



Exploring the forms of sociality mediated by innovative technologies in retail settings



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ABSTRACT

The retail setting is characterised by an increasing usage of advanced and interactive technologies (i.e. mobile apps, Near Field Communication, virtual and augmented reality, etc.) based on high connectivity, ubiquitous and contactless systems that enhance and support consumer shopping experience. As a result of the consumers' interaction with technology while shopping, technology-enriched stores provide new experiences and enable different forms of sociality. The aim of this paper is to explore the forms of sociality mediated by innovative technologies in retail settings. To achieve this goal, we use a qualitative approach involving 20 young consumers in the London-based market, where technology use by this group of consumers is growing. Findings show that digitally-mediated in-store activity mainly responds to a need for advice and trust, and the forms of sociality deployed around it are essentially ephemeral, low-intensity and publicity-oriented modes of interaction that echo the principles of "network sociality" described by critical media theory.

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1. Introduction

Traditionally, consumers approach vendors or other consumers at the points of sale to achieve social, psychological, and economic benefits from these emerging interactions. In fact, they interact with others to reduce the risk involved in the purchase process (Pantano & Migliarese, 2014). However, increased computing capabilities, improvements in wireless technologies, and continuous developments in flexible software and pervasive systems have allowed consumers to ubiquitously access information without the direct assistance of an employee (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Hristov & Reynolds, 2015; Johnson, Kim, Mun, & Lee, 2015; Pantano, 2016, 2014). In fact, ubiquitous networks and context-awareness technologies provide consumers with access anywhere and anytime to information through their mobile devices (Pantano & Priporas, 2016; Strom, Vendel, & Bredican, 2014). Hence, retail settings are shifting to a new concept of store/space wherein an extensive use of advanced technologies, largely integrated into daily life, takes place. In particular, these technological innovations provide novel, interactive and entertaining tools to search,

compare, and purchase products (Blazquez, 2014; Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Yeh & Li, 2014; Pantano, 2016). As a consequence, the increasing use of technology while shopping might dramatically impact on the way consumers build and maintain interpersonal interactions with other consumers or with vendors.

Although previous studies refer to shopping as a social process involving human-to-human interaction (Everts & Jackson, 2009; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Pantano & Migliarese, 2014), new forms of sociality may be involved in the in-store shopping experience, as interaction with technology replaces traditional human-to-human interactions. This represents a hot topic in the current research on innovations within retail settings that still requires further investigations (Chou, Chuang, & Shao, 2016; Everts & Jackson, 2009; Hristov & Reynolds, 2015; Huang, Lu, & Ba, 2016; Pantano, 2014).

The aim of this research is to explore the new forms of sociality emerging from the extensive usage of advanced technologies in retail settings, and how it might create value for consumers while impacting the social interactions. Therefore, our study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent is interacting with technology becoming integrative part of consumers shopping experience?

RQ2: To what extent are new technologies changing consumers' relationships during the shopping experience?

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RQ3: To what extent are new technologies leading towards to new forms of sociality during the shopping experience?

To this end, we interviewed 20 London-based consumers, between 18 and 23 years old, adopting a qualitative, exploratory focus aimed at investigating consumer attitudes towards seeking advice and digital technology use while shopping. The research explores whether consumer interactions with technology is a common experience, and builds on the logics of “network sociality” acknowledged by critical media theory (Wittel, 2001) as a kind of individualised form of interaction based on ephemeral, low-intensity and publicity-oriented practice.

This study advances the current knowledge on in-store interaction within technology-enriched retail settings by detailing the extent to which innovative technologies may effect the in-store shopping practice as a social activity. In particular, it highlights consumers’ in-store interaction with the technology as a potential substitution of social interactions with other consumers or employees. Findings offer insight into the challenges retailers have to face in light of the changing interactional role of vendors in the store, as the forms of digitally-mediated interaction that are typical of the group of consumers we interviewed make increasingly difficult for retail personnel to persuade and influence consumers behaviour.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section will discuss the existing research around the role of technologies in consumer shopping behaviour and the way consumers interact with these technologies. Next, this paper outlines the methods and findings of a qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with young consumers on their usage of technologies while shopping. Finally, we discuss the impact of these technologies on the social interactions held while shopping, and the implications for scholars and practitioners.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Technology and consumer shopping behaviour

The broad array of technology consumers might access within retail settings allows them to easily find, compare, locate and buy products. In addition to these activities, consumers can also find additional information on products and services, create and share wish and shopping list through user-friendly interfaces. Amongst others, NFC (Near Field Communication) provides mobile devices with two-way short range wireless connectivity up to no more than 10 cm, which supports fast checkout by allowing consumers to pay in a “contactless” way while substituting the traditional card swipe or insertion into the reader and the subsequent request of PIN or permission for the payment. Similarly, Quick Response codes (QR) (bi-dimensional barcode including rich information on a product) allow consumers to access information on products by scanning the code through their mobile camera without direct assistance by any employee (Sankaridevi, Vennila, & Jayakumar, 2015; Zhao, Smith, & Alanson, 2015).

As a result of the diffusion of such technologies, recent studies have been investigating how in-store consumer behaviour has been affected by advanced technologies (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Hristov & Reynolds, 2015; Pantano, 2016; Pantano & Priporas, 2016). To this end, research has extensively exploited the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989), by considering the perceived ease of use, usefulness, attitude and behavioural intention as drivers of new technology adoption. This traditional model has been further extended with more constructs such as risk avoidance (Gross, 2015), trust (Perea y Monsuwa, Dellaert, & de Ruyter, 2004; Pavlou & Fygenson, 2006), hedonic value (Pantano,

2014) and utilitarian value (Pantano & Priporas, 2016). Using a new system, a new technology or an innovation involves a certain level of risk related to the uncertainty and the possible consequences emerging from its usage. Thus, trust plays a critical role under conditions of uncertainty and risk, such as during the purchasing of unfamiliar (or unknown) products (Perea y Monsuwa et al., 2004; Park, Gunn, & Han, 2012). In traditional stores, the most important source of trust is the sales assistant (vendor), who shares his/her experience, expertise, honesty, benevolence, confidence, and communication skills to support the consumer’s purchase behaviour (Pantano & Migliarese, 2014). The concept of trust has also been extended to the technology, by implying that if the technology itself is trustworthy, consumers may not be willing to ask others’ support while choosing (Pantano & Priporas, 2016).

Research on the introduction of advanced and interactive technologies within the stores has so far largely focused on the extent to which these systems mediate the traditional communication between consumer and sales assistant (Williams, Nadin, & Windebank, 2012). Mainly, these studies describe the increasing difficulty in building (strong) relationships with consumers who use self-service technologies because of the decreased frequency of interpersonal contacts with other consumers and vendors (Everts & Jackson, 2009; Kim, Suh, & Lee, 2013; Pantano & Migliarese, 2014; Tang, Shee, & Tang, 2001). This might affect shopping as a social experience (Everts & Jackson, 2009), which includes spending time with friends or relatives while purchasing (Gilboa and Vilnai-Yaetz, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2012; Kim et al., 2013). Indeed, one key aspect of the points of sale lies on the ability to offer a social experience (Gilboa and Vilnai-Yaetz, 2013). Moreover, the need to interact with others during the purchase decision includes the desire to be accepted by others and meet others’ expectations, as described in Maslow’s (1954) definition of the social need for belonging.

However, the main focus in most studies on technology-enhanced retail settings has been on consumers’ acceptance of these innovations (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Hristov & Reynolds, 2015; Johnson et al., 2015; Pantano, 2014; Blazquez, 2014, 2016; Yeh & Li, 2014). Thus, research on the degree such technologies (especially smart phone-based social media apps) impact social interaction as a consequence of the adoption of technologies while shopping is still at an early stage.

2.2. Consumer-computer interaction and social relations

As the purchase of a product is often motivated by the attempted acquisition of a certain status or identity, consumers buy items in order to be accepted by a social reference group (Reinstaller & Sanditov, 2005). Thus, they are willing to ask for suggestions and opinions to make a better choice (Li, 2013; Reinstaller & Sanditov, 2005). The request for suggestions might consist of face-to-face questions, which would require the physical presence of other consumers (e.g. friends/relatives/partners/etc.) or a sales assistant in the store, or it might occur via the intermediation of social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter, through which consumers may post their questions to an “imagined audience” (Marwick, 2011) or exchange private messages with other users (i.e. WhatsApp). Past studies also recognize how social interaction between customers and vendors is a determinant of clients’ satisfaction, loyalty and subsequent purchasing behaviour in the store (Drollinger & Comer, 2013; Yang, 2013). Similarly, existing research reveals that consumers usually spend more time and purchase more goods when shopping with friends and relatives (Kim et al., 2013).

Moreover, several studies demonstrate how word of mouth communication influences consumer’s decision-making processes, by allowing consumers to access information, and generate

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