



Fashion companies and customer satisfaction: A relation mediated by Information and Communication Technologies



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ABSTRACT

Adopting the interpretative lens provided by the Systems Thinking and Service Logic, the paper pursues a twofold aim: 1] from one side it offers a wider picture of fashion sector with the aim to support both researchers and practitioners in defining more valuable and effective approaches and 2] from the other side it investigates the customers' perspectives and their approach to Information and Communication Technologies in the fashion sector.

After the definition of four hypotheses, the perceptions of a sample of 1125 customers are investigated through a qualitative survey and the results are analysed using Structural Equation Modelling.

1. Introduction

In the last decades, the traditional balance among buyers, sellers, and that market are showing an increasing instability (Ball et al., 2001; Fligstein and Calder, 2001; Spekman and Carraway, 2006; Alexius and Grossi, 2017). Market logics are changing as consequence of several external influences, such as the transformation of mental models of customers both in marketing and communication strategies of companies and in the relationship among the multiple actors involved in shopping decisions and behaviours (Wind et al., 2001; De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010; Baldarelli and Gigli, 2014).

Several new variables have been added to the traditional shopping behaviour frameworks, thereby increasing the level of complexity in the management and governance of multiple industrial sectors (Solomon, 2014). In the definition of widened perspectives useful for better understanding the relationship among buyers, sellers, and market the technology seems to have a key role (Childers et al., 2001; Hong et al., 2006; Lin and Hsieh, 2006; Di Fatta et al., 2016; Caputo and Wallezky, 2017; Caputo et al., 2017). Several contributions have been provided by researchers and practitioners, including: about the ways in which Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) affect buyers' and sellers' behaviours (Roberts, 2000; Eggleston et al., 2002; Cordella, 2006; Carayannis et al., 2017), about the influence of technology in the definition of needs and expectations of buyers (Wilson, 1995; Wilson and Vlosky, 1998), and about the contributions of technology in defining more efficient and effective selling strategies (Boudreau et al.,

1998; Rapp et al., 2008; Johnston and Marshall, 2016).

Despite the relevant advancements in knowledge provided by all these contributions, among others, the role of ICT as a key determinant affecting the relationships among buyers, sellers, and the market seems to be still unclear (Jayachandran et al., 2005). Specifically, a widened framework surrounding the role of ICT in affecting customers' perceptions and mental models has still not been defined and the many implications for management and governance of multiple industrial sectors have not been clarified (Winter et al., 2009; Caputo, 2017).

With the aim of providing a contribution in the bridging of this gap, the paper focuses the attention on the specific domain of the fashion sector as a particular market area in which perceptions and expectations of customers have a high relevance that affects companies' performances (Craik, 2003; Cervellon and Coudriet, 2013). Building upon previous contributions provided with reference to management and governance of the fashion sector in the light of marketing (Bohdanowicz and Clamp, 1994; Banister and Hogg, 2004; Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010; Turker and Altuntas, 2014), organization (Djelic and Ainamo, 1999; Masson et al., 2007; Craik, 2009), and managerial studies (Crane, 1997, 2012; Hilton et al., 2004), this paper proposes a widened conceptual framework for the study of ICT's role in influencing customers' levels of satisfaction.

Specifically, the interpretative lens provided by *Systems Thinking* (Emery, 1969, 1981; Beer, 1979; Checkland, 1981; Espejo, 1994; Forrester, 1994; Stacey et al., 2000; Jackson, 2003; Golinelli, 2010; Barile, 2011) and *Service Logic* (Lusch and Vargo, 2006, 2014; Grönroos,

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2008; Vargo et al., 2008; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Maglio and Spohrer, 2008; Maglio et al., 2009; Saviano et al., 2017c) are adopted to investigate some dynamics of the fashion sector with the aim of identifying possible relationships among key elements of ICT and customers' levels of satisfaction.

After this, the hypotheses are tested via Structural Equation Modelling using the data collected through a structured survey submitted to a sample of 1350 fashion sector clients in the period from June to October 2017. The findings are then discussed with the aim of defining possible guidelines for a more effective management and governance of the fashion sector and to bridge the knowledge gap about the role of technology in affecting customers' levels of satisfaction in the fashion sector.

Finally, limitations and implications of the study are presented and some conclusions and future directions for research are proposed.

2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

2.1. Reflections about the role of ICT in fashion sector in light of systems thinking

In 2007, Masson et al. stated that “the European Mass Fashion Industry is a good example of a large marketplace sourcing high-variety, high-margin, short-life products in a global context” (p. 238), while in 2008, analysing the US market, Şen wrote that “the fashion industry is characterized by short product life cycles, volatile and unpredictable demand, tremendous product variety, long and inflexible supply processes, and a complex supply chain” (p. 571).

In recognizing these definitions as representative of the fashion sector, some key elements clearly emerge, such as the growing complexity of the fashion market, the instability of market balances, and the need to constantly define updated models for the study of customers' behaviours and expectations. Reflecting upon these key elements, traditional market approaches and models based on the study of previous demand trends and behaviours with the aim of forecasting possible future developments seem to be not really effective (North and Macal, 2007). Traditional managerial and marketing approaches—focused on specific elements of relationships among buyers, sellers, and market in the fashion sector—are showing an increasing uselessness, and new possible interpretative paths are required (Linoff and Berry, 2011). In such a context, Systems Thinking as general interpretative and governance framework could offer useful indications for overcoming a view of the fashion sector that is focused on ex-ante defined elements, such as products, communication, or buyer-seller relationships with the aim of building a holistic picture that is useful for catching opportunities and risks related to the emerging phenomenon (Calabrese et al., 2017; Tronvoll et al., 2017; Saviano et al., 2017a).

According to Systems Thinking, it is possible to state that every kind of organized entity can be considered as a system, and it can be analysed both from a static and a dynamic point of view (Barile and Saviano, 2011; Basile and Caputo, 2017). Using this interpretative framework for studying the relationships among buyers, sellers, and the market in the fashion sector, it is possible to identify on the one hand, a complex of elements such as products, stores, and distribution channels that define the structural side and it is possible to see, on the other hand, the ways in which these elements change over the time-defining condition for reciprocal influence to be able to affect customers' behaviours and satisfaction.

Focusing the attention on this latter perspective, several reflections can be developed with reference to the ICT and to its impact on customers' satisfaction in the fashion sector. Specifically, using the interpretative lens provided by the Systems Thinking Framework, the ICT can be considered a lever that is useful for increasing the opportunities for reciprocal understanding among customers and companies in the fashion sector. Thanks to the ICTs, the customers of the fashion sector have opportunities for acquiring more information about products,

strategies, and approaches of fashion companies and—in this way—they can more easily identify a possible contact point among the companies' value propositions and their expectations and needs (Brogi et al., 2013; McCormick et al., 2014; Wallezky and Caputo, 2017). According to this perspective, online shopping can be considered a relevant technology-based process for fashion companies that are interested in building stronger relationships with their customers (Blázquez, 2014). Considering the online shopping behaviours as the results of fashion companies' ability to provide information, communication, products, and offers aligned with the customers' expectations and needs, it is possible to imagine that the frequency of online shopping is a measure of the willingness of customers to interact with fashion companies' as consequence of their own perceived alignment with fashion companies' message and online platform. Accordingly, a high frequency of online shopping expeditions could be considered as the customers' approach to test the fashion companies' affordability, and it can be considered an element able to affect the customers' satisfaction about the advantages provided by ICTs in the fashion sector. In this perspective the paper states that:

H1. : There is a positive relationship between the frequency of online shopping and the customers' level of satisfaction about the advantages provided by ICTs in the fashion sector.

Online shopping is considered here as a specific implementation of technology with reference to the relationship between customers and companies in the fashion sector. From a more general point of view, several kinds of technology can be identified as elements of influence in customers' perceptions about the advantages provided by ICTs in the fashion sector (Hines and Bruce, 2007). In such a vein, several interesting contributions have been provided with reference to role of self-service technologies (Meuter et al., 2000a, 2000b), RFID technology (Garrido Azevedo and Carvalho, 2012), and 3D body scanning technology (D'Apuzzo, 2007) in the fashion sector. Unfortunately, more of the provided contributions about the role of technology in the fashion sector are strongly focused on their impact on the effectiveness of logistic and service providing processes without considering the implications that technologies could have on affecting customers' behaviours as consequences of a change in their level of satisfaction. From a Systems Thinking point of view it seems that more of the provided contributions about the role of technology in the fashion sector focus the attention on the structure, forgetting the dynamic perspective and its evolution over time. Recognizing this gap as relevant for the management and governance of the fashion sector, this paper aims to enlarge previous contributions that have investigated the impact of fashion companies' approaches to ICTs on customers' level of satisfaction about the advantages provided by ICTs in the fashion sector. Accordingly, the paper states that:

H2. There is a positive relationship between fashion companies' use of advanced ICT and customers' level of satisfaction about the advantages provided by ICTs in the fashion sector.

2.2. Reflections about the role of ICT in the fashion sector in the light of Service Logic

As highlighted in previous sections, the fashion sector is here considered as a part of a market in which customers' perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction have a great relevance (Keller et al., 2014). According to this assumption, the role of customers in the fashion sector requires analysis from all the possible perspectives in light of more recent managerial and marketing contributions (Bridson and Evans, 2004). More than in other sectors, in the fashion sector, the customer must be considered as the central point of all companies' strategies, approaches, and actions (Pettinger, 2004). Accordingly, the fashion sector seems to be the ideal field of validation for the recent marketing contributions provided by the research streams that are rooted in

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