Research Article

Customer Reactions to Pop-Up Store Communications

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Abstract

To date, research has focused on traditional or virtual store atmosphere influences on consumer behaviors. In the case of ephemeral stores, social media messages also stimulate consumers' responses. Inspiring from a stimulus-response model, this study aims to investigate the nature of social media messages and the responses they elicit from consumers in the case of ephemeral stores. A sample of 25 fashion brands was observed through a "nethnography" for 3 months. Research findings showed that social media messages contribute to consumer online/offline journeys, promote customer-brand instant in-store exchanges, influence in-store behaviors and yield to information co-production.

Keywords: Ephemeral stores; Ephemeral retail; Ephemeral retail; Social media messages; Ephemeral messages

The Effect of Social Media Messages on Consumer/Internet-User Responses: The Case of Ephemeral Stores

Introduction

Following the 2008 economic recession, the disposable private expenditure of individuals has been seriously affected and reduced [1]; Around 7000 physical stores were closed, costs becoming high and revenues remained flat [2]. The recession triggered ephemeral stores' blossom [3-5] and in addition to the crippling situation, there was an important lack of funding, lack of targeted turnover or lack of means of brand spending on promotions and communication [6]; this pushed the majority of brands to turn to ephemeral stores [7].

Since the birth of temporary retail, an important presence of digital technologies in physical stores was observed and the "spike of social media mentions" related to these stores was unmissable [8]. In France, the adoption of technological tools is rising. 50.7% of the French population in 2017 was connected to the Internet via a smartphone [9] and spent considerable time on digital platforms as well as social networks. 58% of opinions shared online influence consumers' attitudes and expectations [1]. It is

through the ephemeral store's theatrical design [10], location and communications that brands are looking to build connections with customers connections [11,12].

Ephemeral store characteristics

Ephemeral stores are first and foremost "hit and run retailing" [13], appearing in one place and time, making an impact and disappearing. They are anchored in the present and do not reveal their future actions; "Here today; gone tomorrow" or "now you see it; now you don't" [14] assert this uncertainty of the future of stores thus taking people by surprise and encouraging them to visit [15] the ephemeral store before it disappears.

An ephemeral store is a "magical" place that a brand creates [16] and it is located between physical spaces and virtual spaces [8]. As the consumer is at the heart of this action, the atmosphere becomes "friendly" [17], lively and amazing [18]. Brands have reinvented the shops into real places of entertainment [19], places of experience [20]. Ephemeral stores are represented in both physical and digital configurations [21,22].

At the crossroads of distribution and communication channels

The beginnings of ephemeral stores were rather marked by seasonal distribution models (Marks & Sloan, 2003) through forms of physical distribution. The increase of e-players in the distribution has felt the need, at some point, to meet with the customer base; ephemeral stores subscribed to this possibility [23]. Endowed with this particular fusion, the ephemeral store finds itself complementing digital communication and comes closer to all the more of an operating mode braiding the physical to the virtual. As the current "postmodern" [24,25] distribution era becomes more and more "hybrid" [2], consumers find themselves wandering freely and gracefully between the different points of contact that the brand offers; whether it's a website, a digital platform, a physical or virtual store, or an ephemeral store [26]. Delivery following purchases in one channel and receipt in another is at the heart of the customer experience [19]. It is the act of "showrooming" or "webrooming".

In the context of ephemeral stores, brands rethink communication by giving it a new dimension that goes beyond the simple transmission of an advertising message. Communication turns into a tool for conversation with the brand's consumers. The latter, investing in the design of the ephemeral store to achieve maximum media coverage. The store is at the heart of the media message [27]. Its experiential aspect [28] involves consumers, provides advertising coverage [29] and generates a "buzz".

Research Gap and Research Questions

Environmental psychology is an interdisciplinary field focusing on individuals' interplay with their surroundings. Many studies have paid much interest in the effects of store atmospheres on consumer emotional, intentional and behavioral reactions, and that by studying traditional and online retail [30]. With the rise of technology in retail and the birth of newer forms for retail, it is worth investigating stimuli that influences consumer behavior. In the case of ephemeral stores, brands seem to invest in atmospheric design to propose novel in-store experiences. They integrate design, technology and social media to communicate their store and to provide all facilities to access of information, purchase and so on.

In an omnichannel context, brands can propose ephemeral stores along with other distribution channels and communications channels to meet specific objectives. They heavily rely on social media and social media messages to stimulate customers and hope to trigger positive reactions on their behalf: generate positive word-of-mouth, purchase proposed products or participate in proposed in-store or online activities. Accordingly, this research inspires form the SOR model [31] and aims at understanding what type of message is diffused on social media by brands and how does this message affect consumer (who are also web users) responses: Social media messages (stimuli) -> consumer emotional responses (organism) -> consumer reactions (response).

Methodology

Exploratory studies unveil ambiguity around a studied subject and help in identifying key elements that clarify research questions and aim at answering them [32]. They can simply imply looking at data to see what it might tell us. To better understand the relationship between ephemeral stores with communication messages shared on social media platforms, this study favors qualitative data collection and analysis. Since the data can be exploited from social media platforms, a nethnographic [33] study was adopted1.

The sample comprised of a total of 25 offline/physical fashion brands representing from across several fashion and accessories brand industries [34]. Moreover, the selection considered newly established brands and others that are more established on the market. There was no preference for local or international brands; the selection was interested at the brand that operates on the French market. Data collection started in March 2018 and was stopped in May 2018 at the moment when there was no additional information capable of enriching what has already been said, or after successive applications, the data does not add any properties to the concept; this theoretical saturation was reached after the collection of data from the 25th brand.

The sample's composition is 25% of established brands and 75% of establishing brands. We note that there were no observations of luxury brands. No specific reason has intentionally excluded this category or brands, however, ad hoc research results on social networks platforms (mainly Facebook) did not put this category forward.

Discussion

When it comes to social media exchanges, several characteristics reflect brands (emitting the message) and web users or customers (receiving the message). In the case of ephemeral stores operating in France, the relationship between brands and customers becomes horizontal, allowing at all times a web user/customer response to the brand's message online as well as offline.

Social media messages emitted by brands

Messages shared by brands regarding their ephemeral stores have several specificities related to the message writing style, the message's life cycle and the message's objective(s).

Brand language recipe: "Ephemeral brand language" is a personal jargon that the brand comes up with, respective to its identity and attitude that consists of editing the message and patching it up with its recipe of words, marks, special characters and emoticons (visual texting).

Temporality: The brand shares information about ephemeral stores in temporal logic. The "before, during and right after" the event's dates (or the event's closing date). It is noticed that there are brands that stop the posting activities between one activity and

the other, whilst others continue sharing information about the brand.

Horizontal brand/user relationship: Messages that are conversational and less formal are commonly encountered. The brand might adopt instant exchange with customers using common jargon within the composition of the message. Now that brands want to be more "authentic" and "personal", they tend to sign every post before publishing it.

Engaging conversations and positive user reactions: Promotional posts, contests, and other activities are engaging on social media; they engender likes, loves, other emotional actions as well as conversations between the brand and users2,3,4.

Social media messages influencing the user

Social media messages influence behaviors and highlight the active role of web-users in the case of ephemeral stores:

Travel through different brand touchpoints: The importance of social media pages is that they play an important starting point for the beginning of the trip of web-users through the brand's touchpoints. The brand aims at moving the users across different touchpoints. Using tags and hashtags assures the movement of the social media page user from one "digital location" to another and from a digital to a physical location.

The brand guides the user and directs him/her to the desired finality: Depending on the initial brand's strategy, the movement from one touchpoint to another increases "traffic" to the mentioned brand, increases its visibility, enhances its ranking or (depending on the brand's communications strategy) leads the user to another thread to an action [35].

Momentary interest: There might be a "passenger" effect representing those who are not loyal nor frequenting or returning to the brand's page. These users fell on the page through a tag or a hashtag or were carried to the page through a link. Once on the brand's social media page, they might have been momentarily interested in a conversation or comments over a published post.

Threading bonds: Threading and knitting of the bonds between the brand and internet users and those amongst users. This is apparent with the use of hashtags and tags (one tunneling and funneling into the other). Customers become important levers in the construction of the brand's projected image to the public; they will contribute to the brand's well-being, notoriety and its consideration in the consumer's mindset.

Theoretical Implications

Social media communications go hand in hand with ephemeral store projects and even if it is generated by brands, it can affect web users and brands alike. Brands still have difficulty designing the right message contributing to success on social media [36]. The brand should be paying close attention to identity, investing is well-defined social media campaign objectives, decide on the tone and appeals of the message, allow engagement and evaluate outcomes based on the brand's image [37,38].

Comparing to the results of previous research on social media messages and customer engagement, the current study's findings find some similarities [39]. Consumers may select social media content to gather information, learn more about brands to facilitate their decision-making. The motive could also be hedonic as social media can be a means to the following information for fun and relaxation or curiosity. Most importantly, consumers connect on the social platform to get in touch with the brand and with others and hence the social dimension of social media messages [40].

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1. We interchangeably use the terms consumer and web-user.

2. The terrain delimitated for information collection is social media platforms, where brands share information and exchange conversations with their audiences. Due to their popularity amongst internet users and because most brands are present on these platforms, data was extracted from Facebook and Instagram.

3. Up till the year 2018; Facebook was visited by more than 2 billion active users and Instagram's projection for active users in 2019 will surpass 111 million.

4. By the time of the data collection, the decision was to look at physical pop-up stores since online pop-up stores were very shy still and cases were not observed in the delimited research area.

In addition to providing information to customers/internet users, brands that communicate their ephemeral stores on social media sites, specifically on Facebook and Instagram, take part in a narrative story in which each plays a part in telling. Communications take therefore another stance: ephemeral store messages are initiated by the brand or the customer, reflect an instance (related to a message, a picture, and comment and so on), elaborate, build-up or morph into something new. Social networks [41] are "places" of expression through which the users express themselves and disseminate information that they have created, contributed to creating that are responding to. In their communication, Marciniak R, et al. [42] evoked that opinions givers and opinion seekers do not contribute to giving information about pop-up stores and that were the roles they played whilst on these sites [43]. The present study highlights the horizontal relationship between the brand, customer/internet user and other customers/internet users. The social media platforms on which information about ephemeral stores is shared puts the interaction at the heart of the exchange and not the content. The content becomes the result of the exchange as opposed to be the driver of that exchange [44-46].

Managerial Implications

Social media messages have an important influence on consumer behaviors and in the case of ephemeral stores, influence can have immediate as well as differed responses. In an omnichannel retailing context, Social media message help in moving web-uses between the brand's touchpoints. Ephemeral stores are a "new form of communications and retailing": interweaving physical and digital stores [47].

There is a certain form of brand "osmosis"; an exchange of information between the brand, other brands and internet users. This exchange can have different concentrations at different moments and regulates the exchange accordingly. Social media platforms become relational points between the brand's physical space and the brand's e-commerce or web address. It is an active meeting hub where brand users, platform users and brand representatives meet to virtually and socially ("virtusocial") interact, exchange and share information [48].

When communicating on Facebook pages, it was noticed that some brands did not think about their communications. Publishing a hashtag that does not relate to the post, the brand or the event or that is posted in the wrong format cannot yield the desired positive results. The ephemeral store becomes a meeting hub, a convivial place where brands, friends, fans or customers meet all together and share a good moment.

There is a visual expression of the message (reflected by the emoticons) and it can make stronger statements than mere words. The question lies in the interpretation of this language across cultures and in the ability of social media platform users to express in words versus emoticons or pictures. However, this netno-social dimension is far from human-to-human contact as it cannot express using human conversation and human body language (yet). There are no grammar rules: this new language has a dictionary of its own, and it expresses meanings through visual connotations.

Limitations and Future Research Avenues

The present exploratory study highlighted findings that are proper to communicating and exchanging information related to ephemeral stores on social media platforms [49]. Brands are beyond a mere logic of communicating information related to their ephemeral stores; they are inducing space for information exchange and co-creation and with proposer guidance, they are giving customers space to "have a say" in the brand's activities.

Due to the recency of the topic in academic literature, very few studies have looked at the effects of social media messages on consumer behavior, therefore, it would be interesting to develop further research on a greater number of brands and across industries. The present study's data was collected within a defined time. Repeating data collection across several months or throughout the year increases the research's external validity. In the case of ephemeral stores, seasonality might play an important role in the direction of the communications campaign. As communications messages adapt to market and audiences, a comparative study looking at the effect of social media messages on consumer behaviors across countries or continents. This would present interesting findings related to behaviors across cultures, markets or consumers.

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Conflict of Interest

Author declares no conflict of interest.

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