

Omnichannel Customer Journeys - Fragments of a Never-Ending Story?

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Abstract:

While the potential of storytelling to create emotional and memorable connections to a brand has long been realised, today's omnichannel brands face the challenge of telling their story across a multitude of touchpoints and channels, forming a multi-associative network for customers to navigate and make sense of. With an increasingly blurry boundary between content and commerce, fuelled by new technologies and digital channels emerging and evolving rapidly within the current economic climate, the need for approaches that span the entirety of touchpoints at marketers' disposal has grown. By proposing a framework and research agenda of customer touchpoints as narrative fragments, this project strives to generate a customer-based understanding of meaning co-creation along the customer journey. Additionally, it represents an endeavour to contribute insights into new and emergent channels. As such, the approach presented herein will contribute to retail- and omnichannel marketing literature as well as retail branding theory and practice.

Keywords: omnichannel retail, customer journey, branding, storytelling, narratives, sensemaking

Track: Retailing & Omni-Channel Management

1. Introduction

Within the fields of retail marketing and management, grasping the customer journey has been established as a vital success factor for brands and businesses (Steinmann et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2020). The move towards omnichannel retailing has already been hailed as a major paradigm shift within the field as early as 2016, challenging researchers to reconsider the theories and concepts that have long been held as cornerstones within retail marketing (Parsons & Descatoires). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this need has arguably become even more urgent, as customer adoption of new and digital shopping channels has evolved rapidly and perhaps irrevocably. Brands have increasingly become part of our domestic lives and private spheres, leading to an even stronger intertwining of commerce and content and necessitating a clear brand story across all channels (Cornfield, 2021; Van de Sand et al., 2020). In addition to an academic reassessment, there is thus also a clear need for practitioners to find the means of creating more personal ways of establishing their brand while meeting elevated expectations, a need which places the individual at the very core of the customer journey and assigns marketing a much more central role as the driver of digital transformation and storytelling (Balis, 2021; Batra & Keller, 2016; Tueanrat et al., 2021).

This industry need is juxtaposed with a research body that continues to rely on incremental approaches and fails to look beyond canonical models and theories, remaining ill-equipped to understand the customer's journey within this new and fast-changing context (Baxendale et al., 2015; Harris, 2017). A multitude of approaches, for example, continues to rely on linear customer journey concepts based on the traditional marketing funnel, an approach that is already being challenged as too rigid and simplistic to capture what in reality tends to play out as a looping, non-linear, often chaotic, and deeply personal process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

To address these issues and answer the call for a consideration of new paradigms and theories in light of technology-driven omnichannel retailing and the resulting customer journeys (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016), this paper presents a short discussion of current research on omnichannel retailing as well as brand storytelling. Moreover, an attempt will be made to identify new starting points for understanding modern omnichannel customer journeys through narrative theory. The following section will present a short discussion of the omnichannel and brand storytelling literature streams respectively, outlining pertinent knowledge gaps yet to be addressed. The latter part of this paper will be concerned with synthesising the most promising conceptualisations with post-structuralist theory on narrative fragments to present a novel

research approach to omnichannel customer journeys in a world where, increasingly, brands are no longer the main narrators of their story (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016; B. Stern, 1994).

2. Omnichannel and Brand Storytelling

Omnichannel customer journeys reveal themselves to be a rather under-theorised subject as evidenced by a multitude of descriptive research as well as a dispersion of foci, which often only encompass a single touchpoint, channel, or interaction effect (Cakir et al., 2021; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2007). The concept of the customer journey is often intertwined with customer experience, the former usually being associated with the more efficient, utilitarian aspects of the decision process, while the latter is taken to signify the more hedonistic, enjoyable aspects. In an omnichannel brand environment, however, addressing both of those aspects across all stages of the journey is crucial, leading to calls for an urgent investigation of the interplay between these concepts (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Despite the paradigm shift towards the idea of value co-creation, which firmly stresses the central role of the customer (see Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2016), retail branding seems to struggle with representing the idea that meaning creation drifts more and more out of marketers' control – a development accelerated by the introduction of multiple communication channels and a more complex overall customer journey. Some researchers even argue that a brand's image cannot be communicated, but rather only emerges in the re-tellings of its customers, who influence each other almost as much as brand strategies do (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Further research suggests that skepticism could potentially be overcome by not only presenting customers with a good brand story, but inviting them to actively shape the meaning of the brand, thereby harnessing their narrative power (B. Stern, 1994). With both theory and practice acknowledging the growing centrality of – and need for understanding customer journeys from a customer-focused viewpoint, there is still relatively little research actually adopting a customer-centric view (Kamleitner et al., 2019; Lee, 2020; Tueanrat et al., 2021). Especially omnichannel literature shows a strong methodological focus on analysing *what* is happening, rather than *why* or *how*, with researchers calling out a complete absence of potentially fruitful consumer-centric approaches like narrative analysis or netnographies (Mishra et al., 2021).

Generally, there also remains a strong focus on purchase phases and purchase decisions as the ultimate outcome (Anderl et al., 2016; Juaneda-Ayensa et al., 2016), which may be called into question in light of an omnichannel context whose evolution has been boosted by the

ongoing pandemic. More recent research output already indicates that, for modern brands, topics like loyalty and engagement, which speak to a more long-term relationship customers are willing to enter, might be more relevant indicators for investigating omnichannel customer journeys (Bowden & Mirzaei, 2020; Demmers et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Pagani et al., 2019; Read et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2020). There is also the fact that the very phases of the customer journey which have the highest likelihood of containing “black boxes” within which customers become opaque, namely before- and after the purchase, are precisely the ones in need of more research attention and have thus far mainly received attention from a logistics perspective (see Alexander & Kent, 2020; Tueanrat et al., 2021). Regarding retail channels, the digital realm which bears a high potential for co-creation has thus far mainly been examined under the heading of classical, desktop-based online shopping, with research on touchscreens, apps, AR, and other emergent tools and channels still in its early stages (Hilken et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2020).

When it comes to brand stories, there seems to have been little reaction to the shift towards an omnichannel context and how brand stories have changed in light of it. Despite efforts to conceptualize the effectiveness of communication across different channels (Batra & Keller, 2016), advertising media remain the most thoroughly investigated, with the notion of a retailer-as-brand largely absent (Escalas, 2004a; Escalas & Luce, 2003; Escalas & Stern, 2003; Kim et al., 2017). Numerous case studies from the luxury goods and fashion industries illustrate the perception of the product or the store setting as brand (Brown et al., 2018; Gauri et al., 2021; Hänninen et al., 2021; Larke et al., 2018). Omnichannel retail draws these notions into serious question, requiring a view of the retailer-as-brand to tie their story together across all channels and touchpoints. The multitude of channels also challenges the notion of coherence, which assumes the brand as the main narrator, stressed by branding literature (e.g. Pereira, 2019). However, this notion is rapidly becoming less viable (Visconti, 2018).

Finally, both omnichannel- and brand storytelling research lack an understanding of consumers’ sense-making processes over time, a knowledge gap which becomes even more pressing considering the non-linear nature of the modern customer journey (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). With authors mainly testing the effects of immediate narrative input, there is little clarity on what happens when time-lapses between connected story-elements become longer, which cues would be relevant for beginning the re-framing process into a narrative, or which contextual elements might enhance the likelihood of consumers to integrate presented information into existing stories (Hamby et al., 2017; Hamby et al., 2019; Hamby et al., 2016).

In short, if we view narrativity as a continuum, it stands to reason that different touchpoints along the customer journey bear varying degrees of potential when it comes to communicating the brand's story. Thus, the notion of an omnichannel customer journey provides a crucial extension to existing research on narrative processing and persuasion, as it stresses both the temporal dimension as well as the co-creative agency of the consumer.

In all, an attempt to address brand narratives across touchpoints begs the question of how customers make sense of the multi-associative network represented by modern omnichannel brands. To being tackling this question and addressing the knowledge gaps outlined herein, this paper proposes an approach grounded in post-structuralist theory, outlined in the following section.

3. Fragmented Narratives: A Perspective for Omnichannel Marketing

The multi-associative network omnichannel brands have become arguably requires a re-thinking of those patterns of customer sense-making usually taken for granted. The dispersion of brand stories over a multitude of channels can be said to place a higher amount of responsibility on the recipient who must bridge narrative gaps through their own creative input (Hamby et al., 2017; Sadler, 2021). Indeed, the beginnings of computer technology have been described as a reminder of the fact that human sense making always has been fragmented – a prediction that has become more relevant than ever, with current works describing the ongoing process of mediatization in particular as characteristic of a world constituted by fragmentation (Kozinets, 2021; Sadler, 2021). Yet, or perhaps precisely because of this development, narratives continue to play a central role as algorithms, though able to juxtapose different fragments, remain unable to arrange them into meaningful entities: if anything, increased fracturing of information entails an increased need for interpretation (Markham, 2005; Sadler, 2021).

To better understand such everyday narrative processes, it may be helpful to consider post-structural notions of the open work, the writerly text, and the fragmentation of narratives. Roland Barthes (1975) established the idea of the death of the author, tying in with Umberto Eco's (1989) concept of the *Opera Aperta*, the open work. Essentially, these notions shift the reader or message-receiver into focus as a key creator of meaning (Visconti, 2018). Similarly, the concept of fragmented worlds and fragmented narratives further shifts the attention to the wider structure and Gestalt of a text. Essentially, all units of a narrative are seen as potentially re-organisable to provide an overarching meaning beyond superimposed, conventional

restrictions: while some units function as core points, others serve as peripheral information separating the former, thereby creating a sort of narrative centre around which related fragments are clustered (Visconti, 2018). Driving the concept further, Barthes' work *S/Z* (1970) distinguishes between the writerly text which actively involves the reader in the creative process on the one hand, and the readerly text, for which the reader is a passive receiver, on the other hand. However, a true open text, which would be responsive to the reader's every need, remodeling itself according to the circumstances, remains a hypothetical construct (Turner Iii, 2005). In light of omnichannel branding, this theory could aid in understanding consumer sense-making by thinking of various touchpoints as such units, i.e. fragments of a brand's narrative. If this narrative were further conceived of as having different degrees of openness, the consumer moves out of the passive reader-recipient role, paving the way for more customer-centric frameworks and helping marketers and researchers illuminate multiple potential meanings of brand stories. As the omnichannel paradigm shift can be seen as a direct representation of the increased fragmentation of information characterizing modern life (see Sadler, 2021), such theories emphasizing the growing role of individual interpretation and sense-making may be crucial for future research.

Some of these notions have in fact already been reflected in marketing and branding literature, e.g. by Stern's (1994) revised communication model for advertising. They become conceivably even more acute when marketing communications involve literal two-way channels where consumers can interact directly with both each other and the brand, becoming storytellers in their own right. Taking these thoughts one step further is the notion of the "produser", a user permanently engaged in a writerly process of interpretation (Sadler, 2021). Yet, while these concepts have been used in the context of social media- and communication studies, the notion of fragmented narratives remains, to the best of the authors' knowledge, entirely absent from marketing-, customer journey- and omnichannel literature, its potential for grasping people's sensemaking processes across channels and touchpoints notwithstanding.

Since customer journeys and their concomitant sensemaking processes increasingly involve nonlinear, fragmented information and multi-mediated conceptions of what is meaningful (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Markham, 2005), one could begin to conceptualise different omnichannel touchpoints as fragments of a brand's narrative, which would enable researchers to identify core story-elements and priorities within a brand narrative that is spread out over several channels. This would also entail a view of meaning as largely divorced from the creator and thus suggest constructs allowing for an openness to interpretation

and multiplicity of meaning, which seems apt for investigations of everyday sensemaking. Previous research on narratives further suggests that “writerly” work is likely to be memorable, as it requires people to move from a passive- into an actively interpreting and sense-making role (Hamby et al., 2017). The notion of narrative fragments further goes hand in hand with prior work on both the customer journey and narrative processing, which stresses the importance of context and the interplay of emotional- and cognitive factors to ultimately create behavioural outcomes (Escalas, 2004b; Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). Especially striking in this regard is the supposition of narrative persuasion as a process over time which, given the context of the customer journey, may be thought of as repeating and adding on to a brand’s narrative every time a touchpoint - i.e. fragment - is encountered. This, however, would require the initial crucial shift into the narrative, so that the consumer begins engaging with it (Hamby et al., 2018). With a view towards these theories, a concept of touchpoints as narrative fragments could thus further aid in both understanding the ways customers make sense along their omnichannel journeys as well as identifying and categorizing various omnichannel touchpoints according to their storytelling potential (see Fig. 1).

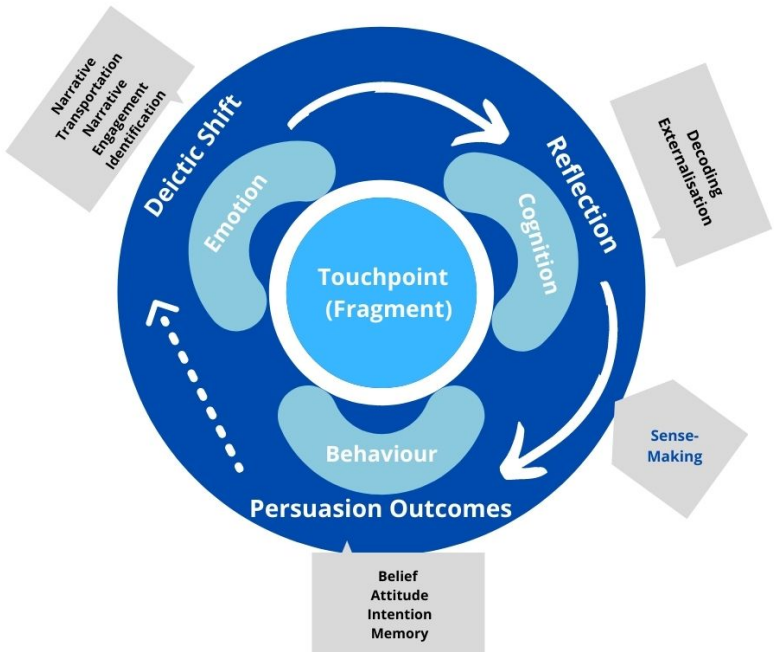


Figure 1. Omnichannel Touchpoints as narrative fragments, adapted from Hamby et al. (2018), Grewal & Roggeveen (2020) & Escalas (2004b)

4. Conclusion and Outlook

All in all, the present work represents an attempt at taking stock of current developments and trends within omnichannel retailing, specifically in relation to the ways in which brand

stories are transported over the course of the customer journey. An overview of the pertinent literature streams and fields of research reveals that the necessary reconsideration of the processes and commonplace concepts within retail marketing necessitated by the paradigm shift to omnichannel retailing, already called for in 2016 (see Parsons & Descatoires), is only just beginning. In particular, a host of knowledge gaps points towards the need for a better understanding of how consumers make sense of the dissipated, multi-mediated, transient pieces of information constituting a modern omnichannel brand narrative. As this process forms a key aspect of today's non-linear, chaotic, and even circular customer journeys, paving the way towards a better understanding and theorisation thereof bears value for researchers and practitioners alike.

Therefore, this paper proposes a conceptualisation of touchpoints along the omnichannel customer journey as narrative fragments, drawing on post-structuralist literary theory as well as consumer- and retail literature. Such a notion would adequately reflect the growing role of the individual within this new realm of customer-brand interaction and allow for research to further probe into- and develop more timely, proactive rather than descriptive, concepts of omnichannel customer journeys based on one of humanity's oldest, most universal, and therefore most effective practices: storytelling.

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