

IS PRIME PRIMING? EXPLORING CUSTOMER JOURNEYS ON AMAZON BRAND STORES

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Abstract

The present study investigates the under-researched dynamics of customer journeys on online marketplaces by exploring their interactions with integrated brand stores. Recently introduced by Amazon, brand stores represent a peculiar case of touchpoint within another touchpoint in an e-commerce setting; the brand is in fact attempting to create and maintain its own brand identity within an environment heavily characterized by the marketplace. Results following a series of focus groups, conducted in Italy and Spain, show that customers experience dissonance when visiting brand stores on Amazon, as they find it difficult to assimilate the coexistence of elements and appeals congruent to the brand and to Amazon in the same online environment. Moreover, it emerges that motivations for shopping on Amazon shape the journey and customers' attitudes towards the brand store as well, to the point that it may even end up to be perceived as a disruption.

KEYWORDS: Customer Journey; Marketplaces; E-Commerce

TRACK: RETAIL & OMNI-CHANNEL MANAGEMENT

1. Introduction

The present work aims to shed new light on consumer experiences within the context of general marketplaces and with new features and functions they introduce. This is particularly relevant when the marketplace in question has a disruptive effect on customers' expectations and journeys, such as Amazon (Vollero et al., 2023), that has grown to be one of the most valuable brands worldwide. According to Statista (2025), its revenues have exceeded 630 billion \$ in 2024. Over 310 million shoppers make at least one purchase per year on Amazon; of those, over 200 million customers subscribed to its Amazon Prime program in 2024. Despite these figures, authors point out that even though "the Amazon effect continues to be in the spotlight, research related to consumers is almost non-existent" (Vollero et al., 2023, p. 1063). Most studies in e-commerce literature do not differentiate between brand-owned e-commerce websites and marketplaces, even when addressing Omnichannel customer experiences. As reported by Rosàrio and Raimundo (2021), major topics developed in the last decade include the combination of e-commerce and social media, the use of big data in e-commerce, and the integration of AI-based technologies to enhance customer experiences. As what concerns shoppers' behaviors and decision-making, literature has focused on showrooming and webrooming, developing frameworks where brand-owned websites and marketplaces are conceptualized in the same way. Marketplaces, however, are rapidly introducing new functions that disrupt customer journeys and expectations for future shopping experiences, even more than brand-owned e-commerce websites: we argue that this is the case of Amazon brand stores. Recently introduced, brand stores on Amazon allow brands to create a miniature e-commerce website on the marketplace, a space exclusively dedicated to the brand (Amazon.com, 2025). Amazon provides sellers with pre-made templates that can be entirely customized to reflect brands' own values, aesthetics and appeals; this involves the possibility of creating new displays for the product catalog and sharing additional content, images and videos. Brand stores would therefore fulfill the purpose of increasing brands' visibility during the customer experience, leading to additional internal and external traffic and conversions as well as enhanced brand awareness (Amazon.com, 2025).

It is still unclear, however, how customers react to the presence of this new "touchpoint within a touchpoint". In fact, literature on omnichannel customer experiences stresses that congruity between channels and touchpoints is key to retaining and attracting customers throughout their journeys (Verhoef et al., 2015; Shi et al., 2020). Achieving seamlessness is even more

challenging when touchpoints owned by different parties are intertwined in the customer experience; also, customers' brand consideration may vary depending on the different types of touchpoints with which they interact (Baxendale et al., 2015). Kranzbühler et al. (2019) investigate the effect of outsourcing touchpoints and find that this translates into customers mentally disassociating the focal brand from the outsourced touchpoint, thus resulting in a shift into their brand evaluation, especially if the third-party brand managing the touchpoint is strong rather than weak. Based on the above, we expect that customers will have difficulty conceptualizing and internalizing a brand store within such a well-established marketplace as Amazon, particularly when the brand store refers to well-known brands that already manage other successful owned channels and touchpoints. To our knowledge, this study is the first attempt to address the issue of customers' perception of brands within a marketplace in a context where a brand-owned touchpoint is embedded within the platform. The present study aims, therefore, to gain new insights into customers' attitudes towards the brand following interactions with Amazon brand stores and how this new touchpoint shapes customer attitudes and behaviors.

2. Methodology

The present study took an exploratory approach to gain new insights into customer journeys on marketplaces and assess the integration of brand stores on marketplaces with the wider retail environment from a consumer perspective. This approach is considered optimal in order to investigate contexts and topics that have been under-researched or with limited understanding on behalf of researchers (Bloor et al., 2001; Gillham, 2005). Exploratory studies may implement qualitative interpretivist techniques, oriented at revealing insights on attitudes, perceptions and feelings from a participant standpoint (Becker, 2018). Also, they allow researchers to uncover rich personal experiences and behaviors (Bloor et al., 2001). Among qualitative techniques, the focus group interview method was identified as most appropriate to study the complex processes of the developing customer journey (Vakulenko et al., 2019). The study adopted a purposive sampling, to identify information-rich cases of customer experiences on marketplaces. This sampling strategy prioritizes in-depth understanding of participants' experiences rather than empirical generalization (Gioia et al., 2013). Therefore, as we wanted to explore the journey and experiences of shoppers within marketplaces, we required prospective participants to have shopped at Amazon.com in the last three months. Due to the wide use of the marketplace, three months were considered a

suitable timeframe for participants to recall their experiences (Vakulenko et al., 2019). Participants were then asked whether they had had previous experiences with brand stores on Amazon.com; they were accepted regardless, but they would be asked separate sets of questions. Participants were recruited between March and May 2025, in Spain and Italy. In total, 16 participants attended face-to-face focus group discussions; participants were all aged 20-30 years, of mixed gender.

Focus groups included four to five participants. This size was chosen because the research protocol included allowing participants to browse Amazon.com in front of the others, in order to show their search processes and to have an actual experience with Amazon brand stores during the focus group discussion. Three experienced researchers managed the group discussions, guiding the participants through the protocol and the emerging themes. Prior to the focus group, a protocol was designed, in order to guide them through discussing all the stages of the journey on Amazon brand stores. First, participants were asked to discuss their online search and purchase habits as well as reasons to purchase on marketplaces compared to brand websites. In the second step, they described their most recent search and purchase experiences on Amazon and discussed their overall processes across different brands and product categories. In this stage, the facilitator also asked participants about brand stores on Amazon.com, whether they had already visited them and – if they hadn't – their expectations. In the third step, participants were asked to individually access a brand store on Amazon through a device provided by the researchers and were allowed up to 20 minutes to browse that brand store as well as other brand stores. In the final step, participants were asked to express their opinions on the brand stores they had visited as well as discuss whether this visit could have an influence on their future shopping behaviors (e.g. re-visit intention, future purchase through the brand store, future purchases on other channels, etc.). Questions were phrased as neutral and unbiased language was used (Larson, 2019).

Focus group data collection ceased at the fifth focus group, after theoretical saturation was reached (Saunders et al., 2018). All focus group discussions were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim into textual documents of participants' explicit responses and expressions. The analysis adhered to a systematic deductive-inductive approach (Gambetti et al., 2015) combined with a lived experience analysis framework (Howell, 2013). All researchers reviewed the transcripts independently, identified a series of themes and sub-themes based on their interpretation, compared and contrasted them, and finally redefined them through a thematic map (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

3. Results

Our findings contributed to the identification of shoppers' decision processes behind the patronage of marketplaces and/or Amazon brand stores, in the search and purchase stages of their journey. Figure 1 illustrates the pathway drawn from the systematic analysis of the collected data; topics emerging for each of the four stages have been enriched with perspectives from existing studies to increase their informational scope.

Fig. 1 – Customers' search and purchase process across brand stores on marketplaces



At each stage of the customer journey different variables contribute to determining customers' perception of the brand store as well as future search and purchase decisions. We discuss them below.

Motivation for shopping on the marketplace

A crucial determinant for consumers to interact with marketplaces is related to the shopping occasion. Customers perceive Amazon as a “general marketplace”, where they can be exposed to an extremely wide assortment to fulfill their needs whether explicit or vague. Familiarity with the marketplace influences customers to the point that they would use Amazon as a search engine. Shoppers are more prone to use product categories or product names as search terms, and, when using brands as keywords, they are aware of the fact that Amazon's

algorithm also includes other brands in the search results, making the evaluation process more complicated. In this sense, product categories become a strong determinant of choice between marketplaces and branded e-commerce websites. For example, customers avoid using Amazon for purchasing clothing, shoes, skincare and personal care whereas they are open to purchasing consumer electronics items there. For certain categories, the brand's own authenticity and originality drive customers towards its branded website. Moreover, some customers develop a sentiment of gratitude towards brands, as they mention "wanting to give business directly to the company", hinting at an emotional bond between them and the brand. With marketplaces, conversely, they feel emotional detachment during shopping journeys, and their explorations are dominated by the superiority of pre- and post-sale services offered. On Amazon.com these include detailed reviews that even provide photos and videos, as well fast delivery, easy product returns, one-click ordering and deals for subscribing to recurring purchases.

Search query and exposure to the brand store

Consumers searching on Amazon.com usually employ broad category keywords at first and then refine their queries using further keywords and filters to navigate the results. Among filters, the "available on Prime" option is very important, as it excludes all products not benefiting from this service; for customers this does not only mean receiving immediate benefits – such as fast delivery – but also feeling reassured about potential logistic issues and service failures.

Shoppers find the variety of results they obtain very useful, allowing them to compare various alternatives; on the other hand, they do experience frustration when, after narrowing their search to fewer alternatives, inconsistent additional ones are shown to them. Participants mentioned feeling they were "getting lost in Amazon", which also influences their response when they are invited to visit the brand store. In fact, they mostly expressed reluctance to proceed visiting the brand store when noticing the related link on product pages or on the results page, because they felt they already had progressed in their journey by identifying potentially interesting products and were afraid they would lose them. The more effort they had experienced examining results and selecting alternatives, the less they would be prone to take "that one click forward". Some participants believed clicking the brand store link would take them out of Amazon.com and directly to the brand-owned e-commerce, which increased avoidance. Other participants, who had already experienced a brand store, disliked the change

from a product-based display to a product category-based structure, and confirmed irritation at being exposed to other products irrelevant to them in that precise journey. In fact, in the brand store home page participants find themselves where other product categories are suggested, different from the searched one. Many stores even personalize both the appearance of said home page to include, for example, “best sellers” or selections of deals, that further contribute to customers’ disorientation. Not to mention a different "style" of the page with larger pictures and videos, that some brands adopt for their brand stores. Participants also pointed out that irritation and disorientation changed dramatically based on whether their intention was to purchase a specific item in that session or to look for inspiration for a purchase that would be made at an unspecified moment.

Visit to the brand store

All participants – independently of previous interactions with Amazon brand stores – expressed confusion and concern about the brand store, as it was unclear to them if they were navigating an Amazon page or if they were on a brand’s page. Somehow seeing they were still on Amazon and they hadn’t followed an external link reassured them, but they still found it puzzling to understand who the vendor was: was it the brand directly or a third party reseller? This created mistrust, especially because brand stores would feature also products not available with Amazon Prime (i.e. lacking the reassuring “Prime” tag), increasing their uncertainties about the subject managing the brand store.

The presence of elements recalling the brand’s values and experience, as well as signals typical of the Amazon experience created consumer dissonance, especially for those very familiar with the marketplace. Participants pointed out that they grasped brands’ intention with brand stores to create a different atmosphere and to be less associated with Amazon, but they never felt being outside of the marketplace due to the many Amazon-like signals present in the store pages. The brand experience was perceived as very temporary, since opening any product page at the brand store takes customers back to the typical Amazon experience.

As what concern appeals used by brands to personalize their spaces in terms of congruity, emotional appeals were judged more irrelevant and incoherent than rational, explanatory ones. Customers stated that Amazon is an extremely practical environment, where users seek objective information they can rationally evaluate, therefore emotional appeals would contribute to dissonance. Participants also questioned the actual advantage for creating an environment that appears different from Amazon because, since they know they are

purchasing on Amazon and intentionally began their journeys on Amazon.com, it would be inconsistent for them to be drawn away from the experience they expected. And this would affect both popular brands and smaller, less-known brands: for popular brands, customers could question the authenticity of products; for smaller brands, customers would perceive their purchase as riskier, feeling far from Amazon's shield of guarantees and post-sale services.

Overall, participants felt that the added value of shopping on Amazon relies in taking advantage of the services it offers, which would increase their confidence in purchasing from the brand store. For popular brands, they would consider returning to the brand store on Amazon in very specific occasions, such as browsing to find inspiration – e.g. looking for gifts – or looking for complementary or related products after securing the actual product they searched for in the first place (e.g. accessories for a clothing item). In any other case, they would consider visiting the brand store a disruption from their intended journey, as most visits to Amazon.com are intended with the purpose of comparing (prices, reviews, shipping timing and conditions, etc.) and an individual brand store would interrupt this process. As what concerns smaller brands, shoppers would be more likely to browse the brand store to gather more information about the products offered, eventual other categories they weren't aware of the brand would offer, and the brand itself.

Outcomes for future journeys

Following visits to Amazon brand stores, customers perceive that they would not be willing to change their shopping habits. They feel that the major decision lies in deciding at the very beginning of their customer journey whether they would use the marketplace or the brand's own e-commerce; and this decision is influenced by many factors such as the motivation of the shopping occasion, their love and loyalty for the brand, the need for convenience (both in terms of pricing and additional services provided). Then, once they decided to opt for the marketplace, likelihood of visiting or avoiding the brand store on Amazon would depend on whether their motivation is oriented towards "just browsing" or "intentional purchase of a specific product", and whether they are looking for a branded or unbranded product. Future outcomes appear as highly dependent on the specific goal customers are trying to pursue, and it seems unlikely that they would develop a form of loyalty towards the brand store on Amazon. Brand stores, therefore, might not be able to "convert" customers towards future

patronage, and rather limit their influence to the specific journey in terms of eventual cross- or up-selling.

4. Conclusion

Results clearly point out that brand stores on marketplaces qualify as a unique type of touchpoint. Not only they are a touchpoint within another touchpoint, but they appear to shoppers as very narrow in terms of usefulness. From our analysis it emerges that the main role of the brand store is acquisition of customers new to the brand, attracting some traffic inside a crowded and very competitive environment such as Amazon.com. Conversion into purchase is limited to very specific journeys, and no loyalty or future patronage is built towards the brand store itself; it, is therefore, valid at the most to create awareness. The study also found that many journeys are influenced by habits and signals that customers already assimilated and coded during past shopping experiences on Amazon. On the one hand, this influences customers' willingness to choose between marketplaces and branded e-commerce websites for their next journeys. Such decision over the channel to adopt for each future purchase appears, in fact, to be rooted in customers' shopping motivations and contextual necessities. On the other hand, experiences with both the brand and Amazon are very specific and different for customers and attempts by either brand or marketplace to overcome such barrier make the whole process more complex and overwhelming for customers. Concerning Amazon, it appears that particularly the bundle of services offered within the Prime program is characterizing customers' interactions with the marketplace and polarizing attitudes, to the point that customers feel lost inside brand stores if they don't perceive any typical signals or linkages with Prime. We may, therefore, state that Amazon Prime "primes" everything, from search processes within Amazon to future patronage decisions; this, in turn, raises issues about negative outcomes for those brands that decide to increase their presence on Amazon through a brand store, and even more so when the experience such store provides is designed to deviate from the Amazon experience. The present study, thus, points to the need for identifying which theoretical underlying mechanisms drive consumer attitudes and reactions to the Amazon brand stores in the different stages of the customer journey. This would be the future step of the present research.

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