

Exploring contact points of interactive media in context of fashion market: A qualitative study

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Keywords

Contact points, Brand Communication, Digital Media, Fashion

Abstract

The emergence of evolving path to purchase leads to gaining a clearer understanding of revolutionized digital channels. Customer engagement in today's electronic word is happening through interactive media contact points. This study investigates various interactive media contact points in context of fashion market. This research was based on qualitative approach using sequential incident technique to understand all contact points and episodes encountered during the customer journey. The study presents detailed analysis of semi-structured interviews. The findings uncovered forty interactive media contact points. The results highlight areas of online customer journey and provide comprehensive understanding of relationship between different stages of an online customer journey. The findings contribute to the growing area of interactive media marketing research. The study provides direction for scholars and practitioners to design interactive media contact points map for fashion brands.

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1.1 Introduction

Fashion market has noticed remarkable development in the past twenty years (Djelic and Ainamo 1999) with reference to ease of adaptability in quality and design (Doyle, Moore, and Morgan 2006) and speed of communication (Franks, 2000). A crucial characteristic for quick responsiveness and more prominent adaptability is forming strong and closer customer-brand relationship. Fashion market in current scenario has become highly competitive and constantly need to refresh their communication strategies to stay connected with its audience.

With the evolution in media and technology, brand communication has also evolved (Stenkamp and Geyskens, 2006). It has allowed fashion brands to speak with each other and their customers without the limitation in time, place and substance. With the upcoming interactive media, the old one-way correspondence has altered itself into a creative intuitive two-way direct communication (Belch and Belch, 2009; Kim & Ko, 2010).

Thus, today's modern marketing environment has given immense opportunities to this day's shoppers. The present day customers are more empowered than ever. They are connected, they are available with choices, they are very well aware of the ongoing trends along with first hand reviews and feedbacks. These opportunities to shoppers become challenges for companies to stay updated, be on top and understand the importance of having a loyal customer base to sustain their business in the competitive market. Understanding the evolving path to purchase that customers are adopting is the success mantra for brands. Companies need to focus and understand how and where the customers are shopping from (Domagk, Schwartz, & Plass, 2010) (Ngo & O'Cass, 2013). The onus of being present in the path to purchase lies on the brands (Kontu & Vecchi, 2014) else they will lose their customers to competition. Interactive Media is one of the factors responsible for this transforming path. Digital shoppers are exposed to a vast number of touch points i.e. sources which customers refer to before and during shopping. These touch points referred to as 'Interactive Media Contact Points' for the purpose of

this study act as opportunities for brands. Hence, brands embracing higher number of Interactive media contact points gain a better share of brand equity and increasing intension to use (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008) (Hong & Cho, 2011). Customer engagement occurs across the channels be it physical or digital, during the customer journey (Frow & Payne, 2007; Jüttner, Schaffner, Windler, & Maklan, 2013), therefore it is crucial to understand its need and requirement in order to reach and service the customer.

1.2 Literature Gap(s)

The present study aims to fill the gap(s) identified from the existing literature. Prior theories and research related to contact points of interactive media are limited to identification and impact of one or few contact points (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; Dessart, 2017; Payne, 2017; van Munster, Constantinides, & Ridder, 2014; Zailskaitė-Jakstė & Kuvykaitė, 2013) whereas the current study takes into consideration all the possible interactive media contact points of fashion industry and presents a comprehensive holistic overview.

1.3 Method

Exploring interactive media contact points requires in-depth understanding of all the direct – indirect interaction elements that may have occurred during a consumer journey. A subjective research approach employing sequential incident technique (Gremler, 2004) was thus adopted to form top to bottom comprehension of all possible contact points.

1.3.1 Sequential Incident Technique

Sequential incident technique “facilitates the investigation of significant occurrences (events, incidents, processes, or issues) identified by the respondent, the way they are managed, and the outcomes in terms of perceived effects” (Chell and Pittaway, 1998). Informants were asked to recall all accounts of interactions that have occurred during their last online purchase which were then thematically identified and analysed. In order to avoid any loss of data, the process adopts “incident telling” approach. It considers all unimportant and non-critical instances as well that would have occurred during an event (Jüttner et al., 2013) which additionally helps to achieve specific aim of the research and thusly, recognizes essential topical subtle elements and cases to help the finding. The role of interviewer is to conduct the session in form a story-telling concept by assisting the respondent in visualizing all the episodes that he/she had encountered during the narrative incident. For the purpose of this study, interviewee continually probed the in-formants to report any episodes (contact point interaction) they recollect during the entire journey of online fashion purchase and portray them as unequivocally as could be expected

1.3.2 Research Procedure

Before initiating the data collection and analysis process, prior literature related to brand communication, contact points and fashion purchasing was browsed with an aim to have a clear understanding of the topic of research. Hence, an arrangement of powerful research questions was made for interviews by following the proposals of (McNamara, 2009). While designing effective interview questions, it was kept in mind that (i) Questions should be easily comprehensible (ii) close-ended questions should be avoided in order to give respondents freedom to choose terms and phrases as per their choice and convenience and lastly (iii) the questions were unbiased to abstain from wording that may impact answers. Before initiating the process of data collection the pre-designed questions were reviewed by experts who had similar interests as the target audience (Kvale, 2007). Opinions, comments and flaws suggested by experts were implemented and the questions were then reframed for final data collection.

1.4 Description of the Participants

In this stage, this research used purposive sampling, because the need for in-depth information in qualitative research informs the choice of theoretical or purposive sampling (Emmel, 2013). This method, also called judgemental sampling, is a technique in which the selection of interviewees is based on judgements about the appropriate characteristics they will present (Zikmund, Alessandro, Winzar, Lowe, & Babin, 2014) (Hair, Lukas, & Miller, 2012). For this study, participants were chosen based on age, gender and level in organization (manager level and above executives) related to fashion industry (National and

International Fashion Brands focusing on Indian Market) to ensure diversification. The sample size was not set precisely prior to the start of this stage, because there were virtually no guidelines for determining purposive sample size or prior data collection, both necessary for qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The final number of in-depth interviews was thirty six when it was observed that the consumers' thoughts and feelings towards their selected brands mostly overlapped and repeatedly captured the constructs in the framework.

The thematic analysis of the 36 interviews revealed repetitive interactive media contact points, which indicates saturation of information after a certain case with converging themes (Eisenhardt, 1989). A case by case analysis was then conducted to check for repetitive themes, it was observed that no new interactive media contact points emerge after the twenty-eighth interview. Still, it was decided to go ahead with the interview of other seven respondents to assure no useful information is missed and no further interactive media contact points are decoded. All the interviews were personal interviews (except two which were on Skype) conducted in different parts of India and took approximately forty five minutes to 1 hour to conclude. A brief summary of profile of the informants is presented in Table 1. The recordings of interviews were then transcribed to ensure minimal loss of data. The written transcripts were analysed to identify the Interactive Media Contact Points for Fashion brands

Table 1- Respondents Profile

Respondent	Gender	Profile	Experience	Industry
1 - Tanya	Female	Fashion Blogger	6	Fashion & Beauty
2 - Shaily	Female	VP - Sales	14	Diamond Jewellery (Earlier Luxury
3 - Sushant	Male	Founder - Fashion Styling App	5	Fashion
4 - Aneeta	Female	Fashion Designer	25	Fashion
5 - Saumya	Female	Sr. Manager - Online Sales	11	Online Marketing (E-commerce)
6 -Abhimanyu	Male	Marketing Manager	7	E-Commerce
7 - Hitisha	Female	Head Marketing Communications	12	Luxury Fashion
8 - Karan	Male	Digital Marketing Consultant	6	Digital Marketing Consultancy
9 - Ankit	Male	Marketing Manager	10	Fashion
10 - Kabir	Male	Deputy Manager - Marketing	8	Online fashion website
11 - Shivani	Female	Owner - Famous Fashion Website	10	Fashion
12 - Tanvi	Female	VP - Business Development	23	Retail
13 - Sheetal	Female	Fashion Profile Creative	6	Fashion
14 - Kunal	Male	Digital Marketing Manager -	10	Fashion
15 - Jaya	Female	PR - E-commerce and Design	4	Fashion Retail
16 - Kanika	Female	Digital Designer	6	Fashion
17- Rini	Female	PR Team Head	12	Luxury Fashion
18 - Abhinav	Male	Fashion Communication	5	Retail and Online
19 - Bhawana	Female	Digital Content Manager	5	Fashion Blogger
20 - Aditi	Female	YouTube Manager	4	Fashion
21 - Gaurav	Male	Fashion Designer	8	Stylist/ Fashion
22 - Ritu	Female	Fashion Beauty & Portrait	3	Fashion & Personal
23 - Shaan	Male	Merchandising	7	Luxury Fashion
24 - Mohit	Male	App Developer	9	IT
25 - Nikhil	Male	Textile Designer	4	Fashion & Hospitality
26 - Ashi	Female	Personal Stylist	8	Individual
27- Puneet	Male	Retail Buyer	3	Retail
28 - Manish	Male	Operations Associate	7	Luxury Fashion Brand
29 - Sarth	Male	Store Display Artist	4	Multi-brand fashion store
30 - Fiza	Female	Fashion Advisor	5	Luxury Good Industry
31 - Manav	Male	Digital Assistant	11	Retail/Fashion
32 - Akash	Male	Color & Trend Manager	9	Fashion
33 - Atin	Male	Social Media Associate	4	Fashion
34 - Afshan	Female	Product Stylist	3	Fashion
35 - Vivek	Male	Account Manager	10	Fashion
36 - Prateek	Male	Studio Stylist	5	Fashion/Entertainment

1.5 Results

The semi-structured interviews were first transcribed to ensure no data is lost. The transcripts were then read number of times and analysed by using an inductive approach. The process aimed at picking up selective words from the respondent's answers and then coding them as per identified themes. Further, a cross case analysis was conducted to review the themes emerged from the responses. Following the refinement and extent of each of the topics, definitions and titles for each theme were created. The themes were identified based on the data and prior literature. Definitions of identified themes are presented in Table 2. Table 3 decodes the interactive media contact points extracted from interviews relating to the six identified themes.

Table 2 - Identified Themes and Definition

S.No.	Themes	Definition
1)	Informative	Interaction point where customers search for query/information about fashion brands.
2)	Promotional	Interactive promotional message from a retailer to a customer.
3)	Comparative	Interaction point where customers can compare two or more fashion products/brands.
4)	Communicative	Interactive communication (except - promotional) between a customer and a brand.
4.1	Direct	The direct online interaction between a customer and a fashion brand.
4.2	Indirect	The indirect online interactions that customers generally have with other customers about the brand.
5)	Process - oriented	Interactive media contact points that occur during the actions or steps of customer journey taken to achieve an outcome.
6)	Product - oriented	Interactive Media Contact points related to fashion brands' product description/information.

Table 3 - Thematic identification of Interactive Media Contact Points

Theme	Interactive Contact Point	Media	Example
<u>Informative</u>	Brand's Website		"Fashion brand's website is generally the first option I browse through if I am thinking of online shopping."
	Brand's Blog Page		"I generally look for the latest trends on brand's blog page."
	Brand's Official Facebook Page		"I definitely think that it makes a huge difference if a brand is present on Facebook, It influences my purchase more."
	Brand's Instagram Page		"Because I am following many bloggers and stylists on my instagram page, I tend to see some brand's posts and request for follow, which keeps me updated. I feel instagram is a good platform especially for fashion brands."
	Brand's presence on Youtube		"Recently, I was browsing on Youtube, when I see this advertisement in between which I wanted to skip but I couldn't as there was no option. It was of flash sale on H&M, and I actually purchased few tops because of the price."
	Brand's Twitter handle		"I get to see instant uploads and feedback by my favourite fashion brand modeled directly on twitter."
	Brand's Snapchat Stories		"I have recently joined this new social media streaming Snapchat for its crazy filters. And I was surprised to see the engaging stories that fashion brands are putting on this platform. From

		behind the scenes to their shoots to sales. I guess it is really gaining peaks."
	Brand's presence on Google +	"I mostly see premier fashion brands on Google+ displaying their fashion picks of the day and access to styles. It helps in adding circles and high end fashion brands always are pioneers in embracing all contact points."
	Brand's Mobile App/Website	"Have you ever thought of your wardrobe turning virtual and a personal stylist suggesting you what is the latest trend? Or for that matter which of your bottoms go best with your t-shirt? Not really right. Even I didn't. But see its up and running at my app as a result of digital revolution, what more to expect."
	Presence of brand on e-commerce websites	"With rapid global growth in e-commerce business, fashion brands are aiming to gain competitive advantage by increasing their presence. It gives fashion brands a comparison with other brands in the same category which influences my decision making as a customer."
<u>Promotional</u>	Brand's Search Advertisement	"I mostly find whatever I am looking for in the advertisements that appear right below search engine query result"
	Brand's Display Advertisement	"I always see ads online for NiravModi [Luxury Diamond Store]. Last night I was browsing net and saw a full-fledged commercial starring Lisa Haydon saying special Diwali sale is on now."
	Mobile Advertisement by brand	"I have not really clicked, but sometimes fashion brands displaying advertisements on app store also drive my attention"
	Online Sale on Brand	"I desperately wait for Forever 21[Fashion Brand] online sale message. It is generally mid-month and is quite genuine."
	Brand's Live Stories/ Updates	"Whilst now with so many upcoming events my posts and reviews go viral as they are live. Audiences have become more aware. Same goes from brand's perspective. Brands no more market to masses they have specific targets. New tools have brought better ways to engage."
	Brand's online campaign	"I look forward to campaigns, new product launches for making a purchase." "As a fashionista, what really drew my attention recently were fashion social networking sites - Roposso and Whoopl. What zomato and tripadvisor did with eat and travel, roposso and whoopl did for fashion retail. It provides me comparative trends, fashion ideas; comparative fashion stories and influences me to be a crazy shopper."
<u>Comparative</u>	Brand's presence on Roposso/Whoopl	"I am a cotton lover, inclined towards comfort clothing. As a blogger, I get really good response from customers on Pinterest. My posts for Kharakapas [Cotton Clothing Fashion Brand] get substantial number of pins from my readers in broadly named category - fashion."
	Brand's presence on Pinterest	"I am very loyal to Levis, when it comes to Jeans shopping because of the perfect fit. Also the SMS for end-of-season sales, and flat discounts motivate my purchase even more."
<u>Communicative - Direct</u>	Brand's Sale & Discount SMS	"I personally value it. I have so many model friends because of my profession, so I keep getting snapchat and instagram updates on latest fashion shows by ace designers - Manish Malhotra, Anita Dongre and I am interested in checking out their new collections and themes."
	Event/ Fashion Shows Updates by Brand	"Live chat button on a fashion website solves two purposes. Firstly it shortens the customer purchase cycle, since the doubts are cleared there and then. Secondly it reduces the cost of the contact center cost as average interaction will be lesser."
	Live Chat	

	Frequently asked questions	"I also look for FAQs sometime because I believe we all as customers have similar mindset so it solves your doubts."
	Loyalty & Membership Emails by brand	"Some websites force you to sign up for newsletters, and updates if you check these websites, so it is confirmed that you will keep getting emails from these brands whether you desire for it or not."
	Discount & Rewards Emails by brand	"Forever 21 is one of my favourite fashion brands. I get an email from them if they have a sale of 20% off or free shipping. So, that's always good, and I tend to go to the Forever 21 website more and buy more based on the fact that I get emails from them constantly reminding me."
	Informative Emails (Ex-Latest fashion trends etc.) by brand	"Sometimes I feel I am more interested in what's going on, what are the latest trending colors or fashion styles, or tips, I get emails from fashion brands but they are all discounts and sale, which becomes over the top sometimes."
	Cross/Up selling (Ex-Display of more product line) Emails by brand	"I recently ordered a shirt from Louis Philip online. I was little adamant as it was a 7k purchase. I received the parcel in 3 days, in a beautiful box well wrapped in a blue and white paper with a hand-written note which thanked me for shopping here and hoped that I enjoy wearing the shirt. They also put a 500 off voucher in the box for my next shopping. I am sure will surely purchase again from Louis Philip using this voucher."
<u>Communicative - Indirect</u>	Discussion of brand on forums and groups	"If I am looking for a product which is quite expensive, I look for it on different platforms."
	Brand's product reviews by bloggers	"When I read so many positive comments about the brand it definitely put me at ease, making me much more confident to shop with them."
	Reviews and feedback by other customers	"I read some good things about it from my online friends who said it is quite quirky, which I'm totally in to, so I thought I'd give it a try."
<u>Process - Oriented</u>	Brand's return/refund policy	"I liked the products, I ordered like crazy but I forgot to read the return refund. Trust me I suffered a huge loss, I had to bear a good sum of sending the packet back to the store and there was only one time refund possible. Ultimately, those dresses are just occupying space in my wardrobe."
	Payment Options	"It is always better to find all possible banks during checkout, although portals like paypal, paytm have made it very convenient these days but more the options better it is."
	Option of Cash on Delivery	"Option to pay on delivery has been in existence for long but was more popular with food items; it has now come in play for fashion industry for Indian audience. I think it is more inclined to cater homemakers and older people."
	Secured Payment Gateways	"I think I hardly check, but I am always advised by my male friends to look for ssl certificate on payment webpage because of increasing cybercrime."
	Delivery time and process	"The process was just too complicated. I also think that the slow delivery or poorly estimated delivery time put me off as well, which made me think that it would take like another month if the jeans didn't fit me."
	Customer Service / Contact Section	"I guess the most important of all is the customer service section when I am purchasing fashion online as I should know where the product will be delivered from and would provide me with a source where I can write to in case of any doubt."
	After sales service	"If I am buying a fashion accessory, I must check the after sales service, as it is essential."

Product - Oriented	Product's Size Chart	"I always find The Label Life [Online Lifestyle Store] a great place to shop because they have a good variety of products, categorized so well into evening-office-weekend sections, along with wide variety of sizes."
	360 degree product description	"If I am looking for shoes, I really tend to check out this new feature that has come in which is the 360 degree product video, it actually gets you to know the actual product."
	Virtual Mirror (Online Fitting & Trial)	"Virtual reality mirrors can record one's measurement and displays the actual fit on your mirror image whilst you not changing the clothes. Robotics and Virtual Reality will thus be like a magic wand for digital technology."
	Product Information	"My shopping is driven by the information; I am very specific with the material of the cloth being cotton only."

1.6 Findings

Through an inductive qualitative research approach, an in-depth holistic understanding of Interactive Media contact points was built. Based on the analysis a total of forty interactive media contact points were revealed from 36 interviews. The findings illustrated that contact points corresponding to informative theme are distinct elements of consumer online purchase journey consistent with past research (Park & Kim, 2003; Sham et al., 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). Research also supports that promotional theme corresponds to interactive media contact points of fashion brands. This could be explained by perception of online consumers; they consider online advertisements (search, display, mails) to be representation of their identity (Taylor, Strutton, and Thompson 2012). This study also revealed communication to be emerging as a distinct theme which can be explained in a manner that consumer's decision making is dependent on advice by peers and evaluating the quality of content conveyed to them (Shankar et al., 2003). Also the findings of the study revealed process and product oriented themes correspond to distinct interactive media contact points. Similar themes were revealed by (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016) (van Riel et al., 2012) while identifying customer experience touch points. Interactive media contact points associated with process-oriented theme explains that convenience in the process to achieve an outcome in this competitive marketplace is rated high by online customers. Similarly, product-oriented theme also emerged as crucial in support with (Hoch, 2002) research. It suggests that the consumers examine and evaluate product guide before purchasing. The research also suggests that there exists no set pattern of buying when it comes to online fashion, the interactive media contact points may arise at any stage and correspond to any theme.

1.7 Implications

In this qualitative research, interactive media contact points were explored with reference to fashion brands. Findings of this intricate research contribute to literature on contact points by revealing interactive media contact points which were uncovered in previous studies. The results of the research study offer managers a comprehensive learning on the pathway of an online fashion customer. The research study also discovered outcomes in terms of contact point mapping which can be implemented while designing marketing and communication strategies to attract customers. The identified interactive media contact points should be considered by fashion managers to gain a more holistic understanding of online customer journey. The study provides direction for scholars and practitioners to understand role of the customer as an active player in developing any fashion brand's digital marketing strategy as it is important for a brand to be persistently active across many interactive media contact points.

1.8 Limitation and Future Research

A general limitation of the study is that it is purely a qualitative research which is able to characterize and observe the pattern of existing interactive media contact points. However, is missing upon the effectiveness and relationship between the foresaid construct. Future research in the similar direction can thus test the relationship between interactive media contact points by measuring consumer

responses. Practitioners can create interactive media contact points map for fashion brands by examining the relationships between contact points that meet customer demands.

1.9 Conclusion

The research study has aimed to answer how new technologies have revolutionized the way fashion companies are interacting and engaging with their customers. It also takes into account how digital technology has altered the pathway of a fashion consumer journey. Drawing from the findings of the qualitative research it can be seen that the relevance of different interactive media contact points may vary for different consumers. Additionally, inter-relation between certain interactive media contact points was observed. Therefore, interactive media model must explore range of customer needs and focus on objectives of the fashion brand to design the best interactive media contact point map.

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