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Customer education in the fashion retail store setting: rethinking the retail function

Covid 19 has forced and accelerated an unavoidable shift in consumers' consumption habits by exponentially increasing the use of online platforms to shop. Yet, the physical retail store is still the main touchpoint to create and strengthen the relationship with consumers. Even more so after months of social distancing, the desire of customers to interact with and be entertained by brands has increased. Therefore, there is a unique opportunity for retailers to further explore the concept of omnichannel retail strategy towards redefining the retail function.

During the pandemic, customers have attempted to acquiring new knowledge, learning new abilities, experiencing new activities, developing DIY projects, and enjoying new hobbies. Retailers should build upon this desire to learn and create by providing unique educational offers aimed at strengthening their relationship with the customer via interaction and engagement (Bell, Auh, & Eisingerich, 2017; Gong, Wang, & Lee, 2021; Vigolo, Bonfanti, & Brunetti, 2019). Recent consumer trends indicate the store should become a place to solve problems and/or to increase understanding of the product and the brand (Hawkins & Scott, 2020). Yet, educational offers should not be limited to the product characteristics but should provide moments of a wider understanding of social, political, cultural issues. Consumers need micro-community shops more than big stores (Bishop, 2021) and are increasingly asking brands to stand for their declared values and positively contribute to the social fabric.

Physical retail stores could still promote the brand's products in a more curatorial form (Bishop, 2021), but mainly they should focus on providing unique educational services which will encourage customers to spend time in their retail space. Scholars have demonstrated that in-store communication is very effective also when regarding themes not strictly related to the brand's core business (Arrigo, 2018; Steils, 2021). Moreover, moments of knowledge acquisitions have proven to allow customers to experience an increase of self-confidence and self-consciousness (Mermiri, 2009), a sense of achievement (Arnould & Price, 1993), a feeling of self-discovery or self-renewal (Arnould & Price, 1993). All these emotional stages can influence a person's perception in a deep and long-lasting way (Grassi, 2020). When these are provided by a brand, a stronger bond is created with the customer and a deeper sense of loyalty is formed (Ahrholdt, Gudergan, & Ringle, 2019).

This paper contributes to the existing literature of consumer education in retailing by expanding into the specific domain of fashion, a domain in which many social issues could be successfully addressed but consumer education is still overlooked by researchers and brands. Based on an interpretive qualitative case study approach, a theoretical framework was created aiming to redefine the retail function by considering education as the key offer retailers should provide. To support the theoretical framework, Grawal's (2018) 5Es model was revised by putting education at centre stage. The other four elements of the framework (customer-centric mindset, excitement, experience, engagement) were reframed in order to inform the core element. Brands' websites, blogs, and comments on brands' social media platform were analysed to identify keywords and elements that are pivotal to create a customer-centric, exciting, and engaging educational retail experience in order to better frame the success of educational brand services.

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