

**LES INTERACTIONS PHYGITALES DE SERVICE !
PLUS OU MOINS DE CONNEXION SOCIALE ?**

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Les interactions phygiales de service ! Plus ou moins de connexion sociale ?

Résumé :

Partager un écran est aujourd'hui une pratique plus fréquente. Cette recherche vise à étudier les aspects sociaux de l'interaction phygiale de service en magasin. À la suite d'une revue de la littérature sur les interactions de service, les résultats d'une recherche qualitative exploratoire montrent que la posture "côte à côte" autour de l'écran peut engendrer des bénéfices sociaux si elle est orchestrée après une première interaction directe en face à face. En conséquence, des propositions sont exposées afin de former les équipes de vente à une utilisation adéquate de ces dispositifs digitaux lors de leurs interactions avec les clients.

Mots-clés :

« Partage d'écran » ; « Phygital » ; « Interaction de service » ; « Connexion sociale » ; « Vendeurs »

Phygital service interactions! More or less social connection?

Abstract

As sharing a screen with another person is nowadays a frequent social practice for different activities, this research aims to investigate the social aspect of phygital service interaction in store. After reviewing the literature on service encounters, this paper presents the results of a qualitative exploratory research. The results show that “side-by side” postures around the screen may generate social benefits when they are initiated after completing a first face-to-face direct interaction. As a result, propositions are draught to allow retailers to train their service teams on the proper manner to use their digital devices during their interaction with customers.

Keywords:

« Screen-sharing»; «Phygital»; «Service interaction»; «Social connection»; «Shop assistants»

Executive Summary

Sometimes considered as a “*means of reversing further high Street Retail Decline*” (Turner, and Corstorphine, 2020), the role of service encounter can be strategic for retail company. Furthermore, the interaction with shop assistants plays an important role as it creates satisfaction (Crosby et Stephens (1987) and brand memories (Flacandji, 2016). However, as shop assistants are increasingly equipped with digital devices, the nature of this interaction is changing.

This paper seeks to understand how the use of a digital device shared with customers by a shop assistant may modify the social interaction as perceived by the customers. Assessing how these new kinds of interaction “around the screen” are perceived by customers is important as customer's attrition depends, first at all, on the perception of the salesperson (N'Goala, 2007),

If research has been conducted on interactions “around the screen”, their sphere of investigation was mainly in a “private context”, i.e., with family and friends (Berrada, 2011, 2014; Durand-Megret, 2014; Roten and Vanheems, 2020). Contrarily, very few research has been conducted on such interactions when they occur with a shop assistant in the commercial sphere. This is in fact quite surprising as such an in-store service practice is rapidly developing (see pictures in figure 1 below). Some brands as Nordstrom refers to as a “co-shopping” service process.

To better understand the phenomenon of “*phygital interaction*” in the field of services, a qualitative research was conducted through semi-structured interviews. The content analysis highlights that a phygital interaction may strengthen social link, but also weaken it.

Therefore, retail managers need to be very careful when encouraging their service teams to use their device during their service encounters with customers. As a phygital interaction can be a double-edged sword, service teams should understand in which case it may generate potential social benefits or drawbacks. When the stores are more and more phygital, service representatives need professional trainings to optimize the relational aspects of the shared use of digital devices rather than only mastering their software.

Figure 1: Examples of phygital interactions in commercial settings



Images: Istock and Thinkstock

Introduction

Screens omnipresence in daily lives has generated new forms of interactions. Internet users are not always alone behind their screens (Kennedy et al., 2008; Zamaria et Fletcher, 2008) as they might be surrounded or accompanied by family and friends while surfing on their devices. If research have been conducted on interactions “around the screen”, they investigated them in a “private shopping context”, i.e., with family and friends (Durand-Megret, 2014; Roten and Vanheems. 2020). Whereas digital screens are more and more present in brick-and-mortar stores, and shop assistants equipped with digital devices, very few research have been conducted on these new forms of service interaction “around the screen” (Vanheems, 2013, 2018). So, the general research question of this paper focuses on understanding how the digitalization of brick-and-mortar stores affects the nature of the service interaction. As the role of service encounter is considered as a “*means of reversing further high Street Retail Decline*” (Turner, and Corstorphine, 2020), answering such question is even more critical when digital retail is growing. Thus, there is a need to assess how these new kinds of interaction are perceived by customers during the service encounter. Therefore, this paper aims to understand how the shared use of a digital device during a service encounter affect the customer’s perception of the interaction. More specifically, it investigates how sharing a same screen with a shop assistant modifies the customer’s perception of social link.

The paper is structured as follows. As this paper focuses on the social dimension of service interaction when shopping in a store, the literature review examines shortly the social dimension of shopping. Next, it reviews the social aspect of in-store service encounters before analyzing how the in-stores use of digital devices impacts the customer’s perception of social benefits. Then, the methodology of the exploratory qualitative research and its results are presented. Finally, theoretical and managerial recommendations are discussed as well as limitations and future avenues of research.

Literature review

1. When the "fun" of shopping is social

As early as 1972, Tauber revealed that the act of buying is not only rooted in utilitarian motivations (i.e., purchase of goods), but also on personal and social motivations. While personal motivations refer to diversion, self-gratification, learning about new trends, sensory stimulation, and physical activity, social motivations refer to social experiences outside the home, communication with others having similar interest, peer group attraction, status and authority, pleasure in bargaining, and in bargains (Tauber, 1972).

Twenty years later, Babin et al (1994) highlight a new hedonic dimension by stating that shopping is also about "fun". The hedonic dimension of shopping comes not only from sensory pleasure aroused by the atmosphere of the stores (Kotler, 1973), with its architectural and sensory components, but also from its social one. In fact, “fun” is also social, and the act of shopping may involve strong social value. Belonging and social status needs, pleasure in communicating and negotiating as well as role playing can also lead consumers to stores (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003). Nonetheless, social exchanges with other shoppers or with in-store service representatives represent a specific category of the customers’ potential social benefits, classified in Holbrook ‘s typology of consumer values (2006) as “extrinsic” and “other oriented”.

2. When service encounter is socially driven

Whereas shopping remains a social experience (Borges et al., 2010), service encounters hold a “first and foremost social” aspect (McCallum and Harrison, 1985, p. 35). Their social nature is clearly recognized as it involves a dyadic exchange between the shopper and the shop assistant (e.g., Brady, Voorhees, and Brusco, 2012; Price and Arnould, 1999).

Shop-assistants remain therefore an important part of the social surroundings of the store (Belk, 1975). They can fulfil customers’ social needs and provide social benefits through interpersonal attentive listening, understanding and empathy (Gwinner et al., 1998; Harrison et al., 2012; Lee & Dubinsky, 2017). While there is a successful interpersonal interaction during the service encounter, a dyadic “rapport” is generated (Gremler and Gwinner 2000) and the exchanges are perceived as more enjoyable and pleasant (Bradley et al., 2010).

3. When stores are becoming more digital: less social link?

While face-to-face service encounters clearly embed a social dimension, scholars have attempted to understand whether the numerous digital devices increasingly placed in stores may replace the social nature of service encounters (e.g., Coutelle, Rivière and Des Garets, 2013; Laparousse and Madrid-Vlad, 2016; Feenstra and Glerant- Glickson, 2017; Vanheems, 2021). When digital devices were firstly positioned in shopping malls, they were intended to help visitors to find their way and to localize stores in a more autonomous manner. Such devices providing information to customers were perceived as a substitute for service employees that were fewer and less available (Bonnemaizon et al., 2012). With the spreading of the digital devices available to customers in stores (i.e., information kiosk/ self-scanning, self-check-in, self-check-out/ store’s applications/ virtual mirror/ AR devices...), a new term emerged as a contraction of “physical” and “digital”. The “Phygital” term is nowadays frequently used in retail to describe the integration of digital devices and screens in physical stores (Klaus, 2021).

Phygital stores provide different shopping values to customers. They are supposed to grant the shoppers with more efficiency and more autonomy (Mencarelli and Rivière, 2014). However, their perceived value seems more utilitarian and cognitive than emotional (Bèzes, 2018). Research about the impact of digital device on social dimension shows contrasted results. While phygitalisation can create social value in fast-food (Vanheems, 2021), it can also generate a relational cost (Mencarelli and Riviere, 2014; Feenstra and Glerant- Glickson, 2017). In comparison with the positive effect of face-to-face service encounters (Meuter et al., 2000), phygitalisation may lead to a greater dehumanisation of the store environment (Coutelle, Rivière and Des Garets, 2013). In the tourism industry, research show a possible social-link destruction related to the use of digital devices to check in or check out (Giebelhausen *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, the valence of the social dimension expresses also a social-link sacrifice rather than only a social-link benefice (Laparousse and Madrid-Vlad, 2016).

4. When service encounter is phygital: more social link?

As digital devices in store may be used in an autonomous way by customers, they can be also handled during a service encounter. Whereas some research indicates that shop assistants may perceive phygital interactions with customers as facilitating new form of partnership and collaboration (Vanheems, 2013), customers may not always have the same perception (Roten and Vanheems, 2019). Even if some research have investigated co-shopping interactions around the screen, they were mostly centered within the private sphere, when relatives and friends share a screen during a shopping journey (Durand-Megret, 2014; Berrada, 2011, 2014; Roten and Vanheems, 2020, 2021). However, no studies have examined the social

link dimension of phygital interaction (i.e., sharing a screen) within the commercial frame of in-stores service encounters. In order to understand the social aspect of this phenomenon, an exploratory qualitative study has been conducted.

Methodology

To better understand the phenomenon of “service phygital interaction”, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The interviews were centred on screen-sharing situations with shop assistants. The respondents were asked about the social perceived benefits and costs of such phygital service interactions relatively to more traditional face-to-face interactions with service employees in stores and to the autonomous use of digital devices in stores (see the interview guide in appendix 2)

Eleven men and nine women, aged between 16 and 79, from various socio-economic classes, living in the provinces of France and in the Paris region, were interviewed (see the sample characteristics in Appendix 1). The interviews lasting between 35 to 55 minutes, were recorded and transcribed in full. The interview process stopped after reaching theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Then, a content analysis was performed manually, using both vertical (within respondents) and horizontal analysis (between respondents) in accordance with the methodological recommendations of various authors (Bardin, 1977; Evrard et al., 2009; Harwood and Garry, 2003; Malhotra, 2004; Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014). To confirm the reliability of the results, a double coded process was applied. The Perreault and Leigh’s (1989) interjudge reliability index confirmed high reliability,

Findings: the social effect of “phygital service interactions”

The research analyses how the sharing of a screen during a service encounter transforms the customer's perception of the social interaction. It highlights both the benefits and sacrifices it generates for the customers while interacting with shop assistants around a same screen.

1. When phygital interaction strengthens social link

The use of a digital device shared with shop assistants in store can create social value. It might be perceived as an “opportunity to actually look on a screen together and there actually, both of us will watch it” (C., 60). Even if the dimension of togetherness appears quite immediately, the consumers' social benefit seems conditioned by the quality of their first verbal interaction - “To check together (on the screen), yes, it can be positive, but at first, I would prefer that the person talk to me” (L., 48). This first verbal interaction seems to shape the readiness of the customer to share a screen with a sales assistant - “That's really, really depends on how it's brought in” (D., 24). This evaluation appears as a function of a quite intuitive social perception - “We have to want to share that moment with the person”(T., 48).

Then, only after a first social rapport has been initiated, phygital interactions may be perceived as “a time for exchange...”(D., 55), resulting in more equal social benefits. In fact, its perceived benefits are grounded on the desire to reproduce a homely togetherness ambiance- “If it's come like: 'I'll show you something interesting, nice, that's it and that's good, and I think that's good', and almost replicates the process we can do at home ...” (T., 48). The notion of family and homelike social wellbeing is omnipresent in the interviewees' motives - “Yeah but I think it's more homely like that! It's like in the family” (L., 56). Therefore, phygital interactions are

related to the feeling of togetherness- "searching and browsing together" (M., 60) and associated with expressions of carrying and concern - "He's just taking care of my purchase and he wants it done right and even in a pleasant manner" (P., 55). This expectation is redundant in the discourse of the respondents - "It shows that the seller is trying to search with me" (P., 55). Indeed, the interviewees mentioned terms like involvement, partnership, trustworthiness and relationship -"It gives me a sense of trustworthiness (...) we felt the person involved who also liked this relationship and what she was doing" (D., 55), highlighting a further step in the in the service coproduction. When the screen is open, its transparency eases the development of social based interaction. Based on a more equal side-by side physical position, it might even deepen the social rapport between the customer and the shop assistant -"There is a complicity in it" (T.48).

2. *When phygital interaction weakens social link*

Nonetheless, the fact that one can combine a mutual visual experience (looking together) with a verbal exchange (discussing together) while using one shared screen artefact exacerbates the social-link dimension not only positively. When sensed as a disguised social presence intended to activate misleading commercial pressure - "I'm afraid I'll change my mind; that they will try to orient me (to a specific brand)" (H., 60), social expected benefits to share a screen are hampered - "As soon as there is a little pressure, I flee out" (S., 59).

In addition, sharing a screen requires an increased attention to the shared contents as people "do not read at the same speed..."(M., 40). "The different timing that everyone has in the analysis of the content of the screen" (P., 55) lowers the perceived social benefits of a real exchange. It is also viewed as a "quickly annoying" (M., 40), "complicated", "not so pleasant" and even "confrontational" (P., 55) practice. Likewise, the presence of the screen during the interaction is sometimes perceived as a competitor on social attention. Since sharing a screen requires splitting personal attention – "But it's disturbing to have someone next to navigate so everyone has his ..., his point of view.... and when you are alone, you are focused..." (M., 63), it is sensed occasionally as competing with the exclusive attention one can look for in a social mutual activity - "Maybe not to see the screen, can promote a relationship with the seller ...?"(M., 18). The attention that needs to be given both to the screen, to the partner's discourse and to one's own thought may feel overwhelming and even generate social distance – "When there is such a competition, I tend to leave, to let the other do, to lose interest..."(P., 55). This sensation of "very cold" and "unfriendly" (T., 48) technical exchanges stemming from a lack of social attention, constitutes a social-link sacrifice that hinders the consumers' readiness to repeat such a phygital interaction with shop assistants ("I don't like it so much because it is a triangle that complicates relationships"[H., 60]).

Discussion, implications, and conclusion

Already in 2000, Bitner, Brown and Meuter, suggested that "*although service encounters have traditionally been conceptualized as "high-touch, low-tech," the infusion of technology is dramatically changing their nature*" (p.138). Nowadays, with the spreading of in-stores digital devices, phygital stores became more "*high-tech, low-touch*". In order to reinvent the physical social encounter and rapport building that is missing in the use of digital self-service in stores (Laparousse and Madrid-Vlad, 2016), service practices embedding phygital encounters appeared as a possible suitable option. However, the results of this qualitative exploratory research among consumers shows that phygital service interaction around a screen may exacerbate the social-link dimension of service both positively and negatively. In fact, it

endorses the concept of co-construction and co-destruction (Plé and Chumpitaz-Caceres, 2010) of social value as has previously been revealed in service research in a tourism setting (Giebelhausen *et al.*, 2014).

However, this study identifies antecedents that might explain this bivalent social effect. It shows that when customers are seeking for social link benefits, the first step of service encounter must remain a face-to-face interaction. Only in the next stage after social rapport is initiated, a side-by-side phygital service interaction can enhance it by reproducing similar social practices with friends and relatives. Then, during the side-by-side service interaction stage around the screen, bonding clues as direct gaze and smiling to the customer remain critical to build social rapport with customers (Gremler and Gwinner 2008).

Whereas a recent paper on the utilitarian dimension of such phygital service interactions in store (Roten, Vanheems and Laroutis, 2022) highlights the interest of considering it “as the conjunction of 3 determinants, individual, product/service, and situational context” (Evrard and Aurier, 1996, p.128), (i.e., the P.O.S. paradigm: Person, Object, Situation), the social-link dimension, on the other hand, emerges in this study as a function of the coproduction posture (Hilton, 2013) around the screen, meaning team work, social support and rapport between the partners as it exists in homey co-browsing practice (Vanheems, 2013; Roten and Vanheems, 2019). If successful, the personal recommendations of the shop assistant will be more credible as it stands as a direct function of the social connexion that customers may feel, quite similarly to the social support a consumer may feel when sharing a screen with a friend (Rippé *et al.*, 2018; Roten and Vanheems, 2020, 2021). However, if no social attention is given to the customer during the phygital encounter stage, the interaction will be perceived as a cold technical and quite asocial process. Awaking a perceived feeling of social support by giving the customer a feeling of partnership and coproduction (Grönroos, 2020) in the servuction process (Langeard and Eiglier, 1987) could prevent frustration and social costs during a phygital service encounter.

As a result, service managers need to be careful when encouraging their service teams to initiate phygital interactions with their customers. First, social link must be created in a classical direct face-to-face interaction. Only then, the service posture may evolve to a side-by side position around the screen. Then, during the phygital service encounter, the shop assistant will need to turn to the consumer and continue to grant him social attention, for example by checking that he can easily and comfortably see the contents at the screen, has the time to read them and feel not only a spectator in the co-browsing process. In sum, the connexion needs to be not only digital, but also social!

This study has some limitations. On a methodological perspective, interviews based on self-declaration may generate possible social desirability bias. Moreover, to limit the length of this article, the socio-demographics impact as gender (man/woman) and age differences (digital natives/immigrants) have not been described in this communication. Furthermore, the specific devices used for screen-sharing services have not been taken in consideration in this communication as it didn't significantly alter the social aspect of the interaction itself. However, future avenues of research could involve store's in-situ experimentations to add internal validity to the results of this research. Additionally, external validity should be enlarged through more recent data and future comparative studies among consumers from different countries. Finally, new avenue of research about phygital service interaction should quantitatively test (using a random sample) the relations between phygital service interaction and social benefits and costs.

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Appendix 1: Interviews sampling

Gender	Age	Birth place	Home town	Profession	Living situation
F	48	Togo- Africa	Paris	Psychologist	Married + children
H	18	Surenne	La Rochelle	Student	Bachelor, living with his parents
H	60	Surenne	Anthony	Architect	Married + children
F	39	La Rochelle	Bois Colombe (92)	Journalist	Divorced + children
H	38	Joinville Manche	Bois Colombe (92)	Journalist	Divorced
F	60	St Jean d'Angely	La Rochelle	Ludothecary	Married + children
H	23	Luxembourg	Saint Cloud(92)	Student	Bachelor - living alone
H	55	Paris	La Rochelle	Producer	Married + children
F	55	Luxembourg	Paris	Cartoonist	Divorced
F	60	Strasbourg	Paris	Teacher	Married
H	34	Strasbourg	Paris	Journalist	Married + children
F	27	Nice	Messe	Speech Therapist	Bachelor - living alone
H	56	Paris	Paris	Accountant	Married + children
H	48	Alger Algeria	Neully sur Seine	Surgeon	Living with his partner
H	56	Marseille	Courbevoie	Building keeper	Divorced + children
F	16	Paris	Palaiseau	School girl	Bachelor, living with his parents
H	78	Reaux - Charente Maritime	La Rochelle	Retired	Married + children
F	79	Déllys - Algeria	La Rochelle	Retired	Married + children
F	63	Casablanca Marroco	Issy-les-Moulineaux	Accountant assistant	Married + children
H	39	Strasbourg	Issy-les-Moulineaux.	Communication / Education	Married + children

	<u>Men</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Bachelor</u>	<u>Married + children</u>	<u>Divorced + children</u>	<u>Divorced</u>	<u>Retired</u>
	11	9	4	5	5	4	2
<u>Percentage</u>	55%	45%	20%	25%	25%	20%	10%

Appendix 2: Interview guide

1. Presentation and Method

2. Part One - Open Interview - Non-directive and narrative (Store service experience)

3. Part Two - Semi-structured

Theme A: The service interactions with shop assistant in stores

Theme B: The use of digital devices in store (From narrative to projective)

Theme C: Experiences of screen sharing services with shop assistants in stores (From narrative to projective)

4. Remarks, conclusion and thanks