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Personalisation: a consumer culture perspective in online fashion consumption

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Summary: This development paper offers initial exploratory discussion with the aim of providing a theoretical contribution to the phenomenon of personalisation through conceptualisation from a UK consumer perspective.

The rationale for the paper is that current conceptualisations of personalisation are from a producer perspective and emphasise the importance of relevance to the consumer to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. This perspective falls short in articulating what personalisation means for the consumer and explaining motivations for engagement with it.

In proposing Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) as the lens for exploring personalisation, discussion takes place as to the links between personalisation, extended self and consumption in the culturally constituted world.

The paper concludes by offering next steps in the study which include further literature review, methodological design and pilot studies.

Introduction

While the concept of personalisation is intuitive, it is also very slippery (Fan and Poole, 2006). The term personalisation has gained traction as a buzzword in marketing and across industries such as retail, education and healthcare. In each of these areas, personalisation exists as a transcendental concept for which to be strived; reasoning being that persons crave and derive benefits from things that are more relevant to them (see Meyer-Waarden, 2013; Piccoli et al., 2017; Vilares et al., 2006). Personalisation appears straightforward, but frequently beliefs differ amongst consumers of what is personalised and what is generic (Li, 2016), and also when personalisation used by organisations is ineffective or not always perceived by consumers as a good thing (Shen and Ball, 2009).

While a number of definitions and interpretations of personalisation exist, there seems little research of what personalisation is from the perspective of consumers. The aim of this research therefore, is to provide a theoretical contribution to the phenomenon of personalisation through conceptualisation from a consumer perspective. In particular, investigation is to take place with the objective of understanding the roles of self and culture in how young UK fashion consumers recognise personalisation online and subsequently engage with it.

Personalisation is either *by* or *for* a person (Kuksa and Fisher, 2017). In this view, personalisation concerns the practice of adapting something to meet the unique, individual requirements of a person. The process of personalisation is either carried out by a person (I personalise for myself), or for a person (someone personalises on my behalf). The concept of personalisation is not new, but due to growing technological capabilities, interest towards it in online contexts is increasing. In the area of online personalisation, studies up to now have focused upon the technical mechanisms that enable tailoring to an individual, or quantitatively measuring the effects that such tools have on the behaviours of consumers (see De Keyser *et al.*, 2015; Ho *et al.*, 2011; Liang *et al.*, 2006; 2009). Such studies therefore offer the what of consumer behaviour in personalisation but offer little explanation as to the why.

In understanding online personalisation from a consumer perspective, Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is offered as a framework. CCT denotes a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). With personalisation existing within a socially constructed and networked world, it is speculated that is influenced by a complex system of influences such as consumption settings, local culture and individual's past experiences. Within CCT Belk (1988) postulated that possessions (tangible and intangible) can both literally and symbolically extend the self, so that we are defined by what we have and what we do. In updating the extended self for a digital world in 2013, Belk went on to state that the concept of a core inner self is an illusion. From this position of extended self, situated within CCT, we may be able to hypothesise links to personalisation and how personalisation is recognised and engaged with by consumers.

Rather than conceiving personalisation in terms of data points, characteristics and relevance, a greater emphasis in understanding why something is recognised as personalised is needed. In a divergence from focusing on dimensions or categories from a producer perspective, this study aims to conceptualise personalisation from the perspective of consumers and the cultures within which they exist. In working towards this aim, explanation of the current incongruence experienced by consumers in instances when they recognise that personalisation has failed, can be found in McCracken's (1986) and Belk's (1988) assertions that identity and culture are dynamic, unstable and continually changing. This is to say that because a consumer once preferred something, it does not provide certainty they will prefer it in the future.

In the socially constructed world, meanings and understandings of objects and processes are imparted by cultures that we are a part of (McCracken, 1986). Objects themselves are inanimate and hold no inherent meaning or agency. The way that something comes to be recognised and experienced as being personalised therefore is influenced by the sense of self a person holds and the culture(s) they are part of. In a consumption context, for something to be personalised, what is not important is the relevance that another agent places upon the object of personalisation, but the relevance to their self that the consumer being personalised places upon it.

Although other conceptualisations of self exist, such as the expanded self (Aron and Aron, 1986) and multiple narrative selves (Ahuvia, 2005), in this study the view of extended self is taken in which self is aggregated through what we have and what we do (Belk, 1988; 2013). Fashion provides the context as clothing facilitate ways for us to display our identity and sense of self within a culture (Entwistle, 2000). Fashion not only enables a way for a person to identify as being part of, or subverting, a certain culture. Acknowledging that identity co-exists with cultures, meaning is culturally and personally constructed, and subsequently applied to what we have and what we do.

Numerous personalisation tools exist in online fashion. There are opportunities for store and brands to personalise offerings to consumers on websites, or through various communications channels. Consumers are also able to personalise, curate and share their own style and identity through social networks such as Pinterest and Instagram.

As this study develops it will explore how our sense of self and the cultures we seek to subvert or be part of influence our engagement with personalisation. One avenue of inquiry may be whether consumers interact differently dependent on the importance they place on fashion in their sense of self.

Future steps

Personalisation, self and culture are individually complex areas of study, and even more so when combined as is proposed above. In taking this research forward, further in-depth review of the literature is needed to draw together the links between personalisation, online, self, culture, consumption and fashion in order to narrow the focus of the study.

Alongside this, methodological design should take place. It is currently envisaged that study will be exploratory (inductive) in nature through in-depth interviews. Rather than producing results that are generalisable to a large population and bound by statistics, research will interpret and validate data collected within a qualitative methodology, across a cross-section of individuals in the UK.

Once appropriate questions have been devised from the current literature, and consideration given to the most effective ways for these to be answered, it is anticipated a pilot study will take place. Pilot studies are a crucial element of a good study design. Whilst, conducting a pilot study does not guarantee success in the main study, it does increase the likelihood (van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001).

The objectives of the pilot study will be to:

- Enable the researcher to become more familiar in the data collection method
- Develop and test the adequacy of the research methods
- Assess the proposed data analysis techniques to uncover potential problems
- Identify areas of interest previously unknown to the researcher.

Conclusion

This paper articulates a current problem in personalisation being that it is predominantly conceptualised from a producer perspective to advance business objectives. In order to better understand it as a phenomenon, including the dangers and opportunities that it poses, conceptualisation from a consumer perspective is needed. Personalisation does not occur naturally but exists within a socially and culturally constructed world.

In identifying links between extended self and consumption within a framework of CCT, we may be able to understand the role of how personalisation is recognised and engaged with by consumers in online fashion contexts.

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