

Tracing Smartphone-Enabled Customer Journeys

—

A Socio-Material Approach

Patrik Stoopendahl

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Textile Management at the University of Borås will be publicly defended Wednesday, May 8, 2024, 1:00 PM in the room Vestindien, University of Borås, Sweden.

Opponent

Jens Hultman, Professor at Kristianstad University, Sweden

The grading committee

Hans Kjellberg, Professor at Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden

Anna Karin Olsson, Associate Professor at University West, Sweden

Maria Frostling-Henningsson, Associate Professor at Stockholm University, Sweden



THE SWEDISH SCHOOL
OF TEXTILES
UNIVERSITY OF BORÅS

Abstract

This doctoral thesis delves into the transformation of the customer journey—that is, the direct and indirect interactions between a customer and retailer over time—in the smartphone era. Using a socio-material perspective, it goes beyond current visions of the customer journey, which often focus on emotions and experiences, and instead explores how agency is distributed across elements that include consumers and their relationship with their smartphone as a device and a gateway to a digital market infrastructure. The research employs phone metering and interviews with informants to obtain insights into how individuals interact with their smartphones throughout their customer journeys, in what is known as “trace ethnography.” This approach unveils three modes of a contemporary customer journey: exploring what to buy, access to instant shopping entertainment, and smartphone-enabled purchasing. The thesis also demonstrates the influential roles played by three key enablers: the social actor, the brand, and the product. Moreover, it explores how customer journeys are integrated into daily life as consumers initiate and pause their customer journeys. Furthermore, it examines how customer journeys can intertwine. These findings reveal the intricate web of interconnections underpinning contemporary customer journeys as they unfold.

This thesis introduces a perspective on smartphone-enabled consumers as hybrid actors who challenge traditional notions of sequentiality and phases in their customer journeys. This perspective leads to a nuanced understanding of agency as being distributed across a network of interconnected elements. Central to this thesis is the concept of “self-marketing,” which elucidates how customers use smartphones to assemble personalized marketing experiences, blurring the lines between traditional touchpoints and user-generated “marketing scenes.”

In summary, this thesis posits that customer journeys are elaborate. While emotions and experiences continue to play crucial roles in customer journeys, the findings show that the actions taken are partly shaped by the digital device and the digital market infrastructure, which are accessed daily. The distribution of agency across a network of elements underscores the transformative potential of smartphones within contemporary customer journeys. The conclusions drawn from this research offer a socio-material view of these journeys, highlighting their complexity and dynamic nature, and emphasizing the active role of consumers in partly shaping their own experiences. These insights collectively enrich our understanding of the customer journey, providing perspectives and opportunities for researchers and businesses alike.

Keywords

Customer journey, Socio-material perspectives, Trace ethnography, Agency, Smartphone

Title: Tracing Smartphone-Enabled Customer Journeys—A Socio-Material Approach

Language: English

Available at: <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:hb:diva-30919>

ISBN 978-91-89833-31-9 (printed)

ISBN 978-91-89833-32-6 (PDF)

ISSN 0280-381X, Skrifter från Högskolan i Borås, nr. 146