

Re-intermediation in the Fashion Industry: A Qualitative Study on Brokers in the Dongdae-mun Fashion District

Min-Joon Kim¹, Nuri Na¹, Joong-Seek Lee¹

¹Seoul National University, Korea

Abstract

Traditionally, middlemen had a large role in physical markets, serving as intermediaries by evaluating and distributing products. However, the rise of online markets and intermediaries have diminished their roles. This study investigates the change of intermediaries' roles in the presence of infomediaries, and the conditions that necessitate the re-introduction of the middlemen as "re-intermediaries". We observed a group of brokers who work in the Dongdae-mun (DDM) fashion district in Seoul, Korea through multiple qualitative research methods including observations, contextual inquiries, and in-depth interviews. Our findings show that the reliability and depth of information relayed by human sources, along with the subjective nature of fashion have contributed to the brokers playing a major role again, despite infomediaries. The DDM fashion district relies heavily on the brokers' evaluations on trends, fashion, and product popularity, in addition to their traditional role of distributing goods in a quick manner.

Keywords: Intermediary; Infomediary; Human Agent; Re-intermediary; Human Factors in Information

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Contact: jseo@snu.ac.kr

1 Introduction

The concept of 'intermediary', which refers to a third party that offers intermediation services between two parties, has been a necessity in many fields for a long time. It has been noted by business historians that the entrance of the professional trader at the end of the Middle Ages was an important driving force for the development of the society(Heilbroner, 1962). These traders have now become real-estate agents, car dealers, and fund managers; the intermediaries in our society(Chircu & Kauffman, 1999). In the marketing domain intermediaries are commonly known as brokers, who act as functional middlemen. The marketing literature identifies "functional middlemen", whose principle business is "specializing in performance of one or more specific marketing tasks, especially those concerned with negotiation. Their compensation is in the form of a commission or fee for a service rendered, NOT a profit on the sale of goods."(*Marketing Channels*, 1982). At least some form of intermediary contact is used in the process of providing nearly every good and service in the economy(Hackett, 1992). For this reason, intermediaries are very important players in the market. Both consumers and producers benefit heavily from the roles of middlemen, who ensure that there is a seamless flow of goods in the market by matching supply and demand(Bailey & Bakos, 1997). Buyers also gain from the services of intermediaries in forms of promotion and delivery(Olsson, Gadde, & Hulthen, 2013). The role of intermediaries, however, have been reduced and altered significantly with the advance of information technology(Howells, 2006).

The Internet has brought the middleman to the digital space(Ordanini & Pol, 2001). A new word combining 'information' and 'intermediaries' has been invented to properly capture its role and place. Fisher defines "information intermediaries or infomediaries" as who are "concerned with enabling access to information from multiple sources and engaged in informing, aggregating, compiling, and signaling information."(Fisher, 2010). Traditional intermediaries were simply human agents who took on the task of collecting and dispersing information and products relevant to the market(Snehota & Gadde, 2001). Infomediaries are able to do this on a much broader scale with high efficiency: infomediaries are machine, after all(Malone, Yates, & Benjamin, 1987). Compared to traditional intermediaries, infomediaries have a huge advantage in reachability and accessibility. For example, local used-car dealerships cannot simply compete with infomediaries like cars.com.

The increasing information accessibility of the general public is pushing intermediaries obsolete (Gellman, 1996).

Despite these trends, at the Dongdaemun (DDM) Fashion District in South Korea, offline traditional intermediaries absorb the infomediary role and become highly specialized to the level where they become a necessity for the market to function and thrive. Technology and the Web are replacing intermediaries, but these human agents have found a way to adapt by taking on additional tasks like gatekeeping and coaching on top of traditional intermediary roles. In order to further investigate this new human-infomediary we use observations, contextual inquiries, and in-depth interviews to address the following questions:

- RQ1. How did the roles of human agents change with the arrival of infomediaries?
- RQ2. What are the information characteristics and areas of human intermediaries that infomediaries are not able to replicate?

The rest of the paper is organized in six sections. In Section 2, we provide further explanation of the DDM Fashion District, the human-infomediary that we will call as brokers, and the relation that this human-infomediary has with the market and potential customers. Based on these observations, we detail our research methodology and approach in Section 3. Findings and results from the research are presented in Section 4, followed by the discussion of our contributions and expandable issues in Section 5. Lastly, our work is summarized and concluded in Section 6.

2 Background

2.1 The Dongdaemun Fashion District and Korean Fast Fashion

The Dongdaemun (DDM) Fashion District can be traced back to 1905, where local shops took in and modified uniforms and blankets from US G.I.s in the outskirts of Gwangjang Market. The assembly of the Pyunghwa Market in 1961 laid the first stone of the fashion district, enabling the market to grow in size and quality. The building of the Art Plaza in 1990, and the following construction of the Milliore Building in 1998 has pushed the market to even further heights. The market now is a booming center for all things clothing, from wholesale to retail businesses (Hong, 2007). This was possible because the DDM Fashion Market naturally integrated a steady production infrastructure as well. Fabric, subsidiary materials, and sewing machines are all present inside the fashion district, and it is this link that has allowed DDM to be what it is today (Lim, 2010). With over 30 million wholesale stores producing multiple products in batches, DDM is considered to be *the* place for fashion design, production, merchandising, and distribution in Korea (Choi, 2013).

The closely-knit relation between wholesale stores and fabric/sewing factories allows the fashion district to speed up its production cycle. While it can be said that DDM's multi-item batch production is similar to fast fashion, the nature of the two are vastly different (Lim, 2010). Represented by brands such as ZARA and H&M, fast fashion is spear-headed by big companies that design, produce, and distribute small amounts of trendy clothing over a short period of time. In contrast, wholesale merchants inside the DDM Fashion District are mostly consisted of four to five people and utilizes a Quick Response (QR) system: When a designed product falls out of favor, production is stopped immediately and production becomes geared towards more popular clothing (Lee, 2010). For example, if a dress worn by world-famous actress Song Hye-gyo in the Korean drama "Descendants of the Sun" is gaining popularity, multiple versions of the dress will be out on display the very next day in the DDM Fashion District. Merchants and designers are able to get real-time feedback from customers, and production is always flexible and fast-paced (Park, 2012).

The incorporation of internet technology has further accelerated the already-fast manufacturing process. Internet shopping is huge in Korea. According to a market research in 2013, Korea's online market boasts 35.7 billion dollars in market share and is continually growing (Kim, 2013). There are orders to be made and delivered, and with Korea's busy cultural repertoire (e.g. The "hurry hurry" mindset) and exceptionally accessible geographical characteristics (a small nation, where traveling from one end to another takes only eleven hours), there are expectations in parcel delivery time (two business days) that must be met (Kang, 2010). At the DDM fashion district, brokers make sure that deliveries from big wholesale stores to smaller retail stores are carried out almost instantly.

2.2 Human Agents and Infomediaries

The definition of intermediaries are especially covered in the field of marketing and business. While the roles of intermediaries have changed over the course of history, the more traditional roles can be boiled down to three main dynamics of traders, distributors, and providers (Snehota & Gadde, 2001). Initially, intermediaries were big as traders. The lack of specialties of other occupations required intermediaries to be a jack-of-all-trades professional (Heilbroner, 1962). Traders were able to connect customers to products, and products to customers by the sharing of information (Ramírez, Parthasarathy, & Gordon, 2013). This intermediary bridges the gap between markets, facilitating interaction among its members (Bayer, Geissler, & Roberts, 2011). This used to be the primary role of the intermediary, until the subsequent development of production technologies that came with the industrial revolution pushed intermediaries from traders to distributors and providers.

Intermediaries acting as distributors during and after the industrial revolution helped producers push the sudden uptick of production to customers. As more and more products were readily available, it was up to the intermediary to push the products so that the market would generate a flow (Malone et al., 1987). Intermediaries were able to serve multiple manufacturers, and some would start focusing on certain products that was better suited to their customers. This manufacturer's perspective of the middleman is what previous studies mainly mention about intermediaries (Olsson et al., 2013). The reverse would also be applicable, with the intermediary delivering the wants and needs of the customers to the manufacturers. The manufacturers would then again provide the goods that the customers have demanded. A cycle was created and maintained by intermediaries (Malone et al., 1987). This too, however, would change with the a new wave of technology.

Technology and the changing of times have definitely forced intermediaries to change in order to survive. It can be argued that the most drastic changes have come with the rise of information technology (IT) in the 1900s (Hagel & Singer, 1999). A new digital intermediary called infomediaries came into being armed with a vast information pool that would surely outperform traditional middlemen (Bakos, 1998). IT allowed the customer to be able to contact the producer directly, establishing a direct contact which left out the middleman and the services they brought (Vandermerwe, 1999). IT also introduced a better control of material flows, further diminishing the roles of intermediaries (Hagel & Singer, 1999). Bleak consequences were observed, with even some scholars arguing that "many intermediaries will die out" (Pitt, Berthon, & Berthon, 1999). This process was even coined the term dis-intermediation by Gellman (Gellman, 1996).

However intermediaries not only did not disappear, but also have took on more specified roles. Infomediaries and intermediaries would exist in harmony, unlike the unpromising predictions of many scholars. This phenomenon is equally observed in the DDM Fashion District. Here, wholesale and retail merchants have access to an infomediary known as the "New Products Market". This is where all newly designed clothing are uploaded for ease of viewing and ordering. Once an order is placed through this website, it is up to intermediaries to deliver the products between retail and wholesale stores. It may seem as a simple job and that the intermediary's role has been reduced, but as the investigation shows below that is not the case. It turns out that intermediaries have a strategic and important role within the market such that the fashion district may not function without them.

3 Research Method

The investigation was carried out over a three-month time period in three distinctive stages, starting from April to June of 2016. The participants of this study are working or had experience working as a broker at the DDM Fashion District. After an initial observation period of two weeks, contextual inquiry interviews were conducted with the research team following a broker throughout his workday. Final in-depth interviews were conducted as the last step. A detailed description of each stage is as below.

3.1 Observations

A two-session observation period was held over two weeks at the DDM Fashion District. Observations were carried out in order to have a better idea of how the fashion district operated. Each session lasted over the entire work "night" (DDM brokers work schedule starts late evening, around 8pm and finishes around 9am), minus the last two hours where the main workload is finished and delivery packages are prepared. The

first observation session was focused on the fashion district itself, with the people surveyed having included brokers as well as retail and wholesale merchants, as shown in the figures below. The second observation session was geared towards the merchants. Observation sessions were conducted in a non-intrusive manner.



Figure 1: Observation Photos - Conducted in a non-intrusive manner, the researchers did on-the-field research on the DDM fashion district.

3.2 Contextual Inquiry

We conducted two contextual inquiry (CI) interviews with two current brokers. CI interviews were conducted in order to better understand the daily routines of brokers, and to find out first-hand the process of information exchange. Due to the nature of the brokering job, it was only possible to conduct contextual inquiries with one person at a time. Each CI lasted over the entire work schedule, which ranges from eight to ten hours. Each CI session was conducted by following a broker over the course of the interview. Both researchers participated fully as an apprentice to the broker, and took part fully in ordering, delivering, and conversing tasks as shown in Figure 2. Permission was granted to follow and film the broker during his work routine, and the footage was then analyzed and transcribed.



Figure 2: Contextual Inquiry Photos - Researchers dressed in appropriate fashion and followed a broker throughout the market.

3.3 In-depth Interviews

A total of six individuals were available for in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted to obtain detailed information that we could not gather from observations and CIs, and to hear about their perspective

directly. Due to the rather spontaneous nature of the brokers' work schedule, we were able to conduct three face-to-face interviews after hours in groups of two. Four individuals currently work as a broker at the DDM fashion district, and the remaining two have had prior experience working as a DDM broker. The interviews conducted were based on semi-structured guidelines, and were recorded under the participants' agreement. The recorded interviews were then transcribed.

4 Findings

Our findings show that brokers who work in the DDM fashion district have a unique work schedule, with the use of digital devices versus pen and paper strictly divided between the time and kind of task. This divide proves to be a deciding factor in the brokers' dual-role as an intermediary and infomediary. For better understanding, we first start off with providing a detailed view on what a typical workday for a DDM broker is like.

4.1 Work Routine

The typical work schedule of a broker at the DDM fashion district starts in the evening at around 8pm. Brokers check into their office and fire up their computers. As shown in Figure 3, the first task for them is to check their email and KakaoTalk¹ accounts for orders. Orders are mostly based off of items listed in the "New Arrivals Market". Experienced brokers organize orders by grouping them by wholesale dealers while at the same time considering their route around the fashion district. Unfortunately for the newcomers, most of them figure out their routes for collecting by trial and error. The phones are busy as the brokers start calling wholesale merchants to relay the order sheet. Jargons and expressions unique to the fashion district is a must when placing orders. After a row with the phones and emails, the brokers are ready to head out to the street. They take their printed-out order sheet along with pen and paper and head out to retrieve the goods.



Figure 3: Work routine of a broker - Brokers take in and organize orders in their offices before going out to retrieve the goods. After taking care of the returns and orders, the products are delivered to the retailers, all before the end of the night.

"I do use computers, but it's mainly before I go out on my run. I capture parts of the orders from the retailers and send them to the respective wholesale merchants using KakaoTalk. I'm basically telling them to prepare the items so I can grab them quickly. This is because it's so difficult to do so when I'm out running and retrieving the goods." <P01>

Before they head on out and tackle the orders, they must deal with the enormous amount of returns. As mentioned earlier, the fashion district runs on the fast-paced quick response (QR) system, and many retailers end up returning a good amount of the orders they placed a few days ago. In order to avoid confusion,

¹KakaoTalk is a free mobile Instant messaging application for smartphones with free text and free call features. It is the most popular instant messaging application in Korea.

the brokers tend to take care of the returns first, and then proceed to their daily order list. If the number of returns is too high, returning and retrieving orders are done simultaneously; they must finish their order list before sunrise, when the orders are loaded on to trucks and delivered to retailers before the start of the work day.

Brokers at the DDM fashion district have to take care on average a thousand orders per shift. These orders are spread out over the entire fashion district and it is all too common for brokers to climb up and down tall buildings and even retrace their paths. The sheer amount of orders and complicated navigation of the market requires brokers to be smart and diligent, while also having the strength to take on the daunting size of orders — A single order may even weight up to 10 kilograms. For this reason, it is extremely rare to see women working as brokers in the DDM.

“At first, I only ran through the lists in whatever order they appeared on my sheet. Now that I have experience, I can see the list of wholesalers and somewhat calculate the shortest path I can take. I also take into account the number of items from each store, so I don’t overload and slow myself down.” <P02>

Because the need of both hands is critical, digital devices such as phones and tablets are usually put away. In contrast to popular belief, it is much more cumbersome for the brokers to work while recording on their phones. This is why the use of pen and paper is preferred by brokers. Things are done and recorded in *their* way instead of a standardized digital input. They incorporate wireless headsets to free up their hands during their runs, and their use of digital devices remain strictly to phone calls — activities that do not require the use of hands. After each building is cleared of orders, brokers take the goods to a centralized pick-up location and head off to tackle the next batch of orders. It is interesting to note that no monetary transactions happen when the brokers pick up the products from the store. Costs are taken care of after the day is over, and little to none is recorded, with verbal exchanges being the majority of confirmations.

“It’s quite difficult for me if I have to take or give I.O.U.s during my shifts. So I try to push and pull the merchants a bit, depending on what their personalities are. Sometimes I’ve got to be stern, and sometimes I’ll let some things slide.” <P03>

“First, I need all my hands, and second, it’s really hectic as it is. I’ve tried calling a few times using a Bluetooth headset, but other than that it is really difficult to use a digital device when doing work. I’ve got to trust my instinct and experience.” <P02>

It is through these runs where the exchange of information takes place. When returning items, brokers give feedback to the merchants on the clothes’ quality, design, price, and so on. When taking in the goods listed on the orders, the brokers learn about the fashion trends and can also give tips to retailers who put in orders about what is trendy and how many of an item should one order. This kind of information is crucial for the broker to expand his customer list, and also helps in matching retailers to wholesale merchants in the possible future.

When the night is almost over and all the goods are collected, they are loaded onto a truck and shipped to the retailers before the start of the work day. Retailers are now able to deliver the goods to their customers on time. However, work is not finished for the brokers. They need to organize and balance their order list, and after that their work “day” can be finished. The brokers are a bridge to many wholesale merchants and retailers — relations with each and every customer has a direct impact on the business of each broker. Having a good reputation is essential to acquiring new retail customers and also trust. If a broker has a good relationship with wholesalers, they may be able to get free “samples” from time to time. Having a possible demo item before an official product launch proves to be vital help in securing new lines of business.

4.2 New Roles for Brokers

In regards with the first research question of this investigation, we have found that in addition to the three traditional roles of intermediaries — traders, distributors, and providers — an additional two roles can be identified: one as a matchmaker, and the others as a gatekeeper. The three traditional tasks are carried out much of the same way as mentioned above in Section 2. While there may not be an exact “trader” role

for the DDM brokers, the distributor and provider are very much alive. Both parts cannot be explained separately, as they are closely-knit together and function as a two-way street. The main difference is that distributing tends to be a physical task, while providing tends to be informational. Brokers as a distributor can be observed when brokers are physically collecting the items ordered by the retailers and gathering them up at a loading zone. On the other hand, during the process of collecting and organizing orders, the brokers are able to learn about the most recent trends in the people's taste in fashion. This process is diagrammed in Figure 4. In turn, the provided information is reflected on the next batch of newly designed clothes made by the wholesale merchants, fulfilling the duty of the provider.

“I am constantly in touch with my retail clients, so it's easy for me to know the current customer trends. If there's a particular style or product that is ordered from multiple stores, I can see what is popular.” <P04>

“Talking to the popular stores, the big ones especially, is usually a good measure to see what is popular. The wholesalers can't really get this information, so I forward these along to my customers.” <P05>

The same can be said when orders are being returned to the wholesalers. Returned products represent a change in people's fashion, whether it is due to seasonal changes or just simple fads fading out. The information going back towards the wholesalers show brokers acting as providers. Wholesale merchants are able to decipher the wants and needs of the market based on both orders and returns. In addition, both wholesale merchants and retail shops This influences the DDM's quick reaction system on fashion, and due to the quick deliveries made by the brokers, the market is able to adjust and adapt to the market in a short period of time.

“If there are products that are returned at a high rate, I call up my customers to see what the issue is. I also take a look at the products to see if I can find the problem. Then on my return trips I tell the wholesalers what the problem is.” <P04>

It is not only the wholesalers and retailers that benefit from this information. The brokers are the ones taking orders and returns, which makes them aware of the fashion business as well. First, by dealing with numerous clients and taking care of countless orders, the brokers are able to have a better understanding of trends of the market. When retailer puts in seemingly outdated orders, brokers are able to step in and give appropriate feedback to the client. The same goes with the quality of the clothing. Brokers obtain various feedback on the clothes' fabric, quality and design from the returns by retailers. The retailers provide which piece of clothing is satisfactory and which is not, along with the specific reasons. By combining the details, the brokers themselves are able to function as a gatekeeper, introducing a more direct quality check in the DDM fashion district.

This process pushes the boundaries of intermediaries, and with the additional knowledge, brokers are given a new role as Gatekeepers within the DDM fashion district. Not only do they function as a gatekeeper, controlling the ins and outs within the market, they also act as middlemen, brokering and linking new retailers to the appropriate wholesale merchants. Brokers can coach new businesses how to approach the fashion district and also give plenty of advice. Gatekeeping and coaching roles help expand the DDM fashion district's market size, and their traditional intermediary activities help in sustaining the market. Their contributions often go beyond their roles of brokers. Armed with the knowledge gained from working as a broker, they move on and take on a different job in the market, perhaps as a wholesaler or retailer. Their network in the fashion industry serves them well.

“At DDM there are so many shops, selling all kinds of different styled clothing, so it is difficult for newcomers to choose a wholesaler to buy from. We do the searching for them, because we know a lot more about the market than they do. We practically live here.” <P05>

“I've been working as a broker for seven years, and I'm still working as one, but I've started a side-job last year. My wife is working as a designer now, and we're running a small wholesale designer shop. Because of my experience and I know many people around the market, it was relatively easy to start this.” <P02>

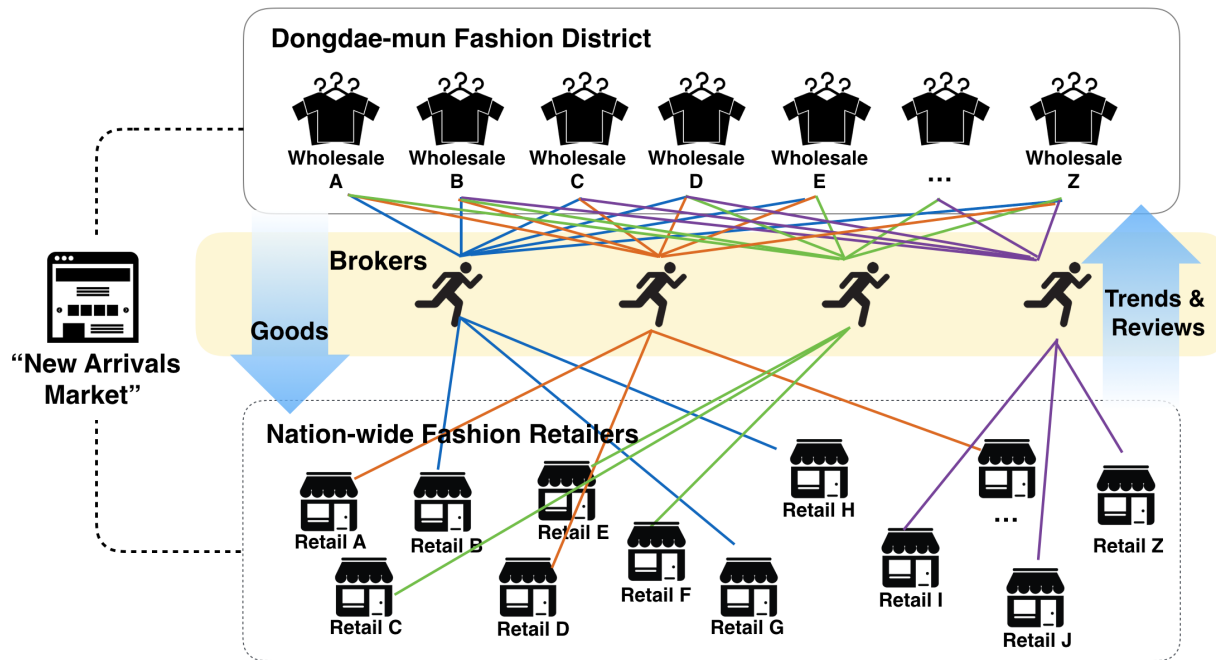


Figure 4: Brokers’ Roles and the Exchange of Information - Brokers connect the DDM wholesale merchants to retailers across the country. The “New Arrivals Market” act as an infomediary, while brokers are responsible for the distribution. Brokers also take part in matchmaking and gatekeeping roles.

“A lot of new retailers who start their own business know people working in DDM from the start. It’s really difficult to start a business from scratch” <P06>

4.3 Brokers as Fashion and Trend Experts — Dealing with Subjective Information

Infomediaries have perhaps forcibly changed the roles of intermediaries, but another important factor is the conditions that give the need for the re-entrance of intermediaries. As mentioned earlier, the creation of infomediaries should have had a negative impact on existing intermediaries. To a more extreme level, infomediaries were supposed to bring an end to the human agent, but that is absolutely not the case. Human intermediaries have a solid footing in the fashion district, and even more so is critical to the maintenance of the DDM market. We have to ask why brokers, in the existence of infomediaries, must go around the market by foot, and act as the delivery man? What is it that infomediaries do not provide versus the brokers? The answer lies in the type of product and information the DDM brokers are dealing with in their work.

In a bigger scale, a look into the logistics of the DDM fashion district provides detail on what the brokers have to deal with. First of all, the sheer size and quickness of the fashion district can be pointed out. There are more than 30,000 wholesale stores inside the market, and each of these wholesalers are operating under the quick response system, pumping out multiple new items every few weeks. With this kind of information flooding to the DDM infomediary called the “New Arrivals Market”, it is almost impossible for the retailers to see which product is gaining interest. Under the QR system, manufacturing new clothes is rapid and instant changes in preference and popularity is crucial in controlling the production line. Merely relying on the infomediary to push out information on hot items is not enough for the merchants. The system may not be updating quickly, or there might be multiple orders and cancellations by customers, causing confusion within the system. And with all purchases being spread out over the diverse pool of clothes in the infomediary, distinguishing what is popular proves to be a difficult task. However, since the DDM brokers are the ones delivering and returning orders to and from the fashion district, their information on the pulse of the market is reliable and trustworthy to both wholesalers and retailers.

“The wholesalers usually stay within the market, and it’s difficult for them to know about the trends,

outside of the market. So they usually rely on us to get information.” <P01>

“I have some stores that I’m really close with. I tend to tell them more about what I’ve learned, and they listen to my advice as well. I sometimes link new retailers to them if it’s a match.” <P06>

Another factor is the item of trade itself in the market: clothes. People want to wear good looking, pretty, beautiful clothes. The problem is that clothing items in general do not have a set standard on defining what is “beautiful”. After all, beauty is a subjective measure — even two pairs of the same shoes in different color sparks plenty of disagreement on what is better looking. Simply put, infomediaries do not have the capability to determine what piece of item is better than the other. The only information that the “New Arrivals Market” can provide to its users is the items that are for sale, how much it is, and the popularity of each item; all numerical values. But with the subjective nature of the preference in clothing, this type of data is not useful. Style and fashion cannot be quantified nor standardized. Recommendations on style is a uniquely human ability, so it is only natural that the DDM brokers, who have the ability to make value judgements, are an absolute necessary in this market. Brokers with years of experience of watching and interacting with the market have the knowledge, or a sense, on what item would be a hit. They know what kind of designs, colors, and styles that are popular, and are in perfect position to relay that information to both wholesalers and retail shops. Brokers can also determine if a product is deemed too expensive, another information that infomediaries cannot provide. The subjective nature of the items in circulation require human agents to be present.

“Last summer, open-shoulder clothing were a hit. But, open-shoulder clothes that had some strap on them, compared to being totally open were more popular. When I pick up on information like this, I let the wholesalers know about it.” <P04>

“A lot of the retail shops that opened recently are geared towards people in their mid-to-late thirties. So naturally more elegant clothing, such as long dresses became popular. It was different than a couple years ago when mini skirts and shorts were a hit.” <P03>

5 Discussion

This research proposes two discussable points: 1) what are the new roles imposed on intermediaries by infomediaries? And 2) is subjectivity what makes human intermediaries a necessity, enabling the co-existence with infomediaries? The changing roles of intermediaries have been very well documented, with seemingly big technological advancements exerting the most influence on the human agents. However, the findings from this investigation contrasts the suspected reduced role of the human intermediary. In addition to maintaining the familiar roles intermediaries had in the past, DDM brokers have taken on a more active role inside the community. We suggest that the nature of information — subjective beauty and style of clothes in this environment — has contributed to the enhanced role the brokers play. Infomediary solutions such as the “New Arrival Markets” are simply a congregation of available items sorted by popularity, and is definitely not capable of providing the stylistic information merchants on both sides need. Wholesale merchants need information on current trends and design styles to manufacture clothes, and feedback from retailers need to come in fast and reliable. The existing roles that the brokers had in the market naturally placed them to be the perfect messengers for both physical items and intellectual knowledge and advice.

Another implication this research has is the applicability to a broad range of problems that pit humans against machines. Research and applications of computers, artificial intelligence and automated systems are on the rise, and present many discussion points within the job sectors. There are studies that show how telemarketers and sports referees are the first jobs that would be replaced by automated machines (Frey & Osborne, 2013). While the observations from this research is limited to the case in Korea and the DDM fashion district, the findings from this study can be applied to a wider range of environments and occupations. The shortcomings of computer-aided systems are clear. As displayed in this body of work, the lack of ability to make judgement calls on subjective matters is an area that must be improved. On the other hand, we believe this investigation has pointed out the direction on how humans can compete and also get along with technological advancements. In areas where humans workers are in direct competition with technology, the kind of insight displayed in this study can prove to be helpful.

6 Conclusion

This research investigated a group of brokers working inside the DDM fashion district to understand the changes infomediaries brought to traditional human intermediaries. Through contextual inquiry sessions and in-depth interviews, this research aimed to understand the brokers themselves and the relationships the brokers had in and out of the fashion district. By focusing on the brokers, the research has found the co-existence of old and new roles of intermediaries carried out by the DDM brokers. On top of traditional distributor and provider roles, DDM brokers have been observed to take on the gatekeeping and matchmaking roles inside the market, simultaneously growing and maintaining the fashion district. The investigation also led to findings related to the conditions that contribute to the re-introduction of intermediaries. In environments where subjectiveness is the main information characteristic, the need for human intervention is high. Unless infomediaries are able to decide and make value judgements on subjective matters, human intermediaries are likely to continue to be needed. Infomediaries can only deliver “shallow” data, and it is the human agents that can delve deeper to find insights from the information. The second coming of intermediaries, or “re-intermediary”, is surely to exist elsewhere, and it would be interesting to discover more environments where this phenomenon is observable.

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