
“What do you think of the return of dungarees?”: Social Media Interactions between Retail Locations and their Customers

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Abstract

Social media presents new digital interaction opportunities and challenges to urban retail locations such as shopping malls, centres and streets. Platforms such as Facebook facilitate online communication with, and between, customers that is not possible through traditional media and marketing techniques. Using data gathered from the Facebook pages of six urban retail locations over 12 months, this paper considers the possible factors that shape online customer engagement and conversation. In particular, we present a thematic analysis of content in shared posts, and discuss how characteristics of a retail location and the structure of the consumer community shape these posts. Our findings are used to form suggestions to further investigate engagement between customers and retail locations via social media.

Author Keywords

Social media; engagement; retail; retail locations

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

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Introduction

Retail locations - shopping malls, centres and streets aim to provide a "one-stop" shopping experience, generating their own image and brand loyalty and encouraging repeat visits from customers [8]. In the UK, for instance, many such venues attract millions of unique visitors each year [5], highlighting the fact that physical, locative shopping experiences are not being entirely replaced by online activities.

Retail locations are, of course, adopting online digital interaction strategies as an extension of their physical presence; in this respect social media presents new opportunities and challenges for retail locations, changing the way they can interact with customers, but also the way that customers can interact with each other [11]. With customers spending an increasing amount of their online-time using social media and more than half of online shoppers interacting with a business via such platforms [9], developing a better understanding of how social media is, and can be, used in this context is an urgent research priority.

Background

Previous work [1][7] shows that a relationship exists between online communications and the financial value of the organization. Although this early work relates more specifically to online product ratings, this relationship is likely exacerbated by the prevalence of social media, platforms which often actively encourage dialogue.

Kruger et al investigated brand-related communication via Twitter [6]. The findings of this work suggest that the main motivation for 'following' a brand on Twitter is to demonstrate that you like the brand, rather than to

contact the brand. This is demonstrated by the communication being predominantly monologic, with few replies from the consumer community. However, the authors do acknowledge that more research would have to be done with brand-accounts that show a higher level of involvement, to determine whether these findings are biased by the medium or by the involvement, or lack thereof, of the business accounts.

Social media can help develop a familiarity between customers and businesses [2], encouraging engagement with the brand. However, this familiarity is not always welcome from the point of view of some customers; this can divide customers on social media into two groups: those who are engagement-prone and those who are not [2][6].

Whilst not all customers will actively engage with a business through social media, a positive use of social media and engagement with customers can positively contribute to brand performance and customer loyalty [9]. As such, it is becoming increasingly important for businesses to understand and develop strategies for effective and beneficial engagement with the customer community through social media.

The need to identify methods of increasing engagement with retail locations is not limited to social media, retail locations have long been attempting to identify factors that affect patronage [3]. As physical retail locations continue to maintain an online presence, including social media, the potential for maintaining and encouraging patronage is increased.

In the study presented here, we begin to investigate how the content of posts sent by retail locations can

affect the level of engagement from the consumer community. We examine the themes that emerged from retail locations' use of Facebook over a 12 month period, highlighting the differences between locations and over time.

Data Collection

For this initial analysis, the official Facebook accounts of six retail locations in the UK, each of which maintain an active presence on social media, were selected: Bluewater (Kent), Boxpark Shoreditch (London), Brent Cross Shopping Centre (London), Bullring Shopping Centre (Birmingham), Oxford Street (London) and Trinity Leeds (Leeds).

Each public post authored by these six Facebook accounts over a twelve month period (1st Oct 2012 – 30th Sep 2013) was collected, along with associated data such as the amount of likes the post received and the comments that have been made on these posts. The resultant data set consisted of a total of 3,759 posts and associated 'likes'. 'Likes' have been chosen as an initial indication of the level of engagement as each Facebook account can only 'like' a post once, giving an indication of the amount of accounts engaging with the posts. 'Likes' also offer a lower threshold to engagement than, for example, commenting on a post. Further investigation can take into account the number, and content, of post comments to further indicate differing levels of engagement. Table 1 shows the amount of posts and likes collected for each location.

The mean *engagement per post* has been calculated for each location; this was defined as the mean amount of likes per post, as a percentage of the total amount of people 'liking' the Facebook page at that time. This

| Location | Posts | Post Likes |
|---------------|-------|------------|
| Bluewater | 502 | 13770 |
| Boxpark | 1286 | 21143 |
| Brent Cross | 673 | 8709 |
| Bullring | 685 | 45614 |
| Oxford Street | 408 | 13918 |
| Trinity Leeds | 205 | 32359 |

Table 1. Amount of posts and likes collected for each retail location.

normalizes the data across locations, taking into consideration the fact that pages with larger follower communities are likely to receive more 'likes' on their posts.

Initial Findings

A qualitative analysis of the 3,759 posts was conducted manually, in order to determine the type of content shared through Facebook by each retail location. This analysis resulted in the generation of a total of 35 codes which were then organized into 4 main themes: information distribution, inquiry, directives and opinion.

Information Distribution

This theme relates to posts that are distributing useful information to people that may view the page, such as information about specific retailers, offers and promotional events as well as job opportunities. For example: "*Forever21 are holding a Student Night at Bluewater on October 3rd.*"

Inquiry

This theme relates to posts that are asking questions of those that are viewing the Facebook page. This often entails asking for opinions on a given product, retailer or event, such as: "*What do you think of the return of dungarees?*" This also includes asking questions on a more personal level, such as: "*Did your parents used to write your name in the back of your clothes?*" Posts under this theme are likely to encourage dialogue between customers and the retail locations [6].

Directives

This theme relates to posts that are used to direct or instruct readers to carry out a particular task, often relating to a specific product, brand or an interaction

with a social media account or platform. Examples included: "Get down to John Lewis to find everything you need." and "Share this post and comment with your most hilarious fish pun to enter."

Opinion

This theme includes posts that share the opinion of those posting from the location's Facebook account. Examples of this included: "We love these styles from River Island" and "We're loving the Autumn/Winter collections in our stores."

Differences between Retail Locations

Each of the four identified themes: information distribution, inquiry, directives and opinion were used to varying degrees by each of the six retail locations. Whilst each location had posts that fell under each of the four themes, the prevalence of these themes differs from location to location, potentially signifying different approaches taken by the retail locations. Based on the prevalence of these themes within the data for the 12-month period, four strategies emerged, with each retail location falling into one of these types of strategies each month:

1. Very strong focus on 'Information Distribution'
2. Strong focus on 'Information Distribution' with elements of 'Directives'
3. Strong focus on 'Information Distribution' with elements of 'Inquiry'
4. Strong focus on 'Information Distribution' with the remaining focus split between 'Inquiry', 'Directives' and 'Opinion'.

These varying approaches show that retail locations are sharing content through Facebook in differing ways.

This could be indicative of conscious decisions to approach social media in a particular manner – the development and use of social media strategies. Further investigation, covering more retail locations, would be necessary to determine how widespread these apparent strategies are. Each of these approaches results in various levels of engagement from the locations' Facebook communities.

Consumer Engagement with Post Content

Further to the above, it also appears that customers who 'like' the locations on Facebook respond to different content types in different ways; this behavior also differs over time, with post content and engagement patterns changing on a monthly basis.

Bluewater customers, for example, respond better when post content is a mixture of information distribution and inquiry. In these months, the mean engagement per post is just 0.045% of total page likes. This level of engagement appears to be low, but is much higher than months where the focus shifts to information distribution and directives, for example, where the mean amount of likes per post drops to 0.01% of total page likes. This behavior, however, was also not consistent over time; months with a focus on information distribution and inquiry had a range of mean engagement levels per post from 0.006% (9 likes per post), to 0.1% (69 post likes) of page likes. This highlights the changing levels of engagement from the consumer community.

Brent Cross, over the 12 month period, uses three of the four approaches, resulting in various levels of consumer engagement. Similar to Boxpark, months with a focus on information distribution and directives receive the highest levels of engagement per post –

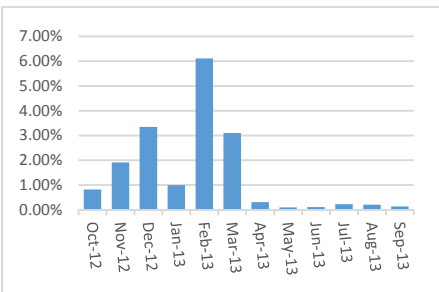


Figure 1. Mean Engagement per Post, Trinity Leeds.

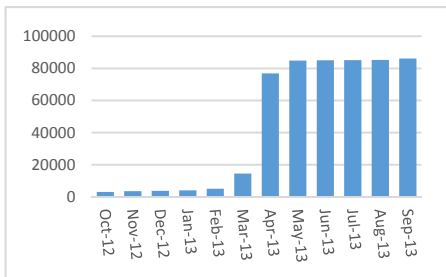


Figure 2. Amount of Page Likes, Trinity Leeds.

0.11% of page likes, on average. Engagement with other post content type was relatively high; months focusing on information distribution and inquiry resulted in an average engagement of 0.10% of page likes. This could suggest that customers respond well to more than one type of post content, or that multiple groups exist within the consumer community, each responding to a particular content type.

Bullring focuses almost entirely on information distribution and inquiry over the twelve month period, with the mean amount of likes per post being 0.045% of total page likes. This engagement behavior is very similar to that of the Bluewater Facebook account.

This difference in engagement across retail locations and between content types shows that there is no single solution to encouraging and maintaining a high level of engagement with social media users, based solely on the content of posts. A better understanding of these consumer communities is needed for conclusions to be drawn as to why different communities engage more with different content types.

Consumer Engagement with New Retail Locations

The official opening date of Trinity Leeds (21st March 2013) is within the twelve month period of data that has been collected. This allows the level of engagement to be assessed both before and after the centre opened. Figure 1 shows the mean engagement per post on a month-by-month basis.

The Trinity Leeds Facebook page experienced its highest levels of mean engagement per post directly prior to the official opening of the centre in March 2013, midway through the study. After the opening of the centre, the mean level of engagement per post drops, as the amount of page likes increases rapidly

(see Figure 2). The level of engagement after the opening drops to the same order of magnitude of other, more established, retail locations. This suggests that early adopters of the page are more likely to be engagement-prone, whilst those 'liking' the page at a later point are less likely to actively engage with the page on a regular basis. These findings concur with the authors in [11], who found that up to 90% of an online community can be classed as peripheral members, behaving differently to non-peripheral members.

Conclusions & Further Work

The work-in-progress described in this paper has shown that there is no single approach to maintaining higher levels of engagement between retail locations and the consumer community. There are of course, many possible explanations for these initial findings, including the potential for different demographics in the consumer communities, along with the potential for multiple sub-communities existing within these larger communities. Further investigation into consumer communities is therefore required to better understand how the structure and members of these communities affects engagement with businesses.

Each physical retail location has different characteristics and traits, containing different retail outlets and attracting different people. This unique character will also be affected by other, less obvious, elements such as cultural perceptions, local economic factors and demographics [4]. These differences between physical locations and also between their customers will likely result in each online community being unique – as the location, their retailers and customers will all approach online social media in a different manner. This presents an interesting digital design challenge as it suggests

that there is no single social media solution that will meet the needs and preferences of each retail location and their online customer communities.

Extending this initial analysis presented here to include more retail locations will allow for better identification of trends and patterns in the data. Furthermore, extending the period from which data has been collected should further facilitate a better understanding of the development of communities and dialogue between the location and the customers. In particular, in order to better understand how *early adopters* engage with retail locations, it will be necessary to identify and analyze the pages of locations that were actively using Facebook prior to opening. It is possible that these locations also experienced much higher community engagement around the time of their opening. If this is the case, it would suggest that those joining a community early tend to have different motivations to those joining the community once it is well established.

These are just some of the potential areas of further work that would generate an increased understanding within the HCI community of how retail community groups are using social media. Although the (brick and mortar) retail industry has been the focus of some ubicomp work [10] in the past, this area remains somewhat untouched by the mainstream HCI community. We believe there is a rich set of opportunities for the HCI community to engage with issues around digital interaction design and retail experience.

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