Retail is currently experiencing an epic META-morphosis, driven largely by technological advances, innovation and the customers demand for personalised experiences across multiple brand touchpoints. In an ever-shifting retail landscape, in which experience replaces inventory, the customer is king. The advent of big data analytics has contributed much to the ability of firms to analyse the experiential elements that drive economic value.

Customer experience can be conceptualised as a customer's 'journey' with a retailer over time, during the purchase cycle across multiple touchpoints. Select a fashion/apparel retailer or brand and critically evaluate a range of offline and/or online touchpoints. You must then use these insights to (re)design the end-to-end Customer Journey Map (CJM) in visual paradigm, illustrating how the customer experience can be enhanced by digital innovation, and applying the tenets of related theory. Use examples from fashion and related industries to support your answer.

MATS34511 Fashion Business in the Digital Age January Exam

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The rapid speed of technological advances are hugely affecting the retail world. If retailers do not innovate their digital operations and adapt to consumers' growing desire for personalisation, quick transactions and an immersive omnichannel experience, they will get left behind. Oliver Bonas (OB) is a UK-based Lifestyle brand retailing women's fashion, accessories, homeware and beauty both in-store and online. They primarily target millennial professionals aged between 25-44 (Sweeney, 2019). OB takes pride in their quirky in-store environment and aims to make people happy by giving customers an Instagram-worthy experience in stores (Sims, 2022). As the in-store environment is so important to OB's brand identity, OB should enhance the customer journey by combining physical and digital interactions to create phygital experiences in order to stay relevant.

Term	Definition
e-commerce	"Commercial transactions conducted electronically on the internet" (Oxford Languages, 2022).
m-commerce	"Commercial transactions conducted electronically by mobile phone" (Oxford Languages, 2022).
Channel	Ways in which goods move from provider to consumer (MBA & Co., 2013).
Kiosk	Electronic terminal offering services through computer screen.
Augmented Reality	"A technology that superimposes a computer-generated image on a user's view of the real world, thus providing a composite view" (Oxford Languages, 2022)
Machine Learning	Use of adaptive computer systems to analyse and infer from patters in data using algorithmic and statistical models (Oxford Languages, 2022)
Deep Learning	"A type of machine learning… in which multiple layers of processing are used to extract progressively higher level features from data" (Oxford Languages, 2022).

Oliver Bonas' current touchpoints

OB's strong high street presence is the primary touchpoint through which consumers interact with the brand, with stores decorated to appear distinctive inside and out (see fig. 1, 2), in turn creating brand awareness and showcasing the "design-led" brand identity through retail environment and products (REFERENCE). OB avoids proximity to larger competitors when choosing store locations (REFERENCE), in turn limiting potential noise that could distort the message of uniqueness and quirkiness they are trying to convey to consumers.

Fig. 1 – OB storefront (left) and inside (right)

OB offers one-off in-store experiences, such as jewellery making or book binding workshops (Eventbrite, 2018). These forms of "retail-tainment" are important touchpoints for OB consumers (Ritzer, 1999 REFERENCE) and experiences such as these drive economic value for OB as they improve brand image, generate brand buzz and cross-channel purchase intention (Jahn et al., 2018).

This strategy had proven successful for the brand, experiencing year-on-year growth between 2008 and 2019 (Endole, 2021). However, the forced shuttering of store doors in 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic caused OB's net worth to drop 13.15% from £8.5 million the year before to £7.4 million (Endole, 2021). OB responded to the growing demand for online shopping during this time by strengthening their e-commerce platforms. This was through improved personalisation of the online experience by using big data and machine learning to email tailored offers to consumers and provide more suitable search results on their website (Isaac, 2021). This e-commerce push boosted online sales by 55% in 2020 (Retail Week, 2022) enabling OB's survival during the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, OB's utilisation of technology in consumer touchpoints is limited to their website and social media presence. While these channels communicate cohesive messages of brand identity (REFERENCE?), build consumer trust through personalisation (REFERENCE), and facilitate product purchase, improving innovation in the use of digital marketing strategies would better contribute to a sustainable competitive advantage. Since the post-covid re-opening of businesses, footfall and in-store purchases have increased, though not to pre-covid levels (REFERENCE). Shopping is increasingly a multi-channel experience, with consumers often interacting with multiple touchpoints before and after purchasing a product (REFERENCE). With product purchase increasingly taking place through online sales (REFERENCE), the role of retail stores must evolve to maintain creation of value for consumers despite the often-preferable convenience of online shopping. This is particularly important for OB where retail store footfall is so important for communicating their brand identity.

While OB strengthened their e-commerce capabilities, competitors showed greater levels of technological innovation. For example, in 2020 Zara launched *Store Mode*, an added functionality for their app and website which allows customers to check UK stores for inventory availability in real time, purchase items for click & collect, book fitting rooms, and use geolocation to find items in-store (Moran, 2021). Meanwhile, OB lacks an app for optimised m-commerce, and does not

effectively utilise even more basic in-store or online digital marketing tools (such as chat bots on their website or kiosks in-store).

While OB's target consumers regularly use e-commerce and m-commerce platforms, they still demand in-store experiences as it is a key creator of value for OB's consumers. OB must innovate in their e-commerce and m-commerce channels and evolve the in-store environment to better support those channels, as well as offer in-store experiences to maintain footfall as online shopping becomes the norm for product purchase.

Mobile Application

As an initial step to enhance customer experience, OB should create a smartphone app in order to integrate and further personalise the customer's shopping experience. Most of Oliver Bonas' competitors e.g. Anthropologie, Free People and John Lewis, already have apps and OB are hugely missing out without one. OB's current consumers are mainly based in the UK which has the second highest percentage of mobile shoppers in Europe with 66.7% (Binns, 2021). Furthermore, in the UK during the peak of the pandemic, m-commerce rose 73% year-on-year and by 2024 UK m-commerce retail sales are expected to reach £105 billion (Binns, 2021). As well as increasing sales, an app would increase ease of shopping, enabling consumers to seamlessly move from in-store touchpoints to desktop to mobile. It would also improve engagement, increase the speed of transactions, and reduce the number of abandoned carts (reference).

The app could include…

Interactive Kiosks

The introduction of interactive kiosks in-store would be an ideal next step for OB as they have become so common and accepted, like mobile apps, they wouldn't put off consumers who are less confident with digital devices. Furthermore, OB customers really enjoy visiting the stores in person due to the attractive interiors and "Instagram-worthy experience in stores"(Sims, 2022). The kiosks would allow customers to log into their OB account, browse products, check stock availability, process payments and order online. This would reduce costs for OB and allow the capture of customer data to create a more personalised experience but also greatly decrease queuing times for customers, which can often be very off-putting, particularly around busy periods like Christmas.

The kiosks would also support the success of "Quiet Time" a new initiative OB have created in order to make sure their brand promise of making living a joyful experience and give cause for optimism is inclusive for all customers (Oliver Bonas, 2022). During Quiet Time, there is no music, reduced background noise, dimmed lighting, and employees do not approach customers, to allow people with sensory issues to shop in a peaceful environment. Interactive kiosks would make Quiet Time more viable as they would allow customers to find out what they need or even complete a purchase, without having to ask a sales associate and disturb the quiet. It would also benefit the growing number of consumers who prefer self-service to human interaction.

AR Furniture and Fashion

It is recommended that OB implement augmented reality (AR) features in their app to assist customers in purchasing clothing and furniture. For garments, the app should take inspiration from ASOS, who's in-app 'See My Fit' AR technology allows consumers to see accurate virtual representations of clothes on models of different heights and garment sizes (Sharkey, 2020). OB,

however, should improve upon this by investing in deep-learning technologies such as DensePose, a technology being developed to map images to the human body (DensePose, 2022). Development of this technology could lead to the development of AR-based virtual fitting rooms where the user can use themselves as the model. Requiring only their phone and using video data of the user in their mirror, virtual garments would be mapped to their body. Beyond this, machine learning could be used to predict the best matching products for the image provided when given input search criteria. For example, users can search for tops to match the rest of their outfit. Machine learning capabilities trained on images of currently worn trends could be used to best predict matching items and styles available in OB's inventory.

Alongside this OB should offer AR-services akin to IKEA's in-app Studio, a functionality where virtual representations of furniture items can be mapped to a room so consumers can be better informed of how items would look in the existing room (White, 2021). The app also uses machine learning algorithms to suggest matching furniture to a user's already owned of furniture (White, 2021).

These technologies would be forms of technology-enhanced personal shopping, allowing OB to add enjoyable, practical and experiential elements for consumers (Blázquez, 2014). 40% of consumers are willing to pay a premium for augmented reality experiences, and 71% would more frequently shop with retailers if AR technology were offered (Shopify, 2021), meaning implementation would drive economic value creation for OB through increased sales conversion and profitability. AR also has the potential to decrease consumer uncertainty as they are better informed. This decreased uncertainty would improve customer satisfaction, decrease returns and increase sales conversions, in turn raising OB's profitability (Tan et al., 2021).

Workshop planning informed by Big Data

To better match in-store experiences to the interest of consumers in specific locales, it is advised that OB use collected data concerning purchases, returns and shipping information to inform the organising of experiences. For example, if a style of print or items of jewellery are selling well and shipping to a particular area with low levels of return, OB would organise creative workshops in nearby stores with practitioners teaching skills associated with the top-selling items e.g., digital print design or jewellery-making. OB members who have purchased items or had items in their basket associated with the event topic would then be emailed informing them that the experience was taking place.

In offering experiences such as these, OB would engage consumers through each of the four realms of experience at different stages, the events would be: Educational – as participants learn new skills; Escapist – as participants engage with practical activities; Entertainment – as participants watch skilled practitioners teach in personable ways, and Esthetic – as participants watch practitioners create beautiful items. This provides participants with, at different stages, both absorptive and immersive experiences through both passive and active participation (Pine & Gilmore, 2011). This, in turn, creates memorable, engaging and positive experiences.

This strategy would allow for OB to adapt to the changing retail landscape where experience is replacing inventory by engaging consumers based on their interests, in turn creating personalised experiences that cause consumers to believe that OB is aligned with their specific identities and values. This would affect improved brand trust and loyalty in consumers (REFERENCE).

Automated gift-wrapping

OB currently offers complimentary gift-wrapping of in-store purchases which is extremely popular with customers. It does however waste a lot of time at the till point, especially around the Christmas period where customers often approach the till with baskets full of items they want gift-wrapped. In the future, OB could invest in technology such as gift-wrapping machines offered by Cpack LTD which are able to wrap 50 products per minute. This would decrease wait times for customers, decrease human error, and allow employees' time and expertise to be put elsewhere. Needs reference.

Conclusion

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