Mobile shopping and the practice of shopping: A study of how young adults use smartphones to shop

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore, illustrate and conceptualise how the introduction of mobile phones transforms the practice of shopping. Drawing on a focus group study of young adults and making use of Practice Theory, this paper shows that the introduction of mobile phones reconfigures the practice of shopping subsequently transforming the agency of consumers. Mobile phones enable consumers to access, store, and process information in new ways; supporting new modes of social shopping, enabling consumers to change the experience of shopping, and making them better equipped economic actors with more access to financial systems and new calculative capacities. While this new agency is beneficial to consumers, it also causes them stress and anxiety.

1. Introduction

The field of mobile shopping is developing rapidly and has generated great interest in both academia and industry (Kourouthanassis and Giaglis, 2012). Mobile phones, particularly smartphones, are changing the way consumers shop as new opportunities to gather information from multiple sources, check for availability, compare prices, and localise products and stores become possible using mobile phones and a new supportive ICT infrastructure (Groß, 2015a, 2015b; Kourouthanassis and Giaglis, 2012).

However, despite the interest this issue attracts, few studies have examined the practice of mobile shopping. While mobile shopping is gaining ground and developing quickly, research into mobile shopping is still scarce (Groß, 2015a, 2015b; Holmes et al., 2013; Spaid and Flint, 2014). The studies of mobile shopping conducted thus far tend to focus on the acceptance of mobile technology (Agrebi and Jallais, 2015; Groß, 2015a; Kim et al., 2009; Wua and Wanga, 2005; Yang, 2012), intentions and motivations driving mobile shopping (Kumar and Mukherjee, 2013; Li et al., 2012; Yang, 2010; Yang and Kim, 2012), and consumer attitudes and reactions regarding mobile marketing (Goh et al., 2015; Grant and O'Donohoe, 2007; Pescher et al., 2014; Sultan et al., 2009).

Although these studies have produced interesting insights into mobile shopping, they do not focus on examining how consumers use mobile phones to shop. That is, studies investigating and conceptualising the practical accomplishment of mobile shopping are largely missing. The few studies examining the "activities" or "behaviour" of mobile shopping show that there is much to be gained by focusing on the "doings" or "activities" of this particular type of shopping phenomenon (Holmes et al., 2013; Spaid and Flint, 2014). These studies suggest that, not only are mobile phones used to shop, they are also central to the performance of everyday shopping practices (Spaid and Flint, 2014). The advanced technological nature of mobile phones in general, and smartphones in particular, enable multiple uses. As a result, mobile phones seem to be seen and used as multipurpose shopping tools that work both as "shopping managers" and "social" devices used to make individual shopping acts into social activities (Spaid and Flint, 2014). Following these empirical studies, the definition and understanding of mobile shopping has been broadened from merely including the act of purchasing products and services with your mobile phone to including a wide range of activities such as checking prices, comparing products, gathering product information, reading user reviews, and issuing payment (Holmes et al., 2013).

In this paper, we want to contribute to mobile shopping research by developing this last stream of activity-focused studies. What is needed is research that goes beyond intentions and perceptions and instead makes the activities of mobile shopping the focus of attention. We need to understand how this new form of shopping is performed and what makes its performance possible. We need to understand how shopping is changed by mobile phones.

An in-depth analysis of how mobile phones are used to shop, what elements make this possible, and how mobile shopping as a new mode of shopping is different from regular shopping could tell us more about the reasons behind mobile shopping and explore the difficulties and problematic aspects of this mode of shopping (aspects missing according to Groß (2015b)). This requires more than merely reporting on the activities involved in mobile shopping, it is a matter of conceptualising and exploring the social complexity involved in the emergence of this new form of shopping.

In addition, adopting a practice-centric approach to mobile shopping give us a deeper understanding of the consequences this new emerging form of shopping has for the consumers that partake in it. Empirical studies have illustrated how mobile phones empower consumers when shopping (Spaid and Flint, 2014). However, few studies discuss the more problematic aspects of mobile shopping. What is needed is a nuanced, critical analysis of both the positive and negative consumer consequences of mobile shopping.

Against this background, the purpose of this paper is to explore, illustrate, and conceptualise how the introduction of mobile phones reconfigures the practice of shopping, and discuss the consequences that this has for consumers and retailers alike. Central questions are: What activities are involved in mobile shopping? What combination of elements is necessary for mobile shopping to emerge and become established? How does shopping practice change when mobile phones are used? What are the implications of these changes for consumers and retailers?

In the following, we set out to answer these questions through an in-depth study of a specific group of consumers – young adults – and their mobile shopping activities. Nine focus group interviews with 55 Swedish young adults (aged 20–30) in total constitute the empirical base in which the analysis is grounded.

Theoretically, this paper takes a shopping-as-practice approach (Fuentes, 2014; Gregson et al., 2002), utilising practice theory (Schatzki et al., 2001; Warde, 2005) to (re)conceptualise shopping as a complex social practice involving various cognitive techniques, embodied knowledge and understandings of the world, as well as specific bodily movements, meanings, and material artefacts (Schatzki et al., 2001). Taking this approach we show how mobile phones reconfigure the elements and the performance of the practice of shopping.

The remainder of this paper is organised into five sections. First, we present a brief literature review of mobile shopping. Second, we present and argue for the shopping-as-practice approach taken here and explain how it relates to previous shopping conceptualisations. This is followed by a more detailed description of the qualitative focus group study conducted. Two combined analysis and results sections follow. The first examines the performance of mobile shopping. This section illustrates and discusses the many activities forming part of mobile shopping. The second section analyses the specific configuration of technology, competence, and meaning that combine to enable and shape the performance of mobile shopping. The paper ends with a discussion of what this practice-based approach and analysis means for the field of mobile shopping research, and the possible implications for consumers and retail practice.

2. Mobile shopping: an emerging field of research

While still a minor field when compared to other research areas, there is now an emerging body of work around the phenomenon of mobile shopping. The majority of the research conducted thus far revolves around three areas: the acceptance of mobile technology, motivations for mobile shopping, and consumer reactions to mobile marketing.

Research addressing consumer adoption, acceptance, and use of mobile technology (Agrebi and Jallais, 2015; Groß, 2015a; Kim et al., 2009; Wua and Wanga, 2005; Yang, 2012) is predominantly based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). These studies show that

consumer intentions to adopt to the new technology is generally affected by their perception of usefulness, enjoyment, ease of use, and convenience (see Groß, 2015a; Davis et al., 1989). Some studies also consider consumers' complex lives, showing that the better mobile shopping technology connects to consumer daily practices, the greater the willingness is to use the smartphone for mobile shopping (Jih and Lee, 2004).

Research exploring consumer intentions and motivations for mobile shopping (Kumar and Mukherjee, 2013; Li et al., 2012; Yang, 2010; Yang and Kim, 2012) shows mix results. Some studies show that hedonistic values are more important for motivating mobile shopping (Li et al., 2012), others contend that mobile shopping is driven by utilitarian motives, such as convenience and accessibility (Holmes et al., 2013), while a third group of studies show that both utilitarian and hedonic motivations, such as efficiency and adventure, contribute to consumer intentions and motivations to adopt and use mobile devices for shopping (Yang and Kim, 2012). One could argue that, taken together, these studies show that motivations for mobile shopping vary across contexts and over time.

Finally, research that explores consumer attitudes and reactions towards mobile marketing show that consumers are resistant to marketing and commercial messages in their mobile phones, regarding the mobile phone as a personal device (Shankar et al., 2010; Varnali and Toker, 2010). Mobile marketing, as these studies indicate, is a difficult task (Goh et al., 2015; Grant and O'Donohoe, 2007; Pescher et al., 2014; Sultan et al., 2009).

These studies are important and provide valuable insights into the emergent phenomenon of mobile shopping. However, they do not, as indiacted above, explore the actual practice of mobile shopping. Activity-centered studies of mobile shopping are, however, not completely missing from the field and one can now discern a fourth emerging stream of research that focuses on the "activities" or "behaviour" of mobile shopping (Holmes et al., 2013; Cliquet et al., 2014; Spaid and Flint, 2014).

Holmes et al. (2013), for example, explored consumer attitudes to mobile shopping in general, and particularly, attitudes towards using mobile phones in different stages in the consumer decision-making process. This study demonstrated that mobile phones are typically used when searching for information and evaluating alternatives, which are standard pre-purchase activities. The study also indicates that high involvement products (expensive and more complex products) tend to increase the use of a mobile device in the decision-making process.

Similarly, a study conducted by Cliquet et al. (2014) showed that the mobile phone is now a digital shopping companion frequently used for pre-purchase activities, both outside and inside the store, such as gathering information and reading product reviews and price comparisons. The mobile phone, this study indicated, is also used as an in-store purchase facilitator, albeit less frequently compared to pre-purchase activities.

Finally, Spaid and Flint (2014) explored consumer lived experiences of using a mobile device for shopping, and the meaning shoppers attribute to these experiences. Conclusions drawn in this study were that consumers experience both hedonic and utilitarian values when mobile shopping, and the motivation driving the use of the mobile device is both extrinsic (saving money, desire for information and trust) and intrinsic (risk-reducing and desire for empowerment).

Taken together, these studies suggest that mobile shopping has developed to a complex and important way of shopping involving a vast array of activities (Holmes et al., 2013). Not only are mobile phones used in shopping, they are also central to the performance of everyday shopping practices (Spaid and Flint, 2014). In this paper, our objective is to contribute to this growing body of work by not only empirically exploring the activities of mobile shopping, but also by reconceptualising this phenomenon using Practice theory. This theoretical framework serves to produce a more dynamic understanding of mobile shopping allowing us to acknowledge that mobile shopping