

The Role of Personalization in Apparel Shopping

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I. Introduction

The bluntness of mass production and individualized consumer needs created a dilemma on what to product, how to produce, for whom to produce, and how much to produce. Giving good products that meet consumers' individual needs as well as good services are now major concerns for many apparel firms. Thus, the shift from an industrial to post industrial paradigm or from the niche marketing to relationship marketing changed the fundamental thinking in merchandising (Duray, 1999). Apparel firms are now seeking to provide "personalized goods and services" to satisfy individual consumers by using agile or module ways of production and delivery.

In global fashion industry, a variety of ways to meet the modern consumers' various preferences in terms of design, size and service are already introduced: custom fit jeans, personalized services, personalized e-store, made-to-measure clothes, customer chosen fabrics, etc. But not many prior studies have attempted to classify the individual consumers' needs in relation to personalization. This research addresses the role of personalization in apparel business by investigating the typology.

II. Literature Review

Number of prior researches emphasized the importance of personalization in contemporary marketing and merchandising. Major research was found in terms of "mass customization" and "personalized services of standardized product".

Mass customization is about providing customers exactly what they want, when they want, at a reasonable price (Chen, Wong, & Wong, 2001). Pine (1993) noted that mass customization can be placed in any stages product value chain (product design - production - marketing and distribution). He categorized fundamental ways to mass customize products as customizing services around standardized products, creating customizable products, providing point of delivery customization, providing quick responses, and modularizing components to customize end product or services. These categorization can be also speculated as varying in the degrees of customization. Hart (1996), pointing out the importance of flexibility in organization to meet

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individual customer need, conceptualized mass customization as collaborative design system, flexible production process and producer-customer learning relationship. Kamali and Locker (2002) who first tried to categorize mass customization in terms of apparel products reported six factors based on empirical research: custom patterns, the design through component choice of size, style and fabric, production planning through forecasting based on point-of-sale data, small lots and repeat orders at the assembly stages, automatic replenishment using point-of-sales data, and adjustment that costumers can make after the purchase.

Service personalization defined as "the social content of interaction between service or retail employees and their customer" (Mittal & Lasser, 1996, p. 95) positively affects consumer's patronage decisions for brands or retail stores. This may be viewed as different concept from customized products or modification of standardized products, but can be viewed as an intangible way of personalizing proposition to customers. Surprenant and Solomon (1987) argued that not all personalization would bring consumer satisfaction. They proposed three types of significant personalization strategies as optional personalization (to allow the consumer to choose from a set of service possibilities), programmed personalization (to give the impression of personalized service by encouraging small talks) and customized personalization (to assist the customer in attaining the best possible form of offering for his or her needs) Allen, Kania and Yaeckel (1998) in their study on online personalization, suggested three strategies of personalization: cyber space personalization, information personalization and online community personalization. Hanson (2000) reported selective choice and customized services as two dimension of personalization.

The main purpose of this study is to explore ways of personalization in apparel business. Specific objectives are to synthesize relevant personalization categories from prior researches and to theoretically identify typology of personalization in apparel shopping.

III. Methods

A vast array of literature on service personalization, mass customization and consumer satisfaction were investigated by the primary researcher. Possible ways of personalization were grouped and re-grouped based on the proximity of concepts. A focus group interview of 12 graduate students were conducted to generate relevant categories of personalization in apparel shopping. In-depth individual interviews with three industry professionals were conducted to verify the typology of personalization on the final stage.

IV. Results and Conclusion

Based on the theoretical research, the focus group interview and in-depth interviews, six categories of personalization were generated.

The first category is named as "mass-customization" that individual consumer needs on design or fit are applied to each production. This approach is an application of personalization in the

product development stage and requires automation or flexible system of apparel production and on-time product delivery. The advantage of this strategy to customer is to get personalized products at reasonable price but a disadvantage can be that (s)he has to wait certain period of time to get the product.

The second category is "ensuring quick response to customer". This category deals with the time issue in merchandising and requires systemized inventory check and delivery. A quick replenishment of products with various colors and sizes were one of the major dissatisfaction factor for consumers.

The third category is named as "optional personalization". This approach is to produce as many SKU's of designs, colors or sizes possible to meet various consumer needs. This requires small quantity productions and accurate forecasting of what could be the possible options to consumer. Without accurate forecasting and optimal production runs, producers have to deal with un-sold products with minor colors or sizes.

The fourth category is named as "customization in customer encounter". This approach deals with the issues of alteration or giving personal touch on standardized products. Embroidery of initials or quick alteration of pants length can be examples.

The fifth category is named as "personalized information" This category is more related to customer data base management and implementations of differentiated service programs. Personalized e-mails and mileage programs are examples of this category.

The sixth category is named as "customer service at point of purchase". This category is related to enhancing service qualities through store personnel. Feelings of "being a special person or special guest to the store" are the integral aspects of this type of personalization. Retailers have to have well trained store personnel and internal marketing to them.

Application of the findings will help researchers and marketers to identify which needs best describes their target market. Future studies should be devoted to generate scale items in order to empirically measure each type of personalization and relationship with other clothing shopping behavior variables.

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