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Media, Marketing, and More – How Social Technology is Changing the Face of Small Business

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the ways in which social media and marketing technology advances are affecting small retail businesses. A total of three interviews were conducted with working professionals in different areas along the fashion supply chain, and were contacted based on common acquaintances. Each interview was conducted over the phone, and lasted between ten minutes and half an hour, with guided and supplemental questions focusing on their experiences with technology in their fields. The results showed that each area was affected in numerous ways, from superficial business changes to advancements at the cores of their individual operating systems. Depending on the level of commitment the businesses had to technology as it appeared and advanced, there were differing levels of impact, however it was agreed upon that media's impact was entirely pervasive. The implications of these results point to the developmental needs of small retail businesses, although it is imperative that each business introduces the technology that makes sense for them as a brand.

Introduction

The fields of fashion and technology have long been intertwined, so it comes as no surprise that as technology and media have developed in the past decade (Palandrani), so have the realms of fashion design and merchandising. These seemingly constant changes and advances are what encourage the creativity and competition in fashion, however with such a volatile market it is no wonder that many brands are faced with a sink-or-swim mentality. The changes we are faced with today will only lengthen and continue, so it is imperative to understand not only the way they work, but the effects they have on small businesses.

Marketing technology in the fashion industry has affected both the social outreach and operating methods in small retail businesses. Media and engagement technologies have required these businesses to change the way they reach out with both their suppliers as well as customers, resulting in a shift in the versatility of small retail (Lund, 2021). The effects span the entirety of the supply chain, and at no point is any one system left out. In a world in which much of the business is digital, exacerbated by younger generational preferences as well as external economic factors, it is imperative to continuously evaluate the impacts of media on small businesses in order to stay afloat and remain competitive.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact that social media and marketing technology has had on small businesses, and how it has changed the way in which these retailers operate. Specific research questions include: 1. What has technology made easier versus what has it made more difficult? 2. What can businesses do now that they may not have been able to prior to the advent of social media marketing and other technology? 3. Can small businesses really remain competitive through these technologies? 4. Are brands just adding more noise to an already busy landscape? This study focuses on these impacts from the perspectives of a small

business (and small business-serving) buying office, a small business branding coordinator of a design company, and finally the owner of a small retail business. Through their views and based on their experiences, it is easier to imagine and begin to construct a future in which these two entities reside unanimously.

Literature Review

Processes Made Easier

Despite its high-minded and highly anticipated ideals, many businesses have been confronted with the actual practicality of technology and media, and are finding that along with the advances and proclaimed benefits, there are also a quantity of setbacks to be uncovered. One of the easiest benefits to identify is the heightened interactions, both in quantity and quality. Businesses are able to reach out to customers that may have been outside their standard geographic targeting and are able to build a newly accessible client base. They are able to have more frequent interactions and conversations because of the ease of communication via social media and other various technologies, and these interactions include the stakeholders along with the customers. (Son & Niehm, 2021)

Processes Made More Difficult

Along with these benefits, there are occasional setbacks. There tends to be a lack of understanding in regards to training and properly utilizing these tools, and because of their heavy usage by large and established brands (who frequently have larger access to the creators of known content) smaller businesses are frequently overlooked. There is also the concern of capital necessary to acquire these platforms, and their associated devices, as well as occasional difficulty

psychologically assimilating these various technology and media pieces into their established brand. (Son & Niehm, 2021)

Change in Competitive Abilities

A question that has been floating in the minds of retailers worldwide since the creation of the small business has been this: how to remain competitive in such a rapidly moving climate. From this essential pondering lies a multitude of other thoughts, one of which centering around whether or not the tools any particular business uses are enhancing (or are in any way a detriment to) the retailer's competitive abilities. In many cases, the answer to this in regards to technology is that it is enhancing competition in standard as well as unforeseen ways. Many businesses view this media as a tool with which to enhance what brand identity they have already established, and the brands that are able to accurately do this tend to be more successful. (Moin, 2017). The more subtle influence of technology on the competitive advantages on small business refer more to the overall growth of the business. The retailer that reaches out and successfully integrates media into their store also has a high likelihood of being innovative and forward thinking, both necessary traits for modern retail businesses. (De Oliveira, 2020) There is also an associated chain affect, in which the more partners that are involved in social media and marketing technology, the more likely everyone in a given channel is to switch, which also leads back to the heightened efficiency of such a channel. (Rapp)

In order to do an accurate assessment of the effectiveness of a business within their realm, it is common to compare them to their peers, but also with the industry "leaders" (or otherwise big businesses). It has been found that, instead of the continued advantage on behalf of big retail businesses, there was actually a growing chance for small retailers to not just continue as they had been, but also to excel. However, it is pointed out that the advantages that gave big

business their place are not entirely disintegrated, significant work is still required of the small retailer, but there is a new way to reach out to customers and get a response in a higher percentage than what would have been possible for them with only antiquated advertising means. (Ortman, 2019)

Effect on the Overall Advertising Environment

Finally, there is the growing concern about the amount of "noise" in the advertising environment, and whether all of this added media is effective or simply adding more to an already crowded space. As our means of interaction and communication push on heavily into entertainment spheres and the worlds between traditional learning (including conversation as well as educational dialogue) and reward receptors blur, there is the heavy emphasis on the need to, in a sense, over-advertise. Brands are feeling the pressure to make everything an experience, and while this may be good for the customer and it may work for a time, there is the added risk that in the end there is simply too much noise and the threat of over-stimulation on behalf of the customer is augmented. For the brand who is able to quickly and decisively integrate technology into their business, this will not be much of a concern. However, for the brands that approach these new tools expecting them to work as all other tools rather than a new, and, according to some, essential part of their business, their target market may remain lost and untapped. (Postman, 1985)

Methods

The overarching goal for this study is to gain insight and understanding on the ways in which media and marketing technology has impacted the operations of small business, as well as to contrast the retail landscape both before and after the advent of modern technology. Because

of the specificity of experiences in these realms and the need to understand the first-hand interactions with technology, this research was done using qualitative research methodology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the goal of understanding how, in their specific fields, media and marketing technology had affected them. In order to understand a broader scope of the impacts of the small retail landscape, three subjects were interviewed from three different fields: buying office owner, small business coordinator, and retailer (see Table 1). Snowball sampling method was used to recruit participants. They were contacted by email, and the list of participants was curated by reaching to one known business leader and inquiring if they had anyone that they would recommend for the interviews. The email stated the thesis statement along with some general questions regarding their respective roles and positions and ended with asking whether they would be interested in participating. Once the list was narrowed, plans for a phone interview were made, and when the time came were completed and recorded.

Name	Occupation	Title	Location
Subject 1	Retail Buying	Owner of Retail Buying office	New York, USA
Subject 2	Sales	National Sales Director	Quebec, CA
Subject 3	Retailing	Small Business Owner	Indiana, USA

Table 1: Participant name, occupation, title, and location of occupation.

Because of the varying occupations and fields of work within the fashion landscape, there was a set list of questions asked, but as the discussions continued into more specific topics, the candidates were encouraged to discuss (and occasionally elaborate on) topics that they were

familiar and comfortable with. The original question list was curated based on basic questions regarding technology usage and levels of involvement, and more in-depth questions focused on perceived impact on their business and the larger market as a whole (see Appendix 1).

Following the listed queries, participants were given time to share any other thoughts or opinions on the matter, and to discuss anything else that they thought was relevant and should be included in the study.

Data analysis was done using content analysis. After listening to and transcribing the interviews, common themes were noted, and a broader analysis of the questions and answers was done.

Results

In order to break down the results into understandable data, each question will be listed, and then the interview responses will be discussed.

Platforms Employed

Following a general question regarding the specific job title of each participant, was the first question which simply asks which social media and/or marketing technologies each business employs.

Out of all of the interviews, every business heavily utilizes Facebook, and its various features and related functions. Instagram, email, and Pinterest were also commonly used, however because of the renown and ease of Facebook, this was the platform of choice. It is important to note, however, that there was a common consensus regarding the diversification of technology usage.

> "It's really not about choosing one form of media, but choosing all forms of social media. You want to be on everything." (Subject 1)

This led to the discussion of other, perhaps more niche platforms of media including TikTok and Snapchat, as well as the business-to-business media platform, Hightail. Hightail allows a brand to publish their item photos and share them instantaneously with their customers and partners, allowing the brand to save time in reaching out to their clients, and giving retailers immediate access to high quality stock photos and publication materials. When asked what processes this innovation has made easier, Subject 2 said

> "Definitely advertising images and e-commerce.We have a studio in house where we shoot three 60 images for all, um, for all styles or e-commerce platforms to make sure that they remain on brand no matter, um, whose platform it is." (Subject 2)

Because of this available program, the brand is able to provide stock images that are not only useful and easily accessed on behalf of the retailer, it enforces the maintaining of the brand image in all publications.

Another key platform that, for many, is heavily impactful yet overlooked, is email. Since the adoption of this media in the early two thousands, Subject 3's business has seen greater levels of interaction and has helped to prepare the business (and its customers) for further media and technological advances.

Processes Made Easier

When asked why they each prefer specific platforms and what processes were made easier, the answers were strikingly similar. The ability to target their specific clientele in an easy and effective manner is key to the modern running of a business, and the advances made by these

various technologies has enabled each respective business to operate at a much more efficient pace, resulting in the general quickening of processes worldwide.

In regards to customer targeting, there is also the sentiment that marketing is no longer just a shot in the dark. You are able to select your particular target market and reach out specifically to them, creating ease of advertising for the retailer, as well as a more beneficial shopping experience for the consumer.

> "We're not just sort of reaching out to a global audience and hoping the right people notice […] Whereas with social media, we're able to reach out to a captive audience that has said they're interested in hearing more about what we have to say." (Subject 3)

Another aspect of social media in particular that has assisted in the operations of small retail businesses is the feature of online shopping. Even though this ability is not particularly new, it has skyrocketed in usage in the past decade.

Despite the diversity of medias used, there was that common theme that not only did these technologies make the running of the businesses easier (and in many cases, more practical), they also allowed for a more customer-centric shopping experience and ease of access that had never before been possible.

Processes Made More Difficult

Because of the different natures of the businesses represented in the interviews, there was a range of responses to this question. For brands that utilize functions that have been in existence for a while and have adequate time to be "perfected" (to the best of their ability), the overall experience is now relatively streamlined. When compared to alternatives, the system does it's job and enhances the efficiency of the business.

This, however, is not the case with all businesses. In a realm in which systems advance before the exhaustion of the item, it can become easy for the users (on both the business and customer ends) to become overwhelmed. This can make it difficult to reach out to specific segments of customers, particularly those who were not born in the era of digital nativity. For retailers that target these segments, it can be difficult to build up their knowledge of the functioning of their systems, as well as to foster a sense of trust about the experience of buying online.

> "I feel like the older people who have the money to spend might not understand this social media, and the younger people that understand it don't exactly have the money to buy what they want." (Subject 1)

Along with the difficulty of reaching these customers, is the feeling that it is perhaps easier to target the wrong segment with certain forms of social technology, and that some effort may be wasted on clientele that does not have the means or the need for your product. Related to this difficulty, remains the age-old difficulty of customer conversion rates.

> "The conversion rate from screen to store seems to be very low. Simply put, it's easy for people to see a post and react immediately with a thumbs up or something like that and go on about their business, but to actually convert them into customers walking through the doors is a little bit more difficult." (Subject 3)

This, however, is not a problem for some companies who are able to link their online shops to their social medias, claims Subject 3.

Change In Competitive Abilities

With this question looking to analyze whether technology had assisted small businesses in raised competition or simply given big business another advantage, there was the sense that media had done both, but with a slightly stronger leaning towards technology having leveled the playing field. In Subject 3's experience, for every singular ad that his small retail business was able to run, their larger competitors such as Macy's was able to run three, and the advent of technology has not changed that. Larger companies naturally have larger budgets, and are able to occupy greater regions of webspace based on available budget alone. However, this same technology has also helped encourage and grow the outreach of word-of-mouth advertising, allowing it to have a greater impact than perhaps ever before. Social media also allows small businesses to open accounts and post at no cost, and very low cost for boosting, so even though their reach might not be as large, they are still able to reach a good portion of their available market.

> "Social media is good at that, because then it enables us at a very low cost to keep our name and face in front of our crowd and potentially even a larger crowd." (Subject 3)

Another exemplification of the levelling effects of social media lies in the occupation of these brands in the consumer mind-space, along with the economic pushes towards shopping small.

> "People want to stay and shop local. And whether that's your Macy's or your local Stephenson's, I feel like they're choosing the specialty stores to go to first." (Subject 1)

Social media marketing has allowed many small retail businesses to band together and push the idea of shopping local and supporting smaller businesses, allowing for a greater acceptance of local consumers of their local businesses, as well as the enforcement of the greater "Shop Small" trend spearheaded by American Express (Amex).

Effect on the Overall Advertising Environment

In a world in which much of the information that is presented to us is in the form of media, it is understandable that there has been growing feelings of desensitization towards much of the data and advertisements that are taken in. However, with the exponential growth of available media is the customer's growing ability to seek out the particular information that they want amidst the rest of the prevailing noise.

> "I feel like yes, it is kind of saturated and is going to get more saturated, but people are going to start expecting it more and more because its just so simple." (Subject 1)

As developers and retailers in turn grow to understand their customer's wants and needs, the customer experience gets easier and more tailored.

> "The wider demographic we go after, the more white noise that we are contributing. The more targeted demographic we go after the better we have a chance of actually reaching and engaging the customer. Again, I go back to what I love about modern day advertising is that I can really only get word out to people who have indicated that they want to hear from us already." (Subject 3)

In a sense, the amount of static noise in the retail media environment depends entirely on the business' collective decisions about the reach of their target demographics. If a company decides to narrow their overall reach, or to tailor certain advertisements to certain segments of their greater market, they will have less of a difficulty in reaching said customer.

> "I think that some people can be frozen by how much data and information is out there and what's relevant and important to them and how they build their personal brand. But I don't think that it's a blanket across the board. I'm so impressed with what I've seen from

our retailers and our retail partners over the last eight months and the different ways that they have worked to keep their end consumer engaged." (Subject 2)

As the pervasion of technology in our everyday experiences grows it is inevitable that we will be able to more adeptly get to the advertisements that we are looking for, but for the brand that is able to engage the consumer and come up with different means of interactions, getting drowned out in the noise should not be as much of a problem.

Changes in Client Interactions

For many businesses twenty years ago, a multiple-month shutdown and rapidly changing social and economical environment would have meant closure. However, for many businesses, because of the advent of social media and marketing technology, this shutdown allowed them to not only reach out to their current customers in a new way, but to even reach out to new customers that would have been traditionally out of their segment. This also works in the realm of business to business. Processes such as a full-season buy that would have traditionally taken weeks or months can be done in a matter of days.

> "I mean, simply it it's probably technology has allowed us to stay in business in the last year […] If you flashback, say 20 years ago, it wouldn't really be possible. I mean, I go back to the era of when if somebody wanted me to see pictures of something, they would send me an envelope over UPS or FedEx and, you know, either sketches or pictures or whatever it was with maybe swatches and you know, all of these things two days, if not weeks. Whereas now, um, I can see things immediately. I can email somebody and say, 'Hey, do you have ATS? It's available to sell on, you know, XYZ category' and if they're any good, they could email me back in a matter of minutes, I can look at those pictures, decide if I want anything, what it is, size it and put together an order." (Subject 3)

Even while the country was shut down, Subject 3 was able to buy, receive, and sell merchandise, without one customer walking through the door. An idea that would have been traditionally unheard of is now commonplace.

> "Despite there being lower foot traffic, the end consumer is showing signs that they still want to be fulfilled, catered to, serviced. We've seen remarkable turnout at events, whether they are virtual in store, by private appointments." (Subject 2)

Businesses have been able to make two way communication on either side of the supply chain, and have been able to develop in the process.

For many businesses, this quick turnaround has influenced their long-term plans as well. What once may have been viewed as a short-term solution is now the cause of mass restructuring. A conversation that Subject 1 had had with a client sums up the way many businesses are realizing the practicality of this new trend, and are subsequently changing their business model.

> "'[Someone once told me] people are never going to stop going to the store, online is never going to be important." I said "that's probable true, but online is the biggest percentage of all of the retailers in the business [right now], why would you not want a piece of that pie?"' (Subject 1)

The low start up, geographic versatility, and rapid turnaround has encouraged many businesses to push forward with their technological advancement and acceptance, and has turned more traditional businesses into tech-savvy giants in very little time.

<center>**Discussions**</center>

Based on the information provided in the interviews as well as that found in the literature, there are a few key aspects to focus on when understanding the impact of social media and marketing technology on small retail businesses. These three points are visible, invisible, and external changes. These focus on the visible changes that can be seen within the business, invisible changes within the business, and finally broader market based changes.

Within the category of visible changes of the business you get those related to operations, and those related to physical store format. With new technology comes new and unknown challenges and barriers, as well as perks. New staff can be needed to maintain and understand these rapidly changing updates (along with just staying on top of the trends), and more often than not, some level of expertise or experience is necessary in the everyday running of these programs. There have also been changes in the way stores are laid out, with the removal of large cashier stations (and replacement by small card readers and cash drawers) resulting in more counterspace for advertisements, point of purchase displays, or however else the retailer decides to utilize their space. There has also been the higher-impact shift of stores from brick-and-mortar to completely online, changing the face of not only their storefront but the community in which they reside, as well. These findings correlate closely with that of Son and Niehm (2021)'s research, and both relate the gravity of these changes for both established as well as evolving businesses. It is clearly understood that, although not impossible, many of these changes are not easy and must be accompanied by a significant amount of thought and planning. (Son & Niehm, 2021)

Along with these more noticeable shifts, there is also a more quiet and subversive shift occurring behind the scenes of many small retail businesses. Because of the relative affordability

and ease of access in online social media advertising, much of the previous advertising budget is being allocated to different places around the business. Whether this means the expensive newspaper advertisements are being traded for a "boosted" Facebook post, or a pop-up shop being replaced with a website, small changes are occurring that may not be visible to the average consumer, but is making a significant impact on the retail landscape as a whole. This allows for a more versatile business, as Doug Stevens points out in his interview with Women's Wear Daily. (Moin, 2017) These new, quick businesses are also more adept and likely to be able to weather fast changes over big business. The other major invisible shift in businesses now, relating particularly to those with online shops and presences, is the changing impact of geographical location on the retailer's target market. In years past a retailer may have put an ad in a local magazine, and sent out postcards with a forty-to-fifty mile radius in order to advertise a local sale. This would have to be done well in advance in order to allow customers time to both receive information about and plan for the sale. Now, a retailer can receive items in the morning, put a post up on their social media accounts, and have customers in buying by the end of the day. Depending on the level of online presence that a brand has obtained, their target market segment may have grown from customers in their area to customers all over the country. This is also evidenced by Son and Niehm (2021), when emphasis is drawn to the new accessibility of customers, as well as stakeholders in the business that may have been previously unreached. (Son & Niehm, 2021)

Finally, the overall market may have seen the most noticeable shift in recent years. Because of the low startup cost and ease of opening, a majority of the businesses open in the United States are small businesses, growing over 7% in just three years (Gaubys, 2020). This heightened level of competition has required businessowners to be even more aware and adept

than ever before. The other heavily impacted area of fashion based on the advent of modern media is the physical appearance of the market. Gone are the days of wheeling overcrowded rolling racks down 7th avenue in New York City, instead we have come upon a time of video conference calls and high-res pdf images sent over email. Marts and markets are being closed in favor of large online design shows, especially as more and more of the supply chain converts to online. This sentiment is also brought up by Rapp (2013), when it is pointed out that with each added member to this online landscape, there is an added pressure on the areas that remain out of this technological sphere. (Rapp, 2013) Along with the ease that is brought by these technologies, there is also a loss of what may have once been one of the hallmarks of the industry: tactility. However, as trends come and go, it is evident that many businesses are still able to maintain the old feelings of the fashion industry, while incorporating the benefits of technology throughout their operations. In summary, technology is something that is not only unavoidable, it is necessary to the survival of many businesses.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Limitations</h2>

The focus of this study was to analyze the impact that social media and marketing technology has made on small business retailers. This was done through interviewing different professionals in their given fields, and recording their responses to multiple media-related questions.

Even though many different areas of the industry were covered through this study, there is always room for further understanding and questioning. Adding a professional media marketer for a small business would have been beneficial in analyzing everything that is necessary nowadays, and interviewing a business that had made the complete transition to online (instead

of brick-and-mortar occupancy) would have helped to understand why a retailer would opt to give up the "traditional" retail experience.

Additional questions would have also been beneficial in certain circumstances, especially further questions focusing around each candidates' field and impacts. If done correctly, these could have helped to paint an even more accurate picture of how the fashion landscape has and is changing. This could also help to predict the ways in which the industry will continue to develop, and will assist in the analysis of future industry trends.

Finally, it may have been beneficial to take a physical tour of the locations and businesses, and if possible see the way in which these have changed. Subject 3's business, for instance, is in its 90th year of operation, and a formal tour may have helped to envision the ways in which technology has changed the physical landscape of the store over time. Because of health and travel concerns it was not practical to take these steps for all of the businesses, but it may have added depth and a better understanding of changes had this been accessible.

Conclusion

Both fashion and technology are items and industries that are incredibly pervasive in modern society. As new and future businessowners begin to take their place in the workforce, it is important to understand the true impact that social media and marketing technologies have had on the retail industry in order to begin to plan for the future. These industries are ever-changing and adapting, and in order to keep up with the times, the same is demanded of its leadership. While the world is currently operating without precedent, there is comfort in knowing that there are certain things that can be relied upon, and how, in the words of Heraclitus, "There is nothing

permanent except change." As we push our way into an uncertain territories, we know that those who are willing to work and learn with purpose will be the ones to shape the future.

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Appendix

1.

Questions -
-What is your name, title, and type of company in which you work.
-What platforms do you currently employ? What is your favorite, or the one that you have made the most progress with? Why?
-What processes have been made easier with the advent of these technologies? Specifically regarding the current buying environment, have marketing or media technologies made buying/selling more possible than if they did not exist?
-What are your major struggles with marketing and media technologies?
-Has media made it more difficult to compete with bigger brands who may have greater access to these technologies, or leveled the playing field in terms of customer outreach?
-In a very entertainment-driven society, do you feel that media technology in particular is just adding more noise, or have you found a way to directly reach out to your target market?
-Have marketing technologies allowed you to reach out to clients and allow a faster pivot than what would have been possible before the era of rapidly available tech?

Table 2 : Questions asked, in order.