

Reflections on phygital experiences: conceptual boundaries, wellbeing benefits and methodological suggestions

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experiences

515

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Received 22 May 2023
Revised 9 August 2023
Accepted 31 August 2023

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the construct of phygital experiences and provide ideas that may spur future research on phygital consumer experiences in relation to consumer well-being using qualitative research methods.

Design/methodology/approach – With the increase in consumers' online and offline interactions, there is a greater need for marketers to prompt integrated consumer experiences (i.e. integrated customer experiences through online and offline interactions). The authors developed this essay based on a literature review of phygital experiences and consumer well-being.

Findings – This commentary provides suggestions on how to expand the conceptual boundaries of phygital experiences by examining the effects of consumer phygital experiences in relation to consumer need satisfaction, consumer happiness and benefits to the firm. The commentary also includes several methodological suggestions that can guide future qualitative research.

Originality/value – The value of this commentary involves insights about research methods stimulated by the current research on consumer well-being.

Keywords Phygital experiences, Consumer need satisfaction, Consumer happiness, Firm performance, Qualitative research

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

In today's world of commerce, many consumers are choosing to interact with firms and their offerings through a mix of online platforms and traditional offline facilities. Phygital (physical and digital) consumer experiences refer to this type of customer interaction with retailers – integrated customer experiences through online and offline interactions (Batat, 2022; Rigby, 2011). Phygital experiences are integrated, multidimensional experiences. They are more than sequential experiences in online and offline channels. The experiences cover



online and offline encounters at various contact points: online and offline experiences related to purchasing, brand, interactions with the firm, promotions and interactions with service/sales representatives. Phygital experiences also cover online and offline experiences and their interactions across all stages of the consumption life cycle, from purchase to disposal.

Phygital experiences provide consumers with greater benefits compared to omni-channel experiences, which mainly focus only on economic transactions in the context of an on-site retail setting (Batat, 2022). Specifically, phygital experiences facilitate easier access to offerings and immersion in the marketplace (Talukdar and Yu, 2021), serve to harmonize customer experiences (Akter *et al.*, 2021) and enhance perceptions of a brand image (Hyun *et al.*, 2022; Sharma *et al.*, 2010; Van Birgelen *et al.*, 2006). Despite the merits and importance of the concept, the construct is still in the early stages of development in consumer research. The goal of this essay is to reflect on the construct and provide ideas that may spur future research on phygital consumer experiences in relation to consumer well-being using qualitative research methods.

2. Expanding the conceptual boundaries of phygital experiences

While the concept of phygital experiences is defined as integrated consumer experiences based on online and offline interactions (Batat, 2022), we believe that this construct remains underdeveloped. That is, consumer researchers adept at using qualitative research techniques have many opportunities to enhance our understanding of the nature and scope of these integrated experiences. We believe that the use of qualitative research methods can enrich our understanding of consumer phygital experiences by broadening our conceptual boundaries of the construct. This can be done in two ways:

- (1) by incorporating elements of sensing, feeling, thinking and acting; and
- (2) by incorporating customer experiences after product acquisition – experiences involving product possession, use, maintenance and disposal.

This broadened definition of phygital experiences can best be captured using qualitative research methods. How can this be done? In two ways.

First, we can enhance our understanding of phygital experiences (integration of customers' online and offline shopping experiences) by broadening the definition of phygital experiences. Specifically, we can incorporate elements of *sensing, feeling, thinking* and *acting* in a multichannel context. Schmitt *et al.* (2015) defined brand experiences to include a combination of sensing, feeling, thinking (analytically as well as imaginatively), acting (i.e. interacting with the environment through bodily actions) and relating to others in a social context. For example, Batat (2021) explored the impact of augmented reality technology on diners' multidimensional responses (sensory, affective, behavioral, social and intellectual) using a qualitative case study method. A broadened definition of phygital experiences is likely to provide qualitative consumer researchers with a deeper understanding of the nature and scope of the construct. Various research methods from quality-of-life research can enrich our understanding of phygital experiences – methods such as experience sampling (e.g. sending messages randomly during experiences to report their emotions) (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter, 2003), day reconstruction method (e.g. writing about the episode *per se* and one's respective emotions at the end of the day) (Kahneman *et al.*, 2004) and using devices that detect participants' immediate sensory/bodily responses.

Second, current research on phygital experiences focuses mainly on consumer experiences during the acquisition stage of the consumption life cycle. Only a handful of phygital consumer studies have explicitly tried to capture consumer experiences after the acquisition stage (Mele *et al.*, 2021). According to the consumption life cycle model of consumer well-being (Lee *et al.*,

2002; Sirgy *et al.*, 2007), customers experience satisfaction during product acquisition, possession, use, maintenance and disposal. Yet, we have hardly any qualitative research on how phygital experiences influence customer use, possession, maintenance and disposal of products. For example, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) compared use-based consumption experiences with possession-based experiences. Use-based consumption experience is defined as ephemeral, access based and dematerialized liquid consumption (e.g. short-term use, rental, sharing, digital use), while possession-based experience is defined as enduring, ownership-based and solid material (e.g. long-term physical possession). As such, we do not know whether phygital experiences have differential effects on consumer-use experiences versus consumer-possession experiences. Qualitative consumer research methods such as netnography (e.g. analyzing blogs and online forums to produce key words in each consumption stage) and quantitative longitudinal studies that track one's cognitive and emotional responses over the different stages of the consumption cycle can synergistically help better understand the behavioral ramifications of this distinction.

3. Consumers' need benefits and the enduring nature of these benefits

We believe that phygital experiences can provide consumers with a multitude of need benefits, and these benefits are likely to be enduring; not so much in the context of an omni channel.

First, we still have a limited understanding of whether and how phygital experiences contribute to consumer need satisfaction (Sirgy *et al.*, 2017 as an example of a behavioral model grounded in need satisfaction theory). Future interpretative research could examine how phygital experiences capture consumer benefits guided by the concept of need satisfaction. The need satisfaction concept is adept at explaining how consumption benefits contribute to consumer well-being. The theoretical assertion is that consumer well-being is significantly enhanced if the consumption experience meets certain basic needs (benefits related to safety, health, economic, sensory, escape, and/or sensation/stimulation needs) and certain growth needs (benefits related to symbolic, aesthetic, moral, mastery, relatedness and/or distinctiveness needs). We believe that qualitative research methods can capture this amalgam of consumer needs and benefits as experienced in a multichannel context and provide readers with a deeper level of understanding of the phenomena.

Second, we believe that phygital experiences have enduring effects compared to customer experiences in an omni channel. Specifically, one may argue that consumer experiences in an omni channel have transient effects, and the effects are subject to hedonic adaptation (Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999). In contrast, given the high level of immersion and flow involved in phygital experiences, one can argue that such experiences may have enduring effects compared to omni-channel experiences. Qualitative research that captures long-term effects based on in-depth understanding of consumers' history, is better equipped to identify and test hypothesized enduring effects, much more so than traditional longitudinal survey research.

4. Phygital experience and consumer happiness

Despite the many benefits that phygital experiences provide to the firm, limited attention has been given to the social benefits. That is, we still do not know much about the impact of phygital experiences on consumer well-being or happiness. Future qualitative consumer research may be fruitful in developing theory related to how phygital experiences contribute to consumer happiness. Here are some suggestions.

First, consumer research has produced evidence suggesting that, compared to material possessions (i.e. tangible products), consumer service experiences may generate greater happiness (Van Boven and Gilovich, 2003). That is, research produced evidence suggesting that consumers experience more positive feelings after pondering an experiential purchase

than a material purchase. This may occur because consumer experiences with services are more open to positive reinterpretations, tend to be more meaningful and contribute more to successful social relationships. We believe that integrated consumer experiences with services can further boost consumer happiness because of the amplification effect that online and offline interactions can produce. Future interpretive studies can be conducted to better understand how phygital experiences enhance consumer happiness in relation to services versus tangible goods. Qualitative research in this context is likely to capture this hypothesized effect on consumer happiness much better than quantitative research. Research capturing this effect requires the type of research that is idiographic, not nomothetic.

Second, the research finding that consumption of consumer services produces a stronger effect on consumer happiness than consumption of material goods has been explained as follows (Gilovich *et al.*, 2015):

- service experiences tend to enhance social relations more readily and effectively than material goods;
- service experiences tend to impact a bigger part of consumer's identity than material goods; and
- service experiences tend to be evaluated more on their own terms with fewer upward social comparisons, which tend to reduce happiness.

As such, future interpretive studies are likely to be more effective than traditional survey research in capturing the role of phygital experiences on consumer's perception of identity, social comparison and consumer happiness.

Third, one can argue that consumers become anxious when buying products online, which is offset by an offline store visit to experience the product in person. In other words, the offline store visit serves to reduce consumer anxiety (Ariffin *et al.*, 2018; Han and Kim, 2017). Thus, the integrated phygital experience provides consumers not only with convenience and greater accessibility but also serves to reduce anxiety and possible consumer regret. Future interpretive studies are in a much better position to provide supportive evidence of the effect of satisfying phygital experiences on consumer happiness as mediated by reduced anxiety and regret.

Fourth, research has demonstrated the potential risks of relying too much on digital marketing technologies (e.g. algorithm-based recommendation system) in purchase decisions. For example, a study by Banker and Khetani (2019) empirically showed that the lay belief that "algorithms hold greater domain expertise" leads consumers to depend too much on the system's recommendations, which may be at the expense of their own well-being. We also should consider the fact that many consumers tend to hold an unfavorable attitude towards technology-driven consumption experiences (i.e. algorithm aversion) (Castelo *et al.*, 2019; Logg *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, future research using qualitative research methods could be conducted to ascertain under what technological conditions consumer's phygital experiences are likely to have a positive influence on consumer happiness.

5. Benefits of phygital experiences to the firm

As noted previously, phygital experiences can provide many benefits to the firm: enhanced consistent brand image (Hyun *et al.*, 2022; Sharma *et al.*, 2010; Van Birgelen *et al.*, 2006), increased accessibility (Batat, 2022) and greater consumer immersion in the marketplace experiences (Talukdar and Yu, 2021). One can argue that phygital experiences provide the firm with financial benefits accrued from long-term customer relationships (via customer

trust and loyalty) (Gao and Huang, 2021; Lazaris *et al.*, 2021). Yet, one can also argue that automated online marketing practices provided by technology platforms (e.g. AI-based content prioritization for news feeds) may undermine customer relationships and limit opportunities for customer learning (Kozinets *et al.*, 2021). Future interpretive studies can be conducted for a better understanding of the underlying conditions involving the positive effects of phygital experiences on the firm's relational and financial performance.

6. Methodological suggestions

To fully understand the concept of phygital experiences and examine its impact on consumer happiness, we recommend researchers use the following multi-methods in their research.

First, we recommend researchers use qualitative methods of ethnography, phenomenology and case studies using in-depth personal interviews to fully understand the construct of consumers' phygital experiences and their impact on consumer happiness (cf. Batat, 2021; Debenedetti, 2021). Qualitative research methods tend to be highly effective in exploring and understanding complex market phenomena (MacInnis *et al.*, 2020), and these methods should help us better understand the nature of benefits accrued through the use of multichannels (compared to omni channels) and identify potential moderators and mediators impacting consumer happiness.

Second, we recommend researchers use experimental research designs to formally test effects of phygital experiences on consumer happiness, hypothesized based on interpretive research. Experimental research should help us test the hypothesized effects of various phygital experiences on consumer happiness under moderating and mediating conditions. For example, experimental research should help us test the hypothesized effects of experience sequence (online to offline vs. offline to online vs. simultaneous experiences) on consumer's perceived benefits and happiness under various hypothesized personal, situational and cultural conditions.

Third, we recommend researchers use the longitudinal survey method to test in the effect of phygital experiences to examine hypothesized changes of the effect phygital experiences on consumer happiness over time – hypotheses developed through interpretative studies. We do not know much about how enduring the effects of phygital experiences on consumer happiness. Longitudinal research can help us better test hypothesized changes of experience satisfaction (e.g. anticipated, experienced and remembered satisfaction) and degree of hedonic adaptation over time (cf. Kahneman, 2000; Zajchowski *et al.*, 2017).

Fourth, we recommend researchers measure consumer phygital experiences at multiple touchpoints (e.g. physical store, digital device-specific encounters) and develop a composite index by summing these experiences based on perceived importance of each contact point. It may be that the composite index would better predict consumer happiness than global consumer evaluations of these experiences.

Fifth, we recommend researchers use various technologies in measuring phygital consumer experiences. As the design and implementation of phygital consumer experience are affected by advanced technologies (e.g. artificial intelligence, augmented reality), it is also important to account for consumers' use of those technologies.

Sixth, we recommend researchers apply fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA; Woodside, 2013) as an alternative method to combine case-oriented qualitative analysis and variable-oriented quantitative analysis. The fsQCA analyzes correlations among independent and dependent variables and offers two types of configurations of necessary and sufficient conditions (Pappas and Woodside, 2021). These conditions enable researchers to reach a distinction between core and peripheral elements based on the causal strength of the outcome: core elements with strong causal strength and peripheral elements with weaker strength. This method also allows researchers to identify possible combinations of causes (e.g. presence of high-quality personalization, presence of high-message quality and presence of

strongly positive emotions) to achieve intended outcomes (i.e. high online purchase intention) (Gonçalves *et al.*, 2018; Pappas and Woodside, 2021). That is, the fsQCA can help researchers identify optimal combinations of various phygital experiences related to consumer happiness.

In summary, it is advisable to use a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. Both methods complement each other well to better capture the construct of phygital consumer experiences across the full spectrum of the consumer life cycle.

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Further reading

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