

Cultural Retail Strategies Go Online:

The socio-material scripts of e-tailing

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Introduction, theoretical framework and methods

This paper examines the various ways in which cultural retail strategies are enacted online. It discusses the underlying cultural logic of three e-tailing sites and how these sites promote specific sets of consumer experiences/understandings and practices through the design and use of specific socio-material scripts.

While it is true that retail marketing has a propensity to draw on psychological theories and make use of quantitative methods in the examination of retailing, there is also now an emergent field of socio-cultural retail studies that use predominantly social theory and employs qualitative interpretative methods (Fuentes & Hagberg, 2013). Over the years, a number of socio-cultural studies of retailing have been conducted and published in retailing journals. For example, Kozinets et al. (2002) offer a cultural analysis of theme brand shops. Arnould et al. (2001) analyse the Wal-Mart ideology as it is enacted by its flyers. Hollenback et al. (2008) offer a cultural analysis of museum shops. Griffith (2011) analyses the multiple meanings that people derive from shopping over the course of a lifetime. Uusitalo (2001) investigates the meanings that consumers attach to different retail formats and brands and Bäckström (2013) conducts a socio-cultural analysis of recreational shopping. Socio-cultural studies of retailing are starting to enter the field and, in light of this development, researchers have even begun to talk about a cultural turn within retail marketing (Borghini et al., 2009).

These studies show that retailing cannot solely be understood in technical and/or psychological terms. Deliberately or not, cultural retailing strategies are enacted and previous studies indicate that these strategies shape consumers understandings and practices. Therefore, to understand why some store concepts, marketing practices and products work and others fail, an understanding of the socio-cultural processes underlying the practices of retailing, shopping and consumption is important (E. Arnould, 2005; Kozinets et al., 2002).

How are then cultural retail strategies accomplished online? How do cultural retail strategies translate from physical to virtual spaces?

These questions remain largely unanswered. E-tailing research in the field of marketing has had a tendency to, like most retail marketing research, draw predominantly on psychological theories, use quantitative methods and focus on issues such as consumer choice, loyalty, and e-service quality (Grewal & Levy, 2009, 2007). Conversely, cultural retail research has had a tendency to focus almost exclusively on “physical” and often spectacular retail sites, such as brand stores (Borghini et al., 2009; Hollenback et al., 2008; Kozinets et al., 2004; Kozinets et al., 2002; Peñaloza, 1999).

Against this background, the aim of this paper is to examine the various ways in which e-tailors enact a cultural retailing strategy.

Theoretically, the paper draws on socio-material practice theory (Orlikowski, 2007; Reckwitz, 2002; Shove, Watson, Hand, & Ingram, 2007). Rather than taking a purely discursive approach, as is common in much cultural

research, the digital interface of e-tailors is approached as a material market device (Araujo, 2007; Callon, Millo, & Muniesa, 2007; Cochoy, 2009). From this perspective, e-tailing websites can be treated in the same way as “physical” stores – as sites that encourage certain practices, produce experiences and frame products as desirable. More than that, drawing on socio-material practice theory one can analyse the socio-material scripts (Jelsma, 2003) – programmes of action – built into these digital devices – and examine what types of consumer practices and trajectories they encourage.

Methodologically, the draws on an on-going online/offline ethnographic study of four e-tailors: Arstiderna.se (an ecological food e-retailer), Lekmer.se (sells toys and children’s clothes) Nelly.com (a fashion e-tailor), and Bygghemma.se (a e-tailor of home decoration and home improvements products).

These four cases are suitable in relation to this study and its aim for a number of reasons. First, these four companies are predominantly e-tailors, meaning they do not have physical stores and are thus obligated to enact their entire cultural strategy online. This, it is assumed, makes the observations of the enactment of a cultural strategy easier. Second, these e-tailors have a strong presence in Sweden and websites in Swedish. This facilitates the interpretation of the material and the collection of non-digital materials (see below). Third, they all have complex websites containing considerable amounts of information and use multiple digital channels to market themselves and their products. This enables the collection of various types of digital materials and thus the production of a richer material. Fourth, the selected e-tailors focus on different product categories and can thus be expected to draw on different cultural discourses to market and frame their products and offering. This is likely to produce interesting variations in the material.

Like most ethnographic studies this one combines different data collecting techniques. First, and perhaps most important, are the observations. Digital observations of the e-tailors websites and other digital communicative platforms (Facebook, Instagram, blogs, etc.) are expected to make up the bulk of the empirical material. The objective is to document how the e-tailors websites are organized, what functions are built in and how these changes over time (a year). The material will be documented through a number of techniques (e.g., screen shots, screen movies, web reader PDF:s) Second, interviews with consumers that use these websites will be carried out to get an understanding of the various ways in which these websites are used and what role they have in consumers’ lives. The interviews are transcribed in full. Third, interviews with company management and web designers will be carried out in order to get an understanding of the ideas, strategies and processes behind the design and organization of the e-tailing sites. The interviews are transcribed in full.

Framing products and formatting consumers: Preliminary analysis

Preliminary analyses of the e-tailing websites show that these promote and simultaneously enable a number of consumer practices and try to encourage consumers along specific trajectories.

For example, the e-tailing sites encourage consumers to browse and search for products. Consumers are presented with various forms of categorizations that are intended to make sense to them as they look to purchase a product. Sometimes this means that product are simply sorted according to product type – e.g., toys/children’s clothes at Lekmera.se — or intended user e.g., male/female at

Nelly.com. At other times browsing trajectories are instead structured according to the companies offers – e.g., type of food box (vegetarian, family, fruit etc.) at arstiderna.com – or according to the “room” they are intended to form part of – e.g., living room, children’s room, bathroom at Byggahemma.se. The trajectories suggested for this consumer practice are designed to help the consumers in their browsing but also work to format the consumer, to prescribe a certain type of browsing practice.

Other consumer practices encouraged include “getting to know the company” - by reading up on them and also engaging with them on other digital platforms – “connecting to the company” – by signing up for newsletters, becoming a member of clubs, or creating a customer account – “purchasing/ordering” – the actual buying of products – and “getting help” – the offering of various forms of customer service. In addition to this the e-tailing sites also work to teach consumers how to consume by encouraging them and offering them the opportunity to learn more about current styles and how to make outfits work (Nelly.com), teaching them to cook by offering recipes (Arstiderna.com), or instructing consumers on how to carry out different home alterations projects – such as redoing your bathroom (byggahemma.se).

As consumers carry out the prescribed practices and follow the encouraged trajectories they are subjected to various messages and images that aim at showing them how and in what context to use the products. These e-tailors show consumers a world – a set of desirable consumption practices – in where the products they market are needed. In the processes they also work to format consumers through both IT-technique and images and texts – to shape them into the type of consumer that suits the e-tailors offerings. Consumers are for example taught how to be caring and responsible parent-consumers at/by Lekmera.se and Arstiderna.se formats them to be ecologically minded quality oriented healthy food consumers. Similarly, consumers are taught to be handy home improvers by Byggahemma.se and fashion oriented and updated consumers by Nelly.com.

In short, this preliminary analysis shows that e-tailing sites are scripted to encourage/enable a set of consumer practices and trajectories through which products are framed as meaningful and consumers are formatted. Like the physical stores previously examined by culturally inclined marketing scholars these e-tailing sites work both frame their products as socially, culturally, and practically meaningful and to construct consumers that fit their offerings.

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