

The sociability pillar of the phygital customer experience: A systematic literature review

Abstract

This study investigates the 'sociability' pillar of the Phygital Customer Experience (PH-CX) framework, focusing on the social benefits consumers derive from their interactions in both online and offline environments. The primary objective is to identify the key dimensions of this pillar and their impact on consumer value. A systematic literature review (SLR) methodology was employed, analyzing a selection of relevant articles from the SCOPUS database. The search process identified a final set of 44 articles that focus on the phygital concept within the management and marketing fields. The study uncovers three core dimensions of the sociability pillar within the PH-CX framework: 'engagement', 'inclusivity', and 'co-creation'. These dimensions enhance social interactions in both digital and physical realms, facilitating stronger emotional connections, broader participation, and collaborative experiences between consumers and brands. The research is limited to articles from the SCOPUS database and focuses on the 'sociability' pillar. Future studies could expand the review to include other databases and explore the interplay between the different pillars of the PH-CX framework. This research provides valuable insights into the social aspects of the phygital concept, offering academics and practitioners a deeper understanding of the sociability pillar. The findings can guide strategies for enhancing customer engagement, inclusivity, and co-creation, ultimately increasing consumer value across various industries.

Keywords: Phygital customer experience; social interaction; engagement; inclusivity; co-creation; systematic literature review

Introduction

Blending the physical and digital elements of customer experience, the PH-CX framework emphasizes six core pillars: practicality, sociability, immersivity, technicality, sensoriality, and affectivity (Batat, 2022). This paper presents partial results from a larger study, focusing specifically on providing initial insights into the sociability pillar. Building on the PH-CX framework as structured by Batat, (2022), our research, using a deductive approach (Saunders et al., 2019), explores deeper into this aspect, which refers to the social benefits, specifically addressing the consumers' need for interaction and connection, that consumers derive from their shopping experiences in both online and offline environments (Batat, 2022). We seek to answer the research question: 'What are the key dimensions of the sociability pillar within the PH-CX framework, and how do they influence the value delivered to consumers?'. To explore this question, our study employs a SLR methodology, allowing for a comprehensive examination of existing research, particularly focusing on articles related to the phygital concept in the fields of management and marketing. This method revealed three main dimensions of the sociability pillar within the PH-CX framework: 'engagement', 'inclusivity', and 'co-creation'. Our research provides key insights that will benefit both academics exploring the phygital concept and practitioners in sectors like retail, tourism, fashion, healthcare, and education. By applying these insights, they can refine their customer experience strategies and increase consumer value.

Methodology

The study's research methodology follows a deductive approach, meaning that the process for gathering data is carefully developed from a theoretical framework already existing in the literature (Saunders et al., 2019). As a result, both the research design and the collection of data are methodically organized according to the PH-CX framework, as put forward by Batat, (2022). This study employs a SLR to explore the core components of the sociability pillar, chosen for its rigorous, organized approach, which minimizes biases and ensures a comprehensive examination by systematically identifying, assessing, and integrating relevant studies (Siddaway et al., 2019). The review was conducted in three main phases (Tranfield et al., 2003):

Planning - A preliminary analysis was conducted to identify the research topic and determine relevant keywords for article selection. A review protocol was then designed and agreed upon by all researchers.

Execution - An extensive search was performed using SCOPUS, identified as the top database for SRL (Gusenbauer & Haddaway, 2020). The search used "phygital" as the keyword, targeting English-language documents in titles, abstracts, and keywords without restricting publication years, resulting in documents from 2014 to 2023. The strategy, which avoided Boolean modifiers, initially identified 81 publications by December 31, 2023. A five-phase screening process ensured relevance to phygital settings in management and marketing. First, one article was excluded due to missing key identification details, leaving 80 articles with complete metadata. Next, titles, abstracts, and keywords were reviewed, narrowing the pool to 76 articles, of which 66 were successfully retrieved. After evaluating conformity issues, one more article was excluded, leaving 65. Finally, the fourth and fifth screenings, based on full article reviews, further refined the selection, resulting in 44 articles for in-depth analysis.

Evaluation – To identify the main topics we employed a manual coding methodology (Saldaña, 2021). We structured our deductive approach around the Batat model framework PH-CX (Batat, 2022; Saunders et al., 2019). We began by using content analysis to organize the data into broad categories based on the model's core elements. This allowed us to categorize and quantify the data within the framework. In a subsequent, more exploratory phase, we conducted thematic coding to identify and interpret patterns and themes, uncovering deeper insights and emerging sub-themes. Throughout the process, we iteratively refined our categories and subcategories as new insights were gained from the data (Saldaña, 2021).

Results

Quantitative analysis

The articles related to our topic span from 2014 to December 31, 2023, with 44 selected for evaluation. Most were published recently, with 17 articles in 2023, 11 in 2022, and 9 in 2021; no relevant articles were found for 2015, 2016, or 2017. Of these, 26 publications have first authors affiliated with European universities. Asia contributed 12 articles, North America 4, and both Africa and Oceania 1 each. Italy leads with 11 publications, comprising 25% of the total. Empirical studies dominate the selection with 31 articles, compared to 13 conceptual ones. Qualitative analyses are most common (19 studies), followed by 7 quantitative and 5 mixed-method studies. The

majority of papers (27) focus on three sectors: retail (11), tourism and cultural heritage (9), and luxury and fashion retailing (7). Although fashion and luxury are sub-sectors of retail, they were treated separately due to their significant qualitative findings. The analyzed papers come from 35 different journals.

Qualitative analysis

Our research identified 'engagement', 'inclusivity' and 'co-creation,' as key dimension of the sociability pillar.

The engagement dimension refers to the emotional connection and active involvement an individual has with a brand in phygital environments. There are three primary ways the engagement takes place in the phygital realm, namely customer-to-brand (C2B), customer-to-customer (C2C), and customer-to-employee (C2E) engagement. Phygital retail stores enhance C2B engagement by promoting consumer activity and information-seeking through digital tools like screens, interactive kiosks and smart mirrors, fostering a more immersive customer journey experience (Banik, 2021). C2C engagement is boosted, for example, by phygital sports retail stores such as the Adidas store in London, which offer immersive experiences with treadmills and interactive screens reproducing racing scenes. These phygital interactions also encourage customers to share their experiences both online and offline (Bonfanti et al., 2023). Ultimately, C2E, is significantly enhanced in phygital settings through digital tools that facilitate screen-sharing and other interactive capabilities between customers and employees. This interaction is critical as it leads to increased cooperation and richer social interactions, which mimic the positive rapport typically formed in physical retail settings (Pangarkar et al., 2022).

The co-creation dimension highlights how phygital technology enables brands to collaborate with individual consumers and entire communities, creating more tailored experiences and gaining broader feedback. For example, Bazzanella et al., (2014) demonstrated this in Volpiano, where a participatory process involving professionals and community members helped shape public spaces. This approach combined analog and digital strategies, using digital media like online platforms and virtual maps to encourage wider participation and real-time feedback, essential for developing more responsive, community-focused urban spaces. Similarly, the local community of Sapphaya, a district of Chai Nat province, central Thailand, expanded their digital presence through online virtual tours and digital storytelling. These enabled audiences not only to immerse themselves in the real, local, rural cultural heritage landscape and view local products for sale on platforms like Facebook, but also encouraged them to interact with the community by giving feedback and thus helping in the co-creation of the experience (Muangasame & Tan, 2023).

Phygital environments promote inclusivity by creating a space where individuals can socialize without the traditional barriers found in either purely physical or digital settings. For instance, in fashion, the 'virtual layer of expression' enables people to express themselves in ways not possible in the physical world. For example, while someone might choose slow fashion for ethical reasons in real life, the virtual layer allows for broader self-expression without physical constraints (Särmäkari, 2023). Furthermore, since male customers often prefer to avoid extensive cognitive processing

while shopping, phygital retail stores use intuitive visual displays. This approach reduces cognitive strain, making the shopping experience more accessible (Banik & Gao, 2023). Additionally, a qualitative study in a Finnish care home used phygital elements, such as digital opera events, to enhance the wellbeing and social connections of older adults through cultural engagement. The study found that these events significantly improved social interaction and emotional wellbeing, allowing isolated individuals to participate in community experiences and boosting their overall quality of life (Caiola et al., 2023). In the education realm, research on mobile technology in South African higher education shows that its adoption helps create more inclusive environments, accommodating the diverse needs of all students, regardless of physical or socio-economic circumstances (Van Wyk, 2023).

Conclusion, limitations and future directions

Our study, through an extensive review of 44 articles, has uncovered the sociability pillar of the PH-CX framework, identifying three key dimensions. Engagement underscores the importance of fostering emotional connections and active involvement between consumers, brands, and communities in both digital and physical environments, thereby enhancing the overall customer experience. Co-creation emphasizes the collaborative potential of phygital technologies, allowing brands and consumers to jointly shape experiences that are more tailored and responsive to individual and community preferences. Inclusivity highlights the role of phygital environments in creating spaces that accommodate diverse social needs, breaking down traditional barriers, and enabling broader participation across various demographics. These findings are part of a larger study, which provides initial insights into how sociability affects customer experiences. Our findings contribute significantly to the academic discourse surrounding the PH-CX framework, providing a deeper understanding of how sociability influences customer value. Additionally, the insights derived from our study offer practical guidance for businesses across sectors, such as retail, tourism, fashion, healthcare, and education, enabling them to enhance their customer engagement strategies and create more inclusive and co-creative experiences in a rapidly evolving marketplace. Future research could benefit from expanding the scope of databases to include a broader range of articles, potentially yielding more diverse insights. Moreover, further exploration into the other pillars of the PH-CX framework is essential to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how these dimensions interact and contribute to the overall phygital customer experience.

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