

## **Phygital: Toward the empowerment of the customer and the competitiveness of the retail businesses**

### **Le phygital: Vers l'autonomisation du client et la compétitivité des commerces de détail**

**EL BADIA Kenza**

Enseignant chercheur

École Nationale de Commerce et de Gestion de Settat

Hassan First University of Settat

Laboratoire Recherche en finance, Audit et Gouvernance des Organisations – LARFAGO

Maroc

**k.elbadia@uhp.ac.ma**

**ASSOUD Mohamed**

Doctorant

École Nationale de Commerce et de Gestion de Settat

Hassan First University of Settat

Laboratoire de recherche en Management Marketing et Communication- LRMMC

Maroc

**m.assoud@uhp.ac.ma**

**WAHABI Rachid**

Enseignant chercheur

École Nationale de Commerce et de Gestion de Settat

Hassan First University of Settat

Laboratoire Recherche en finance, Audit et Gouvernance des Organisations – LARFAGO

Maroc

**Rachid.wahabi@uhp.ac.ma**

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**Abstract:**

With the advent of technology, the retail industry has undergone a significant transformation in the few recent years. Living in the digital era means living in an era where the customers have access to digital tools and information at all times and everywhere. Customers are becoming more tech-oriented, and their expectations are changing rapidly, they also became more demanding regarding many aspects of their shopping experience. And with this free knowledge came the desire to be seen differently, not just the user and the destroyer of goods and services but also an involved stakeholder in the creation process. In response, retailers have been forced to adapt to the new reality and incorporate technology into their businesses. One such adaptation is the concept of phygital - the integration of digital in physical retail spaces, to create a seamless and personalized shopping journey that meets the evolving demands of customers. This article aims to explore, through a critical literature review how the phygital approach can empower customers and make retail businesses more competitive.

**Keywords:** phygital; consumer experience; prosumer; co-creation value; retail business.

**Résumé :**

Avec l'avènement de la technologie, le secteur du commerce de détail a connu une transformation significative au cours des dernières années. Vivre à l'ère numérique signifie vivre à une époque où les clients ont accès aux outils numériques et à l'information à tout moment et en tout lieu. Les clients sont de plus en plus orientés vers la technologie et leurs attentes évoluent rapidement ; ils sont également devenus plus exigeants en ce qui concerne de nombreux aspects de leur expérience d'achat. Cette libre connaissance s'est accompagnée du désir d'être perçu différemment, non seulement comme l'utilisateur et le destructeur de biens et de services, mais aussi comme une partie prenante impliquée dans le processus de création. En réponse, les détaillants ont été contraints de s'adapter à la nouvelle réalité et d'intégrer la technologie dans leurs activités. L'une de ces adaptations est le concept de phygital - l'intégration du numérique dans les espaces physiques de vente au détail, afin de créer un parcours d'achat transparent et personnalisé qui répond à l'évolution des exigences des clients. Cet article a pour but d'explorer par le biais d'une analyse critique de la littérature la manière dont l'approche phygital peut renforcer le pouvoir des clients et rendre les entreprises de vente au détail plus compétitives.

**Mots-clés :** phygital. ; expérience de consommation ; consom'acteur; co-création de valeur ; commerce de détail.

## **Introduction**

The development of digital technology has had a significant influence on many facets of our life recently, from how we communicate to how we work. New business models, improved consumer experiences, and improved operational efficiencies have all been brought about by this digital transformation in numerous industries.

Digital transformation is the process of integrating digital technology throughout all departments of a company, significantly altering how it functions and provides value to its clients. Adopting new technology is only one aspect of this change; another is cultivating an innovative and adaptable culture that enables businesses to swiftly adjust to shifting market conditions.

In today's age, businesses must adjust their traditional approach to incorporate creativity due to the changing role of the consumer. No longer viewed as a passive recipient of goods or services, consumers are increasingly seen as active participants who contribute to their own value (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). They are also becoming more discerning, capable, and skilled in managing their resources, such as time, money, and abilities, to meet their needs (Arnould, 2005; 2007). This new consumer role is referred to as "prosumer," a term coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980 that combines the words "producer" and "consumer."

One of the greatest ways for a business to increase its competitive edge and better please its customers through more individualized offers is to involve consumers during the process of them creating their own value (Hoyer et al., 2010), and the value that we will focus on for this article is the "consumer experience".

The concept of consumer experience appeared in the marketing field following the pioneering work of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), who renewed the explanatory variables of consumer behavior and emphasized that consumers seek out experiences for the pleasure, amusement and sensations they contain. This vision therefore considers the consumer experience as a phenomenon oriented towards the pursuit of fantasies, feelings and entertainment.

This experiential dimension has become a new and indispensable parameter in the design of the point of sale and in the analysis of its perception by its customers. Indeed, contemporary research on retailing highlights the emergence of a third function of the point of sale: the recreational function. The store is not only used to buy products, it is also a source of multiple interactions for the individual; interactions with the products, with the sales staff, with other customers, which can be a source of hedonic gratification in their own right, even in the

absence of a purchase (M. Filser, V. Des Garets, Paché, 2001) According to Filser (2000), consumers who are primarily motivated by pleasure-seeking may view the physical store as a destination for socializing, exploring, strolling, and unwinding. As a result, visiting the store itself becomes a valuable experience for them, with the act of consuming at the store taking on greater significance than the specific products available (Filser, 2001). And according to Blázquez (2014), incorporating digital tools into physical stores is viewed as essential for creating an integrated shopping experience that seamlessly blends both the physical and digital aspects of the shopping process.

Through a literature review, we aim in this article to provide an answer to the following central question: How does the phygital environment in retail affect the competitiveness of industry players and put the customers in a position of power?

In this study, we utilized a bibliographic research method known as a literature review. This approach allowed us to analyze existing literature on the subject of phygital retail. We conducted a systematic search of academic databases, including Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus, using keywords such as “Phygital”, “co-creation of value”, “prosumer”, and “coproduction. After conducting the search, we identified approximately 27 relevant articles, which were thoroughly analyzed and synthesized for our study.

The article serves a dual purpose of theoretical and managerial significance. Theoretically, it presents a conceptual framework that establishes the semantic boundaries between the phygital space and co-creation of experience value while highlighting their interconnectedness. From a managerial perspective, it sheds light on unorthodox strategies that enhance the customer experience.

This scientific article aims to explore and differentiate the concepts of co-creation of value and lived experience in a phygital space. The article will be divided into three sections. In the first section, on lived experience in a phygital space, providing a detailed explanation of the concept and exploring its relationship with co-creation of value, discussing its theoretical underpinnings and exploring its practical applications in various studies.

The second section, we will provide an introduction to the importance of these concepts in modern business practices. We will analyze the various components of a phygital space, including the physical environment, digital interfaces, and customer engagement strategies.

Finally, the third section which is proposed in the form of the conclusion will establish clear semantic distinctions between co-creation of value and lived experience in a phygital space

and provide recommendations for businesses seeking to incorporate these concepts into their operations.

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Through this article, we aim to contribute to the understanding of these two important concepts in modern business practices, and provide insights for businesses seeking to stay competitive in today's rapidly changing marketplace.

## **1. Empowering the Customer :**

### **1.1. The consumer experience**

The article by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) has generated several works that are mainly interested in experiential consumption and the re-enchantment of ordinary experiences, particularly distribution experiences. Nevertheless, it is the 2000s that have been marked by the emergence of a framework for optimized management of the production of experiences by the company, called experiential marketing.

However, this race towards excess and the spectacular in order to offer an extraordinary experience to the consumer, can harm the company in an effort of excess, especially as the consumer no longer wishes to undergo experiences, however extraordinary they may be, but rather seeks to participate in their design and production (de Certeau, 1980). Thus Benavent and Evrard, (2002) and Filser (2002) confirm that the consumer, in an experiential approach, is not a passive actor who reacts to stimuli but an active producer of his own consumption experiences, even the most hyperreal ones. We therefore conclude that companies should

integrate consumers into the experience production process, a concept that we will detail in the next chapter, namely the "co-production of experience". Carù and Cova (2006) suggest that it is important to recognize and appreciate the value of ordinary and commonplace experiences, expanding the concept of experience beyond the extraordinary as previously defined (Carù & Cova, 2002). Typically, ordinary experiences are associated with everyday life, whereas extraordinary experiences are viewed as being outside of it (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2013).

The theory of experiential marketing relies on the most classic rhetorical procedure in marketing (Marion, 1995): the rewriting of history by constructing a previous period as real in order to show the "novelty" in the expression of consumer needs, which here is the need for experiences.

For Abidi-Barthe & Kaabachi (2009), experiential marketing must be understood according to a holistic approach to consumption. The product is no longer the offer that interests the consumer most, but the means to achieve an unforgettable and highly meaningful experience (Carù and Cova 2006). Firat et al (1995) express the same idea: "a product is less and less a "finished" object and more and more a "process" in which the consumer can immerse himself and in which he can also introduce new elements", (Fornerino et al, 2005). The product is then defined as "a global experience that expresses different consumer values: sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and relational values in addition to functional values", (Abidi-Barthe & Kaabachi, 2009). Experiential marketing thus takes up the idea of Immersion (Firat and Dholakia, 1998), it is now a question of engaging consumers in unforgettable processes, by transforming them through the experiences in which they are guided. Arnould et al (2002, p. 423) even suggest that "the economic value of offers increases when we move from commodities to transformations".

### **1.2. The new role of the customer: the prosumer**

Based on the work and research done following Holbrook and Hirshman's pioneering article in 1980, three distinct periods gave rise to three marketing approaches and thus to three figures of the new consumer (Cova & Cova, 2009), they demonstrate how the figure of the creative consumer was constructed in the mid-2000s, following the figure of the individualistic and then hedonistic consumer, thus implying that the consumer had to prove

more and more his value and his skills. The table below presents us with more details regarding the evolution of the marketing approach and therefore the evolution of the role of the consumer.

New marketing approaches	Figures of the new consumer	Consumer level skills
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**Table 1: Marketing approaches, figures and skills of the new consumer**

Relational marketing	Individualistic consumer	Dialogue
Experiential marketing	Hedonistic consumer	Dialogue + Role fulfillment
Collaborative marketing	Creative consumer	Dialogue + Role fulfillment + Resource integration

**Source :** Cova, B., & Cova, V. (2009)

The marketing that interests us in this research is collaborative marketing, which finds its source in the current of innovation and design marketing, which highlights the role of consumers as collaborators of the company and not just as final customers. Von Hippel (1986), studies the role of "lead users" these consumers have a strong experience and expertise in a given field and participate in the evolution of the market in question.

This new marketing approach is also based on the work done in service marketing (Eiglier and Langeard, 1987) which makes the co-production of the service the basis of the servicing system. It was not until the mid-2000s that this old work was reintegrated into a new marketing logic called SDL (Service Dominant Logic) (Lusch and Vargo, 2006; Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Based on the principle of "market with" and no longer "market to", the consumer is now seen as a "market partner" (Peppers and Rogers, 2005), and the co-creation of value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004a) between the company and the consumer is the key process of this new marketing logic.

Customer perceived value has long been interpreted as "the consumer's overall assessment of the usefulness of a product based on the perception of what is received and what is given" (Zeithaml, 1988). But it should be noted that perceived value encompasses other functional, cognitive, affective, social and epistemic aspects (Aurier et al., 2004). This multidimensional

approach to value has called into question all marketing strategies that were based solely on price and quality to promote their products and/or services.

Value co-creation, strictly speaking, was born with the work of the two researchers Prahalad and Ramaswamy with their seminal article: "Co-creation experiments: the next practice in value creation" (2004), since then, the literature dedicated to value co-creation has been enriched thanks to the work of researchers who have been interested in this concept as well as in its key components, its process and its measurements.

Leclercq et al (2016) define value co-creation as a joint process in which actors, whether individuals, organizations, or networks, reciprocally create value. This definition is based on the theoretical foundation of 137 scientific articles. In this process, actors engage with one another by exchanging resources through interactions on an engagement platform. Each actor shares their own resources, integrates resources proposed by others, and potentially develops new resources through a learning process.

This has led several authors to propose a shift from a transactional approach to a collaborative approach, which would encourage companies and consumers to create value together, in order to benefit jointly. According to Lengnick-Hall et al (2000), co-creation means "considering customers as active players in the organization's work". Value co-creation is therefore an integral part of the NIE (New Institutional Economy) approach, which considers the development of skills and resources as endogenous to value creation (Ménard and Shirley, 2005; Vargo and Lusch, 2004).

Understanding the mechanisms and strategies of value co-creation has been the subject of several research studies in marketing, but also in distribution more particularly (Andreu et al., 2010) and in terms of service creation as well (Vargo and Lusch, 2008).

The term "prosumption" was coined as mentioned before by Alvin Toffler in 1980 and refers to a combination of production and consumption, in this case the co-produced supply is intended to be consumed by the contributor himself (Xie et al., 2008). Consumers are thus co-producers of their own supply (Witell et al., 2011). Many researchers claim that this concept is not new, but in fact paramount, they have dealt with the issue, at least implicitly, but it is only recently that they have begun to deal with it explicitly, in light of the various social changes observed, we cite the rise of the Internet and social networks as an example. From this perspective, prosumption encompasses managerial practices such as customization or service delivery (Xie et al., 2008; Jafari et al., 2015).

## **2. Phygital: The competitiveness of Retail Businesses:**

### **2.1. The evolution of retail business**

Following the latest technological advances in the field of distribution and the strong expansion of the experiential approach in marketing and consumer behavior research, the definition of the environment treated under the concept of atmosphere alone seems too reductive, since it neglects the technological and digital aspect that is now omnipresent both at the level of physical points of sale and in the customer's purchasing path.

With the advent of the Internet, several studies have focused on consumer journeys when consumers mobilize several channels during their purchase (Ansari et al., 2008; Balasubramanian et al., 2005; Belvaux, 2004; Gensler et al., 2012; Neslin et al., 2006; Verhoef et al., 2007; etc.), yet this research is purely analytical, cognitive and focused on the purchase decision and does not address the lived experience that is a strategic issue for companies and researchers in the field (Anteblian et al., 2013; Filser, 2008; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

The work that has been done to get a better understanding of the customer's experience has focused either on the real sphere (Bonnin, 2003; Filser, 2002; Hetzel, 2002; etc.) or on the virtual sphere (Kim et al., 2013). On the other hand, very few researchers have studied the experiential experience when it takes place in an environment that combines both spheres, a phenomenon that is increasingly noticed following the digitalization of the purchasing process and points of sale.

The retail industry's distribution channels have undergone significant changes driven by technological advancements, shifting customer preferences, and the need for a seamless shopping experience. That explains why retailers have adopted various strategies, and that the distribution channels used through the last years evolved to engage with their customers (Beck and Rygl, 2015).

Multichannel retailing involves utilizing various channels, and each channel is managed autonomously in "silos", and there may be little coordination or integration between them, resulting in different customer experiences and offers (Frazier, 1999).

Cross-channel retailing, on the other hand, utilizes multiple channels to reach customers, but with a higher level of coordination and integration, with the purpose of challenging consumer creativity (de Certeau, 1990; Cova and Cova, 2009). Retailers strive to provide customers with consistent offers, and customer service across channels, enabling customers to transition seamlessly between channels. However, there may be some limitations to this approach (Badot and Lemoine, 2013; Juanedaayensa et al., 2016).

Omnichannel approach came to take cross-channel integration to the next level by providing a seamless and integrated shopping experience across all channels (Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson, 2014) . The focus is on delivering a consistent and tailored shopping experience, irrespective of the channel used. This statement aligns with the views of Priporas et al. (2017) and Vrontis et al. (2017), who acknowledge that the implementation of "extended self-service spaces" (Vanheems 2013) is the only viable solution to create an omnichannel experience that benefits both customers and retailers.

## **2.2. The phygital experiential context**

In the field of marketing, we find two names to refer to shopping technologies, "NAVA" and "SST". Beck and Crié (2015) define these New Aids to Selling and Buying (NAVA) as: "New technical tools or supports that can be interactive, sometimes ubiquitous and/or collaborative, made available to the salesperson and/or the customer with the aim of facilitating choice and enriching the customer experience". The term SST has been used heavily in the work of Lapassouse-Madrid, Vlad (2016) and Feenstra, Glérant-Glikson (2017), the latter refers to "Self-Service Technologies", which alludes to technological interfaces mobilized by customers that allow them to produce a service without the need for assistance or intervention from contact personnel.

To the best of our knowledge, there is no study that addresses the effects of the phygital experiential context on the perceived value of the experience. To this end, we will rely on existing theories and relationships that concern the experiential context and digital technologies in general. According to Carù and Cova (2006), the experiential context can be defined as "an assembly of stimuli (products) and stimuli (environment, activities) that is capable of creating an experience" that allows the consumer to emerge and appropriate it when it is enclosed, set up and thematized by the distributor.

However, in an era where a health crisis has called into question the management of companies in various fields of activity, particularly mass distribution, and where the watchword is "social distancing". The distributors have to call upon new technologies while taking into account the current societal evolutions to be able to reconcile distance and proximity in order to adapt and respect the requirements emitted by the WHO and the state.

Taking into consideration that, these "experience frameworks with accomplished design" (Antébliau et al., 2013) do not only concern offers and communication channels but also distribution channels (Filser, 2002), the retailer has a new lever in hand to immerse the customer in a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

The digital transformation of the point of sale can take two forms, direct or indirect, the first refers to the fact that the retailer introduces new digital technologies such as SST or NAVA into the store in order to encourage consumers to use them, and the second refers to the fact that the consumer uses his or her own smartphone and the retailer's applications installed on it in order to make a purchase in the store or not. Thus, the hybrid experiential context, known as *phygital*, encourages consumers to co-produce their experience. The omnichannel experience takes into account as an experiential context, the perceived integration of channels, either technological or marketing. Even if this opposition is Manichean since the full integration of channels could eventually be both marketing and technological as Amazon Go seems to announce, it has been preferred to a weak / full integration axis confusing technological and marketing integration (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016).

### **2.3. Shopping technology as a source of value**

Lapassouse-Madrid and Vlad (2016) focused on the different technologies used at the large and medium-sized food stores. Their research concluded that SSTs are a source of value not only for customers but also for retailers who can rely on the autonomy of the consumer to reduce the sales area and the number of employees, especially since they save time in the context of ordinary shopping (Bonnemaizon et al., 2012), however they well point out that this digitalization of the store is accompanied by costs and sacrifices for both parties. In the same sense, focusing on six shopping technologies, Inman and Nicolova (2017) demonstrated that they have a positive impact on customers' attitudinal loyalty. As for Willems et al. (2017), they highlight the influence of SSTs on cost reduction as well as on the hedonic, utilitarian,

and symbolic value of shopping, and Collin-Lachaud and Diallo's (2018) study revealed that the customer's hedonic evaluation positively impacted their intention to revisit the store. Beyond their influences on the hedonic value of the experience, shopping technologies have a real impact on the utilitarian, and social value of customers. (Lao and Vlad, 2018).

Other research has focused on the key components of value creation through technologies (Hilton, 2013), and assert that for this to happen the service delivered must be faster, more convenient, cheaper and available only through the phygital channel, this allows to emerge with three distinct benefits: perceived usefulness, pleasure and autonomy. (Feenstra, Glérant-Glikson, & Valentina, 2018).

The combination of physical and virtual channels now represents the most frequently adopted distribution strategy by retailers (Avery et al., 2012), this concept tends to increase interactivity with the customer, putting them at the center of the retailers' attention (Belghiti & Badot, 2016). Dholokia et al, (2001), propose five key components of interactivity, namely: control, responsiveness, real-time interactions, connectivity and personalization.

Moreover, the research of Yoo et al, (2010) and Teo et al, (2003), who were mainly interested in e-commerce and NICT (new information and communication technologies) sites, prove that interactivity positively impacts the attitude, satisfaction, trust and perceived value towards the site. Xie et al (2008) and Dong et al (2008) suggest that the benefits that consumers obtain from participating in the co-creation process are reflected in the values of the co-creation experience. Marketing literature has extensively studied the perceived values of the co-creation experience, which can be classified into three categories based on Holbrook's (1999) framework: intrinsic self-oriented values such as recreational and emotional benefits, extrinsic self-oriented values such as learning and reassurance, and extrinsic values oriented towards others such as social linkages with the company and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

A 2021 report from McKinsey & Company, "The future of phygital retail," found that phygital retail is becoming increasingly important as consumers demand more personalized experiences. The report suggests that retailers should use technology to create seamless, omnichannel experiences that allow customers to easily switch between digital and physical

channels. The literature review collected highlighted Bathelot's (2017) definition of digitalized physical commerce or phygital point of sale: "Commerce adopting digital tools (informative tablets, connected mirrors...) within a physical point of sale to increase commercial efficiency and optimize the customer experience".

Through our different readings and finding, we can say that the phygital approach is an innovative and effective way for retailers to empower customers and make their businesses more competitive. By integrating physical and digital retail experiences, retailers can offer customers the convenience, personalization, and seamless shopping experience they desire. This approach can help retailers attract new customers, build customer loyalty, and increase revenue. In the age of technology, the phygital approach is essential for retailers who want to stay ahead of the competition and meet the changing needs of their customers.

Our study contributes to the existing literature by providing a conceptual framework for co-creation of value and lived experience in a phygital space, and establishing clear semantic distinctions between the two concepts. However, our research also reveals a gap in the empirical work on the direct impact of the phygital environment on value co-creation through its multiple forms of strategies. Furthermore, there is a lack of tools available to measure the phygital experiential context.

Therefore, we suggest that future research should focus on these issues, aiming to provide empirical evidence on the impact of the phygital environment on value co-creation and developing tools to measure the phygital experiential context. Such research can help businesses to optimize their phygital strategies and improve their ability to meet the changing needs of their customers.

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