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An old model for a new age: Consumer decision making in participatory digital culture

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Abstract The Engel, Kollatt, & Blackwell (EKB) decision-making model has long been a core theory of consumer behaviour. This paper conceptually unpicks it to explore if it can continue to be as relevant in today's participatory online culture, where shopping is increasingly a decision-making process that is driven by a powerful social collective. In order to illustrate the digital world in which the EKB model now operates, we present two fictional, yet realistic, scenarios that illustrate the effects of participatory culture. We conclude that the old EKB model, with some minor tweaks, still provides valuable insights into and explanations of consumer decision making. We conclude by setting a path for future research in this area.

Keywords Digital marketing, Internet, Social media, Social shopping, Consumer decision making, Retailing, Fashion, Participatory culture

INTRODUCTION

Both the trade press and academic research document the shift in consumption practices instigated by the rise of web-based 'participatory culture' where each user can be a producer, influencer and/or consumer of information (Han, 2011; Jenkins, 1992). Naturally, a growing stream of research is busy re-evaluating the applicability of long-established models and constructs in this new digital reality (Belk & Llamas,

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2013; Capon & Hulbert, 2012). Participatory culture has low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement where knowledge is openly shared horizontally among members of digital social networks (Jenkins, 1992). This cultural shift means that information and power is held more firmly in the hands of the consumer, rather than businesses and other organisations. The emergence of a participatory culture, we believe, holds important ramifications for the shopping behaviour of consumers. In this paper we focus specifically on examining our field's traditional perspective on the decision-making process. We propose some modifications to this perspective due to the pervasive influence of participatory culture upon contemporary consumer behaviour.

This paper aims to examine the usefulness and relevance of the EKB decision-making model in a contemporary marketplace where a powerful social collective drives individual decision making. We explore the following research question: how does the rise of participatory culture impact on individual decision making? The following sections discuss previous research on participatory culture with regard to consumer decision making. We then evaluate shopping as a collective experience, before illustrating the changes that have taken place with two realistic, but fictional, vignettes. A conceptual analysis of the decision-making stages has specific ramifications for extant theory, and in particular the EKB model.

DECISION MAKING IN PARTICIPATORY CULTURE: REVISITING THE EKB MODEL

The seminal Engel, Kollatt, and Blackwell (EKB) consumer decision-making model (1968) is one of the core theories of consumer behaviour. It is based upon prior work in educational philosophy by John Dewey (1910/1978) and proposes a sequential process of decision making consisting of 1) problem recognition, 2) information search, 3) evaluation of alternatives, 4) purchase, and 5) post-purchase evaluation (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 1995). It envisions the purchase process as a series of discrete actions, typically precipitated by a conscious recognition of an unsatisfied need. It is grounded in a micro, utilitarian perspective (Foxall, 1989). Consequently, it conceptualises a solitary, rational decision-maker who systematically accesses and sifts through information to maximise utility (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2014). It asserts that consumers go through a fixed sequence of distinct stages when they make purchase decisions. And while not without its critics, it appears in practically every introductory textbook on the subject (for example Blythe, 2013; Solomon et al., 2014) and has been helpful to researchers and practitioners who require a basic framework that systematically defines the steps when consumers process information (Bloch, Sherrell, & Ridgway, 1986; Darley, Blankson, & Luethge, 2010; Haubl & Trifts, 2000; Hoyer, 1984; Kim & Lee, 2008; Park & Cho, 2012).

In the years that followed publication of the EKB model, some authors have questioned the utility of this theory and it has been subject to numerous revisions, reviews and extensions (Bruner & Pomazal, 1988; Darley et al., 2010; Grewal, Roggeveen & Runyan, 2013; Howard, 1977; Howard & Sheth, 1969; Jacoby, 2002; Mowen, 1988; Olshavsky & Granbois, 1979). For instance, Olshavsky and Granbois (1979) explored the notion that a substantial proportion of our purchases do not actually involve making any decisions at all. Jacoby (2002) deemed the EKB model to be too marketer dominated and argued that it lacked a broader recognition of

sociocultural factors that impact upon consumer behaviour. Despite these criticisms, the EKB model is still firmly embedded as a cornerstone of consumer decision making and is not likely to be jettisoned anytime soon. Yet, advances in technology and participatory culture compel us to once again scrutinise the EKB model and its underlying principles, 47 years after it was first published. The next section of this paper will describe participatory culture, and how it is impacting on decision making.

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PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Arguably, one of the most significant changes that drives participatory culture is the ability of users to integrate into networks with other like-minded individuals. Some analysts go so far as to argue that we are on the cusp of a 'hive minded' mentality (Earls, 2007). The *hive-mind* is a large notional entity of people who share their knowledge and opinions. This results in collective intelligence and concentric rings of group affinity modulated by ritualised behaviour. For example, an emerging genre of so-called 'food porn' describes the ritual we observe among people who meticulously document their meals through social media sites. Through gaining this hive-like power, consumers are more informed and cannot be easily duped by companies. This has given rise to a seemingly more democratic and transparent market environment. The hive-mind encourages people to work together to produce more information on products, which helps them to make better decisions. However, critics of the hive-mind would argue that decisions about 'what's hot and what's not' may become less individualistic and more of a collective decision, eventually being governed by blind consensus.

Either way, this trend holds important ramifications for studies of shopping behaviour. In stark contrast to the sequential paradigm of the EKB model, a hive-mind is constantly buzzing - and constantly acting. We propose that we are entering a decision-making environment that is 'always on'; in concert with our digital 'friends', many of us engage in an on-going loop of sharing information about products, monitoring our social networks for updates, and requests for opinions and ratings on planned and completed purchases. This leads to what can be termed polysynchronous consumption, which we define here as

> *integration of two-way peer to peer, peer-content and peer-brand interaction, through blending of multiple channels of face-to-face, asynchronous online and synchronous online communication.*

Such a perspective on decision making has started to be addressed by other researchers in the digital marketing domain. For example, Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) extended and enriched the decision-making model by embracing a consumer-centric diary-based methodology to examine real multi-channel shopping 'journeys' inductively. Through inductive research, an 'orientation stage', which is a mixture of signals from multiple sources and users, guides subsequent decision-making stages. Grewal et al. (2013) evaluated how social, mobile and in-store shopper marketing practices are affecting pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase practices. Several quantitative studies also examine the specific impact of social influence and conformity on individual versus group opinion-seeking and decision-making in shopping contexts (Ambrus, Greiner & Pathak, 2009; Haubl & Trifts, 2000; Kang &

Johnson, 2013). We build on those studies that examine the evolution of individual decision-making processes by focusing specifically on the effect digital participatory dynamics exert upon traditional decision-making practices.

SHOPPING, TOGETHER

As the ways consumers interact with the bricks-and-mortar and online marketplace change over time, so must our fundamental assumptions concerning the psychology of consumer decision making and the sociology of consumer shopping. Robert Putnam's (2001) controversial book *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* chronicled the disintegration of traditional social institutions as people gravitate instead towards solitary pursuits such as surfing the Internet. Since the book's publication in 2001, the Web has become more interactive and - at least in a digital sense - most of us are far from alone. Indeed, today perhaps a more accurate metaphor of contemporary consumer behaviour in the online world is no longer *Bowling alone*, but *bowling together*. Consumers avidly post their opinions, experiences, and product reviews online and eagerly seek the posts of others in their social networks (Tuten & Solomon, 2012). Industry research shows that before they enter a store, 62% of millennial shoppers already know what they want to buy through their research in the online environment, and 84% say that consumer-written content on brand sites influences what they buy (Bazaarvoice, 2013).

Indeed, it seems that for many young people, a meal, clothing purchase, entertainment experience, or even a romantic relationship is not 'legitimate' until they post it on Facebook, Twitter, etc. This has given rise to new shopping technologies that maximise opportunities for sociality with known or new friends. This emerging method of e-commerce, which we term *social shopping,* allows an online shopper to stimulate and simulate the experience of shopping in a bricks-and-mortar store by accessing feedback from other people either prior to or after deciding on a purchase. As such, social shopping is a hybrid of social networking and online retailing (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Olbrich & Holsing, 2011; Shen, 2012). As technology continues to mature, social shopping may even offer a more compelling purchase experience than the in-store interactions it replaces. In the process, it may transform the shopping experience as we currently understand it.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL SHOPPING

Social shopping mechanisms are exemplified by numerous practices such as product ratings, reviews, collaborative design competitions, style advice, affiliate programs, live outfit reviews, visual scrapbooking and crowd-sourced advice. Please refer to Table 1 for a typology and examples of social shopping websites.

In some instances the shopper (or perhaps his or her avatar) can actually 'try on' garments and solicit feedback from a virtual mirror that enables others to view them as well. Social shopping platforms thus transform the solitary human-computer shopping interaction into a group shopping experience that allows the online shopper to request feedback from peers and/or experts, 'try on' items and perhaps even visualise them in use. Whether or not the technologies that enable social shopping can fully replicate more traditional bricks-and-mortar experiences has yet

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TABLE 1 Social shopping website typology

Social shopping website categories						
Virtual wish lists/ scrap-booking	Try it on sites and apps	Pre-purchase feedback	Competitions	Social shopping advocacy	Group purchasing sites	Linking and networking 'sign on'
Svpply Polyvore Pinterest vi.sualize.us Mydeco	Gotryiton Fashionism Justboughtit	ASOS Fashion Finder Facebook Twitter Motilo Daily Grommet	ASOS Fashion Finder	Klout The Fancy Sneakpeeq Fab	Living Social Groupon BuyWithMe	Facebook Connect Modcloth Wanelo

Source: Adapted from Ashman and Solomon (2013)

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to be seen. There are signs that online social networking does accelerate the pace of e-commerce. For instance, according to Griffith (2011), revenue per click from shoppers who arrive at a site via social media links is $5.24, versus the $3.18 per click spent by email shoppers. Academic research seems to support this amplification effect, insofar as there is ample empirical evidence on the 'risky shift phenomenon' that at least in traditional environments, individuals often make riskier decisions when they are part of a group (e.g., Kogan & Wallach, 1967). Current research on online social shopping focuses largely upon user-generated content, social influences and recommendations (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Dennis, Morgan, Wright, & Jayawardhena, 2010; Goldenberg, Oestreicher-Singer, & Reichman, 2012; Hsiao, Lin, Wang, Lu, & Yu, 2010; Olbrich & Holsing, 2011; Shen, 2012; Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012; Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Zhu, Benbasat, & Jiang, 2010). More research is needed to understand how these group effects will translate into virtual environments and impact decision making.

SOCIAL SHOPPING NARRATIVES

In order to illustrate both the historical macro and micro changes in social influence on decision making, we developed a series of vignettes describing the experience of three generations shopping for the same products. The fictionalised accounts follow a stream of marketing research, called storytelling, which provides an alternative mode of expression through communicating meaningful tales to illustrate marketing phenomena. For example, Brown (2006, 2008, 2009) wrote a series of novels that implicitly discuss marketing theory and thought. More recently, Schouten (2014) created a fictitious short story about his work as a therapist to provide nuanced and intriguing insights about how consumer ethnographers develop often uncommunicated knowledge and understanding. More recently, Quinn and Patterson (2013) blurred fact and fiction in their twisted tale of how marketing impacts on the lives of consumers and practitioners.

The stories depict decision makers at different points in time to examine their shopping for two products - a fashion product (vignette 1) and a fitness experience (vignette 2). In vignette 1, three generations of a family buy a prom dress. A prom dress is selected as a unit of analysis due to its historical, cultural and social connotations. Fashion provides a very insightful context of this analysis for the following reasons.

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As a product, it is still materialised as an experiential product, unlike many that have been turned into digital items, like books or music. Fashion is also an apt choice, as it is a subject of much of the chatter on social media (Wolny & Mueller, 2013), and it is the most frequently purchased product category (Mintel, 2014). Vignette 2, depicts a male protagonist and his decision making and consumption of a fitness experience over a 30 year period. The fitness experience is selected as a unit of analysis due to it being strongly linked to personal identity, being an involved and on-going experience, and also because of the shifting cultural definition of fitness and how to achieve it. Most recently the attainment of 'fitness' entails the integration of innovative technological advances such as wearable fitness devices, apps and membership-based websites that provide feedback and community support.

Our stories are then used in subsequent analysis to describe 1) what social influences on shopping exist at each stage of the decision-making process, 2) how they have changed throughout the history of shopping and consumption, and 3) how the emerging practices and technologies linked to social shopping force us to revisit our conceptualisation of the EKB model.

Vignette 1 The case of the perfect prom dress

1977: Mary hangs up the kitchen phone with joy: Skip has finally asked her to the Senior Prom! She immediately dials her best friend Jane to share the news. Jane excitedly tells Mary about the gorgeous dress she saw in the window of Bon Ton Fashions downtown that would be perfect for the event. Jane borrows her Dad's Dodge Dart, and they round up two more friends and drive to the store. Mary tries on the dress, along with six other alternatives as her friends critique each. After two hours of parading in and out of the dressing room to show off each option, the group delivers its verdict: that first one was The Dress all along. Mary writes a cheque to the relieved saleswoman and drives home with her prize. Six weeks later she picks up her Prom photos and she mails a set to each of her proud grandparents and other family members.

2005: Michelle emails Sam to say that she'll be happy to join him and his four other friends for the Senior Prom. She immediately goes online to look for a new dress. Her first step is to Google 'discount prom dresses': that search comes back with a list of about 30 sites. Michelle visits the first five sites on the list, plus one at the top that is highlighted in a different colour. She finally finds a style she likes, so she looks for the brand name on several websites to see who offers it at a lower price. Michelle discovers that she's lucked out - the dress is on sale at the new Bon Ton Fashions outlet down at the mall. She jumps into her Toyota Camry and drives to the mall, then she's back home with the dress by dinnertime. While she's eating, she casually mentions to her mother Mary that she'll be going to the Senior Prom with a group of friends. On the big day, Mary happily snaps pictures of the group with her new digital camera, and two days after the big event Michelle goes to the photographer's website and downloads the professional pictures she has purchased. One especially cool shot becomes the new screensaver on her PC.

2015: Madison, Mary's second daughter, texts Silas to see if he and his friends are going to the Senior Prom. Silas replies yes, and he asks her to come to the dance with them as well as to the overnight after-party. Madison immediately posts gossip about the after-party on Facebook, and she texts her older sister Michelle with the news. As she sits in Algebra class, she Googles 'senior prom wear', and she pins a ton of dresses,

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shoes and accessories to several of her Pinterest Boards, which she shares with her Facebook friends and the Pinterest community. Later that day in English class, Madison receives a Pinterest 'Fashion Boards Outfits' notification on her iPhone. She reads what others have posted about the outfits; many seem to like the one she pinned from Bon Ton. As she sits in her Prius before driving home from school, Madison visits the Bon Ton website. She creates her personal virtual model to try on some dresses. As she shares screenshots with her friends online, she's disappointed to see that most of them give the highest number of stars to one dress that's a bit out of her price range. What a nightmare, she thinks, and tosses her phone in her bag! On her way home, she pops into a shop to have a peek at the dress her friends suggested. She loves it too, but it's still too expensive and she doesn't have long as there's only 30 minutes free parking! After dinner that night, on a hunch Madison goes on her Gilt *app, and sure enough that exact dress is 60% off! Of course, there's a catch: there are only 25 in stock, and then the offer is over. Her heart pounds as she sees on the real time message board that 15 dresses have been sold in the last hour. Madison jumps on the deal - she pays with her Mom's PayPal account and figures she'll deal with that later. Two days later, UPS delivers the dress and sure enough it fits like a glove. On Prom Night, Madison takes a selfie, posts it to Instagram and shares it on Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, where she receives many Likes and comments. The next day, Madison links the previous comments to her photos, and she recommends the brand. She also writes a positive review on the brand's Facebook page. Lastly, she browses the brand's website and creates additional looks, which she uploads to Pinterest to ease the way for others who will face the same dilemma. Hooking up with Silas was okay, but the important thing is she snagged a great deal and earned the respect of her* fashionista *network. And, her mother Mary and sister Michelle will be thrilled to see her looking so grown up - if she can finally teach Mom how to log on to her Facebook page.*

Vignette 2 Diving into wellness

1985: At 7.45 a.m. a 20-year-old Joshua collapses on the sofa with pride. He's just completed Richard Simmon's new 'Blast Off' workout! It was tough. Lots of jumping around and waving your arms in the air, worst luck! Joshua's friend Stacey was right - this will get him in shape in no time. All he had to do was drive down to the video store, pick up the tape and then head to the shopping centre to buy some aerobic shoes. Obviously, he needed to get the neon vest and shorts, black headband and white socks to really achieve the look, *although he's not quite sure he pulled it off. But never mind, Joshua thinks, wiping his sweat away with his headband, at least this will work off the sushi he's going to have with Stacey after work. And he's pretty much quit smoking too, after his office went smoke free on what they're calling a 'wellness' kick. The future looks bright and healthy, thinks Joshua, as he spots the time and dashes off to the kitchen to grab his E.T. cereal and jump in the shower … he must buy more cereal today and not forget to go to the shop after his night out!*

2000: Oh my gosh. This is intense, thinks Joshua. Like really intense. I can't feel my legs anymore, even with these fancy Nike leggings on, and there's sweat dripping down my nose. What must I look like? Just keep going, keep listening to the teacher, he's right, if you carry on spinning you'll look and feel fantastic! Joshua just started taking spin classes at the gym before work and it's tough to say the least! He had to sign up for 12 months at Virgin Active, so he'll have to get used to it. Maybe it would be a good idea to get the low carb protein shake he got that email about from the health food store.

It seems like it would stop his voracious appetite at 11 a.m., which sees him reaching for the doughnuts. He's counting his calories using Weightwatchers 1-2-3 online plan where he has a certain number of points per day and gets to save up points for treats. His friend Stacey is doing it too, nowadays when they go to sushi they order the sashimi and save the points on rice for beer and dessert!

2015: Joshua feels his breath entering and leaving his body as he sits quietly on his meditation cushion in his living room. He feels, after the 90 minute session of Ashtanga yoga, that he has reached a stage in his yoga practice where he feels present. It's taken a long time, since getting injured from years of punishing spin sessions, and trying lots of different styles, but now, sitting here on his mat, he feels at peace, like his mind and body are connected. He blinks his eyes open and smiles at his teacher, who is in front of him on his smart television, in full HD, smiling back. What a brilliant experience it is to do his practice at home, through his online app. No journey to the gym or sharing sweaty exercise equipment with others. He can also track his progress with his online Yogaglo app that tells him when he worked out, for how long, and what the mind, body and spiritual benefits of the class are. He also uses his Wello iPhone case where he can keep an eye on his heart health, temperature and blood pressure. This way he doesn't need to keep visiting the doctor. He sits quietly as he shares his daily monitor reading with Stacey, who's really into cycling these days. Every time she does a lap on her bike around Hyde Park, Joshua hears about it! She probably wouldn't be riding a bike if she didn't get to tell people about it, he thinks guiltily. Joshua stretches one final time before he pulls himself up from the floor and heads into the kitchen, where 'mind, body and green.com' helps him decide what kind of juice to make today; sometimes it's tricky to know the best combinations of fruit and veg to use from his delivered box, and then there are super foods to consider as well! As he walks, Joshua sighs and then smiles. As 50, he finally knows what's best.

THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL CULTURE ON PARTICIPATORY DECISION MAKING

The following sections analyse the foregoing narratives to provide insights into the impact of participatory culture on decision making, along each stage of the previously described EKB model.

Stage 1: Problem recognition

Traditional marketing efforts, such as advertising and promotions, store displays, catalogues, coupons and emails, seek to arouse problem recognition as they draw attention to unrecognised wants or needs (Bruner & Pamazal, 1988). Mary, being a young lady in the 1970s is ensconced in the physicality of high street shopping as she shops for a prom dress. While window shopping, she could coincidently have encountered a necklace gleaming in a jewellery store window, which would perfectly accessorise her prom dress, thus recognising a problem that previously did not exist. In contrast, Michelle, depicted in 2005, would have been significantly more influenced by editorial content from magazines than her mother. Mary's younger daughter Madison, depicted in 2015, experiences multiple and ongoing incidents of problem recognition throughout her day due to her routine online interactions. These exposures to new products or 'must-haves' are initiated by her friends' online

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social interactions, engagement with or observation of editorial content, as well as by formal marketing communications. A Facebook friend, for instance, might post a link to an online store selling affordable but stylish jewellery. Intrigued, Madison 'likes' the post, and a very public conversation thus ensues about the potential necklace choices. Other promgoers might also contribute to the conversation, and suggest alternative stores where she also can search for jewellery. And then the cycle starts again. These haphazard and networked instances of problem recognition were simply unavailable to mother Mary and older sister Michelle, who were reliant on a small number of their real friends. Broadly speaking, collective participation means that the stage of problem recognition is as (or more) likely to be triggered by fellow shoppers than by marketers. Examples of the social shopping sites that Madison uses are Pinterest (e.g., https://www.pinterest.com) and *thehunt.com*.

While it would be natural to assume that multiple instances of networked problem recognition would create a broader shopping experience unsolicited by marketers, this may not be the case. In vignette 2, 50-year-old Joshua's fitness experience is mediated through his selected media. As others in his social networks continually post about potential and fulfilled purchases, problem recognition is a well-trodden path and as such, Joshua asks himself: *'How can I know what I want until I read what other people say?'* By synching his apps and browsing, Joshua follows a trend which 41% of consumers consider when choosing devices to purchase (Mintel, 2014). Through this activity, Joshua is creating what Pariser (2011) describes as a 'filter bubble'. This is when an algorithm, guided by personalised search, begins to guess what a person would like to see based on personal information or user history (Pariser, 2011). This information is then used to create 'ideological frames' (Weisberg, 2011). These may help consumers to solve their problems more effectively through granular targeting (and ensure that subsequent problems follow in the same fashion). However, this also limits a consumer's free assessment of a marketplace and restricts their growth through holding them in routinised behaviour patterns.

Stage 2: Information search

Traditionally, once a consumer is aware of a particular want or need, he or she consults different sources of information to identify choice options (Palmer, 2000), from marketing messages, other people and also past experiences (Bettman & Park, 1980; Solomon, 2015). Digital culture has shifted our reliance away from professional sources of marketing information in favour of non-professional sources such as consumer reviews, search engines, blogs, branded social media pages or customer-created photo feeds (Park & Cho, 2012; Wolny & Mueller, 2013).

At this point, it is practically clichéd to observe that Joshua, Michelle and Madison heavily rely on the Internet to assist their searches. But in 2015, Madison and Joshua have, in a few short years, garnered many more opportunities to utilise such technology, leaving Michelle's options from only a decade earlier seem quaint and constrained by comparison. For example, in her search, Madison integrates the use of Pinterest, avatars, her Gilt app and crowd-sourced advice through other social media in her shopping journey. Fifty-year-old Joshua also has more sophisticated methods of search. He uses multiple apps through his TV and iPhone, as well as browsing the Internet for wellness sites to assist him in gaining information. Vignettes 1 and 2 demonstrate that gaining information online has become an important part of shaping the customer experience (Pauwels, Leeflang, Teerling, & Huizingh, 2011). However, physical stores still play an important role in allowing consumers to physically inspect

the product and seek haptic information, as a growing trend of showrooming and click-and-collect indicates (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). As we see in vignette 1, Madison enhances her search efforts by dropping into Bon Ton to take a quick look at a dress her friends have recommended but which she is not yet sure of.

Additionally, with the increasing multimedia nature of the Web, information search has become visual rather than purely textual. The ascent of many image banks such as Pinterest means that users can search tags and find a desirable product, while utilising other social tools to find a cheaper version of it. For instance, *thehunt.com* takes a request to find a garment or accessory; then community members track it down. When consumers act as personal shoppers for one another, they mimic the role of professional stylists who traditionally guide the selections of other consumers. However, this does not necessarily mean that Madison's decisions are easier than those of her older sister or mother. Cacophonies of choices mean that decisions have become increasingly complicated (Mick, Broniarczyk, & Haidt, 2004), so calling upon peers to assist in filtering the noise is a natural progression within ubiquitous online or participatory culture (Vollmer & Precourt, 2008). In turn though, large feedback volume could have the same effect as hyperchoice. Consumers could experience preference paralysis if it is difficult to find all relevant product options and effectively review the feedback available (Basuroy, Chatterjee, & Ravid, 2003; Breugelmans, Kohler, Dellaert & de Ruyter, 2012; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Khare, Labrecque, & Asare, 2011).

Moreover, searching for information online could eventually result in the devaluation of brands through the potential to gain near perfect product information during the search phase of the decision-making process. As consumers become more informed, they no longer need to rely on proxies for quality, such as brand names, loyalty or positioning (Simonson & Rosen, 2014). Instead of a brand name, the influence that a source has for providing reliable information will become a more important metric when shopping (Simonson & Rosen, 2014). For Joshua in 1980, at the tender age of 20, purchasing the Richard Simmons video was a no-brainer; as a popular branded product it presented little risk to him. This is in line with academic thought from the time which noted that inexperienced consumers will tend towards already popular products whereas experienced users are more likely to venture into the unknown (McPhee, 1963). However, for a 50-year-old Joshua, in 2015, when starting yoga and purchasing a meditation cushion, the information available to him (from his social network and yoga communities) on this specific product would have moderated his inexperience. As Anderson (2006) observed, the Internet has changed consumer behaviour by providing nuanced sources of information about practically every product, which encourages consumers to venture away from products that they would have previously chosen.

Stage 3: Evaluation of alternatives

When a decision maker evaluates alternatives, this process yields a consideration set comprising a relatively limited number of options (Nutt, 1998). After comparison and analysis has occurred, according to a unique set of determinant attributes, the consumer eliminates additional choices and establishes the 'choice set'. Prom-bound Madison, in 2015, being a creature embedded in a world of social connectivity, has an unlimited set of options at her fingertips. But, for some time now, marketers have understood that her cohort relies more upon peer recommendations than upon guidance from commercial sources to narrow down her options (Kozinets,

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Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008; Kumar & Benbasat, 2006; Shen, 2012). What has also changed more recently, are the powerful tools now available that allow creation of choice sets by customising an electronic shopping environment (Verhagen, van Nes, Feldberg, & van Dolen, 2014; Wang & Cho, 2012). We can categorise the online evaluative tools that help to create and narrow choice sets as either passive (reading product reviews, blogs and polls) or active (stating preferences *a priori* using live chat windows, comparison matrices and ordering and ranking tools) (Breugelmans et al., 2012).

For Mary in 1977, the choice of dresses was limited and her search involved an element of luck. She can only access what she sees when she shops downtown. Nevertheless, when she gets asked to the prom, Mary knows exactly where to go (she's probably been planning for this moment for a while!). Once in the store, Mary doesn't know which dresses will be there, or what stock they have available, but her friends and the salesperson are there to act as her active decision-making aids. Michelle fares a little better in 2005. She is able to use her computer to go online and compare the styles of dresses and their prices passively before heading into town to target a store. She knows already which one has the dress at the right price. Michelle's initial pool of products is bigger than her mother Mary's, but once she has used the online database, her search quality is higher and much more targeted. However, Madison in 2015 is even more advantaged. She is able to go online immediately using her mobile to start with a much broader, global search of products. She can quickly narrow down her preferences by discussing online with friends and accessing various ratings across her expansive social network. And, she even has the option to virtually try on a set of candidates via new technologies including augmented reality (AR) to simulate a 'real' dressing room experience (Huang & Liu, 2014).

Social scoring represents a fundamental change in consumer decision-making. Consumers have always elicited feedback from those with whom they shop, but we have never before witnessed the potential for virtually every product, experience or service to have its own consumer-derived score. For example, social shopping metrics today include Klout scores, peeqs (views), pins, likes, gems, hearts, and badges. Paradoxically though, their high scores may undo some products: a fashion product that becomes too popular loses its cachet. Mass adoption dilutes the item's ability to fuel what Freud famously called 'narcissism of minor differences'; or alternatively what Tian, Bearden and Hunter (2001) described as 'counter-conformity motivations' where, in the context of fashion, individuals seek to assert their sense of style by wearing unique outfits. The ultimate socialite's nightmare, after all, as is frequently portrayed in the media, is the prospect of arriving at a prom, or indeed any social gathering, only to discover that someone else is wearing precisely the same outfit as you are. Consumers can now avoid this by visiting sites whereby they can search the event they are attending and register their intended dress.

Stage 4: Purchase

After evaluating alternatives, the consumer selects the product they wish to purchase. During this stage, the shopping experience is fundamental in creating perceptions of value, and therefore either reassures or dissuades the customer of their choices (Blazquez, 2014). Dress hunters Mary, Michelle and Madison each decided to buy a prom dress after narrowing down their consideration set. In 1977, the decision for Mary occurred while she modelled the dress in-store with her friends looking on. In this scenario, Mary's choice was limited by herself, her friends, the stock available and

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the store personnel's energy: at some point a decision needed to be made. In contrast, Michelle in 2005 enjoyed the flexibility of making her choice in transit between her home and a store. She was spurred on by a message about a sale that prompted her to rush out the door before she could view the dress at the shop. Madison didn't purchase at a store, either: she responded quickly to a sale price as did her mother ten years prior - but she bought her dress through her mobile as she went about her daily routine. The vignettes demonstrate that place features less frequently as an immersive tool by which to persuade consumers to make a product choice. Now, consumers have the option to be everywhere through accessing multiple 'places' at the touch of a screen, the effect of place as a container of product choice may become diluted (Findlay & Sparks, 2012). Analysing Joshua's shopping and search behaviours in vignette 2 illustrates this. As he progresses through the years, we see that his attitudes towards place change. He goes from using a place to anchor him to a specific activity, like going to the gym, buying things in store and eating at a restaurant, to having more focus on the activity being facilitated within his current location through using online information and services such as apps, convenient delivery and community.

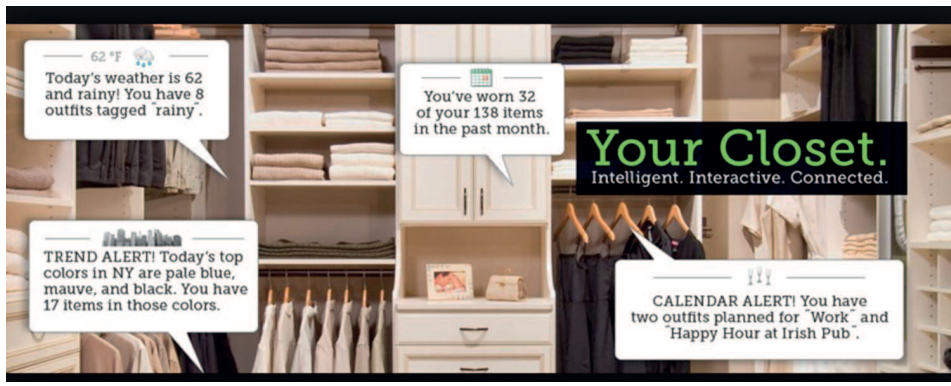
Social shopping tools seek to be a new 'place' in this capacity as decision support systems. Consumers can request social validation on product choices from others in the online environment, and use decision support systems, such as recommender systems, comparison matrix and sensory enabling technology (Kim & Forsythe, 2009). These tools that assist with product choice make the online world, in some ways, more rational, but the constant flow and 'always on' nature of social shopping means it can often be triggered by an emotional impulse.

The abundance of information on social shopping platforms epitomises one of the great ironies of our time: for many consumers the problem is not a lack of choices, but rather too many. This condition of 'hyper choice' (Mick et al., 2004) in turn creates even more demand for intermediaries who can act as cultural gatekeepers to filter the overflow of information. Consumers now consume information, and they may in fact be satisfied with the near perfect symbolic (informational) consumption for products purely by browsing, zooming, putting them into a shopping basket and then discarding.

Stage 5: Post-purchase evaluation

During pre-purchase, the consumer forms expectations about a product. Similarly, during post-purchase the consumer re-evaluates and forms further expectations about their future levels of satisfaction based on how well they think the product has performed (Fornell, Rust, & Dekimpe, 2010). In addition to their own feelings, others' opinions mediate the amount of satisfaction a shopper experiences (Sridhar & Srinivasan, 2012). To return to our three generations of shoppers, the post-purchase phase plays an important role in reinforcing social identity. For Mary, this manifests as mailing photos of her prom 'look' to her proximate loved ones; Michelle reminisces by keeping a picture of the big day as her screensaver; and Madison performs a whole host of real-time sharing and interacting using herself as content, as well as doing some important promotion for the brand that she chose, across her networks. This will help others in the future, but also enhance her *Klout* score. In 2015, Joshua's friend Stacey's post-purchase evaluation is being taken to a new level. Stacey's bike rides around Hyde Park are an important part of her fitness routine, but also serve as a way to generate social capital and solicit validation from her network. This is a practice which has grown in popularity since the rise of the Internet. As identified

FIGURE 1 A digital 'closet'



Source: TiffTaff (http://tifftaff.com/tag/stylitics/) Reproduced with the permission of Rohan Deuskar, CEO & Co-Founder, Stylitics, Inc.

previously, the participatory consumer can solicit feedback and reassurance from others on social shopping sites, and provide influence for numerous others as they voice their opinions across their networked social graph (Ward & Ostrom, 2003). The satisfaction value of purchases depends on the primary consumer's satisfaction, but also more frequently on the virtual satisfaction of others, manifesting in likes, comments, shares, etc. Consumers seem to think *"how can I know if I'm satisfied until I hear what other people say?"* Some creative consumers have tapped this *culture of commendation* and begun blogging and vlogging (video blogging) to document their own purchase experiences (often referred to as 'haul videos'). Indeed, these contributions result in the accumulation of online social capital that in time may escalate into celebrity status (Marr, 2014). However such moments of fame come and go as the Internet's span of attention grows ever shorter - indeed this fleeting fame has morphed from the 'microcelebrity' of a few years ago to the 'Wifame' of today due to the exposure provided by Vine's 6-second videos, Snapchat and other ephemeral online platforms (Williams, 2015). Through cleverly producing and promoting online content of their product evaluations, they can gain a large online following and generate revenue from views and endorsements. If successful, they can become their own personal brands, amassing power and legitimacy in the marketplaces they frequent and creating their own branded community of viewers through the discussion and interaction between their followers on their content. Consumers' choices can also be linked to other available products so that the shopper can replicate others' choices for their own closets (wardrobes). Figure 1 is a screenshot from Stylitics, a social shopping platform that literally replicates the content of physical closets on tablets and smart devices, but is tagged and hyperlinked to other sources of information and media. As such, the post-purchase process today is more transparent, networked, and a larger pool of feedback, gained from outside the consumer's direct reference groups, mediates consumer opinion.

DISCUSSION

The influential EKB model of consumer decision-making was formulated almost 50 years ago. Its authors could not have anticipated today's digital world. While in many

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ways our needs (like obtaining a prom dress or staying healthy) have not changed, the mechanisms we use to satisfy them certainly have. Not only do consumers often undertake each decision-making stage across channels, media and devices, but each stage of the decision may be repeated, skipped, enhanced or deconstructed through it (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). To explore this topic, we posed the following research question: how does the rise of participatory culture impact on individual decision-making?

An aggregate analysis of the stories contained in vignettes 1 and 2 helped identify the extent of and types of social influence during different stages of consumer decision making. Table 2 presents the most influential implications of participatory culture at each stage of the decision-making process. The historical narrative allowed for clearer juxtaposition of those influences in contrast with previous practices.

Social shopping tools may act in this capacity as decision support systems. Consumers can request social validation on product choices from others in the online environment, and use decision support systems, such as recommender systems, comparison matrices and sensory-enabling technology (Kim & Forsythe, 2009). These tools that assist with product choice make the online world, in some ways, more rational, but the constant flow and 'always on' nature of social shopping means it is an emotional one, and often triggered by an affective impulse.

In addition to the in-stage ramification in the decision-making process, the vignettes also illustrate the orientation stage, or ZMOT, as identified by Wolny & Charoensuksai (2014) and Lecinski (2011) respectively. During this stage, which is not explicitly identified in the EKB model, users may not think of themselves as shopping; yet, they are exposed to a plethora of information which is stored in their memories (both real and virtual electronic device memories) for future reference.

The sequence as well as length of each stage has been profoundly affected by online socialisation. Some stages such as evaluation of alternatives have become potentially much more efficient and quicker. Yet, others, such as post-purchase evaluation, are prolonged and the outcomes, such as reviews and ratings of previous experiences, are more finely documented so that consumers can create a permanent record of their experience to feed the next decision-making loop.

IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

For this conceptual research, we selected two types of product categories - a fashion product and a fitness experience, to identify the changing nuances in decision making in the light of participatory culture. These are both high-involvement items and so empirical research by the level of involvement in the purchase - from high-involvement to low-involvement and impulse products - is called for to really understand the decision-making process in different scenarios. This research stream is essential to marketers and retailers who are increasingly utilising technologies to target specific messages to consumers at specific stages in their buying processes, and who need to increasingly integrate social shopping tools into their digital presence.

This paper demonstrates that the EKB model remains a useful tool for analysing the current shopping environment. Even though it is based on fictional vignettes, this paper suggests that the EKB model should be re-evaluated and possibly extended to incorporate the context of participatory culture. Our fictional vignettes also point to

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TABLE 2 The implications of participatory culture on the EKB model

EKB Stage	Description	Participatory culture implications	Associated research questions
Problem recognition	At this stage, consumers may not think of themselves as shopping. They are consciously or unconsciously scanning the media, marketplace and referring to their own previous experience.	Can be triggered by the social shopping environment, e.g., other users' wish-lists, pinboards, recommendations, peers' purchase feeds on social media, in addition to brand-sponsored posts and emails or location-based promotions (based on web analytics of past or present consumer behaviour). The latter is sharable leading to network effects, e.g., when a sale has been announced.	How does a powerful online democracy impact upon the way in which consumers makes decisions? How do group effects on problem recognition translate into social virtual environments?
Information search	Consumers have the intention to shop and search for information prior to shopping. They purposefully seek product-related information through ratings and reviews.	Non-professional and peer sources of information are more trustworthy due to accumulated social capital. Users integrate social media with location-specific searches, which simultaneously devalue the brand as a primary indicator of quality. Polysynchronous communication provides an 'always on' feed of information.	Can the shopper's ability to construct her own avatar impact upon his/her physical self-concept and aspirations? Can the retailer build in the capacity for the online shopper to uncover spontaneous 'finds' similar to the 'treasure-hunting' experiences many stores provide? How can retailers further enhance social shopping platforms to replicate the bricks-and-mortar shopping experience?
Evaluation of alternatives	Consumers narrow down the choice of purchase and search for more information on price, physical attributes, availability and purchase channels. Trying product in-store and browsing products online are widely reported at this stage.	Peers reviews and live chats with friends and sales assistants are used as sounding boards to narrow down a choice set. Visuals of the consumer wearing or using the product can be easily shared and receive a social score to help narrow down choices.	Does access to a wealth of online options increase the size of the shopper's actual consideration set, or do co-shoppers pre-filter choice options and decrease the size relative to traditional decision making contexts?
Purchase	At this stage, consumers make a decision regarding purchase, which may in fact be a prolonged trial, due to the ease of product returns.	The sociality at this stage is limited to those directly engaged in the purchase with the consumer, virtually or in-store. Purchase through various channels (including social media) and devices (mobile) is increasingly common, changing the dynamics of purchase.	Does real-time access to one's social graph boost the impact of subjective norms on attitude formation and product choice? Does real-time feedback from a digital 'group' instigate a similar 'risky shift phenomenon' compared to classic studies of group dynamics and individual decision making? Can the site designer provide reinforcement cues, such as a recorded 'ovation,' when a shopper makes a good choice? What effect do these have?
Post-purchase	Having purchased a product, shoppers consider their satisfaction with it and react with either positive or negative actions and online reviews.	The opportunities for social participation are extensive at this stage. Product reviews, Tweets both peer-to-peer and directly to brand are visible social clues for future shoppers. Creating new visual content with the product through videos or photo stories creates further potential for socialisation.	Does online social shopping reduce the effect of impulse buying and POP stimuli compared to in-store shopping? How does participatory culture influence the 'quality' of individual decision making?

the need for more empirical investigations, based on inductive studies that provide insight on how digital participation happens in practice. In addition, the stage specific analysis of the EKB model's shortcomings (which we offer in Table 2) presents the key vectors of participatory culture that any revamped decision-making model would necessarily need to incorporate.

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