Customer relationship management in a fashion independent retailer environment; Operationalization and Application

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Abstract

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to explore the different marketing techniques accessible to fashion independent retailers and aiming to strengthen their customer relationship and attract/create a community. It also focuses on understanding the applicability and operationalization of customer relationship management marketing techniques in a specific context, here, a fashion independent retailer.

Design/methodology/approach:
To fulfil the purpose, a standard qualitative study approached has been chosen; Qualitative data has been collected through observations (participative and non-participative) of Sivletto, a fashion independent retailer located in Stockholm, Sweden, and semi-structured interviews of its customers and staff.

Research limitations:
This study is limited to fashion independent retailers and specifically Sivletto located in Stockholm.

Originality/Value:
This study contributes to help fashion independent retailers to apply customer relationship management techniques which could help them to find their place in the over competitive modern fashion retail business.

Keywords:
Fashion independent retailers; customer relationship management; customer relationship; brand community; consumer community; knowledge sharing; relationship building; community building; postmodernism; tribal marketing; people-to-people; service dominant logic.
1. Introduction:

This research will explore the applicability and mechanisms of customer relationship management marketing tools, aiming to strengthen a fashion independent retailer customer relationship and helping to create/attract a community. The study will include the observation of a specific fashion independent retailer and the techniques he uses to manage the objectives above mentioned, ultimately reducing mental intangibility and offering a ground for the development of a generalized application of the mechanisms encountered.

1.1 Background:

Fashion independent retailers are currently facing uncertain business conditions. Because of their size, of the market saturation, or the competition, it could appear hard for them to stay on flow. As managing consumers’ desires, preferences and changes of attitudes represents a big challenge requiring an important degree of sensitivity (Packard and Carron, 1982), we could state that their nature itself carry some uncertainty. But what was an inherent risk of this activity turned slowly into a big challenge due to the changes in the market and in society.

Since the 90’s, as we have experienced an important acceleration in product improvements, refinements and innovation, we can notice that market products introduction rate reaches almost a record level (Cooper, 2011, Cooper, 2003). Hence, it could appear more difficult for fashion independent retailers, and small scale businesses in general, to compete and attract the customer in this abundance of offer and competitors. As they do not dispose of the same amount of resources as branded retailers or multi-brand retailers, which are supported by their respective companies infrastructures, it seems that the competition does not turn in their favor; such an “over-competition” increases this uncertainty in buying situation (Fiorito and Fairhurst, 1989). The low-price war led by some companies turn them into spectator of a game they cannot afford to play anymore.

Moreover, the arrival and explosion of the Internet represents another challenge for them, as it globalizes the competition, turning every company in a possible
worldwide dealer, supplier, retailer, in brief, a competitor. As the price war is even more furious online, and as physical retailing carries a cost itself when a product is on the shelf (Anderson, 2006), big companies such as Amazon disposing of a tremendous amount of space to stock their products and their scale-matching logistics finish to turn successful fashion independent retailers into rarities.

On the other hand, this over-abundance of choice leads to a general reduction of the loyal consumers population. As it is a way to ensure constant sales and long-term profitability (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995, Reichel and Sasser 1990, Dixon et al., 2005, Balabanis et al., 2006), creating customer loyalty is considered as an important asset for any fashion business. But this unlimited choice options (Anderson, 2006) and the massive product introduction rate (Cooper, 2011, Cooper, 2003) leads to market saturation, turning customer loyalty into a big challenge for any company in the fashion industry. Companies’ consumer bases tend to see their loyal segments decrease (East and Hammond, 1996) as well as consumers find more difficult to keep perceiving company's product as the best alternative for them (Oliver, 1999) among this constant offer renewing. But considering this loss of loyalty among consumer as the consequence of the actual market competitiveness would be underestimating the effect of social changes observed since the second half of the 20th century.

Since the Second World War, the western society entered into the postmodern era (Lipovetsky, 1983, Lipovetsky, 1987, Lipovetsky, 1990). This “postmodernity” which affects humans and the way they are living, is mainly characterized by individualism. People tend to be more and more autonomous and “free” themselves of society’s limits/ traditional rules. This autonomous behavior is linked with a fragmentation of durable social links such as family, or class consciousness, also the cause of a fragmentation of consumption and the lack of loyalty (Lipovetsky, 1987) previously described. As it seems harder for people to build relationships with other due to the regression of the collective feeling, it seems also harder for them to build a relationship with a brand, a product or a company. Individuals are consequently less predictive and unreliable, which
confuses the traditional marketing apprehension of the consumer (Cova, 1997) and the companies following it.

In some extend postmodernism marked the development of individual’s egocentration (Lipovetsky, 1983): As they are constantly searching for an identity or a meaning in their life (Elliott, 1994), they develop a need to take action, to produce and show their existence, which can be represented nowadays through social media. Social status, for example, does not produce a specific range of specific behaviors like before as people tend to be more detached from social status expectations (Cova, 1997). Hence, it has become difficult for marketing to follow consumers’ needs and desires as they are more fluctuant and less predictable.

This social evolution represents an worsening factor of the uncertainty fashion independent retailing is facing; like presented earlier, they do not dispose of the same organization, infrastructures, or resources in general, available by bigger companies. Facing the same challenge as their bigger and numerous competitors their position turns out to be very challenging, especially concerning customer loyalty. But small businesses and independent retailers play a significant part in the success of any economy (businesscasestudies.co.uk, 2014), because they drive the economic growth, by giving profoundness and dynamism to the market, and create jobs for the masses. Hence, the fashion independent retailer difficult situation turns out to be preoccupying for the whole fashion industry and economy.

To face these market changes and especially the new consumption behaviors, marketing had to evolve. Based on the new consumers’ needs dictated by the post-modern condition previously described, they are aiming to re-capture consumer loyalty by using a different approach of customer and the relationship with him.

For some sociologists (Bauman, 1992, Maffesoli, 1988, Maffesoli, 1993) post modernity marks the emergence of an inverted movement as the one presented earlier; as people lose their traditional bonds they are desperately searching for social links. This quest for social reconnection marks the emergence of “Tribalism” (Maffesoli, 1988); post-modern communities (Maffesoli, 1993) held
together through new links such as emotions, lifestyle, or consumption practices. As traditional communities tend to fade and individuals tend to lack of references, objects and services are helping them to forge an identity. This “lack of community” is counterbalanced by a “thirst of values” (Elliott, 1994) turning consumption into a central element in people’s existence (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993); products replace human beings in the definition of individuals (Cova, 1997). Hence, it appears that the perception of consumption and consumer, far from simply being individual, presents a strong collective aspect. People now value the social aspect of life at the cost of consumption and the use of goods and services (Cova, 1995).

Those communities also represent a return of rituals (Ferrarotti et al., 1993) without any religious form; objects and places are now playing the role of totems. They dispense “authoritative performances” (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) which are the basis for rituals and bonds between community members as well as their sustainability. Moreover, they work as attraction poles for individuals (Cova, 1997); people will gather and participate to prove that they are part of the community.

Marketing took advantage of these new needs and developed a different approach of the customer. As a new imperative, developing customer relationships is presented as a way to build a competitive advantage (Berry, 1995, 1983, Deighton, 1996, Kalawani and Naryandas, 1995). Getting knowledge about the customer was the first step in the discipline’s reaction, as it allows companies to have an insight on customer behavior/motivation and react consequently. Known as Customer relationship management, or CRM, “it focusses on the development of a customer-centric business culture, dedicated to winning and keeping customers by creating and delivering value better than competitors” (Buttle, 2009, p.27).”

Here, management serves as a tool to develop and foremost maintain profitable customer relationship (Buttle, 2009). In this extend the focus is on creating such a long-lasting relationship, which implies moving from independence of both actors, the company and the customer, to dependence or interdependence (Heath and Bryant, 2000). Firms capitalizing on strong firm-customer relationship are
aiming to gain information on how best to serve customers, preserving them from defecting to competitors (Ndubisi, 2004).

To do so, the system of consumption is turned into a social link (Covat, 1995). By offering the right services to their customer, companies play the role of social support (Goodwin, 1994), allowing people to gather around the brand or the firm. Known as Tribal marketing, or ethnomarketing (Covat 1997) it takes its roots in consumers’ desire to belong to a community through the rejection of virtual satisfaction of repeated purchase of the “new” and the seek for direct satisfaction through the sharing of emotion with others (Ibid.). Marketing here, through the development of an aesthetic potential of linking value is perceived as a vector of social bonds and community link (Ibid.). In other terms, the role of tribal marketing is to provide the right context for the development of a community. Marketers are now building communities (Mc Alexander, Schouten and Koenig, 2002) based on commonality or identification among their members, whether a leisure pursuit or a devotion to a brand, among many other identification patterns (Ibid.).

This different marketing approach of the customer, could represent a solution for fashion independent retailers’ uncertain situation. As CRM techniques are aiming to build long-term relationship with consumers, it could represent for them a good opportunity to face the general lack of loyalty. As” loyalty and its sister, customer retention, lead to long term profitability and market share “ (Mc Alexander & al. 2002) this approach could help them to compete again.

This research will explore the customer relationship marketing strategies and techniques applicable by fashion independent retailers hereby stimulating long-lasting relationship, community building and therefore loyalty among their customer. The conclusions will be useful for fashion independent retailer owners which desire to implement CRM but do not know how.

**1.2 Research gap**

As customer relationship management can take many forms, most companies tend to consider it from an analytical point of view (Buttle, 2009).
This specific view turns CRM into “the intelligent mining of customer-related data for strategical or tactical purposes.” (Ibid. p.27) or, in other term, into the collection of information about the consumers. This approach of CRM allows the development of tools and softwares to help companies to identify customers’ buying behavior and consequently interact with them on the level they desire. Hence, studies about CRM tend to focus on this analytical aspect, forgetting at the same time its strategic and operational aspects (McAlexander and al. 2002, Buttle, 2009, Stokburger-Sauer, 2010). Indeed, CRM also implies marketing techniques aiming to trigger concrete effects on customers’ behavior. It thereby becomes relevant to explore the applicability and operationalization of this marketing approach, rather than focusing on its techniques to gather intelligence.

Moreover, if the positive consequences of brand communities are theoretically and empirically well documented in the literature (e.g., Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005; McAlexander and al., 2002), little qualitative empirical researches have been led on its applicability among smaller scale businesses and even fewer in the Fashion industry (Fincham and Minshal, 1995). Therefore Fashion independent retailers represent good subjects to explore such mechanisms in this under-explored scale and context.

Finally many studies have been focusing on the development of communities’ virtual forms; online communities (Surowiecki, Kozinets, 1997, Hagel, 1999, Lu and al., 2010, Chen and Hung, 2010). But rather than replacing their physical form, it had been proven that they complement them (Peris and al., 2002). Hence, online communities are considered to be the result of physical relationships. On the other way around, most relationships started online need face-to-face meeting to become more personal (McCown and al.,2001), which justifies humans’ need for physical relationships. Furthermore it also proves the superiority of physical and direct experiences on online tools in strengthening relationships and community integration (Stokburger-Sauer, 2010).

In this extend, this study will focus on the physical forms of relationships between the retailer and its customer to explore the available solutions for fashion independent retailers to face this thirst for social bonds.
1.3 Purpose of research:

The purpose of this study is to explore the way fashion independent retailers can use customer relationship management tools and techniques to strengthen their customer relationships and build a community around it. As those tools already have been proven to be efficient ways to build loyalty (Mc alexander and al., 2002) and consequently, long-term profitability (Bhattacharya, Rao and Glynn, 1995, Reichel and Sasser 1990, Dixon et al., 2005, Balabanis et al., 2006), this study mainly focuses on understanding the applicability and operationalization of such marketing techniques in a specific context, here, a fashion independent retailer.

By observing such techniques in a physical environment, we will be able to understand the mechanisms in action behind such marketing tools and their implication in the consumer’s mind. By this way, this research is aiming to develop a model helping fashion independent retailers to implement and use the CRM physical marketing techniques.

1.4 Research Question:

Question 1
What marketing strategies can be implemented by a fashion independent retailer to strengthen its customer relationship?

Question 2
What marketing strategies can be implemented in a fashion independent retailer to create or attract a community?
2. Methodological Framework

This chapter presents information and justification about the research strategy and approach applied in this work. Following paragraphs will address the methods employed to reach the results in order to answer each research question and their limitations.

2.1 Approach of the study:

2.1.1 Research Strategy

Like in every research paper, it is necessary to choose a specific approach before conducting the research and collecting data. It could be either qualitative or quantitative, depending on the research goals and purposes.

Since this research aims to explore the applicability of specific marketing techniques in a fashion independent retailer environment and their implication in consumers’ mind, it seems irrelevant to follow a quantitative approach. As qualitative researches put emphasis on words rather than quantification, both in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman, 2012), this paper seeks to understand social phenomena in action in the previously mentioned marketing techniques operationalization and on their key elements definition through respondents answers (Bryman, 2012).

Hence, this study will follow a qualitative approach, fitted for such an exploration. Through this qualitative approach, the study deals with values and their perception by individuals, which are the outcome of interactions, factors and mechanism involved in customer relationship management.

Moreover, as this study aims to explore the operationalization of marketing techniques in a specific context to develop an understanding of the mechanisms in action, its design will be inductive. Indeed, as we aim to discover the feasibility and applicability of the CRM techniques to develop a model based on observation, or in other terms, build a theory, the inductive design appear to be the right path to follow.

The study is conducted by using direct observation, participant observation and semi structured interviews.
2.1.2 Research Design:

The design of the study is a single case study with the aim to produce an understanding and a theory, the authors decided to follow Eisenhardt (1989) model of “Process of Building theory from case study research” which includes the following steps:

![Diagram of Research Process]

*Figure(A) Process of Building Theory from Case Study Research (Eisenhardt, 1989: p533)*

2.1.3 The Case Study Approach:

Case studies are tailor-made for exploring new procedures or behaviors or ones that are little understood (Hartley 1994) which makes it the perfect approach for our study. Moreover, this approach is particularly useful for responding to exploratory questions about a contemporary set of events (Yin 1994), which matches our research questions.

This study approach includes different types of data collection, such as Interviews, questionnaires and observation, Eisenhardt (1989). Case studies are
tailor-made for exploring new procedures or behaviors or ones that are little understood (Hartley 1994).

2.1.4 Selection of the case:
This research focuses on Sivletto an independent Fashion retailer in Stockholm, Sweden as a case studied in order to investigate the customer relationship management mechanisms and techniques aiming to strengthen fashion independent retailer’s customer relationship and helping them to build a community.

Regarding the number of fashion independent retailers in Scandinavia, it would be impossible to study them all. Therefore, the authors decided to search for and select a fashion independent retailer which is known for having a strong customer relationship and is link with a specific community. But as the authors were stranger to the Scandinavian retailing market, the decision to rely on Scandinavian customers and professional following a purposive sampling, the most convenient type of sampling for a qualitative study (Bryman, 2012) was taken. In this case, sampling is seen as a series of strategic choices about with whom, where, and how the research is done (Given, 2008).

In this extend, the authors selected the case using their personal knowledge, advices of 20 students and 3 teachers from the Swedish school of textile (THS) but also from internet and blog publications (namely 10best.com, rawrdenim.com, Facebook, qwuen.com), for convenience and easy access reasons.

From the recommendation and advices collected, emphasized by its convenient location (the authors being students with a limited budget), Sivletto appeared to be the right case to study.

2.1.5 Data Collection Methods:
In data collection, two kinds of sources are considered to be valuable; i.e. primary data and secondary data. Data collected through observation or collected directly from first-hand experience is called primary data, whereas the data
collected from published work or other parties is called secondary data (businessdictionary.com).

Theory building researches usually use multiple data collection methods, and triangulation made possible by multiple data collection provides stronger constructs, (Eisenhardt, 1989). Triangulation refers to the use of more than one method of investigation to increase the confidence in findings (Bryman & Bell 2007). Furthermore, multiple investigators in a study have two main advantages (i) they enhance the creative potential of the study which contributes in the richness of data (ii) the observation from multiple investigators increases confidence in the finding (Eisenhardt, 1989).

For this study three methods were used to collect data, matching Yin’s (1994) sources consideration; three sources have to be selected to make a case study. Following from it the author selected:

- Direct observation
- Participant Observation
- Semi Structured interviews

2.1.5.1 Direct Observation:
Observations were conducted on Sivletto customers and staff. This approach was chosen because the authors wanted to gain an original and first hand data. The authors decided not to appear as researchers, which could have affected the staff or the customers behavior during the observation (Yin 1994).

The observation interval for the study ranged from 40-60 minutes twice a day for three alternative days. Observational data are very useful in overcoming discrepancies between what people say and what they actually do (Patton et al, 2002). All the observational data were collected in the form of notes and mental notes.

2.1.5.2 Participant Observation
In qualitative research, it is very important to get close to the object of the study, which is done via participant observation. In participative observation researchers can experience the subjective dimensions of the phenomenon. Field
work usually involves active looking, informal interview, writing detailed field notes (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

Participant observation can be useful to the researchers in a variety of ways. For instance, it can provide them with the nonverbal expressions of feelings (Kawulich, Barbara B, 2005).

For this study the venue was Sivletto in Stockholm. The participative observation was conducted as covert and nothing was revealed to the subjects under observation. The notes included what actually happened at the venue. Mental notes and written ones were taken at the time of the observation and were later expanded at the end of each observation day so that the authors would not forget any details. The interval for participant observation ranged from 70-90 minutes in three alternative days, which includes the process of observation notes, casual conversation with customers and the store employees. The observation was focused on the following points: verbal behavior and interaction, physical behavior and gesture, human traffic, people who stand out.

2.1.5.3 Semi structured Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on the basis of loose structure composed of open ended questions, (Patton et al, 2002). In order to get the feedback from the customer and employees, a semi structured interview outline was designed to get the feedback from the participants. The interviews were conducted in a discussion form to get a natural response from both customers and staff members. The questions were altered and asked through general conversation with the participants (Refer to Appendix 1, 2 and 3). The decision to use semi structured interviews was motivated by their capacity not to restrict the interviewed discussion and keep the dialogue as natural as possible.

According to Morse (2000) the interview appropriate sample size should be from 6-10 participants, for this study the interview sample was 15 customers and 4 shop employees.

2.1.5.4 Structured Interviews:

The authors tried to conduct structured interviews with the owners of the shop in order get their feedback and use the data for the study. But after several
emails and phone calls they were unable to get hold of the owner of the Sivletto (please refer to Appendix 3 for a copy of the email). Three attempts via email and three attempts via cellphone were made, but the authors were unsuccessful to get an interview, due to mismatching agenda. Therefore the data used for the study comes from direct observation, participant information and semi structured interviews.

2.2 Research process:

As mentioned above, the data relevant to the study were collected from 6 visits at Sivletto shop, 19 semi structured interviews of both the customer and the staff, more than 140 minutes of direct observation and more than 240 minutes of participant observation. The interviews with the participants ranged from 15- 20 minutes as the questions were asked within the conversation in order to get a natural response. Questions to the staff were asked twice from both the authors during different intervals of time in order to get a consistent data for the study. All the data from the direct observation, participant observation and semi structured interviews were collected through mental notes, jotted memos.

During the interviews the participants were encouraged to talk as much as possible and to give as much feedback as they could, which was achieved by not disturbing them while they were talking and encourage them with positive gestures and feedback. The observations and interviews were held during different times in the day i.e morning and afternoon, no fixed schedule or timetable was set by the authors. After 15 customers’ interviews, the authors seemed to have reached the saturation point, as neither new elements nor further information was added by the semi structured interviews. The amount of staff interviews could not be increased because of the staff availability and agenda at the time of the study. As explained earlier, the authors failed to get a structured interview with the owner of the business, but they managed to have a brief discussion (participant observation) with him during their visits.

The observation sessions involved browsing in the shop and noticing the behavior of the customer and the employees of the shop and their interaction with each
other. In order not to raise any kind of suspicion, the observation sessions were held by both authors individually during different timings and days. This strategy helped to increase the study creative potential. Moreover, observation from multiple sources also added to the credibility of the study (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Participant observations were also conducted in a covert way by both the authors during the different intervals and days in order to get the data and information required for the study. The data were collected in a journal and through some mental notes, which were expanded into relevant information within the same day. The elements recorded were the environment, informal conversation, attitude, body language, interaction between participants…

The interview sessions were hidden behind the form of a conversation as the authors did not disclose their true identity to the participant because the authors wanted to get a natural response from the customer, therefore the interviews started like a conversation with “Hi!” The same strategy was adopted when interviewing the shop employee, where the authors were disguised as shopper/customers and started the session with sentences like “Hi, can you help me with..”, it is to be noted that for consistency the employees were interviewed twice by both the authors during different intervals in order to get a much consistent data.

2.3 Data Analysis Methods

The primary data were collected through semi structured interviews as well as direct and participant observations, then, the triangulation process was used to merge the data. Thematic analysis was used in order to group down the similar responses and observations but also to find the similarities between the different data sets. Asper Bryman (2012), it is recommended to pool together the similar answers in one pool to find the similarities between the responded feedbacks. According to recommendations given by Bryman (2012) it becomes a matter of relating similar answers as well as differences among the various sets through axial coding.
To analyze data from different sources, the authors familiarized themselves with data in order to make sense and generate codes. After the codes were generated from the data corpus, including the semi structured interviews, direct and participant observations by using an axial coding process, data with similar themes were grouped in different sets, forming candidate themes. Some themes were separated due to lack of data for coherence and distinction among themes. After distinguishing coherent, distinctive and consistent themes, they were named according to their characteristics. The themes were named after their capacity to describe and capture each theme’s essence.

2.4 Trustworthiness:

Trustworthiness is made up of four criteria, each of which has an equivalent criterion in research (Bryman & Bell 2007):

1. Credibility
2. Transferability
3. Dependability
4. Confirmability

According to Bryman’s suggestions (2012), and in order to increase the credibility of the thesis, the authors decided to use a triangulation method, which occurs when the researchers use more than one method of data collection for the study to check the results. The data collected for the study was from two authors and according to Eisenhardt (1989);

(i) they enhance the creative potential of the study which contributes in the richness of data (ii) the observation from multiple investigators increases confidence in the finding

According to Geertz (1973) transferability refers to whether the result can be generalized or transferred to another context; the theory proposed in this study can be used in and generalized in different sectors and different industries and can serve as a ground theory for further studies.

Theory has been formulated from the works of famous authors and concepts from peer reviewed journals which can be found in the theoretical framework. As per Bryman and Bell (2007), the researcher should record all the research phases in
order to establish dependability. The required data and picture documents could be found in Appendix 1, 2 and 3.

According the Bryman and Bell (2007) complete objectivity is impossible in social research. However, for conformability and to reduce their own biasness, the authors have adopted triangulation to keep the confirmability of the thesis as high as possible.

2.5 Confidentiality

Confidentiality is based on the principle of autonomy respect. In a research context, confidentiality means:

(1) Not discussing information provided by an individual with others, and

(2) Presenting findings in ways that ensure individuals cannot be identified (chiefly through anonymization). Wiles, Rose, et al (2008)

Hence, respondent identities will not be disclosed without permission (Wiles, Rose, et al, 2008) to protect them.

2.6 Method reflection

Qualitative study along with its strength has certain limitations. According to Bryman (2012) the connection between research and theory is abstruse and research quality is heavily reliant on individual skills of the researcher. In addition, case studies do not always need to include direct and thorough observations as a foundation of evidence (Yin 1994). Hence, case study is open to interpretation which makes this research subjective. Since this study is based on observation, the study’s generalizability can be questioned.

Moreover, single case studies present restrictions in generalizability and several information-dispensation biases (Eisenhardt, 1989). Therefore the generalizability of the study may not produce in depth and pluralist viewpoint and observations (Meyer 2011). Moreover, the author’s sample is composed of a unique retailer, which also limits the scope of the study to the fashion industry.

Finally, the biggest disadvantage for using direct observation and participant observation is that the study can be biased due to investigators observation (Yin,
1994). As observants were only two, their observations can present biases as they could have miss some specificities or characteristics in the retailer organization. Their interpretation has also to be considered as possible biases, due to their personal and individual nature.
3. Findings/ Exploration

The following findings are derived from data collected through semi-structured interviews, direct and participant observation. The aim was to figure out what marketing strategies can be implemented by independent fashion retailers to strengthen its customer relationship and what strategies can be implemented to create/develop a community.

Data collected from semi structured interview is consisting of 80% male and 20% female participants. Direct and participant observations are the result of more than 380 minutes of observation. The retailer website was also used as a basic source of knowledge.

3.1 Presentation

First, it appears important to present further Sivletto, composed by three different shops:

Sivletto Stockholm located in Södermalm and established in early 2005; the shop offers a 300+ square meters space offering a vast range of products all dedicated to 50’s lifestyle. Garments, second hand clothes, furniture, hair pomade, books, records… the shop carry a strong selection of curated products fitting the lifestyle they are aiming for.

Unionville, its sister store opened in 2010, is located one street ahead of its big sister and propose (only) men’s clothes and accessories with a strong dedication to the “well-crafted products”. Still carrying this 50’s lifestyle, the shop also extends its product range to pre-war eras styled garment and sells the Blue Highway brand which they produce themselves.

Finally Sivletto Enviken established in 2012 is proposing vintage clothes, replica clothing, books and records.

In this work we will focus on the Stockholm shop, although we mention Unionville as the two shops are strongly connected. Unfortunately, we could not manage to visit the Enviken “wing” of the company, which will not be described in this work.

3.1.1 The shop disposition:

While walking down Malmgardsvägen searching for the 16-18, we were very surprised not to find any shop window or panel announcing the existence of the shop. As the shop is located in a calm, residential neighborhood, far from any of the previously visited and over-crowded shopping street, we were expecting to
find signs, or at least clues telling us that we were on the right way. As we (finally) approached the door, we mentioned to ourselves this curious detail, but we will discuss about this matter later in this paper.

![Picture 1 Source](http://denimhunters.com/)  ![Picture 2 Source](http://denimhunters.com/)

Another surprised stroke us once we opened the door, we had to go down a metallic spiral staircase to access the store. Once down, the room literally “popped” into our eyes; rather than being dark, as expected in an underground place, the shop was very bright, which directly encouraged us to explore it. We were immediately welcomed by three employees behind a huge U shaped bar (which seem to be the neural center of the shop), and by the distinctive sound of a pinball machine; on our left a customer seemed to focus deeply on his score at the machine. Few customers were sitting on sofas arranged near the bar, having a coffee and chatting; some others were having their lunch at the bar. Those elements directly transformed our perception of the place; if we were quite destabilized by the exterior aspect of the shop, our first contact radically re-established the balance, transforming the place into a nice “hanging-out spot”.

The place was alive; people were talking, eating, playing, and laughing which created a real atmosphere. Music also played an important part as it fitted perfectly the lifestyle supported by the shop and directly transport us into a warm 50’s summer.
The shop is constructed in sections or corners, each dedicated to a specific kind of products, we will describe them one by one as it will help the reader to figure the place organized. We began our exploration by the “news in shop” corner, located on the left of the entrance, where, as its name mentions it, new products are displayed.
Around it the denim corner is exposing the impressive selection of denims. Curated among the best brands on the market, this corner seemed to play an important role in the shop as many customers were spending time on this corner.

Right next to it, the shop offers a space all dedicated to the brand “De Palma”, a Californian brand dedicated to the hot rod, low-rider, biker and custom culture underlined by the presence of an original Harley-Davidson bike for sale in the center of the shop and which definitely matches the shop’s lifestyle.
On its right, you enter in the woman section of the shop, which proposes second-hand clothes and new ones, but always connected with this specific lifestyle/era and emphasizing on the product construction and quality.
Still on the right of the women’s corner, the top section of the shop display a large amount of shirt, jackets, T-shirts and other from various curated brands.

Picture 9 Source(http://denimhunters.com/)

Picture 10 Source(http://denimhunters.com/)  Picture 11 Source(http://denimhunters.com/)
This section is neighboring the shoe sections of the shop, which propose new and second-hand pairs for both men and women.

But those spaces are hiding one of the most impressive parts of the shop; the barber's corner. Indeed, in Sivletto you can make an appointment with their barber and come to the shop to have a haircut or be shaved in the pure 50’s style. This location helps the customer to keep his privacy while in the “barbercorner”, allowing him to develop a relationship and have a personal dialogue with the barber like in the past.

This service, available for both men and women, is an important element in Sivletto’s offer; going beyond selling garments, it offers the (quasi) full range of product necessary to live the Lifestyle sported. In relation with the barbershop, the shop displays an impressive range of hair pomade and hair care product, allowing the customer to reproduce the haircut he bears in his home and so to keep the lifestyle alive in his everyday life.
Next to this “hair care” section you can find the record corner, where the customer can, once again, support the lifestyle through the purchase of records. The selection (majorly offering records from the “El Toro” label specialized in the edition and re-edition of 50’s/60’s music) was also played in the store, introducing
the customer and helping to make the product desirable. The shop also offers a large range of books and magazines, still dedicated to the culture and lifestyle previously mentioned: music, clothes, photos, art, hot-rods, bikes, fashion, hairstyles, tattoos… Displayed around the central pillar near the bar, they prove that the culture/lifestyle is alive, allowing the customer to follow its evolution.

Sivletto gives the opportunity to dress the younger one by selling children’s clothes through their “child corner”, composed by replicas and vintage inspired garments for children.
To finish, you can grab accessorizes (iPad cases, wallets, jewelry, hats,…) gadgets, merchandising (Sivletto’s air freshener, comb…) and diverse objects related to the lifestyle (vintage furniture, kitchen tools, magnets, knives, temporary tattoos…) disposed all around the shop.
3.2 External appearance and Location:

As presented previously, the shop external appearance is quite “reduced”. It does not offer any window or any sign from outside, which can be considered as a problem for a retailer. The only thing noticing the shop’s existence is its entrance door (which aspect can repel the vagrant customer as it does not appear very attractive). To be honest, it looks like an alternative/underground nightclub entrance. If you consider the fact that the shop is located in a quiet and residential neighborhood, this “detail” can reduce considerably the attractive potential of the shop. However, if you look from a different angle, the isolated location combined with the lack of exterior appearance make sense; a customer cannot “ran into” Sivletto by mistake, he has to be aware of its existence before. It underlines the shop’s relationship with the community sporting the same lifestyle. The customer has to be initiated by an existing customer or at least search for the information before going to the shop.

All along our interviews with different customers, no one mentioned having discovered the shop by chance. They all mentioned internet (blogs and social medias) or friends as the origin of their interest for the retailer:

“The first time, I went with my brother who was already a customer for few months.”
“Friends living in Stockholm who have this style [Sivletto retro lifestyle] advised me to come here as I was new in town and I was searching for something different”

“I was following a blog about heritage fashion and one day they reviewed the shop. I made the trip and since then I have kept coming back.”

In this extend the customer is already in the adequate mood for the shop; he is already aware of the shop specific lifestyle or the kind of products offered, and he is interested enough to go to the shop (which could take some time). Therefore, the customer is fully dedicated to visit the store, because he “travels” precisely to do so. It will also influence him to stay longer in the shop; as he used such time and effort to go to Sivletto, he has to make his visit profitable.

Moreover, this aspect is emphasized by the fact that the shop is located underground. As customers do not feel the time passing while in the shop, and, due to the vast amount of products available and the opportunities to “hang out” inside the shop, they have a tendency to stay longer. And the more time a customer spends in a shop, the more he is susceptible to make a purchase.

3.3 The Service approach of the customer:

3.3.1 Interior general appearance:

As explained previously, even though Sivletto is located underground, it dispenses a warm and welcoming atmosphere. If the first impression does not predispose this specific mood, the internal appearance is contrasting radically with its external one. First, the shop is unlikely bright compared to its upper part (staircase). This brightness helps to create this warm feeling; when walking into the shop we did not pay attention to the fact that the only natural source of light was a window in the ceiling.

The bar holds an important place in the creation of this feeling; it directly appears as the Shop’s central element. Thanks to it, the place appears to be more than a simple shop, a place aimed towards interaction and exchange. As said previously, we were surprised to see people hanging-out and chatting together (or with the staff) around a sandwich or a drink. Rather than being simply a commercial-aimed retailer, Sivletto appears to be a place where people spend time and socialize with
others. Indeed, some customers were not in the shop to buy something, as they simply dropped by to have a break without exploring the shop or trying anything.

“I come often to grab a cup of coffee and talk about music, clothes or bikes. Here I can take my time and meet people who have the same interests as me.”

“Here [in Sivletto] I always find an ear to talk to. Whatever subject, it does not matter, (...) I’m here to meet people.”

We were also very surprised to see the staff knew personally many of the customers visiting the shop; handshakes and hugs were usual as well as a lot of laughs.

“Some people come at least two times a week. After few weeks, of course we recognize them”

“Some of them are literally part of the furniture…”

Sivletto seems to be an important attraction pole for the people living in the neighborhood and the ones interested in the lifestyle.

“I live two streets ahead, so it’s a place where I like to hang out after work and before coming home.”

The bar, central position and its U-shape reinforces the social aspect as the staff has a constant visual contact with the customer (and the other way around) and can intervene if any help is needed. It also allows them to notice a customer entrance and welcome him at any circumstances.

In this extend, Sivletto appears to be a place where you can take your time; the shop’s location, the exchange/hanging-out opportunities, the vast amount of product and the large retail space are enhancing this aspect. As said before, the customer has to be willing to go to Sivletto; once there the vast offer allows him to “make profit” from the time he is spending there. The large amount of products can make the shop appear as a treasure cave, where you have to discover every corner to be sure not to miss anything and to do so you have to take time and be thorough.

“If you want an advice to understand Sivletto, look at the details, they are many but it’s worth it.”
3.3.2 Products:

As said previously, Sivletto offers an important product range which reaches almost every aspect of the lifestyle sported. However, it would be underestimating the retailer but to consider him as a simple “retro” retailer. A large portion of the products displayed are curated from brand dedicated to the quality of their product (and Sivletto seems very worried about this point). The shop emphasizes its selection on craftsmanship, character and history.

“Here we are not interested in the trend or the new, we offer curated products which have a story, a soul” says a staff member.

As explained before, the “denim corner” was crowded when we visited the shop. Customers were not particularly dressed as if they were sporting the rockabilly/50’s lifestyle, but they seemed very concerned about the quality and the “fade” of their denims.

As we pretended willing to buy a new pair of jeans our first advisor was another customer, which advised us to purchase the same model he was wearing, showing its “amazing fades” as an argument. Facing our unhidden lack of knowledge on the subject, he kindly invited us to discuss about it around a cup of coffee after his shopping session finished.

After some time in the shop, we noticed that many customers were in the middle of an active discussion with members of the staff or with other customers. These “denimheads” (as said about a type of customer which is very interested and dedicated to denim) were a good proof of the shop capability to offer products of quality and to satisfy customers with higher expectations.

“I look for a product [in this particular situation, a denim] of a superior quality that last longer. That is why I come here.” said our helper. “Here I have always been well advised, by the staff or by another customer, that is also why I come back.”

Moreover, after some internet researches, it appears that many of the brands displayed by Sivletto were very exclusive and distributed by few retailers all across Scandinavia (an even Europe) which proves the shop’s dedication to propose a unique and exclusive offer to satisfy even the hardest customer.
The retailer also focuses on the story behind the product; many items proposed by Sivletto are produced by brands which have a real story behind. Some leather goods were handcrafted in a very small scale by a single man located north of Scandinavia. Moreover, as the shop is sporting a 50’s lifestyle, many products sold are related to have a rich history; Some of the Spiewak’s jackets sold in Sivletto were already worn by the us marines during the second world war, the Red Wing Shoes were worn almost a century ago by the American settlers…

This history is an important part of Sivletto’s offer; A story well known by its staff and customers.

“We offer product that resisted through history!” said the owner.

The products sold seem to present a certain “authenticity” and their (hi) story (largely described by the staff) is a proof of their reliability and quality.

3.3.3 The staff service to the customer:

Sivletto approach to the customer is (according to our observation) the most important part of the shop success and singularity. Completely opposed to our previous experiences in the retail environment, the staff seems to be the shop’s main asset.

First, we have to notice that every single customer who enters in Sivletto is welcomed. We have never witnessed any customer arriving down the stairs without being greeted by one or many staff members. This “detail” might seem ordinary, but our respective experiences as customer taught us that being welcomed tends to be rare nowadays among retailers. Moreover, it actually helps a lot to create the atmosphere previously described; as the customer can be repelled by his first impression, the staff attitude encourages him to stay and discover the shop, setting a good basis for him to relax.

This attitude, combined with the relaxing atmosphere, helps the customer to feel comfortable and ease him to dialogue with the staff and ask for any help. As we spend time in the shop, we notice that the staff usually does not need to propose its assistance, the customer goes directly and ask or the staff directly goes and helps the indecisive customer; the U-shaped bar is the perfect tool to create this proximity to the customer. As it allows the staff to have a peripheral view all
around the retail floor, and the customer to always have an eye contact with the staff, it seems easier to start a dialogue.

Moreover, as the staff is very attentive to the customer’s need, they usually come by themselves to offer a helping hand when they see a customer needing help. In our observations, we noticed that the staff always pre-figured customers’ need before anything was ask to him. This appeared to be the result of a strong dedication to serve the customer without overwhelming him of advices or information.

“The staff knows his job. I rarely ask for something, usually somebody always bring it before I ask, but that is maybe because I come here a lot.”

Rather than simply giving the customer the right article in the right size, the staff members usually start by describing a few of the product’s characteristics; country of origin, specificities of construction, hidden details, type of fabric and its utilities…

“Here I discovered a different world. When I was buying a shirt, I did not have a single clue about what fabric it was made of, or which kind of sewing. Thanks to this place I now know those things and I am not buying the same way [as before]”

“I learned so much stuff about the things I wear. Now, I can see if a garment is overpriced.”

“Thanks to the nice people here, I know what I am paying for”

Moreover, they usually ask questions about the customer; What do you do in life? What do you need the product for? What do you want the product to be? What properties are you searching for? They also analyze and ask questions about clothes that the customer is wearing (which brand? How long does he wear it?). Through these questions they try to understand the customer needs and lifestyle to find the perfect product for him.

“It is a service that we offer to everybody who wants to listen. There is no need to buy something that does not look like you. I am not talking only about fits or cut but also of quality, resistance and care.”
But rather than scaring the customer (what we were expecting when witnessig conversations) it helps him to develop a dialogue with the salesperson. Usually each customer spent at least 10 minutes talking with a staff member.

Moreover, the discussion seems to help the customer to find the product adapted to his need and his own lifestyle. We noticed that the product bought by the customer was usually not the one he wanted as his first choice. Some will say that it is the purpose of selling, selling more expensive products to make more profit, but in that case, the product chosen was not just more expensive, it was simply adapted to the customer needs.

“I listened to them. I did it in the past and it worked perfectly.” Said a customer who bought a product Sivletto’s staff advised to him. But it would be wrong to consider the customer as mindless, simply accepting whatever the staff advises him to buy. Many customers were aware of the specificities some products were carrying and were really involved in exchanging with the salesperson. They were also deeply involved in the description of their activities and their essential needs for the product to be.

As many of them were already Sivletto’s customer they also talk about the previous products they bought, how they aged and how the staff’s advices helped them or not to take care of their clothes. But the most surprising part was that some staff members remembered those purchases. Of course, some customers were total stranger to the specificities described and some others were not interested in knowing the product details, but they represent a minority of the customer encountered.

Through the discussion, it seems that the advices given by the staff have an influence on the product’s perception and utility for the consumer. The dialogue with the customer serves as a knowledge exchange tool to educate and “train” the customer to understand the benefit of the product he chooses and to take care of them. Hence his consideration of the product he purchases will evolve as well as his perception of the services a shop can offer. Hence, he comes back and gives feedback about the product itself and the utility of advising the staff gave him.

“I trust them, why going somewhere else?”
“They help me to get the right product; I help them to know if their advice was right” said a customer.
“(…) it does not cost me anything to help them [Sivletto] and other customers to make the right choice” said another.

A good example of this exchange concerned the denim section; as explained previously, the shop’s selection is attracting many customers already knowledgeable about products’ specificities but few of them seemed to be aware of the practical effects of those specificities. Hence, through dialogue, the staff dispenses his experience, which comes also from his previous dialogue with other customers sharing their experience, and helps the customer to find the correct denim with the correct cut and fabric adapted to his needs and requirements. Once the product bought, the customer comes back home and wear the denim, following (or not) the staff advises. Hence, when he comes back again, even to simply take a coffee, he can share his own experience (how the denim fades, how he washes it…) which will be profitable for the staff and all the next customers.

3.4 More than “’selling stuff”, building a community

3.4.1 The Feedback:

As explained before, the relation developed with the customer appears to be an important part of Sivletto’s success. As the consumer is welcomed, advised and taught about the product he buys, he develops knowledge about the products he purchases. Hence, he is able to develop his own experience. We witnessed this phenomenon during our visits; many customers, when discussing with the staff, gave their impression and feeling about their previously purchased clothes. Some of them were talking with staff members around a cup of coffee or with another customer, sharing advices and experiences about the products or the lifestyle they sport.

Moreover, it appeared that discussions with the staff were rarely unilateral, but they really consist into an exchange of information. Indeed, we witnessed that, most of time, the consumer does not simply explain his need; he also exchanges his knowledge about the product he bought/wear with the staff member. In this
extend, the shop is able to gather customer experiences and develop “collective knowledge”.

“…we benefit from our customer experience to build a stronger knowledge about the product we sell to help you [the customer] finding the right product”.

The shop could not gather that much knowledge on its own, the consumer is also bringing his, which is useful in the shop to evolve and adapt and for other customer to be advised and to consider themselves as part of a group/community. Of course, most of them sport the same retro/50’s lifestyle, which can be considered as an important part of their similarity and ease this bond creation, but this constant exchange seems to give a reality to the community. They support the lifestyle AND exchange with each other. These feedback possibilities combined with the opportunity to take time to relax in the shop (take a coffee, eat snacks…) allow the community members to develop human relationship which makes the community alive and real, differing from the tremendous amount of virtual communities (on the web).

“Here I relax and meet people interested in the same things in life than me”

“I learned so much stuff here, that I feel obliged to share it with other people. I feel useful helping others with what I know”

Hence the shop appears to be a pole of attraction for the people sporting the lifestyle for the product it proposes and for the opportunities to exchange with REAL people which seems to help the shop to extend its customer loyal segment.

3.4.2 The Barber:

The barber section in “Sivletto” was really interesting, especially for an apparel retailer to deliver such a service within their shop. The shop is located right opposite to the hat section in the store, where the customer could get a haircut or a warm shave while they were shopping, or they can just come by for a haircut or a shave. Walking in the store, you see a small salon with a vintage design chair and a basin, and the barber with tattoos on most parts of his body and wearing a barber's Apron. In the store, you can see razor blades and ancient knives hanging on the wall along with portraits of notable celebrities from the 50s, as well as a jar of wax in front of the client seat. When entering the barber shop you feel as if you have journeyed through time and traveled back into the past.
Entering the saloon you can see the sign “frisör” which means hairdresser in Swedish.

The behavior of the barber was very friendly and he was open to talk in English for non-Swedish speakers, and he had a lot of stories to share with the customers. He gave advices about which hair styles would suit each customer, and he knew most of the customers, who visited his shop, by their first names. It was a unique thing to see for an apparel retail store to have a barber shop where the customer can get a haircut or a shave while they were shopping. We saw some customers coming in the store just to get a haircut or buy some hair wax, which creates an added value for the first-time customers who would also get an option of haircut while they are shopping for clothes at “Sivletto”.

3.4.3 Events to make the community alive:

While visiting the shop, we noticed the important amount of poster and flyers displayed all around the bar. As we were sitting around it to have a cup of coffee while talking to the shop’s owner, we realized that those posters were promoting events organized by Sivletto itself. Concerts, workshops, exhibition, artist shows…. The shop offers opportunities for its customers (at least once a month) to gather during events linked to their specific lifestyle. As it was impossible for us to attend and participate in one of those events, we tried to interact and discuss with customers to understand what happens during those events and what the purpose of their creation is.

As explained to us, the most usual kind of events is a concert; on those occasions some furniture and displays are removed allowing the shop to become a nightclub. The shop can welcome bands or DJs playing music linked with the lifestyle sported. Those events can also take place in a different location, but they always sport the same atmosphere and are always relayed/ supported by Sivletto. In short, Sivletto is always aware of whatever retro-lifestyle events happen and share the information.

If we first wondered what could encourage people to gather in a fashion shop for something else than buying clothes, music seemed to be a good answer. But after a few discussions, it appeared that people were not mainly interested in the artists performing during the night, but rather by the feeling of “living something”.
“It is a service that we needed to provide. Why sporting those values and lifestyle if you do not give them the opportunity to be alive”, said the owner.

“When I go to those events, I feel part of something”

“Those events remind me that I am not alone and that I can share my passion with other people. It is good to feel surrounded by looking alike people.”

The few people we discussed with described how they met people that have the same passion for the 50’s, denim, bikes, music…

If we actually do not know how does the shop look like when “converted” for those events; customers, when describing Sivletto’s events, focused on describing them as opportunities to gather and meet people. As Sivletto is a place of exchange during the day, it appears to be the same during those nights. The customers “interviewed” declared participating to meet people and share their own experiences. These events appear to them as opportunities to gather more knowledge and exchange their own, but also as elements making the lifestyle they sport alive.

“If you come [to Sivletto] for those events, I am sure you will always meet interesting people.”

“I don’t know, everything seems natural during those nights. Of course the booze helps people to talk, but the general atmosphere welcomes you to meet and share with others”

“It is the same as during the day, but you got much more people to talk to”

They represent an opportunity to discuss and chat about the brands they wear, how they resist against time and the elements, the records they listen, the modification they did on their bike/car, their travels… but also to organize other activities linked to the lifestyle; a customer told us that he met people to go on a road trip during one of those events.

“When you talk to people, you realize that this culture is still alive and that many people are contributing to it.”

“People are doing amazing things and that is inspiring to meet them during those events.”

Those discussions and their effects seem to represent the prefect continuity with the shop emphasis on human relationship. Like in the shop during the day, these events allow customers and staff members to gather information about whatever could make the shop and the lifestyle evolve.
Moreover, some of the people we talked with emphasized the importance of those events to make this culture “true and authentic” (we use their exact words). For some reasons, participating in those events allows them to consider themselves as part of this lifestyle/culture.

“When I go to those parties [events Sivletto is organizing], I feel part of this culture.”

“I’m talking with people about a lot of stuff, and I consider myself as one of them.”

When attending to those concerts/art shows/workshops… they prove its existence and their dedication. Organizing events seems to allow Sivletto to give a purpose to its own existence; people come to consume this lifestyle because they have the opportunity to live it in reality by being part of a community.

Events represent the lifestyle’s link with the real world, giving to the community the opportunity to show its existence (through conversations about customer action linked to the lifestyle) and to realize its singularity, its “rules” (what the community sports and what it does not). Hence, the shop appears as an attraction pole for every person sporting the lifestyle (at least in the Stockholm area): through their participation in those events, customers present a certain legitimacy allowing them to be considered (by themselves and the others) as part of a community.
4 Analysis

Through the exploration phase, the authors’ findings enabled them to develop a certain understanding of the field studied. From the data collected, patterns and their mechanisms were observed and analyzed, allowing, the authors to develop knowledge linked with the research questions previously presented. This analysis is presented in the following paragraphs.

The first and most central element observed helping to fulfil this research purpose seems to be the retailer’s social offer and its influence on customers’ perception; it seems that a fashion independent retailer proposing a retail environment encouraging social interactions provides in the same way a good basis to develop a relationship with its consumer, but foremost, a good basis to build or attract a community. By offering spaces and occasion for customers to interact with the staff, but also with other customers, it seems that individuals are developing a different kind of relationship with the retailer. Far from being simply a shopping session, customer’s visits can also be linked with this social aspect; the retailer is a place of exchange, communication and meeting. Hereby, customers are not only attracted by the retailer physical offer but also by the services he proposes which help them to relax and build social bonds. In this extend proposing such social-interaction-dedicated spaces could represent a way to strengthen a fashion independent retailer customer relationship.

However, this position seems to be allowed by the retailer’s proximity with a specific lifestyle. Indeed, the people interviewed mentioned an interest in the opportunity to socialize, but they also all appeared to be sporting a close or similar lifestyle. The need for socialization might then be linked with their similar interests. It could be natural to consider this attraction for socialization as linked with a mental proximity; thanks to the retailer “social-offer”, the customer expects to meet and interact with people with similar interests. In this extend and in order to strengthen its customer relationship, a retailer social-hub position can be underlined by a cultural aspect. It may be easier for a fashion
independent retailer, appearing as dedicated to a specific lifestyle or culture, to
develop such a social position and role by offering “social-services”.

On the other hand, this aspect appears as an important element in the development
of a community. If the retailer product range appears close or deeply related with
a specific lifestyle or culture and if it offers the opportunity for this community to
gather and socialize, it seems that it can either build its own community or attract
members of an existing one.

Through these two elements, a retailer can occupy a central position in the
community and in its members’ mindset. Combining the two elements above-
mentioned helps the consumer to sport the lifestyle through the shop specific
offer, but also to keep it alive by socializing with active members of the
community. Hence the retailer might build its own legitimacy as the central pole
of the community; to be part of it, individuals have to visit the shop (we may go
even further by considering that sporting the lifestyle means being the retailer’s
customer).

To underline this central position and confirm its customer relationship, retailers
may organize events. Through such gatherings, the whole community is invited,
which seems to help its members to socialize in an extended way. Moreover, it
seems to help them feeling related to the community. Events appear to be useful
for both the customers and the retailer. Indeed, by taking part in those events the
customers realize the importance of the community as they experience something
real and physical, they can grasp its essence.

By organizing such events, the retailer not only creates an opportunity for the
community to gather but also strengthens its central position within this very
group.

However the effects of these marketing techniques may differ if the community
pre-existed the retailer; As a matter of fact, building such a legitimacy to appear
as the community central place could appear more difficult if the community’s
rules are already set.

But, the retailer may develop a different approach of the customer based on
sharing knowledge about the product with him. In this extend, it seems that the
customer is pleased by such a contact with the retailer. More than simply purchasing, he may develop an understanding of the products he buys and transform his vision of retailing and consumption. This approach, while helping him to understand the specificities of the product he purchases, helps him to develop a particular relationship with the retailer.

By offering his knowledge, the retailer creates a personal bond with the customer. To do so, the retailer’s staff has to be trained on the products specificities and characteristics. Here, the customer seems to develop a feeling of trust towards the retailer: as knowledge is shared about the product with him, the customer takes this effort as a proof of the retailer trustworthiness, which strengthens its relationship with the retailer.

Moreover, this feeling of trust can be emphasized by the staff personal approach of the customer. Through their training, allowing him to develop knowledge about the product, staff members can propose adapted product to customers. This element, while helping strengthen the feeling of trust among customers, helps the creation of personal link between the customer and the retailer. Customers, as their demands are treated personally, seem to develop personal bond with the retailer and the staff members, which can help strengthening its relationship with the retailer as he is now personally involved.

Such an adapted service may also develop the customer satisfaction; as he is wisely advised about products he purchases and about their correspondence to his lifestyle and needs, customer may, again, develop trust towards the retailer. His needs are satisfied due to the “expertise service” provided, hence he may come back to keep his needs satisfied on the same level.

Through this knowledge sharing, the retailer might also help the integration of new members in the community. Through this specific approach, the retailer is able to teach and diffuse codes and elements of the lifestyle it sports, which represent a way to introduce new customers to the community. Those “newcomers” would hereby develop a basic knowledge awaking their interest for the retailer’s lifestyle which might lead them to become members of the community. Moreover, by appearing as the legitimizing element for the newcomers of the community, the retailer confirms its crucial position within the
community. In other terms, to be considered as a member, people have to be introduced to the community through the retailer personal link.

By using this specific approach of the customer and through staff training, a fashion independent retailer may overcome the difficulties above-mentioned and help the integration of new members while strengthening its customer relationship.

Moreover, it seems that a fashion independent retailer can strengthen this personal approach of the customer and in the same occasion, strengthen its customer relationship. Indeed, as customers develop their own knowledge about the product, they also share it back with the staff. This involvement in knowledge gathering and sharing seems to be linked with the personal link previously developed with the customer and coming from the retailer personalized services approach. As the customer develops a certain “trust” towards the retailer, it seems that he desires to rewards such trustworthiness and personalized services.

Hence, it appears that knowledge sharing is a two-way process allowing a better circulation of the information and confirming the previously set personal-link between the retailer and the customer. In this extend, if the retailer allows such a feedback and listens to its customers’ opinion and experience, is able to gain knowledge as its customers do. This may allow the retailer to follow its customers experience and advices and to evolve in the same direction. Moreover, as customers’ opinions and experiences are valorized, they seem to appreciate this trust-based dialogue with the retailer, strengthening the personal link above mentioned.

Hereby, by allowing such a feedback a fashion independent retailer may, strengthen the personal link with its customer and by the same occasion, strengthen its customer relationship.

From observations above-mentioned, the authors developed a model summarizing the marketing techniques encountered helping fashion independent retailers to strengthen their customer relationship while helping the development of a/their community.
It has to be mentioned that the following elements are to be set together as they strengthen the influence of each other, allowing the strategy to fully meet its objectives.

Figure 1. (Key components)  
Source. Own illustration
5. Theoretical Framework

Through the authors’ observations, it appears that fashion independent retailers can follow a specific approach of marketing aiming to develop their customer relationship. But to understand deeper the techniques used and their mechanisms, we now need to explore the matching scientific literature. As the elements previously described are working hand in hand to realize the previously-named objectives, they do not seem to influence the customer in the same way. Hereby, it appears natural to develop the individual implication of marketing techniques and elements previously presented in the existing literature to understand their indebted and possible mutual interactions.

5.1 An ethnomarketing approach to include the customer in a social dynamic

As expected, some of the techniques observed can be related to the Customer relationship management literature and its mechanisms. Like an answer to the postmodern human condition previously presented (Lipovetsky 1983), the marketing techniques observed seem to give a solution to the social-link-craving customer. As this new “era” transformed peoples’ conception of life, turning them into individualist and autonomous individuals, leading further to a fragmentation of the social links and, in the same way, a fragmentation of consumption (Lipovetsky 1983, Lipovetsky 1987, Lipovetsky 1990), the techniques observed can be considered as a way to face this disruption of social links/bonds. If the “postmodern man” tends to desperately search for a way to recreate those bonds (Maffesoli 1988, Maffesoli 1993, Bauman 1992) through objects and services (in other word consumption) (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, Elliott 1994) or/and by being part of tribes/communities (Maffesoli 1993), Sivletto, and fashion independent retailers in general, seem to have the capability to satisfy that need.

5.1.1 The retailer as a Linking space

As observed, the first element for a fashion independent retailer to develop and strengthen its customer relationship is to help the development of social interactions. The shop observed is not simply offering products to buy, but it also proposes services, allowing people to create physical and social bonds. The bar
and the tables displayed all around allow people to relax and to dispose of a small space where they can talk with each other. This disposition is clearly aiming to create the right environment to encourage human interactions. Far from the main street shopping environment, Sivletto offers an opportunity for the customers to take their time. As the shop provides an ideal context for developing linking values, it plays a social support role, turning Sivletto into, what Goodwin (1994) calls linking space.

Hereby, for fashion independent retailers to appeal the customer and set a good basis to strengthen its customer relationship, it seems necessary for them to offer social activities or at least spaces dedicated to social exchange. In this extend, they can appear as a linking space (Ibid.), where people come to socialize and play the social support role above-mentioned.

This element can be strengthened if the retailer sports a strong dedication to a specific lifestyle. In this extend, customers attracted by the place could already be dedicated, or at least interested, in the retailer’s lifestyle which would help them to consider having interaction with other people in such places as they may share the same points of interest.

Considering the fact that people “value the social aspect of life at the cost of consumption” (Cova 1995) a shop linking space position and specific offer would allows them to feel part of a determined group and develop social interactions. We witnessed that customers can be attracted by this opportunity to exchange with other people interested in the same lifestyle; some were especially coming to do so.

In this extend, it seems that fashion independent retailers can follow an ethnomarketing, or tribal marketing, approach (Goodwin 1994); through a dedication to a specific lifestyle and the “human interaction-oriented retail space” are providing the right context to develop retailers’ customer relationship. Marketing is here vector of a community link and retailers play the role of Totems (Covat, 1995); they represent a pole of attraction and a potential place of rituals.

However, it appears relevant to mention that for those marketing techniques to attract the customer, it seems necessary that he feels a connection with the retailer. This element is linked with the concept of consumer-brand identification: The
consumer has to feel a certain similarity between the brand, in our case the retailer, and himself (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006, Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). In other terms, such an ethnomarketing approach is aiming for a specific target group belonging to a specific subculture of consumption (McAlexander, 1995). It can represent a strong asset if the target is chosen wisely but it can also represent a potential loss if this target is too specific/small. Moreover, it could be challenging to trigger such an identification; the retailer can miss its target by using the wrong attracting elements.

5.1.2 The retailer as a social support for the community

Once, these elements set, they represent a good basis for the development of a community where the retailer plays a central position. Through the previously presented tribal marketing approach (ethnomarketing) developing an ideal context for social interaction, retailers could support the creation or development of linking values between consumers and create a consumer community (Goodwin, 1994). Once again, by appearing as a linking space (Cova, 1997), a retailer is assuming the role of social support for communities.

Oliver (1999) while working on defining the factors necessary to create an “ultimate loyalty” presented four different kinds of strategies based on two independent factors:

• The level of consumer’s individual fortitude: “the degree to which the consumer fights of competitive overtures on the basis of marketer-generated information.” (Oliver, 1999), or in other terms, the consumers’ resistance to competitors proposition.

• The level of social support or community: “the community provides the impetus to remain loyal because either it is enticing in a passive sense or it proactively promotes loyalty.”(Oliver, 1999), which can be perceived as the capability of the community to make its members loyal.

Those strategies, manage to create different levels of loyalty from the most fragile to the strongest one.

In this case the community factor is considered as an element strengthening loyalty; as it demonstrates the importance of the environment and especially the
way other customers (if forming a community) can influence loyalty. Based on the idea that when individuals share the same/close consumption values or behavior, they develop a sense of community (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) this approach focuses on the creation of a tribe linking consumers.

This “village” (Oliver, 1999) is motivating the customer to be loyal as he is a part of the group. In exchange, the group will keep pleasing its members; “the consumer becomes a (willing) participant because of the attention provided by its members.” (Oliver, 1999). This “consumption community” (Boorstin, 1974, Friedman et al., 1993) judges and advises the consumer which follows the group’s recommendations. By following them loyally, he will become a member of the community rewarded by friendship and protectiveness (Goodwin, 1996).

Hence, by appearing as a linking space for a specific consumer subculture (McAlexander, 1995) a fashion independent retailer is helping its customer to forge a collective identity.

This consumer/brand community regroups three elements (Muniz Jr and O’guinn) 2001):

• The consciousness of a kind (Bender, 1978); qualified of “we-ness” (Bender, 1978) which consists in the connection to the brand but also to other customers.
• The rituals and tradition (Muniz Jr and O’guinn, 2001) which help sharing, transmitting and reproducing community’s meaning within and beyond the community.
• The Moral responsibility (Muniz Jr and O’guinn, 2001); the members have to develop a sense of duty towards the community as a whole and towards its individual members which help to create collective action and group cohesion.

In our case the consciousness of a kind is developed through the retailer’s linking space position dedicated to a specific consumer culture (McAlexander 1995).

Here marketing offers the right environment to develop a collective consciousness. As customers meet each other during their visit at the retailer, they develop a connection with the company but, more important, they develop a connection towards one another.

While they visit the retailer, they become aware of the community existence and of the possibility to be part of it. Hence, if the customer feels the “customer-brand
identification” (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006, Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000) previously mentioned, they also have the possibility to develop relationship with other customers.

This feeling of belonging to a “Tribe” (Maffesoli 1988) is underlined by the possibility of exchange between its members. As explained previously, more than sharing the same lifestyle, consumers have the possibility to exchange with one another (information, knowledge, experience…) and develop a relationship through the shop products and services offered (in the case studied barber, bar, coffee…). Hence, they can feel a certain attention from other members which turns them into willing participants (Oliver 1999) of the community. Customers follow the community judgements, advices and experiences and therefore become inherent parts of the community (Boorstin 1974, Friedman, Abeele and De Vos 1993). As they follow those advices, they are rewarded by friendship and protectiveness (Goodwin 1996) and if they are loyal to the community, they are loyal towards its central pole, the retailer.

Moreover, as customers feel this consciousness of a kind, they develop a moral responsibility towards other customers (Muniz Jr and O’guinn 2001). The customer develops a sense of duty towards a consequently evolving community and also towards its individual members, creating the basis of group cohesion (Ibid.).

Here we notice the importance of ethnomarketing/ tribal marketing techniques. As the retailer proposes a linking space for people to exchange (Goodwin 1996), communication is easier and more fluid among its members which strengthens the unity and spirit of belonging in the community (Cova 1997). Hereby, it represents the community pole of attraction (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002); a place where interactions take place. In other terms, the retailer creates its own “village” (Oliver 1999) above-mentioned, where the product/service is not the only thing that people search for; consumers when entering in the shop are expecting “camaraderie”.

This underlines another aspect of this community building strategy: as the exchange of knowledge is a by-product of the ongoing conversation with the retailer and within the community, it provides sociability, information, support
and sense of belonging (Wellman, Boase and Chen 2002, Ren, Kraut and Kiesler 2007). The community does not only serve the retailer, the user, or the consumer; it allows every one of them to benefit from this relationship based on loyalty towards each other.

5.1.3 Events as rituals for the community

In order to meet all Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) brand/consumer community criteria, fashion independent retailers can help the community to institute some “rules”. By establishing rituals or traditions, the retailer helps strengthening this sense of similarity and authenticity among consumers (McAlexander et al., 2002). Following from it, events are considered as such tools to “help customers experience anticipated, but unrealized product benefits, share experience with others, meet brand-related-people and learn more about the brand heritage/value” (McAlexander et al., 2002).

Through events organization, the retailer is able to give another dimension to its community; as those events represent another occasion for the people to gather and exchange knowledge, it also allows them to have a concrete representation of the community. The community does not appear virtual anymore; its components are gathered in the same location which demonstrates its existence and allow individuals to relate to something real.

The retailer plays the role of totem for its community members; it represents a pole of attraction (McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002) and, through events it organizes, a place of rituals. They dispense “authoritative performances” (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994) which creates and sustains rituals and connections between individuals and the community. Those events are ritualizing the consumer behavior; to be part of the community, you have to attend those events which play the role of a “mass”. There you can socialize and exchange with other customers but also learn community’s rules. Through observations and discussions with “members”, the (future) customer is able to understand what to wear, where to go, what to do to sport the lifestyle, what is accepted and what is not by the community, he can also understand its “hierarchy”. Those events, also
allow the community meaning to be reproduced and transmitted within its members and even beyond the community (Muniz Jr and O’guinn 2001), some people could be attracted by events and become future customers. Hence, the retailer allows customers to spread ideas among the community and beyond. Moreover, those events represent a way for the retailer to make the lifestyle appear alive. By gathering people, the shop demonstrates that the lifestyle it sports is also supported by a large amount of people and that it still evolves.

5.2 The Service dominant logic to support ethnomarketing

Through our observations, we observed that ethnomarketing techniques can be applied by fashion independent retailers to build a consumer/brand community and strengthen its customer relationship. However, it seems that they confirm their position using other marketing tools. As this tribal marketing approach of the customer is directly linked with the Customer relationship management literature, especially with its strategical and operational aspect (McAlexander and al. 2002, Buttle, 2009, Stokburger-Sauer, 2010), we noticed that some techniques observed belonged to a different marketing “tradition”. These techniques, still aiming to strengthen the customer relationship, are more focus on the customer as an individual and represent the retailers’ response to the new geography of knowledge.

5.2.1 Knowledge exchange to promote the retailer’s community and Lifestyle

Our observation showed that the shop employees were very knowledgeable about products, and that they share it with the customer. Employees were focused on providing service, by giving information about the product. Without pushing customers to buy a product, they motivate them by providing information about the product, its specificities and characteristics. Here, knowledge sharing seem to be a cornerstone to strengthen the retailer customer relationship. As per Leonard and Sensiper (1998), the information or the knowledge shared with the customer should be relevant, actionable, and based at least partially in a business context as it impacts the customer’s perception of service quality (Taylor and Baker 1994). Here, through knowledge sharing, the consumer is turned into a knowledgeable individual able to share this knowledge with other customers.
Through this approach, the retailer is aiming to “manage customer knowledge to generate create value creating lock in and channel knowledge to strengthen relationships and effectiveness” (Tiwana, 2002) turning him into an “enabled customer (Ibid.). In our case this sharing of knowledge represents the way customers can enter to the community. If an individual feel the previously presented consumer-brand identification (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002, Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000) but lack of experience, references or simply knowledge to be part of the community, the retailer offers its expertise to help him sport the lifestyle and maybe become a member of the community.

Here again the retailer can confirm its central position by appearing as the gatekeeper of the consumer subculture (McAlexander, 1995). Hereby, retailers can present their expertise as a service, the goods sold are simply by-products of this knowledge sharing service.

This approach appears very close to a specific domain in the marketing literature, promoting a paradigm shift in the way business is conducted. Vargo and Lusch (2007) have recognized the conventional logic as Good dominant, others have referred to it as the “neoclassical economics research tradition” (e.g., Hunt, 2000), “manufacturing logic” (e.g., Normann, 2001), “old enterprise logic” (Zuboff and Maxmin, 2002) or, more specific to marketing, “product orientation” (Keith, 1960), “marketing myopia” (Levitt, 1960), “product marketing” (Shostack, 1977), and more recently, “marketing management” (Webster, 1992). Regardless of the designation, the logic is centered on units of output, historically considered to be goods.

In Service Dominant logic (also known as SDL), service is defined as the application of specialized competences (operant resources—knowledge and skills), through processes, performance, and deeds for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself (Vargo and Lusch, 2007), where operant are active resources creating for themselves and co-creating for others.

Herby, Gronroos (2000) suggested: “The emerging principles of marketing services will become the mainstream principles of marketing in the future. The physical goods become one element among others in a total service offering. This
means that physical goods marketing and services marketing converge, but services-oriented thinking will dominate. (pp. 87–88)"

This service dominant logic is aiming for a value proposition (Vargo and Lush, 2004); it does not simply consider the customer as an output. This service centered vision of marketing focuses on its adaptability to consumer demands through a co-creation process in close collaboration with the consumer (Vargo and Lush, 2004).

The relation with the customer is perceived through several “value cycles” (Day, 1999 p. 70) each providing a ground for competing with services. The customer becomes an operant resource acting on the operand resources during several steps of the value chain (Lush et al. 2007). Hence, “production does not cease with the production process; production is a transitional process” (Vargo and Lush, 2004). As Haeckel’s (1999) work showed, successful firms applying a “sense-and-respond” strategy (instead of a “Make-and-sell” one) are capable of captivating their clients while improving their functioning.

5.2.2 The Co-production of value

This approach also implies a new objective for marketing; as the (co-)production is an extended process, it now implies to build a long-term relationship with customers rather than simply “making a sale”: “Gaining a client” will be the first step to the ultimate goal of “gaining a co-producer” (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan, 2010). Hence, marketing would progressively transform its aim from sales to customer loyalty and relationship building.

This different approach also redefined the importance of “relationship marketing” (Gronroos, 1994) and extends its application to the whole marketing world: focusing on mutual gain and cooperation (Ganesan and Hess, 1997) it considers as central the relation between customers and employees (Gronroos, 2000). It corresponds to a renewal of authenticity in the customer needs and in relationship marketing (http://poptech.org/, 2012). This vision can be linked with the pre-
Industrial revolution times, when the customer was directly in contact with the supplier/producer (Hauser and Clausing 1988, p. 64).

Business will be conducted again at a human/one-to-one level (Vargo and Lush, 2004, 2008,) a people-to-people business scale, which will allow relationships to flourish: As a customer will expect to interact with the same service provider in the future, he will also wish to be in relation with the same person/individual that he perceive has “his” service provider (Gutek 1995; (Prus, 1997). Hence, this co-creation of value will be developed through long-lasting relationships between the customer and the person that provides his services (associated with the goods or not) based on loyalty and mutual exchange.

As explained previously, retailers can implement such a logic into the way they are making business. Here, expertise, knowledge sharing and a possibility to socialize are the services retailers can provide. These services are precisely not an added value of the company, but it is the commercial unit, or in other terms, what the company is aiming to sell. Through this approach, fashion independent retailers they might strengthen their customer relationship.

However sharing information does not appear to be sufficient to create such a relationship. As Vargo and Lush (2004) explained it, keeping a constant flow of information directed towards the customer is important, but it has to be a two way process. As the bond starts with knowledge sharing, it is strengthened by the acceptance of the customer feedback/opinion. Here, knowledge exchange is a two way process, which concentrates more on delivering a dialogue with the client rather than delivering a monologue. Knowledge from the customer has to be incorporated by the company for the ware and service innovation, idea generation as well as for the continuous improvements of its merchandise and services (Thomke S and Von Hippel E, 2002). This constant dialogue allows the company to adapt its offer constantly according to the evolution of its customers.

This mutual exchange of information and knowledge would allow the shop to turn the customer in an asset for the retailer; It either turns him into a shop ambassadors of the retailer or provide useful information, in the form of feedback, to further improvement of business processes.
Through sharing of information the retailer can teach the importance of the product and make the customer understand the value behind the product. This two-way dialogue also finds its roots in the actual changes in knowledge geography.

Nowadays knowledge production is progressively changing its organization, entering into a new age highly influenced by “the wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2005). As different work showed that user-led innovation tend to expand from business-to-business to business-to-customer relation, in niches (Lüthje, 2004) as well as in mass market (Füller et al., 2007), customer themselves tend to create their own community, which collectively creates knowledge (Von Hippel, 1978, Hienerth, 2006). Enhanced by the arrival of internet (Füller et al., 2007) those communities blur the distinction between professionals and amateurs/producers and consumer (Von Hippel, 1978) developing a different circulation of knowledge. Called “co-development” (Grabher et al., 2008) and linked with the “co-creation of value” developed in the service dominant logic (Vargo and Lush, 2004, Vargo et al., 2008), this new approach of knowledge is built around “hybrid communities” (Kunz and Mangold, 2004). Composed with professional and amateurs (Neff and Stark, 2004) they catalyze the production and exchange of knowledge through two different streams: the vertical one which consists of a dialogue between producers and users and the horizontal one which regroups the circulation of ideas and knowledge between the users (experience, recommendation, warnings, revelation of product modification). Moreover, knowledge sharing becomes an ongoing process based on communication/conversation and not a one-time intervention.

As customer expects to interact with the same service provider in the future and so on be able to identify it as HIS or HER service provider, their relation can be considered as a “service relationship” (Prus, 1997); The customer expects relational benefits in exchange for cultivating a long-lasting relationship with his service provider (Gwinner et al., 1998). Hence, this ongoing dialogue allows the community to perpetually evolve, entering in a “permanent beta” state (Neff and Stark, 2004).
The retailer, rather than dispensing a one-way-message to its customer, is following the “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki 2005). In a time when the consumer tend also to be the producer of information (Von Hippel 1978), Retailers need to respect the consumer’s desire to actively participate to the business orientation.

The shop’s linking space position allows it to be the perfect place to set two different streams of information (Neff and Stark 2004): if the vertical (producer to user) one is ensured by the staff desire to share knowledge, the shop services and relax spaces (bar, tables…) allow the customer to develop a horizontal dialogue (customer to customer). As we witness it, many customers talk and exchange their own experience with other customers and also with the staff members. No longer satisfied with the knowledge shared by professional, customers exchange knowledge between them, blurring by the same occasion the distinction between professional and amateurs (Neff and Stark 2004). But rather than diffusing knowledge only among them, they share it back with the shop as a reward for their effort to help people socialize and for being the community pole of attraction.

But it seems that this feedback is allowed by the specific proximity and care from the staff; they try to set a “service relationship” (Prus 1997) with the consumer. By taking care of him, being aware of his needs and offer him a personal solution and knowledge, they set the basis for a long lasting relationship based on the people-to-people approach (Vargo and Lusch 2008, Vargo and Lush 2004, Vargo, Maglio and Akaka 2008) and reinforced by the possibility for the customer to give his opinion.

Through this customer feedback, the retailer is able to evolve in the same way as their customers do.

Alajoutsija, Klint and Tikkaner (2001) have argued that through maintaining a uniform and permanent cooperative relationship with customers, a company can considerably reduce the fluctuations of price and demand in its business cycles and stabilize it in the long run.

The multiple knowledge streams, allow the information to circulate easily between the retailer and its consumers, allowing the company to be as responsive
as possible. The information is collectively produced and analyzed by customers and the community will be “feed-backed” to the retailer, adjusting its offer and knowledge according to it. This aspect is underlined by the constant flow of this dialogue; thanks to the retailer linking space position, customers have the knowledge to give a constructive feedback (gathered through their own experience but also from other customers experience). Moreover, they can share it every time they visit the retailer.

This specific relation allows the retailer to appear as the central pole of a “hybrid community”(Kunz and Mangold 2004) composed by professionals and amateurs(Von Hippel 1978, Hienerth 2006) which collectively creates knowledge. Moreover, the frequency of the interactions and the “specialization” of its members allow the community to evolve constantly entering into the “permanent beta” state described by Neff and Stark (2004).
6. Discussion:

Taking into consideration observations, the authors’ analysis and the literature previously presented, the following can be stated:

Customer relationship management techniques application proves to be a possible way to strengthen fashion independent retailer relationship with their customers and create/attract a community. However to be fully operational, CRM techniques have to be supported by marketing techniques belonging to a different tradition of the discipline; the Service Dominant Logic.

Through the use of customer relationship management marketing techniques, the retailer is able to set a different kind of relationship with its customer. Based on the sense of belonging triggered by the shop’s linking space position underlined by a strong dedication to a specific lifestyle, a retailer can attract a specific range of customer interested in this very lifestyle or consumer subculture and also strengthen its relationship with him through the social dimension it proposes.

Answering the post-modern human needs, the retailer is turned into a place of interaction where people are attracted by the opportunity to create social bonds with people carrying the same interests and lifestyle. Following an ethnomarketing approach, the retailer defines a specific target group and uses its social aspect to appear as a crucial place for the community members. As its social dedicated spaces and services allow customers to interact and socialize, it can be perceived as the place of interaction for the community members. Hence, it seems to be possible for a fashion independent retailer following such marketing techniques to create or attract a community and to appear as its central pole.

This new position allows it to develop a brand/consumer community which will strengthen its customer relationship by the same occasion; as community members develop a sense of belonging towards each other, the shop linking space position helps them to gather and finishes transforming the retailer into a Totem (McAlexander, 2002). This position can be strengthened through the organization
of events, finishing to transform the retailer into an inevitable place for community members.

On the other hand, customer management marketing techniques mechanisms may be developed through the use of Service dominant logic techniques. Playing on its social position, a fashion independent retailer can develop its customer relationship by focusing on exchanging knowledge with its customers. By selling its expertise as a service, a retailer can share its knowledge which will also be shared with other customers thanks to the community and its linking space position. To be able to exchange this knowledge, the retailer staff has to be trained.

But this transfer of information should be a two way process; by allowing customers feedback the retailer is able to confirm the relationship he built with the customer, based on trust and commitment, hence developing a people-to-people approach of the customer and evolving in the same way as the customer does.

6.1 Remarks

However, as the authors developed, and observed this set of marketing techniques, it appeared that limitations have to be mentioned:

Sporting a very specific lifestyle only attract a specific group of customer. Hence, a retailer can reduce its potential customer range; targeting a specific lifestyle as well as selected the right ones can represent big challenges for any fashion independent retailer willing to adopt such marketing strategies.

The retailer available space is also an important concern; it is a luxury to have enough space to dedicate to social activities. However the authors consider that it is the retailer’s role to find a solution to those space problems by offering new/different ways of socialization and hence, appear as a “linking place”.

Moreover, adopting such strategies could cost an important amount of resources of a fashion independent retailer. Transforming its retailing space/floor, training its staff or organizing events can be financially impossible to manage for a number of fashion independent retailers.
The authors would also mention that marketing techniques presented earlier should be included in an evolving dynamic, as the marketing and business landscape is constantly evolving. Hence, the model presented can suffer from weaknesses and miss-adaptation to specific cases.

Finally, the authors consider possible the extension of the previously presented model to other industries; with arrangements and modifications, the observed techniques may be applicable to other domain as they come from a more general marketing perspective.

### 6.2 Limitation:

To conduct this study, the authors did not have access to any funds or financial help. Hence, they were limited to their own means and funds, which took an importance place in the fashion independent retailer choice and in the decision making process.

They were also restrained by the short time given to conduct this thesis. Finally, as Sivletto’s staff agenda mismatched the authors’ one, other interviews were impossible to conduct.

### 6.3. Suggestion for future researches:

As authors’ observations were limited on time and funds, they would recommend a deeper study to be conducted in Sivletto’s specific case, focusing on developing a better understanding of the relationship between the staff and the customer but also on the events organization, motivation and progress.

It could also be interesting to study/measure the effects of such techniques in terms of loyalty and calculate them. Hereby, authors would recommend the conduct of a quantitative study on the outcomes of such techniques in this specific environment.
Understanding communities’ hierarchy, and how marketing could reach the community leaders to influence the rest of the community would also be of interest.

But most importantly, future study could help testing the model, allowing it to evolve and be adapted in different situations, proving, or not, its efficiency.

Finally, future studies could focus on understanding the psychological mechanisms/ effects of knowledge exchange and relationship building; how to trigger feedback, how to ease the feeling of belonging to the community…
7. References

7.1 Figure Reference

Fig A: Process of Building Theory from Case Study Research (Eisenhardt, 1989: p533)


7.2 Picture Reference:

Picture 1: http://denimhunters.com/, (2012), door [ONLINE]. Available at:

Picture 2: http://denimhunters.com/, (2012), Stairs [ONLINE]. Available at:

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8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1: Customers semi-structured interviews guideline

What attract you to Sivletto?
What was your first impression?
Does the place represent something to you?
How can you define the staff behavior?
How much time did you spend in the store?
Did you buy something from the shop?
Would you recommend this place to your friends?
Are you aware of different events that Sivletto hosts?
Do you relate with other customers? If yes, how?

8.2 Appendix 2: A customer interview transcript

As one author sat at the bar to have a cup of coffee, a customer next to him engaged the conversation first in Swedish, then, confronted to the author lack of practice, switched to English:

**Moderator: Bastien**

Respondent: Bjorn, A Sivletto’s customer

I’m sorry but I can’t help telling you to take the Tellason [about the choice of a denim pair presented earlier to the author].

Ah, I don’t know…

You should listen to him [a staff member], he knows his stuff.

What do you mean?
I have come here for three years now, and I’ve never been disappointed by any of the product they advised me to buy. So you should listen to him when he advises you to choose the Tellason, it is for your own sake. What are you wearing now? [about the pair of denim the author wore].

**A 501 Levis Vintage, the model from 1947.**

That is good. But I see that you are riding a motorcycle.

**Are you sure?**

Yeah your in-betweens legs are all gone. It would not have happened with a Tellason. Their construction is stronger, they have a different sewing technique.

**Wow! You seem to know a lot about it!**

You know, I’ve come here for a long time and I met a lot of people here which are interested in this kind of stuff. And like we do now, people here talk a lot.

**That is why you come here?**

Yes. It is cool to meet people interested in the same things and talk with them. You can learn a lot of things from their experience. And what a nice place to do it, you can have a coffee while listening to great music, this is great!

**Do you come here often?**

I don’t know, do you think once a week is considered as often? For me it is not. I like to meet my friends here and new people like you. It is nice to be able to talk to someone about things you like and maybe help them, like I try with you.

**Yes, and I thank you for that mister.**

You are welcome. You know we seem to love the same stuff in life, so it is normal to help each other. You should come to a gig organized by the place. I am sure you will like it.

**Yes? How is it?**
It is great. You can meet even more people, it’s amazing! You know everybody knows each other and talk about what we do or what we like, we just have a good time. But do not worry, we also welcome the newcomers.

**Thank you for the invitation.**

That is a pleasure. But you really should trust them, they will not fail you. When I first came here, I did not know anything about what I was purchasing. But they taught me how to select my garment according to the way I live. You know garments are made to protect you and to adapt to what you do; and not the other way around.

**And what was your first impression when you first came here? Personally I thought I was lost.**

Yes, I know, the place does not look very fancy at the first sight. But this feeling disappeared when I talk for the first time to the people working here. I told you, I did not know a thing, but when I went out I had the basis to go further.

**Did it create an interest?**

Yes, you can say so. I bought my first pair of raw denim and since then, I am a fanatic. They did not push me to buy, they simply explained to me the purpose of buying such a product and its advantages and disadvantages as they did to you. I am really grateful to them; I am not anymore a mindless consumer.

**I guess you have a good relationship with them.**

Of course, otherwise I would not come back as often. But I am sorry, I got to go. It was nice meeting you. And I repeat, trust them, it is worth it.

**I will keep that in mind. Have a nice day and hopefully see you at a gig.**

You are welcome, goodbye.
8.3 Appendix 3: A staff member participant observation transcript

Moderator: Farhan

Respondent: a Sivletto staff member

Excuse me, I want a new pair of jeans, but I have to admit, I’m quite lost.

No problem, I am here for that. First of all what cut are you searching for?

I have to admit, I do not know much about this either.

That is OK! Do not worry, you are not a desperate cause (laughs).

HAHA! Thank you it is a relief.

So, to start I would say, without offence, that you are not tall. So I would advise you to avoid the loose fits and to go for more fitted denim. But what are you doing in life?

I am a student

And what are your searching for? Something comfortable, something light, heavy?

I would say that I like to be comfortable in my clothes, so something light.

Ok, but just so you know lighter does not always mean comfortable. In any case I think we can try a straight cut. It is the most worn cut and offers comfort while being fitted. Do you have an active lifestyle?

What do you mean?

Do you walk a lot? Do you go outdoors often? Do you ride a bike?

I don’t have a car nor a bike, so I pretty much always walk. I ‘m looking for something practical, that I can wear everyday. Something darker than what I am wearing now.

Ok, so you need something for your everyday life which needs to be reliable and comfortable. It also has to resist your long walks. Do you the raw denim concept?
I heard of it, but I do not know what it refers to.

You see, after few time worn, a denim loses its original dark blue color, it fades. Today many denim sold in the world are industrially faded. With a raw denim, the pants are “virgin”, which allows you to create your own fade. They will appear depending on your activities and turn your denim into yours truly. And it will also make it unique.

Cool, I’ll go for raw denim.

Ok, what is your size?

My actual pant is a 32 I think.

Ok that is a good basis, wait few seconds please, I bring this to you.

Few second later she comes back with five different pairs.

Let’s try this one first, it is a classic.

The moderator tries the pants in the fitting room.

How do you feel?

Good, very comfortable.

Maybe a little too much do not you think?

Why?

You see the size does not fit. It is a little too big, we can see it at the bottom of your back.

Oh ok. But it was my usual size

Yes but, every brand has its own specificities. And sizes are one of them. Try this model. It is the same but one size smaller.

Back in the fitting room

Ah! Now I can feel the difference.

You see your back is held. But do you like it, do you feel comfortable?
It is a little too high on my waist

Because this model is a replica of an older version from the 50’s. Same fabrics, same sewing techniques, and same fit. That is the purest cow-boy Jean. You can see that they pushed the detail to the tags and rivets. They have numbers from older series and the tags and leather patch look exactly as they were in that time, but I see what you mean. On those models the waist is higher than modern standards. We can try this one [another pair of denim] which has a lower waist. People searching for comfort usually chose this one but as you were also searching for something practical the previous model might have been the good one.

The moderator tries another pant

Ah this one is perfect

Cool, it is a Belgian brand. The company is held by two friends near Bruxelles. It is a fully European denim. You see the T on the back pocket, it is their sign.

Oh though every brand had the same.

No, every brand has its own and its protected by the law, like a logo. You know we had many conflict in the denim business were caused by those sybols. During the 90’s Levis led a war against the imitators and the other brand using their arcuate. Are you satisfied or do you want to try more models.

No thank you, I really like this one. But where do you get all these stories from?

(Laughs) We are all here very fond of the product we sell and the culture around. So it is just natural for us to know those stuffs.

Your customers must like it.

I got to say that they also help us a lot gathering the info. They are all wearing products we sell, so we try to get their feedback as often as possible, so we can adapt to their wishes. And, you know, it is part of the boutique role to help the customer finding what he wants. We help him understand what product will fit
him, it is normal to explain the product specificities. We just want you to be aware
of the products quality and value.

In any case thank you very much.

Your welcome, don’t hesitate to ask if you need anything. We offer you the coffee
if you by the denim.

Great! Thank you again.

8.2 Appendix 4: Mail to Sivletto’s owner asking for an interview

Hi,
My name is Farhan Ali and I am a master student in fashion management at the Swedish school of textiles, my thesis partner Bastoin Mancini and I are working on our thesis and we want to do a study on your shop. Because we find Sivletto to be very unique and innovative, which include the way the customers were welcomed, the amount of knowledge the staff had about the merchandise, the overall shop ambiance; we would like to use it as a great example of what a fashion independent retailer could be in the fashion industry’s future. The research will be presented at the EUT conference at university of Borås. (https://www.facebook.com/events/645716523087228/)

What inspired us about Sivletto was couple of months back while we were travelling around Sweden, we had the pleasure of coming to Sivletto and experience the shop first hand by ourselves, and we became one of the customers too ☺. We were very much impressed on how the shop was being run, and the helpful behaviour of the staff.

This would be a good chance for us to understand how Sivletto is conducting its business and we will be able to showcase the shop to big audience which can also be beneficial for the shop itself. The goal of our research is to study different factors in the retail business we can keep anything you want off the record.

We would like to request you if you would be able to spare some time for us and answer some of our questions through interview where we would ask you about the whole story about Sivletto and your relationship with your customer.

Kind Regards,
Farhan Ali & Bastoin Mancini
8.3 Photo Log