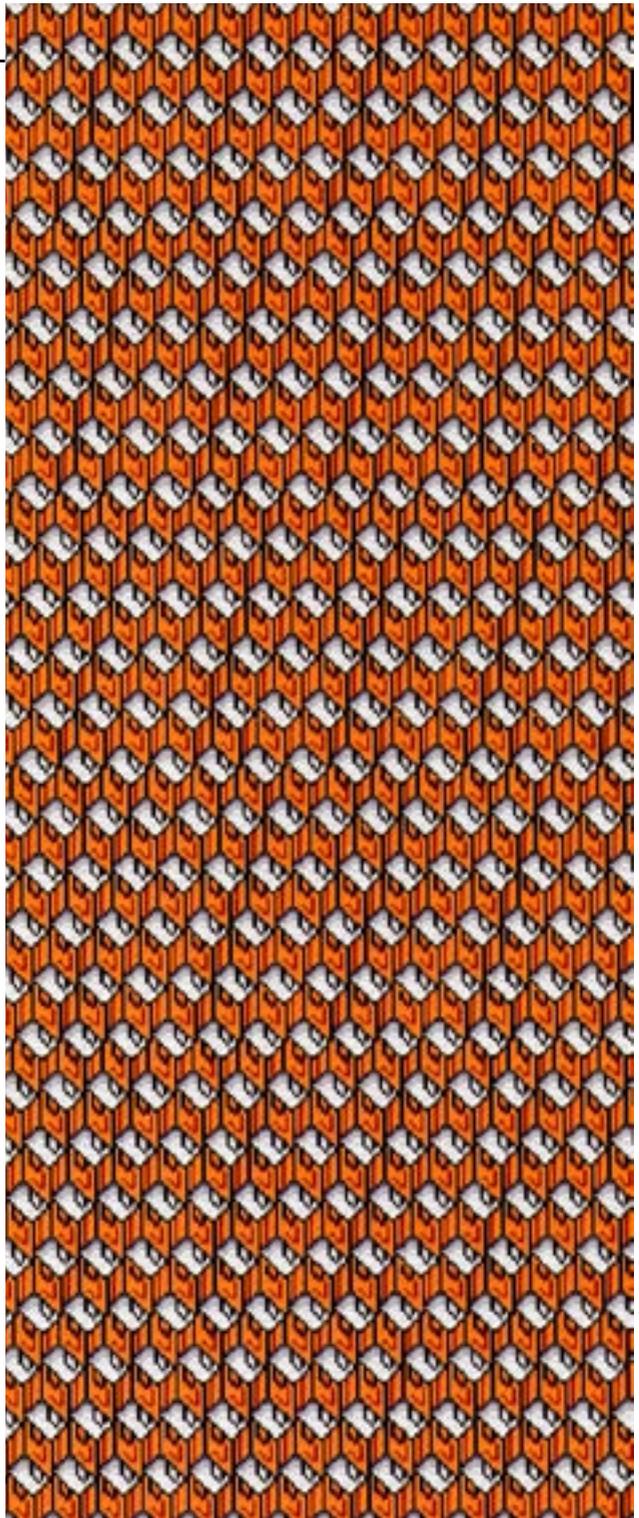


trust, & social shopping recommendation systems

*the relevance of subjective
and non-verifiable
information*

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introduction,

In short, the essay is about the issue of social trust within shopping recommendation systems and the relevance of subjective and non-verifiable information.

‘Social shopping recommendation system’ is not a ‘Wiki-proof’ term. But a more or less similar definition is obtained by Wiki: “Social Software Applications”, as an addition to situated and social software. The term is defined as “applications which take advantage of the (social) group to provide recommendations and product reviews”. The content of the recommendation systems is provided by users and buyers of specific products. The content is subjective and the sources are most of the time anonymous. Though a user is able to use this information when deciding to buy or buy not a specific product. It can function as a virtual social frame of reference.

Questions asked in relation with social shopping recommendation systems, with the emphasis on social trust (not treated in the same order):

- is subjective and non-verifiable data within social shopping recommendation systems really relevant?
- which social and psychological aspects play a role within shopping behavior?
- are there (and if there are), what are the changes in our social behavior when comparing online and offline shopping regarding the usage of a social frame of reference?
- how does the information exchange with social (online) groups (communities) influences the perception of the consumer?
- what about the source-reliability problems within social recommendation, ‘what’ to believe from ‘who’?
- do functional design elements influence the way we shop online in a social manner, is it possible to make environments instead of artificial more sociable?
- can the subjective information of ‘taste’ really be applied to a search system?

Within this paper I will keep the approach to the subject of social software recommendations very practical and I will explain the addressed problems above, by clear texts and most non-scientific analyses. I am not a theoretical expert but a designer so that is where the emphasis is on: addressing design-issues, functionality, usability, some analyses to related social behavior and considerations within designs. The approach is more intuitive and as a starting point a ‘real life’ anecdote has been

used in order to make the material accessible and understandable; it is a combination of experiences and analyses.

Initially I planned to write something about an issue that would be more directly related to the 'housing problem' of the thematic project. Just by accident I changed from subject, it all came from a simple problem. The issue forms the red line through the essay, it is written in the format of an anecdote. The anecdote addresses every 'question', the follow-up texts explains the background and if available a solution for the addressed problem. So there is a constant rhythm of anecdote-problem-background(-solution). The small storytelling thing is about my intentions to buy a song from the iTunes Music Store.

As an information designer I am especially interested in (form and function) user-interaction, supportive graphical user-interfaces, data usage, content relations and the functionality of provided tools. All the issues and problems mentioned above in the small introducing story, are directly related to the fields of activity of information design. My working method for this essay is actually text-based only, something quite new for me. But it's probably a good exercise in reading and writing, using words for explaining.

Jorrit Sybesma

Rotterdam, december 2005

* relevant quotes by third parties are used inline, information regarding technical objective data are printed in footnotes on every page.

“The streets are cold and empty. Rain is poring down from the grey skies, as seen often here in Holland. The streetlights reflect their sharp white gleam into the pools of water on the pavement. Luckily I am inside the Music Store. When I entered the store, the coldness from outside seemed to have followed me, even in here. The door to the store opens slowly and quite. Brushed metal elements reflect a cold and unpleasant light. I see the advertisements, all static. No sound, no sound at all. Strange for a Music Store. Is this a complete new concept? ‘New’, ‘exclusive’, ‘more exclusive’, ‘most exclusive song’, ‘popular’, ‘top 10’, ‘newest’, ‘most recent’, ‘featured’, ‘originals’. What? I hesitate for a moment, just to see if anything would happen. Nothing happens. For another minute I do not move a muscle. My eye catches a streamer: ‘sold more than 100 million songs’; five every second. No other people are around, nothing moves, no sounds are made. It is static, it is all standing still. Forty-five more songs are sold in the meantime.”
– Then I press the Apple-Q keys.

[According to some sociologists, like dr. Albert Benschop from the University of Amsterdam; we do not need all sensing-aspects on the internet. Our own mental capabilities will close the gap between seeing, feeling, sensing and hearing. The only thing we do is looking at the screen and typing the words that appear. We do not smell or touch anything: “but by one way or another, our capacities to imagine things is so strong, that we do not need the real experience. We have the capacity to fill the needs of our sense-organs; only by the experience of one.” The internet is a medium that can heavily influence the human behavior, the way we look at things and replace analog ‘feelings’ by a virtual ‘replacement’. The internet is an excellent tool to extend your social life, or replace it with. Anonymity is partially the cause. - dr. Albert Benschop, University of Amsterdam on a lecture at the National Sociology Day in 1998, free available for reading at the UVA Sociology website, used texts: ‘Peculiarities of Cyberspace’ and ‘Building blocks for an Internet Society’.]

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In order to explore the outer boundaries of the essay, at first some small research to the usage of the internet in relation to commercial activities and social behavior has been done. Internet has changed from an information exchange environment (ARPANET online since 1969 by Advanced Research Project Agency) to a tool that is extending our social lives, technical progress caused social changes. Instead of social individualization, the internet has formed a virtual 'third place' and formed an alternative social environment [- Ray Oldenburg (sociologist, professor and author) defines in 'The Great Good Place' home as the 'first place', work as the 'second' and the 'third place' as an environment or a community where to meet others (the internet for example, or a coffee-bar if you like)]. In the early days of the internet, when we were connected by a dial-up modem and we paid per second, every second was a valuable and precious moment. The time spent on the internet, was used much more effective. Chatting was expensive and you wrote your e-mails offline and sent them when you were finished writing them. When you were considering connecting to the web, you had a specific goal. It was to gain 'this' information, or to buy 'that' product in the United States. And internetting after eight in the evening, in the so called 'off-peak hours', did cost half the money.

[According to national research data done and published by CBS in march 2004 (Central Bureau for Statistics) in the Netherlands, 50% of the internet connections is a broadband one; in 60% of this case it is an ADSL-connection. The other 40% uses a regular cable connection. The amount of ADSL internet-connections in the 'Randstad', the large city area in the west of the Netherlands, is higher than in the rest of the country. 11% of the inhabitants of the Netherlands does not have a high speed internet connection, because it is too expensive. 61% of the Dutch population has an internet connection at home. 78% of the internet users is a family member with children. - CBS report on PC and Internet usage, published in november 2004 via the website of the CBS.]

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Buying products online used to be something you did not, or you did carefully plan at a specific moment in time. It was not something impulsive, like grabbing products off a shelf in the supermarket. It was like walking into an exclusive store and buying that expensive and appealing product, a special moment. Nowadays buying something via the internet, is just like walking your round for the weekly groceries in the supermarket. Not special anymore, it could even be annoying. The lack of exclusive-

ness of buying products through the internet, has some positive effects; it is easy to do, therefore cheaper, faster, et cetera. Enough positive things to think of. Downsides are also known, without being too negative about this development, but these less positive aspects of 'easy buying' are very related to social issues. If shopping in the digital world is almost similar to shopping in the analog world, in the sense that the operation is easy to proceed than the psychologically step to buy something is lower and it is more 'dangerous' due to the facts that the tactile aspects of shopping (touching the product, feeling the money in your hands, the thrill of walking out of the store with a nice shopping bag) are not a part of the experience and process. What I mean with that, is that the process of buying is made easier, but at the same time you do not get informed better equally. You have more choice (quantity) but that does not guarantee more quality. The more choices you have, the more difficult is to make the choice (especially the right one). So to be able to determine if you should buy a product or not, you need more than only the objective information that is often available on the various websites. You would like to know more than only the hard cold facts of the product, like the size and the weight, the color, et cetera. When buying a couch for example, it is nice to know if it is comfortable to sit on. Although we are able to be online till the infinitive, still you are not able to retrieve that kind of information is not shared when shopping on for instance the Ikea-website. The selling points of online stores should be the availability of various sources of information. Initiated by the stores or third parties, like consumer communities (information provided by users of the products); providing a fair mixture of objective and subjective information. And that could provide the customer a tool to make a choice based upon quality.

[In a research published by CBS in 2004 on internet activities and usage of this new medium, the results were actually not surprising; although this research is a little outdated but there has no newer thorough research been done since that time. Only 16% of the people used internet to chat, of course it is an average. The percentage of people who did chat very regularly in the age form 12-17 was 56%. Only 1 percent of the people older than 65 did chat on a regular bases. Most of the people surf the internet, without a predefined goal. They are just online, doing 'nothing'. Sometimes that is caused by the fact that they do not know what to use the web for, in other cases they do not have anything else to do. 55% of the people in the age of 12-17 uses the web for nothing. Just aimlessly surfing on the electronic waves. 15 percent of the users selected for the CBS research uses the internet to download music. 0% of the people older than 65 uses the internet for that purpose. The largest amount of downloads of music comes from the age group from 12 to 17. - CBS report on PC and Internet usage, published in november 2004 via the website of the CBS.]

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One of the more positive effects of being able to do things easier over the internet (without time-limitations), is the fact that you can retrieve a huge amount of (as well objective and most of the time also subjective) information that is available about the products that are sold via the internet. We can find more and different sources of information and we can reconsider our intention to buy a product over a longer period of time. We can hesitate, discuss it analog or virtual, do it, or leave it on the digital shelf. The density of shops on the internet is much higher compared with the situation in the early nineties and the software on your computers hard drive provides all kinds of possibilities -within non shopping environments-, to be commercially active, just by placing buttons like for instance. Look at the Mac OS, you have basic versions of software installed and very often a pop-up window will come up with the recommendation to ‘buy now’, ‘purchase’, ‘register’, ‘buy pro later’, ‘activate’, ‘worth using is worth purchasing’ et cetera. To refer in short further more to the anecdote which is a part of this essay, that is based on experiences with iTunes. Software installed by Apple, at first just a music player, later on a commercial environment has sneaked in. The recent versions of the interface of iTunes are based on an ‘easy-buying’ principle. The differences within the interface and the user interaction between your local playlist of songs and the list of music within the iTunes Music Store, is minimal. That has some positive effects when you look at the user-friendliness, but the line between what is owned by the user and what is not consumed yet is very thin. The showroom of the shopping-center is actually entering the house of the consumer. What is shared and what is owned, and what do I have to (or can I) buy. The (visual and functional) disappearance of the line between owning and sharing can be a concept for a complete essay so I will not go further into that. But it is strange that you have to disconnect your computer, in order to see what is actually yours and what is not... (or what is shared).

[What do we do on the web in relation to commercial and social activities. Again the CBS report on internet and pc usage of 2004 provides the cold, objective and verifiable answer. So 46 percent of the CBS average people group uses the internet to search for commercial information, regarding specific products and services. Again 0 percent of the people older than 65 uses the internet for that purpose. The largest group that is using the internet for the purpose of searching for information on commercial products and services is the age group between 25-34. Followed by the age group of 35-44 and 18-24 years. The youngest age group from 12-17 is best in easy finding this information. The age group of 18-24 visits very often a internet shop. Only 23% of the population of the Netherlands is buying often something online. Of course there is a group

of people which would 'never' buy something online, via an internet shopping experience. Some reasons and percentages on that: 'No need in doing that (31%)', 'Prefers to see or hear the product in real life (24%)', 'General security issues (15%)', 'No trust in internet banking, payment and services (11%)', 'Just no doing it, no reason why actually (8%)', 'Having no experience with it (6%)', 'Other unknown reasons (12%)'. - CBS report on PC and Internet usage, published in november 2004 via the website of the CBS.]

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By blurring this line of owning, sharing and buying people get 'confused' and it is easier to trigger people to buy products. Though it is not a bad thing per se. Seduction, or seducing people (the future consumer) is part of our modern day shopping system, it is common knowledge, but the interface of the web makes it harder to determine whether its intentions are false, commercial or 'good'. What or who can you trust, you are not able to use the social resources when dealing 'face-to-face' with these issues? The analog world uses different methods compared to the virtual 'third place' shopping environments. Besides owning things, the internet plays an important role in the transition of owning things to sharing things. Which adds an extra more social function to consuming and shopping - owning a product but sharing the knowledge, sharing means accessibility, owning a problem but sharing a solution. [What about sharing and modern culture, what means materializing in that context? Does the function of 'things' change, when shared. Does the status change or value when shared? Should that be a part of the 'sociofunction' of 'things', besides the function that is stated in the book 'Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture' in the text 'Functions of Things' by Beth Preston (philosopher), pages 28-32. Described as "the 'sociofunction' involves the manifestation of social facts". In the example given, the economical status can be 'read' from the 'sociofunction' of owning 'something'. Besides that another function is mentioned, the 'ideofunction'. Which can be explained as the function that involves "symbolic more abstract ideas, values or beliefs." A classification system brought up by Michael Schiffer, behavioral archaeologist]. By seducing people to act and do something (buy or 'share' something) in these kind of cases, there is not much effort in doing that. And that seems very logical. If I place a product in your apartment -which you really desire- and you may 'share' it, use it, touch it, listen to it, look at it and you are allowed to keep it till I say you have to return it, the step to buy the product is a small one. Compared with if that same product is placed in showroom thirty miles away. The step to buy or keep a product is made easier when the access to the product is made easier.

But why are people seduced by doing 'things' on the web? What kind of aspects do influence their behavior could that be the lack of social control or the lack of a social frame of reference (reference group like friends, relatives and family)? It is well known by psychologists and sociologists that people behave different when they are acting in (large) groups, when they are drunk or used drugs, when they do not speak the language which is spoken in a certain country, when they do not feel safe or when they are anonymous. And the last aspect is exactly the factor which plays a vital role in social behavior on the web, according to dr. Albert Benschop and I agree with him when he writes: "in 'hypersocial' contacts you are free to choose your identity and a way to present yourself, there are no self-limitations and there are no ethics when it comes to personal responsibility. People feel free to express their feelings without hesitation or limitation". If you are 'nobody', you can do almost 'everything'. That can lead to anything. But to stay closer to the social aspects in relation to shopping behavior on the web: this aspect of living a 'third life' [refers to the previous expression of Ray Oldenburg] plays especially a negative role when it comes to abuse of (social) trust (or addiction). For example when people are very sensitive for seduction and do not think about the consequences that digital decisions may have in their analog life. They think that what they do online, stays online. But when you order a product online, it often will be delivered to you in real life; and that means you have to pay for it. Although it is often digital done, it still can form a financial or relational and social threat [people get caught by their digital actions, although they might think that what they do online will not effect their lives offline - "people feel less responsible and almost free to do anything", according to research done by Elizabeth Rheid on 'Cultural formations, in text-based Virtual Realities].

There are reasons enough to make shopping or spending money over the internet, not too easy. But it always comes to the social acting of an individual itself and the social behavior of the person within a group: his or hers social frame of reference. When you have friends and relatives, you can 'use' them as a reliably (social) recommendation system: in the sense that you can make them part of your (shopping) experience. Whether that is off- or online. People who lack these social resources -or those who are live an excluded life from society-, can use the internet as a replacement of the traditional reference groups. Or use the internet to hide 'in' their "delimited world", according to Albert Benschop. Online, these people can use their 'hyperpersonality' [a 'hyperpersonality' or hyperperson is the virtual personality which forms the netpresence of someone in a virtual world. You're able to use multiple hyperpersonalities to have different hypersocial relations with other 'hyperpersonalities' - free translation

of the definition formulated in the report by dr. Benschop] where they can 'hide' behind. These people are more vulnerable for seductions on the web, because (very simplified) they cannot compare their worlds and relativize the value -and the limitations of the virtual social interaction. What kind of people are 'sensitive' for the seductions that the internet offers and what are the factors that shape the environment for seduction. In the publication 'Cyberpsychology' by dr. Albert Benschop, he concludes (and now I am literal quoting:) that "the web is a social attractive place because of the fact that it has a potential for stimulating emotional involvement". Translated into more concrete aspects that means: the internet is twenty-four hours a day available and easy accessible. It offers broad possibilities to have numerous varied personal contacts. The relations between the persons are 'hyperpersonal' (you are contacting through your digital personality). To continue with the words of Albert Benschop, "interactions by others can be observed from a safe distance, without any risk. The persons are 'unseen', so therefore they act socially in a different way, almost unrestrained because all the virtual 'personal' relations are risk-free". Being able to play different roles in various environments is an aspect that attracts people. Benschop also addresses the problems of people with no social lives and the options the internet offers, where I refer to in the text above.

The design ('sales-methods') of the internet shopping environments changes, as you may have read before: products come into your virtual non-commercial environment (computer or application). We do have more time to spent on the net and more time to shop. Our demands will raise in the sense that we want the same rich shopping experience which we have in the analog world. We do not want plain order HTML-forms, too fast procedures when buying an expensive product. We demand the same treatment like the one we receive when walking into one of our favorite and highly exclusive store. We want to receive something extra, a catalog, a nice shopping bag, an extra product when buying something expensive, et cetera. When shopping virtually, we have that same wish. That is something that has changed since we are able to spent more time shopping on the net. The main problem with internet shopping still remains: you can never walk out of the store with the product you bought. A part of the thrill of buying (exclusive, that is where the web is best in) is the speed of doing it, the follow-up of the chain of events is important. You see something in a shopping-window of a store. You hesitate for a second, walk further. Hesitate again, walk back. Look through the window. Open the store door, over the doorstep. See the product again, get excited, look closer at it, you ask the shop employee to get it out of the shopping-window, you have the tactile experience

with the product, you hesitate for a second, you ask your social frame of reference (- friend, girl or boy, mother or father) you brought with you while shopping, you decide to buy it, grab for your wallet, get your credit card, type the pin-code, wait for the cash-register, and hesitate to click 'yes' or 'no' for another fraction of a second, and within fifteen minutes you are out of the store. With the product, you saw just twenty minutes ago (sometimes for the first time in your life). The chain of events is very shortened when buying the same product online. Funny thing is that the factor of 'seeing the product by coincidence' is their on internet as well. You can walk through a shopping street without planning to shop for something. Being there is enough. Due to the fact that we are now able to shop via the internet for twenty four hours a day, the fact of accidentally virtually 'walking' into something you like, is possible.

The research to time spent on the web and the activities online, done by the CBS [report on PC and Internet usage, published in november 2004 via the website of the CBS], which I referred to elsewhere in this essay, shows that people are 'just surfing'. Like hanging out on the web, very similar to hanging out in real life, just walking through the main street; without a specific goal. Just by coincidence seeing something and buying something, very impulsive shopping behavior. In a research done by 'shopping anthropologist' Paco Underhill (while filming more than 60.000 people in different shopping environments), he concludes that women are way more impulsive when buying things. Strangely enough, in the digital life, things are just the other way around. Men are much more impulsive when buying something online. Men are less critical. Offline they are focussed on buying something very specific, and if they are not able to find it; men don't even ask. In case of buying clothes again men are less critical. Women buy a product and bring it back later, or wait. It is a matter of interest Paco Underhill says; women are less critical in electronic- and computer stores. They buy something and get out fast after, men are 'browsing' every product. Underhill is not very fond about the virtual shopping experience: "Often fonts are too small and offline service is not really well. Virtual shopping is ideal if you would like to order something specific, But if you want to explore and discover, the web is unsuitable." [The research is partially published in the weekly economical magazine FEM Business (FEM = female). The research of Underhill is published in full in the book "Why we buy: The Science of Shopping" - 2004]. I disagree with him on his opinion on virtual shopping, and I do not see any fundamental argument for his statements. Maybe he is afraid of changing his research field.

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A little less critical approach to virtual shopping environments and experiences is published in the book 'Cybershops', by BIS Publishers in 2000. In the book, in the form of a strange collection of outdated screendumps of websites that are mostly already offline, a few interesting projects are mentioned. Which are directly related to the social aspects of the shopping experience, social trust and using social recommendation systems. The authors Claudia Gerdes and Jutta Nachtwey are not scientists or sociologists, but Gerdes and Nachtwey are co-editors of Page: "the leading magazine in Germany for graphic design". They had till recently an active community site (www.cybershoppers.de - domain for sale) for commenting the content of the book or suggesting other issues regarding the design of virtual shopping environments. The book is described as "a vital and even the first visual study to virtual shopping windows, prepare to be dazzled". That is a bit excessive. But there are few things mentioned in the preface of the book, which confirm the problems addressed in this essay regarding the social recommendation and trust aspects when it comes to shopping environments on the internet. Gerdes and Nachtwey think the online shopping environment can compete with the analog shopping experience. As they describe in their introduction, shopping is "much more than just buying something". I agree with them, as I described (from my own experiences) it is a complete and complex built-up experience. All your senses are involved within the experience process. In the article ['Peculiarities of Cyberspace'] of dr. Albert Benschop, where I referred to before, the lack of using all your senses is a big issue in the virtual shopping experience. You only use your visual capabilities to be seduced to buy something. But even your visual senses, are not even pleased very often.

Most of the internet shops are databases and simple ordering forms with a lot of security warnings about safety issues regarding online payments. So why buying online anyway, just like Underhill [regarding comparison virtual and real life shopping] says: "virtual shopping is only ideal if you search for something specific". I would like to complete that by addressing that you miss the tactile experience, the smell of the product of the shopping environment, other products within the same shop (you see only one product at the same time), the atmosphere is cold. But more and more, owners of virtual stores understand the demands of their customers: a shopping environment with the same environmental qualities and treatment what you receive when you are shopping offline is needed. The publishers of the 'Cybershop'-book say they found a few examples of how the sociable aspects can be implemented as well. And they are right about some of them. Think of the issue of social

shopping. In real life, that is an easy thing. You take someone with you, while shopping. In the digital world, it is a bit more complicated. You can sit with your friends behind a computer, with a cup of tea, and shop for clothes or whatever else. That is an option. But there is more, according to the two German writers of the book. They found out that functionality within these shopping environments is not everything. The customers want more than that. The word they present in their publication is 'design'. Without making that ridiculous, but to be able to attract and keep attracting customers you need within a digital store (more than in an analog one) a sustainable and effective design. And of course a surprising concept, without completely reinventing the web-conventions and create an impossible or inaccessible shopping environment. It is much more about "the identity and the 'branding' of the firm exposed by the cybershop", according to the German writers. Very logical: you will not walk into a store you hate, you will try to find another one. Customers apply the same offline rules to the online stores, nowadays since they have much more choice in shopping locations. People want quality instead of quantity. In order to make an online shop a more pleasant and interactive place to stay, to make it less 'cold' [referring to definition by Rheingold, see next few paragraphs, between the square brackets], new features like virtual sales consultants could be added to online shops. That is anyway what the writers of the book 'Cybershops' are very fond of.

They predicted in 2000 that almost every shop would have virtual shopping consultants in the nearby future. Strangely enough that personalization did not happen on the level Gerdes and Nachtwey predicted. And then it becomes interesting. In the same article they refer to a website (www.fabric8.com) where a virtual shopping consultant will help you while personalizing, ordering and buying your product. It, sorry he or she, will guide you through that regularly so 'impersonal' process. The sales consultant answers your questions, but these are still computed artificial things. Graphically based, but nowadays you see more or less the same things, without the inconvenient interface. You feel some kind of faked social interaction with the machine. Though it is still a 'person' created by the store itself, that will only provide you positive commercial information. Not subjective opinions about their products, so you can not trust this 'person'. Another thing mentioned by the writers, which is much more revolutionary, surprising and personal is the possibility to be served by real people online. It is a nice shopping experience offered to the visitors of the French-website of the Paris department store Printemps (www.printemps.fe) developed by Business Lab. The function on this website is probably offline as well. The systems works like this: if you are visiting their website, you are able to ask for assistance of 'Les Webcamers'.

That are people who are rollorblading through the real, physical store on the 'Rue Haussmann', which can be visited in Paris as well. They have a mini-camera and a laptop with them as well and stay in contact with the visiting customer as well. They can offer you personal and individual clothing or product advice, and looking for the real products in the store. You can communicate with the person by chatting through a module on the website (not a real 'speaking'-module though). The Webcammers work like that since the year 1999. Is this the future? No, probably not; but it is a revolutionary concept but way too expensive when concentrating all the shops efforts on the web. The social aspect is valuable and useful, but it can be done in another more effective way. Like for instance the way the Dutch website 'MuziekWeb' (www.muziekweb.nl, online music lending service) provides the user feedback. This site is not mentioned in the book, and the function I refer to is relatively new. It is an artificial function which provides the visitor or future consumer a social music advice, based upon the lending behavior of the clients of MuziekWeb. The software makes an analyses by using the information provided by the visitor and compare it with the data in the database. There is though a total lack of a supporting interface, but the information that is provided is valuable and useful. It is a strange mixture of subjective information (the taste of people) analyzed by a system based on objective factors (instructions). The influence of the visitor (customer) on the system is very limited to adding some artist names and pulling a bar in order to receive a more 'popular' or a more 'exiting' advice. A perfect example of artificial intelligence with a social side.

“I walk into the music store again. This time I try not to be distracted by the silence and the static dead environment. I am here with a mission, I want to buy something. After opening the store doors I am confused. It is not like a ‘normal’ music store, it seems less organized. I do not see anywhere in the shop someone that could be a musicexpert. Someone to ask a very specific question to, that cannot be answered by someone ‘regular’. There is no employee, no real specialized knowledge around. I decide to explore the music store on my own. Shopping like this, is not really sociable, but I do not have a choice in the middle of the night. I am walking towards the shelves where the cd-albums are exposed. Within the cold atmosphere I am searching for something that would be, or would sound not complicated, and happy. Something simple, something old. Going through the cds in the rack, I pass an old single of Curtis Mayfield; ‘Move on up’. An artist way before ‘my time’. Nearby the album of Mayfield, I can only find some strange music. I do not see the relation at all. The label on the shelf says: ‘people who bought the single of Curtis Mayfield, also bought the album Ghost from Michael Jackson.’ So what, is that useful to know? That is commercial information, that could be in some cases be related to the personal taste of somebody. But it is not a certain pattern, it is not something like ‘similar music’. I was not searching for the song of Mayfield, but for a song related in time and kind. I did hear it somewhere and I know there has got to be a relation between the music. I ‘know’ the name of the artist, when seeing it. But the relational commercial information, does not provide the answer.”
– Disappointed I exit the search field, by clicking on the ‘home’-button.

[Technologist and author Howard Rheingold defines the internet or refers to the internet as a 'warm' social place, or definitely not as a so called 'cold' social place (in an article on Virtual Communities). These definition is related to the social quality or social level of specific places on the internet or as the internet as a place 'to be' in general. What is meant by 'warm' is that "the internet has new cultural values within virtual communities. There are social values which make it possible and even encourage to make contact with relatively strange people over the internet." Still you are very limited in the social interaction, for example you do not 'see' each other in normal communication over the internet. You do not hear the other one, or you do not 'see' or feel the product you intend to buy. The feeling of being alone in an internet shop, although sometimes there are indicators which tell you that there are still other 'hyperpersonalities' on the site, is is still an issue which cannot be solved by making a design more interactive. It is still 'cold' and empty, although there are some alternatives in interaction with the computer (website, cybershop) that gives the user a feeling of a 'being part of something' or 'taking part in something'; because you are able to communicate 'live' with those 'hyperpersonalities'. - 1993 The Virtual Community by Howard Rheingold, as is referred to by Albert Benschop in his text 'Peculiarities of cyberspace: virtual community'; published online on the website of the University of Amsterdam of Social & Behavioral Sciences / Media Studies in 2004.]

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The interesting issue regarding comparing shopping on- and offline is the (lack of a) social aspect and of course the sociable level of online shopping. As I referred to before, the internet is a 'place' where there are many factors that distract the human mind [Albert Benschop, Paco Underhill]. But while internetting we are not only distracted, but also influenced. And that is not always a bad thing, if we are able to use our common sense. We want to be influenced when we need someone else's opinion. Our behavior is influenced by others (we trust) in a social frame of reference. We do not have that when we are online. You do not shop with a friend on the net. You are 'on your own'. The way they are influenced when buying a product, differs as well. More and more people find their 'replacement' social frame of reference online. They use online resources which they can ask for something or the can consult on a specific issue. An interesting research- and graduation project is done by Kristine de Valck. Her project is about "Virtual Communities of Consumption: Networks of Consumer Knowledge and Companionship". De Valck graduated on this

research project in April this year at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam, faculty of Retail- and Marketing Management. The outcome of De Valck's project is completely opposite to what Underhill says in his research to on- and offline shopping behavior: that the web is unsuitable for exploring and discovering products while shopping. Underhill did not motivate his statement that well, but I think he is referring to the lack of tactile and real life experiences within the virtual shopping process; while Kristine de Valck is more focussed on the relation of consumers and knowledge. More about the writings of De Valck, she concludes that online communities have a large influence on the shopping behavior of people on the web. So these communities are the ideal way of social shopping recommending. But what about the influencing issue? I referred to the social frame of reference. In the analog world, taking someone with you when shopping. Asking for advice, that is someone you trust. Although he or she provides non-verifiable and subjective data. But it works quite simple, if you ask for feedback in a specific case, to four people and three say 'yes' and one 'no', the chances are great that you choose for the 'yes'-option. So the amount of people that agree or disagree with something specific, does matter in order to make up your own mind. That works quite the same when it comes to social shopping recommendation systems. Although you don't know all these people and the information they provide is non-verifiable, still you think this mass-opinion is valuable.

The behavior as studied by De Valck is confirmed by the CBS, that is showing with hard data the behavior of the Dutch population on the internet [see a few paragraphs back]. I couldn't retrieve the complete essay, only an extended synopsis and the concluding report of her work provided by the Erasmus University; which gives in general a good view on the subject and the problems addressed in the writings of De Valck; when I'm quoting I use that source. In her research De Valck concludes (very surprising) that internet plays a very important role in the marketing strategies of companies, when launching, distributing or testing their products or services. She also signaled that the consumer uses the internet to do research to the background of products, in order to gain more and to weapon themselves with useful information [objectively supported by the CBS report]. There exist large virtual communities, which you can "consult about specific products, services and companies", according to the synopsis of the text by De Valck. The social aspect of having contact with other people plays a central role within this virtual version of the frame of reference. The emphasis of her writings lays on the research to the effects of these large "networks of consumption-knowledge and companionship". She also underlines the effects and pleasantness of being a (more or less) anonymous 'hyperpersonality' in a virtual space, just like Alber Ben-

schop does. They both underline the positive effects of it and see that the internet is a perfect place to make easy connections with each other, but the emphasis within the research of dr. Benschop is more psychological and sociologically. Instead of the research done by De Valck, which is more related to the effects in a commercial way for the retail market. Nevertheless, the background is the same: being someone in a virtual social environment; what refers to the definition of the internet as a 'warm' place in regarding the social activeness of the internet - said by Howard Rheingold. As I wrote before and what applies to what sociologists like dr. Benschop say: in our normal daily life we are depending within all kinds of decision-making situations -also within our consumer behavior- on a social frame of reference. De Valck defines this term differently: "traditional reference-groups". Groups like family, friends, relatives; all people we know very well. De Valck sees that you as an individual have a shared background with these people, just from the start. She describes it as "you live in that environment, you cannot choose these traditional reference-groups. The difference with the new virtual communities in comparison with the traditional reference-groups is the fact that you can choose to connect with them. It's a free choice". Immediately after she writes that it could be possible that the specific 'freedom of choice' the reason is why these virtual communities sometimes have much more influence on the person involved in comparison with the traditional groups of reference. Of course this influence is often limited to a specific area of interest, it is not like you said goodbye to all your analog friends. Although there are of course excessive examples of being purely a 'hyperpersonality', as I referred to before.

The research of De Valck concentrates on the commercial aspects of the forming of these kinds of social recommendation communities and she tries to provide "systematic insights" for the companies on how to 'understand' these consumer-tools. What can be concluded from real life experiences is that these social reference groups, or recommendation 'systems', are very small in the core. There is a lot of 'noise' [the noise is created by those who need a audience and cannot find one in real life, therefore the internet is a perfect place, you are accepted as you are as a 'hypertextualpersonality' - dr. Albert Benschop freely refers to American novelist and satirist -according to Wikipedia encyclopedia- Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. who formulated it as "We are what we pretend to be (so we must be careful what we pretend to be...)"] created around the central figures within these communities. Those central figures are the active ones and opinion-makers, something De Valck concludes as well. It works just like the way the social frame of reference functions in the analog world; the one with the loudest voice is best heard. In her paper De Valck has three main issues to

research. The most relevant in relation to this essay is the “influence effects of virtual communities on the consumption decision-making process”. In general De Valcks concludes that the influence of a social based structure as a community (this works stronger when you are an active member of the community), is larger on the process of deciding. To switch back to our analog environment: if you are heavily involved within the society, you get influenced the most; but the individual can decide what to do with that ‘information’. When excluded from society, the less influence this social environment has on the behavior. The online influence of social structures on online shopping behavior, is most effective when the consumer is searching and looking for information and is sensitive for the opinion of others. [The results of the research of De Valck are created by all kinds of practical research within a specific community, and are supported by theoretical and field-studies to online cultures (ethnographic - qualitative research focussed on a small social group / a community - Wikipedia definition)]. And that strokes with personal experiences looking for a specific product via the internet. You compare your own knowledge, with that what you have gained on the internet. The level of knowledge within a specific community is also relevant; when deciding to use the subjective information or not. If you are social related to the recommendation reference group, the value you attach to the general opinion within a community becomes higher.

When it comes to more complex issues, the influence of social shopping recommendation systems are more limited, according to what De Valck founds out. Users do not have that much trust in the system apparently, important issues are discussed with their old reference groups with whom they have a more intimate relation with. Interesting to see is that the choice trend is though ‘informational’ instead of ‘relational’. What I mean by that is the traditional model of gaining and passing through of information through relation (from father to son, et cetera), is really over. People choose to block out the social aspect, which can be refreshing when you would like to hear a ‘third’ opinion. De Valck concludes as well that the “interpersonal” (analog) and ‘hyperpersonal’ (digital) influence system work exactly the same: “when members have a stronger social relation with a community and when they visit a community more often, the influence of the community on the decision-making process will raise.” De Valck concludes as well that within complex issues, the social relation and the strength of that relation with the virtual community does not play a vital role. We will ‘fall back’ on our existing “interpersonal” relations in our real social lives. What Kristine de Valck concludes as well: “that the influence of a social community is very related to the amount of information that is gained from or provided by the com-

munity itself.” Problem within this virtual system is (again) the source ‘pollution’. Behind the ‘hyperpersonality’ someone with commercial meanings can easily hide. By influencing the content of the community, he or she can create within this social environment a commercial flow of disinformation. For the user of the community or for the members it’s hard to filter these aspects out, because you just don’t really ‘know’ this person, you have only contact with their ‘hyperpersonality’. From all these ‘distant’ (I don’t want to say ‘superficial’) and ‘fast’ social recommending contacts, easily made over the internet from behind your ‘hyperpersonality’ (according to sociologist Albert Benschop), to a system were the closeness of the social relation is the bases of the quality of the recommendation. The real social shopping recommendation system, the ultimate and most reliable one as well. Strangely enough one of the newest ways of recommend products, is a purely social relational one. It can only be used by people who are socially involved within the society; the hear-say principle. But now with a commercial organization behind it! Of course this way of recommending products started of in the United States and since the end of this year, it is for the first time practiced in the Netherlands, as the first country in Europe [according to the RTL news broadcasting agency, which announced this news on monday december the fifth with the sentence “Don’t trust your friends...”].

The buzzing-principle works quite simple: much like the Tupper-ware model [direct-marketing at home, with friends and family; you become a saleswomen yourself -freely based on the text on the Tupperware website]. Someone within a social group applies at a Buzzing-agency. That agency will send the applied person once within a specific period a product, like a movie, a dvd or some kind of electronic device. The applied person is allowed to keep the product, but he or she has to ‘advertise’ the product within their social group, to seduce them (the trusted) to buy the product as well. Or to visit the movie also, et cetera. The principle is that the system should work better, because it is a friend telling you that you should buy or try a specific product. Not someone you do not know. You trust the person, you have a certain social relationship with that person, you would never believe that he or she would try to sell you something, or tell you nonsense. Within this very system, it is important that the Buzzing-person does not reveal his or hers secret of being a Buzzer, otherwise the system fails presumably and the person can be excluded from or ignored by the social group. The Buzzer has to report to the Buzzing-agency (very extended) about the way of Buzzing their products and what the reactions of the ‘Buzzed’ people were. The choice for a working method is completely free, as a Buzzer you are allowed to work with e-mail to Buzz your friends and relatives, but you can

also spam them by telling them about a movie or product in real life. This system of Buzzing blocks out an important and critical issue within standard anonymous social shopping recommendation systems: source validation and trust. You know him or her, so you believe what he or she says. There is no need for a rating system for the trust-level of the recommending source. The next phase of this Buzzer-principle could be even more interesting and frightening. Why not use small cameras to record the Buzz-actions and register the reactions of the 'victims' and use these small clips as advertisements? The Buzz-principle could be a very effective recommendation system, the social-based systems works with 500 Buzz-sources with an effective-range of 10.000 people that can be 'infected'. Is this the future of social recommendation systems, trust or abuse each other?

“I am determined to search for the song again, or the artist I don’t remember. If it is somewhere and I do know the contemporaries of the artist, there must be a way to track the other songs and artists. The musical elements of the song were so simple. The ‘subject’ is simple as well. All easy to define and to abstract and very computable. Which can help showing the relations between music. There is no tool that provided me information about the music. Since very recent their is a new option to add a review to a specific song or an album. That is the first step to a more complete system. But it is hard to get an advice from the iTunes Music Store. It is not able to calculate and predict a taste ‘pattern’, of what I would, could or should like. A pattern generator based upon all kinds of variables, like the song titles, the subjects. A few simple elements, a few different subjects to sing about, for instance: ‘love’, ‘life’, ‘live’, ‘guy’, ‘girl’, et cetera. Plus the person evolved, for example: ‘my’, ‘her’, ‘he’, ‘his’, ‘her’, ‘hers’, et cetera. So you get the titles of the songs ‘my girl’, ‘your guy’; two words, a song, one violin. A drummer, a guitar and a pianist. So simple, almost randomly computable, though hard to find. Okay, lets take a look at the reviews then, maybe that says something about taste?”

– I click on the Safari-icon find my way to www.muziekweb.nl

[During the course graphic- and information design at the Willem de Kooning Academy in Rotterdam, we had a case study during the classes of 'digital media' on the Muziekweb website. We had a meeting with the board of directors of MuziekWeb and were invited to make some proposals for new search methods to music. One of the major outcomes was a system which could produce for every specific artist a (it was not that worked out yet, that it could work on the level of a song) taste-related music advice. So if you like for instance Bob Dylan, you would probably like Van Morrison as well. It was manually produced, and not connected yet to the 'lending' behavior of the people at that time. The system worked visual, clicking and unfolding a music map step after step. Nowadays Muziekweb has another taste-related search and recommendation method. Far more interesting than the system of iTunes Music Store, with their commercial related system. Within the Musicadvice module of the Muziekwebsite, you can fill in the names of artists. After filling in you are able to choose the 'kind of advice'. The system will make an analyses based upon the lending behavior of their clients. So the advice is an automatically generated process of a social behavior like asking around within your social frame of reference about a specific product. And on the other hand it is the ideal, 'smart' digital sales consultant.]

/conclusion

With this essay I was not heading for a mind-blowing conclusion, so that is not something you will read here.

What I can conclude in general that most of the virtual social based recommendation systems can not be trusted fully. Social trust is all about source reliability. With the latest 'Buzzing'-trend, it becomes even worse. There is always the aspect of (commercial) source pollution involved. The newest techniques from commercial businesses to infiltrate your group of friends and relatives makes it even harder to determine the source reliability. Although, it should be very strange to think that everything what is said within your traditional social frame of reference is suspicious information now as well. One thing is for certain; use your common sense (it is a cliché, therefore true) and do not use only one information resource. Many (design) solutions are provided to 'imitate' the social aspects of real life shopping experience, but none of them are succeeding completely. Of course this depends on the services you request for, a digital or a physical one. Funny though is that the latest inventions on social shopping recommendation 'systems' is again an analog one, using the stability of the traditional frame of reference like family, friends and relatives. Instead of using the internet as a main system for recommending products. Maybe the old, refined and very developed way of social interaction is still the best, when comparing it with the more limited non-physical way of communication over the internet. Use the internet as a resource tool to gain the necessary information, not as a world to live in as a fake replacement for the physical life on earth. How much you will be influenced by information gained through the internet, depends on how you are functioning socially. So the digital and your analog life will constantly be compared with each other. Just because the normality of your social life, will be determined in the analog world and not by the amount of contacts you have while hiding behind your 'hyperpersonality'.

So the two 'lives' do influence each other in that sense. The human social factor, plays a vital role within the effect of the recommendation system formed by the social frame of reference. Whether this is digital or analog. The computer, or a website can help by offering all kinds of artificial sales consultants, but often that is not enough. Sharing information, means sharing trust. Do you trust artificial shopping consultants? Talking computers? Shopping assistants? Shopping communities with advertisements? Someone who uses the same camera you would like to buy?

A relative or friend who sells that same camera with discount at a local shop? Hopefully and probably you trust these, but with the knowledge that the information provided by these systems is not (always completely) objective. Sharing the subjective knowledge is one. Connecting this information on the selling points is two.

How will the story continue regarding social trust in shopping recommendation systems, in the future? Where to from here? Has it a future? Can it be narrowed down to one single scenario? Is it like we have to rate the recommendation resources, what actually means that the raters are becoming rated as well? Source reliability tests and certificates? Stars, stripes, points, coins, things, dots, squares filled or not, and circles. It is like tagging everything with labels, stickers, classifications and whatever more can be done. Do we have to suspect our friends and relatives. Will the analog and the digital world merge? No for all those things! Nothing happens. All the parties involved getting smarter, consumers and companies. I do not see some significant changes at hand in the nearby or far future. Do I have a solution that covers all the problems regarding the trust of sources and the source reliability? No, neither. The only thing I can think of, which could be useful for further research is a thing like 'central neutral database' in relation to shopping recommendation systems. Ready to take a glance of the future... Visiting the Amazon website, the iTunes Music Store, or whatever website or online store, you have the option to 'add' or to 'read' the reviews of a specific product. In most cases, there is nothing filled in, or the system of classification is limited down to giving points or stars. "Okay, that is a five star-book you have there". The same with hotels "I slept in a three-stars hotel, expensive...". Besides the fact that this limited way of rating products does not say anything about the 'substance' of the product. (And with the stars-rating; it is like money in 'doubtful' countries, the value of a star can change in a blink of an eye). About the 'central neutral database', you could label it as a total new concept, but I think it is more or less a merging project. Connecting all kinds of commercial websites, to a central reference point where subjective information can be obtained by consumers. That sounds like a institutionalized form, but it could provide a connection with the shopping reviewing systems for sharing information socially and recommend consumers when looking for a frame of reference. So you will never get the message "be the first to write a review of this song". But that is just some philosophy for the future... a lot of questions stay unanswered.

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trust

social shopping &
recommendation
systems

the relevance of subjective
and non-verifiable
information

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