Adding Bricks to Clicks and Clicks to Bricks: Going the Omnichannel Way

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Abstract

In a world that is becoming more globalised, businesses are looking for innovative methods to improve the customer experience. Customers use all of the retail channels available to them simultaneously, reject some, or adopt new ones (such as, making use of smartphone in an offline outlet). Retailers have to offer a consistent as well as seamless experience throughout the buying journey of consumers to compete in the present business environment. Despite increase in adoption of omni-channel retailing in India, still ambiguity prevails regarding omnichannel. The basic aim of this research is to understand the omni-channel nature using research articles. With the help of a theoretical framework, this paper explains this emerging dimension of retailing. We conducted an examination of the articles using content analysis to organize the definitions and grasp the primary attributes of omni-channel retailing, aiming to enhance our comprehension of the term. With the help of this analysis, we have identified three methods for delineating omni-channel retailing: a seamless buying experience, channel integration and a fusion of both. Having a thorough awareness of this concept will help researchers, practitioners and academicians in further enquiry.

Keywords: *Omnichannel, Retailing, Business, Technology*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape, consumers engage with a growing array of touchpoints while navigating the processes of searching, purchasing, and seeking support. For instance, they may employ their smartphones while being physically present in a retail outlet to promptly check availability and pricing, conducting comparisons across various retailers. Subsequently, they effortlessly transition between diverse retail channels, whether online or offline, within the realm of the same retailer or a competitor. Retail practitioners often categorize these individuals as "omnichannel" shoppers. This has arisen because of continuous technological advancements, quick alterations in customers' lifestyles and how they interact with businesses. By establishing a shop online and ship from the physical store alternative for consumers, one of the first to use omnichannel retailing was the grocery sector. (Boyer and Hult, 2006).

Sales for e-stores have continued to rise quickly, while foot fall in many offline establishments has remained stable or has decreased (Sorescu et al., 2011). Prior to the pandemic, omnichannel was considered as a differentiator for businesses. However, the pandemic drastically enhanced its importance (Verhoef, 2021). Different restrictions implemented at the start of the pandemic, such as lockdown periods, had a major effect on retailers and customers (Farrell et al., 2020). Businesses had been pushed to shut down their brick-and-mortar locations and immediately begin offering delivery services so as to go on operating in the difficult circumstances (Wang et al., 2020). Most of the customers were required to adjust their practices and behaviours due to lack of choice. This necessitated the utilisation of online channels and touchpoints. Some consumers got to try new services for first time. This behaviour sustained post the pandemic (Arora et al., 2020).

The omnichannel business model is designed for enhancing the perceived shopping value for consumers. This model significantly influences the shopping experience, transforming it into a distinctive, personalized process that promotes acquisition. Customers have the flexibility to utilize any of the integrated distribution and communication channels throughout the entire purchasing journey. The realms of online and offline seamlessly converge, creating an ultimate and unified experience. Physical store visits are enriched through the integration of mobile technologies as well as digital information kiosks, whereas online channels advantage from options like in-store order pickup as well as direct interaction with products. (Abrudan, I.N et al., 2020).

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According to Kourouthanassis, P.E., et al. (2007), the incorporation of technologies in the retail outlet has a positive effect on the overall buying experience within brick-and-mortar stores.

Objective of the Study

Omnichannel is a broad concept and has been described in myriad ways (Saghiri et al. 2017). Therefore, different perspectives are expressed in various researches to understand it. The basic aim of this particular research is to understand the nature of omni-channel using research papers. Having a thorough awareness of this concept will help researchers, practitioners and academicians in further enquiry.

METHOD

To achieve the research objective, articles relevant to omnichannel theme were searched on main databases such as Emerald, EBSCO Open Access Journals, Science Direct (Elsevier), Research Gate, Springer Link, SAGE and Taylor & Francis. Keywords namely 'omni-channel', 'omnichannel' or 'omni retailing' have been used in the search.

An analysis of the articles was conducted content analysis, as outlined by Kolbe and Burnett in 1991 for organizing the definitions and capturing the key features of omnichannel retailing, thereby increasing our comprehension of the term.

Omni-channel Definitions

Following table shows some of the definitions of omnichannel.

Table 1 Omnichannel Definitions and Descriptions

Burke (2002)	Omnichannel is the integration of channels such that consumers are allowed to switch transparently among them such as, browse online and buy in physical outlet, buy online and pickup in the physical outlet.
Rigby (2011)	The omnichannel experience refers to an integrated sales approach which combines the advantages of brick-and-mortar stores with the information filled experience of online purchasing.
Brynjolfsson (2013)	In omni-channel retail, the differences between offline as well as online dissappear, converting the world into a showroom sans walls.
Levy et al. (2013)	Omnichannel retailing is a synchronized multichannel offering which ensures a seamless experience on using all buying channels of the retailer.
Rosenblum & Kilcourse (2013)	In omni-channel, customers have flexibility to change seamlessly among mobile devices, online and offline stores, all within a single transaction procedure.
Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson (2014)	Omnichannel blurs the difference between online and offline channels and is a new approach of channel integration. In multichannel retailing, there is distinctiveness between offline and online store. In contrast, in omni-channel, consumers have the freedom to smoothly transition between online, mobile devices and brick-and-mortar stores, in a single transaction process.
Beck & Rygl (2015)	Omnichannel retailing entails the synergistic management of various channels of retailing, aiming to provide best possible consumer experience across all channels.
Verhoef et al. (2015)	Omnichannel is the bridge that connects showrooming and webrooming. Shoppers commonly engage in dual searches, exploring information in physical stores while simultaneously use their smartphones to gather additional details regarding offers and discover better prices. Conversely, a reverse behaviour, called webrooming, is also common, where buyers first seek information on the web and then make their purchases in the brick and mortar stores.
Ishfaq et al. (2016)	Omnichannel aims at offering a seamless experience across all shopping channels provided by the retailer. Omnichannel retailing needs businesses to align their physical i.e., store-based as well as virtual channels i.e., online and mobile by coordinating order management as well as logistics processes.
Sopadijieva et al. (2017)	Omnichannel customers actively utilize various touchpoints offered by the retailer, employing a variety of combinations as well as locations. They make use of mobile phone apps to compare prices and download coupons. Also, they enthusiastically engage with digital tools present in the store such as interactive catalogues, tablets or

	price-checkers. Their shopping behaviours include online purchases with in-store pickups or buying items in-store and opting for shipment to their preferred location.
Branwell Moffat (2017)	It is stated that omni-channel combines various touchpoints such that the experience of the consumers is unified as well as consistent.
Larke et al. (2018)	Omnichannel retailing aims to offer higher customer value through a seamless experience of the brand.
Galipoglu et al. (2018)	omnichannel capabilities make the boundaries between physical stores and online businesses meaningless thereby providing a seamless buying experience.
Taylor et al. (2019)	The latest variant of multichannel retailing is omnichannel retailing which involves integration of both channels namely, online and offline to offer a seamless customer interface
Hossain et al. (2020)	In an omnichannel context, every touchpoint that the business has, are integrated and function flawlessly. In order to offer a consistent experience across all channels, price information, promotion offers, product details, delivery data, customer transaction details, and also the company logo are updated at the same time.
Briedis et al. (2021)	Omni-channel entails using a variety of technologies and techniques which give consumers a consistent as well as customised experience through all the channels they choose to connect with the business organisation.
Asmare & Zewdie (2022)	Omnichannel is a latest development in retailing and it involves providing a comprehensive experience by unifying all consumer touch points.

Omnichannel retail signifies the utmost level of integration across every channel. In this, customers engage with channels concurrently, in a parallel and continuous manner, with the flexibility to transition among them at any point in the buying process based on their individual choices, as outlined by Zentes et al. in 2017.

This model has been formulated keeping in view the shifts in expectations of consumers. Given their ability to perform online browsing at any time using multiple devices, consumers anticipate the flexibility to seamlessly as well as simultaneously utilize an increasing array of offline, online, mobile channels as well as touchpoints during their shopping experiences, as noted by Verhoef et al. in 2015 and Cummins et al. in 2016. Additionally, consumers seek prompt information access, a personalized buying experience, and quick delivery, as highlighted in DHL Trend Research in 2015.

Numerous definitions of omnichannel can be found in business reports as well as academic papers, contributing to differences in its understanding. Discrepancies persist, and there is a lack of consensus on whether an agreement has been reached regarding its meaning. Huré et al. (2017) note that, despite some academic consensus on the definition of omnichannel, its characteristics remain vague.

Employing content analysis (Kolbe and Burnett 1991), we examined articles for structuring definitions, capturing key features of omnichannel retailing for a comprehensive understanding of the terminology. Thereafter, two principal features of this concept were identified. With the help of this analysis, we recognize three methods for defining omni-channel retailing namely integrated selling channels, a seamless buying experience, as well as a synthesis of both.

Integrated Selling Channels

Rigby (2011) firstly introduced 'omnichannel retailing' in academics. He characterized it as 'an integrated sales experience which combines the benefits of offline stores along with the information rich experience of online buying.' His definition was afterwards adopted by many scholars like Frazer and Stiehler (2014), Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson (2014), Yumurtaci et al. (2017) and Picot-Coupey et al. (2016).

As per Bieberstein (2015), omnichannel retailing occurs when a retailer's channels of distribution as well as social media contact points are interconnected in a synergetic manner. Ailawadi & Farris (2017) echo this notion, asserting that omni-channel involves the utilization of various channels of distribution as well as communication for integrating activities within as well as across these channels for addressing the buying needs of customers in a better manner.

Similarly, Sealey (2014) defines omnichannel as the amalgamation of all offline as well as digital channels for crafting a unified and innovative customer experience.

Eriksson et al. (2017) defined omni-channel as a scenario where physical as well as online channels are seamlessly integrated thereby unifying all sales channels, inventories, as well as order fulfilment.

 Zentes et al. (2017) similarly emphasize that omnichannel retailing entails complete integration of channels, allowing consumers to engage with all channels of retailing simultaneously. This is achieved through a holistic omni-channel system where every touchpoint of each retail channel is ideally accessible.

Carroll & Guzmán (2013) share a like perspective, describing omnichannel as a synchronized model of operations where all channels of the company are aligned, presenting a unified front for the consumer, and adhering to a consistent way of doing business. These definitions collectively underscore the importance of integrating communication as well as distribution channels within omnichannel retail strategy. Moreover, there is consensus among these definitions that the ultimate aim of such a strategy is to deliver excellent customer service.

Seamless Purchasing Experience

Certain authors emphasize the seamless experience for customers, placing less emphasis on channel integration as the primary aspect of an omni-channel strategy. Kozlenkova et al. (2015), for instance, describe omnichannel as delivering a 'seamless retail experience across all end-user channels,' thereby making merchandise accessible through various channel formats. Although integration is not excluded, it is given less prominence in this perspective. The underlying idea conveyed by this definition aligns with the concept that an omnichannel system brings high visibility, availability of information as well as consistency across various channels, as noted by Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson (2014) and Saghiri et al. (2017).

Building on the emphasis of offering a seamless experience to consumers, Gonzales-Lafaysse and Lapassouse-Madrid (2016) define omnichannel retail as 'interaction with customers using different channels to offer a single seamless omnichannel experience.' Frazer & Stiehler (2014), Kamel & Kay (2011), and Kireyev et al. (2014) all argue that a genuine omnichannel experience is rooted in the willingness to enable customers in purchasing goods whenever, whenever, and however they want. Kireyev et al. (2014) specifically highlight the importance of a similar or identical experience across different channels. Additionally, Bell et al. (2015) express omnichannel as granting customers the liberty to fulfill their order by using the channel which suits them the most. These definitions collectively underscore the customer centric focus of omnichannel strategy.

A Combination of the Two

Some authors incorporate both facets in their definitions. i.e., channel integration and seamless shopping experience. The definition of omnichannel that is most frequently cited comes from Brynjolfsson et al. (2013), stating that as the retail industry progresses towards a seamless omni-channel retail experience, the differences between offline as well as online realms would dissolve, transforming the world to a showroom sans walls.

 Picot-Coupey et al. (2016) characterize omnichannel as "a strategy which enables customers to have a seamless experience within a brand ecosystem by managing channels as interwoven touchpoints." This aligns with the concept of a 'unified cross-channel shopping experience' as expressed by Wisner & Wisner (2014) and Pelet & Lecat (2014) which denotes the 'ability to have a consistent experience across formats, brands as well as devices which is entirely customized and optimized'. Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson (2014) further state that businesses must focus on enhancing the overall brand experience instead of a specific channel. Similarly, Bernon et al. (2016) describe omnichannel in a like manner, defining it as 'a seamless approach to retailing that provides a uniform and single shopping experience across all kinds of retail formats.'

Verhoef et al. (2015) emphasize that in omnichannel retailing, various channels as well as touchpoints are utilized continuously, interchangeably, as well as concurrently by businesses and consumers to enhance the retail experience. "Synergetic management of the many available channels as well as customer touchpoints, in a manner that the consumer experience and the performance over channels are optimised," is how the authors

define omni-channel management. This definition conveys the notion that different channels interact with one another and could be used concurrently to improve the overall customer experience.

Cummins et al. (2016) build upon the definition given by Verhoef et al. (2015), incorporating the vision of Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson (2014) to underscore the ultimate of integrating all retail channels to offer customers a consistent brand experience. The revised definition is the 'synergetic integration of consumer touchpoints as well as communication opportunities with the objective of creating a unified brand experience irrespective of platform, channel or stage in the process of selling.' This definition highlights the collaborative merging of touchpoints as well as communication avenues for establishing a cohesive brand experience irrespective of the specific platform, channel or point in the selling procedure.

Levy et al. (2013) introduced omnichannel retailing as a synchronized multichannel offering which ensures a seamless experience on utilizing all buying channels of the retailer. Beck and Rygl (2015) view omnichannel as a comprehensive selling strategy which encompasses all available channels and enables customers to fully interact with each channel. From the retailer's perspective, channel integration can be either partial or complete, leading to the categorization of the omnichannel strategy into two kinds based on the integration level between channels.

Juaneda-Ayensa et al. (2016) characterize the omnichannel strategy as 'a type of retailing that breaks down barriers between channels by allowing real interaction and enabling consumers to purchase across channels at anytime and anywhere thus giving customers a distinct, comprehensive, as well as seamless buying experience that eliminates channel boundaries' Importantly, Juaneda-Ayensa et al. (2016) align with the fully integrated channels category defined by Beck & Rygl (2015), considering omnichannel specifically as the retailer's fully integrated channels.

Chopra (2016) conceptualizes omnichannel retailing as a mutually beneficial strategy taken by clients to enhance their emotions and experience while fulfilling needs as well as expectations, irrespective of the channel of distribution opted. In a review of literature, Mosquera et al. (2017) constructed an integrative framework which encapsulates the primary features of omnichannel, including: (1) the utilization of multiple channels; (2) blurred barriers between channels with data integration (3) the ultimate objective of delivering customers a comprehensive buying experience.

CONCLUSION

This paper identifies three main perspectives towards the definition of omnichannel i.e., the consumer perspective, the retailer perspective as well as both.

The key characteristics of an omnichannel strategy include integrating all channels including touchpoints, ensuring a seamless consumer experience with the brand instead of specific channels. Consistency is crucial, providing customers with identical services in both physical stores and online or mobile platforms. Regardless of the distribution channel, customers should have information access like order history, ongoing order progress, and loyalty points. Price uniformity across various distribution channels is essential, and customers should have the flexibility to select payment modes and delivery locations, whether at home or in-store.

The future of retail industry lies in the omnichannel strategy. Having a thorough awareness of this concept will help retailers in enriching consumers' experience. It will help them to combat the growing competition in the market. It will also facilitate researchers, practitioners and academicians in further enquiry.

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