A Customer Perspective on Omnichannel Customer Journey and Channel Usage: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates customer behavior during the omnichannel customer journey. The study aims to increase the understanding of omnichannel service environments from a customer-centric point of view. The data was collected by interviewing 10 young adults (from 26 to 30 years old) who had bought a Finnish clothing brand (R-Collection) product via a digital or a physical channel. The research interviews dealt with the interviewees' experiences and channel behavior during their shopping journeys. Our results reflect the multidimensional nature of the omnichannel customer journey and give interesting insights into the usage of digital channels and technologies for clothing shopping. The main result of this study is a model of a customer journey in an omnichannel service environment that combines physical and digital service channels into a single entity. Thus, this research provides additional information on how different service channels and environments combine from a customer perspective.

Keywords

Omnichannel, multichannel, customer journey, online shopping, e-commerce, fashion retail, qualitative study
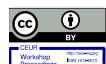
1. Introduction

Due to digitalization and emerging technologies, consumers use various channels and service providers for their purchases [1]. Investments in channel integration are reflected in operating profit growth [2]. Channel integration is also one of the critical factors distinguishing omnichannel from multichannel [3]. The importance of an omnichannel customer to the business is shown. For example, satisfied omnichannel customers generate significant revenue for companies [4].

Although omnichannel retailing has been studied especially in marketing for many years, and the first mentions of the subject can be found in the turn of the 2010s [5,6,7], there are still several research gaps concerning it. Overall, the concept is highly multidimensional, and there is quite a little research that would take a holistic view of the phenomenon. For example, the importance of researching the topic in information systems (IS) since omnichannel services are entirely dependent on technologies and techniques [8]. Previous research also generally focuses on corporate operations and objectives. It also defines an organizational perspective at large. As a result, the research conducted purely from a customer perspective shines in its absence, except for a few recent studies [e.g., 9].

The research question of this study is: *How are consumers' omnichannel customer journeys formed based on their experiences in the retail clothing shopping context?* This qualitative study investigates customer behavior during an omnichannel shopping journey and gives insight into digital consumer

behavior models and customer experience formation. The study aims to increase the understanding of omnichannel behavior that integrates digital and physical channel usage and various service providers into one seamless customer experience. Since studying customer experience is studying the customer journey [1], the omnichannel customer journey was chosen as the framework for this study. Hence, this study provides unique information on digital consumption habits and customer behavior in today's digitalized omnichannel service environments.

The research context was limited to clothing purchases in an omnichannel service environment. Fashion retail plays a massive role in e-commerce, and its share of online shopping is significant. In 2017, half of the Finnish consumers bought clothes and accessories online, which is expected to increase [10]. Official Statistics of Finland (OSF) has studied the development of e-commerce in Finland between 2013 and 2019, finding that clothing shopping is one of the most common and widespread forms of online shopping in Finland [11]. For these reasons, this study focuses on the fashion industry.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 defines the fundamental concepts of the study based on previous research. In Section 3, data collection and analysis are presented, and Section 4 presents the findings of the study. Finally, Section 5 outlines the contributions and managerial implications of the study and offers suggestions for future research. Also, the limitations of the study are discussed.

2. Literature Review

Retail channels have evolved from single to multichannel and further to omnichannel [e.g., 3,12,8]. The concepts differ in terms of channel integration and user-channel interaction [8]. Although the terms of omnichannel and multichannel integration are partly overlapping in the literature [13], it is important to distinguish those. Compared to single and multichannel, omnichannel shifts the focus from channels to the customer and interaction [14].

Instead of looking at different service channels as separate objects, omnichannel brands utilize the synergies between channels to expand their service offering [1,15]. Even though the customer-brand-contact occurs inside a channel, the customer experience is created by interacting with the brand [16]. The touchpoints connect the customer and the brand [17]. Thus, omnichannel is a service environment integrating all the company's digital and physical channels into one seamless customer experience [13]. Figure 1 below illustrates the brand-customer interaction in omnichannel service environments in more depth.
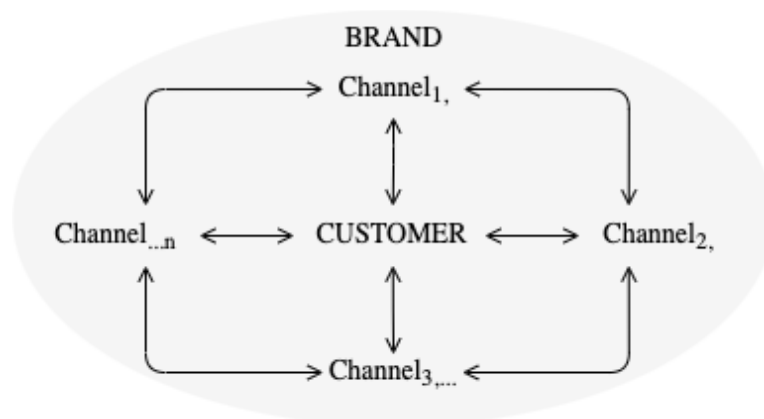
Figure 1: Customer-brand-interaction in omnichannel service environments

The customer journey model is widely used in design science to understand customer behavior [18]. At different customer journey stages, the customer contacts the company or the brand through various touchpoints, either directly or indirectly [19,18]. With omnichannel service, the customer can freely choose the time, place, and purchase method [20]. Although customers generally look for integrated

shopping experiences, their channel choice preferences vary [5]. The customer experience is built on the touchpoints between the customer and the service provider, and these touchpoints are illustrated through the customer journey model [13,20]. The omnichannel practice has been confirmed to improve customers' behavioral responses toward the brand, leading to better customer satisfaction [21]. Superiorly executed seamless customer experience can lead to intention of repurchase and customer influence behavior, such as sharing experience through social media [22].

Touchpoint, or a point of contact, is a stimulus that plays a specific role on a customer journey and transfers a message between the customer and the serv ice provider, brand, or other customers [14]. This encounter creates a customer experience [14]. Channel covers several different contact points [15]. The channel can be company-owned (e.g., web page), customer-owned (e.g., customer's Instagram feed), or third-party-owned (e.g., retailer channel). Customers use various touchpoints and channels simultaneously [24,25]. The fast and intuitive movement is emphasized within and between channels and devices [19]. Hence, the omnichannel customer journey involves unparalleled complexity, such as interaction choices [26].

Omnichannel is a multidimensional construct involving several concepts like a touchpoint or a point of contact, a channel, channel integration, seamless customer experience, and a customer journey. The characteristics of omnichannel are summarized in next Table 1.

Table 1
Omnichannel characteristics

Concept	Definition	Reference
Touchpoint	It is an individual contact between the customer and the brand during the customer journey. The touchpoint has a purpose that may be either brand or customer-driven.	[14,17]
Channel	The channel covers several different touchpoints and enables the interaction between the customer and the brand. Interaction can be either personal or non-personal.	[23,27]
Channel integration	The design and objectives of a channel and the level of coordination that seeks synergies for both business and users.	[2]
Seamless customer experience	Customer experience arises at all contact points during the customer journey regardless of where the touchpoint has been implemented.	[28]
Customer journey	A process or series of multiple touchpoints that a customer goes through to consume a product or a service.	[18]

3. Data Collection and Analysis

The omnichannel topic is still relatively new and scarcely studied from the customer's perspective [28], which calls for qualitative research to help to increase knowledge on the topic. Due to the multidimensionality of the omnichannel phenomenon, we chose phenomenography as our research strategy. Qualitative methods aim to understand social and cultural phenomena [29]. We mapped experiences on how young adults utilized channels as part of their purchasing processes related to a clothing brand.

The research focused on clothing to allow multiple touchpoints between a customer and the brand. Because of the wide-ranging omnichannel phenomenon, the interviews were limited to a single brand. R-Collection is a well-known Finnish clothing brand and an excellent example of an omnichannel brand. The company has several brick-and-mortar stores and digital sales channels, and it is active on social media. It also has other customer-brand touchpoints, including, for example, a loyalty program and collaborations. Selected retailers also sell R-Collection products. Young adults born in the 1990s were chosen because they typically utilize various digital channels for shopping and leisure. Further, they have experienced channel integration and different shopping trends on their own. Each interviewee had a network connection, various devices and applications, and the opportunity to visit the physical store at the time of purchase.

The data collection was carried out by interviewing ten voluntary young adults aged 26 to 30 (for details, see upcoming Table 2). The saturation determined the number of the participants [30]. A maximum time interval of four months was selected between the purchase of the product and the time of the study interview. This way, the interviewees could still remember and identify the channels they had used and their experiences concerning the channels. The interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The interviewees were conducted in Finnish and transcribed in English.

Table 2
Details of the participants of the study

	Age	Gender	Last purchase (time) from R-Collection	Last purchase (product) from R-Collection	Transaction channel (device)	Interview duration
P1	27	Female	2 weeks	Jacket, trousers	Brick-and-mortar store (Helsinki	45
P2	30	Male	1 week	Jacket	Online store in Instagram (smartphone)	29
P3	26	Female	1 week	Beanie, cardigan, skirt	Online store (smartphone)	38
P4	27	Female	3 months	Skirt	Retailer's online store (smartphone)	52
P5	26	Male	4 months	Hat	Brick-and mortar store (Kajaani)	36
P6	28	Male	3 months	Jacket	Brick-and mortar store (Kajaani)	54
P7	27	Female	2 months	Trousers	Tori C2C online marketplace application (smartphone)	42
P8	26	Female	2 weeks	Trousers	Online store (computer)	34
P9	26	Female	1 week	Jacket, 2x shirt	Online store (smartphone)	56
P10	28	Female	2 weeks	2 x trousers	Online store (computer)	72

The interviewees were first briefly presented with the concepts of omnichannel and customer journey to help them to analyze their experiences. The experiences shared by the interviewees were recorded and transcribed, and this data was then coded and analyzed. First, the data was coded by touchpoints and stage of the customer journey. All expressions in which participants described their actions and experiences were extracted and then identified. The results of the analysis are presented next.

4. Findings

The findings show different stages of the omnichannel customer journey and illustrate the individuality of channel usage during the purchasing process. The subsections go through seven identified critical phases of an omnichannel customer, and the channel usage is discussed under each subsection.

4.1. Awareness and Need Recognition

The social environment's role was significant in creating awareness of the product in all the purchasing process descriptions. The affecting social environment included both a physical environment and social media to a greater extent. However, there were differences among the interviewees between what influenced them most on social media. Whereas some emphasized the role of selected identifiable and meaningful social media influencers, some noticed the influence of friends and family. Also, the impact of direct social media advertising was noticed. On the other hand, Instagram was part of the interviewees' daily routines, and the usage was several hours per day. Based on this, it is easy to understand that social media played an important role in purchasing.

> "I guess I had seen the same outfit on a social media influencer I follow. That made the idea of me wearing it [the outfit] quite natural." (P1)

As the above citation illustrates, the participants were quite aware and capable of analyzing how much social media had influenced their purchases. Besides this, the previous brand image formed the awareness of a product. For example, the interviewee below describes his shopping behavior as impulsive.

> "I might be a somewhat impulsive buyer. But, in the end, I buy quite a little. If I do buy something, it's either on a whim or, like usual, I have some special thing [product] on my mind that I've been looking for a long time." (P5)

4.2. Information Searching and Processing

The salesperson was a critical channel for information retrieval in the brick-and-mortar store. In other cases, information was sought via various digital channels. The most used digital channels were the company's website and Instagram account. Other digital channels used for information retrieval were web articles, blog texts, and product reviews accessed via Google. The interviewees looked for information on these channels, especially product features like material or quality.

> "In a store, I think it's natural to ask directly from the salesperson. […] I might ask my friends about their experiences. If I use Google, I'm interested in articles or posts that are more like stories about the products and memories associated with those." (P1)

As the citation above points out, some interviewees described social media influencers and paid collaborations as a significant part of information search and processing. This finding is similar to the

one described in the previous sub-section and emphasizes the role of social interactions in omnichannel buying. Based on participants' descriptions, social media influencers perceived as trustworthy and reliable can communicate marketing messages effectively and credibly. The role of internal sources (e.g., family and friends) is emphasized in information retrieval [31]. Our study suggests that the content produced by R-Collection's influencers was not seen as a marketing message but rather as honest product reviews.

The amount of information search and processing information seemed to be related to how willing the interviewees were to use their time and resources at this stage. For example, participants who showed straightforwardness and impulsiveness preferred fast buying processes.

> " I don't compare the options. When I find a suitable one, I am buying without hesitation. I would describe myself as a straightforward shopper." (P2)

On the other hand, some participants had worn out their corresponding clothes. That may have made the need for a new product more concrete and immediate compared to other interviewees. These participants also reported that they rely heavily on marketing messages and word-of-mouth. A longer time for information searching may also involve a justification for the purchase itself.

> "Of course, I wanted the skirt, but the need was not vital or even real. [...] I decided to give some time for the thought to see if I even remember it [the skirt] later on." (P4)

> " I use a lot of time to think if I need it [the garment] and to find the right one." (P5)

In some of the interviews, post-purchase information retrieval occurred. It was related to two different purposes. First, some interviewees said that they searched for information related to the use of the product at this point. Second, information search seemed to be a way to convince oneself of a successful purchase. Post-purchase information search occurred mainly in online channels. Information was searched, for example, on product characteristics, stock status, or price. For example, checking the product in an online store and noting that it was sold out validated the purchase and made the customer happy. In addition, some interviewees had used online articles to check washing instructions.

> "Quite often after purchasing a product, I go to the website to see if it's sold out. I kind of got the feeling of satisfaction that others have wanted the same product as well." (P4)

In addition, post-purchase information was sought for inspiration. For example, exploring how the purchased product could be combined with other clothes. Inspiration was sought from R-Collection online and social media channels and content by influencers and other users on Instagram. Participants emphasized the visuality of pictures and channels.

> "I went to see what color clothes the shirt had been paired within the online store. [...] I also looked up how a social media influencer had combined the clothes." (P3)

4.3. Impulse

Based on the interviews, a clear impulse was identified on the omnichannel customer journeys. The impulse was related to the first three stages of the purchasing process. The impulse led to (i) a need for or awareness of the product, (ii) a more detailed search about the product, or (iii) an immediate switch to the transaction. In the interviews, the omnichannel service environment made the impulse possible. The impulse was service provider-driven, and it appeared in the right channel at the right time, often on Instagram. For example, sponsored content on Instagram was seen as follows:

"Then one night I was browsing Instagram, and a nice-looking jacket came up there as a sponsored ad. I opened it [in the Instagram shop] and ordered it." (P2)

Discounts and offers were a significant trigger for the buying impulse. Discounted products were described as treasures that were hunted and fought for, added with a fear of losing or missing the opportunity.

"I was delighted with the offer. As if, some primitive hunter-gatherer instinct was waking up. I had found a treasure [clothing] before others." (P4)

4.4. Transaction

The payment practices seemed to depend on the channel used for payment — all interviewees who dealt in the physical channels paid with a debit card. Many interviewees also used a smartphone to make the actual debit card payment in-store.

"I mainly use Apple Pay. In a brick-and-mortar store, I'm used to paying by card. It doesn't make much of a difference either it's my phone or the plastic one." (P5)

However, when buying from online channels, various payment methods were utilized. Interviewees emphasized information security, reliability, ease, and speed differently.

"MobilePay is somehow fresh, and the speed and ease of use do a lot." (P10)

"When I am shopping online, I always use credit card since that brings security." (P5)

4.5. Delivery and Returns

A delivery channel is automatically involved in a customer journey when purchasing from an online store. Some interviewees were affected by delivery costs and added more products into their shopping cart until its value exceeded the limit needed for free shipping. Also, fast delivery and delivery possibilities increased the willingness to purchase. For example, self-service parcel machines made contactless delivery possible and, for that reason, some favored them.

"I rather choose [delivery] as close as possible. I usually favor a self-service parcel machine, and it's so handy, no need to run errands. You just go and tap the code." (P9)

The product returns were mainly experienced challenging. Interviewees even preferred to go to the brick-and-mortar store instead of buying online, even though the returning costs were free. For example, the laborious returning process affected purchase decisions, as some interviewees mentioned having considered their shopping cart for a longer time and trying to avoid mistakes.

"I've found that I am more likely to make mistake purchases on the Internet." (P1)

4.6. Loyalty and engagement

After the purchase, the interviewees were generally happy with their purchased clothing and reported satisfaction with the overall process. However, there were differences in loyalty and engagement behavior between the interviewees. Some wanted to share their reviews and thoughts of the purchased products, thus showing loyalty toward the brand. Some of the interviewees did not show any direct

engagement behavior. Despite this, they also reported that they would buy again from R-Collection, and the customer journey this way affected future shopping preferences. Some participants felt uncomfortable sharing their purchases with their close ones due to different values. The experienced shame about shopping could lead to hiding new clothes from loved ones.

> *"Lately, there's been a bit of a contradiction in how much I've been buying everything. Maybe that's why I don't like to share it [the purchase] with others." (P9)*

Despite this, they were willing to share their reviews anonymously if the seller had asked this, for example, by e-mail. Product reviews from other customers were considered beneficial for purchase decisions. However, R-Collection did not encourage the interviewees to do post-purchase reviews.

> *"I didn't do a review, but I would have gladly done one if it would have been requested. […] I rely on reviews made by other customers." (P10)*

Digital channels, such as Instagram and WhatsApp, were used to share the joy of a new purchase. Sharing positive experiences is one form of customer engagement behavior and further co-creating value [32].

> *"I shared a picture of the shopping bag on my Instagram story because I was so excited that it was finally mine. Unlike usual, then I got quite a many [comments]." (P1)*

Our result suggests that omnichannel services could support this kind of customer behavior. Another way for participants to engage in omnichannel services was to produce content on social media channels.

5. Summary of the Results and Discussion

5.1. Summary of the Results

The literature defines omnichannel as an integrated and seamless customer experience that emerges at various touchpoints and channels between the customer and the company [28,9]. This study aimed to understand how the customer journey is formed by identifying interviewees' experiences. The study also mapped participants' channel use during the process.

The research question of this study was: *How are consumers' omnichannel customer journeys formed based on their experiences in the retail clothing shopping context?* As a result of this study, we present a five-stage model affected by previous experiences and an impulse factor. Our model aligns with other customer journey research [e.g., 18,19,33] but provides more in-depth and up-to-date information on omnichannel-specific customer behavior. Figure 2 below summarizes the results. The various channels that appeared in participants' customer journey descriptions are listed under each phase of the customer's journey.
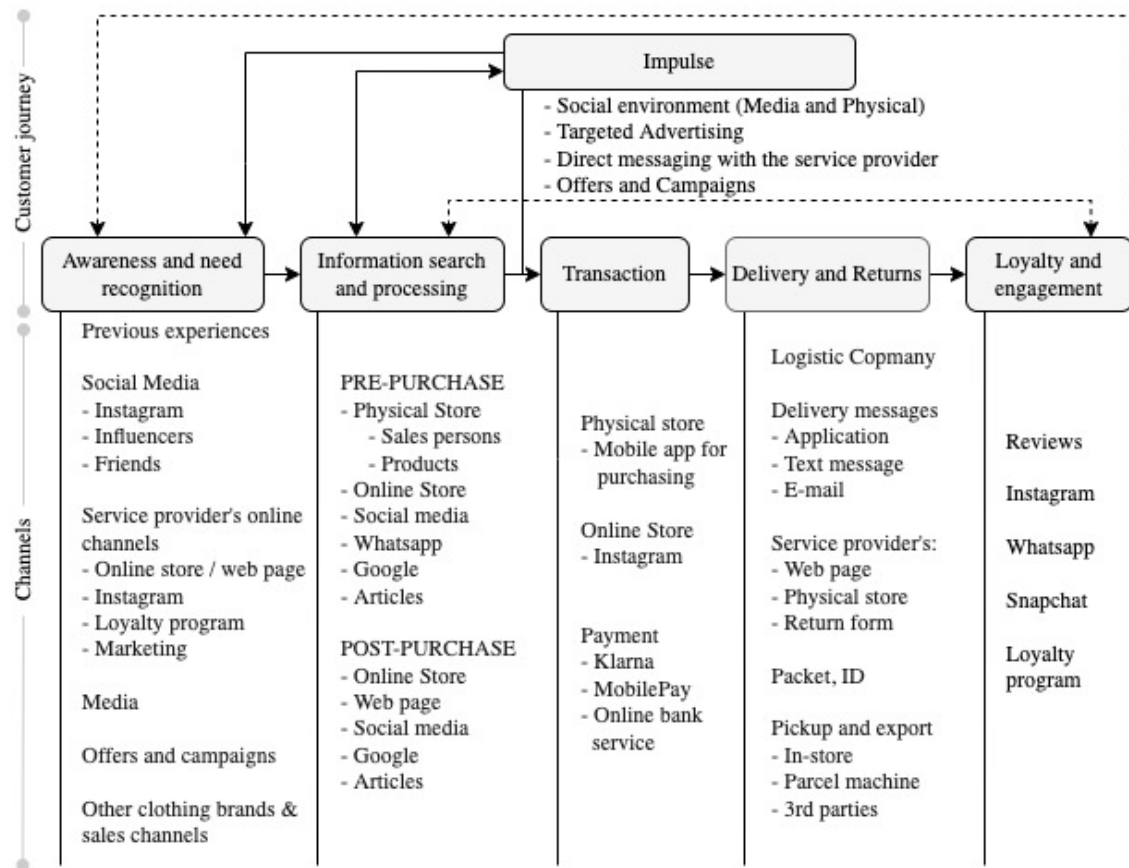
Figure 2: The omnichannel customer journey and channel usage

Based on the results, we identified five stages: Awareness and need recognition, Information search and processing, Transaction, Delivery and Returns, and Loyalty and engagement. The stages correspond to traditional marketing research [e.g., 33,31] and omnichannel customer behavior research [5,20,24]. Nonetheless, our study complements the identified research gap in omnichannel research from a customer perspective.

5.2. Discussion

We found two customer journey factors enabled by the omnichannel service environment: impulse and post-purchase information retrieval. An evident impulse was identified, guiding further shopping behavior. The impulses focused on the first phases of the purchasing process. An impulse triggered either the identification of a need, a more detailed review of the product, or a transaction. Further, in some cases, information retrieval and comparison generated impulses. The mentioned impulses were, for example, targeted advertisements. Based on our results, channel integration and seamless channel usage were key for an impulse to manifest on a journey. Although, the impulse needed to happen at the right time and in the right place to lead to purchase. Following the finding of omnichannel customers' unprecedented [26], this finding suggests that brands must appear consistently across various channels.

Second, interviewees reported information search and processing before and after the purchase decision. The post-purchase information retrieval was related to the use of a clothing and justification for the purchase and occurred mainly in online channels. This finding is exciting for practitioners since omnichannel has further intensified competition between companies [33] and engaged omnichannel customers generate significant revenue [4]. Finding more ways to correspond to customer needs through their customer journey could enhance lasting customer relations. For example, positive post-purchase actions, repurchases [22] and better customer satisfaction [21].

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Individual behavior is particularly evident in different channel choices and preferences during the customer journey [13,20]. We identified several touchpoints that connected the customer and the brand during the shopping journey. It is essential to consider that the presented touchpoints are not generalizable but rather reflect the multidimensionality of phenomena. Although, practitioners should not underestimate the impact of external touchpoints and channels on customer journeys and further experiences. Our findings support prior research suggesting that customer experience is formatted during the customer journey [25]. There are multiple contributors to the experience beyond a service provider's control [35]. Still, several studies ignore the brand impact and a holistic view of how omnichannel services are experienced. Our study sheds light on this topic.

5.3. Managerial implications

Clothing retailers could benefit from implementing customer-point-of-view omnichannel practices. The retailers could facilitate customer engagement by appearing at the right time in the channels their customers are using. Firstly, finding the relevant channels the customers' are using is essential. Secondly, it is important to know the customers, and what ads or other communication they want to see and when they want to see these. For example, in the results of this study, brand ambassador marketing actions seemed to be effective. When a brand ambassador showed a clothing item and how to mix it with other clothing items or accessories, the customers were excited about the content, and wanted to wear similar outfits. Finally, the painpoint of an omnichannel customer journey seemed to be related to the returning process of online orders. Customers fear making mistakes, which may make them considering their shopping cart for longer time. However, evaluating ones return process from a customer's point of view, and communicating it clearly to the customers, would likely improve purchasing convenience. Also, adding sufficient product information to the online shop would help to avoid mistakes with, for example, wrong fit or wrong type of clothes.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Unlike many omnichannel studies, we did not focus only on service provider-driven functions. Instead, we applied a holistic, qualitative perspective, enhancing customers' experiences they had described freely in their own words. This study presents illustrative observations on the topic to understand the phenomena, and it has its limitations. The first limitation of the study is the limited demographic group. Second, although focusing on a single brand can be considered this study's merit, it reflects a very limited context. Especially when analyzing patterns and drivers of customer purchase processes, cultural differences can be significant [36]. Also, the importance of the digital intangible environment should not be underestimated as a part of the customer journey [37]. Hence, this research should be replicated in other contexts in the future. The findings do not either consider, for example, a customer's previous experiences, expectations, and personal values and how these affect the customer's journey. Omnichannel is a multidimensional phenomenon that is difficult to deal with briefly or to limit to just one perspective, which also limited our findings. Understanding omnichannel journeys require further research, including other research methods. These findings could be utilized in service design to create customer-focused services and help highly competitive industries engage their customers.

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