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Factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel retail experience: A South African perspective

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration in the Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences to be awarded at the Nelson Mandela University

April 2023

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DECLARATION:

In accordance with Rule G5.11.4, I hereby declare that the above-mentioned treatise/ dissertation/ thesis is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment to another University or for another qualification.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The successful completion of this endeavour would not have been possible without many people in my life, but I would like to express my sincere gratitude to:

- ❖ The respondents who took part in the study and provided the quality insights that made the data for this study.
- ❖ To my family and friends, particularly Prof. Phetlhu for the support throughout this journey
- ❖ My Mom, for setting the example that it's never too late to follow your dreams. I now see how much you had to sacrifice when you were a mom, student, and a full-time employee, but look where it got you and us as a family. I hope my children understand one day.
- ❖ Trevor, for the unconditional love, support, and patience throughout this MBA journey. You taught me that I could have it all if I prioritised and planned better. I love you.
- ❖ Jasmine, Theo, and Hunter, I stole from your time, and I was not always pleasant when I was under pressure. I will make it up to you. I promise you I am going to be fun again, thank you for your patience. Thank you, Jazzy, for all the help when I was writing the treatise. I love you guys!
- ❖ Dr. Fraser for her guidance, encouragement and understanding throughout the preparation and completion of this treatise.
- ❖ My various MBA group members and classmates for contributing to my learning.

ABSTRACT

The increase in the number of channels driven by technology trajectory over the years have led to a change in customer behaviour. Customers move around different retailer platforms during a single purchase; even so customers still expect a superior and seamless customer experience while navigating these channels.

The present study built on studies conducted in countries such as China, Spain, India, United Kingdom amongst others to determine if the learnings from these countries can be applied in the South African context. This study used an interpretivist phenomenological approach and interviewed a qualitative sample of participants to gain insights on their experiences while shopping in these retailers.

This study will assist Information Technology managers with prioritisation of their technology roadmaps. This study will also contribute to computer science studies because programmers will have a context of a customer's perspective when developing omnichannel solutions.

Lastly, the study can be used by governments and policy makers in developing national strategic plans relating to shared economy because the study highlights the need to omnichannel retailing in remote areas.

The findings from the research were summarised into five themes customer experience, convenience, product, support, and security. The optimal South African omnichannel retail experience is one that allows the customer to seamlessly move across channels by integrating the retailing mix elements of product, place, promotion, price. To achieve this experience, retailers must integrate the customer's profile information and ensure that the customer's payment details are secure and are able to seamlessly login in all the retailer platforms. Contrary to the researcher's expectations, South African customers do not expect an omnichannel support. They expect to keep online support separate from in-store support.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Applications (Apps)

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Automobile Association (AA)

Business Process Management (BPM)

Consumer Price Inflation (CPI)

Customer Relationship Management (CRM).

Gender based violence (GBV)

Living Standard Measure (LSM)

Language Processing Tool (LPT)

Omnichannel Retailing (OR)

Primary Responsible Person (PRP).

Purchase decision process (PDP)

Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA)

Research Ethics Committee (Human) (REC-H)

Reserve-Online-Pick-Up-And-Pay-In-Store (ROPS)

Statistics South Africa (StastSA)

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

The Principal Investigator (PI)

The Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA or the Act)

CHAPTER 1: SCOPE OF STUDY

1.1 Introduction

An omnichannel organisation is one that puts customer interaction at the core of the company by integrating transactions' channels to give consistency and a seamless customer experience (Gerea, Gonzalez-Lopez, & Herskovic, 2021). Omnichannel is the synergetic management of different channels and customer touchpoints (Quach, Barari, Moudrý, & Quach, 2022). A physical store is an example of a retail channel, and so is a virtual company, e-commerce website and mobile application. Cortiñas, Chocarro, & Elorz (2019) define omnichannel as the synergy of several available channels to a retailer and customer touchpoints that optimise customer experience across channels.

A touchpoint is found at any point a customer interacts with the brand and (or the organisation) (De Keyser, Verleye, Lemon, Keiningham, & Klaus, 2020). In an omnichannel retail context, a customer browsing and adding to a cart on a website or mobile app is an example of a touchpoint because the customer interacted with the brand. Equally, a customer returning a product into a brick-and-mortar store is another touchpoint (because they are interacting with the brand) but in this case in a different channel and context.

Retailers with physical storefronts, digital channels (mobile applications (apps), websites), telephone retailing, and warehouses are considered to have multiple retailing channels. Multi-channels are convenient because they offer different options (Thaichon, Phau, & Weaven, 2022). With so many channels, it is common to see that the price from one channel, such as an ecommerce website, differs from the price in-store for the same organisation. Another example of inconsistency between channels is found under a consumer's personal information. For example, your address on the app may be from your previously occupied house, whilst the website displays your current residence. This inconsistency means that there is not only 'one source of truth' if the systems are not properly connected. Consumers expect that all their relevant contextual data is the same across all the channels from the beginning of an interaction with one channel and continuing to another (Silva, Martins, & Sousa, 2018). This

means that whether the customer shops from a mobile app or website, pricing and their personal details for example should be the same across the channels.

Multiple channels are standalone channels which are in other words, not integrated, and according to Thaichon et al. (2022), they can indeed create inconsistencies across the brand. Quach et al. (2022) concurs that inconsistencies in retail channels can have a negative effect on customer loyalty.

Retailers are moving towards an omnichannel model that integrates all the multiple platforms to create a seamless customer experience (Thaichon et al. 2022). Thaichon et al. (2022) further write that, customers want consistency. When customer needs are met, then the retailer stands a chance of having competitive advantage.

Scholars mentioned above have done studies in many different countries other than South Africa, leading up to the problem statement that a study of this nature is still presenting a research gap in South Africa.

1.2 Problem Statement

The evolution in technology in the retail industry has led to dramatic changes in the sector (Rodríguez-Torrigo, Trabold Apadula, San-Martín & San José Cabezudo, 2020). The incorporation of new channels such as online and mobile to physical stores has changed the way consumers normally behave (Rodríguez-Torrigo et al., 2020).

Not only brick and mortar retailers are integrating with digital; pure ecommerce players such as Amazon are making efforts to grow in the physical store environment in countries such as the United States (Andersson, Movin, Mähring Magnus, Teigland, Wennberg, & McGettigan, 2018). Examples of an e-commerce pure players in South Africa are retailers such as *TakeALot*, *Superbalist* and *Zando*. This bidirectional shift means that, it is inevitable that retailers will need to transition to an omnichannel retailing model, by combining both online and offline channels to create a seamless customer experience.

Consumers are increasingly using multiple channels during a single purchase (Andersson et al., 2018) and expect a superior and seamless customer experience (Rodríguez-Torrigo et al., 2020) while navigating these channels.

There seem to be inconsistencies however, of what the optimal omnichannel strategy should be from a customer perspective. This leads to the research problem for this study, factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel experience have not been determined in South Africa

1.3 Research Gaps

Quach et al. (2022)'s research is based on respondents who are between ages of 18 years or older and have experience at Walmart in the last six months of the study. The study suggests that experience from other retailers or from other parts of the world could bring a different result. Quach et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study. The present study was done in a different retailer to Walmart. Participants have experience of shopping at multiple retailers and not only one. This study was done in the South African context and is a qualitative study.

Cortiñas et al. (2019) focused on a sensory store retailer in the fashion industry based in Spain. The present study focused on different retail formats to prove if the findings will align to those of Cortiñas et al. (2019). Cortiñas et al. (2019) suggested that future research in a retail format should be less sensory. This study was not focused only on less sensory retail formats but incorporates all retail formats.

Mishra, Malhotra, Chatterjee & Shukla (2021) used six items scale to measure customer retention. The Mishra et al., study focused on highly educated young consumers, albeit with low-income levels. Most participants were men. The study identified gaps that the sample population could have been wider and perhaps include younger consumers, with variations in their education level, gender, and marital status. From these recommendations, there are no demographical exclusions in this current study. All genders were considered and education did not form part of the criteria for this study. The only exclusion is that only those who are older than 18 but younger than 65 will be eligible to participate, since we presume that legally working age respondents have the means to shop online.

Mishra et al. (2021) surveyed only Indian consumers, which provided an opportunity for consumers of other races and in other countries to be surveyed in this retail

experience regard. The Mishra, et al., researchers suggest that customer retention may be different to customer loyalty and further research can originate from determining what leads to customer loyalty.

Hickman et. al (2019) recommended that future studies focus on different type of retailers other than clothing and groceries. Future studies can also look at variables such as in-store incentives or social influences. The Hickman et al. (2019) study was done in the United Kingdom, thus opening a gap for a similar study to be done in other countries especially developing countries such as South Africa where the present study was conducted. Hickman et. al (2019) also recommended that future research, should study the link between customer journey and how the perception changes throughout the different stages of the customer. The stages start from when the customer interacts with the brand for the first time to when they are fully at ease with the brand. The customer journeys was addressed by one of the research questions of this current study.

Gao, Fan, Li, & Wang (2021) suggest that there are several factors behind customer experience in omnichannel. Even though Gao et al. (2021)'s paper only focuses on channel integration, the study suggests that future research should consider looking into other factors that can lead to an overall customer experience which is what this study did.

To achieve the objectives of understanding factors that lead to an overall customer experience, from a South African customer perspective, the following research questions were answered:

- 1) What do customers perceive as the most optimal retail omnichannel experience?
- 2) What makes customers decide to move from one channel to the next during a purchase?
- 3) What do customers believe that retailers need to improve on, to make the experience of shopping across channels seamless?

After all three research questions above were answered, there was a better understanding of what customers consider to be an optimal omnichannel shopping

experience. Based on customer views, the result will subsequently aid the retail sector in developing an optimal omnichannel retail strategy for their enterprises.

1.4 Rationale for the study

The present study builds on academic research that has been done by scholars (Chen et al., 2022; Gereá et al., 2021; Hickman et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2022). It contributes to academia especially in the fields of business management, operations, and marketing because it will provide insights of how to develop the optimal omnichannel strategy based on customer perceptions.

There is an increased focus on research involving omnichannel retailing and its relationship with customer experience and some of studies emerged from countries such as the United States, China, Spain, India and the United Kingdom. A study of this nature done in the diverse South African cultural context will benefit the South African retail industry as whole because it is multiple nations in one country view. Gereá et al. (2021) highlight the importance of adjusting your language to a way that respondents will understand when dealing with different cultures and this observation was noted for the complex South African socio-economic environment.

A study of this nature is limited in South Africa with the searches “Omnichannel retailing”, which is a limitation to the shopping behaviour studies surrounding the diverse cultures we have in South Africa.

The findings of this study will benefit retail Operations Managers that are considering migrating from a multi-channel or a single channel strategy to an omnichannel strategy. This consideration supports the need to plan for the best suited strategy for their businesses.

This study will also contribute to computer science studies in a sense that, when programmers integrate channels, they need to be cognisant of the customer perspective which are the findings of this study.

1.5 Primary Research Question

The primary research question is the following:

What is the optimal omnichannel approach for businesses based on how customers perceive the optimal omnichannel retailing experience?

1.6 Secondary Research Questions

The secondary research questions are the following:

- 1) What do customers perceive as the most optimal retail omnichannel experience?
- 2) What makes customers decide to move from one channel to the next during a purchase?
- 3) What do customers believe that retailers need to improve on, to make the experience of shopping across channels seamless?

1.7 Primary Research Objective

The primary research objective is to investigate what the optimal omnichannel approach for businesses is, based on customers' perceptions of what the optimal omnichannel retailing experience is.

1.8 Secondary Research Objectives

The secondary research objectives are as follows:

- 1) To measure what customers perceive as the most optimal retail omnichannel experience.
- 2) To identify when customers decide to move from one channel to the next during a purchase.
- 3) To understand what customers, believe that retailers need to improve on, to make the experience of shopping across channels seamless.

1.9 Research Methodology

The following steps were taken in the research methodology:

- 1) Conducted a secondary literature review to understand basic terminology.
- 2) Constructed an interview guide that will be used to collect data for the investigation of the research problem.
- 3) Selected a sample of 10 and max 20 participants to collect data from.
- 4) Collected data using a phenomenological method as well as semi-structured interviews.
- 5) Produced a transcript using Microsoft Word software
- 6) Analyse the transcript using ATLAS.ti software program.
- 7) Interpreted and report the results.
- 8) Synthesised the findings to draw conclusions and provide recommendations.

1.9.1 Research Paradigm

This study employed the interpretivist philosophical worldview since consumer interviews were done to obtain their perspectives on what they believe contributes to an optimal omnichannel experience. The interpretivist worldview dominates if the study is about people in an organisation (Petersen & Gencel, 2013). These scholars further write that the interpretivist worldview is subjective reality; consequently, the truth is relative. It is about how human beings see and interpret the world in the context around them (Petersen & Gencel 2013).

1.9.2 Research Approach

Qualitative research is an inquiry that focuses on the way people make sense of their experiences, their environment and social context. (Quick, & Hall, 2015). According to (Quick, & Hall, 2015) qualitative approaches use a small sample of participants, as the essence is to gather quality information.

The qualitative research paradigm enables the researcher to be more creative with data collection methods. Qualitative research also allows a larger scope to interpret and analyse data (Mukhopadhyay & Gupta, 2014; Ladnier, 2013).

1.10 Research design

The current study is qualitative research study, phenomenological study (including hermeneutics). Phenomenological research design enabled meaningful conversations with participants to get insights on their lived experiences while shopping at omnichannel retailers.

Phenomenological research design is effective at illustrating individuals' experiences (Greening, 2019) as described by the participants. The main objective of phenomenology is to precisely describe the experience (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).

Phenomenology has two elements; namely descriptive and hermeneutic (interpretive) (Neubauer et al., 2019). This study will be using the interpretive phenomenology because it involves engaging customers in an age range of 18 years and 65 years who shop at different retailers. For this reason, it is crucial to correctly interpret the participants' views. Neubauer et al. (2019) state that the phenomenological approach requires the hermeneutic phenomenologist to interpret the narratives provided by participants in relation to their contexts.

1.9.3 Sampling design

This research made use of purposive sampling because it is ideal when a study sets criteria for the sample. The criteria for the sample of this study are individuals that have shopped online and offline in any retailer in South Africa in the last six months.

Purposive sampling is a non-random technique used in qualitative research to identify and select the information-rich individuals or groups that are proficient and well-informed with a phenomenon of interest (Etikan, 2016). With purposive sampling, the researcher decides the criteria of the participants and sets out to find people who are willing to provide the information based on their experience (Etikan, 2016). Etikan, (2016) further states that with purposive sampling, the researcher does not need a set

number of respondents. This is based on the researcher's discretion; interviews were conducted until the researcher feels that the data has saturated.

A purposive sample for this study will consist of individuals who have shopped online and offline in any South African retailer in the last six months. The interviews were conducted virtually, using Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Physical location did not play a major role in the criteria.

Customers had used both online and offline methods in the last six months and were within the specified age range, otherwise they were excluded from this study.

1.11 Data collection

1.12.1 Collection method

This study used interviews as the data collection method. Interviews can assist researchers gain deep insights into understanding the phenomenon. For this study, the researcher sought to gain insights on shopping experiences of customers. Interviews give a direct voice to participants as it allows them to express their perspective. This reduces the chance of the researchers imposing their own views (Thelwall & Nevill 2021).

The Principal Investigator (PI) will recorded interviews using Microsoft Teams and Zoom recording and transcribing functionality. The PI also made handwritten notes. The questions were open-ended and were followed with probing questions. Probing questions assist in gaining further in-depth understanding of participants' experiences or opinions (Snelson, 2016). The use of probing nature of hermeneutic phenomenological approach assisted with getting insights from the participants.

The data collection period was from 12 November 2022 to 18 November 2022.

1.12.2 Enrolment Process

The researcher's business networks were invited via Whatsapp to participate in the research study. These customers had shopped online and offline in retail platforms in the last six months preceding the study. The Principal Investigator briefly explained the purpose of the study to the participants via Whatsapp, invited them to participate,

and asked them to sign the consent form after reading it. Participant required an internet connection and a collaboration tool such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

1.12 Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews are important to get in-depth detail from the participant (Ramsook, 2018). The probing questions assist in the enhancement, validation of data as well as triangulation of data (Ramsook, 2018). The process of conducting semi-structured interviews involves taking notes and listening attentively.

Interviews were recorded using MS Teams and Zoom recording functionality. After the recordings were transcribed, a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software Atlas.ti was used to code recurring themes. Feedback of the transcript was sought to ensure participant validation prior to data analysis. livari, (2018) suggests that if a researcher relies on hermeneutics, they need to test their interpretation by checking with participants because during interpretation, one interprets in their own understanding to make sense of what is being said.

Participants will further be provided with the final copy of the study should they so desire.

Thick descriptions, emerging themes and patterns are reported using verbatim and paraphrased quotes.

1.13 Trustworthiness of the data

This study used member checking to verify accuracy and understanding of the transcribed information. Member checking is the most used technique in qualitative research (livari, 2018). Member checking is done by inviting participants to check and verify researcher's data or interpretation. This process enhances the participants involvement in the process and promotes authenticity and integrity of the research.

1.14 Ethical Considerations

Nelson Mandela Business School research proposals follow an approval process at the Business School. This process covers Ethics Forms and other relevant Appendices which are approved by the Graduate School and Faculty Research Committees. These approval processes cover sampling strategy, participant recruitment, enrolment, data collection, analysis, reporting, risk analysis, consent, and assent protocols.

The respondents were sent a consent form which was further read out to them before the interview. The participants were asked to accept the contents of the consent form in the recording before the interviews commenced. The participant will not be identifiable in the interview by a consent form. The data will be stored for five years for audit and verification purposes. Data will be processed as interpreted transcripts, further enhancing the anonymity process.

1.15 Outline of the study

This report consists of five chapters. The outline of each chapter is below:

Chapter 1 presents an introduction of the scope of the study. This chapter defines key concepts, provides background of the problem statement, introduces research questions, research objectives, ethical considerations and an overview of the research methodology.

Chapter 2 reviews literature that supports the formulated research questions and objectives outlined in Chapter 1. This chapter further contextualises the current South African retail landscape and expands on some of the key terms established in Chapter 1 by drawing from previous literature and various other internet sources. Finally, it highlights the gaps in literature on omnichannel retailing.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology used in this study. The research philosophy, research approach, sampling design, ethical considerations, data collection and analysis methods, synthesising and reporting of data are all included in the methodology chapter.

Chapter 4 covers results from the interviews as well as present the findings of the analysis.

Chapter 5 provides an overall summary of the study by drawing conclusions from the findings. This chapter also highlights recommendations and limitations of the study.

1.16 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the study by providing a detailed background of the problem statement, the rationale for the study. This chapter also highlighted some of the gaps in literature identified early in the project. This chapter proposed the research methodology and explained some of the ethical considerations that were addressed during the investigations.

The next chapter delineates the literature review that will provide groundwork for the qualitative research.

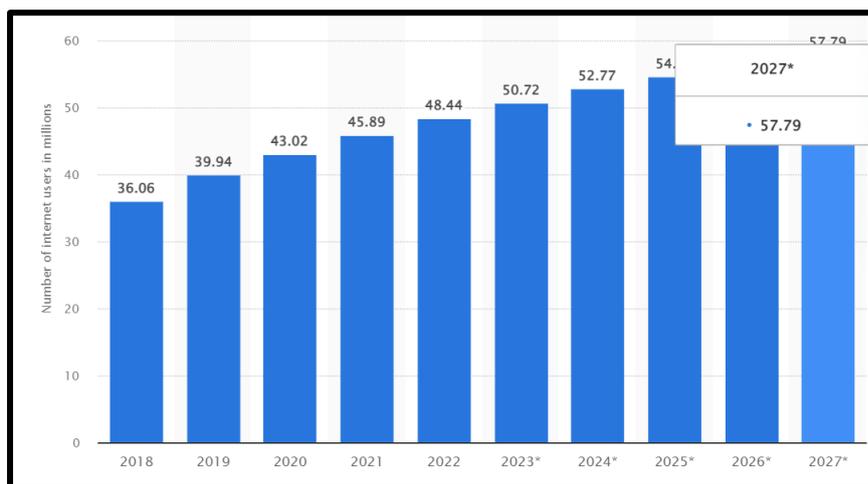
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ON OMNICHANNEL RETAILING

2.1 Introduction

Literature from several authors reveal the importance of integrating isolated or multiple channels to one single ecosystem to enhance customer experience. An omnichannel experience is no longer an option for organisations but a requirement. Customers now have a wealth of information about products, prices, and features at their fingertips. This means that retailers need to constantly innovate to remain competitive and to succeed.

The increase in the South African internet userbase 7% from 2020 to 2021 and another 7% from 2021 to 2022 is projected to grow even further (Statista, 2022).

Figure 2. 1: Number of internet users in South Africa from 2018 to 2027



Source: (Statistica, 2022)

Out of the 48.44 million internet users, 32.55 million are online shoppers. The projection is that another 6.38 million people will be shopping online (eCommerce, 2022). Consumers express the need to cut down on travel costs and are increasingly opting to shop online. Similarly, some customers want to be able to buy online and collect in store and therefore these customers' needs must also be considered.

Chapter 1 provided the background of omnichannel retailing, introduced the problem statement, the purpose of the study, objectives, research approach and the significance of the study.

This chapter reviews literature that supports the formulated research questions and objectives introduced in Chapter 1. Literature review provides comprehensive insight of theories and synchronises prior studies into one (Snyder, 2019). This strengthens the foundation of the secondary knowledge already acquired.

When findings from various papers are integrated, they provide a high-level view of the study, they can assist with answering some research questions, they can also uncover some areas that have been neglected by research (Snyder, 2019).

This study draws from previous literature and the initial search was conducted using Google Scholar to obtain recent peer reviewed studies that are available on omnichannel retailing. Several collated sources were selected and reviewed. The databases searched were Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Emerald, Taylor & Francis and Science Direct, Google Books. The keywords used in the search included omnichannel retailing, customer journey, customer experience and touchpoints. No physical thesis or physical books were consulted because the University subscribes to online databases of e-books and book chapters, and it was easy enough to find e-books with supporting literature on Google books.

Table 2. 1: The search strategy

Databases	Keywords	Search dates	Limitations
Google Scholar	Omnichannel	2017 - 2022	English language only Retail focused
ResearchGate	retailing		
Emerald	Customer journey		
Taylor & Francis	Customer		
Science Direct	experience		
Google Books	Touchpoints		

Source: (Author's Own Summary)

This chapter commences by contextualising South Africa's socio-economic and political climate. This is important to understand for any business that seeks to transform its business model. It further progresses to the complex retail landscape of South Africa, by breaking it down to formal and informal retailing; and brick-and-mortar-store retailing as opposed to purely digital retailing.

To understand the omnichannel phenomenon, the discussion firstly distinguishes between single channel and multiple channels. The chapter then describes the two types of customer experience responses. Literature on a customer journey is reviewed by comparing the traditional customer journey to an omnichannel customer journey. The study also discusses the varying customer purchase decision processes of omnichannel customer journey and traditional customer journey. Retail touchpoints are also reviewed, giving examples and context of what they are in an omnichannel environment.

This chapter also deliberates challenges faced by organisations when trading in an omnichannel environment and confers factors that contribute to an omnichannel experience in other countries such as India, United States, United Kingdom, and Spain.

This chapter highlights and gives context to gaps in omnichannel retailing literature. Some of these gaps were used for the interview schedule question formulation with the aim that customers will provide data to assist in closing these gaps.

2.2 An overview of South Africa and the South African retail landscape

2.2.1 An overview of South Africa

South Africa is a developing country with an estimated population of 60.1million (Trading Economics, 2022) 48,9% male and 51,1% female. The population that lives in urban areas is 67% (Trading Economics, 2021) with 12,7% of households living in informal settlements (South African Government, 2019). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that a person with only upper secondary education is unlikely to get employment in South Africa (OECD 2019). The current minimum wage in South Africa is R23 per hour (Trading Economics, 2021). The current unemployment rate is at 34.5% (Trading Economics, 2021) and youth (between the ages 15 to 34) contribute 46% to the unemployment rate. The youth are the future producers and consumers of the economy; hence the high rate of youth unemployment is detrimental to the economy of the nation. When developing an omnichannel retailing strategy, retailers need to be cognisant of

investments they employ and balance the risk of the investment not being rewarded due to large scale unemployment. Retailers should be clear on their target markets, considering the socio-economic state of South Africa, and consider that targeting high end products to a population of low income, makes the business, mostly likely not to thrive.

The current consumer price inflation (CPI) rose to 6,5%. The CPI is at its highest since January 2017 (Trading Economics, 2021). This means that consumers are cash strapped and likely to spend as little as possible on luxuries. During the time of high inflation Statistics South Africa (StastSA) (2022) reports that, buying down to cheaper varieties and smaller package sizes is a common way for consumers to manage overall spend. This means that retailers may also feel the impact because if consumers are spending less, it translates into less revenue for the retailers. Trading Economics (2022) provides evidence that South African retail sales fell by 0.6% in comparison to the previous year to September of 2022.

The socio-economic climate is not the only obstacle South Africa is dealing with since the nation is also having challenging political factors. In my view, the country faces several challenges including but not limited to, both public and private sector corruption, collusion, and disruptive factions within the government and management structures.

The discussion on how the macro-environment in South Africa has affected the retail landscape in the country is discussed at length below.

2.2.1 The South African retail landscape

The complex South African political and socio-economic factors have resulted in an unusual retail landscape in the country (Masojada, 2021). Research from NielsenIQ, (2022), the retail sector grossed R516bn in sales for the year to May 2022. This includes Supermarkets, garage forecourts as well as informal retail sector such as Spaza Shops and Taverns. R30 billion rands were online sales.

According to Madubela (2021) the informal sector is a 'township economy' that is worth billions and is sought after by the formal sector. The South African Marketing report

revealed that spaza shops contributed 5.2% to the total GDP of South Africa with 2.6 million people on its employ Rogerwilco (2022) hence the formal sector is looking to tap into this market. Even though the South African economy is still considered developing, the South African retail landscape depicts a saturated or mature market. (Malgas, Khatle & Mason, 2017).

In 2022 vs 2021 South African retail sales grew by 3.4% this is due to the lockdown restrictions being lifted. Consumers products were no longer restricted to essentials. The increase in sales in 2021 vs 2020 was 1.7% (Trading Economics, 2021). The strongest sales growth came from household furniture, appliances, and equipment. The reasons are likely that there were more people working from home and needing to be at home more with the sudden hybrid way of working. The next area to see a significant increase was fashion, probably because of consumers having to adapt their wardrobes for working from home and returning to the office after a lockdown. Corporate fashion has since changed to be more casual.

In a study done by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2021), the results revealed that 37% of respondents shopped in physical stores, 20% online via a PC, 20% online via a tablet, 27% via a smartphone device, 26% via homevoice such as Google Home. The stronger sales growth in 2022 vs 2021 and 2021 vs 2020 is largely contributed to the lifting of Covid 19 related lockdown restrictions.

South African consumers visit retail stores to shop for various goods such as but not limited to groceries, personal care, this is regardless of whether the retail store is in a physical form or in a digital form (Masojada, 2021). Masojada (2021) elaborates that digital stores are those that use the internet and a mobile or standing device. The Covid 19 pandemic propelled digital shopping and fostered the South African online business to grow by 66% in 2020. These results outperformed forecasts done prior to the pandemic.

There are 41.19 million active internet users in South Africa as of January 2022 (Johnson, 2022) browsing from desktops, smart phone, laptops and tablets. Of the 41.19 million, 28 million users use social media (Johnson, 2022) and 24 million shopping online (Research and Markets, 2021). These statistics reveal that there is

still a large untapped market and there is a potential for digital shopping channels to grow further in the country.

Seventy percent of a sample responded that responded to Deloitte (2022) revealed that they shop online at least once a month and see a need to reduce trips to physical stores because of increase transportation costs. According to calculation done by Automobile Association (AA), getting groceries delivered might be cheaper than going to the actual store (Pillay, 2022). Petrol prices globally including South Africa have been on a hike over the last few months. The price of petrol is 17% higher than it was in January of 2022 (AA, 2022)

While the scenario displays the need for South African retailers to consider bolstering their online presence, the study refers to consumer need for “cutting back” and “shop online at least once a month” meaning that physical stores still play a major role in the economy. The same study done by Deloitte also found that 26% of respondents prefer online shopping because of the convenience (ITWeb, 2022)

1.17 Unpacking the Omnichannel phenomenon

The technological trajectory has enabled the omnichannel phenomenon to change the game in the retail space from physical shopping to shopping in digital channels such as websites and mobile apps. There are many descriptions or definitions of the omnichannel retailing (OR) phenomenon. The omnichannel approach is a relatively new retailing strategy that Gao, Fan, Li, & Wang (2021) define as the coordinated management of channels that are available to a retailer and customer touchpoints, which intend to optimise customer experience across channels. Lazaris, Vrechopoulos, Sarantopoulos, & Doukidis (2022) define OR as an integrated sales experience that combines the benefits of brick-and-mortar stores with the convenient and information-rich experience of online shopping. The researcher observed that many academics define omnichannel shopping from the perspective of the retailer rather than the customer while Rahman, Carlson, Gudergan, Wetzels, & Grewal (2022) write the definition from a customer perspective. Rahman et. al. (2022) state that omnichannel shopping is when a customer seamlessly uses the multiple channels of a retailer and touchpoints in all stages of their customer journey.

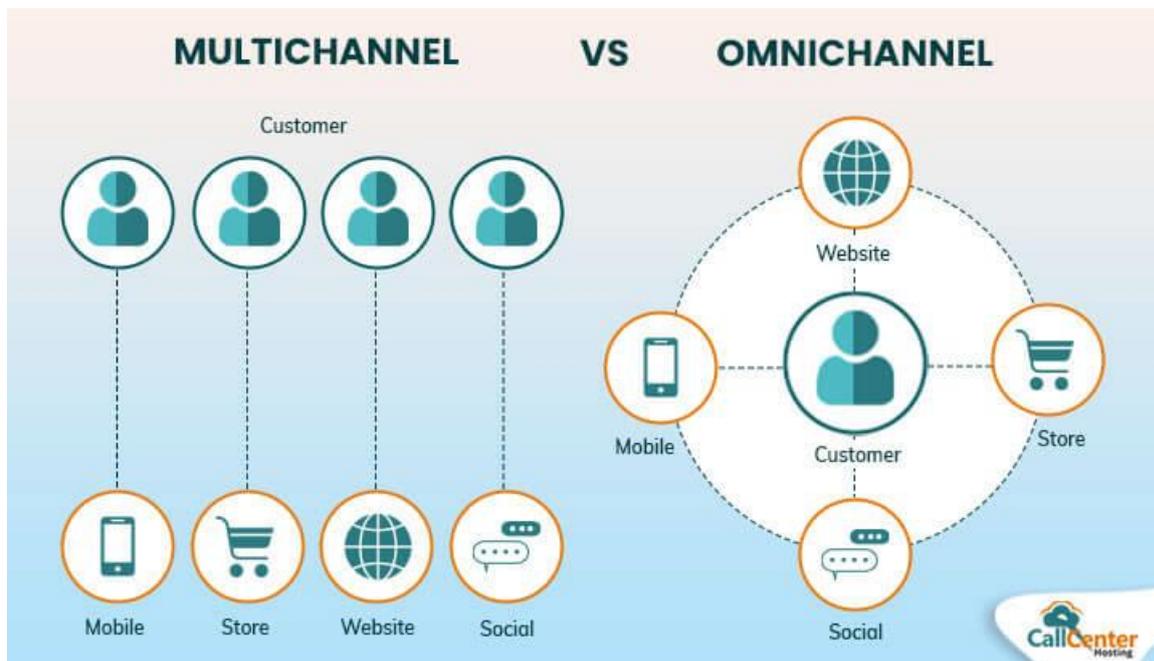
Nigay, Lebedinskaya, & Koshevaya (2021) explain the main difference between traditional channels such as physical stores and digital channels (mobile app, online, physical store, telephone). The multichannel approach services the customer in as many different channels as possible. Nigay et al. (2021) state the main objective of the multichannel approach is the need to ensure that the retailer reaches as many customers and as frequently as possible. The multichannel approach believes that the more channels there are the better. Contrary to the multichannel approach, the omnichannel approach seeks to tie all these channels together to a single ecosystem.

Instead of cannibalisation of physical stores, Gereá et al. (2021) believe that omnichannel has given retailers with a large physical store footprint the opportunity to integrate between their sales channels and touchpoints to increase sales revenue in stores. This will potentially save physical stores from becoming completely obsolete.

In today's world, customers have several options to seek information and prices about products. Customers can for example, browse for prices in price comparison websites, social media, and other online communities. They are also able to seek product information in traditional platforms such as brick and mortar stores as well as from online channels simultaneously (Hosseini, Merz, Röglinger, & Wenninge, 2018). In this digital era, customers want autonomy of their interaction with retailers during their customer journey (Hosseini et al., 2018). According to Hosseini et al. (2018), data about customer journeys and channel preferences can now be obtained much more easily because the customer online footprint has increased tremendously over the years.

The below picture depicts visually the difference between multichannel and omnichannel.

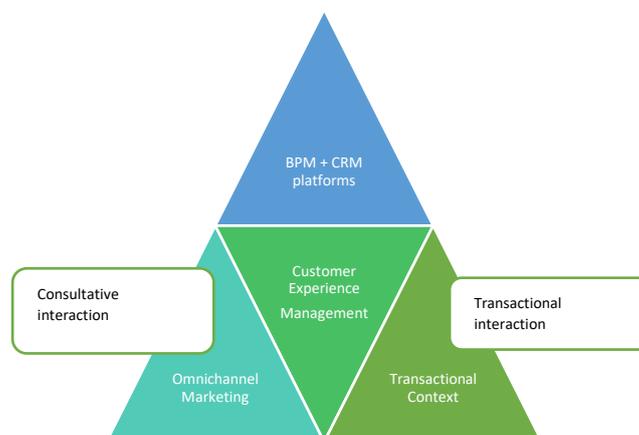
Figure 2. 2: Multichannel vs Omnichannel



Source: (Sharma, 2020)

It is evident that during the omnichannel process, customers can choose their preferred shopping channel, and they have the freedom to switch between channels at any time. The omnichannel approach is about unifying the way the customer interacts with the organisation through integrated channels (Nigay et al., 2021). This creates and enables continuous communication with the customer. (Nigay et al., 2021) further explains the omnichannel approach by developing the omnichannel prism.

Figure 2. 3: The omnichannel prism



Source: (Nigay et al., 2021)

Nigay et al. (2021) propose that the omnichannel prism shown in Figure 1 above, has three main integration points:

Integration at marketing level which integrates communication tools relating to customer relationship management (CRM). These CRM tools include content marketing, social media marketing (SMM), email marketing and messenger marketing.

Integration of Business Process Management (BPM) and CRM allows continuity from one platform to the next, when the customer is switching platforms.

Similarly, Rodríguez-Torrico et al. (2020) alluded that customers also consider the experience seamless when they can move freely across any channel of choice. An example of moving between channels entail moving from browsing on the website, to buying on a mobile application and collecting from a physical store also known as Click & Collect.

Retailers must ensure that their customer service agents are well equipped to handle tactics of the consumers' reality of switching channels (Sun, Yang, Shen, & Wang, 2020). Sun et al. (2020) add that there should also be tutorials available to customers to impart knowledge and competences about omnichannel procedures. Mishra, Malhotra, Chatterjee & Shukla (2021) suggest that when a customer feels empowered, the relationship with the retailer strengthens.

Integration at transactional level is when the customer engages with digital tools in an omnichannel approach. Gao et al. (2021) concurs that it is important to consider the completion of the transaction offline.

With integrated transaction information, the customer's transaction information across the company's channels is traceable. The benefit for the customer is that they can manage their order history, and this fast-tracks the customer's purchase decision in the future.

According to Nigay et al. (2021) all these components of integrated transactional information are important to support the customer through all the stages of interaction from decision making to the actual purchasing of goods whether online or offline. Gao et al. (2021) concurs that the intention of the integration is to ensure that the customer is treated consistently across different touchpoints of the omnichannel system. Organisations can communicate tailored product recommendations to customers based on integrated transactional information such as customer personal preferences, order history and ordering patterns.

In a nutshell, omnichannel retailing allows retailers to synchronise the way they interact with their customers in multiple channels. This means that for a retailer to be an omnichannel organisation, it is mandatory to place the customer at the core of the company interaction through integrating channels. This allows for consistency, which in turn translates to a seamless customer experience.

1.18 Customer experience

Zimmermann, Weitzl, & Auinger (2022) confirms what was discussed in chapter one that treating channels individually does not offer a seamless customer experience. Many retailers are beginning to adopt customer experience as the core of their business models Zimmermann et al. (2022).

In a study done in Austria, Zimmermann et al. (2022) report that retailers such as fashion, beauty and personal care, electronics and furniture retailers are moving towards integrating their online and offline platforms; with a view to increase reviews and enhancing customer experience.

Gao et al. (2021) describe customer experience as the way the customer feels and responds to interactions with a company's multiple touchpoints. Gao et al. (2021) further found that customer experience becomes apparent when a customer starts interacting with a retailer's products, services, staff, and even the general shopping environment. Organisations face a challenge of managing customer relationships across different channels (Gao et al., 2021). These challenges hinder them from providing a seamless customer experience.

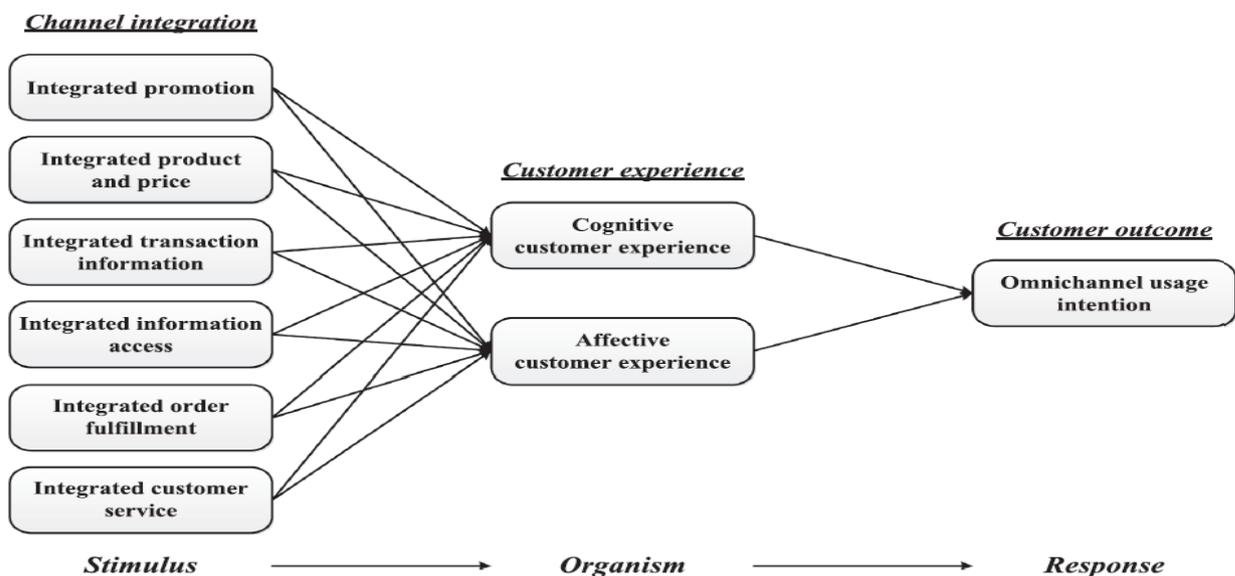
Gasparin, Panina, Becker, Yrjölä, Jaakkola, & Pizzutti (2022); Zimmermann et al. (2022) reveal that omnichannel research is from a company's perspective and not that of the customer. Zimmermann et al. (2022) further reveals that the way customers and companies perceive an optimal customer experience is completely different. Therefore, the present research project is important because it seeks to align the understanding of what customers perceive as an optimal omnichannel experience.

When retailers embark on the integration of channels, they need to understand exactly how customers will respond to each integration point to achieve an optimal customer experience.

Customer experience comprises of two main components namely cognitive response and affective response. These responses are subjective to each customer thus play a pivotal role for any organisation to succeed (Gao et al. 2021).

Rajaobelina, Brun, Prom, Tep, & Arcand (2018) illustrate the points of integration that stimulate either cognitive or affective responses, these are further discussed below.

Figure 2. 4: Customer responses that are stimulated by each point of integration



Source: (Gao et al., 2021)

Cognitive response relates to functional information, such as product quality and price which assists the customers to assess the right products and purchase decisions. For example, a consistent price and product information across channel will stimulate a cognitive response (Gao et al., 2021). With cognitive customer experience, the customer wants efficiency when obtaining products and services.

Affective response is when customer experience focuses on the pleasure and entertainment customers that comes with shopping (Gao et al., 2021). The interaction with different elements of the store, for example, digital signage, iPad, kiosks in a brick-

and-mortar store can provide visual stimuli for the customer. In an omnichannel environment, it brings the online aspect to the store. When affective responses are stimulated, the customer's purchase intentions tend to increase. When the customers' experience has a positive affect for example, enjoyment, they stay and interact with the store environment, which leads to a higher and faster intention to purchase.

1.19 Customer journey

As a result of the digital technology trajectory, the retail industry has experienced new sales channels (Cortias, Chocarro, & Elorz,2019), and customer journeys have become longer. Customers can visit multiple channels for one shopping experience to seek information and decision making. Cambra-Fierro, Polo-Redondo & Trifu (2021) define customer journey as a series of interactions or touchpoints between a customer and an organisation that relate all activities leading to a service delivery.

The traditional customer journey requires a predefined and sequential purchase decision process (PDP) by an organisation. It does not consider channels that are preferred by the customer that are not in the sequence, otherwise referred to as non-sequential customer journeys. Customer journeys become non-sequential customer journeys. The traditional customer journey usually starts with search, evaluation of the product and options, purchase decision and post purchase support.

With the new digital era, customer journeys are influenced by the customers' channel preferences. Customers can move forward and backward in any single purchase whether in a single retailer or different retailers for a single purchase. Due to this back-and-forth movements, the predefined decision process (PDP) is not sequential. This study will give insight on the channel shift decision process of the customer to assist retailer with designing the most optimal omnichannel retail experience.

According to Gasparin, Panina, Becker, Yrjölä, Jaakkola, & Pizzutti (2022) research proves that distinct experiences across touchpoints can be very attractive to customers retailers need to understand the reasons why customers uses different touchpoints at each time. This study will seek to gain insights on this.

Understanding customers' channel switching behaviour plays a pivotal role in predicting the purchase decision process (Hosseini et al., 2018), it cannot be predetermined by any organisation. Even if organisations had control over predetermining the customer decision process, some channels that a customer may move from do not belong to the retailer. Examples are Youtube, Facebook and Instagram where a customer may have sought product reviews first before buying the product at a store or online. Since the organisations have no control over these channels, they lack knowledge on client behaviour on these channels. Customer experience in the overall customer journey may not be always clear because the customer moves from touchpoint to touchpoint in their customer journey. This research study sought to understand customer behaviour in different touchpoints.

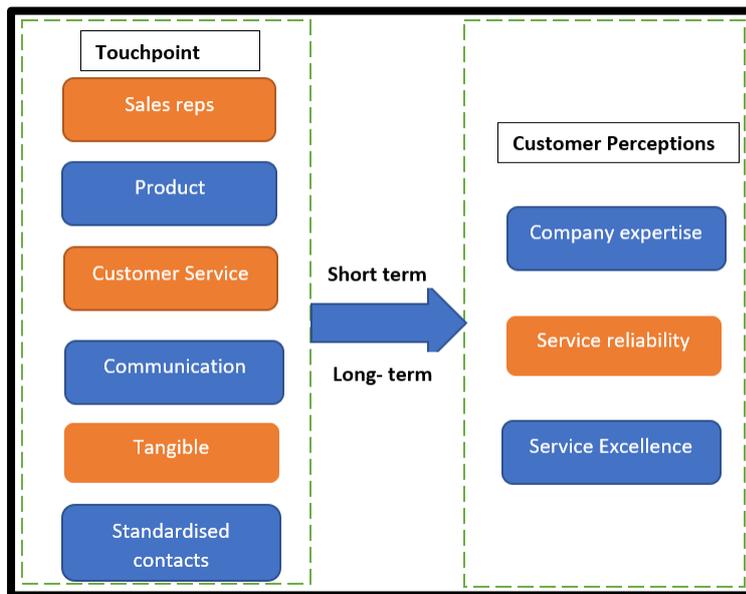
1.20 Customer Touchpoint

Touchpoints are crucial points in the customer journey from the point of awareness to the point of purchase and after purchase (Aichner & Gruber (2017). Aichner & Gruber (2017) define touchpoints as distinct points of contact between the customer and the company, these include behavioural, sensorial, social aspects of the interaction.

Gasparin, Panina, Becker, Yrjölä, Jaakkola, & Pizzutti (2022) define touchpoints as single contacts between the brand or a company and customers across the customer journey with the objective to gather information, make payments, unpacking, and use. The quality of these points of contact affect how the customer perceives the company or the brand. Cambra-Fierro et al. (2021) concur that touchpoints are a building blocks of a customer journey.

Aichner & Gruber (2017) classify six categories of key customer touchpoints which are illustrated below.

Figure 2. 5: Six categories of customer touchpoints



Source: Adapted from Aichner & Gruber (2017)

Each touchpoint above relates to the following:

- Sales Reps- these relate to human interactions (sales pitch, complaints)
- Product - these are product related, including delivery slips and packaging
- Customer Service - this touchpoint includes quotes and billing
- Communication - this refers to the communication strategy including sponsorship, promotions, and advertising
- Tangible - this relates to logos, window displays
- Standardised contact - this touchpoint relates to company emails, websites, and apps.

Cambra-Fierro et al. (2021) found that sales representatives and product are the only two touchpoints that leave both long and short-term effects on customers perception. This is possibly because the more the customer interacts with the sales representative, the stronger the bond. This can also be said about the product touchpoint because it is the core of the transaction. All the other touchpoints yield short-term effects on customer perception. The findings of this study will compare or contrast with current literature.

The use of new technology which was accelerated by the COVID19 pandemic (Gasparin et al., 2022) has played a major role in the increase in touchpoints over the years (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2021). This poses both opportunities and threats for companies. Customers have several touchpoints available to gather information, compare prices, purchase, payments, and ask for post-purchase assistance (Gasparin et al., 2022).

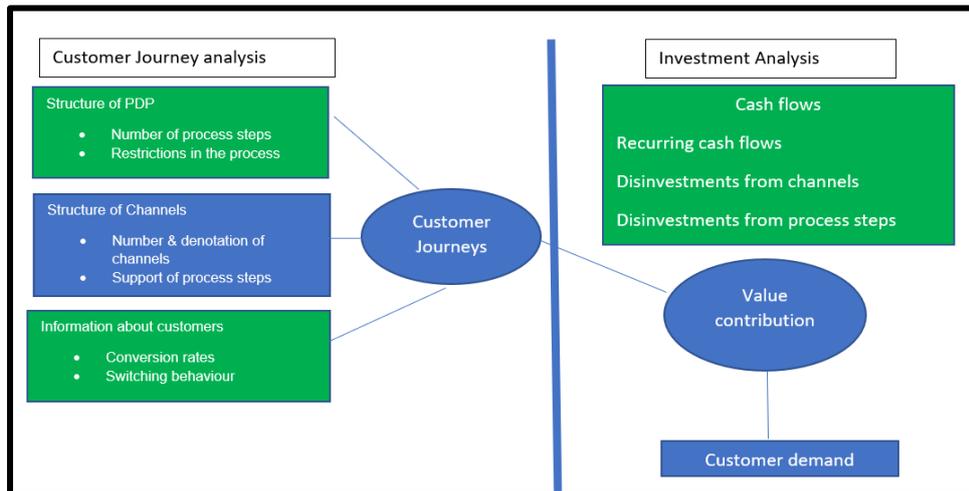
Growth strategies for companies should focus on better understanding the increasing points of contact with the customer (Nigay et al., 2021). Gao et al. (2021) concurs that it is important to understand the complexities of each of the channels in an omnichannel chain as this will empower managers to craft an optimal customer experience for their customers. Retailers do know how to influence these touchpoints, for example, a retailer has no control over a product review on YouTube. Retailers need to leverage off the opportunity of being visible in other channels and advertise and direct customers to their own platforms where they have control. As Cambra-Fierro et al., (2021) states retailers lack ways to identify touchpoints that influence the customer decision making process because they can only manage their own brand touch points such as advertising and in-store displays (Zimmermann et al., 2022). They should also turn threats to opportunities and publish their own content in these channels, this way they will have some control of the product or brand.

Markov's chain describes the importance of understanding how much a customer spends on each touch point before making an investment decision. Markov's chain for modelling customer journey and the principles of value-based management are some of the accepted theories accepted by corporates. Corporates use these tools for decision making relating to the modelling of omnichannel strategies (Hosseini et al., 2018). Hosseini et al. (2018) built on these theories by conceptualising the decision model that helps prescribes to retailers a mathematical method of identifying which touchpoint is used by the customer to prioritise investment during the omnichannel transformation

The below diagram illustrates using the decision model adapted from the Markov's chain. It illustrates the customer journey and investment analysis in an omnichannel context. It seeks to analyse the number of steps in a customer journey and amount of

time each customer spends on each step. Based on the outcome, meaning whichever step the customer spends more time on, the investment or disinvestment decision will be based on that.

Figure 2. 6: Decision model of investing in an omnichannel journey



Source: Adapted from Hosseini et al. (2018)

Hosseini et al. (2018)'s decision model identifies the omnichannel strategy that will give the biggest impact in the value of an organisation long-term. To achieve this, (Hosseini et al., 2018), analyse the customer journey using the Markovs chain. The Markov's chain is non-sequential, therefore the most suited for analysing an omnichannel customer journey. It also calculates probability rates of how long a customer will spend on each channel. Based on the outcomes of the Markovs chain, (Hosseini et al., 2018) also analyse the investment employed and required based on the customer interactions with each channel. As this research seeks to understand the behavioural patterns of when and why the customer moves from touchpoint to touchpoint, it would be important for South African retailers to note the Markov's model before investing or disinvesting in omnichannel platforms.

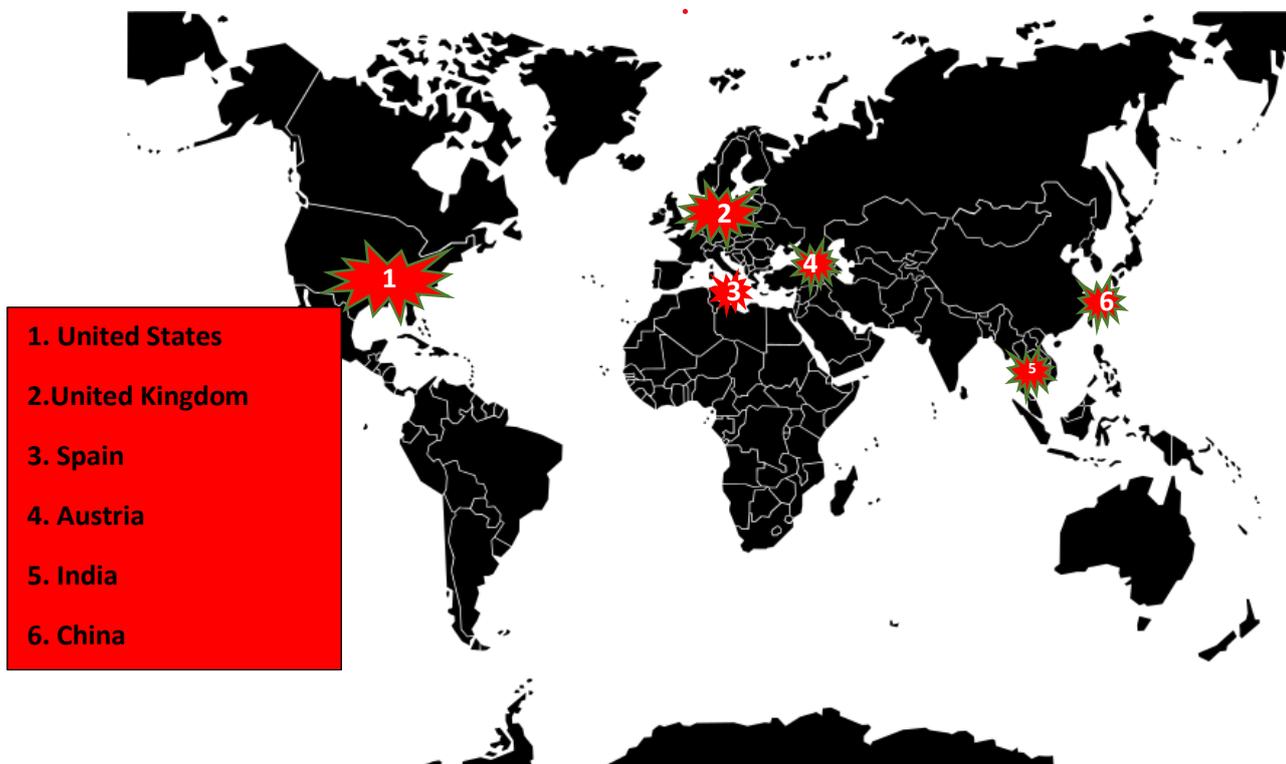
1.21 Factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel experience in other countries

This study was brought about by gaps and recommendations in literature. Different scholars recommended that omnichannel retail study should be done in other

countries. Generally, omnichannel retail literature is limited. There were limited studies found, to date, of this nature that concentrate on the South African omnichannel retailing experience nor on omnichannel retailing experience in other African countries.

The map below displays some of the countries that this study was conducted according to literature review.

Figure 2. 7: Origin of omnichannel retail studies in literature review



Source: Author's own mapping of studied countries, (VanHack, 2022)

2.7.1 China

In a study done in China, Zhang, Qin, Fu, & He (2019) believe that brick-and-mortar stores must be infused with technology that does not only aim at enhancing customer experience but also offer convenience for the customer. Augmented reality is one example that (Zhang et. al, 2019) make mention of, as technology that offers interactive customer experience.

Zhang et. al, (2019) write that personalisation is key to the customer. Consumers expect personalised incentives based on their previous purchases whether online or offline.

While South African customers expressed that personalisation was a contributing factor to an omnichannel retail experience, they did not seem to be interested in in-store technology.

(Chen et al., 2022) write that costs of running an omni channel operation are relatively steep. Poor integration is one of the reasons for costly operations. (Chen et al., 2022) further state that some retailers have had to close their physical stores because of steep operation costs associated with omnichannel retailing. The study done by Chen et al. (2022) also revealed that the quality of channel integration has a positive impact on customer experience. According to Chen et al. (2022) in social exchange theory, customers feel that they owe the retailer if the experience is positive and are feeling grateful. This makes them want to reciprocate by participating in more activities with the retailer.

2.7.2 United States

Quach, Barari, Moudrý, & Quach (2022) did a study in the United States with respondents sharing their previous experience at Walmart. (Quach et al., 2022) warn that their study is based on self-report data which maybe inaccurate. This study shares similar concerns as it is based on customers' previous experiences at retailer, meaning that they may not remember all the detail. The findings of (Quach et al., 2022)'s study differs in the sense that the American customer feels that service integration is crucial to enhancing customer experience in omnichannel retailing; the current study differs because the service integration is not expected by the South African customer

2.7.3 Spain

Cortiñas, Chocarro, & Elorz (2019) discovered that customers expect ease in all the channels. They also found that customers expect products they purchase at a brick-and-mortar store to do what was promised to do online. If not, they want easy ways

of returning the product at little or at no cost. Furthermore, in a sample of respondents in an age range of 36 to 73 years old, Cortiñas et al. (2019) found that the older customer was more prone to searching for information online and buying at a brick-and-mortar store. The younger customer with higher average income is more prone to executing the purchase online. The South African customer had the same expectation of returning the product at little or at no cost if bought online, however, this study did not ask the for the ages of participants.

2.7.4 United Kingdom

Hickman et.al. (2019) reveal that the four main drivers of an omnichannel experience from a British perspective are, familiarity of the brand, customisation of customer information and preferences, perceived value, and the willingness and readiness to use. Hickman et.al. (2019)'s study was qualitative based on the views of marketing professionals based in London. Contrary to the findings in China by Zhang et. al. (2020), Hickman et. al. (2019) found that British customers did not expect much technology in store. They expect a shopping assistant to be available to always assist them. Hickman et. al. (2019) findings were similar to that of this current study.

2.7.5 India

Mishra, Malhotra, Chatterjee & Shukla (2021) suggest that when multiple channels are integrated, they can lead to customer retention. The most important aspect that channel integration is the ability to communicate to customers (Mishra et al., 2021). This benefits both the customer and the retailer. When channels are synchronised, customers can access information easily. This in turn will increase their awareness of the company products and services. When the Indian customer feels empowered, as a result, the relationship with the retailer strengthens (Mishra et al., 2021). South African consumers reported to feel special when the relationship is personalised.

2.7.6 Austria

Zimmermann et al. (2022) did a comparison of customer touchpoint from a customer perspective and from a company perspective. They found that customers perceive

touchpoints differently to companies. They suggest that retailers pay more attention to what is perceived by the customer rather than their own thoughts. Zimmermann et al. (2022). The current study is based on views of the customer which would benefit the South African retail industry.

1.22 Comparison summary

Based on this information, the countries that have done this study are in the northern hemisphere. Countries such as the United Kingdom, some parts of the United States, Austria are developed economies that are heavily dependent on public transport. To avoid having to carry groceries on the train or the bus, they might want the option of online shopping, for instance. Even though India and China are growing economies, they are technological powerhouses, so it is not unexpected that they are among the first to do this research.

Whilst the countries are in the northern hemisphere, the findings are not very dissimilar to this study. Customers in China want a personalised experience like the South African customer however they want technology in-store, but the South African customer is not bothered by that. This finding is similar to that of the British customer. Just like the Indian customer, the South African customer expect product integration and easy access to information.

The purpose of omnichannel retailing is to mitigate the risks that come with multi-channel retailing, even so, omnichannel retailing has known challenges that retailers are facing which will be elaborated on below.

1.23 Challenges with omnichannel retailing

The below discussion focuses on four common omnichannel challenges experienced by retailers in the countries discussed above. These challenges are:

2.9.1 Privacy laws

Omnichannel retailing relies on pooling data from different sources such as websites, mobile applications, and other platforms to work efficiently (Cheah, Lim, Ting, Liu, & Quach 2022). Privacy concerns remain a challenge that hinders the growth of omnichannel retailing (Cheah et al., 2022). Privacy laws are means to protect the consumers' information and are therefore necessary. Retailers need adequate privacy protections and regulation policies to be able convert consumer interactions into sales which will result in business growth (Cheah et al., 2022). South African customers also expressed concerns about loss of information.

2.9.2 Showrooming

Another challenge faced by omnichannel retailers according to Quach et al. (2022) is showrooming. Showrooming is when a customer takes advantage of information from bricks- and-mortar store but decides to make a purchase online even from a different retailer. This means that the brick-and-mortar store acted as a showroom to the customer. Quach et al. (2022) found that when the retailer is unreliable, customer satisfaction and retention decreases. The perceived risk leads to a more showrooming behaviour by customers. Retailers in South Africa also face the showrooming challenge because of the need for the customer touch and feel. If the retailer is reliable, they have a chance of the customer buying from them however, if the customer does not have a good experience in-store they may decide to go to a different retailer.

2.9.3 Conflicting views on integration

There is a misalignment on customer attitudes towards the omnichannel phenomenon amongst scholars. According to Gasparin et al. (2022), current research assumes that customers require a specified level of integration. It does not consider that each customer experiences a different journey in an omnichannel chain alluding to that integration is not always best for the customer. This contradicts the discussions that advocate for channel integration therefore it is important for this study to understand

which parts of the omnichannel process need to be integrated based on the customers' views.

2.9.4 Lack of benchmarks

The omnichannel phenomenon is still in its infancy. Retailers are not able to use lessons learned from other industries (Gasparin et al., 2022) such as banking, health and insurance. The lack of insights may prolong the omnichannel retailing learning process.

The challenges that exist within the omnichannel retailing phenomenon leave a gap for some mitigation plans to come from customers to assist retailers to develop suitable omnichannel strategies that are customer centric which is exactly why this study is going to make a useful academic and practical business management contribution.

2.8 Chapter summary

This chapter starts by giving context of the South African retail landscape. It further unpacks the omnichannel phenomenon. This chapter reveals that for businesses to offer customers a seamless and personalised customer experience, they need to understand the intricacies of different customer journeys. Unlike in single or multiple channels, customer journeys are no longer sequential. In an omnichannel environment, customer journeys have become non-sequential, because customers can switch from one channel to the next in any order.

Chapter 2 expands on the fact that businesses can use tools such as the Markov tool to understand customer journeys to build unique experiences. A customer experience is unique to each customer and is based on their purchasing motives.

Retailers must be aware that each customer interaction can make or break the brand. With great opportunities come challenges. Retailers face several challenges that are associated with omnichannel retailing. Some of these include issues with data breaches, lack of understanding of consumer behaviours, showrooming amongst others.

This study was inspired by some of the gaps in the literature that was reviewed in this chapter. These emphasised the importance of developing the omnichannel retailing experience from the angle of the customer. Many studies omnichannel retailing with customer experience as a measure were done outside South Africa. This is how this study was inspired.

Chapter 3 will elaborate on the research methodology introduced in Chapter 1 in more detail.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Research is the search for new knowledge, or it can be referred to as application of new or existing knowledge about a phenomenon (Mukherjee, 2019). Mukherjee (2019) adds that the ultimate outcome of research is to explore new knowledge acquired by combining and processing informational fragments generated in the data collection phase.

Kapur (2018) views research as a way of critical thinking, understanding guiding principles and a way of advancing of practices. It is an academic activity that consists of defining problems, gathering information, and providing solutions (Kapur, 2018; Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021). Researchers must establish a plan of action of how they will execute their research to achieve their intended objectives. This is known as the research methodology. In essence, research methodology is a strategy and the plan that the researcher will be following (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021). It is important to use methodology that is appropriate to your research to ensure objectives are met and the findings are credible.

In this study, the researcher begins the research investigation by developing the philosophical worldview employing a research paradigm. This qualitative study uses the interpretivist philosophical approach because of its close relationship to qualitative research. Because this study is using the interpretivist philosophy, hermeneutic phenomenological as a research design is one that complements the philosophy because of its nature that elicits probing. The research paradigm plays a crucial role in shaping the researcher's methodological approach that will be used to investigate the research questions (Ragab & Arisha, 2017).

This chapter outlines the research methodology followed in the study. It discusses the research design, instrument design, sampling technique, and the enrolment process. To gather data, virtual or remote interviews were used. The study's hermeneutic phenomenological methodology allows for probing, which helped to elicit more information from the participants. According to (Paul, 2017) researchers can interpret

the narrator's precise experience to the point of comprehending it from the narrator's perspective with the help of interpretivist research.

This chapter emphasises the data analysis process and highlights the significance of data trustworthiness. The researcher goes on to discuss the techniques used, such as credibility, dependability, and transferability. These elements helped make the data trustworthy. The significance of reflection in ensuring objectivity of the study is also covered. Ethical considerations, such as privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality are included in this chapter.

3.2 Research Methodology

Research methodology is the strategy and the plan that the researcher intends to follow when conducting research (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021). Ragab & Arisha (2017) describe it as a format that researchers use to determine how investigations will take place. It links the researcher to outcomes. Research methodology also assists researchers by acting as a guide about potential data gathering and analysis methods (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021).

Ragab & Arisha (2017) write that there is no standard methodology. Each study should follow a methodology based on the nature and scope of the topic. Ragab & Arisha (2017) further report that research process typically starts by the researcher determining the philosophical worldview.

3.3 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy is used as a methodology to determine answers to research questions, the data collection procedures and techniques, data analysis, findings and presentation of results (Alturki, 2021).

There are various research philosophies can be utilised namely positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism and pragmatism (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021). Generally, the positivist philosophy is often linked quantitative research, interpretivism is associated with qualitative research and post positivism and pragmatism is often linked to mixed methods (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021).

The researcher uses the interpretivist philosophical worldview in this study because of the intention to gain deep insights from individuals about their shopping experiences. According to Ragab & Arisha (2017) interpretivism can be applied in certain contexts which are too complex to apply rules and formulae. The South African retail industry respondents have very diverse cultures and situational settings hence there is a level of complexity to it, as discussed in Chapter two.

Applying the interpretivist approach to this study is deemed most suitable. Interpretivism will aid in capturing the mindset and the social context because the participants represent the diverse South African setting. In interpretivist research, much of the knowledge gained is perceived as subjective and unique to each narrators personal context. It is not the absolute truth and therefore cannot be replicated in other contexts (Ragab & Arisha, 2017). Nayak & Singh, (2015) however, argue that interpretivism assumes that all research has a level of bias. Nayak & Singh (2015) suggest that qualitative research must include reflexivity whereby the researcher considers how they may have influenced the findings of the study. For this study, the researcher has included a reflective statement which she consults throughout the research process to avoid a level of bias.

This study uses the qualitative research approach because according to Sibbald, Asif Jiwani, & Martin (2022) qualitative research affords the researcher to talk to or observe participants, on previous experience, perspective, interaction and even relationships. Typically, these elements are very difficult to capture in numbers or using quantitative research. This means that the qualitative approach can give insights to complex situations.

3.4 Qualitative Research Approach

Aspers & Corte (2019) define the qualitative research method as an “iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied.” Another key characteristic of qualitative research is that it places value on the context and the experience that had taken place (Sibbald et al., 2022). For this research,

individuals will be reflecting on previous shopping experiences with retailers. Sibbald et al. (2022) further add that qualitative research often involves speaking to the participant through interviews or focus groups thus capturing their experiences in their own voice.

There is no evidence that demonstrates whether the qualitative approach is superior to the quantitative approach or vice versa, however, qualitative research approach is dominated by quantitative approach (Ataro, 2020). Chapter one revealed that there are limited studies on omnichannel retail customer experiences that use qualitative research globally. This opened a gap for a qualitative study of this topic to be done in South Africa.

LaMarre & Chamberlain (2022) state that some courses have made qualitative research compulsory and is becoming more recommended in university curricular across the globe. LaMarre & Chamberlain (2022) raise concerns of the dominance of interviews in qualitative research to a point that qualitative research and interviews are used interchangeably (LaMarre & Chamberlain, 2022). Thelwall & Nevill (2021) concur that qualitative research may be thought of as just a method that analyses unstructured non-numerical data.

Other negatives associated with qualitative research are that there is a growing concern around the increase of big data methods being a threat to qualitative research. Thelwall & Nevill (2021) believe that big data might eventually be able to get deep insights using algorithms. Having done, this study and having the experience of customers expressing their experiences, that cannot be replace by quantitative data. I was able to get the exact insights on customer emotions on certain topic which cannot be easily done if their thinking is boxed.

3.5 Research design

There are several commonly used qualitative research designs. These are grounded theory, case study, phenomenological research including hermeneutics, narrative research, and action research (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021).

This study utilises the hermeneutic phenomenology because the researcher will be interpreting customer experiences and is the most suited to answering the research questions posited.

Phenomenology is a powerful research strategy that focuses on individual's lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). The goal of phenomenology is to understand exactly what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Phenomenology can be defined as an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a situation by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). The present study seeks customers to elaborate on how the experience of shopping online and in physical stores were for them in the last six months preceding this research project.

The phenomenology method will also assist in determining whether the various retailers where these individuals shop have shaped their way of thinking. Although two retailers may target the same demographic strata of customers, a customer that purchases at Checkers online (for example) or in a physical store may have different expectations than one that shops at Woolworths, as an example.

According to Neubauer et al. (2019), the phenomenological approach requires the hermeneutic phenomenologist to interpret the narratives provided by participants in relation to their contexts. The root of hermeneutic phenomenology is interpretation (Neubauer et al., 2019) of previous experiences in the narrator's world; how they influence the choices of the individual. This benefits the study because the researcher will be able to tell the story from the participant's point of view.

The two aspects of phenomenology employed in research is firstly transcendent phenomenology, which is used in quantitative studies, and secondly hermeneutics, which is utilised in qualitative studies. The transcendental phenomenology treats the research findings and the researcher as objects (Hesham, 2017). It uses bracketing in a mathematical way. The expectation is that the researcher should transcend his personal attitude towards the research and suspend his belief regarding the phenomenon (Hesham, 2017). Contrary to transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutics consider the researcher as an important part of the research because

they are also part of the world that being investigated (Hesham, 2017) and therefore it is important that the researcher always reflects on her on biases.

The next section discusses the population and the sampling frame that was used for this research study.

3.6 Population and sampling frame

3.6.1 Sampling design

Sampling refers to the identification of a small group of members that represent the larger population (Ragab & Arisha, 2017). Ngozwana (2018) writes that the process of identifying the place and the people to participate in a study is done through sampling. According to Arrogante (2022) sample selection and calculations are important for the generalisability of the results of the study. Poor technique of sampling could limit results. This is a qualitative study which usually has an inherent risk of lack of generalisability because of the small sample size (Rahman, 2016). Chapter two demonstrated that there are possibly 32.55 million online shoppers (which is the population) but we will interview only a small sample of those respondents.

There are two categories of sampling methods (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021) namely probability sampling which means that every person in the population has an equal chance of being selected and non-probability sampling which sets a criterion. This research used non-probability sampling.

3.6.2 Non-probability sampling

With non-probability sampling, the selection of the respondents contacted to carry out the research will be made using specific criteria (Wegner, 2012). This means that the selection is not random. This study uses a purposive sampling technique which is a non-probability sampling technique that is dominant (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021).

3.6.2.1 Purposive sampling

Ramsook (2018) describes purposive sampling as a qualitative sampling method where the researcher intentionally selects individuals to participate in the study.

With purposive sampling, (Arrogante, 2022) states that the researcher selects participants that are viewed as having in-depth knowledge. Recruitment can be done via an organisational leadership or committees (Hensen, Mackworth-Young, Simwinga, Abdelmagid, Banda, Mavodza, Doyle, Bonell, & Weiss, 2021). For this study, the sampling frame consists of individuals that have shopped at a South African retailer online and offline in the last six months preceding the study. The sample will be the researcher's network.

There is generally no consensus amongst theorists on the sample size for a qualitative study. According to Paul (2017) data is said to be saturated when new narratives appear, nor do they provide further insights into the phenomenon. Paul (2017) writes that the researcher should collect phenomenological themes of about five to twenty-five individuals.

Bartholomew, Joy, Kang & Brown (2021) write that there is no standardisation in phenomenological studies. Bartholomew et al. (2021) expressed confusion amongst researchers regarding the appropriate sample size in phenomenology and qualitative research. However, according to Hennink & Kaiser (2022) data saturation guides the adequacy of purposive samples in a qualitative study.

Hennink & Kaiser (2022) argues that data saturation can be achieved in a narrow range of interviews nine to seventeen interviews. This study conducted 11 interviews in the cross sectional study in order to meet the university's allotted time frames for completion.

3.7 Data collection method

The choice of a research instrument tends to be reliant on the research topic being investigated, theories, hypothesis that are being tested including methodologies applied (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021). In qualitative studies, there are several data

collection methods that can be used for collecting primary data. These are questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and observations (Ndenje-Sichalwe & Elia, 2021).

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach used in this study provides the opportunity for probing assists with getting insights from the participants, hence interviews were chosen as a research instrument. An interview is a data collection method where one person (an interviewer) asks questions to another person (a respondent) either face to face or virtually (Nayak & Singh, 2015; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021).

Interviews give a direct voice to the respondents and allows them to articulate their perspective in their own words (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021).

Communication tools have become more advanced over the years, opening new opportunities to conduct qualitative research (Archibald, Ambagtsheer, Casey, & Lawless, 2019). The current technological tools available such as Zoom, Microsoft (MS) Teams and Google Meet are some that were used by most businesses during the global pandemic lockdowns as platform to host interviews. Remote interviews are cost efficient in comparison to in-person interviews (Archibald et al., 2019) because one does not need to travel, usually saving in travel costs. However, remote interviews have challenges that include poor video quality, poor transcribing from platforms and the costs of data bundles are also required (Archibald et al., 2019). For this study, participants opted to MS Teams for the interviews, the researcher experienced the poor transcribing from this platform to a point that she opted to discard the MS Teams transcription but rather listen to the interview and transcribe for herself because it was taking longer to edit than transcribing from scratch.

The researcher chose interviews to gain a better understanding of the phenomena from the customer's own words and context. Interviews were chosen by the researcher because of the flexibility they offer in asking additional questions as necessary to capture the genuine substance of the experience.

Thelwall & Nevill (2021) state that when the respondent's voice is clear, the chance of the researcher imposing their own perspective reduces.

According to Nayak & Singh (2015) interviews as method of gathering data are particularly suitable when the researcher wishes to collect data that is about:

- Emotions, experiences, and feelings.
- Sensitive topics.
- Confidential information.
- when dealing with young children, illiterates, language difficulty and limited intelligence.

This is another reason why interviews are best suited for this study because customers will be expressing their experiences.

Types of interviews vary from but not limited to structured, semi structured to unstructured interviews (Nayak & Singh, 2015). Interviews may be limited to one person or extended to several people.

3.7.1 Structured Interviews

The format of questions and answers are controlled. This is like a questionnaire where the researcher has a predetermined list of questions but is done face to face with the respondent. This type of interview is generally formal and conducted often when collecting a large amount of data. An example would be collecting data for census.

3.7.2 Semi-Structured Interview

The interviewer also has a clear list of issues to be addressed however there is some flexibility in the order of the topics. In this type, the interviewee is given chance to ask probing questions if a need arises.

3.7.3 Unstructured Interviews

These types of interviews place emphasis on the interviewee's thoughts. The researcher must be as un-intrusive as possible. The researcher's role is to introduce a theme or topic and then for the respondent to pursue her own ideas.

The present study uses semi-structured interviews. The researcher had predetermined list of questions that were used to guide the researcher towards answering the research questions of the study. The questions were open-ended and at times were followed up by probing or clarifying questions that allowed for collection of open-ended data. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a phenomenon (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interview schedule questions were approved by the university's ethical clearance committees.

3.7.4 The role of the researcher in an interview

Phenomenological narrative is a self-reflective narrative meaning that the researcher's role is quite limited (Paul, 2017). The researcher merely acts a guide to the respondent to arrive at a point where they can elaborate on the experience being discussed (Paul, 2017). Paul (2017) further states that the researcher remains open to exploring the context of the phenomenon.

Paul (2017) suggests 3 steps to follow when conducting phenomenological research methodology.

- **Step 1:** Identify the phenomenon that will form part of the enquiry. Ensure that it provides an opportunity to engage with direct human experiences
- **Step 2:** Choose interviewees that have prolonged experience in the phenomenon. They will eventually share their lived experiences
- **Step 3:** Remember 3 key themes when interviewing:
 - "What does an individual experience in terms of the phenomenon?"
 - "What situations have influenced the individual?"
 - "How were they affected?"

During the interview, Nayak & Singh, 2015 writes that the interviewer should

- be silent and allow the respondent to think aloud.
- Repeat what the respondent is saying encouraging them to develop the point further.
- Use phrases such as "oh" or "yes" or "ok" to express interest.

- Clearly ask the respondent to elaborate on the issue by saying “Tell me more”
- Ask lengthier questions to suggest that a detailed response is sought.

3.8 Ethical Consideration

There are some ethical considerations that a researcher may encounter in qualitative research (Ngozwana, 2018). The Nelson Mandela Business School has a Research Ethics Committee (REC) that ensures that all research projects go through appropriate ethics protocols. The ethics clearance process is quite intensive. It involves submitting the research proposal, which is now chapter 1. The researcher also needs to submit the Research Ethics Committee (Human) (REC-H) form where the researcher stipulates detail on the target group that will be interviewed, the recruitment and enrolment processes as well as highlighting some of the risks, legal aspects and ethics considerations that may be associated with the project. Some of the ethical and legal consideration discussed are confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal from the study (Ngozwana, 2018).

3.8.1 Privacy, Anonymity and Confidentiality of Data

The Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA or the Act), No. 4 of 2013, came into effect in South Africa on 1 July 2021. All research activities that entail the collection, processing, and storage of personal information are implicated (Adams, Adeleke, Anderson, Bawa, Branson, Christoffels, de Vries, Etheredge, Flack-Davison, Gaffley, Marks, Mdhluli, Mahomed, Molefe, Muthivhi, Ncube, Olckers, Papathanasopoulos, Pillay, Ramsay, 2021). Adams et al. (2021) further write that the regulation will run in parallel with other regulatory laws that govern research in South Africa, such as guidelines for research that involves animals (Animal Protection Act 71 of 1962) and protection of Children, (Children’s Act 38 of 2005).

For this research, the participant’s consent was obtained during the recruitment and up to the interview stage. Before the interview commenced, the researcher reconfirmed with the participants that the interview is voluntary, and that they may

withdraw at any stage should they so wish. The researcher continued to give the participants detail on confidentiality.

This means that the research will only be used for the purpose of this study and that their identities will always be concealed. As the interviews were recorded via Zoom and MS Teams, consent was also requested to record the interviews. The interviews took place only once the consent was granted.

The participants were also notified that the information will be stored in password protected devices by the Primary Responsible Person (PRP). The PRP will keep a copy of the interpreted results in secure systems from the business school for the duration of this MBA research and for five years thereafter for audit and verification purposes.

Data will only be returned as interpreted transcripts which will further enhance anonymity of participants.

At the time of disposal, the data will be destroyed.

3.8.2 Enrolment process

The researcher sent a WhatsApp message to networks giving them context of the study. The WhatsApp included the recruitment letter (Appendix 11) that was approved by the business school as well as the ethics clearance number. The Appendix contains the criteria of customers which is required for this study. These customers would have shopped in physical stores and digital platforms in the last 6 months. After the individuals confirmed their interest in participating in the study, we agreed on the platform to be used for data collection as well as date and time. The participants were further sent an enrolment letter (Appendix 12) that stipulates voluntary participation, option to withdraw and confidentiality of the study.

3.8.3 Trustworthiness of the data

A language processing tool (LPT) is one way of ensuring trustworthiness (Skjott, Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). While using LPT allows the researcher to process very large amounts of data, there are obvious consequences to using such a system as Skjott (2019) state one of them being detachability from their empirical context. Literature on qualitative research reveals that believability of the findings should be

prioritised over their detachability from their empirical context Skjott (2019). Skjott (2019) further suggest that classifying and counting the number of instances of a given event should not be used in place of extensive comprehensive descriptions, context elaboration, specific examples, or the inclusion and discussion of opposing data.

The researcher used Atlas.ti as a language processing tool for thematic analysis. The researcher checked codes against her understanding. The researcher had field notes which she used to check her pre-understanding from her field notes against the codes. Farooq (2018) writes that with interpretation comes a risk of misunderstanding and it is important for researchers to declare the possibility of not understanding. This process was to address the issue of trustworthiness of the data.

Farooq (2018) adds that trustworthiness of an interpretative study can be evaluated by assessing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.8.3.1 Credibility

The researcher did triangulation with the supervisor to ensure credibility of the data. The researcher also sent the transcripts back to the participants to ensure correct interpretation of the experiences.

3.8.3.2 Transferability

The interviews took place virtually via Microsoft Teams. They took place during working hours and some after hours when participants had come back from work. This study is transferrable if another researcher seeks to do interviews virtually or if another researcher wants to conduct interviews virtually in a home or office setting.

3.8.3.3 Dependability

The researcher used a peer (external researcher) to go through the transcripts. The supervisor also reviewed the transcripts.

3.8.3.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is established when credibility, transferability, dependability has occurred. Another important factor to determine confirmability is for the researcher to disclose the amount of her prejudices and assumptions (Ramsook, 2018). The researcher wrote a reflective statement which she referenced back to often, as well as her field notes to check her biases towards the study.

3.8.4 Reflection

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (McGrath, Palmgren, & Liljedahl, 2019). The social context of the researcher impacts how the research is approached, in terms of how the researcher asks questions or interprets the data.

Researchers' interpretation of social worlds impacts the research interest (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). This means that it is important that the researcher is aware and understands their social standing and their power to influence the research (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). For this research, the researcher used the Jacobson & Mustafa, (2019) social identity map, to map out her standing in society. This helped identify how her interests, namely, her career, social and personal life may influence how she conducts the research.

The researcher is a divorced black woman in her 40's with three children in primary school. She has a busy lifestyle, having to transport her kids to and from school and other extra-mural activities. The researcher is also an MBA student and belongs to and has led social movements for Gender based violence (GBV) and femicide.

The sudden increase in retail platforms have made her life much easier. Now, she can order from the comfort of her own home and get the shopping delivered at home or collected at her convenience from a local pick-up point.

The researcher has pre-conceptions that the South African retail industry is still behind when it comes to retail technology in comparison the rest of the world. She does not believe that there is an existing authentic omnichannel retailer in South Africa but rather that retailers with multiple channels do exist.

The importance of mapping out social identities was valuable to the researcher; firstly, during the interview process, for example, the practice of not asking leading questions and secondly the data interpretation process made her question her interpretation to ensure that it was not her own belief.

3.9 Data analysis

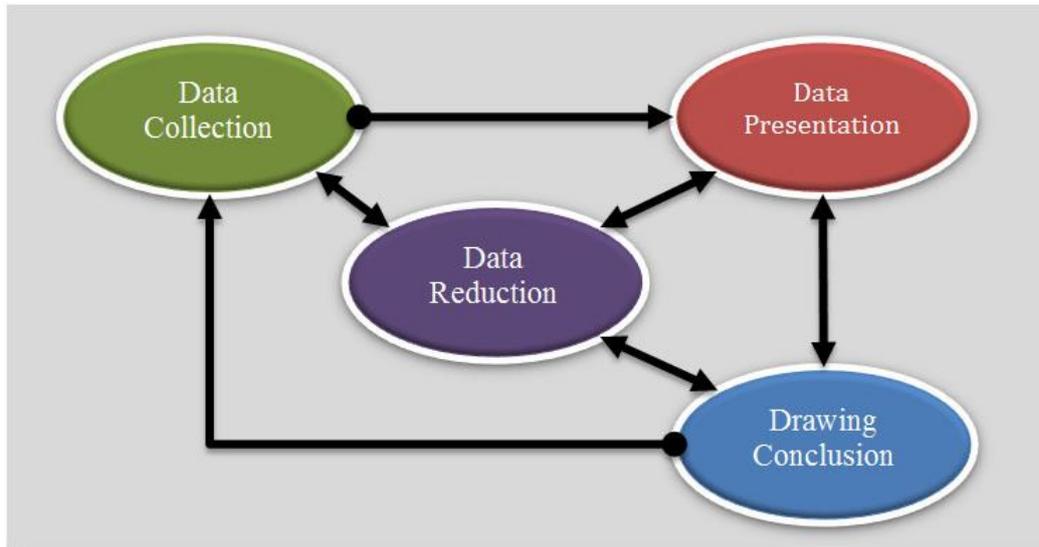
This study used semi-structured interviews as a method of collecting data. As previously discussed, interviews provide the opportunity to the interviewee to express their experience in a flexible way. These interviews were recorded using the recording functionality on the video conferencing platform Ms Teams. The researcher ensured that the time that was scheduled for interviews with the participants that they will not be impacted by loadshedding. While transcripts were then generated automatically from the recordings the researcher decided not to use them because they were taking longer to edit than if she were to transcribe herself from scratch. Data analysis started at the time the researcher was transcribing because she could already identify the patterns that were being discussed.

There are several commonly used qualitative data analysis methods. These are grounded theory, discourse analysis, hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, narrative analysis, and thematic analysis (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). As this study used the hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology, hermeneutic data analysis was also used.

Hermeneutics is a method and theory that can be traced back to the time of writings of Aristotle which was used to interpret written data (Monaro, Gullick, & West 2022) Hermeneutic phenomenology data analysis is not a prescriptive methodology (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021; Neubauer et al., 2019) and many researchers struggle to analyse data because of its lack of structure (Alsaigh & Coyne, 2021). To mitigate against the lack of structure of hermeneutic analysis, the researcher used Miles and Huberman's (1984) concurrent flows of activity. This concurrent flow of activities whose elements

include, data reduction, data presentation, drawing conclusions, and verification is illustrated below.

Figure 3. 1: Concurrent flow of activities



Source: Miles and Huberman, (1984)

3.9.1 Data reduction

The objective of the data reduction process is to determine which data to code initially by allocating labels and identifying patterns to explore (Monaro, Gullick, & West 2022). Monaro et. al (2022) further state that it is a process of interrogating, simplifying, and summarising of the data. The researcher transcribed the interview from the recording using MS Word. The researcher then replayed the recording while reading the transcripts for understanding and accuracy. Scholars refer to this as double hermeneutics. This is a two-step process according to Dabengwa, Raju, Matingwina (2020) that involves:

- i) Participants expressing their social contexts in an interview
- ii) The researcher summarises narratives to make senses of the experiences as one common meaning

Each transcript was interpreted collated by question and uploaded on Atlas.ti software for coding and identification of recurring themes. The researcher ended up with twelve different projects on Atlas.ti. Coding involves examining a portion of the text then

labelling it with a word or short phrase that summarizes its content (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The researcher was also able to bookmark some of the quotations she was intending to use for reporting. When all the themes were labelled and categorised, they were deemed ready for data presentation to commence.

3.9.2 Data Presentation

After data has been reduced, it is organised in a way that is easily accessible, easy to read and draw patterns and conclusions (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Data can be presented visually in various ways including coding trees, mind maps, matrices, or diagrams (Skjott et.al., 2019; Monaro, Gullick, & West 2022). Monaro et. al (2022) further add that data display is an important feature to rigorous analysis. This study used Microsoft Excel to table the data into categories and sub-categories. The researcher then colours coded the themes to group them into sub-themes. According to Skjott et.al. (2019) matrices are the most used types of data displays.

3.9.3 Drawing conclusions and verification

3.9.3.1 Conclusions

Conclusion gives insight to the study's research objectives and questions (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The new insights may prompt the researcher for further sampling or reframing or even a shift in the direction of analytical thinking. The researcher did a quick run scan, or as (Miles & Huber, 1984) refer to as "squint analysis" through across columns and rows to spot any obvious patterns, contrasts, counting and clustering.

3.9.3.2 Verification

The verification process usually spans from the beginning of the cycle of analysis, ensuring the credibility of the research process (Monaro et. al., 2022). While verification in a longitudinal study is to check with a participant the accuracy of a transcript or assess how their experiences connect to a developing understanding of the researcher, member checking is not necessarily an element of interpretive phenomenology (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). First conclusions were checked against

field notes for this study, and whenever the researcher was not clear, she went back and listened to the recording. Data labels and coding used in the beginning of the analysis process were also revisited and cross referenced.

3.10 Synthesizing and Reporting of data

The selection of the analytical approach guides the synthesis of qualitative research (Soilemez & Linceviciute, 2018). (Soilemez & Linceviciute, 2018) further add that this selection typically depends on the research question and scope of the study (Soilemez & Linceviciute, 2018). In hermeneutic phenomenological research, the interpretive meanings are instrumental in describing lived experiences. This study uses thick description of the essence of experience as well as description of the emerging themes to report on the findings. This helps with contextualising the detail.

The researcher also use verbatim as well as paraphrased quotes to report on findings. The researcher used pseudonyms such as Participant 1 to identify the participants to ensure anonymity.

3.11 Chapter Summary

The objective of this chapter was to describe the strategy employed to address the research topic. This chapter discussed the technique, study participants, sampling strategy, data collection and analysis; the researcher's position as the main research instrument, how the study was carried out and who participated in it. Lastly, it highlights some ethical considerations followed as well as how findings will be reported.

The next chapter will present the study's findings and demonstrate that the approach stated in Chapter 3 was followed.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain insights on customers' perceptions of a seamless omnichannel retail experience from a South African perspective. This study sought insights from the researcher's network that have shopped online and offline in any retailer in South Africa within six months preceding the study. This chapter introduces the results of the analysis which stems from the data collected through semi-structured interviews. The data collected from the interviews were supplemented by literature, sourced from peer reviewed journals. The objective of the literature was to determine if there are differences or similarities compared to other countries such as China, United Kingdom, Spain, and others which are discussed in Chapter 2.

The findings of this chapter were able to address the following research objectives:

- 1) To measure what customers perceive as the most optimal retail omnichannel experience
- 2) To identify when customers decide to move from one channel to the next during a purchase.
- 3) To understand what customers, feel that retailers need to improve on to make the experience of shopping across channels seamless?

The study uses hermeneutic analysis which was discussed in Chapter 3. This chapter is presented in two parts. The first part of the findings study gives an overview of the customer's buying patterns such as preferred retailers and product preference by channel. The details were obtained from participants' transcripts to visually illustrate shopping patterns and preferences amongst participants using tables and graphs.

The study did not have exclusions. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 65. The other criterion was that the participants must have shopped online and offline in any South African retailer. No demographic information was requested from the participants.

The second part discusses the actual themes that made findings of the study. These themes seek to address the research questions.

4.2 Customer background

When the participants were asked to name three of their favourite retailers, Woolworths was in the top three for nine out eleven participants interviewed. Checkers was in the top three for four of the participants, while Pick n Pay was in the top three for three of the participants. Hennes & Maurits (H&M) and Zara were mentioned twice as a favourite retailer.

The below table gives a summary of the top five retailers that were frequently mentioned as the top three retailers where the participants shop:

Table 4. 1: Frequently mentioned retailers

Retailer	Number of Respondents
○ Woolworths	9
○ Checkers	4
○ Pick n Pay	3
○ H&M	2
○ Poetry	2

Source: Author's Own Summary

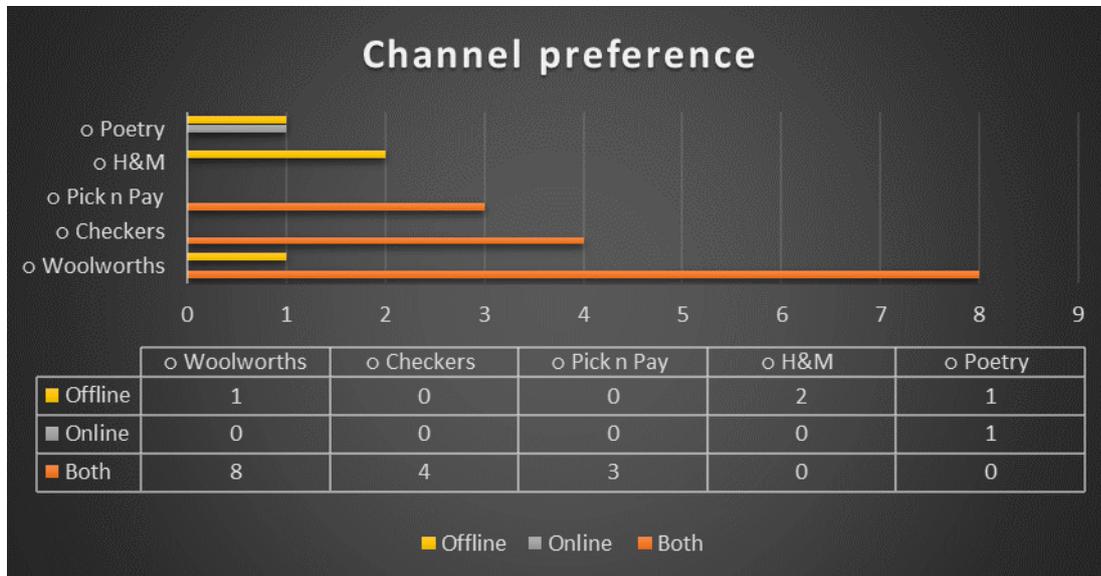
Interestingly, while TakeAlot was not regarded as one of the top three favourite retailers, it was mentioned a number of times by different participants during the interviews. This is probably because since it is not known as a grocery or a clothing retailer, it is not top of mind for participants. After remembering TakeAlot, one participants went as far as asking if it was considered retail.

4.2.1 Preferred channel by retailer

The chart below depicts the participants' preferred channel from each retailer. For the purpose of this study, online refers to both (Web and App). The researcher observed

confusion from participants when they were asked to breakdown the digital (online) channels where participants shopped.

Figure 4. 1: Preferred channel by retailer



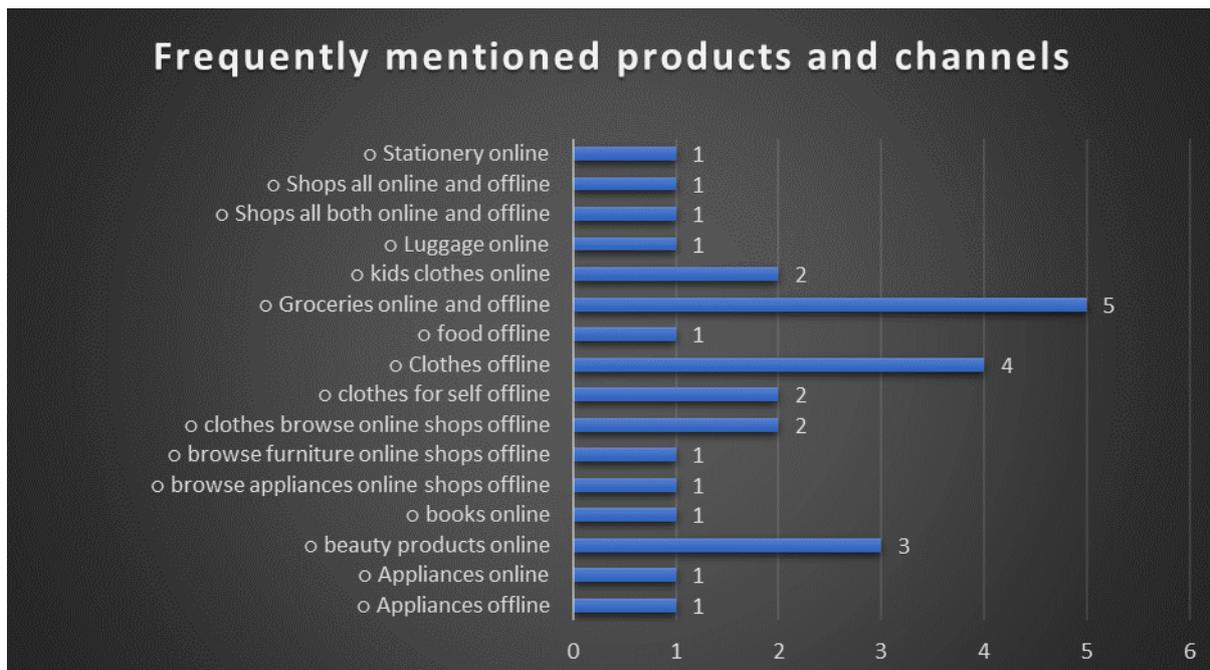
Source: Author’s Own Summary

Out of the nine participants that named Woolworths in the top three, eight of them shop both online and offline, and one offline. All four participant that have Checkers in the top three prefer to shops both online and offline at Checkers. For Pick n Pay, the participants shop both online and offline. At H&M both participants shop offline (in-store) because H&M does not have online presence in South Africa. The two participants that mentioned Poetry in the top three, one shops both online and offline.

4.2.2 Preferred products for each channel

The chart below depicts the frequently mentioned channel for specific products.

Figure 4. 2: Frequently mentioned channels for specific products



Source: Summary of empirical research

Five of the participants are comfortable shopping for groceries both online and offline. Four of the participants mentioned that they use apps such as Woolies DASH and Checkers Sixty60. From the interpretation, it seems that customers are more comfortable shopping for food both online and offline depending on the amount of grocery. Some thought it was easier to do bulk groceries themselves in-store where they could pick the latest expiry date while, others preferred to have bulk groceries delivered to save time.

A total of seven participants indicated that they shop for clothes offline. The seven participants, that shop offline for clothes, three of them browse online first and then go to the store to make the actual purchase. It seems that the most common items that the participants were comfortable shopping online are those that they have bought before, and those items that are not complex to buy, such as groceries and beauty products.

4.3 Demographics Summary

Eleven participants were interviewed. The interview schedule contained questions about the participants' shopping behaviour. They were asked to indicate their top

three favourite retailers, the preferred channel of each retailer. They were also asked to indicate the channel where they shop for different products.

It was interesting to find that the top three retailers that were mentioned were ones that sold groceries, followed by clothing retailers. This is likely that customers tend to spend more time in these types of retailers than for example furniture or electronics retailers.

It appears that most of the participants were comfortable with shopping for groceries both online and offline. Most of the participants indicated that they preferred shopping online for less complex items or items that they have bought before such as groceries and beauty products. Most of the participants shop for clothes offline even though some confessed to browsing online before going to the brick-and-mortar store to make the purchase.

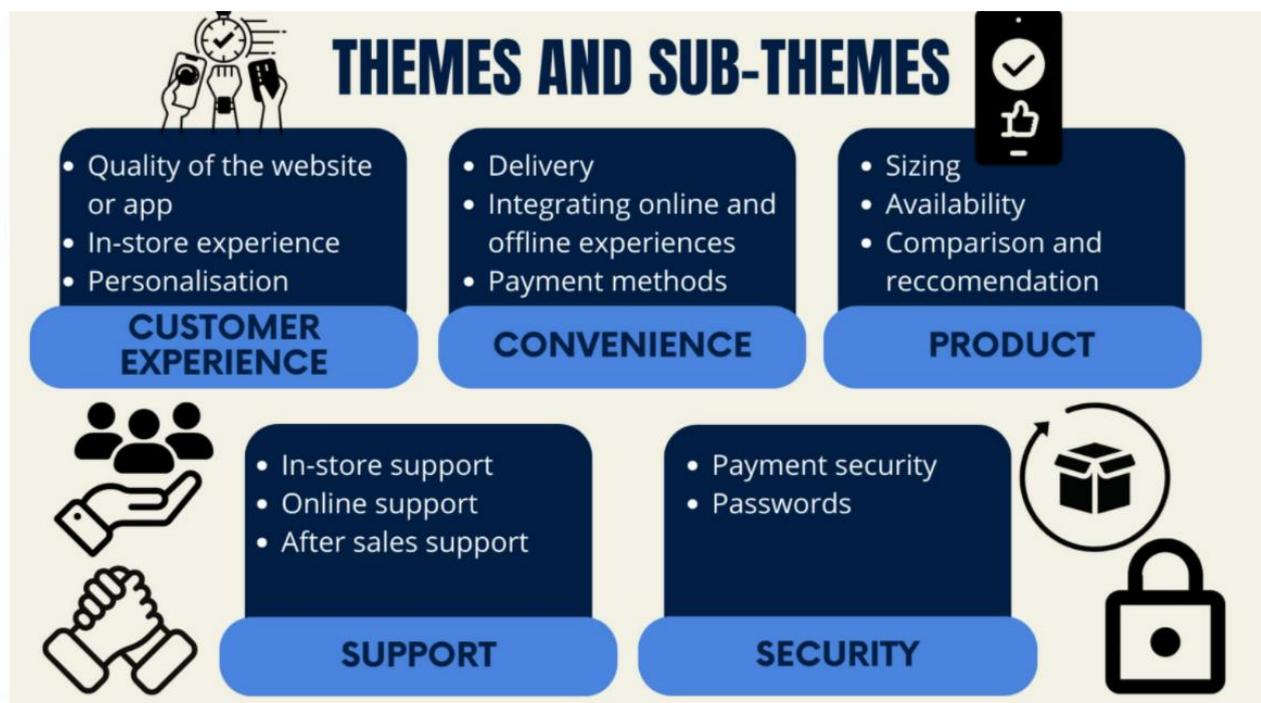
4.4 Themes

Five themes were identified after interpreting and coding the data:

- Customer Experience
- Convenience
- Product
- Support
- Security

After the transcription, the coding commenced where recurring words were grouped into themes and sub-themes. Because the data was rich, the researcher felt that these themes needed to be further broken down to sub-themes. At the time of coding, the researcher thought it would be sensible to group each theme by research questions and was asked to participants, however, she quickly realised that, because the data collection was done through semi-structured interviews, meaning that, the questions were open-ended; it was impossible to box the participants' thinking. During the actual interview times, some of the participants were thinking ahead, answering questions in other sections of the interview schedule. This created an overlap within sub-themes. The themes that emerged from the participants are illustrated below:

Figure 4. 3: Themes and Sub-themes



Source: Author's own construction

4.5 THEME 1: Customer Experience

This theme discusses customer experience as a factor that contributes to an optimal omnichannel retail experience. This theme is broken down into three sub-themes. These sub-themes include the quality of the app, in-store experience, and personalisation. These sub-themes will be deliberated below.

4.5.1 Quality of the app or website

Participants expressed the importance of good customer experience from each of the retail channel they interact with. In reference to online, the quality of the platform whether it is the mobile app or the website was brought up frequently. I sensed a level of frustration when some of the participants were describing websites that take too long to load. Even if everything else is great, a slow-loading website can result in an unhappy customer (Aicher & Gruber, 2017). Aicher & Gruber, (2017) further highlights that retailers who maintain their platforms have a competitive advantage.

Other participants mentioned that an overwhelming choice of products with poor quality filtering does not contribute to a good customer experience. Many participants feel that one should be able to log in, search for the product you want, select, and checkout easily. Participant 2 and Participant 10 as tabled below highlight that each functionality was a key factor for them to determine quality of a platform. Participant 2 describes the experience at Superbalist.com where you search for cream top, and they return all the cream tops they have. She describes this as a positive experience. According to Shankar et. al. (2021) customers who spend extra time and effort searching for the right product have less chances of returning the product. Retailers need to spend more time applying filtering functionality to prevent customer frustration and future returns. Participant 10 describes an unpleasant scenario where she searched for “meat” and a whole lot of other products showed up and some not even relating to meat. Perhaps this research shows that there might be a need for further consumer education in future.

Table 4.2: Excerpts on quality of the app or website

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 2	“It’s quality of the website or app that you are using, how specifically you can search”
Participant 10	“I can't be clicking and then it's just doing that round and round thing to pop in the product I'm looking for and it takes more than 3 minutes to pop. I'm done, I'm gone.”

Table 4.2 is suggesting that website stores need some improvements to be made or else the lack of website/app design quality might frustrate end users.

4.5.2 In-store experience

Participants reported to still enjoy going to the store even though they also found the online option convenient. It appears that some participants use going the store experience as a form or escaping the real world. Participant 8 expressed how she enjoyed going to the mall to try on different clothes but confesses that she no longer has the time to do so since having children. She just loves the experience of being at Poetry. Participant 11 talks about how she just loves walking up and down the isles at

Clicks. Participants 1 and 9 mention that they use the going to the store as a digital break as they work from home. They also use it as a chance to get human interaction. Participant 9 expressed that she sometimes turns on her step count on her watch when she is at the stores. Participant 1 sees going to the store as a chance to burn calories. This is in line with Gao et al. (2021) who found that customers do not only shop to acquire products, but they also shop for enjoyment and entertainment.

Table 4.3: Excerpts on in-store experience

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 9	“I plan my day if I have loadshedding from 12 – 2. I switch my watch on indoor walking and then start doing the grocery shopping.”
Participant 11	“You know lots of physical experience of browsing and I suppose the classic escapism.”

Contrary to the extensive studies that suggest that a seamless omnichannel experience involves technology and online experience in store, the current research found that participants at times, go to the store to take a break from technology. This finding of the study is like the one done in the United Kingdom by (Hickman et. al, 2020); like British customers, South African customers do not expect technology in store, they expect human interaction.

Whatever the purpose for a customer's visit might be, the in-store experience is crucial in the omnichannel context since sometimes customers visit the shop for confirmation, after having already done their research online.

While the in-store experience may be enjoyable at times, participants expressed that one of the downsides of going to the stores are the queues. Some participants indicate avoiding going to the stores at certain times of the month because of queues. Some participants feel that stores do not plan for month end properly because the issue with queues during that time of the month is not pleasant and is not going away.

Physical stores are an integral part of an omnichannel experience, retailers need to invest more in planning and resourcing for the busiest periods of the month to create a seamless omnichannel experience for their customers.

Table 4. 4: More excerpts on in-store experience

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 3	“I find queues a major headache.”
Participant 7	“It’s queues, I don’t know if it’s because they are trying to save money on staff. It’s chaotic.”

4.5.3 Personalisation

Participants expressed that they feel special when a service or experience is personalised. It seems that the smaller shops or boutiques are still inclined to giving a personalised service than the bigger retailers. That is an experience that many of the participants felt was missing. Participant 4 expressed that she loves to shop at small, owner operated web shops or moms’ groups. She often buys beauty products and stationery from these shops because the service is more personalised. Participant 10 explains how she likes it when she is at the store and someone swipes her rewards card at the store and then greets them by saying, “Good day Mrs X.” Participant 9 describes a scenario where she had started her shopping cart at home and when she got to Leroy and Menlyn, they were able to pull up her profile using her phone number and were able to retrieve with the contents in her cart where she then continued to make a payment. Participant 6 explained a few scenarios where she sat at a make-up counter to try on different shades of foundation. She then finds the foundation and then proceeded to pay. She feels that at that moment the store forgets about her because the next time she comes to the store she has to go through the same process. She feels that retailers should update her profile with the shades that she tried on so if she ever shopped again for make-up whether online or offline, they are able to retrieve it.

Table 4. 5: Excerpts on personalisation

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 6	“This means that I am forgotten the minute I leave the counter.”

Participant 10	“It goes a long way when I see that you see me. You appreciate me for being in your shop and I am important.”
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According to the Zhang et. al, (2019) finding on a study in China, the phenomenon of personalisation is key to the customer and that customers expect a personalised service based on their previous purchases. Participant 6 expressed that she wanted to be able to call the retailer and ask them the code of the foundation she bought previously.

Retailers need to invest in integration of customer profiles to create seamless and customised experiences. After all, one of the biggest opportunity for omnichannel retailing is the freedom to switch between channels and touchpoint without losing information at any given stage of the customer journey (Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020).

4.5.4 Theme summary

An Omnichannel shopping process involves the seamless use of the retailer’s channels and touchpoints throughout the stages of the customer journey. From an online perspective, customers expect a superior experience when browsing and interacting with the retailers’ channels. This increases engagement and potentially could convert to a successful sale and with minimal risk of returns. When customers are shopping in store, they expect a seamless experience. Customers are not just shopping only for products, for some it is an experience and an escape: therefore, they should be created a space that allows them to ‘escape’. Companies need to invest more in integrating customer profiles to create personalised experiences because customers always expect quality interactions.

4.6 THEME 2: Convenience

This theme discusses convenience as a factor that contributes to an optimal omnichannel retail experience. This theme is broken down into 3 sub-themes. These are delivery, integration of instore and online experiences, and payment methods. These sub-themes are discussed below.

4.6.1 Delivery

The topic of convenience came up at different points of the interviews with all participants. Delivery is an important factor in omnichannel retailing. The convenience that comes with delivery when shopping online was one of the factors that participants deem to be contributing to a seamless omnichannel retail experience. Participants often mentioned that delivery is free if one buys online over, a certain amount. They felt that this is helpful when one is buying large appliances such as fridges, because if you were buying it in-store you would need to pay a delivery fee. Many participants mentioned the option of having your products delivered as very convenience because you can do other things such as doing housework, and cooking while waiting for the delivery.

Table 4. 6: Excerpts on delivery

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 1	“I can cook if I realise I have run out of tomatoes I do it online instead of switching off the stove or oven”
Participant 3	“I can do laundry and continue with the laundry knowing that they are coming.”
Participant 7	“I would be preparing to cook for example and realise that I ran out of milk and soon as you start shopping, they tell you when the groceries will be delivered to you.”

A customer may experience a great customer experience while selecting the product and checking out, Rahman et. al. (2022) state that regardless of that experience, however, if the delivery service was poor, the customer may still rate the overall service as poor. This means that is important for retailers to be completely diligent on every touchpoint. Cambra-Fierro et. al. (2021) emphasises that every interaction between a customer and a retailer is critical in maintaining the relationship.

Not all participants were positive when talking about delivery. The issue of digital inclusion, which is out of scope for this study, came up frequently. Participant 5 lives in the township and feels that the township market is not considered by retailers when it comes to delivery. She mentions that TakeAlot uses a local guy to make deliveries

in an unbranded vehicle. She strongly feels that, other retailers need to follow suit. I think that this is not a seamless omnichannel experience for a customer in this area because if you are able to access the website and able to transact online, but then find out you are outside the delivery area, it all contributes to a poor customer experience. This is enough for any customer to not return to the retailer.

While the participants of this study reside in Johannesburg and Cape Town, they frequently mentioned a link to the Eastern Cape. The link is either having to visit family or having to go to the Eastern Cape for work or both. Some participants are dissatisfied with how the retailers have not done much to improve experience in the Eastern Cape. They feel that they are customers to these retailers and expect to find some level of service from these retailers when they visit home. Participant 7 was particularly angry when it comes to retailers not investing in remote areas. Participant 7 lives in Cape Town but is originally from Keiskammahoek where she visits her family a few times a year. She describes her experience of having to travel 60km to the next Woolies foods or Checkers when she visits home, because the only store in the area is Shoprite U Save.

Table 4. 7: More excerpts on delivery

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 5	“There are so many people who are left behind who are left out by innovation from retailers because for example they don’t deliver in townships.”
Participant 7	“If there is anything I would change is bring the service to the people. The people being black people, less fortunate, the people in the villages.”
Participant 8	“There is a lot of untapped potential in the informal sector how does a brand like woollies or TFG make themselves available in areas where they wouldn’t normally deliver.”

The South African socio-economic state is a complex one. The South African retail landscape represents a saturated or mature market (Malgas, Khatle & Mason, 2017). Interestingly, there are areas in the country that still do not have supermarkets because they would not be considered as business viable, one could argue that people

in these areas do not have the disposable income that is sought after by the major retailers. As discussed in Chapter 2, Spaza shops contribute 5.2% to the total GDP. The sharing economy is a developing retailing trend because it allows an unlimited number of small service providers and people to access (Cai & Lo, 2020). It's up to these retailers to create shared economy in these areas for example making the spaza shops distributors or fulfilment hubs in these areas.

4.6.2 Integrating the online and offline experiences

Omnichannel retailing is the strategy that seeks to integrate newly available digital channels in the retail industry. Omnichannel retailing highlights the importance of smooth transition across channels. Channels such as Click & Collect, where customers buy online and collect in store are on the rise. As much as many of the participant enjoyed the perks of having their shopping delivered, some participants enjoy the convenience of not having to wait for a delivery at home. Click and collect is one of the omnichannel models that seeks to integrate the online experience with an in-store experience.

Table 4. 8: Excerpts on integrating online and offline experiences

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 1	“Click & collect. It's like a hybrid type of thing you do online and just go and take it from the store because at times you want to avoid standing in queues.”
Participant 2	“A seamless shopping experience for me would be purchase this item then collect it at the nearest local physical store, should you not want the delivery option.”

Like the South African customers, (Cortiñas et al., 2019) found that Spanish customers expect to be able to collect in store. Spanish customers expect collection at the store should be lower than if it was delivered in their homes. None of the participants mentioned collection fees. In South Africa, collection fees tend to be cheaper than the home delivery costs.

Participant 11 felt very strongly that retailers were not catering for the lower LSM when it comes to integrating channels. She tells a story of her shopping experience when she was visiting a friend in Bangkok many years ago. When they got to the till, the friend paid for everything, and they handed her slip where she wrote some information down (which seem to have been her address) and her and the friend started walking.

Table 4. 9: Excerpt on integrating online and offline experiences

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 11	“And I was like, where you going? What about the shopping? And she goes, oh, no, they'll deliver that.”

In a South African perspective where transport is an issue for lower LSM customers, participant 11 felt that this is a model that could work in South Africa. This model is the reverse of Click and Collect where customers buy online and collect in store, instead a customer can buy in store and have their shopping delivered. This is a good example of integrating online and offline because omnichannel retailing is all about integration of channels to create a seamless customer experience.

Customers did not believe there was such thing as a seamless customer experience. They viewed each retailer channels as an individual channel because retailers themselves do not integrate these experiences.

Table 4. 10: More Excerpts on integrating online and offline experiences

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 2	“Until they (retailers) see these channels as one single experience and integrate these experiences for the customer, customers are never going to see it as one.”
Participant 8	“It would be the sales assistants in the store guiding me on how best to do it in the store because unless it is an intuitive application or hardware, they have in store that allows you to do an online sale in the store when they don’t have a product available.”

Many of the participants thought that online and offline were both there to supplement each other. They felt that their shopping patterns in these channels were purely driven by their circumstances at the time.

4.6.3 Payment methods

Many participants feel that retailers should offer multiple options for payment. Many participants expressed that they would have liked to have access to the same payment options across channels. The omnichannel payment solution could lead to a seamless customer experience. Participant 5 tells a story where she was at the store but forgot her purse at home. She had her phone and felt that she could have used her phone should there have been an option to pay using Apple Pay or Snapscan. She had to abandon the purchase. Participant 3 suggested that retailers should investigate the possibility of having a scan and pay option while at the shelves without standing in the queues. This would bring the online experience of seamless checkout in store. Having different payment option also mitigates for the risk that participants do not feel comfortable entering their card details online. When the snapscan QR code launches on the site, they should be able to pay without entering card information. Another omnichannel feature when it comes to payment is to reserve-online-pick-up-and-pay-in-store (ROPS) (Zhang, 2018). This can be useful even if one does not own a credit card.

Another different form of payment that Participant 2 mentioned was possibly pay on consignment. Two of the participants like that in store you pay for the product when you know it fits you, whereas online you pay for it not even knowing if it fits you or not. Some participants mentioned that at times they buy two sizes and then the one that does not fit. In this case, they suggest that retailers only charge them for the item that they keep because it can take a long time for retailers to process refunds. The ROPS model could be an option for this type of customer.

Table 4. 11: Excerpts on payment methods

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 2	"Have the option to pay on consignment."

Participant 10	“I think they could introduce scan and pay options from the shelves so as you scan it adds up and you pay and go out without standing in queues.”
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4.6.4 Theme Summary

Delivery is an omnichannel touchpoint that offers convenience to the customer. Participants seem to enjoy the option of having their goods delivered but voice concerns of not having the same experience when they are not within metro cities. The participants that live in the township express that a lot of the retailers do not deliver in this area thus deprived of the full omnichannel experience. Click and Collect is one service that brings online and offline together and is likely an option that is cheaper for customers. Retailers need to investigate omnichannel payment solutions to cater for the different markets in South Africa and for those that are sceptical to enter their card details online.

4.7 THEME 3: Product

This theme discusses product with sub-themes of sizing inconsistencies, product availability, and product comparisons and recommendations as factors that contributes to an optimal omnichannel retail experience. The below discussion discusses how these sub-themes can contribute to an optimal omnichannel retail experience.

4.7.1 Product sizing

From the interviews, it seems that consumers still do not trust buying clothes online due to not understanding sizing or just not being sure how the clothes or shoes will fit. This is one of the major reasons why most of the participants expressed that it would be the reason to switch from online to an offline store during a purchase. Gao et. al. (2021) highlights the importance of an integrated order fulfilment to create a better

customer experience. Integrated order fulfilment is regarded as a high-touch service that encourages customers to interact with service employees and enjoy the complete shopping experience (Gao et. al., 2021).

Interestingly two of the participants expressed being comfortable shopping for their children online because it is easier with children’s sizes than adult sizes.

Table 4. 12: Excerpts on Inconsistences with product sizing

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 10	“Clothes I buy online for kids most of the time because it’s easy when it comes to size. I find it hard to buy for myself online”
Participant 11	“I don’t buy clothes online. There are very few things that I would. Kids clothes I would still take a chance with.”

The other issue around sizing is that, not all websites have size charts. Respondents reported that they were more comfortable shopping on websites that have size charts for clothes in comparison to the ones who do not have size charts; otherwise they would prefer to just browse online, and when they see something they like, then they would go in store to do the actual purchase. The sentiment was the same when it came to shoes. There seems to be confusion around European and United State (US) sizing to a point that another respondent has asked a friend that travels overseas to bring a few items of clothing so he could be acquainted with US sizes.

Table 4. 13: Excerpts on Inconsistences with product sizing

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 4	“For me it’s the size thing. I usually go to the size chart. I go there and go to my sneakers in the closet to check what they say and then it’s back and forth.”
Participant 5	“With online I need to see like the sizing guide.”

The two scenarios are contrary to the growing narrative that physical stores are “dead” because of the increase in online shopping. Many online pure players are opening brick-and-mortar stores to supplement their online channels to create an omnichannel

retailing strategy (Zhang, 2018). The finding of this study is that many of the participants were still reluctant to buying clothes online for themselves but were comfortable to buy for their children. This is where the ROPS model would fit because it allows customers to still browse place the order online, however, they would have the option to visit the store to try on the product and touch and feel. The ROPS model reduces the return rate and is the perfect way to integrate online and offline channels which could provide a better customer experience for the customer (Zhang, 2018).

Retail Operations Managers need to craft omnichannel retail strategies that support customers who opt to go to the store to try and 'feel'. These strategies in the long run could lower the delivery cost for the retailer and give the retailer the opportunity of cross or upselling (Zhang, 2018).

4.7.2 Product unavailability

When a customer experiences out of stock product, some would choose to switch to a similar brand or to another store where the brand they are looking for is available rather than not buying at all (Ovezmyradov & Kurata, 2019). For the latter, retailers need to manage their inventory optimally to avoid stockouts.

Products unavailability appeared to be a frustration for many of the participants. Participants felt that retailers' inventory management systems should be integrated so that when a product is bought, all retailer platforms should be updated with this information. It can also help with triggering the retailer to order more items, should the product be low in stock levels.

While many respondents mentioned that they have switched from online to the store because the size was not available online, the switch also happens in reverse where participants switch from offline to online. The reason is usually because, either the size or colour they wanted was not available at their nearest store as a result, opted to shop online. This is in line with the findings of (Ovezmyradov & Kurata, 2019) that many retailers still run their physical and online channels independently, lacking the close connectivity required for contemporary omnichannel fulfilment. (Ovezmyradov & Kurata, 2019) further state that stockouts are common in traditional or multichannel

retailing but this can be avoided if a retailer adopts an omnichannel strategy because with omnichannel retailing integrates information systems throughout the retailer's ecosystems.

Table 4. 14: Excerpts on product unavailability

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 2	"If it's not in my size or not in stock. I'm not likely to come back again."
Participant 3	"The other day I was looking for chicken with a price range of R35 to R50. There was none on the app but when I went to the store where the groceries would have been picked, it was there."
Participant 10	"It should be able to pick up that there are now four left. There are shops that show that the product is no longer available. I like that. Don't let me buy something, call me, and tell me it's no longer available."

Customers should be able to see what is available in store, what colours, sizes are available from the retailers' websites. Equally customers should be able to search while in store using their mobile apps or information kiosks in the physical store. The systems integration assists customers with obtaining information from and about each available channel (Gao et. al., 2021).

4.7.3 Price comparison & recommendations

Similarly, to the above discussion inconsistent pricing can be another contributing factor to consumers moving from one channel to the next even to from one retailer to the next. Some of the respondents reported to be doing price checks at price comparison portals or just using the google search engine, however, it seems that the main driver for switching from the store to online is price. The retailing mix consists of five components (brand image, products, price, place, promotion) for each component, consistency across channels is critical (Gerea et al., 2021).

Some participants described how they would go to the store and the sales assistant would tell them that the product is cheaper online. This would be an assistant that works at the store for the very same retailer.

Some participants described scenarios where other customers told them about specials online or at other retailers. This finding aligns with Gereaa et al. (2021) that another customer could be a touchpoint that provides user-generated content. This adds complexity for retailers because this is not a touchpoint that they have control over.

Table 4. 15: Excerpts on price comparison and recommendations

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 9	“The stores are not good about making sure like whatever they have on promotion for the week is updated on all platforms and shelves. I think sometimes the price is what motivates us.”
Participant 10	“In some cases where in the store you already holding a bottle of milk, and someone says oh in Pick n Pay it’s on special... I'm gone.”

This is another example that shows that retailers are still operating their channels separately. In omnichannel retailing, issues of price and promotional discrepancies are reduced thus creating a superior customer experience.

4.7.4 Theme summary

This was an important discussion because for retailers to be able to create the most optimal omnichannel retailing experience they need to understand consumer behaviour. This theme gives insights on consumer behaviour when it comes to switching from one retail channel to the next. The findings from this study take us back to understanding the basics of the retailing mix (brand image, product, price, promotion, place). The elements of the retailing mix must always be consistent. Customer satisfaction will be derived if retailers get the basic principles right. In

omnichannel retailing these are the fundamental points of integration that will create an optimal omnichannel experience for customers.

4.8 THEME 4: Support

Many of the participants brought up support. Participants expressed the different areas in which support affects them hence it is categorised into 3 sub-themes which are in-store support, online support and after sales support. These sub-themes will be discussed at length below.

4.8.1 In-store support

As previously discussed in this chapter that, customers go to the store for affective (enjoyment and entertainment). This means that retailers should provide customer service to achieve the customer's objective of visiting the store. Many of the participant expressed dissatisfaction with service at brick-and-mortar stores. Most of the participants described how they did not receive the support they needed at the browsing touchpoint in-store. The lack of service in-store is one of the reasons participants avoid going to the store because of poor customer experience in-store. If omnichannel retailers want to improve the affective customer experience, they must improve the quality and efficiency of frontline customer interaction (Gao et. al., 2021)

An integrated customer service is one that allows consistent service support across channels, for example, buy online and return in store. Customer service integration is not one that was mentioned as a critical point of integration by the South African customers however, they expect each channel to offer support that is unique for that channel. From this study it appears that most participants choose to keep these lines clear. If they buy in store they expect to return in store. If they buy online, they expect to return the product online. These finding are like that of Gasparin, et. al (2022) that research proves that distinct experiences across touchpoints can be very attractive to customers.

Table 4. 16: Excerpts on in-store support

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 6	“It’s always an adventure shopping. Sometimes people are tired”
Participant 10	“The spirit of Ubuntu is no longer there in the shops, they not investing in customer service. I don't know why”

As previously mentioned, the purpose of going to the store for South African customer is generally for enjoyment and entertainment. They do not want to go to the store because of a failure purchase, that on its own is frustrating hence when at the store, they expect the customer experience to be as smooth as when they bought the item.

4.8.2 Online support

Some of the participants expressed a level of frustration with shopping online specifically because of poor product descriptions. Many of the participants felt that if all the information was available online, then they would not be needing additional online support. Some expressed that at least at the store you may be able to ask someone, but this is not the case online. They also state that with online support you are not able to get your answers instantly. One participant described a scenario where she was shopping online but the picture online displayed two items. She wanted to find out if the price was for both items but had to wait for the next day to get the answers. Participants feel that there is a service gap between online and offline. Some participants even mentioned that retailers should possibly use artificial intelligence such as virtual assistants and nudge bots like other non-retail websites are doing.

Table 4. 17: Excerpts on online customer support

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 9	“Sometimes they have bots that you can chat with, and they were just too damn slow to respond.”

Participant 10	“I've been frozen, I'm struggling with the size some of the bots are gonna tell me we would refer your query. Someone will call.”
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Both participant 9 and 10 felt that retailers should now be aware that when a customer is idle on their site, it most likely means that they have moved on to another site and for this suggest the use of nudge bots. The adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbots provides convenience, simplicity, and considerable advantages through automation, standardisation, and optimization of processes and services, such as customer support, by lowering expenses and enhancing operational efficiency. (De Andrade & Tumelero, 2022)

Table 4. 18: Excerpts on online customer support

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 9	“I think that bots can be deployed to assist someone especially when they see that you've been idle for a while. “Do you have any questions?””
Participant 10	“I don't know whether it's a robot or what. Like while I'm shopping something pops up and they could say how I can help you.”

Chatbots may be able to support the customer during the online purchase however retailers need to ensure that they equip them with sufficient information to be able to service the customer.

4.8.3 After sales support

After sales support is one area that was expressed as a challenge that participants face. Some of the reservations for shopping online was the poor customer after sales support. Many of the participants have experienced issues when they have had to return products that they have purchased online.

Table 4. 19: Excerpts on after sales support

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 1	“It difficult to get support when you have shopped online. Not easy to return items at times you must go to the store.”
Participant 2	“If I return something that's flawed, then they'll make me pay for the Courier fees as well.”
Participant 3	“The after-sales support function on the app is usually poor.”
Participant 6	“You must also take time off to send to return them if they don't fit well, that takes a lot of time and effort and calling and you know, writing emails and that's the hassle I do not like on the online experience part of things.”
Participant 9	“When you go to the store and bought something online you don't like or doesn't fit. The process of returning is generally longer than when you have bought it.”

The above are just a few quotations, many of the participants had strong views about returning the product especially when it comes to online. Participant 10 turned on her video camera to show the kettle that she was supposed to have returned a month ago. Participant 10 did not only express her views about online after sales experience, she also mentioned that the in-store experience which has already been discussed above as being long queues when returning in store. It seems that the issue of queues during purchasing is also experienced at the time when after sales or a return is required.

Some participants offered some suggestions of how retailers could improve the after sales experience for customers.

Table 4. 20: Excerpts on after sales support

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 1	“Take a lot comes and collects the product from you free of charge.”

Participant 2	“Reebok does something cool. If you buy something from Reebok online, they'll deliver it and they'll wait for you to try it on if you want. And then they'll wait ½ an hour while you try it on.”
Participant 10	“When you order there's a shipping and a service fee sometimes, can we just use the service fee to leave package it the way they want it? Like, we just want somebody to come pick it up.”

Retailers should investigate innovative ways to support the customer. For example, Reebok waits for you to try on while the courier is waiting. This minimises the hassle of returning the item for the customer.

4.8.4 Theme summary

Most participants found the lack of support at purchase stage online and offline as frustrating. Moreover, the returns processes in both channels also appears to be frustrating for participants. Some participants do not want the hassle of having to go to the store if they bought the product online, they see that it is inconvenience. They feel that the retailer should pick it up. If they return an item that is bought from the store to the store, they also expect the returns process in store to be seamless. Participants recommended the use of nudge bots to bridge the gap between online and in store support and ways to return.

4.9 THEME 5: Security

Different elements of security were brought up by some of the participants. These were then grouped by sub-themes which are now part of discussion for this theme. These sub-themes were online payment security and passwords.

4.9.1 Payment security

Many of the participants mentioned concerns of entering their information on retailers' websites especially when it comes to payment information. Security plays a big role

in participants decisions to shop online. Participants express discomfort in using their cards online whether they have used the website previously or not. The thought of having to enter their card details provokes anxiety. The main concern around payment is information theft. Participants expressed concerns when shopping online with informal traders, for example, Instagram shops and Facebook marketplace. Participants are concerned that they would make a digital payment, but the products would never arrive. Participant 2 feels that there should be a regulatory body where these small vendors belong to so that when the vendor fails to comply, customers should be able to report them. Otherwise, she felt that the lack of trust from customer marginalises the smaller vendors from the economy. Participant 6 tells a story of when her account was hacked after making an online purchase. She started getting transactions from the United States and the bank did not act swiftly on this.

Online privacy and security play a crucial role in the customer evaluation of the retail channels, as a result, privacy and security concerns might deter some customers from making online purchases (Zhang et. al., 2019). Most participants express some reluctance to shopping online. This is understandable because South Africa is known for scams and fraud.

Table 4. 21: Excerpts on online payment security

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 2	“If you shop at Yaga.co.za, they promise to hold on the money and will pay the seller once you have received the item and it was as advertised.”
Participant 4	“Even if I go to the Zara website which I use often, when it’s time to put my credit card details, I always worry.”

The principle of integration in the omnichannel process means that customer data flows across all retail platforms to provide the customer with a compelling and personalized shopping experience (Cheah et. al, 2022). When customer data is integrated however, Cheah et. al., (2022) states that there are privacy concerns associated with this level of integration which can lead to a customer delaying the purchase. (Cheah et. al, 2022)

Retailers need to take precaution and should put the necessary measures to protect their customers payment information against fraud and loss of personal information. Rahman et. al., (2022) state that customers evaluate the efforts retailers take to protect them from exploitation or information misuse at any stage of the customer journey (e.g., protection of credit card information for purchases in any channels, secure storage of that information in the after sales stage).

4.9.2 Passwords

Remembering all the passwords to all the different websites and apps was another topic that was brought up by some participants. Passwords were more of an annoyance because some participants felt that they log in to these websites or apps once a month, so it is difficult to remember all of them. Customers expressed pleasure when they were using websites or apps that had advanced to biometric authentication.

Table 4. 22: Excerpts on passwords

Speaker	Quotation
Participant 1	“Using biometric will change my online experience because I don’t have to remember all the passwords.”
Participant 11	“I can't remember now which app it was that also has moved over to a thumbprint thing. It's not like the logging in thing isn't a whole mission.”

Biometric authentication (a thumbprint login or facial recognition) can improve the customer experience when shopping online as well as speed up the purchase process because at times, one would need to find the password bank before logging into a website. In fact, one of the participants mentioned, at times he finds that by the time he has found the password and shopped online, it’s likely easier for him to quickly get to the shop to get what he wants.

4.9.3 Theme summary

The researcher sensed a level of anxiety every time participants mentioned payment and online. Five of the eleven participants felt comfortable shopping online whether it was a well-established retailer or not. Some feared making purchases in smaller and

informal retailers than the bigger retailer because they felt that they would have some protection from the banks if the retailer was known. Card fraud in South Africa is a big problem, this makes omnichannel retailing more complicated unless retailers implement omnichannel payment solutions that suit each customer.

While participants understand that passwords are necessary for security purposes, they still found it annoying that they must remember all the passwords to all the websites and apps. Retailers must carefully manage the introduction of technology and innovation into their omnichannel journey. The example of seamless logging in process provides evidence that each touchpoint is crucial throughout the customer's purchasing experience, from logging in through to the post-purchase stage.

4.10 Findings Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to measure what customers perceive as the most optimal retail omnichannel experience. It further identified the reasons customers decide to move from one channel to the next during a purchase. It finally sought to understand what customers, feel that retailers need to improve on to make the experience of shopping across channels seamless.

To gain insights from a South African customer perspective, eleven participants were interviewed. The study did not discriminate on age intentionally, however, the participants were between the ages of 18 and 65. The participants were part of the researcher's network that have shopped online and offline in any South African retailer in the six months preceding the study. Participants were not asked demographic information however they were asked about their shopping behaviour. They were asked to indicate their top three favourite retailers and the preferred channel of each retailer. They were also asked to indicate the channel where they shop for different products. The research presents the top five stores that were frequently mentioned.

Table 4. 23: Frequently mentioned retailers

Retailer	Frequency mentioned
○ Woolworths (Inc WW Foods)	9
○ Checkers	4
○ Pick n Pay	3
○ H&M	2
○ Poetry	2

Source: Author's own summary

It was interesting to find that the top three retailers that were mentioned were ones that sold groceries, followed by clothing retailers. This is likely that customers tend to spend more time in these types of retailers than for example furniture or electronics retailers.

The table below illustrates that participants indicated that they preferred shopping online for less complex items or items that they have bought before. Groceries and beauty products fall in this category. Most of the participants shop for clothes offline, even though some confessed to browsing online before going to the brick-and-mortar store to make the purchase.

Table 4. 24: Channel preference

Retailer	Both	Online	Offline
○ Woolworths	8	0	1
○ Checkers	4	0	0
○ Pick n Pay	3	0	0
○ H&M	0	0	2
○ Poetry	0	1	1

Source: Author's own Summary

Eight of the eleven participants shop at Woolworth both online and offline. One shops only at the store. Four participants shop Checkers both online and offline. Three participants shop at Pick n Pay. Two participants shop offline only at H&M because H&M does not have an online presence in South Africa. The two participants that shop at Poetry, one shops online and the other offline.

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain the data. The semi-structured interviews consisted of thirteen open ended questions that sought to answer the following research questions:

- 4) What do customers perceive as the most optimal retail omnichannel experience?
- 5) What makes customers decide to move from one channel to the next during a purchase?
- 6) What do customers feel that retailers need to improve on to make the experience of shopping across channels seamless?

The findings are organised and presented as themes and sub-themes because the participants were very excited about the topic, and as a novice researcher I did not have the skill to box their thinking. The questions were open ended, meaning that at times they answered some of the questions I was still intending to ask in other research questions. The themes that were identified were:

- Customer Experience
- Convenience
- Product
- Support
- Security

4.10.1 Customer experience

The finding was that customers expect a superior experience both online and offline. When browsing and interacting with the retailer online channels, they expect a good quality website that has good search functionality and that functions at an optimal speed. When customers are shopping in store, they expect a seamless in-store experience. Customers are not just shopping only for products, the shopping is an experience, an escape. Participants expect a personalised service as it makes them feel special therefore integration of their profiles across channels is important.

4.10.2 Convenience

Participants enjoy the option of having their goods delivered but voice concerns of not having the same experience when they are not within metro cities. The participant that lives in the township expressed that a lot of the retailers do not deliver in these areas thus deprived of the full omnichannel experience. Click and Collect is one service that brings online and offline together and is likely an option that is cheaper for customers.

Customers expect omnichannel payment solutions to cater for different capabilities to pay.

4.10.3 Product

The findings from this study take us back to understanding the basics of the retailing mix (brand image, product, price, promotion, place). Customers expect all the parts of the retailing mix to be integrated.

4.10.4 Support

Most participants found the lack of support at purchase stage online and offline as frustrating. Moreover, the returns processes in both channels also appears to be a frustration for participants. Some participants do not want the hassle of having to go to the store if they bought the product online, they see it that is inconvenience. They feel that the retailer should pick it up. If they return an item that is bought from the store to the store, they also expect the returns process in-store to be seamless. Participants recommended the use of nudge bots to bridge the gap between online and in store support and ways to return.

4.10.5 Security

Five of the eleven participants felt comfortable shopping online even at well-established retailers. Some feared making purchases in smaller and informal retailers than the bigger retailer because they felt that they would have some protection from the banks if the retailer was established.

The other finding is that even though passwords are necessary for security purposes, participants still found it annoying that they must remember all the passwords to all the websites and apps.

Chapter 5 is the final chapter of the study. Chapter 5 discusses the conclusions and its limitations and makes recommendations for future research.

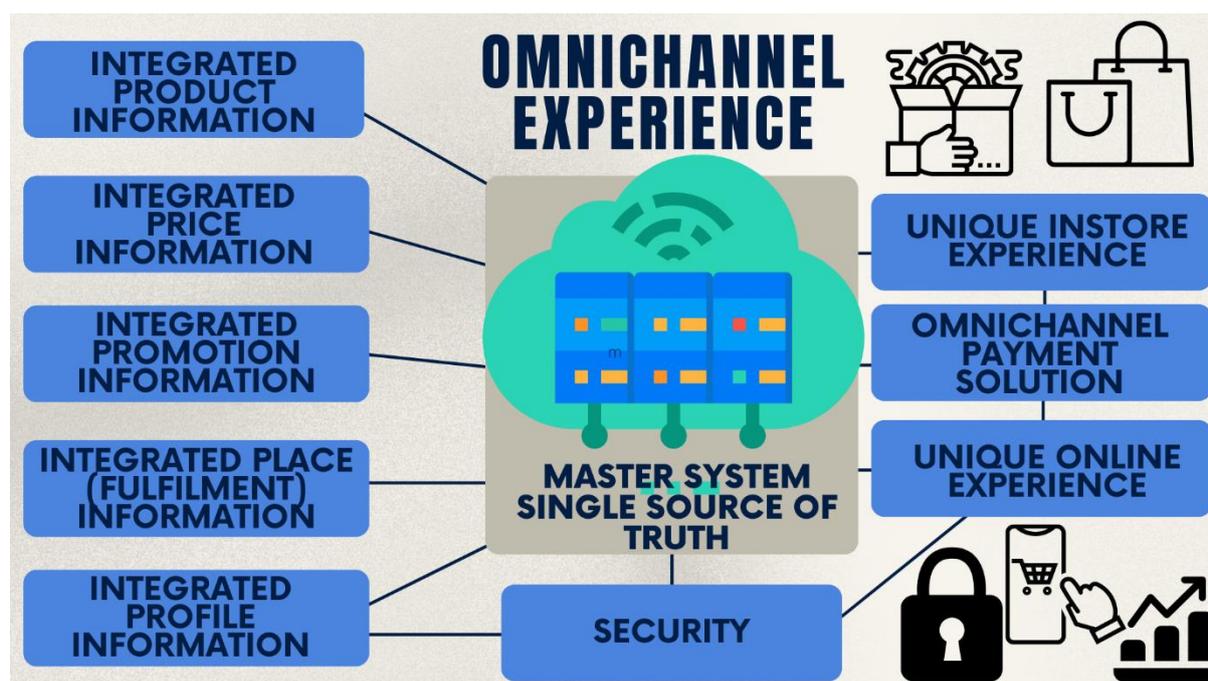
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes the study that was conducted to determine factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel retail experience: A South African perspective by summarising the findings in relation to the research questions and research objectives. This chapter also presents the limitations of the study, provides recommendations that can be utilised by retailers in South Africa as well as proposes areas that can be explored for future research.

The integration of these themes inspired the development of the proposed conceptual framework for the most optimal omnichannel retail experience in South Africa. The framework is illustrated in Figure 12 below:

Figure 5. 1: Conceptual Framework of South African optimal omnichannel retail experience



Source: Author's own construction

Figure 5.1 illustrates that the South African customer expects a good experience whether shopping online and offline. Respondents expect a good quality website or app when browsing online is one that has integrated information to achieve a seamless

shopping experience. This study proposes the 5 P's of the omnichannel retailing mix of product, price, place, promotion, and profile. Respondents view an omnichannel experience as one that integrates product, price, promotion, place, and profile information. They also view it as one that offers omnichannel payment solutions. With omnichannel retailing, the customer sits at the core of the organisation, therefore, it is important that the customer is seen as part of the omnichannel retailing mix.

Through the conceptual framework of the most optimal omnichannel retail experience in South Africa, the study can answer the following research questions:

RQ 1. What do customers perceive as the most optimal retail omnichannel experience?

An omnichannel is one that integrates information about product, price, promotion, place, profile information of the customer in a way that the customer moves seamless across all the channels of the retailer. An optimal omnichannel experience is one that ensures security of customer information and one that offers omnichannel payment solutions.

RQ 2. What makes customers decide to move from one channel to the next during a purchase?

Customers can decide to move from one channel of the retailer to the next because of lack of availability, poor product description, recommendation from other customers, poor service in-store such as long queues, as well as poor quality websites that for example, take long to load picture, and have an overwhelming number of products with poor filtering or search functionality.

RQ 3. What do customers feel that retailers need to improve on to make the experience of shopping across channels seamless?

The findings were that retailers need to improve on resource planning in-store, especially during month end when people get paid. Respondents expressed that queues in-store during this time are annoying. This inhibits a pleasant channel experience.

Retailers need to consider the inclusion of the lower LSM customers in the omnichannel experience by offering delivery solutions in these areas.

Omnichannel payment solutions such as SnapScan, EFT, scan and pay from the shelf, pay on consignment, reserve, and pay at the store must be considered. Retailers need to ensure safety of these payment mechanisms.

Retailers need to manage their product, price, promotion, inventory, and customer profile information to avoid inconsistencies across channels.

Retailers must offer state of the art support that is uniquely suited for the best in-store experience as well as one that is uniquely crafted for the best online experience.

5.2 Significance of the study

The increase in the number of channels driven by technology trajectory over the years have led to a change in customer behaviour. Customers move around different retailer platforms during a single purchase; even so customers still expect a superior and seamless customer experience while navigating these channels.

There seem to be inconsistencies however, of what the optimal omnichannel strategy should be from a customer perspective. This led to the research problem for this study, factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel experience have not been determined in South Africa

This study designed a framework based on the findings that can be utilised by retailers when developing omnichannel strategies. The framework emphasises that retailers should not only focus on product, price, promotion, and place when integrating their channels; they need to also focus on the integration of the customer profile across channels. The integration of the customer profile across channels is what will make the journey across these channels seamless.

5.3 Managerial Implications

5.3.1 Practical Implications

The findings of this study will benefit South African retail Operations Managers that are considering migrating from a multi-channel or a single channel strategy to an omnichannel strategy to have a foundation of developing their omnichannel strategies. In developing omnichannel strategies, retailers need to consider integrating product, price, place, promotional and profile information when developing omnichannel strategies.

The findings of this study will assist Information Technology managers with prioritisation of their technology roadmaps. Secure payment and customer profiles should be at the forefront of any technological roadmap for any company.

This study will also contribute to computer science studies because programmers will have a context of a customer's perspective when developing omnichannel solutions.

5.3.2 Implications for policy makers

Policy makers such as governments departments should consider utilising some of the elements identified in this study such as shared economy in terms of enabling informal retailing in rural areas to act as delivery agents for major retailers in rural areas as well as digital inclusion when developing national strategic plans.

5.4 Recommendations for future research

Future research should focus on the framework for developing omnichannel retail experience for the lower LSM customer. For example, this market uses WhatsApp and Facebook marketplace, the model can incorporate the use of WhatsApp Status as an entry point of the omnichannel experience.

Future research should also focus on technology road mapping for an optimal omnichannel experience from a South African perspective. This study should interview retail practitioners.

There would also be a benefit to have a study that focuses on how retailers can aid with digital inclusion in the rural areas.

5.5 Limitations

The limitations identified in the study were that the sample was small therefore this study lack generalisability. The researcher only had a week to conduct interviews and feels that she could have done more justice to the study had she more time to interview more people.

Another limitation was that the researcher's network is mostly black middle-class and female. While demographics were not a criterion for the study, only two respondents out of the eleven were male and only one was white.

Since the questions were open-ended, it was difficult to transcribe. As a novice researcher, it was difficult to box the participants into one research question which resulted in the overlap of themes. The researcher's networks that were very familiar with the researcher at times went adrift and talked about matters unrelated to the research study.

5.6 Chapter Conclusion

The research questions were restated, and they were answered by the findings of the data that was collected. To conclude, an optimal South African omnichannel retail experience is one that integrates product, price, promotion, place, profile information to enable the customer to shop seamlessly across channels. An optimal South African omnichannel retail experience is one that offers superior in-store experience with human support available when required and a seamless checkout process that does not involve standing in long queues. An optimal omnichannel retail experience is one that allows superior online shopping experience with the latest website and app functionality and support that is available for online purposes.

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Appendix 11: Written information given to Human subject on recruitment

• PO Box 77000 • Nelson Mandela University

• Port Elizabeth • 6031 • South Africa • www.mandela.ac.za

12 November 2022

Dear Respondent

I am studying towards my MBA (Master of Business Administration) degree at the Nelson Mandela University Business School. I am conducting research to investigate what customers perceive as the optimal shopping experience when shopping across channels. I feel that this research will help retailers gain insights into their customers' experiences to develop omnichannel strategies.

You are part of our sample of respondents whose views we seek on the above-mentioned matter. We would therefore appreciate it if you could answer a few questions in an interview. The interview will be virtual via a video conferencing platform of your choice such as MS Teams or Zoom. The interview will take about thirty minutes of your time.

Please note that there are no correct or incorrect answers. The answers should be based on your personal online and offline shopping experience in the last 6 months. Please note also that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. We also guarantee the confidentiality of information acquired by the interview

We want to thank you in advance for your co-operation.

Sincerely,

Tandazile Hopa

Contact details: Tandazile Hopa, tandirouse@gmail.com/ s9829472@mandela.ac.za

To verify the authenticity of the study, please contact Dr. J Fraser at 0861-504 500 and jfraser@mandela.ac.za

APPENDIX 12: Information for volunteer at point of enrolment

12 November 2022

Dear Volunteer

I am studying towards my MBA (Master of Business Administration) degree at the Nelson Mandela University Business School. I am conducting research to investigate what customers perceive as the optimal shopping experience when shopping across channels. I feel that this research will help retailers gain insights into their customers' experiences to develop omnichannel strategies.

You are part of our sample of respondents whose views we seek on the above-mentioned matter. We would therefore appreciate it if you could answer a few questions. It should not take more than thirty minutes of your time.

Please note also that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. We also guarantee the confidentiality of information gathered from the interviews. Neither your name nor the name of your firm will be mentioned in the study.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Tandazile Hopa

Contact details: Tandazile Hopa, [tandirouse@gmail.com/](mailto:tandirouse@gmail.com) s9829472@mandela.ac.za

To verify the authenticity of the study, please contact Dr. J Fraser at 0861-504 500 and jfraser@mandela.ac.za

Interview Schedule

Factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel retail experience: A South African perspective

Dialogue between researcher and a multichannel shopper.

RQ1: What do customers perceive as the most optimal retail omnichannel experience?

- 1.1 Name three of your favourite retail shops.
- 1.2 Do you shop there physically (i.e., in store) or do you shop online/via apps/ via your phone?
- 1.3 Is there a preference of products that you shop in a specific channel?
- 1.4 In what way does the ability to use both online and offline shopping channels add any value to your life?
- 1.5 If you could change anything in your current shopping experience online and offline; what would it be?

RQ2: What makes customers decide to move from one channel to the next during a single purchase?

- 2.1 Can you give me an example of when you started shopping for a product online but ended up buying it in store?
- 2.2 How would you have done it differently to execute the shopping online completely?
- 2.3 How did the decision to move to the brick-and-mortar store benefit you on the purchase that you made?
- 2.4 What would it take for you to see a retailer's sales channels (online/offline/app) as one instead of one is better than the other?
- 2.5 In your experience as a multichannel shopper, what do you think retailers can do to bring the online experience to other customers (especially in remote areas)

RQ3: What do customers feel that retailers need to improve on to make the experience of shopping across channels seamless?

- 3.1 How would you describe a seamless shopping experience?
- 3.2 Have you experienced that recently or any other time?
- 3.3 What other factors not questioned above do you think could lead to a seamless shopping experience in a South African context?

Information and informed consent form

RESEARCHER'S DETAILS	
Title of the research project	Factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel retail experience: A South African perspective
Reference number	H22-BES-BUS-146
Principal investigator	Tandazile Hopa
Address	14 Windsor Rd, Plumstead
Postal Code	7800
Contact telephone number (private numbers not advisable)	0724144489

A. <u>DECLARATION BY OR ON BEHALF OF PARTICIPANT</u>		<u>Initial</u>
I, the participant and the undersigned	(full names)	
ID number		
<u>OR</u>		
I, in my capacity as	(parent or guardian)	
of the participant	(full names)	
ID number		
Address (of participant)		

A.1 HEREBY CONFIRM AS FOLLOWS:		Initial
I, the participant, was invited to participate in the above-mentioned research project		
that is being undertaken by	(Tandazile Hopa)	
from	Graduate School of Business	
of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.		

THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS HAVE BEEN EXPLAINED TO ME, THE PARTICIPANT:		Initial
2.1	<p>Aim:</p> <p>The investigators are investigating Factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel retail experience.</p> <p>The study will contribute to retailers getting insights from customers on what they perceive as an optimal omnichannel retail experience should be.</p>	

2.2	Procedures:	I understand that the interviews will be virtual and will be recorded. It was also explained to me that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any given time. Feedback will take place to ensure participant validation of the prescribed interviews prior to data analysis. The participant would confirm if the email addressed that were used to set up virtual interviews can be used to send feedback. Participants will further be provided with the final copy of the study should they so desire.	
2.3	Risks:	There are no predicted risks or harms associated with this study. The only anticipated suffering is that of the participants' time.	
2.4	Possible benefits:	As a result of my participation in this study, I may see an improvement in the way retailers develop omnichannel retail strategies based on the insights gained this study.	
2.5	Confidentiality:	My identity will not be revealed in any discussion, description or scientific publications by the investigators.	
2.6	Access to findings:	Any new information or benefit that develops during the course of the study will be shared as follows: Reported a opportunity for future research	
2.6	Voluntary participation / refusal / discontinuation:	My participation is voluntary	YES NO
		My decision whether or not to participate will in no way affect my present or future care / employment / lifestyle	TRUE FALSE

3. THE INFORMATION ABOVE WAS EXPLAINED TO ME/THE PARTICIPANT BY:								<u>Initial</u>
(name of relevant person)								
in	Afrikaans		English		Xhosa		Other	
and I am in command of this language, or it was satisfactorily translated to me by								
(name of translator)								
I was given the opportunity to ask questions and all these questions were answered satisfactorily.								

4.	No pressure was exerted on me to consent to participation and I understand that I may withdraw at any stage without penalisation.	
-----------	---	--

5.	Participation in this study will not result in any additional cost to myself.	
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A.2 I HEREBY VOLUNTARILY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ABOVE-MENTIONED PROJECT:		
Signed/confirmed at	on	20
	Signature of witness:	

Signature or right thumb print of participant	Full name of witness:
---	-----------------------

B. STATEMENT BY OR ON BEHALF OF INVESTIGATOR(S)									
I,	Tandazile Hopa								
declare that:									
1.	I have explained the information given in this document to (name of participant)								
	and / or his / her representative (name of representative)								
2. He / she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions;									
3.	This conversation was conducted in <table border="1" style="display: inline-table; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #cccccc; text-align: center;">Afrikaans</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="background-color: #cccccc; text-align: center;">English</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="background-color: #cccccc; text-align: center;">Xhosa</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="background-color: #cccccc; text-align: center;">Other</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> </tr> </table>	Afrikaans		English		Xhosa		Other	
	Afrikaans		English		Xhosa		Other		
And no translator was used <u>OR</u> this conversation was translated into (language) by (name of translator)									
4.	I have detached Section D and handed it to the participant <table border="1" style="display: inline-table; border-collapse: collapse; margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50px; text-align: center;">YES</td> <td style="width: 50px; text-align: center;">NO</td> </tr> </table>	YES	NO						
YES	NO								
Signed/confirmed at _____ on _____ 20__									
Signature of interviewer	Signature of witness:								
	Full name of witness:								

C. IMPORTANT MESSAGE TO PATIENT/REPRESENTATIVE OF PARTICIPANT	
Dear participant	
Thank you for your in this study. Should, at any time during the study:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an emergency arise as a result of the research, or - you require any further information with regard to the study - the following occur 	
<div style="border: 1px solid black; height: 50px; width: 100%;"></div>	
(indicate any circumstances which should be reported to the investigator)	
Kindly contact	Tandazile Hopa
at telephone number	



PO Box 77000, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, 6031, South Africa mandela.ac.za

Chairperson: Faculty Research Ethics Committee (Human)
Tel: +27 (0)41 504 2906

Ref: [H22-BES-BUS-146/ Approval] [Approval valid until 4 November 2023]

4 November 2022

PRP: Dr J Fraser
Supervisor: Dr J Fraser
Department: Graduate School

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO AN OPTIMAL OMNICHANNEL RETAIL EXPERIENCE: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE (MASTERS) (H22-BES-BUS-146)

PRP: Dr J Fraser
Supervisor: Dr J Fraser
PI: T Hopa

Your above-entitled application served at the *Faculty Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Business and Economic Science*, (14 October 2022) for approval. The study is classified as a negligible/low risk study. The ethics clearance reference number is **H22-BES-BUS-146** and approval is subject to the following conditions:

1. The immediate completion and return of the attached acknowledgement to Lindie@mandela.ac.za, the date of receipt of such returned acknowledgement determining the final date of approval for the study where after data collection may commence.
2. Approval for data collection is for 1 calendar year from date of receipt of above mentioned acknowledgement.
3. The submission of an annual progress report by the PRP on the data collection activities of the study (form RECH-004 to be made available shortly on Research Ethics Committee (Human) portal) by 15 December this year for studies approved/extended in the period October of the previous year up to and including September of this year, or 15 December next year for studies approved/extended after September this year.
4. In the event of a requirement to extend the period of data collection (i.e. for a period in excess of 1 calendar year from date of approval), completion of an extension request is required (form RECH-005 to be made available shortly on Research Ethics Committee (Human) portal)
5. In the event of any changes made to the study (excluding extension of the study), completion of an amendments form is required (form RECH-006 to be made available shortly on Research Ethics Committee (Human) portal).
6. **In the event of any changes made to the study (excluding extension of the study), RECH will have to approve such amendments and completion of an amendments form is required PRIOR to implementation (form RECH-006 available on Research Ethics Committee (Human) portal).**
7. Immediate submission (and possible discontinuation of the study in the case of serious events) of the relevant report to RECH (form RECH-007 to be made available shortly on Research Ethics Committee (Human) portal) in the event of any unanticipated problems, serious incidents or adverse events observed during the course of the study.
8. Immediate submission of a Study Termination Report to RECH (form RECH-008 to be made available shortly on Research Ethics Committee (Human) portal) upon unexpected closure/termination of study.
9. Immediate submission of a Study Exception Report of RECH (form RECH-009 to be made available shortly on Research Ethics Committee (Human) portal) in the event of any study deviations, violations and/or exceptions.

10. Acknowledgement that the study could be subjected to passive and/or active monitoring without prior notice at the discretion of Research Ethics Committee (Human)

Please quote the ethics clearance reference number in all correspondence and enquiries related to the study. For speedy processing of email queries (to be directed to Lindie@mandela.ac.za), it is recommended that the ethics clearance reference number together with an indication of the query appear in the subject line of the email.

We wish you well with the study.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Mago'.

Prof S Mago

Cc: Department of Research Capacity Development
Faculty Research Co-ordinator: Lindie van Rensburg

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF CONDITIONS FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

I, **Dr J Fraser (PRP)**, **Dr J Fraser (Supervisor)** and **T Hopa (PI)** of the study **FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO AN OPTIMAL OMNICHANNEL RETAIL EXPERIENCE: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE (MASTERS) (H22-BES-BUS-146)** do hereby agree to the following approval conditions:

1. The submission of an annual progress report by myself on the data collection activities of the study by 15 December this year for studies approved in the period October of the previous year up to and including September of this year, or 15 December next year for studies approved after September this year. It is noted that there will be no call for the submission thereof. The onus for submission of the annual report by the stipulated date rests on myself.
2. Submission of the relevant request to Faculty RECH in the event of any amendments to the study for approval by Faculty RECH prior to any partial or full implementation thereof.
3. Submission of the relevant request to Faculty RECH in the event of any extension to the study for approval by Faculty RECH prior to the implementation thereof.
4. Immediate submission of the relevant report to Faculty RECH in the event of any unanticipated problems, serious incidents or adverse events.
5. Immediate discontinuation of the study in the event of any serious unanticipated problems, serious incidents or serious adverse events.
6. Immediate submission of the relevant report to Faculty RECH in the event of the unexpected closure/discontinuation of the study (for example, de-registration of the PI).
7. Immediate submission of the relevant report to Faculty RECH in the event of study deviations, violations and/or exceptions.
8. Acknowledgement that the study could be subjected to passive and/or active monitoring without prior notice at the discretion of Faculty RECH.

Signatures:

PRP signature:

J.F.E. Fraser

Supervisor signature:

J.F.E. Fraser

PI signature:

T. Hopa

Date: 08/11/2022

Date: 08/11/2022

Date: 08/11/2022

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2 CHAPTER 1: SCOPE OF STUDY

1.1 Introduction

An omnichannel organisation is one that puts customer interaction at the core of the company by integrating transactions' channels to give consistency and a seamless customer experience (Gerea, Gonzalez-Lopez, & Herskovic, 2021). Omnichannel is the synergetic management of different channels and customer touchpoints (Quach, Barari, Moudry, & Quach, 2022). A physical store is an example of a retail channel, and so is a virtual company, e-commerce website and mobile application. Cortiñas, Chocarro, & Elorz (2019) define omnichannel as the synergy of several available channels to a retailer and customer touchpoints that optimise customer experience across channels.

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SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT: BUSINESS SCHOOL

I, (surname and initials of supervisor) FRASER, J.F.E Dr.)

and (surname and initials of co-supervisor) Not applicable

the supervisor and co-supervisor respectively for (surname and initials of candidate) HOPA, T (Ms.)

(student number) 9829472 a candidate for the (full description of qualification)

Master of Business Administration (MBA)

with a treatise/dissertation/thesis entitled (full title of treatise/dissertation/thesis):

Factors that contribute to an optimal omnichannel retail experience: A South African perspective

It is hereby certified that the proposed amendments to the treatise/dissertation/thesis have been effected and that permission is granted to the candidate to submit the final bound copies of his/her treatise/dissertation/thesis to the examination office.

Fraser, JFE (Dr.) JFE Fraser

SUPERVISOR

23/03/2023

DATE