Challenging the "integration imperative": A customer perspective on omnichannel journeys

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The final published version is available online at DOI: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102829

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ABSTRACT

Omnichannel literature largely assumes that retailers should integrate touchpoints across channels to promote seamless experiences. This paper challenges this assumption by exploring how perceived journey integration affects customer experience in omnichannel retailing. A qualitative study reveals that two dimensions of journey integration—consistency and connectivity—interact to form four patterns of omnichannel journeys, each prompting distinct experiences. When looking at this phenomenon through the customer's perspective, we find that there are cases in which low consistency or connectivity can trigger positive experiences, contradicting extant literature. We then formulate research propositions that challenge the "integration imperative" in the omnichannel literature and provide managerial implications for retail firms that want to improve their customers' experiences.

KEYWORDS

Omnichannel retailing; Customer experience; Customer journey; Journey integration.

1. Introduction

Technological advancements in the last few years have dramatically changed the way customers interact with retailers. Customers have numerous touchpoints available to seek information, compare offers, purchase and pay for the offerings, as well as ask for post-purchase assistance (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Quach et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2007), often combining them throughout their customer journeys (Huré et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2015). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated changes both in consumer behavior (e.g., increasing adoption of digital touchpoints) and retailer strategies (e.g., expansion of "click-and-collect" options) (Euromonitor International, 2020), making multichannel shopping the new norm (Nielsen Global, 2020). As a result, *omnichannel retailing*—a strategy to manage a myriad of touchpoints synergistically with the goal of improving the customer experience (e.g., Huré et al., 2017; Verhoef et al., 2015)—is considered the future of retailing (Deloitte China, 2020).

Nonetheless, managers still struggle with this strategy (Barann et al., 2020; Cui et al., 2020). The lack of benchmarks for implementing an omnichannel strategy in some industries and the lack of knowledge about customers' attitudes toward an omnichannel strategy are examples of these struggles (Hajdas et al., 2020). Managers would, therefore, benefit from research that guides the development of omnichannel strategies. The general guideline that omnichannel research currently offers is that *retailers should integrate touchpoints across channels to create a seamless customer experience* (e.g., Beck & Rygl, 2015; Hossain et al., 2019; Huré et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Shen et al., 2018). This guideline follows extant research that mainly adopts a *firm perspective* to study omnichannel retailing. In other words, research focuses on firm activities and posits that firms should integrate touchpoints through consistent and uniform retail elements, such as assortment, design, price, promotion, communication, and data (e.g., Berman & Thelen, 2018; Cui et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2021;

Kuehnl et al., 2019; Peltola et al., 2015; Shi et al., 2020). These studies often assume that customers desire a particular kind of integration without further consideration of how they experience their omnichannel journey.

However, other research findings suggest that more integration is not necessarily always better. Studies that focus on *customer experience* in omnichannel retailing suggest that service attributes do not need to be replicated across touchpoints (e.g., Patrício et al., 2008; Patrício et al., 2011). For example, although adopting uniform pricing across channels is often advocated (e.g., Peltola et al., 2015; Yrjölä et al., 2018), customers might find this strategy less fair than differential prices (e.g., Huang et al., 2005). Research has also shown that inconsistent touchpoints might improve the overall customer experience with a focal brand when customers mentally disassociate the brand from dissatisfying pain points in the journey (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Furthermore, Siebert et al. (2020) demonstrate that inconsistent and unpredictable customer journeys can sometimes be very attractive to customers because they provide distinct experiences across touchpoints, as in the case of the CrossFit regimen. Thus, omnichannel research that adopts a firm's perspective and suggests unifying practices across all firm-owned channels may lack relevant insight into how customers experience the set of touchpoints that make up their journey when moving from one point to another, including the ones outside the retailer's control.

We highlight two problems that need to be addressed to offer more relevant guidelines for omnichannel retailers who want to improve customer experiences. First, researchers should carefully examine the assumption that consistency in retail elements across touchpoints leads to seamless and more positive experiences. Understanding how customers experience omnichannel journeys can give valuable insights into when and how customers benefit from the integration of retail elements. Second, considering that the goal of the omnichannel strategy is to improve customer experience, it is surprising that studies in omnichannel retailing often address customer experience very loosely. Some of them do not even define customer experience (e.g., Juaneda-Ayensa et al., 2016; Peltola et al., 2015); others use evaluations such as satisfaction (e.g., Zhang et al., 2018) and perceived quality (e.g., Herhausen et al., 2015) as proxies. Adopting a more nuanced view of what kind of experiences emerge throughout the omnichannel journey (cf. Becker & Jaakkola, 2020) allows us to better understand the customer's perspective on omnichannel retailing. By approaching omnichannel journeys through a customer experience lens, this study addresses the problems identified and provides guidelines on how to improve the customer experience through omnichannel strategies that go beyond the "integration imperative". Therefore, *the goal of this study is to explore how perceived journey integration affects the customer experience in omnichannel retailing*.

To achieve this goal, we conducted a qualitative study with Finnish and Brazilian customers exploring their omnichannel journeys. Our results show four distinct omnichannel journey patterns formed by the interaction of two dimensions of journey integration: perceived consistency and perceived connectivity of touchpoints. Each pattern prompts different types of customer experiences. This granular approach reveals that, contrary to assumptions in the extant literature, low consistency of retail mix, or barriers across touchpoints (i.e., low connectivity), can in some cases trigger positive experiences such as surprise and feelings of self-sufficiency. Based on our empirical findings, we present four propositions that describe how these two dimensions influence customer experience.

This study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, by problematizing the "integration imperative" in omnichannel retailing literature (e.g., Huré et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2020) through a customer-centric perspective. This perspective was essential to unveil the neglected role of perceived connectivity of touchpoints in omnichannel journeys. Second, by increasing understanding of the determinants of customer experience across and in-between touchpoints, thus answering calls for empirical studies that present a dynamic perspective on customer experience (Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2021). These findings provide valuable managerial implications for retailers that are still struggling with their omnichannel strategies.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. We review the literature on omnichannel retailing and customer experience in the next section followed by the method and results in the subsequent sections. We conclude with a discussion of the main findings, research propositions, and managerial implications.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Integration imperative in omnichannel retailing

Retailing literature is moving from a multichannel to an omnichannel perspective (Hänninen et al., 2020; Taichon et al., 2020). The shift can be characterized by two points: (1) the scope of the channels is broadening to encompass not only traditional retail channels (e.g., store, online website, catalog) but also all touchpoints across the channels; and (2) the borders between touchpoints within online and offline channels are blurred as customers experience them simultaneously (Barann et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2015). We define touchpoints as "individual contacts between the brand/firm and customers across the customer journey that serve a purpose such as information gathering, payment, unpacking, and usage" (De Keyser et al. 2020, p. 6) and channels as the "medium through which the firm and the customer interact" (Neslin et al., 2006, p. 96). According to these definitions, a channel can encompass multiple touchpoints that customers experience in their journeys; therefore, this study focuses on the integration of touchpoints within and across channels. Such integration emerges as the central pillar of an omnichannel strategy (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Peltola et al., 2015; Shen et al., 2018). This article uses the term *journey integration* to explicitly address the customer point of view in omnichannel retailing.

Our literature review (Table 1) identified two aspects of journey integration. The first, *perceived consistency*, is defined as the extent to which customers perceive coherence in retail mix elements such as price, product information, and assortment (Huré et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). Perceived consistency emerges for instance when the customer finds the same product and price in the retailer's online and physical stores; reads coherent information in social media and on a website; receives the same kind of customer service by chat and phone; and identifies similar product or service information in a partner's platform and the brand's official channels. Consistency arises from firm's channel practices aimed at standardizing promotion, transaction, pricing, order fulfillment, reverse logistics, product information, and customer service across brand-owned touchpoints (Cao & Li, 2015). This integration would allow customers to move across touchpoints without finding inconsistencies (Saghiri et al., 2017; Jaakkola & Terho, 2021). In other words, this perspective posits that firms should have a uniform image, standardized ordering and return policies, common promotions and prices, and shared customer data (Berman & Thelen, 2018).

The second aspect of journey integration is *perceived connectivity*, defined as the extent to which customers make seamless, easy, and effortless transitions across touchpoints during their purchase journeys (Homburg et al., 2017; Huré et al., 2017). Perceived connectivity appears when the customer buys a product through the app and gets a suggestion for a nearby collection point; initiates a repair service through the brand's chat and concludes it on a partner's website without having to repeat procedures; chooses a physical store to return products bought elsewhere; or goes to a brand's official channels from third-party review sites without hassle.

The importance of smooth transitions across touchpoints as well as consistency in the elements of retail mix are captured by the concepts of integration quality (Shen et al., 2018;

Lee et al., 2019; Quach et al., 2020) and effective customer journey design (Kuehnl et al., 2019). However, we found that only one study in our review has addressed these two aspects as different, yet dependent dimensions: Huré et al. (2017) suggest that consistency is a prerequisite to promoting seamless journeys. Hence, more research is needed to explore the relationship between consistency, connectivity, and customer experience in the context of increasingly complex journeys, encompassing multiple firm-owned and independent touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Authors	Concept	Definition	Consistency examples	Connectivity examples
Herhausen et al. (2015)	Online-offline channel integration	Integrating access to and knowledge about the offline channel into an online channel	Finding consistent information about store assortment availability and location through online resources	Returning products across channels
Huré et al. (2017)	Omnichannel intensity	Aligning different channels and touchpoints	Finding consistent price, assortment, information, and product range across channels	Finding no barriers when moving from one channel to another
Shen et al. (2018); Lee et al. (2019)	Channel integration quality	Providing customers with a seamless and unified experience across different channels	Receiving the same information across channels, as well as consistent feelings, image, and performance	Having awareness of the existence of all available channels; choosing alternative channels
Zhang et al. (2018)	Consumer perception of channel integration	Perceiving the degree of coordination of multiple channels	Perceiving consistent brand, promotion, price, product information, transaction information, and inventory status across channels	Picking up online purchases at physical stores; returning and exchanging products in another channel
Kuehnl et al. (2019)	Effectiveness of customer journey design	Perceiving multiple brand-owned touchpoints as designed in a thematically cohesive, consistent, and context-sensitive way	Perceiving common brand theme, as well as uniform design of the brand	Perceiving connections between touchpoints that allow simple and fast activities; having personalized customer journeys
Quach et al. (2020)	Service integration	Enabling customers to enjoy a seamless experience during their shopping journey	Receiving coherent information, services, and experiences across channels	Having awareness of the retailer's current channels, their attributes and available services
Shi et al. (2020)	Omnichannel customer experience	Integrating processes and decisions to support a unified view of a brand	Finding interconnected content and information, unified information systems and management operations, consistent price, information, and product range across channels	Migrating tasks from one channel to another; receiving individualized attention and tailored service

Table 1 Journey integration addressed in customer-focused studies

Because we want to explore how perceived journey integration affects *customer experience* in omnichannel retailing, we now review the relevant key concepts in the customer experience literature.

2.2. Customer experience along omnichannel journeys

Customer experience refers to a customer's cognitive, affective, behavioral, sensorial, and/or relational responses to both direct and indirect encounters with a retailer and its brand, products, and services (Brakus et al., 2009; Gentile, et al., 2007; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). These responses can be characterized as spontaneous and non-deliberate, which differentiates customer experience from more evaluative concepts such as perceived service quality or value-in-use (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). In this paper, when investigating how perceived journey integration affects customer experience, we explore the *content* of different experience dimensions, which goes beyond previous studies in omnichannel retailing that address customer experience without much nuance (e.g., Peltola et al., 2015). We recognize that experiences may manifest in diverse sentiments and reactions that can vary in intensity (from weak to neutral to strong) and in valence (e.g., surprise is an experience that can be either positive or negative) (cf. De Keyser et al., 2020). For example, "embarrassment" and "anger" represent negative experiences within the affective dimension; whereas "positive surprise" is a mix of affective and cognitive experience.

Customer experience is a temporally and spatially dynamic concept, meaning that it can be observed as it develops and changes over the duration of a customer journey across multiple touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rawson et al., 2013). Parting ways with the traditional linear purchase funnel view, recent research has emphasized the uniqueness of each customer journey (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Lee et al., 2018). While touchpoints that encompass stimuli, interfaces, and encounters (Barann et al., 2020) are undoubtedly important pockets of experience creation, we argue that focusing on journeys in omnichannel retailing can better capture the determinants of experience formation lying in the in-between spaces formed by consistencies and variations between different touchpoints. Previous literature on customer experience has done a great job in identifying stimuli *within* touchpoints that affect the customer experience (e.g., Verhoef et al., 2009); the present study adds to increasing literature that addresses how interactions *across* and *between* touchpoints (i.e., consistencies and connectivity among them) affect the customer experience (e.g., Kuehnl et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2020).

Whereas many authors assume consistent and seamless journeys as an ideal (Edelman & Singer, 2015; Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), the customer experience literature provides some evidence that casts doubt on this commonly held assumption in omnichannel retailing. For instance, studies have found that customers do not necessarily desire consistency in all retail elements across touchpoints in different channels (e.g., Patrício et al., 2008; Patrício et al., 2011) and that inconsistent touchpoints can even improve the overall customer experience with a particular brand (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Siebert et al. (2020) usefully add “sticky” customer journeys as an alternative pattern most associated with recreational service categories and extraordinary experiences. Sticky journeys are intentionally designed to provide inconsistency, as well as effortfulness and unpredictability (i.e., they can present low perceived connectivity) (Siebert et al., 2020). These features can trigger surprising and exciting experiences, suggesting that a low level of perceived connectivity can potentially lead to positive experiences. Therefore, exploring how customers experience omnichannel journeys gives us room to question commonly held assumptions in the omnichannel literature, such as the need to integrate touchpoints to create seamless experiences.

To summarize, we approach the customer experience as a multidimensional concept encompassing a whole range of positive and negative customer responses to encounters with firms. More specifically, we explore the content of these experiences (e.g., surprise, anger) in the form of customer reactions triggered by the two dimensions of perceived journey integration: perceived consistency and connectivity of touchpoints.

3. Research methodology

This study approaches theory development through explorative interpretation of consumers' remembered experiences in their omnichannel journeys. The multidimensional and subjective nature of customer experience favors the use of qualitative research methods over other approaches (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Palmer 2010). Moreover, the use of personal consumer interviews for theory development has proven successful in prior studies exploring consumer omnichannel behaviors and experiences (e.g., Shaikh et al., 2020; Fiestas & Tuzovic, 2021). In contrast to the aforementioned examples, we adopted an abductive reasoning process, using our empirical findings to "recontextualize" the phenomenon of journey integration in the consumer world (Danermark et al., 2002). Perceiving a mismatch between our empirical observations and existing research (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), we undertook this study using an iterative process through the continuous dialogue between our emerging findings and the literature on journey integration and customer experience.

3.1. Data collection

This study uses three complementary datasets generated between 2016 and 2019, before the COVID-19 outbreak. We collected data through nine semi-structured interviews (Dataset 1) and two focus groups (Dataset 2) conducted among Finnish consumers. The third dataset consists of ten semi-structured interviews with Brazilian consumers (Dataset 3). Following purposive sampling technique, we aimed for diversity in genders and socio-economic status. All participants are adults experienced in multichannel shopping. Table 2 shows the details of each dataset.

Pseudonym, gender and age	Employment	Duration (min)	Thematic focus
Dataset 1 – Face-to-face interviews, Finland, generated in 2016			
Ulrike, F, age 34	Family leave	23:43	Channels: Online store, physical store Product category: Furniture and home décor Interview themes: • Buying behavior within the product category; • Experiences in online and physical stores before, during and after purchase; • Experience during transitions from channel to channel (connectivity)
Jane, F, age 34	Admin. tasks	25:38	
Theodor, M, age 40	Senior manager	24:13	
Jake, M, age 30	Student	31:34	
Mary, F, age 27	Researcher	22:45	
Hailey, F, age 38	Middle manager	45:08	
Turner, M, age 34	Senior manager	40:20	
Axel, M, age 42	Sales manager	34:59	
Vincent, M, age 37	Sales manager	43:22	
Dataset 2 – Moderated focus groups, Finland, generated in 2016			
FG1: Entrepreneurs			Channels: Online store, physical store Product category: Furniture and home décor Interview themes: • Buying behavior within the product category; • Experiences in online and physical stores before, during and after purchase; • Improvement ideas for seamless transitions from channel to channel (connectivity)
Hazel, F, age 35	Senior manager	58:36	
Leslie, F, age 56	Entrepreneur		
Simone, F, age 43	Entrepreneur		
Susan, F, age 31	Entrepreneur		
FG2: Students between ages 21 and 26			
Iris, F, age 25	Graduate student	46:41	
Victor, M, age 24	Graduate student		
Lacy, F, age 21	Undergrad student		
Haven, F, age 26	Graduate student		
Dataset 3 – Face-to-face interviews, Brazil, generated in 2019			
Isabel, F, age 27	Journalist	52:21	Channels: Online store, physical store, mobile app, other digital touchpoints (e.g., social media, third-party touchpoints) Product category: Not specified Interview themes: • Experiences in using multiple channels to search, buy or communicate with the retailer; • Opinions about retail mix consistency across channels;
Ronald, M, age 32	Student	71:13	
Layla, F, age 30	Ad professional	79:51	
Julia, F, age 30	English teacher	43:53	
Lucy, F, age 47	Journalist	46:25	
Anthony, M, age 29	Math teacher	36:17	
Eric, M, age 32	Physician	20:56	
John, M, age 34	Marketer	48:56	
Claire, F, age 34	PR professional	31:22	
Liam, M, age 25	Ad professional	39:26	

Table 2 Datasets analyzed in this study

The datasets complement each other in several ways. First, the markets investigated represent extremes in the retail landscape with regard to size, population, infrastructure, and digitalization. Second, the data sets vary in terms of the retail context studied. The Finnish datasets focus on the furniture and home décor product categories, which feature hedonic characteristics that may influence customer preference for the use of multiple channels (Kushwaha & Shankar, 2013). The Brazilian dataset, in contrast, was not delimited to any product category or channels. Instead, the interviewees' stories covered at least nine different product categories across multiple different channels, enabling a broader analysis. Third, the interview-based datasets allowed for tracing of specific journeys, and the focus group discussions prompted more remembered experiences and allowed us to identify more incidents of moving between touchpoints. Fourth, complementary differences exist between the interview themes in the Finnish and Brazilian datasets. Focus on process fluency and connectivity between different touchpoints in datasets 1 and 2, and on consistencies in retail mix elements in dataset 3, allowed for a more detailed analysis of their impact on consumers' experiences.

3.2. Data analysis

Building on thematic content analysis principles, data analysis began with the development of a coding scheme suitable for analyzing remembered journeys. We applied researcher triangulation to ensure coding validity, whereby the first two authors conducted the initial coding independently, after which the tentative findings were compared and discussed through an iterative process, resulting in refinements in the coding. The researchers were constantly in contact to check the consistency of procedures and to resolve any discrepancies.

The journeys were broken down into touchpoints, which were coded by ownership, nature, and stage of the decision-making process. Based on informant's descriptions, we analyzed journey integration according to the level of perceived consistency in retail mix elements across touchpoints (e.g., price, assortment, information, promotion) and the level of perceived connectivity of touchpoints, following the previously presented definitions. Moreover, we identified verbal and nonverbal cues of customer experience dimensions and the valence of customer experiences, detailing how and why they were affected by perceived journey integration. The procedure resulted in the identification of 59 journeys, such as that of Isabel (Figure 1).

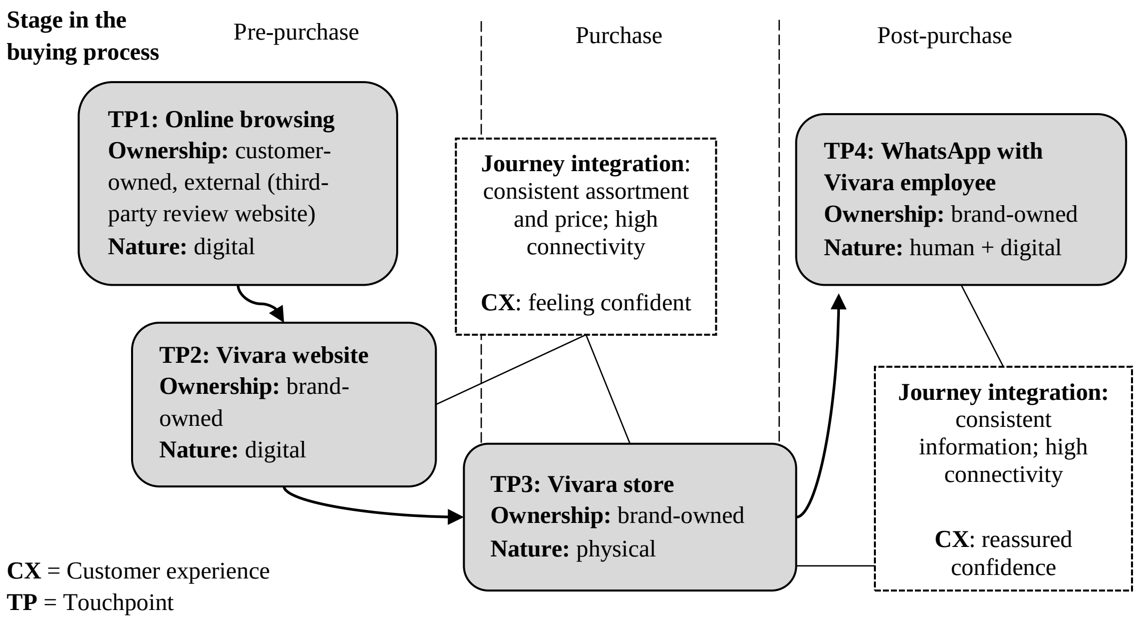

Figure 1 *An example of analyzed customer journeys: Isabel's journey to buy wedding rings*

This comprehensive and detailed analysis reveals our customer-centric perspective on omnichannel experiences. The following section reports our main findings.

4. Findings

Our findings confirm the relevance of perceived consistency of retail mix elements and perceived connectivity of touchpoints as dimensions of journey integration that affect customer experience. However, our findings do not confirm high consistency and connectivity as *necessary* conditions for positive customer experiences. Indeed, there are instances when low consistency can trigger positive experiences, and others where low connectivity triggers positive experiences. Our findings suggest that these dimensions (consistency and connectivity) are *separate* and often *independent* – contrary to the dominant view that customers need to find consistencies across touchpoints to have a seamless journey. The connectivity dimension brings granularity to understanding omnichannel journeys, in which borders between digital, human, and physical are increasingly blurred (De Keyser et al., 2020).

We identified four patterns of perceived journey integration distinguished by their relative degree of consistency and connectivity (Figure 2). High perceived consistency means that customers see focal retail mix elements replicated across touchpoints; low perceived consistency means that customers recognize differences in retail mix in each touchpoint. Regarding the perceived connectivity dimension, a high level means that customers move easily from one touchpoint to another, and a low level of perceived connectivity means that customers need to overcome obstacles to continue the journey. We identified several experiences — listed in bullet points in Figure 2 — originating from the complex interactions between the two dimensions across these four patterns. Note that by using a nuanced concept of customer experience, we go beyond "positive vs. negative" experiences to understand a range of customer reactions throughout the omnichannel journey, thereby offering a better description of how journey integration influences the customer experience. Web Appendix A contains additional representative quotes illustrating dimensions of journey integration and identified customer experiences.

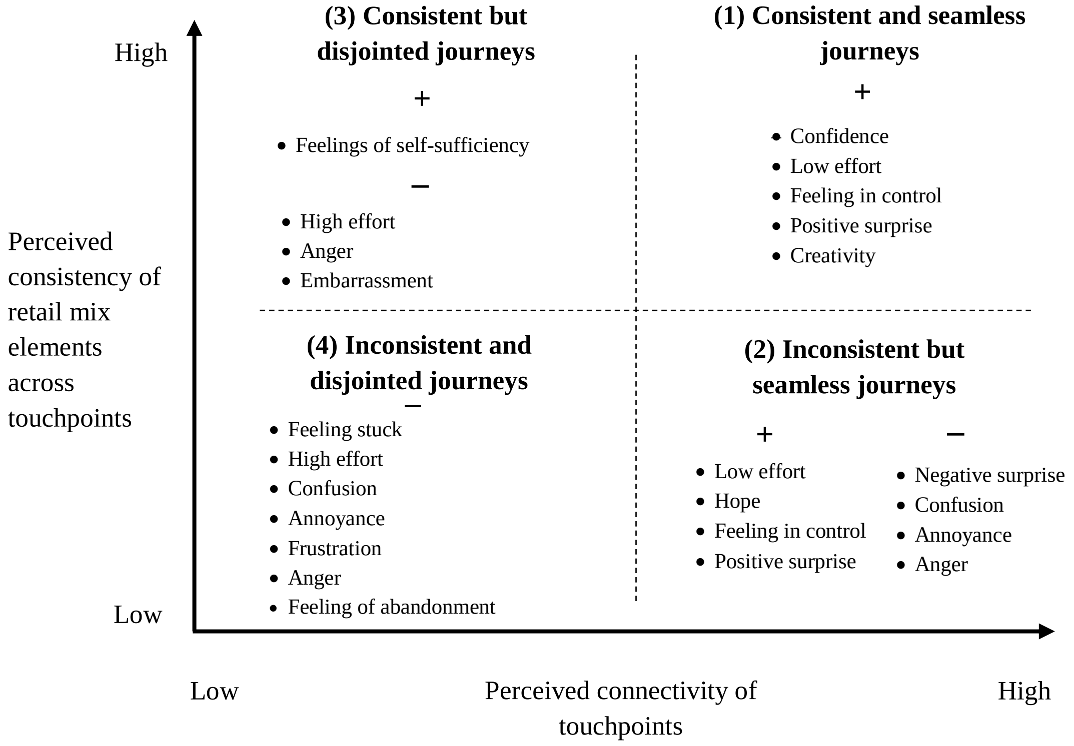

Figure 2 *Patterns of integration in omnichannel journeys and identified positive and negative customer experiences*

Next, we describe the four identified patterns of perceived journey integration. We use vignettes based on our data to present an illustrative journey of each pattern. Map figures for each journey are provided in the Appendix A. Moreover, we discuss how the interactions between perceived consistency and perceived connectivity influence the customer's experience.

4.1. Pattern 1: Consistent and seamless journeys

> *Isabel, age 27, is searching for wedding rings with her partner. She browses online stores, prioritizing retailers that have physical stores because they give her a sense of security and confidence. Isabel needs to be sure about this purchase – it is such an important moment! – so she searches for retailers' reputation on ReclameAqui (a third-party review website). She sees a pair of rings on Vivara e-commerce and decides to go to a physical Vivara store.*

There, Isabel finds the same rings, at the same price, and she feels that her desire has just come to life. She buys the rings. In the following days, while the rings go through customization, Isabel communicates with the salesperson on WhatsApp. When the rings are ready, the Vivara employee sends her a message, and Isabel goes to the store to collect her product.

The first pattern combines high consistency in retail mix elements and high connectivity of touchpoints. In these kinds of journeys, customers usually find the same price, assortment, promotion, and information across touchpoints, and effortlessly move across touchpoints, what results in positive experiences. We identified two ways the dimensions interact in this category: (1) a complementary relationship between consistency and connectivity or (2) situations where one dimension has a stronger effect on the experience while another works in the background.

Isabel's journey (Figure 1) as described in the vignette illustrates smooth transitions across touchpoints involved in purchasing from a jewelry retailer. It highlights perceived consistency in information, assortment, and price. She was able to buy the same ring she had seen online, and experienced connectivity when migrating from one touchpoint to another. This reassured her and made her feel *confident* not only about the purchase, but during the whole process. In other words, high levels of consistency and connectivity triggered positive sensorial experiences (i.e., the transition from just seeing to touching materialized the desire) and positive affective experiences (i.e., feeling safe and sure).

Respondents often expect inconsistencies between online and offline brand-owned touchpoints (see Pattern 2), so they express *positive surprise* when the expected differences do not appear. For instance, after receiving an email from Levi's about a sale on jeans, Claire assumed it was an e-commerce promotion. However, she was positively surprised by the high consistency and connectivity between the touchpoints.

> *I received an email from Levi's about a huge sale on jeans. The message suggested that the discounts were valid for e-commerce only. I went to a Levi's store at the shopping mall to try on the jeans I wanted. (...) But when I arrived at the shopping mall to try on the jeans I wanted, I notice the same discounts! I usually feel that e-commerce and physical stores are separated. (...) I was very happy to leave the store with my new jeans. I wore them the following day, instead of waiting a week to receive the product. I could easily wait, but it was nice to leave the store with the product, having paid the same price I would pay online, without having to wait. – Claire*

Several journeys revealed that positive experiences stem from perceived connectivity, when consistency was assumed as a given. Here, Jake experienced *low effort* when he found no barriers between online and offline channels, having assumed they would have consistent assortment.

> *At IKEA, it's good that you can compile a shopping list online in advance and choose what you need, and once you've put it together, it's easier to find them on the spot. It is made relatively easy. – Jake*

Moreover, an experience of *creativity* emerged from the connectivity of physical and online worlds. For example, Theodor said he would enjoy placing some realistic images of furniture from the retailer website in his home, indicating an imaginary experience (cf. Helkkula et al., 2012; Jaakkola et al., 2015) that could be made possible by integrating digital and physical touchpoints. This also underlines the importance of considering customer-owned touchpoints in analyzing the connectivity of their journeys.

You could take that piece of furniture to the tablet screen, and you could use the camera to place it in your own home. (...) It could remove the barriers, so that you don't need to go into that physical store. – Theodor

In addition, some stories revealed an enhanced *feeling of control* over customers' environment that was triggered by perceived connectivity of touchpoints. In-store access to online reviews is one example of high connectivity that makes Anthony feel he is in control and not left alone in making his decision.

In the physical store you do not have access to other consumers' opinions (as you do on the internet). Multiplatform makes the consumer much more aware. Now I feel able to judge if something is good. – Anthony

Positive surprise also originated from instances of remarkable connectivity in which the retailer went the extra mile in integrating touchpoints. Encountering such connectivity, Susan not only found it helpful, but was amazed by the thoughtfulness of the retailer.

In Korea, I saw in a clothing store where there was a small display and a figure on the hangers. And that figure meant how many likes this product has gained in their online store. (...) I thought, wow, it was somehow really new and fun. (...) The user experience has been taken to a whole different level. – Susan

4.2. Pattern 2: Inconsistent but seamless journeys

Ulrike, age 34, finds herself in an Anttila department store looking for a blender. All of the options feel too expensive, so she doesn't buy any of them. Instead, she goes home and researches the prices online, comparing among multiple different stores. During her search Ulrike finds a discount offer for a blender from Anttila. She is surprised and amused to find an offer from the *store she's just been at – she can get the blender for so much cheaper now! The offer is only valid in netAnttila, the online store, and she doesn't actually remember seeing that particular blender in the physical store. Ulrike decides to order the blender online based on its description. In a couple of days she picks it up from Anttila's register without any problems.*

The second integration pattern comprises journeys with low levels of consistency in retail mix elements – making touchpoints clearly different from each other – but high levels of connectivity. In this category, customers report a seamless but inconsistent journey.

Customers seem to expect some differences in retail elements across touchpoints. A closer examination indicates that customers often expect inconsistencies in assortment and price while they expect consistencies in other elements such as service quality and atmospheric. Thus, inconsistencies do not prevent them from having positive experiences. For instance, for Isabel, price differences across touchpoints in different channels are justified and, therefore, do not trigger negative experiences:

> *I don't think it is unfair, I understand the logic behind charging different prices on online and physical store. The online store doesn't have the same costs as the physical store. – Isabel*

Having experience in comparing prices across online and offline touchpoints appears to be a relevant factor for customers to feel more in *control*. They are thus more prepared to deal with inconsistencies, to the point that they can be seen as just a matter of fact. Julia describes it this way:

> *Apart from this detail, the price difference, the service is the same. I already worked in a restaurant, so I understand the logic behind it. Costs are much lower online; much lower than store rent and employee salaries. It's like this: the store is for those*

who have urgency. If you can wait (for home delivery), buy online. It's up to the customer. – Julia

Ulrike's journey (Figure A.1, Appendix A) illustrates that distinguishing a brand's store names to make them recognizable but perceivably different – Anttila and netAnttila – works with customer expectations by signaling that they are dealing with a clearly different entity. In such case inconsistencies do not intervene in the flow of the journey because they do not cause confusion.

This pattern included different relationships between the connectivity and consistency dimensions. We identified journeys in which a high level of perceived connectivity diminished the potential negative effects of inconsistency by *reducing* consumers' *effort*. For instance, Lucy found inconsistency in product availability, but the staff presented her a solution that increased perceived connectivity and resulted in pleasantly low effort experience.

I went to Gaston to buy new sneakers, but my size wasn't available. The saleswoman said, "let's do this: I'll buy it online for you, you'll pay here, and it will arrive here in two or three days". She purchased the sneakers at the Gaston website for me, and I paid at the register. I don't know about her commission, but I found the solution interesting. She didn't let me leave without buying my sneakers. She didn't say "go buy it online", which is something I have heard. – Lucy

High connectivity also gives customers a *feeling of control* and even the *hope* of finding the product they liked in a different channel. Axel describes with excitement how, during the Crazy Days campaign, not all hope is lost even if the discounted product is sold out online:

"Hullut päivät (Crazy Days, a Black Friday-type campaign that happens both online and offline) is a good example on the e-commerce side (…) it doesn't matter what

time it is, you can buy right away in the morning or at night. (...) But often it is sold out right in the morning. 'Check availability from the physical store' - this is the phrase you then see often. So, you go to the store and the product may be still there!" – Axel

Some journeys showed that inconsistencies themselves were driving positive experiences by enhancing customers' *feeling of control*, or by *surprising* them with a more beneficial scenario – for instance, by paying a lower price. Connectivity works in the background in this scenario. For instance, Lucy felt *surprised* when she found a better price at the online channel of the bookstore she was at. She then used this difference to her benefit.

I bought the book from the Cultura website on my phone while I was at the Cultura bookstore. (…) It was so much cheaper that I bought it right away. (…) A few days later I returned to the mall to pick it up, then I took the opportunity to see a movie. (…) It's a good thing to realize that you've bought something cheaper. – Lucy

As customers acknowledge the features of each touchpoint, they decide how to proceed in their journey according to their goals (e.g., receiving a product earlier, paying lower prices, or getting personal service). Here, inconsistencies are often welcomed. However, despite their acceptance of price and assortment discrepancies, customers do not show the same understanding for inconsistencies in other retail elements. Thus, differences in information and promotion can be deemed unacceptable, especially regarding digital touchpoints (e.g., social media or a website). Negative emotions such as *confusion, annoyance*, and *anger* emerged from these journeys. High connectivity does not alleviate the negative experience in these cases, as Ronald illustrates:

To make super launch campaigns on social media and not be able to deliver the products at the physical store is something that infuriates me. I get mad when I make a useless run to the store. – Ronald

Moreover, customers who are new to comparing touchpoints feel *negatively surprised* when they find inconsistencies in price and payment terms. Nonetheless, their experience might not be completely negative if retailers are transparent about pricing policies and open to negotiation. Liam went to a physical store expecting to buy a television for a certain price, but found that the retailer does not match its own online prices.

> *Prices were different, the payment terms were different, which surprised me a little since I'm not so used to purchase at physical stores. (…) I said I saw a different (lower) price at their website. She (the salesperson) explained to me that the online store was based in another state, where the tax is lower, that is why the products are cheaper. But she said she was going to talk to the manager (to try and match prices) and came back with a price that was about 2% higher than the online offer, so I closed it right away, because it was worth it. (...) It was important to learn that there is room for bargain. – Liam*

4.3. Pattern 3: Consistent but disjointed journeys

> *Turner, age 34, types 'TV stand' into Google Search. He gives several stores a chance but ends up looking closer at an option on an IKEA webpage. He can see color options and prices, and he could even imagine how that product would look in his home. Yet, he still wants to look at it in person to make sure the surface looks nice and that his stereos can fit inside. He writes down the dimensions and the product code in the Notes app on his phone and drives to a familiar location. He finds the TV stand he was looking for quite easily, flagging down a store assistant for help. Seeing the TV stand in the showroom spurs his creativity and gives him some final ideas for his solution – the trip*

was worth it! After getting some additional confirmation from the assistant on all the necessary parts, he heads into the dreaded loneliness of the self-service warehouse. Now he must stay alert, he is by himself, and if he ends up missing something, he knows that he has only himself to blame. Nevertheless, he likes it. Maybe, the feeling of self-sufficiency is speaking? He looks forward to challenging his assembly skills at home.

The third pattern of integration comprises journeys with high levels of consistency, but low levels of connectivity. In other words, customers acknowledge that touchpoints have consistent retail mix elements, but perceive barriers when moving through the journey. This category seems less common. However, interviewees discussed situations in which they could not go forward without dedicating considerable *effort* and/or time to it. For instance, Jane tells that although different ways to display the product (such as in digital or physical showrooms) can be useful at times, she then finds it difficult to compare the product she liked with other products of the same category, stifling her decision making.

> *Decorative pillows or maybe curtains, they should be clearly visible all in one place. I find it somehow disturbing if they are in ensembles (with other products). (...) Or if you find a curtain in an online store, because you can search for it in many different ways (brand name, product name), you (sometimes) can't find them all in one place. So, you really have to put in the effort and look for that product category. – Jane*

The more arduous it was for customers to continue their journey, the more negative emotions such as *anger* appeared. Interestingly, perceived consistency in promotion – for example, supported by cookies and digital traces – may reinforce the problem, as a reminder of something the person could not achieve. This was the case for Julia: she would not continue the journey without knowing in which physical stores she could find the product. Yet she kept seeing ads for it.

I couldn't check on the website the stores that sold the shoes. There was no such option. I didn't consider buying online because I wanted to try them on first. So, I gave it up. But I kept seeing them on Instagram, YouTube… You get a crazy urge to buy, but you can't. It makes me angry. – Julia

Constraints on moving across touchpoints do not always come from tangible barriers. For instance, Ronald could use his mobile phone to search for better prices for the same product while in-store, but he would feel *embarrassed* because, in his opinion, such showrooming behavior represents a threat to salespeople.

I would feel a little embarrassed by the presence of a salesperson. They must be used to having people in the store just to try on and then buy online. Either way, I wouldn't search on my mobile phone inside the store, in front of a salesperson. – Ronald

Furthermore, uncertainty about the amount of effort that would arise from low connectivity of touchpoints resulted in interruptions to customers' journeys with unfamiliar providers. This seems to be an even greater barrier for low-confidence customers. The perceived consistency did not alleviate the *effort* involved in (or anticipated from) transitioning from one touchpoint to another in these journeys.

You have to be pretty well-informed if you start building (selecting all the pieces for purchase) a couch online (...) When you're in the store, the salesperson will know it right away. And if you order that online then we come back to that thing that the product arrives and it's wrong (...) I think that today people don't dare to buy bigger products online. – Axel

Our data also shows that customers who like to challenge themselves and are familiar with the retail environment seem to find a way through disjointed journeys, which is the case in Turner's story (Figure A.2, Appendix A). Despite high connectivity of touchpoints at the beginning, he experienced more difficulty moving across brand-owned touchpoints towards the purchase stage, and then to customer-owned touchpoints in the post-purchase stage. He found high levels of consistency in information, assortment, and price, yet still felt that the progression through the journey was challenging (e.g., he needed to stay focused). Nevertheless, he reports enjoying that he has to collect all the parts himself and be part of the "warehouse experience", indicating a positive experience of *self-sufficiency*.

Disjointed journeys do not affect customer experience negatively when customers develop habits and patterns to overcome perceived barriers. Here, Theodor describes resorting to analog solutions to help him transition more smoothly to a physical store.

> *I write down product names to remember, in a way that I can recognize them in the store. Sometimes I would look directly from the mobile, what those products were, but sometimes I would write the name of the product or the code just on the piece of paper. – Theodor*

4.4. Pattern 4: Inconsistent and disjointed journeys

> *Layla, age 30, wants a specific model of refrigerator. She searches online and purchases the product from the cheapest website she finds: PontoFrio, a well-known retailer from which she had not yet purchased anything. When the product is delivered to her home, she notices its incorrect voltage – 220 instead of the 110 volts she ordered. Layla seeks information on making a product exchange. She tries the chat but fails to proceed with the request. She calls the retailer several times, but the problem is not solved. In every contact she has to repeat her identification data, and she is unable to contact the exchange department. Layla feels stressed. She decides to follow her father's*

suggestion and sends an email warning the retailer she would write a complaint at ReclameAqui if they didn't resolve the situation. Only then the retailer makes contact and exchanges the product. After that, Layla warns close people that she had a bad experience with PontoFrio: "you should be careful before buying there", she says.

The fourth pattern of integration comprises journeys with low levels of both consistency and connectivity. In these journeys, customers feel they are dealing with different entities because of inconsistencies in retail mix elements across touchpoints. In addition, they notice barriers that interfere with the journey flow, and, when stacked onto each other, make the experience exponentially worse.

More specifically, our data shows that low perceived connectivity may enhance the negative effects that inconsistency has on customer experiences. Customers who have disjointed journeys *feel stuck,* experience *high effort* and negative emotions such as *feelings of abandonment*, and often engage in negative word-of-mouth and retailer switching.

In Layla's journey (Figure A.3, Appendix A), she noticed not only inconsistencies in the information the retailer would give to her but also barriers that delayed the product exchange, such as unstable chat and an incorrect phone number. As a customer, she *felt abandoned*. The effort was so intense that she *felt stuck*, and the situation was resolved only after she threatened the retailer with a public complaint on a third-party website.

In another remembered journey, Layla was *frustrated* because she was unable to continue the journey after receiving inconsistent information from a brand.

People would ask in some of their posts showing the products: "Where can I find it?". And the answer was "at the store closest to you", something like that. I wanted to buy *it and couldn't do it. I was frustrated every time I saw a new ad. (…) I was irritated, and I stopped following the brand. – Layla*

Similarly, a combination of inconsistency in information across digital touchpoints and the inability of the retailer to suggest alternative paths prevented John from moving forward and left him *feeling stuck*.

> *The desk was on the official Instagram. It was exactly what I needed, the price was cheap and home delivery was included. But I couldn't find it on the website. So I called the store, and they said it wasn't available. I sent an email, with the Instagram post attached, and they said a partner is responsible for managing the Instagram profile. – John*

As evident in Pattern 2, inconsistencies in assortment are understandable and do not necessarily represent a threat to customer experience. However, when combined with barriers to a fluid journey, even expected differences may damage the relationship with a retailer or brand. For instance, negative experiences reported by Vincent and Jake originated in the way the inconsistency was handled, not in the inconsistency per se. Vincent is describing the progression of *feelings of confusion, annoyance, anger* as he *felt stuck*, while Jake was *feeling annoyed* and *abandoned*. Both were unsure how to continue the journey, so much so that they gave up and switched retailers.

> *It is unfortunate that when I went (to the physical store), and the product was not available, I came across the fact that it is very unclear, when is it available, where it is available, and in what way. (…) It must be clear. It' confusing... (...) The seller must ensure that it is clear where it can be picked up and when. That you don't have to stay spinning around that store and asking people who don't know anything about it. That is, it needs to be handled in a smooth and pleasant way, and it will be a positive experience. (…) It was extremely poorly cared for in all respects, (…)*

especially because of the unprofessionalism (...) my nerves failed me. (...) I got enough of it. (...) It made me question why they have a physical business, and why they also have an online store, why can't they cross-order there? (...) What kind of service is that?! – Vincent

For example, I went to K-Rauta and looked at some air conditioners online, but when I visited their store there were no sales assistants and I couldn't find anything. And the product I would have liked was not there. I would've asked to check in stock, but the workers were all busy filling the shelves, I didn't get any help and I couldn't find the product. And I had other shopping that I could have done, but I was there only for half an hour and left. – Jake

5. Discussion

This paper has explored how journey integration influences customer experience. Our qualitative study reveals four different patterns of omnichannel journeys, each prompting different experiences. This study shows that positive experiences, such as surprise, low effort, feelings of control, and hope, emerge from journeys that have substantial differences in retail mix elements. Furthermore, a positive experience of self-sufficiency emerges from overcoming barriers in journeys with low perceived connectivity. These findings challenge the assumptions that inconsistent or disjointed journeys necessarily harm the customer experience in omnichannel retailing. We present four research propositions based on our findings that advance the understanding of omnichannel retailing from a customer experience perspective.

P1: Perceived consistency and perceived connectivity are distinct dimensions of an omnichannel journey that affect the customer's experience.

Previous literature has highlighted the importance of both perceived consistency and perceived connectivity for the customer experience (e.g., Kuehnl et al., 2019), yet these two dimensions were generally not analyzed separately (e.g., Herhausen et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018). Huré's et al. (2017) study is an exception in which they consider the consistency of retail mix a prerequisite to easy and fluid transitions across touchpoints. Conversely, our findings suggest that perceived consistency and perceived connectivity are somewhat independent dimensions of journey integration in that one can have a seamless experience while dealing with inconsistencies in price and assortment, for instance. The disentanglement of these two dimensions revealed four patterns of omnichannel journeys that influence the customer experience differently, challenging the "integration imperative" that has prevailed in the omnichannel literature. The identification of these two dimensions unveils a more nuanced and granular view of journey integration and its effects on customer experience.

P2: The influence of inconsistent retail elements across touchpoints on customer experience depends on (a) the type of retail element, (b) customers' previous experiences, and (c) perceived connectivity between touchpoints.

Most customers seem to accept inconsistencies of some retail elements across touchpoints, contradicting the general guideline that retail elements should always be uniform across touchpoints (e.g., Huré et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). Customers particularly expect price and assortment to be inconsistent because of the characteristics of touchpoints in different channels, such as lower costs on a website compared with a physical store. Customers do not show the same tolerance for inconsistent information and promotion, however. Therefore, whether inconsistencies are perceived as negative depends on the type of retail element in that there needs to be a justification for the difference between the touchpoints (e.g., lower costs).

Additionally, more experienced customers seem to be more tolerant of inconsistencies and easily adapt their behavior in omnichannel journeys through webrooming and showrooming behaviors (e.g., Quach et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2015). A high level of perceived connectivity between touchpoints is important in these cases because customers can easily optimize their journeys by combining touchpoints. Less experienced customers sometimes do not expect inconsistencies in the retail mix. High perceived connectivity can act as a buffer against potential negative experiences in these cases. For instance, if not finding a specific product in a physical store is a potential driver of a negative experience, smoothly directing the customer to an online store can act as a buffer that results in a positive experience. Hence, whether inconsistencies are perceived as negative also depends on customers' previous experiences, which mold their expectations, and on whether these inconsistencies are accompanied by high connectivity between touchpoints.

P3: Unexpected consistencies/inconsistencies of retail elements across touchpoints result in positive customer experiences when they are favorable for the customers.

The unexpected consistency or inconsistency of retail elements across touchpoints can be a strong driver of positive experiences. The omnichannel retailing literature has assumed that consistency improves the customer experience (e.g., Gao et al, 2021; Huré et al., 2017; Quach et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018), yet the suggestion that inconsistencies can do the same strongly contradicts this literature. This happens when the consistency or inconsistency of retail elements across touchpoints results in a positive surprise in the omnichannel journey. For instance, customers who find a lower price in a particular touchpoint when they were not expecting it express strong positive experiences. These findings highlight the importance of understanding the ordering of touchpoints customers interact with during their omnichannel journeys; in this way, firms can manage the retail elements across touchpoints to positively surprise the customer.

P4: Perceived connectivity of touchpoints has a greater influence on the customer experience than perceived consistency of touchpoints in omnichannel journeys.

Even though the consistency of retail elements – usually the main focus of retailers when developing omnichannel strategies – influences the customer experience, our findings suggest that connectivity of touchpoints has a stronger impact on customer experience in omnichannel journeys. As previously seen, inconsistent retail elements by themselves often do not lead to negative experiences, especially when firms can direct customers smoothly to other touchpoints. Perceived consistency in the retailing mix becomes a secondary matter in these cases. The strongest negative customer experiences emerged in scenarios with low connectivity of touchpoints, when customers felt unable to continue the journey as they would like. Thus, we suggest that perceived connectivity of touchpoints has central importance to the omnichannel customer experience and should not be neglected when scholars and practitioners address journey integration. The customer experience literature, with very few exceptions (e.g., Patrício et al., 2008; Patrício et al., 2011), tends to focus more on the static determinants of customer experience. Considering perceived connectivity of touchpoints is essential if firms want to understand how customers experience omnichannel journeys.

6. Conclusion

Omnichannel retailing largely assumes that touchpoints across channels should be integrated (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Hossain et al., 2019). In this paper, we questioned these commonly held assumptions through exploring how perceived journey integration affects the customer experience in omnichannel retailing. Based on interviews and focus groups with Finnish and Brazilian consumers, our findings demonstrate that the two dimensions of journey integration — perceived consistency of retail mix elements (e,g., price, assortment, information) and perceived connectivity of touchpoints (i.e., easy transitions across them) — interact to create four patterns of omnichannel journeys which trigger distinct customer experiences. We then presented four research propositions that advance the understanding of how the omnichannel journey integration influences the customer experience. In the next section, we discuss how they contribute to the literature.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

Our research contributes to the omnichannel retailing and customer experience conceptual domains. First, while the omnichannel retailing literature largely assumes that retailers should integrate elements across touchpoints to create seamless and positive experiences (e.g., Gao et al., 2021; Huré et al., 2017; Shi et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018), our study debunked this assumption. When moving from a firm-centric perspective to analyzing how customers experience journey integration, we explored the influence of integration practices beyond customer attitudes and behaviors that have been examined in this literature (e.g., Quach et al., 2020; Shen et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018). We discovered complex relationships between journey integration dimensions and customer experiences, such as instances in which inconsistencies of retail elements or even barriers in customer journeys positively influenced the customer experience. These findings advance research on the influence of channel integration on customer experience (Gao et al., 2021) by adding granularity to this relationship. Therefore, by looking more closely at how customers experience omnichannel journeys, our study was able to demystify the “integration imperative”.

Second, our study also contributes to omnichannel retailing by providing some conceptual clarifications. While the omnichannel literature has treated consistency and connectivity as muddled together (e.g., Lee et al., 2019; Quach et al., 2020) or as connectivity dependent on consistency (Huré et al., 2017), our insights into how customers experience journey integration revealed that these can operate as independent attributes which yield four patterns of omnichannel journeys. Therefore, this study explores the concept of journey integration, unveiling the role of a second, independent dimension (i.e., perceived connectivity of touchpoints), in addition to perceived consistency. This is an important contribution considering that connectivity, the most neglected dimension of journey integration, may have even a more significant influence on customer experience than consistency of retail elements, which has been the primary focus of research so far.

Third, our four propositions contribute to the customer experience literature by looking beyond static determinants within touchpoints. Even though the customer experience literature recognizes the importance of the whole customer journey (e.g., Edelman & Singer, 2015), most studies focus on determinants of customer experience within touchpoints (e.g., Verhoef et al., 2009). Few studies pay attention to the consistency of elements across touchpoints, such as thematic cohesion across touchpoints (e.g., Kuehnl et al., 2019), while even fewer pay attention to the connection between touchpoints (e.g., Patrício et al., 2008; Patrício et al., 2011). While some studies in omnichannel retailing focus on connectivity between touchpoints and channels (see Table 1), the lack of a nuanced treatment of the concept of customer experience fails to deliver contributions to this conceptual domain. Our study adds to the customer experience literature by examining its determinants across and in between touchpoints, which contributes to the customer journey mapping and design stream (e.g., Patrício et al., 2008; Patrício et al., 2011) and to a more dynamic perspective on customer experience (e.g., Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2021).

6.2. Managerial implications

We outline three key implications for managers. First, we caution managers to carefully reconsider the "integration imperative" in omnichannel retailing; not every retail element can or should be integrated. Our findings illustrate how consistency and connectivity, while important, are not ends in themselves. Customer journeys can be highly positive even if they are inconsistent or disjointed. For instance, whereas a seamless journey might be cognitively undemanding, a disjointed journey might prove to be rewarding in other ways. The task for managers is to find the optimal level of consistency in the retail mix and connectivity of touchpoints, considering the type of retail element, customers' previous experiences, and the connectivity of touchpoints.

Second, we hope our data extracts, vignettes, and journey illustrations demonstrate the importance of considering the customer perspective on omnichannel retailing. Less weight should be given to internal (technical) considerations of integration, and more emphasis should be placed on understanding how customers perceive consistency and connectivity. For example, if the customer does not perceive the experience as consistent, then the "actual" degree of integration will not matter for the overall experience. We encourage managers to interview customers and map out their journeys. Such an exercise will likely prove eye-opening as managers start to realize how customers perceive different touchpoints and the connections between them. It might also make visible the various customer-owned and external touchpoints that might play a critical role in the customers' journeys.

Third, our analysis also highlights the importance of customers' expectations. Customers have learned in many instances to expect a certain level of inconsistency or low connectivity. Mapping out these expectations among their customers will enable managers to be better armed to make decisions regarding the desirable level of journey integration. Moreover, context matters: Customers will likely appreciate different types of journeys in different purchase situations and product categories.

6.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has explored how omnichannel journey integration influences customer experience. Our findings should be read with some limitations in mind. The results followed from a qualitative investigation into two retail contexts, aimed at exploring the phenomenon through customers' remembered experiences. We focused on customers that are used to journeys comprised of multiple online and offline touchpoints, so our findings may not generalize to other customer segments, such as store-focused and pragmatic online shoppers (Herhausen et al., 2019). Future studies could investigate whether these findings hold for segments that have different patterns of touchpoints usage.

The journeys analyzed in this paper encompass purchases from various product categories (e.g., furniture, apparel, home appliance) and levels of customer involvement, thus accommodating the phenomenon broadly. However, we did not examine differences across retailing categories. Future studies could explore more closely in what contexts customers have negative or positive experiences in response to low levels of journey integration across touchpoints. For instance, we found that disjointed journeys promote high effort but also feelings of self-sufficiency when customers come up with creative ways to overcome barriers between touchpoints throughout the journey. Further research should investigate retailing environments that might benefit from actively making the customer journey less fluid.

Furthermore, our research propositions derive from qualitative findings. Therefore, they should not be regarded as confirmed effects, for example, of the greater influence of perceived connectivity (vs. perceived consistency) on customer experience. The next logical step for future studies would be the quantitative testing of the theoretical propositions we present here. Moreover, other research designs such as real-time tracking of experiences may be useful to explore how the evaluation of consistency and connectivity of touchpoints unfold across the journey as well as to better assess the dynamics of customer experience.

Overall, for future research, we suggest that researchers should be critical of the assumption that greater integration is always the answer to improving customer experience in omnichannel retailing.

APPENDIX A

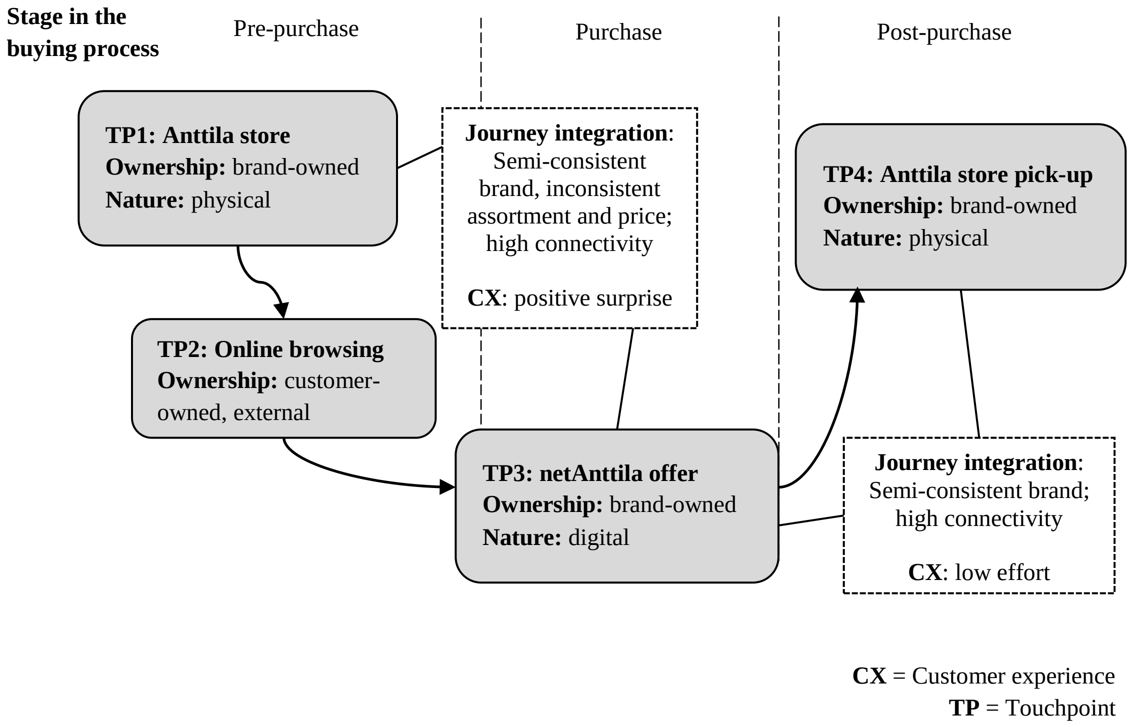

Figure A.1 Ulrike's journey to buy a blender

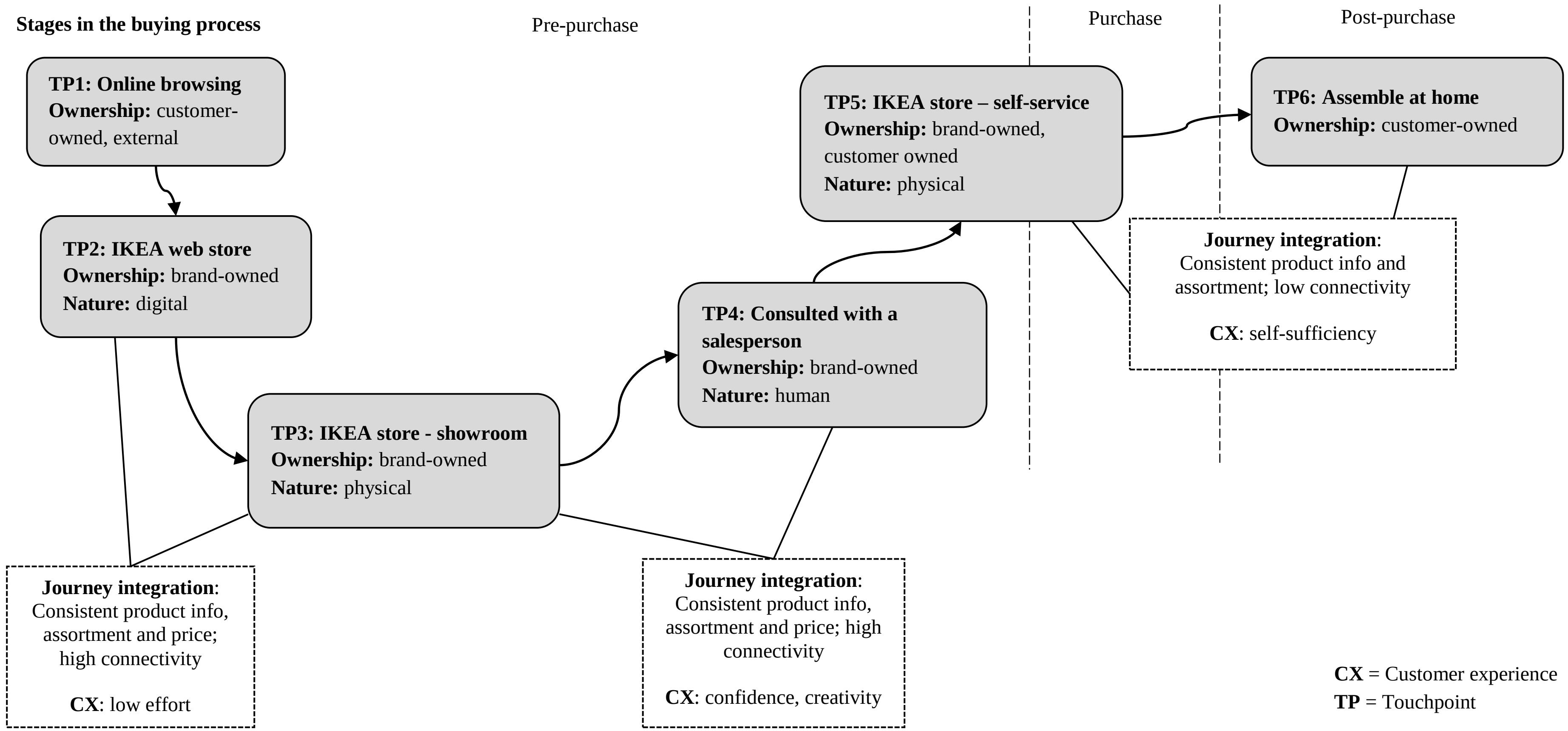

Figure A.2 Turner's journey to buy a TV-stand

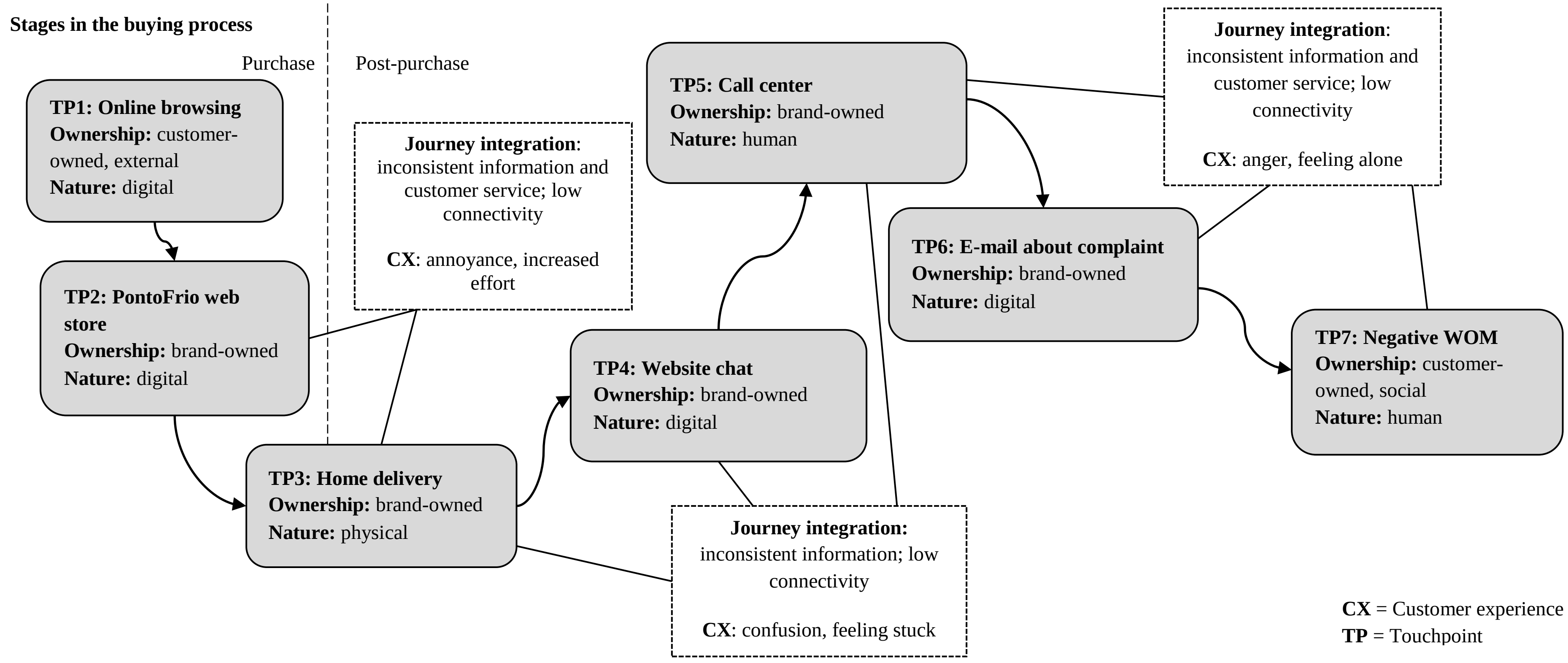

Figure A.3 Layla's journey to buy a refrigerator

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