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**EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING IN OMNI-
CHANNEL RETAIL**

SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of retail companies are implementing omni-channel retail for various reasons, with the most significant being the enhancement of customer satisfaction and loyalty (Rigby, 2011; Arnone, 2017; Nisat & Prabhakar, 2017). The primary goal of omni-channel strategies is to provide unique, intense, and favorable experiences (Klaus & Byuyenm, 2013). However, since each customer is different and perceives the ideal experience distinctly, companies must find the best way to create and offer positive experiences that encourage customers to return.

Retail is an industry that has undergone a series of changes, profoundly influenced by technological developments and globalization. These changes have significantly improved the relationships between companies and consumers. There has been a shift from the physical store to the virtual one, providing a wide range of new possibilities for both companies and consumers, such as streamlining communication and organization, increasing productivity, profitability, and customer satisfaction (Verhoef et al., 2015). Although exclusively focusing on the virtual environment may seem attractive for retail companies, not all dared to take this step before the COVID-19 pandemic. As advantageous as the online store may appear, it can never fully replace the physical store, offering fewer benefits and/or advantages, especially regarding the visualization and handling of the products.

The remarkable development of retail has led to a spectacular increase of the interest by researchers from all over the world (Rigby, 2011; Verhoef et al., 2015; Saskia et al., 2016; Mou et al., 2018; Wollenburg et al., 2018; Wollenburg et al., 2019; Li et al., 2020; Paik & Lee, 2021; Fang et al., 2021). Currently, the omni-channel concept is approached by specialized literature in various contexts, aiming to highlight aspects related to retail companies and the way their customers engage with them. The link between omni-channel concept and experiential marketing is a less explored topic in the literature (Akgun et al., 2013; Klaus & Nguyenm, 2013; Atkins & Hyun, 2016; Vainio, 2015; Pantano & Priporas, 2016; Paik & Lee, 2021; Fang et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2023). From an academic perspective, the current situation appears to raise a research issue concerning the consumer experience in omni-channel retail.

The aim of this research is to highlight a conceptual model designed to analyze the factors influencing omni-channel consumer attitudes. Unlike previous conceptual models that analyze

individuals' willingness to use technological means in various domains, the new model developed and presented is used to analyze factors impacting consumers in the omni-channel domain. To achieve the established goal, the research objectives are the following:

- to identify conceptual models in the literature that study technology usage;
- to identify the theoretical framework of omni-channel retail and experiential marketing in this context;
- to define the concepts of omni-channel retail, omni-channel consumers, and omni-channel companies;
- to define the characteristics of the omni-channel market;
- to identify the factors influencing consumers' use of omni-channel commerce;
- to establish relationships between the identified factors and analyze their intensity.

To fulfill these objectives, the doctoral thesis includes a section dedicated to literature research, followed by a section presenting the quantitative research conducted among omni-channel consumers. In the conclusion, three main parts are presented: theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations and future research topics.

The first part of the doctoral thesis corresponds to the theoretical section, aiming to conduct a comprehensive and rigorous review of specialized literature on omni-channel retail and consumer experience. To achieve this goal, specialized papers, available in academic journals, in international databases and reports from companies were selected.

The first chapter presents the theories identified in the literature studying the use of technological means. The chapter develops theories considered relevant for the present research – Technology Acceptance Theory (TAM1, TAM2), and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT1, UTAUT2).

The second chapter highlights the defining aspects of omni-channel retail. To successfully cover all elements that define omni-channel retail, the evolution of retail is discussed. Additionally, omni-channel consumers and companies are characterized, along with how technology influences the entire retail market. The chapter concludes by presenting the effects that the unpleasant situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic has on omni-channel retail, both globally and on the Romanian market.

The third chapter focuses on the marketing mix applied in omni-channel retail. Considering that each element of the marketing mix contributes significantly to creating effective and successful strategies, product policy, pricing policy, service policy, communication policy, store management policy, and personnel policy are separately described.

The fourth chapter aims to present consumer experience in the context of omni-channel retail. To achieve this goal, the experience and experiential marketing are first defined. Subsequently, the online and offline stores are discussed separately in terms of the experience offered to consumers. The presentation of the effects of omni-channels on experience aims to highlight how omni-channel retail contributes to improving experiences and providing superior satisfaction to consumers. The chapter concludes with the conceptual framework and hypotheses of the quantitative research presented in the following sections.

The fifth chapter presents the elements of the research methodology. First, the context and the design of the quantitative research are discussed. The characteristics of the analyzed sample, the questionnaire used as a data collection instrument, are described in a separate section of this chapter. The validity of the research is established through analyses presented in the final section of the research methodology.

The sixth chapter emphasizes the results of the quantitative research, by verifying all established hypotheses. Theoretical elements that confirm or contradict the results are highlighted. In this regard, works from specialized literature conducting similar investigations are mentioned. All hypotheses are confirmed with the help of coefficients analyzed through the Smart PLS 3.00 software, supported by tables and their interpretations.

Depending on the established hypotheses, discussions are developed. These are included in *the seventh chapter*. In this regard, works from specialized literature are again recalled, with the aim of emphasizing the similarities and differences between the obtained results and existing theories.

The last chapter presents the conclusions of the conducted research. To successfully encompass all ideas, the conclusions are divided into three sections. First, the theoretical contributions of the conducted investigation are outlined. The managerial contributions aim to offer the best implementation ideas of omni-channel retail to companies. The use of the conceptual model and

the investigation of its elements represent the main idea developed in this section, concluding with the presentation of the limitations encountered in the research, as well as future research topic ideas.

CHAPTER 1. THEORIES SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL

1.1. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The continuous development of technology has led to the creation of theories and models intended to improve the efficiency of companies and providing research opportunities. One such theory is the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), created by Fred Davis (1986), aimed to explain how employees adopt or reject technological means. TAM is uses two variables influencing employee behavior: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use.

1.2. Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT)

The Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology provides a conceptual model used to study the availability of individuals to use technology. Developed by Venkatesh et al. (2003), UTAUT1 introduces six variables determining intention and influencing the behavior of technology users: Performance Expectancy, Effort Expectancy, Social Influence, Facilitating Conditions, Intention to Use, and Actual Usage. The Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh et al., 2003) was later modified by the authors of the Venkatesh et al. (2012) model to extend and more precisely capture the intention of technology use, fitting into multiple domains. The authors introduced variables such as Hedonic Motivation, Price Value, and Habits to more efficiently analyze consumer behavior.

CHAPTER 2. DEFINING ASPECTS OF OMNI-CHANNEL RETAIL

2.1. Conceptual Delimitations

Retail encompasses all activities undertaken by a retail company to deliver its products and services to the final consumer (Dabija et al., 2016; Kotler & Keller, 2012; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012; Zentes et al., 2012; Zentes et al., 2017; Joshi et al., 2023). Retailers act as intermediaries between producers and consumers, responsible for providing the necessary services in order to meet all consumer's needs, desires, and expectations (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012).

Unlike traditional retail, omni-channel commerce implies holistic experiences offered to consumers using different channels for information, distribution, product shopping, and communication (Harris, 2012; Dorman, 2013). By utilizing the latest technological innovations, omni-channel addresses consumer needs, aiming to facilitate the shopping process, making it as pleasant as possible, combining the efficiency of company practices with the uniqueness of experiences offered to buyers (Verhoef et al., 2015).

2.2. Development of the Omni-Channel Concept

Representing the evolution of retail over time (Verhoef et al., 2015), the three concepts – multi-channel, cross-channel, omni-channel – define how the development of the digital environment has influenced the relationships between retail companies and consumers. The differences between multi-, cross-, and omni-channel consist precisely in the control over distribution and communication exercised by retail companies and consumers (Payne et al., 2017). By using innovations in retail development, it addresses consumer needs, aiming to facilitate the buying process, making it as enjoyable as possible.

2.3. Omni-Channel Consumers

Omni-channel consumers predominantly belong to Generations Y and Z (Lazaris et al., 2014), being young individuals who spend most of their time online. Their openness to social networks and virtual communication is a reason why they prefer using mobile applications for information and shopping (Lazaris et al., 2014; Dabija et al., 2019).

2.4. Omni-Channel Companies

Implementing omni-channel retail involves the development of the company in order to meet the expectations of customers, and adapt to the possibility of using all channels in relation to them (Wollenburg, 2017). Thus, if methods like promoting and attracting consumers to the physical store used by traditional retail are essential for their satisfaction, omni-channel retail adapts each method to all channels, offering superior satisfaction translated through a unique, perfectly integrated experience (Dacko, 2017).

2.5. Omni-Channel Strategies

Implementing omni-channel strategies requires a transformation of organizational culture, processes, and operations within the company, and the adoption of the latest technological innovations. While traditional retail involves organizing companies to maximize the profit of each channel separately, omni-channel retail involves maximizing the profit of all channels together (Huuhka, 2014). The main strategy of omni-channel retail is to satisfy consumer needs by integrating all channels used in their relationships. By using the communication channels that best suit each customer, the company attracts consumer attention, creates and maintains long-lasting relationships with them (Dabija & Grant, 2016).

2.6. The Link Between Technology and Omni-Channel Retail

The increase of working capacities, the introduction of digital operations, the development of mobile communication means and wireless technology have given consumers and companies access to a vast amount of information (Pantano & Viassone, 2015). Technological means used before have been replaced by newer, faster, and more efficient methods, generating greater satisfaction for customers (Inman & Nikolova, 2017). Among the new technologies used in omni-channel retail are mobile applications, self-scanning tools, QueVision, smart shelves, gravity-based supply systems, Scan and Go, and personalized offers (Kalyanam et al., 2006; Gauntt, 2008; Grewal et al., 2011; Pantano & Proporas, 2016).

2.7. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Omni-Channel Retail

The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in 2019, has significantly impacted the retail sector worldwide. The omni-channel retail industry has been significantly altered, with the effects of the pandemic felt at the global economic level. It has accelerated the implementation and development of digital shopping channels that replaced traditional channels. Consumer behavior changed, and retailers had to quickly adapt to the increased demands in e-commerce, thus investing to improve their online platforms and develop logistics and delivery capabilities (Popa & Dabija, 2023).

CHAPTER 3. MARKETING MIX APPLIED IN OMNI-CHANNEL RETAIL

3.1. Assortment Policy in Omni-Channel Retail

Omni-channel retail has the advantage of precisely targeting customers due to the various channels connecting companies and customers (Hagberg et al., 2016). It is crucial for all retail companies to implement effective assortment policies, leading not only to increasing number of sales but also to increasing customer's loyalty levels. Omni-channel retail implied synchronizing product assortments offered through all the channels used by the company (Verhoef et al., 2007) so that customers have access to the same products regardless the channel they use (Bijmolt et al., 2018).

3.2. Pricing Policy in Omni-Channel Retail

Price is one of the variables that weighs most in the product purchasing decision-making process. It influences consumer's expectations (the higher the price, the higher the expectations). The way they feel the experience is also influenced by the price they pay, giving a greater importance to the experiences they have when purchasing a high-priced product (Rigby, 2011; Li & Wu, 2022).

3.3. Service Policy in Omni-Channel Retail

Consumers using multiple channels for information, shopping, and communication are exposed to a greater number of marketing messages (Kumar & Venkatesan, 2005; Avery et al., 2011). Therefore, retail companies invest increasingly in implementing technologies such as high-speed internet access, location-based services, etc. in order to improve their service policies (Reddy, 2015).

3.4. Communication Policy in Omni-Channel Retail

Digitalization led to the development of individual communication methods that reach consumers quickly and in a suitable manner for each (Hagberg et al., 2015). Promotion of products and services goes beyond their prices (Mou et al., 2018), with companies implementing various

other communication and promotional activities (Khouja et al., 2016). Omni-channel retail facilitates communications with the target audience that allows the company to send information to consumers and to receive feedback, also providing the opportunity for communication between customers (via social networks or forums) or between employees (Verhoef et al., 2015).

3.5. Store Management Policy in Omni-Channel Retail

The most important decisions regarding store management consist in the product positioning strategy (Gu & Tayi, 2016) and their variety (Mou et al., 2018). One key principle states that the organization must determine the right product, the right place for the right customer to find and buy it at the right time (Mou et al., 2018).

3.6. Personnel Policy in Omni-Channel Retail

Quality interaction between customers and staff is essential in the omni-channel retail sector (Mou et al., 2018). Employees are responsible for promoting products to customers through face-to-face methods, informing and encouraging purchases. In order to offer integrated experiences to customers, it is necessary for companies to understand that the online store also plays an informative role, and sales in both environments represent revenue for the company (Wollenburg, 2017).

CHAPTER 4. CONSUMER EXPERIENCE IN OMNI-CHANNEL RETAIL

4.1. Conceptual Delimitations

Omni-channel experience is defined by literature (Verhoef et al., 2009; Gereá et al., 2021) as the consumer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical reaction to the retail company. It is not only defined by factors such as services, in-store atmosphere, prices, or product assortment (which the company can control) but also by external factors such as social influence or shopping purpose (Verhoef et al., 2009). Additionally, the experience involves hedonic, aesthetic, autotelic, and subjective dimensions related to a product or service. It is an integration of these dimensions upon which consumers form an opinion about the targeted product or service, helping them differentiate it from other products or services and providing the opportunity to interact with other consumers in a pleasant manner (Andrews et al., 2012).

In omni-channel retail, it is essential for companies to offer fully integrated experiences, allowing consumers to have unique and personalized experiences regardless the channel used (Melero et al., 2015; Alexander & Cano, 2019). Considering that consumers are aware that retailers own information about them (purchase history, habits, demographic data), they expect to receive products and services that fit their needs and experiences built especially for them (Melero et al., 2015).

4.2. Offline Consumer Experience

To cope with omni-channel consumers, companies must provide unique experiences both online and offline (Bell et al., 2017). While some consumers prefer to purchase products online, others prefer to go shopping in the physical store, where they can see and feel products before making a purchase decision (Vainio, 2015; Bell et al., 2017). Physical stores play a crucial role in the relationships between retailers and consumers as they enjoy several advantages that other channels do not have (Avery et al., 2011). Touching products before making a purchase is essential for a significant number of consumers, minimizing the perceived level of risk (Melero et al., 2015). When the omni-channel consumer enters a physical store, they expect to have a special experience (Cook, 2014), and to receive information that helps them make the right decisions (Cook, 2014; Vainio, 2015).

4.3. Online Consumer Experience

In the online environment, the consumer feels virtual experiences, and the retail company must provide them exactly what they are looking for without having a face-to-face meeting (Inman & Nikolova, 2017). Literature (Fisher et al., 2014) emphasize that the services offered by retail companies in the online environment substantially improve the consumer experience. Fast delivery of products ordered from the digital store is one of these services (Fisher et al., 2014). Special attention must be given to the characteristics of online stores that strongly influence the satisfaction of consumers. Functionality, easy communication, presence on social networks, product presentation, interactivity, and psychological dimension are the main attributes of virtual stores that influence the level of trust and value perceived by consumers (Klaus, 2013).

4.4. Effects of Omni-Channels on Consumer Experience

The development of technology and the emergence of the digital environment have revolutionized the retail industry, changing not only how people communicate but also how transactions are made, becoming the main source of information for the global population in just a few years (Klaus & Nguyen, 2013). Digital channels represent an important innovation in the retail industry, being rapidly adopted and used by consumers worldwide (Kim et al., 2012). It is imperative for retail company managers to implement strategies that support and encourage the use of both digital and traditional channels (Alexander & Cano, 2019; Paik & Lee, 2021).

4.5. Consumer Behavior in Omni-Channel Retail

Omni-channel consumer behavior is defined by unpredictability (Heitz-Spahn, 2013; Cook, 2014; Vainio, 2015; Ponsignon et al., 2017; Abrudan et al., 2020). The freedom to use multiple channels allows them to migrate between them, even between companies that offer the same products, depending on their availability and personal needs (Vainio, 2015). Omni-channel consumers stays connected more than any other consumer category (Lazaris et al., 2014).

4.6. Proposed Conceptual Framework and Research Hypotheses

Based on the studies considered in the theoretical part, a main problem is outlined in this work: the impact of the identified influencing factors – (1) the utility of acquisition channels, (2) omni-

channel experience, (3) omni-channel behavior, (4) channel image, (5) social influence, (6) the COVID-19 pandemic – on omni-channel consumers in Romania.

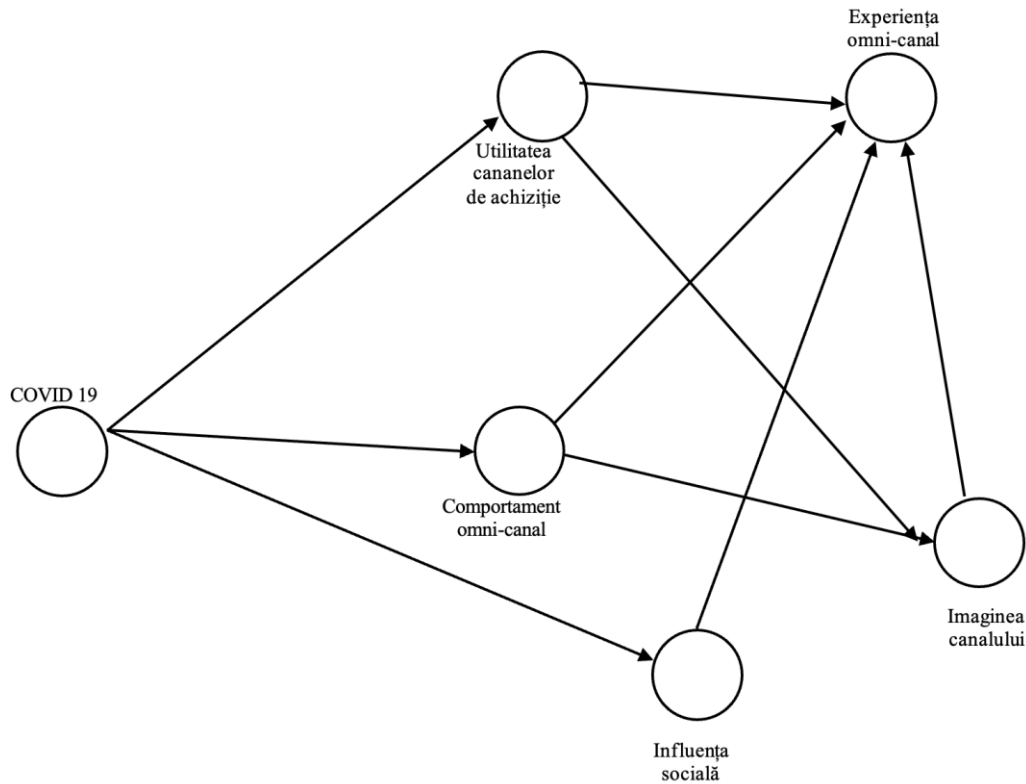


Figure 1. Conceptual model

The proposed conceptual model is presented in Figure 1 and encompasses all the analyzed factors, along with the connections between them. Items extracted from the literature (Dodds et al., 1991; Mathwick et al., 2001; Venkatesh et al., 2003) and used in the questionnaire helped to formulating the constructs and to collect data. Literature (Kim et al., 2005; Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018) facilitated the formulation of hypotheses presented in Table 2. Analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics (IBM, 2015) and SmartPLS (Ringle et al., 2015) software will reveal whether the established hypotheses are confirmed and indicate the strength of the relationships between factors.

Hypotheses	Connections
<i>H₁</i>	UCA → EOC
<i>H₂</i>	UCA → IC
<i>H₃</i>	IS → EOC
<i>H₄</i>	COC → IC
<i>H₅</i>	COC → EOC
<i>H₆</i>	COV → UCA
<i>H₇</i>	COV → COC
<i>H₈</i>	COV → IS
<i>H₉</i>	IC → EOC

*Note: COV = COVID-19 pandemic; UCA = the utility of acquisition channels; IS = social influence, COC = omni-channel behavior, EOC = omni-channel experience; IC = channel image

Table 1. Hypotheses of the present research

4.7. Mediating hypotheses

Developed by Wright (1934) and publicized by Baron & Kenny (1986), the mediation analysis represents a frequently used statistical method in marketing research to investigate whether a relationship between two variables is mediated or explained by a third variable situated in-between (Nguyen et al., 2020). Regarding the model used in the present research, the possibility of the existence of indirect connections between constructs was identified (Table 2).

Hypotheses	Connections	Mediator
<i>HM₁</i>	COV → UCA → IC	UCA
<i>HM₂</i>	COV → UCA → EOC	UCA
<i>HM₃</i>	COV → COC → IC	COC
<i>HM₄</i>	COV → COC → EOC	COC
<i>HM₅</i>	COV → IS → EOC	IS
<i>HM₆</i>	UCA → IC → EOC	IC
<i>HM₇</i>	COC → IC → EOC	IC

*Note: COV = COVID-19 pandemic; UCA = the utility of acquisition channels; IS = social influence, COC = omni-channel behavior, EOC = omni-channel experience; IC = channel image

Table 2. Mediating hypotheses

CHAPTER 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To successfully understand and address the needs of the domestic market, it is necessary to conduct numerous investigations in the field of omni-channel retail. They help companies adapt to the needs and preferences of local consumers. By knowing the factors that influence the purchasing behavior of omni-channel Romanian consumers, strategies targeting essential elements can be constructed.

5.1. Research Context

The present investigation is based on a quantitative research based on the research problem. Following a rigorous analysis of the relevant literature in the field of experiential marketing and omni-channel retail, the research problem was identified, and a proposed conceptual model for analysis was developed. Based on these, nine hypotheses were formulated and verified through the analysis of data collected using the questionnaire, considered the most suitable research tool.

5.2. Research Design

Transmitted online using Google Forms, the questionnaire was easy to navigate and complete by respondents. The obtained sample consists of 307 respondents. Validation of the questionnaire represents the preliminary stage before analyzing the collected data. The purpose of this stage was to identify any errors in formulating the constructs that make up the questionnaire (Hair et al., 2010). For the conducted research, the analysis of the validity and reliability of constructs reveals their correct form.

5.3. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The surveyed population to which the questionnaire is addressed and considered the most relevant for the conducted research consists of members of the Y and Z generations. The sample consists of 307 respondents. The average age of the analyzed population is 25.22 years. The sample consists of 209 (68.1%) female respondents and 97 (31.6%) male respondents. The characteristics of the sample are indicated in Table 3.

Characteristic	Options	Results
Gender	Male	97 (31,6%)
	Female	209 (68,1%)
Education level	Highschool	84 (27,4%)
	University	200 (65,1%)
	Post university	22 (7,2%)
Residence	Urban	254 (82,7%)
	Rural	52 (16,9%)
Income/month	Under 1400 Lei	62 (20,2%)
	Between 1400 Lei and 3500 Lei	142 (46,3%)
	Over 3000 Lei	100 (32,6%)
Job	Full-time employee	152 (49,5%)
	Part-time employee	13 (4,2%)
	Freelancer	17 (5,5%)
	Business leader	10 (3,3%)
	Student	112 (36,5%)
	Unemployed	3 (1%)

Table 3. Sample characteristics

5.4. Research Instrument

The conceptual model created serves as the basis for the applied questionnaire, containing six constructs (Dodds et al., 1991; Mathwick et al., 2001; Venkatesh et al., 2003; Venkatesh et al., 2012; Thuy, 2020) adapted in this thesis to contribute to the analysis of the established hypotheses.

The Utility of Acquisition Channels (UTA) refers to the extent to which consumers perceive a company's retail channels useful and suitable for their needs (Venkatesh et al., 2012). Social Influence (IS) brings to the forefront the level to which consumers are affected by the behavior and opinions of other significant consumers to them (family, friends, admired individuals) in the context of retail channels (Venkatesh et al., 2012). Omni-channel Experience (EOC) reflects the positive or negative emotions felt by consumers in omni-channel retail (Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018). The more complex this is, the more familiar the consumer is with a particular retailer and the more willing to use omni-channels (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987). Omni-channel Behavior (COC) encompasses all individuals' actions within retail channels and the decisions they make (Brown & Venkatesh, 2005). Channel Image (IC) is an important factor that attracts consumers and prompts

them to make purchases, with the probability of choosing a particular channel (Reshi et al., 2019). The COVID-19 Pandemic (COV) generates new reactions among omni-consumers.

5.5. Analysis Regarding Research Validity

To verify whether the research problem and established hypotheses are confirmed or not, an initial analysis was conducted on the constructs and items used in the questionnaire, as well as the conceptual model. In this regard, coefficients proposed by the literature (Cronbach Alpha, Fornell-Larcker, Hetertrait Monotrait, VIF, SRMR, R square) were analyzed to check their validity and reliability (Hair et al., 2010). Following the verification of these coefficients, it was found that both the constructs and the items used are valid.

CHAPTER 6. RESULTS

6.1. Verification of Research Hypotheses

The established hypotheses are analyzed using correlation coefficients, standard deviations, T-test values, and P-values. Through these, it is verified whether the hypotheses are confirmed or not. Table 4 indicates the obtained results, showing that almost all established hypotheses are confirmed.

Hypotheses	Correlation coefficients	Standard deviation	T value	P value	Confidence intervals		Result
					2,5%	97,5%	
UCA → EOC	0,491	0,075	6,537	0,000	0,337	0,625	H ₁ - confirmed
UCA → IC	0,413	0,067	6,183	0,000	0,275	0,528	H ₂ - confirmed
IS → EOC	0,157	0,035	4,486	0,000	0,088	0,221	H ₃ - confirmed
COC → IC	0,293	0,058	5,008	0,000	0,175	0,410	H ₄ - confirmed
COC → EOC	0,095	0,050	1,939	0,053	0,018	0,178	H ₅ – partially confirmed
COV → UCA	0,199	0,058	3,364	0,000	0,077	0,308	H ₆ - confirmed
COV → COC	0,221	0,056	3,917	0,000	0,107	0,326	H ₇ - confirmed
COV → IS	0,240	0,065	3,666	0,000	0,102	0,352	H ₈ – confirmed
IC → EOC	0,212	0,061	3,518	0,000	0,101	0,340	H ₉ – confirmed

*Note: COV = COVID-19 pandemic; UCA = the utility of acquisition channels; IS = social influence, COC = omni-channel behavior, EOC = omni-channel experience; IC = channel image

Table 4. Hypotheses validity

5.6. Mediation Analyses

Analyses regarding mediation are verified using T and P coefficients. A connection is considered significant when P has a maximum value of 5%. Following the analysis conducted with the Smart PLS software (Ringle et al., 2015), the hypotheses regarding mediation are confirmed, except for HM3, which states that omni-channel behavior mediates the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on omni-channel experience. The P-value for this hypothesis is 0.098, exceeding the threshold of 0.05. Thus, omni-channel behavior does not act as a mediating factor in the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on channel image.

CHAPTER 7. DISCUSSION

Marketing researches from literature predominantly focuses on the implementation of strategies (Verhoef et al., 2015; Melero et al., 2016; Zentes et al., 2017; Khan & Fatma, 2023), highlighting both retail companies (Blom et al., 2017; Payne et al., 2017; Sheth, 2020; Paudel & Kumar, 2021) and consumers, emphasizing their satisfaction and acceptance levels (Lazaris et al., 2014; Juaneda-Ayensa, 2016; Arnone, 2017; Park & Lee, 2017). The literature includes studies conducted in developing countries (Dimitrova et al., 2015; Dholakia et al., 2017; Fang et al., 2021) as well as research investigating developed markets (Brunner et al., 2010; Dacko, 2017; Payne et al., 2017), meaning that omni-channel retail is a major and current research interest in marketing.

The conducted research confirms that the utility of channels has a strong impact on how consumers perceive the experienced omni-channel. This emphasizes the need for omni-channel retailers to implement channels that are useful to their target audience (Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018). On the other hand, Khan & Fatma (2023) argue that this is not the only factor influenced by the utility of acquisition channels, highlighting that the channel image is also affected by the perceived utility level, an idea confirmed by the conducted research. The social context of consumers is a powerful factor influencing their choices and the way they perceive the experiences. Additionally, a strong impact on the channel image from consumer behavior has been observed. It is essential for retailers to consider this and therefore to design favorable channel images. The research also highlights the existence of an interdependence between behavior and experience, with a superior experience being the consequence of favorable consumer behavior.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the increased perception of the infection risk through physical retail channels by consumers and, consequently, their migration towards digital channels (Salem & Nor, 2019). The conducted quantitative research confirms the impact of the COVID-19 virus on the perceived utility of retail channels. The social environment of consumers has proven to be an important influence even in the pandemic context, with consumers imitating the behavior of individuals relevant to them. This research confirms the idea of Venkatesh et al. (2012) supporting consumer imitation behavior.

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSIONS

8.1. Theoretical Implications

Existing marketing research in the literature as well as the present research aim to highlight the aspects behind the attitudes and behavior of omni-channel consumers. This information is crucial to understand them and create appropriate strategies for each company's target audience. From the conducted research, it was found that developing countries have significant potential in implementing omni-channel retail since consumers are eager to experience new purchasing methods. Unlike previous generations, members of Generations Y and Z are educated, and capable of making informed decisions, representing the current target audience with information and purchasing power. In these conditions, retail companies need to adapt their sales and communication methods to these generations. The COVID-19 pandemic, the utility of acquisition channels, social influence, omni-channel behavior, omni-channel experience, and channel image have proven to influence omni-consumers in their decisions to use specific retail channels.

8.2. Managerial Implications

Retail company marketing specialists have the ongoing mission to continuously investigate the characteristics of the target audience and create relevant marketing strategies for them. The harmonious combination of channels to suit the targeted consumers and the provision of unique, positive experiences appreciated by them are the goals of any omni-channel company.

8.3. Research Limitations

After investigating the specialized literature, some research limitations were identified. Being a relatively new theme, omni-channel retail is present in a limited number of works in the literature, representing the main limitation of the research. Additionally, considering that the number of Romanian omni-channel consumers is limited, identifying suitable respondents was a challenging aspect of the conducted study. Subsequently, to respond to the questionnaire, they need to understand the significance of the omni-channel concept and realize that they are omni-channel consumers.

8.4. Future Research Directions

This paper addresses omni-channel retail in general, and an in-depth analysis by major retail domains would be a topic of interest for marketers. Thus, a rigorous investigation of the omni-channel behavior of Romanian consumers, depending on the retail domains of major interest to the domestic economy, would provide important information for both literature and retail companies.

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