

# Seamless Shopping in Omnichannel Retailing: The effect of Channel Integration on Consumers' Responses

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# **Seamless Shopping in Omnichannel Retailing: The effect of Channel Integration on Consumers' Responses**

## **Abstract**

Increasing competition in the retailing sector prompts retailers to implement omnichannel strategies to achieve seamless customer shopping experience. Retailers seek to integrate channels so that customers can seamlessly switch amongst them during the shopping journey. However, despite its prominence in practice, there is limited omnichannel research regarding how retailers can create seamless shopping and the beneficial consequences that can be gained from it. The purpose of this study is to establish the drivers and outcomes of seamless shopping experience. To achieve this goal, we find that seamless shopping leads to more loyalty, customer engagement, higher basket size, and a lower likelihood of switching to other brands. We also advance theory by exploring the effect of channel integration on seamless shopping, in contribution to omnichannel research and practice.

**Keywords:** channel integration, seamless shopping, omnichannel retailing

## 1 Introduction

Omnichannel retailing is deemed critical to retailer success (Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015). In the move from multichannel to omnichannel, customers now shop over several channels simultaneously during the purchasing journey. Whilst they interact with several consecutive channels, they expect and demand a seamless shopping journey without disruptions (Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014). Given that omnichannel is a key priority for retailers, firms invest in channel integration to achieve seamless shopping (Cao & Li, 2015; Zhang et al., 2010), however, it is not clear whether these investments are paying off. Research has suggested that one of the main retailer challenges of integrating channels is to provide seamless shopping over channels to obtain strategic advantage (Grewal, Roggeveen, & Nordfält, 2016) yet there remains little empirical evidence of channel integration leading to seamless shopping. Subsequently, consumer outcomes of loyalty, purchase intentions and customer retention (Bendoly, Blocher, Bretthauer, Krishnan, & Venkataramanan, 2005; Herhausen, Binder, Schoegel, & Herrmann, 2015) show promising results of retailers' efforts to integrate channels. Yet little research has attempted to discover the internal experiential elements that may enhance or inhibit these outcomes.

This study makes three contributions to the literature. Responding to several calls for further research on creating seamless purchase journeys (Marketing Science Institute, 2018), we join channel integration and customer behavioral research to help us understand the chain of processes and control in the omnichannel retailing chain of effects. Based on multilevel structural equation modeling of consumer data and 30 retailers in two countries (the UK and France), we suggest that seamless shopping mediates the relationship between firm-channel integration and consumer outcomes of customer engagement, loyalty, basket size, and brand switching. By exploring this framework, we offer additional insights into the outcomes of seamless shopping and provide robust research into the firm channel integration – seamless shopping research will provide valuable insights for managers looking to achieve their omnichannel strategies. Lastly, we update channel integration measures that are becoming quickly outdated. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to empirically test a research framework of seamless shopping to advance omnichannel research and practice.

## 2 Conceptual Background and Hypotheses

The influence of online and offline retail environments on consumer behavioral responses is significantly grounded in servicescape theory (Bitner, 1992). The two states of retailer environment and consumer response are causally linked, such that the retailer environment causes consumers to respond cognitively, affectively, and physiologically. The servicescape perspective identifies that managers continually “plan, build and change” the retail environment to control consumer responses (Bitner, 1992, p. p.57). Building on this, we propose that managers desire to develop the shopping environment across physical channels and touchpoints, to manage seamless customer shopping experiences and influence consumer behavioral responses.

### *Channel Integration*

The occurrence of seamless shopping is dependent on the extent to which channel integration is optimized (Cao & Li, 2015). Channel integration encompasses the employment of more than one channel and the level at which channels interact with each other (Bendoly et al., 2005). More recently, channel integration has been identified in an omnichannel context as “the degree to which a firm coordinates the objectives, design, and deployment of its channels to create synergies for the firm and offer particular benefits for its consumers” (Cao

& Li, 2015, pp., p.200). Firstly, this identifies integration as a firm controlled set of activities, from which the consumer can benefit. For example, the firm provides Wi-Fi in-store so that consumers can quickly find more information on products on their mobiles. Secondly, this suggests cause and effect between firm controlled channel integration and the delivery of beneficial outcomes for the consumer. Thirdly, channel integration contains valance, implying that firms can be more integrated, or less integrated. This suggests that consumer outcomes of channel integration can be more or less favourable. In contribution to servicescape theory (Bitner, 1992), we propose that retailer integration is considered as an environmental dimension that influences seamless shopping as an internal customer response. Therefore, companies striving to integrate their channels will create more efficient shopping environments, prompting customers to perceive their shopping experience as being seamless.

#### *Seamless Shopping*

Seamless shopping is defined as *the customer perception of a continuous and consistent shopping journey across multiple channels with a single retailer* (Cocco & Demoulin, 2020). Further definitions suggest that seamless shopping contains physical connections between ‘channels and devices such as a desktop, laptop and mobile devices’ (Verhoef et al., 2015, p. p.176), online and offline (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Rahman, 2013) and ‘within and across channels’ (Banerjee, 2014, p. p.460). Seamless shopping also implies that the connections between channels and touchpoints become blurred so that boundaries become irrelevant (Hansen & Sia, 2015). The central theme behind these ideas is that seamless experience is characterized by consistency and continuity within the experience.

The construct of seamless shopping has emerged from the intersection between channel integration and customer experience literature. It is often referred to as the optimum experience in customer experience literature (Grewal et al., 2016; Kumar, 2018; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) whilst it is considered as the consumer response to integrated channels in channel integration literature (Cao & Li, 2015). Seamless shopping is also referred to as an aspiration of omnichannel retailing strategy (Kumar, Rajan, Gupta, & Pozza, 2019; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014). Channel integration enables seamless experiences to occur (Banerjee, 2014) and it is often cited as a benefit or objective of integration strategy (Cao & Li, 2015; Zhang et al., 2010). The two constructs are therefore likely to be causally linked. Therefore we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: The more retailers integrate their channels, the higher customers evaluate their shopping as seamless.

#### *Consequences*

We propose that seamless shopping is an internal response that leads to behavioral consequences (following Bitner (1992)), which strengthens the experience by fulfilling consumer expectations, satisfying experiences, and retained shoppers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, seamless shopping has been suggested to improve customer engagement, avoid brand switching, and increase basket size (Hansen & Sia, 2015; Wallace, Giese, & Johnson, 2004). Therefore we expect that seamless experience will almost often lead to better loyalty to the firm, further interaction with the brand, less brand switching, and higher basket size. Seamless experience is therefore anticipated to lead to positive and strong behavioral outcomes identified in marketing literature; loyalty, customer engagement, brand switching, and basket size.

#### *Loyalty*

Loyalty is defined as “the intention to buy from the brand as a primary choice” (Yoo & Donthu, 2001p.3). As customers move between channels and touchpoints throughout their customer journey, the multiple interactions offer more opportunities for consumers to

construct an opinion about a brand. When the experience is more consistent and continuous, this improves convenience, which leads to higher loyalty (Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Therefore, we suggest that seamless shopping increases loyalty.

H2A: Seamless shopping increases customer loyalty.

H2B: Seamless shopping mediates the relationship between firm-channel integration and customer loyalty.

#### *Customer Engagement*

Customer engagement behaviors are interactions between customer and firm that go beyond purchase (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Jaakkola & Alexander, 2014; Van Doorn et al., 2010). Less time and effort expended in dealing with shopping problems may promote positive opportunities to engage during the experience or free up time to engage post-purchase (e.g. publish an online review). Therefore, we expect a positive relationship between seamless shopping and customer engagement:

H3A: Seamless shopping increases customer engagement.

H3B: Seamless shopping mediates the relationship between firm-channel integration and customer engagement.

#### *Brand Switching*

Brand switching is defined as the termination of a relationship with the service provider and switching to an alternative provider (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2004). Cross-channel failures in multichannel retailing prompt customers to switch to another retailer (Wallace et al. 2004). Therefore, as customers move simultaneously amongst channels, a lack of integration may cause a lower perception of seamless shopping, resulting in switching to a competing brand. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4A: Seamless shopping decreases the likelihood of switching to other brands.

H4B: Seamless shopping mediates the relationship between firm-channel integration and brand switching.

#### *Basket Size*

Basket size is defined as the total number of items in the shopping basket (Desai & Talukdar, 2003). When consumers shop across multiple channels, they purchase up to four times more than those shopping in a single channel (Stone, Hobbs, & Khaleeli, 2002). As customers seamlessly switch over channels, they may put more items in their shopping basket due to flow that has been found to lead to impulse purchases (Park, Kim, Funches, & Foxx, 2012). Therefore, we expect seamless shopping to lead to higher basket size:

H5A: Seamless shopping increases basket size.

H5B: Seamless shopping mediates the relationship between firm-channel integration and basket size.

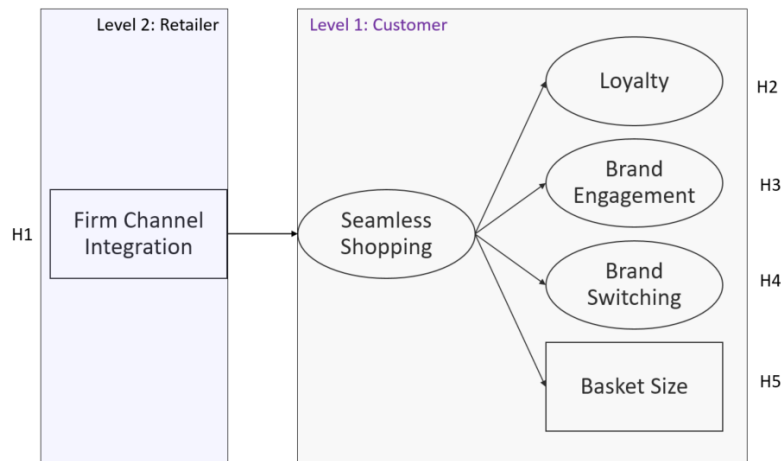
Figure 1 identifies the proposed conceptual framework.

### **3 Methodology**

To empirically test the framework, we conducted two studies that establish seamless shopping in a mediated model. To enable us to empirically investigate the framework, an updated measure of channel integration (antecedent) is required. Therefore, we assess all known channel integration measures and the literature, to construct a new measure. We then observe 30 retailers in two markets, France and the UK, using the measure, which enables us to empirically investigate the framework in both countries. In study 1, we test the link between firm-channel integration and seamless shopping, and seamless shopping on consumer consequences in the French retail industry. In study 2, we confirm the framework for a second time in the UK retail industry. Both the French and U.K. retail industries have

strong retail economies, and both have experienced continued growth in online and offline retailing in recent years.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework showing hypothesized relationships**



### *Measures*

To accurately measure the framework based on its conceptualizations we empirically investigate channel integration from a firm perspective and seamless shopping and all behavioral consequences from a consumer perspective. For firm-channel integration, we constructed a new measurement tool and observed 30 retailers. To measure the mediator and outcome constructs for each study, we used an online customer survey instrument containing the seamless shopping scale (chapter 2) and existing scales from the literature.

To measure channel integration, we assessed several existing scales (Bendoly et al., 2005; Cao & Li, 2015; Frassetto, Frassetto, Miquel, & Miquel, 2017; Lee & Kim, 2010). We added additional items based on a literature review, to form a new measure that addresses channel integration in an omnichannel context. To measure consumer perspectives, a 7-item scale was used to measure seamless shopping in two dimensions; value harmonization and uninterrupted shopping journey. Loyalty was assessed using a 3-item Likert scale adapted from Yoo and Donthu (2001) and customer engagement was measured using a 2-dimensional 7-item Likert scale (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014). Brand switching was measured using a 3-item Likert scale adapted from Romani, Grappi, and Dall’O (2012). All items were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “strongly disagree” to 7= strongly agree). Finally, basket size was measured based on the number of items purchased during the shopping experience (Nichols, Raska, & Flint, 2015).

### *Assessing Channel Integration*

A total of 63 channel integration existing items were reviewed from four scales. They were deemed unsuitable due to the pace of evolution in channel integration (Verhoef et al., 2015) meaning that scales are likely to become quickly outdated. To address this limitation, from the review of channel integration literature and current retailing practices, we added 7 items. These items included integration initiatives between mobile and store, such as the inclusion of a barcode scanner on an app and integration between online devices such as basket storage across online channels.

We added the updated items to the 63 established scale items for a total of 70 items. We then assessed content validity and removed all duplicates, ambiguous, or inappropriate items, which totaled 34 items. As we reviewed several retailers’ integration from outside the firm, we removed 10 items relating to operations because they could not be objectively

measured from outside the firm. We removed a further three items because there was little evidence of their existence in one or both of the countries of study. Following Cao and Li (2015), we categorized the items in general stages of channel integration development, as opposed to dimensions. The final integration measure features 21 items and can be found in table 1.

To establish order, pattern, and hierarchy of firm-channel integration, we used a cumulative method called the Guttman scalogram analysis (1944, 1950), which develops a probabilistic approach to increasing levels of difficulty. To construct the scalogram, we observed each retailer (13 French retailers and 17 British retailers for a total of 30 retailers) using the 21-item channel integration measure and identified a 1 for compliance or 0 for non-compliance. Table 1 shows the final scale. The reproducibility coefficient of the patterns was .91 for study 1 and .92 for study 2, which are higher than the .9 recommended level (Guttman, 1950).

#### *Assessing Consumer Perceptions*

Using a reputable data collection agency, the first consumer survey was carried out with French respondents (n=346, 31.9% female, average age: 35). To ensure semantic equivalence, items were translated and back-translated by several French and U.K. faculty members. Study 2 was carried out with U.K. retailers and consumers (n=344, 67.7% female, average age:37). In each study, respondents were asked to recall a recent shopping experience that occurred within the last three months, to verify an accurate response. To ensure that the conditions were met for a seamless shopping experience, we asked respondents to recall a shopping experience where they had used two or more channels. In each study, we asked respondents to specify the retailer with which they had had their shopping experience.

In both studies, we imposed a pre-defined list based of the top-20 multiple-channel retailers by turnover. Following clarification of their recalled shopping experience, respondents were asked to rate the seamless shopping scale and the outcome variables.

## **4 Analysis and Results**

### *Multilevel Model*

We used Multilevel modeling (MLM) to test the hypotheses since our data encounters an observed predictor variable (firm-channel integration) and perceived dependent variables as rated by customers of the firm. All hypotheses that contain 'A' are focused on the relationships at the individual level, whilst all hypotheses that contain 'B' are focused at both the retailer and customer level. We first undertook several procedures to examine the reliability and validity of the customer scales. First, we used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to investigate the structure and variance for each data set. EFA and CFA revealed that each construct loaded onto its own factor and explained 66% for study 1 and 69% for study 2. The studies provided adequate model fit (Study 1;  $\chi^2 = 508.399$  (142), RMSEA = .066, CFI = .918, TLI = 0.907 and study 2;  $\chi^2 = 568.281$  (202), RMSEA = .073, CFI = .922, TLI = 0.911). The Cronbach's alpha was calculated for each construct and ranged from .743 to .920 throughout all studies. In support of convergent validity, all CR's were above the .7 threshold, and the AVE's were above .5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To confirm discriminant validity, all AVE's were found to be higher than the squared correlation between each pair of constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To examine the requirements for MLM, we carried out an intraclass correlation test (ICC) to assess suitable variance between groups. The ICC was 8% in Study 1 to 6% in study 2. This indicates that up to 8% of the differences in customer perceptions could be attributed to retailer differences.

**Table 1: Integration Measurement Items**

Classification	Code	Item	Source
Integration between online and offline	1	Retailer's online channels provide information about stores such as location, delivery points locations, access information and opening hours	Adapted from Frasquet and Miquel (2017); Lee and Kim (2010); Bendoly et al. (2005)
	2	Click and pick-up in-store	Cao and Li (2015)
	3	Buy online and return in-store	Cao and Li (2015)
	4	Allowing online consumers to browse the inventory in-store	Cao and Li (2015)
	5	Past purchases in the store can be found online	Frasquet and Miquel (2017)
Alignment	6	Align marketing message across channels	Cao and Li (2015)
	7	Align price across channels	Cao and Li (2015)
	8	Align loyal program across channels	Cao and Li (2015)
	9	Align assortment across channels	Cao and Li (2015)
	10	The retailer provides consistent product information across channels	Lee and Kim (2010)
	12	Integrated marketing communication across channels	Cao and Li (2015)
Integration between online and mobile	13	The website is optimized for the mobile	New item, inspired by Wang et al (2015)
	14	The customer basket/cart online is accessible in the app or mobile website	New item, inspired by Close and Kukar-Kinney (2018)
Integration between offline and online	15	The firm advertises its website at its local stores	Bendoly et al. (2005)
	16	Employees at the firm's stores are knowledgeable and helpful regarding the use of its Web site	Bendoly et al. (2005)
	17	Past purchases online can be accessed in the store	New item, inspired by Homburg et al. (2017)
	18	The physical store allows me to do an order online	Frasquet and Miquel (2017)
	19	The physical store allows for checking product availability online via a kiosk/mobile or customer service representative.	Lee and Kim (2010)
Integration between online and customer-service	20	Click-to-call or click-to-chat	Cao and Li (2015)
Integration between offline and mobile	21	The firm advertises its mobile app at its local stores	Based on Bendoly et al. (2005)

Within effects are those that happen within the groups, i.e differences in individual customer responses. 'Between' are the effects that take place between the groups, i.e differences between the groups. The relationship between the predictor and mediator variables means that the traditional mediation 'path *a*' in our model takes place from level 2 (X) to level 1 (M). In contrast to the *a* path, the *b* path occurring between mediator and outcome variables in our model (All 'A' hypotheses) takes place at the individual customer level (the 1-1 part of the 2-1-1 model).

#### *Direct Effects*

Regarding the direct effects of firm-channel integration on seamless shopping, the effect was positive and significant; study 1:  $\beta = .15, p < 0.05$  and study 2:  $\beta = .12, p < 0.05$ . Therefore, there is strong support for H1 in all studies. Firm-channel integration is positively related to consumer perceived seamless shopping. In support of H2A, positive and significant relationships were found between seamless shopping and loyalty (Study 1:  $\beta = .24, p < .01$ , Study 2:  $\beta = .30, p < .001$ ). Results thus show that seamless shopping is a good predictor of loyalty.

In support of H3A, positive and significant relationships were found between seamless shopping and both customer engagement dimensions. For the cognitive dimension, Study 1:  $\beta = .23, p < .05$ , Study 2:  $\beta = .26, p < .001$ . For the affection dimension, Study 1:  $\beta = .35, p < .001$ .



.001, and in Study 2:  $\beta = .45, p < .001$ ). Therefore, we find evidence to support that seamless shopping leads to customer engagement.

Negative significant indicators were found between seamless shopping and brand switching in both studies. For Study 1:  $\beta = -.12, p = .115$  and in Study 2:  $\beta = -.38, p < .001$ . H4A is therefore supported in the UK study but not in the French study. This suggests that French consumers may be more loyal to retailers, even if channel integration is low. Lastly, in support of H5A, a positive and significant relationship was found between seamless shopping and basket size for Study 1:  $\beta = .37, p < .005$ , and for study 2,  $\beta = .18, p = .05$ . Therefore, H5A is supported. We find evidence that seamless shopping leads to basket size.

#### *Indirect Effects*

In addition to the direct effects, we investigated indirect effects. The direct paths from seamless shopping to loyalty are positive and significant whilst the direct paths between firm-channel integration and loyalty are not significant. In both studies, the indirect path between firm-channel integration and loyalty, mediated by seamless shopping is significant (study 1:  $\beta = .05, p < .05$ , study 2:  $\beta = .04, p < .05$ ). We conclude that H2B is supported. Therefore, seamless shopping fully mediates the relationship between firm-channel integration and loyalty.

Indirect effects between firm-channel integration and customer engagement via seamless shopping are both positive and significant. This indirect effect is supported in both dimensions, cognitive and affection, in both study 1 and 2. For the cognitive dimension, in Study 1:  $\beta = .05, p < .05$  and Study 2:  $\beta = .03, p < .05$ . For the affective dimension, in Study 1:  $\beta = .06, p < .05$  and Study 2:  $\beta = .05, p < .05$ . As the direct paths between channel integration and both customer engagement dimensions are not significant, H3B is supported. Seamless shopping fully mediates the relationship between firm-channel integration and customer engagement.

The indirect effect between integration and brand switching, mediated by seamless shopping is not significant in study 1 ( $\beta = -.02, p = ns$ ) but is significant in study 2 ( $\beta = -.04, p < .05$ ). As the direct paths are not significant, we conclude that only in study 2, H4B is supported. Seamless shopping fully mediates the relationship between firm-channel integration and brand switching for the UK population only. Lastly, the direct path between firm-channel integration and basket size is not significant (Study 1:  $\beta = .09, p = ns$ , Study 2:  $\beta = .09, p = ns$ ), whilst the indirect effect is significant in study 1 ( $\beta = .07, p < .05$ ) but not significant in study 2 ( $\beta = .02, p = ns$ ). H5B is supported in study 1 but not in study 2. Therefore seamless shopping mediates the relationship between channel integration and basket size with the French population, but not with the UK population.

## **5 Discussion**

### *Theoretical Implications*

This research aims to extend knowledge of the chain of events from channel integration to seamless shopping and behavioral outcomes, which is central to omnichannel retailing strategies. Based on servicescape theory (Bitner, 1992), we developed hypotheses on main and mediating effects, and tested them with data from two different retail settings, adding to the generalizability of results. Our analysis confirmed that in two separate country studies, channel integration leads to seamless shopping, and seamless shopping leads to loyalty, customer engagement, and a higher basket size.

Firstly, results regarding the consequences in this framework are important because the literature lacks a solid understanding of seamless shopping and the role that it plays in omnichannel retailing. The results also reinforce the importance of achieving seamless

shopping. Secondly, this research empirically confirms the relationship between channel integration and seamless shopping. Although the link between channel integration and seamless shopping has been suggested in the literature (Bendoly et al., 2005; Cao & Li, 2015), we find that a strong omnichannel retailing strategy anchored in channel integration efforts is pivotal to achieving seamless shopping. Our results empirically explain the valuable role that channel integration has to play in influencing seamless shopping, thus advancing channel integration research. Thirdly, this study extends pivotal research in the channel integration field by updating existing measures into the omnichannel environment (Cao & Li, 2015; Herhausen et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2015). Our results show that implementing this comprehensive set of integration activities, is likely to improve seamless shopping.

#### *Managerial Implications*

More integrated channels result in more seamless shopping, whilst less integrated retailers are likely to achieve lower seamless shopping. Our results are also very encouraging for the achievement of positive outcomes following seamless shopping. This provides evidence for managers to encourage directors or funders of omnichannel retailers to invest in channel integration initiatives, to enhance their seamless shopping strategic objectives. The 21-item firm-channel integration measurement tool serves as a checklist to help retailers compete against online retailers and assist them in reaching their seamless shopping goals. Secondly, following analysis of both French and UK retailers, we find continuing evidence that retailers are failing to align prices and promotions; Brands failing to operate basic channel integration initiatives that promote seamless shopping perceptions, are likely to fall behind the competition.

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