Multichannel Strategy in Perspective:
The Consumer Experience at the Heart of Marketing Policy

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Abstract
Since the early 2000s, distribution channels have undergone a deep transformation in developed countries, but also in developing countries. While physical sales structures (stores, branches) have been, for a very long time, the preferred means for consumers to access products or services, the explosion of the Internet channel has radically changed the foundation of consumer experience. The multiplication of physical and virtual touchpoints is a new economic reality that leads consumers to live a total consumption experience, including migrating from one distribution channel to another with great ease. The background of the investigation is thus based on a major transformation: the great volatility of the consumer, quickly moving from one touchpoint to another. This volatility destabilizes manufacturing and retailing firms, whose customers used only one type of channel in the past and forces them to deeply rethink their marketing policy. Companies must learn to implement an efficient multichannel strategy, at the risk of losing market share in an extremely competitive environment. This paper uses literature on multichannel strategy to highlight three essential dimensions: the identification of multichannel strategy accelerators, the paradigm shift implied by a multichannel strategy and the original consumer migration paths that a multichannel strategy must take into account.
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1. Introduction

The distribution of products and services across multiple channels has now become a managerial standard considered by many companies as a priority strategy in creating a sustainable competitive advantage (Wilson *et al.*, 2017). It is only natural for a bank to sell its financial products online and in a network of branches, just as hundreds of large retailers use online and offline organization to reach their consumers simultaneously. Indeed, since the development of e-commerce, many companies in the "Old World" have created their websites to benefit from new business opportunities, developing powerful multichannel strategies. More surprisingly, like Walmart, other companies in the "New World," faced with the limits of an exclusive presence on the Internet channel, have set up a network of physical stores, thus abandoning their original status as pure players. The multichannel strategy clearly aims to combine the advantages of the physical channel (physical stores) and the Internet channel, by offering consumers a wide range of touchpoints:

– For the *physical channel*: interaction with the physical store salespeople; totally secure payment; immediate access to the product, with the possibility of touching it and trying it out; opportunity to live a pleasant and hedonic shopping experience,

– For the *Internet channel*: 24/7 accessibility to products and services; ease of searching for information and comparing prices between products and services; autonomy and independence during the purchasing process; possible delivery at home.

In other words, if companies do not adapt to the new trend of combining physical and Internet channels, they explicitly take the risk of being attacked by multichannel competitors who will offer consumers total access to a multitude of touchpoints. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of the Internet channel does not necessarily mean the proclaimed end of physical channels, as Dykema (2000) stated in his research. On the contrary, it is in their ability to harmoniously combine distribution channels so that companies will create new sources of value. Seeking the best possible qualities and the lowest prices, while at the same time hoping to benefit from a stimulating shopping experience, consumers do not replace one distribution channel with another; rather they

seek to benefit from each of the distribution channels made available to them (Dholakia *et al.*, 2005; Shanthi and Kannaiah, 2015).

This paper is a conceptual contribution to marketing studies. It is based on a synthesis of academic works conducted on the multichannel strategy in order to highlight elements essential to understanding the current dynamics of channel distribution evolution, which affects both developed countries and developing countries such as Pakistan (Rizvi and Siddiqui, 2019). One of the original features of the paper is to study the original conclusions from some important works written in French, and therefore not easily accessible to Anglo-Saxon readers. Three important points emerge from the literature: the identification of accelerators in multichannel strategies, often addressed separately according to different research trends; the real paradigm shift involved in implementing a multichannel strategy; and the diversity of consumer migration trajectories between channels.

2. Multichannel strategy–Three main accelerators

While consumers are learning about the characteristics of products and services and increasingly making their purchases on the Internet channel, they are still very attached to in-store purchases, particularly in order to have a memorable experience and make the most of their visit (Bustamante and Rubio, 2017). Dholakia *et al.* (2005) also point out that, if consumers transfer their purchases from one channel to another, they tend to do so between similar channels (from convenience store to supermarket, for example) rather than between distinct channels (from Internet channel to physical store, for example). In other words, in many cases, the Internet channel and the physical channel have complementary functions: the consumer will naturally be able to search for a product on the Internet channel and then decide whether to buy it in a store or online; he/she will also be able to have it delivered to his/her home, picked up at a physical store or in a self-collection point located near his/her workplace. It is therefore necessary to have an overall vision of the purchasing process, which requires companies to implement a true multichannel strategy. With reference to the work of Blattberg *et al.* (2008), it should be noted that the development of multichannel strategies has been fundamentally accelerated by the following three elements: technology, the market as well as consumer behavior, which all influence one other.

2.1. Technology

Technological innovation and the development of e-commerce are major factors explaining the development of multichannel strategies. Several studies indicate that the radical revolution in information and communication technology is driving the emergence of new forms of distribution channels, particularly in the service industries like banking or tourism (Prahalad and Ramsawamy, 2004; Vanheems, 2009; Xiang *et al.*, 2015; Tom Dieck *et al.*, 2018). The development of multichannel strategies is indeed based on new technologies, such as personal computers and personal communication devices (smartphones). Their common feature is to offer a high level of connectivity to consumers (Verhoef *et al.*, 2017), often summarized by the well-known term ATAWAD: "Any Time, Any Where, Any Device."

The expansion of the Internet channel is largely due to its ability to transfer the physical store to the consumer's home, workplace or resort. As Kaplan and Sawhney (2000) underline, as of the introduction of the new distribution channel, technology has played a central role, both in terms of equipment and infrastructure as well as consumer acceptance. Technological development allows companies to improve not only their customer service, but also their exchange relationship with suppliers (Jap and Mohr, 2002). Porter (2001) confirms that the Internet channel offers companies the opportunity to implement a distinctive positioning strategy. This is particularly true for the retailing industry. Brick & mortar retailers need to specialize to further differentiate themselves and raise the level of customer service in order to compete with their competitors (Gladwell, 1999). The introduction of the Internet channel and the substantial increase in online sales are therefore a real challenge, especially in an economic context characterized by the saturation of locations to create new physical stores (Filser *et al.*, 2020).

2.2. Market

The retailing industry is continuing its transformation, directly impacted by the technological revolution. The customization of consumer relationships is closely linked to the development of the Internet channel (Gratadour, 2004; Yoo and Park, 2016). According to Zeithaml and Bitner (2003), the trend towards customization leads to extreme market fragmentation (hyper-segmentation). Anderson *et al.* (1997) indicated early on that with the increased fragmentation of consumer segments, multiple distribution channels are often the only way to cover the entire market. The emergence of new distribution channels should therefore be seen as an opportunity to recruit new consumers, especially those who are reluctant to patronize physical stores (Avery *et al.*, 2012). Embracing a multichannel strategy allows companies to create and develop strong and sustainable relationships with a consumer solicited from all sides (Vanheems and Nicholson, 2011), while continuing to reach and satisfy new consumers and market segments.

However, it should not be forgotten that the technological revolution and the development of the Internet

channel are making competition in the market increasingly fierce by creating almost total transparency regarding products and services, particularly in terms of their price (Granados *et al.*, 2008). In often saturated markets, where consumers are better informed and very volatile about their choices, competition between companies is increasingly stronger (Vanheems and Nicholson, 2011). The pressure from competitors thus forces them to adopt a multichannel strategy to extend their touchpoints in order to always be where the consumer is present. Knowing that differentiation by product, brand or price is becoming more difficult, the multichannel strategy is one of the best ways for companies to increase their market penetration and gain a sustainable competitive advantage (Stone *et al.*, 2002).

In the new business world, it is true that some companies offer a multiplicity of touchpoints only to avoid the risk of losing their customers, but without always questioning their ability to conduct an efficient multichannel strategy. The multiplicity of touchpoints means, for example, that logistical processes are totally controlled so that the various distribution channels do not offer heterogeneous levels in logistical service quality to the consumer (Murfield *et al.*, 2017). In the same way, it is important not to be left behind by competitors. According to Vanheems (2015), some brick & mortar retailers have implemented a multichannel strategy through simple *imitation* or *organizational isomorphism*, without really understanding its implications and requirements, since companies need to be where their direct competitors are. This case is well known in France with the multiplication of self-collection points by large food retailers, many of which do not reach a sufficient level of profitability (Colla and Lapoule, 2015).

2.3. Consumer behavior

It is now accepted that consumers, especially Generation Y and *millennials* (Jin *et al.*, 2015; Sethi *et al.*, 2018), wish to have greater freedom in the purchasing process. According to Vanheems and Nicholson (2011), they want to be able to choose not only the distribution channel through which they search for information and/or make their purchase, but also the most appropriate purchasing time (order). The desire to search for information on the Internet channel, before deciding on online or offline purchasing, is an increasingly frequent option (Dasgupta and Grover, 2019). After that, it becomes a question of whether to opt for at-home delivery or pick-up at a self-collection point. Amazon has understood the opportunities at this level by creating Amazon Locker, a system of kiosks located in public places that allow the consumer to pick up packages. In short, the desire for complete freedom when choosing distribution channels gives consumers the opportunity to respond to different possible consumer situations (Schröder and Zaharia, 2008).

In general, the Internet channel, with its characteristic of providing consumers with real-time information, turns them much more into *experts* (Vanheems, 2012). Thanks to the information collected on the Internet channel, consumers are more familiar with the companies and the products offered. This knowledge and expertise is explicitly demonstrated in the physical store since, with the information collected on the Internet channel, expert customers often require information that is far removed from the product's essence and very different from that of consumers not using the Internet channel (Vanheems, 2012). This explains an increasingly diversified expression of demand, which is coupled with a change in customers' purchasing behavior. For *millennials* in particular, the fact of playing with a multiplicity of touchpoints has become a major characteristic, specific to a generation born with the Internet channel (Manser Payne *et al.*, 2017).

Finally, each distribution channel in a multichannel strategy contributes, with its own characteristics and touchpoints, to a response adapted to consumer needs regarding their purchasing process (Belvaux, 2006). As Dholakia *et al.* (2005) note, in a situation of several distribution channel options, it is quite natural for consumers to add a new channel in the purchasing process as long as no special effort is required (equipment, channel learning, entry cost, etc.). Consequently, for companies, obtaining a sustainable competitive advantage is not based solely on strategies focused on the profitability of a single channel. To have a chance to attract consumers and manage market uncertainty, an overall vision must be implemented, moving away from a silo approach. It is possible here to talk about the birth of a new paradigm since this paradigm shift clearly represents a new way of approaching old problems.

3. Multichannel strategy–Paradigm shift

Traoré's (2011) research indicates that a multichannel strategy applies to the relationship between companies and their customers, whether it is in terms of communication ("multichannel communication") or delivery ("multichannel distribution"). The second option materializes in the sales environment as the proliferation of distribution channels through which the consumer can interact with the company in different ways (Neslin *et al.*, 2006). Significant literature has been devoted to the subject, which cannot be summarized here. A chronological review of the main approaches to the multichannel strategy and their definitions are provided in Table 1. This makes it possible to identify concepts that resemble one other and highlight the main characteristics of a multichannel strategy.

Table 1: Some definitions of multichannel strategy in the literature since the early 2000s

Authors	Definition (excerpts)
Stone *et al.* (2002)	A strategy that allows consumers to use one distribution channel rather than another to make their purchases.
Montoya-Weiss *et al.* (2003)	A strategy that allows companies to reach their consumers through a combination of physical stores, catalogues, and online sales.
Helfer and Michel (2006)	A strategy consisting in integrating several touchpoints into a single system capable of managing their interactions.
Oh and Teo (2007)	A strategy involving the coexistence of several distribution channels, for companies operating in both a physical and Internet world.
Fournier (2009)	A strategy that is one of the main ways, or even the only way, to combine gains in productivity with a customized consumer approach.
Chatterjee (2010)	A strategy based on the intersection of multiple channels (physical store, catalogue, kiosk, Internet) by exploiting the synergy between them.
Vanheems (2010)	A strategy that allows consumers to migrate from one distribution channel to another under the best possible conditions throughout their decision-making process.
Ciomei (2010)	A strategy of simultaneously marketing products and services through multiple distribution channels, taking into account their commercial potential and profitability.
Picot-Coupey (2013)	A strategy integrating all touchpoints in order to offer a coherent and customized service to the consumer, creating value for the company.
Salle *et al.* (2015)	A strategy involving the overall and transparent integration of all channels and touchpoints, in order to offer an optimized and customized shopping experience.
Verhoef *et al.* (2015)	A strategy aimed at generating synergies between distribution channels and optimizing the customer's experience and performance of all channels.
Jara *et al.* (2018)	A strategy representing the multiplication of coordinated touchpoints in reference to the needs of the consumer, who is now placed at the center of the value-creation process.
Wollenburg *et al.* (2018)	A strategy integrating all marketing and logistical actions across all distribution channels so that the consumer can benefit from a seamless experience.

In the academic literature, the multichannel strategy relies on unstable terminology to evoke various forms of mixing distribution channels. Examples include multiple channels (Chatterjee, 2010), dual channels (Vanheems, 2009), cross-channel strategy (Van Baal and Dach, 2005; Vanheems, 2009; Beck and Rygl, 2015), or omnichannel strategy (Picot-Coupey, 2013; Beck and Rygl, 2015; Salle *et al.*, 2015). Figure 1, based on Volle and Isaac (2014), provides a simplified representation. In most academic works, multichannel strategy is considered to be a generic term for a strategy that allows products and services to be marketed simultaneously across multiple distribution channels, regardless of whether the various channels are integrated (Stone *et al.*, 2002; Neslin *et al.*, 2006; Vanheems, 2009; Saghiri *et al.*, 2017), or not integrated (Avery *et al.*, 2012). This important point makes it possible to understand the willingness of some authors to introduce the notion of an omnichannel strategy in order to highlight a paradigm shift.

Types of distribution channel organization		Definitions	Consumer purchasing process	Organizational diagrams
Single-channel		The firm (F) uses a single distribution channel (C)	The entire process takes place on a single channel	F ———→ C
Multichannel	Conventional type	The firm (F) uses several distribution channels (C) that are not linked to each other	A purchasing process for each channel is imposed on the consumer	F ———→ C
	Cross-channel type	The firm (F) uses several distribution channels (C), some of which may be linked to each other	The consumer can start a purchasing process on one channel and end it on another for a portion of the product range	F ———→ C
	Omnichannel type	The firm (F) uses several distribution channels (C) in combination	The consumer can start a transaction on one channel and end it on any other channel	F ———→ C

Figure 1: Typology of channel organization
(Adapted from Volle and Isaac, 2014)

Indeed, some of the more recent research on multichannel strategy has attempted to systematically categorize the diversity of distribution strategies and systematically differentiate between omnichannel and

multichannel terms (Volle and Isaac, 2014; Beck and Rygl, 2015; Salle *et al.*, 2015; Verhoef *et al.*, 2015; Ailawadi and Farris, 2017). The main idea is that there is now an *omniconsumer* who uses the different channels created by a company in its customer journey either successively or simultaneously (websites, applications, physical stores, social media, email, etc.). With reference to this omniconsumer, the omnichannel strategy is based on the synergies between the different touchpoints used during the consumer journey and the value of the consumer experience as "cognitive as well as affective responses evoked by direct (offline) and indirect (online) customer interactions with the firm or firm offerings across all the touchpoints throughout the customer purchase journey" (Chepur and Bellamkonda, 2019:7). For many authors, in contrast to the omnichannel strategy, which offers all the touchpoints available to the consumer and implements full integration between distribution channels, the multichannel strategy does not establish any link between them. To make a clear distinction between multichannel and omnichannel, Li (2018) suggests using the term "conventional multichannel" when the channels do not result in any integration strategy, and the term "integrated multichannel" (or omnichannel) in the opposite case.

The integrated multichannel strategy refers to a company's corporate policy, which considers that the combination of distribution channels is preferable to the simple superposition of channels. This is because the consumer no longer thinks in terms of the touchpoints at his/her disposal, but in terms of a seamless experience. For the company, channel integration guarantees a coherent and harmonious response to the consumer, according to his/her preferences in relation to a given purchasing situation and shopping tendency (Oh and Teo, 2007; Hamad and Schmitz, 2019). According to Plé (2006), by combining the advantages of each channel, the integrated multichannel strategy will thereby ensure optimal consumer service quality over the long term. It will also strengthen the company's ability to manage ongoing interactions with the consumer. In summary, the integrated multichannel strategy aims to optimize the company's productivity by developing interrelationships between distribution channels, which support each other in the context of consumer migration trajectories.

4. Multichannel strategy–Consumer migration

According to Achabal *et al.* (2005), a multichannel strategy can work effectively in two opposite contexts: (1) Distribution channels collaborate using continuous interactions, from which consumers must benefit, for example in terms of logistical service quality; (2) The different channels are distinct and clearly target different consumer segments, but without harming each other. In his work, Chatterjee (2010) takes up the same idea and also indicates that multichannel retailers ultimately have two options to sell their products: (1) To present each channel as an independent unit, but without allowing consumers to benefit from a seamless experience; (2) To integrate all distribution channels and allow for the easy transfer of products, information and money. In the second case, consumer migration is considered to be a major trend that must be addressed by the company, whose mission is to identify migration paths in order to improve its financial and commercial performance.

4.1. Preliminary clarification

In a research conducted in the early part of this decade, Heitz-Spahn and Filser (2014) asked 750 French consumers to describe their purchasing experience for different products (household appliances, clothing, cultural products, furniture). The objective was to identify the distribution channels and retailers frequented during the preparation of the purchase, and the distribution channel and retailer chosen for the purchase. Following their research, Heitz-Spahn and Filser (2014) established a typology of consumer behavior, based on the number of channels and the number of retailers frequented during the overall purchasing process. It shows that 65% of consumers surveyed frequented more than one distribution channel during the preparation of the purchase and that 55% of consumers surveyed adopted a multichannel and multi-retailer behavior. Beyond the migration between distribution channels, companies must therefore consider the risk of migration between retailers: if they do not have information on the overall consumer journey, it will be difficult for them to understand their needs and expectations and adapt their products and services offering.

The question raised by Heitz-Spahn and Filser's (2014) research refers to the cross-channel strategy as defined in Figure 1. The systematic search for coordination appears to be a main element in a successful cross-channel strategy because it makes it possible to better cope with the risk of consumer migration (Li *et al.*, 2017). Most often, the consumer starts his/her purchase process on his/her smartphone (by looking for information on available products, prices and suppliers) and ends it on another channel (completion of the purchase in store or online). He/she navigates between the different channels with unprecedented ease, each channel playing a specific role in his/her journey and participating in the value creation of the consumer experience (de Haan *et al.*, 2018). According to Vanheems and Nicholson (2011), it is then essential to distinguish between a multichannel and cross-channel strategy: (1) A multichannel strategy corresponds to the company's point of view and refers to the different channels that it makes available to its consumers; (2) A cross-channel strategy refers to the experience encountered by consumers, the one that they were able to acquire in the purchasing process between the different available channels. It is therefore this question of consumer experience that must be at the heart of a

marketing policy. By systematically comparing prices and obtaining informed advice from peers in their social universe, consumers develop sometimes surprising migration trajectories that need to be explored (Chiu *et al.*, 2011; Park and Lee, 2017; Verhoef *et al.*, 2017).

4.2. Identification of three migration behaviors

Marketing studies on migration behavior in a multichannel context are a hot topic that occupies an important part of the literature on multichannel strategy, and one that several researchers have tried to understand and explain (Van Baal and Dach, 2005; Chiu *et al.*, 2011; Pookulangara *et al.*, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2017; Barwitz and Maas, 2018). Consumer migration has been studied in its different forms, and refers to synonymous concepts, such as cross-channel behavior (Vanheems, 2015), channel migration (Ansari *et al.*, 2008; Neslin and Shankar, 2009; Vanheems and Nicholson, 2011; Ackermann and Von Wangenheim, 2014), and channel alternation (Grewal *et al.*, 2003; Easingwood and Coelho, 2003; Vanheems and Nicholson, 2011). Each author introduces his/her own way of classifying multichannel behaviors. Depending on the case, migration is mentioned when some consumers use the same company's distribution channels, while in other cases, migration is mentioned when consumers use not only several distribution channels, but also several retailers.

Van Baal and Dach (2005) divide the distribution channel selection process into two stages: (1) The information search stage, which is the act of collecting information and assigning characteristics to products; (2) The transaction stage, which represents the purchasing action as such. With reference to the contribution of Van Baal and Dach (2005), Chiu *et al.* (2011) study migration behavior regarding competing retailers and classify four main behaviors, establishing a matrix, based on the answer to the following two questions: (1) Do consumers use the same channel, from the information search stage to the purchasing stage; and (2) Do consumers remain loyal to the same retailer, from the information search stage to the purchasing stage? From the answers provided, migration behaviors between the different distribution channels for the same and/or several retailers can be summarized in a model indicated in Figure 2.
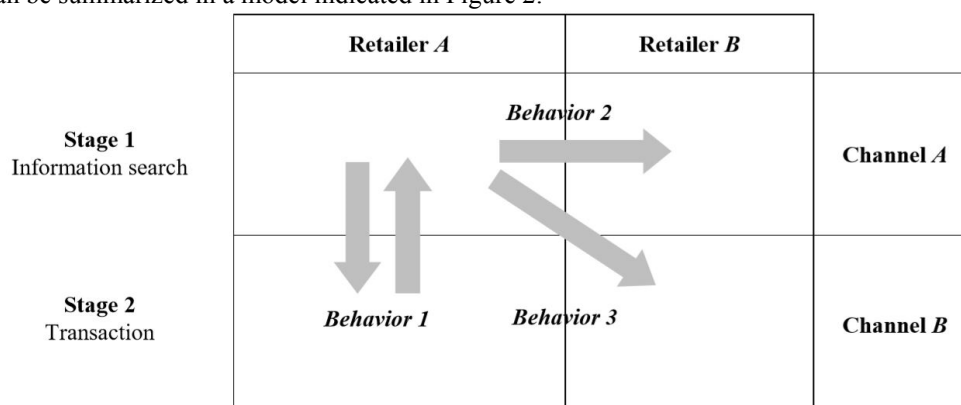

Figure 2: Consumer migration behaviors in a multichannel environment
(Adapted from Filser, 2001)

■ Behavior 1: channel migration with the same retailer

Corresponding to the idea of cross-channel retention expression proposed by Chiu *et al.* (2011), the first behavior consists in alternating between a retailer's different distribution channels (physical store, website), when searching for information, on the one hand, and making the transaction, on the other hand. Two options are possible:

- The click & mortar option refers to the behavior of a consumer who seeks relevant information and evaluates the possibilities of purchasing on the Internet channel, and then purchases the product or service in a physical store. The purpose of this behavior is to make the best choice before entering into the transaction in the best possible place (Belvaux, 2006). In this case, the Internet channel plays an important role in the preparation of the purchase, since it is embedded in a complex system of information and distribution channels (Badot and Navarre, 2002). The physical store must be conceived here as an extension of the consumer experience that was started on the Internet channel (Vanheems, 2010). Some consumers are described as "enlightened" by Bergadaà and Coraux (2008) in order to qualify those who know how to use the Internet channel before coming to talk to store salespeople. They must no longer be considered as mere consumers who devour products during consumption, but as *co-producers of services*.

- The mortar & click option refers to the behavior of a consumer who searches for information in the physical stores and then makes his/her purchase on the Internet channel. This behavior seems to concern mainly experience-based goods, for which a consumer can hardly obtain information regarding its attributes before consumption, and which are relatively heterogeneous in their quality (De Figueiredo, 2000; Belvaux, 2006). The consumer makes his/her purchase on the Internet channel because of the reduced prices offered by

websites or the possibility of it being delivered directly to his/her home. According to Belvaux (2006), the conventional offer in a physical store is still essential for this type of product. For experience-based goods, the consumer needs to use sensorial attributes to evaluate them, which justifies a visit to the physical store. He/she can then find a greater variety of references on the Internet channel after eliminating the main sources of uncertainty (Filser, 2001).

■ Behavior 2: retailer migration

Consumer migration from one retailer to another retailer under the second behavior refers to a single-channel and multi-retailer approach, i.e. the use of several retailers during the decision-making process (Van Baal and Dach, 2005). In a multichannel environment, consumers can use a retailer's distribution channel when researching information and evaluating products, and then purchase them through the same type of channel but from another competing retailer that offers a lower price (Carlton and Chevalier, 2001). Van Baal and Dach (2005) estimated that in the mid-2000s 20% of consumers migrated to other competing retailers following the information research stage. As a result, with the possibility for consumers to switch to other retailers, companies treat this type of behavior as both an opportunity to be taken and a risk to be controlled.

■ Behavior 3: retailer and channel migration

The third behavior corresponds to multichannel free-riding behavior (Chiu *et al.*, 2011; Chou *et al.*, 2016; Pu *et al.*, 2017), which refers to the situation where consumers use a retailer's distribution channel to obtain product information and then purchase from a different distribution channel with a competing retailer (Wallace *et al.*, 2009). In France, a fairly common case is the consumer's consultation of the Fnac website, which specializes in household appliances, before purchasing the product in a Darty physical store, which has historically enjoyed a very positive image in terms of after-sales service through its "trust contract" (Huber, 2011). This is due to the ease with which consumers can nowadays migrate from one distribution channel to another, and from one retailer to another thanks to the remarkable functionalities of the Internet channel (Oueslati, 2011). Such a migration, according to Noble *et al.* (2005), perfectly describes the new freedom enjoyed by the consumer, a total break with the old models that made him/her a *prisoner* of a distribution channel and/or a retailer.

5. Concluding remarks

For many years, dominant marketing approaches have considered the distribution channel as a network of interdependent inter-organizational relationships involved in the process of making a product or service available for consumption or use (Stern *et al.*, 1996). While the consumer was not excluded from the analysis, the focus remained on recurrent interactions between manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers, specifically by exploring issues of dependency, power, conflict and cooperation, but also logistical monitoring and procurement characteristics (Paché, 2008; Chepkwony and Lagat, 2016). The inter-organizational perspective remains relevant, especially when it comes to understanding the predatory strategies of large retailers −such as Walmart− faced with suppliers who want to capture the value created during BtoB exchanges. However, the importance of the consumer in the evolutionary dynamics of distribution channels is now recognized, and academic works now place the consumer experience at the heart of the marketing policy. Thus, according to Neslin *et al.* (2006), the distribution channel should be seen primarily as a coordinated set of touchpoints with the customer, as well as a privileged means by which the company and its consumers interact.

5.1. Managerial implications

This conceptual paper has drawn on the body of research regarding integrated multichannel strategy and, more recently, on omnichannel strategy, in order to show how much the rules of the game have changed in the management of distribution channels. The priority for companies is now to develop an overall vision of the different consumer touchpoints in order to offer him/her a seamless experience that eliminates any dissonance. One of the most serious mistakes would be to pursue a "compartmentalized" management of the different channels, both physical and Internet, since integrated management makes it possible to profitably use the various touchpoints according to the purchasing situations (Salle *et al.*, 2015; Galipoglu *et al.*, 2017). From this point of view, Vanheems' (2015) vision seems particularly relevant: the simultaneous mobilization of touchpoints makes it easier for consumers to switch between touchpoints, and the objective is to understand what is experienced with each touchpoint in order to improve their collective organization. By integrating all touchpoints, the company can focus on customer relationships, in order to offer consistent and customized service.

However, implementing an efficient multichannel strategy is not necessarily easy for companies. While technological tools are useful, companies face organizational obstacles related to their acceptance and dissemination. For example, in the context of consumer migration between a physical channel and the Internet channel, it is difficult for physical store salespeople to accept that consumers come in to test the functionalities of a product, ask for advice and then order online from the website of a competing retailer. This is even more unbearable for physical store salespeople if a large part of their remuneration is linked to the volume of sales they make. Similarly, a company's image would be seriously damaged if a consumer who ordered a product

online from the company's website cannot access the after-sales service of its physical stores; the absence of a seamless experience would then cause a breakthrough phenomenon, and the risk that the consumer would reject both the website and the physical stores out of frustration. Therefore, further exploration is needed in an economic environment that is undergoing a profound change, by removing traditional boundaries between distribution channels in the context of increasingly hyper-connected consumers.

5.2. Limitations

The first limitation of the paper is to propose an exploration of a "unified" consumer experience without sufficiently emphasizing the hindrances encountered by companies. Indeed, it is difficult for many companies to ensure consistency in the customer experience across all distribution channels. For example, the information provided by customer service in store on a product may be different from that provided online, or the in store customer may not be offered the promotion that is available online at the same time; the complex transitions from one distribution channel to another, in a fluid and invisible way for the consumer, were not addressed. The second limitation of the paper is to remain evasive about the nature of the digital experiences delivered, the challenges faced by consumers, and thus help explain a low engagement or recurrent dropouts during channel migrations. The proposed framework does not suggest an in-depth view of the consumer experience, both in terms of sales and incident management, compared with the marketing costs generated by the implementation of a customized relationship between the company and the consumer.

5.3. Research avenues

The first research avenue is related to the distinction between dependent and independent variables. The synergies developed among different touchpoints used during consumers' experience as "delightful" and "cognitive" (dependent variables) have to be linked with the independent variables of technology and consumers' behavior. This grid of variables could be deployed into a mind map or graph. At this pictorial representation all independent and dependent variables can be arranged within the "conceptual layer" of integrated multichannel. Whereupon it would be possible to differentiate the graphical representation to fit it at a "conventional multichannel" (possibly through using different entities or variables, than that of the "integrated multichannel"). The second research avenue is related to a quantification process. The narrative only sustains a theoretical background, whereas no quantitative appreciation was formulated upon specific technologies applied, or economic/financing/purchasing monetary values given. This technological and economics evaluation in numerical data/quantitative information can be structured under the level(s) of regional, national, or international marketplace; Alternatively, the quantitative inclusion should be based on a specific tradable good, or business sector at either developing or developed economy. These are important ways to improve academic and managerial knowledge of the functioning of contemporary distribution channels.

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