

## The impact of COVID-19 on apparel consumers' channel selections and omni-channel shopping behaviors

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*Introduction and Literature Review* The breakout of Covid-19 in 2020 has changed consumers' shopping behaviors and brought retailers many challenges. Before the hit of the pandemic, traditional retail businesses that relied on brick-and-mortar channel had already suffered the intense competition from emerging online retailers. Now the pandemic worsened the situation and urged many traditional retailers to add new retail channels or shopping modes, so they can survive the disaster. Many marketers and researchers asserted that flexible marketing strategies, such as omnichannel retailing, are helping retailers to deal with the troubles and challenges they face during the ongoing pandemic (Chen & Chi, 2021; Nguyen Tran, Van Huy, Nguyen, Do & Nguyen, 2020; Taylor, 2020). Before Covid-19, many retailers were hesitant to invest in omnichannel retailing format, such as online order, curbside pickup. The pandemic has forced retailers to adopt these new shopping forms to survive (Taylor, 2020). Omni-channel retailing is a business model in which different channels are fully integrated to provide a seamless experience throughout a customer's journey (Beck & Rygl, 2015). Although researchers and marketers acknowledged the need and benefits of omni-channel retailing strategies particularly under Covid-19, our understanding on the impact of the current pandemic on consumers' attitudes and behaviors toward omni-channel retailing is inadequate (Brandtner et al., 2021). Therefore, this concept paper applied systematic literature review to fill the gap. By integrating recent research about the impact of Covid-19 on consumer behavior, this study provided suggestions for future research topics and questions related to the impact of Covid-19 on apparel consumers' channel selections and omni-channel shopping behaviors.

*Methodology* To reduce bias and ensure the quality of this study, the research followed the five-step guideline for systematic review research developed by Denyer and Tranfield (2009). Based on the purpose of the study, the authors proposed research questions about apparel shopping channels and methods, the trends of apparel consumer behaviors influenced by the pandemic, and possible future research directions. The authors used all possible combinations of the terms for omni-channel retailing and consumer behavior to search for academic articles by using the database of Business Source Complete (EBSCO). After careful selection and evaluation, 72 peer-reviewed journal articles were retained for analysis and synthesis. Furthermore, via the search engine of Google Scholar, the authors acquired 13 peer-reviewed journal articles about the impact of Covid-19 on consumers' channel choice, shopping methods, and omni-channel behaviors. A content analysis was conducted to identify themes for each research question.

*Findings, Discussion, and Conclusions* Based on the content analysis, the authors identified three main themes for apparel retail channels: store channel, online channel, and other non-store channels. Online channel contains two subthemes: (1) traditional internet channel via computer

or laptop, (2) mobile channel via smartphone or tablet. Online channel also has a fast-growing subset, named social commerce, defined as e-commerce activities and transactions through social media sites (Liang & Turban, 2011). Thus, retail online channels could be identified through two dimensions, hardware (e.g., computer and smartphone) and software (e.g., social media sites and brands or retailers' websites). Other non-store channels include catalog, direct selling, and automated machines (e.g., vending machines). Large retailers often provide multiple channels to sell their products and allow consumers to flexibly choose the appropriate channel meeting their needs. Moreover, consumers can use multiple channels throughout their shopping journey from information search, order placement, order pick-up, to post-purchase activities. From the analysis of literature, the authors identified three main themes for shopping methods: (1) conventional offline shopping, (2) absolute internet shopping, and (3) innovative omni-channel shopping, such as buy-online-pick-up-in-store (BOPS), reserve-online-pickup-and-pay-in-store (ROPS), and offline showrooms with shipping to home (Jin, Li, & Cheng, 2018; MacCarthy, Zhang, & Muyldermans, 2019). The authors found the gaps in the present literature and suggested that future researchers could conduct more apparel consumer behavior studies related to social commerce, automated retailing, and omni-channel shopping methods.

Regarding the impact of Covid-19 on apparel consumer behaviors, we discovered that consumer behaviors changed under different stages of the pandemic, across different countries and areas, and under different governmental policies. Individual differences (e.g., self-efficacy, level of practicing social distancing, and vulnerability of the protection motivation) influenced consumers' channel selections (Moon et al., 2021). Some economic factors (e.g., economic uncertainty) and demographic characteristics such as age, could also help explain changing consumer behavior under the pandemic (Koch et al., 2020; Youn et al., 2021). Few studies have focused on the topic of omni-channel retailing (e.g., online-to-offline coupons, and online and offline channel choice) (Moon et al., 2021; Zhuang et al., 2020), and apparel consumer behavior (Youn et al., 2021). Hence, the authors proposed some research questions in the table below to fill the gaps discovered from the content analysis about the impact of Covid-19 on apparel consumers' channel selections and omni-channel shopping behaviors.

Table 1. Future Research Topics and Questions

Research	Example Research Questions
BOPS and curbside pickup	How do individual differences (e.g., self-efficacy and response efficacy) impact apparel consumers' intentions of using BOPS and curbside pickup?
Channel selections	How do apparel consumers' channel selections change in different stages of the pandemic (during lockdowns and before and after the pandemic)?
	How do Covid-19 policies influence apparel consumers' channel selections and shopping methods in different countries?
Innovative technologies	What determines apparel consumers' intentions of using innovative technologies (e.g., automated retailing, self-checkout tablets or machines) in the post-Covid-19
Offline shopping	Who would be more likely to readopt in-store shopping in the post-Covid-19 era: Effect of age, gender, vulnerability of the protection motivation, consumption

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