OMNI-CHANNEL RETAILING FOR THE LITTLE GUY: A USABILITY THEORY APPROACH TO INTERVIEW ANALYSIS OF THE PREVALENCE OF OMNI-CHANNEL RETAILING AMONG SMALL RETAILERS

By

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(Under the Direction of Clair McClure)

ABSTRACT

In the realm of omni-channel retailing studies, little research focuses on how small apparel retailers are implementing an omni-channel strategy. This study intended to understand how small retailers utilize omni-channel retailing. This study was rooted in the usability theory, which is mentioned in human-computer interaction studies but had yet to be applied to research of omni-channel retailing before this study. This study employed a pre-screening content analysis and semi-structured interviews of small retailers. Forty-four retailers were analyzed and deemed omni-channel retailers. All retailers were contacted regarding interviewing, leading to interviews with four small retailers. The interviews were analyzed using a constant common theme method to understand overarching commonalities across interviews. Several themes emerged, precisely the themes of "there's no cookie cutter recipe," "the end goal," "the best fit," and "today's consumer". This study has novel implications and adds to the body of knowledge understanding omni-channel retailing from a new perspective.

INDEX WORDS: Omni-channel, Usability theory, Semi-structured Interviews, Qualitative, Small retailers, Retailing

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to all of my friends and family who have supported me throughout my life. A few in specific to mention are my parents, Megan and Ryan Strub, my sisters, Allison and Gianna Strub, Dr. Clair McClure, Sara Elhabbassi, Caroline Avery, Lawton Nickles, and Annie Roberts. This list could go on and on, but it just goes to show that I could not be more grateful for the community of love and encouragement around me.

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Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

Overview

This section aims to introduce the problem in the context of the marketplace today, justify why this is a worthwhile research cause, explicitly state the research objectives of this study, and supply the reader with the conceptual definitions that will be frequented throughout this paper.

Background and Problem

Retailing today has evolved from a product-oriented market to a consumer-oriented market, where a retailer must focus on creating and maintaining relationships with the consumer rather than just having the best product on the market. Consumers want the brand to communicate and connect with them (Khusainova, 2020a), not just sell something to them. A retailer must create a brand for themselves, not just their products because the stakes are higher and the success rates are lower. To survive, one must pivot and adapt (Buiocchi, 2020).

Recently, Burberry launched its first social-retail experience in China that offers augmented reality, themed fitting rooms, and more (Meehan, 2020) to create a custom-tailored experience for each consumer (*Social Retail*, 2020). This environment not only blurs the line between offline and online channels but immerses the consumers within both channels simultaneously to further enrich their experience (*Social Retail*, 2020).

Levi's has also integrated new digital experiences, not just platforms, into its omni-channel strategy. They are using apps to host styling sessions (Coker, 2020) to create a relationship with consumers despite COVID-19. Levi's has also developed a virtual closet on Snapchat that will allow consumers to "try on" and purchase products (Coker, 2020). Lastly, the brand is using augmented reality to create fit models so consumers can better understand how products will fit their body (Coker, 2020). These tactics go above and beyond a purchase, they aim to understand what the consumer's needs and how to strategically satisfy those needs while differentiating themselves from other retailers to create a unique experience for the customer. By using an omni-channel strategy, the retailer can create a lasting relationship with the consumer.

In today's environment, a fashion business doesn't need to simply be a multi-channel retailer, it needs to be an omni-channel retailer. Omni-channel strategy is one way a retailer can create a brand for themselves by seamlessly integrating the consumer's experience across the different platforms of commerce, community, and creativity. Retailers are combining offline and online environments to create an overall experience to better compete in the new world of retailing (Buiocchi, 2020). Retailers who offer a tailored and personalized experience across multiple channels are expected to achieve at least a 300% return on investment (NRF & FitforCommerce, 2020).The pandemic has further proven that retailers need to accept technology, whether willingly or unwillingly, as a strong digital presence is essential to survive (Erdly, 2020). E-commerce business, as reported by retailers, has increased from 10% to 200% as compared to last year (Helfenbein, 2020). COVID-19 forced multi-channel retailers to evolve into omni-channel retailers by cornering them into offering services like curbside pick-up and contactless delivery (Meehan, 2020); the amount of retailers that offer a buy online, pick up in-store (BOPIS) option has grown from 66% at the end of 2019 to 76% in 2020 (Kimple, 2020).

The pandemic has also forced consumers to expect more from their omni-channel experience, like real-time inventory, consistency among channels, and creative content to engage with the consumer (Meehan, 2020).

Knowing that an omni-channel strategy is key to survival and most large retailers have had omni-channel strategies in place for quite some time, what about small retailers? As of 2018, there were 30.2 million small businesses in the United States (United States Small Business Administration, 2018). There has been a resurgence of shopping small in the last several years which has kept small retailers afloat, but small retailers continually cite mass retailers as the forces affecting their ability to thrive in the marketplace (Sharp, 2019). The continual growth of small businesses across the United States is supported by the increasing number of craft breweries, small-scale bookstores, and independent films (Wu, 2015).

While small retailers are seemingly at a disadvantage, they have the same tools available to them as the mass retailers do and their small size can be an advantage when instilling an omni-channel strategy (Goodman & Remaud, 2015). Small retailers have the control and flexibility to pivot to meet consumer needs and reach the blind spots that large retailers are simply too large to cater to (Wu, 2015). Small retailers also have the advantage of differentiation and curating a unique experience (Wu, 2015). By using an omni-channel strategy to create a unique experience across all platforms, small retailers are able to capitalize on their size and strengths to compete with larger firms. Omni-channel retailing allows small retailers to broaden their voice and connect with others outside of their local community. Using an omni-channel strategy to connect with consumers, rather than just sell to consumers, allows small retailers to have an advantage over large retailers who may be simply too large to personally connect with each individual consumer. Although the individual voices of small retailers are quieter, their presence is

overwhelmingly larger and their adoption of omni-channel retailing is essential as the industry evolves.

Justification

The prevalence and power of retailers in the marketplace is justification enough as to why there needs to be a more clear understanding of the inner workings of small retailing. Small retailers have the opportunity to curate a retailing environment unlike any mass retailer due to their size and control. Knowing this, one needs to understand if small retailers are capitalizing on the opportunities available to them. By having an understanding of how small retailers are utilizing omni-channel retailing to effectively compete in the marketplace, one can further understand the state of the marketplace as a whole.

Purpose

The study aims to investigate the presence of omni-channel retailing strategies in small retail environments. By understanding if small retail brands are using omni-channel practices, one will be able to further comprehend the mechanics of small retailers and how they compete to survive in today's retail environment. Omni-channel retailing is typically studied in the context of supply chain management or from the consumer's perspective and this research aims to open the door to new areas of development within the omni-channel research realm. The purpose of this research is to:

I. Understand the presence of omni-channel retailing among small retailers.

II. Investigate how each channel is being utilized by small retailers.

III. Uncover which channels small retailers are using.

IV. Recognize how seamless integration is evident within an omni-channel strategy for small retailers.

Research Objectives

The proposed objectives of the research are as follows:

I. To explore if omni-channel retailing is being used by small retailers.

II. To discover how small retailers are using the individual channels.

III. To understand what channels are being utilized.

IV. To uncover how seamless integration is present in the omni-channel strategy.

Significance

The findings of this research will be beneficial to any small retailer trying to integrate an omni-channel strategy into their retailing environment by providing them the proper information to determine what channels to use, how to cultivate channel interaction, and how to curate seamless integration.

This research will also aid in the development of omni-channel research from a utilization and performance perspective, rather than a consumer or supply chain management perspective. Opening the door to new avenues of research within the field will be beneficial to further understand omni-channel retailing. This study will be useful in creating a solid foundation for modern small business research as well, which is essential as small businesses make up the majority of the industry and, thus, should be researched more heavily to accurately understand the retailing field today.

The information detailed above will be uncovered using (1) a content analysis and (2) interviews to determine the presence of the usability model in the realm of omni-channel retailing for small retailers. The usability model describes achieving overall usability through a balanced relationship between the user, task, tool, and user action in the context of the environment.

The study will utilize a pre-screening content analysis to determine if and how a small retailer is using an omni-channel strategy. This will also allow insight into which channels are present, how the channels function, and how the channels interact with each other from an external, third-party perspective. Following the content analysis, interviews will be conducted with small retailers that offer multiple channels to determine if they are utilizing an omni-channel strategy and to better understand, from the managerial perspective, the details of their omni-channel strategy.

Conceptual Definitions

Here is a list of the conceptual definitions of the key terms that will be frequented and operationalized throughout this paper:

1. *Small Business:* one that "is independently owned and operated and is not dominant in its field in national business" (US Department of State, n.d.).
2. *Small-to-Medium Sized Enterprise (SME):* one in which there are fewer than 500 employees (United States International Trade Commission, 2010).
3. *User:* a particular group with a unifying trait who help to construct technology (Pinch & Bijker, 1984) who are defined by their similarities, characteristics, and experiences (Brancheau & Brown, 1993).

4. *Tool:* the specific channels used by users to complete a task (Powell & Moore, 2002)
5. *Channel:* a key link between retailers and consumers in the global economy (O'Brien & Harris, 2013)
6. *Brick-and-Mortar Retailing:* the traditional channel of retailing that occurs in person at the store (Haire, 2018).
7. *E-commerce:* the trading of information, goods, services, and payment over the internet (Oppong et al., 2005).
8. *M-commerce:* using a mobile device to aid in the purchasing process (Clark III, 2001).
9. *Social Commerce:* the channel in which retailers and consumers interact back and forth on social media sites (Liang & Turban, 2011).
10. *Service Continuity:* the ability of a platform to effectively serve its purpose through the ability to retrieve and adapt information and tasks from other platforms available in a multi-platform setting (Denis & Karsenty, 2005).
11. *Task:* an activity a user sets out to complete (Jain et al., 2017) using the tools available.
12. *Omni-channel retailing:* fuses channels together to create an overall experience that depletes the distinctions between all the channels available (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Chapter 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This section reviews relevant literature to provide the reader with background information on the terms and topics most relevant to this study.

Small Retailer Environment

Recent studies tend to focus on omni-channel retailing in terms of supply chain management (Chopra, 2018; Kembro & Norrman, 2019; Abdulkader et al., 2018) or from a consumer perspective (Sharma et al., 2019; Xu & Jackson, 2019; Park & Lee, 2017). While these are important subjects, there is a lack of research surrounding how small retailers utilize an omni-channel strategy. Before delving further into this topic, the concept of a small retailer must be understood.

For the purposes of this research, the definition of a small apparel retailer will need to be clearly defined. A retailer is essentially a person or business that sells products (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019), although this is an outdated view of retailing, as today's retailers interact with consumers to create a relationship with the customer, not just a transaction. Presently, retailing can be defined as a relationship between the business and the consumer that begins at the concept stage and ends at the post-delivery stage and encompasses more than just a simple purchase (Bansal & Kumar, 2014). The United States Small Business Administration defines a small business as one that "is independently owned and operated and is not dominant in its field in

national business" (US Department of State, n.d.). The United States International Trade Commission defines a small-and-medium-size enterprise (SME) as one in which there are fewer than 500 employees (United States International Trade Commission, 2010). As mentioned, this research will focus specifically on small apparel retailers, which will be clearly defined as a small business that employs less than 500 employees and sells women's, men's, unisex, or children's apparel, accessories, and/or footwear.

Being a small retailer limits their "voice" among other, larger competitors (Goodman & Remaud, 2015) especially on social media platforms (Devereux et al., 2019). Although small retailers have smaller voices, they are the dominant form of retailers in the overarching marketplace in many countries (Devereux et al., 2019). Small retailers bring value by capitalizing opportunities that would be difficult for larger retailers to seize on (Goodman & Remaud, 2015); in that essence, a small retailer's size is its advantage in the marketplace. On the other hand, small retailers typically lack the funds and resources to fairly compete with other larger firms (Delgado-de Miguel et al., 2019).

Omni-channel retailing is a sustainable way for small retailers to create a competitive advantage in the marketplace. Having both physical and online channels allows small retailers to match their supply with the right demand and promote sales with efficiency and effectiveness (Delgado-de Miguel et al., 2019). By creating consistency among all channels to create an omni-channel retailing strategy, small retailers are able to create meaningful relationships with consumers (Erdly, 2020), regardless of if these customers are physically local or natives to the retailer's online platforms.

The Small Retailer as the User

The concept of a "user" has been extremely prevalent in all fields such as consumer research, psychological research, and more. User is a broad term that may refer to anything from medical purposes to technological reasons and anything in between. To understand how small retailers use technology, it is important to discuss how relevant fields of research define a user.

The Social Construct of Technology (SCOT) is an empirical model that stresses a multidirectional relationship between the user, artefact, problem, and solution (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). SCOT views users as a social group who help to construct technology (Pinch & Bijker, 1984) and emphasizes that different groups could construct technology in different ways. Users define the problem and help construct the tools to solve it (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). Pinch & Bijker (1984) note that this social group of users must have a unifying similarity that is relevant to the artefact. The artefact in the case of this research would be omni-channel retailing and the unifying similarity would be that the users are a social group of small retailers. After identifying the social group or users, the researcher must go into detail to define who precisely they are (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). The model is typically used for innovative studies in the field of social-technological research due to the underdevelopment of research in the convergent field of sociology and technology (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). As omni-channel retailing by small retailers is a form of sociological technology and is under-researched, this knowledge is insightful to further the understanding of the phenomena.

In the Configuration Approach, Steve Woolgar viewed consumers as a "reader" who interpreted technology and sees the user as a designer rather than a group involved in technological processes (Oudshoorn, 2005); this concept advocates that the user is a reader because of the flexibility of different technologies (Oudshoorn, 2005). In this approach, users are

first identified and technology is then designed to best suit said user (Oudshoorn, 2005). Woolgar's research studied the user as the actor within a company who produced the technology (Oudshoorn, 2005), rather than a user utilizing the technology for their own purposes. This research was furthered by other scholars who defined the user as journalists, policymakers, spokespersons, etc. (Oudshoorn, 2005), but this research has yet to be applied to the field of retailing.

Brancheau & Brown (1993) researched end-user computing in the field of human-computer interaction and, similar to Pinch & Bijker (1984), used common traits to define their user. The user was defined by their personal characteristics and experiences (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). Personal characteristics included variables such as age, motivational traits and behavioral intention (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). Experiences were defined by variables like education, prior tool experience and time since adoption (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). Brancheau & Brown (1993) used this definition as a pillar of the End User Computing framework they developed for further research in the field of human-computer interaction. This framework views the user as an end-user who utilizes the technology at the end of its lifecycle (Brancheau & Brown, 1993), rather than viewing the user as someone utilizing the technology to connect with an end-user or customer.

Users are also important in cultural and media studies and, thus, have been defined time and time again. Research in culture and media studies blurs the line between consumer and designer, stating that one can both design and consume their products (Oudshoorn, 2005). Baudrillard saw consumers as active agents in shaping social relationships and culture (Oudshoorn, 2005). Although this research was focused on how consumers impact the zeitgeist,

it is fair to argue that retailers, large or small, are active agents in shaping social relationships and culture through their adoptions of technology and interactions with consumers.

Schäfer (2011) describes users as active participants in defining culture, which has been heightened by social media and the ability to create content. In this context, it is inferred that a user is defined as someone who uses technology and is active online, a type of consumer. The research states that society has evolved into a participatory culture, where users are more impactful than ever in defining said culture. This is evident in users' ability to create content, post reviews, be active in forums, etc. Throughout the research, Schäfer (2011) acknowledges that new channels of e-commerce and media have changed society and the role of a user. Schäfer's (2011) research focuses on how consumers have more power than ever because of the rise of participatory culture and new media channels. From the lens of omni-channel retailing, it is evident that small retailers as users have more power than ever due to the mass availability of channels and opportunities to connect with their customers through omni-channel retailing.

As demonstrated above, the definition and role of a user varies for all fields and purposes of research. More frequently than not, in the realm of retailing, the user is defined as the consumer. For the purposes of this research from a managerial perspective, the user will be the small retailer employing multiple channels to fulfill the requirements of an omni-channel strategy. The artefact unifying these small retailers will be an omni-channel retailing strategy.

The Channel as the Tool

The meaning of a tool can vary immensely depending on what regard it is being studied. In general, a tool is defined as "something that helps you do a particular activity" (Cambridge

Dictionary, 2019). Since this research focuses on omni-channel strategies, the definition of a tool will be researched in the most relevant field.

In the context of human-computer interaction studies, a tool is typically defined by its computing equipment (i.e. functionality, user-system interface, etc.) and its perceived characteristics (i.e. complexity, compatibility, etc.) (Brown & Brancheau, 1992). The tool can also be synonymous with the "product", as in the platform being evaluated by the user (i.e. application, blog, social media platform, etc.) (Speicher, 2015). Powell & Moore (2002) delved deeper into the end-using computer relationship and defined a tool as the specific variables used by users. Tools need to be effective at providing value to the user, be easy to use, and be consistent (Powell & Moore, 2002).

Regardless of the field of research, it is important to note that it is the responsibility of the researcher to define the tool being used as they see fit for their purposes (Speicher, 2015). While these studies solely focused on human-computer interaction between technology and consumers, the characteristics and defining traits of tools hold true in the realm of omni-channel retailing as well. For the purpose of this research, the tool in question is the specific channel being used by the small retailer. As there are channels available both online and offline, the human-computer interaction definitions above are easily adapted to the realm of retailing, where they have never gone before. Before elaborating on what tasks the user may perform on these tools, one must have a clear understanding of the individual channels and how a small retailer may employ these tools in its omni-channel strategy.

Individual Channel Review

An omni-channel strategy is evidently composed of a multitude of separate channels that work together cohesively to provide a delightful and consistent experience. A channel is a key link between retailers and consumers in the global economy (O'Brien & Harris, 2013); it is the way a product goes from the retailer to the consumer. Channels can vary (O'Brien & Harris, 2013) and exist both offline and online (Sonneck & Ott, 2010), but must come together to form one overall seamless experience in order to be coined a successful omni-channel retailer. Here is a brief overview of individual channels in the omni-channel environment:

Table 2.1
The Channels as Tools

Channel	*Definition*	*Benefits*
Brick-and-Mortar	The traditional channel of retailing that occurs in person at the store (Haire, 2018)	● Hedonic shopping benefits (Hoskins, 2020) ● Customer loyalty (Hoskins, 2020) ● Ability to appeal to all five senses (Hoskins, 2020)
E-commerce	The trading of information, goods, services, and payment over the internet (Oppong et al., 2005)	● Overcomes barriers of time and space (Qin et al., 2014) ● Allows retailers to foster relationships no matter where they are (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013) ● Beneficial to find new customers and engage in new ways (Daniel & Wilson, 2002)
M-commerce	The ability to use a mobile device to aid in the purchasing process (Clark III, 2001) and, more importantly today, the ability to communicate with and create a relationship with a brand.	● Constant communication between the retailer and consumer (Frolick & Chen, 2004) ● Further overcomes barriers of time, space, and proximity to a computer (Clark III, 2001) ● Provides real time data to retailers (Frolick & Chen, 2004)
Social commerce	The ability of retailers and consumers to interact back and forth on social media sites (Liang & Turban, 2011)	● Offer unique experiences (Liang & Turban, 2011) ● Drive sales (Liang & Turban, 2011) ● Customer-centered environment rather than product-centered environment (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013) ● Community-like features (Liang & Turban, 2011) ● Number of users on social media platforms (Liang & Turban, 2011)

Service Continuity between Channels

It is important for one to understand the principle of service continuity, which is composed of both knowledge and task continuity, across platforms. Service continuity itself is

studied most heavily in the context of managerial research and computer development research, but is extremely applicable to the realm of retailing due to the prevalence of multiple channels in an omni-channel strategy.

Knowledge continuity is an important aspect of human interactions, whether that be human-to-human or human-computer. The Interacting Cognitive Systems (ICS) views the "system" as the human-information processing system within each person and sees knowledge continuity as the ability to recognize incoming information from other subsystems and aid in its development and function (Barnard & May, 1999). This is done effectively by one system recognizing a keyword or phrase and using context to match it to the desired output (Barnard & May, 1999), as it would be extremely difficult for a system to interpret all information presented exactly as it. As knowledge continuity is present in the brain to understand and interpret different information, it similarly must be present within the multi-platform computer environment to aid in this understanding and interpretation (Barnard & May, 1999). This understanding has yet to be further applied to omni-channel retailing, which offers multiple platforms across a digital and physical environment to create a synonymous experience. Understanding the principle of knowledge continuity across platforms, or channels in the case of omni-channel, and adapting it to this field of research is only natural due to the nature and traits of omni-channel retailing.

In the field of managerial research, for a firm to be competitive and successful, there must be knowledge continuity amongst its employees (Urbancova, 2012). Knowledge continuity is defined as "continuous knowledge transfer" of critical knowledge within and without the organization that is based on open communication (Urbancova, 2012, p. 38). A lack of knowledge continuity can lead to a drain of intellectual capital that defeats the advantages of the information (Urbancova, 2012). Urbancova (2012) studied the presence of knowledge continuity

within a company through the use of qualitative and quantitative surveys distributed to managers. Managers are the ones who ensure the transfer of knowledge amongst employees (Urbancova, 2012); In omni-channel retailing, it would be supposed that the small retailer is in charge of ensuring the transfer of knowledge amongst the channels, or tools, present.

Task continuity is the frictionless engagement and re-engagement with tasks across multi-platform environments (Jain et al., 2017) which results in the enhancement of the user's experience (Majrashi et al., 2018). This means that users should have a seamless experience when engaging or reengaging with the content on different channels across the omni-channel environment. It is the firm's job to make sure task continuity is present among the channels present, as made clear in Jain et al. (2017), as this source is a patent application created by Microsoft Technology Licensing, LLC. for a patent on task continuity across devices. Although task continuity is solely considered in the realm of technology, it should be considered in the realm of omni-channel retailing, as many channels are online and aided by efficient technology. In the context of omni-channel retailing, it is the small retailer's responsibility to ensure task continuity across channels.

This concept is extremely relevant today because, as mentioned, most retailers have access to different channels. Potential consumers are able to interact with a retailer in various forms, therefore, continuity needs to be established by the retailer to ensure the consumer can complete tasks across all of channels available and, thus, create an effective omni-channel strategy. Several examples of multi-device engagement in retailing in which task continuity would be vital are provided below:

- A user is performing a task on a first device, pauses the application, and opens the task on a second device (Jain et al., 2017)

- A user is performing a task on a first device and opens a second device to use simultaneously to supplement their task (Jain et al., 2017)
- A user completes their first task on a first device and opens a second device to complete an additional second task that is relevant to the first task (Jain et al., 2017)

Task continuity should be interactive and allow the consumer to rediscover previous tasks on all channels, which is imperative because it creates value for the consumer, thus generating high user satisfaction (Jain et al., 2017).

Understanding service continuity is relevant to the retail field because there needs to be a consistent and continuous transfer of knowledge and task amongst channels in the omni-channel strategy to ensure that the channels interact effectively and the consumer does not have to waste valuable intellectual capital to search for or purchase a product in the omni-channel environment. Service continuity not only creates a user-friendly omni-channel experience, which should be incentive enough for a retailer to want to ensure service continuity across their channels. Service continuity is essentially the glue that holds a successful omni-channel strategy together by ensuring customer satisfaction and driving sales.

Omni-channel Retailing as the Task

A task can refer to an activity a consumer does (Jain et al., 2017) through a channel, such as browsing products, interacting with products, chatting customer service, or purchasing items. From the managerial perspective, a task may be something a user does to increase sales or create brand loyalty. Similar to a tool, a task can be anything the researcher decides and the scope of a task can be as broad as needed (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). The variables of a task include the attributes of the user's or tool's purpose (Brown & Brancheau, 1992). A task can also be

classified by its type, scope, functional area, and routine in addition to other variables (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). As made evident through the literature review, the task must be defined by the researcher in the context of the user and the tool to ensure a proper relationship between these variables. The task must align well with the user and tool to increase tool adoption and utilization (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). As mentioned earlier, Brancheau & Brown (1993) researched the user-task-tool relationship in the context of human-computer interaction. As made clear throughout the literature review, this relationship is also prevalent in the omni-channel retailing environment but has yet to be examined.

A task is not simply something one does to achieve its goals (Speicher, 2015). These goals need to be further broken down into two sub-categories: do-goals and be-goals (Speicher, 2015). Do-goals refer to the channel's ability to support the completion of tasks, while be-goals refers to the satisfaction one feels after completing a task (Speicher, 2015). It is important to understand that tasks and goals are two sides of the same coin and both concepts must be defined for either concept to be understood. Speicher (2015) used case studies to formally define each element of the user-task-tool relationship in the context of human-computer interaction to create clear conceptual definitions of usability as a foundation for further study. This foundation was essential for review in this research, as the usability model is prevalent in the omni-channel realm, with the user supposed as the small retailer, the tool supposed as the channels, and the task supposed as offering an omni-channel environment.

For the purposes of this research, the task is broadly defined as offering an omni-channel retail strategy by the small retailer. The do-goal is for the small retailer to offer multiple channels that are seamlessly integrated. The be-goal is for small retailers to feel satisfied with the success of their store, through sales and customer relationships, because of their omni-channel offering.

Verhoef et al. (2015) thoroughly reviewed past research to conceptually define omni-channel retailing and further classify omni-channel retailing as its' own entity apart from multi-channel retailing. Multi-channel retailing is not synonymous with omni-channel retailing. Multi-channel retailing refers to offering multiple channels for consumers to interact with and purchase products from (Verhoef et al., 2015). In multi-channel retailing, these channels are managed separately from each other (Verhoef et al., 2015), potentially leading to a silo effect. Omni-channel retailing merges these channels together, through service continuity, to create an experience that depletes the distinctions between all the channels available (Verhoef et al., 2015). Omni-channel has led to the development of new, interactive channels (Verhoef et al., 2015) that supplement existing channels and better blend them all together into one unified experience. Omni-channel retailing offers a fully integrated and fully interactive environment, while multi-channel retailing does not (Beck & Rygl, 2015).

In essence, the task of small retailers is to adopt an omni-channel strategy, which offers a holistic shopping experience that consumes the customer (Manser Payne et al., 2017). Consumers aren't interacting with individual channels, they are interacting with the overall brand. An omni-channel retailing strategy should be favored by small retailers because it provides value to the consumer. Omni-channel offers value through an entire experience, rather than just through one channel or interaction (Yrjölä et al., 2018). This value stems from the value formed at each touchpoint which is comprised of utilitarian, hedonic, and social dimensions of value that is amplified by the consistency of value across all channels (Huré et al., 2017). Omni-channel retailing is advantageous to small retailers as their size gives them more control over each individual channel and, thus, over their entire omni-channel strategy. Knowing how

valuable omni-channel efforts can be to small retailers further highlights why these retailers should be offering a seamless omni-channel experience that satisfies and engages the consumer.

Chapter 3:

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Overview

This section aims to review several theories of usability that are relevant to the research being conducted, operationalize the terms mentioned in the literature review, and, lastly, present the research model and questions. By reviewing this literature, highlighting its relevance to omni-channel retailing, and adapting existing models, one will be able to create sound research questions in which to further the study.

Conceptual Framework

Shackel (2009)

Shackel's model of usability was originally created in the 1980s, and reinvented in 2009. This reflection resulted in an updated view of the well-established usability model of technology and refreshed the research model for new fields.

The adaptability of new technologies is heavily dependent on the usability of the technology in question (Shackel, 2009). Usability is defined as "the capability to be used by humans easily and effectively" (Shackel, 2009, p. 340). Usability does not need to cater to just the user, it needs to be integrated into all four components of the user-system situation, which are user, task, tool, and environment (Shackel, 2009). The diagram below describes the relationship between the factors in the user-system situation:

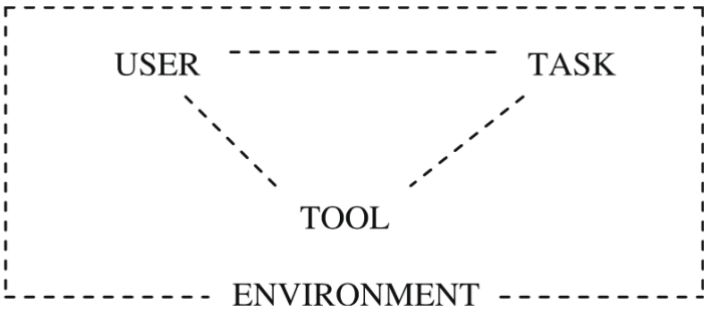

Figure 3.1 The Usability Model by Shackel (2009, p. 340)

As noted in the diagram, the user, task, and tool have equally important roles within the context of the environment. For successful interaction between all three factors, there must be fluid communication and understanding of the importance of each role. All four components must have strong interplay between each other for adequate usability (Shackel, 2009).

After defining and designing usability into a technology, it must be evaluated to determine its success. Usability is evaluated based on its dimensions, performance, and the user's attitude (Shackel, 2009). The dimensions of the technology refer to size, shape, and physical characteristics of the tool being used (Shackel, 2009). The performance of the technology refers to the operational characteristics of the tool in completing the task (Shackel, 2009). The user's attitude towards the technology is evaluated to determine the user's opinion of the cost of use and ease of use of the technology (Shackel, 2009). This evaluation is used to examine if the user, task, and tool are all equally important aspects in the overall usability of the technology. Overall, usability must be defined and evaluated using these metrics to ensure that the technology in question is successful and the user-system relationship is balanced in regard to all components.

Shackel (2009) used the usability model as a framework to evaluate the design of technology for human-computer interaction. This model can be adapted for different platforms

and different goals due to the broad metrics of each component within the usability relationship. In the context of omni-channel retailing, this relationship is present between the small retailer designing the omni-channel strategy, the channels offered, and the existence of an omni-channel strategy.

Brown & Brancheau (1992)

Brown & Brancheau (1992) again look at the usability relationship but from a larger perspective including the context, organization level end-user computing, individual end-user computing, and end-user computing outcomes. Brown & Brancheau (1992) used previous human-computer interaction research to create a cumulative research model of the end-user computing relationship. The model of this relationship is shown below:

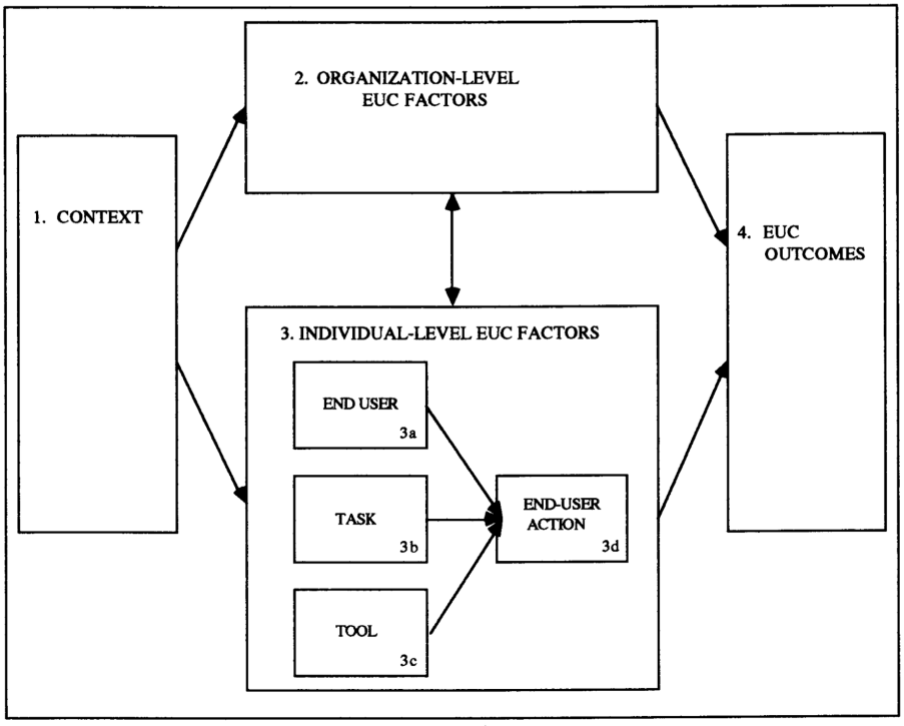

Figure 3.2: The End-User Computing Model by Brown & Brancheau (1992, p. 270)

As evident in the model, the individual-level end-user computing (EUC) factors are synonymous with the components of the user-system relationship, although the components are shown to have a causal relationship on the end-user action. The research stresses that there must be a proper balance between the end-user, task, and tool factors to result in end-user action (Brown & Brancheau, 1992). This is similar to the balance stressed in the user-system situation created by Shackel in the 1980s. The context in this model is defined as the internal and external factors at play (Brown & Brancheau, 1992) and is synonymous with the environment of the user-system relationship presented by Shackel.

Brown & Brancheau's (1992) research model draws upon the usability relationship presented by Shackel (2009) as well as other conceptual research on the usability relationship. This stresses the existence of a user-task-tool relationship in the context of human-computer interaction, yet it has never been adapted to the field of omni-channel retailing.

Brancheau & Brown (1993)

Brown & Brancheau (1992) continued to delve deeper into the end-user computing relationship in their succeeding research published in 1993. In the latter research, the individual-level EUC model above had been revised, as shown in figure 3.3:

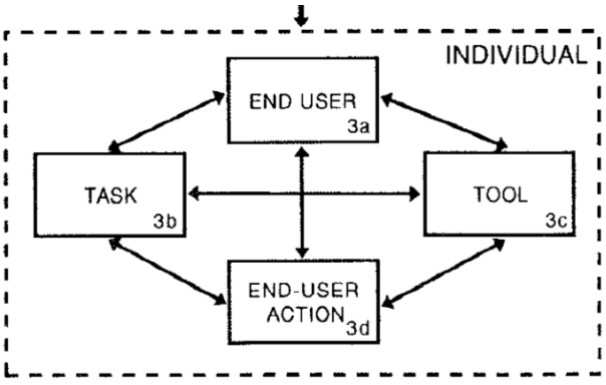

Figure 3.3: The Individual End-User Computing Model Brancheau & Brown (1993, p. 441)

This modification of the model was made to suggest that these relationships are mutual and interactive rather than causal (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). The bidirectional relationship better stresses the importance of harmony between all factors in the individual-level EUC relationship (Brancheau & Brown, 1993).

The research done by Brancheau & Brown (1993) offers an in-depth understanding of the user-system relationship, how to define each factor, and how each factor interacts with each other. The modification of the usability relationship in this research better aligns with Shackel's model (2009) summarized earlier, providing a solid foundation for further research and development of theory in the field of human-computer interaction. The adaptation of this theoretical model for research in omni-channel retailing seems natural, as human-computer interactions are prevalent within the omni-channel environment.

Denis and Karsenty (2005)

As shown throughout this chapter, usability is prevalent within human-computer interaction. It must also be prevalent across all platforms offered in these human-computer interactions. Denis & Karsenty (2005) understand the complexity of balancing usability throughout multiple platforms and the transitions between platforms, also known as inter-usability. Inter-usability between platforms is not achievable if service continuity is not prevalent (Denis & Karsenty, 2005). Service continuity between two touch points allows the consumer to adapt more easily to each individual channel (Denis & Karsenty, 2005). Service continuity is more specifically defined by knowledge continuity and task continuity, which were previously defined in the literature review.

If there are multiple platforms present, there needs to be usability present within each platform and across the multi-platform domain. Inter-usability should be designed into a multi-platform environment and facilitated by the user to ensure the multi-platform environment is effective (Denis & Karsenty, 2005). The multiple platforms need an efficient and effective transfer of knowledge and tasks between them to ensure that the multi-device environment creates a valuable experience (Denis & Karsenty, 2005). The principles of service continuity have primarily been studied in the context of human-computer interaction and technology usability. These principles are transferable to the research of omni-channel retailing because of the prevalence of multiple channels in the omni-channel domain. It is the small retailer's duty to design service continuity into the omni-channel environment to create inter-usability across channels.

Research Gap

Usability has been extensively researched in the realm of human-computer interaction, yet there is a gap in literature linking this theory to the realm of omni-channel retailing research. As technology is an important proponent of omni-channel retailing, it is natural that the usability theory of human-computer interaction is applicable to the field of omni-channel retailing research.

Inter-usability has also been researched in the context of human-computer interaction, but no link has been made to the realm of research in retailing. Because of the existence of multiple channels in retailing, it seems only right that inter-usability be researched amongst these channels to better understand the dynamics of retailing in the modern day.

Additionally, there has yet to be a connection made between the usability model and theory of inter-usability. As inter-usability is the culmination of usability across multiple platforms, it should be supposed that if inter-usability is present, usability is present as well. Inter-usability is seemingly the glue that ensures the usability model's success when multiple platforms are present. As there are multiple platforms available in the omni-channel environment, inter-usability and usability must both be prevalent in omni-channel retailing.

As shown throughout this research, these concepts are adaptable to omni-channel research, but have yet to be applied. By applying these theories to this field, one will be able to increase the depth of research in the field and provide new and unique findings for future research.

Proposed Model

Drawing upon the foundation of the various usability models shown as well as the theoretical understanding of inter-usability, a model can be adapted to better fit the retail field and best suit the purpose of the research. Based on the previous research reviewed, the following model has been proposed:

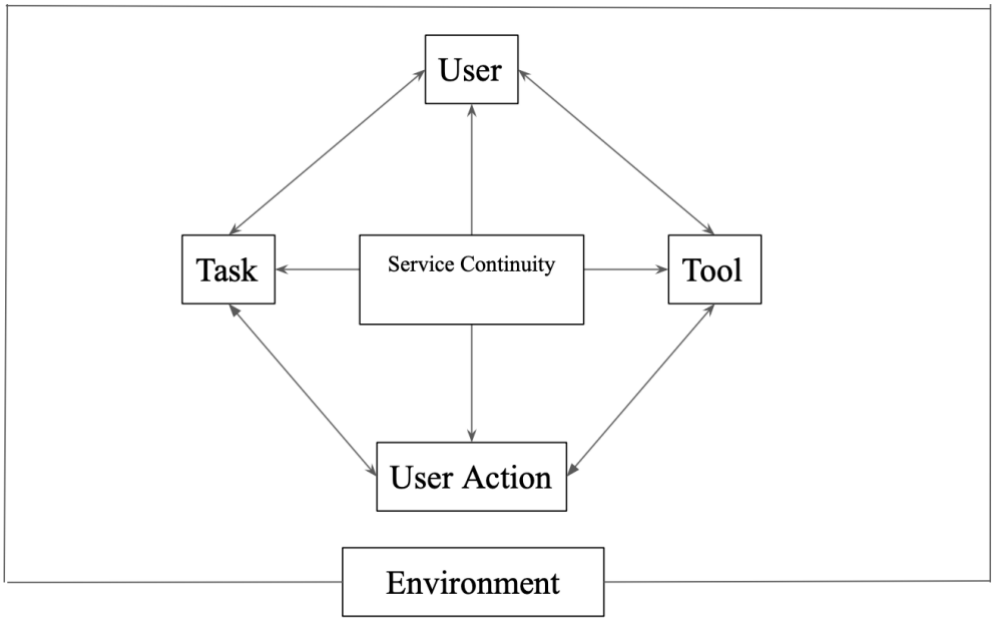

Figure 3.4: The Research Model

It is important to note that this model draws upon the most important aspects found in research in the user-system interaction field and adapts these concepts to the omni-channel retailing environment. Researching these theories, it is evident that they are applicable to this study as there is always a user and system present in retailing. This is beneficial because, in the case of this research, the user is the small retailer and the system being utilized is the omni-channel strategy. This model aims to assist in visualizing the relationship between all variables present in omni-channel retailing for small retailers.

There have been no prior connections made between the user-system model and service continuity model, although the research model demonstrates that the concepts go hand-in-hand. The usability model is simply replicated between channels to create inter-usability which, in turn, fosters continuity between usable platforms. It is proposed that service continuity, as represented by knowledge and task continuity, would live within the usability model in the context of omni-channel retailing. Linking these existing theories together to create a model that

encompasses the relationship and environment of omni-channel retailing will allow for better understanding of how inter-usability is maintained between the tools, task, and user. This will allow for a strong foundation for one to understand the correlation between these different facets present in the omni-channel relationship.

By applying these concepts to this field and creating a viable model, one will be able to better understand the dynamic relationships found between the user, task, and tool in managerial retailing and allow for further, more elaborate research in this field.

Research Questions

Supporting the research model, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do small retailers, consciously or subconsciously, create an inter-usable omni-channel experience?

RQ2: Why do small retailers gravitate to certain channels in omni-channel retailing?

These questions have been crafted with the intent of fully understanding if and how small retailers are utilizing omni-channel retailing. Researching this subject will provide a multitude of new understanding on omni-channel retailing from a managerial perspective and allow for discussions to be had on the presence of omni-channel retailing in smaller businesses. This will provide insight to both academics and retailers.

This study is novel by revolutionizing the usability model through the addition of the continuity model within it. By doing so, it will allow insight into the feasibility of this new hybrid model and its implications for future research. Above that, neither of these models have

yet to be adapted to research in the retail field, let alone omni-channel retailing. As retailing has a strong online presence, the adaptation of this model seems like a natural progression and, if this relationship is shown to be present in retail, will allow for an expansion of research in new avenues of retailing.

Guiding Definitions

Before delving deeper into the research, one must have a clear understanding of all concepts present in the model and related areas. This will allow for sound comprehension of the research questions, research itself, and analysis. The definitions are as follows:

1. *Omni-channel Retailing:* a retailing strategy that incorporates seamlessly integrated channels to ascend above each individual channel to offer an overall experience.
2. *Channel:* the tools that unifies the retailer and the consumer in the marketplace, driving sales and creating relationships.
3. *Small Retailer:* a small business that employs less than 500 employees and sells women's, men's, unisex, or children's apparel, accessories, and/or footwear.
4. *User:* the small retailer employing multiple channels to fulfill the requirements of an omni-channel strategy. The artefact unifying these small retailers will be an omni-channel retailing strategy.
5. *User Action:* the adoption of omni-channel retailing.
6. *Task:* to offer an omni-channel retail strategy that is seamlessly integrated.
7. *Tool:* the specific channel being used by the small retailer.
8. *Environment:* the retailing marketplace today.

9. *Service Continuity:* knowledge and task continuity that is designed into the omni-channel experience by the small retailer.
10. *Knowledge Continuity:* consistency in presentation, functions, and services across channels.
11. *Task Continuity:* allows the consumer to continue a previous task on a new channel.

Chapter 4:

METHODOLOGY

Overview

This section details the methodology used, the instruments that have been developed, as well as how data were collected and analyzed.

Research Design

This research was approached from a qualitative exploratory lens and utilized (1) content analysis pre-interview screening and (2) interviews to answer the research questions at hand. This method allowed for a holistic view of omni-channel retailing by small retailers from an external perspective as well as from the retailers themselves. Qualitative research is beneficial because it gives one the opportunity to understand and explain more in-depth the topic they are researching (Brinkmann et al., 2018), particularly when there is little previous research in said area.

Content analysis allows one to quantify the qualitative data being analyzed (Elo et al., 2014) and is most beneficial at obtaining an external perspective of the presence and characteristics of omni-channel retailing in small retailers. The systematic and objective nature of a content analysis is what makes it useful for describing, quantifying, and understanding a phenomena (Elo et al., 2014), in particular, omni-channel retailing's presence in small retailers.

Interviews were essential to understand the small retailer's self-awareness of omni-channel retailing practices in their business. Interviewing allows one to understand people's

thoughts through a basic form of interaction, conversation (Brinkmann et al., 2018). The researcher probes and listens to gain knowledge and understanding of the topic of interest (Brinkmann et al., 2018). For the purposes of this research, the researcher probed small retailer managerial staff about omni-channel retailing strategies to further understand the presence and mechanics of omni-channel retailing in small business practices.

Because the data was collected through two different methods, data triangulation was present (Flick et al., 2004). Triangulation of data allows for validity because the multiple independent forms of data may form complementary conclusions (Flick et al., 2004), thus confirming the validity of the research presented.

Content Analysis

Content analysis methodology was advantageous for research of the exploratory nature, as this research is, due to its systematic examination (Flick et al., 2004). Content analysis is useful in examining and understanding large sets of data to easily interpret results and create a foundation for further research (Flick et al., 2004). For the purposes of this research, content analysis was useful to verify omni-channel strategies among the selected small retailers.

This particular content analysis was a directed content analysis, which is typically used to extend theory when prior research is limited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In the case of this research, a directed content analysis was utilized to explore the user-system relationship of small retailers and omni-channel retailing. Prior research of usability and inter-usability in the omni-channel setting is non-existent, although this theory has been studied a multitude of times in the field of human-computer interaction. Omni-channel retailing can be considered a type of human-computer interaction to be due to its strong online presence and reliance on technology. Directed

content analysis allows one to understand variables alone as well as the relationship between these variables (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Within this study, this allowed one to understand the user, task, tool, and user actions as well as if there is a relationship between these four pillars in the context of the study.

The findings from a direct content analysis offer evidence for the support or non-support of the topic being studied (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As this research was investigating the presence of the user-system model in small retailer's omni-channel strategies, this allowed for information to form conclusions either supporting or denying the existence of this model in this context.

When conducting a content analysis, there are several questions that one must answer (Stemler, 2000):

1. What data are being analyzed?
2. What population are said data drawn from?
3. In what context are the data being analyzed?

These questions are thoroughly answered in the preceding sections.

Data Selection

The population from which this study drew a sample is the population of small retailers in Atlanta, Georgia. For the purposes of this research, the brick-and-mortar channel was not analyzed in store due to COVID-19. While that may seem like a limitation, research in omni-channel retailing is possible without physically visiting the in-store location, as shown in *b. Instrument Development.* Atlanta was selected because of the close proximity to the researcher. Atlanta was also ideal if follow-up in-store research is to be conducted. Atlanta small businesses

employ 1.6 million people and Atlanta is ranked as one of 2018's top 20 "Best Places to Start a Small Business" (Turner, 2019). These statistics emphasize that Atlanta was regionally appropriate and a hub for small businesses, making it a sound choice for the purposes of this study.

A purposive sample was used to select the population from which to extract data. A purposive sample was used because there is not one comprehensive list of all small apparel retailers in Atlanta. Lists of small apparel retailers in Georgia were searched for using Google until one that represented the population and was deemed appropriate was found. The list of the "50 Best Shops in Atlanta" from Atlanta Magazine (2015) was utilized as the population to collect data. The 50 shops were narrowed down to those that employ under 500 employees, are independently owned, and operate in the apparel industry. The following retailers remained:

Table 4.1
Sample of Small Retailers

Abbadabba's	Wish Atlanta
Bill Hallman	Hunter Collective
A Ma Maniere	Laura Pearce Ltd.
Goorin Bro's.	Tassel's
Standard ATL	Young Blood Boutique
Walter's Clothing	Seed Factory
Baby Braithwaite	London Trading Company
Onward Reserve	Tulipano
Thomas Wages (formerly Tweeds)	Kane Boutique
Lena Larose	Peoples
Sabot	Steven Alan
w.port	Ann Mashburn
Billy Reid	Ginger Howard Selections
H. Stockton	Miller Brothers
Sid Mashburn	Tootsies
The Tough Boot & Co.	Labels Resale Boutique

Due to recruitment issues, data selection had to be expanded to a wider pool of small retailers. The pool was opened to small retailers in Athens, as they are a part of the University of Georgia community and, thus, were expected to be more inclined to respond to a request for an interview. The Downtown Athens website (Downtown Athens, n.d.) was used to find a comprehensive list of retailers downtown. Those retailers were then narrowed down to those that are privately owned, have less than 500 employees, and operate in the apparel industry. The following retailers remained:

Table 4.2
Expanded Sample of Small Retailers

Dynamite Clothing	Tena's Fine Jewelry
The Indigo Child	Margo Sterling Silver
The Red Zone	Fringe
Kempt	Kum's Fashions
Cheeky Peach	Epiphany
Heery's	Agora Vintage
Community	

Instrument Development

The omni-channel presence of small retailers was analyzed similarly to the SO-LO-MO instrument by Özge et al. (2017), who studied omni-channel retailing through a content analysis methodology. Özge et al. (2017) aimed to study how retailers integrate the pillars of commerce through different channels to create a consistent omni-channel experience. The SO-LO-MO instrument is an omni-channel framework that details a "Social-Location based-Mobile commerce" strategy for brands. This template advocates that these are the key components that need to be seamlessly integrated to ensure a successful omni-channel retailing environment (Özge et al., 2017). The different areas of SO-LO-MO commerce can be defined in the table below:

Table 4.3
Definitions of SO-LO-MO (Adapted from Özge et al., 2017, p. 714)

Social	"Stands for [user] desire to interact and exchange information with consumers"
Local	"Emphasizes consumer interest in a local deal"
Mobile	"Stands for mobile and smart technologies deployment during the purchasing process, as it allows purchasing at any time in any place. It requires companies to adapt to mobile environment considering mobile environment features."

To study consistency, Özge et al. (2017) used the definitions above to develop an instrument in which to judge the success of a retailer at offering an integrated SO-LO-MO omni-channel strategy. This template is as follows:

Table 4.4
SO-LO-MO Instrument Development (Adapted from Özge et al., 2017, p. 716)

Social Commerce	● Facebook → Profile → Customer Reviews ● Twitter → Share → Customer Evaluation ● YouTube → Shop → Customer Evaluation ● Pinterest → Store Finder → Like/Customer Feedback
Local Commerce	● Store Finder ● Availability Check → Via online shop, Via mobile application ● Digital In-store Applications ● Local fulfillment → Click&Collect, Same-day delivery ● Local offers
Mobile Commerce	● Mobile Application → ○ Shop ○ Product Information ○ Store Finder ○ Recommend Function ○ Special Offers ○ Customer Account ○ "Wishlist" Function ○ Customer Feedback/Reviews ● Shop → Mobile Version, Standard Web Version ● Mobile Payment ● QR-Scan-Retail

Özge et al. (2017) used this template as the basis for a content analysis of the e-commerce, social media platforms, and mobile applications of 16 retailers in Europe. The content analysis scanned the retailers' different channels looking for features such as ability to interact with content on social media sites, write/view consumer reviews, ability to view store availability, digital in-store applications, and fulfillment services (Özge et al., 2017). Overall, this study stresses the importance of researching the interaction and consistent integration of the channels offered, rather than the number of channels present.

Using the SO-LO-MO instrument as a foundation, an instrument was adapted for the purposes of this research to understand how users are utilizing their tools to adopt omni-channel retailing with the task of creating a seamless experience. This instrument can be viewed below:

Table 4.5
Content Analysis Instrument

Content Analysis of Presence of Omni-Channel Strategy in Small Retailers													
Small Retailer:		**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**	**H**	**I**	**J**	**K**	**L**
Categories:													
Main Focus: Social Commerce													
Facebook													
	Profile												
	Like Products												
	Share Products												
	Shop												
	Promotional Offers												
	Customer Service Function												
	E-commerce Link												
Instagram													
	Profile												
	Like Products												
	Share Products												
	Promotional Offers												
	Comment												
	Customer Service Function												
	E-commerce Link												
Main Focus: E-Commerce													
E-commerce													
	Customer Rating on Product												
	Customer Review on Product												
	Customer Service Function												
	Social Media Links												
Main Focus: Brick-and-Mortar													
Shop Finder via													
	Social Media												
	E-commerce												
	Mobile App												
Availability Check via													
	Social Media												
	E-commerce												
	Mobile App												
Location-Based Online Presence													
	Google My Business												
	Yelp												
	Facebook Pages												
Digital Local Offers													
Digital In-store Applications													
	Store-based terminals												
	Apps for mobile devices												
Local Fulfillment													
	Click & Collect												
	Same-day Delivery												
Main Focus: Mobile Commerce													
Mobile App													
	Shop												
	Product Information												
	Shop Finder												
	Recommendation Function												
	ID/Loyalty Card												
	Availability Check												
	Special Offers												
	Account Administration												
	Wishlist												
	Contact/Feedback												
Online Shop													
	Mobile Online Shop (browser)												
Mobile Payment													
TOTAL													

Data Collection

In December 2020, there were two weeks set aside for the researcher to analyze the original 32 small retailers in Table 4.1 using the content analysis instrument shown in Table 4.4. The selected criteria were evaluated for its presence in each retailer's strategy as well as its presence among all retailers studied.

In early January 2021, the retailers were contacted via email to gauge if there was any interest in participating in the interview process. These retailers were contacted three times. Due to a lack of interest or time from these retailers, potentially due to time constraints, contacting via publicly available email address, or the interview invitation to be conducted via Zoom, the data selection pool was then expanded to the retailers in Table 4.2.

One week in February 2021 was set aside for the researcher to analyze the additional 13 retailers. Again, the criteria shown in the content analysis instrument were evaluated for their presence in each retailer's strategy as well as their presence among the entity. The analysis of the presence of specific characteristics in each individual retailer's environment allowed for the researcher to understand if the retailers being evaluated are offering an omni-channel experience.

In February 2021, the second group of retailers were contacted via Instagram to see if any of these retailers were interested in participating in the interview process. Instagram was selected as the contact method due to the possibility that the lack of responses during the first wave of recruitment could have been due to email being chosen as the contact method. Additionally, during this recruitment group, the researcher offered to meet via phone, masked, socially distanced in-person, or via Zoom at the comfort level of the retailer. There were several responses, resulting in four interviews.

Data Analysis

As examined in the literature review and the theoretical framework, this research paper aims to understand the user-system situation in the context of omni-channel retailing. That being said, the data was analyzed on their tools, or channels, through content analysis; specifically, the frequency of presence or absence of omni-channel tools based on the instrument developed was measured, leading one to uncover the percentage of retailers utilizing these tools. This allowed one to determine if omni-channel retailing was present in each individual retailer's environment through the offering of multiple, dynamic tools that interact together. This content analysis established the presence of omnichannel retailing for the selected small retailers as validation to recruit said retailers for the interviews, where the research questions were fully answered.

Interviews

Interviews were essential for a study of this nature, a semi-structured interview allowed one to ask probing questions to generate open-ended responses by small retail owners and, thus, fully answer the research questions at hand. This methodology is useful to generate insightful conversation about a common theme (Kvale, 2007) to interpret the meaning of the interviewee's perspective with the goal of further understanding omni-channel retailing from the small retailer's perspective. A successful interview is not a back-and-forth conversation with equal dialogue from each partner (Kvale, 2007); the interviewer sets the stage with framing questions that probe the interviewee to elaborate much further on the theme being discussed (Kvale, 2007). Using a semi-structured interview was key because the use of predetermined questions creates a systematic approach and prompts comprehensive responses (Jamshed, 2014). These interviews were conducted via phone call, recorded and transcribed to ensure consistency and analyze

findings. Before detailing the interview instrument, a brief synopsis of the participants of the interview is offered below.

Data Selection

The users of the user-system were the participants interviewed in this method. More specifically, small retailer owners were interviewed to understand, in their own words, what omni-channel retailing is, if and how they use an omni-channel strategy, what channels they use, how they use their channels, and how they utilize seamless integration across these channels. The specific small retailers were selected from the group of small retailers analyzed in the content analysis that were deemed to be omni-channel retailers. This allowed for comparison for analyzation and validity across data.

Instrument Development

The interview instrument was semi-structured with open-ended questions focused on the presence of omni-channel retailing within each retailer's store to encourage in-depth responses from interviewees. These questions aimed to reflect the criteria examined in the content analysis to validate the findings of both methods. The questions were rooted in fully answering the research questions, as they should be (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012).

Following the guidelines of Jacob & Furgerson (2012), the interview instrument had a scripted introduction and conclusion, asked clear and expansive questions, and was focused and concise. The instrument can be viewed below:

Table 4.6
Interview Instrument

Interview Instrument			
Purpose		**Script**	
		Initial Question:	**Follow-up:**
Introduction:	To share personal information about me and ensure the interviewee is comfortable.	Hi! My name is Emily Strub. I am a Fashion Merchandising Graduate Student at the University of Georgia. I am here to learn about the presence of omni-channel retailing in small apparel businesses. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. The purpose of this interview is to understand your knowledge and use of omni-channel retailing in your business. There are no right or wrong answers. I would like you to feel comfortable to say exactly what you are thinking and feeling. If allowed, I will be screen recording this interview, as it will be more accurate to transcribe from a recording rather than my notes. Is that allowed?	If yes: Thank you so much, let's begin! If no: Thank you for letting me know, I will only take notes of our conversation.
Pre-screening Questions:	To verify the user classifies as a small apparel retailer.	What is the name of your retail establishment? What products do you sell? Are you independently owned and operated? How many employees currently work at your establishment?	
Research Question 2:	To understand how retailers gravitate towards certain channels.	In what ways do you sell products to your customers?	Using (channel stated), how specifically do you interact with your consumers? Do you ever sell products through (channel not stated)? If so, how?
Research Question 1:	To understand if retailers are consciously or subconsciously employing omni-channel retailing.	Do you consider yourself an omni-channel retailer? Why or why not?	If you do, consider yourself an omni-channel retailer: Why do you use an omni-channel strategy? How do you use an omni-channel strategy? If you do not consider yourself an omni-channel retailer: Why don't you use an omni-channel strategy?
Research Question 1:	To uncover if inter-usability has been designed into the omni-channel environment.	How do your channels interact with each other? How have you designed a user-friendly retailing environment?	Can you share some examples of channel interaction in your retail environment?
Conclusion:	To wrap up the interview.	Thank you so much for your time and help. It has been extremely beneficial to my research. You can always contact me at ets91679@uga.edu if you need to. How was this interview process for you? Do you have any questions for me?	

Data Collection

The university's Institutional Review Board was contacted for approval for the study, although they responded saying approval was not needed due to the purpose and details of the study not qualifying as human subjects research. After the content analysis was completed, a two-week time frame in January was allocated for the recruitment and scheduling of the interviews. The recruitment message was essential in communicating with the retail establishment, ensuring direct communication with the manager or owner, and scheduling interviews. After receiving little response, these retailers were contacted again, but as was discussed previously, with the limited response the pool was expanded. A purposive sample of retailers were analyzed and then contacted in February 2021. The purposive sample was recruited via Instagram direct messaging. Instagram direct messaging was used because of the possibility of the recruitment emails being ignored or sent to junk mail; it was a more direct form of communication that allowed the researcher to note if the recruitment message had been viewed by the retailer or not. This resulted in a total of four interviews. For the interviews, each of the retailers provided a participant who was in a managerial role at their establishment. It was important that the interviewee was in a managerial role, as it ensured they had an understanding of, if and how the retail establishment's channels work together to create an overall experience.

Interviews were scheduled with each retailer at a day and time that was convenient for them. These interviews were intended to be conducted and recorded via Zoom after the content analysis had been completed, although all retailers opted for a phone call rather than video interview. A phone call eliminated the barriers of physical geography and offered recording to properly record and transcribe the interviews. Interviews ranged from 10 to 15 minutes.

At the start of the interviews, each participant was made aware the call was being recorded and asked for their verbal consent. The researcher also provided a brief overview of themself and the purpose of the study. The interview followed the instrument shown in Table 4.5, although the conversation varied due to participant willingness to share; this resulted in distinct interviews with unique probes based on the nature of the interview.

By doing the content analysis prior to the interviews, it ensured that the small retailer being interviewed was using an omni-channel strategy and, thus, the researcher was able to make more in-depth conclusions regarding the small retailer's knowledge and understanding of the presence of omni-channel retailing in their retail environment. The culmination of methodologies in this way allowed for triangulation of data, curated validity, and completely and comprehensively answered the research questions at hand.

Data Analysis

After all data were collected, the call recordings were downloaded and transcribed using Temi and then exported as Microsoft word documents. All names of participants and their retail establishment were changed to pseudonyms and coded to ensure anonymity. Each transcription was analyzed through a constant common theme approach to fully understand if small retailers are using omni-channel strategies, how they are using them, what channels they are gravitating towards, and how there is seamless integration across omni-channel strategies. The common themes were denoted using a coded color for each individual theme. As these themes were uncovered, they were organized accordingly to make clear conclusions from the data and fully answer research questions. There was a possibility that different themes may emerge from said data and those were taken into account as well to ensure the findings are as in-depth as possible.

The individual themes were then organized and explored for subthemes. The approach of evaluating interviewees' understanding and use of omni-channel practices drove the data analysis process and illuminated the intent to answer the research questions in their entirety.

The validation strategies of data triangulation, low inference descriptors, and member check were all utilized to ensure validity within this study. As mentioned earlier, data triangulation was achieved through the use of both a content analysis and interview methodologies. By using direct quotes without paraphrasing, the context of said quotes were retained and low inference descriptors were effectively used. This was essential to ensure rich information from each interview to effectively evaluate the omni-channel strategies used by small retailers. Member check allowed the interviewees to review the themes that emerged and externally confirm the data analysis process by allowing participants to review their responses organized by theme and confirm that said responses accurately represent their statements.

Chapter 5:

FINDINGS

Overview

This section details the findings of the content analysis and interviews in the context of the research questions.

Content Analysis Findings

As mentioned earlier, the primary goal of the content analysis was to identify which retailers in the sample had the most robust omni-channel strategies and, thus, should be contacted for the interview portion of this research. In doing so, the presence of key omni-channel retailing trends was highlighted.

The content analysis found that all retailers offered some elements of omni-channel retailing excluding one retailer that had gone out of business, leaving 44 retailers to analyze.

Main Focus: Social Commerce

All 44 retailers offered a Facebook page with a customer service function. 95% of retailers' Facebook profiles had the ability to like and share products. 50% of retailers posted promotional offers on their Facebook pages and 93% of said retailers had their e-commerce link listed, but only 25% of retailers provided the ability to actually shop products through the platform, as shown in Table 5.1.

98% of the retailers analyzed had an Instagram page in which a user could like products, share products, and access a customer service function. 95% of these Instagram pages could be commented on by users on the platform. 55% of retailers shared promotional offers through their Instagram. 88% of the retailers examined had their e-commerce link listed. All of the information detailed in this section is concisely presented in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1
Social Commerce Findings

Function	% of Retailers who offer said Function
Facebook Page	100%
- Customer Service	100%
- Ability to like and share products	95%
- Promotional offers	50%
- E-commerce link present	93%
- Shop via Facebook	25%
Instagram Page	98%
- Like products	98%
- Share products	98%
- Customer Service	98%
- Ability to comment	95%
- Promotional Offers	55%
- E-commerce link present	88%

Main Focus: E-commerce

As noted in Table 5.2, 91% of the retailers analyzed had a customer service function on their e-commerce platform. Among all retailers examined, 86% had links to their social media platforms on their retail websites. Only 20% of retailers allowed customers to review and rate products on their sites.

Table 5.2
E-Commerce Findings

Function	% of Retailers who offer said Function
E-commerce	100%
- Customer Service	91%
- Social media links	86%
- Review and rate products	20%

Main Focus: Brick-and-Mortar

All retailers had information about where to find their brick-and-mortar location on their social media while 91% of retailers had this information on the e-commerce platform. 45% of retailers analyzed offered availability checks of products on their social media platform and 75% offered availability checks of products on their e-commerce site. This can be viewed in Table 5.3.

In terms of location-based online presence, information regarding location and contact of all retailers was found on Yelp and Facebook pages. 98% of retailers had location and contact information on Google My Business, as noted in Table 5.3.

As shown in Table 5.3, only 39% of retailers analyzed offered digital local offers that could be redeemed in-store. 59% of retailers examined offered a buy online, pickup in-store option and 5% of retailers examined offered same-day local delivery.

Table 5.3
Brick-and-Mortar Findings

Function	% of Retailers who offer said Function
Brick-and-Mortar Store	100%
- Location information on e-commerce	91%
- Availability check of products in-store on social media	45%
- Availability check of products in-store on e-commerce	75%
- Store information on Yelp	100%
- Store information on Facebook Pages	100%
- Store information on Google My Business	98%
- Digital offers redeemable in-store	39%
- Buy online, Pick up in-store	59%
- Same-day local delivery	5%

Main Focus: Mobile Commerce

None of the retailers analyzed had a mobile application channel. 93% of the retailers examined had a functioning mobile online browser. Mobile payment, like Apple Pay and similar functions, was an available form of payment at 32% of the retailers analyzed. This can be viewed in Table 5.4.

Table 5.4
Mobile Commerce Findings

Function	% of Retailers who offer said Function
Mobile Application	0%
Mobile Online Browser	93%
Mobile Payment	32%

Findings from the Interviews

Selecting Interviewees

As all retailers evaluated were determined to offer an omni-channel experience, they were contacted via email or Instagram regarding joining the study. Follow-up emails and Instagram Direct Messages were sent to remind participants of the opportunity available to them. There resulted in a total of 4 interviews, all conducted within the week of March 1st, 2020 and lasting approximately 10-15 minutes.

The findings in relation to the research questions will be discussed in the following sections.

Theme Interpretation

The study was focused on understanding how small retailers utilize omni-channel retailing strategies. The themes that emerged help one to understand how small retailers, consciously or subconsciously, create an inter-usable experience (RQ1) and why small retailers gravitate towards certain channels in their strategy (RQ2). Data was generated through interviews with prominent employees at small retail establishments in the Athens area. Four theme categories emerged, (a) there's no cookie cutter recipe, (b) the end goal, (c) the best fit,

and (d) today's consumer. Within several theme categories were subthemes. "There's no cookie cutter recipe" could be broken down into (a) small retailers' identities and (b) small retailers' strategies. The subthemes in "the end goal" were (a) curating an experience, (b) gaining exposure, and (c) replicating the experience. In "the best fit", the subthemes were (a) driving sales, (b) engaging with the customer, and (c) survival of the fittest. Below is a discussion of these overarching themes. Table 5.5 shows a demographic profile of the individuals interviewed for this portion of the study.

Table 5.5
Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees

Name	Retail Establishment	Current Position	Years Worked at Establishment	Number of Employees	Description
Elizabeth	Minnie's	Manager	3	27	Jewelry
Sara	Family	Owner and Founder	10	8	Women's Apparel, Accessories, Home goods
Rylan	Camp	Owner and Founder	2	2	Men's Apparel, Accessories, Home goods
Caroline	Wanderlust	Lead Buyer and Marketing Director	6	25	Women's Apparel, Accessories, Home goods

There's No Cookie Cutter Recipe

One prominent theme that became evident throughout the analysis of the interviews was that each small retailer is unique. Each retailer was deemed an omni-channel retailer, but not all identified as one and each retailer's strategy was unique.

Small Retailers' Identities. As the research explored if small apparel retailers are utilizing an omni-channel strategy, several themes emerged. One subtheme that was illuminated

through the interview process was how these small retailers identify themselves. While the content analysis confirmed that these small retailers had adopted omni-channel strategies, half of the retailers interviewed did not view themselves as omni-channel retailers. Both felt that they were moving toward omni-channel but did not feel that they had achieved it yet.

Elizabeth is the manager at Minnie's which operates out of Athens, GA. When asked if she considered Minnie's as an omni-channel retailer, she observed that she did not feel it was, but that was due to the nature of the jewelry industry.

> **Elizabeth:** I would say we're pretty conventional as far, really in all aspects, I feel like and I've been kind of saying this, that the jewelry industry as a whole is not as up to date or as advanced, I guess, as other industries. It is, and it's becoming, but it's still an experience when people are spending that kind of money on jewelry. They do still like to come in. They like it to be more traditional. But I feel like it is moving, like I said, in a direction where people are becoming more aware and educated in purchasing online.

This was an interesting observation to note because, as the content analysis confirmed, Minnie's qualifies as an omni-channel retailer. Elizabeth noted that they offer channels that interact together and complement each other in ways that would deem the retailer as an omni-channel retailer; Elizabeth was unconsciously implementing an omni-channel strategy.

Rylan is the owner of Camp in downtown Athens, GA. When probed to see if he felt that Camp qualified as an omni-channel retailer, his response was:

> **Rylan:** I think we're definitely getting to be at that point. Obviously, we have a lot more area to cover, but I think because we offer in store and online and social media, we're definitely getting to that point.

Similarly, he recognized that he offers a multitude of channels that intermix to form an experience but was unconsciously offering this strategy and did not self-identify as an explicit omni-channel retailer because he felt that they "have a lot more area to cover".

As mentioned earlier, the other two retailers did identify as omni-channel retailers. Sara, the owner of Family, felt that she was an omni-channel retailer because of her offering of multiple channels that work together. Caroline, the lead buyer and marketing director at Wanderlust, identified as an omni-channel retailer because of the integration of channels and complimentary experiences on both.

All four retailers qualified as omni-channel retailers and described their stores as offering multiple integrated channels. It is interesting to observe that half are aware they are implementing an omni-channel strategy and half are not, although they all describe themselves in a similar manner. This distinction illuminates the fact that small retailers may be unaware that they are omni-channel retailers and are unconsciously implementing this strategy into their stores.

Small Retailers' Strategies. As each retailer is unique in their awareness of using this strategy, each retailer had a unique omni-channel retailing strategy itself. Interestingly, each retailer utilized different channels in different ways to achieve different goals, while still creating an overarching omni-channel retailing environment for their consumer.

Almost all retailers interviewed had different perspectives on social commerce. Rylan preferred e-commerce as a sales channel rather than social commerce, while Caroline felt the exact opposite.

> **Rylan:** I would say out of our other sales channels, Instagram is definitely the least that we use for sales, but we do still do it occasionally.
>
> **Caroline:** We actually transitioned from [e-commerce to social commerce], we had a website probably three or four years ago. For us, we just felt like it wasn't profitable enough to keep going. Our stores are really big, and we sell such a variety of products that it was kind of impossible for us, as a small business where we were at the time, to do an e-com site that was able to communicate and have all the products that we sold in the

> stores on our e-commerce site. So, we actually transitioned to selling on Instagram probably a year ago. And for us, it's just worked out so much better cause we can use the same inventory as our retail spaces and then just pull them off the sales floor as soon as people want to purchase things as opposed to having completely separate inventory for an e-com site.

Family used their social media as a commerce platform, while Minnie's harnessed the power of social media to primarily share information regarding the business and its products.

> **Sara:** I would say [Instagram] is more sales driven because we're using it more as a platform to show what we have and to, you know, pretty much get the product in front of the customer. We do certain, you know, we do sometimes have posts that are more engagement driven, like giveaways, or, you know, we have the about on something, but like, I'd say the majority is more sales driven.

> **Elizabeth:** So, we use it primarily to raise awareness. That's what we've always really done. Typically, we don't see a lot of consumers or we used to not see a lot of consumers making larger purchases online, but in the past year, and even before that online businesses have really grown, even like big purchases, such as cars. I mean, we've sold items, six figures online. The more and more information grows, and I feel like consumers, education, and awareness, I feel like our online platform has grown too. It used to be primarily for name brand or awareness, but, we are getting to where we build a little bit more rapport with customers online and sell in that aspect as well.

It was interesting to observe the different perspectives of each retailer in regard to the same channel. All retailers were utilizing social commerce, but each in their own way that best fit their business and their consumer.

Aside from the difference in strategy for selecting channels, there were also key differences in the way each retailer was creating continuity throughout their omni-channel retailing environment. Sara was extremely adamant about the importance of communicating the same brand aesthetic across all platforms.

> **Sara:** I definitely think we're trying to kind of create an aesthetic throughout all of our channels you know, the online store or the Instagram, it's a recognizable brand aesthetic that also works with Facebook and Twitter and all of that is all pretty streamlined in that way. And so I think that by having these different channels, I think we are, we're trying to, you know, of course get in front of more eyes of customers, different customers in different places as well as the online store. But I think overall we're also basically inviting, like we're trying to connect with them in different ways.

Caroline felt strongly about having consistent customer service experiences across all channels.

> **Caroline:** I think the integration from our in-store experience with customer service from our sales associates is very comparable to the kind of treatment or conversations that they could have with us through social media as well.

Ryder and Elizabeth both noted the importance of the same information on all platforms, but Ryder was speaking in the context of product information while Elizabeth was speaking in the context of business information.

> **Ryder:** If we're posting a certain collection on social media one day, we'll make sure it's also ready under our new arrivals online and we'll also, maybe like we'll do a display in the store or put it on a mannequin right when you first enter, so that you're kind of feeling the same experience across the board.

> **Elizabeth:** I feel like all of our channels overlap in some way, especially online, email, just trying to build awareness and show our customers what we have to offer.

Notably, each retailer was creating a seamless experience for their consumer, but in a unique way.

Through the research it became clear that small retailers aren't only unique compared to mass merchants, each individual small retailer is unique in their mindsets and practices. No one retailer's strategy was right or wrong, just unique.

The End Goal

An overarching theme that was evident in all interviewee conversations was the purpose of using an omni-channel strategy. Each participant highlighted why an omni-channel strategy was beneficial to their retail environment, whether that be to curate a relationship, gain exposure, or replicate an experience across channels.

Curating a Relationship. One of the reasons noted for implementing an omni-channel strategy was the opportunity to curate and maintain a relationship with the consumer. For all

retailers, the brick-and-mortar space was the primary sales channel. This was due to the tailored experience each retailer could offer through the channel, being able to interact with customers and serve as a personal shopping guide. Notably, all retailers saw this as an advantage of this channel and gravitated towards it for this reason. Caroline from Wanderlust detailed the importance of the brick-and-mortar location because it allows their employees to serve as stylists and customize each customer's experience. By doing so, they are able to curate brand loyalty with the consumer and create a lasting relationship that is continued on all other channels.

> **Caroline**: So, I guess I would just say we kind of try to go above and beyond with customer service. We do a lot of styling sessions with our customers, kind of engage in lots of conversations while they're inside of our store to kind of see what they're looking for. If they're looking for apparel, what are they looking? For specific events? Or if they're looking for gifts, who are they gifting for? To just try to serve them the best we can and educating them on the products that we carry. Some things that they may miss, our stores are pretty big, so having someone to help kind of guide them around or show them specific products or makers that we carry as kind of, I think our main way to connect with customers, to sell them products.

The importance of the brick-and-mortar channel in creating a relationship with the consumer was echoed by Elizabeth who stated:

> **Elizabeth**: A lot of our consumers shop online before they even come to the store. We can kind of get a feel of what they're looking for - the product they are looking for kind of a specific budget, different things like that. And then when they come in, we talk about, it can be really specific - I'm looking for an engagement ring. I have a picture; I have a price I'm looking to stay around. Or it can be something as simple as it's our anniversary and I'm looking to do something for my wife, and I don't know what, but we do.

As shown through these excerpts, creating a relationship with the consumer is of the utmost importance, especially through the brick-and-mortar channel. It should be noted that the brick-and-mortar channel is not the only channel that instills brand loyalty and promotes engagement with the consumers. Social media was effectively used by all four retailers to maintain the relationship with the consumer. Actual Instagram posts primarily function to drive

sales, but the retailer-consumer relationship is maintained through the ability to message directly with consumers, the usage of Instagram live, and posting Instagram stories.

Gaining Exposure. It was observed that all four retailers see an omni-channel strategy as a means to gain exposure to new consumers in different areas. Utilizing this strategy allows them to harness their social media channels to gain exposure to new eyes in different areas. Sara elaborated on her implementation of omni-channel as a way to gain more customers.

> **Sara:** I think that by having these different channels, I think we are trying to, you know, of course get in front of more eyes of customers, different customers in different places as well as the online store. But I think overall we're also basically inviting, like we're trying to connect with them in different ways.

Being in a college town provides both its benefits and struggles for these retailers. On the one hand, visiting family and friends are introduced to these brands but, on the other hand, there is a seasonal wave of customers coming in and out. Both Sara and Caroline noted the impact of having a retail location in a university town.

> **Caroline:** Well, for us, since we're in a college town or at least our main store is, we found that we had a lot of customers that would find our store visiting Athens, whether it be for the university, to visit their students there, whether they were, you know, parents or family members. And then also just people that had visited Athens for the weekend and wanted a way to shop, remote or not, if they weren't local in Athens, how were they able to shop? Do you have online? which we have that question so much. So, for us, we're able to ship out packages to people all over, which has been such a gift because it definitely floated our business when we were closed and it's spring of 2020 for quarantine with the virus and everything. We've just been able to grow our business through that. And like I said, we're able to have customers that can continue to buy with us, even if they don't live local to Athens. Whether they be students who have graduated, moved on or just visitors that come from California or wherever, and then, you know, love our brand and want to be able to continue to shop once they get back home.
>
> **Sara:** Athens is sometimes limited, you know, when the students are gone during the break or, you know, then it's hard for the businesses here. And so, I think that is another reason why having multiple channels, is really beneficial for a small business like our that's kind of sometimes also seasonally affected by, you know, maybe the students not being in town or Athens being kind of slow in the summer.

By adopting an omni-channel strategy, the barrier of geography is lifted, and one is able to focus on selling to the customer. This is important because these retailers are small, and they cannot rise to success without the sales necessary to do so; exposure to more consumers is necessary to remain competitive.

Replicating the Experience. Notably, engaging in an omni-channel strategy allows the retailer to replicate the same experience across all channels. By replicating this experience, the retailer is again able to maintain the relationship established with the consumer and gain brand loyalty. This was a primary function of omni-channel stated by all interviewees.

> **Rylan:** I think we're pretty intentional about trying to make sure that the experience you're getting in the store can be as much as possible replicated online, especially on Instagram. We try to provide the same amount of product knowledge and customer service online, as we would if you were in person shopping in the store, but also small things. Like if we're posting a certain collection on social media one day, we'll make sure it's also ready under our new arrivals online and we'll also, maybe like we'll do a display in the store or put it on a mannequin right when you first enter, so that you're kind of feeling the same experience across the board.

By maintaining this experience on all channels, the physical location of the consumer becomes irrelevant, and the retailer can focus more on engaging with the consumer and less about the sales necessary to survive.

> **Sara:** So, I definitely think we're trying to kind of create an aesthetic throughout all of our channels you know, the online store or the Instagram, it's a recognizable brand aesthetic that also works with Facebook and Twitter and all of that is all pretty streamlined in that way.

Later in the interview, Sara would mention:

> **Sara:** So not just reaching like a broad variety of customers, but also particularly with something like Facebook live or the more interactive posts on Instagram, we're really trying to create a connection with them where it's not just like they see a product, they actually more connecting with the brand.

This emphasizes the importance of an omni-channel strategy and clarifies why so many small retailers gravitate towards it. Having an omni-channel strategy allows them to replicate a unique experience through each channel. Large retailers may be at a disadvantage, as they are simply too large to interact with every consumer and engage with them across all channels while maintaining quality and personality.

> **Caroline**: I think the integration from our in-store experience with customer service from our sales associates is very comparable to the kind of treatment or conversations that they could have with us through social media as well.

Brand identity is unachievable without consistency. This consistency needs to go above and beyond the brand logo and visual aesthetic. The personality of the brand needs to be communicated in every post and every interaction, regardless of the channel. This is only achievable through the use of an omni-channel strategy.

The Best Fit

One major theme illuminated through the interview process was the gravitation toward specific channels for specific purposes. Although channel integration was present, particular channels were preferred for various reasons, including their ability to drive sales, engage with the consumer, or the necessity of these channels for survival. This was dependent on the retailer and their particular characteristics.

Driving Sales. As made evident through the data analysis, different channels are gravitated towards for different reasons. One reason specific channels were gravitated towards were to drive sales. This is not unusual, as any business needs to make sales to stay alive. What was more interesting was which channels are gravitated towards because they drive sales.

For Minnie's, the brick-and-mortar channel was their primary channel because of its ability to drive sales. The brick-and-mortar location was the most sales driven channel because of, as Elizabeth noted, the traditionalism of the jewelry industry and how most purchases are investments. These reasons stress the importance of engaging with the consumer to create an experience and, thus, drive sales. That being said, sales are starting to grow on their e-commerce channel and traditionalism may be out the door.

> **Elizabeth:** Typically, we don't see a lot of consumers or we used to not see a lot of consumers making larger purchases online, but in the past year, and even before that online businesses have really grown, even like big purchases, such as cars. I mean, we've sold items, six figures online. The more and more information grows and I feel like consumers, education, and awareness, I feel like our online platform has grown too. It used to be primarily for name brand or awareness, but we are getting to where we build a little bit more rapport with customers online and sell in that aspect as well.

Rylan, Caroline, and Sara noted that they gravitate towards their brick-and-mortar channel to drive sales as well, noting its importance in their omni-channel strategy. Caroline and Sara both categorized their social media platform as primarily sales channels, while Rylan and Elizabeth felt that social media was more marketing driven. Caroline and Sara use their social media platforms as a way to raise awareness about new products, answer customer questions regarding product fit/sizing, and sell via Instagram Stories and Instagram Lives. Interestingly enough, Wanderlust gravitated towards Instagram and away from e-commerce as a selling platform. Due to its lack of profitability, the website was transitioned to an informational resource and Instagram was morphed into a social shop.

> **Caroline:** We don't [sell products through e-commerce]. We actually transitioned from, we had a website probably three or four years ago. For us we just felt like it wasn't profitable enough to keep going. Our stores are really big, and we sell such a variety of products that it was kind of impossible for us, as a small business where we were at the time, to do an e-com site that was able to communicate and have all the products that we sold in the stores on our e-commerce site. So, we actually transitioned to selling on Instagram probably a year ago. And for us, it's just worked out so much better cause we can use the same inventory as our retail spaces and then just pull them off the sales floor

> as soon as people want to purchase things as opposed to having completely separate inventory for an e-com.

Social media offers a unique proposition for retailers to market the product in exciting ways, rather than just on the mannequin or hanging on a rack. Sara notes the benefit of using Instagram to sell vintage, one-of-a-kind pieces that are hard to sell through an e-commerce platform because of their uniqueness. Instagram allowed all of these small retailers to drive sales in a way that also engages and informs the consumer.

Engaging with the Customer. Certain channels were selected due to their ability to interact with the consumer. All respondents agreed that social media allows them to engage with their consumer, but it was not every respondent's primary motivation for using the channel. Elizabeth stated that Instagram was engagement driven, due to the ability to educate consumers, promote products, and raise awareness for Minnie's. Rylan described Instagram as a marketing channel in which he can communicate with the consumer. Interestingly, the functions he is using on Instagram are extremely similar to those of the retailers that describe Instagram as a sales channel. The perspective of the nature of the channels was extremely subjective dependent on the interviewee; Rylan gravitated to social media channels as marketing channels rather than sales channels because they are not as successful in comparison to the other channels offered.

> **Rylan:** Definitely majority is just marketing. We do use Instagram as a sales channel. We will post stories of products and, you know, new arrivals and stuff, and people can message us, and we'll send them an invoice to pay. But I would out of our other sales channels, Instagram is definitely the least that we use for sales, but we do still do it occasionally.

Both Caroline and Sara saw engaging the consumer as an overall effect of the omni-channel strategy, rather than something that was achieved primarily through one channel in particular. To those interviewees, engaging the consumer was the purpose of the task, not a

reason to gravitate towards one channel in particular. This mindset encapsulates the idea of omni-channel. It is interesting to note that these two retailers were also the only ones who self-identified as omni-channel retailers. By looking at the big picture instead of each individual tool, these retailers are consciously curating a seamless experience.

> **Sara:** So not just reaching like a broad variety of customers, but also particularly with something like Facebook live or the more interactive posts on Instagram, we're really trying to create a connection with them where it's not just like they see a product, they actually more connecting with the brand. And I think that it's better done, you know, when you have more than one channel. So, we can connect with them in different ways if it's through them coming in or them, you know, commenting on social media or, seeing us live and just kind of seeing someone's face and I think that's, to me, the big goal is like that we're there, we're forming more of a connection with all these different channels that we're using.

Survival of the Fittest. Not all channels adopted by these retailers were due to their specific traits, some channels had to be adopted or modified in order to survive. All retailers noted the effects of the pandemic on their retailing strategy with the implementation of buy online, pick up in store and the modification of the purpose of their channels. Rylan notes how Camp's e-commerce platform was originally used as an informational resource but later morphed into a sales channel in order to stay afloat during the pandemic.

> **Rylan:** It started more as a place where customers could get information about our business, but since kind of last spring when we had to be closed because of COVID, we transitioned to having more of our product available there and definitely using it now as a sales channel also along with, you know, like a marketing platform.

Sara mentions the importance of connecting with the consumer on various channels due to the pressures of COVID-19. A small retailer could not stay afloat if they relied solely on their brick-and-mortar to generate sales.

> **Sara:** Well, I think especially, you know, right now with COVID and having a lot of restrictions in terms of people coming into the store, it's just essential for us to find these other ways to stay connected, because I think if we only relied on in-person sales, we

> would have really had a hard time last year and this year as well. And so, I think that it gives us more options to connect with the customers we already have, but it also we can reach out to customers in other cities.

The pandemic illuminated the importance of implementing an omni-channel strategy, regardless of retailer size. By offering a consistent experience across different channels, the consumer is able to create a relationship with the brand and the retailer is able to continue serving its community, near and far.

Today's Consumer

Seamlessness was present across all interviewee's omni-channel strategy. The most explicit example of integration within all retail establishments is the presence of buy online, pick up in-store. This harmonized retail experience is engrained in the omni-channel strategy offered by each individual retailer because it is expected by today's consumer. The lack of a seamless transition between channels prompts consumers to gravitate towards other retailers who are performing in a manner that is expected in the retailing arena today. Rylan strongly emphasized the necessity of using omni-channel to create a consumer centric retailing experience.

> **Rylan:** I think that like the modern customer, that's just what they've come to expect. I always said even when we didn't have product on our website at the very beginning, I would say we had to have a website because it's to the point where if you don't have these other channels that customers almost don't trust you, especially as a small business, you have to kind of show that you have an understanding of the market and what the customer expects. I think because we're competing so much with online, even if we were only at brick and mortar, your biggest competition is still like an online retailer, so that you have to at least play part of the game.

This seamless transition is curated through aesthetics, channel integration, harnessing data, and more; it is a subjective element that was uniquely integrated into each individual retailer's strategy. Caroline focused on curating an integrated in-store and online experience that is rooted in a seamless customer service experience replicated across platforms.

> **Caroline**: But for us, I think the integration from our in-store experience with customer service from our sales associates is very comparable to the kind of treatment or conversations that they could have with us through social media as well. We do a lot of in-store pickup sales. So that's another way that our social media sales kind of connect back to our retail space. A lot of our customers will buy through our Instagram and then pick up in store. So, they're kind of experiencing both ways for, or I guess both channels through Wanderlust.

Elizabeth mentioned sharing consistent information regarding product and business operations across all channels to raise awareness for the brand and promote sales within the store. Sara was adamant about communicating a consistent brand aesthetic across all platforms so that there is little distinction between channels. Regardless of how this seamless transition is developed, it is important it exists, and each retailer was aware of that importance.

> **Sara:** So, I definitely think we're trying to kind of create an aesthetic throughout all of our channels you know, the online store or the Instagram, it's a recognizable brand aesthetic that also works with Facebook and Twitter and all of that is all pretty streamlined in that way.

Validation Strategies for Interviews

The external validity of the data analysis conducted on the small retailer interviews was further established using member check. Each respondent was contacted by email and informed of the main themes and subthemes that emerged through data analysis. The themes were accompanied by a brief overview and the supporting low inference descriptors to be reviewed by the interviewee. The respondents were able to review the information provided and respond detailing their reaction to the findings. By utilizing member check, the findings are strengthened, and the data analysis is properly justified.

Table 5.6 Member Check Responses

Hi Emily, thank you for sharing this, it's very interesting! I can relate to the categories and believe they reflect my responses well. - Sara of Family

Chapter 6:

DISCUSSION

Overview

The following section provides a discussion of the current research and conclusions from findings of the study. Both theoretical and managerial implications are examined. Finally, the limitations and suggestions for future research are proposed.

Summary of the Study

The evolution of retailing has led to a consumer-centric arena where retailers must cater to the customer to survive. As the consumer expects a unique experience when shopping today, it is the retailer's job to provide this experience (Buiocchi, 2020). By implementing an omni-channel strategy, retailers are able to harness the power of each individual channel to create a holistic, seamlessly integrated, and engaging retail experience that goes above and beyond the consumer's needs. The pandemic has further proven that retailers need to adopt an omni-channel strategy in order to pivot and survive with options like buy online, pick-up in-store and local delivery (Meehan, 2020). Most large retailers already have these strategies in place due to their resources and funds. Omni-channel retailing is more interesting when considered from the perspective of the small retailer, as small retailers make up most of the retailing arena and shopping small has been a growing trend within the United States (Wu, 2015).

This research study analyzed the presence of omni-channel retailing strategies in small apparel retailers in Atlanta and Athens, Georgia. The purpose of the research was to understand the presence of omni-channel retailing among small businesses, investigate how each channel is

being utilized by small retailers, uncover which specific channels small retailers are using, and discover how seamless integration is evident within each small retailer's omni-channel strategy. The research purposes were used as a guide from which to create the research objectives and research questions.

Research Objectives

I. To explore if omni-channel retailing is being used by small retailers.
II. To discover how small retailers are using the individual channels.
III. To understand what channels are being utilized.
IV. To uncover how seamless integration is present in the omni-channel strategy.

Research Questions

I. How do small retailers, consciously or subconsciously, create an inter-usable omni-channel experience?
II. Why do small retailers gravitate to certain channels in omni-channel retailing?

As omni-channel research is typically studied from the consumer or supply chain management perspectives, this research was novel in understanding the phenomena from a managerial viewpoint. The research objectives and questions above were answered using (1) a pre-screening content analysis and (2) interviews to analyze the existence of the usability model in the omni-channel retailing strategies of small apparel retailers.

The research model was adapted from both the usability model and the theory of inter-usability. Usability is defined as "the capability to be used by humans easily and effectively"

(Shackel, 2009, p. 340). The usability model details a balanced relationship between the user, task, tool, and user action in the context of their environment. All four components must have balanced interactions between each other for proper usability (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). Inter-usability, placed within the usability model for the purposes of this research, details that there must be service continuity within and between channels across the multi-platform domain in order to ensure seamless integration (Denis & Karsenty, 2005). Service continuity between two touch points allows the consumer to transition more seamlessly between each individual channel (Denis & Karsenty, 2005).

The use of (1) a pre-screening content analysis and (2) semi-structured interview methodology allowed for a comprehensive view of omni-channel retailing by small apparel retailers from both a third-party perspective and from the retailers themselves. Content analysis validated which retailers were considered omni-channel retailers, while the interviews allowed one to understand if the small apparel retailers were self-aware of the presence of their omni-channel strategy. Because data was collected in this manner, data triangulation was present and confirmed the validity of the findings of this study (Flick et al., 2004).

The pre-screening content analysis was a directed content analysis that was used to investigate the user-system relationship of small retailers and omni-channel retail strategies. The participants were originally from Atlanta, Georgia but the sample was expanded to small retailers in Athens, Georgia due to recruitment issues. Overall, there were 44 retailers analyzed through the content analysis. The instrument itself was developed based on Özge et al.'s (2017) research, which studied omni-channel retailing through a content analysis methodology rooted in the SO-LO-MO framework. This instrument allowed the retailers' omni-channel strategies to be analyzed for the presence of distinct features and functions within each channel and across

channels. The data for the original sample of 32 retailers was collected in December 2020 and all retailers were contacted to gauge if there was any interest in participating in the interview process. After a lack of responses, the sample was expanded and the data for the extended sample of 13 retailers was collected in February 2021. The second sample of retailers were contacted to again gauge if there was any interest in participating in the interview process, resulting in a sample of four participants for semi-structured interviews.

As mentioned, the interviews were semi-structured and featured open-ended questions that focused on the presence of omni-channel retailing within each participant's retailing strategy to encourage in-depth responses from the interviewees. All interviewees were in a managerial role at their retailing establishment, ensuring they were well-versed in the business's retailing strategy and channel usage. After all interviews were completed, the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a constant common theme approach. Several overarching themes manifested through this analysis, including (a) there's no cookie cutter recipe, (b) the purpose of the task, (c) tool gravitation, and (d) today's consumer. "There's no cookie cutter recipe" was further divided into the subthemes of (a) small retailers' identities and (b) small retailers' strategies. Within "the end goal", several subthemes became evident: (a) curating an experience, (b) gaining exposure, and (c) replicating the experience. The subthemes found within "the best fit" were (a) driving sales, (b) engaging with the customer, and (c) survival of the fittest. Data triangulation, low inference descriptors, and member checks were all utilized as validation strategies within this study.

The research questions were fully answered through this methodology. It was interesting to note how the common themes and subthemes emerged across all interviews despite each retailer's unique experience with omni-channel retailing. These small retailers were different in

many aspects but all unified through their experiences of implementing an omni-channel strategy.

Conclusions and Implications

Following the summary of the study, this section will provide a detailed discussion of the relevant conclusions and implications from both a theoretical and managerial perspective. The results of this research provide new and novel contributions to both academia and the retailing industry.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study provide interesting implications for the academic literature surrounding omni-channel retailing in addition to omni-channel retailing from the perspective of small businesses. It is extremely important to note that the usability model had never been applied to context of omni-channel retailing before this study; research using this model is rooted in the realm of human-computer interaction. As technology is an important proponent of omni-channel retailing, the usability theory has justification for being adopted into omni-channel retailing research. The adoption of new technologies depends heavily on the usability of said technologies (Shackel, 2009); as omni-channel retailing is heavily reliant on technology, it must have usability to be adopted. Usability needs to be integrated into all four components of the user-system situation, which are user, task, tool, and environment (Shackel, 2009) and there must be balance between these elements (Brown & Brancheau, 1992). As shown in this research, the user, task, tool, and user action are all present and balanced elements within small retailers and their omni-channel strategies. The themes that emerged within the interview process were rooted

in these core elements of the usability model that were made evident through the analysis of the interviews. The presence of all of these elements, shown through the themes that emerged, is an overarching finding that confirms the overall presence of the usability model within the context of omni-channel retailing. As noted earlier, the user was defined as the small retailer themselves based on their similar experiences and characteristics (Brancheau & Brown, 1993) because of their role as a small retailer. The theme of "there's no cookie cutter recipe" illuminated that the interviewee was deemed an omni-channel retailer and using a unique omni-channel strategy, although they did not all classify themselves as one. The theme of "the end goal" highlighted the several reasons these retailers are implementing an omni-channel strategy. The task itself is derived from the user's goals to complete an action (Brown & Brancheau, 1992); in this case, the small retailer was using specific channels to create an omni-channel strategy for several different reasons -- to curate a relationship, to gain exposure, or to replicate the retailing experience. "The best fit" emerged as a theme and confirmed that specific channels are gravitated towards depending on the retailer and their needs. As Powell & Moore (2002) illuminated, tools need to be effective at providing value to the user and specific channels were gravitated towards for that exact reason.

A second implication from this research is the adoption of the theory of inter-usability in the realm of omni-channel research. Inter-usability had only been researched in the context of human-computer interaction prior to this study. Inter-usability is rooted in a multi-platform experience (Denis & Karsenty, 2005) and omni-channel retailing occurs across multiple channels, making it an appropriate theory for research in this field. Inter-usability was found present through the interview process. The theme of "today's consumer" detailed the importance of having a seamlessly integrated experience across all channels, which is the purpose of

continuity (Majrashi et al., 2018). By offering a seamlessly integrated experience, whether that be through customer service, brand aesthetic, or similar marketing strategies, there was a continuous transfer of knowledge throughout the retailing strategy that allows the retailer to complete their task of creating a holistic omni-channel shopping experience. This seamlessly integrated experience is rooted in the idea of service continuity, which creates inter-usability between platforms. Integration is not feasible without continuous experiences across all channels.

In addition to these two implications, the connection between the usability theory and inter-usability theory had yet to be identified prior to this research. Inter-usability is the culmination of usability across multiple platforms (Denis & Karsenty, 2005), meaning that if inter-usability is present, usability is assumed to be present as well. As shown across all themes uncovered, the usability theory was present in the omni-channel retailing strategies of small retailers. The themes themselves were rooted in each key component of the usability theory. The specific theme of "today's consumer" revealed the presence of intentional inter-usability curated across platforms by the interviewees. Deliberate inter-usability is important to note, as continuity should be curated by the user (Jain et al., 2017). This research confirms that both intended inter-usability and usability were found to be present in small retailer's omni-channel strategies through this study. This highlights that these theories go hand-in-hand and can thus be studied as a joined entity to better understand the phenomena of omni-channel retailing and human-computer interaction.

A fourth implication from this research is the confirmation that omni-channel retailing exists within small apparel retailers. The theme of "the end goal" clarified the reason these retailers are implementing an omni-channel strategy, while the theme "the best fit" noted which

channels were used for what specific purposes to create a successful omni-channel strategy. Speicher (2015) noted that tools need to be harnessed by the user as the user sees fit for their purposes; these small retailers gravitated towards their channels with different motivations that fit their omni-channel retailing strategy best. Interestingly, the theme of "there's no cookie cutter recipe" revealed that although these retailers were shown to be utilizing an omni-channel retailing through the content analysis, they do not always self-identify as omni-channel retailers. As made evident through the results of this study, small retailers are in fact using omni-channel strategies, despite if they are unaware, they are doing so. Omni-channel retail is typically investigated from the lens of the consumer and focused mainly on large retailers, as they are assumed to be implementing the strategy due to their size and resources. Knowing that small retailers are capable of maintaining an omni-channel strategy allows research in this realm to be furthered.

For these reasons, this study provides strong theoretical implications and opens up many avenues of further research in the realm of omni-channel retailing, which will be discussed later on.

Managerial Implications

The managerial implications of this research are of high importance, as there is a lack of research on omni-channel retailing from the managerial perspective, especially from the perspective of small businesses. All interviews conducted involved small retailers located in Athens, GA. That being said, any measurable conclusions and implications would be of great value to those individuals alone. The theme "there's no cookie cutter recipe" may be of importance to these retailers in becoming self-aware of their status as omni-channel retailers. It

emerged during the interviews that not all of these retailers considered themselves omni-channel, but there is potential for them to harness an even deeper knowledge and usage of omni-channel strategies through a self-awareness that they are in fact employing an omni-channel approach. The theme of "the best fit" could be insightful for these retailers to understand how themselves and others are using specific channels for specific tasks, such as how Sara from Family utilized their Instagram to engage with the consumer whereas Caroline from Wanderlust used their Instagram to drive sales. This highlights how different channels can be valuable for different reasons dependent on both the retailer and their target market.

Another managerial implication is the awareness of the presence of omni-channel retailing among small retailers. The content analysis provided an unbiased, third-party confirmation of these small retailers as omni-channel retailers. The theme of "the end goal" highlighted why the interviewees are implementing these omni-channel strategies into their retailing environment. It was made evident through the interview process that all small retailers were providing an omni-channel experience because it provided them the opportunity to form a relationship with their consumer, to gain exposure, and to replicate their unique retail experience across channels. Knowing this, small retailers can understand how their retail establishment could benefit through the implementation of an omni-channel strategy. The benefits that may emerge include more sales, more store traffic, and exposure to new markets.

"Today's consumer" emerged as a theme and revealed that the omni-channel strategies present would not be feasible without a seamlessly integrated experience across all platforms. All participants stressed the importance of a synchronized experience across channels; the synchronization was curated through brand aesthetic, customer service, and other avenues. If a retailer is attempting to offer an omni-channel strategy, they must understand that their channel

offering is only as strong as the interaction between and across channels. This interaction must be seamless and cohesive to ensure success.

"The best fit" gave insight into the why behind channel usage and how said channels integrated together to create an omni-channel strategy that fit each retailer's unique needs. Specific channels were chosen due to their ability to drive sales, to engage with the customer, or because they were essential for survival. Interviewees selected different channels based on these reasonings; for example, both Elizabeth from Minnie's and Rylan from Camp preferred Instagram to engage with their consumer. It was noted by all retailers that having multiple channels allowed them to increase sales, which is extremely important for small retailers in order to stay afloat when competing with larger merchandise chains. Retailers eager to reach new sales or traffic goals can understand the benefits each channel can offer them to attain these goals and grow as a business. The specific benefits generated from each channel may depend on the characteristics of the retailer in question. Some examples found through interviewing were gaining exposure through social media channels and perfecting the customer experience through the store front to create a relationship with the consumer.

Finally, the theme of "there's no cookie cutter recipe" illuminated the finding that small retailers may be unknowingly implementing and maintaining an omni-channel strategy. As illuminated in the interview process, not all of these retailers were self-aware of their status as an omni-channel retailer. By becoming aware of this status, a retailer may be able to fully commit to and implement this strategy more successfully. As made evident through both the content analysis and interview process, omni-channel retailing does exist in the small business sector. As omni-channel retailing can be a daunting phrase, the awareness of its existence and feasibility in the realm of small businesses is important to notify other retailers of the prior existence of omni-

channel in their retailing strategy or the realistic implementation of an omni-channel strategy. It was also uncovered that there is no correct way for a small retailer to implement an omni-channel strategy, it is up to the retailer to define what omni-channel entails in the scope of their business and their customers.

That being said, these findings provide small retailers with a detailed understanding of how to curate an omni-channel strategy within their unique retailing environment. The theme of "the best fit" allows small retailers who may not be implementing an omni-channel strategy guidance on how different channels may effectively meet their retail environment's needs. By having an understanding of how specific channels can strengthen one's retailing strategy, a retailer will be able to modify existing channels or offer new channels that allow them to compete more aggressively with other retailers.

"The end goal" gives small businesses insight into why an omni-channel strategy could be advantageous for their retail establishment. The interviews showed that omni-channel retailing is implemented because of its' ability to create a relationship with the consumer, increase exposure in the marketplace, and replicate an experience across channels. Knowing this, a retailer is able to understand why they should implement this retailing strategy in their business and how it could affect their sales and traffic.

Understanding "today's consumer" allows small retailers to understand precisely how service continuity can be integrated into their retailing environment to satisfy consumers' needs. It was highlighted through the interview process that having a seamlessly integrated experience across platforms -- whether that is through brand aesthetic, customer service, etc. -- is expected by today's customer. Having an understanding of this allows retailers to tailor their retailing environment to cater to the consumer and become a better competitor in today's marketplace. As

shown in the overarching results of this study, each retailer provided an omni-channel experience in a unique way and utilized their channels in different manners to create this experience. Knowing this, small retailers will be able to choose an appropriate strategy that caters best to their consumer and implement it successfully.

Limitations and Future Research

While this research adequately answered the research questions set forth, there were several limitations that framed the scope of this study and gave rise to future research opportunities. First, the location of the retailers interviewed were limited to Athens, GA. As Athens, GA is a college town and there are seasonal fluctuations in population, it may be essential for these retailers to implement an omni-channel strategy; this may be different for small retailers located in different areas. It would be insightful to replicate this study in a metropolitan area to see if the themes are still present amongst small retailers in a different environment. It could also be insightful to replicate this study in a comparable college town to understand if these themes are present among small businesses with similar environments. Future research should consider examining the phenomena of omni-channel retailing by small retailers in other locations to understand if these themes are widely present amongst other small retailers.

Another limitation is the product category evaluated. This research evaluated the presence of omni-channel retailing amongst small apparel and accessory retailers. This cannot be generalized to all small retailers and could vary immensely depending on what product category the small retailer operates in. Additionally, the apparel retailers analyzed varied between women's, men's and jewelry retailers, which could lead to an array of findings. There could be potential key differences in omni-channel strategy dependent on the specific type of apparel

retailer. Future research should consider studying the application of the usability theory to omni-channel retailing in the context of other product categories or further narrowed down into one product category.

A third limitation is the industry which was examined within this study. As the small businesses analyzed were all prominent in the retail sector, these results are not generalizable to all small businesses. To better understand the presence of omni-channel strategies for small businesses, future research should be conducted in other industries such as the restaurant industry, hospitality industry, etc. As most businesses in these industries offer omni-channel experiences, whether it be curbside pick-up of a meal or booking a hotel through interaction with different channels, it would be interesting to understand how the presence and mechanics of omni-channel strategies differentiate within industries that offer omni-channel experiences.

A fourth limitation was the finding that 0% of the retailers analyzed in the content analysis had a mobile application, thus there were no findings on that channel in the scope of the research. That being said, mobile applications are typically used to fulfill orders and small retailers noted their reliance on brick-and-mortar and social commerce channels for sales. Small retailers may not be deeming the addition of a mobile commerce channel valuable enough for their omni-channel strategy. On the other hand, small retailers could be hindering their omni-channel strategy by not offering a unique experience on a mobile application. Further research into the presence of mobile applications among small retailers' omni-channel strategies could provide insight into this area.

In addition to these limitations, another potential area of research would be understanding the relationship between the retailer's perspective of their offered omni-channel strategy and the consumer's interpretation of experiencing the omni-channel environment. One could investigate

customers from each store to explore how the retailer's perspective and the customer's perspective align on what is being offered in the omni-channel strategy and its added value.

Further research could also be devoted to the relationship between customer relationship management (CRM) and omni-channel retailing. The presence of omni-channel retailing in the small retailing environment as well as the discussion of how small retailers utilize omni-channel retailing to engage with consumers proves it as a potential avenue of CRM. Small retailers are utilizing omni-channel as a means to curate and maintain their relationship with consumers through interactions across channels, whether they be transactional, informational, or of the customer-service nature. This provides further implications about how CRM is potentially intertwined into omni-channel retailing and opens the door for future research of omni-channel retailing from this new perspective.

Overall, this research provides meaningful insights to the retailing industry, but the retailing industry is constantly evolving and research in this field could always be furthered. It is imminent that omni-channel retailing continues to be examined and investigated especially through the lens of small retailers.

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