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Adapting omnichannel strategies to answer post-pandemic consumers' evolved in-store shopping expectations

Master's thesis in
International Business

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Technology-infused omnichannel strategies have solidified their role in the turbulent environment of retailing. The advantages of such retailing approaches have been recognised during the interminable rise of e-commerce in the past decades, but the physical resurgence of consumers after the global pandemic evolved omnichannel expectations to new standards. Now, consumers desire a blend of online convenience in physical stores, driving retailers to adapt their technological capabilities to ensure seamless in-store shopping experiences. Because omnichanneling has become a necessity, retailers need to possess the understanding of providing valuable customer journeys.

To offer insights and perspectives around the novel shift in physical retailing, this thesis was conducted as a two-case study, examining two retail giants that have emerged from opposite sides, the physical-first Target and online-dominant Amazon. To gain recent knowledge from the two companies, mainly qualitative secondary data was collected from diverse online sources, which were scrutinised employing content analysis and thematic synthesis. The longitudinal time horizon allowed for a progressive viewpoint to be constructed regarding the evolving dynamics between online and offline channels, and the role of technological implementations.

The results of this thesis firstly sum up the expectations of consumers that have evolved pre- and post-pandemic, mainly the pursuit of convenience, continuity, and hedonistic aspects. Furthermore, this thesis explores various innovative technological features and how they can be integrated into physical stores to support seamless omnichannel expectations. In line with the results, the thesis suggests that most widely adapted technologies within case companies are scattered between the many phases of the shopping journey, either designed to complement the shopping experience by enhancing the favoured attributes, make the in-store interactions and steps more autonomous, or automate back-end operations. These technologies can be joined as a part of cohesive omnichannel experiences to contribute to borderless channel integration, all-inclusive offerings, and personalisation.

The findings demonstrate that both case companies have explicit connections with theoretical frameworks. Along with the findings and synthesis, this thesis reinforces the discourse of post-pandemic omnichannel experiences and supplies real-life examples of diverse strategic uses of in-store technologies.

Key words: in-store technologies, omnichannel retailing, customer expectations

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Teknologiapohjaiset omnikanavastrategiat ovat vakiinnuttaneet asemansa vähittäiskaupan epävakaassa ympäristössä. Tällaisten vähittäismyyntitapojen edut ovat tiedostettu viime vuosikymmeninä verkkokaupankäynnin jatkuvan nousun aikana, mutta kuluttajien fyysinen palaaminen maailmanlaajuisen pandemian jälkeen nosti omnikanavaodotukset uusiin standardeihin. Nykyään kuluttajat mielivät yhdistelmiä verkkokaupan etuja fyysisissä myymälöissä, mikä ajaa vähittäismyyjiä mukauttamaan teknologisia valmiuksiaan varmistaakseen saumattoman ostoskokemuksen myymälässä. Koska omnikanavointi on muodostunut välttämättömyydeksi, vähittäismyyjien on ymmärrettävä, miten tarjota arvokkaita asiakasmatkoja.

Tarjotakseen näkemyksiä ja perspektiivejä fyysisen vähittäiskaupan tuoreesta muutoksesta, tämä pro gradu -tutkielma toteutettiin tapaustutkimuksena tarkastellen kahta vastakkaiset lähtökohdat omaavaa vähittäiskaupan jättiläistä, kivijalkalähtöistä Targetia ja verkkovaltaista Amazonia. Molemmista yrityksistä hankittiin ajantasaista tietoa, pääasiassa laadullista sekundääridataa monipuolisista verkkolähteistä, jotka tarkasteltiin sisällönanalyysin ja teemasynteesin avulla. Pitkittäistutkimuksen aikajänne mahdollisti progressiivisen näkökulman muodostamisen verkkokanavien ja fyysisten kanavien välillä muuttuvista dynamiikoista ja toteutettujen teknologioiden roolista.

Tämän tutkielman tulokset tiivistävät kuluttajien odotukset, jotka ovat kehittyneet ennen ja jälkeen pandemian, pääasiassa mukavuuden, jatkuvuuden ja hedonististen näkökohtien osalta. Lisäksi tutkielma tutustuu erilaisiin innovatiivisiin teknologiaominaisuuksiin ja siihen, miten niitä voidaan integroida fyysisiin myymälöihin edesauttamaan saumattomia omnikanavaodotuksia. Tulosten mukaisesti tutkielma ehdottaa, että tapaustutkimusyritysten laajimmin omaksutut teknologiat ovat hajallaan monissa ostosmatkan vaiheissa, joko suunniteltu täydentämään ostoskokemusta korostamalla haluttuja piirteitä, itsenäistämään myymälässä tapahtuvat vuorovaikutukset ja ostovaiheet tai automatisoimaan taustaprosesseja. Nämä teknologiat voidaan yhdistää osaksi yhtenäisiä omnikanavakokemuksia edistämään saumattomia kanavaintegraatioita, kaiken kattavaa tarjontaa ja personointia.

Tutkimuksen löydökset osoittavat, että molemmilla tapaustutkimusyrityksillä on selviä yhteyksiä teoreettisiin viitekehyksiin. Löydösten ja synteesin ohella tämä tutkielma vahvistaa pandemian jälkeistä omnikanavakokemuksia koskevaa keskustelua ja tarjoaa todellisia esimerkkejä erilaisten myymäläteknologioiden strategisista käyttötavoista.

Avainsanat: myymäläteknologia, omnikanavainen vähittäismyynti, asiakasodotukset

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Introduction 8

1.1 Background and context 8

1.2 Research framework 11

1.2.1 Research gap 11

1.2.2 Research question 12

1.2.3 Research significance and contribution 13

2 Adapting to consumer expectations in the new retail landscape 15

2.1 Omnichannel and multichannel 15

2.2 Consumer expectations and behavioural shifts post-Covid 18

2.2.1 Fundamental factors influencing consumers and the technology-assisted multichannel breakthrough 18

2.2.2 The resurgence of in-store shopping and the pandemic's impact on consumer behaviour 20

2.3 Innovative technologies for in-store experiences 22

2.3.1 Integrating channels through technological capabilities 22

2.3.2 Effect of smart technologies on customer experiences 24

2.3.3 Personalisation of smart feature offerings 27

2.4 Strategies for omnichannel integration and meeting expectations 28

2.4.1 Integration of online and offline channels 28

2.4.2 Seamless omnichannel customer experience 30

2.4.3 Additional considerations of omnichannel strategies 32

2.5 Synthesis 33

2.5.1 Summary of literature 33

2.5.2 Offering a seamless and all-inclusive omnichannel experience 35

3 Research design 38

3.1 Research approach 38

3.2 Rationale for case selection 42

3.3 Data collection 43

3.4 Data analysis 46

3.5 Evaluation of the thesis 49

4 Findings 51

4.1 Target **51**
4.1.1 Impact of Covid-19 on Target 51
4.1.2 Analysis of innovative technologies used by Target 52
4.1.3 Target's omnichannel strategy 55
4.1.4 Customer perceptions on the journey and experiences 58
4.2 Amazon **60**
4.2.1 Impact of Covid-19 on Amazon 60
4.2.2 Analysis of innovative technologies used by Amazon 62
4.2.3 Amazon's omnichannel strategy 65
4.2.4 Customer perceptions on the journey and experiences 68
4.3 Cross-case comparison on meeting evolved in-store expectations **70**
5 Conclusion **78**
5.1 Theoretical contribution **78**
5.2 Managerial implications **82**
5.3 Limitations and future research suggestions **84**
6 Summary **86**
References **88**
Appendices **118**
Appendix 1 Target data source **118**
Appendix 2 Amazon data sources **123**

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Technology enabled customer shopping journey in-store. 23
Figure 2. Customer-centric tech-enhanced omnichannel retailing model. 37
Figure 3. Research onion. 38
Figure 4. Process of individual source evaluation. 44
Figure 5. Data analysis outline. 48
Figure 6. Adapted figure of Target and Amazon. 79
Figure 7. Depth of physical, digital, personalisation, and customer journey. 81

1 Introduction

This thesis delves into the complex and alternating industry of retailing in the face of change in customer behaviour regarding all-inclusive omnichannel shopping. Retailers have faced numerous disruptions, especially since the development of the internet. The latest turn caused by the global pandemic that rattled the retail industry and led the field to lean towards omnichannel retailing is not only terribly recent but might be one of the most prominent retailing shifts in the modern era. The first subchapter presents an overview of the retailing world, leading up to the novel changes rendered by the global pandemic and the evolvement of consumer buying habits. The second subchapter explores the research framework, including the research gap, research question, research significance, and contribution.

1.1 Background and context

Brick-and-mortar stores have fumbled for the whole 2000s in front of the rise of online commerce. E-commerce has year after year accumulated its foothold in the industry of retailing (Coppola 2022), and retailers must increasingly concentrate more on the means of how digital customers want to conduct business (Mantrala & Albers 2022, 508). Because digital channels raised global competition to new highs, making it continually more difficult to achieve advantages over competitors, retailers started to employ multichannel strategies to achieve competitive advantages (Rosenbloom 2007, 7), for example, in consumer trust and loyalty, brand image, and communications (McGoldrick & Collins 2007, 155). However, as consumers started to adapt supporting online actions amid shopping in physical stores, for example, inspecting prices on mobile phones while feeling the genuine products at the store, the transition towards a seamless omnichannel shopping experience began (Brynjolfsson et al. 2013, 24). The retailing industry has now evolved to a point where businesses are required to integrate different channels such as websites, brick-and-mortar stores, social media, and other networks together, or they are in danger of going out of business (Rigby 2011, 68). Technological advancements are blurring the borders between the two worlds, online and physical, allowing for mixed interactions to happen in both channels simultaneously (Brynjolfsson et al. 2013, 23-24). The term omnichannel is used to describe this retail evolution, reflecting retailers' ability to encounter customers in numerous disparate channels that appear as one seamless experience to end-customers (Rigby 2011, 68). Particularly, the emergence of advanced

technologies, the surge in mobile technologies, and increased customer demand drive retailers towards omnichannel strategies (Asmare & Zewdie 2022, 68-69).

The Covid-19 pandemic further diminished the performance of physical store locations, which was expressed by many newspaper and journal titles that the game was over for traditional shopping, and online shopping was declared as the winner once and for all (Yohn 2020; Conca 2020; Meisenzahl 2021). New shopping traits were recognised in consumer research by Accenture (2020) at the start of the pandemic, which noted the once again high surge of e-commerce, this time through the high adoption rates from previously non-users of e-commerce channels. The research identified the inflated interest and usage of omnichannel solutions amongst consumers, such as contactless payments, social commerce, virtual consultations, and in-store pick-ups and returns. (Accenture 2020) Unfortunately for retailers, the pandemic also drove the rate of shopping cart abandonment to new heights (Callahan 2020), meaning that even though more consumers are now shopping online than before, around 70 % of the items placed on a virtual shopping cart are never bought (Baymard Institute 2023). Additionally, many companies that experienced drastic surges in online orders during the pandemic suffered from issues related to fulfilling online orders at a satisfactory pace while struggling with understaffing and warehouse space (Placek 2022).

In 2022, after the worst of the pandemic had eased, many economic journalists wrote about significant rises in consumers' shopping in physical stores and online shopping even suffering substantial downturns at times. Consequently, customers suddenly started to make a comeback to brick-and-mortar stores, which was not envisioned based on the previous perceptions of Covid-19 shifting the shopping demeanour to online definitively. (Wertz 2022; Meyersohn 2022; Rudegeair et al. 2022) According to recent literature, the majority of consumers are making this recovery, and only the heaviest e-commerce users are abstaining from brick-and-mortar stores (Luo et al. 2023). Some of the reasons behind the brick-and-mortar return are to feel the products physically (Wang et al. 2022, 8) and different social exchanges, whether supporting local businesses or interacting with other people (Zielke et al. 2023, 5). Ultimately, the physical resurrection of consumers has now led to a battle between retailers on how they can match omnichannel experiences to the increased demands of returning shoppers without losing them to the next-door's competitor or back online (cf. Heaslip 2022).

Omnichanneling can solve issues that superficially appear to be problems of one singular channel, but in reality, channel integration may be the right solution. For instance, online shopping cart abandonment can be improved by users receiving more value through integrating multiple channels, making them more loyal (He & Zhang 2022, 698), and consumers buying online and picking up orders from stores to improve cost-effectiveness via streamlined omnichannel tactics (Kusuda 2022, 7). Nevertheless, online channels are undeniably important in today's digital world, especially after the pandemic, which further strengthened online retailing's position (Wang et al. 2022, 1). Therefore, retailers need to prepare for the development of a new status quo, in which omnichanneling is the mainstream way of commerce and a requirement for success (Timoumi et al. 2022, 133, 149) as serving consumers in an integrated mix of online and offline channels simultaneously has become a novel necessity (Solem et al. 2023, 29). The benefits of channel integration for businesses have been perceived before the pandemic, such as increased sales and customer loyalty (Simone & Sabbadin 2018, 102), lower costs, increased differentiation, improved trust, market extensions (Steinfield 2002, 4), improved perceived quality, and overall positive purchase decisions (Herhausen et al. 2015, 319). Additionally, turning current single-channel shoppers into omnichannel customers (Sopadjieva et al. 2017, 2) presents a notable opportunity for retailers in terms of increasing sales numbers through the increase in usage of multiple channels, such as buying online and picking up from stores (ICSC 2019).

When consumers were returning to stores and malls in masses, it was quickly discovered that their needs and desires were now more demanding than ever before, anticipating in-store services that can correspond to the convenience they received during the pandemic's online shopping (Foresight Factory 2021, 6). Therefore, today's consumers want to see some of the amenities of the online world in the physical stores to bring together the benefits of both worlds. Some of these characteristics include technology-enhanced shopping, such as smart fitting rooms and contactless paying methods, which ultimately contribute to seamless omnichannel experiences. (Wertz 2022; Hughes 2022; Kapner 2021) The adoption of the omnichannel experience starts from consumers' actions combining different channels together, for example, at the simplest, inspecting prices on mobile phones while on the isles of a physical store browsing through products (Brynjolfsson et al. 2013, 24). To achieve this, an omnichannel retailer must pursue harmony and a flow of thinking between the channels (Beck & Rygl 2015, 177).

Furthermore, since the channels need to be balanced throughout the customer journey, it is crucial to evaluate the sufficient ratio between brick-and-mortar stores and other channels (Gao et al. 2022, 809-810, 823).

Following these developments, omnichanneling is not just a complementary strategy anymore that can bear competitive benefits over those who have not yet shifted to full-focused omnichanneling (Ewerhard et al. 2019, 18). Studies show that consumers who shop in multiple channels are likely to spend more money through impulsive buying than those who only shop in one channel (Sopadjieva et al. 2017, 2; Pereira 2023, 52-53). That is due to omnichannel consumers being influenced in multiple channels simultaneously, spending more on a single trip after doing their own research at retailers' other channels or soon repeating the shopping trip (Sopadjieva et al. 2017, 2). Therefore, it is vital for retailers to succeed in answering these changed customer needs by, for example, matching the diversity, aesthetic, and convenience of physical stores to online ones (Ameen et al. 2021, 337-338) and providing a seamless omnichannel experience where consumers can profit from both physical and digital stimulations across channels (Patten et al. 2020, 1341). The advantages that omnichanneling has combined with the topicality of the omnichannel strategies due to the developments in shopping behaviour caused by the pandemic generates an intriguing motive for this thesis.

1.2 Research framework

1.2.1 Research gap

The current transition caused by the pandemic in consumer shopping behaviour shifting towards demanding technology-supported seamless omnichannel experiences is exceptionally recent, meaning that academic literature is still scarce on the topic. However, rather than scholars focusing on the topic, multinational retailers have emphasised delivering such experiences for their customers (Mishra et al. 2023, 750). Especially existing studies have emphasised the importance of future research regarding

On the other hand is the challenging field of omnichannel retailing, in which the role of new technologies is also missing from the omnichannel management literature (Cai & Lo 2020, 10). In addition, knowledge of channel integration remains limited and varied (Mirsch et al. 2016, 14; Goraya 2022, 1), and how omnichannel customer experiences should be cultivated is relatively unknown (Gao et al. 2021, 13). For example, Salvietti

et al. (2022, 1170) state that channel integration is the most auspicious direction regarding omnichannel research since it is the number one most crucial feature for successful omnichannel retailing because it provides the coherent experience consumers are looking for in the whole concept.

1.2.2 Research question

The main research question is, "How can innovative technologies be adapted by retailers to meet consumers' increased expectations for omnichannel in-store experiences after the pandemic?". The main question has been developed based on the research gap, designed to cover the problem's core comprehensively. To fulfil the research gap, the main question is divided into three sub-questions:

1. How have consumers' demands for physical in-store shopping experiences evolved during the pandemic?
2. What innovative in-store technologies can be implemented to respond to the increased expectations for physical store experiences?
3. What strategies should be adapted when incorporating innovative technologies to support a seamless omnichannel experience?

The first sub-question aims to answer how consumer demands for physical shopping have changed during the pandemic. The first sub-question is needed to understand how these newly developed requirements can be catered to and what characteristics of a physical store consumers desire when committing leisure shopping. The second sub-question seeks to construct a view of what smart technologies can be enforced to react to the advanced in-store demands of consumers. Based on the current trends discussed by economic journalists as introduced previously, it can be assumed that innovative technologies are needed to match the evolved consumer requirements towards omnichannel in-store shopping. Therefore, the question focuses on what technologies can be utilised in what use cases and whether their value corresponds to consumers' anticipations. After building an understanding of customer expectations and the use cases for innovative technologies in omnichannel retailing, the third sub-question aims to comprehend how the first two can be synthesised in the real world to support a coherent customer journey where the fundamentals are fulfilled. It is done by answering what manners of strategies can be implemented with the addition of considering which in-store

technologies are worthwhile to adapt in physical stores and what are the primary omnichannel tactics to advocate. The strategies contribute to responding to consumer needs, supporting positive customer experiences according to the current retail environment.

The research questions are answered with a two-case study supported by a comprehensive literature review. The nature of a two-case study suits the pursuit of understanding a contemporary set of events (Yin 2009, 13) by taking a close examination of real-life phenomena as they unfold in practice (Flyvbjerg 2011, 309), laying an apt base to analyse the recent shifts in the retail sector.

1.2.3 Research significance and contribution

The significance of this thesis lies in its potential to address the critical gap in knowledge about the use of in-store technologies as a tool to answer increased expectations of consumers regarding omnichannel experiences. The significance is further underscored by the timeliness and pressing need to satisfy the newly evolved consumer needs, for which omnichanneling can be the differentiating factor in determining the future's winners and losers of retailing (Mason & Jarvis 2023, 2). As omnichannel strategies are expected to ascend in importance and remain a substantial part of retailers' operations (Charm et al. 2021, 3-4), the need to understand the means and methods of how to implement such approaches increases. This has been witnessed especially since the rise of the pandemic, which put retailers to assess their previously unseen omnichannel capabilities (Cocco & De-Juan-Vigaray 2022, 1081).

Existing studies have highlighted the importance of future research regarding innovative technologies as a medium to improve in-store customer experience (Wang et al. 2022, 10; Böttcher et al. 2023, 4302), which is related to the theoretical contributions of this thesis. Because the present trend to offer all-inclusive and technology-infused shopping experiences leans towards omnichannel strategies (see, for example, Alexander & Kent 2022), omnichanneling is merged into the theoretical contribution to offer as relevant a contribution as possible. Practical contributions give insight into how retailers can adapt modern omnichanneling strategies, facilitating the hardships they face in the post-pandemic environment. The representative companies of the two-case study section of this thesis have profoundly dissimilar backgrounds, specifically chosen for the scenario this thesis covers. As a result, retailers pursuing to capture returning consumers through

enhanced technology-supported omnichannel in-store experiences find this thesis helpful to reflect on, whether their roots are in physical retail or e-commerce.

2 Adapting to consumer expectations in the new retail landscape

This section introduces the theoretical background of consumer behaviour and its occurred shifts after Covid-19, innovative technologies contributing towards omnichannel experiences in the retail industry and their use cases, and sufficient omnichannel strategies for implementing the discussed technologies to answer grown consumer expectations. Overall, the concept of omnichannel retailing has emerged as crucial aspect of modern-day retail, the capability to provide coherent in-store experiences becoming a necessity in order to remain competitive. In-store technologies play a vital role in providing a seamless omnichannel experience, meeting customer expectations and enhancing the retail environment. The literature replenishes the academic research gap regarding the use of innovative technologies to integrate separate retailing channels to enhance physical store experiences.

The journal articles used in this literature review have been evaluated with the SCImago Journal & Country Rank indicator (Journal Rankings 2022) to ensure the quality of the journals. The article has been approved for the literature review if the journal has been ranked in the top 50% at publication, although most journals belong to the top quartile. SCImago's advantages are its countermeasures against self-citations and its emphasis on prestige, although its complex formulas overlook alternate sources like commentaries and interviews (Falagas et al. 2008, 2626-2627). Journal articles whose publishers are not found in SCImago ranking, as well as books, conference proceedings, and edited compilations, are evaluated by their references.

Keywords for literature research included: "shopping behaviour", "in-store technologies", "omnichannel", "physical shopping", and "customer experience". Search engines used were Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, and Volter E-Library, while the sources were primarily from ScienceDirect, Emerald Journal, ProQuest, Ebook Central, SAGE, and Citeseer databases. No specific time range was set for the sources to build an understanding of retail developments before arriving at the most recent shifts.

2.1 Omnichannel and multichannel

Modern-day retailing has evolved to an unprecedented mixture of digital and physical activities that the term omnichannel has been used to describe. Rigby (2011, 68)

emphasised that if retailers fail to morph into this new kind of retail by not integrating different channels such as websites, brick-and-mortar stores, social media, and other networks, they are in danger of going out of business. Seamless omnichannel experiences have become more prominent due to consumers' embracing new ways of shopping, which include features from multiple channels concurrently, such as using a mobile phone as a source of information while walking at a physical store (Brynjolfsson et al. 2013, 24). Consumers' adoption of omnichannel behaviour has likely intensified during the pandemic since one-third of consumers experimented with a new shopping method as a consequence of pursuing value (McKinsey & Company 2020). Nowadays, channels should be presented simultaneously so that the contents of channels are consistent and processes seamless (Shen et al. 2018, 70-71). Consistency across channels is also expected by consumers (Huré et al. 2017, 320), accompanied by the need for total channel integrations since without it, consistent omnichannel experience is not transmitted to customers (Saghiri et al. 2017, 60; Salvietti et al. 2022, 1170). Before the pandemic, omnichannel experience had been employed by retailers to differentiate themselves from the competition to provide more comprehensive services and experiences, but the pandemic elevated and showcased its real potential and significance (Verhoef 2021, 613-614). Cummins et al. (2016, 5) define omnichanneling as the "synergetic integration of customer touch points and communication opportunities for the purpose of creating a unified brand experience regardless of channel, platform or stage in the selling process".

Before the emergence of the term omnichannel, literature and retailers considered multichanneling as the concept of proposing multiple channels for consumers to shop, whether they chose to do it online or offline. However, since the channels were considered detached from one another by retailers, consumers were left with only the strengths and weaknesses of the singular channel they ended up choosing (Gao et al. 2022, 809). Adopting online and mobile channels as supplementary channels next to physical stores was the right thing to do in the era of the internet, but strictly shopping either online or in-store still left many customers wishing for better. For instance, customers shopping online lack the possibility of feeling and touching the product before purchase, they do not immediately receive the product after spending their money, and something can go wrong during delivery or return (Bezes 2016). The shortcomings of picking only one channel over another led consumers to want to assemble and optimise their own shopping path, with as seamless boundaries between the channels as imaginable. That has resulted

in the appearance of various omnichanneling tactics, where retailers pursue to deliver flexible and interconnected shopping experiences (Gao et al. 2022, 810), which are coordinated in a streamlined way by the retailer across all the channels, whether online or offline (Levy et al. 2013, 67).

An alternative term used in a somewhat similar manner for the omnichannel experience is phygital (digital + physical), which means a digital twist in a physical setting. For example, in this retail study, the phygital experience would be a customer using a digital screen to view themselves in another environment, such as at a festival celebration, while fitting a product in a physical shop. (Banik 2021) However, it appears that the term omnichannel is preferred by scholars based on the number of articles found with each keyword. The omnichannel term will appear primarily in the innovative technologies and strategies sections.

An essential factor in developing multiple channels and providing a holistic and frictionless omnichannel experience is the use of versatile in-store technologies. Since the retailing atmosphere is ever-increasingly getting more competitive with all the digital, mobile, and morphing physical channels, it raises customer expectations regarding where, when, and how retailers can engage with them via mixed technologies. This requires retailers to continuously be more creative and innovative when it comes to serving their omnichannel customers. (Savastano et al. 2019, 487) This thesis uses the exact definition of in-store technologies as the study from Alexander and Kent (2022, 1) uses: "in-store technologies refer to the number of different devices and software programs that the consumer encounters when stepping into the physical store." In this thesis, technologies that facilitate the shopping journey are on a pedestal over the ones that the consumer cannot engage with. However, some technologies that support back-end operations, like automated shelving, need to be assessed as well since they can free up personnel to serve consumers. This newly acquired reserve of employee hours can contribute to a more humane and positive customer experience (Zhu et al. 2021, 18), which is essential since human interaction is required by omnichannel consumers in physical channels (Alexander & Cano 2019, 206).

Some examples of in-store technologies are virtual catalogues and digital signage (product display technologies), virtual mirrors and fitting rooms (shopping experience technologies), tablets and QR codes (information search technologies), self-checkouts

(payments technologies), and click-and-collect and vending machines (other technologies) (Pantano et al. 2017, 90; Alexander & Kent 2022, 3). With a suitable integration of channels and technologies, they are designed to drive speed, convenience, efficiency, immersion, enjoyment, and playfulness (Alexander & Kent 2022, 8). To adequately adapt these advanced technologies and omnichannel strategies, the following section delves deeper into the core motivations and factors that shape consumers' behaviour in the evolving landscape of modern retail.

2.2 Consumer expectations and behavioural shifts post-Covid

2.2.1 Fundamental factors influencing consumers and the technology-assisted multichannel breakthrough

The never-ending conversation about the reasons why and how people choose the location and store to perform their shopping has been discussed as early as the late 1940s by Heidingsfield (1949). The decision-making process where people settle to shop is being affected even before the conscious evaluation of the options is initiated by the fundamental reason for the shopping to happen in the first place – is the shopping recreational or economical (Bellenger & Korgaonkar 1980). The early work on buyer behaviour by Howard and Sheth (1969) suggests that there are three critical steps to a buyer's decision-making process: motives, alternatives, and mediators. The set of motives reflects on the fundamental needs of the buyer, alternatives include the other option that exists for the products, and the mediators are the prior knowledge the buyer uses to make the decision based on their motives and alternatives (Howard & Sheth 1969, 467-468). In omnichannel shopping, all of the mentioned variables are mixed together across all the channels retailers offer, but also what competitors are feeding next door or online. However, before the pandemic, multichannel research was insufficient regarding the differences in consumer satisfaction and loyalty when shopping in different channels, resulting in unsatisfied customers (Hult et al. 2019, 19).

Similarly, how the mediators can affect the buying decision at the very last minute before grabbing the product from the shelf, buyer behaviour has also been argued to be closely dependent on the situation, where the surrounding noise and environment can alter the final decision (see, for example, Hansen 1969, 436; Belk 1974, 156; Nicosia 1966, 180-181), while sociocultural background can impact the decision as well (Nicosia 1966, 189).

Just like the definitive buying decision relies on the situation and mediators, variables like price consciousness, product availability and online trust, but also the overall shopping experience needs like customer service alter the outcome whether the point-of-purchase takes place online or in-store (cf. Liu et al. 2013). In addition, different attributes, such as convenience and enjoyment that the consumer is looking for, affect the conclusion where the customer chooses to perform their shopping (Childers et al. 2001).

However, the internet boom and several other commerce channels becoming more widespread means a more problematic job for retailers to manage the multifaceted environment (Neslin et al. 2006, 96). The consumers' demand and retailers' supply of omnichanneling actions has drastically shaped consumers to be more decisive in which stages of buying they want to conduct in which channels (van Dijk et al. 2005, 1). Almost two decades ago, Müller-Lankenau et al. (2006, 190-191) described the channel integration method as the most capable multichannel retailing strategy but the one only a few retailers use. The pandemic thoroughly overturned this take, with retailers having to take an integrated omnichannel stance in order to endure the retail rivalry.

The 2000's internet boom has also generated an ampler selection of eclectic retailers and products, devising one variable after another. The endless pool of alternatives can create confusion in consumers; even though some want to be offered choices, they do not want the shopping experience to be overcomplicated (Drummond 2004, 317). For the whole 2000s, way before the Covid-19 pandemic, the retailing world has been remarkably affected by the rapid changes and shifts in customer behaviour, putting businesses in a "make it or break it" position to survive in today's fast-paced surroundings. The emergence of innovative technologies, ranging from in-store technologies to back-end operations, has shifted the retailing industry for good, further accelerated by the global pandemic (Mason & Jarvis 2023, 138). This technological consumer transformation was the end to many businesses, but some were able to amass significant profits from it if they were capable of pivoting quickly enough in order to catch the changing trend. (Grewal et al. 2021, 6) In the past decade, consumers have started to shop in multiple channels simultaneously, requiring online retailers to establish brick-and-mortar stores and offline retailers to develop webstores in order to stay afloat in the competition (Jindal et al. 2021, 270).

2.2.2 The resurgence of in-store shopping and the pandemic's impact on consumer behaviour

Even though the pandemic drove online sales to record numbers, consumers are still yearning after in-store shopping. The pandemic had a profound influence on both consumers and businesses; many traditionally physical firms, usually local businesses, had to shift to online mediums to sustain the dramatic shifts caused by the pandemic (Relihan et al. 2020, 25; Wang et al. 2020, 217). However, digital-first companies like the online giant Amazon are pursuing the market shares of conventional brick-and-mortar retail stores as well by opening previously unseen physical stores to complement their omnichanneling tactics in order to satisfy a more voluminous segment of consumers (Zhu et al. 2021, 18). Although the groundbreaking occurrences after the pandemic are very recent, some papers about the consumer comeback exist. A recent study (Luo et al. 2023) revealed that even though the return to physical stores alters across consumer groups, the majority are proceeding to shop in physical locations, and only the heaviest e-commerce users are not increasing their trips to physical stores. Motivations behind the in-store shopping recovery can be considered hedonistic (Gröppel-Klein et al. 2021, 106), which include, for example, being able to physically touch and feel the products (Wang et al. 2022, 8), personal contact with other people and salesperson, supporting local businesses, seeking inspiration and enjoyment, and glance through products (Zielke et al. 2023, 5).

Due to many drawbacks propelled by the pandemic, such as supply-chain disruptions and contamination restrictions, consumers were more likely to experiment with new habits they had not tried before. For example, their go-to product may not have been available at their usual store, or they have tested an entirely new shopping method, such as online webstores due to lockdowns. These compulsions towards alternatives led to shifting consumers' habits towards a more flexible style, possibly permanently. Based on the transformations, it seems that the central aspect that drives consumers to be experimental and try new shopping methods and channels is the desire for value. (Arora et al. 2020, 4-8) During the pandemic, consumers mainly shopped online, emphasising the channel's advantages and the public's adoption over traditional retailing. Therefore, in-store technologies are capitalised to respond to consumers' increased expectations regarding seamless experiences in brick-and-mortar stores, like flexibility and convenience, and social attributes like instant gratification, immersion, safety, and speed. (Zhu et al. 2021, 18)

One of the influential shopping decision factors that Nicosia (1966, 189) underlines is the potential effect of one's sociocultural background. In some cultures, the social interaction between the buyer and the seller can be incredibly crucial, along with physically touching or tasting the product before completing the buying decision. This is what modern technologies cannot deliver, such as self-checkout machinery, and the only interaction with the retailer occurs between the buyer and the purchased item after the buying decision has been made, which does not notably raise loyalty towards the seller. (Zinkhan et al. 1999, 14) Due to the pandemic, this kind of culture-dependent face-to-face purchasing interaction may expand to other channels as well, outside the classic physical vendors or stores. Consumers in collectivistic cultures may still fancy social interactions but from the comfort of their own homes, meaning that technology has to fill the gap between the buyer and the seller. (Vrechopoulos et al. 2022, 61) In addition, since consumers themselves play a key role in co-creating value at the moment of sale through various emotions they go through with the salesperson (Delpechitre et al. 2018, 21), adapting a strategy that integrates technical and human interactions in a seamless omnichannel way to offer adequate service for all likings can be considered as sufficient and rather innovative. Therefore, technological shifts and online commerce becoming increasingly popular should not disarray businesses nor consumers to only focus on online channels and forgetting traditional means of retailing because there is always something lost in the communication when the point of sale is not happening face-to-face (Vrechopoulos et al. 2022, 61-62).

Since consumers' increased attraction towards shopping in various channels via different mediums such as mobile phones or smart mirrors generates an exponential growth of separate touchpoints, it also complicates the customer journey tremendously, shifting research to customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef 2016, 69). Phygital stores convert from the point of sale to the point of experience (Salvietti et al. 2022, 1170), creating a hybrid consumption experience that cannot be classified as entirely physical or digital (Batat 2021). For physical omnichannel retailing, which has been accelerated by the recent pandemic (Zhang et al. 2022, 839), positive customer experiences appear to be tied to the diversity, aesthetic, and convenience of the physical store (Ameen et al. 2021, 337-338), where the customer can benefit from the advantages of combined channels, experiencing both physical and electronic stimulations (Patten et al. 2020, 1341). Positive emotions sprouting from omnichannel environments can also drive consumers to make

impulsive purchases (Yin et al. 2022, 11). Amidst this intricate fusion of physical and digital channels that enhance customer experiences, the next section focuses on the innovative technologies that can be employed to achieve channel integration and customer satisfaction.

2.3 Innovative technologies for in-store experiences

2.3.1 Integrating channels through technological capabilities

A vast array of different innovative technologies exist that can conceivably improve the in-store experience; some retailers like Ralph Lauren, Burberry and Walmart include features such as smart mirrors, smart carts, radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags, and beacons in their stores (Roy et al. 2020, 300). The pandemic transformed consumer behaviour, urging the adoption of more services that simplify their lives, such as online streaming sites and various home deliveries. Although these services are not new, their increase in popularity during the pandemic was enabled by the vast capabilities of technology. (Grewal et al. 2021, 6) Especially with 5G networks becoming more common, the superfast broadband allows brick-and-mortar stores to apply applications that use the Internet of Things (IoT), Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Mixed Reality (MR), combined with the assistance from Artificial Intelligence (AI) (Shankar et al. 2021, 14). However, as mentioned before, social interactions still stay crucial as long as humans are part of the interaction (Vrechopoulos et al. 2022, 61-62; Zielke et al. 2023, 5; Zhu et al. 2021, 18), cold technologies without social aspects cannot fully substitute traditional retailing methods, but rather supplement them. For example, even in virtual retail stores, it has been noted that consumers want to do their shopping while using virtual avatars positioned in a 3D store that mimics a physical, traditional retail store. That way, all customers can see each other in the virtual setting, retaining the social aspect of shopping while doing it remotely (Krasonikolakis et al. 2014, 650).

It is self-evident that technologies have different use cases depending on their features. However, generally, they can be divided into five categories: payment system, info/product display, shopping experience, information search, and others (Pantano et al. 2017, 90). A useful model for this study is the framework designed by Alexander and Kent (2022, 8) showcased in Figure 1, which is built on the reflection of different phases

of a customer journey, which is realised as a compulsory element in omnichannel retailing.

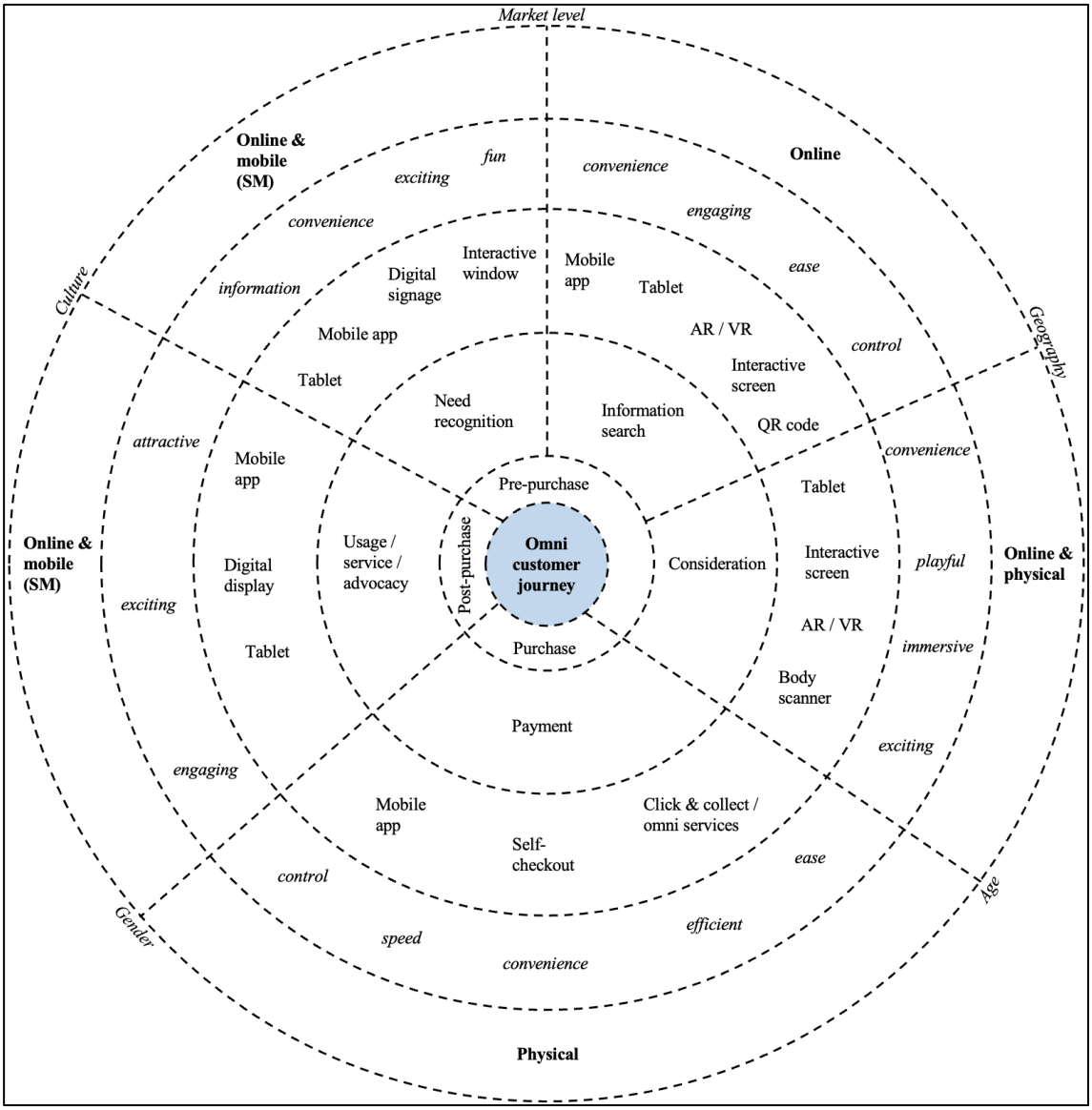

Figure 1. Technology enabled customer shopping journey in-store (Alexander & Kent 2022, 8).

The model divides the technology-enabled customer journey into three phases: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. In the pre-purchase stage, the consumer recognises the need for the product, searches for offerings, and considers options. In-store technologies such as tablets, apps, interactive windows, digital signage, AR/VR, and body scanners aim to create the initial need for the product, in the more hedonistic, utilitarian, immersive, and interactive way, the better. In the purchase step, in-store technologies cover the payment and picking up the product. In an offline channel like a physical store, providing consumers options for self-checkouts, mobile apps, and click-and-collect

services creates a perfect opportunity to merge them into the omnichannel ecosystem. In the final step, the post-purchase stage, consumers use their personal digital devices to submit reviews and word-of-mouth buzz in their social media channels amongst their friends and other potential buyers looking to buy the product. For example, in-store displays can present product-related customer-made posts from social media channels. Therefore, consumers who have already bought the product support and validate future purchases of others. The authors stress that their model is dynamic since many technologies could fit more than one purchasing stage, and new technologies are continuously introduced. (Alexander and Kent 2022, 8)

Overall, using any in-store technology can improve the physical retailer's customer knowledge, which is heavily lacking behind online retailers. Seizing the opportunity to collect data about the preferences and behaviour of consumers can lead to improved inventory management, pricing, and product placement. (Zhu et al. 2021, 18) For instance, mobile apps tend to have better capabilities in collecting and sorting data than mobile websites, which can benefit retailers that capitalise on integrating mobile apps into their omnichannel experience. Customers can monitor their loyalty points, favourites lists, and track the delivery of parcels, only by entering their personal information once when first downloading the app. (Liu et al. 2019, 20) However, because consumers become increasingly more tangled to the online world whilst sharing their private information, it raises security concerns for companies who are supposed to handle the big data (Sánchez & Urbano 2019, 485).

2.3.2 Effect of smart technologies on customer experiences

Traditional definitions of customer experiences are based on research in consumption and customer behaviour models. The consumption experience is stated to include perceptions of the following elements: aesthetic goods, the dimensions of sensory experience, the syntax of communication, time management in terms of pleasure, imagery and fantasy, emotions, and value of play in relation to enjoyment. (Holbrook & Hirschman 1982, 132, 139) Customer experience is additionally defined as the result impression the customer has from the interaction, which leads to the definition of the actual experience being: "The aggregate and cumulative customer perception created during the process of learning about, acquiring, using, maintaining, and (sometimes) disposing of a product or service" (Carbone & Haeckel 1994, 9, 18). However, it is essential to note that the word "customer

experience" contains different nuances depending on its use as either a verb or a noun. As a noun, the concept describes the experience as an outcome rather than a learning response. (Palmer 2010, 196-197) In both cases, the common denominator is how the customer creates or has perceived the upcoming or previous interaction and how these mental pictures have formed.

In terms of how this thesis is concerned, customer experience needs to be defined and evaluated from the omnichannel perspective. Perceived omnichannel customer experience may be defined as the evaluations of customers throughout the seamless interactions across all channels within the specific retailer (Rahman et al. 2022, 612). These, combined with previous conceptualisations of retailing customer experience factors of joy, mood, leisure, and distinctiveness (Bagdare & Jain 2013, 792), can be used to explain the components of customer experience.

Already before the pandemic, the use of in-store technologies have been studied to benefit shopping experience attributes such as enjoyment, interactivity, satisfaction, positive behaviour, and decreasing perceived risk (Roy et al. 2020, 265) while providing quicker and higher quality services (Renko & Druzijanic 2014, 841). During the pandemic, consumers began to discover before-unseen value in shopping phases that were made explicit by the online environment (Babin et al. 2021, 80), forcing retailers to pivot towards technology-based solutions (Shankar et al. 2021, 13), meaning that the pandemic was the ultimate turning point in shaping consumer behaviour to call for smart features. Innovative in-store technologies can improve the overall shopping experience by enhancing enjoyment, control, personality, and interactivity, leading to a higher loyalty towards the retailer (Roy et al. 2017, 266). Customers' expectations for new in-store technologies continuously evolve when retailers implement them, meaning that what once was new becomes a necessity (Grewal et al. 2020, 96; Sheth 2020, 282). That can also be anticipated regarding the attributes consumers crave from the online world once they return to physical stores, expecting a certain level of digital tools they were introduced to in the online setting. Therefore, for traditional brick-and-mortar stores to stay competitive, they need to adopt certain in-store technologies to support positive and frictionless customer experiences in the seamless omnichannel environment.

Firstly, today's consumers envision the same swiftness and convenience from both online and offline stores, setting the physical store to a weaker position from the very beginning

due to the underlying fundamentals of the two. However, retailers who can deliver frictionless and convenient technology-adjusted customer shopping journeys in stores are at an advantage compared to online stores and other physical stores that have not yet implemented similar tactics, ultimately strengthening their customer experience. Secondly, adapting in-store technologies gives retailers more touchpoints with consumers to collect and analyse data about their preferences and shopping habits, once again closing the gap with online businesses that can collect similar data with relative ease and cost-effectively. Thirdly, by automating routine procedures such as stocking shelves, retailers can free their human capital for more influential activities such as aiding customers. (Zhu et al. 2021, 18) The humane side of physical shopping is an advantage over online shopping (Zhu et al. 2021, 18), which is also emphasised by Vrechopoulos et al. (2022, 61-62), and Zielke et al. (2023, 5), meaning that back-end technologies cannot be disregarded in omnichanneling efforts.

The shopping process is the paramount factor for omnichannel consumers (Zhang et al. 2022, 853), and the fundamental part of it is that retailers serve customers when and how they want (Lynch & Barnes 2020, 471). As Alexander and Kent (2022) synthesised, technologies are essential in managing customer experiences (see, for example, Beck & Rygl 2015; Kaushik & Rahman 2015; Larke et al. 2018; Lee 2015; Mosquera et al. 2018), and even the main offline channel, physical stores, is continuously getting more integrated to the mix with online channels to provide personalised and connected customer journey (see, for example, Alexander 2019; Blázquez 2014; Fernández et al. 2018; Mosquera et al. 2018). There is a considerable capability to harness the full potential of current technologies to answer the omnichanneling needs consumers desire by merging the technologies into the overall shopping experience. Besides, the increased demand for seamless shopping channels and touchpoints has derived from the high adoption rate of different technologies amongst consumers, meaning that they should not be phased out by introductions of new technologies. The popularity of mobile devices is an excellent example of how friction between channels such as online and physical stores can be reduced. (Fulgoni 2014, 379)

Some recent studies showcase some relatively unorthodox connections generated by technologies between offline and online stores. For instance, Loupiac and Goudey (2020, 103) concluded that consumers' experience in a webstore reflects their anticipations of the physical store. They revealed that if the website offers a particular atmosphere, such

as the feeling of simplicity when scrolling the products online, consumers also expect similar characteristics from the physical store. Mainardes and Cardoso (2019, 470) found that social media activities have an essential function not only for online businesses but for standard physical stores, too. High adoption of social media is the cause of why some writers such as Kang (2018, 163) state that retailers should spread their promotions and campaigns to as many social media channels as possible while trying to push the customers to share it even further downstream of their social media connections. Therefore, physical stores need to also take the social media section of omnichanneling into account during their marketing efforts, social media most notably positively affecting consumer trust, loyalty and purchase intentions (Mainardes and Cardoso 2019, 470).

2.3.3 Personalisation of smart feature offerings

When retailers assess the possible innovative technologies to adapt to their physical locations, it is necessary to critically analyse what features delight consumers and what only waste resources. For example, features that bring convenience and social presence are appreciated among shoppers, which leads to increased sales. (Grewal et al. 2020, 97) However, the need for social presence via interactions through innovative technologies depends on the person since the depth and type of social stimuli vary based on the opposite party of the interaction, whether they are close friends or members of store staff (Pantano & Gandini 2017, 372). Identifying the aspects that a particular target segment desires is a pivotal function in answering consumers' expectations successfully since personal traits such as preference for quickness, inertia, and the need for human interactions are fundamental whether the customer is going to engage with particular technology or not (White et al. 2012, 257). For example, technologies allowing grab-and-go features might be beneficial in a grocery store, but the customers of a luxury store may seek a more tailored customer experience, such as utilising AR to fit a custom suit virtually (Zhu et al. 2021, 19).

Innovative technologies aim to provide a seamless, customised, and personalised shopping experience (Park et al. 2021, 372). However, personalising customer experience has further benefits than answering the fundamental needs of consumers. If a retailer avails to offer a personalised experience in the pre-purchase phase, such as through product design, product recommendations, information, or promotions, they are more likely to succeed in capturing the customer early in the shopping journey. (Roggeveen &

Sethuraman 2020, 304) Given the evident potential of innovative technologies in cultivating customer experiences, the subsequent section dives into the strategies retailers can apply to benefit from the interrelation of technologies and omnichannel operations.

2.4 Strategies for omnichannel integration and meeting expectations

2.4.1 Integration of online and offline channels

Although omnichannel retailing appears to be what many consumers have been passively looking for even prior to the pandemic, it is still fairly unknown to scholars (Mishra et al. 2021, 161; Timoumi et al. 2022, 148). Directions that require further knowledge include technologically intelligent omnichannel environments, human factors in omnichannel retailing, and customer journeys and experiences (Salvietti et al. 2022, 1170-1172), most empirical omnichannel studies having no supportive theory (Asmare & Zewdie 2022, 70). Albeit the strategy of omnichanneling is founded on channel integration, the literature is absent from the knowledge on how exactly the coalescence should be executed or at least has notable differences regarding the topic (Hansen & Sia 2015, 52; Salvietti et al. 1170). For example, instead of focusing on how to integrate channels, research such as Bang et al. (2013) examined how channel capabilities can be linked with product characteristics (product-channel fit). Riggins (2004) analyzed which channels best suit a particular customer segment (customer-channel fit), and Keller (2010) wrote about the integration of different marketing communication methods into respective channels (communication-channel fit). However, the aforesaid strategies are primarily based on multichannel strategies, whereas omnichanneling requires full channel integration in order for the fundamental concept of seamless, all-inclusive omnichannel shopping to be accomplished (Mirsch et al. 2016, 14). Although channel integration does not necessarily need to happen for some omnichannel effects to occur, for example, online advertising affects the performance of other channels almost as strongly as the parent channel where the initial advertising was conducted (Dinner et al. 2014, 543).

Research is biased towards the risks of channel cannibalisation or complete channel optimisation. (Hansen & Sia 2015, 52) Channel cannibalisation is one of the most prominent risks when adding new channels, which means that the addition of a new medium only shifts sales from an old channel to a new one without gaining new customers or purchases. Another challenge is related to profitability across channels since prices and

margins can have noticeable variances between channels. (Zhang et al. 2010, 176) In addition, retailers can face inconveniences in the vast integration of channels if they are already heavily established in one particular channel that is distinctly more dominant than their other ones. The disadvantage derives from consumers being keenly fixated on a specific channel and may see the addition of other channels as troublesome or pointless. (Cao & Li 2015, 212)

When implementing omnichannel strategies, retailers must also evaluate how many physical store locations they should have and where to locate the stores. Before the pandemic, some retailers were reshaping their store networks by shifting away from smaller physical locations and concentrating on assembling fewer and larger, better-equipped flagship stores (Herring et al. 2014, 3). On the other hand, some incumbents were doing the exact opposite, increasing the number of smaller branches to act more like showrooms, in which consumer researches the product first-hand by visiting a physical store, and then orders the product online (Flavián et al. 2016, 459). In the latter tactic, the point of sale most likely happens online, but the chance of glimpsing and trying the product first reduces the number of returns, which can be costly to the retailer on a large scale. If the customer still chooses to return the product, they can return it to the physical location, again saving costs from the retailer. Therefore, at first glance, technological innovations might lead to a logical consequence of reducing physical stores, but due to lowered online costs, retailers may find opening new smaller stores more appealing to support the growth of omnichanneling. (Gao et al. 2022, 809-810, 823)

The contrary of showrooming is a buyer research behaviour tactic called webrooming, in which the consumer browses the product catalogue online and then proceeds to the physical store to make the purchase (Flavián et al. 2016, 459). Research conducted by Kang (2018, 162) revealed the typical consumer characteristics influencing the preferences between showrooming and webrooming. The study showed that omnichannel consumers who desire information about the product, do price comparisons in multiple channels, and seek social interaction are the ones who are most likely to visit a showroom. On the other hand, omnichannel consumers who also seek product information and social interaction, but in addition a wide range of merchandise as well, were most probable to utilise a webroom. By knowing the characteristics of various customer segments, retailers can adjust their physical and online webrooms accordingly. These two distinct approaches

are trying to gain from the advantages of omnichannel tactics but are doing them differently. (Kang 2018, 162)

In 2017, there were 7 % online-only shoppers and as much as 20 % offline-only shoppers (Sopadjieva et al. 2017, 2), which introduces tremendous growth opportunities for retailers once they find the impeccable mix of channels. For instance, research shows that 67 % of consumers who buy online and pick-up in-store (BOPIS) (Babin et al. 2021, 81) are going to make an additional purchase at the time of collection (ICSC 2019). This suggests that a successful transformation of online-only shoppers into omnichannel shoppers by luring them to pick their purchases from the physical store instead of choosing home delivery can create a notable rise in sales without the negative effect of channel cannibalisation. BOPIS and in-store returns have also been shown to reduce retailers' costs (Mahar et al. 2014, 635)

2.4.2 Seamless omnichannel customer experience

It seems that the most recent research done around omnichanneling revolves around touchpoints, customer journey, and customer experience (Salvietti et al. 2022, 1158), which all require systemic and continuous adjustments to retail strategies in order to capture the consumer as a part of the cohesive ecosystem (Huré, et al. 2017, 315). Barann et al. (2022, 3) constructed a touchpoint concept that consists of stimuli, interfaces, and encounters, in which stimuli and interfaces are components that an organisation can assign as part of its documentation and planning processes, followed by the encounter as in monitoring the touchpoints. The touchpoint concept resembles the early buying behaviour papers like Howard and Seth (1969), which today may be exceptionally functional in the post-pandemic online world since consumers were forced to encounter them during the lockdowns, which is further enhanced by the high adoption of mobile devices and social media (Salvietti et al. 2022, 1157).

However, managing the broad spectrum of mixed touchpoints is becoming increasingly more difficult for businesses aiming to provide a seamless omnichannel venture. Because the amount and types of touchpoints have exploded in a short period, firms are slowly losing control of the overall experience and suffering in terms of creating and managing customer experiences. This requires firms to focus extensively on combining various business functions such as information technology, logistics, marketing, services, human resources and partners. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016, 69) The issue can be pinpointed from

the works of other authors as well since forming a cohesive and fluent omnichannel experience requires retailers to designate active communication means and routes with channel partners (Salvietti et al. 2022, 1170), ultimately propelling towards harmonised and accurate communications (Beck & Rygl 2015, 177). That becomes exponentially more laborious and difficult when the number of touchpoints inflates drastically.

On the other hand, Gasparin et al. (2022, 3) argue that rather than focusing on touchpoints themselves, concentrating on the customer journey originated by the consistencies and variations between the touchpoints can estimate the formation of experience more effectively. When focusing on the holistic journey, retailers can either focus on diminishing the friction during the journey or enhance the overall experience (Gauri et al. 2021, 49). That is also what Rawson et al. (2013, 92) came up with in their research; they found out that customers were fairly unconcerned about singular touchpoints, meaning that a negative experience in one did not phase the overall satisfaction. Instead, the customers were looking at the cumulative experiences the chain of touchpoints provides simultaneously in multiple channels. During the journey, customers process various reactions affected by cognitive, behavioural, or emotional reasons that affect the overall experience (Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 7). By providing a seamless shopping journey, retailers gain more customer engagement, which results in lower retailer switching and increased purchase amounts (Cocco & Demoulin 2022, 469). This does not mean that companies should not engage with individual touchpoints since they still remain relevant insight providers in today's fast-paced digital world. Companies should amplify customer journeys as a part of their operation models in four ways: they need to identify the key journeys, understand current journey performance, redesign and support the experiences, and sustain the transformation through cultural change and continuous improvement. Companies who thrive in offering sound customer journeys have a more valuable competitive advantage compared to those who only excel in touchpoints, with the addition that journey performance is more predictable than touchpoint performance. (Rawson et al. 2013, 93-94, 95) However, customers inevitably experience journeys differently based on contextual, environmental, societal, and individual elements (Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 4)

Research done by Huré et al. (2017) further supports the argument of concentrating on creating a seamless customer journey instead of zooming in on individual touchpoints. They state that consumers expect continuity in products, prices and services no matter the

touchpoint, and if they fail to receive such consistency, it may result in disappointment, anger and frustration. In addition, consumers are looking for seamlessness as in easiness and fluidity, speediness, and pleasantness when moving from one touchpoint to another. (Huré et al. 2017, 320-321) Consequently, it can be noted that the mentioned findings around touchpoints heavily lean towards the bigger picture – the customer journey.

2.4.3 Additional considerations of omnichannel strategies

When the pandemic first hit the retailing industry and shifted consumer behaviour towards more technology-based shopping, whether they were making their purchases in stores or online, the businesses that managed to thrive in the moment of disruption were those with the nimbleness to pivot rapidly. For most companies who succeeded in making the best of the perturbation, the praise belongs to financial, physical, technological, supply chain resources, and innovative and responsive leaders. (Grewal et al. 2021, 6) Therefore, a prominent disadvantage that large organisations face in sudden change is the prolonged ability to act quickly. As technology is a critical influencer in consumer transformation, it can also act as a solution. Companies like Walmart and Target have adopted cloud computing into their processes, allowing physical stores to converge with online shopping, leading to a newly required omnichannel experience, and making retailers more resilient (Sheth 2020, 282).

Critical functions that allow retailers to adapt innovative in-store technologies are to ensure functionality and safety, evaluate investments realistically, and manage customer concerns actively (Linzbach et al. 2019, 47). However, adapting such in-store technologies can be extremely time-consuming, accompanied by extensive use of funds, making it impossible for small and medium-sized companies to deploy them. Therefore, companies need to carefully assess what is the constitutive purpose of the technology, what is the most adequate option, and how it can be sourced. In addition, personal data privacy problems can have devastating effects on brand image, which makes it one of the most prominent risks that need to be addressed. (Zhu et al. 2021, 18) Data privacy issues have become increasingly more relevant due to the increasing amount of personalised experiences, which require vast amounts of sensitive personal data (Roggeveen & Sethuraman 2020, 308).

2.5 Synthesis

2.5.1 Summary of literature

Despite the surge in online sales due to the global pandemic, consumers displayed a resilient desire for in-store shopping. The main drivers for the desire were hedonistic aspects, social interactions, and the tactile connection with products. The evolution of consumer expectations influencing the physical consumer comeback is essential for retailers to comprehend if they seek to prosper in the post-pandemic era.

Consumers' decision-making has always been influenced by various motives, alternatives, and mediators, whereas situational and sociocultural factors lifted their importance during the contamination restrictions. Consumers' motives for recreational shopping greatly shape their choice of the preferred shopping channel, although the borders between different channels have been blurred with the rise of omnichannel retailing. The combination of consumers wanting to keep a hold of hedonistic values while receiving the conveniences that omnichannel shopping provides highlights the value of preserving sociocultural and behavioural shopping norms while embracing smart and innovative technologies. During the pandemic, technologies were brought into the mix mainly in an online form, but consumers are still looking for the same characteristics they got used to while shopping online from home, such as convenience, flexibility, and safety. Although the benefits of in-store technologies have been studied before, the pandemic was the closing event to highlight their true potential, eventually exposing them as the tool of choice to answer today's rising demands of omnichannel customer journeys.

It can be perceived that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for omnichannel shopping by bridging the gaps between channels, forcing consumers to try new methods, and providing necessary insights into consumers' changed behaviour, which resulted in omnichanneling becoming significantly more common or even the standard method of retailing. Channel integration can be considered one of the most prominent steps in omnichannel transformation, as retailers must ensure that in-store technologies align with their online channels, creating a cohesive shopping journey that supports social attributes like instant gratification and immersion.

The omnichannel experience emerged as a solution to cater for the evolved demand of consumers, whereby seamlessly integrating physical and digital elements allows retailers

to transform the point of sale into an immersive and engaging point of experience where every action seems frictionless to the end-user. By embracing diverse, aesthetically pleasing, and convenient environments while uniting tangible and intangible features, retailers can foster positive customer experiences that answer consumers' demands of a shopping journey being enjoyable, interactive, consistent, and personalised. The consistency of simultaneous part-journeys in different channels in terms of factors such as products, prices, and service is critical in forming a sound overall journey that is fluid, pleasant, and speedy for the customer. These consumer expectations cannot be met if channel integration is lacking, in a case where the consumer finds resistance in moving between the channels, cannot access their data and preferences regardless of their chosen touchpoint, cannot experience both physical and electronic stimulation during the interaction, or the journey is inconsistent. That may eventually lead to disappointment for the customer, so delivering a holistic and effortless journey is at the core of omnichannel succession.

However, technology's role goes beyond the emerging physical and digital sides of shopping. Innovative technologies should be harnessed to complement human nature instead of replacing it with digital substitutions, lasting all the way from the pre-purchase to the post-purchase stages. Therefore, a delicate balance of technology and personalisation is vital for retailers, for example, acknowledging the value of human interactions and leveraging it even further with the use of technology, according to the preferences of an individual customer. With a convenient technology balance and understanding of consumers, retailers can take a customer-centric approach by placing the needs and preferences of consumers at the forefront, which further supports positive and sustaining customer experiences. Additionally, employee training is essential in helping customers experience a shopping journey according to their needs.

In the post-pandemic era, retailers must recognise the underlying desire for in-store shopping of consumers, which is not likely to disappear anywhere as long as humans are still the ones who are doing the shopping, seeking for authenticity, engagement, and inspiration. The complex landscape of today's retailing is heavily influenced by the pandemic, in which it is practically impossible for retailers to succeed without taking a technology-complemented consumer-centric omnichannel approach. Therefore, knowing consumers' preferences, behaviour, and purchasing patterns is required to cater to consumers' expectations and guide retailers with their technology adoption decisions.

Fortunately for retailers, data collection and analysis are relatively feasible in a technology-infused omnichannel environment due to the high number of digital devices, such as mobile phones. Besides directly streamlining the shopping journey, data can also optimise physical stores' back-end operations, which indirectly affect the consumers' experience, perhaps through more available staff members. However, with greater power comes greater responsibility, meaning that retailers need to focus on data security and privacy more than ever. Nevertheless, market research and customer feedback will remain as relevant tools, enabling retailers to make continuous optimisations and piloting before releasing new features before full-scale implementation.

2.5.2 Offering a seamless and all-inclusive omnichannel experience

This synthesis of the literature review advocates a holistic approach that combines the best of both physical and digital realms, maintaining the enduring value of in-store shopping and hedonistic aspects while leveraging smart technologies to redefine the future of retail. The literature review suggests that an immersive and memorable shopping journey is achievable through adopting a strategic mix of intrinsic elements of in-store shopping, which have always existed in consumers' shopping expectations, and the utilisation of smart technologies that complement the humane desires of shopping and bring extra value to the journey.

However, the personalisation of offerings is essential since what one consumer values as convenient, others might find it distracting. Since the focus should be on the customer journey rather than constantly increasing individual touchpoints, personalisation becomes increasingly more complex because every touchpoint needs to be dynamic so the overall journey can be personalised according to every individual shopper. There appear to be two levels to personalisation: the feature that technology provides and the depth of it. Therefore, data-driven decision-making via technical integration ascends into a critical position since customer preferences regarding what technologies they want to use and to what level vary. Customer insights can also help retailers choose what the ratio of online and physical aspects should be, for example, when deciding on the amount, size and location of their physical branches, what services they provide, and what their channel integration strategy should be.

If the integration of humane needs and technological tools is executed in a customer-centric manner, not only are the heightened consumer expectations fulfilled, but the

efforts also cultivate brand loyalty, drive revenue, and position retailers as pioneers in the post-pandemic retail industry. Retailers should allocate extensive focus on adequate channel integration so the channels co-exist in a symbiosis so that more channels contribute to more sales, and customers can sense a unifying feeling between the channels, receiving a holistic experience. In addition, since new use cases for existing technologies are discovered and wholly new ones are introduced to the market, retailers who adopt the technology-aided omnichannel strategies are likely to position themselves into a key spot for the future to unlock new opportunities for growth, differentiation, and innovation. This is especially true in the retailing industry, where expectations continuously evolve, meaning that what was once considered a novelty becomes an essential requirement, putting retailers who act rapidly into the forefront to shape the future of retailing.

In conclusion, adapting innovative technologies to support a seamless omnichannel experience requires a strategic and customer-centric approach, data-driven decision-making, and the careful balance of human characteristics and technological advancements. Since the features that smart in-store technologies offer need to be highly personalised, combining insights from consumer behaviour, in-store technologies, and integration strategies sets retailers in a position where they can develop tactics that can offer dynamic shopping journeys based on the individual consumer. To foster dynamic differentiation, retailers need to constantly identify, monitor, and redesign key journeys while supporting the efforts via cultural change and making constant improvements. No matter what strategies retailers adopt, they still need to ensure basic business functions, such as functionality and safety, while evaluating investments before making new adaptations of valuable technologies. This synthesis is visualised in Figure 2.

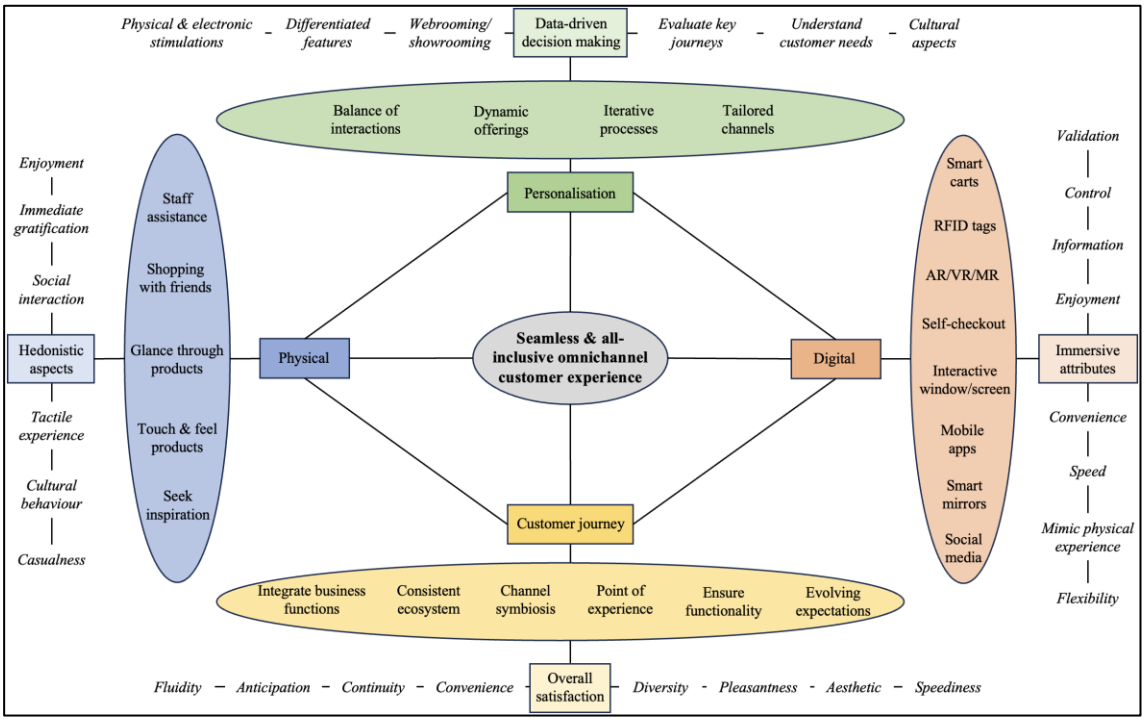

Figure 2. Customer-centric tech-enhanced omnichannel retailing model.

It is also vital to remember that a new disruptive scenario can happen at any time, and companies that were nimble to act quickly in the sudden change were the ones who managed to thrive in the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, all the adaptations and integrations should advance dynamic strategies in the sense that the whole business model may need an abrupt transformation someday. This proposed synthesis serves as a guiding framework for businesses to thrive in the post-pandemic retail landscape, and to assess the marketing efforts of Amazon and Target. Embracing these strategies, retailers can deliver exceptional omnichannel experiences, strengthening brand loyalty and cherishing customer relationships in the highly competitive market, where consumers are more unpredictable than ever.

3 Research design

The research design of this thesis has been developed by utilising the "research onion" created by Saunders et al. (2019, 130, 174). In Figure 3 is the visualised "research onion", which is modified to showcase the chosen research methods of this thesis. The nature of the phenomenon and the setting of the two-case study influences the methodological choices.

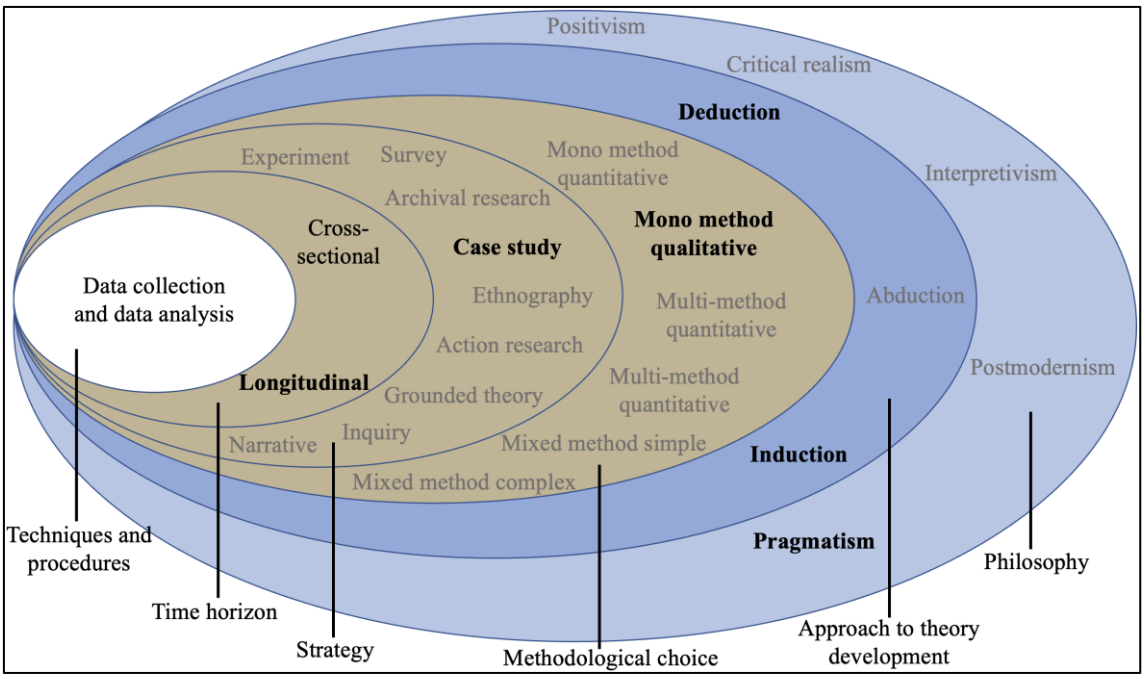

Figure 3. Research onion (Saunders et al. 2019, 130).

In Figure 3, the methodological strategy choices used in the thesis have been blacked out and bolded. The following sections, including research approach, rationale for case selection, data collection, data analysis, and evaluation of the thesis introduce the methods and provide a brief introduction to the limitations and weaknesses of each.

3.1 Research approach

As a research philosophy, pragmatism endeavours to offer practical solutions for future use. A pragmatic approach starts with a problem, which in this thesis is the changed consumer behaviour and struggles to meet the progressed demands, and then tries to answer it by perhaps advancing an organisational development, in this case, the adaptations of technology-enhanced omnichannel strategies. Pragmatism does not exclude any methods on the lower layers of the onion but allows the author to determine

the suitable methods needed to answer the research question. (Saunders et al. 2009, 151) Some ethical issues arise with the implementation of pragmatist philosophy. Since the aim of the thesis is to offer solutions utilising innovative technologies for retailers that are affected by post-pandemic consumer behaviour, the suggestions may have totally different interpretations based on the multiple value systems across the globe, which can differ radically from the author's (Surie & Ashley 2008, 237).

The approach to theory development situates between inductive and deductive as the literature review establishes a preliminary causal network, but it does not limit the findings of the two-case study. That follows the consensus of inductive and deductive approaches complementing each other (Miles & Huberman 1994, 155) and being inseparable (Parkhe 1993, 237). The combination approach suits the needs of the thesis by utilising the existing recent theoretical foundations to assess suitable strategies for successful omnichannel experiences and then evaluating the literature with real-world data. It is done by utilising the cycle of induction-deduction, starting the iterative process from literature and then proceeding to data (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2011, 288), which can create new ideas. As the research topic is a particularly current phenomenon, existing literature is not encompassing regarding the latest retail industry developments. Therefore, the iterative process of employing both inductive and deductive strategies benefits this thesis in reaching an adequate theoretical formulation (cf. Doornbos 2007, 32) from the scarce topical literature by first building the theory and then shaking it with the findings (Miles & Huberman 1994, 155). Additionally, further strategy choices below, such as the two-case study, which cannot prove anything like an empirical study but can offer an amplifiable example (Siggelkow 2007, 21-22), are suitable continuums to the choice of inductive-deductive approach. These strengthen and tie in with the main idea of the thesis by evaluating the post-pandemic era in the omnichannel phenomenon, with relatable case choices to represent the use of varying strategies to create new ideas with the combination of induction and deduction (cf. Suddaby 2006, 639) for retailers to embrace amid consumer behaviour change. The amplifiable examples offer applications and instances of omnichannels and integration strategies for retailers to exploit in-store technologies to match today's demands.

Since the research question is entirely qualitative, the dominant methodological choice is qualitative research, although minor numerical data makes this thesis conducted in mixed methods (cf. Saunder et al. 2019, 152). Qualitative research can be argued to not being

representative, therefore, generalisation cannot be made. Instead, it is said that qualitative studies only showcase the contents, the range of the data, and the factors that influence them. (Lewis & Ritchie 2003, 269) However, a review conducted by Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Laffitte (2014, 595) reveals that numerous scholars demand studies to be re-examined by qualitative means in various disciplines to discover considerations and theories that have yet to be revealed by quantitative means.

The selection of a two-case study methodology for this research is grounded in its appropriateness for investigating the intricate and evolving phenomenon of how innovative technologies can be adopted by retailers to meet consumers' increased expectations for omnichannel in-store experiences after the pandemic. The two-case study approach suits well the complexity of the research context since a two-case can draw cross-case conclusions (Yin 2009, 20) and when analysed in-depth, allows for the most comprehensive understanding to be built between the studied phenomenon and its context (Dubois & Gadde 2002, 554). The benefits of case studies also include the possibility of developing fresh theory and providing a theory that is empirically valid and, therefore, easily testable as well (Eisenhardt 1989, 546-547). In addition, case studies are renowned for their ability to provide holistic and meaningful views on real-life events, allowing researchers to understand complex social phenomena (Yin 2009, 4), therefore, the two-case study approach supports the theoretical and practical contributions of this thesis.

The comparative approach of this two-case study aligns with the research questions due to the case selections giving a versatile view of the modern omnichannel retail sector. The examination of the two case companies allows for a great comparison of similarities and differences between Target and Amazon (cf. Stake 2005, 82-83), facilitating a detailed, rich, complete, and varied understanding of the contrasting strategies and experiences of these two retailers (cf. Flyvbjerg 2011, 301), both of which operate in the same industry but have distinct backgrounds and approaches. Examining more than one retailer brings accuracy, validity, and reliability to this thesis (cf. Noor 2008, 1604), conspicuously due to the variance between the two chosen companies. Given the evolving nature of post-pandemic consumer behaviour and the absence of fully established knowledge and understanding, a two-case study offers the flexibility to explore and develop new concepts (Dubois & Gadde 2002, 559). Since the post-pandemic omnichannel retail landscape is

such an unknown area, both for scholars and managers, contrasting Target and Amazon allows this thesis to generate novel theoretical contributions and managerial implications.

Due to the nature of a two-case study, this thesis cannot state any causal connections between theory and the empirical world by only looking at the efforts of Target and Amazon. Instead, the aim is to compose a plausible theoretical background, and the secondary data regarding the operations and performance of the two retailing giants only act as additional justification. Additionally, losing track of what is relevant to the study and not providing anything new, empirically or theoretically, is a considerable risk related to case studies. (cf. Siggelkow 2007, 22-23) As Siggelkow (2007, 23) states, if the case ends up not providing any intriguing or groundbreaking findings, it at least should contribute to allowing for future theory development. The mix of induction and deduction generates a comprehensive understanding of the studied topic as the interplay of theory and data compliments one another (cf. Miles & Huberman 1994, 155) and applying deductive characteristics to otherwise illogical induction enhances the generalisability (Carr 2009, 48), therefore allowing for future theory building on the foundations of this thesis. However, the general issues of case studies can be mitigated by exploiting the iterative nature of case studies (Eisenhardt 1989, 546) and iterative inductive-deductive approach (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2011, 288; Doornbos 2007, 32).

For this thesis, a mix of cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs was implemented to facilitate the two-case study. The data collection was cross-sectional in nature, meaning that the data collection was conducted during a brief temporal timespan. However, the data used in this thesis represent a longitudinal perspective, able to present change and development (Saunders et al. 2019, 155), spanning from the earliest relevant actions of the two case companies in early 2010 to the most recent events in 2023. This kind of retrospective data collection is considered a plausible option for fully longitudinal designs (Mayer 2008, 96), but studies where the data collection is undertaken in a cross-sectional manner are inclined to selection bias (Singer & Willett 2003, 10).

The phenomenon could have been examined actively over a more extended period, but due to scarce time resources and the contemporary subject of this thesis, the case study is preferred to be carried out as a retrospective form in order to fill the relevant research gap and provide topical solutions for the retail industry. As covered in the respective section, the literature gap has long been neglected by scholars, meaning that due to the urgent

nature of the retail evolution, this may have a tremendous contribution to the academic field, also acting as a quick remedy for the managerial and executive segment. Therefore, this case study benefits from the characteristics of retrospective longitudinal studies, as they are time-efficient and cost-efficient since the data can be collected immediately in a single stint (Mayer 2008, 96).

3.2 Rationale for case selection

Target and Amazon have been chosen for this study due to their differences in nature, one being a physical retailing behemoth and the other being the king of e-commerce. These two companies supply an expansive assortment of procedures undertaken during and after the pandemic, which can be reflected in relation to the existing theory. Because the companies have very distinct backgrounds, the findings accommodate both offline and online retailers, and therefore, this study sheds light on the challenges and opportunities across the whole industry of retailing. A deep sense of how these industry-leading retailers respond to the changing consumer landscape is received, whether the stakeholders interested in this thesis have managerial or scholarly motives. Additionally, Target and Amazon represent the current wave of omnichannel retailers. Both are on the edge of recent consumer behaviour transition, aiming to nourish their customers with all-inclusive technology-supplemented omnichannel solutions. Therefore, they offer valuable insights for this study about the different strategies they capitalise on to integrate in-store technologies and humane characteristics into one coherent customer journey, aligning with the research questions.

However, even though the two companies are pursuing to achieve the same outcomes of immersing their customers into the loyal group of customers who are deeply engaged and satisfied with the customer journeys they experience, they have very distinctive approaches. Target started as a traditional brick-and-mortar store, which was the type of retailer to suffer the most from the pandemic, and therefore, having to increase their means of reaching customers via digital channels. Physical retailers like Target were also the ones who experienced the consumer comeback most intensively and had to develop a sufficient response to retain their customers. However, due to Target's innovative omnichannel approach, which it has been implementing for quite some time, consumer evolution seems more challenging than the pandemic's start, to what it had been preparing for by coincidence for years. On the other hand, Amazon has dominated the e-commerce

side of retailing for the past years and has had the delight of experiencing the surge of online retailing amid the pandemic, being exceptionally well prepared for the unseen situation. However, Amazon is also adjusting its strategies to better correlate with the shifted omnichannel needs of consumers, for example, by establishing small physical stores and offering versatile fulfilment options. Amazon's operations are shaped according to omnichannel methods, although the physical touch and social aspects are rather diminutive, which can be prerequisites for some of today's consumers.

Due to the broad range of retailing, limiting the scope is needed. Based on the author's research, the phenomenon mainly affects non-grocery retailers such as apparel and department stores. However, it does not mean that grocery retailers are not experiencing a change as well, but consumers' demands and adequate solutions are not interconnected between grocery and non-grocery retailers. Therefore, food retailing is excluded from the study, meaning that the literature does not cover consumer habits or company strategies of essential retailing, and neither Target's nor Amazon's grocery customers nor grocery performance are considered. However, some technologies and omnichannel strategies used by the two case companies in their grocery operations are included in their respective sections since many could also be applied to non-essential retailing. Because the post-pandemic omnichannel strategies that companies ought to apply are extremely recent, the long-term impact of the endeavours that Target and Amazon are taking to facilitate consumers' novel demands and foster satisfaction may sometimes be ambiguous or fragile.

3.3 Data collection

Only secondary data was used in this two-case study since exploiting already existing data is better suited for a thesis with limited time and financial resources (cf. Mayer 2008, 96), also being more manageable to organise (Vartanian 2010, 13). Other advantages include the possibility of discovering unseen results and data availability for readers to access. However, some disadvantages are the applicability and quality of the data collected. (Saunders et al. 2019, 352-354) In order to avoid biases and pitfalls that are apparent when handling secondary data, a robust data collection method is mandated to screen each source for its relevance and rigour. Therefore, the data screening process of this thesis employs a structured and systematic approach to ensure the overall validity of

a source. The process vouches that the seemingly relevant data is appropriate for the research questions of this thesis (cf. Saunders et al. 2009, 272).

The process was initiated with a data search. The quest started from the search engines of Google and EBSCOhost by using key terms "pandemic", "Covid-19", "in-store technology", "physical stores", "omnichannel", "customer experience", and "shopping behaviour", always preceded with the company name that was under research at the time, either "Target" or "Amazon" (for example, "Amazon physical stores"). After the search results were received, Figure 4 illustrates the individual process of screening each search result to determine their suitability for inclusion. For the source to have been approved for the two-case study, it needed to pass each step without exceptions. Verification was involved as the process of confirming throughout the data screening, incrementally improving this thesis's reliability, validity, and rigour (cf. Morse et al. 2002, 17).

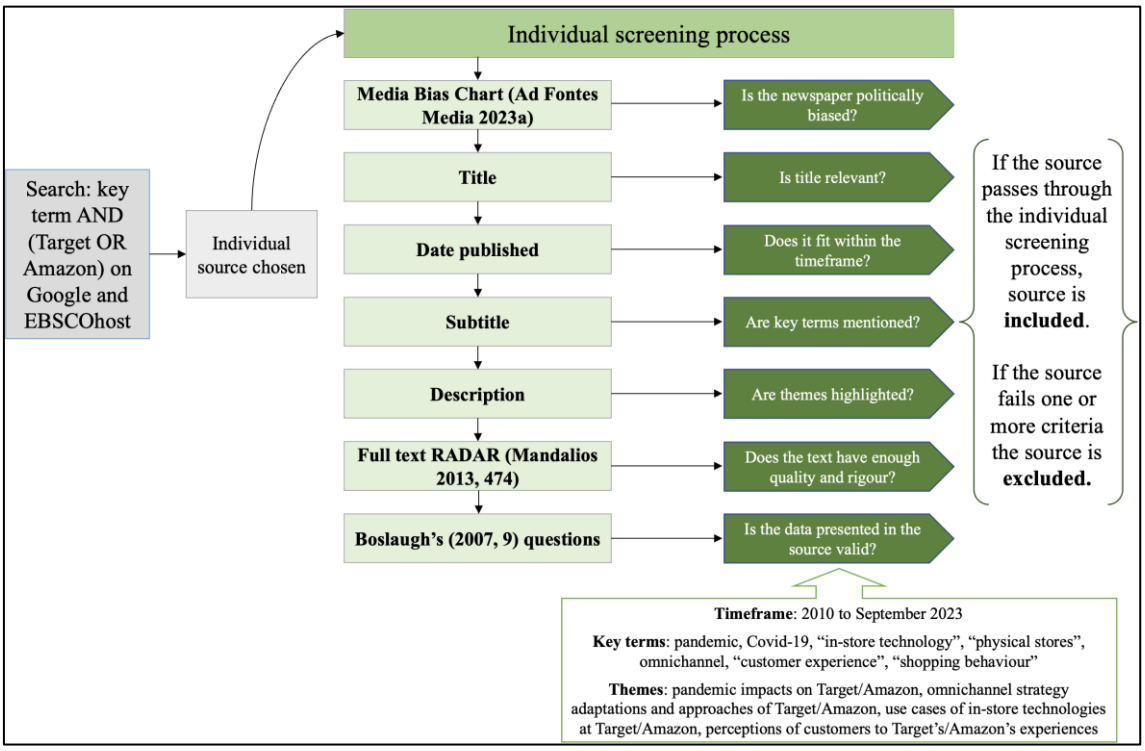

Figure 4. Process of individual source evaluation.

After the search results were listed in the search engine, either Google or EBSCOhost, the first step was to inspect the source type and the publisher's name. If the source type was a newspaper article, then the political bias of the publisher was examined with the use of the Media Bias Chart (Ad Fontes Media 2023a), which is operated by analysts following a methodical content analysis procedure. Metrics such as expression, headline,

political position, and language are rated by a team of analysts from the whole political spectrum to provide reliability within chosen articles and ensure their credibility (Ad Fontes Media 2023b). The screening process could proceed if the publisher was determined as factual and balanced. Non-newspaper sources did not have similar auditing.

The second step was to assess the source's title to ascertain its relevance for the two-case study. The title was required to fit this thesis's general direction, indicating that the source contains applicable data, whether about the operations or performance of the two case companies. Following this, the publication date was verified to ensure that the material falls within the set timeframe, which spans from the early 2010s to the latest developments in September 2023. The focus of this thesis is on the most recent shifts in the retail industry, so the beginning of the timeframe is underrepresented in the findings since sources that were older than 2020 were only seen beneficial for this thesis if the data was still considered as topical or the data provided historically consequential information.

If the source was found to be timely, further scrutiny was applied by checking the subtitle and description for the mention of key terms and themes. If some of the key terms or synonyms (for example, "physical stores" and "brick-and-mortar stores") were found in the subtitle, the possible description was surveyed regarding the themes. The presence of desirable themes were pandemic impacts on Target/Amazon, omnichannel strategy adaptations and approaches of Target/Amazon, use cases of in-store technologies at Target/Amazon, and perceptions of customers to Target's/Amazon's experiences.

Then, the full text of each source was considered for its quality and rigour according to the author's capabilities to assess the relevance, authority, date, appearance, and reason for writing (RADAR) of the source. This assessment was utilised to determine that the data is relevant to this thesis, the author is reliable, the data is usable, the source is professional, and the source has no hidden agendas. (cf. Mandalios 2013, 474) Finally, a three question-set was employed to close the evaluation (Boslaugh 2007, 9):

> What was the original purpose for which the data were collected? What kind of data is it, and when and how were the data collected? What cleaning and/or recoding procedures have been applied to the data?

If the questions were answered confidently, the sources were applicable to the study to provide insight and draw conclusions based on the literature.

The findings include secondary data from mainly qualitative sources: newspaper articles, industry reports, market research, transcripted executive interviews, and company websites. However, minor quantitative data was included from statistics and sales numbers).

3.4 Data analysis

The method for data analysis can be described as a mix of two methodologies or a mixed methods review. Analysis was done by a content analysis method, while synthesis followed a scheme of thematic synthesis. This was done to extract as much as possible from the data and answer the research questions as thoroughly as possible.

Content analysis suits data that is presented in written form, such as keywords and themes, allowing for interpretation of the results based on conclusions of the data (Bengtsson 2016, 10), which is why it was especially suitable for the secondary data that was in the form of newspaper articles, market research, industry reports, transcripted executive interviews, and company websites. Content analysis is instrumental since statistical analysis is not capable of providing meaning to the data (Bengtsson 2016, 13).

In terms of the topic, content analysis was used as it allows the demonstration of themes of omnichannel strategies and in-store technologies as one of the traits of content analysis is that it presents theoretical backgrounds, concepts used, procedures and interpretations (Bengtsson 2016, 11).

When it comes to responsibility, it is essential to bear in mind the precautions that were taken into consideration to ensure validity. The researcher's responsibility within the analysis phase lies in limiting errors that happen through fatigue, interpretation errors and bias. Validity and reliability are ensured by minimising the above-mentioned common pitfalls to produce rigorous and credible results. (Bengtsson 2016, 11)

Throughout the data collection process, data was grouped and categorised within an informal list of the contents and themes presented within the data set. The data was identified by scrutinising each source at a time and immediately gathered on a separate document while simultaneously connecting themes and concepts in the actual thesis document. Throughout the process, data was listed within a table by date, publication, author, and article title.

Once data content was examined to provide meaningful output, the synthesis followed to make sense of the content analysed. The thematic synthesis included elements of constructing descriptive themes and later developing analytical themes (Thomas & Harden 2008, 4), which included examples of descriptive themes such as the usefulness of in-store technologies and omnichannel expectations and analytical themes such as balancing technological and humane aspects. Constructing analytical and descriptive themes can be conducted in a manner deemed rigorous (Thomas & Harden 2008, 7), which is a critical remark when considering the evaluation criteria for the thesis.

Synthesis entails a process where researchers translate themes and concepts from one scenario to another, in addition to validifying that the context matches each case and remains clear (Thomas & Harden 2008, 8). This entailed translating the findings into a cross-case comparison and investigating the findings of in-store technology-infused omnichannel strategies based on the literature.

The thematic synthesis also offers opportunities for pattern identification and hypothesis generation, which is how the thesis also aims to theoretically contribute to future research by offering synthesis on existing cases and theories as well as testable propositions. Thematic synthesis is also described as one of the more accessible synthesis methods and seeks to provide consistent analysis across various sources. (Booth et al. 2012, 40, 226)

Thematic synthesis is done by reorganising and clustering the data under specific umbrellas and categories to match the research objectives and questions. The cross-case comparison was used to anticipate patterns, contrasts and similarities between Amazon and Target. The synthesis was conducted to bridge gaps between literature and findings, especially within the post-pandemic era and drawing back to academic discourse.

During the analysis process, themes were identified and grouped in the following ways:

- Pandemic impacts on Target/Amazon
- Omnichannel strategy adaptation and approaches of Target/Amazon
- Use cases of in-store technologies at Target/Amazon
- Perceptions of customers to Target's/Amazon's experiences

These were primarily grouped separately for each case and later connected in and compared in the latter stage of the cross-case comparison.

Since the data was collected through EBSCO and Google search engines and carefully individually analysed based on the content, the preliminary analysis approach aligns with the previously mentioned research method. After each data was meticulously validated with the screening process, the data was explored in depth by identifying key concepts and themes based on the content.

Figure 5 outlines the complete research process, from gathering data to content analysis and thematic synthesis. The figure lays out the process and the critical steps taken in each stage. The process offers transparency, replicability, and a clear set of guidelines to reach similar findings. The steps start with the data collection and validation, which has also been explained in detail in Figure 4. The content analysis followed, which included managing an informal document of findings, allowing for in-depth exploration by individually combing through the source and exploring unique data within it. Once data was collected and gathered based on content, the thematic synthesis followed, which allowed for meaningful connections by reorganising the original findings. The thematic synthesis included the cross-case comparison to bridge theoretical foundations and real case examples correlating differences and similarities between the two chosen cases.

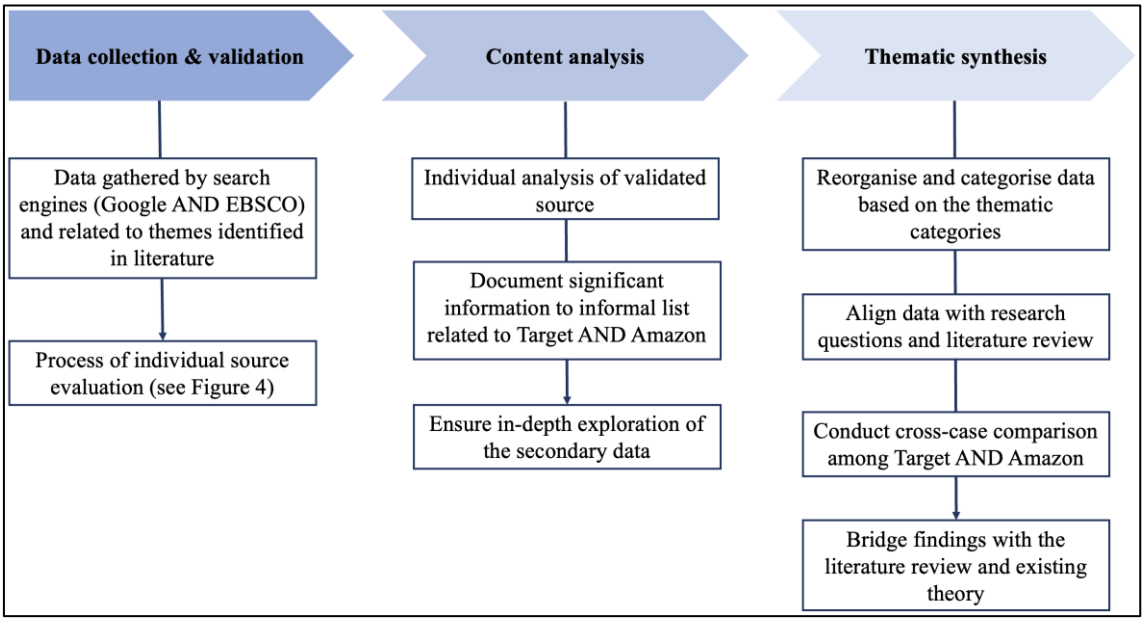

Figure 5. Data analysis outline.

As illustrated, Figure 5 offers a step-by-step approach and methodology to the used research approach concerning data analysis, which follows the data collection methodology. This stage is crucial for transparency and further elaboration on how data

was analysed and the steps taken. After the data analysis has been explained, the next part is the remaining data evaluation.

3.5 Evaluation of the thesis

In regard to evaluating the trustworthiness of the thesis, one needs to evaluate and review the content based on well-known and used criteria. For the purpose of this thesis, the Lincoln and Guba (1985) evaluation criteria is utilised due to the popularity and prior use of it. It has also been frequently adopted in qualitative research. This thesis will follow the general guidelines of four concepts, which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300). Evaluation criteria are required for the integrity of the thesis and its content.

Credibility is essential to prove that the findings resemble the real world (Lincoln & Guba, 296), which is also relevant considering the nature of the study in terms of providing practical utility as well. In other words, credibility serves as the truth value of the thesis (Hammarberg et al. 2016, 500). In addition, there are three questions that one should consider in terms of credibility (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294):

1. Familiarity of the topic and sufficiency of data in terms of meriting claims?
2. Are there strong links between observation and categories?
3. Can another researcher come close enough to the results and agree with the made claims?

Considering this study, a few commonly known approaches and measures were taken in this regard, such as a sufficient amount of time researching and peer reviewing with advisors in the form of regular check-ups. Before collecting any data, adequate time was spent on the topic and studying the phenomenon. In the end, credibility entails that the findings are not only trustworthy but plausible (Stenfors et al. 2020, 598).

Transferability refers to how well the research can be applied and predicted in a broader or another context (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 296-297), transferability also allowing the findings to be applied, for example, to another group or setting (Stenfors et al. 2020, 598). Transferability aims to demonstrate a connection between this thesis and existing prior research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). To address these criteria, the thesis offers

an extensive explanation of the context, an open recitation of the analysed case companies, as well as a rationale for the case selections.

Dependability, the third criterion (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 299) entails that there is a clear logic to the research and traceability of findings and documentation to build trust among the reader (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294), which in this case of this thesis happens in the form of transparency. This thesis aims to address this by detailing and outlining the research process with the object of increasing traceability.

The final evaluation criterion is confirmability (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 300), meaning that the outcomes and findings are not based on bias or interpretation but rather on the data. The outcomes should be links between findings and easily understood by others (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 294). This is addressed by detailed explanations of findings and limiting bias by offering clear examples to draw conclusions and not base findings solely on imagination.

While this thesis follows academic rigour, there are some limitations that must be acknowledged. Due to time constraints, the study relied predominantly on secondary data. While this allowed for a comprehensive analysis of longitudinal trends, it may have generated biases that primary data collection could have mitigated, such as wrongly interpreting secondary data produced by others. For example, direct interviews from the case companies could have reduced the risk of personal biases during the data search or interpretation. Additionally, secondary data, particularly newspaper articles, present a risk related to contamination, where the publisher might collect, organise or share the data without transparent methodology (Rabianski 2003, 51).

Since the research process has been outlined and evaluated, the following section presents the key findings from the case study.

4 Findings

This section aims to construct a comprehensive understanding of the omnichanneling environment of the two chosen case companies, Target and Amazon. The section is divided into three sub-chapters, of which the first two analyses the landscape and efforts of the respective case companies, and the third creates a distinct comparison between the two retailers. The two sub-sections analysing the case companies include the same points of interest, starting from assessing the pandemic's effects and ending up with the customers' satisfaction towards the retailing experience. Despite the analysis being conducted in a similar manner for both companies, the contrasts between the two are evident due to the distinguishing characteristics of Target and Amazon. The section ends with a cross-case comparison where the operations and approaches of the two case companies are analysed while drawing explicit bridges to the literature review section.

4.1 Target

4.1.1 Impact of Covid-19 on Target

As a traditional retailer, Target was initially at the losing end of the retail battle during the pandemic. This was indeed the case in terms of physical sales due to consumers' personal preference of avoiding any chances of contamination, but also because of suggestions and restrictions determined by the officials. As an immediate effect once the pandemic hit, e-commerce soared with the expense of physical retailing. (Salpini 2021) However, because Target is not a non-essential retailer since it also sells groceries, it belonged to the group of essential retailers that were not government-mandated to close its operations. Therefore, Target's online sales erupted, while in-store sales still accounted for over 80 % of total sales in the first full quarter of the pandemic (Del Rey 2020). Overall, sales increased by almost 20 % during the first pandemic year (Meyersohn 2021).

Target managed to leverage its online operations, as the sales grew through online channels by as much as 275 % in the first April of the pandemic. (Tyko 2020a) Early in the pandemic, Target gained increases in discretionary product sales when consumers were stocking on necessities. However, when the pandemic's duration extended for a longer period, people also started to conduct non-essential shopping at Target. The effect was further intensified since the public was not allowed to travel or eat outside, leading to a 30 % growth in home furnishing and a 10 % rise in apparel categories (Barro 2020).

Although Target is known as a physical-first retailer, it has amplified its e-commerce efforts for an extended period of time. For the first time in 2015, the company invested more in technology that supports omnichannel strategies rather than only anchoring on brick-and-mortar stores (Wahba 2016), resulting in Target being capable of serving its increased online customer base.

Although Target was paying more attention to digital technologies and strengthening its e-commerce capabilities, it never wanted to entirely morph into the role of an online retailer. Instead, it opted to retain supporting positive in-store experiences by creating a seamless omnichannel experience, where borders between online and offline channels are minimal (Mixson 2021), to become the most accessible place to shop in America (Lauchlan 2020) This approach proved beneficial as the company did not have to wait long for its in-store sales to start climbing again since in the summer of 2020, the sales from brick-and-mortar stores were already up by over 10 % compared to last year. Predominantly, electronics and apparel sold significantly more than comparable sales from the year earlier, while average buying amounts were up when consumers visited fewer retailers and sourced most of their shopping from the same retailer. (Halzack 2020) In addition, Target managed to turn the newly acquired online shoppers into omnichannel customers by becoming the first choice for its customer to fulfil their shopping needs once the need emerges, the effect also extending to physical channels (Barro 2020).

Contamination restrictions limiting store visitors weakened Target's capability to serve its customers (McNamara 2020). However, the prominent reason why Target was able to flourish in the pandemic and expand its sales on all shopping channels was due to the previous investments to support the ever-increasing surge of e-commerce and same-day delivery options. The indigenous conception of Target was that customers were going to lean towards quicker delivery methods in the future, and the pandemic heavily contributed to this vision. (Halzack 2020) Only minor disruptions occurred in the supply chain when consumers were hoarding essentials such as toilet paper and hygiene products (CBS News 2020).

4.1.2 Analysis of innovative technologies used by Target

At the beginning of Target's customer journey is the advertisement. For online shoppers, Target has collaborated with its own company, Roundel, to offer website users the most relevant advertisements based on their information and habits. The partnership offers

strategically placed, relevant, and personalised ads for users for a more tailored experience while providing more value for ad-providing partners. (Target 2022a) In addition, Target having developed its own in-house media company brings it an additional revenue stream outside of retailing (Repko 2022a). The company calls this tactic interested-based advertising, in which Target allows the third-party service providers to gather certain non-identifiable information such as clicks and time about the customer when they visit various channels of Target. Usually, the data is gathered via web beacons or cookies. (Target 2023) In omnichannel retailing, channel advertising can have cross-channel effects, meaning that online advertising can be as meaningful to in-store performance as more traditional advertising means.

Online shoppers are offered three methods of how Target can fulfil their orders, two of which turn them into omnichannel customers. Once the online customer enters the mobile app or website and proceeds to checkout online, they have three different delivery options: pick-up, drive-up, and home delivery. Pick-up lets the customer collect their order from the store without the need to wait in line, the drive-up option offers an employee to bring out the order all the way to the customer's car, and if the customer is not in a hurry to receive the order, they can choose shipping. (Chopra 2022) To amplify the effect of BOPIS amongst its customers, Target offers a mobile feature that lets customers see how a product, such as a sofa, fits inside their homes via the use of AR technology (Perez 2017a). More recently, drive-up returns have been added as a method of returning an item, in which a customer can initiate the return process through the app and simply return the items straight from their car (Kline 2023).

Target is bringing mobile channels into the physical mix by expanding its mobile loyalty apps to complement customers who are not using the physical club card. The loyalty program offers products and deals based on the shopping history of the customer, whether the buying takes place online or offline. (Meyersohn 2019a) The store infrastructure also supports the omnichanneling habits of customers, such as taking advantage of mobile phones as a source of information whilst shopping by providing a high-speed wireless network (Target 2017a). Notably, Target's official mobile app has been developed to enhance customer engagement and immersion in the physical in-store experience compared to not using the app. Features of the app include organising shopping lists, signing up for coupons, checking item availability and in-store location, browsing products and offers, ordering online, and the ability to scan physical receipts to earn

rewards in both online and offline channels. (Wharton Online 2023) The in-store product locator is supported with Bluetooth beacons, which track and guide the customer to find the right product. Along with making the in-store location finder possible, the same beacons are also used to suggest nearby deals (Perez 2017b), location-based product recommendations, and features of trending items (Target 2015a). The app strives to streamline the customer experience in a way that removes the border of using a digital companion in a physical experience (Johnson 2013).

Physical shopping experiences are intensified beyond the mobile app companion with the use of interactive technologies. In 2019, Target and Disney collaborated to bring small-sized Disney stores inside selected Target locations to cater to even the youngest of the family. The sections are equipped with interactive displays to play and watch movies from and photo opportunities in the form of smart mirrors where one could see themselves wearing Mickey's hat or a lightsaber through AR technology. (Target 2019) Furthermore, Target is bringing Ulta Beauty shop-in-shop to its beauty sections, which are also equipped with smart technologies such as a virtual make-up trying tool that ensures a safe way for customers to trial products (Tyko 2020b).

Target also utilises technology to unchain human resources to other assignments from tasks that can be automated. The company freed thousands of team member hours previously used to cover tech support to spend more time with customers inside the stores by developing a bot software to troubleshoot and fix store IT issues. The effect of newly released employee hours is even further supercharged by capitalising on handheld technologies used on the sales floors. Target built in-house software for staff' handheld terminals that can meet customers' demands right on the spot by, for example, checking the product availability and fulfilling customer's orders all the way to choosing the delivery method. The software displays an example of omnichannel efforts that Target is taking in the back-end operations by combining technologies, supply chain, and online stock together (Target 2017a) to ease the daily operations of stores by, for example, support IoT services, team member services, and manage workflow (Woods 2018).

Target utilises machine learning (ML) in ordinary retail operations, such as ordering replenishments once the shelves are running out of a certain product, but in more sophisticated areas too, such as tagging photographs uploaded onto its website (Reed 2020). Also, RFID tags are used in product hangtags to effectively stay on the wave of

customer trends as ordering more of the same products is more manageable. Smart RFID help fulfil online orders and inform omnichannel customers utilising their mobile phones of the precise availability of the product at their closest store. (Target 2015b) In addition, the company has developed their self-checkout to provide a smoother and instinctive experience (Target 2017a) while supporting all contactless payment methods (Rodriguez 2022). To maximise sales, fulfilment centres are equipped with software that allows customers to choose from a pool of back-up items if it happens that the customer's first choice is not available (Danziger 2022), and an option to allocate another person to pick-up the order (Repko 2022a).

However, even if Target is applying technologies to automate processes, such as bots to fix IT issues, the company still prefers humane aspects over automation when personal interactions are in question. In 2019, the company CEO stated they were not eager to implement robots onto the sales floor to retain the human touch. (Meyersohn 2019b) Therefore, Target's priority is to focus on customer touchpoints, whereas technology complements humans in operations where the customer is not present (Kohan 2020).

4.1.3 Target's omnichannel strategy

Behind Target's success in the post-pandemic retail industry is the focus on thriving in all the channels the company operates in while trying to provide a holistic customer experience, no matter the channel (McCann 2022). Despite being a physical retailer destined to fail due to consumers disappearing from the street scene, Target mainly survived thanks to the early investments in customer omnichannel adaptations. The CEO of Target, Brian Cornell, stated in 2017 that the company is concentrating on long-term strategies, putting the customer experience on the pedestal by smoothlining the shopping journey via rapid, stable, and capable digital infrastructure. Therefore, Target redesigned physical stores with the help of digital features such as intelligent mobile terminals that allow the employees to serve customers with all their needs at one point of interaction and combine online channels, such as savings and flagship apps, together. (Target 2017b) By immediately paying on the shop floor in the presence of a store employee with a handheld device, customers can skip the waiting lines at the traditional cash registers (Garcia 2018). The newly formulated store design is based on customers' feedback and aspires to serve omnichannel customers who prefer to jump between channels actively (SCT 2017).

Brick-and-mortar stores have always been the backbone of Target's retailing model, which it is bolstering even further via extensive investments. In 2022, Target aimed to open new stores and remodel existing ones to take into account the growing demand for physical shopping after seeing the investments in store pick-up options and in-store experiences pay dividends year after year. Same-day services have been one of the fundamental elements of growing the business since way before the pandemic, Target having realised it ahead of competitors. (McCann 2022) Target offers pick-ups from in-store Starbucks cafes and returns via its drive-up services, which allow customers to come and collect their orders without long delivery times (Target 2022a). It is practising rather aggressive marketing tactics to bring its same-day services to consumers' awareness. For example, it launched a sales campaign simultaneously with Amazon's equivalent, except that Target can fulfil orders on the same day through BOPIS options, whereas Amazon cannot (The Daily Record 2019).

Most importantly, Target provides a broad range of same-day delivery services and options to serve customers in any way they want to conduct their shopping, increasingly the journey starting from online and ending up to in-store, drive-through, or parking spot pick-up. In addition, Target offers customers collecting their orders a separate area from the rest of the shoppers, which has additional products and self-checkouts (SCT 2017). To further support the same or next-day fulfilment of online orders, the company is establishing sortation centres which advance the sorting of online orders to allow quicker deliveries (Target 2022a), expanding the number of sortation centres in the US market to at least fifteen by the end of 2026, while using the nearly 2000 stores as distribution hubs (Young 2023).

Target is utilising physical stores as brick-and-mortar warehouses to ensure quick deliveries. With a vast store footprint, the company has an expansive coverage of warehouses that can fulfil same-day deliveries that many online competitors offer, which has now been followed by other physical retailers as well. This tactic was first implemented at Target in 2017, which turned out tremendously successful once the pandemic shifted physical shopping towards home deliveries. (Freedman 2022) The approach is paying off since 95 % of Target's total sales are fulfilled by physical stores, meaning that even the majority of digital orders are processed through them (McCann 2022), which is no wonder due to the integration of supply chain and online channels (Target 2017b).

That remarkably successful omnichanneling approach has resulted in Target opening 30 new stores and remodelling 200 existing stores to be better suited for increasing same-day services, such as BOPIS. The new stores extend the current markets in new areas, and remodels will modernise the store atmosphere and improve hold spaces and pick-up areas for more efficient online fulfilment. (Target 2022a) Remodelings are executed according to the market; for example, a store that customers often visit on foot may offer easy grab-and-go items at the front of the store, whereas tourism destinations may have supplies needed for travelling outside of home (Kline 2023). Expanding the store fleet can be noticed from the number of active stores year-by-year, as the number of stores mainly remained the same for the majority of 2010s, but the number has increased with at least 20 stores per year since 2016 (Smith 2023a).

The format of new stores varies depending on the individual market, urban areas receiving stores smaller in size, and the likes of Texas getting megastores (Edelson 2022), also due to the increasing need for backroom fulfilment capacity for rapid deliveries (Young 2023). Even though Target is establishing more sortation centres to increase its next-day delivery coverage (Young 2023), fulfilling orders directly from stores is lucrative for Target's cost management since it shaves about 40 % off from delivery costs compared to a delivery from a sortation centre (Thomas 2019).

Target exercises many tactics that boost consumer spending in all of the channels. For example, Target collects data from club card members and loyalty app users, analysing and using it to create personalised offerings based on consumers' habits and shopping history (Meyersohn 2019a). The company encourages impulsive buying by pick-up customers having separately designed footpaths for them to initiate impetuous needs (SCT 2017) and combined stores taking localised inspiration for their designs from the surrounding geographical environment and local producers (Edelson 2022). This approach is clearly serving Target well since about a fifth of customers who collect orders by themselves make in-store purchases on the same trip (Repko 2023), in addition to the 90 % fulfilment savings the company makes when customers pick up the orders themselves (Thomas 2019).

Shop-in-shop collaborations are a vital part of Target's omnichanneling strategy. In addition to the before-mentioned cooperations with Ulta Beauty, Starbucks, and Disney (Repko 2022b), Target also brings Apple stores with specially trained staff to some of its

physical locations (Target 2022b) and a massive catalogue of Levi's goods, including the recent extension to home supplies on top the traditional denim wear (Velasquez 2022). For customers shopping for jewellery, Target will soon collaborate with piercing company Rowan to offer in-store ear piercings (Repko 2022a). Beyond physical ties, Target further strengthens its omnichannel efforts with these brands by including benefits from them through its loyalty program, such as promoting free and extended Apple service trial periods when being a member of Target Circle (Target 2022b). The explanation behind these shop-in-shop collaborations is that they offer a more personal shopping experience than a standard, barely merchandised shelf space without assigned experts and a customised presentation of the display set. With this tactic, Target and collaborating brands aim to provide mutual customers with an omnichannel experience, where all of their demands are answered on a single trip to Target (Danziger 2022).

4.1.4 Customer perceptions on the journey and experiences

The approach that Target is taking to its digitally enhanced omnichannel shopping experience is generating positive returns in terms of sales growth since it has been positive from 2017 to 2022 (Smith 2023b), and foot traffic returned to typical levels quickly after the pandemic (Metz 2022). However, even though foot traffic has been mainly positive in year-on-year numbers, there have been monthly or even quarterly dips in physical visitors since 2020, and the foot traffic increases have remained quite negligible (Gravy Analytics 2022; Gravy Analytics 2023). The overall trend of website visits has been in decline after the high of 258,5 million visits in December 2019 (Chevalier 2022a) to only 188,2 million in December 2022 (TipRanks 2023), even though e-commerce sales have been on a steady rise for most of the 2010s, experiencing even more significant surges in 2020s (Statista Research Department 2023a). Still, online sales accounted for 18,6 % of total sales in 2022, whereas the share was only 8,8 % in 2019 (Smith 2023c).

Online, there are different understandings about Target's customer retention rate. For example, InMarket's (2022) consumer loyalty report found that Target is scoring below average in customer loyalty of big box retailers. In contrast, Business Insider reports that the company enjoys higher loyalty than average amongst other major retailers (Reuter 2023). Nevertheless, customer satisfaction rates were at the industry average before the pandemic, according to the ACSI Retail and Consumer Shipping Report 2018-2019

(ACSI 2019)[1]. However, recently, Target has been the choice of 36 % of American consumers as the best in-store shopping experience, beating Walmart by a hefty 9 % margin. From the age group of 25-34, it was favoured by 47 %, and from ages 18-24 the rate was 41 %. (Bizouati-Kennedy 2023).

Factors that counted towards Target's clear win on in-store customer experiences were bringing convenience and positive hedonistic aspects. In-store cafes, self-checkouts, stocked shelves, easy store layout, and effortless parking were some of the characteristics which made the shopping experience more customer-friendly. On the other hand, Target's more pleasant environment, such as better lighting and design, merchandising, and broader aisles, served more comfort to shoppers than competitors' store atmospheres. (Bizouati-Kennedy 2023) The company has been remarkably triumphant in providing customers with an all-inclusive and seamless experience, to the extent that the experience is so positively overwhelming and convenient that an unofficial impulsive buying symptom called the "Target Effect" has been generalised (McMahan 2018).

Some retailers, Target included, have started employing theft-deterrent merchandising strategies, critically affecting the convenience of the shopping journey. At the same time, Target is also pushing customers towards technology-based options such as self-checkout, meaning that there are fewer employees on the shop floor to assist with locked products. (Kim 2023) However, safety measures are woefully needed since organised retail thefts have led to the closure of nine Target stores in different cities (Repko & Fonrouge 2023).

Before the pandemic, around 21 % of Target's sales came from unplanned purchases (Repko 2022b)[2]. Since impulsive buying is such a considerable manner for Target, it has tried to amplify it with tactics mentioned before, such as specifically planned store layouts for pick-up customers (SCT 2017). However, worsening inflation and climbing borrowing costs make retail consumers more price-conscious. The change in the economy affects retailers, especially Target, since consumers are cutting from discretionary products and focusing on necessities (Chávez 2023) while continuing to spend on experiences and services (Chávez 2023; Georgiadis et al. 2023). Besides, Target is

[1] Original source: ACSI (2018) ACSI Retail and Consumer Shipping Report 2018-2019. American Customer Satisfaction Index.
[2] Original source: GlobalData (2020) Top 50 Global Retailers, 2019 Update – Sales, Market Share, Positioning And Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). GlobalData.

already an underdog when it comes to foot traffic since its competitors Costco, Sam's Club and Walmart all have increased their foot traffic by double digits year-on-year from January 2022 to January 2023, whereas Target's increases have been minimal, and in some regions even negative. That is because wholesale club customers tend to be much more loyal while spending more each year than Target's customers. In addition, wholesale clubs appear more appealing to price-conscious shoppers. All of this combined with Target's demographic, which is primarily young, emotional shoppers seeking trendy items and who are more likely to be affected by economic disruptions, will have an effect on Target's succession. (Gravy Analytics 2023)

In late 2013, Target received major backlash when a widespread security breach impacted as many as 110 million of its customers. The data compromise almost halved the sales in early 2014 compared to the same period a year earlier, with additional expenses to cope with the breach, such as insurance payments, litigation and other fees. (Harris 2014a) As an immediate response, Target shifted from the traditional American magnetic strip debit and credit card technology to the European variant of chip and pin. Furthermore, the company applied more secure technology to oversee its network, payment systems, and customer data, which were criticised as measures that should have been implemented long ago. (Harris 2014b)

After stepping up its e-commerce efforts and going toe-to-toe against the most powerful online retailers, Target has faced some issues with high online traffic. Two years after the security breach, Target's website fumbled under the pressure of high website visitor count during Cyber Monday sales, leaving many shoppers unsatisfied. (Nasr 2015) Target has since managed to reinforce its IT infrastructure since some peak days in terms of online sales during the pandemic overtook the sales on Cyber Monday. However, sustaining the count of online visitors does not come cheap, as the surge of e-commerce amid the pandemic accrued hundreds of millions of dollars in novel costs. (Unglesbee 2020)

4.2 Amazon

4.2.1 Impact of Covid-19 on Amazon

As a vast number of American businesses were struggling to keep afloat once the pandemic hit and closed everything down, Amazon grew to totally new dimensions. Since most of the negatively impacted businesses were caught flat-footed in the emergence of

online-focused retailing, Amazon's business was already built for it. (Rapp & Harty 2021) It was said that the pandemic could be a golden age for Amazon thanks to the fundamental nature of Amazon, where people are shopping and working remotely (BBC 2021). At first, customers were ordering necessities from Amazon when protecting themselves from the virus, but they quickly started to order non-essential products as well (Palmer 2020).

The company experienced tremendous growth in all of its business sectors, including media streaming and cloud-based web services (BBC 2021), but remarkably, the online retailing side of the business saw an exponential surge. In the second quarter of 2020, the first full quarter that the effects of the pandemic really ploughed over the US, Amazon grew its online sales by 48 %, which was such a tremendous increase along with other business sectors that the company saw its largest profits ever, a total of $ 5,2 billion (Dastin & Rana 2020). The triumphal continued deep into the pandemic, as in the first quarter of 2021, Amazon again reported an increase of 44 % in online sales, accounting to crushing its 9-month-old record, now profiting a total of $8,1 billion (Business Wire 2021). The company also became more prominent to other businesses around it since 32 % of marketing executives thought that Amazon had become more important for them during the pandemic (Chevalier 2022b).

However, the magnificent supply chain that allowed customers to get the quickest service in the industry suddenly was not a competitive advantage anymore. Other retailers started to provide rapid and smooth remote shopping solutions to the extent that the features became a new norm, leading to Amazon losing its uniqueness. (Butler 2022) Despite this, Amazon concentrated on staying on the top and continued its innovation. Most of its success in supply chain management came from exploiting innovative technologies, which were hardly used for such tasks before. It also broke down its internal silos to ensure that innovation could happen at any level of the company structure, which helped the company to perform more effectively under the challenges brought by the pandemic. (Masini 2021) Innovation played a pivotal component in Amazon's preparedness to thrive immediately once the pandemic started since it had already expanded its reach far over the usual retailers. All of Amazon's home products, such as its TV unit, home-security devices, and smart speakers, brought the non-online shoppers who had those products closer to Amazon even before the pandemic restrictions were posed, making it effortless for Amazon to capture these customers once they had to shift to online. (Harris 2020)

The sudden surge in e-commerce demand had its drawbacks too, even for a company like Amazon with excellent supply chain capabilities, varying from warehouses to planes. The unpredicted rise of online orders caused difficulties in meeting the promised delivery windows, which were the crown jewel for Amazon (Palmer 2020). The company has since continuously enhanced the efficiency of its supply chain, cutting down the number of touchpoints an online order needs to go through, resulting in faster delivery speeds and lower costs (Reuters 2023).

4.2.2 Analysis of innovative technologies used by Amazon

Amazon's customer journey in its Amazon Style fashion stores is filled with various technologies that customers come across when shopping in its only physical channel. The store has been developed to minimise interactions with the employees, offering an experience where the customer does not need to talk to anybody. The store environment supports mobile app-oriented shopping by providing free WIFI and phone chargers. (Beckett 2022)

The shopping experience starts with the only mandatory human interaction, where an employee welcomes the customer to the store and explains its operating principles (Jarrett 2023), although the employees can also be asked for human recommendations if a customer so wishes (Beckett 2022). Physical searching for clothes and sizes has been bypassed. Instead, customers use their mobile phones to scan items to access more details about them and to order the products straight to the fitting room (Jarrett 2023). Additionally, customers can also choose to order the products to a pick-up counter if they prefer to try the products on at home (Molina 2022). Even if a customer does not purchase the item directly from the store, the non-purchased items are still saved to Amazon's app, meaning that they can be ordered later online (Moorman 2022; Jarrett 2023). To cater to omnichannel customers' needs even further, they can browse clothes online and order them to a store for a try-on, and immediately return them at the premises if needed (Vasen 2022). This technology that combines the shopping characteristics from both online and offline worlds saves the customer from the hassle of carrying the items to the fitting rooms (Vasen 2022; Becket 2022). The in-store mannequins and display also offer a scannable QR code to try on the whole outfit or only parts of it based on the customer's selections (Kohan 2022).

The products that customers order to try on in the fitting rooms are completed with some additional recommendations, which customers can decide to try on and perhaps add to their purchases (Kohan 2022). In addition to the extra clothes that the customer receives in the fitting rooms based on algorithms and inputs in Amazon's mobile app (Kohan 2022), the option to choose some recommendations is already introduced on the mobile app when scanning through different items, where algorithms propose similar products according to the customer's preferences (Beckett 2022).

Once the customer is ready with their product selections, they are positioned in a virtual queue and fitting rooms are prepared by the staff to include the chosen and recommended items (Molina 2022). Amazon uses a highly advanced inventory management system in its backrooms to efficiently find the right products (Kohan 2022). Once the employees are done with stocking the room, customers get a notification on their mobile phones when they can access the fitting room, which is also opened via the app. (Molina 2022) Privacy is essential in the experience, not only by entering the room via the app, but room closets are also locked from customers side when employees are stocking them (Beckett 2022).

The customer is greeted by a large touchscreen when they enter the fitting room. The touchscreen displays all the clothes that are present in the room, both the customer-chosen and Amazon-recommended ones. If the customer desires to try on additional ones, they do not have to interact with an employee but instead can order different sizes and colours straight from the screen. (Cheng 2022) Amazon's back-end technology in its fulfilment centres and store backrooms ensures that customers receive their clothes quickly into the fitting room's shelves once they request (Vasen 2022). Algorithms also come into play on the touchscreen, where customers can order additional items based on Amazon's recommendations (Jarrett 2023). Amazon's algorithms benefit from ML that allows the recommendations to be personalised and offered in real time (Vasen 2022). The products can also be rated by giving them thumbs up or down after fitting the product (Widman Neese 2023). Furthermore, if the customer feels the urge to ask for help from a human member of the staff, they can do so by pressing the help button on the fitting room's touchscreen (Kohan 2022).

When customers have found the right products, Amazon offers versatile payment options. Customers can allow Amazon to directly charge their bank account associated with their

Amazon profile or choose to pay with traditional methods such as credit card or cash. (Molina 2022) Additionally, Amazon offers an exceedingly innovative option called Amazon One, which scans customers' palms and syncs them to their credit card, meaning they can just wave one of their palms on top of the reading device when exiting the store (Murphy Marcos 2020; Molina 2022). In the event that a customer wants to make a return after the purchase, mobile phones are used to either check the drop-off code at Amazon Locker self-service kiosks or to show a QR code at various locations for employees to scan (Green & Meisenzahl 2023).

The fully digital store has enormous benefits for Amazon regarding knowing their customers. It can collect data from every step of customers' shopping journeys, such as what products they prefer and how long they spend time shopping. (Kohan 2022) Combined with customer data that the company collects from online shopping, especially from omnichannel Amazon Prime customers, from Amazon's home devices such as e-readers, doorbells, smart speakers, and even from Amazon's online streaming site, the e-commerce giant has a nearly endless pool of data to analyse. It has developed an in-house data algorithm to create predictions from the data sets, which are then shared across its own services, also offering the software as a service to other companies. (O'Flaherty 2022)

Besides the technology-infused customer experience that Amazon offers in its fashion retail store, it also has smaller format grocery stores that are equally innovative. Even though the technology is now mainly used in grocery and convenience stores, the digital features will likely move over to Amazon's fashion retailing in the future, ultimately streamlining omnichannel operations (Walton 2022).

Most notably, Amazon's convenience stores have a broad range of payment methods, which are designed to make leaving the stores with purchases as effortless as possible. For example, Amazon has used smart carts, which allow customers to pay directly at the screen of the cart (Rains 2023), and more recently, the company introduced a totally cashier-less concept. Cashier-less technology allows customers to walk out of the store without using any payment terminals and relies on observations of cameras and sensors, which are then fed to AI to track what products customers pick while constantly improving detections via deep-learning software. When customers exit the store, Amazon

charges them via the technology mentioned earlier that simply works by customers scanning their palm. (Kang 2022)

Overall, Amazon capitalises on a multitude of distinct in-store technologies. The way it exploits them creates a comprehensive assortment of helpful tools that customers encounter, but also a supportive frame for back-end operations. The shopping journey ingeniously begins with human interaction (Jarrett 2023) to express to customers that human staff are present if needed (Beckett 2022). Then, the shopping journey continues to be fully technology-enabled to streamline the process, utilising mobile phones to digitally choose the products to be tried on (Jarrett 2023) and making further adjustments with the use of a touch screen (Cheng 2022), which are fulfilled by highly advanced inventory management software (Kohan 2022). Finally, customers can choose to do their fitting at home (Molina 2022) or postpone the purchase and order the fitted clothes later online (Moorman 2022; Jarrett 2023), completing the store visit with versatile payment options (Rains 2023; Kang 2022). These technologies that the company enables commit to their central omnichannel strategies.

4.2.3 Amazon's omnichannel strategy

Nowadays, Amazon aims to be the jack of all trades. The company started as an online store and is the world's largest e-retailer today. However, it has also developed its own consumer devices, provides online advertising and cloud-computing services, creates television shows and movies, and has transitioned to physical retailing. (Day & Gu 2019) Considering Amazon's physical retailing approach, which can be viewed as hybrid omnichanneling, where online shopping is combined with physical storefronts. For example, AI tracks customer's online shopping habits and compiles a ready-to-go grocery bag to be picked up on the way home from work. (Lufkin 2020)

Hardware that Amazon produces for ordinary consumers is designed to thicken its separate channels together, diluting the edges between them. For example, Amazon manufactures Echo speakers, which are powered by its in-house Alexa AI (Amazon 2023a). Not only those who have acquired these devices are closer to shopping on Amazon once they decide to shop online, but the Alexa software also lets them make shopping lists, both for online and offline shopping, and place orders via voice commands, all of these directed exclusively to Amazon's webstore. The software can make decisions independently regarding which products to order if the device owner

allows, and the AI actively learns about their shopping patterns. (Amazon 2023b) The effect is amplified with the subscription service Amazon Prime, which gives access to all of Amazon's consumer services seamlessly through a single account (McAfee 2021), which as a result strengthens the company's customer loyalty. Along with the subscription, customers receive free two-day shipping for Prime products, special discounts, and unlimited streaming and reading on Amazon's streaming site and e-book devices. (Danziger 2018)

In 2015, the company started slowly moving towards the high street, launching its first physical stores in the form of bookstores and speciality stores that only sell highly rated products. (The Economist 2021) Even then, Amazon attempted to bring online touch into the physical world, such as displaying data from its website next to the books in its bookstores (Dastin 2022). In 2017, it acquired a central grocery chain Whole Foods, and has since branded one new convenience and one grocery store chain. In 2021, it was reported that the company would finally be stepping into big-box retailing. At the time, the timing was questioned because the shift to big-box retailing was considered as being relatively late, but at the same weirdly timed since e-commerce was at surge due to the pandemic. (The Economist 2021)

Due to the advanced technology that surveys the product availability and location in stores, Amazon can act accordingly based on the item availability in each store and provide sufficient quantities where they are most needed. That enhances omnichannel capabilities since the company can offer store pick-ups and fulfil online orders straight from store backrooms more efficiently. (Walton 2022) Overall, the ingenious fulfilment of online orders is one of Amazon's essential priorities, which is mainly dependent on its efficient and comprehensive supply chain, starting from regional fulfilment centres and ending with delivery stations. The company keeps innovating and investing in warehouse automatisation and developing its own fleet of delivery trucks and airplanes. (Banker 2021)

Delivering orders quickly to myriad locations is one of the critical omnichannel tactics of Amazon, and it is estimated that the logistics unit of Amazon would be the world's fifth-largest logistics firm if it were independent (Barbee et al. 2021). As mentioned, Amazon offers free and quick home deliveries for its Prime subscribers, but the company also focuses on alternative delivery fulfilment methods. Amazon has established thousands of

Amazon Lockers that operate as self-service kiosks which customers can access on their own, using a provided code via mobile phone. (Gebel 2021)

Even if Amazon does not currently have a massive brick-and-mortar store presence compared to other US retailers, it certainly does not come short when offering return options. Besides customers shipping returns directly to Amazon by themselves or scheduling a UPS pick-up, the company offers versatile drop-off locations in the form of UPS branches, Amazon Lockers, Kohl's stores, Whole Foods stores, and Amazon stores. Some return locations do not even require the product to be packaged. (Green & Meisenzahl 2023)

Amazon equips its employees with tools that seize the advantages of data and cloud platforms to adjust rapidly to new customer experiences. The ease to innovate and the technologies used to do it contribute towards the company's open innovation culture. (Halkett 2022) Indeed, developers are constantly trialling out new features and designs; for example, Amazon's app recently received a TikTok-like feature, in which people can scroll through a photo and video feed on the Amazon app to seek shopping ideas. In the case of consumers finding something intriguing, they can find a direct link to purchase the product under the post. (Perez 2022) However, in general, the mobile app and website are filled with features that streamline the shopping experience. These features include virtual try-ons for shoes and glasses, BOPIS, AR view for furniture, and various purchase-decision amplifying features such as browsing products by interests and previously watched items. (Chen 2023)

AI and ML are crucial technologies for Amazon for channel integration. As mentioned, cashier-less stores, product recommendations, warehouse automatisation, and shopping habit forecasts are some of Amazon's use cases for AI and ML. In fact, the whole supply chain, the crown jewel of Amazon, relies on these technologies to accurately forecast and evolve to changing customer trends (Masini 2021). The products can also be delivered quicker since AI analyses what products are most in demand in different locations (DeVon 2023) Now, AI is also being experimented with in supportive back-end operations, such as drawing summaries from a vast pool of mixed customer reviews for future potential customers getting a more concise view of a specific product. Previously, the issue has been that the actual pros and cons of a product may be challenging to identify. The company CEO states that they will stay future-oriented and optimistic about

the capabilities of AI (Murphy Kelly 2023), now generating an AI chatbot which would be included in its web store's search engine to guide its customers (Day 2023).

4.2.4 Customer perceptions on the journey and experiences

As Amazon experienced exceptional growth during the pandemic (BBC 2021), its sales growth was over 37 % from 2019 to 2020, moderately becoming steadier next year with a growth of almost 22 % (Statista Research Department 2023b). As expected, the disparities of performance between physical and online channels are imposingly distinct during the worst pandemic years, with e-commerce sales growing by double-digit numbers in 2020 and 2021, while physical sales dragged behind with negative growth in 2020, managing to grow slightly in 2021 (Coppola 2023a). According to Feedvisor's (2019) survey conducted with 2.000 consumers who had ordered from Amazon within 24 months consisting of 55 % of Amazon Prime members, Amazon enjoys tremendous customer loyalty. In 2019, 71 % of its customers ordered from Amazon at least once a month, while a whopping 64 % of customers visited its online channels at least weekly. Amazon is seen as an all-encompassing customer journey since the vast majority are conducting all shopping phases within its platforms, such as searching for the product, checking prices, and reading reviews. (Feedvisor 2019, 5-6, 14-15)

Because Amazon's business exploded instantly during the pandemic (BBC 2021), it needed to scale up its business to retain the pre-pandemic levels of customer loyalty. Therefore, the company went on a hiring spree to obtain more warehouse workers, software engineers, and hardware specialists (Weise 2020), which led Amazon to double its workforce from late 2019 to the end of 2021 (Palmer 2023a). These efforts likely mitigated the risks, but customer satisfaction still dropped year-on-year in 2020 and 2021, returning to the pre-pandemic level in 2021 (Coppola 2023b). However, customer satisfaction will likely drop soon since inflationary pressures force Amazon to continuously raise its Prime subscription prices to preserve free shipping, combined with the frustration from late package deliveries (Baertlein 2023).

After the anticipated news in 2021 that the company would finally be entering into big-box retailing (The Economist 2021), in early 2023, Amazon revealed that it was cancelling its plans to open the new convenience store, which would have been filled with technology that streamlines the shopping journey (Wayt & Wingfield 2023). Not even a year before that, Amazon had shut down all of its high-street stores in the US and UK,

only focusing on grocery and department formats (Dastin 2022). More recently, after stating to focus on grocery and department formats (Dastin 2022), Amazon has continued to close down its physical stores, this time shutting down eight of its small-format cashier-less grocery stores (Soper 2023).

It was reported that many of its retail stores did not match its expectations since sales growth could not keep up with its other retail operations, but the company still remained committed to developing its long-term physical retail business (Palmer 2022). The company was also critiqued for focusing too much on the in-store technology rather than the customer experience and underestimating the competitive advantage of physical retailers who have operated in the field for decades. Amazon had neglected the essential trait of physical retailing to seduce the customer through the shopping journey, including variables like the environment and product assortment. (Hanbury 2023) Currently, Amazon's website shows 70 physical store locations, 24 small format Amazon Go stores, 44 Amazon Fresh department stores, and only two Amazon Style apparel stores (Amazon 2023c).

The store closures belong to widespread cost-cutting procedures Amazon has taken after the economic downturn (Palmer 2023b). Amazon is reducing its massive workforce acquired during the pandemic with 27.000 layoffs in 2023 (Stringer 2023), and cancelling or closing 44 current warehouse facilities and postponing the opening of 25 (Palmer & Cortés 2022). The economic uncertainty and inflationary prices have affected Amazon's customers to spend less on discretionary products, moving towards more inexpensive options (The Motley Fool 2023). However, cost-cutting seems to work since, in the second quarter of 2023, Amazon gained its largest quarterly earnings growth since the pandemic (Cao 2023).

Although some customers are heavily invested in Amazon's cashier-less stores and enjoy the seamless shopping journey, the company recognises that a significant crowd of people shun the concept (Bitter 2023). Attitudes are divided similarly regarding its technology-infused Amazon Style stores, where less technologically savvy customers may be unable to shop within the store's best functions compared to the younger target audience (Kohan 2022). Overall, the shopping experience in Amazon Style stores divides opinions. Some customers state that the physical experience does not match the one received online, people do not value the social aspects technologies provide, the in-store experience is

overwhelming, and the product selections are poor (Beckett 2022). Conversely, some customers see the journey as innovative (Beckett 2022) and convenient, AI recommendations as beneficial, the in-store experience seamless and integrated with Amazon's other channels, and the optional interactions with store staff as socially gifting (Kohan 2022). The technology-heavy shopping continues to divide customers at home too, because Amazon's voice shopping through, for example, smart speakers, is only used by a fraction of device owners (Anand 2018).

The store technologies have other points of worry as well, especially the cashier-less concept, which is based on AI, image recognition, and sensors since they create significant data security concerns related to issues such as constant surveillance, lack of transparency, and data abuse (EDPS n.d.). These advanced technologies that allow Amazon's cashier-less and frictionless stores to exist have allegedly collected biometric data from customers unlawfully (Rosenblatt 2023). Although the case is open, it still implies that many customers do not trust the cashier-less concept (Loeb 2023).

As Amazon exploits its home devices to gather customer data to forecast purchase patterns and create algorithms (O'Flaherty 2022), the heavy monitoring of the end users of these products is another data concern that can be perceived as intrusive. Devices such as speakers, TVs, or sleep trackers feel familiar to customers and therefore, do not pose as new data concerns, even though they are designed to track ordinary life habits. (Murphy Kelly 2022) Amazon's methods to gather and analyse data are becoming increasingly problematic since data privacy is a growing concern among 86 % of the general US population, and 40 % do not trust businesses to handle their data ethically (KPMG 2021). However, the concerns may be disregarded by many due to increased demands since consumers are insisting on personalisation (Arora et al. 2021, 2).

4.3 Cross-case comparison on meeting evolved in-store expectations

The retail industry has encountered many consumer shifts, and the adoption of technologies as an instrument to react in the fast-paced world has only been accelerated by the pandemic (Mason & Jarvis 2023, 138). Long before the pandemic, the literature has described channel integration as a solution (Müller-Lankenau et al. 2006, 190-191) to the problematic multifaceted environment (Neslin et al. 2006, 96), where retailers are required to establish either online and offline stores (Jindal et al. 2021, 270). The pandemic catalysed a surge in online shopping but also made consumers more flexible

and morphed behaviours towards alternative, value-seeking shopping methods (Arora et al. 2020, 4-8). Both case companies have been adjusting to these changes with adequate measures as Target was able to thrive in the pandemic due to previous omnichannel investments (Wahba 2016; Mixson 2021), and Amazon had a unique positioning as its business model was crafted for e-commerce (Rapp & Harty 2021; BBC 2021). Target and Amazon witnessed the evolutions that unfolded during the worst of the pandemic, for example, consumers shifting from essential buying to non-essential categories (Barro 2020; Palmer 2020) and losing the advantages they had been known for before the pandemic (McNamara 2020; Butler 2022).

Amidst the technology-driven shifts in the modern retail landscape, Target and Amazon strategically navigate the intricacies of integrating innovative technologies and omnichannel strategies to enhance in-store customer experiences. Literature highlights the significance of utilising advanced technologies, such as smart mirrors, RFID, IoT applications, AR, and AI (Roy et al. 2020, 265, 300; Shankar et al. 2021, 14). It is undisputed that both retailers follow the modern trend of integrating technologies into physical stores. Target uses technologies extensively to provide a seamless omnichannel experience, such as by incorporating mobile phones as a tool to aid in shopping (Johnson 2013; Perez 2017a; Target 2017a), utilising technologies to make the shopping experience more interactive and convenient (Target 2017b; Target 2019; Tyko 2020b), and smart back-end features for rapid order fulfillments and reallocation of employees to customer-facing tasks (Target 2017a; Reed 2020). Similar to Target, Amazon applies technologies in the physical journey via the use of mobile phones as a tool to perform the shopping (Beckett 2022; Jarrett 2023), streamlining the in-store experience to make it more effortless and flexible for customers (Vasen 2022; Kohan 2022; Cheng 2022; Molina 2022; Jarrett 2023), while exploiting technologies to ensure smooth and reliable back-end operations (Kohan 2022; Vasen 2022; DeVon 2023). Therefore, the approaches of the two case companies support the literature since they integrate technologies to endow customer journeys according to the risen expectations of consumers (Zhu et al. 2021, 18; Grewal et al. 2020, 96; Sheth 2020, 282). However, only Target can be viewed as taking advantage of back-end technologies to free up employees to customer-facing roles (Kohan 2020) like the literature suggests (Zhu et al. 2021, 18), whereas Amazon's efforts to automatise the supply chain seem to be more motivated by excellence in delivery capabilities (Banker 2021; Walton 2022).

As modern omnichannel consumers demand traits such as convenience, efficiency, enjoyment, and playfulness (Alexander & Kent 2022, 8) while seeking hedonistic experiences (Gröppel-Klein et al. 2021, 106) that are filled with practical (Wang et al. 2022, 106) and social features (Zielker et al. 2023, 5), both case companies integrate technology-supported omnichannel strategies that aim to answer these expectations. For instance, Target has interactive displays and smart mirrors on the shop floor for customers to engage with and virtually trial products (Target 2019; Tyko 2020b), employees have handheld multifunction terminals which streamline shopping journeys (Garcia 2018), and versatile same-day services (McCann 2022). On the other hand, Amazon equips its stores with smart fitting rooms to mitigate customers' hassle (Cheng 2022), order clothes to physical stores for a try-on (Vasen 2022), and heavy use of algorithms (Vasen 2022; Jarrett 2023). As these numerous technologies contribute to the explosion of touchpoints, they force companies to combine business functions (Lemon & Verhoef 2016, 69). Indeed, Target integrates many actors in its supply chain (Target 2017a), whereas Amazon utilises its technological prowess to control the supply chain (Masini 2021).

The scholarly discourse identifies challenges and strategies around online-offline channel integration, stressing the importance and complexity of seamless integration across multiple channels (Salvietti et al. 2022, 1170; Mirsch et al. 2016, 14). Target blends digital and physical platforms to offer cohesive shopping experiences (Mixson 2021), whereas Amazon has crafted its approach by infiltrating physical retail with tech-centric innovations after establishing a solid online background (Day & Gu 2019). Target aspires to offer a holistic experience in all of its channels (McCann 2022) by combining its services under one channel (Target 2017b) to answer all of its customers' demands at once (Danziger 2022). On the other hand, Amazon aims to diminish borders between its channels by vast expansion outside traditional retail functions (Day & Gu 2019, Amazon 2023a) while tying its channels together with heavy use of AI and ML (Masini 2021) and bringing online features into physical stores (Dastin 2022). However, the literature warns that customers may see the addition of a channel as pointless if they are heavily attached to previous channels (Cao & Li 2015, 212). As Target's roots are in traditional retailing, it has enabled online channels to accompany its physical ones. Its website visits have declined (Chevalier 2022a; TipRanks 2023), while online sales have increased (Smith 2023c). Amazon has established its channels vice-versa, starting as an online-first retailer and stepping up to the physical world more recently. It has encountered some hardships

in new channels as the performance of its new physical stores was a disappointment (Palmer 2022). At least regarding the smart grocery stores, Amazon's customers were shunning the concept (Bitter 2023) and did not consider it to be in line with the experience that Amazon provides online (Beckett 2022), which aligns with the literature regarding physical store expectations customers have from shopping online (Loupiac and Goudey 2020, 103).

Academic research points towards various strategies retailers employ in their physical store networks, from compression to expansion (Herring et al. 2014, 3), with varied purposes like showrooms and webrooms (Flavián et al. 2016, 459). Both retailers' actions resonate with the literature as Target employs a strategic approach in remodelling and launching physical stores to support functions such as BOPIS and modernise store atmosphere (Target 2022a), basing decisions on customer feedback and omnichannel functionality (SCT 2017). Target's strategy is to establish a vast store network (Smith 2023a) and adapt store formats according to each market (Edelson 2022). In contrast, Amazon introduces innovative, technology-driven physical stores (Walton 2022) that vary in formats and sizes (Dastin 2022). However, regarding this thesis that focuses on non-essential retailing, after the recent closedowns of all of its high-street stores (Dastin 2022), Amazon currently has only two physical stores that are not grocery-oriented (Amazon 2023c). Therefore, based on the literature, neither can be said to strictly follow webroom or showroom strategies (Flavián et al. 2016, 459), although they support the two approaches if a customer so desires. Both retailers allow mobile app features to order the product later online after visiting a store (Wharton Online 2023; Moorman 2022; Jarrett 2023), Amazon allows customers to order items online to physical stores for a try-on (Vasen 2022), and Target equips AR on the mobile app to initially showcase the product before a customer visits a physical store (Perez 2017a). Based on the literature, retailers can reduce costs through customers returning products by themselves (Gao et al. 2022, 823; Mahar et al. 2014, 635) and BOPIS (Mahar et al. 2014, 635; Kusuda 2022, 7), which are conducted by the case companies very differently, as Target has a vast store network accepting pick-ups and returns (Thomas 2019; Target 2022a) and Amazon utilises third-parties (Green & Meisenzahl 2023).

As both companies integrate in-store technologies to improve customer touchpoints, using data to understand their preferences and habits becomes more prevalent (Zhu et al., 2021), data also allows customers to benefit from omnichannel elements and making

personalisation possible (Liu et al. 2019, 20). Both Target and Amazon illustrate the literature in the real world since they leverage customer data (Kohan 2022; Target 2023) to enhance personalisation in advertising and customer interactions (Meyersohn 2019a; Target 2022a; Jarrett 2023; Vasen 2022), although Amazon takes the data collection and purchase forecast prediction further through its home devices (O'Flaherty 2022) and fully digital stores (Kohan 2022), which benefit them in increased sales of recommended products (Beckett 2022; Kohan 2022). Overall, the literature suggests that personalisation of shopping journeys allows retailers to capture the customer early on in the journey (Roggeveen & Sethuraman 2020, 304), making it a crucial function since consumers' views differ on the features that bring added value (Grewal et al. 2020, 97) and the technologies that they want to engage with (White et al. 2012, 257). Again, both case companies support the literature as they offer highly personalised shopping experiences. Target offers versatile order fulfilment options (Chopra 2022) and returns (Kline 2023), which are supported by its significant coverage of sortation centres and stores that act as distribution hubs (Young 2023), driven by smart software solutions (Reed 2020; Danziger 2022). As Amazon's supply chain is its pride (Palmer 2020), it also offers all-round order fulfilment and return solutions (Green & Meisenzahl 2023) made possible by its extensive network of fulfilment centres and delivery stations accompanied by the massive fleet of delivery vehicles (Banker 2021; Barbee et al. 2021), ultimately led by its intelligent software (Walton 2022). Besides the method of order fulfilment, Target's customers are permitted to choose from a comprehensive selection of payment methods (Rodriguez 2022), although Amazon's assortment is even more inclusive with the use of smart carts and even cashier-less stores (Kang 2022; Molina 2022; Rains 2023), meaning that the company takes the full advantage of the possibility to merge the customer into the omnichannel ecosystem (Alexander and Kent 2022, 8).

Additionally, mobile apps can effectively bridge online and offline retail, providing robust data collection and enriching customer engagement across channels (Liu et al. 2019, 20), also being one of the most effortless methods to reduce friction between channels (Fulgoni 2014, 379). Target and Amazon harness mobile apps differently, with Target focusing on integrative and helpful functions (Target 2015b; Meyersohn 2019a; Chopra 2022; Wharton Online 2023) and Amazon prioritising autonomous, digitalised in-store shopping (Gebel 2021; Molina 2022; Becket 2022; Jarrett 2023; Chen 2021). With all the data and personalisation omnichannel strategies provide, it is paramount to

acknowledge the challenges and responsibilities tethered to the vast use of customer data (Sánchez & Urbano 2019, 485), especially due to the high need for personalisation (Roggeveen & Sethuraman 2020, 308). Both retailers have run into data privacy concerns, Target having experienced a massive security breach (Harris 2014a) and Amazon being accused of unannounced data gathering (Rosenblatt 2023), either experiencing dents in their brand images as the literature warns (Zhu et al. 2021, 18).

Notable disparities arise when the humane features of in-store experiences are evaluated. Target's technological implementations exist so it can offer seamless omnichannel experiences where the borders between offline and online channels are reduced (Mixson 2021), but the focus stays on conducting customer interactions in a humane manner, and technologies only reinforce the store operations (Meyersohn 2019b; Kohan 2020). On the other hand, Amazon has adopted an expansive technological infrastructure, where it aims to minimise human interactions between customers and employees (Beckett 2022). Therefore, Target's approach aligns more with the literature since, while technology furnishes a multitude of tools and avenues for streamlining experiences across various customer touchpoints, it is imperative to underscore that it does not mitigate the pivotal role of human interactions in retail experiences (cf. Vrechopoulos et al. 2022, 61-62; Zielke et al. 2023, 5; Zhu et al. 2021, 18). Even though Amazon's in-store customers can request help from an employee if needed (Kohan 2022), it has been critiqued for being too technology-focused and losing sight of humane desires (Hanbury 2023), going against the literature.

Furthermore, Target amplifies the humane experiences of its physical stores through multiple collaborations with other brands, creating shop-in-shop locations (Repko 2022b) and mutually benefitting services (Repko 2022a; Target 2022b). These collaborations advance Target's capability to answer customers' all demands on a single trip (Danziger 2022). The shop-in-shop concept is another strategy along with other omnichannel efforts that Target implements to further strengthen the "Target Effect" (McMahan 2018). Literature shows that consumers shopping in multiple channels are sensitive to impulsive buying (Sopadjieva et al. 2017, 2; Pereira 2023, 52-53), which Target indeed enjoys from (Repko 2022b) and takes full advantage by morphing store layouts (SCT 2017). Meanwhile, Amazon centralises its offerings under its Amazon Prime subscription (McAfee 2021), which was hugely popular during the pandemic (Palmer 2020; Dastin & Rana 2020; BBC 2021). Amazon expands its omnichannel tentacles by investing in its

own consumer devices (Harris 2020) equipped with AI, which are supposed to push device owners to purchase from Amazon via voice commands and automatisation (Amazon 2023b). However, similarly to its physical stores being disliked for being too technology-focused (Hanbury 2023), these shopping mediums offered by Amazon's consumer devices have not been massively welcomed (Anand 2018). Literature underlines the importance of technologies bringing social presence and convenience, avoiding those that do not delight consumers (Grewal et al. 2020, 97).

Target ingeniously combines humane preferences with technological support tools to bring convenience and hedonistic aspects, making consumers consider it the best in-store experience (Bizouati-Kennedy 2023). Even though findings suggest that Amazon is not enjoying the same level of physical retailing success as Target, Amazon's in-store experiences are regardless seen as innovative (Beckett 2022) and altogether as a seamless omnichannel experience by some shoppers (Kohan 2022), which is explained by the literature of customers experiencing journeys differently based on individual and surrounding variables (Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 4). Based on the literature, customers are more concerned about the cumulative journey (Rawson et al. 2013, 92) affected by their reactions (Grewal & Roggeveen 2020, 7) rather than singular touchpoints (Rawson et al. 2013, 92), which the findings suggest that Amazon is struggling to achieve, which can lead to unsatisfaction from customers (Huré et al. 2017, 320-321). On the contrary, findings imply that Target's success emerges from its cohesive omnichannel approach, where it blends technology and humane characteristics (Johnson 2013; Kohan 2020; Meywesohn 2019b) to provide a holistic customer experience (McCann 2022) while offering options and tailored solutions (Target 2015a; Meyersohn 2019a; Target 2022a; Chopra 2022; Repko 2022a), overperforming Amazon's physical operations that are more focused on maximising data usage (Kohan 2022; O'Flaherty 2022) and supercharging personalisation via algorithms (Kohan 2022; O'Flaherty 2022; Beckett 2022; Vasen 2022; Jarrett 2023) while keeping human interactions to a minimum (Beckett 2022) through autonomous shopping (Jarrett 2023; Kang 2022).

According to the literature, providing a seamless shopping journey results in higher sales (Cocco & Demoulin 2022, 469), explaining Target's physical success over Amazon's. Personalisation is conducted differently in the two case companies; Target mainly provides several options across the shopping journey for customers to choose freely, whereas Amazon personalises offerings with data and algorithms without giving that

many options. Therefore, for example, less technologically savvy customers are excluded from Amazon's customer base (Kohan 2022), resulting in Amazon ignoring the fundamental hedonistic reasons behind the physical customer comeback (Gröppel-Klein et al. 2021, 106; Wang et al. 2022, 8; Zielke et al. 2023, 5). Meanwhile, Target provides a convenient and hedonistic shopping experience that appeals to many consumers (Bizouati-Kennedy 2023).

After all, the journey from consumer decision-making, influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, to final purchase (see, for example, Nicosia 1966, 180-181; Howard & Sheth 1969, 467-468; Hansen 1969, 436; Belk 1974, 156; Hult et al. 2019, 19), has evolved significantly during disruptions like the pandemic (see, for example, Relihan et al. 2020, 25; Wang et al. 2020, 217; Arora et al. 2020, 4-8; Zhu et al. 2021, 18; Mason & Jarvis 2023, 138). The required strategic recalibrations and quick pivots amidst the pandemic (Grewal et al. 2021, 6; Babin et al. 2021, 80; Shankar et al. 2021, 13) and now the recent economic challenges such as inflation and fluctuating borrowing costs (Chávez 2023; Baertlein 2023), continue to test strategic agilities of Target and Amazon, compelling them to adjust and innovate amidst altering consumer behaviours and spending patterns (Chávez 2023; Gravy Analytics 2023; Palmer 2023b; The Motley Fool 2023). Thus, as the retail landscape continues to morph, integrating and balancing technological advancements with crucial human elements and agile strategies emerge as decisive to navigating and excelling in the dynamic retail environment.

5 Conclusion

The thesis focused on the seamless omnichannel strategies and adaptations of in-store technologies in two prominent case companies, Target and Amazon. The original research question, "How can innovative technologies be adapted by retailers to meet consumers' increased expectations for omnichannel in-store experiences after the pandemic?" outlines the main objective of the thesis, which was conducted by a two-case study. The findings from the cross-case comparison imply that while both cases come from opposite ends of the spectrum regarding starting points and strategic emphasis, they incorporate various technology-supported omnichannel strategies. The findings from the two-case study signify that despite the symbiosis of innovative technologies and omnichannel experiences is essential in today's retail setting, retailers should not dismiss the human nature that is deeply rooted in hedonistic characteristics in the in-store shopping journey. The thesis also provides theoretical contributions and managerial implications, hopefully evoking future research avenues and interest.

5.1 Theoretical contribution

One of the key findings from the literature, previously explored in the thesis, was the role of technological features in complementing the customer journey instead of replacing characteristics essential for human nature. The in-store technologies should not be substitutes but rather complement the hedonistic aspects, which is what the post-pandemic consumers expect from all-inclusive omnichannel experiences, receiving the best of both physical and online features. This was consistent with the case analysis of Target. While having the advantage of an extensive physical store network, Target retains the relation of hedonistic aspects and technological attributes in a customer-satisfying balance. Target employs technologies in supportive roles and back-end processes, streamlining the journey customers receive in stores. Target ingeniously implements in-store technologies in a way that benefits the customer by making the shopping journey more convenient and presentative of hedonistic aspects without totally morphing the concept of retailing so customers are never forced to use in-store technologies if they do not see them as worthwhile. The findings further strengthen the assembled inference, which is drawn from the literature indicating that there could be links between these elements, as based on the findings, consumers value the benefits that technology-infused

omnichannel strategies bring, but they appreciate them staying in the background and only use them according to own considerations.

Some of the findings and thematic synthesis can be illustrated in Figure 6. Figure 6 comprises the strategic customer-centric approach, data-driven decision-making, balance of human characteristics, and technological advancements within seamless omnichannel experiences in the cases of Target and Amazon. In order to succeed in providing seamless omnichannel experiences, retailers must adapt and incorporate features of the four categories of digital, physical, customer journey, and personalisation. Most smart features offered need to include high levels of personalisation; this requires a combination of consumer behaviour knowledge, in-store technologies, and integration strategies. The thesis also points out that companies that were quick to adapt to the radically changing circumstances of the pandemic had a higher level of success during the pandemic. This supports that adaptions and integrations must be dynamic and flexible to sudden changes.

Figure 6 represents a synthesis with the addition of real-life case examples of Target and Amazon as a guiding framework for how Amazon and Target have functioned in the post-pandemic retail landscape regarding seamless and all-inclusive omnichannel customer experiences.

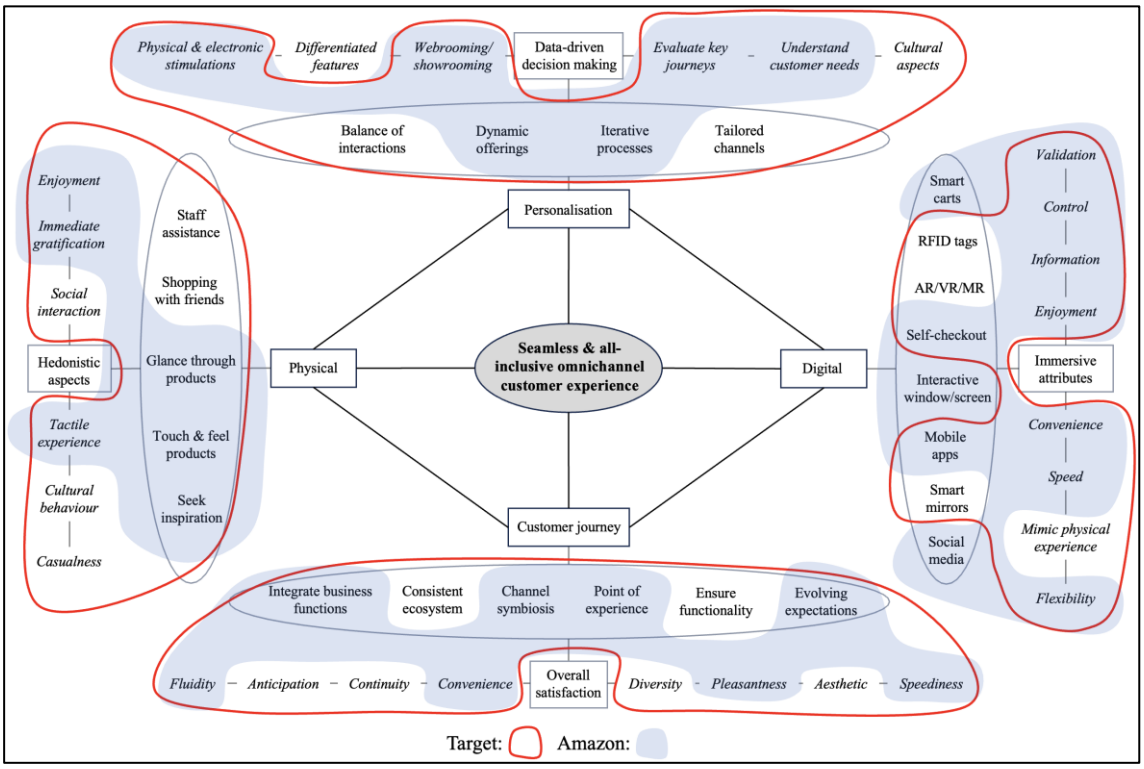

Figure 6. Adapted figure of Target and Amazon.

The theoretical contributions of this thesis have various benefits and applications for its readers, academics, and practitioners. As illustrated through the landscape pictured in Figure 6, Target has a broader reach and span in more features compared to Amazon. Especially within overall satisfaction and hedonistic aspects, it surpasses Amazon by its presence.

Although there is much overlap between the companies, several underlying differences emerge from the depth of digital, physical, personalisation, and customer journey functions, illustrated in Figure 7. For example, both retailers provide customer-facing technologies such as in-store integrated mobile apps, which are supposed to bring customers enjoyment, convenience, and speed while personalising them with dynamic offerings by understanding their needs through data collection. However, a distinct dichotomy can be seen amongst Amazon's customers as some people value the fully mobile phone-dependent journey that the retailer employs, but those who find the experience awkward and shy from the extensive data gathering do not have any other alternatives to avoid them. Therefore, the intensity of provided physical and digital features is essential, meaning that are the features mandatory to encounter, or are they something that complement the journey, customers being able to enjoy their benefits if they so desire. Secondly, the inclusivity of personalisation and customer journeys is vital in order to satisfy the expectations of as many customers as possible; retailers have to assess if the methods and journeys are appropriate for only a small customer segment or the whole market. Many other examples that support this claim have been presented in the cross-case comparison in section 4.3.

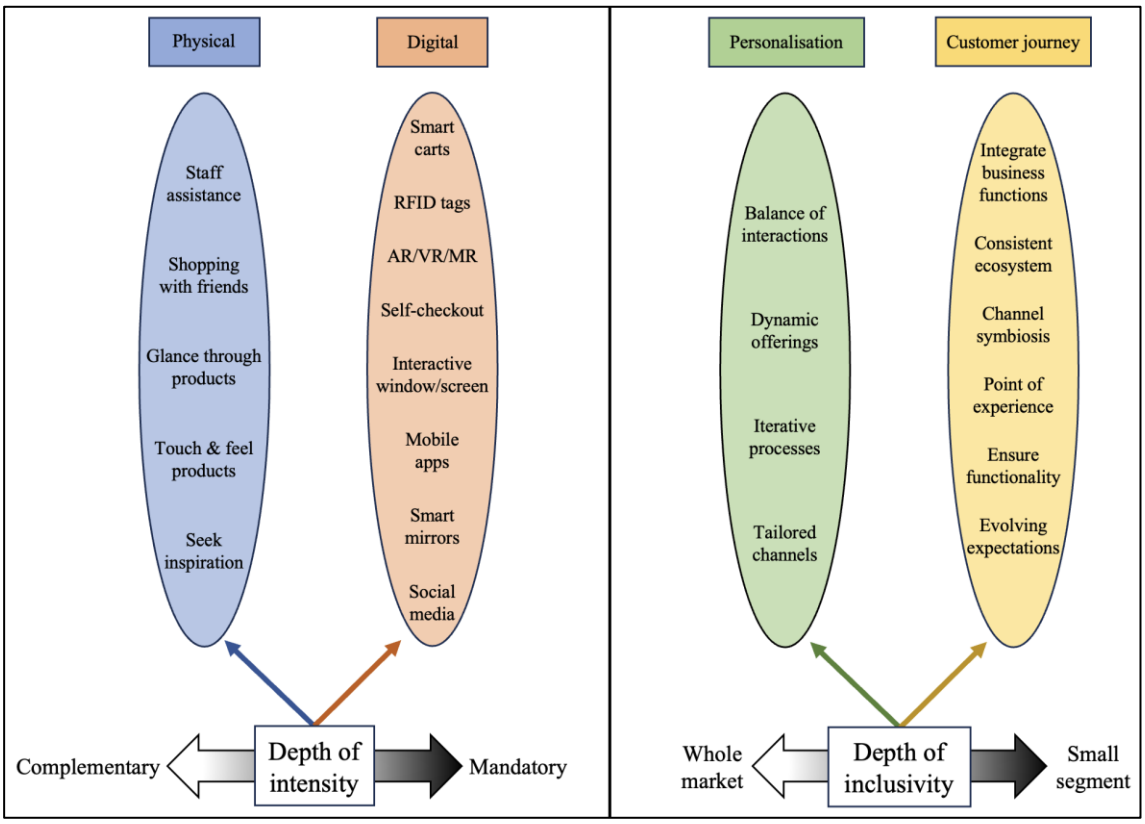

Figure 7. Depth of physical, digital, personalisation, and customer journey.

Overall, Target focuses on the holistic customer journey, ensuring its customers receive the expected practical and emotional pleasures. On the contrary, Amazon possesses its own characteristics, as shown in Figure 6. While Amazon shares a strong online presence, the physical stores do not align with the anticipations and expectations customers have from transferring from online to physical shopping. One apparent deficit is the lack of catering to human fundamentals, as seen in the figure. As a born online retailer, Amazon faces the risk of adding a new channel when expanding physically, meaning that the existing customers who are already heavily attached to the online mediums can view the addition of physical channels as pointless. While some channels may be deemed necessary and valuable, it is dependent on the case and the customers attached to the specific case company and their unique expectations.

The thesis additionally contributes theoretically by addressing the previously stated and identified research gap concerning technology-supported omnichannel shopping experiences. The issue of scarce literature is addressed by not only providing new research but also connecting it to existing theories and synthesising it with real-life cases. The thesis assists in the lack and need of research concerning the use of innovative technologies to enhance the in-store experience (Wang et al. 2022, 10; Böttcher et al.

2023, 4032) by not only the thesis itself but providing future research avenues and testable propositions.

The thesis provides a new synthesis of the customer-centric tech-enhanced omnichannel retailing model, which also includes the integration of channels, which has been limited and varied in previous literature (Mirsch et al. 2016, 14; Goraya 2022, 1). The research further provides means and elements of how omnichannel customer experiences should be composed and from what elements. Something that likewise was lacking in the current discourse surrounding the topic (Gao et al. 2021, 13). Theoretically, the thesis supplies the academic field by further bridging the theoretical and empirical gap of theoretical frameworks and foundations with real-life case examples. The chosen cases offer a high degree of versatility by representing two differing cases, creating an in-depth exploration of significantly dissimilar uses of technology-supported in-store omnichannel strategies and elements.

Theoretically, the study aims to evoke future research and interest in the topic, which is why a few conclusions from the study can be drawn into testable propositions for future cases. These propositions have been based upon and drawn from the initial theoretical backgrounds and the specific findings of this thesis. Proposition to further develop and test Figure 6 and Figure 7 in terms of the degree of input companies put into certain technological features in relation to the outcome of customer reactions to it, since not all the aspects benefit all of the retailers in the field, since the depth of use and integration of technological features and their individual customers vary. As this thesis has covered, omnichannel expectations are dynamic and continue to develop. Despite the challenges, some retailers still succeed in fulfilling expectations, as seen in the case of Target, another proposition would be to explore how omnichannel in-store experiences can evolve without losing the essence of the human touch.

5.2 Managerial implications

When describing the managerial implications, it should be broken down into two questions regarding what the benefits are and who they apply or serve. The thesis has many benefits in terms of practical uses in regard to non-essential retailers in adapting in-store technologies to support their omnichannel functions. The thesis firstly presents changes in consumer expectations after the wide use of online channels during the pandemic, also covering the consumer comeback into physical stores, which benefits

retailers in knowing how in-store expectations have evolved, what types of characteristics need to be accounted for, and how these shifts can be catered. Secondly, in-store technological functions that can be adapted into omnichannel strategies supply retailers with knowledge of tools and various elements that could complement, enhance, or, in the case of back-end processes, substitute existing features in their brick-and-mortar environment. Thirdly, the thesis serves applications for in-store technological features that match evolved customer expectations of seamless and all-inclusive shopping across all channels. Due to the two case companies proposing versatile strategies from both sides of the retail spectrum, businesses at any stage of their omnichannel expansion gain from the insights of this thesis, whether they are still at a single-channel phase or already firmly positioned in multiple channels. The detailed uses and examples of actual cases provide valuable comprehension for successful channel integration, not only equipping retailers with tools to survive but also upgrading their inter-channel performance. The performance advancements mainly emerge through the increased spending of omnichannel consumers, and the new breed of experimental consumers who are willing to either expand the number of shopping channels they use or are fleeing from their previous go-to retailer due to unanswered expectations present a massive opportunity for retailers to revamp their sales.

The implications serve top-level and senior-level executives from a strategic perspective when drawing up business models and plans for omnichannel in-store customer experiences and how they can best serve customers. This thesis also offers functions for middle management and frontline employees to match the actions and daily operations to the strategic needs and expectations of consumers. It is important to remember that the actual stars of the customer-centric approach are the consumers, which entitles them to be affected by the applications to further convenience and enjoyment, among many other factors in their shopping journey. It also implies that the competitive landscape, along with other industry actors, such as suppliers, developers, and regulators, adapt to these types of all-inclusive evolvements and new technological in-store functions to support the borderless travelling between channels, complementing higher customer demands now and in the future.

5.3 Limitations and future research suggestions

The thesis aimed to evaluate the innovative technologies that could enhance the in-store experience for consumers returning to physical shopping after the pandemic with their increased expectations and demands. For academic significance, this thesis provides a theoretical contribution to a relevant retail phenomenon on how innovative technologies can be used as a medium to improve in-store customer experience, which can easily be studied further or empirically tested due to the methodology applied to this thesis. For managerial implications, retailers can benefit from the study by implementing the discussed and potentially advantageous technologies in their physical stores, managing to hold on to returning customers.

As mentioned, the case study's purpose is not to create any causal inferences, but the findings are usually empirically viable and, therefore, can be tested. The reliability and validity of a qualitative study are heavily dependent on the researcher, which also affects the collection of secondary data since the initial purpose of the data lies somewhere else than in this study. Because secondary data is used, no major ethical considerations exist. Although secondary data does not require any ethical considerations, it should be noted that the danger lies in the researcher's interpretation. Generating such a study could be more reliable when consulting with a larger researcher pool to minimise bias and interpretative errors further. This was also stated in previous sections of 3.3 Data Analysis in terms of the researcher's responsibilities (Bengtsson 2016, 11).

While versatility was accounted for by having two distinct case companies, the risk lies in the generalisability of the results. One must make sure to account that, in some cases, the two distinctions offer very different results, which is why future research could tackle this by including more case companies and extending the scope of the data pool. Considering the time limitation, this thesis tackled this point well by taking on a cross-case comparison.

The strategy being a two-case study, this study cannot state anything as an indisputable fact, but it contributes to future longitudinal studies. In future cases, adjusting the data type for primary data could yield more in-depth results and findings from individual elements of in-store technological adaptations of omnichannel strategies. While the thesis has been well revised, the author's experience always goes without saying. This was

controlled by consulting more experienced researchers and several guides; however, it should be included as a disclaimer that, although controlled, could slightly impact.

It is essential to state that while addressing limitations thoroughly may initially seem off-putting for a reader, it is not only ethical and required but meant to inform the reader of new pathways for contributing to and processing the research. Acknowledging and recognising potential limitations aids in credibility and acceptance when done by the author themself (Ross & Zaidi 2019, 263), as well as gaining trust since some of the limitations have clearly been kept in mind as they have been stated before as focus areas while conducting the thesis. In addition to noting the limitations, suggestions for improvement and changes have been made to encourage and engage the reader in future research (Ross & Zaidi 2019, 263).

This thesis has purposely studied the adaptation of seamless in-store technologies used within two major retailers, however, while the various elements and strategies connect with customer experiences, it mainly lies on the expectations of adaptations. Studying the customer perceptions and reactions and utilising the omnichannel strategies as an initial starting point could offer fruitful discoveries about the effectiveness of various omnichannel in-store technology uses, instead of starting from expectations but rather evaluating effectiveness in terms of measuring how these expectations are met based on the strategies suggested. The thesis offers a good starting ground about the importance and uses of omnichannel adaptations, which is why further study could emphasise variations of strategies and especially customisation when it comes to the theoretical foundations of how strategies benefit physical retailers. As the thesis has shown, omnichannel strategies are not a one-size-fits-all-all, which is where managerial implication lies by offering solutions.

The thesis focused on non-essential retailing examples of Target and Amazon. However, the findings mentioned about the vastly changing economic impact, which especially shocks essential retailing. This raises the question: how do essential retailing companies adapt to their respective expectations, and do the same frameworks apply, or how do they differ? In addition, the case study cannot confirm causal connections, which is where potential future research may lie in studying the topic with a different methodological approach.

6 Summary

Technology-infused omnichannel strategies are a recent phenomenon that has risen after the pandemic. The phenomenon occurs from consumers returning to the physical retail scene with their newly acquired habits and tastes absorbed from enjoying the amenities of online shopping during the pandemic. The main fuel for the brick-and-mortar store comeback emerges from humane aspects of physical shopping, such as seeking social interactions and touching the products, while getting immediate gratification from not having to wait for a shipment. Therefore, modern consumers are craving a mix of the best aspects from both worlds while requiring the agility to shift between the channels whenever and however they desire. Altogether, they expect to enjoy from the emotional side of physical shopping while utilising digital tools they grew used to when shopping online, ultimately fading out borders between channels.

Along with these retail transformations, the research was guided by the main research question: "How can innovative technologies be adapted by retailers to meet consumers' increased expectations for omnichannel in-store experiences after the pandemic?" In addition, the thesis contributes to the research gap, which is defined as scarce literature and little research on how innovative technologies can be used to enhance in-store experiences.

To address this question and the needs of the current research streams, the thesis conducts a two-case study and a cross-case comparison between two major players in the field, Target and Amazon. The research approach was a qualitative two-case study, utilising content analysis and thematic synthesis to draw conclusions from the findings. This choice of methodology was due to the urgent nature of the phenomenon and with the goal of yielding immediate theoretical contribution by bridging case examples along with theoretical frameworks through synthesis. Furthermore, the research approach kept in mind providing swift and much-needed practical benefits for the retail industry and its actors.

The findings reveal that both case companies ride the wave by maximising the benefits of in-store technologies to achieve cohesive omnichannel customer journeys. While both companies demonstrate numerous merits that align with the literature, the data findings not only support this with the evidence but additionally provide examples of how these

merits benefit the case companies. Even though Target and Amazon fundamentally exemplify the theoretical foundations, the most notable differences between these two companies arise from the implementation and depth of how these strategies and technologies are executed. Out of the two, Target succeeds in producing more holistic customer journeys in accordance with the evolved expectations. Like Amazon, Target heavily employs technologies to provide in-store convenience and seamless omnichannel experiences but does not neglect the importance of hedonistic aspects. Target is able to embrace the fundamental essence of shopping while utilising innovative technologies to complement the characteristics that are heavily linked with consumer shopping expectations.

Along with the findings and cross-case comparison, this thesis offers theoretical contributions by curating a synthesis between a customer-centric omnichannel approach through the studied case companies. Theoretically, the thesis bridges literature frameworks and connects with the exposed research gap. The thesis presents propositions such as studying the intensity and use of technological features to further elaborate and develop research within the field. Managerial implications, such as strategic use of in-store technological features and effects, along with intel on evolved consumer expectations, are also listed.

Finally, the thesis offers and evokes potential subsequent research avenues by stating limitations and interesting considerations that can be further established.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Target data source

Author(s)	Year	Title	Publisher	Accessed
ACSI	2019	Press Release and Consumer Shipping 2018-2019	American Customer Satisfaction Index	26.8.2023
Barro	2021	Target Is Having a Pretty Good Pandemic	Intelligencer	22.9.2023
Bizouati-Kennedy	2023	Target, Walmart and More Retailers With the Best In-Store Shopping Experiences, According to Consumers	GO Banking Rates	24.8.2023
CBS News	2020	Coronavirus In Minnesota: Target Placing Limits On Cleaning Supplies, Toilet Paper	CBS News Minnesota	22.9.2023
Chávez	2023	Walmart sales rise as inflation keeps consumers hunting for bargains	Financial Times	26.8.2023
Chevalier	2022	Total global visitor traffic to Target.com 2020	Statista	24.8.2023
Chopra	2022	What Target Is Doing Right In The Pandemic Era E-Commerce Race	Forbes	20.8.2023
Danziger	2022	Why Apple, Ulta, Levi's, Disney, Starbucks And More Choose Target For Collaboration	Forbes	23.8.2023
Del Rey	2020	Government shutdowns of "nonessential" retailers were a huge gift for Amazon, Walmart, and Target	Vox	22.9.2023
Edelson	2022	Target Unveils New Store Concept; Spoiler Alert: It's Bigger Than Ever	Forbes	16.8.2023
Freedman	2022	The Retail Shift From Store To Home: Omnichannel Strategies That Are Here To Stay Post-Lockdown	Forbes	10.8.2023

Garcia	2018	Target launching 'Skip-the-Line' checkout technology, will open at 5 p.m. on Thanksgiving	MarketWatch	23.8.2023
Georgiadis, Strauss, Edgecliffe-Johnson & Smith	2023	Travellers take to the skies even as ticket prices and temperatures soar	Financial Times	26.8.2023
Gravy Analytics	2022	Target's Foot Traffic Outperforms Walmart's in Q2 2022	Gravy Analytics	24.8.2023
Gravy Analytics	2023	How Recent Target Foot Traffic Data Suggests Increasingly Cost-Conscious Spending	Gravy Analytics	24.8.2023
Halzack	2020	It's No Accident That Target Is a Covid Winner	The Washington Post	20.8.2023
Harris	2014	Data Breach Hurts Profit at Target	The New York Times	24.8.2023
Harris	2014	After Data Breach, Target Plans to Issue More Secure Chip-and-PIN Cards	The New York Times	24.8.2023
InMarket	2022	Q4 2021 Consumer Loyalty Report	InMarket Insights	26.8.2023
Johnson	2013	Target tightens focus on mobile as in-store shopping tool	Retail Dive	23.8.2023
Kim	2023	"Going shopping" is dead	Vox	28.8.2023
Kline	2023	Target Spending $5 Billion to Deliver Better Stores, 'Affordable Joy'	The Street	28.8.2023
Kohan	2020	Target's Big Investments, From Small-Format Stores To Digital, Prove Successful	Forbes	23.8.2023
Lauchlan	2020	Digital growth slows, but Target stays on target for ongoing omni-channel transformation	Diginomica	24.8.2023
McCann	2022	Target announces plans to invest $5B mainly in stores as same-day services drive growth	Modern Retail	10.8.2023

McMahan	2018	The 'Target Effect:' A psychologist explains why you can't just buy one thing	NBC News	28.8.2023
McNamara	2020	Walmart and Target limit number of shoppers in stores amid coronavirus pandemic	CBS News	22.9.2023
Metz	2022	Here's How Well Target Bounced Back After COVID-19	The List	24.8.2023
Meyersohn	2019	Target expands its loyalty program. It's about the data	CNN Business	17.8.2023
Meyersohn	2019	Walmart wants robots in stores. Target doesn't	CNN Business	21.8.2023
Meyersohn	2021	Target saw more sales growth in 2020 than the last 11 years combined. Here's why	CNN Business	22.9.2023
Mixson	2021	Retail Reimagined: A Look at Target's Digital Roadmap	Intelligent Automation Network	24.8.2023
NASR	2015	Target site back after Cyber Monday TKO	CNBC	24.8.2023
Perez	2017	Target adds AR shopping to its mobile website	TechCrunch	28.8.2023
Perez	2017	Target rolls out Bluetooth beacon technology in stores to power new indoor maps in its app	TechCrunch	24.8.2023
Reed	2020	NRF 2020 - Target's CIO on the tech secrets behind Target's transformation - build features customers love, and abstract your infrastructure	Diginomica	24.8.2023
Repko	2023	Target says it will close nine stores in major cities, citing violence and theft	CNBC	26.8.2023
Repko	2022	Target thinks it can keep growing sales — here's how the retailer plans to do it	CNBC	28.8.2023
Repko	2022	Walmart and Target's quarterly results lay bare the retailers' stark differences	CNBC	24.8.2023
Repko	2023	Target shoppers can now make a return without leaving the car	CNBC	23.8.2023

Reuter	2023	Meet the typical Target shopper, a millennial suburban mom with a house-hold income of $80,000	Business Insider	26.8.2023
Rodriguez	2022	Does Target Take Apple Pay?	Go Banking Rates	28.8.2023
Salpini	2021	What 6 charts say about the pandemic's impact on retail	Retail Dive	22.9.2023
SCT	2017	Target redesigning stores with multichannel customers in mind	Shopping Centers Today	17.8.2023
Smith	2023	Target: number of stores in the U.S. 2006-2022	Statista	28.8.2023
Smith	2023	Sales growth of Target in the United States from financial year 2016 to 2022	Statista	23.8.2023
Smith	2023	Target: sales share in the U.S. 2019 to 2022, by sales channel	Statista	28.8.2023
Statista Research Department	2023	target.com: E-Commerce net sales from 2014 to 2022	Statista	24.8.2023
Target	2015	Testing, Testing, 1,2,3: Beacon Technology Arrives in 50 Target Stores	Target	24.8.2023
Target	2015	RFID: New Tag Technology Will Elevate Target's Guest Experience	Target	28.8.2023
Target	2017	Here's How Target Is Investing in Store Technology to Make Shopping Even Better	Target	21.8.2023
Target	2017	Investing to Grow: Target Commits More Than $7 Billion to Adapt to Rapidly Evolving Guest Preferences	Target	16.8.2023
Target	2019	Big News, Disney Fans: You Can Shop the Disney Store at Target Right Now	Target	23.8.2023
Target	2022	Target Announces Investments to Drive Long-term Growth	Target	10.8.2023
Target	2022	Target's Turning Up the Tech Joy with *More* Apple at Target Shop-in-Shops, Plus the Best	Target	23.8.2023

		Retail Offer Out There on a Free Trial of Apple Fit-ness+ and More		
Target	2023	Interest-based Advertising	Target	21.8.2023
The Daily Record	2019	Retail chains adapting to changing technology	Special to The Daily Record	23.8.2023
Thomas	2019	Target CEO says cost of handling online orders drops 90% when shoppers use same-day options	CNBC	23.8.2023
TipRanks	2023	Website Traffic Chart – target.com	TipRanks	24.8.2023
Tyko	2020	Target digital sales make significant gains because of COVID-19 demand, but in-store sales drop, driving shares down	USA Today	20.8.2023
Tyko	2020	Target and Ulta Beauty team up to bring 'shop-in-shop' concept to 100-plus Target stores in 2021	USA Today Money	23.8.2023
Unglesbee	2020	Target's 141% digital growth during pandemic pushes sales and costs up	Retail Dive	28.8.2023
Velasquez	2022	Levi's Expands to 300 More Target Stores	Sourcing Journal	23.8.2023
Wahba	2016	Target Lays Out Multi-Billion Dollar E-Commerce Plan	Fortune	22.9.2023
Wharton Online	2023	4 Examples of Digital Transformation in Retail	Wharton University of Pennsylvania	23.8.2023
Woods	2018	Meet Target's Stores Deployment Interface that Realizes Distributed Edge Computing at Retail Scale	Target tech	28.8.2023
Young	2023	Target Investing $100 Million to Expand Next-Day Delivery	The Wall Street Journal	23.8.2023
Total number of sources: 67				

Appendix 2 Amazon data sources

Author(s)	Year	Title	Publisher	Accessed
Amazon	2023	Alexa Features	Amazon	6.9.2023
Amazon	2023	Do more with Alexa	Amazon	6.9.2023
Amazon	2023	Amazon physical store locations	Amazon	11.10.2023
Anand	2018	The Reality Behind Voice Shopping Hype	The Information	6.9.2023
Arora, Ensslen, Fiedler, Liu, Robinson, Stein & Schüler	2021	The value of getting personalization right-or wrong-is multiplying	McKinsey & Company	25.9.2023
Baertlein	2023	Focus: Amazon, other retailers revamp 'free' shipping as costs soar	Reuters	27.9.2023
Banker	2021	Amazon Supply Chain Innovation Continues	Forbes	5.9.2023
Barbee, Jayakumar, Touse & Venkataraman	2021	Retail's need for speed: Unlocking value in omnichannel delivery	McKinsey & Company	6.9.2023
BBC	2021	Amazon hopes pandemic habits stick after profits triple	BBC News	30.8.2023
Beckett	2022	'Hi-tech', underwhelming: Amazon's IRL clothing store misses the point of shopping	The Guardian	4.9.2023
Bitter	2023	Amazon Fresh stores are installing self-checkout after years of trying to get customers to use Just Walk Out tech	Business Insider	5.9.2023
Business Wire	2021	Amazon.com Announces First Quarter Results	Business Wire	30.8.2023
Butler	2022	How mighty will Amazon be after the pandemic?	The Guardian	1.9.2023

Cao	2023	Amazon CEO Andy Jassy's Massive Layoffs and Cost Reduction Are Paying Off	Observer	27.9.2023
Chen	2023	10 tools and features that help you get even more out of shopping on Amazon	Amazon	6.9.2023
Cheng	2022	Amazon Has a Real-World Fitting Room, and It Makes Me Want to Shop	CNET	4.9.2023
Chevalier	2022	Impact of COVID-19 on the importance of Amazon in the United States 2021	Statista	30.8.2023
Coppola	2023	Amazon's online and offline sales growth rate 2019-2027	Statista	26.9.2023
Coppola	2023	ACSI - U.S. customer satisfaction with Amazon.com as of 2022	Statista	26.9.2023
Danziger	2018	Amazon's Customer Loyalty Is Astounding	Forbes	6.9.2023
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Dastin	2022	Amazon to shut its bookstores and other shops as its grocery chain expands	Reuters	5.9.2023
Day & Gu	2019	The Enormous Numbers Behind Amazon's Market Reach	Bloomberg	5.9.2023
Day	2023	Amazon Plans to Add ChatGPT-Style Search to Its Online Store	Bloomberg	6.9.2023
DeVon	2023	From Amazon to Wendy's, how 4 companies plan to incorporate AI—and how you may interact with it	CNBC	6.9.2023
EDPS	n.d.	Just Walk Out Technology	European Data Protection Supervisor	5.9.2023
Feedvisor	2019	The 2019 Amazon Consumer Behavior Report	Feedvisor	26.9.2023

Gebel	2021	What is Amazon Locker? How to use the free and convenient delivery pick-up system	Business Insider	6.9.2023
Green & Meisenzahl	2023	Need to return an Amazon purchase? The ecommerce giant has doubled its return options	Business Insider	6.9.2023
Halkett	2022	Using Customer Obsession to Drive Rapid Innovation	Forbes	4.9.2023
Hanbury	2023	Amazon is closing certain Amazon Fresh and Amazon Go stores, suggesting that grocery hasn't been as fruitful as it hoped	Business Insider	25.9.2023
Harris	2020	How Amazon became a pandemic giant – and why that could be a threat to us all	The Guardian	1.9.2023
Jarrett	2023	I went shopping at the Amazon Style store in Los Angeles and found an impossibly cool clothing selection and high-tech fitting rooms	Amazon	4.9.2023
Kang	2022	Here Comes the Full Amazonification of Whole Foods	The New York Times	5.9.2023
Kohan	2022	Amazon Style Store Where Tech Meets Fashion	Forbes	4.9.2023
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Lufkin	2020	The curious origins of online shopping	BBC	6.9.2023
Masini	2021	How Amazon Moved Faster Than Ever During the Pandemic	Northwestern University	1.9.2023
McAfee	2021	3 Reasons Why Amazon Will Likely Continue To Gain E-Commerce Market Share	Forbes	6.9.2023
Molina	2022	Amazon is opening its first physical clothing shop with	USA Today	4.9.2023

		brands like Calvin Klein, Lacoste		
Moorman	2022	Second Amazon Style location in the country opens at Easton Town Center in Columbus	The Columbus Dispatch	4.9.2023
Murphy Kelly	2022	Amazon is always watching	CNN Business	25.9.2023
Murphy Kelly	2023	Amazon is trying to make it simpler to sift through thousands of user reviews	CNN Business	6.9.2023
Murphy Marcos	2020	Amazon One: Amazon's launches hand scanners as its new entry option in select stores	USA Today	4.9.2023
O'Flaherty	2022	The data game: what Amazon knows about you and how to stop it	The Guardian	5.9.2023
Palmer & Cortés	2022	This map shows where Amazon is closing warehouses across the country	CNBC	27.9.2023
Palmer	2020	How Amazon managed the coronavirus crisis and came out stronger	CNBC	30.8.2023
Palmer	2022	Amazon is shutting 68 retail stores, ending Amazon Books, 4-star and Pop Up shops	CNBC	25.9.2023
Palmer	2023	Amazon set to begin new round of layoffs affecting more than 18,000 people	CNBC	26.9.2023
Palmer	2023	Amazon to close eight Go convenience stores in cost-cutting move	CNBC	27.9.2023
Perez	2022	Amazon launches Inspire, a TikTok-like shopping feed that supports both photos and videos	TechCrunch	6.9.2023
Rains	2023	I tried Whole Foods' 'Just Walk Out' technology and was impressed that I could pay with my palm, but was not happy with the risk of being over-charged	Business Insider	5.9.2023

Rapp & Harty	2021	Just how massive Amazon has grown during the pandemic, in 8 charts	Fortune	29.8.2023
Reuters	2023	Amazon optimizes delivery network for speedier delivery, lower costs	Reuters	22.9.2023
Rosenblatt	2023	Amazon, Starbucks face WA class-action lawsuit over customer data	The Seattle Times	26.9.2023
Soper	2023	Amazon's cost-cutting binge claims another casualty: Self-checkout stores in 3 cities	Fortune	25.9.2023
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Stringer	2023	A comprehensive list of 2023 tech layoffs	TechCrunch	27.9.2023
The Economist	2021	Amazon's department-store plans are less surprising than they appear	The Economist	5.9.2023
The Motley Fool	2023	Amazon.com (AMZN) Q4 2022 Earnings Call Transcript	The Motley Fool	27.9.2023
Vasen	2022	Amazon reimagines in-store shopping with Amazon Style	Amazon	5.9.2023
Walton	2022	5 Reasons Why Amazon Go Is Already The Greatest Retail Innovation Of The Next 30 Years	Forbes	5.9.2023
Wayt	2023	How Amazon's Bricks-and-Mortar Dreams Hit a Wall	The Information	5.9.2023
Weise	2020	Pushed by Pandemic, Amazon Goes on a Hiring Spree Without Equal	The New York Times	26.9.2023
Widman Neese	2023	What it's like inside Easton's Amazon Style store	Axios Columbus	4.9.2023
Total number of sources: 66				