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OMNICHANNEL ENVIRONMENT — PHENOMENA, PROCESSES AND THE DIRECTIONS OF CHANGE

ŚRODOWISKO OMNIKANAŁOWE — ZJAWISKA, PROCESY, KIERUNKI ZMIAN

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ABSTRACT

Omnichannel as a concept was introduced to the business practice due to the development of multichannel actions and their integration. This paper aims to identify processes and phenomena occurring in an omnichannel environment in the past years (2020–2022) and their evaluation based on the literature. We used the literature review method, focusing mainly on two professional journals: *Total Retail and Multichannel Merchant.* Based on the literature studies, we can say that in the analysed period, the major issues discussed were the extension of customer experience and personalisation of contact, development of offered ways of delivery (including the curbside delivery or 'dock and load') and payment methods (including m-payments), the need for more frequent actualisation of POS solutions, changes in the way in which stock and supplier relations are managed, implementation of new technologies (such as headless e-commerce and Progressive Web Application [PWA]), development of contact-less shopping and further development of sustainable commerce.

Key words: customer behaviour, omnichannel, new marketing trends, COVID-19

ABSTRAKT

Omnikanał jako koncepcja został wprowadzony do praktyki biznesowej w konsekwencji postępującej integracji działań multikanałowych. Celem artykułu była identyfikacja procesów i zjawisk zachodzących w środowisku omnikanałowym w ostatnich latach (2020–2022) oraz ich ocena w oparciu o literaturę przedmiotu. Zastosowano metodę przeglądu literatury, koncentrując się głównie na tekstach opublikowanych na łamach czasopism biznesowych: Total Retail oraz Multichannel Merchant. Na podstawie przeprowadzonych studiów literaturowych można stwierdzić, iż w analizowanym okresie koncentrowano się głównie na: rozbudowie doświadczeń klienta i personalizacji kontaktu, rozszerzeniu proponowanych sposobów dostawy (w tym dostaw na chodnik czy „dock and load") i metod płatności (w tym m-payment), konieczności częstszej aktualizacji rozwiązań POS; zmianach w sposobie zarządzania magazynem i relacjami z dostawcami, wdrażaniu nowych rozwiązań technicznych (w tym headless e-commerce i PWA), rozwoju zakupów bezkontaktowych czy dalszym wzroście znaczenia handlu zrównoważonego.

Słowa kluczowe: zachowania konsumentów, omnikanał, nowe trendy w marketingu, COVID-19

JEL: M31, M30

Introduction

Homogenisation of customer experiences across channels has been implemented for a while and aims to adopt the available technologies for the needs and requirements of customers, especially in real and virtual channels (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014; Santalova, Lesnikova, Kustov, Balahanova, & Nechaeva, 2019). Research related to omnichannel is positioned in a stream of customer and offer behaviours (Li et al., 2018; Lafkihi, Pan, & Ballot, 2019), similar to that of offerers only (Rigby, 2011; Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Rahman, 2013; Grewal, Roggeveen, & Nordfält, 2016; Lim, Rabinovich, Rogers, & Lester, 2016; Wiener, Hoßbach, & Saunders, 2018).

Omnichannel solutions were initially used in commerce to extend previously implemented multichannel options. It is pointed out that omnichannel experiences have been developed for over a decade. In this concept, offerors guarantee the customer's ability to order and take the commodity in all the channels (Taylor, Brockhaus, Knemeyer, & Murphy, 2019). Sometimes, it is also said that based on the preferences in terms of all channel usage, the typologies of customers are built, and they show the omnichannel customers separately (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014; Gregor & Gotwald-Feja, 2018). Omnichannel is sometimes also treated as a path to deliver customer value, which became crucial during the Coronavirus Disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic. On average, one in three American citizens used omnichannel solutions (such as shopping online and stationary collection) during the pandemic, and two in three-plan to continue this form of transaction fulfilment (Briedis, Gregg, Heidenreich, & Liu, 2021). The research, published in the 'Voice of the Retail Industry Survey' conducted in July 2020, shows that the pandemic forced sellers to treat entering the omnichannel as their top priority (Bourlier, 2020). At the same time, it is challenging to state to what extent omnichannel solutions will be implemented and what factors can influence their further functioning.

Identifying processes and phenomena happening in an omnichannel environment in the past 3 years (2020-2022) is difficult due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which appeared at the beginning of 2020. On a global scale, until Sep. 13, 2022, around 610 million people got ill due to the coronavirus, and over 6.5 million died (WorldoMeter, 2022). Apart from the health condition of humankind, the results of the pandemic were reflected in the worsening economic situation of specific countries, the massive growth of unemployment (in 2020 alone, over 225 million regular posts vanished), further increase in the number of people struggling with extreme poverty, increase in public debt, decrease in investments (in Europe and North America for 42%), and a significant growth in the prices of commodities and services (United Nations, 2020). The other type of consequences is visible in the popularity of remote work, the decrease in working hours (Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, 2020) and the popularisation of online tools in building the employees' brand (Sobocińska, 2022). At the same time, the worsening of the current and future economic situation perception of households (Biga et al., 2020) will significantly influence the fulfilment of customer needs. Research shows that entrepreneurs were not prepared to implement omnichannel and multichannel solutions forced by the pandemic (Acquila-Natale, Chaparro-Pelaez, Del-Rio-Carazo, & Cuenca-Enrique, 2022; Gerea & Herskovic, 2022; Gutierrez-Leefmans, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic also influenced customer attitudes and market behaviours (Kucharska & Malinowska, 2021; Liu, Fang, Cai, Su, & Wang, 2022; Mącik & Mącik, 2022). The forced implementation of solutions decreased the probability of being infected by the virus. It was reflected in the changes in needs satisfaction (social distance, purchases in the real world with many limitations, and the necessity to purchase certain goods online). The ways to make orders also changed. Significant changes in offerors' suppliers accompanied all these behaviours, mainly in the tools used by companies in relations with customers (Peppers & Rogers 2022). These processes relate to virtualisation and the need to unify customer experiences in different channels (or guarantee their equivalence and substitutional character), which was mentioned earlier. Customer behaviours seem to gravitate towards omnichannel or (which is surprising in terms of the earlier research results; Gotwald-Feja, 2016)-toward the domination of online channels (Naragon, 2022).

In this paper, we have analysed texts published in the professional online journals, Total Retail and Multichannel Merchant. We selected papers which appeared in search results related to the 'omnichannel' keyword, published between March and September 2020 and in 2022 (until June). There were 134 papers from Total Retail and 172 documents from Multichannel Merchant. The literature review method was used, and it aimed to identify the phenomena and processes related to the omnichannel environment and their evaluation. As a consequence of the research goal, detailed questions were stated regarding customers' needs and experiences, changes in terms of product delivery and usage of technologies by enterprises. The papers mainly reflect the pandemic challenges, covering the challenges regarding satisfaction of customers' needs in the virtual and real world in parallel (Stabler, 2020). The changes and tendencies which were noticed are described below more in the issue order, not necessarily chronologically.

The Method

In this paper, the qualitative attitude was used. Regarding social sciences, the literature review is usually based on scientific sources (Czakon, 2011; Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021). In terms of omnichannel, the implementation of new solutions and theoretical analysis is made faster in professional journals, and not scientific journals; therefore we have focused on the former, applying the rigours of a systematic literature review. We selected the journals devoted to multichannel and commerce because, in this case, the implementation of omnichannel solutions was advised at the earliest. The journals were one of those that were the first ones to describe omnichannel. All the texts presented in the search results after typing the keyword 'omnichannel' in Total Retail and Multichannel Merchant were analysed. There were two periods for analysis: at the beginning of the pandemic (58 and 23 papers) and during the pandemic (76 and 149 articles). If the issue discussed in a paper was previously described in an earlier publication, quoted and analysed, we desisted from presenting the same content again. Based on the research results, we made an overview of the phenomena and processes related to the omnichannel environment. Then the results were combined with the scientific research results published in peer-reviewed journals, indexed in SCOPUS database.

Results

The importance of consumer experience personalisation is growing steadily. It is, therefore, vital to enable users to build an experience almost a'la carte, which is difficult for sizeable online commerce chains. For this reason, the importance of small and flexible players is crucial to adapt to clients' needs and preferences (Stabler, 2020). At the same time, it is noted that customer contact should be meaningful. This excludes short and brief business relationships and emphasises (mainly through CRM (Customer Relationship Management) and Artificial Intelligence [AI] systems) a more profound experience through a better understanding of each customer. The dynamic approach to the customer is also a factor that significantly affects the total satisfaction and perception of the brand and the marketing materials it provides (Estas, 2020; Garber, 2020).

Stein Mart implemented (in March) the solutions to enrich customer experience in online purchases and collection in a standard shop, Buy Online, Pick-Up In-Store (BOPIS). It aimed at the personalisation of customer experience in every brand touchpoint. BOPIS is often equated with the technology of implementing a 'button', which calls for assistance and alarming the employee that a customer wants to collect the package. In this way, the carrier can invite the customer with their first name, offer promotional goods (finally enhancing the total value of the client's cart) and deliver it in the shortest possible time (Schebella, 2020; Sackos, 2022). During the pandemic, new models of delivery (services) appeared, and they are still available. Among others, they are Research online, purchase in-store (ROPIS) and Buy online, return in-store (BORIS) (Balytsky, 2022). Even if the first one was known in the literature as Research online, purchase offline (ROPO) (Gregor & Gotwald-Feja, 2017), the concept was popularised during the pandemic for apparent reasons. Additionally, the customer is not switching the offeror, which might be a significant change compared with the ROPO effect. The purchase is finished in-store to shorten the waiting time for a product. New products were used in the model (e.g. the groceries offered by supermarkets). It resonates with Neslin's (2022) model, which presents various strategies and stages of the customer's decision-making process.

Feng, Zhang, Feng and Zhu (2022) propose a model which relates to the cost of visiting the store in omnichannel, using the BOPS effect. The authors state that allowing customers to complete online shopping with the traditional visit to the store is one of the strategies for the omnichannel presence of the company. However, they point out that the strategy implies many challenges related to price management and store visiting cost relationships.

Feeney (2022) states that the attitude towards POS (Point of Sales) must change (Nguyen & Borusiak, 2021). Currently, it is impossible to implement a single technology for 5–10 years. It is inevitable to adapt it to the needs of customers and their preferences, including using new technologies like AI, personalised advertising or acceptance of various payment methods (Pero 2022). It is essential to guarantee the maximum comfort for the user. Implementation of the 'additional brain' in store, which will interpret inventory, scan shelves and all the data from the point of sales, and forecast the demand, becomes necessary if one wants to keep a competitive advantage in the omnichannel environment. 'Data is retail's secret weapon to reduce costs, improve labour reliability and consistency, and access operational insights' (Baylin, 2022). Inventory automation frees the labour, which can focus on customer service (Thielens, 2022).

However, the changes happening in brick-and-mortar stores are not only related to inventory management (Haggerty 2020) or the shop's 'interface'. Due to the changes in customer expectations regarding technology usage, it is crucial to implement the so-called 'experiential retail'. It is essential for omnichannel customers who need stretching of fluent, sage and exciting user experience from the virtual to the real world (Barnes, 2022). An example of such a solution can be an ACI Smart Engage. This mobile platform offers the sellers a chance to present their offer directly on a customer's smartphone, using geolocation, voice commerce and the technology of picture recognition (ACI Worldwide, 2022).

Technological changes are related to the possibilities granted by so-called 'headless e-commerce'. Implementation of solutions which divide the front-end and back-end of shopping portals allows the potential for easy and fast reaction to changes in customer surrounding and lets the seller become independent from one technology provider for the whole store. It results in smoother interactions with the website for customers and helps in easier adaptation to the sellers' and clients' expectations. Headless e-commerce is often joined with the term 'MACH' (meaning: Microservices, API-First, Cloud-Native and Headless). So the attitude is stretching and covering the implementation of small and independent solutions in one full service. To be successful in online commerce, employees who adapt fast and are open to change are crucial (Broke, 2022).

A total of 8 in 10 US citizens agree that during the COVID-19 pandemic, unnecessary movement must be reduced, and 6 in 10 support telephone contact with physicians, banks and pharmacies. At the same time, research proves that two-thirds of clients, regardless of age group, prefer online shopping and pick-up in-store (Wethered, 2020). Clients require adjusting their preferences regarding the product and delivery (Panzer, 2020; Cocco

& De Juan-Vigaray, 2022). Some brands also develop the concept of adaptation to customer needs through returns collection (to reduce the purchasing risks) (Freedman, 2022). It is, however, challenging for target groups of different ages to differ significantly in terms of the products in the cart and the application's interface (Bergman, 2020). For example, many suppliers do not use the offered changes by providing voice shopping. Only 15% of contact centre leaders plan to implement that solution (Abeysena, 2022).

It is inevitable to extend and change the customer experience towards using the shop's floors (especially in terms of big retail chains) instead as a place for meetings rather than pure commerce. Concerning the need for personalisation, a transition towards direct to customer (D2C), like in the local stores (Stabler, 2020), can be implemented, especially since customers support the solution. Almost half of the customers (55%) more eagerly buy directly from brands which result in a reduction of the distribution network costs and allow financial optimisation (Panzer, 2020). Implementation of these solutions supports omnichannel customers who, 30% more often than other customer groups, buy coffee in the shop's café or pick up medicine in the shop's pharmacy during regular shopping. The role of minimally distractor factors is important not only to implement omnichannel solutions but to be an omnichannel (Birnbaum, 2020).

Extension of customer experience is in line with its optimisation, and AI can be of assistance with implementing real-time data analytics (RTDA) or Application Performance Monitoring (APM) analysing the most important application's parameters (Long, 2020). Enterprises must, however, cope with not only gathering or sorting the data but with efficient usage of the information derived from the data (Seify, 2022).

In relation to customer experience, the growth of augmented reality (AR) and virtual (VR) reality's role is noticeable in terms of testing the product before purchasing and-using it instead of purchasing (Maddimsetty 2022). The development of 5G networks and usage of their abilities (faster Internet connection, more devices, etc.) will accelerate the process (Stabler, 2020). Openness for AR/VR can raise the conviction that enterprises should get involved in the Metaverse (announced by Mark Zuckerberg) because those entities which 20 years ago did not decide to enter the online world had lost the market opportunity (Ryan, 2022). The potential to enter the hybrid world is related to all the organisations, and it was initially tested during Metaverse Fashion Week. It was proved that there is a possibility to find a balance between the usage of the virtual world and immersion comparable to that in the real world. Among others, this is the reason why organisations should prepare strategies for entering Metaverse (even if only in a scenario model) (Moreti, 2022). As an example of engagement in hybrid environments, we can present the cooperation of Mattel and Forever21 brands, thanks to which Metaverse users can buy clothing, accessories and equipment inspired by the Barbie world (Albiges, 2022). The quality of the Internet connection is still a challenge and, in many cases, will be a barrier to entering the full usage of the hybrid world (Norton, 2022).

The role of the speed of page loading (Pilarczyk & Rogala, 2018) and the development of Progressive Web Applications (PWAs) is growing to shorten the customer journey (Cardarella, 2020). The processes of omnichannel development involve all the enterprises which take attempt to implement seamless commerce. They face the challenges of implementing changes in an evolutionary, not revolutionary, way to compete successfully with others. Jaszczyk (2022) recommends them a few priorities:

- The clients have to be positioned in the first place, and technological plans should be adjusted to their needs, regardless of the plans for the solution's implementation and its timing;
- The companies should invest only in good technologies because their implementation can improve the financial results of the company (savings from customer service), but additionally, it creates the potential to implement a higher level of customer purchasing experience personalisation;
- Implementation of innovations related to the online ecosystem of customer experience should be considered;
- The technological plans have to be related to complex business strategies.

Customer preferences towards delivery have also changed. Clients using the service, for example, the delivery on the day of order offered by UPS (O'Brien, 2022) or Amazon, in the majority of cases, accept a 2- or 3-day period to wait for the delivery of an ordered product. For that reason, companies are forced to use the newest technologies for order completion or use historical data to accurately forecast the demand. It is also challenging to guarantee the resilience of supply chains in terms of the unpredictable business environment (Dagan, 2022). The character of the relationship with suppliers, directed at the agility of the organisation, seems to be inevitable (Garber, 2020). The problem's role grew due to the pandemic. The necessity to maintain close and positive relations with suppliers (also the local ones) becomes crucial for maintaining the quality and scope of services, implementing new solutions, improving enterprise performance and improving its flexibility (Agile, Lean) (Barnes, 2020). Acquisition of a good supplier becomes challenging and new solutions are there to help. For example, Extensiv offers the brands the possibility to use the suppliers' search (Extensiv, 2022).

Implementation of omnichannel solutions can require additional resources, so the limitation of costs with unaffected product quality is crucial, especially during COVID-19. During that period, curbside delivery develops. The package is delivered in front of the house, but the client is responsible for further logistics (e.g. collecting and taking it to his or her flat). Such delivery limits the time for delivery, allows serving more customers and can be contactless (Barnes, 2020) and, for that reason-safer. The pick-up window, fast packages (having the basic groceries, prepared to pick them up in-store and have no contact with others) or 'dock and load' (putting the order which was previously bought and paid for directly to customers car parked in front of the store) are other examples of the delivery innovations (Osburn, 2020). The usage of drones for product delivery is another issue. Walmart can serve as an example, as it covers 4 million households with drone delivery (Keenan, 2022), experiencing an increase of online sales of 99% compared between March 2019 and 2020 (Rosenstrauch, 2020). Some companies noticed the change in the usage of robots or autonomic cars in delivery, especially at the last stage of order fulfilment (Sackos, 2022). Some of those and the other solutions would not have even been considered before COVID-19. Metzker (2022) believes that brick-and-mortar shops can have a significant competitive advantage due to the broad network of selling points and their distributed retail chains. This way, the concept of instant delivery can become real. Black (2022) states that in that situation, omnichannel from the customer's perspective is the chance to fulfil the shopping in an optimal way, and for that reason, traditional retail chains with a broad potential for delivery become efficient in the omnichannel world. In this way, the shops can easily manage returns which are far more challenging for virtual entities. This is why the latter need to consider reverse delivery or building partnerships with specialised organisations which handle not only complaints and returns but also will use the economy of scale (Huddle, 2022).

Limitations and avoidance of contact (Akers, 2020) are in line with the trends of self-service purchasing or product scanning and putting products to the cart at the same time as payment in the cashier, optimal, self-service ones (Barnes, 2020). The solution, which was not that long ago developed only to shorten the service time for customers, becomes an element in improving the safety of people. The role of robots and cobots (collaborative robots) (Barnes, 2020) is similar since they were designed for order processing and direct interaction with humans. Lack of contact limits the chance for infection, and the humanoid shape of cobots allows for building a good relationship with the customer. In terms of delivery, the acceleration of processes aimed at financial optimisation (decrease in employment, automation and robotisation) is noticed, but it is motivated not only due to financial issues but mainly by the requirements of customers and the current situation. The expectations of customers relate to something far more significant than just virtualisation. They cover the need of the possibility to fulfil purchasing processes on entertainment and social platforms. It is especially related to Generation Z, which is far more familiarised with technologies than the Y Generation and the chance for smooth service and fast delivery is a basic condition, not a 'premium' feature (Hook, 2022). Shopping on social networks gets more popular, and the value of transactions in 2021 in the so-called social commerce was US$958 billion (Morris, 2022). Social media are not enough for solving conversions known from shops (although some platforms are working in that direction). For that reason, a part of brands prefer, for example, the organisation of live events on their websites instead of on social networking sites (Holland, 2022). It can be caused by the fact that brands treat social media rather as a tool for promotion, reaching customers and building loyalty, and not conversion itself (Champion, 2022).

The role of inventory management grows due to the necessity to focus on one channel during COVID-19 frees some resources and allows the job of ordering the systems for multiple locations. Hogue (2020) states that such actions will be crucial when customers come back from lockdown to their natural omnichannel preferences. In that context, the popularisation of electronic payments is essential (Eichinger, 2020) since they do not require a presence of a seller and they allow full self-service automation. The functioning of shops can also change. Enterprises need to choose whether to focus their attention on delivering customers a complex service (at the expense of the back-office processes) or allow instant delivery due to shrinking the shop area (and extension of the warehouse facility) (Kroner, 2022).

At the same time, the problems with the labour force became a challenge (Feeney, 2022). The solution to this problem can be greater involvement of technologies. The need to virtualise the job influenced not only the development of employees' competencies in e-commerce but also forced the absorption of new behavioural patterns of customers. For that reason, the presence of a seller in the shop is not required to make customers feel satisfied. However, online services in the form of video conversations started to be required by clients (Hordagoda, 2022). The reason could be to balance the previous absence of the seller.

The need for clients' online safety (Ronhaar, Zehner, & Langhorne, 2021) is essential due to the growth of intensity of criminal behaviours aimed at capturing transactions, payments or private data (Benge, 2020). An increase in the number and value of online transactions can determine the growth of interest in this field by criminal groups. Not only the data stealing and its usage not in accordance with the intended purpose, it might also be dangerous. Inappropriate usage of data by enterprises themselves is punishable, and for that reason, it is suggested to hire experts in private data protection or network safety (Joshi, 2022). Suppliers are forced to ensure certificates of safety for websites and their identities online because such investments can be translated into customer trust (Palanisamy, 2022). Similarly, it is important to provide similar safety measures to the company, especially while the popularity of online payment grows (Laudenbach, 2022). It is also visible in the model buy now, pay later (BNPL), where the customer finalises purchasing at the point of sales, but the payment is postponed or divided into instalments without the need to use a debit card or classical procedure for consumer credit (Ryan, 2022, Martin 2022). It is forecasted that the value of the market shall grow from US$ 15.91 billion in 2021 (globally) to US$ 22.86 billion in 2022 and US$ 90.51 billion in 2029 (Fortune Business Insights, 2022).

The change in the efficiency of action evaluation is also visible. Initially, marketers measured the efficiency of mailing with the number of opened and read e-mails. Currently, the attention is transferred to qualitative factors related to customer engagement (Sargeant, 2022).

The element which allows further virtualisation is the implementation of solutions of AI (Mcglynn, 2020). It is a crucial trend from the perspective of AI operational efficiency. Research suggests that 35% of customer purchases on Amazon come from recommendations stimulated by AI, and by the end of 2023, the commerce plans to invest in this area US$ 12 billion, which is a growth of 230% while comparing with the year 2019 (Mcglynn, 2020).

Sustainable commerce becomes very important, especially in relation to the declarations of the retail chains to implement sustainable fabrics (ZARAvir), zero carbon footprint (H&M), and growth of the value of the second-hand clothing market (from US$ 24 billion currently, the value can reach US$ 51 billion in 2023) (Stabler, 2020). Although the issue was not much visible due to urgent challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears again due to the periodical ease of the health problems. It seems that sustainable commerce, from a classical perception of the issue, covering the balance between technological, social, economic and environmental issues becomes visible in a different manner. It can be seen in 'empathising commerce' (Akers, 2020) and customer and employee voluntary service (e.g. free product delivery for elderly people during pandemics) or virtualisation of some goods (like offering access to online events for easing social distancing while still participating in culture). Wilson (2022) noticed that the sustainable attitude of business should be derived directly from the mission of the organisation. 'Purpose-driven marketing becomes a buzzword like the omnichannel itself'. Almost all the customers (94% of respondents) declare that they value purpose-driven companies, regardless of their ambitions to create a metaverse or to meet sustainability goals. For this reason, the communication of goals by companies should be clear at the levels of strategy, key values and brand message (Wilson, 2022).

McGovern (2020) writes about the 'new normality' caused by the coronavirus. The 'commerce apocalypse', which was experienced by the economies of all countries, can be described by the virtualisation and transition from omnichannel to single-channel (online). The structure of employment in marketing and logistics has changed, similarly as automation of advertising material creation is noticed, and the institutions teaching marketers try to adjust to the new reality by adapting the teaching programmes. The relations with other humans in a shopping situation in shops are pushed to the background (especially for Z Generation), but the usage of fast online service becomes crucial (even within 8 s, with the usage of a chatbot to answer customer queries). The author also states that the 'new normality' does not wait till the COVID-19 pandemic ends.

Sularia (2020) additionally noticed that COVID-19 has caused many changes related to not only the new consumption models or the say in how retail chains operate. Among others, distant work is stimulating online shopping. Other changes in terms of organisation actions are the attitude 'digital first', efficient inventory management as a key for achieving profitability, and 'cost-less customers' online appearance (who buy online because they have no other option). In Sularia's (2020) perception, logistics will be the element of competitive advantage building, which is stimulated by the growing popularity of distributed production. It is symptomatic that the ready-made solutions to be implemented in e-commerce appear (in a model 'plug and play'), and online shopping will naturally become a vital part of the customer journey (Rosenstrauch, 2020). Implementation of the solutions which support better functioning of the applications (Birnboim 2022) (or websites) and delivering customers the best product possible is caused by the necessity to transfer the majority of customers online. It is hard to say what we can say about the disappearance of omnichannel towards single-channel, because multi-screening still gains popularity. Customers prefer solutions of that sort because they give more possibilities (Stotz, 2020). Assuming usage of a television set, personal computer and smartphone (or tablet)-three channels are already used. Even if the content is not complementary and related to different brands, it is opposed to a single-channel idea.[1]

On the other hand, Smythe (2022) noticed that the implementation of a customer-centric approach is significant, and the level of omnichannel integration needs to be determined by the needs of customers. In his opinion, such attitudes allow companies to increase ROI (Retur on Investment). So if customers prefer online channels, maybe optimisation should be applied here (reducing the usage and the role of the other ones).

Discussion

The phenomena described above seem to be the background for omnichannel environment development. Although the matters presented are related mainly to the issues caused by the pandemic, some of them were visible earlier (although their role was smaller). An example might be the necessity of paying attention to customer experience (Schmitt, 2015). Headless e-commerce, PWA, changes in relations with suppliers and employee or service optimisation are problems which touch business in general, not only in terms of an omnichannel environment. However, we must agree that the implementation of omnichannel in the enterprise makes those issues more important than in multichannel or single-channel reality (especially while considering the entities operating in e-commerce only). Some novelty might be the need for less direct contact with the other person (seller); however, while we compare it with earlier research results (Kowalczyk, 2006), the issue appeared far earlier than the pandemic. The need for social distancing implementation just made those challenges more visible than ever before.

We can also agree that the ability to complete the purchasing process in social networks and the change in their role is significantly determined by the pandemic. Although social commerce was analysed earlier (Turnbaum & Strauss & Lai), the necessity for transferring social and emotional activity to social networking sites and the appearance of the digital natives' generation (or the Alfa Generation) caused the acceleration in the changes.

It can also be said that the most significant challenge is an attempt to diagnose the future directions for omnichannel environment development. One of the key factors influencing the potential forecast is the further development of the Metaverse. Mark Zuckerberg's proposition is highly interesting for offerors and clients, among others, for the deep immersion offered by AR. Yet, it is hard to predict whether Metaverse will replace omnichannel or, rather, will become a part of it. Maybe in the future, we will speak about the single channel in terms of AR application.

It is also hard to state whether and which actions taken by organisations were caused by COVID-19. Initiation of works on the implementation of virtual solutions was visible far earlier, and it can be rather related to technological advancement and the digital economy (Gregor & Gotwald-Feja, 2017; Kucharska, 2020). It is also difficult to answer which phenomena have the potential to become trends and a constant element of the economic landscape. Determinants for this can be high dynamics of technological advancement, social trends or the natural tendency of humans to gain comfort (at the expense of development or change) (Young, 2022).

Summary

The analysed issue seems to complete the requirements of novelty, especially in relation to the intensity of the changes (compared with earlier years). Although it is a serious limitation that the attention was focused only on two professional online journals, the number of over 300 analysed papers concerning omnichannel addressed mainly to enterprises which implement them can be of a certain value. The development of omnichannel activities can be related to a significant development of customer experience (in relation to the customer journey and available channels, including VR, AR and voice commerce) and its personalisation. It is also noticeable that the spectre of delivery methods has developed significantly, including dock and load or instant delivery. Changes in the intensity of omnichannel solutions usage by customers force a more frequent update of solutions implemented in brick-and-mortar stores (POS technology), used to manage inventory or concepts like Metaverse, headless e-commerce and PWA. The pandemic forced the development of contactless shopping, and Żabka or Amazon kept the solutions. It is worth noticing that sustainable commerce and transparency are important regardless of the pandemic stage.

Some pay attention to the fact that we are facing the 'new normality' (McGovern, 2020), where people have adjusted to the surrounding threats caused by the deadly virus and have implemented new patterns of behaviours which can be a standard in the future. The source of these challenges is the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we need to ask ourselves if the so-called 'new normality' is really caused by the appearance of the virus, lockdowns and their consequences or, rather, regardless of it. This question can be an inspiration for further research in terms of the meaning of factors stimulating technology implementation, omnichannel commerce and the omnichannel environment. The research that we conducted allows showing a few problem areas related to omnichannel (which stands in line with the results of Salvietti, Ziliani, Teller, Ieva, and Ranfagni's research [2022]). The first group of problems is the customer behaviours of clients, including the fulfilment of customer journeys and preferences towards specific channels or omnichannel customer experience (Omnichannel-CX). Furthermore, the supply side of the market requires attention, including usage of new technologies (such as real-time research solutions, AR and the Internet of Things), human resources management or the risk of channel cannibalisation. The omnichannel strategies (in terms of creation and implementation) of companies require in-depth studies, especially after the pandemic eases and also require research attention.

Endnotes

[1] The problem with introducing that issue is related to the fact that different authors treat the internet as one channel, eliminating the mobile channel as a separate one. On the basis of this, multi- or omnichannel appeared more rarely. See B. Gotwald-Feja, *Konsument w realiach omnichannel*, SIZ, Łódź 2015.

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