

Authentic omnichannel: Providing consumers with a seamless brand experience through authenticity

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Abstract

Omnichannel represents a customer-oriented distribution paradigm through which retailers can deliver a seamless customer experience and create an authentic brand narrative that is communicated to customers across diverse touchpoints. Despite the increasing relevance of the omnichannel approach, research on how omnichannel can affect the customer experience remains scant. This research consists of a qualitative study and three experimental studies. Drawing from signaling theory, we contend that the signal congruency established by omnichannel—where all the channels are aligned and convey a consistent message to customers—can enhance consumers' purchase intention and perceptions of brand authenticity. We further investigate the role of brand authenticity as a mediator of the relationship between multichannel customer experience (seamless vs. nonseamless) and purchase intention, as well as of brand untrustworthiness as a moderator of the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity. The results show that a seamless multichannel customer experience has a significant main effect on purchase intention and that participants in the seamless multichannel customer experience condition perceive the brand as more authentic than those in the nonseamless multichannel customer experience condition. Both the mediation and moderation hypotheses are supported. These findings enhance the literature on signaling theory and omnichannel. They also provide insightful implications for retailers in terms of managing the omnichannel customer experience. Overall, this study integrates the research areas of brand authenticity and omnichannel and provides valuable insights by indicating how seamlessness can boost consumers' perception of brand authenticity. Furthermore, the study advances our knowledge by investigating the impact of brand authenticity as both a result of the omnichannel customer experience and a predictor of purchase intention.

KEYWORDS

brand authenticity, brand experience, multichannel customer experience, omnichannel, seamlessness, signal congruency, signaling theory

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Defined as “an integrated sales experience that melds the advantages of physical stores with the information-rich experience of online shopping” (Rigby, 2011, p. 4), the omnichannel strategy represents the future of retailing. This is particularly important for brick-and-mortar retailers, who are increasingly impacted by online retailer pursuit to win customers and achieve retail dominance (Alguezaui & Filieri, 2020). Threatened by e-commerce players such as Amazon and Shopify, brick-and-mortar retailers have had to profoundly adapt their business models such as by integrating multiple distribution channels to survive in an increasingly competitive environment (Alguezaui & Filieri, 2020; Gong et al., 2022).

Omnichannel overcomes the traditional separation between the physical and the online, store to provide an integrated system where customers can autonomously move across touchpoints, all within a single transaction process (Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014). Omnichannel retailing represents not only a shift in the retail paradigm (Verhoef et al., 2015), but also a customer-oriented retailing model rooted in consumer behavior (Alexander & Blazquez Cano, 2020).

Unlike the multichannel strategy, characterized by a lack of integration across the different retail channels, the omnichannel approach is based on continuous interplay and seamless interaction between customers and brands (Alexander & Blazquez Cano, 2020). Such seamlessness removes distinction among the available channels, creating a “showroom without walls” (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013, p. 1). It means that customers can seamlessly interact with brands, “navigating between channels with continuity and ease” (Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020, p. 18). Retail seamlessness facilitates a transition from multichannel to omnichannel strategy, enabling customers to purchase goods at any time and from any location, irrespective of the channel they choose. A seamless omnichannel experience provides customers with the flexibility to either buy products online through a website or mobile app and collect them in-store, or purchase items online and return or exchange them in physical stores.

Omnichannel retailing is a win-win strategy; particularly the click-and-collect model that benefits both customers and retailers, in that it can enhance customer choices (Verhoef et al., 2015). The omnichannel strategy also enables retailers to create and deliver a seamless brand experience to customers, via an authentic brand narrative that is communicated across multiple touchpoints (Duffy & Nobbs, 2018). By enabling a customized and consistent customer experience, omnichannel retailing represents a feasible solution to achieve a competitive advantage.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly impacted the retail industry (Joshi et al., 2022), the omnichannel approach proved to be a valuable solution for retailers that experienced sales declines due to state-mandated lockdowns and the subsequent shutdown of nonessential physical stores (Acquila-Natale et al., 2022). Initiating a sudden high-volume shift from offline to online, the pandemic has pushed consumers to consider more than one shopping channel (particularly after the common panic buying) and to be more willing to explore different types of retail touchpoints (Deloitte China, 2020). It

has consequently pressured retailers to expand their channel integration to survive in a postpandemic changed environment (Deloitte China, 2020). This has mainly been achieved by adapting existing infrastructures and processes to expand into different retail channels (Acquila-Natale et al., 2022). The seamless integration of physical and digital channels across multiple touchpoints is now a strategic priority for most retailers (Hilken et al., 2022).

This study examines the omnichannel strategy through the lens of signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011), where a signal is “an action taken by the better-informed party in a setting of asymmetric information to communicate its true characteristics in a credible fashion to the less-informed party” (Lee et al., 2005, p. 610). That is, omnichannel has been conceptualized as one of the marketing signals that a business can use to convey information to its customers, thereby reducing information asymmetry between retailers and consumers. Drawing from the tenets of signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 2002), this research hypothesizes that consumers respond positively to signal congruency (Vergne et al., 2018) enabled by a seamless multichannel customer experience (omnichannel), which occurs when all channels are aligned to convey a consistent message and deliver a consistent experience across different distribution channels (e.g., physical stores, websites, and mobile apps). In line with signaling theory, it was predicted in this study that a seamless multichannel customer experience (omnichannel) positively influences purchase intention and brand authenticity perceptions. In contrast, the incongruent signal from a nonseamless multichannel customer experience is likely to produce ambiguity for consumers, which can negatively affect purchase intentions and brand authenticity perceptions. Omnichannel can also be construed as a marketing signal because it represents a business commitment to provide a seamless, integrated customer experience across all channels and touchpoints. By using omnichannel as a marketing signal, retailers can communicate to customers that they are committed to meeting their needs and preferences in a consistent and personalized way.

Despite the increasing relevance of the omnichannel approach, there is still a lack of knowledge, especially in relation to the shift from multichannel to omnichannel retailing (Thaichon et al., 2022). Only a few studies have examined consumer behaviors and perceptions in the context of the seamless integration of retail channels across multiple touchpoints (Acquila-Natale et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020). Thus, research on how omnichannel retailing can affect the customer experience is scarce (Gao et al., 2021; Hickman et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020). The significant investment that is required to develop an omnichannel approach, and the highly likely positive effects of omnichannel on business performance make this knowledge gap concerning for brands (Cocco & Demoulin, 2022). Furthermore, while the omnichannel literature has clearly highlighted the relevance of seamlessness, no prior research has focused on its effects on consumer perceptions of brand authenticity. This is despite authenticity, which has been defined as a cornerstone of contemporary marketing (M. Beverland, 2006), emerging as a critical brand characteristic that consumers expect in a purchase experience. Some scholars (e.g., Salvietti et al., 2022) have called for research examining how companies can keep their brand

identity while “integrating all the different channels so as to offer a seamless but authentic experience” (p. 15).

To fill this knowledge gap, this research aims to: (1) assess the critical dimensions of the customer experience that drive consumer behavior in the omnichannel context; (2) identify the effects of a seamless multichannel customer experience (omnichannel) on (a) consumer purchase intention and (b) consumer perceptions of brand authenticity; (3) investigate the mediating role of brand authenticity in the relationship between seamless multichannel customer experience and purchase intention; and (4) assess the moderation of brand untrustworthiness in the mediation of brand authenticity between seamless multichannel customer experience and purchase intention.

This study's results indicate that a seamless multichannel customer experience has a significant effect on purchase intention, and that consumers in the seamless multichannel customer experience condition perceive the brand as more authentic than those in the nonseamless multichannel customer experience condition. Thus, both the above mediation and moderation hypotheses are supported.

This paper makes several contributions. First, it employs signaling theory to enhance understanding of the seamless multichannel customer experience. It extends both signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) and the signal congruity literature (Vergne et al., 2018) by conceptualizing omnichannel as a set of consistent signals, as opposed to multichannel that can lead to conflicting signals that cause consumer confusion. Second, this research further develops the theory of omnichannel retailing by deepening understanding of what affects customer purchase intentions during their journey across multiple channels. Third, it integrates the omnichannel literature with that on brand authenticity, which is a characteristic that can be enhanced via the seamless integration of channels.

This paper is structured as follows. First, it reviews the main contributions to the omnichannel literature with a focus on the difference between multichannel and omnichannel. Second, it presents signaling theory as the theoretical framework that informed this research. Third, the results of a qualitative study (20 semi-structured interviews with consumers) and three experimental studies are discussed. The primary purpose of the interviews (Study 1) was to assess the critical dimensions of the customer experience that drive consumer behavior in the omnichannel context, while the three experimental studies were conducted to explore how the (seamless vs. nonseamless) multichannel customer experience (Studies 2 and 4) and brand authenticity (Study 3) affect purchase behavior. Lastly, managerial implications and potential future research directions are covered.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Multichannel versus omnichannel

The omnichannel concept is considered an evolution of the multichannel, with a specific focus on “the integration and coordination of detached channels to meet consumers' needs for seamless

channel transitions” (Shen et al., 2018, p. 62). The multichannel strategy assumes that each user prioritizes one channel to interact with a company (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014). However, the lack of communication and integration among channels does not allow for a holistic view of customer needs and behaviors. Such siloing of channels, the narrow channel scope, a lack of integration of touchpoints in the buying process, and inadequate consideration of how channels can both independently and jointly impact the brand experience are the main drawbacks of the multichannel strategy (Manser Payne et al., 2017, p. 4).

While the multichannel approach aims to provide customers with more than one channel, these channels are compartmentalized and lack integration. In the multichannel approach, online and in-store channels are managed individually (Neslin & Shankar, 2009), with limited integration not only of channels but also of cross-channel objectives.

In contrast, the omnichannel strategy is based on channel integration. In particular, omnichannel provides three levels of integration among channels: (1) informational integration; (2) transactional integration; and (3) relational integration (Li & Gong, 2022). These all positively influence perceptions of perceived fluency, which further generates customer engagement (Li & Gong, 2022).

Moreover, omnichannel aims to provide customers with a seamless retail experience (Verhoef et al., 2015; Yrjölä et al., 2018). The omnichannel strategy allows for improving the customer experience, achieving a seamless integration of channels, and delivering a consistent brand experience to customers (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014). By offering a unified and integrated customer experience across different distribution channels, from brick-and-mortar to digital (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Picot-Coupey et al., 2016), omnichannel retailing can more efficiently and personally respond to consumer needs. Omnichannel focuses on the customer rather than on retail channels or sales (Verhoef et al., 2015), and the most crucial interaction is with the brand as opposed to the channel itself (Manser Payne et al., 2017; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014, p. 4).

By integrating the information on a single user and defining an individualized profile for everyone, the omnichannel is superior to the multichannel approach as it enables the monitoring of multiple customer interactions through multiple touchpoints in real time, through the customer's lens (Yrjölä et al., 2018). While multichannel retailing keeps channels separate, omnichannel retailing provides a holistic view of channels that can better address diversity in customer shopping behaviors (Li et al., 2018; Yrjölä et al., 2018).

With the proliferation of mobile technology, smartphones have become one of the key channels that can enable a seamless shopping experience (Acuti et al., 2022; Kang, 2019; Rippé et al., 2017). The pervasiveness of smartphones represents a real opportunity for channel integration via omnichannel strategy. In line with this, the spread of mobile apps can help retailers that are striving to shift to an omnichannel service with more options to acquire new clients while retaining existing ones (Al-Nabhani et al., 2022). Increasingly able to manage multiple touchpoints simultaneously, customers expect retailers to provide omnichannel platforms that allow them to move

smoothly from one touchpoint to another along their journey, effectively blurring the barriers in their purchase-decision process (Huré et al., 2017; Ostrom et al., 2015; Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020). Moreover, the role played by omnichannel as a driver of digitalization (Szozda, 2023) is challenging retailers to effectively create a “show-room without walls” (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013, p. 23), by integrating online and offline channels and designing seamless omnichannel experiences where data are leveraged to offer personalized customer experiences (Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020).

Omnichannel retailing thereby offers a customer-centric perspective (Hajdas et al., 2022). It allows customers to evolve from their role as consumers to that of value co-creators during each phase of their decision-making process (Huré et al., 2017; Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014). Unlike the multichannel strategy, which represents a unique, unidirectional, and linear approach to value creation, omnichannel combines the perspective of both the retailer and the user. The omnichannel strategy enables companies to design and deliver superior customer experiences, leading to a competitive advantage (Gahler et al., 2022).

This study assesses the effects of seamless (omnichannel) versus nonseamless (multichannel) experience on purchase intentions and brand authenticity and regarded omnichannel as a set of congruent signals that deliver a consistent message to customers.

2.2 | Signaling theory

Information asymmetry between producers and consumers on product characteristics, including general quality, specific features, and similarities and differences across competing offerings, is a hallmark of the modern market (Spence, 2002).

Most marketers employ signals to transmit details about the good or service they are selling, to overcome the information asymmetry issue. A signal is “an action taken by the better-informed party in a setting of asymmetric information to communicate its true characteristics in a credible fashion to the less-informed party” (Lee et al., 2005, p. 610). In marketing, signals can be defined as product-related, “marketer-controlled” and “easy-to-acquire” information that consumers can use as cues “to form inference about the quality and value of that product” (Bloom & Reve, 1990, p. 59). While companies can employ these signals to reduce information asymmetries between consumers and themselves, consumers can use them to make inferences about product or service quality. In line with this, signaling theory is a theoretical framework that explains how two parties address restricted or hidden information in prepurchase circumstances (Wells et al., 2011, p. 375).

Signaling theory was developed to understand individual behavior in situations characterized by information asymmetry (Spence, 2002). Signaling theory has been applied in various research contexts, such as finance (e.g., Benartzi et al., 1997), management (e.g., Certo, 2003), and marketing (Connelly et al., 2011; Rao et al., 2013).

Such signals can work together (signal congruity) or can compete (signal jamming) (Connelly et al., 2011). When considering signal sets, congruity across signals is key to their effectiveness (Connelly et al., 2011). This is because congruent signals amplify the effects of each other by cross-confirming the signaled content (Plummer et al., 2016), while incongruent signals create ambiguity (Zhao & Zhou, 2011). That is, congruent signals reinforce mutual effects that confirm signal content (Plummer et al., 2016), while discordant signals create ambiguity (Paruchuri et al., 2021).

In the context of signal congruity in retail marketing, the agreement between various signals emanating from the same source, where consumers receive the same message via consistent signals, prevents confusion and improves communication (Connelly et al., 2011; Vergne et al., 2018). In contrast, the presence of numerous competing signals can lead to signal jamming, which is “the inference problem encountered by the decision-maker in an economic transaction” (Fudenberg & Tirole, 1986, p. 367). It was determined in this study that omnichannel works as a set of congruent signals, as opposed to multichannel that can cause conflicting signals and consequent signal jamming.

2.3 | Signal congruency

In a retail setting, consumers are often exposed to multiple simultaneous signals that can arise from the same or different signalers (Connelly et al., 2011). For instance, signals can originate from different departments within the same firm (Mollenkopf et al., 2022). In accordance with signal congruency, when two signals are incongruent, receivers of the relevant information will likely find it challenging because of the apparent contradiction (Paruchuri et al., 2021; Vergne et al., 2018). In line with this, Vergne et al. (2018, p. 798) found that CEO overcompensation (negative signal) contrasted with company engagement in corporate philanthropy (positive signal).

Such lack of signal congruency occurs when individuals attempt to categorize entities, checking the alignment between a category and other available attributes based on a category prototype (Fiske et al., 1987). Where a mismatch is observed, the evaluated entity will likely be seen as ill-fitting against existing categories, as occurs where there are incongruent signals that lead to negative assessments (Vergne et al., 2018). In a retail setting, when consumers try to make inferences about the expected quality of a product or a service, congruent signals could help them influence their attitude and behavior (Kao et al., 2020).

Since congruency, that is, consumers' perceived coherence of retail touchpoints (Picot-Coupey et al., 2016) is a crucial characteristic of omnichannel, we conceptualize nonseamless multichannel as based on signal incongruity (i.e., each channel is managed separately and gives individuals different information) and seamless multichannel (omnichannel) as based on signal congruity (i.e., all channels are aligned to provide a seamless customer experience).

2.4 | Omnichannel and brand authenticity

Marketing research has widely acknowledged the importance of brand authenticity as a valuable product attribute, with consumers increasingly wanting their products and brands to be authentic (Chronis & Hampton, 2008). Brand authenticity has been defined as “the extent to which consumers perceive that a brand's managers are intrinsically motivated in that they are passionate about and devoted to providing their products” (Moulard et al., 2016, p. 421). The notion of brand authenticity revolves around what is true, original, or genuine (Ilicic & Webster, 2016; Moulard et al., 2016; Napoli et al., 2014; Spiggle et al., 2012). Authentic brands are characterized by genuineness, sincerity, originality, quality commitment, connection to heritage, and continuity (Beverland, 2006; Napoli et al., 2014).

Omnichannel retailing can enable the creation and promotion of an authentic brand story that is communicated consistently to customers across multiple touchpoints (Duffy & Nobbs, 2018). Its continuity (i.e., consistent over time) and integrity (i.e., care for the customers), which are core dimensions of brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), mean that omnichannel can positively affect consumer perceptions of brand authenticity.

Brand authenticity is known to enhance message receptiveness (Labrecque et al., 2011), improve perceived product quality (Moulard et al., 2016), and boost purchase intentions (Napoli et al., 2014). With the advent of online sales channels, such as livestream shopping and conversational e-commerce applications, companies can outline their brand identity and values through channel integration to offer a seamless and authentic customer experience (Hamby et al., 2019; Hilken et al., 2018). One of the best practices to promote brand authenticity is to create a consistent message across all channels.

Integrating multiple channels and assuring a consistent design across touchpoints can enhance the perceived brand authenticity. In line with this, omnichannel retailing represents a customer-centric strategy that disrupts the traditional processes of value creation. This study examines how the seamlessness of the customer experience may influence consumer purchase intentions and perceptions of brand authenticity. In the following sections, an overview of the studies is presented, and the research hypotheses are discussed.

3 | OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

This research consisted of a qualitative study (20 semistructured interviews with consumers) followed by three experiments. The primary purpose of the interviews (Study 1) was to assess the critical dimensions of the multichannel customer experience driving consumer behavior. This qualitative study allowed us to develop three experiments aimed at examining the role of multichannel customer experience (seamless vs. nonseamless) in influencing purchase intention and brand authenticity (Study 2), and the mediating role of brand authenticity on the relationship between multichannel customer experience and purchase intention (Study 3). The role of brand untrustworthiness as a moderator of the relationship between the multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity was also investigated (Study 4).

Figure 1 visually illustrates the overarching research framework and summarizes the studies undertaken.

Three experiments based on three independent data collections were conducted. In Studies 2 and 3, the participants were asked to review scenarios (see Appendix C) where the multichannel customer

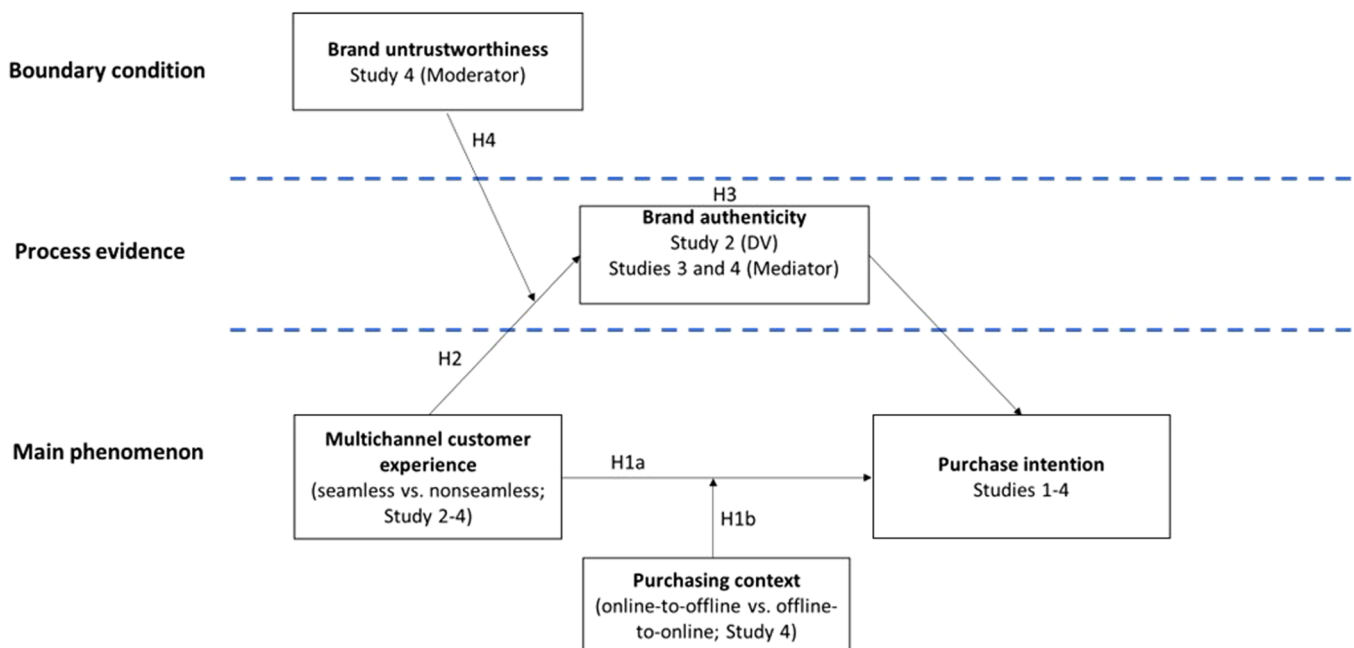


FIGURE 1 Research framework.

experience (seamless vs. nonseamless) had been manipulated. As cosmetics is one of the three main sectors that have successfully implemented omnichannel strategies, based on growing omnichannel-influenced sales (Scalefast, 2018), the product category chosen for these experiments was sunscreen. Sunscreen is also a genderless product, which makes it particularly suitable for an experimental study. In Study 4, two different scenarios were developed to manipulate purchasing context (online-to-offline vs. offline-to-online) (see Appendix D). The scenarios in Studies 2 and 3 describe a typical online-to-offline multichannel customer experience, where the purchasing process starts online with the customer noticing a promotion and reordering goods or services and then going to a physical store to collect them (Chen et al., 2019). The scenarios in Study 4 included an offline-to-online purchasing context, in which the process starts in the physical store where the customer selects and purchases a product, and then goes online to search, pay or share (Chen et al., 2019).

Study 2 aims to assess the main phenomenon, that is, the effects of multichannel customer experience on (1) purchase intention (H1a) and (2) perceived brand authenticity (H2). Study 3 tests whether the effect of seamless (vs. nonseamless) multichannel experience on purchase intention is mediated by perceived brand authenticity as stated by H3 (process evidence). Finally, Study 4 tests a moderated mediation relationship that addresses both the mediation of brand authenticity and the moderation of brand untrustworthiness (H4). We included brand untrustworthiness a possible boundary condition for seamless multichannel experience on brand authenticity. Study 4 also tests the combined effects of multichannel customer experience (seamless vs. nonseamless) and purchasing context (online-to-offline vs. offline-to-online) on purchase intention (H1b).

3.1 | Hypotheses development

3.1.1 | Seamlessness

The escalating availability of mobile technology has resulted in a proliferation of retail channels where consumers can interact with brands and look for a shopping experience that is as seamless as possible (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014; Rodríguez-Torrice et al., 2020). A seamless omnichannel customer experience needs to involve channel integration that is capable of adapting to changing consumer behaviors in terms of different brand activations (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Neslin (2022, p. 114) identified eight dimensions through which customers perceive channel integration: (1) channel breadth; (2) channel transparency; (3) consistent content; (4) process; (5) marketing; (6) customer freedom in choosing channels; (7) the extent that channels are synchronized; and (8) the extent the channels work together. Based on the framework by Rodríguez-Torrice et al. (2020), seamlessness is determined by three main factors: (1) marketing mix consistency (i.e., the product, price, and promotion are the same for

each channel); (2) freedom (i.e., customers can freely choose among parallel channels); and (3) synchronization (i.e., customers can smoothly switch between channels, such as search product information online and make the purchase in-store). Quach et al. (2022) found that consistency across different channels is regarded by customers as a primary benefit, in that it reduces risk perceptions. In line with this, Chang and Li (2022, p. 16) developed a Seamless Experience Scale based on two crucial characteristics: (1) the extent of the interconnectivity between touchpoints; and (2) the efficiency of customers migrating shopping tasks across touchpoints throughout the shopping journey.

It has been argued that one retail channel is no longer sufficient for customers undertaking a shopping journey (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). The integration of online and offline channels into a seamless omnichannel customer experience has become increasingly crucial (Cummins et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Torrice et al., 2020). Seamlessness across channels is known to affect purchase intentions as well as positive word-of-mouth, and to determine positive consumer-brand interaction experiences (Picot-Coupey et al., 2016; Verhoef et al., 2015). In line with this, Chatterjee (2010) uncovered that retailers that adopt omnichannel strategies are more profitable than those that employ multiple independent channels.

Yet, despite seamlessness emerging as a focal issue within retail strategy (Ewerhard et al., 2019), few studies have examined how retailers can create such a seamless customer experience (Rodríguez-Torrice et al., 2020). This research posits that when the multichannel customer experience is seamless (i.e., omnichannel), customers are more likely to purchase the product or service. Thus, a seamless (vs. nonseamless) multichannel customer experience is likely to enhance consumer purchase intentions. It was therefore hypothesized that:

H1a *Consumer purchase intention is higher when the multichannel customer experience is seamless (vs. nonseamless).*

In addition, this research addresses the role of the purchasing context, that is, whether the omnichannel purchase is initiated online or offline (in the store). Compared with physical stores, online stores are perceived as having disadvantages related to "shipping and handling charges, exchange/refund policy for returns, providing an interesting social or family experience, helpfulness of salespeople, postpurchase service, and uncertainty about getting the right item" (Kacen et al., 2013, p. 12). Online stores could amplify uncertainty generated from information asymmetry, affecting consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes (Jin et al., 2022). Thus, we predict that the effects of a seamless multichannel customer experience will be greater when the purchase starts online to be finalized in the store. We hypothesize that multichannel customer experience and purchasing context (online-to-offline vs. offline-to-online) will interact in their effects on purchase intention. We predict that the effects of multichannel customer experience on purchase intention are greater in the online-to-offline purchasing context.

H1b *Multichannel customer experience (seamless vs. nonseamless) and purchasing context interact in their effect on purchase intention such that seamless multichannel customer experience and online-to-offline will result in greater purchase intention.*

3.1.2 | Brand authenticity

There does not appear to be any former research that has focused on the perceived authenticity of seamless omnichannel experiences. According to Alam and Gani (2019), the omnichannel retailing strategy enables authentic brand interaction with customers, who can purchase from anywhere and at any time while being provided with the ultimate customer experience. Hilken et al. (2018) similarly contended that providing customers with an authentic omnichannel experience should be a marketing imperative. Brand authenticity is concerned with how an offering aligns with the brand's core values (Morhart et al., 2015). It provides customers with a story about the brand and its values and implies that a brand will stay true to itself and its customers (Hamby et al., 2019).

As continuity (i.e., consistency over time) and integrity (i.e., care for customers) are recognized as core dimensions of brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), it was assumed in this study that a brand could be perceived as less authentic if the customer experience is nonseamless (e.g., a multichannel customer experience). In contrast, interacting with a company that provides a seamless customer experience is known to create a perception of brand authenticity for customers (Hilken et al., 2018). It was therefore proposed in this study that when the multichannel customer experience is seamless, customers will perceive the brand as authentic, with the following hypothesis put forward:

H2 *The perceived brand authenticity is higher when the multichannel customer experience is seamless (vs. nonseamless).*

In addition, as past research has found that authenticity is affected by signal congruency (e.g., Spielmann & Babin, 2011), we predict that the signal congruency enabled by omnichannel will affect consumer perceptions of brand authenticity. This study hypothesized that:

H3 *Brand authenticity mediates the relationship between multichannel customer experience and purchase intention.*

3.1.3 | Moderation of brand untrustworthiness

Brand trustworthiness has been conceptualized as a component of brand credibility that deals with consumer perceptions of a firm's willingness to honor its promises (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

When brand promises are not kept at every point of contact between the consumer and the brand, brand trustworthiness is negatively affected (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005). For example, if a brand offers a promotion online but the promotion is not available in the store,

the brand may be perceived as untrustworthy by consumers. In contrast, when store employees act in accordance with the brand's claims and promises, consumer perceptions of brand trustworthiness are likely to be reinforced (Burmam & Zeplin, 2005). It was subsequently hypothesized in this study that consumer-perceived brand untrustworthiness (e.g., the brand does not deliver what it promises; adapted from Erdem & Swait, 2004) moderates the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity, so that when brand untrustworthiness is high the relationship is strongly negative; in contrast, when brand untrustworthiness is low the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity is weakened. We expect that the extent to which consumers perceive the brand as untrustworthy may provide a boundary condition that explains why some consumers respond more negatively to customer experience than others. Thus, we propose that brand untrustworthiness moderates the effect of multichannel customer experience on purchase intention. Thus, the following was hypothesized:

H4 *Brand untrustworthiness moderates the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity.*

The following sections discuss the testing of the above hypotheses, conducted across the different studies.

3.2 | Study 1

A qualitative approach was carried out with 20 semistructured interviews conducted with consumers. This responds to Asmare and Zewdie's (2022) omnichannel research review that highlighted that most empirical omnichannel studies have adopted survey-based methods and encouraged future research to consider a qualitative approach. Study 1 of this research was used as a pilot study to refine the hypotheses through preliminary testing (Sofaer, 1999). The interviews followed a semistructured protocol and the flexible interview format allowed participants to freely express their own viewpoints on channel integration. Expanding on Tyrväinen and Karjaluoto (2019), the interview questions asked respondents their opinion of retailers offering products both online and at the physical store. These were focused on the most important aspects of a multichannel customer experience, characteristics of a positive multichannel customer experience, characteristics of a negative multichannel customer experience, conditions for a satisfying multichannel customer experience, channel preferences, and the effects of personal positive multichannel customer experiences.

3.2.1 | Design and participants

Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 20 retail consumers across multiple channels (in-store, website, and Instagram). To be included in the sample (see Appendix A), participants had to be adults and to have had experience with multichannel

retailers. Data were analyzed via an open-coding approach (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007), to identify categories and themes (Kvale, 1995) as well as relationships among them. The interviews were transcribed and examined recursively and separately by two researchers, who identified recurrent themes or coding categories. Using these categories, the researchers coded the data independently, and input this coding into NVivo 10 as a means of organizing the disparate data. These researchers then compared their coding and assessed intercoder reliability ($k = 0.90$). Appendix A summarizes the key characteristics of the sample and contains the identifiers that were used to reference quotations ($R =$ respondent).

3.2.2 | Results

The analysis of the interviews was used to identify themes and quotes as further illustrated in Appendix B. Seamlessness emerged from the interviews as the first critical factor pursued by customers in the multichannel context. Study 1 confirmed that seamlessness can lead to purchase intention (R4: "They make the buyer more inclined to buy; thanks to the presence of the product in the store, the customer can check its characteristics and, if necessary, to try it on [clothes or cosmetics], and thanks to the possibility of buying it online, he can get it easily and directly to his home, a second time after seeing it in the store and perhaps having thought about the purchase").

The participants highlighted seamlessness as a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic (R4). Companies providing seamless shopping experiences were also seen as preferable as they are democratic: (R6). In addition, seamlessness was associated with customer freedom (R10, R14) and shopping convenience (R10, R15). A seamless multichannel customer experience was also linked to loyalty outcomes (R5) and purchase intentions (R2, R5). According to the participants, a seamless customer experience increased their purchase intentions in the same store. In contrast, the absence of seamlessness was associated with a negative opinion about the retailer and negative impacts on consumer trust in the brand (R2).

The results also indicated that omnichannel (in-store, website, and Instagram) drives perceptions of brand authenticity, based on a consistent story being narrated to consumers (R2). Transparency about the nature of the product and consistency when conveying brand philosophy and values to customers were also seen as signals of brand authenticity (R19: "Especially when it comes to cosmetic products such as sunscreens and face creams or serum; it's important that the ingredients list is explicated on the website and that all the information about the product is disclosed"). According to the interviews, one of the best signals of brand authenticity is the creation of a consistent message across all channels (R5), which is coherent with the concept of signal congruency (R5: "Integration and consistency are essential for the company to be true. The message conveyed online must not be different from the one conveyed in a physical way").

These results align with the literature, which has highlighted that brand authenticity in the omnichannel context emerges as a continuous project, an ongoing process and a narrative (Heidegger, 1996) that avoids "fixity" because it refuses to be entrapped in a static definition. Unlike the multichannel approach that is based on separate, more rigid classifications, omnichannel conveys brand authenticity. These Study 1 results indicate that retailers need to consider seamlessness and brand authenticity as influencing factors of an omnichannel experience and need to manage multiple touchpoints simultaneously to enhance the overall customer experience.

Based on these findings, we conducted three experimental studies to attain empirical confirmation of the hypotheses.

3.3 | Study 2

Study 2 tested H1a and H2, with the aim of assessing the effects of multichannel customer experience on: (1) purchase intention; and (2) perceived brand authenticity. This research employed an in-between subject experimental design that involved experimental manipulation of the multichannel customer experience (seamless vs. nonseamless). It was anticipated that participants would estimate the seamless multichannel customer experience condition to have greater influence on purchase intention and perceived brand authenticity than the nonseamless multichannel customer experience condition.

3.3.1 | Design and participants

This study recruited 112 business students from a university campus in Canada (79 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.3$ years, $SD = 8.39$). The experiment was administered via online software (Qualtrics), with the participants randomly assigned to one of two multichannel customer experience conditions (seamless vs. nonseamless). Five participants that failed to complete the questionnaire were excluded from the final sample.

3.3.2 | Procedure and stimuli

Participants were sent a recruitment notice asking if they would participate in this study in exchange for partial course credit. They were told that the experimenter was interested in learning about consumer preference in the context of online shopping. Participants were randomly assigned to either the seamless or nonseamless condition and presented with a corresponding multichannel shopping scenario that was developed based on Rodríguez-Torrío et al. (2020). In the seamless condition (Scenario 1a), participants were asked to imagine a shopping situation where a sales promotion of 20%, found on the company's Instagram profile (online-to-offline), could be applied for the in-store purchase of a sunscreen named Sun Gold. They were told by the sales associate that they could pick up

and exchange or return the item in the store regardless of where they bought it.

In the nonseamless condition (Scenario 1b), participants were told by the sales associate that the sales promotion could only be applied if the sunscreen was purchased on Instagram and that it was not possible to pick up, exchange, or return the Sun Gold sunscreen in the store. Participants were then asked to provide responses for the main dependent measures, including purchase intention and brand authenticity. They were also asked to answer demographic questions, including demographics. The participants were then debriefed. As shown in Appendix E, purchase intention was measured via a 3-item, 7-point scale that evaluated the self-reported likelihood that a consumer would purchase a product (Kozup et al., 2003). Brand authenticity was measured through a 4-item scale adapted from Bruhn et al. (2012).

Scenarios 1a and 1b were pretested ($n = 90$; $M_{\text{age}} = 21$; 50 males) using a 7-point Likert scale. Ninety students from a Canadian university participated in an online pretest in exchange for course credits. The pretest established that the shopping experience described in Scenario 1a was perceived as more seamless than that described in Scenario 1b. Indeed, the scenarios yielded significantly different results across the levels of seamlessness ($M_{\text{seamless}} = 5.92$; $SD = 1.49$; $M_{\text{nonseamless}} = 2.83$; $SD = 1.65$; $t(45) = 6.05$; $p < 0.001$).

Attitude toward the brand ($M_{\text{brandattitude}} = 4.08$) was included as an additional measure to ascertain that the scenarios did not differ in terms of brand attitude via three items (e.g., unfavorable/favorable; $\alpha = 0.94$; Guèvremont & Grohmann, 2018; Nan & Heo, 2007). Having pretested the scenarios, the manipulations were used to test the hypotheses. In the next section, the studies are presented.

3.4 | Results

3.4.1 | Purchase intention

To test H1a and H2, two separate one-way analysis of variances were conducted using purchase intention and brand authenticity as dependent variables, respectively, and multichannel customer experience (seamless vs. nonseamless) as the independent variable. The results showed that seamless multichannel customer experience has a significant main effect on purchase intention ($F = 21.43$; $p < 0.001$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.16$). The participants reported greater purchase intention in the seamless ($M = 4.77$; $SD = 1.51$) versus the nonseamless multichannel customer experience condition ($M = 3.42$; $SD = 1.57$).

3.4.2 | Brand authenticity

The results indicated that seamless multichannel customer experience has a significant main effect on brand authenticity ($F = 21.54$; $p < 0.001$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.14$). That is, the participants in the seamless multichannel customer experience condition perceived the brand as more authentic ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.64$) than those in the nonseamless ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.46$).

3.4.3 | Discussion

The results of Study 2 highlight the main effects of seamless multichannel customer experience, revealing its important role in influencing both purchase intention and consumer-perceived brand authenticity. As a result, H1a and H2 were supported. Since the findings indicate that a brand is more likely to be perceived as authentic when the multichannel customer experience is seamless, this research further explored the role of brand authenticity. In the next study, the mediation role of brand authenticity on the relationship between multichannel customer experience and purchase intention was examined.

3.5 | Study 3

Study 3 tested whether the positive effect of seamless (vs. nonseamless) multichannel customer experience on purchase intention, as demonstrated in Study 2, is mediated by perceived brand authenticity.

3.5.1 | Design and participants

For this study, 105 international business students were recruited on campus at a university in Italy (83 female; $M_{\text{age}} = 23.7$ years) and received partial course credit for participating. The experiment was administered via online software (Qualtrics).

3.5.2 | Procedure and stimuli

The recruiting and questionnaire administration procedures were the same as Study 2. Participants first read about either the seamless or the nonseamless multichannel customer experience scenario (see Appendix C) and were then asked to provide responses on variables including brand authenticity and purchase intention.

3.5.3 | Main effects

These results confirmed that participants reported greater purchase intention in the seamless ($M = 4.55$; $SD = 1.22$) than in the nonseamless condition ($M = 3.50$; $SD = 1.62$), which supported H1a.

3.5.4 | Mediation analysis

To examine the hypothesized mediation mechanism in H3 [Independent Variable (IV) (multichannel customer experience) \rightarrow mediator (brand authenticity) \rightarrow Dependent Variable (DV) (purchase intention)], mediation analysis via Model 4 in PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2017) was conducted to examine the mediating effect of brand authenticity on the relationship between multichannel customer experience and purchase intention. The results indicated that the indirect effect via perceived brand authenticity

is significant [effect = 0.66, 95% CI (0.25; 1.15)], while the direct effect became insignificant [effect = 0.39, 95% CI (-0.01; 0.79)], thereby confirming full mediation and providing support to H3.

3.5.5 | Discussion

Study 3 findings indicate a significant mediation effect of brand authenticity on the relationship between multichannel customer experience and purchase intention. These results confirm that brand authenticity is an important factor in the omnichannel context, which supports H3. They also demonstrate full mediation of brand authenticity, which suggests that the direct path explains no additional variance in the influence of multichannel customer experience on purchase intention.

3.6 | Study 4

Study 4 combined the two research objectives addressed in the previous studies to form a moderated mediation model which can examine both the mediation (i.e., how multichannel customer experience leads to purchase intention via brand authenticity) and the moderation of brand untrustworthiness underlying the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity. Study 4 also tests the effects of online-to-offline versus offline-to-online multichannel customer experience on purchase intention.

3.6.1 | Design and participants

In this study, 107 participants were recruited via MTurk (66 male; $M_{\text{age}} = 40$ years). The experiment was administered via online software (Qualtrics). Usable responses were those of participants that had successfully completed the MTurk Human Intelligence Task

(HIT) in the set time window and that submitted their user identification code. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two multichannel customer experience conditions (seamless vs. nonseamless) and the two purchasing context conditions (online-to-offline vs. offline-to-online). Participants received monetary compensation of 2 USD for their participation.

3.6.2 | Procedure and stimuli

Participants first read one of the four scenarios (see Appendix C) and were then presented with a survey in relation to the outcome measure (purchase intention), the mediator (brand authenticity), and the moderator (brand untrustworthiness). In addition to the scenarios used in Studies 2 and 3 to describe a typical online-to-offline multichannel customer experience (i.e., from Instagram to the store), Study 4 included an offline-to-online scenario. That is, the process started in the physical store where the customer selected a product, and then went online to search, pay or share (Chen et al., 2019). These purchasing context scenarios were pretested ($n = 54$) using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Offline to Online*; 7 = *Online to Offline*), which yielded significantly different results ($M_{\text{online-to-offline}} = 6.33$; $SD = 1.59$; $t(54) = 20.6$, $p < 0.001$; $M_{\text{offline-to-online}} = 3.63$; $SD = 1.98$; $t(54) = 9.5$; $p < 0.001$). Appendix E provides further detail on the scales and items used in Study 4.

3.6.3 | Main effects

In Study 4, participants reported greater purchase intention in the seamless condition ($M = 4.55$; $SD = 1.22$) than in the nonseamless condition ($M = 3.19$; $SD = 1.68$), which thereby also supported H1a. The results also revealed a significant interaction ($F = 18.25$; $p < 0.001$; partial $\eta^2 = 0.15$) between multichannel customer experience and purchasing context on purchase intention. As shown in Figure 2 below, the combination of the experimental variables is a

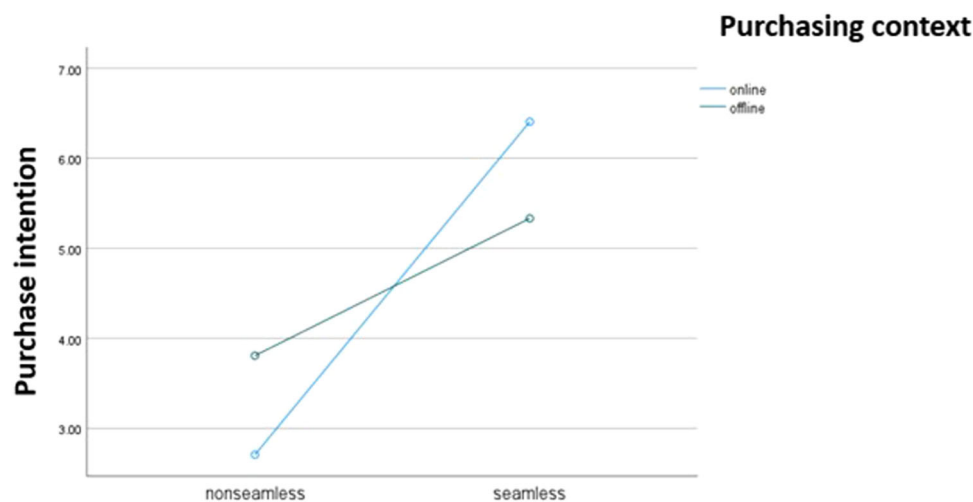


FIGURE 2 Interaction of multichannel experience and purchasing context.

relevant predictor of purchase intention. That is, the interaction term (multichannel customer experience \times purchasing context) is significant, indicating that the effects of multichannel customer experience on purchase intention are greater in the online-to-offline purchasing context.

3.6.4 | Moderated mediation analysis

To test the moderation–mediation effect, the moderating effect of brand untrustworthiness and the mediating effect of brand authenticity were integrated using PROCESS macro (Model 7, bootstrap = 5000). The results indicated that multichannel customer experience has a significant indirect effect on purchase intention through brand authenticity, both in the offline-to-online [$b = 3.25$, 95% CI (1.85; 2.86); $p < 0.001$] and online-to-offline scenarios [$b = 2.35$, 95% CI (1.85; 2.85), $p < 0.001$], which also supported the (partial) mediation hypothesis again (H3). Moreover, brand untrustworthiness appears to moderate the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity (H4), meaning that when brand untrustworthiness is low, the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity is highly positive, and that when brand untrustworthiness is high, the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity is weakened. This is relevant to both the offline-to-online [interaction = -0.68 , 95% CI (-1.04 ; -0.31); $p < 0.001$] and online-to-offline scenarios [$b = -0.30$, 95% CI (-0.54 ; -0.06); $p < 0.05$].

Figures 3 and 4 show the slopes of the relationship between multichannel customer experience and brand authenticity at three points along the scale of the moderator, based on the pick-a-point approach (Hayes, 2017). In both figures, the slopes change because of moderation of brand untrustworthiness, thereby confirming the moderation effect.

3.6.5 | Discussion

As the results of Studies 2 and 3 indicated that multichannel customer experience has an effect on purchase intention, the question arose of what effects can be obtained by manipulating the purchasing context (online-to-offline vs. online-to-offline). The subsequent results of Study 4 supported H1a and H1b, which confirmed the effect of multichannel customer experience, and of its interaction with purchasing context, on purchase intention. This final study also examined the relationship between multichannel customer experience and purchase intention through brand authenticity, and uncovered that the mediation of brand authenticity is dependent on the level of brand untrustworthiness (H4).

4 | CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research provides several theoretical advancements. First, it answers Asmare and Zewdie's (2022) call for theory-driven research in the omnichannel field. It contributes to signaling theory research by focusing on how consumers process a set of congruent signals. This research has conceptualized a seamless multichannel customer experience (omnichannel) as an instance of signal congruity and a nonseamless multichannel customer experience as an instance of signal jamming, where potentially conflicting signals are concurrently but independently communicated to receivers (Vergne et al., 2018). Based on the tenets of signaling theory, when consumers lack adequate information to assess the real value of a product, they look for cues or observable attributes to reduce uncertainty (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 2002). Conceptualizing omnichannel as an instance of signal congruency, this research helps to understand how convergence of physical and digital channels and the integration of

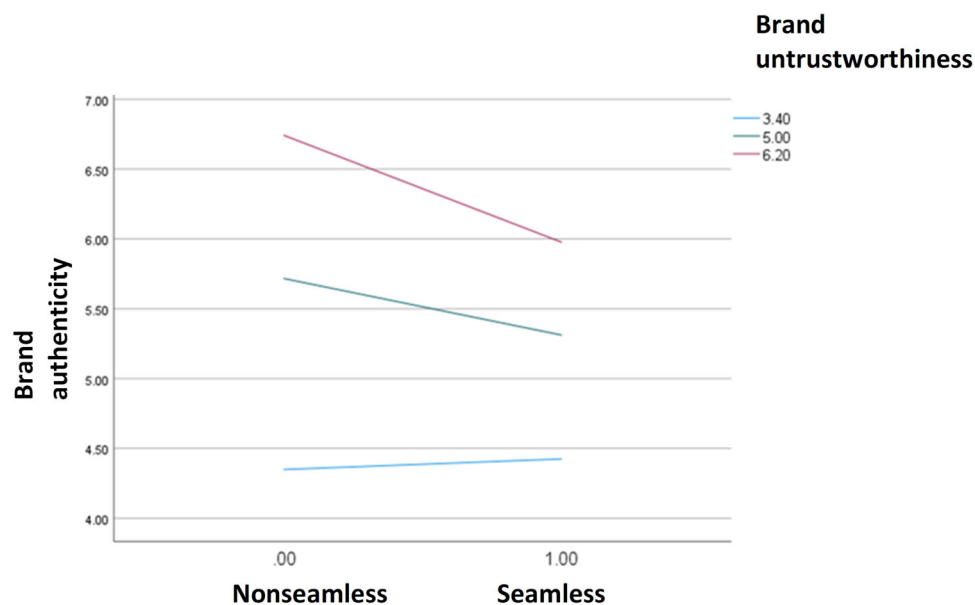


FIGURE 3 Study 3 moderated mediation.

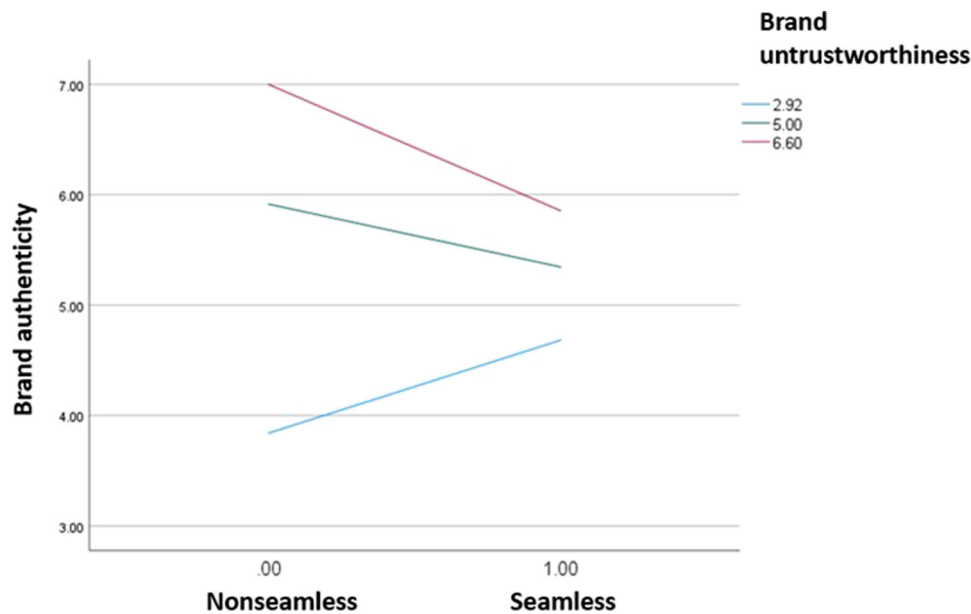


FIGURE 4 Study 4 moderated mediation.

offline and online experiences into an omnichannel experience could represent a strategic opportunity for retail companies (Hilken et al., 2022, p. 1661). This research also indicates that signal congruency via omnichannel can enhance consumer purchase intention and perceptions of brand authenticity. As a result of congruent signals, omnichannel can dispel uncertainties concerning a purchase, and thereby positively affect consumer behavior.

Second, this research further validates signaling theory as a useful theoretical framework to explain how signal congruency conveyed by the seamless multichannel customer experience may affect perceptions of brand authenticity. It builds knowledge of the role played by brand authenticity, both as an outcome of the influence of the omnichannel experience and as a predictor of purchase intention. While extant research has explored the nature of brand authenticity (Napoli et al., 2014) and the consumer quest for authenticity in consumption experiences (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), this research bridges the research gap on brand authenticity in the context of omnichannel. It makes a significant contribution by showing how seamlessness can enhance perceived brand authenticity. In an era when authenticity is a fundamental cornerstone of marketing, the omnichannel strategy allows brands to connect with customers via a seamless experience, ensuring the brand is consistent in its messaging and genuine in its approach. By prioritizing continuity (i.e., consistent over time) and integrity (i.e., care for customers), which are core dimensions of brand authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), omnichannel retailing allows consumers to create an immediate association with brand authenticity. Omnichannel retailing enables an authentic, consistent brand story, communicated across multiple touchpoints (Duffy & Nobbs, 2018). Additionally, omnichannel retailing makes it easier for brands to manage multiple channels, to deliver a consistent brand experience. Future studies should seek to deepen

understanding of brand authenticity in the context of omnichannel, by manipulating perceptions of brand authenticity and measuring their interaction with seamlessness to affect customer purchase intentions.

Third, this research has responded to Rodríguez-Torrico et al.'s (2020) call for examination of the moderating and/or mediating effects of omnichannel. It has subsequently included brand untrustworthiness in the research framework, to examine whether consumer perceptions of the signal (omnichannel) are influenced by perceptions of brand untrustworthiness. The results indicate that the act of providing consumers with a seamless multichannel customer experience is not sufficient to enhance perceptions of brand authenticity when consumers do not trust the brand. A fruitful future research direction is to investigate additional moderators that may influence the relationship between seamless multichannel customer experience and purchase intention, such as customer-perceived quality, brand trust, and customer satisfaction.

Fourth, these results have uncovered a significant effect of the interaction between multichannel customer experience and purchasing context on purchase intention, indicating that the effects of seamless multichannel customer experience on purchase intention are greater in the online-to-offline context than in the offline-to-online content. As uncertainty generated from information asymmetry can be amplified when customers shop online, affecting consumer perceptions and behavioral outcomes (Jin et al., 2022), seamlessness should be employed to overcome this. Our findings indicate that consumer-perceived online store disadvantages (related to shipping and handling charges, exchange/refund policy for returns, post-purchase service, etc.) could be overcome by making the multichannel experience seamless.

Future research could consequently focus on the differential effects of omnichannel signals in different purchasing contexts.

Lastly, by employing a mixed-method design to investigate omnichannel, this research responds to the call for the use of qualitative methodologies (Salvietti et al., 2022), to deepen understanding of consumer behavioral patterns (Asmare & Zewdie, 2022; Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014).

In addition to further advancing the omnichannel retailing theory, this study provides substantive managerial relevance. It sheds light on how retail marketers can develop and implement omnichannel strategies that help customers to move more smoothly across different channels.

First, this research highlights the benefits of marketers employing a seamless multichannel approach (omnichannel) to reduce information asymmetry, especially in an online-to-offline purchasing context where customers do not have information on the retailer's backend processes (Jin et al., 2022). Signal congruence enhanced by omnichannel is especially relevant in the metaverse context, where brands create effective omnichannel strategies that blur the virtual with the real world (Dwivedi et al., 2023, p. 772).

Second, these results validate the prioritization of seamlessness among consumers, and point out that there should be more attention on seamless channel integration that enhances omnichannel marketing capabilities. This research answers Verhoef et al. (2021, p. 666) call for studies on whether omnichannel is worth the investment, or whether a multichannel approach is sufficient. It highlights that marketers should provide seamless, consistent shopping experiences across multiple online and offline channels. This could be done by offering more flexible product exchange/return policies, and by developing integrated marketing communications that emphasize the connectedness of the different channels and touchpoints. Marketers should clearly position their brands as offering a seamless shopping experience, signaling that their retail channels are not isolated silos. They could thereby normalize the customer's tendency to webroom or showroom. The results indicate that showrooming or webrooming are not a deterrent for customers, in that the easier customers can switch seamlessly between in-store and online, the more likely they are to purchase from the retailer (Verhoef et al., 2021). Marketers should also strive for signal congruency via multichannel alignment, as perceptions of misalignment can detrimentally impact on purchase intention and subsequently brand reputation.

Third, marketers should strive to enhance brand authenticity perceptions, as those that are perceived as authentic are often evaluated more positively by customers. As brand authenticity has emerged in this research as an antecedent of purchase intention, marketers should pay attention when developing promotional communications to ensure they convey brand authenticity. This can be achieved by telling a consistent brand story that emphasizes the values and the heritage of the company, as well as the brand's genuineness and sincerity.

Lastly, another aspect of seamlessness that should not be underestimated is the opportunity provided by omnichannel retailing to continuously collect customer data during interactions. The continuous interplay and seamless interaction offered by the

omnichannel experience means that marketers can collect data that helps them to build consistency across their omnichannel marketing strategy. Collecting and integrating such data—enhanced by instant updates on all interactions with the company—will allow marketers to understand how customers engage with the company throughout the customer journey, including valuable insights into customer attitudes and behaviors. Such data could be used to personalize future offerings and promotions, and to enhance consistency across the various channels. By tapping across the different channels, marketers could also gain a more comprehensive understanding of the customer to create personalized experiences. For example, Study 1 results indicated that seamlessness is associated with customer freedom. Unlike multichannel retailing that is company-oriented, omnichannel offers customers more freedom and empowerment. They can cocreate their own journey, switching between online and offline channels and independently deciding when and how to interact with the company. To provide customers with such a “sense of freedom” experiences, retailers should go through a transformation that is not only process but also cultural.

4.1 | Limitations

This research is subject to some limitations that constrain the generalizability of its findings while at the same time suggesting opportunities for further research. First, Studies 2 and 3 employed student samples. Although such convenience samples may be a limitation in terms of the generalizability of these findings, students have been often used in experimental research because they are homogeneous along many dimensions, including age and education (variables that are likely to affect attitudes).

Second, these results are product-specific, as the research focused on products with a high level of familiarity but low involvement. This study could be replicated with other product categories with different levels of familiarity, consumer involvement, price, and risk perceptions. Furthermore, this study only used unknown brands to avoid confounding the results with prior attitudes and preferences relating to existing brands. Future research could test our hypotheses with known brands, considering that scenarios based on well-known brands could fail to manipulate perceptions because of existing consumer attitudes and preferences related to existing brands.

Third, a further limitation is the external validity identified as one of the main issues with experiments. Future research could employ field experiments to assess the predictions hypothesized more closely and increase external validity.

Lastly, this research is country-specific in that it was conducted in Canada and Italy. Replications might consider other markets and countries, including those with different demographic characteristics.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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APPENDIX A

See Table A1

TABLE A1 Study 1 sample.

ID	Country	Gender	Age
R1	Italy	Male	22
R2	Italy	Male	21
R3	Italy	Male	21
R4	Italy	Male	22
R5	Italy	Male	21
R6	Italy	Male	21
R7	Italy	Male	21
R8	Italy	Male	21
R9	Italy	Male	22
R10	Italy	Male	21
R11	Italy	Female	21
R12	Italy	Female	21
R13	Italy	Female	21
R14	Italy	Female	21
R15	Italy	Female	21
R16	Italy	Female	22
R17	Italy	Female	22
R18	Italy	Female	21
R19	Italy	Female	21
R20	Italy	Female	21

APPENDIX B

See Table B1

TABLE B1 Themes emerged from the interviews.

Themes	Respondents	Quotes
Seamlessness as a necessity	R4	R4: I think that, given the era we are living in and the pandemic situation, it is very important for brands to have both an online and an offline presence.
Seamlessness as democratic	R6	R6: I think that offering products both online and offline in the store could make companies more democratic, giving everyone the opportunity to purchase the product they want. Obviously, the two shopping experiences are different but I think it is fair to offer everyone the possibility to purchase in this way especially following the lockdown.
Seamlessness as customer freedom	R10, R14	R10: I believe that companies that provide both methods greatly facilitate the purchasing process and therefore make the consumer feel free to choose the method that is most convenient for them. R14: I think that the most important aspect is related to the fact that an online and offline shopping experience allows the consumer to have more freedom, flexibility and to make decisions in a different way).
Seamless as convenience	R10, R15	R10: I prefer companies that offer a product both online and offline, because they allow the purchase in a convenient way both for those who prefer to buy in physical stores because perhaps, they make an impulse purchase, seeing the product in the window, or because they do not want to wait for shipping times), and for those who prefer to buy online (perhaps also for reasons of distance from physical stores that sell that specific product). R15: It is a form of convenience for the final consumer and a very important feature for an offer system of a particular brand to make its products available both in points of sale and online especially in this postpandemic period as a product offer both online and offline widens the chances of winning over more consumers.
Purchase intention	R2, R4, R5	R2: If a company gives customers the chance to have the same discounts both online and offline, this would incentive people buying more in the physical stores (indeed in our days people tend to buy more online than offline.) R4: They make the buyer more inclined to buy; thanks to the presence of the product in the store, the customer can check its characteristics and, if necessary, to try it on [clothes or cosmetics], and thanks to the possibility of buying it online, he can get it easily and directly to his home, a second time after seeing it in the store and perhaps having thought about the purchase"). R5: I would definitely approve of brands that sell products both online and in store, I think that it's very important today to have an online store. I would definitely prefer to buy a product from a brand that has both online and in store purchase option, rather than a brand that only has one of the options.)
Trust and loyalty	R2, R19	R2: For the type of context we are experiencing, I believe it is necessary to be able to buy both online and physically in the store. However, it has happened several times that the experience was not seamless and this affected my trust about the company negatively. R19: I think that, given the era we are living in and the pandemic situation, it is very important for brands to have both an online and an offline presence. I also think that if there's no interruption between these two types of experiences, the customer would be more likely to become loyal to the brand.
Authenticity	R2, R5, R16, R19.	R2: To me, a positive multichannel experience is able to explain a brand's values and story both online and offline, highlighting the "about us" section on the website and offering me an immersive experience once physically in the store). Transparency about the nature of the product and the brand philosophy is fundamental. R5: Integration and consistency are essential for the company to be true. The message conveyed online must not be different from the one conveyed in a physical way. R16: The positive experience is characterized by the possibility of collecting information on the brand and on the product that you intend to buy through the site, by reading the reviews of other consumers and this affects the choice or not to buy this product. Without the ability to also buy online, this would not be possible. R19: Especially when it comes to cosmetic products such as sunscreens and face creams or serums, it's important that the ingredients' list is explicated on the website and that all the information about the product is disclosed. I would also like to have the same discount opportunities both online and offline and the possibility to exchange my product regardless of the way I bought it.

APPENDIX C

See Table C1

TABLE C1 Studies 2 and 3 online-to-offline scenarios.

<p>Scenario 1a (Seamless multichannel experience)</p>	<p>Please read the following scenario and, as best as you can, place yourself in the role described. Imagine that you are in a store shopping for a Sun Gold sunscreen. While you are in the store, you remember you saw that a sales promotion of 20% was offered on the same item on the Instagram profile of the company. So, you ask the shop assistant whether the same sales promotion could be applied for the in-store purchase. The shop assistant tells you that the same sales promotion can be applied in-store. Furthermore, you ask the shop assistant whether it would be possible to order the Sun Gold sunscreen online from the company's website and then pick it up in the store and whether you can exchange or return it in the store if you buy it online. The shop assistant confirms that you can pick up and exchange or return the item in the store regardless of where you buy it.</p>
<p>Scenario 1b (Nonseamless multichannel experience)</p>	<p>Please read the following scenario and, as best as you can, place yourself in the role described. Imagine that you are in a store shopping for a Sun Gold sunscreen. While you are in the store, you remember you saw that a sales promotion of 20% was offered on the same item on the Instagram profile of the company. So, you ask the shop assistant whether the same sales promotion could be applied online. The shop assistant tells you that unfortunately the sales promotion can only be applied if the Sun Gold sunscreen is purchased on Instagram. Furthermore, you ask the shop assistant whether it would be possible to order the sunscreen online from the company's website and then pick it up in the store and whether you can exchange or return the sunscreen in the store if you buy it online. The shop assistant tells you that, unfortunately, it is not possible to pick up, exchange, or return the Sun Gold sunscreen in the store.</p>

APPENDIX D

See Table D1

TABLE D1 Study 4 offline-to-online scenarios.

<p>Scenario 2a (Seamless multichannel experience)</p>	<p>Please read the following scenario and, as best as you can, place yourself in the role described. Imagine that you are in a store shopping for a Sun Gold sunscreen. While you are in the store, you see a sales promotion of 20% that is offered on the products of the company. So, you ask the shop assistant whether the same sales promotion could be applied for an online purchase. The shop assistant tells you that the same sales promotion can be applied online on the company's website. Furthermore, you ask the shop assistant whether it would be possible to preselect the product in the store and then go online and pay for it and whether you can exchange or return it in the store if you buy it online. The shop assistant confirms that you can pick up and exchange or return the item in the store regardless of where you buy it.</p>
<p>Scenario 2b (Nonseamless multichannel experience)</p>	<p>Please read the following scenario and, as best as you can, place yourself in the role described. Imagine that you are in a store shopping for a Sun Gold sunscreen. While you are in the store, you see a sales promotion of 20% that is offered on the products of the company. So, you ask the shop assistant whether the same sales promotion could be applied for an online purchase. The shop assistant tells you that unfortunately the sales promotion can only be applied if the product is purchased in the store. Furthermore, you ask the shop assistant whether it would be possible to order the sunscreen online from the company's website and then pick it up in the store and whether you can exchange or return the sunscreen in the store if you buy it online. The shop assistant tells you that, unfortunately, it is not possible to pick up, exchange, or return the Sun Gold sunscreen in the store if you buy it online.</p>

APPENDIX E

See Table E1

TABLE E1 Measures.

Constructs	Sources of items	Items
Purchase intention	Kozup et al. (2003)	<p>Would you be more likely or less likely to purchase the product, given the information shown?</p> <p>Given the information shown, how probable is it that you would consider the purchase of the product?</p> <p>How likely would you be to purchase the product, given the information shown?</p>
Brand authenticity	Adapted from Bruhn et al. (2012)	<p>This brand is offers continuity</p> <p>This brand is unique</p> <p>This brand is genuine</p> <p>This brand remains true to its values.</p>
Brand untrustworthiness	Adapted from Erdem and Swait, 2004	<p>This brand doesn't deliver what it promises.</p> <p>This brand's product claims are not believable.</p> <p>This experience with the brand makes me expect it doesn't keep its promises.</p> <p>I cannot trust this brand</p> <p>This brand pretends to be something it isn't.</p>
Attitude toward the brand	Guèvremont and Grohmann (2018); Nan and Heo (2007)	<p>Dislike/Like</p> <p>Unfavorable/Favorable</p> <p>Negative/Positive</p>