

# INVESTIGATING SHOPPING EXPERIENCE AND FULFILMENT IN OMNICHANNEL RETAILING: A PROPOSED COMPARATIVE STUDY IN ROMANIA AND UK OF GENERATION Y CONSUMERS

*Dan-Cristian Dabija<sup>1</sup> and David B. Grant<sup>2</sup>*

*<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania*

*<sup>2</sup>Hull University Business School, Hull, UK and Hanken School of Economics, Helsinki, Finland*

*Emails: [cristian.dabija@econ.ubbcluj.ro](mailto:cristian.dabija@econ.ubbcluj.ro); [d.grant@hull.ac.uk](mailto:d.grant@hull.ac.uk)*

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This paper presents a literature review and proposed research agenda to examine whether Romanian retailers are more inclined than UK retailers to reach out to young consumers, i.e. Generation Y through omnichannel retailing to improve their shopping experiences and also determine the impact of this strategy on logistical and fulfilment activities.

**Research approach:** This paper is based on a literature review in three key areas: omnichannel retailing, young consumers' attitudes and fulfilment and the propensity of online buying behaviour in an emerging market (Romania) versus a more developed economy (UK). As there are few studies related to these aspects, the paper attempts to highlight the best options retailers have for both marketing and online fulfilment when addressing/entering new markets that are very attractive but where cultural background are more different than their traditional markets.

**Findings and Originality:** The literature review suggests there is an opportunity to explore two main relationships: i) marketing and fulfilment for online consumers and omnichannel retailing efforts, and ii) consumers' propensity to purchase online in an emerging market versus a developed economy.

**Research impact:** This paper suggests some research concepts and ideas to investigate the online fulfilment and buying behaviour of younger generations of consumers in both Romania and the UK. The scope of the proposed agenda will include young consumers' purchase behaviours' as regards omnichannel retailing, and logistical fulfilment in an emerging market versus a developed economy including different cultural backgrounds.

**Practical impact:** The paper provides some direction for practitioners on assessing proper market development strategies on an emerging international context, taking into consideration different cultural implications and patterns, as well as focussing on buying propensity of different generations when active in omnichannel retailing. However, the suggested research concepts and ideas would provide a more holistic approach towards a better overall performance of retailers.

**Keywords:** Omnichannel retailing, Logistical fulfilment, Generation Y, Online purchase behaviour

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## **Introduction**

Retailers today increasingly face new and varied challenges related to customer attraction, retention and loyalty against a backdrop of ever-changing polyvalent consumer behaviour (Dabija and Pop, 2008). They also face issues in their distribution regarding in-store availability and online fulfilment (Ferne and Grant, 2008; 2015). In order to act upon consumers' feelings, enhance their experience, influence their decisions (Soars, 2009), make them (re)visit the 'bricks and mortar' or 'click and order' stores and spend considerable time to survey the offers etc. (Heinemann et al., 2015), retailers and producers bombard consumers with a plethora of stimuli conveyed through advertising and point of sale display. In order to meet customers' needs and fully enhance their unique experiences and enjoyment, retailers change or renew their range of products, rethink or restructure the interior of the store and develop innovations for individual and corporate buyers (Dabija et al., 2016). In addition to innovation, an equally important role is played by the customization or individualization, at maximum level, where possible, of a retailer's products and services (Mochon et al., 2012; Siobhan-Hatton and Min, 2015).

This strategy, called omnichannel retailing, can have a synergistic effect on retail, where a consumer's experience is properly enhanced through the simultaneous use of all available distribution channels (Gerritsen et al., 2014; Chopra, 2016) as well as through social media, game consoles, applications for portable devices (iPad, smartphone, tablets etc.) which make the experience unique and prompt customers to buy (Verhoef et al., 2015). Based on consumer's previous buying behaviour and socio-demographic characteristics, the retailer may create, as part of a direct marketing strategy, a message tailored to the consumer's personality, lifestyle, values, preferences, motivations (Williams, 2004), the products browsed via the applications on his/her portable devices (Abishek and Henchand, 2016), his/her activity on the retailer's webpage, on blogs, forums and other social media where people comment on the retailer and/or its products and services. In this way, the consumer becomes the retailer's partner by joining the retailer in creating value (Heller-Baird and Gonzales-Wertz, 2011), helping it get the attention of other consumers, recommending the retailer's offer to other people and posting comments in the online environment, etc.

As smartphones and other portable devices have increased their contribution to the generation of Internet traffic, more and more retailers think about increasing their investments in mobile commerce and specific applications because these instruments are seen as predictors of greater development of their own business. The applications and the current technology enable retailers to obtain a lot of information about customers, such as the frequency with which they visit the online store, the time elapsed from the last visit, their purchasing behaviour and preferences, the information accessed, the number of transactions made using the applications etc. (Apps, 2014). However, one of the challenges for the retailers using omnichannel is how to build the customers' trust in the security of personal and financial (credit card payment) data transmission and diminish the risk of using the online channel (Chopra, 2016). Through social media, commerce in the future will not be only an electronic commerce but also a social commerce in which the focus will be on enhancing the buyer's virtual experience and making the online payment easier through specific instruments such as e-wallets (Online Retailing Trends, 2014; Yee and Heutger, 2015).

However, are there cultural differences (Grant, 2004) in approaches to this new shopping experience, and what are the ramifications for delivery, fulfilment and related logistical and supply chain activities? Based on these issues, this paper's purpose is to present a literature review and

proposed research agenda to examine whether Romanian retailers are more inclined than UK retailers to reach out to young consumers, i.e. Generation Y, through omnichannel retailing to improve their shopping experiences and also determine the impact of this strategy on logistical and fulfilment activities.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Omnichannel retailing**

Capturing the attention of the modern consumer seems no longer possible without a continuous presence in the online environment and on social networks. This kind of presence provides the retailer with more possibilities to satisfy the customer's desires and expectations and customize its products and services according to his/her needs (Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson, 2014). In order to enhance the customer's retail brand experience, whether s/he chooses to visit a traditional 'brick and mortar' or a virtual store, retailers always have to improve their own performance and deliver unique and special customer experiences (Breidbach et al., 2014; Verhoef et al., 2015). In order to maximize their presence among customers, retailers have over time pursued a multi-channel retailing strategy. Global retailers such as Carrefour, Tesco, Metro and Delhaize have inaugurated various grocery (e.g. supermarkets, hypermarkets, proximity or discount stores) and non-grocery (e.g. medium-sized and large-sized specialty stores) retail formats, brick and mortar as well as online stores (Grant et al., 2006). They have also used teleshopping, mobile commerce and product catalogues (Heinemann et al., 2015).

These initiatives enable consumers to select the most advantageous distribution channel in terms of proximity, convenience, price, kindness of personnel, store ambience, products and information availability, delivery speed (Yee and Heutger, 2015), and channel transparency and accessibility (Gerritsen et al., 2014). Obtaining the proper performance in approaching markets depends on the type of merchandise distributed i.e. low versus high value products (Chopra, 2016), by the distribution channels used, and the extent to which the retailer is able to improve the shopping experience of consumers by evolving from a multi-channel strategy focused on traditional retail formats to an omnichannel strategy based on the internet and social networks, portable devices and applications for smartphones, iPads, iPhones etc. (Ferne and Grant, 2015, Heinemann et al., 2015, Online Retailing Market, 2015; Verhoef et al., 2015; Gonzales-Lafaysse and Lapassouse-Madrid, 2016).

Their online presence is fully justified, as by 2018 mobile commerce will generate almost half of the e-commerce for individual consumers. It is also predicted that the smartphone market will rise spectacularly from about 1.6 billion units in 2013 to almost 6 billion by 2020. This may also be the case of a global access to quality internet where 90% of the world's population will be able to access online the assortment offer of retailers, which will make possible the transfer from the 'one-stop-shopping' concept to the 'one-click-shopping' (Yee and Heutger, 2015).

A major objective of retailers is to provide consumers with positive and unique experiences when they gather information for decision-making and look for the best ways to satisfy their needs and desires (Gong and Janssen, 2015), regardless of the channel used. The advancement of technology enables customers to change the distribution channels quite frequently and of information regarding the options, intentions, preferences and searches of consumer (Potter, Towill and Christopher, 2015), which calls for their proper integration and synchronization by the retailer while it maintains the quality of the service provided and prevents any information loss (Henk and Holthaus, 2015).

The focus of a multi-channel strategy is on the retailer and the channels it uses to attract a consumer's attention, establish relationships, and enhance retention. Through this strategy, the retailer understands the consumer's needs and desires based on preferences and behaviour

patterns recorded when visiting or buying from the online store, and integrates the applications containing messages conveyed through direct-mailing campaigns (Heinemann et al., 2015). A recent US study shows that 88% of purchases are the consequence of a ‘web-rooming’ behaviour where the client firstly uses any online information available in different channels but afterwards buying the products in a physical store (Yee and Heutger, 2015).

In contrast, the focus of an omnichannel strategy is on the interaction between retailer and consumer through various channels and how to best use them, the dialogue between consumer and retailer as well as among consumers and the way in which their interest in the retailer’s entire offer can be stirred (Fernie and Grant, 2015). Through an omnichannel strategy the retailer understands what the consumer really wants and desires by means of a ‘system of engagements’ based on the proper analysis and interpretation of ‘big data’ obtained from using social networks (Tang and Ofori-Boateng, 2016).

Three types of exchange take place between consumer and retailer: information, products and services and money (Chopra, 2016). Four categories of retail business models can be identified depending on how the customer is informed and can make a purchase and achieve proper fulfilment of a purchased product or service, and are shown in Table 1. The importance and relevance of showrooms for consumer fulfilment was confirmed by a US study undertaken for consumer electronics – 70% of the clients of Best Buy were eager to test the products before buying them online, even if the information regarding characteristics, performance, etc. had been done through different online channels such as mobile, e-store, social platforms, etc. (Yee and Heutger, 2015).

	<b>Purchase of products and services (Fulfilment)</b>	<i>Pick-up of goods from the retailer (Drive-In, favourite store, other store etc.)</i>	<i>Delivery to a place established by customer</i>
<b>Manner of informing</b>	<i>Bricks and mortar stores, through the retailer’s employees</i>	Traditional retail format/ classical food and non-food retail through physical stores, e.g. Kaufland, Lidl, Carrefour etc. (RO), Tesco, ASDA, John Lewis (UK)	Showrooms, delivery to a place established by customer or pick-up from showroom if the product is available, e.g. emag (RO), Argos (UK)
	<i>Click and order stores, based on customers’ feedback (comments, suggestions, reviews, etc.) and online interactions with the retailer (chat, messenger, etc.)</i>	Modern retail, online purchase and order pick-up at an established place, e.g. Cora Drive-In (RO), Tesco Drive-In (UK)	Classical electronic commerce, e.g. PC Garage (RO), Amazon (UK)

**Table 1: Business models in retail depending on how the customer is informed (Adapted from Chopra, 2016)**

In contrast to traditional retailing, omnichannel retailing has a major advantage in terms of product availability, customer service and the reduction of the company’s management, operational and coordination efforts. There is no more need for grocery or non-grocery products to be necessarily available on a store’s shelves because they can be found in another store of the same chain or of a competing chain (Moussaoui et al., 2016). The retailer may use social networks, gaming consoles, applications for various portable devices (Gonzales-Lafayse and Lapassouse-Madrid, 2016) to replenish stock-outs sought by a customer and send them to his/her home by courier or other mailing services (Fernie and Grant, 2015).

By using a smartphone application to compare the product offers of several stores in a particular area a consumer may identify not only the chain selling the product but also the store where it can

be found (Steele, 2015). Thus, the consumer not only saves a lot of time, but also optimizes the shopping experience, the utility of the purchased items, shortens the trip from one store to another, increases shopping enjoyment and thus increases satisfaction with the retailer and the application used, e.g. iBeacon (Yee and Heutger, 2015). Depending on the products seen via the application downloaded on the portable devices the consumer can also identify the best quality-price ratio, obtaining in the end customized products and services that meet expectations and requirements (Abishek and Henchand, 2016).

The use of a social network in parallel with visiting a classical or online store offers both parties a major advantage: within its communication policy the retailer advertises its products and offers whereas the consumer, during interactions with the store, conducts real-time reviews on product availability, tests or compares the characteristics and advantages or the uses of various items (Heinonen, 2011). Then, via comments posted on blogs, forums, etc. the consumer provides others with feelings during the purchasing act as well as valuable feedback on the advice received from the retailer's employees, the availability of brands, store cleanliness, etc. By revealing these experiences and feelings before, during and after the purchasing act, the consumer indirectly helps advertise the retailer's image and better embeds them in the mind of other consumers.

Omnichannel retail is also increasingly influenced by technological advancement as it allows the standardization, digitization and automatization of processes and the use of applications developed by retailers anytime and anywhere (Henk and Holthaus, 2015). This has profound effects on sales and the management of distribution channels, the improvement of buyer-seller relationships, salesforce management, the generation of corporate added-value and the product's usefulness (Chopra, 2016).

### **The Generation Y consumer segment**

Due to the heterogeneity of consumer generation lifestyles, the different desires, expectations, experiences, values, preferences, arising mainly from the particularities and specificities of socio-demographic characteristics, from consumer traditions and consumer purchase behaviour, the contemporary society as a whole and also different organizations must think and act according to the principles of 'multi-generational marketing'. Such an approach is directed towards establishing proper relations with each generation of individuals and succeeding in effectively responding to the needs and behaviours of its members (Martin and Prince, 2009). In this approach, marketing finds support points from the sociology of generations (Pilcher, 1994). From a sociological perspective, a generation is made up of groups of individuals of similar age, who witnessed the same historical phenomena in a given period of time (Mannheim, 1952), have a collective consciousness, based on values, common beliefs and attitudes (Pilcher, 1994).

Despite similarities, members of a generation will never completely reveal homogeneous characteristics. Although generation theory refers to six different groups of individuals (Williams and Page, 2009), depending on their birth year (starting 1930) in the analysis of specific behaviours the most relevant generations of consumer are Generation X (1965-1979) and Y (1980-1999). The majority of their members are still alive and may form opinions on issues of sustainable development in retailing. Of course, such an approach should not neglect the Baby Boom generation (1946-1964) which can certainly also express relevant opinions regarding retailing and sustainable development. A clear distinction between generation X and the previous one (Baby Boom) or the next one (Generation Y) is difficult to achieve, due the fact that some of its features are common to the other two (Martin and Prince, 2009).

The Generation Y segment, also known as Millennials, DotNet and the iPod Generation, is made up of individuals characterized by multiculturalism, ethnic and sexual tolerance and acceptance. They

grew up in an environment dominated by innovation, rapid change, living almost symbiotically with different forms of personal technology e.g. computers, tablets, iPods, etc. A typical Generation Y family has two incomes, individuals rely more on their own forces with a sense of independence and perfect autonomy, being concerned with self-image and relying very much on social networking (Williams and Page, 2011). Generation Y is characterized by the desire to make their own choices, customizing the information received, curiosity and doubt, the spirit of collaboration, speed, entertainment, innovation. Its members are highly educated, mostly being e-learners. The use of email is somewhat outdated for the Generation Y segment; they mostly prefer services such as SMS, social networks; the messages should be short, concise and sincere (Jorgensen, 2003).

The Generation Y segment also uses social media and applications for mobile devices to obtain information about the new products or offers before or during visiting the traditional or the online store, compare other consumers' opinions from online forums about the prior use of products and services and visit blogs to get more information about product characteristics and utility. Whether consumers visit the bricks and mortar or online store to seek information about brands, assortments, products characteristics, functionalities and/ or availability, retailers may benefit depending on their consumption behaviour and their online account available in the retailer's platform, e.g. a customized or special offer, discount coupon, etc. (Ferne and Grant, 2015; Abishek and Henchand, 2016). This strengthens the consumer's general impression about the retailer leading to a purchasing decision much faster than when the client does not know the retailer and their offerings. In the case of an online order, the consumer more and more has the option of picking-up the order himself/herself in a traditional store in the neighbourhood of his home or workplace, may visit a collection point of 'drive-in' store if the retailer offers this possibility, or can receive the offer to an established place of destination by courier services (Ferne and Grant, 2015).

The young and modern consumer, empowered and enlightened (Heller-Baird and Gonzales-Wertz, 2011), is eager to be present everywhere, in any places and with any means, without boundaries, which transforms him into an omniconsumer (Yee and Heutger, 2015). Practically, in satisfying his needs, the contemporary consumer is constantly connected with novelties, using when s/he uses social networks and other technologies available on portable devices to gain information about the latest offers. He searches information regarding comparison of products, prices etc., and determine the ways through which he might optimize the product consumption and utility and increase his or her satisfaction and contentment (Yee and Heutger, 2015).

### **Romania versus the UK**

With the liberalization of its market and economic development, increasing purchasing power, and entry into the European Union (EU), the Romanian market has become more and more attractive for various international retailers both in grocery and in non-grocery. This period also coincides with the opening of new shopping centers in almost all cities of Romania, on surfaces between thousands and hundreds of thousands of square metres (Dabija and Abrudan, 2015).

Regarding online retailing, despite having a low Internet penetration rate of about 50%, Romania nevertheless ranked 10<sup>th</sup> worldwide with 73.6 Mbps average connection speed in 2015 compared to an average global speed of 32.5 Mbps (Belson, 2015). This unique market niche has been set upon by both pure-player and bricks-and-mortar retailers eager to develop new virtual stores offering a wide and steadily growing range of products, introducing the concept of drive-ins for product collection, and focusing on online shops specialized in primarily non-food products but also on some food products delivered by their own network of shops or third-party logistics (3PL) providers. To strengthen Romanians' shopping experiences, e-retailers showrooms offering increased possibilities for fulfilment, information and specialized technical advice for consumers, allowing them to make the best choice regarding new products or resealed ones from returns.

As noted above, online retailers also make it possible for customers to check online prices for identification the cheapest product, tracking orders placed, etc. Although targeting any consumer segment, omnichannel retailers and pure e-retailers predominantly focus on the younger generation of consumers; i.e. Generation Y, who prefer the use of portable devices, social networks, and other digital platforms. Romanian retailers quickly understood this trend and adapted by developing applications through which smartphones users are more quickly informed about special offers, new products, etc. However, the effect of this focus on retail logistics and fulfilment activities is nascent in Western Europe and almost non-existent in Eastern Europe, especially Romania.

In the UK, the rise of retailer power in the marketplace has been well-documented and understood, particularly grocery retailing (Ferne and Grant, 2008). However, a recent survey by KPMG (2016) of grocery and non-grocery has found that consumers are opting for free service over their preferred delivery options, causing retailers and parcel providers to face challenges meeting customer requirements at potentially high cost to their business, particularly returns that are of growing significance to both retail store and logistics operations as consumers are provided a free and convenient service, which they consider to be of utmost importance when choosing a retailer. This focus by retailers on processes and costs may be symptomatic of attitude by UK consumers towards the online shopping process where they may act more like business to business or B2B logisticians as regards availability, delivery, condition and returns (Grant et al., 2006, Xing and Grant, 2006). Hence, the advantages of technology and cross-marketing evident in Romania may be lagging in a UK context.

### **Conclusions and suggested research ideas**

Recent developments in technology have allowed retailers to intensify and diversify their presence in a consumer's proximity. Retailers seem to focus their market development strategy after the adage 'if you are not present online now, you do not exist', targeting mostly young consumers segments because they show not only an increased willingness to use various portable devices, but rely for their information and communication especially on the virtual environment, which enables companies to strengthen their online presence, offers, promotions and benefits.

International retailers, including some in Romania and UK, have recognized the importance and necessity of their online presence on various social platforms, developing in this regard a sustained presence in cyberspace. Evidence shows that in an emerging country such as Romania, domestic and also foreign retailers resort to specific smartphone apps capable to capture and attract the attention of customers and inform them properly by means of Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn. Here retailers present new assortments, various product characteristics, but also offer lifestyle advice and suggestions useful for consumers' daily lives. Being aware of the rapid pace at which today's consumers adopt new communication technologies and the fact that the online environment enhances consumers' shopping experiences, retailers more and more frequently shift a large share of their businesses to the online environment, thus implementing a omnichannel strategy (Ferne and Grant, 2015).

Does all this mean Romania is lagging the UK in omnichannel marketing endeavours to Generation Y consumers by having to focus more on them? And, has being a late entrant into a capitalist market economy allowed Romania to start with a clean sheet to bypass distribution and fulfilment issues that are being resolved organically in western European economies? A focus on consumer offerings and convenience in Romania and a focus on process efficiency and costs in the UK suggest that there may be a dichotomy between these countries at present. We therefore argue there is a need for research to investigate these issues across both countries to establish the advantages each has over

the other, and similarities and differences in order to suggest best practice knowledge transfer between them.

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