Fast or Furious

A study of attributes important to the online customer experience in fast fashion shopping

by

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Abstract

The primary aim of this paper is to investigate which attributes are most important to the online customer experience (OCE) in the fast fashion industry. Qualitative data was gathered through a netnography of online customer reviews and comments, and a comprehensive framework of attributes important to OCE in the fast fashion industry was constructed. This framework includes nine primary attributes, which are further broken down into thirteen secondary attributes and seven tertiary attributes. Based on the findings of this study, the attributes most important for OCE in the fast fashion industry are *delivery*, *returns*, *customer service*, *products*, *technology*, and *omnichannel experience*, including their respective secondary and tertiary sub-attributes.

With help from prior literature, the identified attributes of importance to OCE in the fast fashion industry were then compared to the attributes important to the physical store experience. Several similarities were found between the attributes important to customer experience in the two channels, such as the importance of *customer service*. Furthermore, some attributes are shared but differ in importance. One such attribute is *returns*, which takes on an amplified role in OCE. Attributes unique to OCE were also identified, one of these being *user experience*. Finally, the paper addresses the implications of the identified attributes for retailers with both physical and online channels, and points to the importance of providing customers with a seamless experience while also considering that customers may focus on different attributes depending on which channel they are shopping in.

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1 Introduction

Imagine that you are in search of a dress for your graduation ceremony. You decide to look online, where you know a much wider selection of items is available. You finally find a dress you love, and you are over the moon to find that the retailer offers express shipping in 1-2 days for just $8.

However, with the graduation ceremony just one day away, your online order has not yet shown up. You have made several unsuccessful attempts to get in touch with customer service. Four disconnected phone calls and two unanswered emails later, you are now forced to choose from the limited options in the stores in your city.

Your online order does not arrive until a week after the ceremony, and ten days after the promised express delivery date. When you open the box, you are appalled to find that the item inside is not even what you ordered! Once again, you are faced with the impossible task of contacting customer service. This time, you reach a representative on your third attempt and immediately demand a refund. However, the representative informs you that you will not be refunded until you have sent back the item and they have handled the return – a process that could take several weeks.

Many of us are drawn to online fast fashion shopping for its wide selection, low prices, and convenience – After all, what could be better than an endless range of budget-friendly fashion that can be delivered to your home with a single click? However, the online shopping experience can be affected by a range of factors, and as illustrated by the above example, there is a lot that can go wrong! To optimize the customer experience, it is therefore essential for fast fashion retailers to know what is important to customers when shopping online.

Customer experience is defined as "the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company" (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, p.118). Understanding one's customers is highly significant to retailer success (Grewal, Levy & Kumar, 2009), and by doing so, retailers can enhance the customer experience and, as a result, retailer performance (Puccinelli, Goodstein, Grewal, Price, Raghubir & Stewart, 2009). However, today's customers are more knowledgeable and demanding, and therefore their needs and wants are more difficult for retailers to satisfy (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017). This makes it especially necessary, but also difficult, to identify the attributes important to customers and which could consequently affect their overall experience.

Meanwhile, online purchases are becoming more prevalent. In fact, 75% of people shop online at least once a month (Statista, 2019), and in 2021, online retail shopping sales reached an estimated 4.9 trillion U.S dollars worldwide, forecasted to grow by 50% by 2025 (Statista, 2022). The fast fashion industry is an especially interesting context to investigate due to the prominence of online shopping in this area. According to Statista (2022), fashion is the largest B2C online shopping market segment with a global size of approximately US$752.5 billion in 2020, with this value expected to grow 9.1% every year till 2025. Furthermore, as will be addressed in the literature review, there is a gap in prior research when it comes to customer experience in online fast fashion, which this study aims to fill.

When shopping online, customers engage in contact not only with the retail company, but also with other customers and with the devices themselves, making online shopping interactive in nature (Novak, Hoffman & Yung, 2000). Additionally, customers can take the role of content providers online (Novak, Hoffman & Yung, 2000). Thus, the customer experience can be influenced by a range of factors, both within and outside of retailers' control (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros & Schlesinger, 2009). This is another reason it is especially important to investigate which attributes are the most important to customers when shopping online.

Additionally, it is worth investigating how these attributes compare to the attributes important to the physical store experience. Bäckström and Johansson (2017) studied various attributes of importance to customers which could therefore affect the customer experience in physical store retail. They found that traditional aspects of the store, like the layout, personnel, and display of items are some of the most important attributes to customers. Other relevant attributes identified by Bäckström and Johansson (2017) include in-store technological solutions and the effect of atmospheric cues, such as music, scents, and colors. Due to the rise of omnichannel retail (Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015), a comparison between these attributes and those important in online shopping could be especially relevant for retailers operating in both channels.

2 Research problem

With the increased popularity of online shopping, especially in the fast fashion industry, the question arises as to what is important to customers when shopping online – Are the attributes important to the online customer experience similar to the previously established attributes important to the physical store experience, or do customers focus on other attributes when shopping online? Recognition of attributes important to online fast fashion consumers can provide valuable insight for online fashion retailers wanting to improve their customer experience. Furthermore, such research may be of relevance to omnichannel retail, as retailers aspiring toward this approach need to be aware of attributes important to fast fashion customers in both offline and online channels. This is another reason it is relevant to investigate which attributes are most important to consumers in online fast fashion shopping. Hence, the main research question of this paper is:

Which attributes are most important for the online fast fashion customer experience?

The sub-questions are:

How do these attributes compare to the attributes important for the customer experience in physical fast fashion shopping?

What are the implications of these attributes for fast fashion retailers operating on both channels (physical stores and online)?

3 Literature review

3.1 The fast fashion consumer

Fast fashion is described by Sull and Turconi (2008, p.5) as "the retail strategy of adapting merchandise assortments to current and emerging trends as quickly and effectively as possible". The main difference from traditional fashion strategy is that fast fashion retailers react to trends and changes in the market within a few weeks, as opposed to designers who push trends into the market in longer periods of time (Sull & Turconi, 2008). In line with Sull and Turconi (2008), Barnes and Lea-Greenwood (2010) highlight that the key features of a fast fashion strategy are time, customer demand, and constant searching for new trends.

The aforementioned key features of fast fashion go hand in hand with the creation of a new type of consumer who is more demanding and fashion savvy (Barnes, 2008). Thus, gaining their loyalty may be a difficult task, as they are not loyal to a specific brand or retailer – they simply buy what they need, when they need it (Barnes, 2008). Moreover, consumers are constantly surrounded by information, and are easily able to access new trends and fashion products. This ease of access to information results in a more demanding consumer, who knows what is trendy at the moment and expects retailers to offer it (Barnes, 2008; Bruce & Daly, 2006). Furthermore, the constant search for new trends is closely linked with the affordability of fast fashion, as consumers know that once they do not want to wear an item anymore because there is something more trendy in the market, they can easily replace it at a low cost (Barnes, 2008).

3.2 Customer experience

In order to understand customer experience, we have to understand its roots, and it all started with the study of consumer behavior. Consumer behavior is a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained with a simplistic model. According to Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, p.139), "the behavior of people in general and of consumers in particular is the fascinating and endlessly complex result of a multifaceted interaction between organism and environment". Therefore, it is essential to understand that consumers are more than simply information processors, and that there are experiential aspects of consumption which play an important role in understanding consumption as a holistic phenomenon (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). In concordance with Holbrook and Hirschman (1982), Schmitt (1999) observes that experiential marketing views consumers as "rational and emotional human

beings who are concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences" (Schmitt, 1999, p.53). In line with this view of consumption, Verhoef et al. (2009, p.32) note that "customer experience is holistic in nature and involves the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical responses to the retailer."

As previously mentioned, Meyers and Schwager (2007, p.118) define customer experience as "the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company". Customer experience can be observed throughout the whole customer journey, all the way from any expectations customers have before the purchase occurs to the post-purchase behavior that comes after; it is no longer enough to just sell products or services (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel, 2002). In order to provide a memorable customer experience, companies must understand the customer journey and the clues that are part of it (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel, 2002). The authors define an *experience clue* as "anything that can be perceived or sensed — or recognized by its absence" (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel, 2002, p.86). Furthermore, they state that "each clue carries a message, suggesting something to the customer" and "[t]he composite of all the clues makes up the customer's total experience" (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel, 2002, p.86). They highlight that recognizing and understanding the clues that are being sent to the customers is the first step towards accurately managing customer experience.

3.3 Customer experience in physical stores

When it comes to physical stores, there are several studies about how the customer experience can be formed and what can influence it (e.g. Bäckström & Johansson, 2017; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal & Voss, 2002; Grewal, Levy, & Kumar, 2009; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009). Today's stores are changing and evolving, in part due to technology development and its integration into the store scenario (Fuentes, Bäckström & Svingstedt, 2017) and also due to customers interacting with the brand across multiple channels (Chen & Lamberti, 2016). At the same time, customers are becoming more demanding, and consequently, customer experience management becomes more complex (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017). Customers are visiting stores with high expectations for enjoyment where they seek to experience different types of responses (e.g. cognitive, affective, social, etc.) triggered by in-store stimuli, and therefore, retailers need to offer an outstanding customer experience that could meet these expectations (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017). Despite this, Bäckström and Johansson (2017) found that customers still consider

traditional values to be important for their physical store experience, mentioning attributes such as personnel attitudes and the layout of the store. Therefore, they argue, retailers need to focus on developing new ways of presenting these traditional values, in combination with new technologies demanded by customers (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017).

Along the lines of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) and Schmitt (1999), Sachdeva and Goel (2015) highlight the importance of the experiential aspect of consumption in today's retail world. The authors point out that "what people remember about shopping experience is determined by the mood, feelings and intensity of emotions created in particular moments while shopping" (Sachdeva & Goel, 2015, p.290). Accordingly, they stress that today's retailers need to deviate the focus of attention from what they sell to how they sell it, calling this " the experiential paradigm shift in shopping" (Sachdeva & Goel, 2015, p.292). More than ever, retailers need to improve the physical store experience, as they are facing increased competition from online retailers and have to enchant customers to buy through memorable and enjoyable experiences – the physical store is not a merely transactional place anymore (Sachdeva & Goel, 2015).

There are several factors that can influence customers when visiting a store (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009). Puccinelli et al. (2009) developed a framework recognizing multiple elements of consumer behavior which are key to understanding customers. They are (1) goals, schema, and information processing, (2) memory, (3) involvement, (4) attitudes, (5) affect, (6) atmospherics, and (7) consumer attributions and choices. Each of these elements can influence different stages of the buying process. Furthermore, Verhoef et al., (2009) present a holistic view of customer experience. They assert that customer experience should be analyzed in its entirety, with the focus not only on attributes which can be influenced by the retailer, but also on attributes beyond their control. Moreover, the authors point out that social and physical components of the customer experience should be studied in addition to the cognitive evaluations and affective responses that are usually prioritized when discussing customer experience. In accordance with this view, they present a framework of factors influencing the physical store customer experience, including social environment, service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price, customer experiences in alternative channels, past customer experiences, and retail brand (Verhoef et al., 2009).

In line with Verhoef et al.'s (2009) model of customer experience creation, Bustamante and Rubio (2017) identify several components of the physical store customer experience. The

physical store experience is described by the authors as a multilayered phenomenon that is formed through customers' responses, both internal (cognitive, affective and physical) and social, such as encounters or interactions with other customers or employees. The findings of Bustamante and Rubio (2017) show that all of these elements of the physical store customer experience are key to its management and have a huge impact on retailers' efficiency. Accordingly, there is a strong relationship between the appropriate management of physical store customer experience with customer satisfaction and store loyalty (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017).

Ballantine, Parsons and Comeskey (2015) address the importance of considering atmospheric cues affecting customer experience from a holistic point of view. They assert that the different factors influencing the physical store experience are not perceived in isolation by customers. Considering atmospheric cues from a holistic point of view also means that there is a need to understand how they can affect the whole buying process, from the pre-purchase phase to post-purchase behavior (Ballantine, Parsons & Comeskey, 2015). Atmospheric cues, and how customers perceive them, are strongly related to the feeling of comfort when being in the store. If these cues positively influence customers, this can lead to an increased time spent at the store, which could in turn lead to increased customer buying intentions (Ballantine, Parsons & Comeskey, 2015).

Moreover, Alexander & Cano (2020) highlight the importance of store design in delivering a good customer experience and creating remarkable memories. The authors address the importance of using previously neglected spaces in stores to improve the experience and to connect with customers – for instance, one such space may be the fitting rooms, where the buying decision is made. Additionally, they address the importance of creating spaces in the store that can resemble social media behavior, as the impact of influencers and peers is constantly growing. In these spaces, customers can be encouraged to connect with each other. Concordantly, Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p.69) point out that "customer experiences are more social in nature, and peer customers are influencing experiences as well". Alexander and Cano (2020) further suggest that retailers can resort to storytelling to create "magical moments" with their customers and be able to engage with them in different ways (Alexander & Cano, 2020, p.7).

3.4 Customer experience in fast fashion physical stores

Even though retail is evolving, physical stores still play an essential role in transmitting the brand essence (Alexander & Cano, 2020). In fast fashion, the store is a key player in ensuring that new items are available to customers on a regular basis (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). There are a number of physical attributes that influence customer experience in fashion stores – window display, overall design, layout and merchandising, decoration, signage, and fitting rooms, among others (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). However, in fast fashion, the most influential attributes are those closely related to the product – namely, window display, store layout and display, and signage (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). Lea-Grenwood (1998) states that window display is a communication tool for retailers and can highly influence potential customers' decision to enter the store. In line with this, Barnes & Lea-Greenwood (2010) remark that to effectively influence customers, items displayed in windows should reflect customers' needs.

Store layout and display is another essential attribute to influence customers and create a good experience in the store. Customers' purchase decisions are highly affected by the different ways products may be placed within the store (Lea-Grenwood, 1998). Moreover, visual merchandising acts as a driver of brand image, strengthening communication activities and influencing customer behavior in the store (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). Lastly, signage in fast fashion is crucial to communicate with customers about current trends and promotional activities (Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). The authors remark that signage in fast fashion is used to conduct customers to key garments in the store, which in turn, leads to incrementing purchases of other garments.

3.5 Online customer experience

In later years, several researchers have explored online customer experience (OCE) and the factors influencing it. For instance, in online shopping, the website itself is important to consider, and website functionality is one aspect which has been suggested to impact OCE. Rose, Hair & Clark (2011) include ease-of-use of a website in their framework of OCE, and Singh (2019) found that customers expect websites that are easy to use and may become frustrated if this is not the case. Bilgihan, Kandampully and Zhang (2016), too, note that ease of use of a website is an antecedent of OCE, also including ease of locating the website as a relevant factor.

There are also other elements of a website which are considered to be of relevance to OCE. Visual appeal of a website may be one such attribute (Rose, Clark, Samouel & Hair, 2012; Singh, 2019), although Pham and Ahammad (2017) found website appearance to be insignificant to customer satisfaction. Other website-related attributes which have been suggested to influence OCE are personalization (Bilgihan, Kandampully & Zhang, 2016) and customization (Rose, Clark, Samouel & Hair, 2012; Pham & Ahammad, 2017; Castro-Lopez, Vazquez-Casielles & Puente, 2019; Jaiswal & Singh, 2020).

Customer service is regarded by many as one of the main factors of OCE (e.g. Pham & Ahammad, 2017; Jaiswal & Singh, 2020; Singh and Söderlund, 2020). In their study, Singh and Söderlund (2020) found customer service to be the most significant driver of the online grocery shopping experience, and suggest that a lack of communication may even be seen by customers as a reason to switch retailers. Furthermore, honest customer service is important, as failing to keep promises made to the customer may be detrimental to the customer experience (Singh & Söderlund, 2020). Singh (2019) notes that customer support should be "characterized by a caring attitude" (p.1311) and argues that customers want customer support representatives to listen to their problems as well as solve them.

Product and price attributes are also important to OCE, and are included, for instance, in Izogo and Jayawardhena's (2018) model. Similarly, Jaiswal and Singh (2020) regard economic value as one of the main contributing factors to OCE. Furthermore, in the online grocery shopping context, Singh (2019) notes the significance of assortment, product quality, and price, including these attributes under the term *customer return on investment*, as they influence the economic benefit the customer derives from their online purchase. It is further noted by the author that customers expect the same product quality when shopping online as they would get in a physical store, and are disappointed when this is not the case. Similarly, they want similar prices online to those offered in physical stores, and extra delivery charges may be frowned upon as this is considered part of the service offered by online retailers (Singh, 2019).

Other attributes which have been suggested to be of importance to OCE are delivery and returns. Lin, Wu, and Chang (2011) found delivery to be the most important factor affecting online customer satisfaction, and delivery experience is also included in models by Singh (2019) and Söderlund and Singh (2020). Similarly, Pham & Ahammad (2017) consider ease

of returns to be one of the most important factors to customer satisfaction, and Singh (2019) notes that smooth returns are a key factor to the online grocery shopping experience.

For retailers operating across multiple channels, coherence between channels may also influence the customer experience. Gao, Li, Fan & Jia (2021) found that when it comes to omnichannel retailers, inconsistency between online and offline experiences has a negative effect on customer retention. It is further noted that this effect can be mitigated by channel transparency, convenience, and seamlessness (Gao et al., 2021). Similarly, Quach, Barari, Moudrý and Quach (2022) note that service consistency in omnichannel retail has a direct effect on flow and perceived risk, and hence also on customer experience.

When discussing attributes important to OCE, several researchers distinguish between different dimensions of the experience. Although various terms are used throughout the literature, many researchers describe one dimension that is goal-oriented and another that is pleasure-oriented. Terms which have been used to explain such dimensions include functionality-psychological factors, cognitive-affective and utilitarian-hedonic.

Klaus (2013) distinguishes between functionality and psychological factors in the OCE. Functionality refers to aspects like usability, communication, social presence, product presence, and interactivity, while psychological factors include trust, familiarity, and value for money (Klaus, 2013). Pandey and Chawla (2018) slightly adapt these dimensions to study them in the fashion context. When it comes to the functionality dimension, they add one factor, informativeness. As for psychological factors, they define these as "beliefs, feelings and shopping practices that act as both drivers and inhibitors of online shopping" (p.326) and argue that such factors include e-distrust (e.g. fear of online fraud), e-negative beliefs (fear of being lured in by advertising and making unnecessary purchases), e-self-inefficacy (fear linked to one's own lacking knowledge of the internet), e-logistic ease (including delivery timeliness, delivery accuracy, and ease of returns), e-convenience (including convenience in access, search, and transaction), and e-enjoyment (time and effort needed).

Furthermore, several researchers distinguish between cognitive and affective dimensions of OCE (e.g. Rose et al., 2012; Izogo and Jayawardhena, 2018; Barari, Ross and Surachartkumtonkun, 2020). In Rose et al.'s (2012) model of OCE, the cognitive experiential state refers to thinking and conscious processing, and is linked to the antecedent variables of interactive speed, telepresence, challenge, and skill. Meanwhile, Izogo and Jayawardhena (2018) found six dimensions of the cognitive experiential state: trust, expertise task, product,

cost, convenience, and usability. Affective experience, on the other hand, is described by Rose et al. (2012) as related to feelings and emotions and suggests that it is affected by ease-of-use, customization, connectedness, aesthetics, and perceived benefits. The first three of these variables are suggested to affect perceived control, which in turn influences the affective experience (Rose et al., 2012). Barari, Ross & Surachartkumtonkun (2020) found that customers may emphasize the affective or cognitive experience depending on the success of their shopping – in their study, customers in a successful context emphasized affective experience, while the focus in an unsuccessful context was a cognitive experience.

A similar distinction which is used to describe the OCE is that between its utilitarian and hedonic dimensions. Castro-Lopez, Vazquez-Casielles and Puente (2019) define utilitarian quality as "the value derived from completing objectives of finding information and/or purchase" and hedonic quality as "the value derived from enjoying the search for information and/or purchase" (p.598). In utilitarian experience, the authors include web quality, offered service, and security, while hedonic experience is considered in terms of fun, enjoyment, and entertainment (Castro-Lopez, Vazquez-Casielles & Puente, 2019).

According to Izogo and Jayawardhena (2018), the difference between the utilitarian-hedonic perspective and the cognitive-affective perspective is that the former relates to the nature of the experience itself, whereas the latter addresses "the psychological states of consumers arising from their shopping experiences" (Izogo & Jayawardhena, 2018, p.382). Singh (2019) addresses both the cognitive-affective dimension and the utilitarian-hedonic dimension, noting that customers want an experience that is both frictionless and pleasurable. In her framework of the online grocery shopping experience, the frictionless experience accounts for the utilitarian and cognitive dimensions. The pleasurable experience, on the other hand, refers to the hedonic and affective aspects (Singh, 2019).

3.6 Online fast fashion customer experience

Kawaf and Tagg (2017) investigated OCE in the fashion context. This study focused on understanding how customers construct their experiences and found that online fashion shopping experiences are made up of perception of the environment, emotion, risk and trust, behavioral constructs, and situational constructs (Kawaf & Tagg, 2017). However, the study does not give a detailed account of the attributes under each of these categories nor their relative importance.

In their study of OCE, Pham & Ahammad (2017) classify fashion as a search good. Such goods are defined as being "characterised by product attributes where complete information about the goods can be acquired prior to purchase", whereas experience goods are "characterised by experience attributes that cannot be known until the purchase and after use of the product" (Pham & Ahammad, 2017, p.335). However, fast fashion, when bought online, may actually be considered an experience product in some regards – there are many unknown elements when buying an item of clothing online, such as the quality, the fit, and the material. These product attributes remain unknown to the customer until the purchased items are received and used. Although there is often an abundance of information about a retailer and its products available to the customer online, the uncertainty associated with an online purchase cannot be ignored. This uncertainty may have implications when it comes to the attributes important to the online fast fashion customer.

Cachero-Martínez and Vázquez-Casielles (2021) consider online fashion shopping to consist of an emotional experience, a visual experience (linked to the design and usability of the website), and an intellectual experience (related to conscious thinking and customer creativity). Interestingly, the paper also describes social and pragmatic experiences, but these are not emphasized by the authors in the fashion context. This is notable considering that the social experience includes interaction with staff and other customers (Cachero-Martínez & Vázquez-Casielles, 2021) and Bäckström and Johansson (2017) found that the behavior of the staff is among the most important attributes to consumers shopping in physical stores. It seems reasonable to believe that customer service and online word of mouth should also be relevant to the online experience, but this is not fully addressed by Cachero-Martínez and Vázquez-Casielles (2021). Furthermore, the pragmatic experience focuses on functionality and convenience, including value for money and speed (Cachero-Martínez & Vázquez-Casielles, 2021), all of which are closely associated with online shopping. Fast fashion, especially, is dependent on these factors, as consumers want to keep up with rapidly changing trends while not spending too much time or money. This part of the online fast fashion customer experience, too, seems somewhat unexplored. Thus, we believe there may be important attributes of the online fast fashion customer experience warranting further research.

3.7 Omnichannel experience

Retail is evolving. There are many reasons for this, but one of the most notable is the rapid development of technology which allows customers to connect with a brand through multiple touchpoints (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Rahman, 2013; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015). Integrating these touchpoints in a seamless way is key to retailers' success (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Rahman, 2013).

According to Rangaswamy and Van Bruggen (2005, p.6), "[m]ultichannel marketing enables firms to build lasting customer relationships by simultaneously offering their customers and prospects information, products, services, and support (or any combination of these) through two or more synchronized channels". Furthermore, they note that the correct synchronization of channels decreases customers' desire to go to competitors. Taking advantage of and knowing how to analyze the information generated by customer behavior across channels can help retailers to better understand their customers' needs and desires, thus building stronger relationships with them (Rangaswamy & Van Bruggen, 2005).

On the other hand, a new term has been discussed more recently in the literature. Rigby (2011) notes that the fact that retailers will be able to interact with customers throughout countless channels requires a new name: omnichannel retailing. The author defines a strategy of omnichannel retailing as "an integrated sales experience that melds the advantages of physical stores with the information-rich experience of online shopping" (Rigby, 2011, p.67). He further addresses that retailers who fail to integrate their channels in order to allow customers to enjoy a seamless experience risk being left behind.

In line with Rigby's view, Kleinlercher, Emrich, Herhausen, Verhoef, and Rudolph (2018) recognize the importance of websites as information drivers. The information about the physical store that is presented on retailer's website highly influences customers' tendency to switch among channels. The advantages of physical stores can be highlighted on retailers' websites, leading to an increase in brand awareness and purchase confidence among customers (Kleinlercher et al., 2018). The tendency of customers to use one channel for information search and another to make the actual purchase has been referred to as "the research-shopper phenomenon" by Verhoef, Neslin and Vroomen (2007, p.129).

3.8 Outcomes of the literature review

The presented literature review will serve as a guide for the rest of the paper and help answer the research questions. It provides a comprehensive overview of existing research on customer experience, both in physical stores and in online shopping. Furthermore, through the review, a gap was identified in the area of OCE in fast fashion retail. Hence, our research aims to cover this gap and to compare our findings with existing literature on physical store customer experience. This will allow for a discussion of the similarities and differences between the attributes important to customers when shopping online versus in physical stores.

4 Methodology

In this section, the chosen methodology will be introduced and justified. Firstly, the research philosophy which guides our study will be described, and we will then argue for the selected research strategy and method. This will be followed by an explanation of the research design, which will present the process of data collection and data analysis. Finally, the validity and reliability of the study will be discussed.

4.1 Research philosophy

4.1.1 Ontology

In this study, we take a relativist ontological position. According to this view, there is no single reality, but instead, several realities to be discovered through research. These realities are dependent on the perspectives from which they are viewed, which also means that the observer is part of determining what is true (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). We believe that customer experience is unique to each customer and thus also that the attributes important to consumers are perspective-dependent – essentially, each customer has his or her own reality. Additionally, as researchers, we are part of describing these realities. Therefore, what is discovered in this study is dependent both on the perspectives of the customers in the study and on us as researchers, making a relativistic approach suitable.

4.1.2 Epistemology

This study follows a constructionist epistemology. Constructionism holds the point of view that reality is subjective and should therefore be studied by looking at how situations are experienced by different people, rather than by searching for any overarching laws (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Again, this approach is suitable for our topic as we believe customer experience to be subjective. For this reason, our goal is not to find any overall law as to what is important to customers, but instead to search for similarities.

4.2 Research strategy

4.2.1 Qualitative research

To gather in-depth data on attributes which are important to consumers in online fast-fashion shopping, we applied qualitative methods. This type of research is useful when it comes to understanding the meaning people see in actions, as well as for understanding processes

(Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In this study, it is a suitable approach since we want to understand how customers experience the online shopping process. Furthermore, qualitative research can be used to study how conflicts arise between people and organizations and how these parties perceive each other (Rennstam and Wästerfors, 2018). This is another reason why a qualitative study is suitable to study this topic, since a negative customer experience can essentially be considered a conflict between the customer and the retailer. Additionally, as mentioned, we take a relativist and ontological approach to research. Research methods associated with these views tend to be qualitative (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). It is our belief that qualitative methods allow us to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' perspectives than would quantitative methods. Finally, as many studies of OCE have used quantitative methods (e.g., Lin, Wu & Chang, 2011; Rose, Clark, Samouel & Hair, 2012; Pham & Ahammad, 2017; Bhattacharya, Srivastava & Verma, 2019; Castro-Lopez et al., 2019; Barari, Ross & Surachartkumtonkun, 2020; Jaiswal & Singh, 2020; Chen, Le & Florence, 2021; Quach et al., 2022), we believe there is a need for more qualitative research into this multifaceted topic.

4.3 Netnography

For the purpose of answering our research questions, a netnography was conducted. Two brands were chosen, from which comments and reviews available online were collected and analyzed. The chosen brands were H&M and Zara, which were selected as they are the two biggest fast fashion brands worldwide based on revenue (Statista, 2020). However, the focus of our study is not specifically on these two brands but rather on customers' experiences when buying online.

Netnography is a method that is used to analyze and interpret situations, phenomena, cultures and communities that develop in an online context (Kozinets, 2002). There are multiple reasons for this selection of method. Thanks to its flexibility, a netnography provides an unobtrusive way of collecting and analyzing data, in a context that is not influenced nor biased by the researcher (Kozinets, 2002). Therefore, this method will make our presuppositions less likely to influence the results. Additionally, customers may be more truthful in comments or reviews than they would be in other settings – When writing comments online, they are not in a formal face-to-face setting with pressure to answer questions, as may be the case during an interview. Furthermore, a netnography allows us to access data about specific customer experiences, avoiding the potential issue of customers not

recalling their experiences when asked directly (e.g. in an interview). Online reviews and comments are often written shortly after an experience, making this data likely to be more detailed.

Several steps are involved when conducting a netnography (Kozinets, 2002). The first of these is to formulate the research question or questions and identify online communities that will answer them. Then, researchers must gain in-depth knowledge about the chosen communities and individuals that are being investigated. The next steps in the process are data collection and data analysis, which are followed by the interpretation of the data (Kozinets, 2002).

4.4 Research design

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), research design involves outlining the principles of the study to be conducted. These principles must be concordant with the research context, the research philosophy, and the research questions. The process involves explaining what data will be collected, how and from where. Lastly, it needs to be established how the collected data will be analyzed. For this paper, two studies were conducted, a pilot study and a main study.

4.5 Pilot study

Prior to the main study, a pilot study was conducted. Data were gathered through a netnography, where 116 comments from Trustpilot, Facebook and Playstore were selected and analyzed. A number of attributes of OCE were recognized (see Figure 1). As the attributes found in the pilot study were also supported by the main study, they will be explained in the analysis together with the new findings.
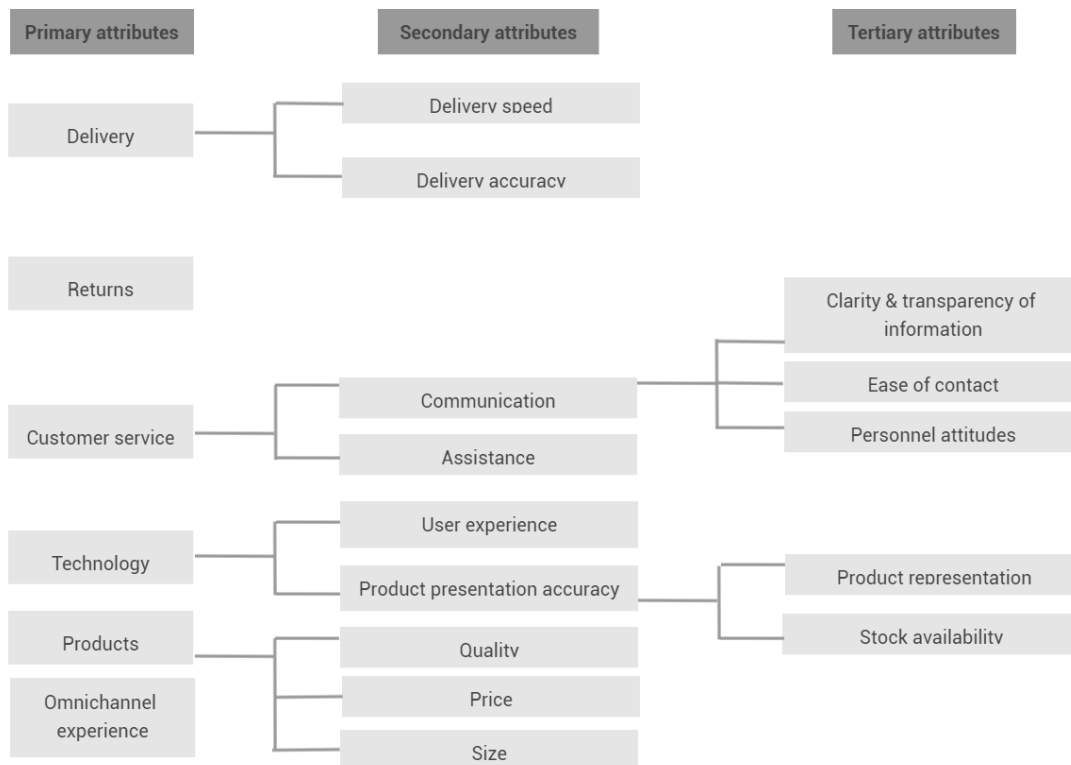
```
Primary attributes          Secondary attributes              Tertiary attributes

Delivery ──────┬──── Delivery speed
               └──── Delivery accuracy
                                                    Clarity & transparency of
Returns                                             information

                                                    Ease of contact
Customer service ──┬── Communication ──────────     Personnel attitudes
                   └── Assistance

Technology ──┬── User experience
             └── Product presentation accuracy ──┬── Product representation
Products ──┬── Quality                           └── Stock availability
           ├── Price
Omnichannel└── Size
experience
```

Figure 1. Pilot study framework

4.6 Main study

4.6.1 Selection of online platforms

According to Kozinets (2002), when choosing online communities to analyze, it is preferable for them to have: (1) a topic or segment relevant to the research problem; (2) a high amount of posts; (3) high user participation; (4) descriptive and detailed data; and (5) interactions among members that are relevant for the research question. For the purpose of our study, interaction among members was not taken into consideration as it is not related to our research problem.

Taking into consideration the above requirements, three platforms were selected: Trustpilot, Playstore, and Facebook. These platforms were chosen due to the high amount of posts and the continuous interaction between customers and the brand. Furthermore, each platform gives a different perspective of the customer experience. On Trustpilot, customers usually leave reviews about the brand to share their experiences with the community, while customers on Facebook often seek help with different issues they have with the brand.

Furthermore, in Playstore, reviews about the user experience when interacting with brands' webpages and applications are typically shared.

4.6.2 Selection of empirical material

After the platforms had been selected, the process of data collection began. This involves two elements: data that is copied directly from the selected platforms and the observations and interpretations that researchers register from the data (Kozinets, 2002). To allow for better organization of the data, comments and reviews from customers were placed into a spreadsheet. When collecting and selecting the data, the research problem was used as a guide to choose comments and reviews of particular relevance. The criteria for selection and collection of the data are listed below:

- The content should be about the selected brands
- The content should be about online shopping
- The content should be descriptive and clear
- The content should explain a specific experience
- The content should express an explicit or implicit opinion about the experience

Based on these points, 611 comments were collected from the selected platforms. Of these, 304 were about H&M and 307 about Zara. 162 comments were from Facebook, 260 from Playstore, and 189 from Trustpilot.

4.6.3 Data analysis

An in-depth analysis needs to be performed to be able to recognize specific and diverse content when analyzing qualitative data. Themes may arise when repetition in this content is observed (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). As stated by Ryan and Bernard (2003) themes are abstract constructs that could be observed throughout the data and are easy to identify when you can answer the question "What is this expression an example of?" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p.86). There are different ways in which themes can originate, through an inductive approach, where they emerge directly from the data, or through an a priori approach, where the theme originated from the prior understanding that the researcher possesses of the phenomenon under study (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We mainly used an inductive approach. After comments were gathered, they were first analyzed to identify wide themes, which were then analyzed further and broken down into more specific ones. The identified themes formed

the basis of the primary, secondary and tertiary attributes depicted in the final framework (see Figure 2).

4.7 Validity and reliability

Validity, reliability, and generalizability can be used to examine the quality of research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Internal reliability considers whether multiple researchers of a study agree on its findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To take this into account, each of us independently analyzed the reviews of the netnography to find themes. Our individual notes were then compared to ensure their congruence before the final attributes were established.

External reliability refers to the extent to which a study may be replicated (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In constructionist research, transparency in the collection and analysis of data is key to reliability (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To increase the transparency and hence also the replicability and reliability of this study, the methods used are described in detail. For instance, the process explained by Kozinets (2002) was used to conduct the netnography, and descriptions of the selections of firms and of comments are provided.

Validity is about the extent to which a researcher is really measuring or studying the concept they say they are (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This study aims to investigate what attributes are most important to the customer experience when shopping for fast fashion online, and it is thus important to ensure that this is what is being studied through the selected methods. We believe a netnography of online reviews can indicate what is important to customers, as we assume that an attribute must be of considerable importance to a customer for them to write publicly about it online. Furthermore, according to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), in constructionist research, validity is about including enough perspectives. In this study, we gathered data through 611 comments from three different platforms, allowing us to gain insight into the unique perspectives of many customers.

External validity revolves around the generalizability of research findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The generalizability of this study may be considered limited due to the inclusion of just two brands in the netnography. However, our aim is to investigate the customer perspective as opposed to the brand perspective, and we believe the study includes enough customer perspectives to provide some level of generalizability.

5 Analysis

As mentioned, prior to the main study a pilot study was conducted where a framework was developed (see Figure 1). The primary attributes found in the pilot study were *delivery, returns, customer service, technology, products* and *omnichannel experience*. Within these attributes, sub-attributes were identified.

The findings from the main study show consistency with the findings of the pilot study, but also provided new insights, resulting in added attributes. The new primary attributes are *loyalty programs*, *sustainability* and *eWOM*. The new secondary attributes are *delivery cost*, *ease of returns*, *refunds*, *return policy flexibility*. The new tertiary attributes are *checkout & payment*, *navigation & features*. The framework resulting from the combined findings of the pilot study and the main study is presented in Figure 2.

It is worth noting that primary, secondary and tertiary do not refer to the attributes' importance – any level of an attribute can be most important to the OCE. Rather, these terms mark the relationship between the attributes. That is, secondary attributes are sub-attributes of primary attributes, and tertiary attributes are sub-attributes of secondary attributes. All attributes included in the framework will be explained in the upcoming section.
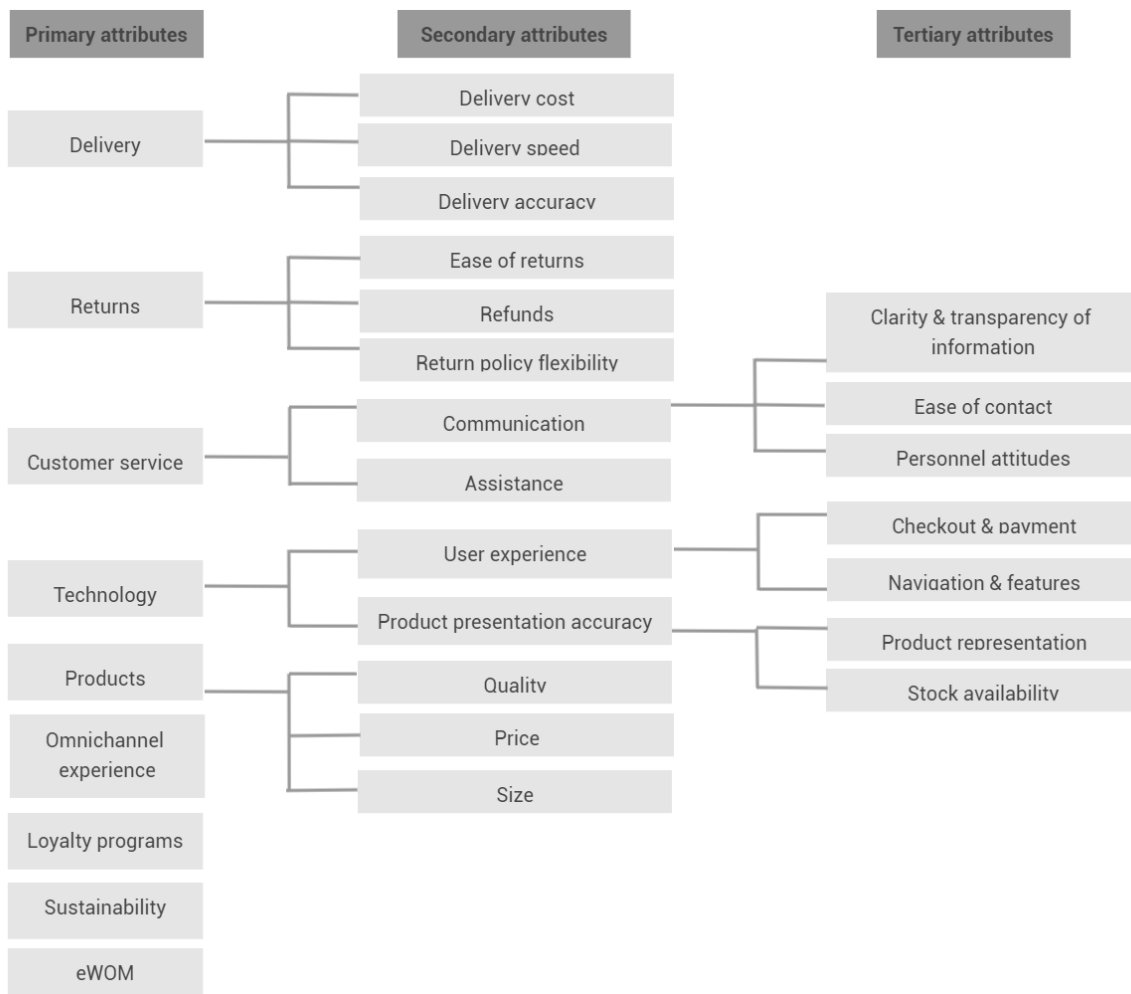
Figure 2. Main study framework

5.1 Delivery

The first primary attribute important to consumers when shopping for fast fashion online is *delivery*. Firstly, it goes without saying that it is important to customers to actually receive their order. Several customers complain about orders going missing and never showing up. When non-delivery does occur, it matters how this is handled by the retailer. For example, it is important to customers to be refunded quickly:

"This is a bad bad service company. We are still struggling to get our refund for an online purchase that never showed up for our son's 1st birthday. We spoke to a representative who said they couldn't cancel the order and eventually the company cancelled the order and never informed us or processed a refund! Now its been almost 2 months and we call every second day but still no hope of a refund. We are helpless.. How do we get our money back?" (Avrio Rebello, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

Additionally, within the delivery category, we identified three secondary attributes: *delivery cost, delivery speed,* and *delivery accuracy.*

5.1.1 Delivery cost

This secondary attribute refers to customers placing importance on the cost of delivery. For many, free delivery seems to be somewhat of an expectation, as opposed to an added bonus:

"I am finding Zara's delivery service on sale items a rip off this year!! It does not matter how much sale items you order, they could be up to £100+, you still pay a delivery charge and they do not have a store collection option. Free delivery for non-sale items £50+. Ridiculous! They also charge for drop off point delivery collection which should at least be foc for any amount items." (Kimberley, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

Additionally, it seems that in some cases, free delivery can compensate where other attributes are lacking. In the below comment, for instance, the customer notes that with free delivery (and returns), they are more tolerant with delayed deliveries:

"...[M]y last two orders were a bit late. Not sure what happened but with free delivery and free returns I can't really complain." (Freya Byrne, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

5.1.2 Delivery speed

Another secondary attribute of delivery important to fast fashion customers when shopping online is *delivery speed*. This attribute seems to be of very high importance to many consumers, especially those ordering items for specific events:

"The last few times we have used them their shipping has been awful. I've never used a slower company. Now this time it's going to ruin presents for a Birthday. Never again. Avoid." (Alex Holden, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

In the above example, it is worth noting that delivery speed is indirectly used as a metric to compare retailers ("I've never used a slower retailer"). Furthermore, the "never again" in the comment indicates that this attribute may be so important that customers avoid companies that have failed to deliver orders quickly. Finally, the customer ends their review by urging other customers to avoid the company due to its slow delivery, suggesting that this attribute is significant enough to prompt negative word of mouth from dissatisfied customers.

Extra disappointment arises when retailers fail to live up to promised delivery dates. For some customers, inaccurate estimations of delivery times almost seem to cause more dissatisfaction than the delivery speed itself:

"This is the 2nd time I am experiencing this... you guys should not give your customers a delivery date if you can't deliver it on time! I was told a couple of times that it will be delivered within the given date but it is now past the date given and I still haven't received or heard from you guys. This is so disappointing!" (Ca Salas, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

"While I understand that natural disasters such as hurricanes can impede businesses, H&M should indicate that their shipping has been greatly delayed due to Hurricanes on their website. Instead, they make it seem like all is well and operating per normal, allow you to make a $14.99 faster shipping purchase, and then send you an email telling you that your shipping is delayed ... If you can't deliver per the agreement made when a customer places an order and selects speedier shipping, then DON'T OFFER IT!!!! It's that simple. Poor form H&M. (Mara, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

In the first of the above comments, the customer asserts that Zara should not make promises about delivery dates which they cannot live up to. Similarly, in the second comment, a customer argues that H&M should not offer express shipping if they cannot deliver quickly. These comments seem to imply that if the retailers simply made more accurate estimations of delivery speed, customers may not have minded the speed itself.

5.1.3 Delivery accuracy

Another secondary attribute of delivery which is of significance to online fast fashion customers is *delivery accuracy*. This refers to the extent to which the items received by the customers match what they actually ordered. There are several examples of customers ordering an item, only to receive something completely different:

"I ordered a black blazer and received a green jacket instead…" (Rynah Ch, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

"... I made an order and have received it today and it is not what I ordered. I ordered black leggings and I have received a camel shirt jacket thing instead. This is the second time this has happened to me" (Tiffany Leeann, Facebook, H&M, 2021)

"This company is definitely a scam. It's the second time already that I order products online and they send me completely different products…" (graziele sousa da silva, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

When customers receive different items from what they have ordered, as in the above examples, it causes a lot of disappointment. In the third example, one customer describes H&M as a scam after receiving products not matching their order. It is interesting to note that in both the second and third of the above comments, customers say that this is the second time this has happened to them - meaning they ordered from the retailer again after the first mistake. This suggests that customers may tolerate one-off mistakes in delivery accuracy, but become aggravated by repeated errors.

5.2 Returns

Another primary attribute important to consumers when shopping for fast fashion online is *returns*. This is divided into three secondary attributes: *ease of returns*, *refunds*, and *return policy flexibility*.

5.2.1 Ease of returns

Ease of returns refers to how smooth the return process is for the customer, and how much time and effort must be put in to return an order. This includes how easy it is to acquire a return label and what options are available for the transportation of a return. In the below example, a customer is frustrated by Zara's complicated return process, implying that this takes away from the fun of the shopping experience:

"Online shopping with Zara is the biggest nightmare I've experienced. There will be a myriad of issues (faulty items, sending wrong item or size) and then good luck returning anything. Firstly they'll send you to multiple addresses to make returns, and then you get there (If you can find the address) and the return codes are unrecognised. So you have to call them and get new codes. My Zara days are done. Shopping is supposed to be fun!" (Lucy Lewis, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

This is not the only customer complaining about a difficult return process. One person goes so far as to say that it "will kill you":

"... If you are buying, be sure to keep whatever comes to you or returning process will kill you." (Dai Gungte, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

Furthermore, in addition to general complaints about overly complicated return processes, some customers address more specific issues. For example, accessing return labels seems to be a common issue:

"I received the wrong item and I couldn't even return it. Been trying to return it for 4 days now and it keeps on saying label generation failed." (HOLY CRAB, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

As mentioned, ease of returns also takes into account the options for returning items. In addition to convenient transportation alternatives, it is important for some customers to be given the option to return items ordered online in physical stores:

"Online returns is a breeze although I have had issues with trying to return online orders in store as the staff can't always access the online returns portal ..." (Caroline Grogan, Trustpilot, H&M, 2022)

5.2.2 Refunds

Another secondary attribute of returns is *refunds*, which refers to customers receiving their money back for returned items. When they have decided not to keep items, customers want to be refunded – and quickly. When this does not happen, many customers feel deceived, with some even feeling like their money has been stolen by the retailer:

"I had returned a product more than a month back and haven't received my refund yet! Your customer service does not respond, you guys have stolen my money, and happily taken back your product. Really Disappointed!" (Shrea Kukreja, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

"They stole my money. I sent back two unwanted (and not used items!) and waited for the refund. They refunded only for one thing! And both of them were in the same pack! ... I will be contacting the police. Not gonna pay for things I didn't keep. Avoid at all cost." (Edi, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

In the above example, the customer even threatens legal action, thus pointing to the high importance they place on receiving their refund quickly. Additionally, they urge other customers to avoid the retailer, again indicating that refunds are of high importance. It is also

worth noting that, similarly to delivery, if retailers fail to refund customers within the promised time span, this may cause extra confusion and disappointment for customers:

"I returned items over three weeks ago, and have constantly chased up for my refund as the website clearly states this takes 14 days. The agents have no reasonable explanation why they are holding on to my money, they seem less interested in customer satisfaction, I have now raised this as a dispute through my bank which is also a lengthy process to get my money back. I have bills coming out and urgently require my own money back but they refuse to acknowledge their delay and error, the stress and inconvenience this has caused me." (Saiqa Khan, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

Additionally, the above customer expresses that the delay of the refund has caused them "stress and inconvenience", thus clearly impacting their overall experience.

5.2.3 Return policy flexibility

The final secondary attribute of returns is *return policy flexibility.* When it comes to returns, customers want retailers to consider each individual situation and make exceptions for special circumstances, rather than merely adhering to policy:

"I too have had a bad experience with Zaras return policy. Having spent £50 on my sister for Christmas, they will not exchange for a different size as the receipt is 3 days out of date. Shame on you Zara when all other companies are extending returns after xmas" (Gwen Newton, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

In the above example, the customer complains that Zara does not extend their return period after Christmas when "all other companies" do. This is especially significant as it indicates that this attribute is so important that customers compare companies on the basis of it. Similarly, another customer explains that they are unlikely to purchase from Zara again due to the company's customer service representatives strictly adhering to the return policy rather than taking the circumstances into account:

"Customer service accounts for a lot, and the customer service at Zara is truly horrendous. In fact, on the basis of its non-existence, I would be unlikely to purchase from them again. There is zero leeway with regard to slightly out of date returns, this despite the fact that they dispatched my order in three shipments, the latest of these arriving after my departure overseas. My sister brought the item to me but subsequently returned to the UK a week later

than planned, due to personal emergency, then had to self isolate, missing the returns window by two days. As others have stated, the customer service agent simply quotes the policy and is completely devoid of empathy or understanding of extenuating circumstances. It is certainly enough to make one think twice about ever purchasing from them again." (meep, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

5.3 Customer service

The next primary attribute important to consumers when shopping fast fashion online is *customer service*, which can be split further into two distinct secondary attributes: *communication* and *assistance*.

5.3.1 Communication

Communication is a secondary attribute of *customer service* which relates to the communication between the retailer and the consumer. It includes the tertiary attributes *ease of contact*, *personnel attitudes*, and *clarity and transparency of information*.

5.3.1.1 Ease of contact

The first sub-attribute of communication is *ease of contact*. This tertiary attribute refers to the ease with which customers can reach representatives from the retailer to get assistance. Complaints in this area include unclear contact information, long wait times when calling, and lack of response from the retailer:

"There is no email contact and the telephone lines are really busy. Would not recommend online buying." (MSilver, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

"... There is no way of contacting customer service directly only chat advisers and bots, emails bounce back and even social media channels are not answered it is so frustrating. No responsibility taken for appalling service. Avoid unless you like losing money and time!" (JJ, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

"Takes an order, takes a payment, doesn't answer emails and hangs up on customers. This a brand to trust?" (Pwbtb Weller, Facebook, H&M, 2021)

"Found H&Ms telephone customer service quite disappointing (especially for such an internationally recognised brand). I was kept on hold indefinitely, then told I would be transferred and then cut-off. I have spent approximately 50 mins attempting, without success,

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to action a delivery address correction for an order placed on 31/01/22. Very disappointing! Will stick to shopping at other online retailers in future..." (Deon Shenell Palmer, Facebook, H&M, 2022)

Each of these issues makes it difficult for the customer to get into contact with a customer service representative. Customers seem to feel that this indicates a retailer not taking responsibility for their service, which inevitably leads to some frustration on the customer's part, thus affecting the customer experience for the worse.

5.3.1.2 Personnel attitudes

The second sub-attribute of communication is *personnel attitudes*. This is a tertiary attribute referring to the overall feeling that customers get from the customer service representatives – Are they friendly and respectful? Do they seem like they genuinely want to help? Complaints under this category are often rather personal in nature, sometimes naming specific employees, as in the below example:

"You really need to have some kind of training for your customer service staff, they are rude and short, have no sense of customer service or even try to be helpful. I had the pleasure of chatting with "Maria" at the Finnish/Swedish customer service, as it is not possible to call for help.... Maria should be removed from her job, she does not seem to care much for it!" (Ida Sheida, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

Customers want to feel like they are talking to someone who really cares about their experience. Some people note feeling like customer service representatives simply "can't be bothered" to help, or do not care:

"When I contacted Zara's customer service about it, they didn't care at all about what happened, and treated me very poorly as if I wasn't a paying customer ..." (Velena Petrova, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

"Beware if you have any issues, their online customer service is the worst in the retail space. Indifferent, unhelpful, and rude - the trifecta of horrible service. They can't be bothered to try and help me return or receive information regarding a defective product they sent me." (Selina, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

In the above example, it is worth noting that the focus of the customer's complaint is on the fact that customer service did not even attempt to help, as opposed to the fact that they did not manage to successfully help. This is a relevant distinction, as will be clarified in the assistance section. It seems that to some customers, it is enough for a customer service representative to just really listen to their problems:

"...just want to say, best buying experience I had so far, customer care service is so friendly and they legit listen." (theblues theskies, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

Finally, customers want service to feel personal and not robotic:

"Hey there, I just called customer care at CST 6:32 PM. The agent I talked to was not friendly at all. It was like I was talking to a robot ..." (Sunayan Paul, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

5.3.1.3. Clarity and transparency of information

The last sub-attribute of communication is *clarity and transparency of information*. This tertiary attribute is about how clear, accurate and consistent the information provided to customers by customer service representatives is. One of the most common complaints in this regard is lack of information:

"Absolute joke. Made an order over two weeks ago and hadn't received it ... The lady on the telephone informed me that it had been left in a bin outside over two weeks ago! This bin has since been emptied. There was no card left by the post man. No email sent to inform me the item was 'delivered' and no one contacted me via the telephone number on my account to inform me ... Awful communication and customer service." (Melanie, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

"... One month later and I still hadn't heard anything about my order just that it was "processed". Then a little later I get an email saying my order was cancelled. No explanation why ..." (Amy Hodge, Trustpilot, H&M)

Another issue faced by customers is inaccurate information:

"I made an order and it auto filled the wrong delivery address (my previous address when I was at uni). I rang customer service and was told I had to wait for Hermes to receive the parcel then ring them again to cancel it with Hermes. Once on the phone they said this in fact

was not true and they couldn't do this ... Poor communication from them and incorrect information. Need to sort out their system" (Sophie, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

"I placed an order with 7 items on it. There was no update for 4 days and then I randomly received an email saying that my order's been canceled due to some items being out of stock. I checked all the items that I ordered on their site and they were all still in stock (literally every single item)..." (Lia, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

As evidenced by the above comments, customers want information that is correct and truthful. Inaccurate information may also take the form of false promises:

"... Terrible service: Customer service was misleading, telling that they will accelerate for it to arrive on time and that they will communicate regularly, yet did not change the delayed delivery date and did not communicate back." (Patricio Amuchastegui, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

Furthermore, one customer complained about the substandard language skills of the customer service representative they spoke to, which also negatively affects the clarity and transparency of information:

"...The customer service staff do not understand English very well and communication is extremely poor..." (Laura Hall, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

Additionally, some customers complain about receiving conflicting information after speaking to multiple customer service representatives. This also has a negative impact on the clarity of information:

"... I called customer service TWICE and got two entirely different answers ... One told me that I could expect the shipment in a week, or possibly later. Another told me I could expect the shipment by the 9th of September..." (Mara, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

"I've never had such a horrible experience with a company before. When I placed the order with my correct address, during shipping somehow it converted offer to an old billing address at a location I no longer lived. Rep number 1 said it does that for security. After talking three different reps all giving conflicting info, I asked to speak to a manger and he ... told me the rep I talked to misinformed me..." (Amber Srofe, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

5.3.2 Assistance

The second sub-attribute of customer service important to online fast fashion customers is *assistance*. Contrary to *communication*, this secondary attribute refers to the actual help customers receive from customer service representatives. Many customers seem to care less about whether representatives are attempting to help, and more about the results of this help:

"... No help, solutions, possibility of exchange or gift card offered by customer service phone line, Just 'can't do anything'. Won't bother with Zara again" (gata, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

"... Phoned customer 'service' as the sweater is needed for an event tomorrow - but rep couldn't update delivery info, nor cancel the order, nor give me stock levels for the item at the nearest store, nor call the nearest store and put one aside so I could buy it on my way home tonight. I am not certain where the 'service' actually was in this case. Will very much hesitate before I order online again, and will never waste my time with your customer service team in future." (Stef Stone, Facebook, H&M, 2021)

In the above comment, it is especially noteworthy that the customer refers to H&M's customer service as "customer 'service'", with the latter word in citation marks – as if to question whether the customer service representative in this case offered any actual service. This emphasizes the customer's focus on the results of assistance.

Furthermore, in both of the above examples, customers express hesitation to buy from retailers again due to ineffective customer service. One customer says they will "very much hesitate" before buying online from H&M again, while the other simply says they "won't bother" with Zara again. Both of these comments indicate the importance of the *assistance* attribute. The below customers describe similar experiences with ineffective service:

"...i placed an order, got a completely different order in the mail and customer service was unhelpful: "we are so sorry this happened! we will make sure this won't happen again!" but won't refund me my money - so just shallow lip service ..." (blair z, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

"...Whenever I try talking to their live agents, they keep giving me excuses and trying to pretend to help when nothing is being done ..." (Natasha Sahu, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

In the last example, the customer feels like the representative is just pretending to help while not actually doing anything to help. In this case, it seems that customer services' attempts to help did little for the customer, who is very focused on results. Thus, it may be the case that

while some customers are attitude-oriented when it comes to customer service (placing importance on representatives' intention to help, friendliness, etc.), others are assistance-oriented (placing importance on the concrete actions taken by representatives and the results of these actions).

5.4 Technology

Another primary attribute important to OCE is *technology*. This attribute takes the interface of the website or application into account. Here, we observe comments about the ease of navigation, how products are presented, the layout of the website or application, and technical issues. We further divide this attribute into two secondary attributes: *user experience* and *product presentation accuracy*.

5.4.1 User experience

This secondary attribute relates to users' feelings when navigating the website or application. For example, is it easy to use? Can they find their way to the products they are looking for in just a few clicks? Can they sort and filter items as they please? User experience is one of the most recurrent attributes identified through the netnography. This attribute is further divided into two tertiary attributes, *checkout & payment* and *navigation & features*.

5.4.1.1 Checkout & payment

This attribute represents the experience that customers have when accessing their baskets or carts to complete their purchases and the problems that they may experience when paying. In this regard, customers seem to value an easy and fast checkout, where they can observe all the products that their cart contains while at the same time being able to quickly proceed to the payment step. The proper synchronization in the account is also a key element for customers, with some highlighting the importance of items remaining in the cart when, for instance, switching between website and app, or simply when leaving the app for a while:

"...but if you leave stuff in your cart it just gets deleted. So after about an hour of online shopping I favorite all the stuff in my cart so it wouldn't disappear but it ended up only saving 2 things to favorites which really sucked…" (Eden, Playstore, H&M, 2022)

"My shopping bag doesn't seem to sync with my online account. Even when it does, my shopping cart is empty the next time I open the app…" (Casey, Playstore, H&M, 2022)

Furthermore, the payment step is key, especially as this is where the purchase is processed. Several problems here can affect the customer experience, the most common ones appearing to be when customers are charged twice for the same purchase and when they are simply unable to pay due to technical issues. It is also worth noting that customers expect online shopping to be "easy", so they do not want to face problems when doing it:

"I bought from your online store and got charged twice for the same item, and this is not the 1st time I'm experiencing this, honestly this is annoying as I have to log the complain with the bank and ask for the money to be reversed,my bank charges me for this. Please consider changing this because its really annoying 😡.Online purchasing is supposed to make our lives easier but you guys are doing the opposite" (Siphelele, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

"Whenever I buy online, it double deducts after some few weeks. Zara is a crook." (Nolukholo, Facebook, Zara, 2022)

"...Also adding things to the basket and being met with "can't check out now, try back later"... Well what an absolute waste of my time" (Miranda, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

"The app is not functional. I doesn't allow me to sign in and also went i was signed it i am unable to check out my cart. Please fix a lot of issues in the app. also I am unable to add products to the cart…" (Shree, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

5.4.1.2 Navigation and features

This attribute refers to the ease of navigation and the available features. Customers appreciate websites that are easy to follow, where they can reach the desired product or feature in fewer clicks. Simplicity and time efficiency appear to be key elements for customers, who expect not to waste extra time and effort when making purchases:

"...For the love of everyone's patience and sanity, make navigation on the app simpler and the models showcase the merch." (Saba, Playstore, Zara 2021)

"Great collection, ease of use and navigation…" (Vigyan, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

"A great app, quite easy to use and everything works as it should do…" (Tam, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

"Awful User Experience! Who designed this? How are you supposed to browse anything easily and quickly? Couldn't even find the category I wanted." (Sara, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

Furthermore, customers remark on the importance of features such as the wishlist and available filters. When it comes to the wishlist, the data shows that this should be easy to access and navigate. Furthermore, it is frustrating to customers when a limited amount of products is permitted on the wishlist, or when items disappear from the wishlist:

"...The only downfall being that you get a restricted wishlist, meaning oyu can only have around 50 items in your wishlist." (Tam, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

"...the items i have kept in my cart and wishlist keep disappearing..." (Tenzin, Playstore, H&M, 2022)

"...The wishlist is long winded to navigate. Once you click on a saved item, you can't scroll left and right to see the rest of the list like you used to. You have to come out of that page, and go back to the wishlist, which has automatically scrolled back to the first item each time. Therefore, if you want to check your whole wishlist, the process is a time waster Absolutely non user friendly..." (Kelso, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

Similarly, filters are important for customers, and when using them they expect the filters to show accurate results and to remain throughout the whole session of use:

"The filter doesn't work properly and it's frustrating to search for available size. For ex. If you want to filter specific size you get anavailable clothes that says "coming soon". It takes forever to find available size." (Aiste, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

"The product filters never work; if you select certain ones, then tap on a product, when you go back the filters completely disappear. Also, after this new update, the wishlist is now very hard to access, plus the app has more lags in general." (Eliza, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

"Filter is not retained while browsing through the items." (Deepthi, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

5.4.2 Product presentation accuracy

This secondary attribute involves the display of items: How well do the pictures represent the products? How well-explained is the available product information? Is the stock correctly represented? Such matters are included in this attribute, which is further divided into *product representation* and *stock availability.*

5.4.2.1 Product representation

This tertiary attribute addresses issues like the accuracy of the pictures showing a product. Customers want to be able to properly see the product, and seem to be discontent with pictures that are overly produced, where the focus is on the model rather than the product. Furthermore, the way in which the items are displayed is an essential part of customer experience, and items in any given picture should be easily accessible. For instance:

"I Love to shop in H&M, but what I don't like are the models posing, sometimes is just not posible to see the product so I just don't buy. I just don't get it... what is the point of such posing if you don't show the clothing" (Lukrecija, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

"The Zara website needs to be redesigned so customers can see the garment properly. It's more fashion shoot magazine arty layout than making it a easy experience for a customer to buy online…" (Suzanne, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

"A very stupid app, just like their website. Where in this age will you find a shopping website that just flaunts their models like a fashion magazine instead of actually selling/displaying clothes. Their inventory is so weird, not displayed in a shopping kind of way, and its very hard to find what you are looking for. The site is basically empty of items to shop." (CJ, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

"Shame on you for displaying items that draws attention to the people who want to spend money on the items that you are show boating. I tried to buy the "red wool" trench and the only items listed were a belt, pair of pants and some shoes.. no red trench however, it didn't happen once.. it happened twice…" (E.B, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

Moreover, it is important to customers that information about the products is available. Also important is information about the models, such as size and height, so customers can better understand the products and the fits. This attribute is key when buying online since customers are not able to try items on in advance – the more information about the product, the less of a risk that the customer may have to return it:

"...I just hope you indicate the HEIGHT AND THE SIZE OF THE CLOTHES,THE MODEL IS WEARING IN THE PICTURE ON YOUR WEBSITE.Please!!!..." (Vanessa, Facebook, Zara, 2022)

5.4.2.2 Stock availability

This tertiary attribute entails comments about the stock available. The accuracy of the stock displayed is essential for a good customer experience. Customers are disappointed or annoyed when they cannot buy the items they want because they are out of stock, but especially when these products are shown anyway:

"...however I don't like when you filter by size and it shows you items that aren't actually available in that size! out of stock items should not be shown, it's pretty unfair." (Erin, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

"Everything is sold out quickly in the app store strange" (Hayal, Facebook, Zara, 2022)

"It's almost impossible to get the clothes you want because everything sells out in 5 minutes. Whenever I want to use the Notify Me button it doesn't work either. I would really love to see an improvement on inventory…" (Jessica, Playstore, H&M, 2022)

Furthermore, the lack of availability can also occur after the purchase, causing the order to get canceled automatically:

"...Placed 4 seperate order all have been cancelled due to lack of stock. Absolutely rubbish." (Sharon, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

"I've waited 2 wks for my order only to be told that my main item is sold out. I then requested for the entire order to be cancelled. The online chat is unhelpful& frustrating…" (Sharon, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

5.5 Products

Products is another primary attribute important to OCE. In this category, we address customers' insights regarding the products. How satisfied are they with the products? Are the products meeting quality expectations? Do the products provide good value for money? Are the sizes accurate? This attribute is divided into the secondary attributes *quality*, *price,* and *size*.

5.5.1 Quality

This secondary attribute addresses the quality of the products, which can highly influence the shopping experience. The overall experience and the opinion that customers have about the brand appear to be closely linked to product quality:

"Worst clothes ever. They have a very bad material and its like they want people to laugh to the one who wears it. Close ur franchise, pls" (ShortMemes, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

"One of the favourite stores. I often order items on H&M app (the last order I received today). I love the quality of H&M items, especially sweaters and kid's clothes. Shipment is always fast. That's why I don't have complaints at all" (Francesca, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

Furthermore, the *quality* attribute is closely related to the *customer service* attribute. It is important for customers to get the help they need when facing issues with the quality of items:

"Low quality products They will not respond to your emails if the product is defective. Reached out to them many times but never respond and doesn't agree if their product is of low quality. #shitzara" (OyeHarneet, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

Additionally, some customers relate the quality attribute with their future purchase decisions, for better or for worse:

"Thank you Zara, for giving me the best hoodies and a jeans possible, it's so comfortable and such a life saver and the quality is premium. No compromise with the fabric proves the point, I would love to own more from Zara." (Imran, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

"...Absolutely atrocious fitting, could not return items via DHL (no shop would take it)... Customer support could not help and was completely useless, I will never EVER buy from this brand again." (Ben, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

Furthermore, what seems to be even worse for customers is receiving brand new items which are already in bad shape or appear to be of bad quality. Customers appear highly disappointed when packages and items do not seem to have gone through sufficient quality control before being sent:

"Very disappointed with quality it is being really bad lately.... I used to love zara. I've just collect my parcel and again awful. Very nice satin shirt but again threads are pull out

everywhere, the fabric is ruined. Why no one is checking before sending out?" (Diana, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

"It's getting worse everyday… the last time I ordered i received used items, sandals leather was wrinkled not new and the a blouse had the sleeves rolled up inside the bag, they don't even take the time To pack properly returned items. Quality has never been the greatest but it's becoming so bad lately. After a few washes looks like an old rag..." (Clau, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

5.5.2 Price

This secondary attribute represents issues that customers address regarding price. Price plays an important role when it comes to fashion, but especially in fast fashion, where customers expect to get cheap prices. In some cases, customers recognize that low prices can be related to low quality, while others expect value for money:

"The poor quality of the clothes reflect the low price - in other words, "you get what you pay for"." (Becky, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

"...I've shopped with H&M regularly and had no problems so far. The quality of h&m clothing is hands down top-notch for the price. I get all my essentials like ribbed top, fleece and kids clothes which lasts a few seasons…" (Mrs Edith, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

Some other customers seem to "demand" both low prices and high quality, and if this is not the case, they seem to feel disappointed about the brand:

"I don't like it anymore.. horrible style and design! Cheap fabric for crazy money, synthetic and polyester 🤮 what happened to Zara !? Where is the fashion 🥴" (Victoria, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

"High price, but the quality is like in all mass markets" (Kevin, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

Furthermore, transparent prices are really important for customers. Customers complain when the price shown is different from the price listed in the shopping cart:

"Why hasn't anyone been able to respond to my request about the price on an item stated clearly vs when it's in cart. Price stated is less than what appears in my cart? Occurred yesterday. I have a screen shot." (Gina, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

Moreover, customers are discontent when promotions and discounts are not respected. Some construct a bad concept of the brand when they get the feeling that promotions and discounts are not real or they feel that they are being deceived:

"I'm trying to use the 25% off a favourite item but it keeps saying discount not applicable?! I cannot see any clause that I am not following?" (Leanne, Facebook, H&M, 2021)

"Why are you deceiving us by offering 15% off for members on sale? It was already reduced then you increased the prices so so that it looks like the 15% disct has reduced the actual prices on top of sale prices. Please rectify this ! its unfair and misleading. Not a good way to generate profit." (Farzana, Facebook, H&M, 2022)

"They trick you with promises of discounts. Once you go to check out they strip the discount off. Then when you manually reapply it with a discount code its £1 more than is advertised!" (Long, PLaystore, H&M, 2021)

5.5.3 Size

Size is a key attribute when buying clothes online, especially because customers are not able to try on items before buying as they can in physical stores. Thus, the customer's ability to buy the correct size will largely depend on how well retailers describe and explain their sizes, how clear the pictures are, and the information about sizes that is available.

Customers show disappointment when sizes of items are not representative of the size that they were expecting. For instance, in the comments below, customers complain about the sizes of the clothes not matching the sizes that they are used to. This issue leads to a disappointing experience, with some even claiming that they will not buy again from the retailer:

"Why do Zara clothes come up so small? The label says large for UK and USA when the USA use different sizing to the UK and the skirt actually measures a size UK 10" (Nicola, Facebook, Zara, 2022)

"It's 2021 and after reading other reviews it's clear nothing has changed with H & M. The pants I bought online are seriously off in sizing. This is the second time I bought my usual Large only to have it fit like an XL. NEVER again will I shop at H & M." (Michelle, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

Additionally, customers value the information regarding sizes and fittings that is available when buying online. They expect the brand to fully explain how the fit is, what size the model is wearing, and any special remarks about the garment that they should know before buying:

"Good products. I have bought a product from Zara first time. Just make the app bit more user friendly. Also please mention the measurements of the clothes in a better way. Since regular/oversize/slim/skinny fit may have same sizes but differ in the fittings. And the front length of the the trousers specially. Rest its all good. Already ordered another product yesterday." (Akash, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

Furthermore, size can be a sensitive topic. Within this attribute, some customers complain about the availability of sizes, such as a lack of sizes for all body types, or models that only represent certain body types. Customers want diversity and inclusion, and if this is not provided, a bad reputation of the brand is constructed together with a disappointing experience for the customer:

"...Hard to navigate, artsy photos that show you NOTHING, unflattering angles and pics, stick thin models, clothing with totally unrealistic sizes. I have tried to persevere with finding my way round this site, but now I'm done. i'll take my dollar somewhere else..." (Helen, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

"Zara, so slow out the gate. It's 2022, could we see some photos of woman that actually represent real life , average people, not size 4 teenagers. How does this help your sales? Most women friends I know don't go into Zara anymore as there is zero representation of their body type." (Emily, Facebook, Zara, 2022)

"Not enough XXL designs, most of those you have are impractical and improprtionate." (Louise, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

5.6 Omnichannel experience

Another primary attribute important to OCE is *omnichannel experience*. The connection between the physical store and the online store is key for a good customer experience. Customers seem to value a well-organized and established connection between channels. They appreciate the easiness and convenience of buying online, but they still want to know that if they go to the physical store, they will get the assistance needed:

"I don't understand the bad average. I really love love love the customer service Zara provides here in Belgium. Whenever I don't like something, I just return it in my local store and the money is refunded almost immediateley. It makes ordering clothes so much easier and relaxing (I prefer to return in the store then by post, because in general postal service does dare to go wrong). More shops with fysical stores should provide this service" (Laura, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

As illustrated by the example above, the connection between channels contributes to a better and more seamless customer experience. The customer goes further and suggests that every shop with a physical store should provide such an omnichannel service.

There are many features that customers value when it comes to an omnichannel strategy. In-store pick up is often mentioned and really adds to the service as it may often be more convenient than home delivery, since customers can pick up their parcel whenever it fits their schedule. It is usually also cheaper than other delivery options, or even free. This option is important to many customers:

"Simply excellent and collection in store was easy and all I had to do was scan the bar code and the machine brought my order to me. I paid using Apple Pay and my order was not cancelled nor was I discriminated against unlike other online companies I have reviewed." (Clark, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

"Unable to add products to the cart. Unable to find store for pick up option. Too many trouble for placing an order. I am a frequent shopper and it's disappointing to face such issues" (Shraddha, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

"I appreciate the clean and user friendly UI. I hope you guys consider having a "Store Pickup" option on your app, just like Uniqlo's app here in the Philippines" (Kevin, Playstore, H&M, 2022)

Furthermore, the possibility to return or exchange items that have been bought online in the physical store is another omnichannel feature important to customers:

"Store mode finds no local store and I and was in the store yesterday. It also will not allow me to return my order to the store and exchange online and collect in the store. Very disappointing. I am traveling for business and I exspect a far better service from Zara!" (Wes, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

Moreover, the concordance of the information between online and physical channels is key. Customers want to be able to obtain accurate information about the stores when they go on the website. Prices and stock availability are the main features that customers check when comparing online and physical channels. If the price found on the website does not match the one found in the physical store, customers will feel disappointed. Furthermore, the option of seeing in-store stock availability online is mentioned by several customers as a useful tool, and discontent arises when information is not accurate:

"Different prices online and in-store too annoying[.] See an item online but need other size, website shows you where, then you get charged almost 70% more than web price for the privilege of trekking in to get it! (Pricematch unavailable because first time app didn't load, and second time colour was temporarily out of stock so didn't appear). Different prices online and in-store are a new thing, and website does have small print telling you now, but I won't be shopping with H&M any more. (Cat, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

"One of the worst apps I've ever used, please don't issue an application if you cannot manage and linking the availability with your stores. Very bad experience as the app shows that the my size is available in more than store and after going to most of them i realized that the product is not available in all of the stores. If Zara cannot manage or update ana app so they must deactivate it." (Bishoy, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

"There is every reason to love this app, the quality of clothing is just fine annd most of the times delivers in a day!!! They exchange in store. They announce dates when discounts happen in store and on app and allows us the track in store availablity of the clothing. Not to forget they have the best, trendy outfits. Best fashion app for me" (Gowthami, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

Lastly, customers that have a formed idea about a certain retailer and how its physical store looks seem to expect the same from the online store. Some customers seem to want the physical store experience to be maintained through the online store, thus generating a seamless experience:

"A minimal design from Zara gives you a great user experience inside the app. They have retained the in-store experience through the app. Great job Zara!" (Sayan, Playstore, Zara, 2022)

Some customers show discontent when having had a nice experience in the store and then being disappointed by the website, or feeling that it is completely different from the store:

"It is not really understanding how they trying to sale their products...? I when to the store and I saw many amazing and fashion items that I really love it. But in the app looks just like gallery art. So boring" (Jose, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

"The Zara website needs to be redesigned so customers can see the garment properly. It's more fashion shoot magazine arty layout than making it a easy experience for a customer to buy online. Your stores are great 🙌, online it's terrible. 🥲" (Suzanne, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

5.7 Loyalty programs

Another primary attribute important to consumers is the loyalty programs offered by a retailer. Customers want to feel like their loyalty is valued and rewarded. For instance, a well-functioning point scheme for membership programs is important:

"They have a really great customer loyalty program where you don't have to spend outlandish amounts of money to earn rewards ..." (Janet Brown, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

"Hi, is there somewhere I can give feedback on your points system? I really hate the way it resets, it feels like there's no incentive for longer term loyalty" (KerryAnne Drew, Facebook, H&M, 2022)

"Zara does not give us any loyalty points for buying clothes unlike H&M ..." (Mitra Khanna, Facebook, ZARA, 2021)

"App is good, Rewards program does not work. Even after calling and emailing customer service I never received the points for my 6 orders when I had signed up. I have a member ID and account but for whatever reason its never reflected in the app. Feels like they just dont care other retailers dont have this issue." (impending euphoria, Playstore, H&M, 2022)

As illustrated by the latter two examples, customers may compare reward schemes between retailers, perhaps suggesting that loyalty programs can impact a shopper's choice of retailer. Furthermore, free shipping for members is considered an additional way for the retailer to recognize a member's loyalty:

"No free delivery for members anymore? Have to spend over £20 now. Shame. An item I want is on offer but with delivery..its back up to full price! I'll go elsewhere." (Ally Delaney, Facebook, H&M, 2021)

"Super easy to use and really good with being a member having free shipping ... " (Maya Cowdall, Playstore, H&M, 2022)

"So members have to pay shipping now .. anything under £20 .. I used to order about once a week .. not anymore .. so disappointed .. and my points keep getting scraped back to zero .."(Janine Murphy, Facebook, H&M, 2022)

Finally, members may expect special discounts compared to other shoppers and can become disappointed if they do not receive extra perks. In the below comment, it seems the customer is dissatisfied not with the discount itself, but with receiving the same offer as non-members:

"Little bit disappointed! All day yesterday on the app had 20% off for everyone. Today for Black Friday I just checked my app and members get 20% off everything today as the Black Friday deal... but you say "members always get more" but its the same discount that everyone had on the app yesterday as it is today for Black Friday. Little disappointed" (Sophie Monk, Facebook, H&M, 2022)

5.8 Sustainability

Another primary attribute important to OCE is *sustainability*. Sustainability and fast fashion are not terms that usually go hand to hand. However, lately, fast fashion companies are making efforts to show their brands as more sustainable, with some brands launching special sustainability collections and working towards a more environmentally friendly image. So, do customers take these efforts into consideration? Are sustainability issues important for their overall experience?

Based on the findings of this study, online fast fashion customers value certain aspects of sustainability. Even though some customers may acknowledge that fast fashion is not inherently sustainable, they seem to care about small actions brands take to decrease their environmental footprint. For instance, some customers like to receive their purchases in a more sustainable package:

"...H&M now have recyclable packaging which is a change for the better imo." (Caroline, Trustpilot, H&M, 2022)

"Reasonably priced items, packaging is good and "somewhat" environment-friendly, orders usually get delivered in 2-3 days…" (Freya, Trustpilot, H&M, 2022)

"...Ordered 2 item, the delivery was very smooth, fast and convenient. I would especially like to highlight the fact that the packaging did not contain any plastic, which is very important to me because it's great for the environment. Very happy with my purchase!" (Abigél, Trustpilot, Zara, 2021)

Furthermore, some customers state that they only buy the retailers' sustainable collections. For these customers, sustainability in fashion is a key attribute and a determinant of purchase:

"Why can't I search for sustainable/ "conscious" clothes online any more? Those were the only ones I bought. I'm looking for the kids range." (Laura, Facebook, H&M, 2022)

However, there are some customers that show concern about the sustainability efforts coming from fast fashion retailers. They seem reluctant to believe that these brands are making any effort to decrease their environmental footprint, or they may think that what is being done is not enough. In this case, some of them even claim that they will stop buying from the brand if they do not see any improvement:

"Prices are obviously affordable but I personally need a lot more effort on ethical and sustainable aspects from Zara. Even if they are stylish, I will abandon them, if they continue in a similar manner." (Bernetta, Trustpilot, Zara, 2021)

"I feel a moral obligation to no longer use H&M. I can't support fast fashion and cheaply made clothing items made in China. I think in the interest of the environment and taking power away from China, the world is best off moving their business elsewhere, to (more expensive) sustainability made clothes manufactured in less dictatorial countries" (Kassian, Playstore, H&M, 2021)

Moreover, customers expect retailers' actions to match their words. A lack of concordance between what the brand says and what they do may affect customer opinions about the brand and therefore also the overall customer experience. It is important for customers that brands deliver what they promise:

"...I asked what happens to returned damaged goods and when I enquired if they went to landfill I was told they couldnt possibly respond to that question.....great one zara, what was that about a zero waste objective?" (Soph, Trustpilot, Zara, 2022)

5.9 Electronic word of mouth (eWOM)

The final primary attribute identified is electronic word of mouth (*eWOM*). When buying online, customers tend to check others' opinions and reviews before making purchases. This can directly or indirectly influence the OCE. For instance, after reading about other customers' negative experiences, some customers feel nervous or reluctant to buy from the brand because they are almost expecting to face the same problems as other customers:

"...I have a return scheduled tomorrow but after reading all the reviews here I am sure I won't get any refund so I will go to the store for return" (Urvashi, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

"Was skeptical because of the recent reviews but the app runs perfectly fine. It's set up the same way the mobile website does so once you're used to how it's laid out, it's perfectly easy to shop." (Laura, Playstore, Zara, 2021)

"I was nervous about ordering online after reading all the bad reviews but to my suprise I actually did end up receiving my parcel the next day after paying for next day delivery!..." (Ann, Trustpilot, H&M, 2021)

In the last comment, the customer notes that she was surprised to receive the package on time. This shows what an important role online reviews play when buying online. As illustrated by the above comment, they can negatively affect the OCE even if a customer decides to ignore the reviews. Negative reviews may also scare off potential customers altogether. In the comment below, a customer says that she will not make an online purchase from the brand after reading about other customers' bad experiences:

"Not game to do any online shopping with this company due to all the complaints. Goodbye." (Katie, Facebook, Zara, 2021)

6 Discussion

In this section, we will answer our research questions and analyze our findings in light of prior literature. Each of our research questions will be discussed separately.

6.1 Research question 1

Which attributes are most important for the online fast fashion customer experience?

Our research aimed to identify which attributes fast fashion customers consider most important when shopping online. Through our study, we have identified several of these attributes and illustrated them in a comprehensive framework of OCE in the fast fashion industry. In order to assess the relative importance of each attribute, several determinants were taken into account. This included the repetition of an attribute in the data, customers claiming they will not buy again from the retailer due to a certain attribute, customers directly comparing the retailer with competitors on the basis of an attribute, and the attitudes and feelings expressed towards the retailer resulting from an attribute.

Firstly, *delivery* is one of the attributes that is most important for OCE. In this sense, the findings of this study are broadly consistent with the existing literature affirming that delivery is a key attribute for customers buying online (e.g. Lin, Wu, and Chang, 2011; Singh, 2019). Additionally, our study identifies three secondary attributes of *delivery*: *delivery cost, delivery speed* and *delivery accuracy*. The *delivery cost* and *delivery speed* attributes are closely linked with fast fashion, as its customers want the newest trends delivered as soon as possible at affordable prices. When this is not the case, the OCE is spoiled. Additionally, failure to live up to the estimated delivery date may be considered an unmet promise to the consumer, coinciding with Singh and Söderlund's (2020) assertion that failure to keep promises to the customer can be highly damaging to the customer experience.

Closely linked with *delivery, returns* is another attribute that is key for OCE. This attribute is further divided into the secondary attributes *ease of returns*, *refunds*, and *return policy flexibility*. This study has shown that a smooth return process is vital for online retailers. One of the key necessities for customers buying fashion online is the possibility to return items easily, especially since they cannot try items on in advance. Additionally, after returning an item, they demand fast refunds. Customers who have experienced a bad return process show reluctance to buy again from the same retailer. On account of this, retailers should aim to create a smooth return process that does not negatively impact the OCE. To do so, some

points are proved to be valuable to customers, such as return labels provided in advance, quick refunds, diverse drop-off points, options for in-store returns, and flexible return policies that take special circumstances into consideration. These results concur with the literature. For instance, in their study of OCE, Pham & Ahammad (2017) found that post-purchase experiences, including returns, are essential to online customer satisfaction. Likewise, Singh (2019) found that a smooth return process is essential for OCE.

Another attribute that is highly important to OCE is *customer service*. Within this attribute, two secondary attributes were identified, *communication* and *assistance*. The *communication* attribute is further divided into the tertiary attributes *ease of contact*, *personnel attitudes*, and *clarity and transparency of information*. Our findings demonstrate that the quality of customer service that a retailer offers is key to OCE. Customers who are unable to reach customer service or who do not receive the desired help show disappointment towards the retailer, some showing intentions of not buying from the brand again. These findings are consistent with the literature. For example, Singh and Söderlund (2020) found that customer service is essential for customers, resulting in a positive customer experience and favorable WOM, in addition to their repurchase intention. It may be the case that customer service serves as what Berry, Carbone and Haeckel (2002) refer to as an *experience clue*. A customer service representative being rude to a customer, for instance, may indicate that the retailer does not value its customers. Furthermore, we found a notable distinction between communication and assistance. To some extent, this supports Singh's (2019) notion that customers want to both be listened to and receive help solving their problems. However, our findings suggest that in some cases, customers may prioritize communication over assistance or vice versa.

The next attribute that is especially important to OCE is *technology*. Two secondary attributes were recognized within *technology*: *user experience* and *product presentation accuracy. User experience* is essential for OCE, as it is what sets the ambiance when buying and makes customers feel comfortable with the retailer's website. Additionally, a user-friendly website enables customers to quickly find what they are looking for, which is key in fast fashion. Our findings demonstrate that there are specific features that fast fashion customers seek in a website. For instance, the availability of filters and their accuracy – fast fashion is characterized by having a wide variety of garments, fits, colors and sizes, and customers remark on the importance of being able to filter their search. Moreover, the decision to buy is not always made instantly, so customers appreciate the possibility of having a wishlist where

their favorite items can be saved for future purchases. The significance of a well-functioning website is also emphasized in the literature. For example, Rose, Hair and Clark (2011) present the ease of use of a website as an essential factor influencing OCE. Furthermore, Vakhariya (2020) found that a user-friendly website is vital for an enjoyable OCE.

The *product presentation accuracy* attribute, the other sub-attribute of *technology*, is also highly significant for OCE. Our study shows that customers prefer simple and straightforward pictures of the items, where they can easily observe the garment and its characteristics. This indicates that retailers should avoid over-produced pictures, where the focus is put on the models and not the products. This is the first study, to our knowledge, to examine customers' opinions regarding the presentation of items on fast fashion websites.

Additionally, it goes without saying that the *products* attribute as well as its sub-attributes *quality, price* and *size* are essential. It is worth noting, though, that this is not exclusive to online experiences. In fast fashion, customers demand cheap prices but also good quality, so value for money is key. Furthermore, receiving low quality items or items in bad shape can spoil the OCE and affect future purchases. When in a physical store, customers can judge the quality and condition of a product first-hand, but when buying online they entrust this task to the retailer. Therefore, it is crucial to the OCE for retailers to carry out quality control of their products prior to sending them. Moreover, the secondary attribute *size* was also found to be highly important, especially since customers buying online cannot try items on beforehand. Therefore, retailers need to provide precise information about the sizes and the fit of all their garments. This attribute goes hand in hand with the *product presentation accuracy* attribute, as true-to-life pictures combined with precise sizing information can help customers make accurate purchases resulting in a satisfactory OCE.

Lastly, the *omnichannel experience* is an essential attribute for customers, especially for those who like to buy both in physical stores and online. Our findings demonstrate that the seamless connection between both channels motivates customers to buy and gives a more positive experience with the retailer. Likewise, Quach et al. (2022) remark that to ensure a pleasant shopping experience, retailers should aim to offer harmonious and consistent services across channels, which will also reduce risk perception among customers.

Additional attributes were identified (see Figure 2), but the aforementioned ones were recognized as the most important ones for the OCE. This does not mean that the rest of the

attributes are to be left aside, but rather that retailers wanting to thrive online should prioritize offering outstanding service within these attributes.

6.2 Research question 2

How do these attributes compare to the attributes important for the customer experience in physical fast fashion shopping?

The literature review provided an overview of attributes important to the physical store experience. To answer our second research question, these attributes will be compared to those important to the OCE which were found in the current study.

According to prior literature, some of the most important attributes to customers when shopping in physical stores are behavior of personnel (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017; Pantano & Migliarese, 2014) and store layout (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017; Alexander & Cano, 2020; Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). Based on our findings, these attributes seem to translate to the online experience, at least to some extent.

For instance, behavior of personnel corresponds to our *customer service* aspect. Although Bäckström and Johansson (2017) do not specifically distinguish between personnel attitudes and assistance, they note that "[t]he behavior of the staff influences customers' experiences in a variety of ways; for instance their willingness to help and their professional knowledge and skills, as well as their attitude and ways of treating in-store customers" (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017, p.250). This has parallels with our distinction between personnel attitudes and assistance, where the former refers to the way employees treat customers and the latter to the actual help received by customers and its results. To some extent, the "professional knowledge and skills" described by Bäckström and Johansson (2017, p.250) reflect the assistance aspect, whereas the "willingness to help" and "attitude and ways of treating in-store customers" can clearly be linked to our online aspect of *personnel attitudes*. This indicates that, whether shopping online or offline, the behavior of personnel is important to customers.

It is worth noting, however, that although the behavior of personnel is important in both the physical and online format, it takes slightly different forms. Bäckström and Johansson (2017) give several examples of proactive help by personnel in physical stores, offered while the customer is still browsing. When it comes to online shopping, on the other hand, the vast majority of assistance takes place post-purchase when customers reach out to customer

service after encountering problems – hence the name *customer service*. Additionally, the nature of the communication between customers and employees differs between the offline and online formats, with the latter lacking face-to-face contact. This may have an impact on the way customers perceive employees, giving a less personal impression.

The importance of store layout as noted by Bäckström and Johansson (2017), Alexander and Cano (2020), and Barnes & Lea-Greenwood (2010) can also be linked to online shopping, albeit less directly. In a physical store, store layout may refer to how logically the store is designed and how easily customers can find what they are looking for. The same concept can be transferred to the online format, and it appears this is indeed also important online. This is included in our *user experience* aspect, as the website of an online retailer serves as its store. The same way store layout is important to customers in offline stores, the layout of a website and its ease of navigation is important to customers shopping for fast fashion online.

Delivery and *returns* are two online attributes distinct from the physical store attributes mentioned in existing literature. Delivery is unique to online shopping, and so is not a relevant aspect in physical store shopping. However, this online aspect may originate from the same customer wants as some physical store attributes. For instance, in a similar way to store layout (and website layout for online shopping), *delivery speed* and *delivery accuracy* can be linked to convenience and speed. While the layout of a physical store enables customers to quickly find what they are looking for, delivery is what determines how quickly customers get their products when shopping online. In fast fashion, customers may be especially dependent on quick and accurate delivery due to wanting to keep up with quickly-moving trends.

Returns take on a particularly amplified role in online fast fashion purchases, since customers shopping online do not have the opportunity to try on items before buying. This makes returns a key part of the shopping process, and an aspect that is very important to many customers. This is coherent with existing literature describing risk as an important factor in online shopping (e.g. Quach et al., 2022). Returns have a clear link to risk, as smooth returns where the customer gets refunded quickly minimize perceived risk.

6.3 Research question 3

What are the implications of these attributes for fast fashion retailers operating on both channels (physical stores and online)?

This paper investigated the attributes important to fast fashion customers when shopping online. The findings, especially when considered together with prior studies on physical store customer experience, also provide implications for retailers operating both online and offline.

Firstly, some attributes are unique to online shopping, such as delivery. This means that, for instance, in order for an offline retailer to start online sales, there are entirely new attributes to consider. As soon as they start selling online, retailers begin being evaluated on new attributes, such as *delivery cost* and *delivery speed*, and consequently also competing based on these attributes.

Additionally, as indicated by the findings of our study, customers want a seamless experience. This may be easier said than done. Some attributes are important to customers both offline and in physical stores, such as *sustainability, loyalty programs,* and *customer service*. However, despite being important in both channels, customer service may need different approaches online and in physical stores. The behavior and availability of personnel in physical stores are considered throughout the whole shopping experience. When buying online, on the other hand, customers typically seek representatives' help during the post-purchase stage, when they need to solve an issue or because they have further questions about the purchase. In this sense, retailers may need a different approach to employee training online versus in physical stores. For those working in physical stores, the focus should be on knowledge about the product and customer advice, and for those working in online customer service, the focus should be on communication and problem solving.

Furthermore, the seamless experience that customers seek when interacting with a brand through multiple channels includes not only the services and products but also the feelings, ambience and the experiential aspect. The experience of customers in a store may be influenced by, for example, the colors, the smell and the music (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017). These attributes are important to consider when operating in more than one channel. Customers that visit a certain store and later visit that retailer's website want to see a clear connection between the two, and experience the same feelings. Hence, it is essential for retailers to aim to connect channels in every possible aspect to create a unique and seamless experience for customers. This requires careful consideration of how feelings prompted by attributes not directly translatable to online channels (e.g. smell and sound) can be replicated across channels.

7 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore which attributes are most important to OCE in the fast fashion industry. Furthermore, we wanted to investigate how these attributes compare to the physical store experience. Finally, we aimed to understand the implications of our findings for retailers operating in both channels. Thus, we formulated three research questions:

RQ1 - Which attributes are most important for the online fast fashion customer experience?

RQ2 - How do these attributes compare to the attributes important for the customer experience in physical fast fashion shopping?

RQ3 - What are the implications of these attributes for fast fashion retailers operating on both channels (physical stores and online)?

To study these questions, a netnography was conducted. Regarding the first research question, our findings resulted in a framework (see Figure 2) that recognizes several attributes which are important to the OCE. These are divided into three categories of attributes: primary, secondary and tertiary. We would again like to emphasize that this does not mean that one category is more influential than the other, but simply that secondary attributes are sub-attributes of primary attributes, and tertiary attributes are sub-attributes of secondary attributes.

The identified primary attributes are *delivery, returns, customer service, technology, products, omnichannel experience, loyalty programs, sustainability,* and *eWOM.* Secondary attributes are *delivery cost, delivery speed, delivery accuracy, ease of returns, refunds, return policy flexibility, communication, assistance, user experience, product presentation accuracy, quality, price* and *size.* Lastly, tertiary attributes are *clarity and transparency of information, ease of contact, personnel attitudes, checkout and payments, navigation and features, product representation* and *stock availability.* We conclude that the most important attributes for OCE are *delivery, returns, customer service, products, technology,* and *omnichannel experience,* including their sub-attributes. Nevertheless, the remaining attributes are still highly relevant to OCE. Additionally, the importance of attributes may differ between individual customers.

When it comes to our second research question, a number of attributes common to OCE and physical store customer experience were recognized, but also attributes that differ between

the two channels. *Customer service* is important in both channels, but is an attribute that may take different forms depending on the channel. Furthermore, the *returns* attribute is shared among both channels but its role is elevated in OCE, where customers are not able to try on the products beforehand. The *user experience* attribute is unique to the OCE, but includes ease of use and navigation of the website, which can be linked to the corresponding store layout attribute of the physical store experience. Similarly, *delivery* is another attribute that is exclusive to OCE. Nevertheless, its sub-attributes *delivery speed* and *delivery accuracy* are linked to the quickness and convenience that are crucial in fast fashion. These same aspects can be seen in the physical stores taking other forms, such as precise layout and fast service.

Lastly, in our third research question, considerations for retailers operating in both channels (physical stores and online) were addressed. As mentioned, there are some attributes unique to one channel and others that are shared. However, a seamless connection between different channels of the brand is important in order for customers to have a positive experience. Retailers need to carefully consider how this connection is established in order to maintain the brand experience throughout multiple channels, as customers seek to experience the same feelings in all channels. Therefore, retailers need to find ways to translate the physical store experience to the online experience and vice versa, making customers feel that whether they shop in a physical store or online, the overall experience feels consistent.

7.1 Theoretical implications

Previous research has studied OCE and its components. However, to our knowledge, this is the first paper focused solely on OCE in fast fashion. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the current state of research in OCE by studying it in a different industry. Furthermore, previous studies on fast fashion have focused mainly on the supply chain (Bruce & Daly, 2006; Guercini & Runfola, 2020), on the business model (Lorenzoni, 2016), and on fast fashion in physical stores (Rese, Schlee & Baier, 2019; Barnes & Lea-Greenwood, 2010). Our study contributes specifically to a neglected area of the literature on fast fashion, namely OCE. The findings of our study resulted in a framework that recognizes several attributes important to the fast fashion OCE.

Our findings are partly consistent with studies focusing on OCE in other industries. For instance, Singh (2019) found several attributes influencing OCE in online grocery shopping. Attributes like service excellence, which includes delivery, returns and refunds, reliable customer service, and responsiveness, were identified by Singh (2019). Furthermore, the

author's findings also include attributes like service efficiency, which includes website navigation, ease of use, and fast delivery; and economic benefit attributes such as quality and price. Moreover, Rose, Hair and Clark (2011) emphasized the importance of website's ease of use for a pleasant OCE. Likewise, Kawaf and Tagg (2017) found several categories of constructs that form the OCE, within these categories, the importance of web atmospherics, web design, and web quality is highlighted. Hence, our findings support the results of these researchers by studying OCE in a different setting, namely, fast fashion. The concordance of the results could imply that these findings are relevant to many different industries.

7.2 Managerial implications

The findings of this paper give rise to several managerial implications. Firstly, the framework included can be used by managers of online fast fashion retail companies seeking to optimize OCE. It provides a comprehensive overview of attributes important to fast fashion customers when shopping online, going into detail as to how these attributes affect the OCE. Particularly notable attributes include *delivery, returns, customer service, products, technology,* and *omnichannel experience,* including their sub-attributes, making these especially important for managers to consider. Furthermore, for managers of fast fashion retail companies operating offline and online, the findings of this study emphasize the importance of providing a seamless experience while taking into consideration the different expectations of customers when shopping in the two channels.

Additionally, this study points to the multifaceted nature of many attributes by making important distinctions such as that between personnel attitudes and assistance. Such a distinction provides valuable insight for managers, helping them better understand how customers may perceive customer service depending on their focus on attitudes or assistance. A related implication is the importance of providing both of these in order to please both those customers that are assistance-oriented and those that are attitude-oriented. The fact that customers focus on different sub-attributes of customer service also indicates the importance of being attentive to individual customers, in concordance with Meyers and Schwager's (2007) notion that customer experience is a subjective response.

Finally, as explained in the theoretical implications, it is our belief that although the framework was constructed based on a study of online fast fashion retailers, the attributes included may be relevant to other industries as well. Thus, while the managerial implications

outlined here are directed primarily towards those in the fast fashion industry, they may provide insights for managers in other industries as well.

7.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

One limitation of this study relates to the number of companies included in the data collection. Different results could have arisen from adding more brands to the data collection. Secondly, most of the comments collected in the netnography were from customers who have had negative experiences. This can influence the quality of the data and our interpretation of the attributes important to the customer experience. Furthermore, our analysis was based on data collected from three platforms. In this sense, more diverse information could have been gathered from other platforms than those selected for our study.

Future research could gather data from different platforms and brands to increase the generalizability of our findings for the fast fashion industry. Additionally, the same topic could be investigated using a different method, such as interviews, in order to gain insights from a different perspective. Moreover, a study focusing on retailers' perspectives of the OCE in fast fashion could be a good contribution to complement this study, which focuses solely on customers' perspectives. Such a study could investigate the extent to which attributes important to the OCE match the attributes prioritized by retailers.

8 References

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