

# Revamping the Face of Apparel Retail Industry using Omni-channel Concept

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## Abstract

Omni-channel is a new concept being used by retailers to provide highly personalized services to customers. In this digitalized realm, retailers are providing a number of channels and touchpoints to customers such as offline (apparel retail store) and online (e-commerce website) for apparel shopping. In order to enable the online interaction in an offline store, many apparel brands are merging the services of online and offline platform. However, studies of synchronisation between the services of online and offline platform remain scarce. The aim of this study is to explore the synergy between the online and offline channel's services and their relationship. This study is exploratory in nature and conducted in Delhi using 450 customers who are using multiple channels for apparel shopping. Questionnaire was used to identify the services received from both the channels during apparel shopping. A three dimensional structure has been developed to understand the services provided across the channels. Based on the findings, there is a positive and significant relationship between the online and channel services which indicates that there is a synergy between the services of both the channels. This study also provides the guidelines to retailers for providing better omni-channel practices during different phases of customer's shopping journey. Various digital technologies such as mobile POS, digital wallets and artificial intelligence technologies (facial recognition, speech recognition, virtual assistant, chatbot) and facilities such as ROPO, BOPIS, BORIS, Ship from store have been suggested to retailers for the enhancement of synchronisation between the channel's services.

**Keywords:** Apparel retail; artificial intelligence; channel services; omni-channel; online and offline channels

**Citation:** Vidushi & Dr. Radha Kashyap, "Revamping the Face of Apparel Retail Industry using Omni-channel Concept", *Journal of the Textile Association*, 82/2 (142-149), (Sept-Oct '2021)

## 1. Introduction

Earlier customer was able to use a single channel (physical stores) for apparel shopping. In this advanced era of digitalization, customers are now able to use a number of channels especially online and physical stores for shopping [7]. They can use these channels simultaneously and separately for buying the best suitable product according to their requirement. The simultaneous use of multiple channels for shopping is called omni-channel shopping. Several brands such as Bestseller, Shoppers Stop, Max Fashion and Lifestyle are already moved toward this concept and few are still running in the race.

*"Omni-channel concept blurs the space between the online and offline channel"*

A number of channels such as television shopping, catalog, kiosk, e-commerce marketplace (Jabong, Myntra, Flipkart and Amazon), online website and mobile application have been offered by various retailers for shopping [17]. A survey conducted by Deloitte in 2014 revealed that one in three consumers uses multiple channels while making a purchase. These retailers are called as multi-channel retailers as they are offering multiple channels for shopping. However, the multi-channel customers are not satisfied with the services they are getting across the channels as the similar products, price and promotions are not offered on the both the platforms. Based on this, multi-channel retailers are now

heading towards omni-channel retailing to provide highly customized experience across the channels. In order to provide this seamless shopping experience, they serve the customers inside and outside the walls.

Omni-channel approach is essential for both online and offline retailers in order to survive in this competitive market. A brand which is present on online platform but not on offline platform and vice versa, has to present on each and every channel otherwise customer will buy through some other brand. Nykaa Fashion and Zivame are the best example of this strategy. Earlier both the brands are available on online platform only but based on the demanding customers, they moved towards offline channel as well to sell their products. This strategy helps to serve the customer at anytime, anywhere and through any channel which will in turn attract the new customers and retain the loyal ones. Several brands such as Shoppers Stop Ltd, Aditya Birla Retail Ltd and Future Group are redefining the omni-channel concept as they are already present on both online and offline platforms. Due to this pandemic situation, various fashion brands are now realising the importance of this concept and want to do business using all the channels and formats.

*"Transparency and technology are the key elements of Omni-channel retailing"*

An omni-channel brand should focus on the service, data and information transparency across the channels in order to execute the strategies well. For the smooth functioning of omni-channel brand, it is necessary to provide similar services, product and information in terms of quality, price and quantity across the channels. Also, a single data should be available for access and sharing in a data distributed

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environment. Various technologies should be used in the offline stores to provide online experience such as Alexa and virtual assistants. Various facilities should be provided through the online channel for getting offline experience such as BOPIS, BORIS and ship from store etc.

Several studies have been conducted for identifying the services offered to online and in-store shoppers in specific context of convenience related to access, search, transaction and possession process [2]. Some studies have investigated the services provided to customers while online shopping in terms of access, search, transaction, possession and post purchase convenience [8]. However, there were very less studies conducted for Omni-channel shopping and services offered to omni-channel customers.

### **Objective of the study**

- This study identifies the synergy between the online and offline channels services.
- This study explores the various artificial intelligence technologies and facilities of Omni-channel shopping.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### ***Omni-channel Retail***

Omni-channel retailing integrates the experience of online and offline platform. Multi-channel retailers are now moving towards this concept by integrating both the channels (online and offline). Multi-channel retailers are adopting various new technologies while transforming from multi-channel retailing to omni-channel retailing.

### ***2.1 Technologies used by multi-channel and omni-channel retailers***

#### ***2.1.1 Virtual assistants:***

Virtual assistants are those digital devices that are helping the customer while shopping. Tablets, i-Pad and digital signage are the example of virtual assistant technology. Using this technology, they can easily search the information related to the product at any time and place of the store. They can use these devices even for completing the checkout process without any difficulty and effort.

#### ***2.1.2 Speech recognition technology***

Speech recognition technology provides an opportunity of asking the information related to the product through a digital device. Alexa and Siri are the two technologies of speech recognition artificial intelligence. Using these devices, customers do not have to ask each and everything from the salespeople, they can even ask the location of the product in the store from these digital devices.

#### ***2.1.3 Facial recognition technology***

This technology captures the facial expression of the customer while examining the product and for displaying the information of the customer in the system. In US and Europe, many brands are using this technology such as Amazon Go wherein customer do not have to use the cards in the checkout

process; camera will capture their face and display all the information of the customer in the system and automatically the shopping amount will be deducted from their account. This can also be used to know whether customer like the products displayed in the store or not. Using this technology, brands can predict which pattern and colour of the garments customers like the most and accordingly they can choose their product line as per the behaviour of the customer. Facial recognition technology provides insights about consumer's buying decision process by identifying the individuals and their shopping habits [16]. Alibaba x Guess pop-up based in Hong Kong use gyro-sensors for scanning the face of the customer to know their behaviour.

#### ***2.1.4 Chatbot***

This technology has been used by most of the brands wherein customer can ask any query about the product from the chat option available on the brand website or application.

#### ***2.1.5 Data Fabric***

This technology provides frictionless access and sharing of data in a distributed data environment [16].

#### ***2.1.6 Digital wallet***

These wallets provide easy to use, follow and user friendly approach of completing the payment process. Google pay and paytm are few examples of digital wallet. Using this customer can save the transaction slip electronically; they can complete the checkout process where they want to finish it in few minutes. Simple and flexible payment methods can improve the transaction convenience [8].

Multi-channel retailers are offering various channels to customers for shopping but they are not providing the seamless experience across the channels. The omni-channel strategy helps in bridging the gap between the online and offline platform in order to provide highly personalized services to its customers. Various facilities of omni-channel strategy provide seamless experience to customers. Few have been discussed below:

### ***2.2 Facilities provided by omni-channel brands***

Omni-channel brands are providing following facilities to its customer for providing highly customized services with minimal effort. They are:

#### ***2.2.1 Click and Collect***

Omni-channel retailers are integrating the facilities of online and offline platform. In click and collect facility, they are integrating click option from the online channel (website or application) and collect from the offline stores. With the help of this strategy, customer will get their products within few hours even if they ordered the product online. This facility reduces the delivery time of online ordered products and shipping charges. This facility is also called as BOPIS (Buy online pick up in-store). In-store pick up allows the retailer to use the existing inventory effectively and efficiently [5].

### 2.2.2 Ship from store

This facility is extension of the click and collects facility wherein customer can choose for home delivery option provided in the click and collect option. Using this option, they will get the product at their doorstep instead of collecting it from the store. Ship from store feature can use the existing inventory effectively in order to decrease the excess stock [5].

### 2.2.3 BORIS (Buy Online Return In-store)

This facility provides an opportunity of returning the online ordered product through offline stores. Using this, customers do not have to wait for long to get their required product. Customer can choose the nearest store of the brand and can return the product there after showing the payment details and specifying the return reason. BORIS has become popular among retailers and consumers. This can help retailers to integrate their online and offline channels after sales services [13].

### 2.2.4 ROPO (Reserve Online Purchase Offline)

This facility provides an opportunity of reserving the product online and then buying it from offline store. Using this, customer can examine the product in person which will in turn save the time of reordering the product due to incorrect size or colour.

## 2.3 Online and Offline channel's services

Omni-channel brands are merging the services of online and offline channels wherein the brand which are available online only are now moving towards offline platform and vice versa. Omnichannel concept integrates the online and offline channel services which not only provides seamless experience but also strengthens the relationship with the customer and enhances the purchase intention [14].

A similar service such as same products availability on both the channels, same prices, promotions across the channels is the main aim of omni-channel strategy wherein transparency is one of the most important factor. By providing transparency between the services offered by both the channel, a brand can create a good omni-channel environment. Online channels are easy to access, search for

the information and for transaction process as compared to offline channels [2]. However, offline channels are providing better possession services in comparison to online channel. Online channel can be complementary to offline channel and vice versa [6]. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H1: There is a positive correlation between offline channel services and online channel services.

## 2.4 Customer's shopping journey

The three phases of customer's shopping journey have been used to understand the services provided by retailers. These are:

### 2.4.1 Pre-consumption phase

This phase consists of the services being offered to customer for searching the product information before making purchase such as description, price, inventory (quantity), size and colour etc. and consistency of products. Pre-purchase information search is the most critical stage among the five stages of customers shopping journey- problem recognition, pre-purchase information search, and evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluations [1].

### 2.4.2 At point of consumption phase

This phase includes the services provided to customers while making a purchase. The customers who are using click and collect functionality can buy the additional products from the store [4].

### 2.4.3 Post-consumption phase

This phase consists of the services being offered to customer after purchasing the product such as promotion, returns and loyalty etc. Omni-channel promotions can be defined as offering consistent promotion information across channels in order to facilitate and encourage combined channel use [14]. Coupon promotion in omni-channel retail has become increasingly popular [10].

## 3. Methodology

Exploratory approach has been used to explore the synergy between the online and offline channel's services in an omni-channel environment and their relationship.

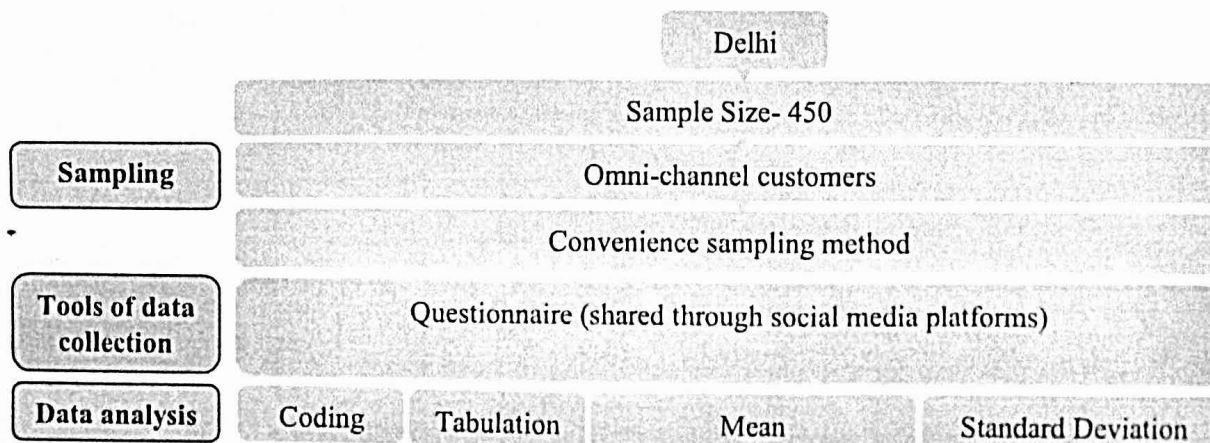


Figure 3.1: Research plan of the study



This study has been conducted in Delhi. 250 females and 250 males were approached who use multiple channels for apparel shopping out of which only 225 males and 225 females have shared the complete data.

### 3.1 Data collection and analysis

Web based questionnaire was used to collect the primary data and secondary data has been collected using available case studies, documents, reports and published articles. Data has been collected using convenience sampling technique. The questionnaire has been shared with 500 respondents. Various social media platforms such as Gmail, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram were used to share the questionnaire with the respondents. However, the response rate was 90% as only 450 respondents have shared the complete data. Various statistical techniques such as mean, standard deviation and correlation have been used to analyse the results. The questionnaire includes 2 sections- demographic detail section and services section. 17 self developed statements were used to identify the services received by customers from omni-channel brands. 5 point Likert scale (Strongly agree-5, agree-4, neutral-3, disagree-2 and strongly disagree-1) have been used to get the responses on the statements from respondents. Mean and standard deviation has been used to analyse the data. Reliability of the scale has been checked using Chronbach's alpha. The Chronbach's alpha of the overall scale was 0.885 which was considered as acceptable.

## 4. Results and discussion

In general, this study found that Omni-channel concept provides better services to customers during their shopping journey.

### 4.1 Demographic profile of the respondents

**Table 4.1: Demographic profile**

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	225	50
Female	225	50
<b>Age group (In years)</b>		
21-30	387	86
31-40	63	14
<b>Occupation</b>		
Employed	144	32
Entrepreneur	24	5
Homemaker	4	1
Part timer	1	0
Student	277	62
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Married	77	17
Unmarried	373	83
<b>Family Income (yearly income in ₹)</b>		
₹ 8,00,000 - ₹ 12,00,000	236	52
₹ 12,00,000 - ₹ 16,00,000	105	23
More than ₹ 16,00,000	109	24

### 4.2 Phases of customer's shopping journey

The three-dimensional structure consists of three phases of customer's shopping journey - pre consumption, point of consumption and post consumption phase along with the online and offline channel's service dimensions.



**Figure 4.2: Research Framework**

#### 4.2.1 Pre-consumption phase

##### 4.2.1.1 Searching information

First step of any shopping process is to search the information about product such as price, stock units/quantity, image, quality (fabric and trim details), colour and size. The omni-channel concept provides a facility of information search across the channels to its customers. Earlier we can check online product information at online channel or offline product details at offline channel only. With the help of omni-channel strategy, a brand can provide its customer a service of cross checking the information of product across the channels.

**Table 4.2.1.1: Searching information across the channels**

VARIABLES	M	SD
PC1: Can easily search information of online available product through offline channel	3.74	1.01
PC2: Can easily search information of offline available product through online channel	3.92	0.91

This indicates that the online channel provides better service of information search related to the products in comparison to offline channel.

Various technologies have been used by brands in other countries to improve the searching facility at offline channel such as Alexa- speech recognition AI technology and virtual assistants (tablets, i-Pad and digital signage) have been installed at offline outlets in Delhi also so that customer can easily search information of online product. Brands can provide chatbots on their online website or application for providing this searching facility to their online customers.

##### 4.2.1.2 Checking inventory

Stock unit is an important consideration of a customer while doing shopping. This feature provides the stock details of product available at online and offline channel. The omni-channel concept provides a facility of checking the inventory across the channels. Earlier we can check quantity of online products at online channel or of offline product at offline channel only. With the help of omni-channel strategy, a customer can check the inventory details of the product across the channels. For example, ZARA is a brand which provides a facility to their customers through online channel (website and application) wherein they can check the product availability at offline store and can order from the same.

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**Table 4.2.1.2: Inventory checking across the channels**

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**Table 4.2.1.2: Inventory checking across the channels**

VARIABLES	M	SD
PC3: Can easily check inventory of online product through offline channel	3.51	1.00
PC4: Can easily check inventory of offline (in-store) product through online channel	3.71	0.96

This indicates that the online channel provides better service of inventory checking in comparison to offline channel.

Various brands are now providing this service of inventory availability checking across the channels to their customers. Brands can integrate an option of product availability at offline and online channel in their application or website. With the help of technologies such as Alexa and virtual assistant (tablet, i-Pad, digital signage), they can provide this service at offline channel as well.

##### 4.2.1.3 Product consistency

This service is related to the consistency of products in terms of product description, price and promotions across the channels. The omni-channel concept provides a facility of similar product availability across the channels. Earlier if we want to buy an online available product from an offline store then we have to show the image of the product to the salesperson and asked him to check the availability of the same and most of the time that product was not available at offline store. With the help of omni-channel strategy, customers are now interacting with the brand instead of the channel wherein they are getting similar information, products and services across the channels.

**Table 4.2.1.3: Product consistency across the channels**

VARIABLES	M	SD
PC5: Similar products at both the channels	3.65	0.97
PC6: Similar product price at both the channels	3.31	1.04
PC7: Similar product promotions at both the channels	3.32	1.06

This indicates that similar products have been offered by retailers across the channels. Hence, both (online and offline) channels provide better service of product consistency.

Brands can use artificial intelligence such as Facial Recognition Technology to scan customer's behaviour like what garment, colour and patterns they have searched the most then provide those products on both online and offline platform. They can check the searching history of online customers through Data Fabric artificial intelligence technology wherein they can easily analyze the real time and historical data.

#### 4.2.2 At point of consumption phase

##### 4.2.2.1 Product buying across the channels

This service is related to the facility of buying the product across the channels. The omni-channel concept provides a facility of buying the products through any channel, anytime and anywhere. Earlier if we want to buy a product from online website then we can buy it from online channel only and offline product from offline channel only. However, omni-channel strategy provides a buying facility of online product through offline store and offline product through online store. For example, Max Fashion and Lifestyle are the two brands which are providing click and collect facility to its customers wherein they can buy online ordered product through offline store and even get it at their doorstep within a day or two.

**Table 4.2.2.1: Product buying across the channels**

VARIABLES	M	SD
<b>APOC1:</b> Can easily buy online product through offline channel	3.74	0.89
<b>APOC2:</b> Can easily buy offline product through online channel	4.06	0.90

This indicates that online channel provides better service of product buying in comparison to offline channel.

Various brands are now providing services such as BOPIS (buy online pick up in-store), ROPO (Reserve online purchase offline), click and collect and ship from store, with the help of which customer can buy online product from offline store. During this pandemic, most of the brands are now providing a service of getting the product from offline store using video calling feature wherein customer can call the store using Whatsapp video call and ask the sales person for the required product. They will show you the product and briefing about the same and you can order the product for home delivery from there.

#### 4.2.2.2 Payment system across the channels

This service is related to the payment system provided by the channels. The omni-channel concept provides a service of easy-to-use payment system to its customers. They can use this system across the channels for buying the product. Earlier if we want to complete the transaction process at offline store then we have to wait for our turn and stand in a queue or a gateway error has been shown while completing the checkout process at online channel. With the help of omni-channel strategy, easy to use payment system has been used by the brands for completing the process without any difficulty.

**Table 4.2.2.2: Payment system across the channels**

VARIABLES	M	SD
<b>APOC3:</b> Can easily use digital wallet for buying online product through offline channel	4.06	0.77
<b>APOC4:</b> Can easily use digital wallet for buying offline product through online channel	3.94	0.80

This indicates that offline channel provides better service of completing the checkout process in comparison to online channel.

Various brands are using Mobile POS at offline store for providing quick and easy check out process to its customers with the help of which they can complete the transaction process from any corner or place of the outlet. Digital wallet such as paytm, Google pay, UPI has been provided for easy and contactless payment. Amazon Go store provides a facility of scan and go wherein customer will go inside a store, select the product and scan it to complete the transaction process. Artificial intelligence technology such

as Face Recognition Technology will automatically scans the customer face using camera placed on the top of the wall in order to display the card details of customer after scanning for the payment deduction.

#### 4.2.3 Post consumption phase

##### 4.2.3.1 Return policies across the channel

This service is related to returning the product across the channel. The omni-channel concept provides a service of returning the product across the channels. Earlier the online purchased product was returned through online channel and offline purchased product through offline channel only. With the help of omni-channel facility like BORIS, customer can return the online product through offline channel. For example, Shoppers Stop is providing a facility of returning the product wherein customer have to reach them through mail or exchange/return option given on the website, they will pick the product through courier and after quality check they will either exchange or return the product as per the raised request. Decathlon is providing 90 days return of offline store purchased product wherein customer can return the product at any outlet of Decathlon which is nearest to their location.

**Table 4.2.3.1: Return policies across the channels**

VARIABLES	M	SD
<b>POC1:</b> Can easily return the online available product through offline channel	3.73	1.06
<b>POC2:</b> Can easily return the offline available product through online channel	3.49	1.12

This indicates that offline channel provides better service of returning the product in comparison to online channel.

Various brands are now providing a facility of returning the product across the channels. With the help of BORIS (Buy online return in-store), a customer can return the online purchased product through offline store. Walmart Mobile Express Return provides a quick refund at the store after returning the product. Customer will have to scan the payment slip using their phones, go inside the store, locate the return lane, scan the QR code and quickly they will get the refund back. For offline shopping returns, many brands are providing a facility of return the products such as within 30 days at another store of the same brand which is nearest to your location.

##### 4.2.3.2 Loyalty program across the channels

This service is related to redeeming the loyalty points/coupons/voucher across the channels. The omni-channel concept provides a service of redeeming the benefits across the channels. Earlier we can redeem the coupons got for offline product at offline store and for online product at online store only. With the help of omni-channel strategy, a customer can even use his online coupons at store and offline



vouchers at online website or application. For example, The Body Shop provides E-gift cards to its customers which they can use at both online and offline channel.

**Table 4.2.3.2: Loyalty program across the channels**

VARIABLES	M	SD
POP3: Can easily redeem coupons/voucher/loyalty points of online purchased product at offline channel	3.69	1.01
POP4: Can easily use coupons/voucher/loyalty points of offline purchase products at online channel	3.70	1.00

This indicates that both the channel (online and offline) provides better service of redeeming the points/coupons/voucher.

Various brands are now providing cross redeeming of the coupons, vouchers and loyalty points. With each buying, customer will get points and that will be added in their wallet. They can use their wallet points either at online channel or offline channel.

#### 4.2.4 Purchase Intention

This explains the intention of customer for buying the apparel products using omni-channel facility and recommends it to others.

**Table 4.2.4: Purchase Intention**

VARIABLES	M	SD
PI1: Will use omni-channel concept for buying apparel products	4.09	0.76
PI2: Will encourage others to use omni-channel concept for buying apparel products	4.04	0.81

From the above result, it is found that the customer's purchase intention is positively influenced using omni-channel facility

#### 4.3 Correlation between the channel services in an omni-channel environment

**Table 4.3: Correlation between variables and they will use**

		OFFCS
ONCS	Pearson Correlation	.742**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Note: OFFCS = Offline channel services and ONCS = Online channel services

From the above result, it is concluded that there is a positive and significant correlation (.742\*\*) between the online and offline channel services which implies that there is a synergy between the online and offline channel's services in an Omni-channel environment.

#### 5. Conclusion

Customers are now moving towards and dependent on online elements for apparel shopping but based on this, retailers cannot ignore the importance of offline elements. As a theoretical contribution, this study provides a 3-dimensional framework of channel's services which can be used by multi-channel brands to develop the strategies for adopting the omni-channel concept and by omni-channel brands to assess their performance. Based on the findings, the following recommendations have been suggested to retailers-

- Various channels have been offered by retailers to customer for apparel shopping and there is a synchronization of services between the channels. However, retailers can use various data mining technologies for improving the transparency of information across the channels. A seamless data access and sharing will be created using these technologies.
- It can be concluded that technology is one of the parameter which can enhance the functioning of omni-channel brands. Various technologies have been mentioned in the result section which is being used by omni-channel brand for smooth functioning. Table 5.1 shows the different technologies provided by omni-channel brands during different phases of customer shopping journey. Multi-channel retailers can use these technologies according to their feasibility and facilities as per the requirement of their brand.

**Table 5.1: Technologies/Facilities used for omni-channel retailing**

Phases of Customer Shopping Journey	Technologies/Facilities
Pre Consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ξ Speech recognition technology: Alexa</li> <li>ξ Virtual assistants (tablets, i-Pad and digital signage)</li> <li>ξ Chatbot Technology</li> <li>ξ Facial Recognition Technology</li> <li>ξ Data Fabric</li> </ul>
Point of Consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ξ ROPO (Reserve online purchase offline)</li> <li>ξ BOPIS (Buy online pick up in - store)/ Click and collect</li> <li>ξ Ship from store</li> <li>ξ Video calling feature</li> <li>ξ Mobile POS</li> <li>ξ Digital wallet such as paytm, Google pay, UPI</li> </ul>
Post Consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ξ BORIS (Buy online return in - store)</li> <li>ξ E-gift cards (easily used on both the channels- online and offline)</li> </ul>

#### Managerial Implications

The 3-dimensional structure developed in the study can act as KPI (Key performance indicator) of Omni-channel shopping and can be used to investigate the functioning of Omni-channel brands. The technologies discussed in the result

section can act as key drivers of Omni-channel retailing and will be useful for those brands that are starting to invest in this concept.

#### 6. Limitations of the study

The respondents in this study are relatively small and

between age group (20-40 years). Hence, future research could be done with a large sample size and with each age group. Further studies could explore the impact percentage of these services on purchase intention. In future, studies can explore the relationship of various technologies or facilities with the channel's service attributes in future.

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### The Textile Association (India)

#### Membership Fees

W.E.F. 01 -04-2021

Sr. No.	Type of Membership	Membership Fee*
A.	Corporate Member	INR 20,000
B.	Patron Member	INR 4,600
C.	Life Member	INR 3,200
D.	Overseas Member	USD 120
E.	Lifetime to Patron Member	INR 2,000

\*Plus 18% GST