

Developing customer engagement through communication consistency and channel coordination

Communication
consistency

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Received 17 February 2022
Accepted 13 January 2023

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to understand how integration efforts at both communication and channel levels can foster customer engagement behavior in the retail sector from the perspective of employees.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through 231 face-to-face questionnaires completed by frontline employees in shopping centers. A structural equation modeling approach was applied to test the proposed hypotheses.

Findings – The results highlight the importance of integration efforts as external stimuli for enhancing employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior. Findings extend the stimulus-organism-response model by predicting responses that go beyond employees' behavior to predict customer engagement behavior. Results also confirm the mediating role of attitudes toward marketing communications and synergy realization in the proposed model.

Practical implications – Retailers should integrate their multiple channels and operate consistently and in coordination through them to develop employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior. Managers should regularly collect information from their employees as they represent an important touchpoint in omnichannel retailing.

Originality/value – There is a gap in the omnichannel retailing literature regarding how integration efforts at a communication level may complement integration efforts at a channel level for developing customer engagement. This study addresses this gap by adopting a novel perspective using frontline employees as a source of information for assessing customer engagement behavior. It extends knowledge about how customer engagement behavior may be developed and strengthened from the employees' point of view.

Keywords Communication consistency, Channel integration, Employees, Customer engagement behavior, Retailers, Synergy

Paper type Research paper

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The authors thank the editor and the two reviewers for their helpful comments. This research was supported by grant PID2020-116247GB-I00 from the Spanish Agencia Estatal de Investigación. The authors also thank Fundación CajaMurcia for supporting the copy editing of the paper.



Spanish Journal of Marketing -
ESIC
Vol. 27 No. 2, 2023
pp. 241-260
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2444-9709
p-ISSN: 2444-9709
DOI 10.1108/SJME-02-2022-0022

Fomentando el compromiso del cliente a través de la consistencia en la comunicación y la coordinación entre canales

Resumen

Objetivo – Este estudio analiza, desde la perspectiva del empleado, cómo la integración de la comunicación y la coordinación de los canales de distribución fomenta el *engagement* de los clientes en el sector minorista.

Metodología – Los datos fueron recogidos a través de 231 cuestionarios personales realizados a empleados de centros comerciales. Las hipótesis se contrastaron mediante un modelo de ecuaciones estructurales.

Resultados – Los resultados destacan la importancia de la integración para fomentar la percepción de los empleados acerca del *engagement* del cliente. Estos resultados extienden la aplicación del Modelo de Estimulo-Organismo-Respuesta para predecir no sólo el comportamiento de los empleados si no el *engagement* del cliente. Los resultados también corroboran el rol mediador de la actitud hacia las comunicaciones de marketing y la obtención de sinergias.

Implicaciones prácticas – Los distribuidores deben integrar todos los canales y actuar de forma coordinada y consistente para mejorar la percepción de los empleados acerca del *engagement* del cliente. Se debe recabar información periódica sobre las percepciones de los empleados ya que constituyen un importante punto de contacto en la gestión omnicanal de los establecimientos comerciales.

Originalidad – Este estudio aborda un gap existente en la literatura acerca de cómo los esfuerzos de integración a nivel de comunicación complementan los esfuerzos a nivel de canal para fomentar el *engagement* del cliente. La novedad de este estudio reside en estudiar estos aspectos desde la perspectiva de los empleados.

Palabras clave Consistencia en la comunicación, Integración de canales, Empleados, Engagement del cliente, Establecimientos comerciales, Sinergias

Tipo de artículo Trabajo de investigación

通过沟通一致性和渠道协调发展客户参与

摘要

目的 – 本研究旨在从员工的角度了解沟通和渠道层面的整合工作如何促进零售部门的顾客参与行为。

方法 – 数据收集于购物中心一线员工所填写的231份面对面问卷。应用结构方程建模方法来检验所提出的假设。

研究结果 – 本文结果强调了整合工作作为外部激励对于提高员工对顾客参与行为的认知的重要性。研究结果通过预测超越员工行为的反应来预测客户参与行为，从而扩展了刺激-机体-反应模型。结果还证实了对营销传播和协同实现的态度在所提出的模型中的中介作用。

实践意义 – 零售商应该整合其多种渠道，并通过这些渠道持续协调地运作，以培养员工对顾客参与行为的认知。管理者应该定期从员工那里收集信息，因为他们是全渠道零售的一个重要接触点。

原创性 – 在全渠道零售业的文献中，关于沟通层面的整合工作如何补充渠道层面的整合工作以发展顾客参与的问题，存在研究差距。本研究通过采用新颖的视角，将一线员工作为评估顾客参与行为的信息来源来解决这一差距。它扩展了关于如何从员工的角度发展和加强顾客参与行为的知识。

关键词 关键词沟通一致性，渠道整合，员工，顾客参与行为，零售商，协效作用

文章类型 研究型论文

1. Introduction

Engaging customers across channels has been specifically regarded as a key challenge for omnichannel retailers (Lee *et al.*, 2019). The integration of online and offline marketing channels is essential for providing a “seamless” customer experience along the customer journey (Gasparin *et al.*, 2022; Hajdas *et al.*, 2022; Neslin, 2022). Coordination is the core idea behind retailers’ integration efforts at a channel level (Neslin, 2022). Nevertheless, omnichannel retailing encompasses not only the channels of distribution but also those of communication (Cui *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, retailer efforts need to work jointly at distribution and communication levels (Cui *et al.*, 2021; Yin *et al.*, 2022), although prior

research has been devoted almost exclusively to channel integration (Ailawadi and Farris, 2017; Yin *et al.*, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2018). This paper addresses this gap by showing how integration efforts at a communication level complement integration efforts at a channel level in developing customer engagement behavior.

Additionally, despite recent interest to better understand integration efforts from the customer's perspective (Mishra *et al.*, 2021; Šerić *et al.*, 2020; Yin *et al.*, 2022), less research has analyzed one of the most valuable information sources and stakeholders for retailers: frontline employees (Barnes *et al.*, 2013; Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2014; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2020). As Han *et al.* (2022) stated, retailing constitutes a service ecosystem and focusing only on customers is insufficient to understand customer engagement. Employees represent an important – yet under researched – source of information for assessing customer behavior (Yoo *et al.*, 2020; Yue *et al.*, 2021). In fact, only a few marketing studies have examined the behavior of customers from the employee's perspective (Savastano *et al.*, 2019; Yoo *et al.*, 2020; Yue *et al.*, 2021), whereas analyzing the behavior of employees from the customer's perspective is far more common (see, for instance, Sicilia *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it may be interesting, and contribute to the literature on customer engagement, to understand how customer engagement behavior may be developed and strengthened through integration efforts from the employees' point of view. Interestingly, most customer engagement definitions share the concept's core interactive nature (Rather *et al.*, 2022), as employee – customer interactions are theoretically regarded as the root of customer engagement (Han *et al.*, 2022). For that reason, employees may be key informants to understand how to enhance customer engagement behavior in the retailing context.

Drawing on stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), the present paper proposes a model to understand how employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior may be enhanced through integration efforts at a communication level (communication consistency) and at a channel level (channel coordination). Unlike other papers that have mainly focused on offline integration (Cachero-Martínez and Vázquez-Casielles, 2017) or online environment as stimuli (Dabbous and Barakat, 2020), this paper considers the integration of online and offline media and channels as the key stimuli to enhance employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior. This paper also offers an integrated view of two streams of research that have been increasingly connected due to advances in technology, integrated marketing communications and omnichannel marketing. It is, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, the first paper to use frontline employees as key informants of a retailer's integration efforts.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses SOR theory to introduce the antecedents of employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior. Based on this theory, this paper proposes that communication consistency and channel coordination influence attitudes toward marketing communications and synergy realization, which finally determine employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior (Section 3). The methodology of the study, results and implications are discussed in Sections 4, 5 and 6. Finally, limitations of the study and proposed avenues for additional research are discussed (Section 6.4).

2. Theoretical development

2.1 Stimulus-organism-response theory

SOR theory was originally designed for general environmental psychology by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). It posits that external stimuli can affect an individual's internal state or organismic response, subsequently leading to behavioral responses. The first component, "stimulus" (S), refers to certain features of an environment that arouse individuals. The

second component, “organism” (O), refers to the affective and cognitive intermediary states that occur when the individuals are affected by the stimulus. The third and last component, “response” (R), refers to individuals’ reactions to stimuli and organisms (Tang *et al.*, 2019).

Responses (R) have been applied in the retailing sector to study customer responses and behaviors, usually in terms of customer trust (Islam *et al.*, 2020), customer satisfaction (Cachero-Martinez and Vázquez-Casielles, 2017; Prassida and Hsu, 2022), purchase intention (Dabbous and Barakat, 2020) and customer engagement (Lee *et al.*, 2021). This framework has also been used to study employees’ reactions to external stimuli (organizational efforts) to predict their own behavior, such as loyalty (Zhu *et al.*, 2014) and even to predict the benefits for the organization they belong to, such as organizational learning (Attiq *et al.*, 2017). However, to the best of the researchers’ knowledge, it has not been applied to employees before to predict customers’ behavior.

This study uses the SOR framework to explain that a retailer’s integration efforts are important as external stimuli for employees that may enhance their perceptions about customer engagement behavior. Communication consistency and channel integration act as stimuli variables (S) to provoke certain affective and cognitive intermediary states in employees (O), which, in turn, drive their perceptions of customer engagement behavior (R). This rationale is consistent with previous IMC and omnichannel studies that have proposed integration efforts as key stimuli in the retailing environment (Payne *et al.*, 2017; Šerić *et al.*, 2020).

2.2 The stimulus (S): communication consistency and channel coordination

Communication consistency and channel coordination are at the center of IMC and omnichannel marketing, respectively. First, the essence of IMC lies in coordinating activities, improving efficiency of communications and ensuring consistency for all its stakeholders (Valos *et al.*, 2017), including frontline employees (Porcu *et al.*, 2020). Second, omnichannel marketing features a “holistic” shopping experience, one in which a customer’s buying journey is smooth irrespective of the channels used (Payne *et al.*, 2017). Interestingly, omnichannel marketing also aims for consistency since new digital touchpoints have blurred traditional cross-channel boundaries (Gasparin *et al.*, 2022).

Both approaches – IMC and omnichannel marketing – although coming from different disciplines and theoretical backgrounds, are aligned in their core idea; that is, the need to embrace a holistic perspective, the need for coordination and integration and the search for consistency in information and communication. In an SOR approach, a retailer’s integration efforts, at both communication and channel levels, should constitute an important stimulus that will generate an internal response from frontline employees.

2.3 The organismic response (O): attitudes toward marketing communications and synergy realization

Organism describes the internal cognitive and/or affective states that intervene between a stimulus and an individual’s response to that stimulus (Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Consumer empowerment, trust and attitudes have been considered as organism variables in retailing studies that have applied the SOR framework (Prassida and Hsu, 2022). Following this approach, this study identifies attitudes toward marketing communications as an internal affective state and synergy realization as an internal cognitive state to explain the employee’s organismic response to the retailer’s integration efforts.

Attitudes toward marketing communications is defined as a predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner toward the communications efforts of a particular company or brand (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986). Synergy realization refers to the

achievement of major synergies including improved customer trust, consumer risk reduction, perceived service efficiency and improved customer awareness and experience (Herhausen *et al.*, 2015; Neslin *et al.*, 2006; Wu and Wu, 2015).

2.4 The response (R): employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior

The responses of employees to a retailer's integration efforts could be assessed considering different outcomes, but the concept of customer engagement has emerged as one of the biggest challenges for omnichannel retailers (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Customer engagement is important because it leads to positive outcomes such as customer loyalty (Rather, 2018; Rather and Hollebeek, 2021). The concept of customer engagement is composed of emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions (Bailey *et al.*, 2021; Rather and Hollebeek, 2021). The behavioral manifestation of customer engagement reflects the level of customer involvement, participation and connection with the products, services and activities of the firm (Verhoef *et al.*, 2010).

Prior research has confirmed several antecedents of customer engagement behavior including positive emotions (Flavián *et al.*, 2021; Pansari and Kumar, 2017), service quality (Islam *et al.*, 2019), social support (Lee *et al.*, 2021) and customer knowledge sharing (Behnam *et al.*, 2021). However, despite the importance of providing a seamless customer journey (Neslin, 2022), literature on customer engagement has not yet given sufficient attention to integration efforts as a way to develop customer engagement (Gao and Huang, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2019). Interestingly, customer engagement behavior may start its development through an initial employee–customer interaction and then continue with additional encounters along the customer journey (Flavián *et al.*, 2021; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017).

Customer engagement starts within the service experience process (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017) and may therefore be observed by those agents involved in the provision of the service, that is, frontline employees. Frontline employees interact with customers every day in the physical store (Thomas and Pazour, 2021; Savastano *et al.*, 2019), so they may directly observe their brand-related behavior (Barnes *et al.*, 2013; Cambra-Fierro *et al.*, 2014). In fact, the social aspect of customer engagement is so important that it may be observed in the public context of consumption (Rather and Hollebeek, 2021). Even in the online environment, frontline employees may assess customer engagement behavior, as they have become “silent observers” by quietly witnessing the online interactions between the company and the customers (López-López *et al.*, 2021).

There are antecedents of a similar approach in the studies of Savastano *et al.* (2019) and Yoo *et al.* (2020). In Savastano *et al.*'s (2019) study, employees assessed customer experience in an omnichannel retail environment. In Yoo *et al.* (2020), employees evaluated customers in terms of time, effort and cocreation behavior in product and service development. According to these studies' authors, frontline employees may have a well-formed opinion about customer behavior. Similarly, this study assumes that employees may have a well-formed opinion about customer engagement behavior.

3. Research model and hypotheses' development

The SOR model suggests that the effects of environmental stimuli on behavior are mediated through an organism state, such as affective and cognitive aspects including feelings and thoughts (Dabbous and Barakat, 2020). Following recent IMC and omnichannel marketing research, this study focuses on the integration efforts at a communication and a channel level as environmental stimuli driving employees' internal affective (attitudes toward marketing communications) and cognitive responses (synergy realization).

3.1 Integration at a communication level

Under the renewed IMC conceptualization, communication consistency reflects the communication of consistent and transparent positioning through the company's touchpoints (Porcu *et al.*, 2019). Communication consistency nowadays constitutes a challenge due to the wide range of media options available (Kitchen, 2017; Valos *et al.*, 2017; Šerić *et al.*, 2020). IMC advocates have agreed that the consistency of owned touchpoints is one of the basic pillars of the integration approach (Porcu *et al.*, 2019; Šerić *et al.*, 2020).

With the SOR model, frontline employees may perceive the consistency of owned touchpoints as an external stimulus that may influence their internal affective state. Following Payne *et al.*'s (2017) recommendation regarding the selection of an easy operationalization of touchpoints, four retailer brand-owned touchpoints were selected: physical stores, corporate website, brand pages in SNSs and the app. The reason for this selection is explained below.

First, physical stores were selected for being the place where employee–customer interactions occur. In addition, physical stores are of great importance in the retailing sector and have proven to be more influential on customers than many other touchpoints (Ieva and Ziliani, 2018; Baxendale *et al.*, 2015). Second, the corporate website was chosen because it represents the most widely used touchpoint (Islam *et al.*, 2020). Third, brand pages in SNSs were selected because of their social character (Hallikainen *et al.*, 2019). Finally, the app was selected because of its increasing importance in the retailing sector. As a result of this selection, communication consistency perceived by employees was conceptualized in this study as the communication of a consistent and common message across the physical stores, the corporate website, the brand pages on SNSs and the app.

The studies conducted from a customer perspective have shown positive outcomes derived from communication consistency. For instance, Šerić *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that communication consistency has a strong direct impact on brand loyalty. In addition, Navarro *et al.* (2009) observed that a consistent communication campaign resulted in more favorable attitudes toward the campaign. From the perspective of employees, Deepa and Baral (2022) observed that the perceived impact of effective integrated communications shapes employees' attitudes, proving that employees are aware of the importance of integration at a communication level.

The most immediate internal response of communication consistency on employees is likely to be positive affect (O) in the form of attitudes, explaining the mechanism by which integration efforts at a communication level evoke a change in the perception of customer engagement behavior. The higher the consistency between physical stores, corporate website, brand pages on SNSs and the app, the more positive will be the internal affective state generated among employees because employees find their retailers to be doing a good job at a communication level (Yoo *et al.*, 2020). In addition, when individuals perceive stimuli as consistent, they form positive attitudes (Yin *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H1.* Communication consistency has a positive effect on frontline employees' attitudes toward marketing communications.

From the perspective of IMC, it is vital to understand the synergies obtained between different media for marketing communications. In fact, the essence of IMC is all about consistency and synergy (Henninger *et al.*, 2017). One of the main goals of IMC is synergy realization as the company attempts to integrate all messages into one voice (Kitchen, 2017). Synergy realization can be defined as the improvement of a business via effective integration (Wu and Wu, 2015). Different synergies have been identified in the literature,

such as improving customer trust, improving customer awareness, reducing consumer risk and covering diverse shopping preferences (Neslin *et al.*, 2006). As synergy implies that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, synergy realization can be considered as a cognitive internal perception according to the SOR model.

Traditional research on IMC has found support for synergy realization when combining different media (for a review, see Naik and Peters, 2009). Havlena *et al.* (2007) found synergies between print and television. Recent work on social media has begun to find support for IMC proposals about synergy realization. For instance, Kumar *et al.* (2016) observed that social media works synergistically with both television advertising and e-mail marketing. Based on the SOR model, the cognitive internal response derived from communication consistency may be employees' perception of synergy realization. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H2. Communication consistency has a positive effect on frontline employees' perceptions of synergy realization.

3.2 Integration at channel level

Given the importance of physical stores for both IMC and omnichannel marketing, the concept of channel coordination has gained relevance. Channel coordination is complex in terms of the large variety of combinations available (Wu and Wu, 2015). Nevertheless, there seems to be consensus regarding the need to effectively integrate online channels with physical stores to produce the most positive results for the company (Cui *et al.*, 2021; Herhausen *et al.*, 2015; Valos *et al.*, 2016). Following Wu and Wu (2015), this study uses the concept of "channel coordination" to refer to the extent to which the firm integrates marketing activities in offline and online channels (p. 245).

Because of channel coordination, different synergies may arise (Hajdas *et al.*, 2022). Although there is still little empirical evidence on synergy realization derived from channel coordination, Herhausen *et al.* (2015) concluded that channel coordination can be used as a means of achieving competitive advantage in the retailing sector. In addition, Gao and Huang (2021) found a positive effect derived from channel coordination on customer loyalty. Moreover, Wu and Wu (2015) observed an improvement in related customer-based synergies, such as trust. Thus, recent evidence seems to suggest that synergies can be achieved via the adequate coordination of the online and physical channels.

Since frontline employees interact with customers (Yoo *et al.*, 2020) regarding various issues (product availability, promotions, prices, etc.) that may differ between physical stores and online sources (Herhausen *et al.*, 2015), this study proposes that when frontline employees perceive channel coordination as an external stimulus, a cognitive internal response in the form of synergy realization will arise. According to the premise of the SOR model, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H3. Channel coordination has a positive impact on frontline employees' perceptions of synergy realization.

3.3 Impact on employees' perceptions about customer engagement

According to SOR theory, employees' responses (R) may depend on their internal affective state (attitudes toward marketing communications) derived from the external stimulus to which they have been exposed (communication consistency). In this sense, previous

literature has demonstrated that attitudes tend to drive behavior, particularly engagement (Gastil and Xenos, 2010).

Although restricted to social media, Bailey *et al.* (2021) found a positive relationship between attitudes toward company communications through their SNSs and customer engagement. Similarly, Gao and Huang (2021) observed that consistency across channels was related to customer engagement. Given this relationship between attitudes and engagement (Gastil and Xenos, 2010), employees who have a favorable attitudes toward marketing communications may transfer this internal affective state to an improved perception of customer engagement behavior. Since the retailer by whom they are employed has worked well at a communication level, their attitudes toward marketing communications (O) are expected to enhance their perceptions about customer engagement behavior (R). Based on the SOR model, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Attitudes toward marketing communications have a positive impact on employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior.

The internal response of synergy realization may also affect employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior. In fact, synergy realization in terms of customer trust may favor engagement (Liu *et al.*, 2018; Palvia, 2009). Therefore, once trust in the brand has been obtained and risk perceptions reduced, employees' perceptions about customer engagement will probably be higher.

Another common synergy – customer awareness – pertains to the existence of the brand in the consumer's mind; therefore, the achievement of synergies in the form of customer awareness may also foster engagement (Hutter *et al.*, 2013). Other described synergies, such as service quality and customer experience, have also been related to customer engagement (Prentice *et al.*, 2019). Based on the SOR model, employees' internal cognitive responses about the different synergies achieved (such as customer trust, service efficiency and improved customer awareness) will provoke a response in employees, enhancing their perceptions about customer engagement behavior since they will perceive more opportunities for customer engagement to take place. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

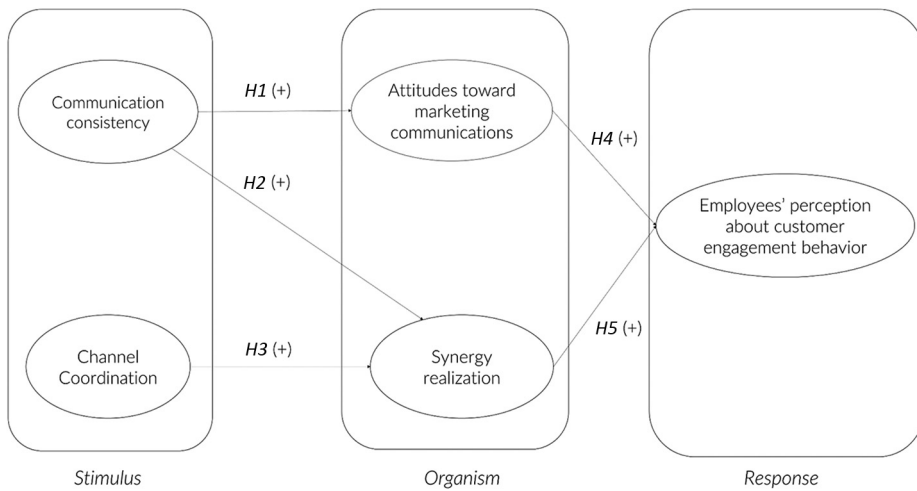
H5. Synergy realization has a positive impact on employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior.

Figure 1 reflects the conceptual model based on the SOR model that forms the basis for the study's hypotheses. The conceptual model may be useful to understand how integration efforts at a communication level and at a channel level may foster employees' perceptions about customer engagement through attitudes toward marketing communications and synergy realization.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data collection and sample

The model was tested using data gathered from a survey conducted in the physical stores of different retailers located in shopping centers. The sampling procedure consisted of a nonprobabilistic, convenience sampling method (Malhotra and Birks, 2007). The survey was administered through face-to-face questionnaires conducted in two shopping centers in two Spanish cities – a large city and a small–medium city (see Table 1). Data were collected in December 2019 over a period of two weeks. The interviewer approached frontline employees in physical stores, and they were kindly asked to participate in the survey research.



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Figure 1.
Conceptual model proposed

	Gender		Time working for the retailer		Physical store evaluation	
	Men	Women	<1 year	>1 year	M (SD)	F (sig.)
City 1	40.8% (42)	59.2% (61)	38.8% (40)	61.2% (63)	4.55 (0.59)	0.041 (0.841)
City 2	50.8% (65)	49.2% (63)	30.5% (39)	69.5% (89)	4.53 (0.62)	
Total	46.3% (107)	53.7% (124)	34.2% (79)	69.5% (152)		

	Apparel	Shoes/complements	Cosmetics	Home appliances	Technology	Others
	City 1	47.6% (49)	21.4% (22)	9.7% (10)	5.8% (6)	1.0% (1)
City 2	48.4% (62)	24.2% (31)	10.2% (13)	6.3% (8)	2.3% (3)	8.6% (11)
Total	48.1% (111)	22.9% (53)	10.0% (23)	6.1% (14)	1.7% (4)	11.3% (26)

Table 1.
Sample description

Participants comprised 231 frontline employees from the retail sector. A total of 47.6% of the sample had worked in their store for between one and five years, 34.2% for less than a year and 18.2% for more than five years. Apparel retailers accounted for almost half of the sample, and the other half was composed of sectors such as furniture, groceries, technology, home appliances and cosmetics. There was a similar distribution among retailers for the two cities across these variables. Frontline employees were asked to evaluate the physical store where they were working on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 5 (very good), and there were no differences between the mean values of the two cities for physical store evaluation. Employees rated their corresponding stores quite favorably, with a mean value of 4.54.

4.2 Measurement

The scales used in the questionnaire were extracted from those used in the extant literature and had previously been translated into Spanish. Four academic professionals and two undergraduate students completed the questionnaire as a pretest to ensure a proper understanding of the different questions. Survey guidelines established by Fowler and Cosenza (2009) were used to assess the clarity of the instructions, the clarity of the wording, the relevance of the items, the absence of biased language and the format of the questionnaire.

Table 2.
Scale refinement

Construct/items (Source)	Loading (<i>t</i> -value)
<i>Communication consistency (S)</i>	
Adapted from Šerić <i>et al.</i> (2020); $\alpha = 0.91$; CR = 0.931; AVE = 0.772	
There is coherence between the company's website and the information available in the physical store	0.812 (21.422)
There is coherence between the company's communication and the information available in the physical store	0.905 (47.221)
There is coherence between the company's social network sites and the information available in the physical store	0.918 (50.006)
The company's marketing communication tools (website, social networks, apps and physical stores) focus on a common message	0.874 (28.470)
<i>Channel coordination (S)</i>	
Adapted from Wu and Wu (2015); $\alpha = 0.82$; CR = 0.836; AVE = 0.564	
The company offers the same products online and in physical channels	0.771 (22.060)
The company uses cross-advertisement or promotion in online and physical channels	0.805 (20.233)
The company provides identical prices in online and physical channels	0.796 (20.761)
The company offers online help or technical support for products purchased at physical stores	0.615 (11.703)
<i>Attitudes toward marketing communications (O)</i>	
Adapted from Shen <i>et al.</i> (2016); $\alpha = 0.91$; CR = 0.927; AVE = 0.809	
My opinion of the company's marketing communications is favorable	0.845 (29.449)
The company's marketing communications are interesting	0.945 (45.618)
The company's marketing communication strategy is good	0.906 (41.620)
<i>Synergy realization (O)</i>	
Adapted from Wu and Wu (2015); $\alpha = 0.83$; CR = 0.841; AVE = 0.571	
The company improves customer trust by providing different channels for purchasing products	0.789 (19.274)
The company covers diverse shopping preferences for customers with different channels	0.690 (16.655)
The company improves customer awareness by cross-promoting products via different channels	0.785 (22.012)
The company improves service efficiency for customers by providing more channels for purchasing products	0.756 (18.910)
<i>Employees' perception about customer engagement behavior (R)</i>	
Adapted from Cambra-Fierro <i>et al.</i> (2014); $\alpha = 0.76$; CR = 0.780; AVE = 0.548	
Our customers are willing to share their shopping experiences	0.630 (9.188)
Our customers are willing to suggest the company's products	0.902 (22.868)
Our customers are willing to recommend the company's products	0.660 (11.937)

All scales were measured using five points. Table 2 contains detailed information on the measures used in the study. As frontline employees responded to all items, some of them had to be adapted to this specific target.

The measurement for communication consistency ($\alpha = 0.91$) was based on Šerić *et al.* (2020) and included specific items to assess consistency between the physical stores and the remaining selected touchpoints owned (corporate website, brand pages on SNSs, app). For instance, one item was “there is coherence between the company's website and the information available in the physical store.” The channel coordination scale ($\alpha = 0.82$) was based on Wu and Wu (2015) and included items such as “the company offers the same products online and via physical channels.” The scale of attitudes toward marketing

communications ($\alpha = 0.91$) was based on Shen *et al.* (2016) and included items such as “my opinion of the company’s marketing communications is favorable.” The synergy realization scale ($\alpha = 0.83$) was based on Wu and Wu (2015), and included several synergies such as trust, awareness or service efficiency. For instance, one item was “the company improves customer trust by providing different channels for purchasing products.” Finally, the measure of employees’ perceptions about customer engagement behavior ($\alpha = 0.76$) was based on Cambra-Fierro *et al.* (2014) but adapted to be responded to by frontline employees. This scale employed items such as “our customers are willing to suggest the company’s products.”

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the measures used. The fit of the measurement model was acceptable [$\chi^2(125) = 251.741, p = 0.000$; RMSEA = 0.061; SRMR = 0.064; CFI = 0.949, NNFI = 0.938; IFI = 0.950, TLI = 0.938]. As Table 2 shows, each item has significant factor loadings ($p < 0.01$) for the theorized constructs, and all values are over 0.60 (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Next, satisfied convergent validity analyses were performed. All the construct reliabilities exceeded the critical value of 0.70 and the average variance extracted (AVE) was above 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was calculated for each scale to evaluate the scale reliability (see Table 2).

Table 3 contains information regarding the discriminant validity of the study’s constructs, as well as their descriptive statistics. Two approaches were used to assess discriminant validity. First, the AVE for each construct was compared with the squared correlation between construct pairs (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) to check that the AVE exceeded the squared correlations for all measures. Second, the confidence interval was calculated at plus or minus two standard errors around the correlation between factors (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988); none of the confidence intervals in the analysis included 1.

Common method bias assessment was carried out to ensure the validity of the study results. Common method bias can be avoided using appropriate procedural and statistical techniques (Malhotra *et al.*, 2017). Regarding the procedural techniques, several remedies were implemented:

- the questionnaire was pretested;
- participants were informed that their answers would be treated anonymously;
- participants were told that there were no right or wrong answers; and
- participants were encouraged to answer questions as honestly as possible (Malhotra *et al.*, 2017).

Second, regarding the statistical techniques, all items were modeled as indicators of a single factor representing the common method effect. Confirmatory factor analysis

Concept	1	2	3	4	5
1. Communication consistency	<i>0.7718</i>	0.282	0.288	0.215	0.105
2. Channel coordination	0.413; 0.649	<i>0.564</i>	0.056	0.514	0.048
3. Attitudes toward marketing communications	0.394; 0.681	0.080; 0.392	<i>0.809</i>	0.095	0.063
4. Synergy realization	0.328; 0.600	0.625; 0.809	0.145; 0.473	<i>0.571</i>	0.127
5. Customer engagement behavior	0.166; 0.482	0.072; 0.368	0.116; 0.384	0.210; 0.502	<i>0.548</i>

Note: ^aNumbers in italic represent the AVEs for the variables (diagonal), squared correlation (above the diagonal) and confidence intervals (below the diagonal)

Table 3. Discriminant validity^a

showed poor fitness [χ^2 (153) = 2,339.482, p = 0.000, NNFI = 0.440, IFI = 0.537, CFI = 0.533, RMSEA = 0.198], confirming that common method bias was not a great concern in this study.

5. Model and hypotheses’ testing

5.1 Research model

A structural equation modeling approach was followed using Lavaan package R. The structural model’s fit to the data was acceptable [χ^2 = 234.613 (129), p < 0.01; NNFI = 0.943; IFI = 0.952; CFI = 0.952; TLI = 0.943; RMSEA = 0.061, SRMR = 0.068]. The results obtained are shown in Table 4. The effect of communication consistency on frontline employees’ attitudes toward marketing communications was significant and positive (β = 0.538, p = 0.000), supporting *H1*. A positive relationship between communication consistency and synergy realization emerged (β = 0.130, p = 0.100) but was not significant at a 5% level. Thus, *H2* is not fully supported. In addition, there was a positive and significant effect of channel coordination on synergy realization (β = 0.647, p = 0.000), supporting *H3*. That is, when employees perceive that the retailer integrates marketing activities in offline and online channels, they will see synergy realization more likely. Finally, both employees’ attitudes toward marketing communications (β = 0.164, p = 0.013) and synergy realization (β = 0.302, p = 0.000) were found to enhance employees’ perceptions about customer engagement behavior, supporting *H4* and *H5*.

5.2 Mediation analysis

The results show that the indirect effect of communication consistency on employees’ perceptions about customer engagement behavior through attitudes toward marketing communications is significant (β = 0.068, p < 0.05). The results also show that the indirect effect of channel coordination on employees’ perceptions about customer engagement behavior through synergy realization is significant (β = 0.104, p < 0.01). However, no support was found for the indirect effect of communication consistency on employees’ perceptions about customer engagement behavior through synergy realization (β = 0.030, p > 0.10) (see Table 5).

	Path	Coefficient	Standard error	
Communication consistency	→ Employees’ attitudes toward marketing communications	0.538***	0.072	<i>H1</i> (supported)
Communication consistency	→ Synergy realization	0.130*	0.079	<i>H2</i> (not fully supported)
Channel coordination	→ Synergy realization	0.647***	0.063	<i>H3</i> (supported)
Attitudes toward marketing communications	→ Employees’ perception about customer engagement behavior	0.164***	0.066	<i>H4</i> (supported)
Synergy realization	→ Employees’ perception about customer engagement behavior	0.302***	0.074	<i>H5</i> (supported)

Table 4.
Results of SEM analysis

Notes: *** p < 0.01; * p ≤ 0.10

Table 5.
Indirect effects

	Path		Coefficient	Standard error
Communication consistency	→ Attitudes toward marketing communications	→ Employees' perception about customer engagement behavior	0.068***	0.033
Communication consistency	→ Synergy realization	→ Employees' perception about customer engagement behavior	0.030 (ns)	0.021
Channel coordination	→ Synergy realization	→ Employees' perception about customer engagement behavior	0.104***	0.033

Note: *** $p < 0.01$

Finally, to test if the different range of experience of the sample may have influenced the results obtained, a multigroup analysis was conducted with two clearly differentiated subsamples: one year or less working in the retail store (low experience) and more than one year working in the retail store (high experience). Multigroup analysis begins with the estimation of two models: one in which all parameters are allowed to differ between groups (free model) and one in which all parameters are fixed to those obtained from analysis of the pooled data across groups (constrained model). If the two models are not significantly different (ANOVA), it can be assumed that there is no variation in the path coefficients by group, and the multigroup approach is not necessary. As shown in Table 6, the comparison of the free and constrained models by ANOVA did not reveal significant differences, indicating that the coefficients did not vary between the two groups. Thus, the results are similar for employees with low and high experience in the retail store.

6. General discussion

Unlike many other studies that have approached customer engagement, this study was developed using employees as key informants, as this group represents the primary remaining source of personal contact between a company and its customers (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020). Thus, the results complement studies analyzing integration efforts using retailers (Hajdas *et al.*, 2022; Savastano *et al.*, 2019) or customers (Mishra *et al.*, 2021; Šerić *et al.*, 2020) as an information source.

Consistent with IMC theories, communication consistency was found to have a positive impact on employees' attitudes toward marketing communications. Consistency is a basic pillar of the IMC framework (Bruhn and Schnebelen, 2017; Porcu *et al.*, 2019), and employees' attitudes seem to be affected by communication consistency. The effect of communication consistency on synergy realization was marginally significant, which reveals that communication consistency as an external stimulus (S) seems to be more important for inducing an affective internal response (O) in employees (in terms of attitudes toward

Table 6.
ANOVA free model and constrained model in multigroup SEM analysis

	Df	Chi-squared difference test			Diff Df	Diff	Pr(>Chi-sq)
		AIC	BIC	Chi-sq			
Free model	295	9,278.4	9,560.4	495.95			
Constrained model	300	9,276.9	9,541.9	504.46	5	7.6093	0.1791

marketing communications), compared to inducing an internal cognitive response (synergy realization).

Regarding integration efforts at channel level, channel coordination showed a positive impact on synergy realization. Channel coordination seems to act as an external stimulus (S) provoking a cognitive response in employees (O) in terms of synergy realization. This result is important since efforts at channel level are very demanding (Wu and Wu, 2015), imposing many barriers and difficulties on retailers (Hajdas *et al.*, 2022). According to frontline employees, the results clearly indicate that such efforts are likely to be rewarded with the achievement of various synergies such as customer trust, awareness or service efficiency.

Regarding the outcome of the proposed model (R), both affective (attitudes toward marketing communications) and cognitive organismic responses (synergy realization) enhance employees' perceptions of customer engagement behavior. The mediation results also support the role of employees' attitudes toward marketing communications and synergy realization in explaining the effects of a retailer's integration efforts on employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior. This result is consistent with findings of Arghashi and Yuksel (2022) and Bailey *et al.* (2021) regarding the mediating role of attitudes on customer engagement. It also extends the results obtained by Gao and Huang (2021) about how to facilitate customer engagement behavior.

6.1 Conclusion

Drawing on the SOR model and on the recent findings of both IMC and omnichannel marketing literature, this study concludes that communication consistency and channel coordination are key for developing customer engagement behavior from the perspective of employees. The results provide insights into the importance of integration efforts at both communication and channel levels, which act as key stimuli inducing employees' affective (attitudes toward marketing communications) and cognitive responses (synergy realization) and indirectly contributing to increase their perception of customer engagement behavior.

6.2 Theoretical contribution

This study contributes to the customer engagement literature in several ways. First, it contributes to the extant literature by broadening the antecedents for developing customer engagement behavior in the retail sector. Previous studies (Gao and Huang, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2019) had focused only on quality of channel integration as antecedent of customer engagement. This study shows that integration efforts at a communication level should be added to integration efforts at a channel level to better capture their potential influence on customer engagement behavior.

Second, this study also delves into the mechanisms through which employees' perceptions about customer engagement behavior are formed. Based on SOR theory, this study identifies the affective and cognitive organismic responses that are derived in the perception of customer engagement behavior. First, communication consistency across owned touchpoints acts as an external stimulus generating an affective organismic response among employees, improving their attitudes toward marketing communications. Second, channel coordination acts as an external stimulus that generates a cognitive organismic response among employees in the form of synergy realization.

Finally, this research approached the study of customer engagement behavior from the employees' perspective. While previous research has been focused on customers (Mishra *et al.*, 2021; Valos *et al.*, 2016), marketing managers (Wu and Wu, 2015) or brand managers (Luxton *et al.*, 2015; Savastano *et al.*, 2019) as key informants, this study was developed using frontline employees as informants. Although some work has already focused on

employees to assess customer behavior (Savastano *et al.*, 2019; Yoo *et al.*, 2020), little research has used employees as informants of customer behavior in a retailing context.

6.3 Implications for practitioners

The current study identifies several significant practical and managerial implications for retailers. In addition to channel coordination, this study highly recommends consistency in the communication conducted across all owned touchpoints. Specifically, it is important to maintain a common message through a business’s website, brand pages in SNSs, app and physical stores. Instead of considering only the website (Islam *et al.*, 2020), SNSs (Dabbous and Barakat, 2020), app (Wu *et al.*, 2021) or physical stores (Cachero-Martínez and Vázquez-Casielles, 2017), this paper demonstrates the importance of integrating all these owned touchpoints for enhancing customer engagement behavior. Nowadays, the number of channels and media that must be integrated is growing (e.g. TikTok, Snapchat, Twitch), and it is a huge challenge for retailers to operate consistently and in coordination, transmitting a common message across them.

This study also recommends (see Table 7) that retailers regularly collect information from their employees as they are closer to customers and may provide useful insights about how to develop customer engagement. They are very important agents in the so-called service ecosystem that constitutes retail stores (Han *et al.*, 2022), as face-to-face contact is one of the most important touchpoints along the customer journey. Managers should also consider that the digitalization era is changing the form and function of a physical store (Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020). Hence, the function of frontline employees is emerging as a critical touchpoint in the customer journey. Employees may offer a different or an amplified perspective, but at the same time, one that is complementary to that of customers (Barnes *et al.*, 2013; Yavas, 2007). Since customers evaluate the overall quality of the service provided by the retailer, employees may offer information about how consumers move across channels and whether the retailer is avoiding cross-channel free riding (Savastano *et al.*, 2019).

Conclusions	Theoretical contributions	Managerial implications
1. Communication consistency and channel coordination act as key stimuli inducing employees’ affective and cognitive responses	1. Integration efforts at a communication level should be considered when assessing customer engagement	1. A common message should be maintained through a retailer’s website, app, brand pages and physical stores
2. A retailer’s integration efforts contribute to increase employees’ perceptions about customer engagement	2. Communication consistency across owned touchpoints improves employees’ attitudes toward marketing communications	2. Retailers should regularly collect information from employees to obtain useful insights about how to develop customer engagement
	3. Channel coordination generates a cognitive response among employees in the form of synergy realization	3. Frontline employees emerge as a critical touchpoint in the customer journey since they know well how consumers move across channels
	4. Unlike previous research, customer engagement is evaluated from the employees’ perspective	

Table 7. Conclusions, theoretical and managerial implications

6.4 Limitations and future research

This work has several limitations that could lead to future research. It has only evaluated customer engagement behavior from an employee's perspective. Future research may use a dyadic approach to analyze both employees' and customers' perceptions regarding communication consistency and channel coordination for a particular retailer. In addition, the fact that some employees were working for less than a year can be considered as a limitation since they may be less aware of their retailers' integration efforts and may have less experience to assess customer engagement behavior. Similarly, employee–customer interactions may be more likely in some sectors (e.g. technology) than in others (e.g. apparel), making it more difficult for employees with fewer interactions with customers to assess customer engagement behavior.

Finally, this study has not considered certain aspects related to the employee–retailer relationship (e.g. working environment, training). In this sense, [Hajdas et al. \(2022\)](#) have highlighted the growing importance of employee-related factors as channel integration increases. Similarly, [Song et al. \(2019\)](#) proposed that employees' competencies are essential for improving integration in the context of omnichannel retailing.

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