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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN AN
EVOLVING CONTEXT.
FROM SINGLE CHANNEL TO OMNICHANNEL USE.

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“International Mention”

*Reserve your right to think, for even to think wrongly is
better than not to think at all.*

Hypatia (Υπάτια)

A Ellas.

A mis abuelas, a mi madre, a mi hermana.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the development of the internet and the world wide web in the 1990s, the retail context has undergone an extraordinary evolution. Thus, technology's expansion has intensely affected business models and it has also provoked changes in consumer behavior. Focusing on consumer behavior, technological growth has radically changed the way in which consumers interact with companies and also how they purchase. Specifically, the internet allowed firms new ways of transferring their products and services to the ultimate consumer, in sum, it entailed a new possible distribution channel through which consumers could buy products, and, as a result, new ways of purchase emerged. E-commerce, or computer-mediated commerce, initially appeared as a revolutionary way of buying, changing all of the schemas of retailers. Subsequently, these technological advances led to the development of new devices, especially the internet-enabled mobile devices. These devices improved retail possibilities from the beginning, with the Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) and, later, with the introduction of smartphones and tablets, which brought about the emergence of mobile commerce (m-commerce).

Not surprisingly, these channels have become common purchase channels. According to, Statista (2019a) people worldwide who buy products and services through digital¹ devices has increased from 1.32 billion in 2014 to 1.79 billion in 2018. This figure is expected to reach 2.14 billion people by 2021, which will mean a growth of more than 60% in seven years. In addition, this implies that in 2021 the digital sales will represent more than 17% of all retail sales worldwide (Statista, 2019b).

¹ The term "digital" is used throughout this dissertation as an umbrella term (Hanson & Kalyanam, 2000) including both online (computer-mediated channel) and mobile (mobile-mediated channel) channels.

However, although digital devices –online and mobile– have transformed the way people buy, consumer behavior has continued to evolve. Once consumers assimilated the use of digital devices to buy, they started combining regularly these digital devices with brick and mortar² during all the stages of the decision-making process. As a result, consumer behavior evolved from a single to a multiple use of channels³ for interacting with firms.

Specifically, in 2017 a study of 46,000 shoppers revealed that 7% of consumers shopped on the internet exclusively, 20% were physical store-only shoppers and 73% used multiple channels during their shopping journey (Sopadjieva, Dholakia, & Benjamin, 2017). However, this multiple channel use does not mean an independent use, on the contrary, consumers treat all the channels as complementary. For example, an Insight from Google (2019) showed that some terms referred to the physical store, such as "open" and "close" and combined with "now" have increased more than 200% in the mobile searchers from 2015-2017. This data offers an interesting picture of how the particularities of each channel are exploited by consumers' personal convenience. But, what is more, this can represent a great opportunity for firms to canalize consumers between channels.

Under these circumstances, several firms have increasingly acknowledged the importance of these behaviors, and they have adapted their strategies to this evolving context. At the beginning, companies started adding channels (online and mobile) to their retail strategy and then conceiving of channels as a whole. For instance, Macy's and Nordstrom⁴ have adapted their decisions to the "multiple channel world" with a maxim: offering an excellent customer experience across all the channels (Loeb, 2019). In the same line, after its launch to the digital retail, Inditex Group⁵ has been adapting its strategical decisions to this evolving consumer until becoming one of the examples of success (Kantar Consulting, 2018). Moreover, some practitioners, such as the Marketing Science Institute, have also highlighted this topic as a research priority since 2010 (MSI, 2010, 2018).

² Throughout this dissertation, we refer to brick and mortar channel also with the terms "offline" and "physical".

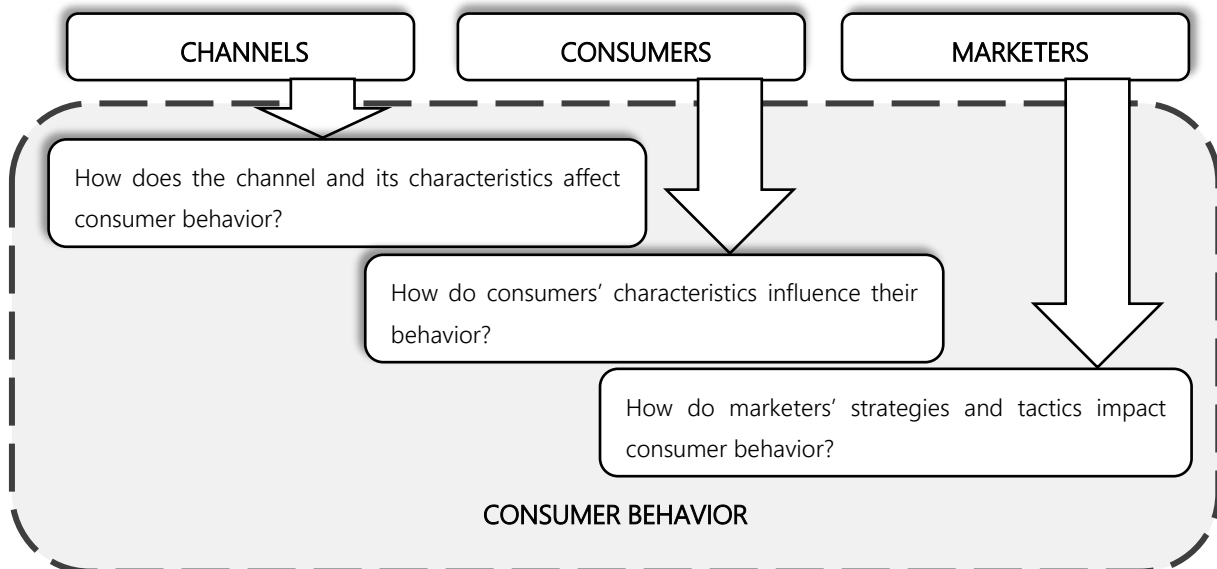
³ Although we acknowledge the existence of other channels and touchpoints (e.g. catalogs, telemarketing, mail order, TV, kiosks...), this dissertation focuses on the brick and mortar, as offline channel, and the main digital channels (online, considering PC and laptop; and mobile that includes smartphone and tablet).

⁴ Macy's (<https://www.macys.com/>) and Nordstrom (<https://shop.nordstrom.com/>) are two American department stores.

⁵ Inditex Group is a Spanish clothing company (<https://www.inditex.com/es/home>).

Consequently, the particularities of consumer behavior in this evolving context have also attracted the interest of academics. Specifically, in the last decade, this topic has been the objective of several special issues in high impact journals, such as the *Journal of Interactive Marketing* (Shankar & Yadav, 2010), the *International Journal of Electronic Commerce* (Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014a) and the *Journal of Retailing* (Brown & Mantrala, 2015). Additionally, some scholars started to develop conceptual models and approaches to deepen the knowledge of this consumer. One example of this is the proposed approach developed by Dholakia et al. (2010) for studying consumer behavior in multichannel environments. These authors, adopting a consumer-centric view, provided a comprehensive framework consisting of three key pillars: channels, consumers and marketers (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Overview of Dholakia's et al. (2010) framework.



Source: Own elaboration.

These pillars have been also emphasized by Kumar (2010), who suggested that customer lifetime value could be determined by firms' decisions, customers' characteristics and preferences, and the proliferation of media and channels. In addition, these pillars have been directly or indirectly considered as priorities in consumer behavior research by current researchers (e.g. Cummins, Peltier, & Dixon, 2016; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014b; Saghiri, Wilding, Mena, & Bourlakis, 2017).

As Dholakia et al. (2010) stated, all **the channels** present differences that are key to understanding consumer behavior in this environment. For instance, a brick-and-mortar store allows consumers to touch and physically evaluate the products, while in digital channels this is

presented as the main restriction. However, digital channels offer greater convenience, consumers can buy at any time through PCs and laptops, and also everywhere via mobile devices. On the contrary, the physical store is immobile and limited to a geographical place and certain open hours. In addition to the channels, **consumers** hold several characteristics that affect somehow their choices and their subsequent behaviors. Consumer internal factors, such as experience, personality or emotions, can influence the way they interact with the channels. In some cases, these factors lead consumers to the use of channels in isolation; in other instances, they drive them to combine physical and digital channels as a unique channel. Finally, **marketers'** actions are crucial in consumer-channel interactions. Specifically, the information and the level of assistance provided by the firm are two critical factors that affect consumption. In addition, the channels structure and the degree of assortment that the marketers offer via each channel are crucial. In sum, the manner in which marketers manage all the channels will influence consumers' behaviors and responses.

The authors argued that collectively these three pillars offer a "broad-based set of variables" for enriching the study of consumer behavior (Dholakia et al., 2010, p. 91). Although the approach was originally proposed to advance multichannel retailing, the authors stated that this framework could be updated to the context requirements. As a result, this dissertation takes this framework as a reference and adapts it to the studied context, considering as pillars in current retailing: (1) the digital channels, (2) the omni-consumers and (3) the perceived role of omni-marketers. We enrich these three pillars addressing different questions about consumer behavior in this evolving context that are still unexplored.

For the first pillar, we consider **the digital channels**. Concretely, we deepen into the digital channels. First, we advance the understanding of the single use of the mobile channel. Then, we elaborate on the combined use of mobile and online channels, together with the physical store. Regarding the second pillar, consumers, we focus on **omni-consumers** (omnichannel consumers) –those who use several channels simultaneously (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014). Specifically, we try to analyze how their personal characteristics impact their reactions and behaviors. Finally, we adapt the marketers' pillar to the omnichannel context where consumers interact with companies across multiple retail channels seeking a seamless experience (Shen, Li, Sun, & Wang, 2018). In this case, we extend this pillar by considering **the perceived role of omni-marketers**. Essentially, we want to understand how the way consumers perceive the omnichannel vendors' decisions regarding the channels impact on their reactions and responses.

Therefore, the general objective of this PhD dissertation is to enrich research by studying how the digital channels, the consumers characteristics and the perceived role of marketers affect consumer behavior in this evolving context.

Adapting Dholakia's et al. (2010) approach, this general objective moves forward the three pillars –the digital channels, the omni-consumers and the perceived role of omni-marketers– to address four specific objectives.

- Specific objective 1: To offer a better understanding of consumer behavior in the mobile channel by analyzing how the particularities of mobile channel influence the mobile shopper's (m-shopper) internal states and their intention to continue shopping through mobile devices.
- Specific objective 2: To analyze how two traits of consumer personality (impulsiveness and need for touch) influence the channel choice in omnichannel processes, that is, combining the offline channel together with the online vs. the mobile channel.
- Specific objective 3: To test the role of the consumers' omnichannel tendency in the information processing by studying consumers' emotions and experiences undergone in the digital channel.
- Specific objective 4: To investigate the omnichannel seamless experience conceptually by proposing the dimensions of the construct, and empirically by testing its effect on consumer satisfaction.

To achieve these objectives, we draw upon previous knowledge (see Chapter 1). On the one hand, we observe the reality of the context in order to situate the research. Specifically, we look at several reports regarding consumers and practitioners' behaviors. On the other hand, we undertake a review of the most relevant academic research to clarify the main concepts and extant knowledge. In addition, in each chapter, we review the main specific literature to address each of the four specific objectives.

Subsequently, we base our research on different theoretical frameworks that allow us to nourish the investigation. Specially, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, the Trait Theory, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) are considered. Moreover, to empirically test the specific objectives, this dissertation follows two different research methods, the survey and the experimental design, each are used separately and combined depending on the objective.

The four specific objectives of this PhD dissertation fill several gaps detected by the extant literature. First, acknowledging the importance of mobile devices in the retail context, the literature has suggested a thorough study of the mobile channel (Gao, Waechter, & Bai, 2015; Groß, 2015). As a result, we elaborate on studying the mobile channel's continuance of shopping behaviors, while considering previous research recommendations (Shin, Kim, Park, & Oh, 2017; Susanto, Chang, & Ha, 2016).

Second, considering the clear differences between mobile and online devices, the literature has emphasized the inclusion of the mobile channel in the omnichannel research and the independent study of its particularities (e.g. Frasquet, Mollá, & Ruiz, 2015; Kushwaha & Shankar, 2013). Consequently, we advance this issue by analyzing the use of mobile versus online channels combined with the physical store when engaging in omnichannel processes.

Third, the individuals' internal characteristics have been considered as critical factors of consumer behavior (Dabholkar & Bagozzi, 2002). Subsequently, these factors have been proposed to be included in the multiple channel analyses (Barwitz & Maas, 2018; Dholakia et al., 2010). Specifically, Dholakia et al. (2010) underlined that consumers' goals, values, prior experiences, emotions or some dispositional characteristics, such as personality, can influence their use of a particular channel. To highlight this topic, we focus on omnichannel tendency (omni-tendency) –a technological-related trait consequence of consumer experience engaging in omnichannel shopping–, to understand the information processing (represented by emotions and experiences) in the digital store.

Finally, scholars have highlighted the importance of facilitating consumers' seamless experience in the omnichannel context (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018; Shen et al., 2018; Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015). However, although some authors have made an effort to conceptualize the customer experience in this context (e.g. Shi, Wang, Chen, & Zhang, 2020), there is no theoretical and empirical evidence about how firms can create such seamless experience and its importance in consumers' responses (Mosquera, Pascual, & Juaneda Ayensa, 2017; Verhoef et al., 2015). To address this unanswered question, this dissertation delineates theoretically the omnichannel seamless experience (OSE) construct, and empirically tests its downstream effects. Concretely, we develop the OSE construct and analyze its impact on consumer satisfaction.

Table 1 summarizes the specific objectives, approaches, methods, analyses, and main gaps that we address in each chapter.

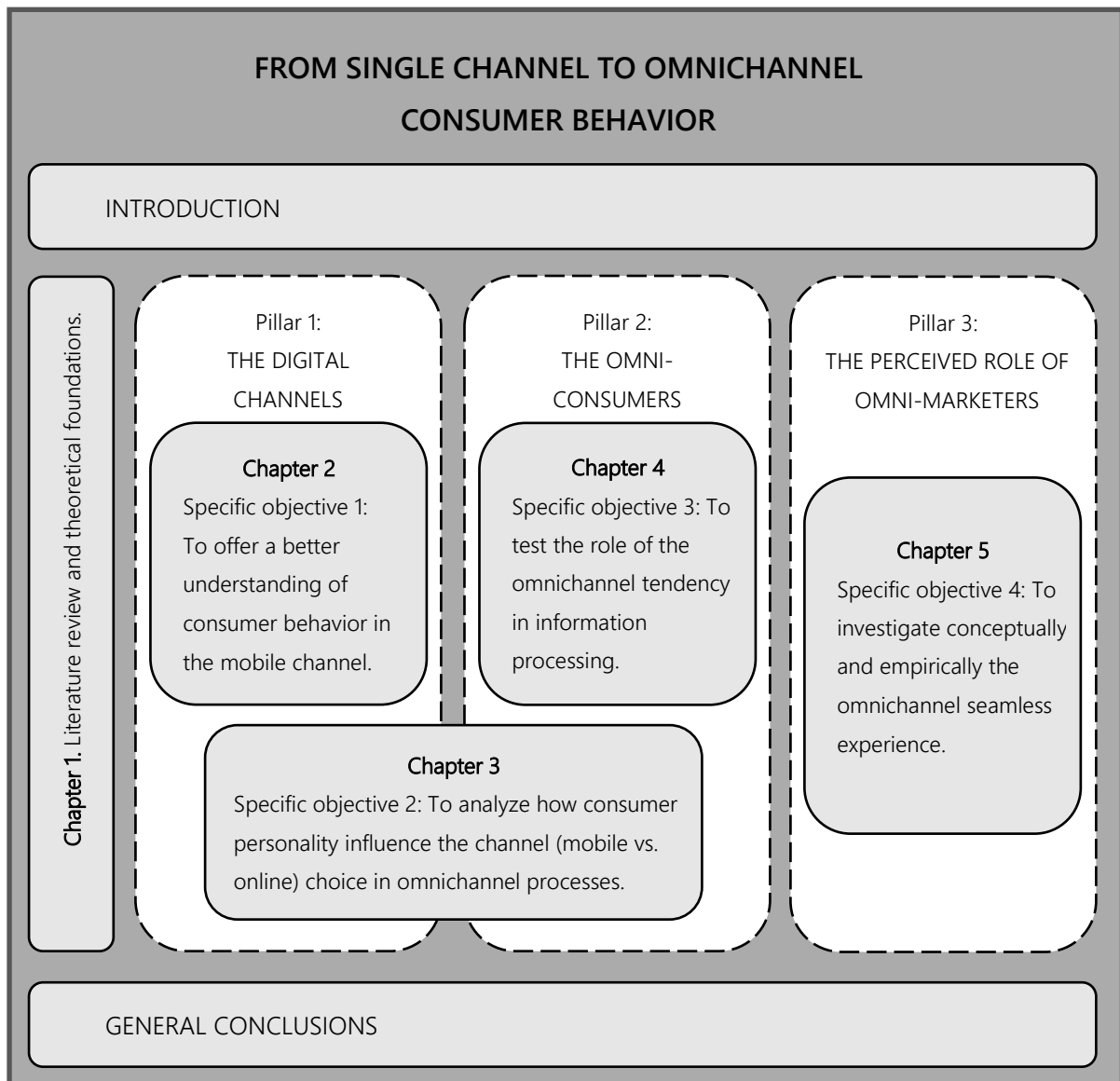
Table 1. Dissertation overview.

Chapter	Specific Objective	Approach	Method and analysis	Main gaps addressed
Chapter 2	To offer a better understanding of consumer behavior in the mobile channel by analyzing how the particularities of mobile channel influence the m-shopper internal states and their intention to continue shopping through mobile devices.	S-O-R model.	Survey of 122 m-shoppers. PLS-SEM and Mediation effect (bootstrapping).	To study the mobile channel independently and thoroughly by recognizing consumers continuance behaviors.
Chapter 3	To analyze how two traits of consumer personality (impulsiveness and need for touch) influence the channel choice in omnichannel processes, that is, combining the offline channel together with the online vs. the mobile channel.	Trait Theory.	Survey of 284 digital shoppers. ANOVA and Multiple linear regression.	To include the mobile channel in the omnichannel research by analyzing the combined use of mobile vs. online channels with the physical store.
Chapter 4	To test the role of the consumer omnichannel tendency in the information processing by studying consumers' emotions and experiences undergone in the digital channel	ELM.	Survey of 284 digital shoppers. PLS-SEM and MGA.	To study the impact of personality on consumers channel use by analyzing the effect of omni-tendency on information processing.
Chapter 5	To investigate the omnichannel seamless experience conceptually by proposing the dimensions of the construct, and empirically by testing its effect on consumer satisfaction.	OSE new proposal.	Survey of 170 omnichannel consumers. Experiment with 220 shoppers. Multiple linear regression, ANOVA, and MANOVA.	To offer theoretical and empirical evidence about the omnichannel seamless experience by proposing a measure and testing the impact of the construct.

Structure of the dissertation

The dissertation is organized based on the sequence of the proposed objectives. Hence, we structure the dissertation in five chapters. After this introduction, the literature review and theoretical foundations are presented in Chapter 1. Then, the four specific objectives are addressed in the next chapters. Finally, the general conclusions drawn from the detailed analysis of the previous chapters are discussed (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Structure of the dissertation.



All the chapters address the general objective of this doctorate dissertation. However, each chapter presents a specific procedure to achieve it. Consequently, Chapters 2 to 5 are independent investigations that develop different empirical studies that deal with the specific objectives mentioned above.

Before developing the empirical studies, in Chapter 1, we offer a detailed literature review that allows us to establish the basis of the research. In addition, in this chapter we present the different theoretical approaches that nourish the PhD dissertation. Besides, we explain how the different theories have been applied by previous research in the context. Both aspects increase our understanding of the evolving context and help us to lay the foundations of the research.

After presenting a picture of the previous knowledge regarding this evolving context, we start focusing on the mobile channel. Specifically, Chapter 2 proposes a model to offer a better understanding of mobile channel continuance behaviors, addressing in this way the single channel use phase. After understanding the mobile continuance behavior, we integrate this channel in the omnichannel analysis by analyzing how two traits of consumer personality influence the way that consumers carry out their omnichannel processes, considering the mobile and the online channels (Chapter 3). Once we detect the differences among online and mobile channels in the omnichannel processes we focus on omni-consumer characteristics. Precisely, in Chapter 4 we try to explore how the consumer's omnichannel tendency impacts information processing. Finally, considering that consumers expect a seamless experience across channels, we propose the development of the OSE construct. Moreover, after deepening theoretically this construct, we explore how it impacts consumer satisfaction (Chapter 5).

With these chapters we enrich prior literature and advance the three pillars. **'The digital channels'** pillar is addressed in Chapter 2 and 3. **'The omni-consumers'** pillar is studied in Chapters 3 and 4. The last pillar, **'the perceived role of omni-marketers'**, is deepened in Chapter 5.

Finally, in the last section of this PhD dissertation, the general conclusions are presented. First, we discuss the main contributions of this research to the academic literature. Then, we suggest specific recommendations that companies could consider for improving their strategies in this evolving context. Particularly, we draw interesting highlights useful for practitioners in the clothing industry, the sector selected in this thesis.

Application to the clothing industry

Before finishing the introduction, we would like to state the importance of the product chosen. In this case, to address the previously proposed objectives, we focus on a single product category, clothing. Consequently, all the independent studies are developed considering this specific product.

We select clothes for several reasons. On the one hand, from the academic point of view, clothing has been one of the main sectors studied in marketing literature, and, concretely, a key area of interest in consumer research (O'Cass, 2004). Specifically, in the digital retail context, researchers have studied technology adoption in the initial stages of technology development (Kim & Kim, 2004; Mathwick, Malhotra, & Rigdon, 2001), but also consumer-firm long term relationships (e.g. Curtis, Beach, Abratt, Huizenga, & Rhoades, 2011). However, in m-commerce research, there is a lack of studies that consider continuance behaviors for clothing.

In addition, considering the current context –where consumers have a wide range of channels available–, the study of the particularities of this product category may emerge as critical. Clothes belong to the experiential product category whose primary attributes are hedonic (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Concretely, experiential goods represent those products in which key informational attributes cannot be known before the direct experience with the product (Nelson, 1970, 1974). As sensory elements are particularly relevant for evaluating clothes (Blázquez, 2014), this can imply consumers use digital channels combined with brick-and-mortar in the decision-making process.

Furthermore, clothing's primary attributes are hedonic, and the shopping process is sometimes associated with leisure and recreation (Park, Kim, Funches, & Foxx, 2012). This can entail longer shopping processes looking for entertainment and fun, and consequently the use of different channels. In this sense, the use of digital channels, especially mobile devices, has been usually associated with pleasure and enjoyment (Chong, 2013). In the same line, literature has found that consumers use several channels during their shopping process while looking for enjoyment (Konus, Verhoef, & Neslin, 2008). Nevertheless, research has scarcely considered the study of the clothing industry in multiple channel research. As exceptions, some authors have included clothing among one of the studied products (Blom, Lange, & Hess Jr, 2017; Konuş et al., 2008; Sands, Ferraro, Campbell, & Pallant, 2016). But few studies have considered clothing as the main studied product (Blázquez, 2014; Cho & Workman, 2011; Juaneda-Ayensa, Mosquera, & Sierra Murillo, 2016).

On the other hand, from the practical perspective, on the basis that both digital and omnichannel commerce have not developed equally in all industries, clothing has been one of the fastest growing business sectors. On the one hand, clothing has been a leading category purchased amongst mobile and online device owners in the last years. Specifically, in 2016 clothing was bought by 26% of Spanish consumers via mobile devices and, in 2018, this figure has increased to 44% (Ditrendia, 2018). Besides, 50.5% of the online shoppers in Spain purchased clothes through the online channel, which represented more than 11 million people (ONTSI, 2018). On the other hand, clothing has been one of the sectors to show good results in omnichannel implementation (Gao & Yang, 2016). In fact, in Spain, one out of five online clothing purchases includes an offline search and one out of three offline purchases is preceded by an online search (Google, 2017). In addition, 65.5% of non-digital buyers use digital channels for looking for clothing products information (ONTSI, 2018).

As a result of all the above-mentioned aspects, the study of clothing consumer behavior within this multiple channel context proves tremendously important.

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*One never notices what has been done; one
can only see what remains to be done.*

Marie Curie