Optimising Omnichannel: The Case of South African Fashion Retail

Abstract

Purpose - This study investigates the obstacles middle-market fashion retailers face when pursuing omnichannel (OC) retailing in South Africa (SA), a fast-growing yet infrastructure-constrained market, and indicates how their operations can be optimised.

Design/methodology/approach - A qualitative approach was selected, using multiple case study research and multi-method data collection using semi-structured interviews, observation and secondary sources, which were thematically analysed.

Findings - The three OC transitioning fashion retailer cases expound on the specific characteristics and industry dynamics within SA that add complexity to the implementation of OC. The research reveals specific enablers that enhance dynamic capability that SA fashion retailers have developed to overcome OC challenges, including investments to improve e-commerce logistics specific to the market context, adapting to unreliable external infrastructure, developing a growth mindset and a focus on mobile operations and credit facility.

Originality - By foregrounding an emerging-market context long overlooked in OC scholarship, the study proposes a conceptual framework linking market characteristics to the nature and intensity of OC hurdles and to the dynamic capabilities required to surmount them.

Practical implications – A granular understanding of contextual factors is critical for designing viable OC strategies in emerging markets. The insights guide fashion and non-fashion retailers seeking to implement OC in similarly nuanced environments.

Keywords: Omnichannel retail, South Africa, dynamic capability, fashion

Paper Type: Research Paper

1. Introduction

Today's fashion consumers shop across channels, expecting a frictionless experience throughout their purchase journey; consequently, many fashion retailers are adopting and investing in omnichannel retailing (OCR) (Lynch and Barnes, 2020) to the point where it is an expected convention (Business of Fashion/McKinsey, 2024; Radomska *et al.,* 2025). The evolution of OCR has resulted in a considerable body of theoretical conceptualisation (e.g. Larke *et al.,* 2018; Verhoef *et al.,* 2015) while empirical studies found increased customer loyalty, satisfaction and spending (Solem *et al.*, 2023). Few retailers, however, have truly achieved OCR because of operationalisation difficulties such as employee conflict, siloed inventory systems, and poor logistics transformation (Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Ye *et al.*, 2018).

Optimising OC operations differs according to geography (Larke *et al.*, 2018) with countries' unique customer expectations, retail structures and levels of OC evolution (Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Solem *et al.*, 2023; Ye *et al.*, 2018). Extant OC studies are heavily focused on developed

markets (Cicea *et al.*, 2023; Ghatak, 2024; Mishra *et al.*, 2022) while Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.,* (2022 p.1134) point out that "drivers and barriers in OCR can vary according to market characteristics and industry dynamics". Optimising OC fashion retail in South Africa (SA) will therefore differ from developed economies (Pentz *et al.,* 2020; Sampson and Mugobo, 2023). Responding to calls for further research on channel integration levels bringing competitive advantage in different cultural settings (Sharma and Dutta, 2023), this study contributes to the "lack of research on OC retailing in developing countries such as South Africa" (Henderson and Niemann, 2024, p.52) by deepening cross cultural insights regarding OC integration (Mishra *et al.,* 2022).

The SA fashion market was valued at $7,159 million in 2023 and forecast to rise to around $10,000 million by 2028 (Euromonitor, 2024). In 2019 online comprised 5-6% of fashion retail sales compared to the US at 16-20% (Statista, 2023). This jumped to 11% post COVID-19 and is set to increase to 18% by 2027 (Statista, 2023). The popularity of online fast fashion, particularly from Shein has encouraged consumer acceptance of e-commerce (Euromonitor, 2024; Pentz *et al.*, 2020) but OC adoption in SA is still playing catch up (Euromonitor, 2024) with physical retail entrenched in the nation's culture (WGSN, 2023). Despite this, many SA fashion retailers have heavily invested in OC operations (Euromonitor, 2024) with boundaries between digital and offline shopping continuing to dissolve (Haeri, 2025). With growth potential and the likelihood of post-COVID investment payback, OCR research in SA is timely.

The retail business context in SA is challenging, with recent inflation, high unemployment and significant population division (Haeri, 2025; Quinn, 2023), however the OECD (2024) expect slow but steady economic growth, lower interest rates and more robust power supplies; factors encouraging for retail investment in SA. External factors inevitably impact OC development, requiring retailers to grow relevant capability to overcome barriers to implementation (Solem *et al.*, 2023). The purpose of this research is to shed light on what and how contextual factors influence the development of capabilities to support OC development for fashion retailers, contributing to the research field by uncovering new insights on how contextual factors in SA influence implementation of OCR and by proposing a conceptual framework for optimising OC operations. Given the scale, complexity and risk of OC implementation (Salvietti *et al.,* 2022) such insight is valuable to both academics and practitioners.

The paper continues with a contextualised review of extant literature on the operationalisation of OCR, where OC strategy and dynamic capabilities intersect. This is followed by an account of the multi-method qualitative research design involving three fashion retailer case studies. Key findings are synthesised, leading to recommendations on how to optimise OC operations, equipping SA fashion managers with relevant knowledge on how to approach OC complexity. Future research directions are also discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Omnichannel Strategy

The OCR business model provides coherence across integrated channels (Ye *et al.*, 2018), requiring business synchronisation (Climent *et al.*, 2022) which leads to higher complexity and cost than multichannel retail (Larke *et al*., 2018; Salvietti *et al.*, 2022). In compensation, OC adoption can bring increased operational efficiency and consumer cross-shopping (Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.,* 2022). Enhanced purchase and delivery options lead to

competitive advantage (Berman and Thelen, 2018), while OCR increases access to customer information from touchpoints, facilitating personalised shopping experiences (Silva *et al*., 2024; Solem *et al.*, 2023).

Many retailers follow a process of transformation towards OCR (de Carvalho *et al.*, 2024; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.,* 2022; Sharma and Dutta, 2023), conceptualised by Berman and Thelen (2018) as four stages of transition: the 'crawl' stage where some cross channel services are in place, but channels are siloed, and the customer experience inconsistent; the 'walk' stage denotes purchase optionality being extended; 'run' allows customers to purchase and return anywhere, with fast delivery underpinned by purchase history data; the final stage, 'sprint', sees retailers honing customer experiences and supply chains. Within this transition, OC strategy requires resources and capabilities to combine to offer customers seamless and consistent experiences (de Carvalho *et al.*, 2024). This involves channel organisation to connect services such as click-and-reserve; buy-online-pick-up/return-in-store (BOPIS/BORIS): buy online, home delivery/return online (via courier), and in store ordering of online inventory - endless aisle (Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Lynch and Barnes, 2020; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.,* 2022; Solem *et al.,* 2023). OCR in SA is mainly found in the middle-market sector where most of the larger fashion retailers demonstrate some OCR transition (Mordor Intelligence, 2023), thereby providing the context for this research.

2.2 Omnichannel Hurdles

Despite the convenience for consumers that OC provides, its execution brings operational challenges for retailers (Larke *et al.*, 2018; Salvietti *et al.,* 2022) which can involve customer data analytics, fulfilment and logistics, high returns, inventory management, inconsistency, lack of expertise, organisational restructuring and conflict (Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Berman and Thelen, 2018; Climent *et al., 2022*; de Borba *et al*., 2021; Ghatak, 2024; Henderson and Niemann, 2024; Ye *et al.,* 2018). Bijmolt *et al*., (2021) suggest three main categories of OC hurdles: marketing-related, supply chain and logistics related and management-related.

OCR marketing benefits include improved customer service using personalisation and relationship building (Solem *et al.*, 2023) but consistent experiences across channels are unachievable when teams plan by channel (Berman and Thelen, 2018). Additionally, the infrastructure for OC marketing can present hurdles; the two most common in SA are internet connectivity and payment gateways (Statista, 2023). Although internet and mobile adoption are high (Statista, 2023), mobile data is expensive and unreliable, and load shedding (interrupted electricity supply) impacts retailers' IT systems (Bloomberg, 2023). SA consumer trust of online payments is low (Sampson and Mugobo, 2023).

In traditional single-channel retailing, supply chain fulfilment processes are linear whereas for OCR logistics are complex; at-home delivery incurs high costs (Larke *et al*., 2018) and can be slow and insecure (Cocco and De-Juan-Vigaray, 2022). Online fashion retailers face the ubiquitous hurdle of high return rates resulting in increased operational activities and higher costs (de Borba *et al.,* 2021). In addition, OC retailers face inventory management hurdles (Larke *et al.*, 2018) because cross-channel fulfilment and OC services require accurate, holistic, real-time stock information (Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Berman and Thelen, 2018) which is especially challenging in the fashion sector where demand is influenced by trend and season.

While SA retailers are likely to face similar logistics challenges to those found in previous studies, they may be compounded by additional contextual constraints that manifest as external OC hurdles (Hajdas *et al.*, 2022) such as poor transportation infrastructure (OECD, 2024) and mismanagement of state-owned enterprises (OECD 2024; Sampson and Mugobo, 2023). Ineffective railways mean retailers rely on road transport; the large distances between key cities and the rural population together result in costly and slow fulfilment (Weber and Badenhorst-Weiss, 2018). An inefficient national postal system increases reliance on couriers to provide expensive last-mile services (Sampson and Mugobo, 2023). Extant studies note management-related hurdles to OC implementation include recruitment, training and retaining those with relevant digital skills and passion (Larke *et al.*, 2018; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.*, 2022; Ye *et al.*, 2018). Organisational structure and systems change required for OCR transition is challenging (Aiolfi and Sabbadin, 2019; Berman and Thelen, 2018), particularly for legacy multichannel retailers (Barbosa and Casais, 2022) and institutional change may result in conflict (Ye *et al.,* 2018). Facing high unemployment, SA retailers find access to well-educated, digitally equipped local employees difficult and hiring restrictions for international personnel apply (Deloitte, 2020; OECD, 2024).

2.3 Omnichannel Enablers

Optimising OCR requires an understanding of key challenges to develop the resources and capabilities to enable OC strategy (Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.*, 2022). Stemming from the resource-based view of competitive advantage, the dynamic capabilities concept (Teece *et al.,* 1997) proposes that capabilities are not static but create, expand, and adapt; organising resources, work routines and systems, and addressing technological change to achieve new competitive advantage (Eriksson *et al.,* 2022; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.*, 2022; Teece, 2007). Solem *et al.* (2023) extend Teece's generic framework by identifying four areas of dynamic capabilities specific to OCR: technology – including the capability to implement systems and optimise integrated channels; optimising customer experiences – including efficient management of supply chains, last mile operations and returns, and the creation of physically anchored experiences; collaboration – both internally and externally; and overarching OC functionality including customer centricity and personalised marketing communications. These are supported by wider scholarship (Aiolfi and Sabbadin, 2019; Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020; Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Berman and Thelen, 2018; Cocco and De-Juan-Vigaray, 2022; Eriksson *et al.*, 2022; Larke *et al*., 2018; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.,* 2022; Radomska *et al.,* 2025; Ye *et al.*, 2018). Secondary research suggests retailers in SA are developing nuanced capabilities to overcome specific market challenges (Mordor Intelligence, 2023; Pargo, n.d.; Weber and Badenhorst-Weiss, 2018), however, it is not clear how these relate to OC strategy.

2.4 Research Gap and Research Questions

Frameworks detailing OC hurdles and enablers (Berman and Thelen, 2018; Radomska *et al*., 2025; Solem *et al.,* 2023) have rarely been applied in emerging economies (Ghatak, 2024; Henderson and Niemann, 2024; Mishra *et al*., 2022). OCR studies in fashion retail are limited and largely consumer-centric (Lynch and Barnes, 2020; Silva *et al*., 2024). Given fashion's growing role in emerging markets (Business of Fashion/McKinsey, 2024), SA offers an exemplar setting.

Four research questions (RQs) ensue from the literature to guide the onward research:

1. How have SA middle market fashion retailers implemented OC operations?
2. What OC operational hurdles do SA middle-market fashion retailers currently face?
3. Which dynamic capabilities enable OC success for SA middle-market fashion retailers?
4. How can their experience inform recommendations for optimising OC operations?

3. Methods

To explore OCR within SA business settings interpretivism was adopted, taking the "insider view to seek and unpack knowledge, interactions, and processes within organisational settings" (Cassell *et al.*, 2018 p.35). A qualitative multi-method approach allowed alternative perspectives to be uncovered (Silverman, 2014) using employee interviews and observation of online customer reviews. The research followed a cross-sectional case study strategy in common with previous studies investigating OC operations (Barbosa and Casais 2021; Eriksson *et al.*, 2022; Larke *et al.*, 2018; Ye *et al*., 2018) with SA middle market fashion retail organisations as cases (Yin, 2009).

3.1 Case Selection

A sampling frame of SA fashion retailers was developed using market reports and retailer websites from which the three cases (profiled in Table IV, section 4.1) were purposively selected based on four criteria: an OC retailer (at least one online and one offline channel, offering at least four OC services and recent investments in OCR); a middle-market positioning (Posner and Williams, 2015); founded and operating in SA; more than 200 employees and generating annual turnover above £2.2 million (R50 million).

3.2 Data Collection

The multi-method research strategy involved two types of data collection; interviews with senior executives working for the case retailers and observed online customer reviews about OC experiences with the retailers. Secondary data (including web pages, business reports and news articles) were used to corroborate the primary data, enhancing the robustness of the dataset through triangulation. Literature themes informed the interview questions (Flick, 2018) and guided the collection of relevant data in customer reviews. Table I provides an overview of the research instrument framework including interview protocol, observation data collection themes and informing literature.

<<Add Table I here>>

3.2.1 Industry Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with case employees generated data regarding first-hand experience of implementing OCR (Creswell and Miller, 2000) and emerging phenomena relevant to OCR (Silverman, 2014), with questions modified according to participants' experiences (Flick, 2018). A reiteration of the project's purpose, the definition of OCR, an outline of the interview structure,

and a reconfirming of consent preceded the substantive questioning (Silverman, 2014). The interviews began with broader questions concerning hurdles and dynamic capability relating to OC, funnelling, with probing, to more detailed questions concerning the SA market context (Silverman, 2014; Yin, 2009).

Purposive sampling was used to recruit case participants who had experience with OC operations. Initially, five individuals at four potential case companies were approached via email. Three companies responded positively and to avoid a homogenous sample (Silverman, 2014) participants were asked to recommend individuals across departments and areas of OC expertise resulting in a broad spectrum of relevant informants from e-commerce, fulfillment, merchandise management and digital marketing sections of the retail businesses. Table II provides profiles of the participants from the three cases. Given the project involved two methods and three cases, three interviews with each company were deemed appropriate (Yin, 2009). Interviews lasting around 50 minutes were conducted online, enabling easy recording (Flick, 2018).

<<Add Table II here>>

3.2.2 Observation: Online Consumer Reviews

Defined as the systematic capturing of actions, behaviours, discussions, or processes of individuals, communities or organisations (Silverman, 2014) observation was used to capture customer opinions about the OC services and operations of each retail case. OCR is rooted in providing value to consumers (Larke *et al.*, 2018) therefore customer reviews uncovered hurdles and weaknesses as well as capabilities. Non-participant observation enabled verification of self-reported information from industry experts with actual customer experiences (Yin, 2009) and the discovery of dimensions, particularly hurdles and weaknesses, that interview participants may have been unwilling to highlight (Silverman, 2014). Social media (Instagram and Facebook), the app store and HelloPeter (SA's number one online review platform) were used to collect relevant data on customers' OC service experiences. 123 customer reviews were observed for R1, 210 for R2 and 103 for R3 (totalling 436 OC customer reviews).

3.3 Data Analysis

The thematic analysis process began with the interview data being transcribed verbatim, sense checked, anonymised, and familiarised (Flick, 2018). In Vivo coding was used to form first-cycle codes from both interview and observation data sets, while attribute coding was conducted to establish the frequency and thus importance of OC dimensions to customers (Saldaña, 2021). Second-cycle axial coding was employed to develop category organisation through grouping, resorting, and re-labelling first-cycle codes (Saldaña, 2021) to arrive at 22 categories pertaining to the four research questions, presented in the next section. The final coding labels were additionally informed by themes arising from secondary data assimilation. Table III demonstrates code and category development, supported by indicative quotations from interview and observation data.

<<Add Table III here>>

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Lincoln and Guba (1985)'s criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity were applied to improve research rigour and quality. The aligned research instruments ensured consistency in data collection while recording and transcription provided dependable data (Silverman, 2014). The interview guide was piloted for sense checking and probing was used to corroborate responses from the same case to strengthen credibility (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and to elicit authentic data. Two primary data collection methods, supplemented by secondary data scrutiny, allowed for triangulation of themes, reducing bias (Flick, 2018; Yin, 2009). Transparent research methods (section 3.2) and case selection (section 3.1) ensured transferability (Silverman, 2014). Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation and security of data.

4. Findings

The findings are discussed in relation to the RQs and are supported by indicative excerpts (see also Table III).

4.1 Similarities and Differences in how SA Retailers have Implemented their OC Operations (RQ1)

Table IV summarises the retailer cases used within the analysis. While all provide broadly homogenous OC services, nuances emerge in implementation through ship from store (R1), buy online, return online (R2 and R3) and next day delivery (R1).

<<Add Table IV here>>

All cases had a physical retail legacy with multiple brands managed as separate units, supported by centralised online teams to drive OC focus and consumer-centricity. R2 has a larger network of stores, while R3 had no app at the time of the research. The pandemic accelerated their shift from multichannel to omnichannel, evidenced by new e-commerce leadership (R2), online team and DC expansion (R3), and virtual try-ons (R1). Online growth was linked to improved OC performance, with plans including RFID implementation (R1), enhanced stock availability (R2), and advanced data analytics (R3). All were developing endless aisle capabilities to enable in-store access to online inventory, but R1 lagged regarding in-store-purchases-to-customer home shipping services. Collectively, they were in early OC transformation stages, classified as 'walk', but showed strong long-term commitment, for example:

> *R1 P1: "When you make a shift or change to a strategy like omnichannel, it's not just products or features, I mean digital products, it's people, it's process, and it's the platform that all have to change."*

4.2 OC Operational Hurdles Faced in the SA Middle-market Fashion Industry (RQ2)

4.2.1 Internal Hurdles: Technology, misalignment and fulfilment challenges

The internal hurdles identified align with existing research on OC implementation challenges (e.g. Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Ghatak, 2024), with particular emphasis on technology, internal misalignment, fulfilment, and data use. System integration emerged as a key concern across cases, for example:

> *R2 P4: "We've plastered things on top of each other, from a technical perspective and we've not necessarily spent the time… cleaning up the systems. And I think there's a lot of technical debt."*

Internal incoherence was evident across all cases, with collaboration between online and store operations hindered by organisational silos. These silos could generate team conflict (R2, Larke *et al.,* 2018). Store-led mindsets often caused resistance to change and limited understanding of OC strategies.

For online fulfilment R1 and R3 ringfenced stock to process orders through a centralised DC, whereas R2 allocated stock to stores and fulfilled from either DC or stores, however all retailers faced hurdles in cross-channel fulfilment:

> *R2 P4: "How do we do it [fulfilment] profitably? … because there's just not enough margin, once you've delivered and returned all the stuff."*

Interview data was corroborated by observation data pertaining to order cancellations, delays and inaccuracies for example:

> *R2 Review: "Every order for the past maybe 5 orders have been split. One item arrives quickly and the other takes ages..."*

The difficulties of using customer data analytics effectively were apparent, for example:

> *R3 P7: "At the moment it's quite a rigmarole for us to get access to data. We've set up all the systems to be able to do it, and we're going to get there very soon...the information exists but being able to access it and use it, we've got a bit of work to still go."*

A lack of customer reviews regarding personalised communication suggested minimal data leveraging for marketing in all cases.

4.2.2 External Hurdles: SA Transportation, Economic and Political Landscape

External hurdles partly aligned with prior studies (e.g. Ghatak, 2024; Radomska *et al.,* 2025; Silva *et al.,* 2021; Weber and Badenhorst-Weiss, 2018) and secondary sources documenting SA business contexts (e.g. Haeri, 2025; OECD, 2024) but distinct complexities unique to SA retail were clear.

In a large country with three main cities, dispersed rural populations and a poor rail transport network, fast fulfilment was difficult and costly.

R1 P2: "It's not like just popping down the road … [it's a] seven-hour drive to get there".

The unreliable postal service, areas demarked as unsafe for delivery and those without traditional street addresses posed specific delivery challenges:

R2 P4: "We also have people that don't have easy to find addresses. Lots of people stay in informal settlements and things like that, they don't have a delivery address necessarily."

In all cases SA economic conditions caused OCR operational complexity. Income inequality and unemployment led to low consumer spending power, constrained by the cost of mobile data and price sensitivity to delivery fees. In contrast, high-income online shoppers expect a world-class OC experience, hard to justify without market scale:

R1 P1: "It's interesting, because while it's a low contribution, the people who shop online are extremely high net worth, typically, individuals, and their expectation is your service matches Amazon."

Civil unrest disrupted stock movements and destruction of DCs, and mismanagement of the national electricity grid resulted in back-up solutions:

R1 P1: "We've had the case in unrest… two years ago, with DCs, we were lucky, relatively unscathed. Other retailers were really impacted, whole DCs burned or looted. The expense of load shedding… is enormous. It costs us hundreds of millions of rand for the generators."

4.2.3 Market-Specific Factors - Shopping Preference and Skills Shortages

Corroborating secondary sources regarding SA consumer behaviour (Quinn 2023; WGSN, 2023), preference for physical shopping, low trust in online shopping, lack of credit cards, preference for cash and retailer loan payments all heightened hurdles for SA retailers in their endeavours to encourage consumers to shop across channels:

R3 P8: "I don't think online [shopping] is like a default. It's kind of a second-best. If it's not in stores, I'll get it online, as opposed to the other way around."

Shortage of digital skills for OCR development cited as a hurdle in previous studies (e.g. Larke *et al.,* 2018; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al*., 2022; Ye *et al.*, 2018) was exacerbated by the small size of the online retail market in SA:

R3 P7: "You need people to hit the ground running and… there's just not enough scale in SA for people to have had that experience yet ...we've had seven vacancies in that space [e-commerce team] for almost a year. We just can't find people."

4.3 Relevant Dynamic Capabilities and Enablers for OC Success in SA Middle-market Fashion Retailers (RQ3)

While many capabilities relevant to the cases align with extant OCR research (e.g. Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.*, 2022; Solem *et al*., 2023), the SA context gave rise to specific enabling factors.

4.3.1 Leveraging Channel Integration

Stores were important enablers for all cases; facilitating online conversions, order fulfilment and returns:

> *R2 P4: We also have, like mini fulfilment centres in all our stores scattered around the country...click and collect has been key… so using those stores also as collection points… massive."*

All cases demonstrated a strong click-and-collect network, including partnerships to serve undeliverable areas. Enhanced online security and real-time delivery communication further boosted consumer confidence in online shopping:

> *R2 P5: "When consultants come from overseas or you have an international party that's designing all of these world-class solutions for first-world countries, you can't copy and paste it into SA, it's not the same environment. So, we have to go a level down in our thinking [about OC] to make a great success of things."*

The prioritisation of, and investment into, mobile channels to access OC was important, as also mentioned in secondary sources in relation to SA consumer markets (Bloomberg, 2023; Statista, 2023).

> *R1 P1: "To have financial services in our main mobile app is really key to whether we have excellent CX, store card offers and all that good stuff."*

Updating store systems to integrate e-commerce and logistics was key to enabling endless aisle capabilities. Real-time, integrated stock and fulfilment systems were viewed as essential for effective OCR operations:

> *R1 P2: "Having that view of customer, stock, product across your systems and across your channels and environment, that's really a biggie.*"

4.3.2 People and Process Reset

Consistent with de Carvalho *et al*. (2024) and Eriksson *et al.* (2022), all cases showed organisational change and mindset shifts, particularly through restructuring and greater interdepartmental collaboration, for example:

> *R3 P7: "I think from a people perspective, there's been a very intentional focus on making omnichannel a priority and setting up the teams and the structures to be able to leverage the tools that we've bought and to invest. I think it's almost like a shift in mindset and a shift in terms of how intentional you are at information sharing."*

Amid challenging market conditions, a growth mindset was key to optimising OC operations in SA. Across all cases, employees were described as hard-working, resilient, and solution-oriented, fostering innovation and creativity in developing OC capabilities; contrasting with extant literature (section 2.2, e.g., Larke *et al.,* 2018; Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al.*, 2022):

R1 P2: "[SA] people are very hungry… hungry to learn and innovate and move forward and grow."

All cases looked to OC retailers abroad for fresh thinking:

R1 P2: "We do a lot of work with international retailers to understand their journey and see where they've gone. I think one advantage that we have is… being slightly behind the curve of the Internet revolution is that we can pull back concepts and ideas externally."

4.4 Leveraging OC Experiences in SA Fashion Retail to Inform Recommendations for OCR Optimisation (RQ4)

Three specific levering opportunities emerged as the retailers reflected on their OC experiences.

For two retailers, customer-facing platform integration was a recent development. For example, R2 relaunched a unified website and mobile app across all brands. Observed reviews indicated this consolidation enhanced OC operations by boosting cross-shopping, order values, and loyalty, while improving digital marketing efficiency and customer data integration:

R2 P5: "Allowing a single platform through which a customer can place one order, one checkout, one payment and shop across all of our brands".

Strong brands were seen as vital to optimising OC operations in all cases. In a market with low consumer trust in online shopping, brand equity served as the foundation and trust anchor for OCR success:

R2 P6: "The greatest strength is the equity and the affinity of the brands that they have built up over the years. They [customers] will follow".

The pronounced segmental differences in SA mean customer tailoring is vital for OCR progression:

R3 P8: "I think something just to be mindful of is, how many different types of personas we're dealing with in South Africa… like your omnichannel almost needs to be similar to your marketing strategy where you have different customers that we are trying to reach.

5. Conclusion, Implications, Limitations and Future Research

5.1 Conclusion

Our findings reaffirm the well-documented complexity of omnichannel retail (OCR) transformation (Larke *et al*., 2018; Salvietti *et al*., 2022) yet extend prior work by exposing how SA's structural realities reshape familiar hurdles. Like earlier studies, we observe persistent difficulties in synchronising technical and logistical systems and in reconfiguring organisational resources (Aiolfi and Sabbadin, 2019; Barbosa and Casais, 2022; Cocco and De-Juan-Vigaray, 2022; de Carvalho *et al*., 2024). SA retailers confront additional constraints - dilapidated transport

networks, widely dispersed consumers and intermittent civil unrest highlighted in market analysis reports (OECD, 2024; Statista, 2023) - but not foregrounded in developed-market research (Berman and Thelen, 2018; Lynch and Barnes, 2020). These context-specific barriers magnify last-mile costs and unreliability, making fulfilment the system's weakest link.

Crucially, we show that real-time, fully integrated inventory visibility is a non-negotiable capability for fashion OCR in emergent settings, a gap overlooked in studies that highlight non-linear fashion journeys but underplay back-end integration (Lynch and Barnes, 2020; Silva *et al*., 2021). Inventory blind spots, especially evident in R2, compound fulfilment delays, eroding customer experience (CX). This directly answers Sharma and Dutta's (2023) call to examine how customer location shapes fulfilment and returns: in SA, geography dictates feasibility and cost of service levels, forcing retailers to weigh CX ambitions against cash reliance and low e-commerce trust. Thus, the transition to channel integration is not merely complex (de Carvalho *et al.,* 2024) but context-contingent, challenging the assumption of linear capability accumulation (Salvietti *et al*., 2022).

Our study also sharpens understanding of dynamic capabilities. While channel integration and organisational change are confirmed as central (de Carvalho *et al.,* 2024; Eriksson *et al.,* 2022), we foreground physical stores as cultural and operational catalysts - an aspect downplayed in emerging market OCR research (Ghatak, 2024). SA stores function as trust anchors, micro-distribution hubs and data-collection sites, echoing Mishra *et al.*'s (2022) suggestion that retail culture drives digital uptake. The extensive network of R2 stores and loyalty programme (see Table IV) may, temporarily compensate for a slower transition to fully integrated fulfilment capabilities. Moreover, a pronounced learning capability emerges; local chains import practices from geographies more favourable to OCR, accelerating adaptation despite infrastructural deficits.

Finally, we reinforce the strategic value of advanced analytics (Radomska *et al*., 2025; Salvietti *et al*., 2022). In highly segmented emerging markets (OECD, 2024), granular data enable differentiated CX - e.g., tiered delivery fees or alternative payment options (Cocco and De-Juan-Vigaray, 2022) - that improve economics without abandoning inclusivity. By integrating these insights into a context-sensitive framework, our study contributes a novel lens for assessing OCR readiness and optimisation across similarly constrained markets.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study highlights how market characteristics and industry dynamics shape OCR implementation in emerging markets. Our conceptual model (Figure 1) offers a framework for understanding this relationship by categorising context-specific enablers and identifying how local conditions intensify common challenges or introduce new ones. While grounded in the SA fashion retail context, the model provides transferable insight for other emerging markets facing similar constraints. It extends existing OCR theory by linking operational hurdles to dynamic capabilities in context, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of OC optimisation in fashion retail across developing economies.

<< Add Figure 1 here>>

5.3 Practical Implications

This study offers practical implications for optimising OCR in SA fashion retail, with relevance for other emerging markets. Improving access for constrained consumers is essential, particularly in discretionary sectors like fashion. Expanding mobile channels and branded apps, offering credit payment options, and establishing last-mile fulfilment points can broaden reach. Partnering with delivery providers (e.g. Pargo (n.d.) and leveraging brand trust can encourage OC adoption. Data-driven segmentation enables customised fulfilment options and pricing, supporting profitability. Given high return rates, investment in integrated, transparent inventory systems (e.g., RFID) is vital. Enhancing fulfilment reliability and embracing the store as a mini-distribution centre are key to driving OC engagement.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

The theoretical base for this study is limited by the dominance of developed market and non-fashion OCR literature (e.g. Barbosa and Casais, 2021; Sharma and Dutta, 2023). To address this, trade sources (Statista, 2023; WGSN, 2023) were used to capture fashion-specific challenges. Some contextual studies, like Sampson and Mugobo (2023), focus on e-commerce rather than OCR, yet offer valuable insights into overlooked operational barriers.

Case study research is dependent on case selection (Yin, 2009) and constrained by scale, geography, and time (Larke *et al*., 2018; Silverman, 2014). While SA's volatility presents limitations, its aspirational consumer base, growth trajectory, and competitive retail landscape (Euromonitor, 2024; Haeri, 2025; Henderson and Niemann, 2024) offer transferable insights for similar emerging markets. Deliberate sampling ensured access to senior executives, prioritising depth over breadth.

Given the limited OCR research in emerging markets such as Brazil, Malaysia, and Nigeria (Cicea *et al*., 2023), these settings present opportunities to apply and refine our context-sensitive framework. As the study focused on middle-market fashion, future work could explore other segments within fashion, or cross-sectoral applications. Since OCR capabilities vary by retailer size (Mrutzek-Hartmann *et al*., 2022), investigating SMEs and OC-native entrants could uncover further nuances.

Finally, greater focus on OCR performance metrics, including trade-offs linked to outsourcing and partner capabilities (Salvietti *et al.,* 2022), would enhance understanding of value creation within emerging market settings. As OCR evolves globally, attention to context-specific factors will be crucial to effective strategy, implementation, and optimisation.

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