Research Paper

The dynamics of consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing: Insights from Hungarian and Austrian consumers

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Abstract: This study investigates consumer satisfaction with omni-channel retailing in the clothing sector, specifically comparing behaviours in Hungary and Austria. Utilizing qualitative data gathered from focus group discussions, the research delves into how consumers transition between online and physical shopping environments and identifies both the challenges consumers encounter and consumers preferences in each context. Key findings reveal trust issues associated with online shopping, complications related to sizing and returns, and the influence of cultural, economic, and technological factors on omni-channel strategies in both nations. While Austrian consumers tend to adopt a hybrid shopping model that combines online research with in-store purchases, Hungarian consumers display a pronounced preference for in-store shopping, driven by concerns over trust and return policies. The results underscore the necessity for retailers to develop customized omni-channel strategies that cater to distinct consumer preferences thereby enhancing customer satisfaction. The study helps retailers and policymakers to optimize omni-channel retail experiences.

Keywords: omni-channel retailing, customer satisfaction, shopping experience, Hungary, Austria

1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of retailing in the digital age has transformed how consumers shop, and this led to the rise of omni-channel retailing. This strategy integrates multiple shopping channels, including physical stores, websites, and mobile applications, to provide consumers with a seamless and cohesive shopping experience. In the fashion and clothing industry, omni-channel retailing is particularly significant, as consumer preferences increasingly prioritize convenience, personalization, and flexibility. In Austria and Hungary, the adoption of omni-channel retailing is gaining momentum, with consumers navigating between online platforms and physical stores to meet their shopping needs. Understanding the unique experiences and preferences of consumers in these two countries is essential for retailers aiming to enhance customer satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term market competitiveness.

Omni-channel consumers often utilize multiple channels simultaneously to optimize their shopping experiences (Ryu, 2019). This underscores the importance of retailers providing transparent and consistent merchandise and services across all channels (Ye et al., 2018). However, shopping behaviours in Austria and Hungary vary significantly due to cultural, economic, and technological differences. For example, Hungarian consumers exhibit a strong preference for in-store shopping, prioritizing the ability to assess product fit and quality firsthand, which highlights the need for better integration of online and offline experiences (Yrjölä et al., 2018). Conversely, Austrian consumers increasingly value the convenience of online shopping but continue to appreciate the tactile and sensory engagement of physical stores (Truong, 2021).

Despite the growing relevance of omni-channel retailing, existing research primarily focuses on developed economies or single-market contexts, often overlooking regional and cross-cultural differences in consumer behaviour. Limited attention has been paid to how cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors influence omni-channel adoption and customer satisfaction in diverse markets such as Austria and Hungary. This study addresses this gap by comparing the behaviours and preferences of consumers in these two distinct European markets and provided insights into the barriers and enablers of omni-channel retail strategies.

In doing so, it expands the current understanding of consumer satisfaction in omni-channel environments, particularly within the under-researched Central and Eastern European context.

Consumers face various challenges in combining physical and online shopping experiences, including trust issues, perceived risks, and inconsistent service quality. These challenges can hinder the effectiveness of omni-channel strategies (Sang-Hwa et al., 2021). Moreover, the varying levels of e-commerce adoption between Austria and Hungary necessitate tailored approaches to address these challenges. Austrian consumers benefit from advanced retail infrastructure and higher digital literacy, enabling greater integration of shopping channels. Meanwhile, Hungarian consumers experience infrastructural barriers, trust deficits, and a preference for in-store shopping, and emphasize the need for strategies that build trust and simplify online shopping processes (Öztürk & Dündar, 2020). Addressing these region-specific barriers is critical for enhancing the shopping experience and fostering consumer satisfaction.

To address these challenges and explore the dynamics of consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing, this study is guided by the following overarching research question: What are the key factors influencing consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing, and how do these factors vary between Austria and Hungary? This question is supported by the four objectives. First, to explore and understand how consumers in Austria and Hungary experience clothing shopping across physical and online channels. Second, to identify the challenges and barriers consumers face when integrating physical and online shopping experiences. Third, to analyse consumer preferences, behaviours, and satisfaction levels across different shopping channels in Austria and Hungary. Finally, to provide practical insights for the retailers and policymakers on how to enhance omni-channel retail strategies. These objectives enable the study to break down the complexities of consumer satisfaction into specific, actionable components, ensuring the research is comprehensive and directly tied to the study's central question.

By addressing this research question and the outlined objectives, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on omni-channel retailing and its impact on consumer satisfaction. Specifically, the findings will offer actionable insights for retailers and policymakers and can be fed into strategies to enhance the shopping experience and build consumer trust in Austria and Hungary. These insights will not only support the development of regionally tailored omni-channel strategies but also contribute to the broader academic discourse on consumer behaviour in diverse retail environments.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical underpinnings

The study of consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing can be significantly enhanced through the application of various theoretical frameworks, notably the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), and the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model. Each of these theories provides a unique lens through which consumer behaviour and satisfaction in the context of integrated retail environments can be understood. This section lays the theoretical foundation for the subsequent review of empirical studies by highlighting the relevance and applications of these frameworks in omni-channel retailing.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) posits that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness are critical determinants of technology adoption (Zhang et al., 2022). In omni-channel retailing, where consumers interact with multiple platforms—both online and offline—these factors become paramount. For example, when consumers perceive that a retailer's online platform is user-friendly and enhances their shopping experience, they are more likely to engage with it. Studies have shown that user experience plays a crucial role in driving omni-channel shopping intentions (Truong, 2021). Furthermore, TAM provides insights into how the acceptance of various shopping channels impacts overall satisfaction, as a seamless and efficient shopping process is linked to higher satisfaction levels (Hasbullah et al., 2024).

The Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) builds upon TAM by introducing additional constructs such as social influence and facilitating conditions (Capriello & Riboldazzi, 2021). In omni-channel retailing, social influence often manifests through peer recommendations or social media interactions, both of which significantly shape consumer intentions to shop across channels. For instance, studies reveal that social media strongly influences consumer perceptions and behaviours in omni-channel environments (Rodríguez–Torrico et al., 2020). Similarly, facilitating conditions—such as the availability of customer support and the integration of logistics—play a vital role in ensuring consumers can navigate seamlessly between channels, enhancing their satisfaction (Ryu, 2019).

The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Model offers a framework for understanding how external stimuli—such as marketing communications and service quality—affect internal consumer states, such as satisfaction and loyalty, and subsequent behaviours, like repeat purchases (Zafar & Yaqub, 2022). In omni-channel retailing, these stimuli may include promotional offers, high-quality customer service, and consistent shopping experiences across various platforms. Positive omni-channel experiences, characterized by effective communication and service quality, have been shown to increase consumer satisfaction and loyalty (Liao et al., 2024). For instance, consumers who receive consistent service across both online and offline channels report higher satisfaction, which positively influences their likelihood of returning to the retailer (Papashvili & Kovács, 2023).

Collectively, these theoretical frameworks highlight the importance of creating integrated, user-friendly shopping experiences that effectively leverage technology while considering psychological and social factors influencing consumer satisfaction. However, despite these theoretical insights, gaps remain in understanding how these constructs interact in real-world settings, particularly across diverse consumer segments and varying retail contexts. These gaps underscore the necessity of examining empirical studies, which are reviewed in the following sections, to investigate the interplay between these theoretical frameworks and consumer behaviour in omni-channel retailing.

2.2 The evolution of omni-channel retailing

Omni-channel retailing has emerged as a transformative approach in the retail industry, enabling businesses to integrate various shopping channels, such as brick-and-mortar stores, e-commerce platforms, mobile apps, and social media, into a seamless and unified consumer experience. This evolution is driven by technological advancements and changing consumer preferences, particularly by the increasing demand for flexibility, personalization, and convenience (Yrjölä et al., 2018).

Initially, retailers operated in a multi-channel environment where each platform functioned independently, often leading to fragmented consumer experiences. With the advent of omni-channel retailing, the focus shifted toward providing consistency and synchronization across all touchpoints, ensuring that consumers can switch seamlessly between channels during their shopping journey (Ryu, 2019).

In the clothing retail sector, omni-channel strategies have been pivotal in meeting diverse consumer expectations. For instance, features such as "buy online, pick up in-store" (BOPIS) and mobile-enabled price comparisons exemplify how omni-channel retailing enhances consumer satisfaction by bridging the gap between online and offline channels (Hübner et al., 2016).

However, the pace of omni-channel adoption varies across markets. In developed economies like Austria, robust digital infrastructure and elevated levels of digital literacy have facilitated the rapid adoption of advanced omni-channel solutions. Conversely, in emerging markets such as Hungary, infrastructural limitations, economic constraints, and trust deficits in online platforms have hindered similar progress (Papashvili & Kovács, 2023). These regional disparities highlight the importance of tailoring omni-channel strategies to the unique needs and expectations of different consumer groups.

2.3 The role of consumer satisfaction

Consumer satisfaction is a cornerstone of success in the retail industry, particularly in omni-channel retailing, where the complexity of integrating multiple shopping channels creates unique challenges and opportunities. Satisfied consumers are more likely to exhibit

loyalty, repeat purchases, and positive word-of-mouth, all of which are critical for sustaining competitive advantage (Ellitan & Suhartatik, 2023).

In the context of omni-channel retailing, satisfaction hinges on the ability of retailers to deliver seamless, personalized, and convenient shopping experiences. Key factors influencing satisfaction include service quality, channel consistency, ease of navigation, and the availability of real-time inventory information. For example, consumers value the ability to initiate a purchase online and complete it in-store without encountering discrepancies in pricing or product availability (Hübner et al., 2016).

The importance of trust cannot be overstated in shaping consumer satisfaction in omni-channel environments. While Austrian consumers benefit from advanced systems and greater digital trust, Hungarian consumers often express concerns over online data security and product authenticity, reflecting broader infrastructural and cultural differences (Gazali & Suyasa, 2020). These disparities underline the need for region-specific strategies that address both technological and cultural barriers.

Moreover, the role of technology in enhancing consumer satisfaction continues to grow. Emerging tools such as augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI) enable retailers to provide personalized recommendations and virtual fitting options, significantly enhancing the customer experience (Foysal et al., 2021). However, the effectiveness of these innovations depends on such innovations' accessibility and alignment with consumer expectations, which vary significantly across different economic and cultural settings.

As omni-channel retailing continues to evolve, understanding and addressing the diverse factors that influence consumer satisfaction are essential for retailers aiming to create meaningful and lasting connections with their customers.

2.4 Factors influencing consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing

Consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing is influenced by a combination of cultural, economic, and technological factors that shape shopping behaviours and expectations. These factors vary significantly between regions, which emphasizes the importance of tailoring omni-channel strategies to the unique needs of specific markets.

Cultural norms and values significantly influence consumer preferences and behaviours in omni-channel retailing. Austrian consumers, for instance, exhibit a preference for seamless and efficient digital experiences, reflecting their higher levels of digital literacy and trust in online platforms. They frequently utilize mobile apps, augmented reality (AR), and other advanced technologies to enhance their shopping experiences (Kapusy & Lógó, 2020).

In contrast, Hungarian consumers demonstrate greater scepticism toward online platforms, driven by concerns over data security, product authenticity, and unclear return policies. These cultural differences necessitate strategies that build trust and address the specific needs of Hungarian consumers, such as clear and transparent communication from retailers (Gazali & Suyasa, 2020).

Economic conditions also play a pivotal role in shaping consumer satisfaction. Austria's robust economy and higher disposable income levels enable consumers to prioritize convenience and premium shopping experiences, making them more likely to adopt omni-channel strategies. Conversely, Hungary's more price-sensitive consumers often seek discounts and promotions, highlighting the need for cost-effective solutions (Rebiazina et al., 2020). These economic differences influence consumer expectations, with Austrian shoppers valuing advanced omni-channel features, such as real-time inventory visibility, while Hungarian shoppers prioritize affordability and value for money.

Technological advancements, including AR and AI-driven personalization, have transformed the omni-channel landscape by providing consumers with innovative and convenient shopping options (Foysal et al., 2021). Austrian consumers have embraced these technologies, leveraging features like virtual try-ons to enhance their shopping experiences. However, Hungarian consumers face challenges related to digital infrastructure and digital literacy, which limit their adoption of these tools (Kim et al., 2019). Retailers must ensure that technological solutions are not only advanced but also accessible and user-friendly to meet the expectations of diverse consumer groups.

Despite its numerous advantages, omni-channel retailing faces significant barriers that hinder consumer adoption and satisfaction. These barriers are particularly pronounced in

culturally and economically diverse markets, such as Austria and Hungary, where consumer trust, technological infrastructure, and logistical challenges vary significantly.

Consumer trust is a critical barrier in omni-channel retailing, especially in emerging markets. Hungarian consumers frequently cite concerns over data security, product authenticity, and online payment safety as deterrents to engaging with digital shopping channels (Gazali & Suyasa, 2020). These trust deficits are exacerbated by unclear return policies and inconsistent communication from retailers, which further undermine confidence.

In Austria, trust barriers are less pronounced due to the prevalence of advanced systems and higher levels of digital literacy. However, Austrian consumers are overly sensitive to discrepancies between online and offline pricing, which can lead to perceptions of unfairness and reduced trust in retailers' omni-channel strategies (Rebiazina et al., 2020).

Logistical inefficiencies are another major barrier to omni-channel adoption. Hungarian consumers often experience delayed deliveries, complex return processes, and inaccurate product descriptions, which discourage repeat online purchases (Papashvili & Kovács, 2023). The lack of real-time inventory visibility also leads to frustration, as products displayed online may not be available in-store.

Austrian consumers face fewer logistical issues due to better-developed infrastructure, but challenges such as inventory synchronization and service consistency across channels remain problematic (Hübner et al., 2016). Retailers must invest in supply chain optimization and technology integration to address these issues and to enhance consumer satisfaction.

Limited digital literacy among Hungarian consumers poses a significant barrier to omni-channel adoption. Many consumers are unfamiliar with advanced technologies such as augmented reality (AR) or mobile payment systems, which leads to hesitancy in adopting these features (Kim et al., 2019). This is compounded by inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, where internet connectivity and delivery networks are underdeveloped.

In Austria, where digital literacy is higher, accessibility barriers are less pronounced. However, retailers must ensure that their omni-channel solutions remain user-friendly and inclusive, catering to a broad spectrum of consumers. These regional differences underscore the importance of designing omni-channel strategies that are both technologically advanced and adaptable to diverse market needs.

2.5 Consumer-desired improvements in omni-channel retailing

Enhancing consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing requires addressing key areas that consumers identify as critical for improving their shopping experiences. These improvements span personalization, operational efficiency, and transparency, each of which plays a vital role in fostering trust and loyalty among consumers in Austria and Hungary.

The demand for personalized shopping experiences has grown significantly, driven by advancements in technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and augmented reality (AR). Austrian consumers, in particular, express strong interest in AI-driven product recommendations and AR-enabled virtual fitting rooms, which enhance convenience and engagement during the shopping process (Foysal et al., 2021).

In Hungary, where digital adoption is slower, consumers prioritize reliable product descriptions and straightforward navigation over advanced personalization tools. Retailers operating in this market should focus on building trust through clear and accurate information while gradually introducing technologies that align with local preferences (Kim et al., 2019).

Clear and consumer-friendly return policies are among the most desired improvements, particularly for Hungarian consumers. Ambiguities in return procedures, coupled with concerns over delays in refunds, discourage online shopping and erode trust (Gazali & Suyasa, 2020). Retailers can address these issues by simplifying return process and by offering transparent timelines for refunds, thereby boosting confidence in online channels.

Austrian consumers, while more comfortable with online shopping, highlight the importance of consistent pricing across channels. Discrepancies between online and offline prices create perceptions of unfairness, which undermine satisfaction. Ensuring price synchronization across all channels is critical for maintaining credibility in the Austrian market (Papashvili & Kovács, 2023).

Consumers in both Austria and Hungary seek better integration between online and offline channels. Features such as real-time inventory visibility, click-and-collect services, and

flexible delivery options are highly valued as these enhance convenience and reduce friction during the shopping journey (Hübner et al., 2016). For instance, Austrian consumers often expect seamless transitions between channels, such as the ability to return online purchases in-store, while Hungarian consumers desire more reliable logistics to support omni-channel capabilities.

Retailers must invest in technology and infrastructure to create a cohesive omni-channel ecosystem that meets these expectations. Ensuring that digital and physical touchpoints are fully integrated can significantly enhance consumer satisfaction and loyalty.

By addressing these cultural, economic, and technological dimensions, this part of the study provides a comprehensive foundation for understanding the dynamics of consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing. The insights above establish the theoretical and empirical context for this study, aligning with its research objectives and questions. The following chapter outlines the methodology employed to investigate these dynamics through qualitative research methods, including data collection and analysis techniques, in the comparative contexts of Austria and Hungary.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing focus group discussions to explore the clothing shopping preferences and experiences of consumers from Austria and Hungary, with a specific focus on measuring customer satisfaction. The research aimed to gather insights from participants regarding their shopping behaviours, preferences, and overall satisfaction with clothing purchases in their respective countries. The focus groups consisted of nine participants in total, with five residents and citizens from Austria and four from Hungary. This study applied a demographic design to capture a diverse range of insights from individuals directly engaged in clothing shopping in the European context, thereby ensuring the findings reflect varied perspectives.

3.1 Research method and data collection

A qualitative approach was chosen due to its suitability for exploring complex social phenomena, namely consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing. Focus group discussions were deemed particularly effective for eliciting detailed accounts of consumer behaviours, as they allow for interaction among participants, often uncovering nuanced insights not easily captured in individual interviews (Krueger, 2014).

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling, which was chosen for its effectiveness in identifying individuals with diverse experiences in omni-channel retailing. Inclusion criteria required participants to be actively engaged in clothing shopping and to be familiar with both online and offline channels. This method allowed the researcher to access hidden populations, such as individuals with specific omni-channel experiences, who may not be reachable through random sampling.

3.2 Study sample

The study focuses on Austria and Hungary as comparative case studies to explore consumer satisfaction and behaviour in omni-channel retailing within the clothing sector. The selection of these two countries is grounded in their distinct cultural, economic, and retailing characteristics, which offer a valuable framework for understanding regional differences in consumer preferences and challenges.

Austria represents a developed Western European economy with a strong tradition of high-quality retail services, high disposable income levels, and widespread adoption of e-commerce technologies (Papashvili & Kovács, 2023). Austrian consumers are accustomed to hybrid shopping models that combine online research with in-store purchases, emphasizing seamless omni-channel integration as a key driver of satisfaction (Truong, 2021). This makes Austria an ideal case for examining advanced omni-channel strategies and for identifying opportunities to refine service offerings in highly digitalized markets.

In contrast, Hungary is a Central European market undergoing significant economic transformation, characterized by lower disposable income levels and slower e-commerce adoption compared to Austria (Kapusy & Lógó, 2020). Hungarian consumers exhibit a strong reliance on in-store shopping, driven by concerns about online trust, return policies, and perceived risks associated with e-commerce (Rebiazina et al., 2020). The cultural preference for tactile shopping experiences and scepticism toward digital platforms offers a rich context for exploring the barriers to omni-channel adoption in emerging markets.

Furthermore, Austria and Hungary share geographic proximity and historical ties, making them suitable for a comparative analysis that highlights both shared and divergent consumer behaviours. This allows the study to provide actionable insights for retailers aiming to operate across similar regional markets, where cultural nuances and economic conditions may require customized approaches to enhance consumer satisfaction and loyalty. These differences provide a rich context for exploring how consumer satisfaction varies across distinct market conditions and cultural settings.

By selecting Austria and Hungary, the study addresses critical gaps in the literature on omni-channel retailing, particularly in the context of cross-cultural consumer behaviour and satisfaction in the European retail landscape. This dual focus contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities retailers face in meeting the evolving demands of consumers in distinct yet interconnected markets.

3.3 Focus group procedure

The focus groups were conducted on Google Meet to accommodate geographic dispersion, as respondents resided across different cities and countries. This choice of platform facilitated remote engagement while ensuring compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) concerning data protection and privacy. The fact that video recording was to be used during the sessions was discussed with participants beforehand to ensure GDPR compliance; however, only the audio was used for transcription via Descript.com. The online platform allowed participants to join discussions from the comfort of their homes, fostering an open and comfortable environment for dialogue.

Each focus group session lasted approximately 60–90 minutes, allowing sufficient time to explore all key topics. The semi-structured discussion guide was pretested with two individuals to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions. Efforts were made to create an inclusive and comfortable environment to encourage active participation and minimize groupthink, such as emphasizing confidentiality and balancing contributions across participants.

The discussions were guided by a semi-structured discussion guide, with open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about participants' clothing shopping behaviours. After collecting the data through focus group discussions, a systematic approach was applied to analyse the transcripts and identify patterns that addressed the research question.

3.4 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data collected from the focus group discussions. This method is well-suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions regarding shopping for clothing (Lisiak-Felicka et al., 2022).

For the coding process, the analysis followed a systematic process involving: familiarization with data where the researcher transcribed the audio recordings and reviewed the transcripts multiple times to ensure familiarity; and initial coding where codes were generated inductively by identifying recurring phrases, ideas, and patterns in the transcripts. For instance, recurring codes like "trust issues", "return policies", and "omni-channel integration" were grouped into broader themes such as "barriers to adoption" and "drivers of satisfaction." These themes were then cross validated against the research question to ensure alignment with the study's objectives.

The next step was searching for themes. The initial codes were clustered into broader themes, reflecting significant patterns in the data. Following this, themes were reviewed against the original data to ensure they accurately captured participants' views. Each theme

was clearly defined and given a concise name (e.g., "trust issues," "sizing challenges"). Themes were organized and synthesized into a coherent narrative that aligned with the research objectives. To ensure rigor, the coding process was revisited iteratively, and discrepancies were resolved to maintain reliability and validity (Guest et al., 2006).

3.5 Data saturation

To ensure the adequacy of data collection and analysis, this study adhered to the principle of data saturation, a critical concept in qualitative research that indicates a point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data. Saturation was achieved as recurring themes – such as trust issues, sizing challenges, and return processes – were consistently identified across participants in both focus groups. These themes appeared repeatedly, both within and across the Austrian and Hungarian groups, confirming the robustness of the data.

The small sample size of two focus groups (nine participants in total) was sufficient for achieving saturation due to the focused nature of the study, which explored a specific phenomenon—clothing shopping experiences in omni-channel environments in Austria and Hungary. Qualitative research highlights that saturation can be reached with smaller sample sizes when the research context is well-defined, and participant responses are rich and detailed (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Thematic analysis further reinforced this saturation, as no new codes or themes emerged during the final phases of data analysis.

By systematically documenting and analysing recurring patterns, the study ensured that the insights obtained were comprehensive and reflective of the research objectives. This methodological rigor aligns with established standards in qualitative research, supporting the validity and credibility of the findings (Guest et al., 2006).

The focus group discussions covered a variety of topics related to clothing shopping behaviour, including how participants plan their purchases, choose where to shop, and decide between physical and online channels. Participants were asked about their overall shopping experiences, the barriers they encounter in online shopping, and the factors influencing their preferences for certain retailers. For example, questions included: "How do you decide where you shop for clothing?" and "What prevents you from shopping online for clothing more frequently?" These open-ended questions aimed to elicit detailed responses and encourage rich dialogue, providing deeper insights into participants' shopping preferences and experiences.

This focus group study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on consumer behaviour in the clothing retail sector, especially regarding cross-border shopping experiences and the unique preferences of residents and citizens in Austria and Hungary. By synthesizing the insights gathered through a robust methodological approach, this study provides valuable recommendations for retailers and policymakers seeking to enhance customer satisfaction. The qualitative design and thematic analysis ensured that the findings align closely with the study's research objectives, offering a nuanced understanding of consumer behaviour in omni-channel retailing across Austria and Hungary.

4. Results

This section presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis of the focus group discussions. The analysis focuses on understanding how Austrian and Hungarian consumers navigate the shopping process in both physical and online environments. By examining the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase behaviours of the participants, the research highlights key differences, similarities, and challenges faced by consumers in each country. These findings reveal specific themes, such as trust in online shopping, the importance of physical interaction with products, sizing and fit issues, and difficulties with the online return process. A detailed exploration of these themes offers a clearer understanding of consumer behaviour in omni-channel retailing. The study included nine participants: five from Austria and four from Hungary. All participants were either citizens or long-term residents of their respective countries. A socio-demographic summary is presented in Table 1:

Table 1. Demographic breakdown of the sample. *Source: Author's own*

Participant ID	Country	Age range	Gender	Occupation/Status	Experience with omni-channel shopping
P1	Austria	25–34	Female	Marketing specialist	Extensive
P2	Austria	25–34	Male	IT professional	Moderate
P3	Austria	25–34	Male	University student	Moderate
P4	Austria	25–34	Male	University student	Extensive
P5	Austria	25–34	Male	Freelance designer	Moderate
P6	Hungary	25–34	Female	Sales associate	Extensive
P7	Hungary	25-34	Female	IT professional	Extensive
P8	Hungary	25–34	Female	University student	Moderate
P9	Hungary	25-34	Male	Logistics manager	Extensive

While the comparison of shopping phases highlights the distinct preferences and behaviours of Austrian and Hungarian consumers, both groups face common barriers to fully embracing online shopping. Table 2 summarizes those barriers that significantly impact on customers' overall satisfaction and the adoption of online channels.

Table 2. Consumer behavior across shopping phases in Austria and Hungary. *Source: Author's own*

Phase	Austria	Hungary
Pre-Purchase	Participants rely heavily on online research to compare prices, read reviews, and explore product options.	Participants are cautious about relying on online information and prefer visiting physical stores first to verify product quality.
	A participant stated: "I always check at least two or three websites to compare prices and see what others are saying before heading to a store."	A respondent noted: "I do not trust online reviews that much. I need to see the product myself before I buy it."
Purchase	Consumers adopt a hybrid approach, browsing online and purchasing in-store or vice versa.	Consumers primarily favor in-store purchases due to trust issues and concerns with returns.
	A participant shared: "I like to try on clothes in-store, but sometimes I will go back online to get a better price."	A participant explained: "I prefer in-store because it's easier to deal with problems like returns."
Post-Purchase	Consumers actively leave online reviews and utilize return options through e-commerce platforms.	Consumers rely more on word-of-mouth recommendations and prefer in-store returns over online options.
	A participant remarked: "If something does not fit, I just send it back. And I always leave a review to help others decide."	A respondent shared: "I trust what my friends say about products more than reviews online."

Another key theme that emerged was that of barriers to online shopping, as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Barriers to online shopping. *Source: Author's own*

Barrier	Description	Participant quotes
Trust Issues	Concerns about product authenticity and reliability were common across both groups.	"I'm always a little worried if the product will look the same as it does online." (Austrian participant) "There's just no guarantee that the product is as good as it looks online." (Hungarian participant)
Sizing and fit	Participants faced difficulties in determining the correct size for clothing items when shopping online.	"I have had too many bad experiences with sizing. It is hard to trust the size charts." (Austrian participant) "Sizes online never match what they say, and returning is a hassle." (Hungarian participant)
Returns	Complicated return processes discouraged online shopping, especially among Hungarian participants.	"If I buy something online and it doesn't fit, I'd rather deal with a local store than go through the return process online." (Hungarian participant)

4.1 Sub-themes and nuances

The dynamics of consumer behaviour in omni-channel retailing are significantly influenced by the interplay of technology adoption and cultural preferences. These sub-themes capture the nuanced differences between Austrian and Hungarian consumers in their approach to clothing shopping in omni-channel environments.

The first sub-theme is Technology Adoption: Austrian consumers demonstrated higher engagement with digital platforms, using mobile apps and online reviews more frequently than Hungarian consumers, who exhibited more caution toward technology. The second sub-theme is Cultural Preferences: Hungarian consumers showed a preference for in-store purchases due to cultural tendencies toward risk aversion, while Austrian consumers exhibited more confidence in the convenience offered by online shopping.

In both Austria and Hungary, consumers exhibited unique preferences and challenges when navigating omni-channel retail environments. Austrian participants favoured a hybrid shopping model, integrating online research with in-store purchases, while Hungarian consumers relied more heavily on in-store experiences. The key barriers to online shopping—trust, sizing, and return processes—were prevalent in both countries, though Hungarian participants faced greater difficulties with returns. These findings offer insights into how cultural and economic factors shape consumer behaviour in omni-channel retailing, laying the groundwork for the discussion section, which explores practical implications.

5. Discussion

This study reveals significant differences in consumer behaviour and preferences in omni-channel retail environments between Austria and Hungary, shedding light on the factors influencing consumer satisfaction, the barriers faced, and the improvements desired by consumers in these two distinct markets. By addressing these findings, this discussion ties the findings back to the research objectives, highlights their theoretical contributions, and provides actionable recommendations for retailers.

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the unique dynamics of consumer satisfaction in Austria and Hungary. Austrian consumers demonstrated a clear preference for a hybrid shopping model, combining online research with in-store purchases. This behaviour aligns with global trends in omni-channel retailing, where consumers seek to capitalize on the strengths of both online and offline channels to maximize convenience and efficiency (Foysal et al., 2021). On the other hand, Hungarian consumers exhibited a stronger reliance on in-store experiences, reflecting concerns about trust and usability in online shopping platforms. These results echo prior research that emphasizes trust as a crucial factor influencing consumer adoption of e-commerce (Mehreen et al., 2020; Kang, 2023).

Recurring challenges such as trust issues, sizing concerns, and return difficulties emerged as critical barriers to omni-channel adoption in both countries. The prominence of these issues supports the relevance of the TAM, which highlights the importance of perceived ease of use and usefulness in driving satisfaction. Austrian consumers' preference for seamless omni-channel systems underscores the role of usability, while Hungarian consumers' hesitations reveal the need for trust-building mechanisms and infrastructure improvements.

The differences observed between Austrian and Hungarian consumers further highlight how cultural and economic factors shape omni-channel behaviours. For example, Austria's advanced retail infrastructure fosters a more integrated shopping experience, while Hungary's emerging market conditions contribute to scepticism and reliance on in-person shopping. These insights provide a valuable context for understanding how regional variations influence satisfaction in omni-channel environments.

6. Implications

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on consumer behaviour in omni-channel retailing by applying and extending established frameworks such as the TAM, the UTAUT, and the S-O-R model.

The findings validate TAM's emphasis on perceived ease of use and usefulness, demonstrating their importance in shaping consumer satisfaction. For instance, Austrian consumers' adoption of hybrid shopping behaviours reflects the role of ease of use in fostering omni-channel engagement. Similarly, Hungarian consumers' reluctance to adopt online shopping highlights the challenges posed by low perceived trust and usability, underscoring the need for technological advancements and infrastructure development.

This study also expands on UTAUT by highlighting the significance of facilitating conditions and social influence. Hungarian consumers require stronger support systems and clear communication from retailers to overcome barriers to omni-channel adoption. Additionally, the findings align with the S-O-R model by illustrating how negative stimuli, such as poor return processes or trust deficits, adversely affect satisfaction and loyalty. These theoretical contributions underscore the importance of integrating psychological, technological, and social dimensions when designing omni-channel strategies.

The findings have significant implications for retailers operating in Austria and Hungary: the need for tailored strategies that address market-specific challenges and consumer preferences should be emphasized. For Austria, retailers should focus on leveraging advanced technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) tools and real-time inventory management, to enhance the hybrid shopping experience. These solutions align with Austrian consumers' preference for efficiency and seamless omni-channel integration. Additionally, synchronized pricing across online and offline channels is crucial for maintaining consumer trust and satisfaction, as inconsistencies can erode loyalty.

In Hungary, improving trust and simplifying return processes should be key priorities. Retailers can achieve this through transparent communication, such as clear return policies and accurate product descriptions. Introducing user-friendly technologies like virtual fitting tools can also address sizing challenges, though targeted education campaigns may be required to encourage adoption. Finally, leveraging social media and peer recommendations can foster greater trust and engagement, as suggested by the UTAUT (Rodríguez–Torrico et al., 2020).

These findings underscore the need for tailored omni-channel retail strategies that reflect the distinct preferences and challenges of consumers in Austria and Hungary. By addressing trust deficits, enhancing technological adoption, and ensuring consistency across channels, retailers can better align their offerings with consumer expectations. The following section summarizes the study's contributions, highlights actionable recommendations for retailers and policymakers, and explores opportunities for future research.

7.   Conclusions

This study explored the clothing shopping preferences and experiences of consumers in Austria and Hungary, utilizing qualitative focus group discussions to gather insights into their behaviours and satisfaction levels. The findings indicate that Austrian consumers prefer a hybrid shopping model, combining online research with in-store purchases, while Hungarian consumers exhibit a stronger reliance on in-store experiences. These behaviours highlight significant differences influenced by each country's cultural, economic, and infrastructural factors. Despite these differences, common barriers such as trust issues, sizing challenges, and complicated return processes emerged in both groups, with Hungarian participants reporting greater difficulties with returns. These findings emphasize the need for tailored retail strategies that address the unique preferences and challenges of consumers in each market, enhancing customer satisfaction in omni-channel retail environments.

The study contributes to theoretical frameworks such as the TAM, UTAUT, and the S-O-R model by extending their applicability to under-researched contexts like Central and Eastern Europe. For instance, the findings validate the TAM's emphasis on perceived ease of use and usefulness, particularly in Austrian consumers' hybrid shopping behaviours, which are driven by efficiency and convenience. Hungarian consumers' reluctance to fully adopt online shopping underscores the importance of trust-building measures and facilitating conditions, as highlighted in the UTAUT. Additionally, the S-O-R model is supported through evidence: namely, that negative stimuli, such as unclear return policies and low trust, adversely affect consumer satisfaction and loyalty, particularly in emerging markets like Hungary.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer actionable insights for retailers and policymakers. Retailers in Austria should prioritize advanced technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) and real-time inventory management, to enhance the hybrid shopping experience and streamline integration between online and offline channels. Transparent pricing across all channels is crucial to maintaining consumer trust and loyalty. For Hungary, improving trust in online platforms through clear communication, robust return policies, and consumer education campaigns are vital. Simplified sizing tools and better product descriptions could address sizing challenges and foster greater adoption of online shopping. Both markets could benefit from leveraging social media and peer recommendations to drive consumer engagement and trust.

While the study provides valuable insights into consumer satisfaction in Austria and Hungary, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size of nine participants, while sufficient for achieving data saturation, may not fully represent the broader populations in these countries. The qualitative focus group approach, while rich in detail, may also introduce biases due to the subjective nature of participant responses. Expanding the study to include other product categories and incorporating longitudinal designs to observe changes over time could further enrich the understanding of omni-channel consumer behaviour.

Future research should explore additional countries or regions to validate these findings and to investigate the socio-demographic impacts on consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing. Additionally, examining the role of emerging technologies, such as AI and AR, in overcoming barriers like sizing and returns could provide valuable insights. By addressing these challenges and opportunities, this study lays a foundation for advancing the understanding of consumer satisfaction in omni-channel retailing, offering both theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for retailers and policymakers.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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