Channel integration and retail business performance in the pandemic covid-19: The mediating role of strategic agility

[1]Emine Yildiz-Bunyatov* and Tugba Gurcaylilar-Yenidogan**

Akdeniz University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Business Administration, Turkey*

Akdeniz University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Business Administration, Turkey **

Abstract: Along with the Covid-19 pandemic, unprecedented changes have occurred in customer shopping experiences arising from time constraints, insufficient stock, and social distance. Up till now, some retailers have become more resilient to crises, and some have even attained more growth in such a turbulent atmosphere. What the retail industry learned deeply from public health threats is that multi-channel interoperability builds up retailer resilience and creates some opportunities while fostering strategically agile behaviour and hence better performance in times of crisis. In this line, the present study here examines whether online-offline channel integration improves strategic agility and retail business performance during the pandemic outbreak of Covid-19. The data obtained from Turkish clothes retailers confirms the mediator role of strategic agility in the relationship between channel integration and retail business performance. This study provides the first evidence for the performance-enhancing effect of channel integration through strategic agility in the struggle with the pandemic.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic outbreak brought an unprecedentedly rapid structural transformation of the business environment. Consumption patterns and habits have extremely changed during the pandemic (Elali, 2021). Businesses, governments, and civil societies worldwide have experienced dismal survival times of health degradation. Despite all drawbacks, digitally transforming organisations have suffered relatively little damage, recovered quickly in the fall, and succeeded even more in growing out of the crisis. The pandemic proved once again that strategically agile organisations can learn faster, create differentiated customer experiences, and survive in times of crisis. It is worth noting that some industries have been more successfully striving, as in the ready-made clothing industry, in strategically agile behaviour during the pandemic.

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Different channel usage offers new opportunities for retailers in lockdown periods when consumer spending is drastically decreasing (Hwang et al., 2020). Whereas the offline channel (physical store) does not work effectively, the online channel attracts new customers and prevails to keep retailers alive (Beckers et al., 2021; Netto et al., 2021). Customer sensitivity to social distance caused some raised touchless interaction for shopping and returning packages as a new norm. Emergency declarations and stay-at-home practices increased online orders and revenues. As retailers shift their strategy focus from the physical to the digital channel, many new customer services, which could never be seen and imagined before, have become a normal part of daily life (Fortuna et al., 2021). All in all, customer-retailer interaction has been evolving rapidly in performing at any time and from almost anywhere (Hosseini et al., 2017; Perry et al., 2019). Despite everything, the development of contactless shopping and delivery cannot be reduced to public health concerns but is certainly associated with changing shopping behaviours (Wang et al., 2021). The new era of retailing will continue to rise over the next years as customers prefer online purchases in terms of hygiene rules, free shipping, faster delivery, and many more exciting services (Ranjan et al., 2021). Digital technologies will be no doubt used in and surely contribute to the offline channel experience through online touchpoints. However, solely using online channels still suffers serious disadvantages of touching and feeling clothes fabrics (Blázquez, 2014). The offline environment offers a more comfortable, relaxing, and fun environment for shopping. Going forward, retailing will be able to sustain and can indeed create superior customer value in case online and offline channels function as complements (Jang & Burns, 2004; Pantano & Viassone, 2015; Sheth, 2021).

It seems quite obvious that online and offline channels have complementary strengths. Although online purchase provides richer information and real-time access, physical communication may be more limited or presented in a standard format. Compared to online purchases, customer interaction is powerful in stores, but physical retailing services still suffer from location and time constraints. Audio-visual media can be used more effectively in an online environment. However, offline purchasing provides more alternatives for building a stronger brand through staff and presentation, buildings and facilities, exteriors, and other tangible elements (Rose et al., 2011). As a result, omnichannel retailing grows into an emerging new business model to truly understand agile movement in challenging times. Omnichannel retailing integrates multiple channels to ensure supply chain connectivity and information sharing while coordinating sales and marketing communication and processes. As retailers move away from the single online or offline business model and quickly implement an agile approach to capture omnichannel practices, they can adapt faster and better to the normalization of the coronavirus disease (Hwang et al., 2020; Pantano et al., 2020).

In line with omnichannel retailing literature, previous studies have empirically examined performance differences from either channel integration (e.g., Boyd et al., 2019; Cao & Li, 2014; Kolbe et al., 2021; Tagashira & Minami, 2019; Xin et al., 2021) or strategic agility (e.g., Arokodare & Asikhia, 2020; Gerald et al., 2020; Leite & Braz, 2016; Nazir & Pinsonneault, 2021; Zhou et al., 2018). However, these efforts were even less likely to disclose the strategic role of channel integration in difficult times. According to our best knowledge, no study is available yet to assess the mediating role of strategic agility in the relationship between channel integration and performance. To bridge this gap, the present study focuses on the strategic role of channel integration in the pandemic recovery and the question of how organisational agility mediates the relationship between channel integration and retail business performance.

This study is important in several ways. First, we provide early insights into channel integration resulting in agile organisational behaviour and better performance in the ready-made clothing industry. Channel integration enhances the customer experience, provides supply chain connectivity, and encourages knowledge sharing for new product and service development. In all these benefits, channel integration breeds innovative capabilities of organisations to respond to changes. Although previous literature points out independent estimations of channel integration and strategic agility that result in improved performance, the direct effects of channel integration on retail business performance may produce biased results. Where channel integration does not lead to business proactiveness and organisational agility, a self-enhancing bias does occur in better performance. In a parallel line, our mediation analysis unveils improved retail performance when channel integration leads to responding agility. Otherwise, we usually cannot tell whether an association exists solely between channel integration and business performance. Second, we provide further empirical evidence on the role of channel integration in responding to the global health crisis Covid 19. The pandemic process reveals the strategic importance of channel integration in breaking down a global health crisis. Our study reveals that channel integration can be used as an innovative recovery strategy in crisis management by addressing the differences in retail business performance. Overall, this study contributes to strategic marketing and management literature by providing evidence on how to serve omnichannel retailing and integrated channel management as a recovery strategy to exit crises.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Today, customers use smartphones to check prices and shopping options, get customer reviews, choose a specific payment option, order online, and give feedback (Jocevski et al., 2019). The application of advanced technologies plays an essential role in creating an integrated channel experience that fosters retailer-customer interactions. Digitalization also helps redefine the shopping experience through applications such as click-and-collect service, social network interaction, and buy-online-and-return-in-store service (Gao et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2020). Customers can use several touchpoints and retail channels to interact with brands or retailers during a customer journey including pre-purchase, purchase-, and post-purchase stages (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Tsiotsou & Wirtz, 2015). Furthermore, retailers are expected to provide a consistent and synchronized experience across multiple channels and touchpoints (Hosseini et al., 2017). To meet new customer demands and expectations, offline and online channels employ together in an integrated way. Channel integration leads to a smooth customer experience and hence supports retailers to establish and improve agile organisations (Son et al., 2021).

Compared to multichannel retailing, omnichannel offers more customer-oriented services (Piotrowicz & Cuthberston, 2014) and involves the main aspects of customer experience (i.e., connectivity, integration, consistency, flexibility, and personalization) (Hsia et al., 2020; Shi et al., 2020). Shopping recommendations from a nearer physical store can be given to the customer who reviews product information on the mobile phone (connection); new products can be launched synchronously across channels (integration); price and sales information can be easily accessed across channels (consistency); after-sales service of a product that has purchased online can be got offline (flexibility); customized recommendations can be suggested by collecting online purchase history of customers (personalization). Thanks to omnichannel retailing, regardless of the location where consumers do actual shopping, they have access to products and services at the same price, an equivalent quality, and the same value proposition in integrated channels (Baykal, 2021). In connection with the benefits of channel integration, omnichannel retailers can demonstrate

superior financial performance with increased trust, increased customer loyalty, higher consumer engagement rates, and more opportunities for cross-selling (Boyd et al., 2019; Cao & Li, 2014; Xin et al., 2021). Learning from the coronavirus outbreak and integrating offline and online channels, a significant number of retailers have achieved to mitigate economic losses and deal with the pandemic crisis.

Agility has now become a necessity to meet rapidly changing customer demands. It can serve as a recovery strategy while exploring new ways of survival and growth (Maskell, 2001; Richards, 1996). Strategic agility is defined as the ability of management to adapt to uncertain and rapidly changing environments, respond to new competitive landscapes and innovations, seize opportunities, and control persistent threats (Ganguly et al., 2009; Roberts & Grover, 2012, Setia et al., 2008; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999; Sherehiy et al., 2007; Sheridan, 1993; Weber & Tarba, 2014). Agile behaviour of organisations regards speediness and flexibility, high quality, customization, responsibility, and low cost that help keep surviving or even growing in hard times (Akhtar et al., 2017; Eckstein et al. 2015; Maskell, 2001; Richards, 1996, Vokurka & Fliedner, 1998). The speed of movement promotes timely completion of tasks, seizing opportunities, rapid problem-solving, and responding to change. Fulfilling an order, responding to a customer's complaint, approving a purchase order, and making decisions on investments require promptness of action and fast response. Flexibility refers to foreseeing market changes and adapting to new conditions and customer expectations. More flexible retailers can cope with sudden changes and provide accurate support to customers for selecting desirable products. All in all, strategic agility manifests itself in many aspects, from product delivery time to speedy response to customer complaints, from taking prompt decisions to flexible adaptation and reorganisation in response to recent changes.

As never before, organisations are well aware of the fact that an agile and resilient approach fosters competitive power and sustains organisational life. Organisations that fail to adapt to new rising knowledge and technology and identify generational differences would be selected and eliminated through ever-changing competitive environments. Omnichannel applications support integrated information access among channels and strengthen organisational agility against change. Omnichannel management enables one to anticipate changing customer demand and achieve prompt responses to new consumer preferences with the data analysis obtained from different channels. In addition to the information advantages of omnichannel to firm performance, consumers can compare a diverse set of product options and return online purchases from the physical stores and thus feel a unique and personalized shopping experience. In a nutshell, omnichannel retailing that enriches a real-time, integrated shopping experience provides an opportunity for improvement in products, processes, store arrangements, and sales platforms (Son et al., 2021).

In times of crisis, organisations and the external environment are in constant and rapid change. Organisations will improve their chances of survival if they act agile to handle the challenges of the crisis. With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, the retailing industry has witnessed a superior customer experience in an omnichannel retailing environment. Just as some retailers had already invested in different channels before the pandemic, some others started to diversify their channel alternatives soon after the pandemic had disclosed itself. Organisational renewal against the global outbreak has been attained by integrated channel management that stimulates retailers' agile responses to the crisis (Al-Omoush et al., 2020; Liu et al. 2020). Retailers with a seamless integrated channel service across multiple channels have handled rapid and correct strategic moves in dealing with the pandemic. Based on the above-mentioned literature and arguments, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H₁: Channel integration positively affects strategic agility.

Organisations struggle with excessive pressures on operational efficiency (Rafique et al., 2018). According to Arokodare and Asikhia (2020), strategic agility and future foresight are prominent phenomena of understanding and challenging the uncertain environment of the 21st century that hinders firm performance. Tackling uncertainty, they shed light on the interplay between strategic agility and business performance. Gerald et al. (2020) found that strategic agility significantly affects competitive advantage and thus leads to improved performance. Zhou et al. (2018) argue that agile organisations respond quickly to sudden changes which in turn achieve a greater market share and higher asset utilization. Furthermore, strategic agility enhances creativeness and thus generates greater financial benefits. Leite and Braz (2016) revealed that strategic agility impels innovation that may improve firm performance. Overall, strategic agility serves to achieve high efficiencies and then better performance. Strategic agility increases revenues from new products and processes while reducing non-value-added transactions and marketing expenditures. Agile organisations make instant responses to turbulent circumstances and transform uncertain and risky times into an advantage. As a result, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H₂: Strategic agility positively affects retail business performance.

Organisations implementing integration across channels, go beyond mere retail sales while engaging with consumers, strengthening customer relationships, and hence enhancing long-term customer loyalty (Son et al., 2021). According to the study by Oh et al. (2012), retail channel integration allows organisations not only to be efficient in presenting existing offerings but also to be innovative in creating their future proposals. Schramm-Klein et al. (2011) denote that the interconnections among retail channels positively affect customer loyalty. Establishing a well-integrated multi-channel system fosters perceived distinctiveness in customers.

Shi et al. (2020) revealed that customer perception about the compatibility and interoperability of channels significantly affects purchase intention. Customers are willing to be active members of a purchasing process where channels are tightly and smoothly integrated (Hajdas et al., 2020). Integration of sales channels and touchpoints has recently drawn tremendous attention as a promising tool for exploring growth and survival challenge. Relatedly, Urbaitytė and Ulbinaitė (2020) argue that the omnichannel strategy is the 'one best way' for retailers to restore performance. Multi-channel integration allows organisations to maintain profitability while correctly responding to sudden changes. Each channel used for communication, delivery, and sales offers a unique value proposition to customers. Customer interaction through different channels increases overall customer satisfaction. In a fiercely competitive environment that requires rapid responses to customers' expectations, an integrated channel experience fosters customer satisfaction, perceived service value, customer reliability, responsiveness to customer demands, customer acquisition, and retention rates. In turn, organisations can gain a sustainable competitive advantage through future returns from non-financial performance outputs. Accordingly, channel integration is likely to improve business performance through strategic agility and the following hypothesis can be suggested:

H₃: Channel integration improves retail business performance through strategic agility.

Financial and non-financial measures are not independent; instead, they are closely linked to each other due to the intertwined roles of 'business performance'. From a longer-term, future-oriented perspective, non-financial performance constitutes financial performance. Said et al. (2003) argue that non-financial performance information provides straightforward and timely feedback from the environment and therefore non-financial performance measurement is conditional on ensuring accurate measurement of financial performance. Micheli and Neely (2010) unveil the reason

behind relying on the interplay between financial and non-financial performance measures by pointing to the constant change in competitive conditions, fluctuations in demand, increased use of information technologies, and a wide variety of cost calculation methods. Whereas traditional performance evaluation solely rests on profit-based measures, financial and non-financial measures hold together in the strategy-oriented performance evaluation (Haldma et al., 2007).

Precious studies (e.g., Ittner & Larcker, 1998; Krishnan & Ramasamy, 2011) confirm that financial success, in a dynamic and competitive business environment, largely depends on non-financial performance on customer satisfaction, customer value, and on-time delivery. When multi-channel applications are correctly implemented, customer satisfaction and service reliability increase. Building customer trust through channel integration creates repurchase intent. A satisfied customer often buys more from the relevant company and recommends it to her friends. Customer satisfaction, which is one of the non-financial performance indicators, has a significant impact on financial performance. Price sensitivity decreases as customer satisfaction continues. Non-financial performance increases the accuracy of decisions to be taken in environments where uncertainty prevails. Once again, non-financial performance outputs such as market share, timely fulfilment of customer orders, prompt responses to customer issues like returns, exchanges, modifications, on-time delivery, and customer satisfaction have a positive impact on financial performance. For all these reasons, retail business performance can be successfully evaluated within both financial and non-financial dimensions. Consistently, this study considers retail business performance as a second-order structure.

Research Method

Over the past decade, the retail industry has been challenged to attract and retain customers by using different online and offline channels. Despite the diversity of channel alternatives, the desired outcomes from the integrated functioning of channels could not be accomplished until the year 2019. 'Stay at home' practices, curfew orders, and social distance restrictions during the pandemic process have restricted customers' location choices for shopping. Pandemic restrictions brought about unexpected patterns of consumer behaviour. The impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the retail industry has been much faster and more remarkable. Permanent changes are also foreseen in the long term. Besides expanding their online channels, retailers are racing to keep up with touchpoint trends. That is not all but at the same time, they fiercely struggle for strengthening multi-channel applications and hence ensuring integrated interoperability of online and offline channels. Due to the accelerated adoption effect of the pandemic outbreak on omnichannel management, retail channel integration has become an interesting focus of research concerning strategic agility and business performance. To this end, this study aims to examine channel integration levels and agile responses to changes in consumption patterns of ready-made clothes retailers and hence disclose potential performance differences.

The retail sector, with a total turnover of 1.2 trillion TL, is one of the most important sectors in Turkey (TAMPF, 2021). According to the annual rate of change at which a sector's turnover increases or decreases, the textile, clothing, and footwear sector became the fastest-growing sector of Turkey with an increase of 118% in the year 2022. In the year 2021, 70.7% of Turkish consumers experienced online shopping in spending on clothing, accessories, and shoes (TUIK, 2021). The present study here surveys an important research area to attract significant research when considering that the Turkish clothing sector exhibited the highest annual turnover change in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak.

Sampling and Data Collection

This study aimed to collect data on ready-made clothes retailers operating in Turkey. First, we used a wide range of data sources from well-known online platforms (Trendyol and Hepsiburada) to determine a set of Turkish clothes retailers. Second, the final list of retailers was built upon cross-checking lists of Turkey's top 100 retailers (DigitalAge, 2018), members of the United Brands Association (United Brands Association, 2021), and Turkey's top 2 most preferred online shopping platforms (Hepsiburada and Trendyol, 2021). The retailers on the list were rechecked to confirm that the selected retailers have both online and physical stores for their commercial activities. A total of 167 retail companies were then included in the survey. The online survey link was distributed to the retailing managers who are working in the positions of CEO, General Manager, Marketing Manager, and E-commerce Manager via online platforms. The survey of the research was created electronically due to the global epidemic and sent out to ready-to-wear retail businesses via LinkedIn messages and e-mail. The data collection process started in October 2021 and ended in April 2022. A pilot study was carried out as a first phase. By doing so, we evaluated how well the statements in the questionnaire could be understood and checked item response rates, construct validity, and item reliability for constructs from the statistical preliminary findings. After making the necessary improvements the serial data collection was executed as a second phase. 110 questionnaire forms were returned from 167 retailers. There was no response from 57 retailers due to their inability to communicate via LinkedIn, not having an active LinkedIn account, or not returning to the survey. Performing data extraction from electronic records was ascertained that some respondents clicked the survey link and then left the link without filling out the questionnaire completely. At last, 87 usable questionnaires were obtained with a 52.10% response rate.

Measures

The questionnaire form of this study reached the final version after a pilot study had been conducted on the ready-made clothes retailers operating in Turkey. Citing references for the constructs, all the measurement items are listed in Table 1. Omnichannel experience and channel integration refer to a degree of inter-channel service content. The scale for channel integration developed by Wu and Wu (2015) was used in this study. Respondents were asked to evaluate to what extent they were able to use offline and online channels in a coordinated and integrated manner during the Covid 19 pandemic. Accordingly, the items expressing channel integration were rated on a five-point scale: 1=not at all, 2=very little, 3=moderately, 4=significantly, and 5=completely.

Table 1. Construct Measurements

Construct	Measurement	References
Channel Integration		Wu & Wu, 2015
Pre-purchase stage	CI-We use the same or similar brand names in online and physical channels.	
	CI2-We use cross-advertisement or promotion in online and physical channels (i.e., online ads and campaigns in the physical store/ads and campaigns of the physical store on online channels).	
	CI3-We provide identical products and prices in online and physical channels.	

	CI4-We provide online information services in physical stores to facilitate access to a wider product range.	
	CI5-We provide rich product information (e.g., size, colour, stock status, delivery options, etc.) and a pre-purchase evaluation process online.	
	CI6-Our customers access the same content through online and physical channels.	
Purchase stage	CI7-Our customers order products at online channels and seamlessly pick them up in-store.∇	
	CI8-We provide negotiation online and in turn offer quick, accurate solutions in responding to customer complaints such as product returns.	
	CI9-We provide well-functioning online services for order tracking.	
	CI10-Our customers can access similar and numerous amounts of payment methods in online and physical stores.	
Post-purchase stage	CI11-Our customers can return products bought online to physical stores in case of repair, replacement, or any other additional services.	
	CI12-Our customers can ask for online help and technical support for the products purchased at physical stores.	
	CI13-We collect consumer information and data through both physical (offline) and online channels to execute personalized marketing efforts.	
	CI14-Our customers can ask for help and technical support in-store for the products purchased by online channels.	
	CI15-We provide live (real-time) customer support (e.g., live chats and phone calls) for post-purchase evaluations.	
Strategic Agility		Nazir & Pinsonneault, 2021
	SA1-Respond to changes in aggregate consumer demand.	
	SA2-Customize products or services to suit individual customers.	
	SA3-React to new product/service launches by competitors.	
	SA4-Introduce new pricing schedules in response to changes in competitors' prices.∇	
	SA5-Expand into new regional and international markets.	
	SA6-Change (i.e., expand or reduce) the variety of products / services available for sale.	
	SA7-Adopt new technologies to produce better, faster, and cheaper products and services.	
	SA8-Switch suppliers to avail of lower costs, better quality, or improved delivery times.	
	SA9-Success and speed in implementing omnichannel marketing processes.	

Retail Business Performance		Chia et al., 2009
Financial performance	BP1-ROE	
	BP2-EBITDA	
	BP3-Capacity utilization	
Non-financial performance	BP4-On-time delivery	
	BP5-Fulfilling customer orders	
	BP6-Responding to return requests	
	BP7-New product launches	
	BP8-Establishing beneficial partnerships	
	BP9-Customer satisfaction	

∇*Removed from the scale*

Although strategic agility includes two subconstructs of sensing and responding, most of the previous studies emphasize the priority of responding to determine agility in organisations. The responding component of agility refers to the organisational capability of fast, instant, and even transformative responses to changes in demand, product development, marketing mix, organisational processes, and network relationships. Following this definition, we adapted Nazir and Pinsonneault's (2021) measurement items to operationalize the responding agility of retailers. Respondents were asked to rate how easily and quickly they were able to carry out strategic actions expressing agility during the Covid 19 pandemic on a five-point scale: 1=not at all, 2=very little, 3=moderately, 4=significantly, 5=completely.

Business performance is a second-order construct derived from financial performance and non-financial performance. Consistent with a balanced approach to performance measurement, retail business performance was measured with items adapted from Chia et al. (2009). Respondents were asked how they performed compared to their close competitors during the Covid 19 pandemic, and the performance items were rated on a 5-point scale. 1=much worse, 2=somewhat worse, 3=stayed the same, 4=somewhat better, 5=much better.

Hypothesis Testing: Data Analysis and Results

Partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 3.0 was used to test the measurement model and research hypotheses. PLS-SEM technique is robust to the non-normality assumption and small sample sizes of test statistics (Hair et al., 2016). In this study which was carried out with a relatively small sample, we estimated for measurement and structural models, respectively.

Testing the measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed to evaluate the validity and reliability of measurements. The results are presented in Table 2. Cronbach's alpha values are above 0.70 which confirms the reliability of the scales. Convergent validity was assessed considering the factor loading of the indicator, composite reliability (CR), and the average variance extracted (AVE). Two items with factor loadings less than the cut-off of 0.40 were removed from the model. Except for strategic agility, the AVE value for each construct is greater than 0.50 and factor loadings of all items are above 0.50 (Wong, 2013). The AVE value of strategic agility is greater than 0.40 but its CR value is more than the cut-off of 0.70. The average variance extracted alone delivers more conservative estimates of measurement validity. According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), the

convergent validity of strategic agility can be acceptable, even though the AVE exhibits more than 50% of the variance. The composite reliability coefficient value for each construct exceeds the threshold value of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2016). As a result, the measurement model of this study was found adequate to satisfy internal consistency reliability and convergent validity.

Table 2. Validity and Reliability of Measurements

Construct	Item	Factor Loading	STVDEV	T Statistics	p	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Channel Integration						0.922	0.933	0.502
Pre-purchase phase						0.866	0.900	0.600
	CI1	0.825	0.053	15.677	0.000			
	CI2	0.746	0.060	12.443	0.000			
	CI3	0.753	0.073	10.292	0.000			
	CI4	0.709	0.082	8.671	0.000			
	CI5	0.777	0.066	11.718	0.000			
	CI6	0.829	0.042	19.720	0.000			
Purchase phase						0.861	0.915	0.783
	CI8	0.865	0.044	19.635	0.000			
	CI9	0.900	0.030	29.616	0.000			
	CI10	0.889	0.040	22.330	0.000			
Post-purchase phase						0.822	0.875	0.587
	CI11	0.618	0.132	4.679	0.000			
	CI12	0.804	0.047	17.278	0.000			
	CI13	0.847	0.036	23.541	0.000			
	CI14	0.766	0.091	8.393	0.000			
	CI15	0.776	0.054	14.502	0.000			
Strategic Agility						0.807	0.855	0.429
	SA1	0.557	0.069	9.898	0.000			
	SA2	0.697	0.097	5.752	0.000			
	SA3	0.497	0.071	9.775	0.000			
	SA5	0.649	0.104	4.798	0.000			
	SA6	0.695	0.087	7.495	0.000			
	SA7	0.765	0.080	8.726	0.000			
	SA8	0.658	0.073	10.557	0.000			
	SA9	0.680	0.068	9.685	0.000			
Retail Business Performance						0.944	0.953	0.692
Financial performance	BP1	0.918	0.041	22.188	0.000	0.912	0.945	0.851

BP2	0.935	0.022	43.194	0.000
BP3	0.913	0.024	37.646	0.000

Non-financial performance					0.920	0.938	0.716
BP4	0.846	0.054	15.618	0.000			
BP5	0.864	0.066	13.065	0.000			
BP6	0.893	0.034	26.027	0.000			
BP7	0.768	0.063	12.281	0.000			
BP8	0.793	0.069	11.561	0.000			
BP9	0.905	0.042	21.353	0.000			

Discriminant validity, the degree of overlap between constructs, was evaluated by using the Fornell-Larcker and cross-loading method, and the Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlation. Fornell-Lacker method compares the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) with the correlation of latent constructs. While a construct explains variance better in its indicator, the square root of AVE for each construct will have a greater value than the correlations with other constructs (Wong, 2013). Table 3 presents the discriminant validity based on the Fornell-Larcker criterion showing the AVE of the constructs exceeds the square root of correlations.

Table 3. Construct Correlations and the Squared Roots of AVE

	Non-financial performance	Financial performance	Channel Integration	Strategic Agility	Purchase phase	Post-purchase phase	Pre-purchase phase	Retail Performance
Non-financial performance	**(0.846)**							
Financial performance	0.807	**(0.922)**						
Channel Integration	0.365	0.315	**(0.709)**					
Strategic Agility	0.420	0.392	0.520	**(0.655)**				
Purchase phase	0.371	0.338	*0.886*	0.501	**(0.885)**			
Post-purchase phase	0.260	0.254	*0.874*	0.375	0.713	**(0.766)**		
Pre-purchase phase	0.344	0.262	*0.906*	0.504	0.706	0.648	**(0.775)**	
Retail Performance	*0.974*	*0.920*	0.364	0.430	0.376	0.270	0.329	**(0.832)**

The Fornell-Larcker criterion lacks sensitivity (Rönkkö & Evermann, 2013). Therefore, we provide the HTMT ratio of correlations as a measure of similarity between latent constructs in Table 4. The HTMT values were found within the range of 0.288 to 0.881, below the threshold value of 0.90 (Hair et al., 2016). Overall, the results demonstrate an adequate degree of divergent validity for measures.

Table 4. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	Non-financial performance	Financial performance	Channel Integration	Strategic Agility	Purchase phase	Post-purchase phase	Pre-purchase phase
Financial performance	0.881						
Channel Integration	0.390	0.338					
Strategic Agility	0.492	0.440	0.583				
Purchase phase	0.414	0.382	*(0.980)*	0.591			
Post-purchase phase	0.298	0.288	*(1.007)*	0.449	0.844		
Pre-purchase phase	0.381	0.292	*(1.012)*	0.583	0.810	0.752	
Retail Performance	*(1.047)*	*(0.988)*	0.384	0.489	0.415	0.304	0.361

Values for first-order constructs (i.e., channel integration and retail business performance) are shown in parentheses and should be disregarded.

Testing the structural model

After ensuring the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the structural model was tested. In this study, channel integration and business performance constructs were added to the model as second-order constructs. The path coefficients pointed out the second-order reflective construct weights (Table 5). The present study yielded significant path coefficients between first-order and second-order constructs at the 0.01 level of significance.

Table 5. Structural Statistics for Second-Order Constructs (Channel Integration and Retail Business Performance)

	Coefficients	STVDEV	T Statistics	p	VIF
Channel Integration→Pre-purchase phase	0.906	0.032	28.696	0.000	1.000
Channel Integration→Purchase phase	0.886	0.031	28.247	0.000	1.000
Channel Integration→Post-purchase phase	0.874	0.044	19.758	0.000	1.000
Retail Performance→Financial performance	0.920	0.026	35.660	0.000	1.000
Retail Performance→Non-financial performance	0.974	0.010	95.514	0.000	1.000

This study then proceeded in estimating the causal mediation model by which to test hypotheses (H1, H2, and H3). Table 6 depicts path coefficients for hypothesized causal relationships. First, the path coefficient for the relationship between channel integration and strategic agility was found to be 0.520 with a significance level of 0.01. This result revealed that channel integration has a significant positive effect on strategic agility, in support of hypothesis (H1). Second, the effect of strategic agility on business performance was significant at the level of 0.01 with a path coefficient value of ($\beta = 0.330$), thus supporting hypothesis (H2). Third, channel integration was found to have a positive impact on performance ($\beta = 0.192$, $p > 0.05$); however, this effect was not statistically significant while the model includes paths to strategic agility. The result here was indeed encouraging us to link strategic agility to mediation outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986).

Nevertheless, some comparisons across direct/indirect/total effects of channel integration on retailing performance could unveil the previously unnoticed mediation role of strategic agility.

Table 6. Hypothesis Tests

|	Coefficients	STD DEV	T Statistics	p	(f²)	VIF
Direct Effects						
Channel Integration→Strategic Agility	0.520	0.098	5.325	**0.000**	0.370	1.000
Strategic Agility→Retail Business Performance	0.330	0.127	2.602	**0.009**	0.101	1.370
Channel Integration→Retail Business Performance	0.192	0.162	1.183	0.237	0.034	1.370
Specific Indirect Effects						
Channel Integration→Strategic Agility→Retail Business Performance	0.172	0.078	2.207	**0.028**		
Channel Integration→Financial Performance	0.177	0.148	1.193	0.233		
Channel Integration→Non-financial Performance	0.187	0.157	1.188	0.235		
Strategic Agility→Financial Performance	0.304	0.115	2.631	**0.009**		
Strategic Agility→Non-financial Performance	0.321	0.123	2.619	**0.009**		
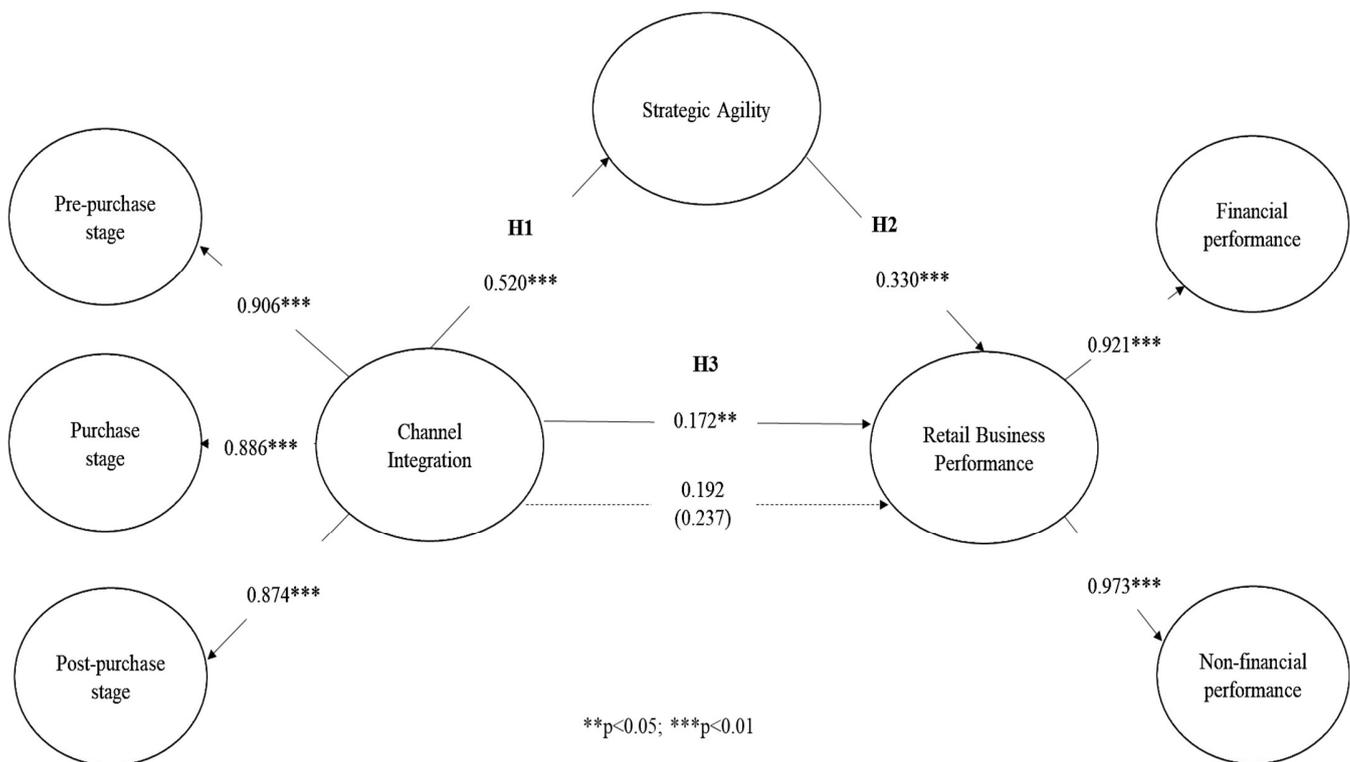
Figure 1. The path results from the research model

Following Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedures to find out the presence of mediation, the unmediated model was tested as well. According to the results of the unmediated model, retailing performance was positively and significantly affected by channel integration ($\beta = 0.364$, p<0.015). Thus, the precondition was met to support the mediation hypothesis. Given the results of the mediated model (Figure 1, Table 6), we further examined the mediation effect of strategic agility on the relationship between channel integration and performance. The results revealed that the indirect effect of channel integration is significant on retail business performance ($\beta = 0.172$, p<0.05), and the R^2 value of the mediated model increased from 0.132 to 0.187. Accordingly, our results demonstrated the mediator role of strategic agility in the relationship between channel integration and better retailing performance in crisis periods, thus confirming the H3 hypothesis.

Discussion

Our mediation analysis of strategic agility in the ready-made garment industry revealed some important findings linking channel integration to retail business performance. We found a positive and significant relationship between channel integration and retail business performance in a preliminary examination of the unmediated model, where strategic agility is not included in the model. Unlike the findings of the bivariate impact test, a nonsignificant effect was found between channel integration and retailing performance when strategic agility undertakes to mediate between the other two. Adding a strategic agility mediator increased the explanatory power of the research model. All in all, we concluded that strategic agility fully mediates the relationship between channel integration and retail business performance. In addition, specific indirect effects revealed a significant relationship between Channel Integration→Strategic Agility→Retail Business Performance linkage in further support for mediation.

Theoretical Implications

This study sheds light on bivariate and multiple impacts of channel integration, strategic agility, and retailing performance. Dissimilar, the previous work lies at the two antecedent determinants of business performance. On the one hand, some of them (e.g., Oh et al.,2012; Schramm-Klein et al., 2011; Son et al., 2021; Urbaitytė & Ulbinaitė, 2020) exhibit a significant positive relationship between channel integration and retail business performance. We call this direct effect "biased evaluation" and provide evidence for a causal mediation for retailing performance. According to our findings, channel integration leads to retailers' agile responses to unprecedented changes, which, in turn, fosters innovative recovery from crises. Our mediation argument conveys an indirect effect of channel integration that is not alone sufficient for retailing performance but through promoting strategic agility. To our best knowledge, this is the first study reporting the detection of responding agility of channel integration in crisis management. Our distinctive focal point in the context of strategic and change management unveils the innovative aspect of the present study.

On the other hand, although some previous studies (e.g., Gerald et al., 2020; Leite & Braz, 2016; Zhou et al., 2018) exhibit a positive relationship between strategic agility and business performance, none of them focused on the role of organisational agility in recovering retailing performance, which was seriously damaged during crisis periods. In this respect, this study extends the effects of agility on organisational resilience and performance improvement to the ready-made retailing industry. Strategic agility enhances retailing recovery in business performance in times

of crisis. The agility of retailers to respond to unprecedented changes can be accomplished by online–offline channel integration. Hence our effort here exemplifies how retailers can increase and sustain customer experience in hard times.

Managerial Implications

This study also has important implications for managers. First, considering that channel integration exerts a positive effect on strategic agility, retailers shall create a seamless customer experience in which channels are working in a collectively coordinated and inter-functional integrated manner. In turn, they can respond to changes in consumer demands, make strategic maneuvers in competition, and offer higher quality products or services at lower costs. Second, the positive effect of strategic agility on retail business performance rationalizes investments in channel integration. Retailers, who can act more quickly and adapt immediately to the changes, can indeed recover faster from crises and avoid performance damages. Third, performance improvement is valid for retailers that can make strategically agile attacks stemming from exploiting channel integration. During the Covid-19 pandemic, only retailers with channel integration have accomplished customer satisfaction by reducing social contact and increasing uninterrupted shopping. Customers have preferred retailers that offer contactless delivery and adopt a cross-channel purchase-return policy. Today, customers increasingly shift in enrollment from traditional retailers towards omnichannel ones.

Limitations and Recommendations

New knowledge produced in this study still surrounds some limitations, encouraging further studies. The study considers performance effects during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic is still ongoing, it would be contributory to repeat the survey in the future. In addition, this study is cross-sectional and based on a relatively small size of sample, which may cause some robustness problems. Large-scale samples from different nations are needed to provide precise findings.

Conclusion

While competition has become even more challenging along with global crises, while the frequency of technology usage has been rising, doing business in the retailing landscape is ever-increasingly revealing the importance of developing new business models. The omnichannel business model enriches the customer experience when customers can purchase and return products anytime and anywhere. Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson (2019) unveil the innovative recovery potential of a multi-channel environment that serves customer interaction with different shopping styles in an integrated form.

Despite all this, many businesses are still lacking a proper organisational configuration for coordinating and integrating multiple channels. Along with the Covid-19 pandemic, several changes in the shopping process due to time constraints, insufficient stock, and social distance revealed the need for organisational renewal for integrated channel management. Compared to all negative effects in all sectors, unfavourable effects of the Covid-19 outbreak in the retail industry (e.g., reduced foot traffic, at-home quarantine, and worried consumers) were felt keenly, much faster, and more noticeable. Precisely for that reason, the retail area research offers a very relevant

environment to explore the relationship between channel integration, strategic agility, and retail business performance. To bridge knowledge gaps in the strategy-performance link in the pandemic disruption, the present study here investigates the mediator role of strategic agility in the relationship between channel integration and performance in the clothing industry. The data obtained from the ready-made clothes retailers operating in Turkey revealed some important results on how easily and quickly the retailers carry out their actions, to what extent they use online and physical channels in an integrated way, and what performance differences do occur in strategic agile behaviour.

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