Consumers' Perceived Value and Word of Mouth in Omnichannel Marketing: The Mediating Role of Flow Experience

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Abstract

The era of omnichannel retail has arrived, and it is breaking the boundaries between online and offline channels to provide seamless shopping experiences. To stay competitive, enterprises are increasingly adopting omnichannel strategies, making consumer research especially crucial. Perceived value, as the basis for understanding consumer behavior, is vital for decision-making and gaining competitive advantage. Yet, how consumers assess shopping value and how its dimensions affect word-of-mouth remain underexplored. This study examines Generation Z consumers in Henan Province's apparel industry through a quantitative approach, analyzing the relationship between perceived value and word-of-mouth in omnichannel contexts, with flow experience as a mediator. Results show that utilitarian, hedonic, and social values significantly influence word-of-mouth, and flow experience mediates these effects. The study recommends that enterprises should refine the management of each dimension of perceived value and strive to enhance consumers' overall perceived value. At the same time, creating flow experience should be regarded as a key objective in omnichannel service design, guiding its transformation into positive word-of-mouth behaviors and thereby supporting the sustainable development of enterprises.

Keywords: Consumer perceived value, Flow experience, Word-of-mouth

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Introduction

The term “omnichannel retail” first appeared in a 2009 retail research report published by the American data consulting firm IDG. Against this backdrop, consumer behavior has undergone significant changes compared with traditional retail contexts. Omnichannel marketing enables consumers to access products across multiple channels, enjoying a seamless and convenient shopping experience, thereby meeting their needs to alleviate life and time pressures (Kanat & Atılgan, 2023). Research indicates that consumers who shop across channels spend more, shop more frequently, and exhibit longer customer lifetime values (Neslin, S. A., & Shankar, 2009). Consumer perceived value (CPV) is defined as “the trade-off between product benefits and customer-perceived sacrifices” (Zeithaml, 1988), encompassing three dimensions: functional value, emotional value, and social value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). These value dimensions influence consumer behavior differently in single-channel versus multi-channel environments. They not only influence purchase decisions, brand selection, price sensitivity, and product evaluations but also stimulate word-of-mouth communication while enhancing satisfaction and loyalty. However, the differential effects of each perceived value dimension on consumer word-of-mouth behavior within an omnichannel context remain understudied, particularly the potential mediating role of flow experience.

Due to cultural differences and uneven levels of economic development, China does not constitute a homogeneous market but rather comprises multiple submarkets, among which Henan Province represents a typical example. The textile and apparel industry serves as a vital pillar of the economy in many countries (Dicken, 2003). With continuous advancements in information technology and the evolution of consumer awareness and purchasing habits, the channel management model in the apparel industry has undergone profound transformation. Management strategies for omnichannel retailing in developed economies may not be directly applicable to the Chinese market. Exploring successful implementation strategies for omnichannel retailing in China's rapidly growing retail market, particularly within the Henan apparel sector, holds significant importance. Furthermore, generational theory indicates that age influences consumer behavior, with each generation exhibiting similar values, attitudes, and behavioral preferences. Generation Z consumers demonstrate high acceptance of digital access methods, strong technological adaptability, and proficiency in usage (Nagy I. D., et.al., 2024). Consumers from different generations possess

distinct characteristics and therefore need to be studied and analyzed separately.

Against this backdrop, this study examines Gen Z consumers in Henan Province, to explore how various dimensions of perceived value influence word-of-mouth within an omnichannel shopping environment. It aims to supplement and enrich existing practical case studies on the impact of perceived value on word-of-mouth behavior in this context, while providing theoretical foundations and practical insights for consumer behavior management in Henan markets for multinational corporations.

Research Objectives

1. To study the influence of consumer-perceived value dimensions (utilitarian value, hedonic value, social value) on flow experience within the context of omnichannel retail.

2. To study how word-of-mouth behavior is affected by flow experience throughout the omnichannel customer purchase process.

3. To investigate how, in the context of the omnichannel customer shopping process, flow experience mediates the relationship between word-of-mouth activity and consumer-perceived value dimensions (utilitarian, hedonic, and social value).

Research hypothesis

H1: Omnichannel utility value positively influences flow experience.

H2: Omnichannel hedonic value positively influences flow experience.

H3: Omnichannel social value positively influences flow experience.

H4: Flow experience positively influences consumer word-of-mouth.

Furthermore, based on H1, H2, H3, and H4, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: Flow experience mediates the relationship between omnichannel utility value and consumer word-of-mouth.

H6: Flow experience mediates the relationship between omnichannel hedonic value and consumer word-of-mouth.

H7: Flow experience mediates the relationship between omnichannel social value and consumer word-of-mouth.

Scope of the Study

Content Scope

Using Henan Province, China as a case study, This study explores the psychological mechanisms underlying the relationship between perceived value and word-of-mouth behavior. The study uses SEM and questionnaire surveys to evaluate the mediating effect of flow experience under the guidance of flow theory. The findings provide theoretical justification for omnichannel retailing's management of customer word-of-mouth.

Population Scope

This study employs simple random sampling to select Generation Z consumers aged 20 and above within Henan Province's apparel industry who have experienced omnichannel shopping. Based on W.G. Cochran's (1953) formula, the minimum sample size is calculated as 385 respondents. Data collection utilizes an online questionnaire distributed to the aforementioned sample.

Review of literature and Concepts

Flow Experience

Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory explores the motivations underlying individuals' engagement in spontaneous (self-directed) activities, positing that flow occurs when an individual's abilities are well-matched to the challenges they face. In marketing research, flow experience has emerged as a key factor, emphasizing how consumers perceive activities as intrinsic rewards—that is, deriving enjoyment without requiring material compensation (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The flow state is characterized by complete absorption in an activity, during which individuals lose awareness of themselves and the passage of time, yet fully enjoy each moment and seek to replicate the experience. Since its inception, flow has often been regarded as an important mediating variable linking external stimuli to behavioral responses.

Empirical studies indicate that flow significantly enhances consumers' willingness to engage in word-of-mouth communication. For instance, In traditional shopping, when consumers enter a flow state, they become fully immersed, enjoy the experience, and lose track of time, prompting them to share their shopping experiences and generate positive word-of-mouth (Li Y., & Wang, W. 2021). Additionally, In an omnichannel shopping environment, Rodríguez-Torrico et al. (2023) found that flow experience serves as a mediating factor between a seamless shopping journey and consumer word-of-mouth. According to flow theory, high levels of immersion and enjoyment are prerequisites for entering the flow state. Given that flow constitutes a vital component of the omnichannel consumer experience, consumers

experiencing flow are more likely to proactively share their feelings and recommend products or services. Therefore, this study posits that flow experience may serve as a significant antecedent driving word-of-mouth communication in omnichannel shopping contexts.

Perceived Value

While perceiving benefits and sacrifices, customers also weigh them to form their perception of overall value. Sweeney & Soutar (2001) found that consumers evaluate products not only based on expected performance and versatility (functional value), but also through the enjoyment or pleasure derived from the product (emotional value) and its social impact on others (social value). Rintamäki, T., et. al (2006) developed a comprehensive multidimensional measurement instrument, which was consistently applied throughout their research and encompassed three core dimensions: utilitarian value, hedonic value, and social value. Accordingly, building upon previous studies, this paper adopts these three dimensions as independent variables for investigation.

Utility value emphasizes efficiency and goal-oriented shopping by rationally allocating time, effort, and funds to obtain suitable products through convenient means and at appropriate costs (Chang & Geng, 2022). In omnichannel environments, channel integration and shared benefits not only reduce search and economic costs but also enhance convenience, thereby facilitating consumer entry into flow states. Hedonic value focuses on the enjoyment and immersion derived from shopping. Omnichannel models allow consumers to flexibly switch shopping methods while incorporating interactive and novel experiences. This sense of pleasure may cause consumers to lose track of time and become immersed in the shopping process. Social value manifests in interactions via social media and online communities, helping consumers gain recognition and social support (Salem & Alanadoly, 2024). Omnichannel shopping enables consumers to share and communicate anytime, fulfilling their social needs and fostering deep engagement through flow experiences during purchases.

Word-of-Mouth

Arndt (1967) first introduced the concept of word-of-mouth (WOM), defining it as non-commercial verbal communication among consumers regarding brands, products, or services. This form of communication is perceived as more credible and influential than advertising, accelerating market acceptance of new products. Subsequently, Westbrook (1987) defined WOM as informal opinion exchange among consumers regarding products or services, encompassing both positive and negative perspectives. This exchange extends beyond face-

to-face interactions to include non-contact communication. His definition expanded the scope of content, form, and effects, gaining widespread academic recognition. Overall, scholars generally agree that word-of-mouth possesses three key characteristics: First, it is inherently informal information transmission based on interpersonal interaction. Second, its content extends beyond purchasing and consumption experiences to encompass consumer attitudes and trends. Third, such exchanges are typically perceived as non-commercial, thereby enhancing credibility and influence. This study adopts Westbrook's definition, viewing word-of-mouth as informal information exchange and opinion communication among consumers regarding product attributes, usage experiences, or service providers.

Conceptual Framework

Based on flow theory, The conceptual framework proposed in this study is as follows:

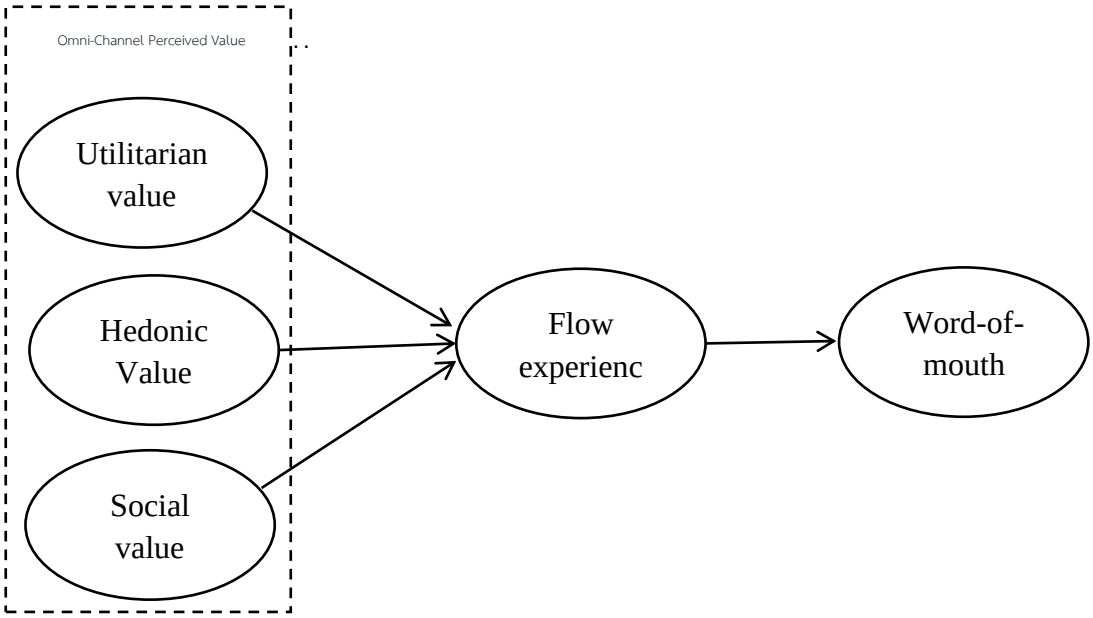

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study conducted a questionnaire survey targeting Generation Z consumers aged 20 and above in the apparel industry of Henan Province, China. SPSS and AMOS were used to assess reliability, validity, main effects, and mediating effects, examining the influence of utilitarian value, hedonic value and social value on word-of-mouth behavior in the omnichannel shopping context, as well as the mediating role of flow experience.

Research Tools

Data was collected via an online questionnaire divided into three sections: Part One screened omnichannel shoppers by assessing omnichannel shopping experience, product categories purchased, and number/types of channels used to ensure participant comprehension. Part Two measured the study variables: utilitarian value, hedonic value, social value, flow experience and word-of-mouth behavior. All were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, referencing studies by Babin et al. (1994), Rintamäk, T.i et al. (2006) , Sweeney and Soutar (2001),Quach et al. (2022) and Rodríguez-Torrico et al. (2023). Basic customer data, such as gender, age, occupation, degree of education, and the number of omnichannel shopping experiences within the previous six months, are gathered in Part Three.

Data Analysis Methods

This study first used descriptive statistics (mean, percentage, standard deviation) to examine the distribution of the sample across demographics, perceived omnichannel value, flow experience, perceived privacy risk, and word-of-mouth behavior. Questionnaire reliability was assessed via Cronbach's α, and validity was evaluated through content and construct validity (factor analysis loadings, commonality, and cumulative contribution). Factor analysis reduced variables to composite factors to reveal underlying structures, while Pearson correlation analyzed relationships among perceived omnichannel value, flow experience, perceived privacy risk, and word-of-mouth. Finally, SEM tested relationships between observed and latent variables, including direct, indirect, and total effects, validating the theoretical model's applicability and explanatory power.

Research Results

Reliability and validity analysis

As shown in Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the scales are 0.815, 0.820, 0.815, 0.827, and 0.841, respectively, all exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7, suggesting satisfactory reliability for these scales. As shown in the table, It indicates that no item deletion is necessary.

Table 1 Reliability analysis

Scale	Item	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted	Cronbach's Alpha
Utilitarian Value	UV1	0.700	0.711	0.815
	UV2	0.668	0.745	
	UV3	0.633	0.780	
Hedonic Value	HV1	0.668	0.757	0.820
	HV2	0.695	0.730	
	HV3	0.657	0.768	
Social Value	SV1	0.653	0.759	0.815
	SV2	0.629	0.784	
	SV3	0.719	0.691	
Flow Experience	FE1	0.627	0.815	0.827
	FE2	0.744	0.701	
	FE3	0.685	0.761	
Word-of-Mouth	WOM1	0.655	0.808	0.841
	WOM2	0.696	0.790	
	WOM3	0.690	0.793	
	WOM4	0.663	0.804	

Table 2 presents the convergent validity of the scales. Convergent validity refers to the phenomenon where items measuring the same latent trait cluster onto the same factor structure, with high correlations among their measured values. The CR values and the AVE values are all greater than 0.5, indicating that the scales demonstrate satisfactory convergent validity.

Table 2 Convergent Validity of the Scale

Scale	Item	Standardized Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Utilitarian Value	UV1	0.800	0.817	0.598
	UV2	0.778		
	UV3	0.741		
Hedonic Value	HV1	0.758	0.820	0.603
	HV2	0.801		
	HV3	0.771		
Social Value	SV1	0.752	0.819	0.602
	SV2	0.722		
	SV3	0.848		
Flow Experience	FE1	0.701	0.832	0.624
	FE2	0.860		
	FE3	0.800		
Word-of-Mouth	WOM1	0.721	0.842	0.571
	WOM2	0.785		
	WOM3	0.767		
	WOM4	0.749		

The discriminant validity table is shown in Table 3. Good discriminant validity between the variables is indicated by the correlation coefficients between the latent variables, all of

which are less than the square root of the AVE on the appropriate diagonal.

Table 3 Discriminant Validity Table for the Scale

	Utilitarian Value	Hedonic Value	Social Value	Flow Experience	Word-of-Mouth
Utilitarian Value	0.774				
Hedonic Value	0.526	0.777			
Social Value	0.502	0.586	0.776		
Flow Experience	0.463	0.528	0.513	0.789	
Word-of-Mouth	0.559	0.588	0.569	0.586	0.756

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Analysis

Based on the reliability analysis and confirmatory factor analysis, the constructs demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity, indicating that the SEM can be conducted. The SEM was constructed using AMOS 24.0, and the resulting path coefficients are presented in Figure 2.

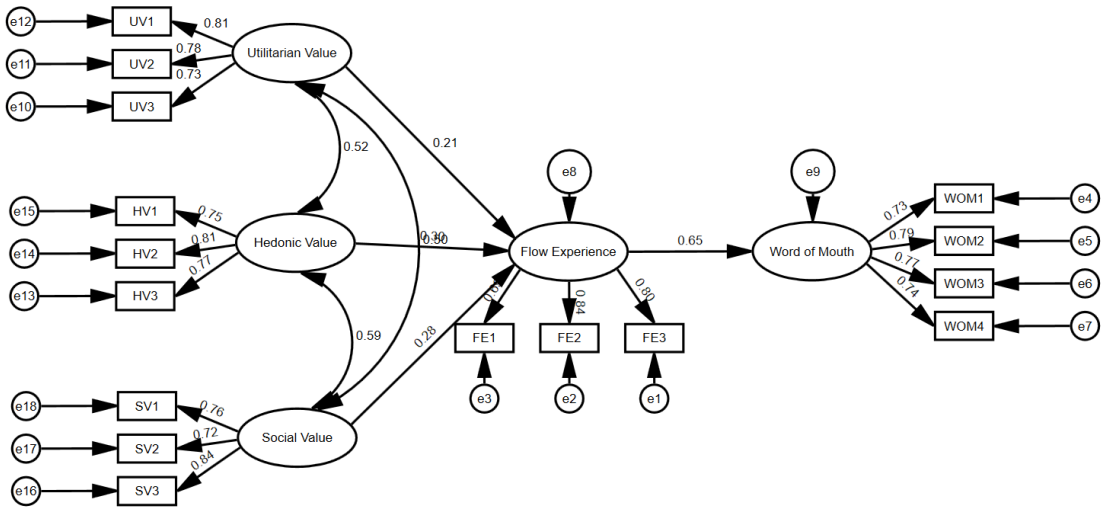

Figure 2 Structural Equation Model

Table 3 presents the path analysis results, and Table 4 shows the mediation effect tests. As indicated by Tables 3 and 4, all hypotheses are supported.

Table 4 Path Analysis

Hypothesis	Path			β	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
H1	Flow Experience	<---	Utilitarian Value	0.213	0.067	3493	***	Supported
H2	Flow Experience	<---	Hedonic Value	0.300	0.075	4.470	***	Supported
H3	Flow Experience	<---	Social Value	0.277	0.060	4.198	***	Supported

H4	Word of Mouth	<---	Flow Experience	0.647	0.053	10.829	***	Supported

Table 5 Mediation Effect Path Analysis

Mediating Path	β	S.E.	P	95% Confidence Interval	
				LLCI	ULCI
Utilitarian Value ⟶ Flow Experience ⟶ Word of Mouth	0.138	0.048	0.002	0.051	0.242
Hedonic Value ⟶ Flow Experience ⟶ Word of Mouth	0.194	0.056	0.000	0.092	0.314
Social Value ⟶ Flow Experience ⟶ Word of Mouth	0.179	0.050	0.000	0.089	0.286

Conclusion, Discussion, Suggestion

Conclusion

This study focuses on the role of perceived value in the apparel industry's word-of-mouth mechanism within an omnichannel shopping environment. Using Generation Z consumers in Henan Province, China as the sample, quantitative analysis and SEM were employed for empirical testing. The findings align with the research objectives, with key discoveries as follows: First, within omnichannel shopping scenarios, consumers' perceived value—encompassing utility value, hedonic value, social value, and emotional value—significantly drives their word-of-mouth behavior, with utility and hedonic values playing particularly prominent roles. This indicates apparel consumers prioritize both efficiency and practicality while also seeking pleasure and immersive experiences during omnichannel shopping. Second, The association between perceived value and WOM was partially mediated by flow experience. This implies that the stronger consumers' immersive experience, the more evident their willingness to share positive experiences with those around them.

Discussion

This study finds that in an omnichannel shopping environment, perceived value (utility, hedonic, social) exerts a positive influence on flow experience, consistent with prior research findings (Kim & Han, 2009). Utility value reflects consumers' pursuit of functional and practical benefits, emphasizing shopping efficiency and resource conservation. Omnichannel shopping integrates online and offline channels to deliver suitable products to consumers at reasonable prices and with convenient experiences, making the shopping process effortless, efficient, and seamless. This immersion facilitates flow experiences. Hedonic value focuses on pleasure and enjoyment during shopping. The omnichannel environment enhances entertainment and immersion by integrating multiple touchpoints and interactive experiences. This allows consumers to satisfy practical needs while triggering flow experiences—such as immersion and time distortion—through aesthetic pleasure and emotional connection. Social value encompasses social interaction, recognition, and belonging. Omnichannel shopping facilitates feedback and social support through online-offline interactions and experience sharing, enhancing consumers' perception of social value. Overall, heightened perceptions of utility, hedonic, and social value in omnichannel shopping foster positive cognitive experiences and promote flow states.

Further research indicates that flow experiences exert a significant positive influence on WOM behavior. This finding aligns with existing studies showing that consumers in states of high immersion and concentration are more likely to experience positive emotions and satisfaction, thereby stimulating word-of-mouth recommendations, repurchase intentions, and other positive behaviors. For instance, Guerra-Tamez, C.R. et al. (2021) found in a craft beer consumer survey that both perceived value and flow experience exert direct and significant effects on word-of-mouth. It is evident that a seamless shopping experience and a state of flow, as optimal experiences in omnichannel shopping, can also significantly promote word-of-mouth.

Furthermore, The mediating role of consumers’ flow experience has been confirmed in the omnichannel shopping journey. Specifically, utility value satisfies functional needs, hedonic value provides emotional pleasure, and social value facilitates social interaction—all of which induce consumers' deep engagement and focus. This creates high-quality shopping experiences and promotes positive word-of-mouth dissemination. This finding resonates with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory, validating its applicability in digital and omnichannel retail environments.

In summary, this study introduces flow experiences into omnichannel marketing scenarios, demonstrating that utility, hedonic, and social values can all serve as antecedents triggering flow, which further influences consumer word-of-mouth behavior. This not only extends the application of flow theory to digitally integrated omnichannel shopping contexts but also provides empirical evidence for explaining the conversion of consumer value perceptions into actions. The findings suggest that businesses should prioritize creating functional, entertaining, and social-interaction values within omnichannel marketing strategies. This approach enhances consumer immersion and flow experiences, thereby boosting word-of-mouth dissemination and brand loyalty.

Recommendations

First, enhance omnichannel perceived value. Enterprises should adopt a consumer-centric approach to create comprehensive value for consumers across utility, enjoyment, and social dimensions: optimize product recommendations and payment experiences through big data to improve shopping efficiency; enhance pleasure through immersive interactions, playful designs, and AR/VR technologies; and boost social engagement via online sharing, interactive communities, and collaborative events to fulfill multidimensional needs and foster word-of-mouth diffusion. Second, optimize flow experiences. Businesses should accelerate interface loading speeds and improve interaction fluidity to reduce shopping friction. Simultaneously, they should offer personalized recommendations, gamified tasks, and real-time interactions to heighten immersion and engagement. Finally, foster positive word-of-mouth propagation. Companies can leverage social media engagement, loyalty rewards, or user-generated content to encourage consumers to share experiences. Tailor differentiated activities specifically for Gen Z and younger demographics to create a virtuous cycle of “experience-share-spread,” Encourage more consumers to become voluntary brand advocates, thereby enhancing brand influence and supporting the sustainable development of the enterprise.

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