Driving customer inspiration to foster loyalty: a study on showroomers

Marta Frasquet
Faculty of Economics, University of València, València, Spain, and

Marco Ieva
Department of Economics and Management, University of Parma, Parma, Italy

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims at understanding the role of customer inspiration in driving loyal (versus competitive) showrooming behaviour and positive word of mouth towards a retailer.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper designed a model of customer inspiration in the showrooming context and tested it with data from more than 600 showroomers.

Findings – Showroomers are inspired in-store by salesperson quality and offline-to-online integration services. Inspired-by is positively related to inspired-to, which in turn drives loyal showrooming behaviour and positive word of mouth.

Originality/value – This paper develops the construct of customer inspiration in an omnichannel context and uncovers novel antecedents and consequences. The outcome provides useful implications for retailers in dealing with showroomers, with the aim of increasing their loyalty.

Keywords Customer inspiration, Showrooming, Positive word of mouth, Omnichannel, Salesperson quality, Offline-to-online integration

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In the current omnichannel environment, customer journeys can start and end in any channel, e.g. consumers can search online and buy at a physical store (webrooming) or search in physical stores and purchase online (showrooming) (Zhong *et al.*, 2023). Showrooming has increased in popularity; according to a Forrester Consulting study (Shopify, 2022), 54% of consumers were likely to look at a product in-store and buy it online, thus engaging in showrooming behaviour. A consumer survey in the USA shows that 53% of Walmart shoppers and 38% of Target and Costco shoppers made an Amazon purchase within a day of visiting the store (Numerator, 2021), showing that a significant proportion of a retailer's customer base is prone to showroom. Showrooming behaviour has been identified as the prevailing cross-channel behaviour according to Maggioni *et al.* (2020).

Showrooming has usually been seen by brick-and-mortar retailers as a major threat, thus prompting some physical retailers to implement measures to reduce showrooming. As showrooming behaviour grows, "trying to prevent showrooming completely seems like rowing against the current" (Neslin, 2022 p. 120). On the contrary, retailers could benefit from encouraging showroomers to visit their physical stores and then persuading them to buy from their online channels rather than from an online competitor's by employing digital devices in the store or QR codes linked to their online store. This demonstrates that showrooming can be harnessed

as a positive consumer behaviour (Haridasan *et al.*, 2021; Sit *et al.*, 2018). The positive side of showrooming is referred to in the literature as "loyal" (Frasquet and Miquel-Romero, 2021; Rejón-Guardia and Luna-Nevarez, 2017) or "own" (Neslin, 2022) showrooming, in contrast to "competitive" (Gensler *et al.*, 2017) showrooming or free-riding (Rapp *et al.*, 2015). The distinction between "loyal" and "competitive" cross-shopping was introduced by Neslin and Shankar (2009) and pertains to customer retention or loss within a specific customer journey, without implying that the shopper has developed a loyal attitude.

Academic studies on showrooming have largely focused on understanding how individual traits or retailer actions explain competitive showrooming (e.g. Gensler *et al.*, 2017; Schneider and Zielke, 2021; Wang and Wang, 2022; Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Our literature review, presented in the following section, reveals a research gap: the difference between loyal and competitive

showrooming has been overlooked despite its theoretical and managerial relevance (Neslin, 2022). From a theoretical standpoint, loyal showroomers display a different behaviour to competitive showroomers: they visit the store of Retailer A with the intention of searching information and browsing products to buy online, and they end up buying at the website of the very same retailer A (Rejón-Guardia and Luna-Nevarez, 2017). It is then key to understand the drivers of loyal (versus competitive) showrooming and the related consequences in terms of positive word-of-mouth. From a practical point of view, showroomers can be competitive or loyal; thus, showrooming represents both a challenge and an opportunity for retailers, which are called to manage complex customer journeys with the goal of retaining customers across offline and online channels. Therefore, there is a need for a better understanding of the drivers and consequences of loyal versus competitive showrooming.

To address the abovementioned gap, this paper relies on customer inspiration theory (Böttger *et al.*, 2017) to explain showrooming behaviour. The concept of customer inspiration has aroused rapid interest among marketing researchers, as it allows a more nuanced interpretation of complex consumer behaviours. It is a rich and novel marketing construct transferred from psychology by Böttger *et al.* (2017). Some authors have used it to explain pro-environmental behaviours (Khoi *et al.*, 2020; Kwon and Boger, 2021; Winterich *et al.*, 2019); it has also been applied in relation to the use of digital media or technologies, for example to understand consumer behaviour on social media (Izogo and Mpinganjira, 2020) or consumer reactions to augmented reality (Hinsch *et al.*, 2020; Nikhashemi *et al.*, 2021). With reference to the showrooming context, customer inspiration can be relevant as shoppers are exposed to different stimuli when visiting a store that may inspire them to purchase at the retailer's online channels and not at a competing online retailer within a specific customer journey. Following Böttger *et al.* (2017), customer inspiration could be evoked by stimuli encountered at the store that drive the shopper to pursue a consumption-related goal. Due to the complex nature of showrooming, wherein consumers interact with multiple touchpoints and channels to explore and purchase products, being exposed to a myriad of stimuli – both offline and online – (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019), customer inspiration theory seems to offer a suitable theoretical perspective to study showrooming. Specifically, salesperson quality and offline-to-online integration act as sources of customer inspiration. Finally, loyal (versus competitive) showrooming – i.e. the showroomer's decision to stay with the same retailer or switch to a competing retailer within a specific purchase decision – and expectations to engage in positive word of mouth are the consumer responses that stem from customer inspiration. Based on the identified research gap regarding loyal versus competitive showrooming, this paper is the first to employ customer inspiration in an omnichannel context; it aims to analyse the role of customer inspiration in driving loyal (versus competitive) showrooming behaviour, and to assess related drivers and consequences.

This study makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it contributes to showrooming behaviour literature by focusing on the role of customer inspiration in influencing shoppers between loyal and competitive showrooming. Understanding the mechanisms driving loyal (versus competitive) showrooming would allow managers to attenuate the negative consequences of

showrooming and enhance customer retention within the shopping journey. Second, it contributes to the consumer behaviour literature by extending the research stream on customer inspiration to an omnichannel context and by identifying two antecedents, i.e. salesperson quality and offline-to-online integration, as well as two outcomes, i.e. showrooming behaviour and expectations to engage in positive word of mouth, of customer inspiration. Thus, retailers could manage salespeople and devices in the store, to design inspiring store experiences that could help to retain showroomers within their channels.

2. Literature review

2.1 Cross-shopping behaviours: webrooming and showrooming

Showrooming and webrooming are two specific cross-shopping behaviours that have gained prominence with the widespread adoption of digital channels and touchpoints (Roy *et al.*, 2022). Academic interest in cross-shopping (shopping across channels) within the context of multi- and omni-channel retailing is growing, as revealed by the bibliometric review conducted by Halibas *et al.* (2023). Webrooming and showrooming are two forms of the concept of research shopping originally proposed by Verhoef *et al.* (2007) as using one channel to search for information and a different one to purchase, and are generally motivated by the desire to obtain more complete information before making a purchase (Haridasan *et al.*, 2021; Roy *et al.*, 2022). The difference between the two behaviours is the sequence of channel usage between search and purchase, i.e. webrooming involves searching online and purchasing offline, whereas showrooming involves using physical stores to search and online channels to purchase (Fernández *et al.*, 2018; Shankar *et al.*, 2021).

Some papers have investigated cross-shopping behaviours in general (Haridasan *et al.*, 2021; Nosi *et al.*, 2022), focusing on the search synergies achieved by channel combination. More specifically, several authors compare webrooming and showrooming, concluding that webroomers achieve more satisfaction (Flavián *et al.*, 2019) or greater smart shopping feelings (Flavián *et al.*, 2020) than showroomers, or that channel integration has a stronger impact on showrooming (Goraya *et al.*, 2020). While showrooming and webrooming are both cross-shopping behaviours seeking to achieve the benefits of channel combination during the purchasing process, as argued by Flavián *et al.* (2020), each exhibits distinct drivers and outcomes; consequently they warrant individualized attention to yield valuable insights. Accumulated research on webrooming reveals that consumers engage in this behaviour due to the heightened efficiency of online channels for acquiring and comparing information (e.g. by reading online reviews as evidenced by Wu *et al.* (2023), along with the increased advantages of purchasing offline, particularly in mitigating the risks associated with online shopping (Roy *et al.*, 2022). Since our research aim was motivated by the adverse effect of showrooming on store profitability, we will delve deeper into the literature review on showrooming below.

The prevalent approach to understanding showrooming, similar to other cross-shopping behaviours, has been the input–output approach, whereby shoppers balance the costs and benefits associated with using one channel over another for the

search and purchase stages. For instance, to explain showrooming Gensler *et al.* (2017) and Jain and Shankar (2023) assessed the benefits or value of in-store searches alongside the benefits of online shopping, while Rajkumar *et al.* (2020) analysed the perceived showrooming value of showrooming. The value derived from different channel combinations is influenced by perceived channel attributes and consumer factors, among which monetary savings play a key role. Research has identified positive impacts on showrooming of various price-related factors, including online price advantage (e.g. Arora and Sahney, 2018; Schneider and Zielke, 2021), consumer price consciousness (Schneider and Zielke, 2020), value consciousness (Frasquet and Miquel-Romero, 2021) or smart shopper perceptions (Flavián *et al.*, 2020; Rajkumar *et al.*, 2020). In addition to price, information acquisition and uncertainty reduction play a pivotal role in explaining the cross-shopping behaviour of showrooming. Researchers have observed that need-for-touch (Jain and Shankar, 2023), heightened online purchase risk (Chimborazo-Azogue *et al.*, 2022; Nosi *et al.*, 2022; Rajkumar *et al.*, 2020) and, more broadly, perceived convenience (Gensler *et al.*, 2017; Jain and Shankar, 2023; Nosi *et al.*, 2022) contribute to explaining showrooming behaviour. Connected with information acquisition, a significant research line has delved into the role of salesperson service in showrooming. As argued by Gensler *et al.* (2017), high-quality service can, on the one hand, elevate customer satisfaction, potentially leading to purchase at the retailer (as observed by Frasquet and Miquel-Romero, 2021 and Schneider and Zielke, 2021). On the other hand, quality service equips shoppers with the information they need to make online purchases; along these lines, Jain and Shankar (2023) found that staff assistance increases perceived showrooming value.

2.2 Showrooming behaviour: competitive and loyal facets

The practice of showrooming has the potential to adversely affect retailers, primarily due to the prevalence of free-riding behaviours and their subsequent impact on store profitability (Halibas *et al.*, 2023). The majority of studies approach showrooming as a form of free-riding, hence assuming showroomers consistently make online purchases from a competing retailer (Chiou *et al.*, 2012; Rapp *et al.*, 2015). However, shoppers may switch channels during the shopping process without switching retailers; this type of cross-shopping behaviour is referred to as "loyal" cross-shopping. In contrast, "competitive" cross-shopping occurs when shoppers research at one retailer but make their purchase from another (Neslin and Shankar, 2009). Loyal showrooming is defined as obtaining information offline at Retailer A and purchasing online at the same Retailer A (Frasquet and Miquel-Romero, 2021; Rejón-Guardia and Luna-Nevarez, 2017). In contrast, competitive showrooming means gathering information offline at Retailer A and purchasing online at Retailer B (Gensler *et al.*, 2017; Schneider and Zielke, 2020). Most showrooming studies have overlooked these two facets of showrooming, so research on the drivers of loyal showrooming is particularly scarce.

Loyal showrooming would be a behaviour that does not negatively affect retail profitability, as in this scenario, the retailer successfully retains shoppers throughout the search and

purchase stages of the shopping process. Thus, showrooming could offer opportunities to retailers as it improves customer experience and cultivates loyal behaviours (Schneider and Zielke, 2020; Sit *et al.*, 2018). Some studies have shown that customers who shop across multiple channels of a firm are more valuable than single-channel customers as they exhibit higher purchase amounts, purchase frequency and profitability (Kumar *et al.*, 2018; Kushwaha and Shankar, 2013; Montaguti *et al.*, 2016).

Knowledge about the circumstances that influence the decision of a showroomer to stay within the same retailer's channel is limited. Nosi *et al.* (2022) found that free-riders experience post-purchase cognitive dissonance, suggesting that retailers can act to prevent that discomfort and encourage consumers to purchase within their channels. In an in-depth qualitative study of showroomers, Sit *et al.* (2018) suggest that showroomers experience positive emotions (i.e. curiosity and excitement) when searching in-store; this is an opportunity for retailers to design inspiring product displays and interactive sessions with salespersons, as well as synchronize their online and offline channels. In a segmentation study of showroomers, Schneider and Zielke (2020) found that loyal showroomers, to a greater extent than other segments, exhibit a desire for social contact, and search for personal information in-store. The strategic role of personal service in driving loyal showrooming is confirmed in the study by Frasquet and Miquel-Romero (2021), which also suggests that retailer trust, satisfaction and attitudinal loyalty would be related to loyal showrooming behaviour. Retailers face the challenge of designing and integrating their channels to retain customers who initiate their shopping journey by searching on their own channels. This entails encouraging loyal or own showrooming while preventing competitive showrooming (Neslin, 2022). Research exploring the fact that showrooming may not be intentional but rather driven by factors under the control of the retailer remains notably scarce (see Frasquet *et al.*, 2023; Maggioni *et al.*, 2020). This presents an opportunity to investigate whether showroomers could be retained by offering relevant stimuli in-store that inspire them during a specific transaction.

2.3 Customer inspiration

The concept of inspiration was developed in the field of psychology (Hart, 1998; Thrash and Elliot, 2003, 2004). Böttger *et al.* (2017) introduced the concept of customer inspiration by taking the original psychological concept and validating it within the marketing domain. Customer inspiration is defined as "a customer's temporary motivational state that facilitates the transition from the reception of a marketing-induced idea to the intrinsic pursuit of a consumption-related goal" (p.117).

Inspiration is a specific type of intrinsic motivation that is triggered by external stimuli that energizes and guides behaviour (Thrash and Elliot, 2003). Thrash and Elliot (2004) conceptualized inspiration as a hybrid construct with two component processes: an activation state (inspired-by) and an intention state (inspired-to); in a later study, the authors suggested the transmission model of inspiration from one state to the other. Based on the transmission model of inspiration (Thrash *et al.*, 2010), customer inspiration is conceptualized as a two-step process: first, an activation state where an external

marketing stimulus evokes a state of inspiration in the consumer (inspired-by) and, second, a motivational state that triggers a consumption act (inspired-to). Since both components – inspired-by and inspired-to – are necessary for inspiration to occur, yet they are distinct states, customer inspiration is conceptualized as a construct made by two different dimensions (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). The inspired-by state is activated by the reception of a marketing stimuli that evokes in the consumer new ideas, stimulates imagination or broadens mental horizons. Once activated, inspiration moves to the inspired-to state, where the consumer experiences the urge to actualize the new idea (e.g. purchasing a product). Thus, inspiration is a transition process from a deliberation phase (inspired-by) to an implementation phase (inspired-to).

In the retailing field in particular, inspiration has been considered in a few studies on augmented reality to understand how AR can generate inspiring experiences that can change customer responses (Hinsch *et al.*, 2020; Nikhashemi *et al.*, 2021; Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2019); outside the augmented reality (AR) context, Herhausen *et al.* (2019) looked at the way customer inspiration contributes to loyalty formation among multichannel-based segments. However, among those retail-based studies, only Hinsch *et al.* (2020) used the two-component concept of customer inspiration, which is core to the current richer conceptualization of inspiration as a process. Inspiration is connected with a specific and non-ordinary process of learning or knowing, cultivated by the association with something or someone, i.e. the inspiring external source (Hart, 1998; Thrash and Elliot, 2003). Customer inspiration could stem from print ads, new product offerings and several sources available in the environment where consumption occurs (Böttger *et al.*, 2017; Saha and Mukherjee, 2022). Customer inspiration is very relevant for showrooming as in a shopping context, customers are inspired-by external stimuli when they are receptive to new ideas, such as when they have planned to purchase something (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). This is the case of the showrooming situation where the shopper visits a physical store to gather information about products prior to a purchase online. Herhausen *et al.* (2019) found stronger effects of customer inspiration on retailer loyalty in the store-focused, multiple channel and online-to-offline segments. Showroomers visiting stores typically search extensively for information and are therefore receptive to new ideas. Consequently, inspiration could play a significant role in their behaviour.
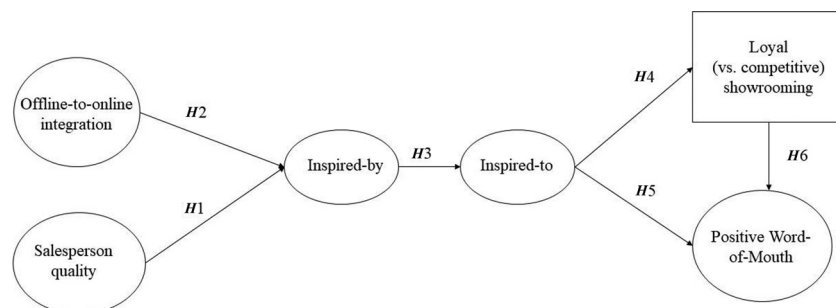
2.4 Positive word of mouth

Böttger *et al.* (2017) argued that more distally, customer inspiration can also lead to consequences related to customer engagement. Izogo and Mpinganjira (2020) found that customer inspiration can positively drive engagement behaviours. Engagement behaviours include a wide array of actions such as positive word of mouth (van Doorn *et al.*, 2010). Positive word of mouth has been conceptualized as any positive communication about a service firm's offerings and is considered an important relational outcome (Berger, 2014; Ng *et al.*, 2011). It is a crucial mode of sharing positive evaluations and information on a product or service with others (Jeuring and Haartsen, 2017). Examples may include giving recommendations about a retailer, sharing positive comments on a specific element of the service provided and encouraging friends and relatives to purchase from a particular retailer. Positive word of mouth represents a trusted information source for shoppers (Ng *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, given its impact on consumer behaviour, positive word of mouth is a key outcome of interest for academics and practitioners (Berger, 2014). In the present study, expectations to engage in positive word of mouth has been then considered as a relevant outcome.

3. Research model and hypotheses

Based on the customer inspiration theory proposed by Böttger *et al.* (2017), this study presents a research framework based on customer inspiration theory in the showrooming context (Figure 1). Showroomers are consumers who enter a store to search for information before making an online purchase; therefore, they would be receptive to new ideas. Customer inspiration theory posits that inspiration emerges by the presence of an inspiring source and the characteristics of the individual (Thrash and Elliot, 2004), suggesting two types of antecedents: source and individual characteristics (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). We chose two important source characteristics in the showrooming context, namely, salesperson quality (human dimension) and offline-to-online integration (technological dimension). Sources of inspiration encountered at the store, such as salesperson quality and offline-to-online integration would stimulate the shopper. The consequences of customer inspiration can be behavioural, emotional or attitudinal (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). Our model (Figure 1) proposes that customer inspiration would affect a showroomer's behavioural decision to buy online from the retailer visited or at a competing

Figure 1 Research framework

Source: Authors' own work

retailer (i.e. engaging in loyal vs competitive showrooming) and would contribute to building expectations to engage in positive word of mouth towards the retailer. In the following sections we provide more details on our theoretical development.

3.1 Sources of customer inspiration

The inspired-by state emerges when a customer obtains new information about a product or service that may stimulate their imagination (Cao *et al.*, 2021). When showroomers visit a physical store, they seek information to help them make the right online purchase (Sit *et al.*, 2018). Salesperson advice stands out as a valuable source of in-store information. In the digital era, store-based retailers face fierce competition from their online counterparts. Within this competitive environment, high-quality salespeople emerge as a potent instrument for differentiation (Fassnacht *et al.*, 2019; Fergurson *et al.*, 2021). Quality salesperson service refers to how knowledgeable and trustworthy salespersons are (Gensler *et al.*, 2017). In line with this definition, Fergurson *et al.* (2021) found that the most important retail salesperson attributes for omnichannel shoppers were honesty, knowledge and friendliness.

A quality salesperson would help to reduce purchase risk and increase satisfaction with the retailer. Surprisingly, Gensler *et al.* (2017) found that salesperson quality had a non-significant effect on competitive showrooming but salesperson availability did have a significant influence. However, subsequent studies reported a positive effect of salesperson quality on reducing showrooming (Fassnacht *et al.*, 2019; Frasquet and Miquel-Romero, 2021; Schneider and Zielke, 2021). The above studies did not consider the potential effect of salesperson quality on customer inspiration. However, there are arguments to support the existence of such a positive effect. Sit *et al.* (2018) observed that showroomers would be receptive to interaction with the salesperson, suggesting that salesperson quality could inspire customers in a showrooming context. Communication and information exchanges with store personnel have the potential to inspire customers by unveiling new attributes or uses of the product. In-store shoppers, according to Fergurson *et al.* (2021), appreciate salespersons who are knowledgeable and communicate in a friendly manner. The link between salesperson and customer inspiration has not been explored in the literature, although Cao *et al.* (2021) found that social and informational interactions in online brand communities have an impact on the inspired-by customer state. The salesperson can provide inspiring informational and social interactions that act as a stimulus to inspire showroomers. Thus, we hypothesize that salesperson quality has the potential to activate the customer inspired-by state in showroomers:

H1. Salesperson quality is positively related to the showroomer's inspired-by state

In the omnichannel era, shoppers expect to use multiple channels interchangeably and seamlessly during the search and purchase stages (Verhoef *et al.*, 2015). Retail firms are responding with efforts to integrate channels, thus blurring the borders between these channels, allowing shoppers to switch channels during the customer journey (Neslin, 2022). By increasing channel integration, retailers can augment the value of multiple channels and provide content across offline and online channels that may excite shoppers (Goraya *et al.*, 2020).

Channel integration efforts work in two ways:

1. online-to-offline, i.e. providing information about and access to physical stores at online channels; and
2. offline-to-online, i.e. providing information about and access to online channels at physical stores (Herhausen *et al.*, 2015).

As showrooming entails offline exploration followed by online purchases, the focus of interest in this study is the latter dimension. Offline-to-online integration offers shoppers at physical stores the opportunity to engage with the retailer's online channel, e.g. examine products online that are not available in-store (Swoboda and Winters, 2021). Consumers who employ more than one channel during the purchase process, i.e. research shoppers (Verhoef *et al.*, 2007), seek to alleviate purchase uncertainty. Thus, they search intensively for information to be confident they are making a good choice (Flavián *et al.*, 2020). Showroomers typically visit physical stores to acquire product information and would thus be receptive to new stimuli that facilitate decision making, such as QR codes for accessing online reviews or additional product details. Equipping stores with tools that provide consumers with easy access to online information, often through smartphones, not only improves the shopping experience but also fosters customer engagement (Viejo-Fernández *et al.*, 2020). By encouraging shoppers to access the online channel while being at the store, retailers can showcase additional inspirational content; Herhausen *et al.* (2019) found that shoppers who use multiple channels and touchpoints tend to feel more inspired. Consequently, offline-to-online integration provides showroomers with new online cues that complement the sensory experiences in-store, thereby enhancing consumer motivation and fostering an inspired-by state:

H2. Offline-to-online integration is positively related to the showroomer's inspired-by state

3.2 Customer inspiration process and outcomes

The transmission model of inspiration (Thrash *et al.*, 2010) suggests that individuals make a transition from being inspired-by an external stimulus to being ready to implement this idea. This conceptualization is included by (Böttger *et al.*, 2017) in their customer inspiration model by establishing a causal link between the inspired-by state and the inspired-to state, an approach that has been followed in subsequent customer inspiration studies (Cao *et al.*, 2021; Izogo and Mpinganjira, 2020).

In the omnichannel retail sphere, the transmission model would mean that potential showroomers are inspired by in-store stimuli (i.e. salesperson quality and offline-to-online integration) and are subsequently inspired to act to pursue a consumption-related goal. Thus, the activation state (inspired-by) would be followed by the intention state (inspired-to), so that showroomers inspired by the retailer would be likely to take actions such as further exploring products – online or offline – or making a purchase (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, we hypothesize:

H3. Customer inspired-by state is positively related to customer inspired-to state

Inspiration is a motivational state that leads the individual to pursue and realize an idea. Following Thrash and Elliot (2003), inspiration is connected to approach rather than avoidance behaviours. In the marketing arena, customer inspiration can be a predictor of consumer responses that are beneficial for firms. Those responses include behaviours, emotions and attitudes that ultimately result in higher customer value (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). Marketing literature has analysed behavioural outcomes of inspiration such as exploration behaviour, unplanned purchases (Böttger *et al.*, 2017), engagement behaviours or purchase intentions (Izogo and Mpinganjira, 2020), but not omnichannel behaviours such as showrooming.

Based on the customer inspiration theory, we expect that those showroomers (i.e. shoppers visiting a store to obtain information before purchasing online) who get inspired by the visit to a store would tend to engage in approach behaviours towards the retailer (i.e. loyal showrooming) rather than avoidance ones (i.e. competitive showrooming). According to the push–pull–moor framework (Bansal *et al.*, 2005), an inspiring in-store experience could serve as a mooring factor that binds the showroomer to the retailer, thereby mitigating switching behaviour. Inspiration, characterized as a temporary motivational state, facilitates the transition from the deliberation stage to the implementation stage (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, when customers are inspired, the shopping process initiated by seeking information in a physical store is more likely to progress to online shopping within the same retailer's channel. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4. Customer inspired-to state is positively related to loyal versus competitive showrooming behaviour

In the omnichannel retailing context, shoppers are able to interact with multiple touchpoints of different firms, and retailers find it challenging not to lose customers along the purchase journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In addition to behavioural responses that are relatively immediate, customer inspiration can also have more enduring consequences, related to loyalty attitudes and intentions (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). Inspiring customers appears to be an effective way to gain not only short-term sales but also long-term loyalty (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019). Physical stores are able to display more inspirational stimuli than online channels, as they allow human interaction and increased sensory stimulation (Cui *et al.*, 2022; Herhausen *et al.*, 2019). Thus, inspired customers would experience a feeling of connectedness with the firm; this would encourage shoppers to share their positive opinion of the firm with other customers, and to create and share content endorsing the retailer (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). We expect that a potential showroomer who has been inspired at a retailer's store will be more likely to engage in positive word of mouth. Hence:

H5. Customer inspired-to state is positively related to positive word of mouth

The nomological network of consequences of customer inspiration considers loyalty to be the end effect of customer inspiration (Böttger *et al.*, 2017). As suggested by Böttger, purchase behaviours stimulated by inspiration could result in higher loyalty attitudes and intentions. By purchasing online from the retailer's online channel – that is, switching channel but not retailer – showroomers would be more likely to engage in positive word of mouth. One reason consumers engage in word of mouth is to influence the impressions others have of them (Berger, 2014). In this respect, the valence and the degree of novelty and surprise of what people share play an important role: word of mouth about a positive and exciting situation is more likely to generate positive impressions associated with the sharer (Berger, 2014). Loyal showrooming driven by inspiration represents a positive and involving experience since the consumer sticks, from the moment of inspiration to the purchase stage, with the same retailer that was the source of that inspiration. Therefore, consumers who have purchased at the retailer's online channel (i.e. loyal showroomers) are more likely to engage in positive word of mouth towards the retailer than those who have purchased at a competing retailer (i.e. competitive showroomers). Thus, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H6. Loyal versus competitive showrooming behaviour is positively related to positive word of mouth.

4. Methodology

Data were collected by means of an online survey conducted in June 2021 in Spain among a national representative panel of Spanish shoppers provided by the research company Netquest. The research company is in charge of selecting and managing the shopper panel, administering the survey and compensating respondents. At the time of the study, no COVID-19 lockdown measures were in place; therefore, stores were open. Given that the focus of the study was showrooming, we only included in the survey respondents who answered "yes" to a question asking whether they had engaged in showrooming behaviour in the past six months: they visited a store to look for information on products that they later bought online. The six-month period was used as we considered product categories that do not evidence high purchase frequency and our selection was consistent with previous studies (e.g. Gensler *et al.*, 2017). Quota sampling by gender and age was used to reflect the online shopper population. The shoppers were asked to report the product categories related to their latest showrooming experience and they were asked to recall their showrooming experience with reference to one randomly selected category, in line with the methodology used by Gensler *et al.* (2017). The survey tool used to collect the responses conducted the randomization process. Thus, the survey involved only shoppers who purchased a product online after offline information search in the recalled showrooming experience. We asked respondents to report the name of the retailer whose store they visited from a list including the following national and international retailers: El Corte Inglés, MediaMarkt, Carrefour, IKEA, Decathlon, ZARA, Alcampo, Pull&Bear, Toys'r'us, Bershka, H&M, Worten, Stradivarius, PcComponentes, Juguettos, MANGO, Apple, Sprinter, Decimas, FNAC, Movistar, Lidl, Imaginarium, Intersport, and other retailers. Of these, El Corte Inglés, MediaMarkt,

Carrefour, IKEA, Decathlon, ZARA, Alcampo and Pull&Bear were selected by more than 70% of respondents.

Constructs were measured by means of measurement scales available in the literature of reference. Salesperson quality was measured using a scale proposed by Gensler *et al.* (2017). Offline-to-online integration was measured on a scale from Swoboda and Winters (2021). Customer inspiration (both inspired-by and inspired-to) was measured using the scale described by Böttger *et al.* (2017) and positive word of mouth was measured with a scale on expectations to engage in positive word of mouth adapted from Zeithaml *et al.* (1996). Finally, the behavioural measure of loyal versus competitive showrooming was a dichotomous variable asking whether the online purchase was made from the retailer they had visited (in which case the answer was recorded as loyal showrooming, equal to 1) or from a competing retailer (response recorded as competitive showrooming, equal to 0). The dummy variable was employed as the outcome of interest was the occurrence of

a specific behaviour. The scales applied to this last showrooming experience and the employed wording are shown in Table 1.

After data collection, 629 responses were analysed to perform data cleaning. The data cleaning process involved two specific activities: checking response time by employing a boxplot to identify potential outliers; and verifying the presence of multivariate outliers based on Mahalanobis distance. While no outliers were found in terms of response time, according to the chi-square distribution of the Mahalanobis distance, nine cases were identified as outliers as they displayed a *p*-value higher than the conventional threshold of 0.05 (Aggarwal, 2017). Therefore, nine cases were removed, corresponding to 1.4% of the sample. After data cleaning, 620 responses were used for further analysis. Partial least squares (PLS) analysis was employed by means of SmartPLS. PLS analysis was employed for the following reasons, as suggested by (Peng and Lai, 2012): the emerging status of theoretical contributions in

Table 1 Factor loadings and reliability measures

Construct	Item	Standard loadings	*p*-value	CA	AVE	CR	Mean	SD
Salesperson quality (Gensler *et al.*, 2017)	The salespeople of this retail store are very knowledgeable	0.88	<0.0001	0.88	0.80	0.92	5.61	1.15
	The salespeople of this retail store provide friendly and responsive service	0.89	<0.0001					
	You can trust the salespeople of that retail store	0.92	<0.0001					
Offline-to-online integration Swoboda and Winters (2021)	When I purchase from [firm's] offline store, the firm provides access to its online store	0.82	<0.0001	0.78	0.69	0.87	4.89	1.42
	When I purchase from [firm's] offline store, employees are helpful when using its online store	0.87	<0.0001					
	When I purchase from [firm's] offline store, I can inform myself about available products in its online store	0.81	<0.0001					
Customer inspired-by Böttger *et al.* (2017)	My imagination was stimulated	0.80	<0.0001	0.89	0.69	0.92	4.91	1.32
	I was intrigued by a new idea	0.82	<0.0001					
	I unexpectedly and spontaneously got new ideas	0.85	<0.0001					
	My horizon was broadened	0.85	<0.0001					
	I discovered something new	0.82	<0.0001					
Customer inspired-to Böttger *et al.* (2017)	I was inspired to buy something	0.85	<0.0001	0.90	0.72	0.93	4.86	1.38
	I felt a desire to buy something	0.89	<0.0001					
	My interest to buy something was increased	0.86	<0.0001					
	I was motivated to buy something	0.88	<0.0001					
	I felt an urge to buy something	0.74	<0.0001					
Positive word of mouth (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996)	How likely would you: (from 1 = "not at all likely" to 7 = "completely likely")			0.90	0.77	0.93	5.28	1.27
	Say positive things about this store to other people?	0.90	<0.0001					
	Recommend this store to someone who seeks your advice?	0.91	<0.0001					
	Encourage friends and relatives to do business with this store?	0.89	<0.0001					

Notes: All constructs apart from positive word of mouth were measured by asking respondents to state their agreement with the following statements from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree"; CA = Cronbach's alpha; AVE = average variance extracted; CR = composite reliability; SD = standard deviation. Loyal versus competitive showrooming was measured by means of a dummy variable and for this reason it is not included in the present table
Source: Authors' own work

the area of customer inspiration; the violation of the assumption of normality of distribution of constructs and residuals; and the need to use a dummy variable in the model (loyal versus competitive showrooming). Many scholars indicate that the choice of PLS-SEM is appropriate when multivariate normality is violated (Hair *et al.*, 2012; Nitzl, 2016; Do Valle and Assaker, 2016). PLS also permits the unrestricted use of single-item measures (Hair *et al.*, 2014) such as a dummy variable, which is present in our model. Common method bias was checked by employing three different methods. We performed the Harman's single-factor test by means of an exploratory factor analysis with all the items, and the single factor accounted for 28.0% of the variance, which was far below the majority variance. To further rule out the presence of common method bias, VIF values were checked at the factor level, as suggested by (Kock, 2015), and we confirmed that each factor displayed a VIF value below 3.3. We also employed an additional approach suggested by (Kock and Lynn, 2012): checking the VIF of the outer model after running a model that is regressing a random variable (e.g. randomly generated) on all the variables included in the original model. All the VIF values of the factor were fairly below the suggested threshold of 3.3. Therefore, we could conclude that common method bias was not an issue in our data. The average age of the participants in the sample was 35 and comprised 51% females and 49% males, and 65% of the subjects had at least one university degree. Out of the 620 respondents, 44% of them displayed loyal showrooming behaviour compared to competitive showrooming.

5. Results

The structural model that has been developed involves all the constructs displayed in Figure 1. The first step in a PLS analysis is to assess whether the measures used as operationalizations of constructs are both reliable and valid (measurement validity). The second stage involves the interpretation of the resulting model coefficients (structural validity). The results showed that the measurement model is adequate (see Table 1). All indicator loadings were significant and above 0.70. As regards internal consistency and reliability, all composite reliabilities and Cronbach's alpha were greater than or very close to 0.70. Thirdly, all average variance extracted (AVE) values were higher than 0.50, thus supporting the convergent validity of constructs. Finally, the analysis confirmed discriminant validity given that all the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlation values were below the recommended threshold of

0.90 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015; see Table 2). Since loyal versus competitive showrooming was measured using a single dummy variable, statistics for internal consistency, reliability and discriminant validity cannot be reported.

The bootstrapping procedure run on 5,000 bootstrap samples was used to calculate the *p*-values of the path coefficients and test the hypotheses (see Table 3). The results of the structural model were analysed following Hair *et al.*, 2014). No collinearity issues were identified as the variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below the value of 5. The fitted model explained a good proportion of variance in the key endogenous constructs (R^2 inspired-by = 0.20; R^2 inspired-to = 0.52 and R^2 positive word of mouth = 0.26). The results supported all the six hypotheses. As regards the source characteristics, salesperson quality ($p < 0.01$) and offline-to-online integration ($p < 0.001$) were positively and significantly related to customer inspired-by state. Thus, H1 and H2 were both supported. The customer inspired-by state exhibited a significant and positive relationship with the customer inspired-to state ($p < 0.001$), thus supporting H3. The customer inspired-to state displayed a positive and significant relationship with loyal versus competitive showrooming ($p < 0.05$), as well as with positive word of mouth ($p < 0.001$). Loyal versus competitive showrooming was also positively related to positive word of mouth ($p < 0.01$). Thus, support was found for H4, H5 and H6.

To summarize, the results show that salesperson quality and offline-to-online integration can drive customer inspiration among showroomers. Customer inspiration could, in turn, increase the likelihood of loyal versus competitive showrooming and was directly related to positive word of mouth. Finally, it was observed that loyal showrooming also played a positive role in the relationship with positive word of mouth.

5.1 Robustness check

To assess the robustness of the model, a robustness check was performed by adding control variables to the model. The following control variables were added to the model presented in the main analysis to influence customer inspired-by state, loyal versus competitive showrooming and positive word of mouth: age, gender, online price gain and product involvement. Age and gender were employed to control for demographic differences. Online price gain was employed as a control variable to account for potential price differences between the online and offline channels, and it was measured using a scale adapted from Gensler *et al.* (2017). Product

Table 2 Heterotrait–monotrait ratio of correlation values

Constructs	Inspired-by	Inspired-to	Loyal vs. competitive showrooming	Positive word of mouth	Offline-to-online integration	Salesperson quality
Inspired-by						
Inspired-to	0.80					
Loyal vs competitive showrooming_	0.04	0.10				
Positive word of mouth	0.52	0.55	0.14			
Offline-to-online integration	0.51	0.46	0.05	0.56		
Salesperson quality	0.37	0.40	0.10	0.65	0.59	

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3 Results from the PLS bootstrapping procedure

Hypotheses	Path coefficients	t statistic	p-value
H1: salesperson quality → inspired-by state	*0.17*	*3.07*	*0.002*
H2: offline-to-online integration → inspired-by state	*0.34*	*7.20*	*0.000*
H3: inspired-by state → inspired-to state	*0.72*	*29.34*	*0.000*
H4: inspired-to state → loyal vs competitive showrooming	*0.10*	*2.47*	*0.01*
H5: inspired-to state → positive word of mouth	*0.49*	*13.00*	*0.000*
H6: loyal vs competitive showrooming → positive word of mouth	*0.09*	*2.64*	*0.008*

Note: Rows in italic indicate significant relationships
Source: Authors' own work

involvement was employed to control for potential differences in the degree to which shoppers are interested in each product category: intuitively, high or low involvement could influence the degree of customer inspiration and showrooming decisions. Product involvement was measured by adopting a scale from Zaichkowsky (1985). Regarding product involvement and online price gain, all indicator loadings were significant and above 0.70, and no issues emerged in terms of reliability and convergent and discriminant validity. Table 4 presents the results for the hypotheses after the inclusion of the control variables. All the hypotheses were still supported, thus confirming the results of the main analysis.

6. Conclusions

In the omnichannel context, where showrooming is an increasingly prevalent behaviour, retailers would benefit if they dealt with showroomers in such a way as to persuade them to buy at their online channels rather than at competing online retailers. To this end, customer inspiration can be instrumental to achieve showroomer preference. This study sought to understand the role that customer inspiration could play in the decisions of showroomers to engage in loyal (versus competitive) showrooming, and in driving positive word-of-mouth towards the retailer. This is one of the first studies to highlight the importance of studying in-store customer inspiration in an omnichannel retail context. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature on shopper behaviour as more knowledge is gathered on showrooming behaviour by focusing on the showroomer's decision to be loyal or not when switching to the online channel. This research also contributes to the literature stream on customer inspiration by validating the construct in an omnichannel context and shedding light on key sources and consequences of in-store inspiration.

6.1 Discussion and theoretical implications

Our findings shed light on two important sources of customer inspiration in physical retailing that are relevant for showroomers. Salesperson quality (*H1*), namely, the extent to which salespersons can offer helpful and knowledgeable support to customers, is related to customer inspiration. Salespersons can interact with customers, solicit new ideas and show them new ways of using products and services. These results are linked to retailing literature on the relevance of salesperson interactions with shoppers (Beatty *et al.*, 1996; Fergurson *et al.*, 2021). This finding draws attention to human touchpoints given their potential to inspire customers in a scenario where much attention has shifted towards the digitalization of the shopping experience. Therefore, in the current scenario, where artificial intelligence is attracting increasing attention, the importance of salespeople as drivers of inspiration should not be overlooked. Results also call academics to consider interactions with others (e.g. employees, peers) as sources of customer inspiration.

Furthermore, the inspired-by state is also elicited in showroomers through the provision of offline-to-online integration services (*H2*). This finding confirms the value of channel integration for shoppers who are increasingly omnichannel (Neslin, 2022). Providing a seamless in-store shopping experience across channels allows shoppers to access information and content online related to products and services while they are in the store. This appears to be especially important for showroomers, who are accustomed to using both offline and online channels throughout their customer journey. This is the first study to shed light on how increasing seamlessness between offline and online channels could also enable and foster customer inspiration.

The inspired-by state takes the showroomer to the inspired-to state (*H3*), thus validating the link between the two

Table 4 Results from the PLS bootstrapping procedure with control variables

Hypotheses	Path coefficients	t statistic	p-value
H1: salesperson quality → inspired-by state	*0.17*	*3.14*	*0.002*
H2: offline-to-online integration → inspired-by state	*0.34*	*7.31*	*0.000*
H3: inspired-by state → inspired-to state	*0.67*	*24.05*	*0.000*
H4: inspired-to state → loyal vs competitive showrooming	*0.08*	*1.97*	*0.04*
H5: inspired-to state → positive word of mouth	*0.41*	*9.87*	*0.000*
H6: loyal vs competitive showrooming → positive word of mouth	*0.08*	*2.45*	*0.01*

Note: Rows in italic indicate significant relationships
Source: Authors' own work

components of customer inspiration suggested by Böttger *et al.* (2017) in a new context, namely, the showrooming context. Empirical evidence highlights the positive consequences of customer inspiration in showrooming: a higher propensity to engage in loyal (versus competitive) showrooming (*H4*) and greater positive word of mouth (*H5*), which is also driven by loyal showrooming (*H6*). Inspiring showroomers leads them to stick with the same retailer when buying online: the results reveal the interplay between customer inspiration and loyal versus competitive showrooming. This chain of effects confirms the nomological network, which includes both behavioural and attitudinal outcomes, as suggested by Böttger *et al.* (2017), thus validating the aforementioned network in a showrooming domain; these findings coincide with showrooming research on the interaction of loyal (versus competitive) showrooming with loyalty (e.g. Frasquet and Miquel-Romero, 2021; Schneider and Zielke, 2020). Customer inspiration should therefore be included as a key antecedent of loyal (versus competitive) showrooming.

To summarize, the present study highlights the role of human interactions and integration between offline and online channels as customer inspiration drivers. Moreover, it enriches previous theory on customer inspiration by addressing the link between customer inspiration and loyalty in the behaviour of showroomers.

6.2 Managerial implications

Retailers would benefit from exploring the inspiring potential of store experience as these may shift online purchases made by showroomers from competing retailers to online purchases through their own channels. With the growth of e-commerce, customer inspiration might represent an additional goal that retailers should address when designing or re-designing the in-store shopping experience. Retailers should employ human and technological elements within the customer experience to transform showroomers into loyal showroomers.

Our study also shows how retailers can increase customer inspiration by leveraging salesperson quality and channel integration. Training salespersons to improve the quality of their interaction with customers is therefore paramount to achieving positive consequences in customer inspiration terms. For instance, salespersons could be trained to show customers how products might look like in different contexts and settings, and thus trigger the inspired-by state. The use of augmented reality could serve this purpose. Moreover, our study highlights the role of offline-to-online integration, which has been found to increase customer inspiration: showroomers constantly use both online and offline channels, and services linking offline channels with retailers' online channels can be essential to increasing customer motivation to purchase and to influence their expectation to engage in positive word-of-mouth. Hence, retailers should strive to integrate offline and online channels, also providing easy access to online channels to those shoppers in the store. This can be done in different ways depending on the type of shopper. For instance, in the case of shoppers who do not make frequent use of smartphones for shopping, retailers would take a more proactive stance, offering them the option to visit the company's online store for a wider range of products, or for ideas on how to create an outfit or decorate a room; or even offering to place an online order for them when the product is not available in the shop. However, shoppers are increasingly wandering around shops with their mobile phones in their hands. To inspire those shoppers, channel integration actions should give them more freedom to interact – for example, by displaying QR codes to access online information about a product line, or to access product reviews. These shoppers could also be encouraged to install the retailer's mobile app, which allows the richest offline–online integration, as shoppers at the store can access exclusive online content and benefits. Depending on the profile of the target customer and the retailer's progress towards omnichannel, different actions can be implemented with the same objective: to stimulate and inspire the shopper by integrating the store with online channels.

7. Limitations and future research

Our research explored the role of customer inspiration in a showrooming context, identifying several drivers and consequences of customer inspiration for showroomers. However, our study had several limitations. We acknowledge that additional sources of inspiration exist in retail stores in the omnichannel context, such as interactive product displays, in-store communications, etc. It would be interesting to assess the role of peer observation and customer-to-customer interactions as sources of customer inspiration: given that customers might interact with other customers in the store or online, it would be worthwhile understanding the potential of social interactions and social exposure in driving inspiration. In line with many studies focusing on customer inspiration in other contexts (e.g. Park *et al.*, 2022); Izogo and Mpinganjira, 2020), our study employs a cross-sectional survey approach. However, further evidence on the role of customer inspiration is needed to fully support the causal relationship between the analysed constructs. It would be interesting to identify the sources of inspiration among webroomers, where websites and social media are key touchpoints.

Regarding the outcomes of customer inspiration, following Böttger *et al.*'s (2017) call for research, we focused on purchase behaviour, specifically the showrooming decision, and its relationship with word of mouth. We recognize that this approach only partially addresses the nomological network of consequences associated with customer inspiration in the showrooming context. It is crucial to also consider other outcomes such as in-store purchases, engagement behaviour and loyalty intentions to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Another limitation of our study is that we analysed the showroomer's decision to purchase either through the online channel of the retailer whose physical store was visited (loyal showrooming) or through a competing retailer (competitive showrooming). It is important to clarify that the term "loyal" showrooming refers to remaining within the retailer's channels for both search and purchase during a specific shopping journey, and does not imply the development of a loyal attitude towards the retailer. Our study found a significant relationship between loyal showrooming and positive word of mouth, suggesting that consumers who engage in loyal showrooming within a particular shopping trip are more likely to engage in positive word of mouth. This finding encourages further investigation into the connections between loyal showrooming and broader measures of customer loyalty.

Finally, a vast amount of literature highlights the role of customer satisfaction as an antecedent of loyalty intentions. Future studies could expand the model, exploring satisfaction and loyalty intentions as outcomes of customer inspiration and showrooming behaviour.

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Corresponding author

Marco Ieva can be contacted at: marco.ieva@unipr.it