QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON INTEGRATION OF ONLINE-OFFLINE MARKETING STRATEGY FOR RETAIL ENTERPRISES

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ABSTRACT. *This study uses qualitative research to carry out the hierarchical division of online-offline marketing strategy integration for Chinese retail enterprises. By using qualitative grounded theory, collecting data, theoretical sampling, data analysis are made and 32 Chinese retail enterprises are analyzed. Their 2013-2016 years' second-hand data (enterprise annual reports) are used to establish the classification of online-offline marketing strategy integration. The model of online-offline marketing strategy integration classification is constructed, based on product strategy integration, price strategy integration, promotion strategy integration and service strategy integration. At last, management implications and future research directions are also given.*
Keywords: Retail enterprises, Online-offline, Marketing integration, Grounded Theory (GT)

1. **Introduction.** New channels have brought opportunities and challenges for retailers, and those channels must be properly utilized to achieve integration and avoid channel separation. Verhoef et al. [1-3] point out that channel separation or integration depends on the retailer's channel integration capability. Therefore, cross channel integration involves how to integrate channels to create cross channel integration, which is an important issue in the multichannel retail industry [1-5].

In the previous cross channel integration literature, researchers put forward different conceptual frameworks [1,2,4,6,7], analysis models [8-12], exploratory research based on qualitative methods [13], or empirical research based on consumer research [3,14-16].

The existing research focuses on the influence of the online-offline marketing strategy on consumers [17-20], but there is little research on how to divide the integration level from the perspective of the enterprise.

The innovation points of this study are: 1) the innovation of the online-offline marketing strategy integration level classification for Chinese retail enterprises. The online-offline marketing strategy integration is an abstract concept. There is no quantitative index. Most of the researchers prefer consumer perspective and there is no level classification method from enterprise perspective. 2) The innovation of the online-offline marketing strategy integration measurement model. This study constructs the online-offline marketing strategy integration measurement model by empirical research. Fuzzy Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) is used to model construction of. There are no researchers who have used this method to build an integration measurement model of online and offline marketing strategy integration.

This study tries to solve two neglected problems. 1) What is the definition of online-offline marketing strategy integration? 2) How to divide the level of online-offline marketing strategy integration? This study uses online-offline marketing strategy integration to assess the effectiveness of online-offline channels integration for two reasons: firstly, online-offline marketing strategy integration is the preferred option for the existing literature to measure the online-offline channels integration [21]; secondly, online-offline marketing strategy integration includes product, price, promotion and service integration, which are key content of the business activities of enterprises.

Consequently, this paper will summarize the related theories of online-offline marketing strategy integration and give a definition. Then, using Zhang et al., Chaffey and Cao and Li's qualitative research methods to compare 2013-2016 years' second-hand data (enterprise annual reports) of 32 Chinese retail enterprises [2,22,23]. Grounded theory is used to establish the classification model of online-offline marketing strategy integration, and confirm the validity of theoretical model.

2. **Defination of Online-Offline Marketing Strategy Integration.** How to define online-offline marketing strategy integration, two main methods appear in the previous literature: narrow definition and generalized definition. The narrow definition emphasizes the synchronization and consistency of online-offline [24], even the products of online-offline are homogenized. Under such condition, online-offline marketing activities belong to a single management system [25]. This mode has built a systematic and comprehensive system [26]. In contrast, the generalized definition emphasizes the multiple connotations of online-offline marketing strategy integration. It is not always the same [6], synchronous or complementary [27]. Different connotations constitute the definition of online-offline marketing strategy integration [6,7,13]. Neslin et al. give the definition of integration in this context, that is, the management of interdependence between cross channel activities. Therefore, the focus of integration is probably the goal, design or deployment of different channels [7].

For generalized definition, cross channel integration is a process of development, which can be defined as the interaction between online and offline channels, as well as the cooperation degree of advertising and promotion or consistency or complementarity of enterprises use different media and channels to distribute products and contact to customers [27]. The degree of integration ranges from completely separated to completely integrated [7]. In addition, the generalized definition recognizes that online-offline marketing strategy integration is in the developing process. This idea creates opportunities for researchers to measure integration by observing the interdependence of enterprise channels management.

Two other views also should be considered to define the online-offline marketing strategy integration: consumer-centered or enterprise-centered. For consumer-centered view, this concept is highly consumer-oriented. It is a way to manage the consumer [6], and guide consumers from the channel A to channel B, and provide special benefits to consumers [28], such as improving the satisfaction, or achieving a seamless shopping experience between online and offline [29]. On the contrary, enterprise-centered focus on bringing benefits to enterprises, such as creating integration [7], realizing economies of scale [7,22], and improving profitability [13]. At any point, it cannot reveal the goals of the online-offline retail business alone [1,10]. However, the study might be confused from two aspects at the same time, which is not conducive to combine the relationship. Therefore, this study explores the concept from the point of enterprise view.

Previous studies have shown that most of retailers are developing online-offline marketing strategy integration [2], and the degree of integration ranges from completely separated to completely integrated [7]. However, from the point of development view, the level division of the prior online-offline marketing strategy integration is not operable. Therefore, this study summarizes the research, in order to establish a more appropriate classification

model. Grounded theory [36] is used to explore retailers' practice activities of strategic integration through annual reports: 1) present situation of retail enterprises to implement the online-offline marketing strategy integration; 2) the basis of the integration level division.

According to prior research results, combined with the McCarthy's [37] 4Ps theory and Bitner and Booms' [38] 7Ps theory, this study proposes the definition of online-offline marketing strategy integration: online and offline communicate and integrate products, price, promotion and service objectives, design and deployment to strengthen the marketing strategy effect, and improve the enterprise integration performance. The operating dimensions of the online-offline marketing strategy integration are product, price, promotion and service.

For prior online-offline marketing strategy integration research, product integration, price integration, promotion integration and service integration are further elaborated (Table 1) [30-35].

TABLE 1. Literature review of marketing strategy integration content

Marketing strategy integration	Author	Main dimension	Research method
Product integration	Zhang [31]	Product category and brand	Qualitative
	Huang [32]	Product display, product category, brand	Qualitative
	Andreini [30]	Product quality	Quantitative
Price integration	Wang [33]	Marked price	Quantitative
	Huang [32]	Selling price, price discount	Qualitative
	Zhang [31]	Price discounts and price of special products	Qualitative
	Andreini [30]	Price level	Quantitative
Promotion integration	Wang et al. [34]	Promotion product category	Quantitative
	Sayadi and Makui [35]	Promotion time, promotion efforts, promotion frequency	Quantitative
	Wang [33]	Promotion method	Quantitative
Service integration	Zhang [31]	Consulting services, product demonstration and experience services, receivables services, packaging services, delivery services, replacement services	Qualitative

3. **Qualitative Research.** This research refers to Cao and Li's [23] variable measurement model of online-offline marketing strategy integration. In the qualitative research, grounded theory [36] is used to analyze 32 Chinese retail enterprises' annual report (2013-2016) to divide the online-offline marketing strategy integration level. Grounded Theory (GT) is used for qualitative research, which aims to summarize theories from practical experience data. There is no theoretical hypothesis. According to the observation phenomenon or experience data, the original data and the phenomenon summary are used to form systematic theory. According to the grounded theory, the analysis process is as follows.

3.1. **Data collection.** The initial sample consisted of 107 Chinese retail enterprises, whose revenues are over 1 billion yuan and went public in 2016. This sample covers seven retail formats: 50 grocery shopping center, 14 supermarket chain, 27 clothing, 5 home

appliance chain, 5 chain pharmacies, 3 online retailers, 3 leisure food. 3 online retailers only have a single channel and 6 enterprises do not have enough available information, so they are eliminated and the final sample includes 98 retail enterprises.

In this study, these 98 enterprises are taken as data pools, because they have 1) the diversity of cross channel development level, 2) the real competitiveness, and 3) relatively perfect public information. Through the annual report, this paper analyzes the integration level of the marketing strategy from 2013 to 2016. In this period, Chinese retailers are generally expanding the online-offline marketing strategy integration.

3.2. **Theoretical sampling.** According to the theoretical sampling standards [36], 98 Chinese Listed Retail Enterprises' annual report data was collected from the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC). After analyzing the data of 32 companies (2013-2016, 128 companies annual reports), the initial data arrive at "data saturation" [36]. With theoretical sample increasing, the new observation data cannot correct the estimated value. These enterprises are selected according to the following criteria. A) Carry out retail activities of different types of products (including department store shopping center, supermarket chain, clothing, household appliance chain, drugstore chain, leisure food). B) In each type of product, the retail activities of different product categories are carried out. For example, in the field of dress retailing, we studied Hailan Home (men's wear), Anta Sports (Sports), Semir Clothing (casual and children's wear), La Natsu Bell (women's wear), Urban Beauty (underwear). C) Diversification of offline entity shop layout and online experience.

3.3. **Data analysis.** Using the information in the annual report, this study applies the grounded theory content to analyzing the integrated development of every company's multi-channel related strategic activities or online-offline marketing strategies. This step is harder to understand. Why do you want to encode or create a so-called node? The reason is that for information, you need to create a node to help build relationships and further analysis. For example, the sky is numerous, and stars can be sorted and sorted through defining constellations. These collations can lay a foundation for further analysis of the whole star distribution. Two consecutive coding stages are performed by using NVivo 11.

Firstly, an Open Coding process is used to match the annual data with the initial concept. Open Coding can be used as a node in a container holding project. With the development of the project, these nodes may be moved into the logical location in the spindle code. For example, we can encode the labels that "consumers can buy online and pick up through offline stores", which is "online-offline service integration" node. The next node is analyzed and compared with the first node. If it is similar, it is allocated to the same node. If it is not similar, it will be encoded with different nodes. For example, "online and offline product sharing" cannot be allocated to online-offline service integration nodes in the annual report, but it is encoded by a new node "online-offline product integration" node.

This process continues until 27 empirical codes have been identified. By comparing and analyzing these codes, 16 of them were retained, ambiguous, or inappropriate codes were deleted.

Secondly, Axial Coding is used to explore the relationship between nodes, then classify them, and classify nodes into different categories according to their internal similarities. For example, similar nodes, "online-offline service collaboration" and "online-offline product synergy" are classified as "marketing elements integration".

According to the integrated activities of each company's online and offline policies and different goals, the level of integration of online-offline is divided. For example, "marketing elements integration" is classified into the classification of "online-offline complete

integration (level 4)"; "different marketing mix strategies" are classified into online-offline separation (level 1).

3.4. **Results.** With the complicated and systematic coding process, the purpose of this study is to measure all aspects of marketing strategy coordination and classify it into different levels. In the whole coding process, data analysis is strictly followed by theoretical sampling and constant comparison until the data is saturated [36]. This method improves the reliability of the interpretation of data. In order to improve the effectiveness of the research results and reduce the possibility of bias, research framework is presented to retail research expert. According to feedback, the spindle of encoding is rearranged, and 16 empirical encoding is divided into four major categories (Table 2) to establish the online-offline measurement framework of integration. Then, this framework is used to analyze the remaining 66 companies (a total of 98 enterprises in the sample, excluding 32 that have been analyzed in the theoretical sample). No new concepts are presented, which further validates the effectiveness of the measurement tools [36], as shown in Table 2.

Considering the timeliness of the research, this research mainly focuses on the online-offline marketing strategy integration in 2016. In order to ensure the validity of the measurement model, 16 indicators and four online-offline integration classification definitions are submitted to expert in the retail field. It is required to assign each of the indicators to the online-offline integration category that is considered "correct". Then different methods are used to calculate the reliability of the classification. It is found that 38 of the 48 possibilities are passed, so the rate of passing is 79%. The Probability Loss Ratio (PLR), which is promoted by Rust and Cooil [39], is calculated, including the number of categories, the number of encoders and the proportion of coding protocols, and the Probability Loss Ratio (PLR) reliability is calculated to be 94%. Rust and Cooil [39] suggest using Nunnally's thumb rule (Rule of Thumb) to verify, so the PLR value equal to 70% is enough for exploratory research, and 90% is enough for marketing research. Therefore, the research on the online-offline integration measurement has sufficient feasibility.

In order to measure the development of cross channel integration of 32 companies in the last sample, the data of qualitative research is analyzed again, so as to determine the synergy level of marketing strategy based on annual reports. Unless otherwise specified, assume that all online-offline marketing strategy integration activities continue in 2013-2016, even though enterprises do not mention it again in annual reports. Therefore, a company's annual online-offline marketing strategy is identified as the highest level of integration in the year. For example, as shown in Table 3, qualitative research in encoding Suning 2014 and 2015 annual "Part integration of marked price, selling price, price discount, special product price price level" belongs to level 3, and this is the annual Suning integration strategy of the highest level, so Suning online-offline marketing strategy integration of 2014 and 2015 is level 3. In logic, Suning 2016 "Part integration of marked price, selling price, price discount, special product price, price level" belong to level 3, "Online-offline product integration" and "Online-offline price integration" belong to level 4. So level 4 can best represent the 2016 Suning online-offline marketing strategy integration level.

According to this method, 32 Chinese enterprises are placed in different levels, such as Table 4.

As an important role in Chinese traditional retail industry, some enterprises, such as Suning, Yonghui supermarket and Small Commodity City have been severely impacted by online retail, but with their online shopping platform strategy and clear strategic positioning, they still retain the leading advantage and achieve a more cooperative online-offline marketing strategy. Gome, Hailan Home, Anta Sports and other enterprises have not reached the degree of complete coordination in the product, price, promotion and service

TABLE 2. Online-offline marketing strategy integration level measurement model

Integration level	Contents	Category	Nodes
Online-offline separation (level 1)	Retailers sell goods or services through different channels, but the channels are operated independently.	Different market communication	Different brands and no interaction information is not shared
		Different marketing mix strategies	Different pricing strategies in different channels Different brands in different channels Different products in different channels Different services in different channels
Online-offline mild integration (level 2)	Retailers optimize the established channels and collaborate on the activities of market communication with consumers.	Market communication integration	Use the same brand in all channels Coherence in cross channel market information
Online-offline moderate integration (level 3)	Retailers collaborate to optimize the established channels and pay attention to market communication activities with consumers.	Part integration of marketing elements	Part integration of product category, brand, display and quality Part integration of marked price, selling price, price discount, special product price, price level Part integration of promotion product category, frequency, time, mode and preferential margin Part integration of consultation, product demonstration and experience, receivables, packaging, delivery, and replacement services
Online-offline complete integration (level 4)	Retailers collaborate to optimize the established channels and focus on creating a seamless shopping experience with consumers.	Complete integration of marketing elements	Online-offline service integration Online-offline price integration Online-offline promotion integration Online-offline product integration

integration. While Zhou Shengsheng, Semir Clothing, Yong Wang and other enterprises have realized the consistency of the same brand and information sharing between online and offline, but the coordination degree of marketing strategy is low. Chongqing Department Store, Yinchuan Xinhua Department Store and Friendship Group are not sensitive to the market. The advantages at traditional retail period cannot be fully moved to online channel and the online-offline channels are separated or not interactive.

4. **Research Conclusions and Limitations.** This study draws three main conclusions through the study.

TABLE 3. Suning online-offline marketing strategy integration level measurement (Data come from 2013-2016 annual report)

Online-offline marketing strategy integration level	Nodes	Year			
		2013	2014	2015	2016
Online-offline separation (level 1)	Different brands and no interaction information is not shared Different pricing strategies in different channels Different brands in different channels Different products in different channels Different services in different channels				
Online-offline mild integration (level 2)	Use the same brand in all channels Coherence in cross channel market information	1		1	1
Online-offline moderate integration (level 3)	Part integration of product category, brand, display and quality Part integration of marked price, selling price, price discount, special product price, price level Part integration of promotion product category, frequency, time, mode and preferential margin Part integration of consultation, product demonstration and experience, receivables, packaging, delivery, and replacement services		1	1	1
Online-offline complete integration (level 4)	Online-offline service integration Online-offline price integration Online-offline promotion integration Online-offline product integration				1 1

TABLE 4. Online-offline marketing strategy integration level division of 32 Chinese retail enterprises (Data come from 2013-2016 annual report)

Online-offline marketing strategy integration level	Enterprises
Online-offline separation (level 1)	Chongqing Department Store, Springland International Holdings, Yinchuan Xinhua Department Store, Friendship Group, Hui Yin Wisdom Community
Online-offline mild integration (level 2)	Brilliance Shares, Rainbow Shares, Zhou Shengsheng, Wuhan Department A, Semir Clothing, AEON, Hall, Giordano International, Leah, Chinese Lilanz, China Retail Trends
Online-offline moderate integration (level 3)	The Gome, Hailan Home, CCOOP Group, Anta Sports, La Natsu Bell, Red Chain, Urban Beauty, Laiyifen, Shanghai New World, Guirenniao, Motom
Online-offline complete integration (level 4)	Suning, Yonghui Supermarket, Small Commodity City, Red Beans Shares, KeLaidier

First, using previous qualitative research results and theoretical basis, we build an online-offline marketing strategy integration classification system. Based on the 32 selected Chinese retail enterprises, we collect annual report data and adopt the grounded theory to classify 32 enterprises' integration level. It provides a basis for China's retail enterprises to integrate the marketing strategy of online and offline channels.

Second, research shows that product strategy integration, price strategy integration, promotion strategy integration and service strategy integration are the main basis for online-offline marketing strategy integration classification, which reflects the importance of these four elements. This provides the key point for the retail enterprises to develop the online-offline cooperative work.

Third, Suning, Yonghui Supermarket, Small Commodity City and other enterprises act as an important role in Chinese traditional retail industry, although suffering the impact of online retail, but with their online shopping platform and clear strategic positioning, they still maintained the leading advantage and achieved an integrated online-offline marketing strategy. Gome, Hailan Home, Anta Sports and other enterprises came to the stage in product, price, promotion and service synergy, but failed to achieve full integration. Zhou Shengsheng, Semir Clothing, AEON realize the online sharing of information by using the same brand between online and offline and keep the consistency of the information, but they have low level of integrated marketing strategy. In addition, Chongqing Department Store, Yinchuan Xinhua Department Store and Friendship Group are not sensitive enough to the market. The advantages of traditional retail cannot fully express on line, and online and offline channels are separated from each other and they are not interactive.

Of course, there are also shortcomings in the research process. 1) The classification system needs to be further improved. Though analyzing the annual reports with grounded theory, this paper strives to fully reflect the integration degree of online-offline marketing strategy, but there are many influencing factors, and it has the possibility of omission. 2) Only qualitative research method is used for integration classification. Although the method is scientific, it is subjective more or less. For above problems, we hope that following researchers could pay attention to them.

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