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The never-ending story: discovering touch points and
customer experiences along the customer journey

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&

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ABSTRACT

Today's society is earmarked by developments in technology so drastic, that our lives are continuously changed, impacted and remolded. When thinking about how many impressions one goes through during a single day, the results will be uncountable. And at an increasing pace, many of these impressions are shifting to the digital realm. This thesis acknowledges these rapid changes in the modern world of marketing, particularly the digital aspects of it. Yet while a great amount of research has been conducted to more closely understand digital marketing and how to conduct it, a significantly little amount of research has been spent focusing on the customer. This while the path that a customer takes from need to purchase may have grown to be more complex than ever. Not all the impressions that a customer gains on a certain product or brand come solely from the company behind it.

As such, we decided to focus on exploring this customer journey – a relatively nascent theme in the field of marketing research. More specifically, we aim to answer the following research question:

How is the customer purchasing decision affected by the customer's interaction with touch points throughout the customer journey?

Our main purpose was to arrive at a model as an answer to the research question, that could be used as a foundation for future research studies. We were intensely curious at gaining a better understanding of the customer journey and what the customers experience as they are touched by different influential channels during their travel from need to purchase. Our study shows that it is possible to synthesize the state of current research on the topic of the customer journey and support it with empirical data gathered from interviews with a variety of customers. Central to our thesis are the following two definitions that we have constructed based on current literature:

The customer journey is *the individual experience that a customer has when interacting with touch points in the path from a pre-purchase to a post-purchase setting.*

Touch points are *moments of contact between customer and company that individually and collectively influence customer experience.*

The third critical element is that of the customer experience, which we don't explicitly define, but implicitly construe as a distinct construct with a powerful impact by serving as the catalyst between touch points and customer actions and perceptions.

The result is a conceptual model of the customer journey that we feel could be a foundation for future research on the customer journey to build upon and perhaps one day could serve as an overarching model for marketing as a whole.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The digital state of society

It is not unreasonable to state that the internet has taken hold of modern society and made a critical impact on the lives of billions. A ten-year period saw an increase from 55% to 87% for the share of households with internet access in the European Union (Statista, 2019a). Due to this still rapidly developing technology, people worldwide have gained instant access to information, their social circles, products, services and a whole sea of potential avenues that may fill their diverse needs. While some opt to stay behind and live their lives offline, a great majority of consumption has moved to take place over a network of cables and radio waves. Indeed, e-commerce sales worldwide are estimated to reach 4.88 trillion US dollars by 2021, an increase of more than 100% as compared to 2017 (Statista, 2019b). Moreover, these trends towards the digital realm have become so drastic that research in digital marketing, particularly on the topic of the customer journey, is vital, critical and sought after (Marketing Science Institute, 2018).

The consequence of these trends has been unavoidable: our society has become increasingly digital. We do not consume - and live - in the same reality as the one that existed decades ago. Birthday wishes are made digitally, and people are reminded to give them through a notification on Facebook. When looking to purchase a new television, we do not simply go to the store and ask; we use Google to find any relevant information on what model to buy. We meet potential dates by flicking a picture of them to the right. Books are no longer physical but have joined the increasingly growing army of “e” products that are available on demand. Television and radio are giving way to services such as Netflix, YouTube and Spotify. Our consumption patterns have changed significantly, which has altered the landscape and in doing so made an impact on anyone willing - or needing - to participate in it.

What can be noted though, is that the age-old romantic story of consumer meets company still holds. From a value standpoint, there is a duality to the roles performed by customer and company; both parts derive and deliver value from and to one another (Kumar, 2018, p. 1). While traditionally this has mostly taken place in the physical dimension, it has shifted towards the digital as well - and thus presented a great number of possibilities of communication (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 122). Previously, companies had to consider marketing their products and services to consumer in a select number of offline channels. If a great many people travel via public transport, then posters in buses and metros is the way to go. When most people in the country are watching the newest episode of a popular TV show - then you can be sure this is marketing primetime. And what then happens when an entire society is shifting their lives to the online realm? Exactly. Then digital marketing is born.

The concept of digital marketing has added a new, deep layer of complexity to the path that customers take from first hearing about a product to making the purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 69). This path is increasingly called a customer journey, the critical topic that the Marketing Science Institute refers to in their call to research (Marketing Science Institute, 2018). What makes this journey so complex to understand, is the number of touch points involved in shaping each individual experience. Indeed, the customer journey – which is the topic of this thesis - is made up by touch points, both

offline and online and each of them is a point of contact between customer and company (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Rudkowski et al., 2018, p. 2). In a world as complex as the one we live in today, there are thousands of touch points imaginable. As such, in this thesis we aim to understand the customer journey to a degree where we can provide a solid conceptual model of the concept and generate beneficial insights from the fields of touch points and customer experience as well. We will first dive a little deeper into introducing the topic and field before arriving at a definitive research question.

1.2 Digital marketing as a practice and field

As any novel way of technology immersing itself into our lives, digital marketing did not just pop up to take the prominent place that it has in society today. Indeed, a thematic exploration by Lamberton and Stephen reveals three “eras” of digital marketing; these are the eras of (1) digital media shaping and facilitating buyer behavior, (2) consumers taking an active role in shaping digital media, word-of-mouth and networks and (3) the age of social media (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). From the year 2000 through to year 2015, the authors show the changes each era had through the usage of three central themes (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Initially, the internet started out as a platform for individual expression, as a search and decision-support tool and as a marketing intelligence platform (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, pp. 152-155). But anything basic has the potential to drastically advance, and digital marketing is no different. These developments show how the internet initially developed as a platform primarily for the consumer, but eventually made space to allow companies to enter the online sphere as well. By 2015, individual self-expression had the power to amplify or dull marketing actions, user-generated content could be used for marketing purposes and specific social media platforms could be targeted to capture marketing intelligence (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, pp. 159-161). All these developments have led to an interesting point in the present “where digital marketing is just marketing, simply because almost all marketing activities a firm might consider now can have some kind of digital aspect” (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, p. 168).

Another literature review by Quinton and Simkin prefers to turn this statement around, instead referring to the “digitization of the marketing domain” (Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 456). These authors take a slightly different approach to reviewing the academic literature that has been published over the years. They find that the arrival and adoption of the internet brought about a change to the nature of the exchange process between customer and company (Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 457). After that massive step forward for society came the next big hurdle; both companies and academics started to wrestle “with the transference of offline activity to online activity” (Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 458). There dawned a realization that the realms of offline and online held both great similarities and differences. Initially the two concepts were approached in similar manners. Customers were still seen according to the traditional model, but over time this shifted to “a new model of consumer with different needs as those already known and emphasized by the classical economy theory” (Belinger & Calin, 2011, p. 26). Indeed, concepts such as interaction and social exchange became more prominent and the role of online communities and networks in the building of a relationship between customer and company had to be reevaluated (Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 459). But some of the most critical differences have only recently started to emerge. Many companies are still lagging on creating “digital-centric” marketing strategies - while we previously found

that digital marketing could be considered as “just marketing” (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, p. 168; Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 461). This points us to the first distinct indication towards the larger topic of our thesis, which is that the emergence of the digital world bears a role in the reshaping of customer experience that “requires a new and different mindset incorporating a more holistic and strategic perspective that encourages integration” (Kaufman & Horton, 2014, as described by Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 461).

Another critical change is that of the consumer gaining impressive amounts of empowerment through the level of interaction that the internet allows. Indeed, the perspective of “managing the customer” had to be reappraised (Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 463). This led to a host of related issues and opportunities arising. Predictive analytics to provide personalized results for consumers, increased choice and room for evaluation, the ability to interact with businesses on a wide variety of platforms and the advent of user-generated content are but some of the great changes that impact both consumer and company in the digital realm (Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 464).

Despite all the advancements on research on the topic of digital marketing, it is still difficult to find a definition of digital marketing that bears an academic consensus. Like research on the topic, the term itself has evolved over time from being a specific term to become a more encompassing, “umbrella term” (Kannan & Li, 2017, p. 23). The authors of this article finally settled for a definition in line with a general definition on marketing by the American Marketing Association. As such, Kannan and Li define digital marketing as: “an adaptive, technology-enabled process by which firms collaborate with customers and partners to jointly create, communicate, deliver, and sustain value for all stakeholders” (Kannan & Li, 2017, p. 23).

What stands out from this definition is that digital marketing is what literature reviews on the topics have found; marketing is now a two-way street. Customers, along the digital highway, meet other customers as well as encountering companies and other parties. They do not only consume but create. No longer is digital marketing itself an enabling force, but rather is enabled “by a series of adaptive digital touchpoints encompassing the marketing activity, institutions, processes and customers” (Kannan & Li, 2017, p. 23). This means that it is important to precisely understand the consumer journey in order to make the right decisions in matching target markets with purchase behaviors (Hyun & Kwon, 2015, p. 48). Yet this is made difficult by the approach to studying digital marketing. Quinton and Simkin find that “The coverage of digitalization in marketing has generally been atomized into subject specific areas, such as technology adoption, information systems literature, consumer use of digital tools to access brands, multi-channel management and marketing communications” (Quinton & Simkin, 2017, p. 456). A review on the digital environment shows there to be five main areas of focus, namely those of (1) consumer behavior, (2) social media and user-generated content, (3) platforms and two-sides markets, (4) search engines and (5) contextual interactions (Kannan & Li, 2017, p. 25). While this ties the entirety of digital marketing more closely together - or at least gives more of an organized overview - it still does not present a truly holistic picture.

The review by Kannan and Li emphasizes that a single origin - digital marketing - has sprouted research into a vast number of new areas. Where internet was originally a single platform, this has exploded into a number of platforms - each with their own subtopics. And these are not all shallow areas that have not yet been explored. The field of social media marketing, for example, has been extensively covered in research, illuminating a number of relevant topics (Tafesse & Wien, 2018, p. 1). The entire field of digital

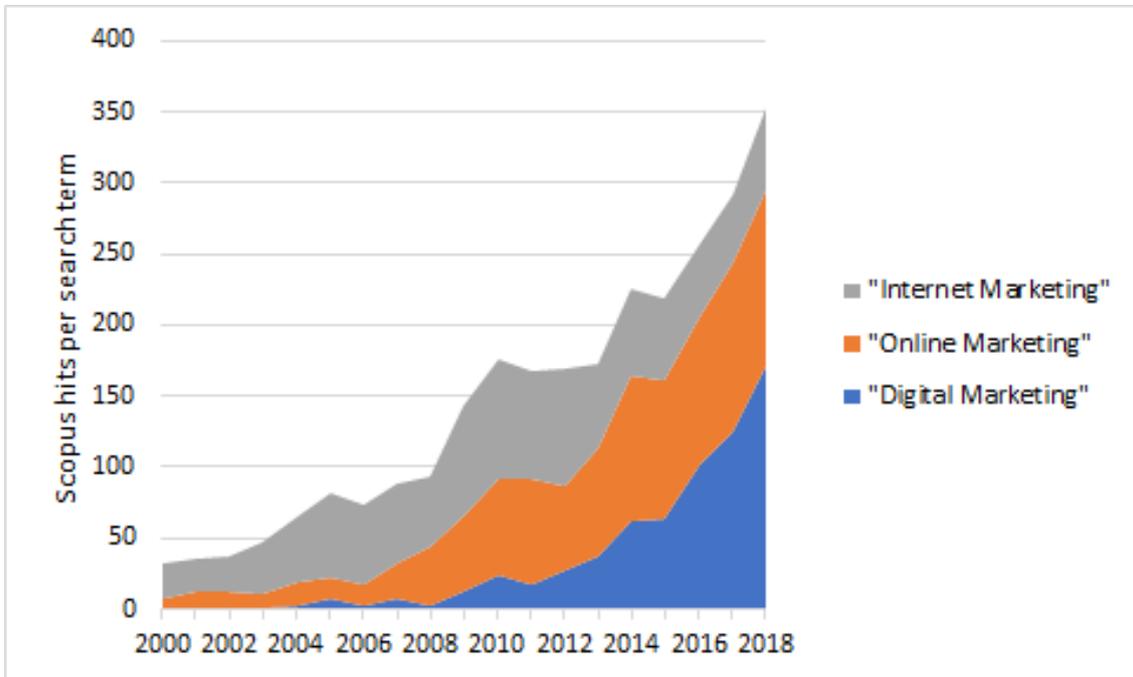


Figure 1: Digital marketing research trend

marketing research has grown so large in fact, that Lamberton and Stephen consider reviewing the entire breadth of topics it holds “an undertaking infeasible in a single article” (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, p. 146). Indeed, searching academic articles using Elsevier’s Scopus with the terms *digital marketing*, *internet marketing* or *online marketing* yields sharp upward curves as can be seen in *figure 1*. What can be determined from this figure is that both individually, as well as a combined whole, the field of digital marketing and fields that are interrelated to it has experienced a strong increase over the past two decades.

1.3 Problem conceptualization and importance

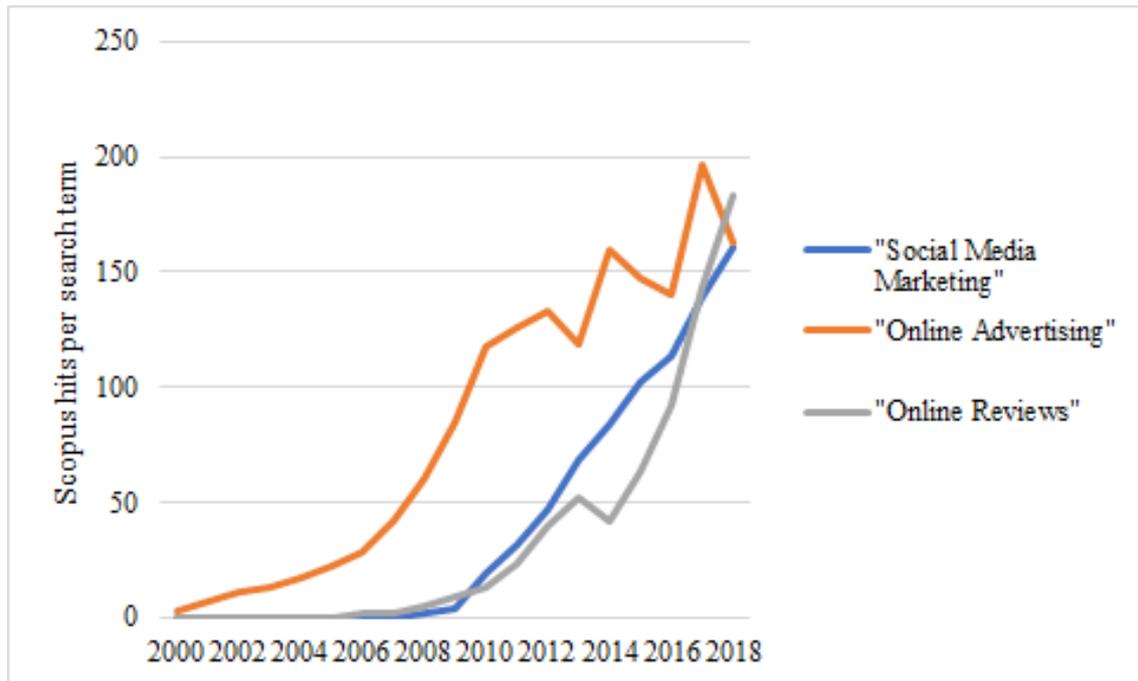


Figure 2: Digital marketing subtopic trends

So, in such a rapidly saturated field of research, how does one arrive at an area that is relatively unexplored, holistic, as well as containing both academic and managerial implications? This is a feat made particularly difficult by the entire field currently undergoing a research boom (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, p. 162). Such a research boom adds great difficulty; it muddles the waters of the field and does not allow for peering into the near future - let alone further beyond. In such a situation we believe that it is most beneficial to look for current “cutting edges” and “trends” in the field. Certain topics such as *social media marketing*, *online advertising* and *online reviews* are far more saturated than others - as can be seen in *figure 2*. So instead of looking for a broader segment, we decided to look for a niche in the field that shows a lot of potential.

We previously found that digital marketing is enabled by touch points, the number of which has been found to increase by 20% annually (Bughin, 2015, p. 359). This concept of touch points is closely interwoven with the concepts of customer experience and customer journey and the customer purchase journey has been described as “the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touch points, that makes up the customer experience” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). Such a definition makes it seem like an extremely vital process to understand, as understanding the customer is critical for business success. This can be seen from firms investing heavily in customer-centric tools such as customer relationship management. Indeed, such tools enable firms to collect customer information that is deemed valuable because it can improve among others firm decision-making effectiveness (Mullins et al., 2014, p. 38). In fact, recent research has proposed to start viewing the customer as an asset to the firm. An article by Kumar from 2018 determines that it is critical to understand customer reactions to firm actions, because “the true measure of any marketing strategy or initiative is the improved financial result for the firm implementing it” (Kumar, 2018, p. 15). In other words, a better understanding of the customer leads to better marketing strategy, which leads to improved financial results. And as mentioned, recently the customer journey has

emerged as an overarching construct for understanding the customer. Quoting Hyun and Kwon again; “it is important to precisely understand the consumer journey in order to make the right decisions in matching target markets with purchase behaviors” (Hyun & Kwon, 2015, p. 48). And in order to understand the consumer journey, it is critical to understand the customer itself.

Yet this narrower focus on the journey that customers take is rarely adopted. Again, using Elsevier’s Scopus, we find that 2018 saw only 67 articles with the topic of *customer journey* - a number that disappears into the mass of articles in the general field and pales when compared to other subtopics. The same applies for the topic of *touch points*, which reaches only 55 hits in 2018. *Figure 3* shows how these two topics have developed in comparison to other, more popular fields.

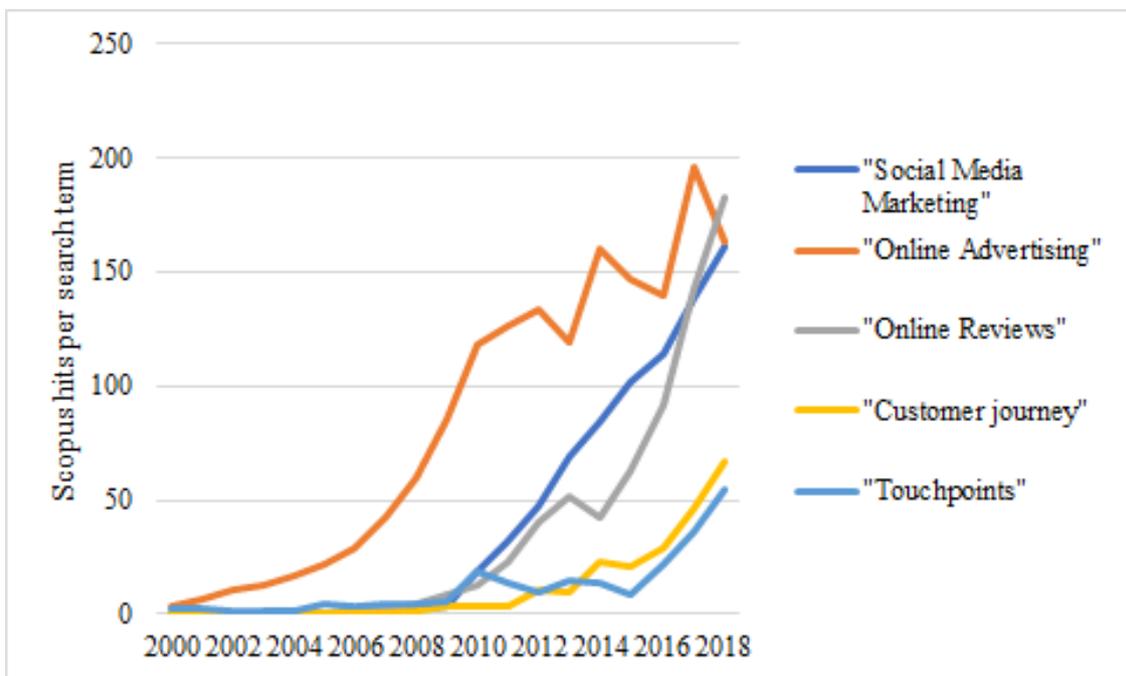


Figure 3: Digital marketing trend comparison

While trending upwards, both these fields have received relatively little attention. Terms such as *relationship marketing* and *customer relationship management* are keywords that can be found in combination with digital marketing. Yet according to Lemon and Verhoef, these are terms connected to older ventures into the customer, their journey and their experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). These previous academic ventures provided a foundation for ideas related to the customer experience and journey - but cannot be considered focusing on the customer experience itself (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, pp. 73-74).

Despite little modern research in the field, it is the creation of a strong customer experience that has been considered “a leading management objective” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 69). Kannan and Li found that a critical area to focus on is “understanding the role of various touchpoints in determining customers' purchase journey” (Kannan & Li, 2017, p. 27). This understanding is so important as there exists a wide range of touch points, all with differing impacts. A retail website, for example, is one such touch point that is “a first online navigation” that “can determine the future of a customer’s relationship with retailers and their offerings” (Demangeot & Broderick,

2016, p. 814). A further criticality lies in the fact that “given the relatively nascent state of the customer experience literature, there is limited empirical work directly related to customer experience and the customer journey” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 70).

Moreover, as we found previously, there seems to be extremely little research combining the topics of digital marketing and the customer experience and journey. Yet it is exactly such an increased focus that is vital as “customers now interact with firms through myriad touch points in multiple channels and media, resulting in more complex customer journeys” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 69). It is considered so vital, in fact, that the Marketing Science Institute states “characterizing the customer journey along the purchase funnel and strategies to influence the journey” as one of their research priorities for the years 2018 to 2020 (Marketing Science Institute, 2018).

What this leads us to believe is that there is a distinct gap in research that stems from a combination of factors. First and foremost is the issue that the customer journey has not been fully characterized. Lemon and Verhoef have constructed a conceptual model that distinctly shows the stages of the customer experience and which touch points it encounters (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). Yet while this gives a good general impression of what the customer journey looks like, it does not show the distinct interactions that a customer has with the various touch points and stages in other behavioral processes such as consumer attitude, decision-making models and the purchase funnel. Only very recently has such research started to appear. Kuehnl et al. found a relationship between consumer perceiving their customer journey as positive and their loyalty to the brand (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Yet the authors constructed this research on a conceptualization of the customer journey that is distinctly brand-oriented, whereas we perceive the main gap to primarily lie in the understanding of what elements of the customer journey - and its touch points - trigger the customer in making a particular purchasing decision.

Secondly, the fact that so little research on the customer journey and its touch points has been done for marketing as a field in general means that this has not been done either in the realm of digital marketing - despite the booming increase of academic interest in the field of digital marketing. And it is not just the explosive academic interest that shows a distinct need for more understanding on the customer's journey in the digital world. Companies worldwide are becoming increasingly reliant on the touch points that they can control - such as websites and social media - without any true understanding of how these touch points interact with the customers. This despite estimates that digital ad spending worldwide might cost companies globally a whopping total of \$427.26 billion (eMarketer, 2018). Finally, it may not come as a surprise that there is a distinct lack of empirical data on these topics, both as separate concepts and as a larger, combined one. As such, we are interested in exploring these areas further and shedding light on a relatively dark field of marketing.

1.4 A closer look at concepts

Before arriving at a definitive overarching question that will guide our research in the field of the customer journey and its touch points, we feel like we should set a scope for this task. It is infeasible to focus on the entire field of the customer journey as a whole, as it has hardly been covered yet. Like in any exploration, we will have to sketch a map and as such we need to define some borders that we will adhere to in our research.

1.4.1 Digital touch points

As described in the introduction, the field of the customer journey is a nascent one. Practitioners can expect to encounter a swarm of negative consequences when not able to properly implement cross-functional, end-to-end experiences for the customer (Maechler et al., 2016). And obviously, the reverse is also true. Yet managing the customer journey is not an easy thing to do as we are currently living in a world that boasts “multi-touchpoint, multichannel, always-on, hypercompetitive consumer markets” (Maechler et al., 2016). Research has found that “when consumers embarked on journeys that involved multiple channels their experience was materially worse than during single-channel experiences, whether those experiences were digital or not” (Maechler et al., 2016). A conceptual model constructed by Lemon and Verhoef presents four main types of touch points; (1) brand owned, (2) partner owned, (3) customer owned and (4) social and external touch points (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). When considering the many different variants of touch points that can be included in each of these categories, the mind starts to stagger. An industry report by Kitewheel shows that 2017 saw the total amount of customer journey interactions at a little under 3.5 billion (Kitewheel, 2018a, p. 4).

The company that presented this number, Kitewheel, is considered a leader in the customer journey orchestration space (Van Den Brink-Quintanilha et al., 2018). This company has designed a customer journey maturity model to be able to find where companies and entire industries stand in terms of customer journey strategy adoption (Kitewheel, 2018b). This model consists of four phases; (1) starting, (2) piloting, (3) rolling out and (4) scaling (Kitewheel, 2018b). These phases show how a company can start to adopt the customer journey perspective in order to reap benefits for their firm, not in the least in terms of financial performance (Kitewheel, 2018b). What this shows is that one of the first steps that a company can take in such a recently explored perspective is to look internally at how they can manage the customer journey - which will essentially consist of managing their touch points. Kuehnl et al. define an effective customer journey design as “the extent to which consumers perceive multiple brand-owned touchpoints as designed in a thematically cohesive, consistent, and context-sensitive way” (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Still, one cannot ignore that brand-owned touch points are starting to form the minority of all the touch points that exist in the digital world. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Reddit and many more have allowed customers to take the wheel and determine themselves what they share and what they hold back. As such we simply do not agree with defining the customer journey as singularly related to brand-owned touch points only - indeed, as mentioned earlier, Lemon and Verhoef have shown there to be four (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). Since no conceptualization of the customer journey exists as of yet, we are primarily interested in creating such a conceptualization and in order to do so will allow our testing to cover all variants of touch points. This obviously yields limitations and potential avenues for future research – topics that we will cover at the end of the thesis.

1.4.2 Defining versus testing

We have found that practitioners are rapidly working towards finding a way in which to work while academia is yet to catch up. A report written for Forrester by Van Den Brink-Quintanilha et al. identifies eight major players in the field of orchestrating customer journeys (Van Den Brink-Quintanilha et al., 2018). As a number, this almost rivals the amount on relevant published research on the topic. Still, the relevant research that has been published is most certainly interesting.

A recent article by Kuehnl et al. found that an effective customer journey design consists of a (1) thematic cohesion of touch points, (2) consistency of touch points and (3) context sensitivity of touch points (Kuehnl et al., 2019). These authors define an effective customer journey design as “the extent to which consumers perceive multiple brand-owned touch points as designed in a thematically cohesive, consistent, and context-sensitive way” (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Moreover, they conceptualize both effective customer journey design and brand experience as two distinct but interrelated value drivers of customer experience (Kuehnl et al., 2019). They continue their study to find that these two both positively influence customer loyalty (Kuehnl et al., 2019). This provides interesting first insights into the consumer behavior underlying the concept of the customer journey, something that was lacking in the industry together with lack of a “widely accepted definition and adequate measure of how consumers perceive an effective customer journey design” (Kuehnl et al., 2019).

While this study shows how an effective customer journey design impacts one aspect of consumer behavior, that of consumer loyalty, it fails to emphasize exactly what it is that a customer journey design looks like. Moreover, we feel that before one can move into testing relationships, the academic world needs a more solid, encompassing model of the customer journey to move forward with. As such, in this theoretical framework we will attempt to more solidly create such a model - even if conceptual - that we will create relevance for using empirical methods. Indeed, Kuehnl et al. used interviews with consumers in order to arrive at their definition of an effective customer journey design - but did not make this the primary topic of their research (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Instead, they moved rapidly forward to testing their conceptual model empirically. We aim to focus more on the initial step of creating an empirically tested model before moving into testing the more detailed relationships that such a model may contain.

1.4.3 Brand perspective versus purchasing decision perspective

Despite aiming for the creation of an overall model of the customer journey, one still needs to adopt a perspective on which to focus - particularly if one is aiming to create empirical relevance for such a model.

The study by Kuehnl et al. takes on a distinct brand-centric perspective, which shows in their defining an effective customer journey model as ““the extent to which consumers perceive multiple brand-owned touchpoints as designed in a thematically cohesive, consistent, and context-sensitive way” (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Yet we have previously argued that one cannot focus on one of the four categories of touch points before the existence of a general model. As such, limiting oneself to brand-owned touch points in the definition of an entire field limits the generalizability of such a study. Especially considering Lemon and Verhoef’s findings that the customer journey contains at least three more touch points (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). While we use the construct of brand-owned touch points in our study as well, we do so in an approach that does not

define the entire model. Rather, we see brand-owned touch points as the lens through which we can shine some light on the unexplored topic that is the customer journey. That is, we are using this perspective as a way of allowing us to gain empirical insight into the larger concept itself.

Moreover, the brand perspective of Kuehnl et al. becomes more apparent in their choice of dependent variable - that of brand loyalty. While this is highly relevant in the perspective of a customer journey that is defined purely by brand-only touch points, it fails to bring to light a much more vital understanding - which is that of financial returns. Indeed, the value of marketing is critical for both researchers and businesses. Hanssens and Pauwels define marketing value assessment as: “the identification and measurement of how marketing influences business performance as well as the accurate calculation of return on marketing investment (ROMI)” (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016, p. 173). The same authors conclude that “we know a lot about marketing elasticities on hard performance metrics but know little about how marketing affects soft performance metrics and how these relate to hard performance under different conditions” (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016, p. 187). One such soft metric is that of attitude - how customers think or feel - and Hanssens and Pauwels find that “Recent literature has demonstrated that including such attitude (or “purchase funnel”) metrics in market response models increases their predictive and diagnostic power” (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016, p. 181). The authors shape this into what they term a “consumer road to purchase” where “Online behavior does not simply reflect underlying attitudes (e.g., a known brand obtains higher click-through on its ads), it also shapes them” (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016, p. 181). This provides early hints that the customer journey and purchase funnel may be interconnected. Moreover, connecting this two allows for future research to begin attempting to connect hard and soft performance metrics, where “only a few studies to date have quantified the connection between soft and hard metrics in ways that managers can use” (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016, p. 182). Equally, if not more important, is the authors’ finding that “more research is needed to learn the best ways to model the consumer decision journey” which “is an important agenda because attitudinal and transactional metrics are not highly correlated, and thus brands run the risk on focusing on the wrong performance metric in conducting their marketing valuations” (Hanssens & Pauwels, 2016, p. 182).

Practitioners also find that “Customer journeys create competitive experiences that drive loyalty and in many cases are the primary influence behind purchasing decisions” (Kitewheel, 2018a, p. 4). In a multitude of ways, it seems sensible to focus on this primary relationship between customer and company; the dual workings of customer and company providing value to one another (Kumar, 2018, p. 1). This value comes to fruition when the customer makes the decision to acquire a product, thereby initiating the exchange of value. The customer acquires a product that will serve as a way to fulfill a need, and the company receives financial returns. In this study we are therefore interested in adopting a purchasing decision perspective in regard to characterizing the customer journey.

1.4.4 The digital environment

In the introduction we have seen the important role that the digital world has taken in our lives and it may therefore come as no surprise that in this study we aim to focus on digital touch points. There are multiple reasons for this.

Firstly, we have already stated the importance that the digital world has - and will continue to have - in our collective lives. As such understanding the digital world more clearly has multiple major benefits. Secondly, many consumers nowadays will have had some form of digital interaction with a brand-owned touch points - yet the same cannot be said of the other way around.

Across product categories, people hardly ever go into a physical store but do their shopping primarily online. Books are for instance increasingly purchased online, as well as medicine (Madahi & Sukati, 2014, p. 144). There is a strongly growing trend of buyers turning digital. Globally, 2019 is estimated to see 1.92 billion digital buyers – up from 1.32 in 2014 (Statista, 2019c). It seems therefore appropriate and even more feasible to conduct the study while focusing on digital touch points rather than focusing on physical ones.

Finally, in a world where “digital marketing is just marketing, simply because almost all marketing activities a firm might consider now can have some kind of digital aspect”, one can find that using digital touch points to construe a general model is not that unreasonable (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016, p. 168). Indeed, findings from both practice and research indicates that there is little difference between digital and physical touch points. Consumers nowadays choose one starting channel but might switch channels in the middle of the decision-making process (Madahi & Sukati, 2014, p. 130). This is reflected by practitioners who mention that brands today are marketed “across every single touchpoint, from customer service to physical locations to the online checkout process” (Kitewheel, 2018a, p. 4). In fact, the customer journey seems to be made up by touch points that exist over a range of differing channels (Kitewheel, 2018a, p. 7).

1.5 Research question and purposes

As mentioned in the introduction, the field of the customer journey is an up-and-coming one. It is a concept that has become increasingly critical during the rise of digital media as a tool for marketing, and indeed a great deal of research has gone into the topic as can be seen in the literature review by Lemon and Verhoef. Indeed, digital media have added a whole host of new touch points, the number of which is growing drastically – previously found to be at a growth rate of 20% annually (Bughin, 2015, p. 359). One can argue that the customer journey is then a critical tool for marketers to be able to make sense in this increasingly chaotic world. As a starting point, we find the most foundational article to be that of Lemon and Verhoef. Indeed, the authors present a recent and comprehensive literature study on the customer journey and thereby provide a tremendous amount of insight into the current level of knowledge present on the customer journey, particularly from the perspective of the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Yet while this foundational article presents a general model of the customer journey, we feel it lacks a distinct focus on the interaction between the customer and touch points. We find that this is critical to include in a model to be used as a platform for answering further research questions. Indeed, in their article the researchers present a research agenda with suggestions on what research questions concerning the customer journey to find answers to in future studies (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 87). We find that the model presented by the authors does not provide a foundation substantial enough to trigger deeper research into each of these proposed questions as we find that a deeper understanding of the customer is needed in how they experience the customer journey and what impact their interactions with touch points has on both the customer journey as well as their purchasing decision. What we deem necessary as an answer to this is a comprehensive model of the customer journey that has a high level of flexibility and practicality in order to give future studies the possibility to answer. The creation of such a model is what we aim to arrive at through our research question:

How is the customer purchasing decision affected by the customer's interaction with touch points throughout the customer journey?

Critically, this research question is bound by three specific purposes:

- (1) It is our purpose that the knowledge yielded from answering the research question allows us to sequentially produce a model of the customer journey. Thereby, such a model would be our de facto answer to the research question.
- (2) The purpose of such a model as an answer to the research question is to allow practitioners to determine a best course of action for their brand, their touch points and their overall business strategies with the purpose to overcome the challenges described in the introduction and reinforced by the specific mentioning of the research questions by Lemon and Verhoef, such as: “What is the optimal design for the customer journey for firms?”, “How can touch points be seamlessly integrated across the journey?” and “Can we identify new types of customer segments by their use of specific touch points in the customer journey?” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 87).
- (3) Allows future researchers to further explore critical elements of the customer journey, by having a model that serves as a foundation to answer research questions such as: “Can the ‘purchase funnel’ and the ‘loyalty funnel’ be integrated in such a way that we can understand short-term behavioral consequences as well as long-term loyalty

effects of the design of the customer journey?”, “How do customer choices for touch points in the customer journey relate to each other? Do these choices and influences change over time?” and “Can we identify anomalies in customer journeys—whereby customers deviate from habit or predictions—and identify potential moments of influence?” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 87)

1.6 Concluding remarks

In conclusion, we can state that we are primarily interested in seeing how a customer’s purchasing decision is affected by their interaction with touch points throughout the customer journey, and how these findings affect the characterization of the customer journey model. We previously stated that the rise of digital media has brought with it the rapid rise of new types of touch points. Previously, a customer would come in contact with a brand only through offline touch points – as no online touch points yet existed. Yet nowadays, the digital world is deeply embedded in our lives. And due to the growth rate in both number of digital media platforms as well as the innovation of these platforms, the customer journey becomes increasingly important in order to weave together the entire field of marketing. With this research we intent to significantly advance the field of research on that of the customer journey and touch points. We also aim to yield relevant and applicable managerial implications that will benefit practitioners dealing with issues surrounding the customer journey. An overview of the purposes can be found in appendix I.

2. SCIENTIFIC METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct our study in a proper way, it is essential for us to be aware of the exact points of departure and assumptions which are underlying in our research. Making clear which research philosophy - more precisely which ontological and epistemological standpoints - we are following, will help us to conclusively reason for our chosen directions and made decisions regarding the research subject and methodology.

2.1 Research philosophy

A very high percentage of students face confusion and difficulties in understanding when it comes to classifying and debating research philosophy (Mkansi & Acheampong, 2012, p. 139). Depending on which research philosophy you apply, different vital assumptions underlie your strategy of research and the chosen methods within the research process (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 108). Hence it is even more important to have a comprehensive overview and understanding of the subject matter. Shaping and stating the research problem as well as the method selection are highly related to the way how researchers perceive the world and how they interfere with her in order to learn and acquire knowledge (Barinaga, 1999). Within this philosophical field there are principally two main kinds of thinking - ontology and epistemology - which are influencing researchers' thinking about the research process in different ways (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 109). We will discuss these two ways of philosophical thinking while simultaneously arguing for our adopted position choice regarding our research question.

2.1.1 *Ontology*

The ontological point of view refers to “claims regarding the nature and structure of being” (Rawnsley, 1998, p. 2). It engages in the questioning of what exists within the nature around us (Urmson & Réé, 2005, p. 272). A simplifying definition of ontology would describe it as “the view of the world” (Barinaga, 1999). Within the field of ontology there are two different positions that can be discussed regarding how researchers see the characteristics of reality - namely objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 110).

Objectivism adopts a position where “social entities exist in reality external to social actors” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 110). Objectivists reason that in order to apply scientific methods properly, facts that can be replicated and observed in public are necessary (Diesing, 1966, p. 124). This argumentation stresses the fact that “no matter what men are like, knowledge about them must be subject to impartial public verification and criticism and must in this respect be similar to natural science knowledge.” (Diesing, 1966, p. 124)

Subjectivism in comparison is a very broad philosophical term, which “maintains that the truth of some class of statements depends on the mental state or reactions of the person making them” (Urmson & Réé, 2005, p. 373). It has the goal to understand the meanings that individual actors are connecting to social happenings and considers that subjective realities are constantly changing (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111). Long et al. describe this as a position in which “[reality] is subjective and cognitively constructed on an individual basis.” (Long et al., 2000, p. 190) By summarizing several scientific positions, Diesing argues that in order for scientific results to be adequate from a subjective point of view, it is necessary to “understand action from the standpoint of the

actor, as a process of defining the situation, evaluating alternatives in terms of goals, standards, and predictions, and choosing to act” (Diesing, 1966, p. 124). Furthermore, he argues that subjectivists contrast the natural and social science by reasoning for the uniqueness of the character of human behavior, which implies that science needs to acknowledge and consider the *subjective meaningfulness* of human actions in order to be valid (Diesing, 1966, p. 124).

In order to answer our research question properly, we concluded to tread the path of subjectivism. We arrived at this conclusion as the character of this research is highly subjective in approach and qualitative methods are here suitable and necessary to acquire valuable results. While it could be possible that the customer journey can be viewed objectively as well, we think this to be incredibly hard to do – if not impossible. The nature of the customer journey and its intimate relationship to customer experience logically binds it to the realm of subjectivism. While one can objectively determine or design a journey, the actual experiencing of the journey falls to the customer. As such customers can interpret their experiences within the digital customer journey in many ways, affected by their own personal view of the world (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 111). Therefore, the objectivist position would be inappropriate to apply to our research and so we choose to adopt the subjectivist position instead.

2.1.2 Epistemology

The epistemological stance touches upon “what constitutes acceptable knowledge in a field of study” (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 112). It deals with “the basis of knowledge and in what manner knowledge can be transmitted to others.” (Long et al., 2000, p. 190). Hence, epistemology touches upon the question of how to gain knowledge and how to examine the afore mentioned reality (Long et al., 2000, pp. 190-191). A common synonym for epistemology is “Theory of Knowledge”, since it is deduced from the Greek word *episteme*, which directly translated signifies “science” or “knowledge” (Urmson & Réé, 2005, p. 113). Within the theory of epistemology, the pivotal question that needs to be answered is “whether or not there are necessary and sufficient conditions for justifying belief and refusing skepticism” (Rawnsley, 1998, p. 3). In other words, it is about “the way to know and the nature of knowledge” (Barinaga, 1999). Processes that can be counted into the epistemological scope are: “Believing, perceiving, imagining, inferring, remembering, reflecting, constructing, and corroborating” (Rawnsley, 1998, p. 3). When diving deeper into the field of epistemology, there are three different philosophies that can be identified: Positivism; Realism; and Interpretivism (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 113). These three philosophies are discussed beneath.

Positivism represents a mostly natural scientific point of view, where credible data can only be the output of observable phenomena (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 113). This philosophy refuses abstract concepts of reality, aiming solely on detailing witnessed phenomena that can be measured and monitored by empiricism (Trochim et al., 2016). It regards the social reality as real, where researchers can gain more insights about those realities (Walliman, 2011, p. 21). From their deterministic point of view, only scientific methods could reveal the truth about reality, where cause and effect patterns are taking place (Trochim et al., 2016). The aim to discover natural laws by manipulating and monitoring certain conditions within an experimental setting is hereby the main method for generating scientific results (Trochim et al., 2016). The thereby set up hypotheses are usually generated by utilizing relevant already existing theory (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 113) and researchers are viewed as objective and value free (Walliman, 2011, p. 21).

Realism considers reality as existing and recognizable as it actually is (Walliman, 2011, p. 22). Philosophical proponents of Realism argue that the impressions that researchers' senses reveal to them as reality are true, thus the world receives a quite detached existence to the one in the mind of humans (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 114). Within this philosophical branch there are two types of realism, namely direct and critical realism (Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 114-115). While direct realists argue, that their experienced image of the world is pictured correctly by their senses, critical realism considers that senses can be deluding and that one can only experience sensations of reality which may not necessarily be right (Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 114-115). So, a critical realist is convinced that there is indeed a social reality that can be studied by researchers, which is independent of humans' minds and he/she is skeptical about humans' capability to grasp the world around them with certainty (Trochim et al., 2016). In this respect it can be noted that the prior determined term of subjectivism is also a type of realism, since claims of truth about subjective conditions are outspoken of which some are probably accurate (Sayre-McCord, 1988, pp. 14-15).

The third philosophical direction is that of Interpretivism, which claims that the way we see the world around us is the conception of our mind (Walliman, 2011, pp. 21-22). Interpretivists criticize the positivistic approach (reducing the world's complexity by defining generalizing patterns) by stressing the circumstance that people as social actors behave in different ways (Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 115-116). The interpretation of their social roles in their everyday live is congruent with the sense that they attach to these roles (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 116). That is why phenomena can be seen from different angles and can be interpreted in several ways (Walliman, 2011, p. 22). As a researcher's perception is affected by his/her own values and beliefs, and because this perception is used to experience the world, researchers cannot be value free and objective (Walliman, 2011, p. 22).

Since we are using a qualitative strategy to approach the examination of our research question the positivistic philosophy accentuating statistical evaluations and quantifiable observations (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 114) will not serve the academical purpose within this research paper. Additionally, positivism builds up on the knowledge that already preexists (Walliman, 2011, p. 21) and as the narrower focus on the journey that customers take is so rarely adopted, positivism would not be suitable in this context either. Furthermore, we need to consider that thoughts and emotions cannot be observed directly (Trochim et al., 2016) and since our aim is to enter the customers' world and to shed light on the unique and complex digital customer journey, interpretivism is our philosophy of choice. This is in line with Saunders et al. who indicate that the interpretivist approach can be, inter alia, very suitable in the field of marketing (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 116). This is sensible, as one cannot define the reality that individuals live in when they experience events or touch points. The very nature of man is that each person is a different being, with a unique personality and view of the world. As the customer journey applies to each of these individuals, the only logical approach is that of interpretivism.

2.2 Research approach

When it comes to the task of building and developing theories within research there are 3 salient methods that can be used: deduction, induction and abduction (Rodrigues, 2011, p. 132).

In the deductive approach, one uses speculative theories in order to solve perceived issues through observing and experimental tests (Walliman, 2011, p. 19). When applying deductive reasoning, narrow conclusions are made based on logical argumentations, where general existing theories are used to formulate hypotheses, which then in return are more specifically observed, tested and confirmed or negated through empirical evidence (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010, p. 15; Trochim et al., 2016). Scientists supporting positivism apply a deductive argumentation to establish hypotheses that can be tested and if their findings cannot project reality, theory revision helps them to make a more reliable forecast of reality (Trochim et al., 2016). Hence, researchers use falsification to create a trial and error approach where the most appropriate theory remains (Walliman, 2011, p. 19). A problem within this reasoning approach is, that the content of truth is highly dependent on the validity of the underlying assumptions (Walliman, 2011, p. 19).

Inductive reasoning instead, is proceeding from concrete observations to more general theories in a wider context and it has therefore particularly in the initial phase a more exploratory and open-ended character (Trochim et al., 2016). In other words, what we learn and experience from the world around us is leading to conclusions that we make, which then can lead to generalizations or even law-like rules and believes (Walliman, 2011, p. 17). It is applied on grounds of empirical evidence, where made empirical observations lead to general inferences based on the respective findings, which then in return will be used to refine existing or generate new theory (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010, p. 15). Problematic with this approach can be its generalizability. It is hard for researchers to know the exact amount of observations; the actual number of different situations as well as the conditions under which these observations need to take place to arrive at reliable conclusions (Walliman, 2011, p. 18).

Abductive reasoning is formally very similar to induction, since it also starts with incomplete observations, where the most probable explanations are used for testing in order to refine or generate general theories (Rodrigues, 2011, p. 135). Thus, abduction – which is often also named “Inference to the Best Explanation” – entails explanatory reasoning through the confirmation of hypotheses (The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2014). Proponents of this line of argumentation try to comprehend new insights through the creation of general conceptions resting upon previous knowledge (Rodrigues, 2011, p. 135)

As stated earlier, there is not much research done in this specific marketing field of the digital customer journey. This leads to a shortage when it comes to already existing literature and theories in this field. Therefore, deduction can be excluded as a proper research approach, because hypotheses cannot be drawn from non-existing theories. In accordance with that and the chosen path of interpretivism, we are going to consequently adopt inductive reasoning in order to conduct our research. We choose this over abductive reasoning, as we are interested in finding a common ground from multiple individual experience as gathered through empirical methods. We are not interested in finding a “best explanation”, but rather we are interested in finding any generalizable findings that could be used in the characterization of the general customer journey.

2.3 Concluding remarks

In order to make clear what our scientific approach will be in this study, we will conclude the main points covered in this section.

In this study, we will take the ontological position of subjectivism, which states that social reality is made from different perceptions. The subjective position is dependent on individual experiences of social actors, which is relevant to the topic of the customer journey as each customer travels a unique path in this journey that can only be subjectively described.

Our epistemological position is that of interpretivism. Humans are different from physical phenomena; they create meanings and multiple social realities can exist based on several different interpretations of the world. As researchers, we will attempt to gather and understand different social realities and based on that draw own interpretations on what this could mean for a general model of the customer journey.

We will approach the research using inductive reasoning, in which one focusing on gaining an understanding of how social actors interpret social world through empirically gathering data, analyze that data, making observations and formulate new theory.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overall methodology

As we have discovered previously, the field of the customer journey is a relatively nascent one. While the underlying concept of businesses having a customer-centric perspective is not new, there are hints that this newest evolution of the customer journey is a more extensive one – made more complex by the rapid advent of information and communication technologies such as digital media (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This novel nature of our field of research motivates strongly for a qualitative approach. It is not our intent to test hypotheses in this study as that would be jumping ahead of what the field currently offers. Indeed, qualitative research enables one to study “phenomena in the environments in which they naturally occur and uses social actors’ meanings to understand the phenomena” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 2). What qualitative research especially allows one to do is to “describe processes” (Gephart, 2004, p. 455). More specifically, qualitative research is able to provide a basis for “understanding social processes that underlie management” and has the potential to “rehumanize research and theory by highlighting the human interactions and meanings that underlie phenomena and relationships among variables that are often addressed in the field” (Gephart, 2004, p. 455). This highlight of interactions is critical as this is key to our research question in which we aim to uncover how customers interact with touch points throughout their customer journey and what impact this has on their purchasing decision. Indeed, our purpose is to arrive at a model that describes the customer journey that could advance both the academic field of the customer journey as well as provide an insight for practitioners on how the customer interacts with touch points in a natural environment to aid management decisions. Therefore, we opted for a qualitative research approach as this would allow us to combine the breadth of knowledge from an updated literature review with the deep level of insight that comes from interviews (Gephart, 2004, p. 455). This is different and more appropriate than quantitative research which relies on “using the hypothetical-deductive model that uncovers important relationships among variables and tests general propositions” (Gephart, 2004, p. 455). While this is also a highly interesting approach, it is not relevant yet in the field of the customer journey as no true model exists yet that presents several variables and relationships to test quantitatively. The model that we hope to arrive at through our research should be able to serve as a step in the direction of quantitative research and towards the goal of a comprehensive, quantitatively and empirically tested model of the customer journey.

3.2 Overall delimitations

In order for us as researchers to carry out a more potent study, it is important to delimit our research project (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 193). If the topic’s nature is designed too vague or broad, it can be decisive for the project, eventually leading to a shortage of direction and impact (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 193). As the author Best in the year 1970 already suitably stated: “The weapon of research is the rifle not the shotgun.” (Best, 1970). Without this direction and focus researchers could be confronted with a flood of information (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 193) leading to a likely loss of perspective regarding their research project. What we are focusing on is evident from our concluding remarks, so we decided to include our decisions on what not to focus on and as such to delimit our research project.

One of the primary delimitations of our research project is that we will allow it to be rather broad in scope. While ordinarily this could cause confusion in terms of analyzing results, it provides us with greater freedom to fully explore the customer journey. For example, we are deciding to not focus on specific products, brands or industries. As such, the literature review is open to include a broad array of information that may otherwise be left out. Furthermore, we determined to not set any boundaries to focus solely on offline and online channels. Still, we are predominantly interested in the effects that digital touch points have on the customer journey and the potential interaction and interplay they may have with non-digital touch points. Yet, we still want to be open for any information respondents may have on offline channels that otherwise would have been left out. For both the first delimitation and the second, it allows our research subjects to answer more freely and in turn allows us to provide a more thorough thematic analysis – an approach that we will discuss further in chapter 3.4.4. Indeed, one could say that our approach to data gathering is a rather holistic one as we will attempt not to miss out on critical insights and as such preferring to rather see the whole picture first before narrowing it down to the key details. That is also why we are choosing for thematic analysis, as this will allow important themes to emerge from the literature, that we can subsequently gain further insight in through semi-structured interviews (Braun et al., 2018, p. 845).

Additionally, we have to focus on a few particular fields of research for our literature review and largely based our decision of which fields to focus on by searching for pre-existing literature review articles on the topic. In this, Lemon and Verhoef's work is critical as it will allow us to set our focus on the topic on customer journey, as well as that of touch points and the customer experience. While this provides us with a stable foundation for our research, as the authors have conducted a thorough overview of the customer journey, it also guides us into a certain direction. We have attempted to avoid this by absorbing the knowledge gained in the literature review part of their article and by critically examining the more subjective analytical part. As such, we intent our model to be drastically different in terms of how it covers the customer journey, while still building on a similar knowledge base. Initially our intentions were set on implementing the purchasing decision process into the customer journey in a deeper way, but we decided to move forward by allowing the purchasing decision process to set the stage for our empirical analysis. By this we mean that the purchasing decision process would be the lens we would view the customer journey through.

3.3 Research strategy

We have previously defined that the goal of this research project is to be able to answer our main research question that is connected to three research purposes. In order to do so we will need a structured research strategy that is able to produce high quality results in line with the truth criteria that we will cover at the end of our thesis. In short, we can say that we aim to abide by four concepts, those of (1) credibility, (2) transferability, (3) dependability and (4) confirmability (Morse et al., 2002, p.14). We chose to follow these proposed concepts as they are the most frequently used criteria in the evaluation of qualitative research – and as such the appropriate counterpart to the more quantitative concepts of validity and reliability (Cope, 2014, p. 89). More on these criteria is covered in chapter 8 at the end of this thesis. To guide our research, we decided to structure it in a sequential manner, as one of the purposes of our study is to sequentially arrive at a model that characterizes the customer journey.

What we mean with “to sequentially arrive” is that we will try to arrive at our goal of creating a model of the customer journey by taking one step at a time. This means that each next step builds upon the previous one, to assure that we keep the high quality that we intend for our study to have. As such, we have three distinct steps in our study:

- (1) To start, we plan to conduct a thorough literature review on the critical topics of *customer journey* and *touch points*. This will provide us with a solid theoretical ground to build upon.
- (2) Then, we plan to conduct semi-structured interviews with customers to obtain deep insight into their reasoning, experiences and decision-making. This would build upon the previous step to lead to the third step of our study.
- (3) Comparing knowledge obtained from both the first step and the second step in order to obtain final insights into how to synthesize the customer journey into a complete model.

It is perhaps easier to visualize this. *Figure 4* presents the research approach. At each step we plan to present a model of the customer journey that reflects our latest insight.

We will further detail the various methods that we will use in this study in this part of the thesis, starting from the methods that underlie purpose one.

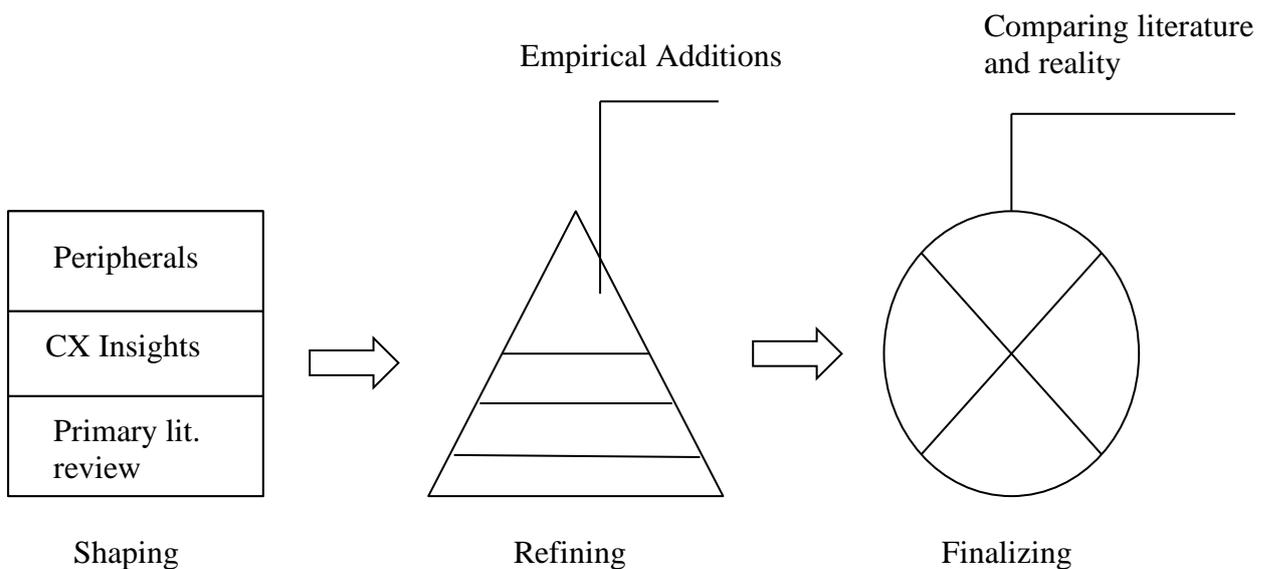


Figure 4: Research approach model

3.4 Literature review

The first step in our research is to thoroughly review the literature that already exists on the topics of *customer journey* and *touch points*. By doing so we are aiming to create a solid skeleton that can assist us in developing a more definitive model of the customer journey. As described in *figure 4*, the main literature review would be the base of our research. We would then build on top of this with insights from both the field of customer experience as well as insights from peripheral fields.

3.4.1 Primary literature review

In order to facilitate a relevant and accurate literature review, several rules and guidelines were set.

- (1) To carry out the review we would use Scopus which is “the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature: scientific journals, books and conference proceedings” developed and maintained by Elsevier (Scopus, 2019).
- (2) An initial search was carried out using a search query that can be found under appendix II. In line with recommendations of carrying out a high-quality literature review, this initial query focused specifically on leading journals in the field of marketing in order to arrive at a first harvest of major contributions (Webster & Watson, 2002, p. 15)
- (3) The second search we carried out covered the entirety of journals available. The search query used can also be found under appendix II. In order to enhance replicability of our literature review, we carried out a dual approach in which both authors used the same search query to arrive at an initial list of relevant articles. The authors then conducted both an individual and combined thematic analysis of the abstracts that the search query yielded, arriving at the same conclusion as to which articles were to be considered or discarded. The thematic requirements were those articles that focused on research that aimed to define a topic, aimed to expand upon a topic or provided a relevant case study into a topic.
- (4) The final list was a combination of the initial search and the second search, which yielded 29 articles on the concept of *customer journey* and 14 articles on the concept of *touch points*. As such, the entire literature review consists of a total of 43 articles deemed relevant enough for the creation of a skeleton model to build upon.
- (5) It should be considered that the results yielded from the literature review are time-specific; since we included 2019 as a year in our query future searches may find a differing number of articles - most likely a larger number. This is due to the fact that we are writing in the beginning of the year and articles may still be published in 2019 that are not included in our query.

3.4.2 Literature search for customer experience insights

The search for insights from the field of customer experience was structured like a literature review, but with less rigid parameters for replicability. Instead, the goal was to yield a list of relevant articles that could serve as a database of knowledge to the authors in order to find the best and most appropriate content to use for the construction of the initial customer journey model. Regardless, we will describe our process here in order to ensure some replicability remains.

- (1) Again, using Scopus, a general query for “customer experience” was carried out limiting results to the exact keyword and only articles in the field of business, management and accounting resulting in a total of 365 articles. The search query can be found in appendix IV.
- (2) In order to ensure that we were dealing with recent literature, we filtered the list down to articles published year 2014 and forward. This resulted in a list of 257 articles.
- (3) As scouring hundreds of articles is a rather time-consuming task, we decided to adopt an approach of data saturation. That is, we would create a list of articles -

starting from the most recently published one going backwards - and use the resulting list as our database of knowledge.

- (4) In order to increase credibility and confirmability, we decided to allow for a “go backward” approach, which means reviewing article citations to discover prior articles to consider (Webster & Watson, 2002, p. 16).

3.4.3 Literature search for peripheral insights

This search was far broader than the one focused on customer experience due to the sheer number of topics. In order to keep the research focused, we decided to focus on a set of particular topics and using the combined data-saturation and go-backward approach adopted in the search for literature on customer experience. The topics we decided to focus on were:

- (1) Purchasing decision process
- (2) Consumer attitude
- (3) Consumer attitude building
- (4) Purchase funnel
- (5) Consumer decision-making process

We decided to focus on these topics due to their relevance to the construction of our model as we felt these areas would provide particularly valuable insights. The influence of data-saturation and a go-backwards approach would assist us until we found that we have enough knowledge necessary to construct a model of the customer journey. One can consider this part to provide us with the information to understand the phenomena underlying what we are discovering in the main literature review.

3.4.4 Thematic analysis

As we have mentioned earlier, a critical part of our study would be to analyze the knowledge gathered through the literature reviews. Indeed, as we are aiming to gather a lot of knowledge currently present in the field of the customer journey, some method is necessary to make sense of all that data. In order to do this, we opted to use thematic analysis, which has the aim of “identifying patterns (‘themes’) across qualitative datasets” (Braun et al., 2018, p. 2). More specifically, we are adopting the use of reflexive thematic analysis which is a fully qualitative approach to thematic analysis and allows us to arrive at themes that are “conceptualized as meaning-based patterns, evident in explicit (semantic) or conceptual (latent) ways, and as the output of coding – themes result from considerable analytic work on the part of the researcher to explore and develop an understanding of patterned meaning across the dataset” (Braun et al., 2018, p. 6). As such, we aim to conduct thorough analytical work on the knowledge gathered from the literature review to arrive at themes that we consider to be shared meaning-based patterns. This means that despite the disparate approaches, contexts and conclusions of the earlier research that we are evaluating, we capture the implicit ideas underlying the information into a single theme – which is in line with the current perspective on the use of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2018, p. 3).

3.5 Interviews

The interviews were the second big task of the research, as they would yield critical insights to adopt into our customer journey model. In our research we aimed to adopt a semi-structured interview design, where the goal was to allow the subjects to freely explore the concept of the customer journey. To allow for this we divided up the interviews in two specific segments; one focusing on allowing the customer to detail their insights on the customer journey and the other focusing on allowing the customer to reflect on themes regarding the customer journey. Additionally, we aimed to gather data that could apply to a broad range of products and services. Still, for time and quality purposes, we decided to start this field of research by focusing on high involvement products as we theorize that these types of products require a more cognitive approach to a purchasing decision that allows us to most clearly paint a picture of the customer journey. As interviewers, we aimed to unobtrusively guide our subjects along the questions in the interview guide – which can be found in appendix III.

3.5.1 First interview segment

The first interview segment is one where the subject is intended to be able to answer our questions unhindered by any knowledge that might impact on the credibility and dependability of the data gathering. We aimed to design the questions in such a way as to allow the subjects to arrive at their own conclusions instead of guiding them in a particular direction. Questions were subject to consideration of both researchers individually before being accepted into a final interview guide. Additionally, specific efforts were made to detail the purpose of each question being asked in its significance towards the study – such as linking every question to a specific part of the theoretical findings.

3.5.2 Second interview segment

The second interview segment is one where we allow the subjects to comment on some critical foundations of our research in the form of themes. We do so in a semi-obtrusive manner; while we did not reveal the topic of our research nor our conclusions, the themes showed the subjects a specific topic that we wanted answers on rather than allowing them to roam free with their answers. We also called the themes we discovered in the literature review “statements” towards the interview subjects. Our purpose with this is to be able to first allow the gathering of unbiased data on the topic of the customer journey before then gathering “expert” data of the subjects in their expert role as an individual customer. No one knows the customer’s behavior better than the customer themselves and by providing them with some – but not all – information on the research subject, we intend to gather further, original and insightful knowledge from non-academic experts in the field of consumption and being a customer.

3.5.3 Pre-testing

In order to increase the credibility as well as the dependability of the interview design in a real-life interview scenario, pre-testing was conducted in order to find flaws and shortcomings in the first draft on the interview guide. Pre-testing consisted of conducting two complete interviews separately from one another and with the intent to match the real interview setting as closely as possible.

We conducted the pre-test interviews separately as the real interviews will be conducted separately as well. The interviews were recorded but will not be fully transcribed as they

simply served quality control purposes. We interviewed two anonymous participants; with pre-test interview one being conducted at a duration of roughly 45 minutes and the second interview taking roughly 60 minutes. Conclusions and improvements of the interviews were then compared. The proposed changes that either matched or were agreed upon as being useful to the final version of the interview guide were implemented with the result of:

1. A simplification of the first interview segment.
2. The interview length being shortened.
3. A drastic simplification of themes in the second interview segment.
4. The implementation of semi-structured elements, with the main questions providing structure while follow up questions are inserted by us as researchers during our respective interviews. Agreed upon was to use a triply-why approach, whereby we ask the question “why” until a satisfactory level of understanding concerning a subject’s answer is reached.

After the re-design, we did a joint final test of the new interview guide and concluded that it worked better. This final interview landed at a length of roughly 30 minutes, allowing us in the role as researchers to ask further questions if necessary, without the interviewees being subjected to the strain of a lengthy interview.

For full transparency, the entire, final, interview guide can be found in appendix III.

3.5.4 Choice of respondents

Another important element of describing the interview process is to describe our reasoning concerning our choice of respondents, or subjects. We are primarily interested in gaining insights from the subjects that a semi-structured interview method provides (Gephart, 2004, p. 458). Ideally, these insights will come from a relatively broad range of demographic characteristics. Though this is a qualitative study, and in such a choice of respondents might not be highly relevant, we feel it will provide a greater strength to our contribution if respondents show at least some demographic variation. Due to constraints in both time and resources, we opted to source for interviewees in our direct circle of acquaintances. As such, the method of sampling used in our study is that of judgement sampling as we have “actively selected the most productive sample to answer the research question” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Indeed, we attempted to fit together respondents with differing demographic backgrounds that all have experience in both using online and offline channels to conduct their purchases – which could be considered a form of critical-case sampling (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Our final sample size was determined by a combination of establishing data saturation and playing within the boundaries set by constraints in time and resources. Data saturation is a commonly used justification for sample size in semi-structured interviews (Francis et al., 2010, pp. 1229-1230). We measured our data saturation by determining when both researchers felt that a level of repeating significance was acquired – enough to provide relevant insight that could contribute to the creation of our model. This means that both researchers would analyze responses separately and discuss if a same conclusion was reached. After 8 responses, we felt confident that we had reached a level of data saturation that would provide us with the insight needed to finalize our model. Indeed, the purpose of the interviews was quality, not quantity.

Because of our choice of sampling, there are certain limitations we expect to encounter in our research. The first is related to the sample size. Indeed, one can expect the sampling error of a small sample to be large and as such biases are inevitable (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). Secondly, as we are using judgement sampling, our own knowledge and characteristics can bias choice of respondents and therefore induce bias into the results of the study. Thirdly, not all respondents are equally good observers and as such it can be expected that the data gained from some subjects will be richer than the data gained from other subjects (Marshall, 1996, p. 523).

Though these limitations are expected to have a certain impact on our study, such as to its reliability, we attempted to counteract such limitations by conducting interviews separately from one another to ensure the same level of data quality would be obtained. And in order to ensure that both researchers followed the same protocol, we conducted pre-testing as described above so that data yielded will be of similar quality. Furthermore, the respondents would be answering from their role as a customer in a critical-case type sampling. As such, one could consider any insight to be relevant and providing rich data as respondents answer to their own subjective interpretation of the customer journey. One would not interview a business student on the best way to conduct a complicated surgery, you ask a doctor. In our study, we have the benefit that any respondent that uses both online and offline channels is an expert in the field of being a customer. Finally, during interpretation of the data we are planning to provide information on which subjects provide agreement on themes we are planning to find through our literature review and which subjects do not provide agreement on these themes. This is considered to be important in data interpretation when using judgement sampling (Marshall, 1996, p. 523).

In order to provide further clarity to our interview process, some simple demographic characteristics of our interview subjects as well as the durations of the interviews can be found in table 1. Our aim with this is to provide a context to the quotes that we have used in this empirical analysis part of our thesis.

3.5.5 Interview setting

In this section we will briefly detail the setting that each interview took place in as this provides the reader with a better understanding of this part of the research process. It also allows the reader to reach their own conclusions in terms of the level of quality that data obtained through interviews such as we have constructed them can provide. The interview process was designed beforehand through pre-testing, but the final evaluation of the general interview setting as conducted is described here.

Each interview started with some general, unrecorded small talk to put the subject at ease in what could otherwise be interpreted as an uncomfortable, formal situation. We explained the process of the interview, though we carefully avoided any reference to what would be expected of the subjects other than that they would have to provide answers to some questions and their opinion on some statements. We did not explain or reference the customer journey in any way, as we felt that this would become obtrusive to obtaining the desired data. In general, we aimed to deviate as little from the interview guide as possible and succeeded in this. In three instances, we had to explain to the subject what we meant with a certain question – which we did while at the same time avoiding guiding the subject into a specific direction. The interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting with a voice recorder placed in the middle of the table, and a computer present for the researcher to display the interview guide on so that it could be

followed as closely as possible. After the interview was over, it was quickly wrapped up. The subject was thanked for their attention, informed that if they so desired, they could receive a copy of the final thesis and a copy of their interview transcript. At this point, if the interview subjects asked questions about the specifics of our research, we would answer them – though no alterations were made to their transcript.

By conducting the interviews in this formalized, semi-structured setting we aimed to gain as much insight as possible of a similar quality from differing character backgrounds.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of interview candidates and interview lengths

Interview	Age	Nationality	Gender	Education	Family Situation	Length
Subject 1	28	Swedish	Female	University	Engaged, two-person household	40m17s
Subject 2	59	German	Female	University	Single, one-person household	39m12s
Subject 3	61	Dutch	Female	University	Married, two-person household	27m28s
Subject 4	58	Dutch	Male	University	Married, two-person household	40m27s
Subject 5	23	Dutch	Male	University	Single, one-person household	33m45s
Subject 6	25	Swedish	Female	Secondary	Married, two-person household	24m29s
Subject 7	31	Dutch	Male	University	Single, one-person household	33m19s
Subject 8	52	Swedish	Female	University	Engaged, two-person household	35m42s
Averages and Totals	42	1 German 4 Dutch 3 Swedish	5 Female 3 Male	7 University 1 Secondary	3 Single 2 Engaged 3 Married	34m20m

3.6 Analysis method

The data aggregated under a total number of eight interviews conducted gives us empirical, exploratory insights into the workings of the customer journey in practice. These findings also allow us to critically compare theory with practice in order to find potential overlaps and gaps between the two.

In our approach to data analysis we used thematic analysis, which is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data” (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). We chose to adopt this approach due its flexibility, which is highly helpful when it comes to research that borders on the exploratory such as the research presented in this thesis. This flexibility is a characteristic of thematic analysis recognized by researchers and, moreover, thematic analysis can be “applied across a range of theoretical frameworks and indeed research paradigms” (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297). Clarke and Braun also indicate another reason why thematic analysis is a strong method to use in our research, in that it allows one to analyze data and identify patterns within and across data gathered from and grounded in the experience of interview participants (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297).

We have taken a reverse path in the way of thematic analysis which means that we have first identified the larger themes through producing a comprehensive theoretical framework, before supporting these themes with empirically gathered data resulting in the codes that shape these themes. This indeed presents all the pre-requisite elements required for a thematic analysis as it is the codes that represent that most interesting parts from the data, and it is the codes that serve as building blocks for the larger themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016, p. 297).

Findings are presented in a tabular format and follow a structure of either supporting or not supporting the conclusions that we have drawn during the literature reviews in the theoretical framework part of this thesis. We will then use the majority of this section to support our findings with quotes from the interviews and link these statements from our subjects to theoretical conclusions we have drawn previously. The overall findings will be displayed in a table at the start of chapter 5. We approach the level of support in the table by allowing the interviews to support theoretical themes in one of three ways: (1) no support, (2) weak support and (3) strong support. Again, our argumentation of why we have giving a certain level of support to specific interviews will be discussed as well in this fifth section of the thesis. In general, it can be said that the label of no support would be attached when the subject made no significant statements that could arguably support theoretical findings. The label of weak support would be attached when one could argue for a statement made in an interview supporting theoretical findings, but it is not directly applicable or requires strong argumentation to make sense. Strong support is the label that is attached when a statement given by a subject directly supports theoretical findings without much argumentation being needed.

An easy way of explaining this approach is by providing a metaphor. If our research would concern supporting that the color of the sky is blue through interviewing people, our labeling of no support, weak support and strong support would be as follows. No support would be given for people stating that the sky is “unequivocally orange”. Weak support would be given for people stating that it is “as the color of the sea” (if prior research exists on the color of the sea), or “not red, nor green, but that other color that is missing in this combination of colors”. Strong support would be given when subjects respond saying that the sky is blue, though we allow for shading in the answers such as

when respondents would argue that the sky is “light-blue” versus that the sky is “baby-blue”.

The outcome of this method of comparison would be to be able to provide a final conceptual model, where we highlight which elements have been found to be supported by both findings in literature as well as empirically in the field – and as such can potentially move towards hypothesis testing in future research. Another outcome would be the discovering of gaps between literature and findings, which allows for the presentation of either gaps in the conceptual model that should be filled by future research or that shows where the conceptual model provides a proper explanation that is supported by both literature and empirical findings. Ideally, this would allow future research to move from a more qualitative nature to a more quantitative nature.

3.7 Research ethics

Ethics play a central role in research design (Saunders, 2009, pp. 183-189) and we have taken great care to consider both these topics at each stage of our research. Our primary way of ensuring that we were conducting ethical research can be found in the way we handled our interview subjects. We will list some critical design elements that we implemented to ensure our research would be carried out as ethically and responsibly as possible, which covers all relevant points taken up by Saunders in his book on research (Saunders, 2009, pp. 188-201):

(1) We ensured complete and open communication towards the research subjects by presenting them with a statement at the start of the interview. This was a statement of intent that explained the purpose of our research, how we would treat the subjects, how we would treat any details they would share with us and that we would completely anonymize their answers. In this regard, we have removed the interview transcripts from the published thesis. Whenever we refer to the interview transcripts, we refer to the documents that we have removed as appendices from this thesis.

(2) We avoided asking any leading questions, instead allowing subjects to answer based on their own reality. While this obviously instills a certain level of subjectivity into the results of our study, it also allows for more honest answering and a lower degree of pressure placed on the subjects. At several points during the interviews, subjects would ask if they answered correctly to which we as researchers responded that any answers they give are perfectly fine.

(3) Recording the interviews requires extra care to be taken, and so part of the statement of intent that we mentioned earlier required the participants to agree to the conditions we would place them under. If a participant would disagree, we would simply not continue with the interview and delete the audio file.

(4) Earlier, we talked about data saturation. This topic is also relevant when talking about ethical aspects of the research. In general, interviewing more participants does not necessarily mean that more additional information will be produced. So, it would not only be redundant to collect a lot of repetitive information but even unethical to continue questioning additional interviewees, if this gained data was already collected and documented in previous interviews. This argumentation is in line with the portrayals of Francis et al. in 2010 who argue, that “the use of samples that are larger than needed is an ethical issue (because they waste research funds and participant’s time)” (Francis et al., 2010, p. 1230).

Through this approach we aimed to conduct research with great ethical consideration towards our interview subjects. Wider ethical considerations with our research subject and its larger theme as a whole will be discussed at the end of this thesis.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Consumer or customer

Before moving into the meat of the theoretical framework, we feel it is appropriate to take some time to cover the terminology of customer that will be present in this framework. We spend some time to do so because (1) based on the findings in the literature review, we conclude that there is no fully clear terminology in the field yet and (2) it allows us for clear and effective argumentation. In order to prevent misunderstandings and to keep the focus of this research paper as accurate as possible, it is inevitable for us to deliver a distinct definition of the two terms *consumer* and *customer* and to disclose our corresponding considerations to the reader. A consumer can generally be defined as the end user who is consuming goods or services for personal use (“Consumer,” n.d.), whereas a customer is usually considered as an individual or organization that is the actual purchaser of goods or services, but not necessarily the one who is consuming them (Ramees, Rahman & Safeena, 2016, p. 259). When we are investigating subjects in this paper regarding their undertaken journey in the digital world, we include the whole range of different stages in order to shape their journey as encompassing as possible. This means to consider the whole continuum of different buying phases reaching from a pre-purchase to a post-purchase setting. Thus, regarding our research aim, we decided to apply a more comprehensive definition of the term customer, where even the consumptive characteristics of consumers are included. Accordingly, we see a consumer as an individual that solely uses (consumes) a product or service. As such they are not involved in the pre-purchase phase leading up to a purchasing decision and neither, are they involved in the purchasing decision itself. A customer on the contrary is the individual that experiences both the pre-purchase setting and the purchasing decision, as well as the post-purchasing decision. Either because they are the consumer, or they experience the impact of the purchase in another way. Using our conceptualization of the consumer and the customer one can see that they can be the same person, in which case both the roles of consumer and customer experience the entire journey, or they are two different persons, in which case only the customer experiences the entire journey. Therefore, we choose to use the term customer journey.

4.2 Literature review

In order to arrive at a skeleton for our conceptual model, we conducted a literature review that focused particularly on the topics of *customer journey* and *touch points*. A summary of these topics can be found separately in table 2 and table 3.

A few interesting, overarching themes can be identified from the literature review. As mentioned in our methodology we did not apply a “go forward” or citation analysis approach. We did look at citations and second-hand articles as a secondary step in the literature analysis. While the articles yielded through this citation search have not been included in the main literature review, they are mentioned in a separate subheading in this analysis of literature review findings and how they strengthen and/or change these findings.



4.2.1 *Defining the customer journey*

Before starting out with the main body of this thesis, we should first take a few moments and determine the most accurate definition of the customer journey to move forward with. Such a definition can assist us with a foundational understanding of what a customer journey is before we transform it into a model. And indeed, arriving at a coherent definition is critical as there does not seem to be a collectively agreed upon definition in literature. Roughly half of the articles discovered in the literature review do not define the customer journey, and the other half have disparate definitions with certain shared themes and concepts. It is these shared themes and concepts that we find most interesting and see reflected in the argumentation of those articles that lack a proper definition. We will use these overarching themes to arrive at a definition that could be considered most appropriate for the field in its current form.

Table 2 shows the complete list of articles that our literature review yielded, showcasing, among other elements of information, the definitions that some of these articles have used for describing the customer journey. We have analyzed and compared these definitions to construct an aggregate definition that most accurately reflects what the customer journey is.

First and foremost is the shared agreement that the customer journey is not something that happens at a set instance in time but rather over a stretch of time that may or may not be defined by several steps or stages. One of the core articles in the field seems to be an article by Lemon and Verhoef that was referred to in many of the other articles that our search yielded. It seems therefore sensible to start with their definition of the customer journey, particularly since other authors have used the work of Lemon and Verhoef in the creation of a definition. Lemon and Verhoef describe the customer journey as “how customers interact with multiple touch points, moving from consideration, search, and purchase to post-purchase, consumption, and future engagement or repurchase” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 79). This definition implies a linear traversal of stages that seem interrelated to the stages of the customers’ decision-making process. This is the conclusion found in the definition invoked by Wozniak et al., which is based on the works of Lemon and Verhoef and Stein and Rameseshan. Wozniak et al. find the customer journey to be “a series of exposures to or experiences of touch points in multiple channels and media along different stages of the consumer decision-making process” (Wozniak et al., 2018). Halvorsrud et al. are more direct in their definition, stating that the customer journeys are “visual representations of events or touchpoints depicted chronologically, often accompanied by emotional indicators” (Halvorsrud et al., 2016, p. 3). Yet this linear conceptualization of the customer journey is not universally agreed upon. Wolny and Charoensuksai find that customer journeys are structured non-linearly and stand in contrast to the linear structures of decision-making models (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014, p. 319). These authors opt for a looser definition of the customer journey by using Clark’s perspective that it is as “a description of customer experience where different touchpoints characterize customers’ interaction with a brand, product, or service of interest” (Clark, 2013 as cited by Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014, p. 319). Canfield and Basso share this looser approach to the customer journey, where it does not strictly adhere to a process or linear path. They find that the customer journey is “a customer-oriented technique (i.e., the customer’s point-of-view is the key focus), which maps all the touchpoints that a customer has with a product and service when he/she is engaging with the company” (Canfield & Basso, 2017, p. 104). While this certainly is an interesting perspective, it seems to be in the



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minority with most authors finding the customer journey to be a process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Ponsignon et al., 2017; Rudkowski et al., 2018; Hamilton et al., 2019), a series or sequence (Bosio et al., 2017; Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Wozniak et al., 2018) or as consisting of stages (Barari & Furrer, 2018; Yachin, 2018). In our definition of the customer journey, we will adhere to the trend in the field and consider the customer journey to consist of a more linear structure. Still, other definitions add an interesting twist to this conceptualization. Anderl et al. consider the customer journey to include “all contacts of any individual customer with a retailer over all online marketing channels, prior to a potential purchase decision” (Anderl et al., 2016, p. 185). This implies a more free-form process approach that considers the pre-purchase stage to be an open sea of interactions that funnels customers to a purchase decision.

This definition by Anderl et al. leads us to the second share theme among the definitions. Nearly all authors find touch points to be an integral part of the customer journey. While we will cover the concept of touch points more in-depth a little later in this literature review, it seems to be nearly universally agreed upon that touch points are a vital element of the customer journey. 20 out of the 29 studies on the customer journey place a heavy emphasis on the role of touch points in shaping the customer journey. Most definitions seem to imply that it is the touch points that pave the road that the customer travels along – whether this road takes shape as a sequence, process or something else entirely. As such this seems most definitely important to include in the definition of the customer journey.

The third overarching theme is that nearly all definitions find the customer to be central to the customer journey. While initially this may seem obvious, there is more than just a name-based foundation to this. One could initially misconstrue the customer journey as something that companies specifically design in order for the customer to have the best possible experiences in dealing with the company’s brand. But what becomes clear from literature, is that the customer journey is exclusively the way in which customers experience the path of touch points that has been laid out for them. In many of the definitions that we found, it is the customer that interacts or takes contact with the retailer – not the other way around (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Anderl et al., 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Canfield & Basso, 2017; Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Rudkowski et al., 2018; Hamilton et al., 2019). This customer-centricity shows through in the way that authors find the journey to take shape. The journey is characterized by a highly level of personalization, variety and a balance between cognitive and emotional engagement (Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 16). As such, it is only the customer that can individually experience the journey. As such companies could be seen as playing the role of mediator; they try to ensure that customers are experiencing their journey in the right way (Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 7). The field of service management calls this service blueprinting; to “use knowledge about the customer journey to develop optimal service design” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 79). But again, in order to gain an adequate understanding, one will have to take the customer perspective. It is also mostly service management literature that talks about visually mapping the customer journey in order to construct a service design around it. In this research we are aiming to create a general customer journey model that could be used by firms to create general service designs. But the most important realization of the customer being central is that while one can generalize the similarities between customers, one can never generalize the entirety of customers into a single model. It is therefore important in our research to truly place the customer central in the goal of understanding.



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The fourth and final overarching theme is that of the customer experience. Like with touch points, we will cover the role of customer experience further at a later stage of this review. For now, we can conclude that the customer experience has a lot to do with the customer journey. Only five of the articles did not mention the customer experience in a significant manner, which seems to be a strong indicator that the customer experience and the customer journey are two concepts that go hand in hand. Primarily, the customer experience seems to be a concept that is inherently embedded into the customer journey. Indeed, Lemon and Verhoef conceptualize the customer experience as a journey across touch points (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 74). Their model reflects this, showing the customer experience as distinctly embedded into the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). Further research finds that it is at the touch points in a customer journey that one forms the experience, embedding the latter into the former (Wozniak et al., 2018; Kuehnl et al., 2019). What makes customer experience such an interesting and complex concept is that it can be seen as personal and unique (Halvorsrud et al., 2016). This is caused by the interaction between customer and the various touch points that exist, which "involves a number of channels and reflects the emotional, behavioural and cognitive responses present in the process" (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014, p. 319). As such, it seems vital to include the concept of customer experience into the definition of the customer journey.

Based on these four overarching themes, we have arrived at the formulation of a definition that encapsulates most of the knowledge yielded from the literature review. We therefore define the customer journey as *the individual experience that a customer has when interacting with touch points in the path from a pre-purchase to a post-purchase setting*.



Table 2: Literature review on the topic of customer journey

Author(s)	Year	Title	Journal	Approach	Design	Definition	Definition Source	Touch points	Goal
Vaghela	2014	The voice as a relationship milestone	Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice	Quantitative	Survey	Not mentioned	-	No	To report on an international survey researching the power of voice in marketing, what data matters, how voice is valued by the consumer, and what marketers and brands can do to enhance the customer experience.
Wolny & Charoensuksai	2014	Mapping customer journeys in multichannel decision-making	Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice	Qualitative	Personal Diary and Interviews	A description of customer experience where different touchpoints characterize customers' interaction with a brand, product, or service of interest.	Clark (2013)	Yes	To provide understanding on how consumers use and react to different media and channels in their shopping journeys for cosmetics.
Anderl et al.	2015	Helping firms reduce complexity in multichannel online data: a new taxonomy-based approach for customer journeys	Journal of Retailing	Quantitative	Modeling	Includes all contacts of any individual customer with a retailer over all online marketing channels, prior to a potential purchase decision.	Lee (2010); Haan et al. (2013); Xu et al. (2014)	Yes	Developing and testing a new taxonomy-based approach that supports inferences about consumer decision making.
Marquez et al.	2015	Walking a mile in the user's shoes: customer journey mapping as a method to understanding	Internet Reference Services Quarterly	Qualitative	Review	Not mentioned	-	Yes	To demonstrate the importance and relevance of the mapping process for any library user



		the user experience							experience.
Stockwell	2015	Using live data and social amplification to drive fan engagement	Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice	Qualitative	Case study	Not mentioned		No	To find out how a small group of marketers and sales and agency staff were convened in 'The Punnet' to create visitor personas, map the customer journey and support that journey end-to-end by applying real-time sports analytics data to deliver benchmark-beating results.
Van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen	2015	Mapping out the customer's journey: customer search strategy as a basis for channel management	Journal of Marketing Channels	Quantitative	Survey	Not mentioned	-	No	To propose a clear and intuitive model that will support companies developing an effective multichannel strategy.
Canfield & Basso	2016	Integrating satisfaction and cultural background in the customer journey: a method development and test	Journal of International Consumer Marketing	Mixed	Interviews and Survey	A customer-oriented technique (i.e., the customer's point-of-view is the key focus), which maps all the touchpoints that a customer has with a product and service when he/she is engaging with the company.	Canfield & Basso (2016)	Yes	To develop and test a method to map the customer journey along the service process, integrating customer satisfaction and cultural background, and to improve the managerial applications of the customer journey method.



Halvorsrud et al.	2016	Improving service quality through customer journey analysis	Journal of Service Theory and Practice	Qualitative	Case study	Visual representations of events or touchpoints depicted chronologically, often accompanied by emotional indicators.	Halvorsrud et al. (2016)	Yes	To present Customer Journey Analysis and Customer Journey Framework as an approach designed to support an integrated study of the service delivery process as planned and as actually experienced.
Lemon & Verhoef	2016	Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey	Journal of Marketing	Qualitative	Review	How customers interact with multiple touch points, moving from consideration, search, and purchase to postpurchase, consumption, and future engagement or repurchase.	Lemon & Verhoef (2016)	Yes	To develop a stronger understanding of customer experience and the customer journey in this era of increasingly complex customer behavior.
Rosenbaum et al.	2016	How to create a realistic customer journey map	Business Horizons	Qualitative	Review	Not mentioned	-	Yes	To clarify the confusion surrounding CJM by putting forth a method that blends consumer feedback and research into the CJM process, using an actual retail mall as an example.
Bosio et al.	2017	Customer experience research with mobile ethnography: a case study of the alpine destination serfaus-fiss-ladis	Review of Marketing Research	Qualitative	Case study	A sequence of steps of which some are touchpoints with a particular brand, product, or service	Stickdorn et al. (2017)	Yes	To demonstrate how mobile ethnography tackles the issue of assessment of customer experience by assessing data in a holistic way, in-situ, and in real-time.



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George & Wakefield	2017	Modeling the consumer journey for membership services	Journal of Services Marketing	Quantitative	Modeling	Not mentioned	-	Yes	To model the consumer journey of admission-based membership services from initial purchase to full-season memberships.
Inversini	2017	Managing passenger's experience through mobile moments	Journal of Air Transport Management	Qualitative	Interviews	Not mentioned	-	Yes	To present a preliminary research on mobile touchpoints in airport passengers' experience.
McColl-Kennedy et al.	2017	How do you feel today? Managing patient emotions during health care experiences to enhance well being	Journal of Business Research	Qualitative	Review	Not mentioned	-	No	To better understand patient and family emotions during health care experience and how this understanding can be used to design and better manage patient experiences and enhance patient well-being.
Mikolajova & Olsanova	2017	How to engage children in to the world of traditional car brands? Exploration of specific touchpoints between future buyers in the car industry and established brands	Central European Business Review	Qualitative	Interviews	Not mentioned	-	Yes	To define the consumer journey of children through their childhood stages and provide specific touchpoints relevant for a given age, which could be integrated into the marketing communication of car brands to start building this young audience as future buyers.



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Ponsignon et al.	2017	Customer experience design: a case study in the cultural sector	Journal of Service Management	Qualitative	Interviews and Documentary Evidence	The entire process the customer goes through and consists of all individual encounters between the customer and the organisation	Voss et al. (2008)	Yes	To articulate a set of design characteristics that support the alignment between an organisation's design intention and the actual experience of customers
Barari & Furrer	2018	The customer experience ecosystem in two cultural context	Journal of Financial Services Marketing	Qualitative	Interviews	The customer journey encompasses three stages: pre-encounter, during the encounter, and post-encounter.	Klaus et al. (2013)	Yes	To focus on the development of a customer experience ecosystem during a journey which is embedded in meso- and macro-layers.
Barwitz & Maas	2018	Understanding the Omnichannel Customer Journey: Determinants of Interaction Choice	Journal of Interactive Marketing	Qualitative	Interviews; Focus Groups	Not mentioned	-	No	To find out what drives customers' interaction choices along the customer journey, to reveal goal structures underlying customers' behavior along their journeys and to suggest a segmentation approach based on the underlying types of value-in-use that customers seek in interactions.
Folstad & Kvale	2018	Applying Transactional NPS for Customer Journey Insight: Case Experiences and Lessons Learned	Services Marketing Quarterly	Mixed	Case Study	The customer journey is seen as consisting of a series of steps or stages or as a sequence of touchpoints in which the customer interacts with the	Lemon & Verhoeff (2016); Halvorsrud et al. (2016)	Yes	Monitoring Experience of Customer Journey



						service provider towards reaching a particular service goal.			
Hamilton et al.	2018	The effects of scarcity on consumer decision journeys	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	Qualitative	Review	An iterative process through which the consumer begins to consider alternatives to satisfy a want or a need, evaluates and chooses among them, and then engages in consumption	Court et al. (2009)	No	To review research in marketing, psychology, economics and sociology to construct an integrative framework outlining how these different types of scarcity individually and jointly influence consumers at various stages of their decision journeys.
Hosseini et al.	2018	Mindfully going omni-channel: An economic decision model for evaluating omni-channel strategies	Decision Support Systems	Quantitative	Data Analysis	Not mentioned	-	No	To propose an economic decision model that considers online and offline channels, the opening and closing of channels, non-sequential customer journeys, and customers' channel preferences.
Nakata et al.	2018	Chronic illness medication compliance: a liminal and contextual consumer journey	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science	Qualitative	Interviews and Hermeneutical Analysis	Not mentioned	-	No	To conduct an empirical study of chronic illness medication compliance.



Rudkowski et al.	2018	Here today, gone tomorrow? Mapping and modeling the pop-up retail customer journey	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	Qualitative	Observations and mapping	The process of customers experiencing and interacting with retailers and brands through a multitude of offline and online channels and touchpoints;	Rudkowski et al. (2018)	Yes	To understand how marketplace-based pop-ups fit within the customer journey and experience, and explores how touchpoint ownership and influence illuminates the understanding of the marketplace-based pop-up customer journey.
Varnali	2018	Understanding customer journey from the lenses of complexity theory	The service industries journal	Qualitative	Review	A service system composed of a network of agents and interactions that integrate resources for value co-creation.	Ng. et al. (2012)	Yes	To explain how complexity theory provides a fruitful foundation to systematically describe the complex nature of customer experience and advance our understanding of the concept of customer journey.
Wozniak et al.	2018	Psychological antecedents of mobile consumer behaviour and implications for customer journeys in tourism	Information Technology & Tourism	Quantitative	Survey	a series of exposures to or experiences of touch points in multiple channels and media along different stages of the consumer decision-making process	Lemon & Verhoeff (2016); Stein & Rameseshan (2016)	Yes	To analyse the effects of psychological factors on mobile consumer behaviour.



Yachin	2018	The customer journey: learning from customers in tourism experience encounters	Tourism Management Perspectives	Qualitative	Case study	The journey involves three phases: a prospective pre-trip period phase, an active tourism experience and a reflective post-trip phase	Ingram et al. (2017); Shaw & Williams (2009)	No	To explore firm–customer encounters along the customer journey as learning opportunities.
Kuehnl et al.	2019	Effective customer journey design: consumers' conception, measurement, and consequences	Academy of Marketing Science	Quantitative	Survey	Not mentioned	-	Yes	To present and define customer journey design and provide evidence of its positive influence of an effective CJD on customer loyalty through brand attitude.
McColl-Kennedy et al.	2019	Gaining customer experience insights that matter	Journal of Service Research	Quantitative	Data mining and sampling	Not mentioned	-	Yes	To provide a conceptual framework that integrates and extends key foundational work and by taking a customer perspective approach comprising value creation elements, customer discrete emotions, and customer cognitive responses at distinct touchpoints to gain salient CX insights.
Vakulenko et al.	2019	Service innovation in e-commerce last mile delivery: mapping the e-customer journey	Journal of Business Research	Qualitative	Interviews	Not mentioned	-	Yes	To provide insights into how service innovation affects e-customer behavior and presents a basic map of the e-customer journey.



4.2.2 Defining touch points

During the literature review we discovered that one of the most vital elements of the customer journey is the concept of touch points. They are so vital, in fact, that they are a critical part of the definition of the customer journey. The second part of the literature review that was carried out presents findings that reinforce and advance findings from the first part of the literature review.

This second stage of the literature review focused solely on literature published specifically on the topic of touch points. Once again, the goal is to arrive at a common definition based on those used by authors in the field. Opposed to the disparity in the definitions from the first part of the literature review, this second part yielded findings that were far more analogous.

Similarly to our approach with the topic of the customer journey, table 3 lists an overview of the articles that our literature review on the concept of touch points yielded. Again, we have analyzed and compared definitions on the concept of touch points to filter them down into one aggregate definition that more accurately reflects what touch points are.

Nearly all definitions identify a touch point to occur at either a specific moment in time (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016), a physical point of interaction (Khanna et al., 2014; Bosio et al., 2017; Ieva & Ziliani, 2017; Ponsignon et al., 2017; Rudkowski et al., 2018) or both (Halvorsrud et al., 2016; Ieva & Ziliani, 2018b). This is in line with what we have found from our earlier focus on the customer journey and what again gets reflected in the articles yielded here. That is: “a sequence of touchpoints forms a customer journey” (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 115). It makes sense that if each touch point takes place at a single instance and at a single point in time, then it takes an entire sequence of them to allow for a customer to take a journey that creates a customer experience. This raises some intriguing questions such as how many touch points are enough and do touch points have different levels of impact. While not the primary focus of this study, it would be interesting to gain some insights into these questions. What we can be certain of though is that a customer will inevitably interact with touch points. Lemon and Verhoef have previously established that there are four types of touch points that a customer will encounter along their journey: (1) brand-owned touch points, (2) partner owned, (3) customer owned and (4) social and external (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). Each of these touch points shapes and molds the experience that a customer has along their journey, which may or may not impact their purchase decision. Interestingly, while only one of the categories of touch points is considered to be brand-owned, many of the definitions refer to the interaction taking place between customer and brand. This implies that customers may experience a more “complete” brand experience for one brand while for another they may experience one that is fragmented and incomplete.

Kuehnl et al. found that an effective customer journey is one that is characterized by touch points exhibiting (1) thematic cohesion, (2) consistency and (3) context sensitivity (Kuehnl et al., 2019). This provides an indication that touch points, while existing at specific moments and places in time, also take shape as a whole. Moreover, the customer journey is more effective when they are perceived to be one whole (Kuehnl et al., 2019). As such, the veil between company and customer becomes very thin and it is critically important for the brand to be able to influence as many of the touch points as possible.



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Additionally, it seems that there is an agreement among authors that the role that touch points play in the customer experience is that of influencing the customer experience. What this means is that every single touch point has the power to impact the customer experience that lies embedded in the customer journey. The interrelated nature of customer experience and customer journey therefore has an intimate relationship with touch points as well in that one needs to control these underlying points in space and time to be able to drive the customer experience that is part of the larger customer journey.

Our definition as such needs to take into consideration each of these shared themes. This has led us to define touch points as *moments of contact between customer and company that individually and collectively influence customer experience.*



Table 3: Literature review on the topic of touch points

Author(s)	Year	Title	Journal	Approach	Design	Touch points Definition	Definition Source	Touch points Role	Link to customer journey
Khanna et al.	2014	Identifying and analyzing touchpoints for building a higher education brand	Journal of Marketing for Higher Education	Qualitative	Review	All the different ways that an organization's brand interacts with and makes an impression on customers, employees, and other stakeholders.	Davis & Dunn (2002)	Influencing	
Lim et al.	2014	Impact of satisfaction with e-retailers' touch points on purchase behavior: the moderating effect of search and experience product type	Mark Lett	Quantitative	Survey	Not Available	-	Moderating	Not mentioned
Stein & Ramaseshan	2015	Towards the identification of customer experience touch point elements	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	Qualitative	Interviews	Moments of truth between the customer and any part of the company.	Stein & Ramaseshan (2015)	Influencing	The journey that a customer takes to achieve a certain shopping task (e.g., search for information, purchase a product), therefore, is formed by a series of touch points. (p. 8)



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Halvorsrud et al.	2016	Improving service quality through customer journey analysis	Journal of Service Theory and Practice	Qualitative	Case study	Moments of contact between the customer and the organization.	Zomerdijk & Voss (2011)	Influencing	A customer journey is modeled as a sequence of consecutive touchpoints (p. 6)
Ieva & Ziliani	2016	Towards digital loyalty programs: insights from customer medium preference segmentation	International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management	Quantitative	Survey	Any customer contact point through which the firm and the customer interact	Neslin et al. (2006); Romaniuk et al. (2013)	Not mentioned	Not mentioned
Melero et al.	2016	Recasting the customer experience in today's omni-channel environment	Universia Business Review	Qualitative	Review	Purchases and interactions.	Melero et al. (2016)	Moderating	Not mentioned
Parise et al.	2016	Solving the crisis of immediacy: How digital technology can transform the customer experience	Business Horizons	Mixed	Interviews; Surveys	Can change how consumers interact with a company's products and services.	Parise et al. (2016)	Influencing	effective organizations map out the multiple touchpoints in their customers' journeys and determine where and when remote product experts are needed (p. 416)
Bosio et al.	2017	Customer experience research with mobile ethnography: a case study of the alpine destination serfaus-fiss-ladis	Review of Marketing Research	Qualitative	Case study	Any kind of direct or indirect contact point between the customer and the service provider.	Meyer & Schwager (2007)	Influencing	A sequence of touch points forms a customer journey (p. 115).



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Ponsignon et al.	2017	Customer experience design: a case study in the cultural sector	Journal of Service Management	Qualitative	Interviews and Documentary Evidence	The point of contact where customers meet and interact with the provider and subsequently perceive and evaluate their actual experiences at each of these contact points.	Roth & Menor (2003)	Enabling	CJ is a continuous flow of touchpoints
Sohn	2017	Consumer processing of mobile online stores: sources and effects of processing fluency	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	Quantitative	Survey	Not Available	-	Moderating	Not mentioned
Ieva & Ziliani	2018	Mapping touchpoint exposure in retailing	International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management	Quantitative	Survey	Episodes of direct or indirect contact with the brand.	Baxendale (2015)	Influencing	A journey of touchpoints along pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase situations.
Ieva & Ziliani	2018	The role of customer experience touchpoints in driving loyalty intentions in services	The TQM Journal	Quantitative	Survey	The verbal and non-verbal incidents a person perceives and consciously relates to a given firm or brand.	Duncan & Moriarty (2006)	Influencing	New online channels have led to a proliferation of touchpoints (Pantano and Viassone, 2015), that is, the number of verbal or non-verbal incidents a person perceives and consciously relates to a given firm or brand within the customer



									journey.
Rudkowski et al.	2018	Here today, gone tomorrow? Mapping and modeling the pop-up retail customer journey	Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	Qualitative	Observations and mapping	Contact points or encounters that occur between the customer, the brand, the firm and/or other influencers.	Rudkowski et al. (2018)	Influencing	CJ is a process of customers experiencing and interacting with retailers and brands through a multitude of offline and online channels and touchpoints (p. 2)
Wagner et al.	2018	Online retailing across e-channels and e-channel touchpoints: empirical studies of consumer behavior in the multichanne e-commerce environment	Journal of Business Research	Quantitative	Survey and Experiment	An e-channel touchpoint represents the software alternatives that retailers can provide for e-channels (specific digital shopping formats).	Wagner et al. (2018)	Moderating	Consumers conduct their online customer journeys across multiple e-channels (categories of Internet-enabled devices, e.g., mobile devices) and e-channel touchpoints (p. 1)
Vakulenko et al.	2019	Service innovation in e-commerce last mile delivery: mapping the e-customer journey	Journal of Business Research	Qualitative	Interviews	Not Available	-	Influencing	Service encounters (touchpoints) together form the complex customer journey (p. 2)



4.2.3 Combining the two concepts

Based on the literature underlying the two definitions, as well as the definitions themselves, we are now ready to arrive at a conceptual model of the customer journey and the role of touch points within this journey. Grounded in literature we have found there to be several design requirements that serve as the themes from our literature review:

(1) The customer journey is both continuous as well as a stage-wise process

That the customer journey is a continuous process containing stages is something we derive from various separate clusters of literature on the topic. The continuous part is something that speaks for itself; the customer journey is something that occurs smoothly over time. Still, we find the customer to journey through certain stages that fit into the process part. While a great many definitions of what a process is most certainly exist, we find the most appropriate one to be “a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end” (“Process,” n.d.). The reason why we find this to be the most appropriate definition, is that we are taking a purchasing process perspective on the customer journey. And in the purchasing process, one travels through specific stages. The authors Lemon and Verhoef propose that firms should adapt the perspective of the customer journey, when trying to organize the complicated conception of the customer experience through acknowledging the customer journey’s continuity and by determining particular purchase stages (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, pp. 76 & 82).

It is Lemon and Verhoef that have most clearly brought forward a model for the customer journey, which shows both the continuous as well as processual nature of the journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). However, what we find to not be clearly portrayed by this model is the role that touch points play in the customer journey. Lemon and Verhoef determine touch points that are specific to the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stage while we find the literature to specifically focus on the intertwined nature of touch point and the customer journey. Vakulenko et al. find that touch points “together form the complex customer journey” (Vakulenko et al., 2019, p. 2). More specifically, the touch points are points of contact – verbal and non-verbal incidents – during which the customer creates a perception of a firm or brand (Ieva & Ziliani, 2017; Ieva & Ziliani, 2018a). And even if the customer journey travels across pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages, Rudkowski et al. find that the customer interacts with multiple touch points – both online and offline – throughout this journey (Rudkowski et al., 2018, p. 5).

We see touch points, therefore, as points of interaction that stretch across stages rather than being confined to specific ones. When purchasing a new phone, a customer might use the company website, for example, in differing stages of the journey. They might need to look up information to compare phones, they might purchase the phone on the company website, and they might try to find a service number when encountering an issue with their phone. This is, again, in line with literature.

Within literature that studies the design of experiences, the customer journey is depicted as the whole process which the customer is undergoing, and it includes all encounters that an individual customer is experiencing with an organization (Voss et al., 2008, pp. 248-250)



Finally, it is necessary to state that these individual encounters between customer and company do not mean that they are solely interactions between customer and company. The proliferation of brands in today's digital age allows a customer to perceive a brand in a multitude of different channels (Dahiya & Dahiya, 2018, p. 4). They might encounter the same phone brand on the company website, in ads, on their favorite YouTube channel, on a review website, on social media and a whole host of other places. This adds increasing complexity on the company behind a product to ensure that they manage their touch points as well as possible to smooth out eventual ripples that external sources produce.

As such, while in theory of journey literature the consumer is considered to follow a distinct order reaching from the pre-purchase over the purchase to the post-purchase phase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, pp. 74-75), we find equal value and relevancy in the customer journey to be described as "a continuous flow of touchpoints" (Lanir et al., 2014; as cited by Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 30). A flow that incorporates touch points across the four categories as define by Lemon and Verhoef (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). We aim for our model to incorporate this perspective in a way that is as logical and understandable as possible to both academics and practitioners alike.

(2) Touch points, both individual as well as a collective, have the power to affect each stage of the customer journey

This is a topic that has already been ventured into slightly under the previous section, but one that deserves its own section for added attention. Touch points, as critical drivers on the customer journey, perform this role both individually as well as a collective. We have determined previously that they exist across all stages of the customer journey, with every point of interaction having the potential to become a touch point. Indeed, a point of interaction becomes a touch point only if a customer creates a perception of the brand or product by entering this interaction (Khanna et al., 2014, p. 129). The reason why individual as well as collective touch points affect each stage of the customer journey, is that customers do not use only one type of channel. In fact, research has revealed that customers use varying channels for different parts of the customer journey (De Keyser et al., 2015, p. 456). There can be found different types of purchasers, conducting e.g. information search in one but executing the actual purchase in another channel or carrying out the actual buy in one channel but utilizing post-purchase service in another one (Verhoef et al., 2007, p. 129 & 134). Such purchasing behavior means that customer interacts with different touch points that together affect the customer's perception and thereby the customer journey.

If one takes air travel, for example, we can see clear examples of this omnichannel approach and how touch points affect the customer journey, both individually as well as collectively. Nowadays, one purchases air tickets only - and there exists a wide range of alternatives to do so. Perhaps one first compares prices on airline tickets on a comparison website, or maybe one has a loyalty program with a particular airline and therefore goes directly to the company's booking website. Once a desirable ticket has been found, the customer goes through the purchasing stage where the company may aim to insert additional touch points – such as suggesting adding a meal or allowing the customer to choose their seat in advance – which is only available depending on which channel the customer enters the stage. They might receive their tickets by mail, or on an application in their phone. Aside from the actual trip, air travel is mostly digital nowadays (World



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Economic Forum, 2017, pp. 3-6). At some point before their trip, the customer can check-in on a number of differing channels – such as the airline’s app, the website or on the day of travelling by going to a service agent at the airport. The airport is another situation where an uncountable number of touch points is present. The check-in process; security checks; shopping availabilities; crowds etcetera may all affect the perception of the customer. Perhaps their flight is delayed, and the airline implements an elegant fix, or not. Perhaps there is a great amount of turbulence during their flight, the free coffee runs out, or the flight assistant has a bad day. By entering and analyzing such a scenario, one can see the complexity that the web of touch points creates. We see that “touchpoints can be inserted en route to stimulate buyer actions in favor of a firm’s offerings.” (Nakata et al., 2018). Moreover, touch points are not limited to those managed by companies or brands themselves, and indeed they share the touch point space with all other touch points that form the customer journey – such as the physical and social environments (Ponsignon et al., 2017, pp. 7-8).

What this scenario also shows, is that touch points also occur in the phases of search and after-sales and not only throughout the consumption process (Verhoef et al., 2009, p. 32). Yet all touch points are included in determining what experience the customers have and extreme outcomes across the customer journey can influence the act of extending already existing contracts significantly (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 9). An airline does not want a customer only once, they want them again and again. The complexity of customer encountering touch points even in the phases before and after purchase is added upon by the fact, that there is a tendency that customers apply several channels as well as other options in every phase of the journey, the search phases in the initial pre-purchase stage included (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 121). This argument is also appropriate for particular individuals alongside their specific journeys (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 121).

Rudkowski et al. get to the heart of it when they express that one crucial element of the customer journey are touch points (Rudkowski et al., 2018, p. 6). They state that several touch point types appear during the complete customer journey, including the phases of pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase as well as the according behaviors of consumers (Rudkowski et al., 2018, p. 6). These touch points act both individually as well as a collective and during all these touch points, customers are aware of the experiences that they encounter and they also analyze and interpret the occurring events (Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 8). This makes it important for companies to be aware of the critical role of touch points in the customer journey, as well as the structure of the journey as a whole. Better said, these findings emphasize how vital it is to focus on the actual function of individual customer touch points; to approach their specific attributes; as well as to incorporate those touch points within the whole customer journey structure (Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 9).

(3) The customer journey does not stop at purchase or post-purchase but is always being travelled.

At first glance this conclusion may feel similar to the first one we presented, but the difference is distinct once properly explained. Whereas the first conclusion goes in on the continuous and processual nature of the customer journey in general, this conclusion refers to the temporal flexibility that the customer journey presents. A customer can spend a very long time in any of the stages of the customer journey before completing a



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cycle. And the customer journey does not end once a cycle is completed, but rather enters a new cycle that is adapted by previous experiences and expectations for the future. This leads to a more complex perspective, in which experiences caused by the consumption of consumers is leading to a storage of memories, which in itself can become touch points too (Arnould & Price, 1993, p. 42).

This conclusion is in line with research by Lemon and Verhoef, who assume that the external factors and prior experiences that customers have made get included into the process, resulting in events which again can be experienced by the customers in the future (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 76). What this leads us to assume is that a customer is travelling their journey in an infinite manner. Even when determining to not purchase a certain product, they are still stuck in one of the stages of that particular customer journey – never truly moving forward but still travelling, nonetheless.

One can compare it to buying pizza from a certain place in one's hometown. Positive experiences become ingrained with buying a pizza from that specific place. Once one moves away, these experiences remain – to be activated when one visits family in this hometown. In such a scenario, one is nearly always stuck in some stage of the post-purchase phase and moves relatively quickly through the other phases to purchase once visiting one's hometown. This is just one example of the countless possibilities, shapes and forms of the customer journey. This example closely follows the model as presented by Lemon and Verhoef, though we feel that previous experiences and expectations for future experiences can be touch points in and of itself (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). The fact that we find that the journey does not end at purchase or post-purchase means that all potential points of interaction presented to a customer may become touch points at any stage of the customer journey.

(4) Touch points can have different strengths in different customer journey stages, based on their context sensitivity – but they should still be thematically cohesive as well as consistent.

Our final conclusion follows the ending paragraph of the third conclusion, in which we presented a counterpoint to a key element of the customer journey model as presented by Lemon and Verhoef, where they present touch points as being purely related to either the pre-purchase, purchase or post-purchase phase. Indeed, we find that touch points arise from all possible points of interaction between a customer and a company – which can take many shapes or forms. Still, there is wisdom in what Lemon and Verhoef present in that certain points of interaction are more relevant in specific parts of the customer journey. While we theorize that any point of interaction can become a touch point at any stage of the customer journey, they do have their distinct characteristics that companies can use to their advantage. Clever firms are trying to create and implement ongoing touch points on the customer journey in order to govern consumers' decisions, such as recommended pairing products during a checkout process or providing information on what users that looked at the same product also bought. This shows that it is possible for companies to generate touch points that are strongest in one particular stage of the customer journey while potentially weaker in other parts.

Moreover, we see touch points as something for more comprehensive than just singular entities that impact a customer at one or more stages of their journey. Companies can strengthen specific points of interaction to create a path of least resistance that the



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customer can travel – to both their benefit as well as that of the company. The concept of a path of least resistance is one commonly used in the fields of medicine, evolution and a host of other areas of research. It is related to the principle of least effort, indicating that there is a tendency that in order to accomplish a purpose, individuals select the option which demands the merest effort possible (Chang, 2016, p. 1118). This is an interdisciplinary principle, that has influenced – among others the field of business research (Chang, 2016, p. 1122). It seems therefore logical for firms to consider a decoupling from the phase of post-purchase through a proactive design and accomplishment of touch points, which create guidance, motivation and makes the actual utilization more practicable (Nakata et al., 2018). Doing so brings a wide array of benefits but it still requires knowledge of context, thematic cohesion and consistency of these touch points. These are not random concepts but have been found to be part of effective customer journey design (Kuehnl et al., 2019). These three concepts individually and collectively allow a company to design a path of least resistance that customer can travel on. Particularly context sensitivity is important here, since it helps individuals to perceive the travelling on the path of the customer journey as more convenient, controllable and less risky (Kuehnl et al., 2019). This is critical to another vital element of the customer journey, which is the customer experience. Regarding the management of customer experience Bosio et al. find that this is only possible, if companies have spotted the touch points which are pertinent in the eyes of the customers and it does thereby not matter, on which channels they occur (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 117).

The other two concepts, that of thematic cohesion and consistency are mostly relevant in brand-owned implementation (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Thematic cohesion is helping customers to make the formation of semantic knowledge blueprints easier when interacting with several touch points by establishing a linkage between the brand and the individual activities, desires or lifestyles of the customers (Kuehnl et al., 2019). While touch point consistency makes it easier for individuals to travel through the customer journey in order to attain certain objectives, desires or lifestyles (Kuehnl et al., 2019).

This perspective of creating a customer journey of least resistance is one that has been described earlier, but never defined as specifically as such. Rosenbaum et al. presented the recommendation for managers to collect information about the customers and to differentiate between crucial and less relevant touch points with the intention to create all-embracing maps of the customer journey which include all potential touch points (Rosenbaum et al., 2017, p. 5). They further state that following this procedure can lead to very complex maps of the customer journey, which customers might pass through (Rosenbaum et al., 2017, p. 5). Those crucial touch points can also be named “moments of truth” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 86). They are considered to have the most vital impact on the results of key customers and are displayed en route of the journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 82).

4.2.4 Creating the conceptual model

Based on the four conclusions as well as the two definitions that have arisen from our literature review, we have created first iteration of a more comprehensive customer journey model. The model – as visible in *figure 5* – implements all of the four conclusions and is in line with the definitions on the customer journey and touch points.

The model presents the customer journey as a circle in order to visualize the continuous nature of the customer journey as a process. It is still a process, as we have divided the circle into distinct stages that a customer can arrive in. The number of these stages, as well as what they represent, will be determined in a later section of the thesis. Important to realize about this stage structure is that customer can remain in any of the stages indefinitely depending on how their customer journey is going. Additionally, at the center of the customer journey lie all the potential points of interaction that each have the power to turn into a touch point. The arrows represent the amount of influence touch points can have in that particular stage of the customer journey. The online check-out process, for example can be littered with touch points and therefore potentially presents a better opportunity for strong touch points than other stages of the journey.

When thinking on how to convey the thoughts underlying this model in the best way possible, we have arrived at the metaphor of a bicycle wheel. The points of interactions are at the center of the wheel and allow the entire wheel to spin by connecting at strategic parts through spokes or “touch points”. If these spokes wouldn’t exist, the wheel would not be able to move forward and therefore the journey would halt. Alternatively, an overwhelming number of touch points would make the journey work – but slow it down significantly due to the high amount of effort necessary to spin this heavy wheel. We will use this metaphor as well in the second and final iterations of the conceptual model, during which we will present the role of customer experience as well as that of the purchasing process respectively.

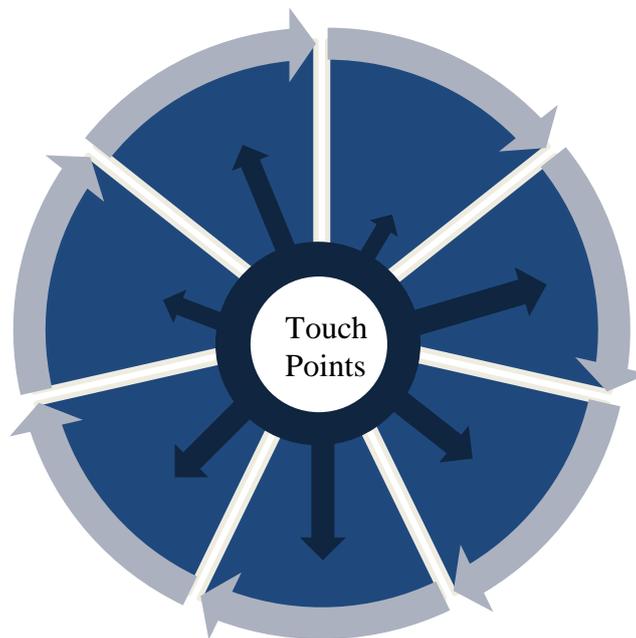


Figure 5: First iteration of the customer journey conceptual model



4.3 The role of customer experience

As we've previously established, customer experience is closely interwoven with the customer journey as well as with the concept of touch points. This interrelated nature can be clearly seen in the definition that we have created by compiling our findings from the literature review that we conducted. This definition finds that the customer journey is *the individual experience that a customer has when interacting with touch points in the path from a pre-purchase to a post-purchase setting*. One of the critical elements that one can determine from this definition is that the customer experience is created when a customer interacts with touch points. Correspondingly, we found the definition of touch points to be that they are *moments of contact between customer and company that individually and collectively influence customer experience*. Both definitions combined present little room for arguing that the customer experience is not closely related to both the concept of the customer journey and that of touch points. And indeed, Schmitt et al. find that every service exchange leads to a customer experience (Schmitt et al., 2015). This is reflected by other authors as well, describing customer experience as a reaction which has a subjective nature, happens internally and which customers go through when interacting with firms indirectly or directly (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). And even these internal and subjective responses have been investigated further, with Lemon and Verhoef finding that the customer experience is “a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 74). Unfortunately, there has been little empirical work directly related to the customer experience and the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 70).

The process model as presented by Lemon and Verhoef places the customer experience as a distinct construct inside of the customer journey, which in turn consists of a (1) pre-purchase, (2) purchase and, (3) post-purchase stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). It therefore seems logical to make a similar inclusion of customer experience in our model. Yet to ensure proper inclusion, we will first examine the concept a little further – particularly in its relation to both the customer journey and its touch points. We can then make a more educated creation of the customer journey model as created from literary sources before we venture into empirically reviewing this model.

4.3.1 *The customer experience is a subjective, emotional response*

One of the first conclusions that we can draw from literature on the customer experience, is that it is a subjective, emotional response. McColl-Kennedy et al. created a model that integrates this emotional response into the customer experience – finding the customer discrete emotions to co-exist with value creation elements and customer cognitive responses at distinct touch points (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 10). Their work on the customer experience affirms that emotions are a vital part of the customer experience. This subjective and emotional character is reinforced by other authors who find that customer experience can be specified as the individual's “personal interpretation of the service process and their interaction and involvement with it during their journey through a series of touchpoints, and how those things make the customers feel” (Johnston & Kong, 2011, p. 8). While we are not conducting a literature review as comprehensive as we did on the topics of customer journey and touch points, others before us have reported findings that show a lack of consensus on a definition of



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customer experience, but that most definitions highlight its personal and subjective character (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 114).

This subjective and emotional nature also poses a challenge in assessing the customer experience. A challenge that is partially caused by the subjective nature which the customer experience has and due to the broad spectrum of its driving forces, as discussed by Følstad and Kvale (2018, p. 1).

Lemon and Verhoef found there to be cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses in the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 74). This is a wide range of drivers and show the emotional response to function alongside other responses that may or may not be integrated with one another – but do not necessarily have to be. McColl-Kennedy et al. mention the customer cognitive response as one of the vital elements of the customer experience, highlighting the non-emotional elements that come into play as well (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 13). This is important to realize when incorporating the customer experience into the wider customer journey model, particularly since the experience has a distinct impact on the customer journey. In their research, Nakata et al. detail different experiences when consuming. The character of these experiences is reaching from a cognitive and emotional setting to a physical and symbolic one (Nakata et al., 2018). Furthermore, the authors argue for the fact that the specific living situation in which the individuals are situated in affect their manners and behaviors and hence also affect their individual customer journey (Nakata et al., 2018). They add an interesting point here by indicating that “opportunities for touchpoints lie in the circumstances surrounding consumption” (Nakata et al., 2018).

It is not necessarily farfetched to state that the brain provides customers with a broad range of services useful in determining which product or brand to purchase. The interconnected relationship between experiences, journeys that customers take through a service experience and emotions has been documented plenty (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2017, pp. 247-248). What is new, is to incorporate this entire range of responses into a larger, more general customer journey and to determine how these responses can affect this journey. Moreover, it is important to realize that these responses do not simply occur at distinct and separate points in time, but at a continuous pace that is hard to determine or control – indeed, try to think of your own experience when purchasing something that requires your full attention. The proposed conceptual model should therefore take this chaotic, inconsistent nature of the customer’s responses into account. As an example, we could lift the fact that a few small positive experiences at brand-driven touch points could potentially be wiped out by one single, hugely negative experience at a touch point that is outside of the company’s control. This is just one possible journey, travelling over a select number of touch points for one single, subjective customer. Every journey is different for every customer, just because every individual is different in the way they process stimuli and respond to these stimuli. This is reflected by Bosio et al. who find that the customer journey experienced by individuals differ from each other, since the touch points that the customers experience are changing, even if those customers would seek an identical product or service (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 115).



4.3.2 The customer experience is created through interactions

The next realization on customer experience, is that it is created through interactions between customer and company. In order to provide customers with superior customer experiences, Barwitz and Maas found it to be crucial to gain insights in order to answer the question why customers choose certain ways of interacting (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 116). These interactions arise at touch points, which we have previously determined exists an extremely large number of. Additionally, every customer is different and reacts differently to interactions which leads them to essentially designing their own customer journeys, since there are almost infinite possible ways of interaction during the phases of pre-purchase, purchase as well as post-purchase which the customers can utilize (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 116). In their study, the authors conclude that companies would be able to improve their management of the customers' experiences, by segmenting customers on grounds of the forms of value that the customers try to acquire when interacting with their environment (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 117).

It is important to realize that the interactions stand separate from delivering the actual customer experience itself. It is not possible for companies to directly deliver customer experience, instead they must provide the preconditions which make it possible for the customers to go through the experiences that they have wished for (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010, p. 13). What is critical about this is that customers evaluate their experience as they move through the interactions with the company (Lemke et al., 2011). At each touch point, customers are aware of the experiences that they encounter, and they do evaluate them as well (Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 8).

At this point we can determine the vital nature of the customer experience in driving the customer journey forward. When recalling our definition of a process, we find the customer journey as a process to be "a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end" ("Process," n.d.). This is reflected by authors stating that customers do not think about specific brands, products or services – they simply utilize services or products in order to accomplish certain things (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 115). As such, customers have a need that they must fulfil, and customers travels their journey for a multitude of differing products, brands and services at the same time. In fact, Rudkowski et al. state that the process known as the customer journey is one where customers experience and interact with brands through multiple online and offline channels and touch points (Rudkowski et al., 2018, p. 2).

As customers, we are always present in a myriad of different customer journeys that we may actively engage in at one point in time. While one might currently not be engaged actively in the customer journey of purchasing a car, they are subconsciously traveling in the early stages of this particular journey. Advertisements on YouTube, marketing campaigns of particular brands and plenty more can instill early experiences into the customer without them realizing it. During these "leading experiences", the customers interact with a brand, product, or service through touch points (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 115).



4.3.3 The customer experience creates value

Critical to the role of customer experience in the customer journey, is that the customer experience creates value. It is the interactions in pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase phases that have been found to play an essential part in creating value on the customer's as well as on the company's side (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 116).

In particular, it is the metacognitive experiences that form overall opinion (Sohn, 2017, p. 138). By developing authentic experiences, personal added value is created for customers (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 113). This means that customer experience should be actively managed, since this can be responsible for making a brand, product or service successful or not (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 112). Al-Dmour et al. highlight the direct positive impact of the customer experience on satisfaction (Al-Dmour et al., 2019, p. 53).

The customer experience creating value is something that we hypothesize occurring throughout the entire customer journey with differing impacts at different stages. If a customer has come to the decision to buy a product of a brand that fills their need particularly well, post-purchase customer service is excellent and in general the overall experience is great then this contributes tremendously further down the line. Prior experience can generate trust and trigger future intentions (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 122). As such, the customer journey then becomes a critical tool for practitioners to evaluate important marketing concepts such as customer retention, competitive analysis and more.

By creating value for the customer through excellent customer experience that is delivered through touch points, companies can create value for themselves as well. This is due to the fact, that there is a higher chance that customers articulate purchase recommendations regarding services, brands or products, if prior positive experiences have arisen, while at the same time a negative influence on the buying decision of others could be performed if those prior experiences were negatively affected (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 112).

As such, the standard marketing goal of creating value for the customer covers more than simply fulfilling needs – it is about delivering excellent experiences throughout the customer journey. Winning over a customer at critical steps in the customer journey ensures they keep traveling the journey using your product. Again, invoking the example of airline travel, we can sketch a scenario on how this might work in practice. If someone has great experiences traveling with an airline, then their customer journey becomes skewed in favor of this airline. While other actors might attempt to steal away this customer through strategically placed touch points, the experience could be so strong that the customer ignores these attempts. Their favored airline might themselves place strategic touch points in order to retain the customer's loyalty. One such tool that has been very effective in the field of air travel specifically, is that of loyalty programs – a concept that has carried over to other fields of industry (Ieva & Ziliani, 2017, p. 195).

4.3.4 Value created through customer experience drives the customer journey

Flowing out of the previous conclusion, this fourth realization may not come as a surprise. We have already demonstrated the lasting effects of value created through customer experience and indeed, the links among prior experience, current satisfaction,



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and future interaction choice that Barwitz and Maas have found to have been empirically demonstrated in various studies (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 118).

In line with our previous finding that the customer journey does not stop at certain stages, Lemon and Verhoef find that the post-purchase stage extends “temporally from the purchase to the end of the customer’s life” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 76). It is here that the role of value creation through customer experience can be seen driving the customer journey forward, into a new cycle. This happens because in this phase of the customer journey there is a tendency of a higher interaction between the customer and the brand or product and customers tend to carry out repeating loyalty and buying decisions on grounds of those prior made experiences (Hamilton et al., 2011, p. 1079 & 1082; Etkin & Sela, 2016, pp. 80-81). This means that the value created for a customer affects their repeat purchases and loyalty decisions. As such, once a customer journey has been set in motion in favor of one particular brand – it may be hard for other brands to stop this wheel from spinning.

An individual that has tens of thousands of loyalty points with one particular airline may be incredibly hard to sway towards another brand – so long as the experience of that customer keeps pointing in the direction of that airline. However, let us assume that this airline makes a mistake and removes all the loyalty points that the customer has collected and due to policy is unable to reimburse the customer these points - then this may have significant impact on the journey of that customer. Their experience may shift their journey in favor of a competitor, which the customer may select due to their experience with that brand’s touch points.

4.3.5 Customer experience transcends individual stages in the customer journey

It should not come as a surprise that the fifth and final conclusion of customer experience literature is that the customer experience transcends individual stages of the customer journey. We have already found that customer experience is a concept that is stored in the customer’s memory, to be used for repeat purchases and loyalty decisions (Nakata et al., 2018). This is in line with the model of Lemon and Verhoef, who find that past experiences and external factors are incorporated into the customer journey and leads to a customer’s future experience – which will eventually become a past experience and the cycle keeps on going (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). In general, we can see that this is closely related to how we function as human beings, in that “prior experience of a stimulus and memories play a major role, as do environmental stimuli.” (Sohn, 2017, p. 139). In line with this, another quote by Lemon and Verhoef specifically shows that transcendental nature of customer experience in the customer journey. In this quote, Lemon and Verhoef find that the post-purchase stage particularly “covers aspects of the customer’s experience after purchase that relate to the purchased product, which itself becomes a critical touchpoint at this stage” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 76). As we have previously argued that touch points transcend stages as well, the mere fact that customer experience has the power to become a touch point in and of itself leads us to the conclusion that the customer experience has the power to transcend stages as well.

In continuation, we can argue that customer experience may even transcend customer journeys; due to the fact that if customers experience satisfaction, they usually evolve loyalty, leading them to support a brand, product or service extensively (Buttle & Maklan, 2015). Indeed, customers may become touch points towards one another. This

has been a central element to the rise of influencers on social media – where people’s experiences become touch points for other people, to the point that this has turned into a job for the most successful of social media profiles.

4.3.6 Integrating customer experience into the customer journey model

Now that we have gathered critical conclusions on the concept of customer experience, we can create a new iteration of our customer journey model and improve it - to be built upon by the third and final iteration.

In this section we have examined the customer experience and found it to be two simple words that encompass the complex interaction that leads to reactions, expectations and the formation of lasting perceptions. This is in line with a definition that Al-Dmour et al have come across in their research that finds the customer experience to be “an interaction (or series of interactions) between a consumer, product, company, or its representative that leads to a reaction. It is a form of evaluation, which compares customers’ expectations with the stimuli generated from interactions with the company and its offerings during various moments of contact.” (Al-Dmour et al., 2019, pp. 37-38). McColl-Kennedy et al. view the customer experience as consisting of diverse emotions of customers, components creating value as well as cognitive reactions of customers towards particular touch points (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 10). Additionally, they argue that the customer journey contains several touch points along its way over time (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 8).

It is not only critical to understand academically but provides significant benefits to practitioners as well. In today’s world, brand differentiation can be achieved by taking customer experience into account when generating new innovations (Tivasuradej & Pham, 2019).

The combination of conclusions and realizations has led us to arrive at the model as presented in *figure 6*.

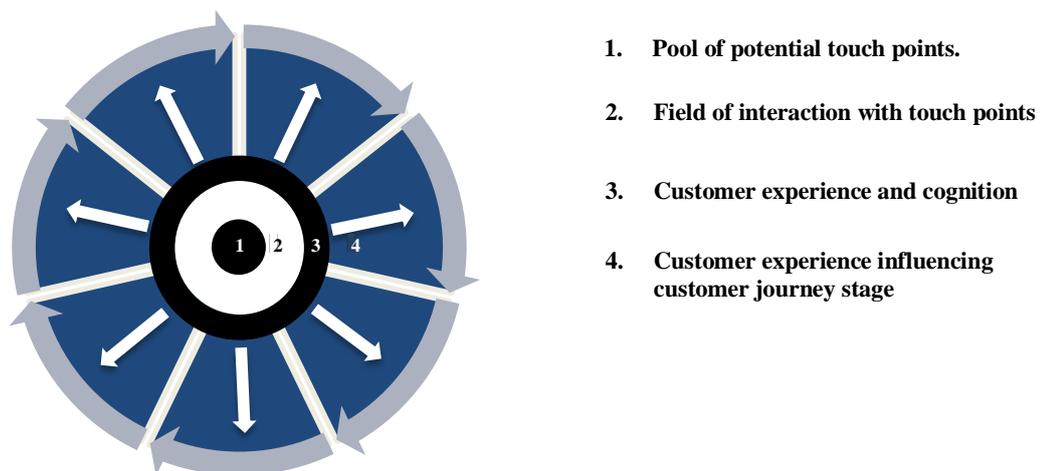


Figure 6: Second iteration of the customer journey conceptual model



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Some further explanation is necessary in order to understand the model, which is now growing slightly more complex. The core of the customer journey is still the pool of potential touch points (1), which at critical and less-critical moments in time become touch points through an interaction with the customer (2). The outer black ring is the customer experience (3), which is affected when a customer interacts with a touch point. It's continuous, transcendental nature is visualized as it stretches across all the stages. The white arrows on the blue fields (4) indicate that the customer experience in turn affects the customer's perceptions and decisions in a particular stage of the customer journey and eventually determines the forward motion of the customer journey. Continuing with the metaphor of a bicycle wheel, we can say that the customer experience takes the critical role of ball bearings. Without properly greased and working ball bearings, the wheel cannot move forward. As such, it is the interplay between touch points and customer experience that determine momentum, which is carried to the rest of the wheel by the spokes. While we previously established the spokes as the way in which potential points of interaction affect the customer journey, we can now establish spokes as the way in which customer experience affects the overall customer journey.

This follows more closely the actual mechanism of a real bicycle wheel. Movement starts at the centre, is translated through the ball bearings to the spokes which in turn affect the entire wheel. Metaphorically, movement starts at the potential points of interaction, is translated through customer experiences to the customer – which in turn drives the customer journey forward by urging the customer towards forming a perception or making a decision.

4.4 Introducing the purchase decision-process

The third and final critical set of knowledge that we need in order to strengthen our conceptual model of the customer journey, is to implement our purchasing process perspective. The areas that we could potentially discuss in this section are each themselves entire fields of study and as such we will not deep dive as we have done in the previous, more specific, sections. The purpose of this section is to provide a lens that we can use to analyze our conceptual model through.

A key element of taking this perspective that we have taken on the customer journey, is that we see it as a general journey that a customer takes for a product that fills a specific need – as opposed to a customer journey for specific brands individually. Our reasoning for this is that a customer may not automatically enter the customer journey with the intent to purchase a specific brand, but rather we see the customer entering the customer journey with the intent to fulfil a need. We theorize that the customer then continues this journey from the foundation of an evoked set which then later funnels down to one particular product. All potential experiences that a customer encounters along the journey to fulfil this particular need are stored and will be recalled during future rotations of the customer journey cycle. This means that we see the customer journey as a constant interaction between the customer and the wider world and all potential solutions it has to offer to fulfil a specific need, the ways in which various actors are trying to reach the customer and the experiences that the customer has along the way.

This also means that our conceptualization of the customer journey is a tool that can be used to further investigate other key critical areas of interest to marketing researchers, such as competition, consumer behavior and others. By looking at the customer journey



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in this way, one can truly see the value of marketing campaigns ensuring that a certain brand is situated in the evoked set of a customer – as this provides great benefits for this brand to be considered and adopted into the customer’s journey to fulfil their need. One can argue that Coca Cola puts a great amount of effort and money into advertising with the goal putting their brand into the mind of the customer when the need for a refreshing drink arises. Such an interaction could greatly benefit the company by allowing the customer to ease their customer journey in providing a path of least resistance.

4.4.1 The relevance of the purchasing decision process

While a central aspect of the customer journey is both the points of interaction that turn into a touch point when customers interact with them, another central aspect is to provide a general road that the customer travels one. We find that the purchasing decision process paves such a road. Previously, we argued that the customer journey is both continuous as well as a stage-wise process – and it is this processual nature that we will focus on here.

A customer does not simply purchase a product but will require an underlying reason to purchase this product and often determine which product fills their need most closely. Crudely put; a thirsty person is more likely to purchase a bottle of water than a well-hydrated person. And indeed, Dahiya and Dahiya describe the different stages within the purchasing decision process as consisting of need recognition, search for information, evaluation of alternatives, selection and purchase as well as post-purchase (Dahiya & Dahiya, 2018, p. 8).

When one considers this purchasing process more closely, one can see how it can be considered as a continuous customer journey that does not truly know either start or finish. Any customer, for any product, can be assumed to go through the same stages of the purchasing decision process – yet it can take different levels of complexity or durations depending on the individual as well as the specific need in question. As such, considering the interlocking relationship of touch points, the customer experience and the wider customer journey becomes critical to be seen through the lens of the purchasing decision process. While one could hypothetically merge the conceptual model of the customer journey with other types of customer processes, we find the purchasing decision process to be the most applicable as it directly applies to the customer and plotting out the process visualizes something that resembles a customer journey – but is lacking the connection to touch points and the customer experience.

Moreover, certain characteristics of the purchasing decision process directly comply with our underlying foundations of the customer journey. One such characteristic is that customers can leap over certain stages of the purchasing decision process and as such may or may not pass through every stage within the process (Dahiya & Dahiya, 2018, p. 6).

There are some critical conclusions that we can draw from literature on the purchasing decision process and the wider literature on consumer behavior.



(1) The customer's cognition is the membrane between their customer experience and their perceptions and actions.

When a certain need arises in a customer, regardless of what has triggered this need, they will have to find a way to fulfil this need. Truly, this is in our biological nature. When you are hungry, you are naturally driven to find food. When you are thirsty, you are similarly driven to find something to drink. While this may at some point in our past have been a (relatively) simple task, today's needs have grown more complex in both their underlying drivers as well as the copious ways of meeting these needs.

The way in which the customer deals with this task of fulfilling their needs, is by finding the best alternative possible. Yet again, this is not a simple task to complete. As such, the customer relies on their cognitive abilities to translate what they have experienced into usable perceptions, which eventually turn into conclusive actions. Admittedly, this is putting it in a rather simple way as even this seemingly process can quickly turn incredibly complicated – but the essentials are easy to understand.

A one-time negative experience with a particular brand may mean that this brand has a negative perception for the customer for the foreseeable future. That customer service agent that had a bad mood may have made a significant enough impact that the customer cognitively processed the experience into a lasting perception, based on which they acted by switching brands.

(2) The customer uses ways to make this cognitive task as easy as possible.

As we mentioned previously, it is not an easy task for the customer to cognitively process the wider world around them and the experiences that their interaction with this world generates. As such, the customer uses ways to make this easier on themselves. They will not go over all brands in existence that may fit their need – but go for the ones that they are familiar with and narrow it down through preselection (Rouen-Mallet et al., 2014, p. 64). This is a concept in consumer behavior that is called the evoked set, which has been defined as “the set of alternative choices (brands or products) that answer to the benefits associated with an envisaged consumption context and that the consumer is able to remember when making the choice” (Aurier & Cooper, 1995).

(3) Touch points are what provide customers with information to make the cognitive task as easy as possible.

Touch points then, are those points of interaction which the wider world around us provides to make our cognitive task of making a decision a little bit easier. Digital channels, for example, are making it easier for consumers to arrive at buying decisions on grounds of their ability of being able to search information, evaluate this information, express recommendations as well as influencing other consumers by for instance giving feedback (Dahiya & Dahiya, 2018, p. 3).

Previously, we brought up the concept of a “path of least resistance” and the way in which touch points provide customers with ways of making their cognitive task easier provides an excellent example of how this concept applies. It is in a company's best interest to present the customer with a host of touch points that each make their task as



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easy as possible. Advertisements serve to trigger need requirement but may also provide quick and easy to digest bits of information on a certain product or brand that stick around in a customer's brain. The same applies to word-of-mouth. One of the reasons that this is so powerful to marketers is that when we hear about something that can fill a potential need from a person we trust, this creates a great way for us to make the cognitive process a lot easier. This potentially stems, once again, from our roots in survival – where we relied greatly on the knowledge shared by those closest to us. A person from our tribe informing us of a wonderful river with fresh berries would mean our guaranteed survival, for at least the short-term future.

Nowadays, touch points are all around us and provide us with countless ways of making this task as easy as possible. There are sites for comparing products of all types, YouTube channels solely focused on hosting reviews, influencers that make a living by advertising products to their followers and many, many more.

When piecing together this short overview of three conclusions from consumer behavior literature, one can begin to see how this fits together with the concepts of touch points, customer experience and the customer journey. As such, we can now present our conceptual model of the customer journey – with the added components that allow us to view it in a useful perspective. The purchasing decision process and its elements rooted in consumer behavior allow us to test the model empirically through interviews.

4.4.2 Concluding remarks

While we find that the various sub-areas that the wider field of consumer behavior encompasses greatly benefit research on the customer journey, the primary focus of this thesis is to first provide a conceptual model of the customer journey that can be used in future research to, for example, link it to specific topics within the field of consumer behavior. As such, we have covered only a sliver of potentially interesting links.

Most of our thoughts on the relationship between the various insights from the field of consumer behavior and the customer journey will be covered in the discussion part of this thesis as our thoughts could potentially lead to further avenues of research.

As such, the most relevant conclusion from this final part of the theoretical framework is the purchasing decision process, which we use as a way to operationalize our conceptual model for empirical testing. By using the purchasing decision process we can discover insights by having a frame to work in with our interview subjects. The latter part of this final section is meant to provide a literature foundation for the discussion that will come after the presentation of interview findings.



5. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Table 4: Results from empirical analysis

Themes	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6	Interview 7	Interview 8
The customer journey is both continuous as well as a stage-wise process	Strong support							
Touch points, both individual as well as a collective, have the power to affect each stage of the customer journey	No support	Strong support	Strong support	Strong support	Strong support	Weak support	Strong support	Strong support
The customer journey does not stop at purchase or post-purchase but is always being travelled.	Strong support	Strong support	Strong support	Weak support	Strong support	Strong support	Strong support	Strong Support
Touch points can have different strengths in different customer journey stages, based on their context sensitivity – but they should still be thematically cohesive as well as consistent.	Strong support	Strong support	Weak support	Strong support	Strong support	Weak support	Weak support	Strong support
The customer experience is a subjective, emotional response	Strong support							
The customer experience is created through interactions	Strong support							
The customer experience creates value	Strong support							
Value created through customer experience drives the customer journey	Strong support							
Customer experience transcends individual stages in the customer journey	Strong support							



5.1 Empirical analysis

5.1.1 First point of analysis: continuous, processual customer journey

Theme: *The customer journey is both continuous as well as a stage-wise process*

This first, important theme has received strong support across interviews. The subjects seemed to be either directly or indirectly aware of the existence of a customer journey – or in the least of them participating in a continuous process as a customer. In our research we focused primarily on the digital touch points involved in the customer journey, and these are indeed valuable to customers in driving the process forward – but are not necessarily a must. Rather, they could be seen as a complementary way of finding the information necessary to lead to a purchase. Subject 3, when asked on whether they usually look online and purchase offline answered:

S03: *“Sometimes when I see something that I know I can buy in a store nearby, then I’m going to the store. Just to check it up ... But then I see them online and I think “wow”, I’m going to try them in the store and then I’m looking it up online in which store I can buy them offline and then I’m going to try them. And then I usually buy them in the store.”*

This statement shows the fluid and continuous nature involved in the customer journey and the important role that digital touch points play in it. It is also in line with with Vakulenko et al. finding that touch points “together form the complex customer journey” (Vakulenko et al., 2019, p. 2). Subject 3, during the interview, repeatedly indicated the importance of physical contact with certain types of products. However, it seems to usually be the digital touch points that lead subject 3 to start the customer journey:

S03: *“...I just Google on things and then I see a nice site. A few years ago, I found a site with wonderful clothing I didn’t know. And I ordered two things, then I was adventurous. I ordered two things and they both were very nice, and I was very pleased with them. So now I regularly visit that site to see if there are new things and so. And sometimes a friend tells me: ‘you should look on that site’ or ‘I bought it on that site’.*

Subject 3 here also indicates that the reverse flow can be true as well, where an offline touch point leads to an online purchase. The single most important offline touch point seems to be people recommending a certain product or website, and this is something that has been mentioned by multiple subjects. Critically, the purchasing process seems to still hold true – regardless of which channel is being used. This reflects the conclusion of Rudkowski et al. that the customer interacts with multiple touch points throughout their journey, which can be both online and offline (Rudkowski, 2018, p. 5). All subjects talked about this process indirectly, and one even mentioned it directly. Talking about navigating a sea of online channels, subject four mentioned:

S04: *“you have to be a bit clever in order to go through this decision-making process, I guess.”*

Subject 6 went even farther, calling the entire process from start to finish a travel:

S06: *“Yeah, well...well it’s the travel to it. To the purchase. Where you look at different coffee mugs. You’re in the store and you don’t like that one, but you might like that one. But you’re gonna buy this one.”*



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When asked a follow-up question the subject responded with the statement that the entire buying of the product is an experience – from the decision to make a purchase, to the determining of which product to buy to finally buying and using the product. This is reflected in other statements by the subject and is in line with what Lemon and Verhoef have displayed in their model of the customer journey, particularly the focus on the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77).

The subjects highlighting the fluid nature between online and offline touch points is in line with what we have found practitioners in the field to state (Kitewheel, 2018a). Additionally, all customers talk about a purchasing process that is customized to their individual needs. When asking subject 08 to describe what she is doing when she buys a certain product she answered:

S08: “First I get the idea... [T]hen I also decide how much money it should cost... [T]hen I have to save some money... And then... I search for information on the internet. And also, I check out if the price is going down. Maybe they change one product model, stop the actual manufacturing of one specific model and release a newer model. Then sometimes the older model is available for a lower price... And then I think I go online and check out the different pieces and after that I go to the store and try it out. Hold it in my hands etc. And then after that I check out the prices and buy the product where it is more convincing.”

This interestingly reflects the study by Voss et al. On the design of experiences and the processual nature of the customer journey, that includes all encounters an individual experience with an organization (Voss et al., 2008, pp. 248-250). It also reflects the proliferation of brands that allows a customer to perceive a brand in a multitude of different channels (Dahiya & Dahiya, 2018, p. 4). Customers essentially have a host of individual encounters that they experience in a process-like manner and obtain perceptions of products in a complex, proliferate way in an interplay between online and offline channels. What becomes apparent from the answers of the subject is that it is the touch points that drive the process forward, while the respondents still feel that they pertain a level of control. Subjects choose the channel that fits them best for specific sections of their customer journey, and it is the touchpoints that serve as markers on what paths they will take. This follows closely to a previous statement in the literature review that the customer journey can be described as “a continuous flow of touchpoints” (Lanir et al., 2014; as cited by Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 30).

For some subjects this happens subconsciously, while other subjects reflect this rationally. Each seems to be aware that they take steps through the process, though not all go through the process in the same way. This strongly reflects the concept of a customer journey that is unique to the individual traveling it. Some might focus more on one part of it, while others might focus more on something else. One critical driver seems to be what type of touch point the customer uses and another critical driver seems to be the individual experiences that one has along the way. These two drivers are something that we will focus on in the further empirical findings of this section.



5.1.2 Second point of analysis: touch points affecting customer journey

Theme: *Touch points, both individual as well as a collective, have the power to affect each stage of the customer journey*

It becomes clear from the statements of the customers that touch points are incredibly powerful drivers of the customer journey – and can affect each stage of the customer journey. The workings of the touch points seem to change depending on whether they affect the customer journey individually or as a collective. This seems to follow a sort of layering construction, where the experiences gained via individual touch points stack on top of one another to form a collective experience as well. Subject 8 mentions this in form of how the same individual touch point can layer on top of one another to form an experience that has a critical outcome:

S08: *“If they call me from a company. One time I can say okay I just listen and then I say no. If they call me a second time, I just say to them don’t call me again. And the third time I just hang up the phone [laughing]. And then I am never going to buy from them again... Because I want to decide by myself and I don’t want this input. This manipulating influence.”*

This clearly shows that if the company had stopped calling after the first time, subject 8 would still have been a potential customer in the future – since the layered experience was not negative enough to leave a lasting impact. It is difficult to determine though what touch points will be positive and what touch points will be negative, largely due to the individual nature of the customer journey. What we can determine though is that this statement is in line with what Khanna et al. concluded on the subject, in that they found that a point of interaction becomes a touch point only if a customer creates a perception of the brand or product by entering this interaction (Khanna et al., 2014, p. 129). In continuation on this, subject 5 mentions that they do not trust online reviews, indicating that sometimes companies hire people to leave reviews. This makes subject 5 feel as if the company “is trying to pull one over on its customers”. Subject 6 on the other hand indicates that reviews are a vital part of their customer journey, with them actively searching out reviews in order to help them make a decision. A completely different conclusion comes from subject 4, who indicates annoyance with websites tracking their IP address to increase the prices of plane tickets or hotel rooms. We can see that each customer has the potential to enter the same kind of interaction with differing mentalities and through this a point of interaction can turn into either a positive or a negative touch point.

As such, it appears as though the individual and collective impacts that the customer journey has on a person seem to revolve largely around which type of customer is traveling and what path they are traveling on. This can be used to a company’s advantage by inserting specific touch points at strategic positions along the customer journey to motivate the customer towards an action that is favorable to the company (Nakata et al., 2018).

The impact of layered experiences through individual touch points has also been shown to be carried over in the entire customer journey:

S02: *“Yes, there is more to buying a product than the actual buy. It is the name of the company and the brand etc. And maybe while buying this specific product the customer realizes that the company is offering other products too. And as a satisfied customer I*



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am maybe also interested in those other products and I maybe start informing myself about those products too, ending up buying those other products as well.”

Subject 2 here indicates that the large positive experiences that they have had with a specific brand before leads them to be a satisfied customer. This again highlights the critical nature that touch points play in the customer journey, in that touch points act both individually and collectively and customers analyze and interpret the events and encounters they have with them, as well as the experience this creates (Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 8). As such, when getting into contact with the company's touch point highlighting other products that the brand or company is offering, they start to inform themselves about these products – even buying them at times. This shows the interrelated nature of touch points; one touch point showing different offerings of the company might not make a difference, but if it is stacked on top of a layer of positive previous experiences, it might have the impact necessary to make the customer purchase additional products from the company or brand.

What is also interesting is that a powerful enough layered experience will eventually counterbalance negative experiences that occur. Subject 3, when talking about their car breaking down on the way to work, indicates that:

S03: “Well...when I'm driving to my work and it lets me down. Where I have to be on time to give a training to a group, that wouldn't please me. And maybe the first time I would say: ‘ah, it's beginners' bad luck’. But if it happens all the time. But still I would think it's this one thing, it's not the total brand.”

As such, the layered experience that a customer has with a brand seems to come from individual touch points, as well as usage of the product, and determines their future customer journeys. If they have a very strong layered experience with a brand, it will be difficult for competitors to convert these customers. And even individual negative experiences with that brand might not topple the large stack of positive, previous experiences that the customer has with the brand. Interestingly, this seems to closely follow the saying that one drop may make the bucket spill over. Throughout their customer journey the customers have a bucket of experiences that fills with negative experiences. Enough negative experience will make the bucket spill over and the customer will switch. It also shows that the playing field of touch points is chaotic and that companies cannot control all possible scenarios – some touch points are formed by the customers interaction with physical and social environments which companies have limited control over (Ponsignon et al., 2017, pp. 7-8).

Additionally, each customer attaches different weights to experiences of different kinds and stemming from different touch points. One kind of experience from one kind of touch point might not put as much water in the bucket of one customer, whereas it may make the bucket of another customer spill over. This is reflected by the article of Ponsignon et al., in which the researchers highlight the criticality of focusing on the actual function of individual customer touch points as well as to incorporate those touch points within the whole customer journey structure (Ponsignon et al., 2017, p. 9).



5.1.3 Third point of analysis: unbound customer journey

Theme: *The customer journey does not stop at purchase or post-purchase but is always being travelled.*

Related to the theme under 5.2.1, our research subjects showed support for our conclusion from theory that the customer journey does not stop at purchase or post-purchase but is always being travelled. There is a consensus among the subjects that one is always a customer. Subject 3 makes an interesting statement when saying:

S03: *“I think that’s...you can’t deny you’re a customer in this consumer’s world. I think you’re a customer 2.0. Yeah.”*

All subjects agreed with the theme of them always being a customer, but their reasoning for why they are always a customer differed among them. Subject 1 indicates that they are always a customer because they always have to process marketing from various companies. Despite not having to buy a specific product, this still makes them a customer to this product simply for having to consciously process their advertisements. Subject 2 indicates that they are always a customer because once they purchase a certain product, they are attached to a company – relying on them for servicing of the product. Subject 6 has an interesting statement that one is always a customer simply because you’re always processing anything you see:

S06: *“Because you’re always looking at things around you and seeing things. You don’t even have to be in a store. You can be at a friend’s place and then they have these great coffee mugs and then you want the coffee mugs. And then you ask: “where are they from?” oh well... “Were they pricey?”. Oh well, I will look into it. And then you’re a customer.”*

Subject 6 indicates that one is always a customer, because one is always consciously or subconsciously processing the world around them and evaluating the products within it. This is in line with Arnould and Price who argue that the things that customers experience while consuming results in the storage of memories, which can become touch points in itself too (Arnould & Price, 1993, p. 42).

But the customer journey not stopping at a certain point does not simply have to come from customers always being customers. A customer journey not stopping may come as well from past experiences playing a role in current or future consumption decisions. This has been covered by Voss et al. who found that the customer journey is the whole process which the customer is undergoing and that it covers all encounters that an individual experiences with an organization (Voss et al., 2008, pp. 248-250). And as experiences remain in the customer’s memory, it seems only fitting that it may affect their present and future purchases as well. Indeed, subject 8 covers the way this works when talking about past experiences with the purchase of a camera:

S08: *“When it comes to cameras, I think I maybe consider two brands before others. Because... everybody knows about them. Me too. [laughing] And one of them I have had before so of course I think I maybe look more on those two brands.”*

This statement also shows the dual workings of own experience and the touch point of collective knowledge about the product. Subject 8 indicates that two brands enjoy her preference because (1) everybody knows about these brands and (2) subject 8 has previous positive experience with them. This also shows that the customer journey does



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never stop. One is always using past experiences shaped in their unique customer journey to assist with purchases in the present or future. Here, the assumptions of Lemon and Verhoef are fitting in. They indicate that previously made experiences and other external factors are getting included into the process and can possibly result in future events that can be experienced by the customers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 76). Furthermore, this process is supported by the other subjects as well. Subject 2 mentions that in purchasing a laptop they consciously recall the last laptop they had, which experiences they had with it and how they can improve upon these experiences in the current purchase. Indeed, past experiences seem to affect largely the search of information after the subject has consciously made the decision to look for a product because a certain need has arisen. Subject 1 talks about how they are consciously doing this:

S01: *“When it comes to the brand of the product, I think about which computers do I have worked with before and which ones were good? So, I tried for example HP, I tried ACER, ASUS, LENOVO and from all of those that I have tried there is one brand that I think is better than the other. So that is one part that I will look for.”*

Additionally, one can be both a customer in the customer journey as well as a touch point in the journey of others. Again, quoting subject 1:

S01: *“...after buying the product I maybe also influence my family and friends etc. It maybe takes some time before I talk about it, unless it is a really bad product or if its delayed or I am super happy with my purchase. It depends on what happens in which situation. But at some point, I talk with other people about the product that I bought and about my feelings and maybe it will also affect them in a certain way afterwards.”*

This statement by subject 1 also indicates the temporal nature of the customer journey being able to stretch over long periods of time. They indicate that with extreme product experiences, they will more rapidly dissipate this information among their social circle. But with other experiences it might take longer, though they still find that at some point they will talk about it and share their experiences. As such the customer journey never stops for both themselves as well as for those, they are sharing their experiences with. This sharing of experiences was echoed by the other subjects, with subject 1 stating that they are more inclined to share directly in case of a drastically negative or positive experience.



5.1.4 Fourth point of analysis: contextual strength of touch points

Theme: *Touch points can have different strengths in different customer journey stages, based on their context sensitivity – but they should still be thematically cohesive as well as consistent.*

Interestingly, the research subjects seemed aware of the fact that not all touch points are created equally. They do not find that touch points have the same level of impact across channels. Interestingly, the subjects each give a slightly different shade of reasoning as to why the impact across channels differs:

S03: *“Uhm, well because not every channel has...my same attention.”*

S04: *“Ehm...well because some channels aren’t really the right influencer.”*

S05: *“I think that certain social media platforms or maybe the people are using those social media platforms, the average of people, might speak more to me and I would be more...uh...appreciative of those channels than I would others.”*

What the research subjects indicate here is that there is a right match for them and a wrong match. Different types of touch points play different kinds of roles for the research subjects. While one might appreciate magazines or the recommendation of a friend, another looks at social media, online reviews or information from an official channel. In that regard, context sensitivity is important, because it can help individuals to discern their travelling on the customer journey path as more convenient, controllable and less risky (Kuehnl et al., 2019). What is interesting though, is that the subjects are still searching for a level of thematic cohesion and consistency among touch points. Subject four explains a variation of this rather well:

S04: *“I want to have independent information. That’s something which I would use, I would use the company itself. But that also depends upon the fact whether the company is trustworthy or not.”*

The subject refers to the purchasing of a product by the company Phillips, and that some online fora are better than others – based on the level of independence. Still, the company channels itself are appreciated as well by the subject. Further, the subject indicates they don’t want a clash of information – but rather rational, neat, independent display of information for the customer itself to draw its conclusions from. People have different kinds of approaching getting the information they need, but all seem to search in their own way to fit the gaps in information they need to fit in order to move onto the purchase of product. S02 states in that regard the following:

S02: *“I am looking for different product tests from different web portals like for example Stiftung Warentest or similar ones. I am reading articles in technical journals. I am looking what other people are saying in the internet. So, I get a total overview from different directions and different point of views... I am quite experienced when it comes to searching for information online. Everything that I am looking for I search for on different pages on the internet. So, it is not so difficult for me.”*

Furthermore, the type of cohesion and consistency that the customer is looking for also seems to depend on the type of product. For example, subject 5 made the following related statements:



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S05: “ *Ehm...it depends on the product that I want to buy. Sometimes it wouldn't really matter, I think, to get a brand product. But in some cases I just don't have enough knowledge of a particular product and the brands that sell that product. Uhm...and then I think I would be more uhm...skewed towards a more well-known brand because I would know that they deliver quality products.* ”

S05: “ *Whenever I feel like I...uhm...have to be healthy. I tend to go towards well-known products. Well-known brands.* ”

S05: “ *That it's not related to this brand and it does influence my shopping behavior, every once in a while. That I go for the more well-known brands.* ”

While this does not directly indicate that customers are actively looking for thematic cohesion and consistency, what can be argued for is that a level of thematic cohesion and consistency can contribute to customers making a particular choice. This is something that has been previously found by Kuehnl et al. who write that thematic cohesion helps customer to make the formation of semantic knowledge blueprints easier when interacting with several touch points by establishing a linkage between the brand and the individual activities, desires or lifestyles of the customers (Kuehnl et al., 2019). As a case in point, subject 5 indicates that when the need for following a healthy lifestyle arises, they are more likely to purchase the products of well-known brands. This seems to hint at the possibility that the customer makes rational choices that are influenced to a certain extent by the amount of touch points they have been in contact with. Indeed, for subject 5 if they have a day where they do not feel the need to fit the healthy lifestyle, they purchase products from different brands than on those days when the need to fit the healthy lifestyle arises. The touch points of the more well-known brands then start to take effect in the customer's rationalization. The touch points that the customer has come into contact with have instilled in their mind a connection between the products of the brand and a healthy lifestyle, which could activate when the customer experiences a day when the need for a healthy lifestyle arises. It should be mentioned here, that for companies to manage those customers' experiences, they need to spot the touch points relevant to the customers - despite the channels on which they occur (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 117).

While we have found evidence to confirm that touch points have different strengths in different stages of the customer journey, we have found no direct evidence indicating that customers are actively looking for thematic cohesion and consistency among touch points. There are some indirect clues though. A statement by subject 3 shows such an indirect clue:

S03: “ *Sometimes when I see something that I know I can buy in a store nearby, then I'm going to the store. Just to check it up. And it has happened a number of times that I thought, nah. The fabric isn't what I thought it would be.* ”

What this seems to indicate, is that the information that subject 3 finds online does not correspond with the information that the customer finds in the physical touch points. To decrease such disappointments, subject 3 finds comfort in using the touch point of online reviews left by other customers:

S03: “ *For instance this winter there was this sweater and I thought “that's nice” and then I watched some reviews and people said: “No, it's a bummer! The color isn't what*



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it is on the picture, the fabric is not good. It's far smaller than the size would claim to be" and then I didn't buy it."

The article by Kuehnl et al. that we adopted the concepts of thematic cohesion and consistency among touch points from was solely focused on brand-owned touch points. While in that case such cohesion may be relevant or necessary, it seems that customers do not search for the same level of cohesion or consistency among all the four levels of touch points as presented by Lemon and Verhoef (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). The customers seem to enter the customer journey with a certain level of cognitive readiness. They want their journey to be as easy as possible, potentially in order to reduce any risks of getting the wrong items and wasting time on getting the wrong items – such as subject 3 indicates. In this context Chang's principle of least effort comes into play, revealing that in order to accomplish their goals, individuals tend to choose the option with the least possible required effort (Chang, 2016, p. 1118). While customers may be influenced by the message that a cohesive and consistent swarm of brand-owned touch points brings – such as in the case of subject 5 – they still rely on a far wider scope of touch points to make their decision. Interestingly, this corresponds closely to our previous finding that individual touch points may work in collective ways through a layering of experiences. A highly effective web of touch points might be extremely good at layering enough positive experiences on top of one another to ensure that the customer feels they have enough necessary to rationalize the purchase of a product. This layering effect is reflected in a statement by subject 2:

S02: "...I think that all those things that I experience form a whole impression together in the end. What I personally see and read has maybe a bigger effect on me than the other things. Professional expert magazines, where they test several products etc. have for instance a very great influence on me. And they are all different, so I don't want to only read one magazine. I will have to look through several ones and then in a second step I read the opinions of other people and then after reading maybe hundred good reviews I discover that there is a positive or negative tendency towards this product."

This statement highlights both the individual nature of which touch points are relevant in the customer journey. Subject 6 shares the sentiment of needing to check out reviews conducted by independent testers. Subject 5 prefers to search a specific kind of interaction with a sales person. All subjects indicate different ways in which they travel through their journey and highly different kinds of impacts that they have experienced. This is in line with previous findings that show that most definitions of the customer experience highlight its personal and subjective character (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 114). Indeed, each subject interviewed show that they experience a "personal interpretation of the service process and their interaction and involvement with it during their journey through a series of touchpoints and how those things make them feel" (Johnston & Kong, 2011, p. 8).

What this may mean for companies is that this may be an indication that a cohesive and consistent swarm of touch points is highly relevant for companies only to the extent to how much they are able to influence the touch points available to customers. For example, a clothing company may need to put significant effort in establishing a net of cohesive, consistent touch points in order to counter-balance the strength of online reviews. It seems that, even digitally, the strength of word-of-mouth still reigns supreme. Essentially, companies need to be looking into building an effective and impactful web of touch points that is able to layer strong, positive experiences on top of those



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experiences that customers have gathered from touch points that are outside of the companies' control.

An interesting side-note here is that a majority of the subjects talks about the trustworthiness of websites playing a crucial role in the shaping of an experience, as well as the way in which they present their information:

S07: "It is the detailed description of the products that some sites have that are helpful. Some sites are better than others. They just have everything written down there. Information that a computer nerd or a computer scientist or someone that studied IT finds handy and can have a use of. Those technical specification sheets... the bad companies have them as well, but they leave out a lot of stuff that they don't think a customer should even know."

S05: "It doesn't matter too much if I buy it from a well-known website or a lesser-known website, as long as I feel comfortable with looking at these websites and trusting it with my own reasoning."

Subject 7 here indicates in what way they would like information to be displayed. Subjects 3 and 4 also indicated their own preferences of how information should be displayed. Subject 6 did not indicate *how* they want their information to be displayed but does indicate that the source of information is important – stating that independent, expert reviews are more trustworthy than influencers.

Subject 5 highlights that the trustworthiness of a website is important, but states they have their own reasoning for trusting it. This own reasoning plays a role for many of the subjects. Subject 6 looks more at how modern the design of a website is, whereas subject 3 aims to avoid websites that have large texts popping up begging for her attention.

Again, these examples indicate the highly individual nature of the customer journey and the different weights that customers place on different experiences gained from different touch points that individually, and collectively through layering, affect the outcome of their journey. Here, companies have the important task of identifying the crucial touch points also referred to as "moments of truth" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 86), since they have the biggest impact on their key customers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 82).



5.1.5 Fifth point of analysis: customer experience and emotions

Theme: *The customer experience is a subjective, emotional response.*

This is another theme that received wide support among our research subjects. Each seemed to find that emotions indeed play a major role in the customer experience, though the underlying argumentation of how and why varied among the subjects.

Subject 5 showed clear signs of being more influenced by sales staff and indicated that if a salesperson enters his customer journey at the wrong moment this could have an adverse effect.

S05: *“If I have a salesperson who is really pushy for example. Or really, around, when you just want to browse. The I would turn a little bit angry maybe. Not angry, but just, annoyed. By this person and I would close down on anything that he might have to say to me.”*

And this single event might even leave an experience that leaves a lasting impression.

S05: *“If I have a positive or negative experience with a particular salesperson in, I don’t know, a TV shop or something. And I want to buy a TV, the next time I would be very much influenced and in thinking back on the conversations that I might have had with this TV salesperson, which would make me think better on my purchase. Be more critical. As opposed to when someone would’ve been very positive...uhm...yeah I think I would be less on guard.”*

While this example by subject 5 applies to physical touch points, they indicated that their response would be the same in a digital setting. When talking about online sales videos, subject 5 mentioned the following:

S05: *“If for example...if a product would have a video that explains some specifications or it’s just a promotional video of the product and...if there’s a person in the video promoting the product. If I would not connect with that person, I would be...uhm...yeah, I guess that’s based on emotions, I just wouldn’t feel a connection. I just wouldn’t be...I would be less attempted to look more into this product.”*

Related to this subject 08 stated:

S08: *“[Online advertisements,] ...they are okay. But i feel like nothing, I don’t really care about it. It doesn’t affect me.”*

For subject 5 this experience was based very much about the personal contact, while other subjects focused on different elements of customer experience through emotional response. One scenario that came up a lot is trustworthiness of a website leaving a lasting impression.

Subject 3, when talking about websites they distrusted during the online search process, said the following:

S03: *“Well there was...there was for instance this website that didn't mention prizes. And they didn't mention how many kilometers a car had driven already. Or there was no picture. You know, and then I think nah I want more information. And there were a few sites where that was the case. So that's when I thought nah, I'm not going to look any further. And there were also sites that say:” Wonderful!” and this and that and that also*



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makes me distrust uhm... So, the plain sites with just information. The information I need."

In the same context S08 mentioned:

S08: *"It is hard to understand if the people who are writing on the internet, ehm if they really have used the camera or if they maybe just talk about the product. You never know if it's true what they say and what their motives are and sometimes I even think that it actually could be a seller. So that could then be the reason why it is glorified... And then I think, mmh maybe it is a seller not an actual private user... [Then] I try to change the website and see if someone else writes the same or if they maybe write something else."*

All subjects agreed to the involvement of emotions in shaping the customer experiences, but this seems to take different shapes depending on which channel the customer is using or prefers. This seems to make sense in light of what other researchers mention in that there is a broad spectrum of driving forces behind the customer experience (Følstad & Kvale, 2018, p. 1) and that emotion is one of the distinct responses in the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 74). In regards of this, it makes sense that some experiences are more general while others are more individual. Websites seem to need to instill certain levels of trust in their visitors before they will even consider a purchase. Offline, it seems to work in roughly the same way with sales staff. And in using the products, significant emotional situations seem to play a major role in leading to lasting positive or negative experiences as well. Subject 3, when talking about the purchase of a new car, mentioned the following regarding how certain scenarios could lead them to attach negative experiences to a brand they are loyal to:

S03: *"Well...when I'm driving to my work and it lets me down. Where I must be on time to give a training to a group, that wouldn't please me. And maybe the first time I would say: "ah, it's beginners' bad luck". But if it happens all the time... But still I would think it's this one thing, it's not the total brand. But then maybe there would be a little voice in my head that says: "maybe you should look at something else"*

It is not unreasonable to understand that such a stressful situation would lead a lasting experience that can negatively affect their purchasing behavior in the future. It also affirms that the specific living situations in which individuals are situated affect their manners and behaviors and hence their individual customer journey (Nakata et al., 2018).

What was mentioned by the subjects as well is that emotions also play a big role in the actual customer journey itself. Subject 8 explains the following when asked if experiences, stemming from emotions, affect more than just product purchase:

S08: *"Yes. I think there is always something more. I think you also buy for example a feeling. You buy status and also comfort of course as well as happiness. Different feelings."*

This statement by subject 8 is nearly exactly echoed in a statement by subject 3:

S03: *"Uhm...yes. I think you're not just buying a thing, or a product, but you're buying a feeling. And you're buying an experience. And you're buying a good mood. Or...I think...there's always emotion in it. I think so."*



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Subject 2 further clarifies that in their case, they design, technical specifications and the price affect them emotionally as well. The design that is trending in society instills a desire for them to follow this trend and purchase this modern design – a process that is affected by their emotions of wanting to fit in and have this socially desired product.

We can conclude here by a blanket statement of subject 6 when asking if their experiences are affected by emotions:

S06: *“Well, isn’t everything affected by emotions?”*

And again, serving as a red thread throughout our findings, is the fact that the way in which emotions affect the customers is something that is individually determined. The way in which one customer experiences emotions may not be similar to the way in which another customer experiences emotions. Additionally, certain touch points may be emotional triggers for one person but not for another. This stems from what Bosio et al. have covered in their work finding that the customer journey experienced by individuals differ from one another as touch points that customers experience are changing, even if those customers would seek an identical product or service (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 115). As an example: if one person has a dog that they care for and love, then a touch point in the form of a commercial using a dog may be more appealing to them than to a person that strongly dislikes dogs. Even if the advertisement does not even market a dog-related product.

So, we can conclude that everything is affected by emotions, but not in the same way for everyone. Subject 1 says it quite well when they give an answer to the question if their experiences are affected by their emotions:

S01: *“Yes, because my feelings are the strongest ones and they decide what I am going to buy.”*



5.1.6 Sixth point of analysis: customer experience and interactions

Theme: *The customer experience is created through interactions.*

This conclusion has received support in such a way that it required the researchers to reconfigure their understanding of how customers approach interactions. Using interactions as a blanket theme has received strong support, but customers have indicated differing ways in which they interact with various touch points. Again, this seems to be dependent on the individual doing the interaction.

It seems that the creation of the customer experience comes from a combination of interactions during the search process, sales process and usage process. What started our redefinition of what interaction can be is the discovery that quite a few of the subjects indicate that it is not direct interaction that drives the customer journey – or creates the customer experience – but rather it is the consumption of information that does so. As such we present four different kinds of interaction that cover the ways in which the subjects interact with various touch points. These are presented in table 5.

Table 5: Interaction matrix

		Instigator of contact	
		Company	Customer
Response	Active	Two-sided interaction	Two-sided interaction
	Passive	One-sided interaction	One-sided interaction

In any interaction, we find that either it is the company that is searching some form of interaction, or it is the customer that is doing so. The recipient then has the choice to either actively engage in the interaction or passively engage in it. Passive engagement means that the recipient puts little or no energy into responding to the instigation of an interaction. We will present the various ways in which the subjects cover these kinds of interactions.

Subject 1 seeks the interaction by herself and is looking for a two-sided interaction:

S01: *“I wanna talk with the people working in the store. So that I know that I have the guarantee in the store and that they can help me, because they have the support service to which you can just go in with the laptop and they will help you and fix every problem.”*

This shows specifically that the subject is actively seeking out an interaction with the company in order to get the information that they need in order to fulfill the purchase. It also shows that the findings by Zomerdijk & Voss. They found that it is not possible for companies to directly deliver customer experience, instead they must provide preconditions which make it possible for customers to go through the experience that they have wished for (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010, p. 13). This is reflected by subject 5, although they seem to be very sensitive to the salesperson that they are interacting with. And indeed, if it is the company that is actively searching the interaction subject 5 becomes annoyed and rejects the interaction. This is something reflected by the earlier statement by subject 7, who indicated that a first sales call might be met with a more energetic passivity, while subsequent sales calls only lead to frustration and annoyance.



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No subject seems to prefer the interaction where it is the company itself that takes the initiative in establishing interaction. Even online, subject 3 indicates that she avoids websites that are far too intense with their messaging towards the visitor. As such, it is highly important for the company to know their customers and ensure that they are providing the optimal conditions for each customer to gain the desired customer experience.

A far more frequent form of interaction is one-sided interaction where it is the customer that is actively seeking out information. This can take shape in the form of Googling for reviews, such as subject 6 indicates. Subject 2 has indicated that they search out expert reviews as well. The impact of this interaction is critical as well:

S02: *“If I read for example bad reviews from other people, I maybe think that those negative things could happen to me too. Maybe I will have to think over my decision. So, then this causes me thinking it over again, informing me more and more. So, this bad experience of other people could also affect my own experiences.”*

This active searching for information is something that is agreed upon by nearly all subjects. Subject 4 indicates that:

S04: *“Because I also rely on...uhm...well discussion with other people who have also the same research or...uhm...and they didn't build it up only digitally. In the case of the car I discussed with our former choir member, Peter, and he is a huge fan of cars and he is very much into reading about cars, so I rely on his opinion as well.”*

This also indicates the trend towards customer to customer interaction that affects the fate of a brand or product. When customers review products, other customers rely on their findings in order to determine whether they should purchase or not. Yet even this can be earmarked by negative experience, such as subject 5 states:

S05: *“Uhm...well I know for a fact that some companies hire people to...uh...leave reviews on their websites that are not overly positive but above average...or at least sometimes positive, maybe even fewer times negative, but that the overall review is above average in positivity. And...this usually shows...this is one thing that companies...they will easily...uh...earn my distrust. Even if they deliver quality products, I would beforehand feel as if the company is...uh...trying to pull one over on its customers.”*

These statements by the subjects reflect the plurality of touch points that can play a role in the customer journey. Rudkowski et al. have previously found that the customer journey is one where customers experience and actively interact with brands through multiple online and offline channels and touch points (Rudkowski et al., 2018, p. 2). The combination of literature and statements by subjects show that interaction is possible even when the other side is not actively responding. Moreover, the type of touch point seems to play no role, in fact both offline and online touch points are crucial. While all the subjects look for information online, a part of the search process requires some of the customers to physically experience the product. This is where online interactions break, and the customers feel that them, interacting with the product itself, will do the trick:

S04: *“Ehm, what is helpful buying online is that you get a very...you can build up a detailed overview of specifications. What is in fact not helping online is that you still have to imagine how things are working. If you have a car, it's quite simple, you have a*



gear, you have a steering wheel, you have a gas and things like that - you have a break. So, you are familiar with the process. But if it's something brand new, you haven't used before, then you have to...uhm...yeah well, you have to build up an experience and you can't do that online. Well you can do that online if someone is going to provide you with movies or YouTube films where they present the product - that will help. But I think, at a certain stage it's better to have the experience."

Subject 4 here indicates that, if unfamiliar with a product that is more expensive, they feel like they need to build up an experience. They feel that they need to be able to imagine using the product. Certain online touch points are approaching this need, through films on YouTube where the product is presented. But this highlights an area where companies could drastically improve the customers' need for interaction without pushing this interaction on the customers. Virtual reality headsets, for example, might allow customers to more closely inspect a potential product from the comfort of their home. This fits right in with the apparent need for customers to be able to have some freedom in finding information and instigating interaction when they feel like the want to.

5.1.7 Seventh point of analysis: customer experience creates value

Theme: *The customer experience creates value.*

That the customer experience creates value is another conclusion that has received strong support from all our research subjects. Each subject seems to be cognitively aware of the benefits that previous experience with a product or brand brings them in their role as a customer:

S03: *"Yeah, because they [the experiences] make uhm...what I buy or don't buy. So that's...it's...its experience based".*

S05: *"It's for future reference, in part. Uhm...whenever someone is positive or negative in...uh...uhm...if something is positive or negative in my search for a product in my...uhm...whatever I see, read, hear or do on social media...uhm...I would this as a reference in future...in the future, so that I could...if it's positive I could determine what degree of...uh...uh...yeah, positive experience I would want to reobtain. Or if it's negative, I would know what I want to evade."*

These statements show clearly that there is a lot of value created for customers by them having customer experiences. This is closely in line with Barwitz & Maas finding that it is the interactions in pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase phases that have been found to play an essential part in creating value on the customer's as well as on the company's side (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 116). And as we have previously found, it is interactions that drive the customer experience forward.

Subject 3 has an excellent way of putting just exactly why it is that these customer experiences are so valuable:

S03: *"Yeah. And maybe I in the first case [positive experience], I would recommend and in the second [negative experience] if people would ask my opinion I would have said: "nah, I've had a bad experience with that". And I notice people listen to that. People are avoiding disappointments, I think. So."*



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S03: *“Because I usually buy a brand I already know and of course that’s how it works psychologically” ...” And I think it helps uhm...to automate the next buy of the same brand.”*

What subject 3 is talking about in this section of the interview is that the positive experiences that one has had with a certain brand in the past, lead one to buy that brand again in the future. Subject 3 finds that people try to avoid disappointments and the customer experiences that one has had help to automate the customer journey. And indeed, previous literature finds that prior experiences can generate trust and trigger future intentions (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 122). There is clearly a direct positive impact of the customer experience on satisfaction, and our subjects confirm that this affects their future purchase decisions (Al-Dmour et al., 2019, p. 53).

And it is not just the usage of the product that creates a valuable experience; online touch points are able to transfer a certain experience as well. Subject 8 finds that the design of a product can catch their attention, and finds that it can create an impactful experience that indeed is valuable to the customer as they are building a better understanding of the product

By far the most common way in which the experience is valuable though, lies in the automation of the customer journey. And interestingly, nearly all the subjects had similar statements regarding this. In general, the logic was that if the subject had a good experience with a brand, they were likely to buy it again in the future. And if they had a negative experience with a brand, they were not likely to buy it again in the future. Customers rely on their database of knowledge to make their searching process easier. Subject 1, when asked what makes the entire process easier, answered as follows:

S01: *“First of all my own experiences. Have I seen this product before? Have I known this thing before? For example, the brands. Okay I know which one is better for me and which worse.”*

Even more critically, subject 7 stated the following when asked how he would rank the different sources of information available to them:

S07: *“I would say my own experiences would come first, then the benchmarking test sites and then the user reviews. Because user reviews you could just buy. Some group of people that get paid to give reviews of products like for instance students or other people that need a bit of extra cash.”*

Interestingly, good and bad experiences seem to determine to an extent how likely a customer is to switch to a competitor. This may seem obvious at first glance, but the model of the customer journey gives a more detailed understanding of how this process may work. A customer, throughout their journey, interacts with touch points that layer experiences on top of one another. If it’s positive experiences, this eases the future repetitions of the customer journey for the, while negative experiences require them to find alternatives. This has previously been covered in literature where researchers found that there is a higher chance that customers articulate purchase recommendations regarding services, brands or products if prior positive experiences have arisen, while at the same time a negative influence on the buying decision of others could be performed if those prior experiences were negatively affected (Bosio et al., 2017, p. 112). We feel that experiences layer on top of one another, as at times it is not a single event that determines future decisions. At other times, this does happen. Customers seem highly



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aware of this as well. Subject 7 states the following when asked if their experiences are valuable to them as a customer:

S07: “Yeah they are. Because if I have bad experiences with a website or whatever. I am not likely to return to them, because there are so many competitors that would want to get me as a new customer buying their products. And they offer better support etc.”

This shows that the competitive game between companies is not just about fulfilling needs, but about presenting the right touch points to the right type of customer in order to create a positive experience that layers on top of previous positive experiences. Depending on the type of customer, this ensures a somewhat stable continuation of the relationship between customer and company. This symbiosis is even mentioned by one of the subjects:

S02: “If I am a satisfied customer, the company will be satisfied too in the long run. Because satisfied customers influence other customers in positive ways, which might lead them in return to buy new products.”



5.1.8 Eight point of analysis: value drives the customer journey

Theme: *Value created through customer experience drives the customer journey*

It may not come as a surprise that the value that customer experiences create drive the customer journey. We have previously found that it is the experiences that help make the customer journey easier or more difficult for a customer. Indeed, the links among prior experience, current satisfaction and future choice has already been empirically demonstrated previously (Barwitz & Maas, 2018, p. 118). If customers have a brand that has never let them down, then it's very easy for them to repeat the same purchase over and over again – and avoid disappointments along the way. It is put quite simply by the research subjects:

S03: *“Uhm...well, a good experience with a brand makes me buy again. And a bad experience makes me think twice. So yeah that really does...influence my purchases. Absolutely.”*

S04: *“Well, if a product is not functioning the way it should function, I won't purchase it anymore. I would definitely look for an alternative.” ... [now talking about the reverse scenario] “Then I would definitely...I rest my case. We purchased a Kangoo [car brand] again.”*

S05: *“The product itself is of course important, but...uhm...I might be more...lenient is not the right word, but...I might be more approachable if I had a past positive experience.”*

It seems that all research subjects find that the customer experience is critical in determining the direction of the customer journey. In case of a positive experience, then a future purchase is made easier – thereby driving the customer journey forward and making it easier for the customer to travel it. It is indeed here that the role of value creation through the customer experience can be seen driving the customer journey forward in a new cycle – which occurs because there is a tendency of a higher interaction between customer and company post-purchase and customers tend to carry out repeating loyalty and buying decisions on the grounds of previous experience and the value this has generated (Hamilton et al., 2011, pp. 1079 & 1082; Etkin & Sela, 2016, pp. 80-81).

But in case of a negative experience, an alternative should be found – which requires a more cognitive effort on the part of the customer. This cognition is clearly shown in the weighing of alternatives. Subject 1 indicates that they bought a computer of one particular brand that they had negative experiences with. This required subject 1 to cognitively process why they had these negative experiences and how other brands may resolve these negative experiences. In this instance, the first brand had a short lifetime while the second brand worked really well, even after taking a lot of damage. Additionally, the aggregate statements by the subjects indicate that customers are looking for ways to ease their process, and it is the experiences that they have gathered that drive this customer journey forward:

S01: *“If we take for examples cellphones around me. If I buy a cellphone I will buy a Samsung, because that's the one I have experienced is best for me.”*

These previous experiences may even cross product categories and drive forward other customer journeys that a customer may participate in. This is shown in a statement by subject 7:



S07: *“When I first bought a Samsung, I had an in-depth researching session about all the phones that were out there. I compared everything. I compared prices, quality, how fast is the phone. I even looked at the user reviews, the benchmarks. Everything. And Samsung was not at the top at that time, but my tv was from Samsung, everything else that you can think of was from Samsung. Even the microwave! [laughing] So I was like, well Samsung hasn’t let me down so far regarding electronics. So, I am going to buy a Samsung phone even if Sony was best at that time. But I never had Sony that much, so I decided against it.”*

This indicates multiple things: (1) a layering of past positive experiences outweighs even a rational analysis of what product fits the customer’s need best, (2) the experiences that a customer has are driving customer journeys, even if these journeys concern another product category and (3) experiences are tied to brands, which in itself then becomes a touch point – reminding the customer of their previous experiences with other products of that brand. And, in line with previous findings, the customer journey does not stop at certain stages – the post-purchase stage extends “temporally from the purchase to the end of the customer’s life” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 76).

Finally, it seems that the experience drives forward the customer journey in different ways – depending on the type of product and individual gaining the experiences. This, again, is in line with our previous findings that the impact of experiences is an individual concept. When asked about different levels of negative experiences, subject 6 states the following:

S06: *“If you're buying a product and it promises to have all these different gadgets and things that you can do and then when you're...when you're using it you see that this isn't working. That's false marketing. Your product doesn't live up to what you're promising it to do and then...then it's a bigger thing. But if it's like...if there's a program which I think performs less than other programs in the washing machine, then you know I can I can understand that such as if you want to wash wool or something then yeah. I mean how do you wash wool in a normal washing machine. I understand that that might not be the best experience.”*

5.1.9 Ninth point of analysis: customer experience transcends journey stages

Theme: *Customer experience transcends individual stages in the customer journey.*

As a conclusion to the empirical analysis, we can conclude that the customer experience transcends the individual stages in the customer journey. We have even found that customer experiences can transcend different customer journeys themselves. Indeed, previous literature finds that customer experience is a concept that is stored in the customer’s memory, to be used for repeat purchases and loyalty decisions (Nakata et al., 2018). In our interviews we have found that (1) customer experience affects purchases, both those in the present and potentially those in the future, (2) customer experiences follow one throughout the journey and (3) customer experiences from one individual can serve as a touch point for other customers. This final point has been reflected by both subjects and previous research. Buttle and Maklan state that customer experience satisfactions evolves into loyalty, which leads to customers supporting a brand, product or service extensively becoming touch points toward one another (Buttle & Maklan, 2015). This last point is enhanced by the advent of digital solutions, such as pure social



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media and other types of sharing media with social aspects, such as YouTube, Snapchat etcetera.

When asked whether the subjects notice a brand more or less often around them after a purchase, nearly all respond that they see it more often. Subject 8 says:

S08: "I see it more often. [laughing] It is actually a bit scary... I think that now when I have the product myself. I want to see if someone else has the same. Because I don't think that I have seen any Toyota Hybrid car before and now I see it everywhere. [laughing]"

As determined earlier, experiences even outweigh other critical sources of information in the customer journey:

S02: "Yes. I have had good experiences with some brands in the past which I was using. So, I am looking for those brands first, but I am also open for new products that are maybe better than the product which I had experiences with."

And when questioned whether subject 01 would consider buying a brand again that is cheaper than others, but with which she had bad experiences with before, she answered:

S01: "No, the experience goes before everything. So, if I have bad experiences, I will never buy it again."

It seems that the customer experience is always lingering in the mind of customer, and that it has a critical role in driving the customer journey forward by transcending individual stages of the customer journey – completely in line with the findings by Nakata et al. (2018). If the customer experience would be bound solely to one individual stage of the customer journey, we would not have found such a large amount of statements from subjects that customer experiences are one of the most important, if not the single most important, variable when determining which product to buy to fulfill a need.

Moreover, it seems nearly impossible for the customer experience to be bound solely to one particular stage within the entire customer journey, mainly because of the hypothesis of the layering of experiences that are generated through interaction with touch points. It seems that customer experiences are always carried with a customer and serve as a primary way for customers to determine what product to buy. Experiences are layered on top of one another and carried with a customer to serve this particular purpose.



6. DISCUSSION

We have reserved this section as an open space for us to discuss the research findings, and perhaps provide some interesting insights that could be researched further in future endeavors.

6.1 The customer journey model

Perhaps the most important outcome of our thesis is the customer journey model that we have arrived at and the myriad insights that we hope it can provide into the world of interaction between customer and company. In the introduction, we referred to the duality of roles performed by customer and company in that both parts derive and deliver value from one and to one another (Kumar, 2018, p. 1). Our model of the customer journey essentially dissects this relationship on the plane where customer and company meet. It is touch points that allow for the interaction between customer and company, which is why many researchers state that the customer journey is made up by touch points (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Rudkowski et al., 2018, p. 2). This can lead one to the conclusion that without touch points it becomes infeasible for a company to conduct its business. If Amazon decided to no longer have a website, it's business would most likely start to deteriorate drastically. If Dropbox didn't allow for people to sign up for their services online, they would cease to exist within a short period of time. It the entire crawling heap of touch points that allow customer and company to come into contact that enable an interaction to be established. What makes this journey so complex, is that any person's customer journey includes all contacts of any individual customer with a retailer over all marketing channels prior to a potential purchase decision (Anderl et al., 2015). This also means that a person's customer journey never ceases to end, as we have found to be true in the interviews. Each and any touch point that a customer comes into contact with triggers an experience, no matter how little or how large (Schmitt et al., 2015). What makes this all even more complex is that the customer experience is a subjective, emotional response (Johnston & Kong, 2011, p. 8; Bosio et al., 2017, p. 114; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019, p. 10). Understanding the customer is more important than ever, as there is such a broad spectrum of what drives a customer's experience with touch points (Følstad & Kvale, 2018, p. 1). One person may be delighted that a company proactively contacts them to inform them about a service they are missing out on while another person may find the exact same phone call to be bordering on harassment. Lemon and Verhoef found that there are cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses that are all part of the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 74). Our model essentially dilutes this complex web into a single visualization, showing how the customer interacts with touch points over the duration of the purchasing decision process, how the customer experience is evolved in all these interactions, and that the customer journey is never-ending.

Based on our findings, we envision that marketing in the near future will become increasingly focused on gaining a deep understanding of individual customers, which to our knowledge will require combining the quantitative power of big data and analytics with the qualitative power of customer journey mapping. In an ideal world, companies will know what each customer wants, when they want it and how they want it communicated. Companies will know what type of journey is desirable for each individual customer. This requires companies to create vast webs of touch points that are able to customize the experience of individuals as they interact with them. A challenge that requires great shifts in and evaluation of topics such as privacy, computing power, commercialism and, indeed, marketing.



6.2 The customer journey and segmentation

Flowing from the previous section on the customer journey model, we started to wonder about the future of the concept of customer segmentation. Indeed, one of the most critical ideas that has arisen during this research project, is that the concept of the customer journey and the concept of customer segmentation are highly related and highly influential on one another. Understanding what segment a particular customer belongs to may help companies to determine what type of customer journey can be expected for that specific segment and that specific customer. As found previously, there is a broad spectrum of what drives a customer's experience with touch points (Følstad & Kvale, 2018, p. 1). This spectrum consists of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses – all part of the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 74).

The concept of customer segmentation is not particularly new, but it has been previously applied to mostly determine in what ways companies should change their messaging in order to reach the right customer segment. What seems to become more and more important in the blend of digital and physical touch points in the future, is understanding the journeys that different customers take and how they should be segmented in order to deliver the easiest journey possible. Indeed, customers that have previously belonged to the same customer segment under the rules of traditional marketing, might in this new model of marketing fall in completely different segments. Again, this is an insight that is not new as previous literature states that segmentation is “shifting away from being something monolithic and turning toward a state where many different types of segmentation are able to coexist simultaneously (Bayer, 2010, p. 247). We feel that the customer journey introduces the next step in this shift. Customer journeys can be so incredibly individual that companies may have to narrow down segmentation to near-individual or perhaps even individual levels. Previously, such an approach has been termed to turn larger segments into “micro-segments” as this allows for “precise targeting, with knowledge of what the retention and value drivers are for each customer” (Bayer, 2010, p. 247). This is exactly what our research into the customer journey concludes as well, with more specific insight into how companies can approach this challenge. The retention and value drivers are part of the customer experience, and discovering what these are allows companies to finetune their touch points in order to appeal to each micro-segment appropriately. We feel that our model allows practitioners and researcher to take the next step in analyzing how this could be achieved.

6.3 The fluidity of digital and physical touch points

One of the major realizations that stems from this research project, is that there is an incredible fluidity between the enormous amount of digital and physical touch points. Kuehnl et al. (2019) already discussed the necessity for a great level of thematic cohesion as well as contextual sensitivity in touch points that brands own themselves. Our findings seem to support their study in this regard; customers feel a need for some form of cohesion if they are to make sense of their customer journey as can be seen from the answers of our interview subjects. However, the fluidity of digital and physical touch points present customers with an incredible variety of routes that can be taken to the destination of a purchase. A customer that has always purchased online may at some point be required to make a purchase offline, and the reverse is also true. This is not a new concept in the field of the customer journey, as previous researchers have found that the customer journey is made up by both offline and online touch points (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Rudkowski et al., 2018, p. 2). Our research reaffirms this conclusion



and shows that it is possible to drop the annotations of digital and physical and instead refer to all touch points simply as such: touch points. The reason being that customers seem to not notice digital or physical presence, but expect it based on the characteristics of the brand in question. What could be considered a new insight is that especially the cohesion between online and offline representation may become incredibly important in the future. Important, as customers nowadays expect to be able to fulfill their customer journey at whatever touch points they desire. This provides an incredible challenge for companies as digital touch points allow for easy measurement and analytics, but offline touch points are harder to measure. Additionally, customers consider both brand-owned touch points as well as non-brand-owned touch points to both provide impact on their customer journey – as can be seen from the answers of our interview subjects. Further research could potentially take a look at this division and determine how strong this impact is for each respective touch point category. Do customers expect brand-owned touch points to provide a greater level of experience, or is any touch point enough to tip the scales on the purchasing decision?

6.4 The customer experience is critical – as is customer cognition

In section 4.4.1. we introduced three preliminary conclusions that fell outside of the scope of this thesis. These were that (1) The customer's cognition is the membrane between their customer experience and their perceptions and actions, (2) the customer uses ways to make this cognitive task as easy as possible and (3) touch points are what provide customers with information to make the cognitive task as easy as possible.

While our research did not focus on proving these statements specifically, we did find some insights that may assist future ventures into the field of customer cognition - particularly in the perspective of the customer journey. All of the interview subjects seemed to be able to determine that the translation of their customer experience into perceptions and actions could be attributed to a logical chain of reasoning. One bad experience might not outweigh a large number of good experiences, though as the bad experiences keep stacking up it takes the customer's cognition to arrive at a conclusion of what to do about this.

It can also be seen that touch points serve the customers to make the cognitive task of filling a need as easy as possible. Earlier research shows that digital channels make it easier for consumers to arrive at a purchasing decision (Dahiya & Dahiya, 2018, p. 3). This is reflected by our interview subjects; they indicated various ways in which they attempt to make their task as easy as possible and, moreover, that digital touch points provide a far easier way to get the information necessary for the customer's cognition to turn need into purchase. A hypothesis then can be that the customer's cognition in the customer journey is a scale that ranges from hardly any cognition required to lots of cognition requires, and that this scale is affected by customer experiences and the touch points that deliver them.

These findings are in line with earlier work on the topic of customer experience, particularly in how it is shaped in interactions with companies. Lemke et al. have previously found that “customer experience is conceptualized as the customer's subjective response to the holistic direct and indirect encounter with the firm, and customer experience quality as its perceived excellence or superiority” (Lemke et al., 2011, p. 846). Their research seems to confirm that consumers use cognition as a tool to judge their experiences as a customer as useful to their task of fulfilling a need. We seem to have found the same conclusion in the context of the wider customer journey.



7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1 General conclusion

We started our research with an introduction to the digitalization of the world of consumption that we currently live in. We found that this increasingly digital world has the implication of unloading a massive number of traditional and new types of touch points on the customer. Our purpose was to understand this from a customer journey perspective. This introduction eventually led us to the following research question:

How is the customer purchasing decision affected by the customer's interaction with touch points throughout the customer journey?

To make it manageable to arrive at an answer, we created three specific methods that we would use in answering this research question: (1) characterizing the customer journey, (2) reflecting on the conceptual model by looking at the customer journey through the eyes of the customer and (3) finding gaps and strengthening the conceptual model of the customer journey by filling these gaps. By using these methods, we could sequentially build up a model of the customer journey as an answer to the research question.

We started our thesis by looking at current literature in the field of the customer journey and quickly arrived at the work by Lemon and Verhoef as a foundational piece that we could depart from (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Indeed, they were the steppingstone to two comprehensive literature reviews that we complemented with additional articles in adjacent fields. We arrived at an understanding of the theoretical view on the customer journey by synthesizing definitions from pre-existing literature. This allowed us to define themes concerning the customer journey that shaped our initial iteration of the customer journey model. We then tested the themes we identified against the real-life experiences of customers through conducting eight semi-structured interviews. Our findings from this research process are many and can be summarized into the following conclusions that capture the overall essence of the findings:

- (1) Touch points exist both inside and outside the control of companies. These touch points are responsible for generating customer experiences and pave the path that customers take on their customer journey. They exist both offline and online, though specifically the online touch points have allowed the customer journey to undergo drastic and rapid changes – such as the ability for customers to instantly share their experiences, thereby affecting numerous other customers. Touch points function both individually and collectively. Individually they make a single impression on the customer, generating an experience. These experiences layer themselves through more and more touch points being interacted with. Great work by Kuehnl et al. (2019) has previously ventured into the field of touch points and how they function, though they primarily focused on brand-owned touch points whereas we believe that all touch points are critical for practitioners to identify and extract value from (Kuehnl et al., 2019).
- (2) The customer experience is the most critical driver in the customer journey and can even outweigh other variables that have been traditionally found to be important in a purchase decision. They are generated through interactions with individual touch points, but through a process of experience layering they create a weight that impacts the customer in their journey in many ways. The customer experience exists throughout the customer journey and is also a vital element of

competition between firms. The concept of the customer experience was a critical element of the article by Lemon and Verhoef. Therefore we used it to further enhance the main understanding of the customer journey by combining knowledge on the customer experience with the insights from authors other than Lemon and Verhoef (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

- (3) The customer journey is a highly useful way to model a customer's path-to-purchase. We have discovered that it is not the traditional customer segment that determines how companies should approach their target market, but rather it is the customer journey segment that they should aim to approach. The massive web of touch points, particularly the digital ones that are so readily available, allow customers to shape their own, unique ways. Touch points and the experiences they generate are all processed on an individual level, which means that no interaction is like another. One can, however, seem to class different types of journeys together.

These general conclusions, as well as our more detailed analysis of empirical findings, seem to support our earlier conceptual model of the customer journey sufficiently in order to present it as our final model. This final model is listed here in *figure 7*.

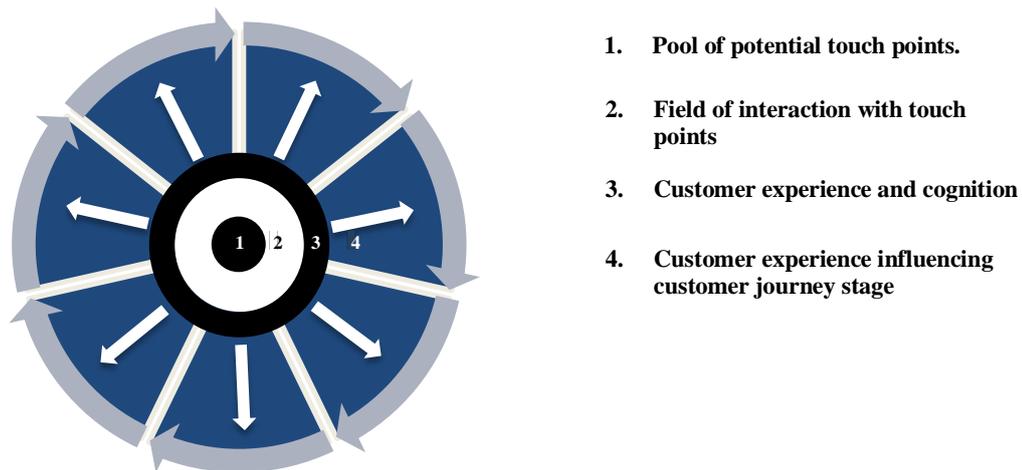


Figure 7: Final conceptual model of the customer journey

This final model is an unchanged version of the one presented earlier in thesis. Indeed, empirical findings provide support for each of the theoretical foundations to underly the model. As such this model can serve as a foundation for future quantitative work where the various relationships between the model's elements can be determined and statistically tested. We have chosen to stick with a circular type of model as this accurately reflects that the customer journey is a never-ending one. For a customer their story from need to purchase truly never ends, as they go through the same process over and over again.

We will now allow ourselves some space for discussion, where we can cover some of the findings more critically and shed some light on topics that are outside the scope of our thesis but may present interesting avenues of research for future projects.



7.2 Contribution to literature

One of the main goals of this research project was to be able to contribute to the nascent state of literature in the field of the customer journey. In the introduction of the thesis we found that a minority of research in the wider field of marketing focuses on this specific niche, which we found was drastic as a model of the customer journey may potentially present a model that can be used to review a very wide range of traditional marketing models.

An earlier model of the customer journey was presented by Lemon and Verhoef in an article published in 2016 (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77). This model was based on a comprehensive literature review and presented the evolution of the customer journey over the years of marketing research. The model that they presented served as a basis of our study and we have been able to test certain underlying foundations of their model as well as those foundations underlying the changes and additions we added to the model, primarily through exploratory empirical research. Indeed, we were able to confirm most of the foundations underlying the model of Lemon and Verhoef, such as (1) the continuous nature of the customer journey, (2) the critical role of the customer experience and (3) the critical role of touch points. What we have attributed by presented our own model though is that we have explored the inner workings of the customer journey and as such were able to determine more thoroughly (1) the functioning of touch points as a critical part of the customer journey, (2) the functioning of the customer experience as a critical part of the customer journey, (3) the functioning between touch points and the customer experience and (4) add the customer's rational and cognition.

Another important article in the field of the customer journey is the work by Kuehnl et al., that was published in 2019. We were able to support certain findings in their work, such as the functioning of touch points. Additionally, we were also able to support certain counterarguments to their article such as (1) that analyzing brand-owned touch points requires taking into account the other types of touch point and (2) that certain aspects of brand-owned touch points function in the way as described by Kuehnl et al. only when one complements this with the wider findings that we have presented in our work (Kuehnl et al., 2019).

Generally, we feel that our model contributes to the overall state of research in the field of the customer journey. By conducting comprehensive literature reviews and combining this with empirically obtained data from customers themselves, we have synthesized all the current knowledge on the customer journey into a single model that can be used for future research. The avenues to take from this point forward are plenty and provide great opportunities for marketers to understand more deeply the relationship between customer and company. While previous literature has approached the customer journey on a shallower level, more recent works have made great stops forward. We are then talking about articles such as those by Lemon & Verhoef (2016), Kuehnl et al. (2019), Barwitz & Maas (2018), McColl-Kennedy et al. (2017 & 2019), Stein & Ramaseshan (2016) and Ieva & Ziliani (2017, 2018a & 2018b). While these are the articles that we ourselves feel have provided the most value to our research, it is the understanding from the combined previous work in the field that has enabled us to synthesize what we believe to be a relatively accurate model of the customer journey. Our contribution then is a combination of those prior works, that sometimes focus on separate insights. By combining all these previous insights, we have created a comprehensive overview of the current status of research in the field of the customer journey while at the same time



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stimulating further research that can build upon our model that serves as an aggregation of current knowledge in the field. From our model, further research can structurally sprout off research particular elements of the model, such as how customer cognition affects touch point design, how to segment customers in the future, how to maintain a database of touch points and how different interactions with touch points lead to different outcomes. The possibilities are nearly endless.

Finally, in the introduction we started by presenting the field of digital marketing and focusing heavily on this digital aspect of marketing. What can indeed be found from the interviews we conducted, is that the digital world is becoming increasingly intertwined with the physical one – to the point that one can argue whether or not digital and tradition marketing should now simply be called marketing. Our reasoning for this is that it is evident that customers use the channel that makes their task of filling a need as easy as possible. When narrowing down their choice they use the easily accessible alternative of the internet, with its intricate web of touch points. Once they arrive at a product that may fit their list of requirements, they might want to check it out physically to do a final inspection. Interestingly, this does not necessarily need to be in a store but could be achieved by allowing the customer to order the product and send it back without any hassle. What we essentially feel, is that the model of the customer journey as presented in this thesis is a more overarching model of marketing in general that could be applied to both digital touch points, physical touch points and – most importantly – a combination of the two. To focus primarily on one or the other in terms of marketing research may in the near future mean to just explore certain segments within the customer journey more closely. While some customers may purchase their products solely online, most purchases will still require an offline interaction that is crucial to the customer's journey as well. What can be said though is that digital marketing is taking an increasingly important role in allowing customers to ease their task of finding the best product for their needs. It will grow – and perhaps already has grown – into the most important marketing channel to focus on. Our addendum to this is that it should be considered as highly important, but not most important. Indeed, most important is to take the overall perspective of the customer journey, and then to determine which specific parts of the journey are crucial for a company to focus on.

Overall, we argue that our thesis raises the overall level of knowledge in the field of marketing and specifically the niche of the customer journey to a new level and allows for early steps towards quantitative studies in this young field of study. We have some hypotheses and ideas for future research that we will present under point 7.4.

7.3 Practical implications

While this thesis is largely academic of nature, we have also taken into account the importance of practitioners and the benefits they may draw from our research. The conclusions from our research serves practitioners and companies in the following ways:

- (1) It informs practitioners and companies in what way they should manage their touch points.
- (2) It informs practitioners and companies how they should start thinking about segmenting their customers, and in what way the customers' touch points may affect their business and marketing strategies.



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(3) The conceptual model of the customer journey allows practitioners and companies to hypothesize about the customer journeys of their own customers and at what point in this process to place their most critical touch points.

While our study does not give direct pointers on what companies can do specifically to boost critical key performance indicators, it does allow practitioners and companies to reflect on their approach to marketing on a corporate strategy level. The direct pointers that we can conclude from our study are that companies should:

(1) Determine what their strategic goal is with the customer journey i.e. where do they want the customer to travel towards other than the purchase. While our study took the perspective of the customer, the company can put their own perspective right alongside that of the customer. An example of goal setting could be a restaurant that wants customers to have a smooth experience when booking a table online that leads to customers booking a table and following through on their booking, with potential for them coming back in the future.

(2) Compile a database of their touch points and in what way they contribute to the overall strategic goal of the customer journey. Following the previous example, the restaurant could include their own website, potential partners they have online, their physical location and service, any after-purchase service, digital communications that the customer may receive from the company etcetera.

(3) Identify key touch points and measure their performance along the customer journey of their customers. A key touch point for a restaurant could for example be their website, and the experience that customers have there.

(4) Implement changes to those key touch points if necessary and follow up if these changes are causing positive changes to the overall strategic goal of the company in regard to the customer journey.

Future research could build on our study to further flesh out and explore specific parts of the customer journey to give more direct pointers to how companies could use the customer journey in their business and marketing strategies.

7.4 Limitations and future research

As with any study, ours has to be placed within certain borders and therefore there are certain limitations involved. In this section, we will present the major limitations of our study and propose how future studies could be designed to fill potential gaps raised by these limitations.

The qualitative nature of the study presents the issue of subjective interpretation, both on part of the subjects involved in the study, as well as our interpretation as researchers. The major result from this is that it is hard to generalize study results, which is characteristic of qualitative studies (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 327). Still, the intent of the study was to more closely explore and characterize the customer journey, with the purpose of conceptualizing a model that has a high degree of credibility. The semi-structured interview design adopted to conduct some first empirical tests provides a reasonable way of achieving a higher degree of both reliability and validity in the outcome of our study (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 327). As such, we adopted this design to allow our study to



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achieve high credibility and dependability. To achieve transferability as well as confirmability, future studies that use the conceptual model presented in this thesis should be of a more quantitative nature in order to test the various relationships that we have discussed.

Another limitation that should be mentioned is the number of interviews that have been conducted. In total we performed eight of them. There were mainly two criteria applied when making our decision. First and foremost, we were constrained in both time and resources. A similar study design adopted by Kuehnl et al. (2019) reached close to 40 interviewees; yet the peer-reviewed, academic nature of their study implies multiple years in terms of time and potentially a budget to conduct the research with – we had neither. Secondly, we used the principle of data saturation. Data saturation is achieved when researchers cannot find and collect additional information that could evolve a conceptual theory any further (Francis et al., 2010, p. 1230). This, again, ties into the subjective nature to studies of a qualitative design. We found that the responses of our eight subjects proved satisfactory in terms of the intent with our study, which is to characterize the customer journey through the eyes of the customer. We found that these eight experiences corresponded closely to one another and presented early empirical evidence to the model's credibility. Still, in order for the model to be tested using the powers of statistics and hypotheses, quantitative studies should be carried out using our model as the theoretical framework. This would also attribute to the generalizability of the model.

Thirdly, there is always the risk that interviewees could subconsciously try to affect and bias the results of the study. For instance, by answering interview questions only according to what they want to reveal or what the researchers might want to hear and not what reality would actually look like. This is in line with Saunders et al. who state that “the interviewee may...be willing to participate but may nevertheless... choose not to reveal and discuss an aspect of the topic...” (Saunders et al., 2009, pp. 326-327). We tried to contain this issue of receiving only a partial image of the truth by repeatedly questioning the interviewees about their individual opinion and thereby digging deeper into the actual genuine truth.

A fourth limitation concerns the distribution in terms of the demographic characteristics of our subjects. While we aimed for a well-spread range of subjects, we are lacking respondents between the ages of 40 to 50 years old, as well as those of a more elderly nature and more subjects that have not completed an education at university level. Additionally, all the participants involved were aware of how to search products online and purchase products online. Those that experience the customer journey solely offline may experience a completely difference type of customer journey. While we theorize that this will not be the case due to some overlapping principles in the cognition and mindset of the customer, this could be researched in future studies. Despite this, the nature of our study was characterized by a focus on the digital society of today and tomorrow and as such may present a model of the customer journey as a new way of approach today's and tomorrow's customers.

Most of the limitations mentioned refer to either the qualitative nature of the study and therefore its inability to yield generalizable results or the subjectivity of a semi-structured interview design. Such limitations are to be expected with a study of this nature and as such provide good opportunities for future research to adopt different research designs while focusing on the same topic. Most interestingly would be the



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quantitative study and analysis of some of the ideas presented in this thesis. Finding statistical significance for the relationships as presented in the conceptual model would be the next step to create a generalizable model of the customer journey that might one day be adopted as a new way of looking at the conduction of marketing. Some potential topics that we are particularly keen on gaining more insight on:

- The functioning of our model in different contexts, cultures and industries. For example testing our model against Hofstede's approach to culture would be incredibly interesting.
- A further and deeper classification of touch points and how they potentially differ in strength, depending on context, interaction type, culture, segment etcetera.
- A more comprehensive understanding on what the customer journey means for traditional marketing and what next-level marketing would look like.
- An escalation of the field of the customer journey as the next step for research on marketing in general. We feel that the customer journey model has the potential to become a model for marketing as a whole. This requires heaps of further research though.

As a conclusion, we can state that we opted to focus more on the qualitative side of characterizing the customer journey. This means an increased focus on the credibility and dependability that such a design brings through the possibility to have subject's clarify answers and to allow the exploration of interesting avenues that presented themselves during the conduction of the interviews. These are indeed reflected in literature on the topic of research design (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 327). We have incorporated such a design into our study and as such are eager to see what future studies of a different nature might bring.



8. TRUTH CRITERIA

In this chapter we are going to treat the truth criteria in order to examine the quality of the conducted research. As suitable criteria we have detected *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*.

When examining the research quality of a scientific work there are in general two cornerstones that are critical: validity and reliability (Golafshani, 2003, pp. 600-601). If researchers want to decrease the likelihood of “getting the answer wrong”, they really need to pay close attention to these two cornerstones (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 156).

Validity concerns the link between two different variables, trying to answer the question if the relation between those two variables is causal or not and if the research results really mean what they are indicating (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 157). So, when talking about valid measures, it means that they are actually “capturing what they are supposed to capture” (Ghuri & Grønhaug, 2010, p. 78). While Reliability is focusing on the consistency of the findings that researchers will obtain through using certain data collection methods and measurement techniques (Saunders et al., 2009, p. 156). It is mostly referring to a measurement's stability (Ghuri & Grønhaug, 2010, p. 79).

As one can see when reading these described characteristics, they mostly seem to have an underlying quantitative nature, because their focus seems to lay mainly on the topic of measurement. Which is why those cornerstones are heavily discussed in literature when it comes to their usage in qualitative research.

In general, there are three different stances that researchers are pleading for: There are the ones who argue that validity and reliability (1) remain suitable concepts and can be adapted even for qualitative studies; (2) are mostly impractical for qualitative studies and new criteria should be adopted; and (3) can still be used when substituting them with parallel concepts, which are taking the qualitative characteristics into account (Morse et al., 2002, pp. 13-14). We decided to follow the third option for two reasons: Firstly, we used a qualitative strategy to approach the examination of our research question and therefore quantifiable observations and statistical measurements didn't serve the academical purpose within this research paper. And secondly, it was of greatest importance for us as researchers to achieve credible and high qualitative results.

The authors Lincoln and Guba for instance used “trustworthiness” as a synonym for validity and reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 601). Their work is very imprinting, and other authors are following their approach. Golafshani states that in order to make sure that reliability is guaranteed in a qualitative study, it is necessary to have a high trustworthiness (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601). He even numerates several researchers who “developed their own concepts of validity and have... adopted what they consider to be more appropriate terms, such as... trustworthiness.” (Golafshani, 2003, p. 602)

The most frequently used criteria in order to create an evaluation of a qualitative research are those proposed by Lincoln and Guba in 1985 (Cope, 2014, p. 89). Their notion of trustworthiness includes the four concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability as well as confirmability (Morse et al., 2002, p. 14). So, in order to assess the quality of our research, we are going to discuss those four concepts and examine their applicability regarding our thesis.



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The first concept - credibility can be seen as an “overriding goal of qualitative research... [and it] refers to confidence in the truth of the data and interpretations of them.” (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 539) So, when conducting qualitative research, it is indispensable for researchers to build confidence in the veracity of their findings. The authors Lincoln and Guba state that the findings’ believability need to be reinforced through the research that is conducted and that the study is regarded as credible by external readers (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 539). This can be done by presenting the researchers’ experiences and validating their results with the interviewees (Cope, 2014, p. 89). The author Cope furthermore suggests, that researchers “should demonstrate engagement, methods of observation, and audit trails” (Cope, 2014, p. 89). In our thesis we have undertaken several measures to reach high credibility across the three purposes of our research study. We cross-checked each other’s work and continuously ensured that both researchers agreed upon something before moving to the next item on the research agenda. Moreover, the interviews were designed using the same cross-checking principle as stated before. Moreover, we did individual pre-tests and then compared notes on where to improve the interview design. This new design was then tested again. Additionally, all interviews were recorded, transcribed and the transcriptions attached to this thesis to ensure high transparency – though we removed them from the published version for ethical considerations regarding our subjects’ privacy. In order to not allow any misunderstandings to cloud the results from the interviews, a semi-structured interview design was chosen to allow us to ask follow-up questions that could clear up any misunderstandings.

The second concept - Transferability focuses on the issues of how generalizable the research results are and to which degree they can be transferred to other research scenarios (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 539). Therefore, the researchers need to ensure the provision of adequate data as well as a description of all carried out implementations in order to demonstrate to their readers, if the data can be used in other contexts too (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 539). By presenting adequate information about the interviewees, researchers can enable the reader to estimate whether the study is transferable or not (Cope, 2014, p. 89). In order to obtain a high transferability within this study, we have documented demographic characteristics of the interviewees that would allow for replicability or comparability, while still maintaining the subjects’ privacy. We also explained the crucial elements of our thesis like for instance the research question; research purpose; theoretical framework; conceptual model and our empirical findings. Furthermore, the literary reviews were conducted and presented in a manner that ensures maximum replicability and the construction, design and operation of the interviews were described with as much detail as possible to allow for reconstruction in future research studies. In addition, the interviews were conducted over a variety of subjects with different nationalities, gender and age groups. This to ensure that result would potentially match over demographic differences. Moreover, does the interview design in general allows for a wide range of potential interview candidates. Likewise, an interview guide was developed. This, to ensure consistency and to provide the readers with information about the asked questions and themes. As well as to provide them with a contextual feeling in which prevalent conditions the questions were answered and how the interpretation of the results should take place.

In the context of qualitative research, the third concept - Dependability can be regarded as the twin brother of reliability in quantitative research (Golafshani, 2003, p. 601). Thus, it is concerning the question if the spawned findings are stable at different points of time, when asking the same or similar participants again in a replicated study under



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similar conditions (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 539). So, dependability can be reached, when “another researcher concurs with the decision trails at each stage of the research process” (Cope, 2014, p. 89). In this context, Lincoln and Guba suggest using an “inquiry audit” to examine the consistency of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 317). In our study, it was of utmost importance to establish dependability. While a thorough inquiry audit could not be conducted, we ensured that our review presented all available documentation to be able to be subjected to a thorough inquiry audit. Firstly, we formulated the research question, we then selected our interviewees, conducted the interviews while recording and writing down essential comments, we transcribed the interviews and have chosen a suitable method for analyzing the gathered information. Through this procedure we made sure that dependability was prevalent because all variances were documented and can therefore be comprehended, reviewed and reconstructed by other researchers at any time.

Finally, Confirmability is regarding the objectivity of the results that the researchers have achieved (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 58). The collected data should portray the actual answers, that the interviewees have given, and biased interpretations of the interviewees should be avoided (Polit & Beck, 2008, p. 539). Researchers can establish confirmability by depicting how findings and interpretations were generated and by emphasizing that the results originate directly from the gathered data (Cope, 2014, p. 89). We were striving for high confirmability within this study and we have tried its realization through the provision of rich quotations of the interviewees covering each discussed subject area. Indeed, at any time we gave an interpretation of the data we refer to either a direct quotation of a subject or which subject(s) we are basing our interpretation on. We also documented thoroughly how findings and interpretations were generated. This we did by creating transcriptions of all the interviews and using a mix of rich quotations in our text, identifying which subject’s interview we are basing our statements on and by aiming overall to have results and statements source directly from the data gathered from the subjects.



9. SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

Originally, we planned to put this part into our general conclusions, but we as authors are highly concerned with matters such as privacy and the deep implications that marketing can play in the lives of the average person. Therefore, we decided to dedicate an individual segment to the societal implications of (digital) marketing in the future and what role our research may play in these developments.

As we explored in our introduction, today's society is characterized by a rapid advancement of information technologies that allow for companies to reach out the customers in completely new and innovative ways. Part of the intention that we had with this thesis was to explore a new way of looking at how the customer may navigate this rapidly evolving world. The sea of touch points available to the average customer is staggeringly large when one starts to truly contemplate. We felt that a large aspect of this study therefore is just this aspect of a digital society and shedding light on how companies, and customers, can traverse its challenges in the future – particularly from a marketing-related standpoint.

When we look towards the future, and we do not have to look far, we can see that new, complex waves of technology are about to wash over us. Advancements such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality and digital home assistants such as Google Home and Amazon's Alexa will eventually play a large part in our lives. When overlapping these developments with our findings on the customer journey it shows that it is possible for companies to design a customer journey that is more customer-friendly, more efficient and indeed perhaps better for the environment as well. It would save customers a lot of unnecessary headache if instead of being torpedoed by an army of touch points, they are affected by one strong touch point at the right place and at the right time. Information overload is something that is already a troubling concept, and it will be hard to see how much of an impact the marketing efforts of companies may have in the future – particularly when empowered by highly advanced digital technologies.

With our conceptualization of the customer journey, we attempted to create a model that is future proof in order to discover where and how customers are impacted by the myriad touch points surrounding us. In our practical implications we presented the idea of companies constructing a database of their touch points to see which ones work and which ones don't. Essentially, we would aim to see a future where the only marketing content we see in our lives are the ones that can make a distinct impact on our lives instead of wasting psychological space and effort.

Finally, one cannot deny that there is a multitude of growing global issues that need attending, such as energy conservation, sustainable production and similar themes. Allowing companies to more accurately determine the customer journeys of their target markets, will enable them to optimize their resource allocation in a way such as to reduce waste, unnecessarily spent energy and indeed allow for more optimized production and logistics. This is a dream that we hope our conceptual model of the customer journey will play a small part in. We ourselves have taken the utmost consideration to societal aspects in our study, to the point of not printing out any part of the thesis other than required in the end. All work, review and commenting were conducted completely digitally. Even travelling was done eco-friendly. We took the bike, used public transport and even coffee purchased during our writing was sourced ecologically.



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Appendix I: Research question and purpose overview

Research Question	How is the customer purchasing decision affected by the customer's interaction with touch points throughout the customer journey?
Purpose 1	To sequentially create a model of the customer journey as an answer to the research question.
Purpose 2	To provide a model that serves as a practical tool for practitioners.
Purpose 3	To provide a model that serves as a foundation for future research studies.



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Appendix II: Literature review search queries

Queries used in initial search first literature review:

KEY ("customer journey") AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2019) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2017) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2015) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2014)) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Business Research") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Industrial Marketing Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "European Journal Of Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Strategic Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of The Academy Of Marketing Science") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Marketing Science") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Consumer Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal of Digital and Social Media Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "International Journal of Internet Marketing And Advertising") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing Communications") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Interactive Marketing"))

KEY ("touch points") AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2019) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2017) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2015) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2014)) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Business Research") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Industrial Marketing Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "European Journal Of Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Strategic Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of The Academy Of Marketing Science") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Marketing Science") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Consumer Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal of Digital and Social Media Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "International Journal of Internet Marketing And Advertising") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing Communications") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Interactive Marketing"))

KEY ("touchpoints") AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2019) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2017) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2015) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR , 2014)) AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Business Research") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Industrial Marketing Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "European Journal Of Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing Management") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Strategic Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing") OR



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LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of The Academy Of Marketing Science")
OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Marketing Science") OR LIMIT-TO
(EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Consumer Marketing") OR LIMIT-TO
(EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal of Digital and Social Media Marketing") OR LIMIT-
TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "International Journal of Internet Marketing And
Advertising") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Marketing
Communications") OR LIMIT-TO (EXACTSRCTITLE , "Journal Of Interactive
Marketing"))

Query used in second search first literature review:

KEY ("customer journey") AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2019) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2017) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2015) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2014)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar") OR LIMIT-TO
(DOCTYPE,"ip"))

KEY ("touch points") AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2019) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2017) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2015) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2014)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar") OR LIMIT-TO
(DOCTYPE,"ip"))

KEY ("touchpoints") AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2019) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2017) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2015) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2014)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar") OR LIMIT-TO
(DOCTYPE,"ip"))

Queries used in second literature review:

KEY ("customer experience") AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2019) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2018) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2017) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2016) OR LIMIT-TO (PUBYEAR,2015) OR LIMIT-TO
(PUBYEAR,2014)) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE,"ar") OR LIMIT-TO
(DOCTYPE,"ip"))



Appendix III: Interview guide

Introduction

In this interview we want you to put yourself into the situation of a common daily life scenario. We are going to sketch and explain this scenario to you and we will then in a next step ask you several questions relevant to different subject matters.

Permission and Information on Privacy-related matters

To protect your identity as well as your privacy, we will anonymize your answers and only display simple demographic characteristics that apply to you, such as gender, age, occupation and nationality. Parts of the answers that you give today will be incorporated into our research and may be quoted in the final version of our thesis - again using an anonymous alias. We will be honest in our representation of your answers, and will in no way attempt to twist them to fit our research agenda. Finally, we are aiming for an open and honest dialogue with you as a research subject and will provide you with the final version of our thesis so that you can for yourself see how we have incorporated your answers into our study.

Knowing this, are you willing to participate in this interview and give consent to the usage of your answers in our research study and any works related to this study that may be published now or in the future?

Scenario Description

The scenario that we will present you with today is one where you are purchasing a product that normally requires more thorough consideration.

1. Can you think of such a product? Could you name the type of product for us?
2. What about this product makes you feel it requires more thorough consideration?
3. Have you purchased such a product recently, or can you recall when you last purchased such a product?

Now that we have established your scenario, we will move into the detailed part of the questioning. Please answer based on the scenario and, if necessary, recall the last time you purchased such a product.

Determining the purchasing process part of the customer journey

If interesting avenues of information appear during the interview, ask:

1. You mention . . . Can you elaborate on this?
 2. Why was it like that?
 3. How did that make you feel?
 4. What did that make you do?
-
1. Why would you purchase such a product?
 2. Do you look for information when buying such a product?
 - a. How easy is it to search for information online?



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- b. What makes it easy?
 - c. What makes it hard?
3. Do you consider some brands before others?
 - a. How does this affect your purchase?
4. Do you buy the product online?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Describe what you do when you buy the product?
 - c. What is helpful while buying?
 - d. What does not help you in this?
5. Describe the period between the purchase of the product and when you start using it for the first time.
 - a. What are your experiences? Positive/Negative?
 - b. Do you interact with digital media during this time? Why?
6. Once using the product:
 - a. Do you notice the brand of that product more or less often around you?
 - b. What experiences do you have when using the product?
 - c. What contributes to this?

Themes part

- 1) I am always a customer.
 - a) Why?
- 2) There is more to buying a product than just the purchase.
 - a) Why?
- 3) What I see, read, hear and do on digital media affect my purchases.
 - a) Why?
- 4) What I see, read, hear and do on digital media affects my purchases equally.
 - a) Why?
- 5) My experiences affect my purchases.
 - a) Why?
- 6) My experiences are affected by emotions.
 - a) Why?
- 7) What I see, read, hear and do on digital media affect my experiences.
 - a) Why?
- 8) My experiences are valuable to me as a customer.
 - a) Why?
- 9) My experiences affect only the purchase of a product.
 - a) Why?