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A large, stylized sunburst graphic in shades of teal and dark teal, positioned on the left side of the cover. It has a dark teal center and radiating segments of varying lengths and shades.

Expanding the Understanding of Omnichannel Customer Journeys

An Experience Perspective

Isadora Gasparin



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EXPANDING THE UNDERSTANDING OF OMNICHANNEL CUSTOMER JOURNEYS

An Experience Perspective

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ISADORA GASPARIN: Expanding the Understanding of Omnichannel

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ABSTRACT

Customer journeys have become increasingly complex as customers combine touchpoints across online and offline channels. While firms pursue omnichannel strategies to enhance customer experience, research has largely adopted a firm-centric view of omnichannel customer journeys (OCJs). This perspective emphasizes channel integration, journey design, and customer evaluations of firm-controlled touchpoints, but it overlooks how experiences emerge and evolve along the OCJ and how actors beyond the focal firm influence the process. Addressing these gaps, this doctoral thesis develops an experience-focused, customer-centric understanding of OCJs. Following an abductive research approach, the thesis iterates between theory and empirical insights to refine how OCJs are conceptualized and understood.

The thesis comprises four articles. Article I examines how customers perceive integration in OCJs and how these perceptions shape their experiences. Through interviews and focus group data, it conceptualizes integration as two distinct dimensions, i.e., perceived consistency of retail mix elements and perceived connectivity across touchpoints, and shows that positive experiences can emerge even when one dimension is low, challenging assumptions of an “integration imperative.”

Article II reviews the literature to evaluate how omnichannel research incorporates the customer perspective. The analysis reveals a narrow focus on customer evaluations and firm-controlled touchpoints, underscoring the need for a broader, experience-based, and consumer-oriented view. The article outlines pathways for research to develop consumer-based insights to inform omnichannel strategies.

Article III investigates third-party touchpoints as interactions mediated or intermediated by entities beyond a focal firm and a focal customer, such as delivery partners, influencers, or other customers. Using the Sequential Incident Technique, it maps end-to-end journeys and identifies the different roles third-party touchpoints play in shaping the journey’s trajectory and the dynamics of the customer experience.

Article IV develops a higher-order framework to understand journeys as experiential processes. Through a theory synthesis approach, it integrates journey

approaches fragmented in the literature and introduces three building blocks that provide a foundation for understanding experiences across contexts.

Together, these articles provide a comprehensive understanding of OCJs and of how customer experience emerges and evolves throughout this process. This expanded view emphasizes customers' experiences embedded in their lifeworlds and highlights the roles of various actors beyond the focal firm in shaping those experiences. Adopting an experiential perspective on omnichannel customer journeys offers significant theoretical and practical implications for the fields of customer journey, customer experience, and omnichannel marketing literature.

KEYWORDS: Customer journey; Customer experience; Omnichannel marketing; Touchpoint; Purchase journey; Consumer journey; Consumer-based strategy.

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Asiakaspolut ovat muuttuneet yhä monimutkaisemmiksi, kun asiakkaat käyttävät ja yhdistävät kosketuspisteitä sekä verkossa että fyysisissä kanavissa. Yritykset kehittävät omnikanavaisia strategioita asiakaskokemuksen parantamiseksi, mutta tutkimus on pitkälti omaksunut yritysälhtöisen näkökulman omnikanavaisiin asiakaspolkuihin (omnichannel customer journeys, OCJ). Tämä näkökuuma painottaa kanavien integraatiota, asiakaspolun suunnittelua ja asiakkaiden arvioita yrityksen kontrolloimissa kosketuspisteissä, mutta se sivuuttaa sen, miten kokemukset syntyvät ja kehittyvät OCJ:n varrella ja miten yrityksen ulkopuoliset toimijat vaikuttavat tähän prosessiin. Näihin tutkimusaukkoihin vastaten tämä väitöskirja kehittää kokemuskokemisen, asiakasälhtöisen ymmärryksen OCJ:stä. Abduktiivista tutkimusotetta noudattaen väitöskirja vuorottelee teorian ja empiiristen havaintojen välillä täsmen-tääkseen, miten OCJ:t käsitteellistetään ja ymmärretään.

Väitöskirja koostuu neljästä artikkelista. Artikkelei I tarkastelee, miten asiakkaat hahmottavat integraation OCJ:ssä ja miten nämä havainnot muovaavat heidän kokemuksiaan. Haastattelu- ja fokusryhmäaineiston pohjalta artikkeli käsitteellistää integraation kahtena erillisenä ulottuvuutena: vähittäiskaupan markkinointimixin koettuna johdonmukaisuutena ja kosketuspisteiden koettuna kytkeytyneisyytenä. Tulokset osoittavat, että myönteisiä kokemuksia voi syntyä, vaikka toinen ulottuvuus olisi matalalla tasolla, mikä haastaa oletukset integraation välttämättömyydestä.

Artikkeli II tarkastelee aiempaa kirjallisuutta arvioidakseen, miten omnikanava-tutkimus on huomioinut asiakasnäkökulman. Analyysi paljastaa kapean painotuksen asiakkaiden arvioihin ja yrityksen kontrolloimiin kosketuspisteisiin, mikä korostaa tarvetta laajemmalle, kokemuskokemisen ja kuluttajälhtöiselle näkökulmalle. Artikkelei ehdottaa tutkimussuuntaa, joiden avulla voidaan luoda kuluttajälhtöistä ymmärrystä omnikanavastrategioiden teuksi.

Artikkeli III tutkii kolmansien osapuolten kosketuspisteitä vuorovaikutuksina, jotka välittyvät tai välillisesti tapahtuvat yrityksen ja asiakkaan ulkopuolisten toimijoiden kautta, kuten toimituskumppanit, vaikuttajat tai muut asiakkaat. Sequential Incident Technique -menetelmää hyödyntäen tutkimus kartoittaa asiakaspolkuja kokonaisvaltaisesti ja tunnistaa kolmansien osapuolten kosketuspisteiden erilaisia rooleja asiakaspolun etenemisessä ja asiakaskokemuksen dynamiikan muotoutumisessa.

Artikkeli IV kehittää teoreettisen viitekehyksen, jonka avulla asiakaspolkuja voidaan ymmärtää kokemuksellisin prosesseina. Teoriasynteesin kautta artikkeli yhdistää aiemmassa kirjallisuudessa hajanaisesti käsiteltyjä asiakaspolkunäkökulmia ja esittelee kolme elementtiä, jotka luovat perustan kokemusten ymmärtämiselle eri konteksteissa.

Yhdessä nämä artikkelit tarjoavat kokonaisvaltaisen ymmärryksen omnikanavaisista asiakaspoluista sekä siitä, miten asiakaskokemukset syntyvät ja kehittyvät tämän prosessin aikana. Tämä laajennettu näkökulma korostaa asiakkaiden kokemuksia heidän omassa elämismaailmassaan ja nostaa esiin erilaisten yrityksen ulkopuolisten toimijoiden roolit näiden kokemusten muovaamisessa. Kokemuksellinen näkökulma omnikanavaisiin asiakaspolkuihin tarjoaa merkittäviä teoreettisia ja käytännön implikaatioita asiakaspolkuja, asiakaskokemusta ja omnikanavamarkkinointia koskevalle tutkimuskirjallisuudelle.

ASIASANAT: Asiakaspolku; Asiakaskokemus; Omnikanavamarkkinointi; Kosketuspiste; Ostopolku; Kuluttajapolku; Kuluttajalähtöinen strategia.

UNIVERSIDADE DE TURKU

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ISADORA GASPARIN: Ampliando a compreensão das jornadas

omnicanal: uma perspectiva da experiência do cliente

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RESUMO

As jornadas do cliente tornaram-se cada vez mais complexas à medida que os clientes combinam pontos de contato (touchpoints) entre canais online e offline. Enquanto as empresas seguem estratégias omnicanal a fim de aprimorar a experiência do cliente, a pesquisa acadêmica tem, majoritariamente, adotado uma visão centrada na empresa das jornadas do cliente omnicanal (omnichannel customer journeys, OCJs). Essa perspectiva enfatiza a integração de canais, o desenho da jornada e as avaliações do cliente sobre pontos de contato controlados pela empresa, mas negligencia como as experiências emergem e evoluem ao longo da OCJ e como atores além da empresa focal influenciam esse processo. Abordando essas lacunas de pesquisa, esta tese de doutorado desenvolve uma compreensão das OCJs focada na experiência e centrada no cliente. Em uma abordagem de pesquisa abducativa, a tese alterna entre teoria e evidências empíricas para refinar a forma como as OCJs são conceituadas e compreendidas.

A tese é composta por quatro artigos. O Artigo I examina como os clientes percebem a integração nas OCJs e como essas percepções moldam suas experiências. Por meio de dados de entrevistas e de grupos focais, conceitualiza a integração como duas dimensões distintas—a consistência percebida dos elementos do mix de varejo e a conectividade percebida entre os pontos de contato—e mostra que experiências positivas podem emergir mesmo quando uma das dimensões é baixa, desafiando suposições sobre um “imperativo da integração”.

O Artigo II revisa a literatura para avaliar de que modo a pesquisa sobre omnicanalidade incorpora a perspectiva do cliente. A análise revela um foco restrito às avaliações do cliente e aos pontos de contato controlados pela empresa, o que evidencia a necessidade de uma visão mais ampla, baseada na experiência e orientada ao consumidor. O artigo esboça caminhos de pesquisa para desenvolver insights baseados no consumidor que informem estratégias omnicanal.

O Artigo III investiga pontos de contato com terceiros (third-party touchpoints), definidos como interações mediadas ou intermediadas por entidades além da empresa focal e do cliente focal, tais como parceiros de entrega, influenciadores ou outros clientes. Utilizando a Sequential Incident Technique, mapeia jornadas de ponta a ponta e identifica diferentes papéis que os pontos de contato com terceiros desempenham na formação da trajetória da jornada e da dinâmica da experiência do cliente.

O Artigo IV desenvolve um framework de ordem superior para a compreensão de jornadas como processos experienciais. Por meio de uma síntese teórica, integra abordagens de jornada fragmentadas na literatura e introduz três elementos estruturantes que fornecem uma base para a compreensão de experiências em diferentes contextos.

Em conjunto, esses artigos oferecem uma compreensão abrangente das OCJs e de como a experiência do cliente emerge e evolui ao longo desse processo. Essa visão ampliada enfatiza as experiências dos clientes inseridas em suas vidas e destaca os papéis desempenhados por diversos atores além da empresa focal na formação dessas experiências. Uma perspectiva experiencial sobre jornadas do cliente omnicanal oferece implicações teóricas e práticas significativas para a literatura em jornada do cliente, experiência do cliente e marketing omnicanal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Jornada do cliente; Experiência do cliente; Marketing omnicanal; Ponto de contato; Jornada de compra; Jornada do consumidor; Estratégia baseada no consumidor.

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Doing a PhD has been the most transformative journey of my life so far. The path I envisioned on Day 1—March 9th, 2020—profoundly changed just a couple of days later, and continued to be redrawn month after month, year after year. Fortunately, I have not traveled alone. At each detour, I had the support to adjust. At every crossroads, I had help making decisions. I am immensely grateful to several people.

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Isadora Gasparin
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List of Original Publications

This compilation thesis is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

- I Gasparin, I., Panina, E., Becker, L., Yrjölä, M., Jaakkola, E., & Pizzutti, C. (2022). Challenging the "integration imperative": A customer perspective on omnichannel journeys. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102829>
- II Gasparin, I., & Slongo, L. A. (2023). Omnichannel as a consumer-based marketing strategy. *Journal of Contemporary Administration (Revista de Administração Contemporânea)*, 27(4). <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-7849rac2023220327.en>
- III Gasparin, I., Panina, E., Becker, L., & Jaakkola, E. (2026). Out of control? Understanding how third parties shape the customer journey. *Manuscript under review in an international peer-reviewed journal*. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 13th SERVSIG Conference in Bordeaux, France, in 2024.
- IV Gasparin, I. (2026). Conceptualizing the experienter journey. *Unpublished manuscript*. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the QUIS19 Conference in Rome, Italy, in 2025.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Motivation

Maria is moving cities to study. Her old computer is failing, and she needs a faster device to process large volumes of data for her courses. The purchase also excites her, as it is a chance to return to gaming, a hobby she has missed.

When she browses retailers' websites, disappointment sets in. Top-level computers exceed her already tight budget, strained by moving costs. Her sister offers to cover the difference, but Maria feels uncomfortable accepting and looks for alternatives.

On a second-hand platform, a promising option catches her eye. She sends it to a tech-savvy friend for advice, but she warns against it. Feeling lost, Maria researches computers on forums, creating a list of recommended models to track. She discovers a comparison blog and signs up for its newsletter, which arrives with an unexpected bonus: a partner retailer's discount code valid online and in-store.

With courses starting soon, Maria feels the pressure mounting. She asks her friend to visit the retailer with her. At the store, they shortlist cost-effective options and discuss them over coffee. Maria tells her friend that because of her, she now feels confident, though the option still exceeds her budget. She calls her sister and agrees to accept help since the amount needed is now less than originally offered. Her sister is happy to help, and Maria feels grateful.

She orders the computer online for delivery to her new address. After it arrives, she takes her old computer to a combined recycling and flea market facility, earning a discount on purchases there. She then buys a second-hand table instead of ordering the new one she had saved in a furniture store app. She feels good about making an environmentally friendly choice.

This fictitious vignette, inspired by empirical data collected for this research, broadly illustrates a consumer undergoing several events comprising multiple behaviors, emotions, and thoughts—that is, experiences. This process, in which experiences develop, is commonly represented in marketing research through the metaphor of a *journey* (Hamilton & Price, 2019; Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As a customer, Maria interacts with various organizations, platforms, and peers, mixing

and matching touchpoints, i.e., customers' points of contact with companies, brands, partners, other customers, and third parties (Barann et al., 2022; Dhebar, 2013). This reflects the growing consumer empowerment and control in the marketplace (Han & Broniarczyk, 2022; Kahn et al., 2018; Kozinets et al., 2021).

More specifically, the phenomenon illustrated by the vignette is an *omnichannel customer journey* (OCJ): the process a customer undergoes to purchase, access, and use an offering (e.g., products and services) across coordinated online and offline channels (Barwitz & Maas, 2018; Neslin, 2022; Tueanrat et al., 2021). While the purchase process has long been a central theme in marketing (see Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, for an overview of the conceptual roots of journeys), renewed interest stems from its increasing complexity, which now involves a myriad of channels and touchpoints. For example, in the European apparel industry, purchases across both online and offline channels account for 64% of total sales (McKinsey, 2024). Likewise, more than 90% of consumers surveyed in the United States purchase groceries both online and in stores (The Food Industry Association, 2025).

OCJs complicate marketing management, requiring a deeper understanding of the touchpoint landscape to develop agile, responsive, and personalized strategies (Marketing Science Institute, 2024). However, practitioners continue to have a limited view of how customers interact with a single firm across multiple channels and platforms (Demand Metric & Mitto, 2021), which undermines firms' ability to deliver industry-leading customer experiences (Harvard Business Review, 2023). Despite increasing investments in customer journey analytics (Gartner, 2024) and the emergence of roles such as the Chief Experience Officer (Deloitte, 2025; Dunlop et al., 2024), understanding and managing OCJs remain significant challenges. To overcome this challenge, marketers have been called to adopt a more customer-centric view of OCJs (Yu et al., 2025).

Marketing research offers many journey lenses to better understand OCJs. Maria's journey, for example, can be seen as a *customer purchase journey* for a new computer (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), a *social customer journey* with her sister and friend as companions (Hamilton et al., 2021), a *consumer job journey* related to relocating (Bettencourt et al., 2022), an *extended consumption journey* with the practice of gaming (Schau & Akaka, 2021), or a *consumer journey* toward a more sustainable lifestyle (Becker et al., 2020). These specific journey lenses are not merely framing alternatives; rather, they represent a multilevel and dynamic structure of interrelated phenomena (e.g., purchase, social interaction, goal pursuit) that occur simultaneously (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Hamilton & Price, 2019). For example, the customer purchase journey for a new computer (i.e., the lower-level phenomenon) both influences and is influenced by the extended consumption journey involving the practice of gaming (i.e., the higher-level phenomenon). Moreover, Maria's journeys affect and are affected by those of her friend and sister.

The example illustrates an important assumption underlying this thesis: journeys can be viewed from multiple perspectives, and such a “helicopter” view is relevant to gaining a truly customer-centric view of OCJs.

The OCJ phenomenon addressed in this thesis lies at the intersection of three fields of literature: *customer journey*, *customer experience*, and *omnichannel marketing*. *Customer journey* literature focuses on the decision-making and purchase process that customers go through across purchase stages and touchpoints with firms over time (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). *Customer experience* literature concerns customers’ reactions and responses to offering-related stimuli (e.g., brand, package) perceived at touchpoints (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020). Customer journey and customer experience are closely related concepts, as the former serves as a means to understand the latter (Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Rehman et al., 2026). *Omnichannel marketing* literature concentrates on the coordination and synergistic management of all touchpoints to ensure a seamless customer experience as customers move across channels (Neslin, 2022; Verhoef et al., 2015).

These three fields combine interests in strategy, retailing, and service research and have different roots within the marketing discipline, making the theoretical landscape of OCJs highly dynamic. Customer experience and customer journey, rooted in buying behavior processes and concepts such as service quality and customer satisfaction, now encompass considerably more complex processes involving not only a focal firm and its offering, but also many parties within and outside the firm’s control (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The focus of research has also shifted from overall service evaluations to customers’ spontaneous reactions and responses at the touchpoint level, including affective, cognitive, physical, sensorial, and social dimensions (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Gahler et al., 2023). Similarly, omnichannel marketing advances beyond multichannel marketing by moving away from siloed approaches to channel management and embracing the increasing integration of channels, which customers and firms use interchangeably and simultaneously in their interactions (Neslin, 2022; Thaichon et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2015). Accordingly, these key concepts continue to evolve in response to shifts in contextual factors, such as technological advances (e.g., artificial intelligence) and changing customer behaviors (e.g., technology adoption) (Homburg et al., 2017; Kahn et al., 2018; Schweidel et al., 2022).

Research across the three fields has explored questions related to firms’ management of multiple channels and touchpoints that form an OCJ (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Studies have examined how to integrate and optimize channels (Salvietti et al., 2022; Vaishnav & Ray, 2023) and the challenges associated with implementing omnichannel strategies (Cao & Li, 2018; Radomska et al., 2024), to the extent that full channel integration is often considered an unattainable goal (Cui

et al., 2020; Hajdas et al., 2022). Other studies have addressed the design and management of customer experience and customer journeys across touchpoints, including the structural, financial, and cultural dimensions involved (Arkadan et al., 2024; De Keyser & Van Vaerenbergh, 2024; Homburg et al., 2017; Homburg & Tischer, 2023). A further key area of interest has been the assessment of the impact of customer experience management on firm performance and its role as a source of competitive advantage (Wetzels et al., 2023). Mirroring a research interest in managing OCJs, studies have also explored how customers perceive firm-owned touchpoints in their journeys to be seamless, coherent, consistent, and personalized to their needs, and how such perceptions influence outcomes such as customer loyalty (Cocco & Demoulin, 2022; Jaakkola & Terho, 2021; Kuehnl et al., 2019).

While research has offered valuable insights into omnichannel and customer experience management, this thesis highlights two problems within the existing literature¹. First, theoretical frameworks (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and empirical studies tend to adopt a *firm-centric perspective on OCJs*, even when investigating customers' perceptions. Such an approach limits the understanding of OCJs to interactions between the focal firm and its customers, overlooking parts of the journey involving other actors (e.g., other customers, independent organizations) who also contribute to the customer experience. Second, and perhaps a consequence of the first problem, there is *limited insight into how the customer experience forms and evolves over time and across touchpoints*. Existing research often focuses on overall evaluations (e.g., journey seamlessness) or examines only snapshots of the journey (e.g., a small set of touchpoints and a single stage), thereby overlooking the dynamic and multidimensional nature of experiences. Consequently, the literature on OCJs remains in an emergent stage, lacking established theoretical frameworks that address the customer perspective and extensive empirical investigation of experiences throughout the OCJ. As a result, there are few practical guidelines for researchers and managers on how to operationalize these concepts to understand customers' perspectives on their OCJs.

To address these theoretical and managerial challenges, this thesis aligns with recent calls for a more customer-centric view of the processes that customers and consumers live through (e.g., Reitsamer & Becker, 2024; Schau & Akaka, 2021) and advocates for a departure from firm-centric perspectives on OCJs. This shift entails focusing on how customers navigate and make sense of their journeys, the kinds of experiences they have along the way, and how these experiences shape not only their relationships with firms but also their broader life goals. This thesis argues that a customer-centric perspective is best informed by a multilevel and dynamic structure

¹ Section 2.4 provides a detailed discussion of the research gaps that this thesis addresses.

(Becker et al., 2020; Bettencourt et al., 2022; Hamilton & Price, 2019), which expands the boundaries of an OCJ beyond the purchase process involving a focal firm. In doing so, it more effectively accounts for touchpoints beyond the firm's visibility, e.g., non-firm-controlled touchpoints (De Keyser et al., 2020).

1.2 Research Questions and Positioning

The purpose of this doctoral thesis is *to develop an experience-focused understanding of omnichannel customer journeys*. An experience-focused understanding departs from traditional firm-centric approaches that emphasize managing firm-controlled touchpoints. In doing so, it acknowledges that numerous actors beyond the focal firm shape the OCJ and influence consumers' affective, cognitive, sensorial, physical, and social experiences throughout the OCJ. Moreover, it recognizes that OCJs are not isolated events but are embedded within broader life journeys, highlighting the need for a holistic and dynamic understanding.

As the purpose of this thesis is exploratory, it aims to deepen understanding of the phenomenon of OCJs through *what* and *how* questions (Saunders et al., 2023). To achieve this, three research questions are posed:

RQ1: What does an omnichannel customer journey entail from a customer-centric perspective?

RQ1 focuses on what an OCJ is from the customers' perspective. In other words, it seeks to identify the key elements that delineate the phenomenon and its constituent parts (e.g., touchpoints) from the perspective of those living it. This provides a foundation for understanding not only OCJs but also broader journeys (e.g., consumption practices).

RQ2: How does the customer experience emerge and evolve along omnichannel customer journeys?

RQ2 explores the dynamics of customer experience (i.e., its formation and evolution) throughout the OCJ. Drawing on a multidimensional view of customer experience as non-deliberate, spontaneous reactions and responses to stimuli at touchpoints (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020), this thesis analyzes experience both at the granular touchpoint level (i.e., how the experience emerges) and at the holistic journey level (i.e., how the experience evolves). In doing so, it can not only identify experiences that emerge at different points in the journey but also examine their effects on subsequent steps.

RQ3: What affects omnichannel customer journeys beyond firm-controlled elements?

RQ3 explores elements of omnichannel customer journeys that fall outside a firm's direct control, such as interactions between customers and other customers and with independent organizations. This thesis argues for a broader understanding

of the various actors involved in the customer journey and the stimuli they provide that shape the experience, thereby supporting a truly customer-centric view.

Together, these research questions integrate three key domains (i.e., customer journey, customer experience, and omnichannel marketing), each bringing its own elements to the research project. The customer journey domain serves as the starting point, offering essential concepts (e.g., touchpoints) and frameworks (e.g., multilevel journey structures) that guide the empirical investigation and are revisited throughout the research process. Omnichannel marketing literature provides the contextual setting and highlights distinct features (e.g., touchpoint integration, seamless transitions) that characterize the OCJ as a complex, contemporary process requiring further exploration. Meanwhile, customer experience literature offers a lens for examining what occurs during OCJs from a customer-centric perspective, guiding investigations into dynamic customer responses and reactions. **Table 1** provides an overview of key concepts, which are further detailed in Chapter 2.

Table 1. Overview of key concepts

CONCEPT	DEFINITION	REFERENCES
Customer journey (Customer purchase journey; Service journey)	The process that a customer goes through to purchase, access, and use an offering. Subordinate to consumer journeys. It is divided into touchpoints.	Lemon & Verhoef (2016); Tueanrat et al. (2021)
Consumer journey	The process that a consumer goes through in pursuit of higher-order life goals. It is superordinate to customer journeys.	Becker et al. (2020); Hamilton & Price (2019)
Customer experience	The customer's non-deliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli embedded within a specific context. It comprises affective, cognitive, sensorial, physical, and social responses.	Becker & Jaakkola (2020); De Keyser et al. (2020)
Omnichannel marketing	The synergistic management of all channels and customer touchpoints, both internal and external to the firm. The objective is to ensure that the customer experience and firm performance are optimized across channels.	Cui et al. (2020); Verhoef et al. (2015)
Omnichannel customer journey (OCJ)	A customer journey characterized by high integration between online and offline channels.	Barwitz & Maas (2018); Neslin (2022)
Channel	A medium through which a customer and a firm interact.	Neslin et al. (2006)
Touchpoint	An individual moment of contact between a customer and a firm (and its offerings) across the customer journey. It comprises multiple offering-related stimuli.	Becker & Jaakkola (2020); De Keyser et al. (2020)

CONCEPT	DEFINITION	REFERENCES
Channel integration	The degree to which a firm coordinates the objectives, design, and deployment of its channels to create synergies for the firm and offer benefits to customers. It is the basis of omnichannel marketing.	Cao & Li (2015); Neslin (2022)
Offering-related stimuli	An offering-related element that can be perceived or sensed by the customer (e.g., logo design, packaging, text). It affects the customer experience.	Barann et al. (2020); Becker & Jaakkola (2020)

By developing a customer-centric perspective on OCJs, this doctoral thesis aims to contribute to all three literature fields. Specifically, it seeks to generate insights for omnichannel marketing, customer journey, and customer experience that extend beyond firm-controlled touchpoints. Inspired by Hamilton (2016) and the call to generate consumer insights that inform strategy, this thesis approaches customers primarily in their broader roles as consumers, rather than limiting them to their relationships with specific organizations. Central to this perspective is an expanded view of the OCJ, encompassing multiple actors (e.g., firms, technologies, social media, independent third parties) that support consumers in achieving both purchase- and non-purchase-related goals (Hamilton & Price, 2019).

This thesis is a compilation of four articles. **Table 2** outlines the role each article plays in answering the research questions derived from the research purpose.

Table 2. Compilation of articles forming the thesis and their role in answering the RQs.

ARTICLE	TYPE OF ARTICLE	ROLE IN ANSWERING THE RQS
I. Gasparin, I., Panina, E., Becker, L., Yrjölä, M., Jaakkola, E., & Pizzutti, C. (2022). Challenging the "integration imperative": A customer perspective on omnichannel journeys. <i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i> , 64.	Empirical	Explores perceptions of journey integration from the customer perspective in a business-to-consumer context (RQ1). Identifies multidimensional customer experiences that emerge in response to perceptions of journey integration (RQ2).
II. Gasparin, I., & Slongo, L. A. (2023). Omnichannel as a consumer-based marketing strategy. <i>Journal of Contemporary Administration (Revista de Administração Contemporânea)</i> , 27(4).	Literature review	Proposes research paths for developing a consumer-based understanding of the omnichannel customer journey (RQ1). Suggests research directions for understanding touchpoints within and beyond a firm's control (RQ3).

ARTICLE	TYPE OF ARTICLE	ROLE IN ANSWERING THE RQS
III. Gasparin, I., Panina, E., Becker, L., & Jaakkola, E. (2026). Out of control? Understanding how third parties shape the customer journey. <i>Manuscript under review in an international peer-reviewed journal.</i>	Empirical	Conceptualizes third-party touchpoints as integral components of customer journeys (RQ1). Investigates multidimensional experiences arising from interactions with third-party touchpoints in a business-to-consumer context (RQ2). Identifies the roles that third parties outside the firm's control play in shaping the dynamics of customer experience and the course of the customer journey (RQ3).
IV. Gasparin, I. (2026). Conceptualizing the experienter journey. <i>Unpublished manuscript.</i>	Conceptual	Develops a higher-order view of journeys, centered on the individual experiencing them (RQ1). Reconceptualizes touchpoints to include both market and non-market actors in the formation of experiences (RQ2). Clarifies how multiple actors beyond the firm participate in journeys and shape the experience (RQ3).

1.3 Outline of the Doctoral Thesis

This doctoral thesis is structured into five chapters (**Figure 1**). Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, outlines the study's motivation, and presents the research questions. Chapter 2 provides the conceptual foundations across three literature fields—customer journey, customer experience, and omnichannel marketing—and discusses their intersections, thereby developing the theoretical underpinnings that guide the research. Chapter 3 details the methodology, including the research philosophy, the approach to theory development, and the research strategy, design, data collection, and analysis. Chapter 4 summarizes the findings of each of the four articles that constitute the compilation thesis. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to each research question and outlines the theoretical contributions, managerial implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

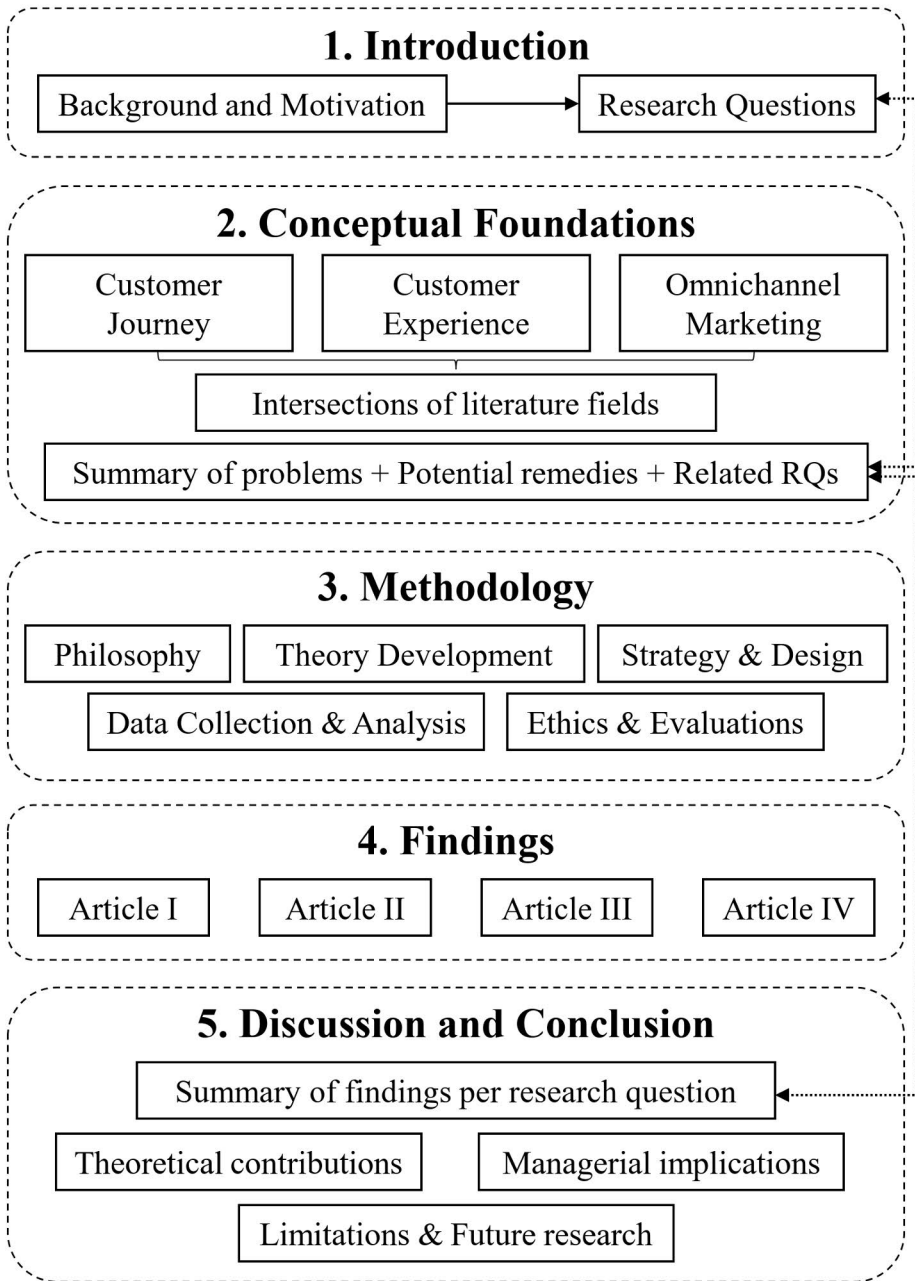


Figure 1. Outline of the doctoral thesis. Source: Author's own work.

2 Conceptual Foundations

This chapter outlines the conceptual foundations of the thesis by introducing three key literature fields: *customer journey* (Section 2.1), *customer experience* (Section 2.2), and *omnichannel marketing* (Section 2.3). Each section details how its respective field has developed, focusing on its core concepts and main research themes. Building on these separate overviews, Section 2.4 examines the intersection of these three fields to identify what has been studied and what remains underexplored. These intersectional gaps directly inform the thesis’s research questions.

2.1 Customer Journey

The first literature field central to this thesis is customer journey. This section delineates the development of customer journey research through its main themes: journey conceptualization (2.1.1), journey structure (2.1.2), and journey management (2.1.3).

2.1.1 Conceptualizing Customer Journey

The noun *journey* denotes a “passage from one place to another” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and is widely used as a metaphor for a process that unfolds over multiple stages over time. In marketing, the customer journey concept has been anchored in the service delivery (Tax et al., 2013; Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2010) or the purchase cycle (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) in both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) markets (Purmonen et al., 2023; Steward et al., 2019). More broadly, the customer journey refers to the process by which customers access and use an offering (Tueanrat et al., 2021).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) trace the roots of the customer journey concept to early models of customer buying behavior, such as the Howard-Sheth model and the attention–interest–desire–action (AIDA) model (see Santos & Gonçalves, 2021, for a review). These stepwise models describe how customers move linearly from need recognition to purchase decisions and post-purchase (Court et al., 2009; Puccinelli et al., 2009). More recent developments propose alternative models emphasizing

cyclical patterns of experiences (Siebert et al., 2020) and recursive consumer states (Lee et al., 2018). Nevertheless, linear models remain a parsimonious and generalizable foundation for conceptualizing the customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021).

Customer journey frameworks typically emphasize three key qualities: (1) Customer journeys can be divided into stages; (2) They comprise multiple touchpoints; and (3) They have a processual nature. **Figure 2** illustrates these qualities.

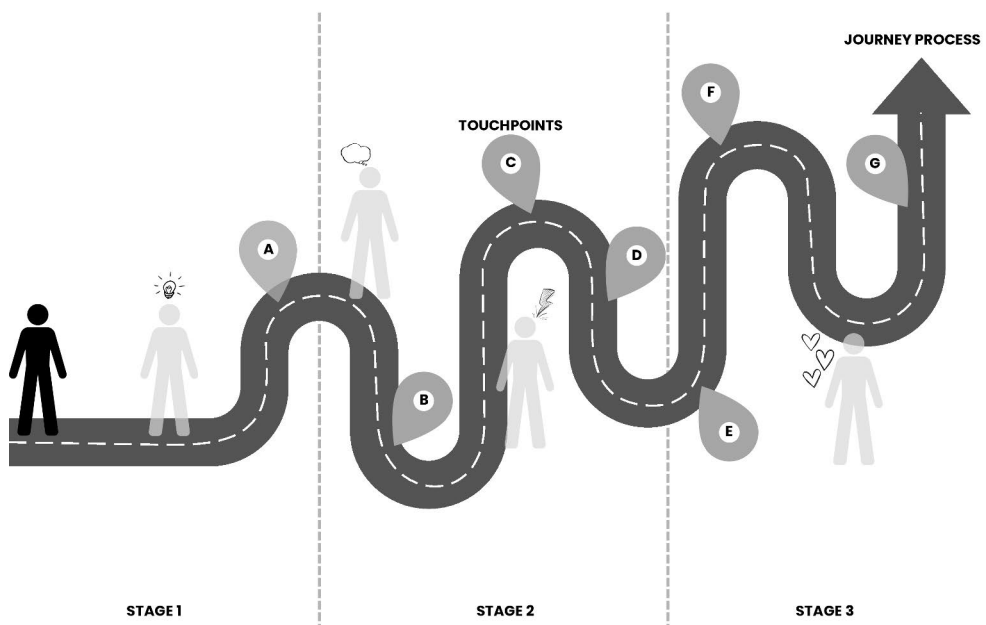


Figure 2. A depiction of a customer journey process comprising multiple stages (1-3) and touchpoints (A-G). Source: Author’s own work.

Customer journeys are commonly divided into *stages* that mirror foundational stepwise models. Purchase-focused models typically distinguish pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages, each comprising specific customer behaviors, e.g., need recognition, search, consideration, choice, ordering, usage, and engagement (Hamilton et al., 2021; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Puccinelli et al., 2009). In B2B contexts, models emphasize both the purchasing and usage stages (Purmonen et al., 2023). Service delivery-focused models divide the journey into pre-core, core, and post-core service encounter periods (Voorhees et al., 2017).

At each stage, customers encounter a series of *touchpoints* with firms or brands. Touchpoints can be classified in various ways (**Table 3**). Although there is no consensus on their definition (Barann et al., 2022; Følstad & Kvale, 2018), touchpoints are generally understood as moments of contact or interaction between a customer and a firm or brand (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Touchpoints encompass customer interactions in firm-owned or controlled channels (e.g., website, physical stores) as well as in channels controlled by customers, influencers, and other firms (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Actors beyond the firm’s control often manage key touchpoints related to payment, delivery, and post-purchase evaluation and interact with the focal firm to provide the service (Kranzbühler et al., 2019; Vakulenko et al., 2019). At each touchpoint, customers perceive and react to offering-related stimuli (e.g., logo design, packaging) that influence their experiences (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Hence, touchpoints offer a granular perspective of what shapes customer journeys at distinct points in time.

Table 3. Typologies of touchpoints.

REFERENCE	TOUCHPOINT DEFINITION	TYPES
Meyer & Schwager (2007)	“instances of direct contact either with the product or service itself or with representations of it by the company or some third party” (p. 117)	<i>Direct</i> : contacts with the product or service itself during purchase, use, and service; usually customer-initiated. <i>Indirect</i> : encounters with representations of the offering, e.g., word-of-mouth recommendations or criticisms, advertising, news reports, reviews.
Anderl et al. (2016)	“contacts of any individual customer with a retailer over all online marketing channels, prior to a potential purchase decision” (p. 185)	<i>Firm-initiated</i> : firm is the origin of the contact, e.g., display advertising. <i>Customer-initiated</i> : customer is the origin of the contact, e.g., online search.
Lemon & Verhoef (2016)	“individual contacts between the firm and the customer at distinct points in the experience” (p. 71)	<i>Brand-owned</i> : designed and managed by the firm and under the firm’s control (e.g., advertising, website, product attributes, price, packaging). <i>Partner-owned</i> : jointly designed, managed, or controlled by the firm and one or more of its partners (e.g., agencies, distributors). <i>Customer-owned</i> : customer actions outside the influence of the firm, its partners, or others. <i>Social/external/independent</i> : e.g., other customers, peer influences, independent information sources, environments.

REFERENCE	TOUCHPOINT DEFINITION	TYPES
Becker & Jaakkola (2020)	“moments when the customer interacts with or ‘touches’ the offering” (p. 639)	<i>Direct</i> : e.g., physical service encounters. <i>Indirect</i> : e.g., advertising.
De Keyser et al. (2020)	“individual contacts between the brand/firm and customers across the customer journey that serve a purpose such as information gathering, payment, unpacking, and usage” (p. 438)	<i>Firm-controlled</i> : predominantly designed and controlled by the brand/firm (e.g., store environment, corporate website, employees). <i>Non-firm-controlled</i> : predominantly controlled by the customer, influencers, or other brands or firms.

Importantly, customers’ responses are not confined to specific points in time but contribute to an evolving dynamic experience (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). This *processual nature* is visible in what happens “in between” touchpoints and stages, e.g., customers smoothly transition from one to another (De Keyser et al., 2025; Jaakkola & Terho, 2021). It is also evident in the view of journeys as iterative processes across several cycles over time (Purmonen et al., 2023; Siebert et al., 2020). These iterative processes can be highly routinized or unpredictable (Siebert et al., 2020). Thus, the processual nature of journeys helps in understanding them as unfolding processes in which experiences emerge (De Keyser et al., 2025; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Accordingly, the following sections discuss research on how such processes are structured and managed.

2.1.2 The Multilevel Structure of Journeys

Alongside conceptualizing customer journeys and their key components (e.g., touchpoints), the literature has addressed the multilevel structure in which they are embedded. Becker et al. (2020) and Hamilton & Price (2019) draw an important distinction between two levels: customer journeys are processes toward more concrete goals (e.g., purchasing a product), whereas consumer journeys are motivated by more abstract goals (e.g., living a better life). Similarly, Bettencourt et al. (2022) argue that customer journeys focused on acquiring and using products and services are subordinate to consumer journeys focused on pursuing an overall job (e.g., losing weight). Hence, consumer journeys represent a higher-order phenomenon encompassing various lower-order customer journeys.

The multilevel structure of journeys shifts the focus from particular firms to consumers’ lifeworlds, expanding the range of market and non-market actors involved in these processes (Becker et al., 2020; Bettencourt et al., 2022). At the customer-journey level, this structure extends beyond the customer as an isolated individual to include social others who “travel” together (Hamilton et al., 2021;

Thomas et al., 2020). Social others range from proximal individuals to distal and even unknown others, resulting in differences in how they affect the customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021). These social others can be so intricately involved in the customer journey that the experience becomes collective (Thomas et al., 2020).

At the consumer-journey level, the multilevel structure highlights how value is continually created through consumption beyond firm-centric interactions, e.g., through customer-owned touchpoints (Akaka & Schau, 2019). A consumption journey perspective focuses on extended engagement with a practice (e.g., surfing, running) that underlies the journey, rather than the individual undergoing it (Schau & Akaka, 2021). Here too, customer journeys feed into consumption journeys, supporting the emergence and evolution of experiences (Akaka & Schau, 2019; Schau & Akaka, 2021).

A similar rationale applies to other journeys individuals undertake in roles such as employees (Gustafsson et al., 2024), patients (Nakata et al., 2019; Trujillo Torres & DeBerry-Spence, 2019), and educators or students (Beverland et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that, at a broader level, seemingly different journeys are highly interrelated phenomena in which experiences feed into each other.

2.1.3 Customer Journey Management

As the customer journey became a relevant concept for marketing practice (Marketing Science Institute, 2024), research advanced on customer journey management, defined as the “design, composition, and order of touchpoints in the CJ [customer journey] to contribute to positive evaluative outcomes of the customer experience” (Homburg & Tischer, 2023, p. 1051). Customer journey management is considered part of customer experience management (Homburg et al., 2017) and is addressed in Section 2.2.

Customer journey design represents a customer-centric evolution of service blueprinting, a visual method widely used to design and improve service processes (Patrício et al., 2008; Shostack, 1982). While service blueprinting focuses on detailing the constellation of activities involved in delivering a service to a customer segment (Bitner et al., 2008), customer journey design addresses customers’ point of view on service delivery across touchpoints over time (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010).

In addition to journey design, mapping techniques have emerged to help firms identify relevant touchpoints (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Although there is no consensus on mapping guidelines (Tueanrat et al., 2021), these techniques are widely used as visual representations of customer experiences throughout the customer journey (Liang et al., 2023; Patti et al., 2020; Rudkowski et al., 2020).

Customer-focused research provides insights into customer perceptions of journey management. For example, Kuehnl et al. (2019) show that customers

perceive brand-owned touchpoints based on thematic cohesion (e.g., shared brand theme), consistency (e.g., uniform processes and logic), and context-sensitivity (e.g., responsiveness to needs). Additionally, Jaakkola & Terho (2021) emphasize that customer journey quality depends on whether touchpoints allow smooth transitions (i.e., seamlessness), are coherent in experience cues, and fit customers' preferences and context (i.e., personalization). Studies also show that customers assess whether touchpoints are satisfying or dissatisfying, which impacts customers' relationship with firms and brands in subsequent stages (Kranzbühler et al., 2019). Overall, well-designed journeys are positively associated with outcomes such as brand attitude, service quality, and loyalty (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021; Kuehnl et al., 2019; Reitsamer et al., 2024).

2.2 Customer Experience

The second literature field central to this thesis is customer experience. This section delineates the development of customer experience research through its main themes: experience conceptualization (2.2.1), experience management (2.2.2), and phenomenological experience (2.2.3).

2.2.1 Conceptualizing Customer Experience

Customer experience is defined as “customers’ non-deliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli along the customer journey” (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020, p. 9). These responses and reactions are multidimensional, encompassing cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social dimensions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Although customer experience is closely linked to the customer journey, the concept has evolved somewhat independently, as shown by reviews and synthesis works (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021; Zha et al., 2023). A considerable amount of thematic overlap has been identified between the two bodies of literature (Mele et al., 2025; Tueanrat et al., 2021). This finding suggests a need for greater integration between customer experience and customer journey research (Rehman et al., 2026).

The roots of the customer experience concept trace back to Holbrook & Hirschman's (1982) seminal article on the experiential view of consumption. Their critique of the dominant information-processing paradigm was that it focused on functional aspects and neglected experiential components such as fantasies, feelings, and fun, which also guide consumer behavior and interactions with products and services. Research in this stream initially explored extraordinary experiences in hedonic contexts (e.g., river rafting; Arnould & Price, 1993). In managerial

literature, Pine & Gilmore (1998) introduced the “experience economy,” advocating for memorable experiences as offerings distinct from goods and services. This perspective was widely adopted across industries, emphasizing how managers could create experiences through firm-controlled factors such as communications and brand identity (Schmitt, 1999). This includes orchestrating cues not only about the offering’s functionality, but also about the company’s environment, including those conveyed by employees (Berry et al., 2002).

In the 2000s, a new perspective emerged, emphasizing that everyday, ordinary experiences are also meaningful for customer relationships. Carù & Cova (2003) criticized the assumption that experiences are extraordinary and proposed a continuum ranging from ordinary to extraordinary. They also acknowledged that consumption experiences occur even without a market relation (e.g., a meal at a friend’s house). This nuanced understanding, combined with the emergence of the service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008), led to a growing emphasis on the customer’s role as co-creator of experiences in interactions with service providers, other customers, and other actors (Jaakkola et al., 2015; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Rather than creating (or “staging”) experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), firms offer artifacts and contexts that customers use to co-create their experiences (Gentile et al., 2007). This development reinforced the understanding that experiences are influenced by factors both within and beyond the firm’s control (Verhoef et al., 2009). Experiences in both B2B and B2C contexts are co-created with other actors such as customers and suppliers (Lemke et al., 2011).

Contemporary views regard customer experience as a dynamic, iterative process that unfolds throughout the customer journey (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Integrating multiple perspectives, Becker & Jaakkola (2020) argue that customer experience emerges as subjective and context-specific responses and reactions to offering-related stimuli, emphasizing that firms cannot create experiences but can monitor, design, and manage stimuli that influence them. They further clarify that these responses are non-deliberate and spontaneous, distinguishing customer experience from deliberate evaluations such as satisfaction and perceived quality (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). This distinction positions customer experience as prior to evaluative constructs (De Keyser et al., 2020). The sequence “stimuli perception-experience-evaluation” (**Figure 3**) illustrates these processes, framing customer experience as “the ‘raw’ data underlying and driving the specific processes that shape consumer behavior” (De Keyser et al., 2015, p. 14).

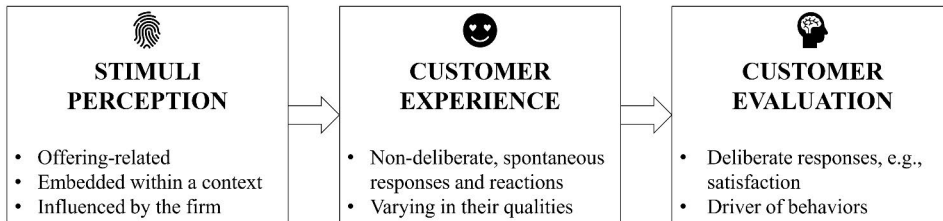


Figure 3. The “chain” process of customer experience formation. Source: Author’s own work.

Taken together, customer experience frameworks emphasize three characteristics: (a) *customer subjectivity and agency*, as customers are not merely passive recipients but actively interpret and co-create their experiences; (b) *contextual embeddedness*, as internal states and external environments shape responses; and (c) *limited firm control*, as experiences are influenced by factors beyond the firm’s reach (e.g., influence of social others).

To further explore the main themes in this literature, this thesis relies on Becker & Jaakkola (2020)’s distinction between customer experience as responses to (a) managerial stimuli, and (b) consumption processes. These traditions underpin different research themes within the customer experience literature, i.e., customer experience management vs. phenomenological understanding of customer experience. The former focuses on how a more passive customer reacts to stimuli controlled by firms, while the latter focuses on how a more active customer makes sense of their own lifeworld (Lipkin, 2016). The following subsections detail each theme.

2.2.2 A Management Perspective on Customer Experience

Customer experience management comprises “the cultural mindsets toward CEs [customer experiences], strategic directions for designing CEs, and firm capabilities for continually renewing CEs, with the goals of achieving and sustaining long-term customer loyalty” (Homburg et al., 2017, p. 384). Research focuses on organizational strategies, processes, operations, and culture through which firms influence desired experiences (De Keyser & Van Vaerenbergh, 2024), including the design of cues communicated by products, services, and environments (Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2010). These cues represent the smallest stimulus unit that affects the customer experience (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

Managing customer experiences is complex, involving trade-offs between benefits and costs across structural, financial, and cultural dimensions (Arkadan et al., 2024). Whether and under what conditions customer experience management leads to superior firm performance is a key research question, with studies generally

finding a positive relationship (Gao et al., 2023; Klink et al., 2021; Wetzels et al., 2023). Particularly in business-to-business markets, where offerings and interactions are more complex than in consumer markets, customer experience management is considered a source of competitive advantage (Wirtz et al., 2025; Witell et al., 2020).

Exploring successful implementation of customer experience strategies, Köninger & Gouthier (2024) identify measurement ability (i.e., a capability factor) as a critical determinant. As expected, measuring customer experience has become a central theme in customer experience management (Bueno et al., 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2024). However, consensus on how to measure customer experience remains elusive. Firms often rely on proxy metrics such as customer satisfaction and Net Promoter Score (NPS), which fail to report what customers truly think and feel (Zaki et al., 2021). Measurement challenges include operationalizing context and accounting for non-linearity (Palmer, 2010). Nevertheless, researchers have developed various scales, such as brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009) and online experience (Bleier et al., 2019). While some argue that customers perceive the experience as an overall assessment (Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2021), others advocate for granular, multidimensional measures at the touchpoint level (Gahler et al., 2023). Recent advances in artificial intelligence support the integration of qualitative and quantitative data to yield richer insights (McColl-Kennedy & Zaki, 2022).

Studies from a management perspective typically examine customer experience in terms of reactions to a specific firm. For example, research has explored perceptions of the physical and social surroundings as antecedents to the customer experience (Kranzbühler et al., 2018; Verhoef et al., 2009). Many adopt the stimulus–organism–response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) to address cognitive and affective experiences with stimuli (e.g., atmospheric cues). However, this approach is often criticized as overly deterministic (Yakhlef, 2015). Other studies focus on specific experiences, such as discrete emotions (e.g., gratitude, fear) during firm-customer encounters (Kranzbühler et al., 2020) and flow-type experiences (i.e., immersion states) during online interactions with firms (Rose et al., 2012).

Research also examines how particular dimensions of experience evolve over time. For example, Manthiou et al. (2020) argue that positive and negative emotions coexist during consumption, while Caruelle et al. (2024) analyze fluctuations in emotional states as customers navigate stimuli throughout a service encounter. Because experiences are inherently personal and shaped by prior experiences (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), achieving a complete understanding remains challenging: “it is unlikely that we will ever have the complete picture of CX [customer experience] because it comprises too many responses and reactions, many of which are path-dependent” (Gustafsson et al., 2024, p. 339). A more holistic understanding is pursued within the phenomenological tradition.

2.2.3 A Phenomenological Perspective on Customer Experience

Managerial research has primarily adopted the firm's internal perspective (e.g., De Keyser & Van Vaerenbergh, 2024), in line with a view of firms as creators of the customer experience (Lipkin, 2016). However, an alternative perspective rooted in phenomenology approaches customer experience as embedded in individuals' everyday lives, positioning consumers as active agents and firms as resource providers (Heinonen et al., 2010; Lipkin, 2016). This perspective emphasizes that experiences are co-created by multiple actors through sense-making processes involving lived and imaginary situations (Becker et al., 2023; Helkkula et al., 2012). A key premise is that firms do not determine value in the experience; rather, it is "always uniquely and phenomenologically determined by the beneficiary" (Vargo & Lusch, 2008, p. 7).

Studies on customer experience management are rooted in a dyadic view of experiences as emerging from interactions with a firm. In contrast, a phenomenological perspective adopts a systemic view encompassing many actors (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). As such, phenomenological studies extend the context of experience to consider the influence of social structures and institutions (Akaka et al., 2015; Akaka & Vargo, 2015). Rather than starting with the firm, this perspective focuses on customers' activities and interactions with other actors over time (McCull-Kennedy, Gustafsson, et al., 2015). For example, McCull-Kennedy, Cheung, et al. (2015) examine practices that characterize the co-creation of experiences among customers, staff, and other actors (e.g., family), both inside and outside a residential care home facility. Lipkin & Heinonen (2022) explore how customer ecosystems shape customer experiences with an offering (an activity tracker). This approach is centered on the customers, their goals, and their lifeworld, which includes various actors (e.g., various service providers, co-customers, friends, family) (Lipkin & Heinonen, 2022).

Even when studying customers' experiences with specific products and brands (e.g., Apple iPhone), researchers emphasize dynamic, intertwined processes of experiencing and perceiving value in relation to the individual's lifeworld, which includes previous experiences and a broader social framework (Helkkula & Kelleher, 2010). This holistic approach enables exploration of experiences with a broader range of offering-related stimuli, such as those triggered by others' experiences (Dube & Helkkula, 2015).

2.3 Omnichannel Marketing

The third literature field central to this thesis is omnichannel marketing. This section delineates the development of omnichannel marketing research through its main

themes: omnichannel conceptualization (2.3.1), omnichannel implementation (2.3.2), and omnichannel attitudes and behaviors (2.3.3).

2.3.1 Conceptualizing Omnichannel Marketing

Omnichannel marketing refers to “the synergistic management of all customer touchpoints and channels” (Cui et al., 2020, p. 104). The scope of touchpoints includes those internal to the firm (e.g., firm-owned applications) and external (e.g., partner-controlled platforms), while the scope of channels encompasses distribution, transactional, and communication channels (Ailawadi & Farris, 2017; Cui et al., 2020). The primary aim of omnichannel marketing is to optimize both customer experience and firm performance across integrated channels and touchpoints (Verhoef et al., 2015).

Within this literature, a channel is typically defined as “a customer contact point, or a medium through which the firm and the customer interact” (Neslin et al., 2006, p. 96). However, because this definition focuses on interaction, it excludes one-way communications such as advertising. This limitation led to the adoption of the concept of touchpoints as an expanded perspective on channels, similar to its use in customer journey and experience literature (Baxendale et al., 2015; Herhausen et al., 2019). Although the distinction between channels and touchpoints is often blurred, channels generally refer to physical stores, online websites, and catalogs, and touchpoints represent specific interaction moments within a channel (e.g., an in-store interaction) (Wagner et al., 2020).

Omnichannel marketing is considered an evolution of multichannel management, a research area that gained traction in the early 2000s with the proliferation of channels for customer-firm interactions (Neslin et al., 2006). While channel integration was already relevant in multichannel research, it became even more critical as digital and mobile technologies blurred channel boundaries (Verhoef et al., 2015).

One of the earliest uses of the term “omnichannel” appeared in Rigby (2011), who introduced the term in *Harvard Business Review*: “something so different that it requires a new name: omnichannel retailing” (p. 1). Rigby’s premise, that fully integrated and coordinated channels deliver a seamless or unified customer experience, anticipated much of the vocabulary that would later dominate omnichannel marketing research (see Salvietti et al., 2022 for an overview of definitions). Since then, research has expanded beyond retail sales channels (Beck & Rygl, 2015) to include service delivery (e.g., Barwitz & Maas, 2018), distribution (e.g., Ailawadi & Farris, 2017), and franchising (e.g., Chaney et al., 2025).

2.3.2 Omnichannel Strategies and Implementation

As a management concept, omnichannel marketing is firm-facing, whereas customer journey and customer experience are customer-facing concepts. Consequently, research in omnichannel marketing is largely practitioner-oriented and focused on operational issues such as data management and integration (Mirzabeiki & Saghiri, 2020; Salvietti et al., 2022). A central research interest concerns the development and implementation of omnichannel strategies.

Omnichannel marketing strategies are typically conceptualized along a continuum of channel integration, ranging from siloed modes, in which channels operate independently, to fully integrated modes, in which channels are coordinated (Cao & Li, 2015). Building on this, Neslin (2022) proposes two dimensions of omnichannel strategies: (1) firms' management of their online and offline channels and (2) firms' orchestration of the customer journey from search to after-sales stages. The resulting framework ranges from an unconnected strategy (i.e., no coordination between channels and no attempt to guide the journey) to a complete strategy (i.e., full coordination of all channels across all journey stages to deliver a "fully satisfying shopping experience"; Neslin, 2022, p. 3). Determinants of a firm's positioning strategy include customers' perceptions of integration, segmentation, task sharing, assortment, and price harmonization across channels (Neslin, 2022).

These developments underscore the extent of business transformation required for implementing omnichannel marketing. Not surprisingly, research has focused on identifying operational, strategic, and cultural barriers (Hajdas et al., 2022; Radomska et al., 2024). For example, Cao & Li (2018) classify technology-related (e.g., infrastructure), organizational (e.g., firm size), and environmental (e.g., competitive landscape) factors shaping retailers' integration efforts. Bijmolt et al. (2021) examine tensions in integrating marketing and operations perspectives on the customer decision-making process and product flow, respectively. Cui et al. (2020) highlight informational challenges that hinder the potential of omnichannel marketing, including access to and integration of customer data, marketing attribution across multiple touchpoints, and consumer privacy protection. Researchers emphasize that overcoming these barriers requires substantial resources, often rendering full integration unattainable (Cui et al., 2020; Hajdas et al., 2020). As increased costs reduce the desirability of complete integration strategies (Neslin, 2022), the question of the optimal level of omnichannel marketing remains unresolved.

2.3.3 Customer Attitudes and Behaviors in Omnichannel Contexts

Because research has primarily focused on strategic and logistical aspects of omnichannel marketing, customer experience has received comparatively less attention (Both & Steinmann, 2023; Gibson et al., 2024). Studies on the customer side have examined attitudes and behaviors within integrated channels (Sharma & Dutta, 2023; Vaishnav & Ray, 2023), following technological developments (Kahn et al., 2018) and the evolving role of customers (Kahn et al., 2018; Yrjölä et al., 2018).

Research has explored specific omnichannel behaviors such as *webrooming*, when customers research products online but make the purchase offline, and *showrooming*, when customers research products offline but make the purchase online (e.g., Fernández et al., 2018; Flavián et al., 2019, 2020; Goraya et al., 2020). Nuances include, for instance, researching and purchasing across different channels within the same organization (lock-in) or involving competitors (free-riding) (Fang & Li, 2025). Motivations for these behaviors include channel-related (e.g., convenience, cost), product-related (e.g., type), and consumer-related (e.g., price consciousness, perceived risk) factors (Sharma et al., 2024).

Researchers have also examined customer attitudes toward omnichannel marketing, such as channel integration quality (Gao & Huang, 2021; Hossain et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Shen et al., 2018). Channel integration quality reflects customers' perceptions of a firm's ability to deliver a seamless and unified experience across channels (Sousa & Voss, 2006). Measurement scales developed in this literature help marketers assess customers' ratings of channel integration and its impact on customer outcomes such as satisfaction, trust, and purchase intention (Zhang et al., 2018). Channel integration enables signal congruency (i.e., channels are aligned and convey a consistent message), which influences perceptions of brand authenticity and feelings of smart shopping, thereby predicting purchase intentions (Massi et al., 2023). Touchpoints that enable customers to gather comprehensive information about a firm (e.g., mobile app, loyalty program) lead to stronger perceptions of channel integration (Salvietti et al., 2025).

2.4 Gaps and Opportunities at the Intersection of Literature Fields

Having reviewed each field separately, this section explores the overlap among the previously discussed literature fields: customer journey, customer experience, and omnichannel marketing. Specifically, it examines themes at the intersection of these fields that have received less research attention yet are relevant to understanding omnichannel customer journeys from an experience-focused perspective. The

identified gaps guide the research at the intersection of the literature fields. **Figure 4** illustrates the key themes of each literature field, how they intersect, and the thesis’s theoretical positioning at the center.

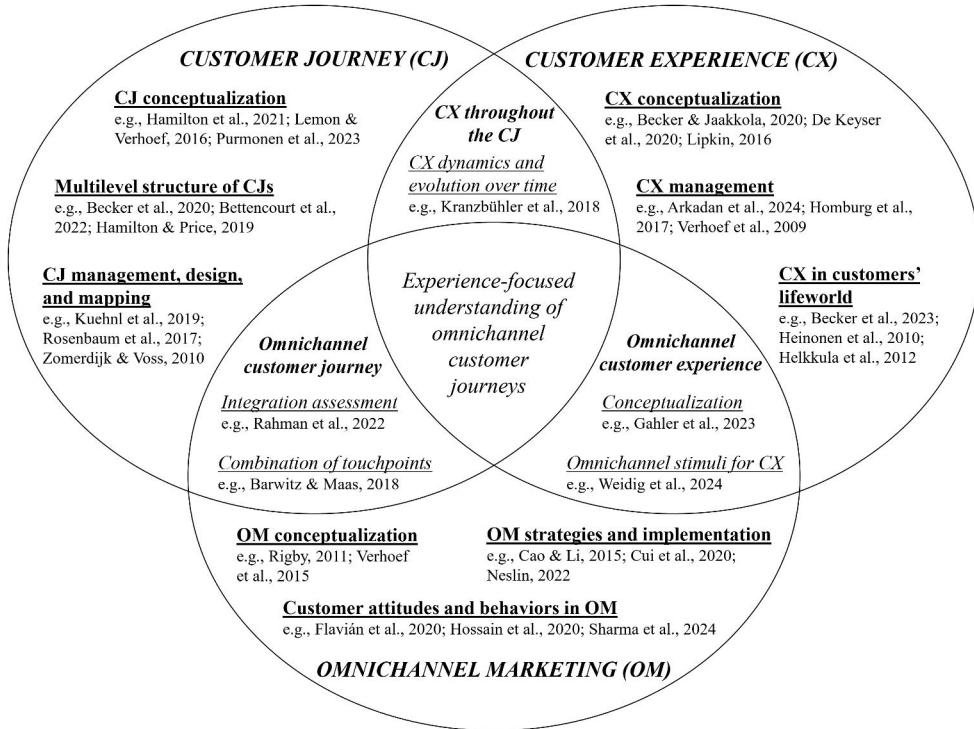


Figure 4. Literature fields’ intersections and positioning of the thesis. Source: Author’s own work.

2.4.1 Omnichannel Customer Journey

This thesis highlights two research themes at the intersection of customer journey and omnichannel marketing literature that are relevant for developing an experience-focused understanding of OCJs: (1) customers’ assessment of integration in their OCJs; and (2) customers’ combination of specific channels and touchpoints during their OCJs. This subsection discusses how these themes have been addressed, the remaining limitations, and how to overcome them by shifting from a firm-centric to a customer-centric view of touchpoints in OCJs.

First, research has examined how customers assess the level of integration of their OCJs, typically based on perceptions of a firm’s efforts in journey management and omnichannel management. OCJs are often conceptualized as cumulative experiences, reflecting the overlap between journey and experience concepts. For example, Cocco & Demoulin (2022) define “seamless shopping journey” as

customers' evaluation of their entire journey with a retailer, including consistency in product availability, prices, and offers across channels. Similarly, Chang & Li (2022) define "seamless experience" as a holistic assessment of the journey with a retailer, including factors such as easy transitions across touchpoints and consistency in the retail mix. Rodríguez-Torrico et al. (2020) define "omnichannel seamless interaction experience" through freedom in channel selection and synchronization, while Rahman et al. (2022) define "perceived omnichannel customer experience" as evaluations of appropriateness and consistency of assortment, pricing, services (e.g., delivery, pick-up, returns), personalization, and safety measures. In sum, these conceptualizations of OCJ mirror the dimensions of channel integration quality discussed in Section 2.3.3.

Second, research has explored how customers mix and match channels and touchpoints during OCJs, as well as their motivations and consequences. Studies show that channel-switching behavior is influenced by the value customers seek. For example, those seeking utilitarian value-in-use (e.g., efficiency) switch channels more frequently and prefer impersonal interactions (e.g., algorithms), while those seeking hedonic value-in-use (e.g., pleasure) prioritize personal interactions (Barwitz & Maas, 2018). Harris et al. (2021) find that customers adopting a maximization strategy (i.e., seeking the best outcome possible) switch channels more often and use review touchpoints, leading to longer OCJs. Similarly, customers who engage in webrooming (i.e., research online, purchase offline) have longer journeys due to an extended search phase and use online touchpoints (e.g., product comparison websites, blogs) to find in-depth information before migrating to offline touchpoints to purchase (Fernández et al., 2018). Overall, combining different touchpoints for search and purchase is associated with higher customer confidence and satisfaction with the OCJ (Flavián et al., 2019; Herhausen et al., 2019).

Despite these insights, studies on OCJs have several limitations as they adopt a firm-centric view, focusing on customers' navigation across firm-controlled channels (e.g., websites, stores; Cui et al., 2022; Frasquet et al., 2019; Miquel-Romero et al., 2020). Although some OCJ studies explore touchpoints less controlled by firms, such as influencers (e.g., De-Juan-Vigaray & Cocco, 2025) and outsourced partners (e.g., Kranzbühler et al., 2019), they remain focused on particular types of touchpoints and provide limited insight into how customers combine resources from multiple sources when navigating OCJs. Overall, the scope of OCJs in this literature is surprisingly narrow, considering that conceptualizations of both omnichannel marketing and customer journey refer to much more complex phenomena.

This thesis emphasizes the importance of adopting a customer-centric perspective that considers how customers utilize various resources across touchpoints, including those controlled by external actors. This requires reframing OCJs more broadly around customers' lived experiences rather than evaluations of

firms' efforts, which are only a part of their OCJs. For example, Reitsamer & Becker (2024) argue that, in contrast to a firm-centric scheme structured around touchpoints and stages, customers partition their journeys into bounded events when they encounter distinctive changes (e.g., service interruptions, ambient cues). This partitioning shapes how they remember the journey, as customers form their overall experience based on the average of all events, which are influenced by peaks, ends, and trends within each event (Reitsamer & Becker, 2024). These findings underscore the relevance of examining how customers perceive their own journeys, which kinds of experiences matter, and the roles that dimensions such as consistency play in their experiences. Understanding these configurations could reveal how customers steer their OCJs and why they choose certain paths over others.

2.4.2 Omnichannel Customer Experience

For the purpose of this thesis, two research themes at the intersection of customer experience and omnichannel marketing are relevant: (1) conceptualization of omnichannel customer experience (OCX) and (2) omnichannel stimuli influencing customer experience at OCJ touchpoints. This subsection discusses how these themes have been addressed, the remaining limitations, and how to overcome them by shifting the focus from overall evaluations to multidimensional experiences.

First, OCX is often conceptualized as an overall assessment of integration in OCJs (Rahman et al., 2022), reflecting the overlap between customer experience and customer journey concepts, as discussed in Section 2.4.1. Other definitions emphasize proxies such as satisfaction with the journey (Le & Nguyen-Le, 2020). In contrast, Gahler et al. (2023, p. 4) define OCX as “a customer’s subjective, directed, and multidimensional mental responses to an interaction with an experience partner at a touchpoint in a customer journey stage.” The authors emphasize that OCX emerges at the touchpoint level in response to interactions with different experience partners (e.g., brand, employee, other customers).

Second, research has examined how omnichannel stimuli influence the customer experience. An omnichannel stimulus can be characterized as a signal to customers of a firm’s efforts to promote coordination across its channels (Massi et al., 2023). Personalization (i.e., tailoring touchpoints to customers’ preferences and needs; Weidig et al., 2024) is one of the most studied omnichannel stimuli, since omnichannel strategies rely on large volumes of customer data available across touchpoints (Cui et al., 2020). Personalized deals and content affect cognitive and emotional experiences, driving purchase intentions and word-of-mouth (Tyrväinen et al., 2020). Personalization also shapes evaluations of multiple touchpoints (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021; Lemke et al., 2011), though its optimal level may depend on company- and customer-related contingency factors (Weippert, 2024).

Although offering insights into customer experience management in omnichannel, prevailing conceptualizations of OCX are limited because they adopt an evaluative perspective (e.g., Rahman et al., 2022), which contrasts with the understanding of customer experience as spontaneous, non-deliberate reactions and responses (see Section 2.2.1). Moreover, research focuses heavily on personalization, neglecting other omnichannel characteristics (e.g., consistency, connectivity; Shi et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2024) that can also serve as stimuli for experience.

This thesis argues for departing from a general evaluative approach to understanding OCX as a dynamic, multidimensional response that emerges at the touchpoint level and evolves throughout the OCJ. This literature would benefit from comparisons between touchpoints, particularly contrasting interactions with different experience partners (Gahler et al., 2023). Although some studies contrast the effects of different types of touchpoints (e.g., firm-owned vs. partner-owned) on brand consideration (Baxendale et al., 2015) and firm evaluation (Kranzbühler et al., 2019), for instance, they do not explore customer experiences. Additionally, a deeper understanding of customers' experiences in omnichannel environments is valuable for informing optimal integration strategies (Neslin, 2022). This includes, for example, investigating how attributes such as consistency and connectivity positively or negatively influence experiences.

2.4.3 Customer Experience Throughout the Customer Journey

To develop an experience-focused understanding of OCJs, this thesis highlights a relevant research theme at the intersection of customer experience and customer journey: the dynamics and evolution of customer experience over time. This subsection discusses how this theme has been addressed, the remaining limitations, and how to overcome them by shifting from a static to a dynamic view.

A more dynamic view of customer experience acknowledges that experiences at each touchpoint accumulate, thus influencing their valence and intensity over time (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Empirical studies suggest that the relevance of each touchpoint depends on its type and the journey stage. Specifically, studies have shown the varying levels of influence of touchpoints controlled by firms/brands or third-party entities (e.g., other customers, independent sources) on the pre-purchase stage (Baxendale et al., 2015; Herhausen et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2020) and on the post-purchase stage (Pizzutti et al., 2022).

These studies, however, are limited because they rely on proxies for customer experience, such as satisfaction (Herhausen et al., 2019; Pizzutti et al., 2022), overlooking the dynamic nature of experience formation. Calls for more research on

touchpoint interdependencies and whether experiences are carried out or fade away throughout the journey (Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2021; Voorhees et al., 2017) remain largely unanswered.

This thesis argues for adopting a comprehensive view of the customer experience throughout the customer journey. This approach integrates touchpoint-level perspectives, which focus on experiences at specific interactions (e.g., Gahler et al., 2023), and journey-level perspectives, which focus on the overall experience of the journey (e.g., Rahman et al., 2022). To this end, it is important to examine customer experience as path-dependent (i.e., informed by previous experiences) and embedded in a multilevel structure of journeys (i.e., encompassing broader lifeworlds) (Becker et al., 2020; Schau & Akaka, 2021). This approach could identify critical touchpoints for experience formation beyond purchase activities and reveal how other actors contribute to experiences. It also opens avenues for exploring how firms collaborate with external organizations to influence experiences across all touchpoints (Arkadan et al., 2024).

Table 4 aggregates the limitations identified across fields and intersections into two overarching problems, along with their potential remedies. These gaps inform the research presented in this doctoral thesis and guide the research questions.

Table 4. Summary of gaps and opportunities in the context of this thesis.

PROBLEMS IN EXISTING RESEARCH	POTENTIAL REMEDIES	RELATED RQS
<p><u>Firm-centric view</u> OCJs are narrowly conceptualized as processes involving a focal firm and its customers, overlooking actors and touchpoints beyond the firm’s control. The empirical scope of OCJs has been restricted to a pre-defined set of channels and touchpoints, resulting in a snapshot view of the phenomenon.</p>	<p><u>Customer-centric view</u> To examine how customers navigate, assemble, and experience OCJs by acknowledging the contribution of multiple actors—both within and beyond firm boundaries—and by considering a broader range of touchpoints.</p>	<p>RQ1: What does an omnichannel customer journey entail from a customer-centric perspective? RQ3: What affects omnichannel customer journeys beyond firm-controlled elements?</p>
<p><u>Focus on overall customer evaluations</u> Customer experience is often treated as an evaluative concept based on customers’ overall assessment of their OCJs, overlooking the dynamic and multidimensional nature of experiences</p>	<p><u>Focus on dynamic customer experiences</u> To embrace a dynamic and multidimensional view of customer experience by examining how feelings, thoughts, sensations, and other responses emerge at the touchpoint level and evolve throughout the OCJ.</p>	<p>RQ2: How does the customer experience emerge and evolve along omnichannel customer journeys?</p>

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

A research philosophy is a system of beliefs and assumptions (e.g., ontological, epistemological, and axiological) that underpin the development of knowledge (Saunders et al., 2023). These beliefs guide the approach to research inquiry and determine the relationship among theory, data, and the researcher's values (Arndt, 1985). Because marketing research is characterized by a heterogeneous and fragmented scientific identity (Franke & Mazanec, 2006), outlining one's research philosophy is particularly relevant in this field.

This thesis's research philosophy can be broadly defined as *interpretivism* (Saunders et al., 2023). In terms of well-known typologies in social sciences (e.g., Arndt, 1985; Morgan, 1980), this thesis is therefore positioned within the *interpretive paradigm*. The starting point is that the researcher seeks to understand the social world of research participants from their point of view, through subjective experiences, meanings, and social constructions (Saunders et al., 2023). This stance aligns with the thesis's focus on omnichannel customer journeys (OCJs) and the experiences individuals have while navigating them, which are inherently subjective and contextual.

Following an interpretive paradigm, the ontological position of this thesis is based on a *subjective view of reality*, in the sense that reality is considered a product of individual experience (Arndt, 1985; Morgan, 1980). Since subjective experience is context-dependent, reality is viewed as socially constructed, thus dynamic, shaped by interaction, and open to change over time (Saunders et al., 2023). In the context of the research topic, this ontological position holds that each "experiencing" individual has their own perspective on their OCJs, which in turn guides the researcher's interpretation of the process (Arndt, 1985; Calder, 1977).

The epistemological position of this thesis is *interpretivist* in the sense that acceptable, valid, and legitimate knowledge arises from a combination of the research participants' perspectives and the researcher's empathetic stance (Saunders et al., 2023). Therefore, this thesis's approach to knowledge construction is through social interaction and interpretation of the subjective and lived experience (Schwandt, 2006). In the context of the research topic, this epistemological position

means that key concepts such as customer experience and customer journey are constantly assessed and reassessed in light of the meanings individuals ascribe to them.

Moreover, the axiological position of this thesis adopts a *value-bound perspective*, in that the author is part of the social phenomena being researched and interpreted, and therefore cannot be fully separated from them (Saunders et al., 2023). In this case, the author is also a consumer interacting with technologies, service providers, brands, and social others, and therefore experiencing her own journeys in a specific context as a woman, Latin American, immigrant, student, early career researcher, etc. These positions “color” the researcher’s vision, just as familiarity with certain theories does (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Nevertheless, ethical considerations guide this work (see Section 3.6), not the author’s axiological positions.

3.2 Approach to Theory Development

This thesis adopts an *abductive* approach to theory development, characterized by a constant movement between empirical and theoretical domains (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In contrast to an inductive approach (e.g., grounded theory), abduction is sensitive to data while using pre-existing theoretical frameworks to guide interpretation (Saunders et al., 2023). The empirical world keeps primacy, but in service of theorizing (Van Maanen et al., 2007).

An abductive approach supports the generation of new concepts and the development of theoretical models because discoveries from data force the researcher to reconsider existing theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Abduction is an “inferential creative process” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 170) in which the researcher develops new theories from surprising evidence observed in the empirical world. Consistent with an interpretive research philosophy, what counts as surprising depends on the researcher’s familiarity and affinity with particular theoretical fields (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

In this thesis, the back-and-forth between empirical data and existing theory is visible throughout the entire research process (**Figure 5**). The starting point, shown at the center of the figure, is the set of existing frameworks on omnichannel customer journeys, developed in the literature presented in Chapter 2. Limitations identified within those frameworks (discussed in Section 2.4) prompt the project’s initial motivation: understanding the customer perspective in omnichannel marketing. This broad motivation leads to two complementary projects, one field-based (i.e., Article I) and the other literature-based (i.e., Article II). The key findings and takeaways from these projects are then compared with existing theory. In a recursive process, these comparisons inform an expanded, experience-focused understanding of OCJs,

illustrated by the expanded area at the center of the figure. This expansion results in more specific motivations: first, to explore elements beyond the focal firm that influence the journey (i.e., Article III's field project); and second, to refine the concept of journeys (i.e., Article IV's literature project). The key findings and takeaways from these projects generate new theoretical insights that shape the expanded understanding of OCJs. Hence, the initial framework is successively modified through the continuous interplay between theory and data, and each article serves as a source for the development of an expanded understanding of the phenomenon (e.g., Vink & Koskela-Huotari, 2022).

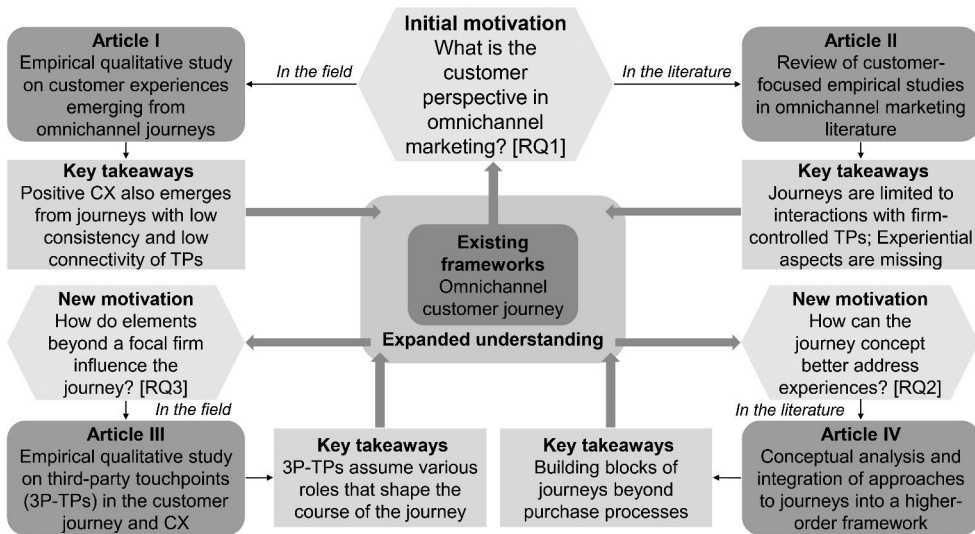


Figure 5. Abductive research process. Source: Author's own work.

3.3 Research Strategy

Considering the problems identified in existing research and their potential remedies (Section 2.4), there is a need for a research strategy that emphasizes a customer-centric view of OCJs and the experiential nature of such processes. Characteristics such as customer subjectivity, context dependence, and the multidimensionality of experiences favor qualitative approaches to studying OCJs (Palmer, 2010). This thesis thus follows a *qualitative research strategy* characterized by an exploratory focus on developing a complex, holistic picture of the phenomenon, based on participants' views (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Deshpande, 1983).

To this end, this thesis relies on a *phenomenological research approach* to understand OCJs from the perspective of those who experience them and in their own context. In other words, it focuses on how individuals experience and make

sense of the OCJ phenomenon through first-person descriptions (Thompson et al., 1989).

The unit of analysis in such a phenomenological approach is individual consumers who experience OCJs embedded in their lifeworld, i.e., the mundane everyday life in which human beings experience culture and society among fellow human beings (Goulding, 2005). *Consumer* is a more general term for these human beings who integrate resources from both market and non-market actors; customer is the role they assume in a relationship with a particular firm (Hamilton, 2016; Hamilton & Price, 2019). This position thus moves away from a firm-centric view of OCJs as standardized processes in which consumers follow similar patterns and can be segmented by channel usage (Herhausen et al., 2019; Neslin, 2022).

A qualitative strategy based on a phenomenological approach to OCJs is also valuable for expanding the methods employed in this literature, which has been predominantly conceptual and quantitative (e.g., survey, experiments) (Both & Steinmann, 2023).

3.4 Research Design

To collect and analyze evidence to answer the research questions, this thesis relies on three research designs: qualitative interviews (Articles I and III), a literature review (Article II), and a conceptual analysis (Article IV). This section outlines each design, its objectives, and the justifications for it.

A *qualitative interview* study was employed in Article I (Gasparin et al., 2022) and Article III (Gasparin et al., 2026) to empirically investigate OCJs in a business-to-consumer context. In Article I, the study aimed to explore consumers' perceptions of integration in their OCJs. The objective was to understand what kinds of experiences emerge from such perceptions. In Article III, the study focused on mapping the development of a specific OCJ across multiple third-party touchpoints (i.e., involving a third entity between the customer and a focal firm). The objective was to understand how these touchpoints influence the progression of the journey and the dynamics of the customer experience. In both studies, the choice of a qualitative design based on interviews is justified by its ability to foster an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, allowing the researcher to gather detailed descriptions of events and emphasize the meanings behind them rather than their frequencies (Carson et al., 2001).

A *literature review* study was employed in Article II (Gasparin & Slongo, 2023a) to evaluate customer-focused empirical studies on omnichannel retailing. The objective was to unveil the state of knowledge on this topic. To this end, a critical (often called integrative) approach was adopted to assess how well the customer side (versus the firm side) has been addressed in this literature (Torraco, 2005). The

choice of a critical literature review design is justified by its value in creatively synthesizing and assessing the literature, particularly on emerging topics such as OCJs, thereby yielding novel perspectives that advance the field (Snyder, 2019). This step is regarded as fundamental in identifying opportunities for future research aimed at a more experience-centered understanding of OCJs.

A *conceptual analysis* study was employed in Article IV (Gasparin, 2026) to identify key attributes of the journey concept and compare them across journey approaches in the literature. The objective was to build a higher-order journey conceptualization centered on the experience. To this end, a theory synthesis approach was adopted to integrate fragmented literature streams using the journey concept, which is based on different and often conflicting definitions (Jaakkola, 2020). The choice of a conceptual analysis is justified by its ability to unveil the meanings and boundaries of concepts, thereby avoiding fragmentation and conceptual confusion (Bergkvist & Eisend, 2021; Tähtinen & Havila, 2019). In doing so, the higher-order conceptualization offers a delineating conceptual contribution to the marketing field (MacInnis, 2011), benefiting future research on OCJs.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

3.5.1 Article I: Qualitative Interview Study 1

To investigate consumers' perceptions of integration in their OCJs, the first qualitative interview study (Article I) employed individual semi-structured interviews (N=19) and focus group interviews (N=8). Individual interviews provide detailed accounts of participants' experiences (e.g., thoughts, beliefs), whereas focus group interviews promote interaction among participants, which can reveal less accessible aspects of a phenomenon (Carson et al., 2001; Lambert & Loiselle, 2008). Combining these methods within a single study enables a richer description of the phenomenon (Lambert & Loiselle, 2008).

Study 1 used three datasets collected from Finnish and Brazilian consumers between 2016 and 2019, prior to the start of the doctoral project (**Table 5**). Data from Brazilian participants were gathered in Portuguese by the thesis author, while Finnish data were collected in Finnish by the second author in Article I. Across datasets, purposive sampling was employed (Palinkas et al., 2015; Suri, 2011), selecting participants who had experienced OCJs (Goulding, 2005).

Table 5. Datasets analyzed in the study for Article I

DATA SET	PARTICIPANTS (PSEUDONYM, GENDER, AGE)	DURATION (MIN)	THEMATIC FOCUS
1. Face-to-face interviews, Finland, 2016	Ulrike, F, 34	23:43	Channels used: Online store, physical store
	Jane, F, 34	25:38	
	Theodor, M, 40	24:13	Product category: Furniture and home décor
	Jake, M, 30	31:34	
	Mary, F, 27	22:45	
	Hailey, F, 38	45:08	Interview themes: Focused on the connectivity of touchpoints
	Turner, M, 34	40:20	
	Axel, M, 42	34:59	
Vincent, M, 37	43:22		
2. Moderated focus groups, Finland, 2016	<i>Focus group 1: Entrepreneurs</i>	58:36	Channels used: Online store, physical store
	Hazel, F, 35		
	Leslie, F, 56		Product category: Furniture and home décor
	Simone, F, 43		
	Susan, F, 31	46:41	Interview themes: Focused on the connectivity of touchpoints
	<i>Focus group 2: Students</i>		
	Iris, F, 25		
	Victor, M, 24		
	Lacy, F, 21		
	Haven, F, 26		
3. Face-to-face interviews, Brazil, 2019	Isabel, F, 27	52:21	Channels used: Online store, physical store, mobile app, other digital touchpoints (e.g., social media, third-party touchpoints)
	Ronald, M, 32	71:13	
	Layla, F, 30	79:51	
	Julia, F, 30	43:53	Product category: Not specified
	Lucy, F, 47	46:25	
	Anthony, M, 29	36:17	
	Eric, M, 32	20:56	
	John, M, 34	48:56	Interview themes: Focused on the consistency of touchpoints
	Claire, F, 34	31:22	
	Liam, M, 25	39:26	

The datasets complement each other in terms of market contexts (Latin America and Europe) and thematic focus (channels used, product category, and interview themes). Finnish data emphasized experiences of connectivity between touchpoints (i.e., transitions during OCJs), whereas Brazilian data focused on experiences of consistency across touchpoints (i.e., coherence in retail mix elements such as price, product information, and assortment). Participants recalled experiences on several OCJs.

Data analysis was conducted by the two researchers in 2020 and 2021, after the start of the doctoral project. Following thematic content analysis principles (Kassarjian, 1977), a coding scheme was developed to classify each touchpoint by ownership (e.g., brand-, customer-owned), nature (e.g., digital, physical), and stage (e.g., pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase) (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Perceptions of high and low integration were interpreted from informants' descriptions of consistency and connectivity of touchpoints. Additionally, cues of customer experience dimensions (e.g., affective, cognitive) and valence were identified.

Initial coding was conducted independently by the two researchers, followed by translation of interview excerpts into English. Tentative findings were compared and refined through iterative discussion, ensuring consistency and resolving discrepancies collaboratively. This process resulted in the identification of 59 excerpts of journeys across datasets, from which patterns of OCJs and emerging experiences were derived. Section 4.1 summarizes Article I's findings.

3.5.2 Article II: Literature Review Study

To assess the omnichannel retailing literature, the literature review study reported in Article II followed established guidelines for conducting reviews in the business field (Palmatier et al., 2018; Paul & Criado, 2020), given the absence of strict standards for critical reviews (Snyder, 2019). Although critical reviews are usually not systematic, a review protocol inspired by systematic approaches was developed in 2021 to identify customer-focused empirical articles, specifying search terms, databases, timeframe, and inclusion and exclusion criteria. The Scopus database was selected for its comprehensive coverage of business and management journals. The search targeted articles published between 2011 and 2021 that used the keywords *omnichannel* (*omni-channel*) or *channel integration*, combined with *customer* or *consumer*, in the title, abstract, or keywords. To ensure high-impact sources, the search was limited to the top 10 marketing journals ranked by Scopus CiteScore 2020 (Harzing, 2022). The initial search yielded 50 articles. After screening titles, abstracts, and keywords, 32 papers were excluded because they were conceptual, firm-focused empirical studies, or customer-focused single-channel studies.

Data analysis was conducted by the thesis author in three phases, following recommendations for qualitative content analysis (Bos & Tarnai, 1999; Seuring & Gold, 2012; White & Marsh, 2006). In the first phase, a preliminary reading ensured the articles were suitable. This initial impression is a less structured activity referred to as "fluctuant reading" (Bardin, 2011). Through this activity, 11 additional articles were identified. As they met the impact criteria, they were included in the set, which comprised 29 articles in total.

In the second phase, articles were systematically examined using analytical categories. Following Seuring and Gold's (2012) recommendations, categories were initially derived from existing literature reviews (e.g., objectives, theory, methods, findings) and later refined inductively during coding. Additional focus was placed on the touchpoint approach and scope, the stages of the customer journey, and the customer outcomes of interest. Relevant excerpts and observations for each category were documented in a spreadsheet. Research themes were then identified by jointly analyzing at least three categories (i.e., objectives, customer outcomes, and findings) and grouping articles accordingly. In the third and final phase, the spreadsheet was analyzed to relate each category to essential customer concepts such as customer experience.

Detailed procedures for the literature review—including the search protocol, data cleaning steps, analytical categories, and the output spreadsheet with the analysis of 29 articles—were made publicly available via Harvard Dataverse (Gasparin & Slongo, 2023b) and Mendeley Data (Gasparin, n.d.) upon publication of Article II. Section 4.2 presents a summary of Article II's findings.

3.5.3 Article III: Qualitative Interview Study 2

To map a specific OCJ across multiple third-party touchpoints, the second qualitative interview study (Article III) collected data through in-depth interviews with consumers. A purposive sampling approach was employed to ensure participants represented information-rich cases of OCJs involving third parties. Recruitment began with invitations posted on information boards at the University of Turku campus in Finland and was later expanded through participant referrals via snowball sampling. Eligibility was limited to individuals who had recently purchased products in the electronics, fashion, or furniture/interior design categories, consistent with prior research (e.g., Herhausen et al., 2019; Pizzutti et al., 2022).

Eighteen in-depth interviews (**Table 6**) were conducted face-to-face in Turku, Finland, in 2023. Interviews were carried out jointly in English by two researchers (i.e., the thesis author and Article III's second author) using the Sequential Incident Technique (SIT) to capture sequentially perceived incidents over time (Stauss & Weinlich, 1997). SIT provides a comprehensive view of the journey from the customer's perspective (Roos, 2002) and captures both critical and routine incidents (Stauss & Weinlich, 1997). As participants described the events of their journeys, a timeline was created on a whiteboard using sticky notes. This visual reference served as a framework for discussing experiences both event-by-event and in terms of the overall journey, enabling a processual view of the phenomenon.

Table 6. Participants and their journeys (Article III)

PARTICIPANTS (PSEUDONYM, GENDER, AGE)	DURATION (MIN)	PRODUCT CATEGORY AND OFFERING	JOURNEY DURATION
Anna, F, 21	72	Fashion: Jacket	~2 months
Ben, M, 35	78	Electronics: Tablet (+ pen)	1,5 years
Cleo, F, 38	72	Furniture: Baby feeding chair	4 months
Dora, F, 23	63	Fashion: Sunglasses	1 day
Enzo, M, 25	97	Electronics: Computer	~2 years
Fay, F, 26	106	Fashion: Bag	~1 year
Gabi, F, 38	64	Electronics: External hard drive	~3 months
Hugo, M, 21	76	Electronics: Phone	~2 months
Ivy, F, 33	83	Fashion: Bag	20 days
Joy, F, 31	79	Fashion: Trousers	~1 year
Kaia, F, 23	71	Electronics: Computer	1 month
Leo, M, 26	96	Furniture: Bed	1,5 years
Mia, F, 30	78	Electronics: Phone	~3 months
Nala, F, 29	75	Electronics: Dishwasher machine	5 months
Otto, M, 23	82	Furniture: Sofa	~2 years
Pam, F, 25	80	Fashion: Sleeping bag	~3 years
Quinn, M, 36	93	Electronics: Game console	~1 month
Ray, M, 35	98	Furniture: Lamp	Several weeks

An interview script was prepared to collect general data about the journey (e.g., product details, starting and ending points) and to explore journey trajectories and experiences. Using prompts such as “*What happened next?*” and “*What were you feeling/thinking/doing at this point?*”, participants discussed different moments of the journey. To aid recall, two decks of cards were used: AT-ONE touchpoint cards (Clatworthy, 2011), illustrating typical touchpoints (e.g., email message, social media, physical store), and another depicting a range of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that are part of the customer experience, developed by the second author. These cards helped participants recall additional moments and articulate their experiences more fully. Interviews concluded when no further events and experiences were recalled. After that, researchers briefly exchanged impressions regarding third-party touchpoints discussed during the interview.

Data analysis followed iterative procedures from hermeneutic phenomenology, going back and forth between parts of the textual material and the whole (DeBerry-Spence, 2008; Thompson et al., 1989, 1990). First, interview transcripts and photos of journey maps were examined by the thesis author. For each journey, a digital version of the whiteboard map was created, illustrated with quotes from participants about their experiences. The focal firms were defined as the main firms in the journey: the brand or manufacturer and, if the retailer is different from the brand, the retailer; third-party touchpoints were therefore examined in relation to these focal firms. Next, memos were created to document interpretation and insights from each interview (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interpretation involved describing the offering and purchase goals emerging from the data, contextual factors (e.g., participants' lifeworld), focal firms involved (e.g., brand, retailer), relevant third-party touchpoints, and their influence on the journey progression.

After that, a cross-case analysis was conducted through a new iteration of part-to-whole analysis (Thompson et al., 1989). Based on the memos of individual cases, emerging themes were identified and integrated by comparing similarities and differences across cases (Goulding, 2005; Thompson et al., 1989, 1990). Episodes from different journeys were analyzed inductively to identify the role these touchpoints played in the course of the journey and the dynamics (i.e., changes) in the customer experience.

To ensure rigor, the second author revisited journey memos and digital maps to validate and extend initial interpretations (Conroy, 2003), documenting reasoning in a separate file. Independent coding materials were then compared and marked for agreements, disagreements, and partial matches. Refinements were discussed iteratively, resulting in the grouping and naming of third-party touchpoint roles based on patterns emerging from the data. Section 4.3 presents a summary of Article III's findings.

3.5.4 Article IV: Conceptual Analysis Study

To analyze the journey concept, the study reported in Article IV conducted a conceptual analysis in three phases: identifying attributes that define the concept, comparing approaches in the literature, and delineating a novel perspective that integrates them.

Data collection began with a systematic literature review guided by established guidelines (Palmatier et al., 2018; Paul & Criado, 2020; Snyder, 2019). The search on Scopus targeted both journey and touchpoint nomenclature, as touchpoints represent key components of journeys. **Figure 6** details the systematic literature review procedures, including the inclusion criteria, conducted in 2024. The final set comprised 158 articles published between 2006 and 2024.

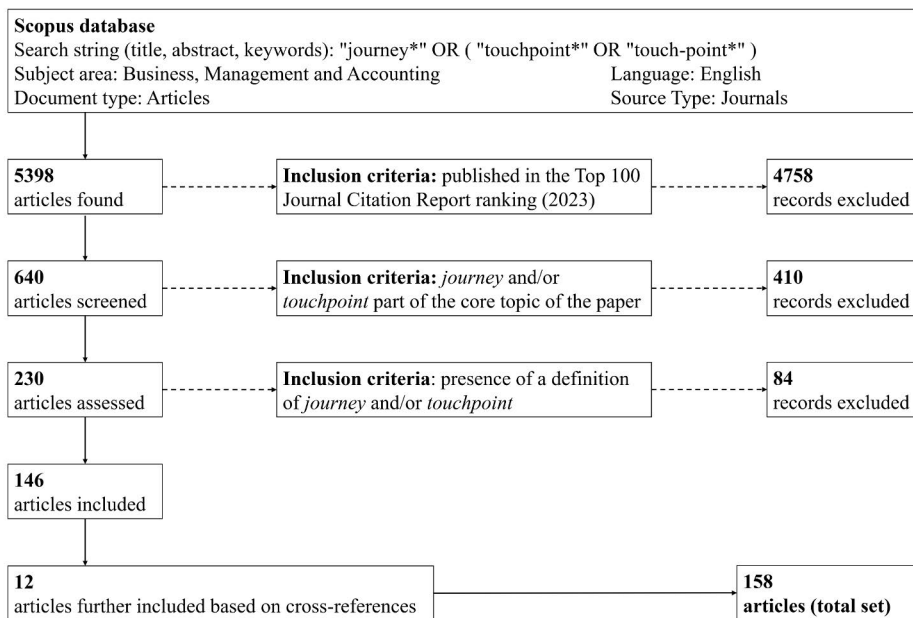


Figure 6. Systematic literature review procedures. Source: Gasparin, 2026 (Article IV).

In the first phase, data analysis began with the extraction of excerpts that define and describe journeys and/or touchpoints from each article. Following concept development guidelines (Podsakoff et al., 2016), primary attributes of the focal concepts were identified and organized into themes. Separate coding procedures were applied for each concept. First-order attributes were grouped into second-order categories and then organized into third-order themes, progressively increasing the level of abstraction. This process resulted in the identification of key attributes summarized as the 3 Ps: the journey process, the journey performer, and the journey participants. Across definitions, the journey emerged as a *process* undertaken by a *performer* involving multiple *participants*.

In the second phase, these key attributes served as an organizing framework for comparing different journey approaches, exploring their similarities and differences. Articles were grouped according to the process described (e.g., purchase, service delivery, engagement), and for each process, the other key attributes (i.e., performer and participants) were compared.

In the third phase, insights from the comparative analysis informed a narrative reasoning focused on theory synthesis (Jaakkola, 2020). For each key attribute, an experience-centered rationale was applied to accommodate commonalities and differences across approaches. This process resulted in the delineation of the building blocks of a higher-order view of journeys anchored in experience and the

development of a novel concept: the experiencer journey. Section 4.4 presents a summary of Article IV's findings.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical standards was ensured throughout the research process, including design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Guidance was drawn from multiple sources, including governmental bodies (e.g., Finnish National Board on Research Integrity), data protection legislation in Brazil (Lei Geral de Proteção de Dados) and Europe (General Data Protection Regulation), affiliated universities, and the broader academic community.

Recruitment and data collection adhered to general principles of ethical research involving human participants: respect for dignity, autonomy, cultural heritage, and biodiversity, as well as minimization of potential risks, damage, or harm (TENK, 2019). Prior to participation, individuals received a privacy notice for scientific research and signed an informed consent form. These documents outlined the study's purposes, procedures, handling of personal information, potential risks and benefits, and provided contact information. They emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw consent at any time. Participants in the Article III study were offered a €14.90 discount code for a Finnish restaurant chain as a token of appreciation for their time and effort.

Data preparation procedures ensured the removal of potential identifiers, such as names, from transcripts. Access to raw data was restricted to the primary investigators (the thesis author and the second interviewer). To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants for reporting findings.

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools introduced during the development of this thesis were not used to process research data nor to produce original text. Tools such as OpenAI's ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude, and Microsoft's Copilot were employed exclusively for language-related support (e.g., clarity and grammar checks applied to the author's own text), for brainstorming structural options (e.g., the division of sections or naming of subsections), and for reviewing coherence across parts of the text (e.g., assessing whether gaps identified in the introduction are appropriately addressed in the literature review). All content produced with the assistance of these tools was carefully reviewed and edited by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the final text.

3.7 Evaluations of the Studies

Although multiple approaches exist for evaluating qualitative research, assessment criteria are typically organized around two issues: *validity* and *reliability* (Creswell

& Poth, 2024). Validity concerns the accuracy with which social phenomena are represented in the study, whereas reliability addresses the consistency of approaches across different researchers (Silverman, 2021). This subsection discusses the validity and reliability of the studies comprising this thesis.

3.7.1 Validity Assessment

Traditionally, validity in qualitative research has been reflected in criteria such as *credibility* (truthfulness) and *transferability* to other contexts, which correspond to internal and external validity in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Increasingly, validity is understood as a recursive process involving multiple validation strategies combined to achieve trustworthy findings (Cho & Trent, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2024). Common strategies include triangulation of qualitative sources, participant collaboration, thick description, and the researcher’s reflexivity.

Triangulation of qualitative sources involves gathering perspectives from different sources, such as individuals with diverse viewpoints (Patton, 2015). In this thesis, triangulation is evident in sampling procedures that aimed for participant diversity in terms of demographics (e.g., Brazilian and Finnish consumers) and journey contexts (e.g., product category, duration, channels used). It is also reflected in the use of two different interviewers—separately in Article I and jointly in Article III—as part of a research team in constant communication, which helps maintain transparency (e.g., stay “honest”) and minimize individual researcher bias (Flick, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participant collaboration refers to involving participants in the research process, often as co-researchers, to enhance the accuracy of information provided (Creswell & Poth, 2024). In Article III, participants actively engaged in in-depth recollections of their journeys and co-created journey maps during interview sessions.

Thick description entails reporting rich, detailed accounts of cases, including their contexts and meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2024). Such descriptions enable readers to assess transferability to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Articles I and III provide detailed information about participants and their journeys, supplemented by verbatim quotes and contextual illustrations of touchpoints and experiences.

Researcher reflexivity involves “continual evaluation of subjective responses, intersubjective dynamics, and the research process itself” (Finlay, 2002, p. 532), thus requiring awareness of one’s own role in the research. Reflexivity should occur throughout the research process, before and after data collection and analysis, and be disclosed to readers (Patton, 2015; Finlay, 2002). In this thesis, reflexivity was practiced especially during interview preparation and data analysis. Given the researcher’s familiarity with OCJs, there was a risk of imposing personal values and

perceptions without self-awareness (Berger, 2015). Researcher positionality and assumptions are presented in Section 3.1 (axiological position), in line with disclosure recommendations.

3.7.2 Reliability Assessment

Reliability in qualitative research is commonly addressed as *dependability*, which refers to the consistency and stability of the research process over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability primarily involves providing transparent details on how data were handled (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

In line with dependability guidelines, empirical articles include detailed descriptions of data collection (e.g., purposive sampling; Goulding, 2005) and data analysis (e.g., abductive approach in Article I and inductive approach in Article III). Analysis procedures such as codebook development and coder collaboration to achieve shared understanding (Article I), as well as memo development to support interpretation (Article III), are documented. In both studies, researchers independently analyzed data before comparing coding to assess consistency.

Dependability recommendations for systematic literature reviews were also followed in data collection and analysis procedures in Articles II and IV. Both articles provide explicit documentation of search protocols, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and coding strategies, enabling other researchers to audit and replicate the review process (Palmatier et al., 2018; Tranfield et al., 2003).

4 Findings

4.1 Article I: Challenging the “Integration Imperative”: A Customer Perspective on Omnichannel Journeys

Article I was motivated by the need to empirically understand the customer perspective in omnichannel marketing, in line with RQ1 (i.e., what does an omnichannel customer journey entail from a customer-centric perspective?). Although omnichannel marketing emphasizes enhancing both customer experience and firm performance across channels and touchpoints (Verhoef et al., 2015), research has predominantly focused on the latter, examining issues such as channel addition and integration, while neglecting the customer experience of omnichannel journey integration (Salvietti et al., 2022). Article I is an empirical investigation of how customers’ perceptions of journey integration affect the customer experience. The study focused on customer purchase journeys in omnichannel retailing, involving multiple touchpoints, including customer-owned ones.

The article adopts a problematization approach that challenges the assumptions underlying the existing literature (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). Specifically, it critiques the prevailing notion in omnichannel retailing research that firms should integrate touchpoints through consistent and uniform retail elements such as assortment, design, and price (e.g., Cui et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2020). The “integration imperative” is regarded as a means of enhancing the customer experience by making it seamless, smooth, and consistent (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). However, studies have shown that customers sometimes prefer unpredictable experiences (Siebert et al., 2020) and that inconsistencies can benefit brands by distancing them from dissatisfying experiences (Kranzbühler et al., 2019). This mismatch highlights the need for insights into when and how customers benefit from integration efforts. Article I argues for examining this issue through a customer experience lens—not merely in terms of positive or negative valence, but from a multidimensional perspective (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

The article focuses on customers’ perceptions of journey integration through two dimensions: perceived consistency of retail mix elements and perceived connectivity of touchpoints. Previous research has treated these dimensions as interdependent,

suggesting that a consistent retail mix facilitates smooth transitions across touchpoints (Huré et al., 2017). Using a qualitative design based on interviews, the study explores the customer experience that emerges from these perceptions throughout the journey, shedding light on the content of such experiences (e.g., surprise, anger).

The findings reveal that the two dimensions of journey integration are distinct and often independent, to the extent that journeys can be simultaneously high in one dimension and low in the other. The combination of different levels within each dimension yields four patterns of integration in omnichannel journeys, each prompting distinct experiences (Figure 7). First, in consistent and seamless journeys, customers find the same price, assortment, promotion, and information across touchpoints, and move effortlessly between them. Second, in inconsistent but seamless journeys, customers note clear differences across touchpoints in retail mix elements, while navigation remains easy. Third, in consistent but disjointed journeys, customers perceive consistent elements while encountering barriers as they move through the journey. Fourth, in inconsistent and disjointed journeys, customers perceive inconsistencies in retail mix elements across touchpoints and barriers that interfere with the flow of the journey.

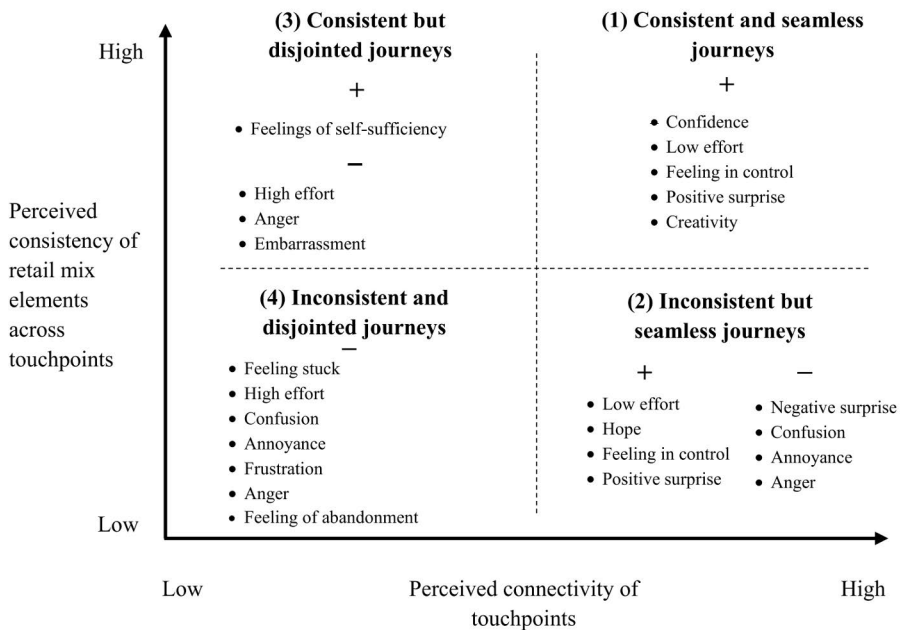


Figure 7. Patterns of integration in omnichannel customer journeys and customer experiences. Source: Gasparin et al. (2022) (Article 1).

A key insight from these findings is that positive customer experiences can emerge even when one dimension is low. For example, consistent but disjointed journeys may lead customers to feel self-sufficient as they overcome barriers when moving from one touchpoint to another. Similarly, inconsistent but seamless journeys can result in positive surprise, low effort, feelings of control, and hope. Collectively, these findings challenge the “integration imperative,” suggesting that low levels of integration do not necessarily harm the customer experience during journeys.

The empirical findings of Article I culminate in four research propositions that advance a customer-centric perspective of omnichannel journeys. They propose that consistency and connectivity are distinct dimensions of an omnichannel journey that affect customer experience (P1); that inconsistent retail elements—such as price and assortment—can positively impact customer experience (P2), particularly if they favor the customer, e.g., allowing them to pay a lower price in a different channel (P3); and that perceived connectivity has greater relevance for customer experience, as customers value smooth transitions across touchpoints (P4).

4.2 Article II: Omnichannel as a Consumer-Based Strategy

Article II was motivated by the need to assess existing knowledge about the customer perspective in omnichannel marketing, in line with RQ1. Developed in parallel with Article I, it follows a literature review design. The article argues that much of the omnichannel marketing research has focused on the challenges of implementing omnichannel strategies, particularly issues of channel integration. At the same time, the customer experience has received less attention. Article II aims to identify what is currently known—and, more importantly, what is missing—in this body of literature to offer insights to better inform omnichannel implementation.

The thematic analysis of customer-focused omnichannel marketing studies reveals that existing research focuses on customer evaluations of omnichannel marketing efforts (e.g., perceived quality, satisfaction), determinants of omnichannel customer journeys (e.g., motivations for channel choice), new customer behaviors resulting from channel combinations (e.g., webrooming), and omnichannel customer segmentation (e.g., by channel usage). However, a closer examination of this literature uncovers a myopic view of the customer experience in omnichannel journeys. Specifically, research has focused on customer evaluations rather than experiential aspects of the journey, and has limited its scope to interactions with a focal firm, primarily during the pre-purchase and purchase stages.

In line with recommendations to prioritize consumer insights in strategy development (Hamilton, 2016), Article II advocates a shift in perspective in omnichannel marketing research—from a customer view to a consumer view

(Hamilton & Price, 2019). **Figure 8** illustrates what a shift from a customer to a consumer perspective entails for researchers: a wider variety of entities and relationships involved in journeys, a multilevel perspective on the journey processes and goals, and new approaches to the substantive, conceptual, and methodological domains.

	Omnichannel perspective based on...	
	Customer	Consumer
Entities and relationships		
Process		
Substantive domain	Individuals interacting with a specific firm across multiple touchpoints to achieve concrete purchase goals	Individuals interacting with various actors across multiple touchpoints to achieve abstract higher-order goals
Conceptual domain	Customer journey; Firm-controlled touchpoints and channels; Evaluative outcomes	Consumer journey; Firm-controlled and non-firm-controlled touchpoints; Multidimensional experiences
Methodological domain	Emphasis on descriptive research designs	Emphasis on exploratory research designs

Figure 8. Comparison of customer versus consumer perspectives on omnichannel marketing. Source: Gasparin & Slongo (2023a) (Article II).

Article II proposes research paths to advance consumer-based omnichannel marketing, thereby moving the field from a customer-based to a consumer-based view. It adopts the framework by Brinberg & McGrath (1985), which explains how knowledge expands within a discipline through three interrelated domains: substantive (i.e., real-world phenomena), conceptual (i.e., abstract representations of phenomena through frameworks and concepts), and methodological (i.e., the procedures to study the phenomena). Drawing on findings from the literature review, the article explores how each domain is represented in customer-based omnichannel research and proposes three research paths for transitioning to a consumer-based understanding. Each path combines two domains and applies to a third domain, resulting in what Brinberg and McGrath (1985) define as theoretical, experimental, and empirical paths.

In the theoretical path, Article II recommends improving the conceptualization of the omnichannel experience, differentiating it from evaluative concepts such as channel integration quality, and developing theoretical models of omnichannel consumer phenomena informed by contemporary issues, such as hyperconnectivity. In the experimental path, Article II suggests exploring omnichannel integration from the consumer perspective and touchpoints beyond a firm-centric definition (e.g., as channels). Along the empirical path, Article II recommends developing new ways to capture experience dynamics in omnichannel journeys. Together, these paths form a research agenda to generate consumer-based insights that can better inform omnichannel marketing strategies.

4.3 Article III: Out of Control? Understanding How Third Parties Shape the Customer Journey

Article III was motivated by the need for a better understanding of the elements beyond a focal firm that dynamically influence OCJs, in line with RQ3 (i.e., what affects omnichannel customer journeys beyond firm-controlled elements?). Developed after the empirical (I) and literature review (II) articles, it focused on mapping touchpoints involving third parties (e.g., delivery partners, influencers, other customers, friends, family members, platforms) to understand their roles in shaping customer journeys and experiences. Although third parties have long been recognized in marketing literature as influential actors affecting the relationship between customers and firms (e.g., word-of-mouth, outsourcing), a journey-based, processual understanding of their influence was missing.

This research identifies four pairs of roles that third-party touchpoints play in shaping the trajectory of customer journeys and influencing the experience (**Figure 9**): (1) **trigger roles** that start the journey by either aligning (*pull-trigger role*) or conflicting (*tension-trigger role*) with a customer's need or want; (2) **route-finding roles** that help the customer map out (*expander role*) and narrow down (*refiner role*) possible routes in navigating the journey; (3) **direction-facilitating roles** that steer the journey flow either smoothly to the next natural step (*enabler role*) or abruptly to an alternative route (*redirector role*); and (4) **modulatory roles** that fine-tune the intensity of the customer experience without changing the journey route, either by making it more pleasant (*enhancer role*) or less pleasant (*detractor role*) to follow.

Pairs	Sub-roles of third-party touchpoints	Relevant CJ stage	Impact on CX dynamics	Network properties	
I. TRIGGER ROLES	PULL-TRIGGER 	Starts the journey by aligning with a customer's need or want, facilitating smooth progression	Pre-purchase (need recognition)	Positive CX (e.g., hopeful anticipation), more localized and contained to the TP	Intermediary
	TENSION-TRIGGER 	Starts the journey by conflicting with a customer's need or want, requiring negotiation before the journey progresses	Pre-purchase (search)	Negative CX (e.g., skepticism), carried over to other TPs	Mediator
II. ROUTE-FINDING ROLES	EXPANDER 	Maps out possible routes, expanding the landscape of trajectory options for the journey before it progresses	Pre-purchase (search)	Complex CX connected with learning about options (e.g., hopefulness, curiosity, frustration), carried over to other TPs	Mediator
	REFINER 	Narrows down possible routes for the journey, refining and eliminating options (often mapped by <i>expander</i> third-party touchpoints)	Pre-purchase (consideration, comparison)	Complex CX connected with comparing options (e.g., cognitive effort, reduced uncertainty), carried over to other TPs	Mediator
	ENABLER 	Smoothly moves the journey to the next step by removing barriers and accelerating the flow within a particular route	Throughout the journey	Positive and neutral CX (e.g., excitement, ease) more localized and contained to the TP	Intermediary
III. DIRECTION-FACILITATING ROLES	REDIRECTOR 	Abruptly forces a U-turn in the journey by introducing obstacles that close a route and redirect the journey to alternative ones	Pre-purchase and purchase	Complex CX connected with unexpected changes (e.g., annoyance, acceptance, optimism) carried over to other TPs	Mediator
	ENHANCER 	Makes the journey more pleasant to follow by reinforcing the current route	Throughout the journey	Positive CX (e.g., reassurance, confidence), more localized and contained to the TP	Intermediary
IV. MODULATORY ROLES	DETRACTOR 	Makes the journey less pleasant to follow by adding friction and noise	Throughout the journey	Negative CX (e.g., annoyance), more localized and contained to the TP	Intermediary

Figure 9. Roles of third-party touchpoints in customer journeys and their impact on customer experience dynamics. Source: Gasparin et al. (2026) (Article III).

To further interpret these roles, Article III employs Actor-Network Theory's distinction between intermediaries and mediators (Latour, 2005). In ANT, an *intermediary* transports (offering-related) meaning without transformation, while a *mediator* translates, distorts, or modifies the meaning it carries. ANT emphasizes that actors acquire mediating or intermediating properties through relationships within networks rather than possessing them a priori. Applying this distinction to third-party touchpoints suggests that they can assume mediating or intermediating properties between the focal customer and the focal offering.

The intermediary vs. mediator distinction offers insights into why third-party touchpoints influence the journey in different ways. When enacting intermediary properties, 3P-TPs do not significantly change how customers understand the offering, even when they introduce disturbances to the journey. As intermediaries, third-party touchpoints in *pull-trigger*, *enabler*, *enhancer*, and *detractor* roles prompt short-term, localized experiences while customers stay in their current paths. In contrast, third-party touchpoints that enact mediator properties actively reshape meanings for customers, with lasting effects. As mediators, third-party touchpoints in *tension-trigger*, *expander*, *refiner*, and *redirector* roles prompt experiences that carry over and influence subsequent moments of the journey. These findings suggest that the impact of a third-party touchpoint does not necessarily depend on the type of third party involved, but rather on situational and contextual factors, such as the customer's current needs at a particular stage of the journey (e.g., learning about options). Consequently, a single third party, such as a family member, can assume different roles throughout the customer journey.

Building on these findings, Article III proposes a customer-centric definition of a third-party touchpoint as *a moment of contact between a focal customer and a focal firm/brand's offering (or its representation) via a distinct third entity (person or organization) that intermediates or mediates the connection.*

4.4 Article IV: Conceptualizing the Experienter Journey

Article IV was motivated by the need for a better conceptual tool to study the emergence of experience in journeys, in line with RQ2 (i.e., how does the customer experience emerge and evolve along omnichannel customer journeys?). Developed in parallel with Article III, this article addresses the lack of a robust and coherent conceptualization of journeys. Although the journey has been employed metaphorically to refer to different processes, its distinctive role as a structure for understanding experience formation and evolution (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2025; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) is often neglected or underemphasized. Moreover, the absence of clearly defined attributes fragments the literature, forming

“camps” of journey approaches (e.g., a customer journey anchored in a purchase cycle vs. in goal achievement; Arkadan et al., 2024).

To address these problems, Article IV adopts a theory synthesis approach (Jaakkola, 2020) to develop a higher-order journey conceptualization centered on experience formation, thus emphasizing what makes the journey a unique concept. This approach unfolds across three phases, each with its own findings.

Building on a systematic literature review, the first phase identifies three key attributes of journeys that are consistently addressed in definitions or descriptions, regardless of context or nomenclature: process, performer, and participants. First, the literature anchors the journey to a *process* (e.g., purchase, goal pursuit) that can be divided into smaller parts (e.g., a collection of touchpoints forms a journey). Second, it defines a *performer* as the individual (e.g., customer, patient) who undergoes the process. Third, the literature delineates the journey *participants* as the multiple actors involved in the process (e.g., other customers, frontline employees, brands, service providers). In journey definitions, the performer plays a more active role (e.g., “goes through,” “performs,” “experiences”). In contrast, participants play a more passive role and are defined in relation to the performer (e.g., participants are “encountered” by the performer).

The second phase employs the key attributes to compare different journey approaches. The articles are grouped by the journey process they describe: purchase (in both B2C and B2B contexts), service delivery, goal-seeking, practice enactment, and engagement. These approaches are also compared with respect to performers and participants. Overall, journeys involve either the pursuit of a particular objective or goal—from concrete goals such as purchase to more abstract life goals such as being healthier—or the enactment of a practice with no clear end goal, such as surfing. In these processes, performers may assume different roles and interact with market and non-market participants in various touchpoints.

The third phase integrates these approaches into a higher-order perspective grounded in experience-centric logic, called the *experiencer journey* framework (**Figure 10**). Article IV delineates three building blocks of a higher-order view of journeys, anchored in experience and built upon the journey’s key attributes. The first building block is the *experiencer*: an individual who plays various roles (e.g., customer, patient). The second is the *experiential process* the experiencer undergoes, which can be anchored to different contexts (e.g., purchase, engagement with a practice) and structured into multiple phases and touchpoints. The third is the *experience partners*, in organizational or human form, who are involved in the experiential process. These building blocks are interconnected, as the anchor of a particular experiential process frames the roles the experiencer assumes and shapes the scope of experience for the partners involved in the journey.

Article IV proposes an overarching definition of an experienter journey as a *temporally ordered configuration of goal- or practice-related touchpoints (i.e., events in time and space) where multidimensional experiences emerge in interactions with experience partners (e.g., market and non-market actors)*. In addition, it defines a touchpoint as a *context-situated moment in the experienter journey in which an experienter perceives and reacts to particular stimuli coming from an experience partner in affective, cognitive, sensory, social, or physical ways*. These experience-focused building blocks provide the basis for an experience-centric understanding of any journey, as they accommodate much of the variability observed in the literature. Article IV concludes with a discussion of the implications for how researchers study journey phenomena, exploring typical choices in journey research, limitations of traditional journey frameworks, and the value of the suggested conceptualization.

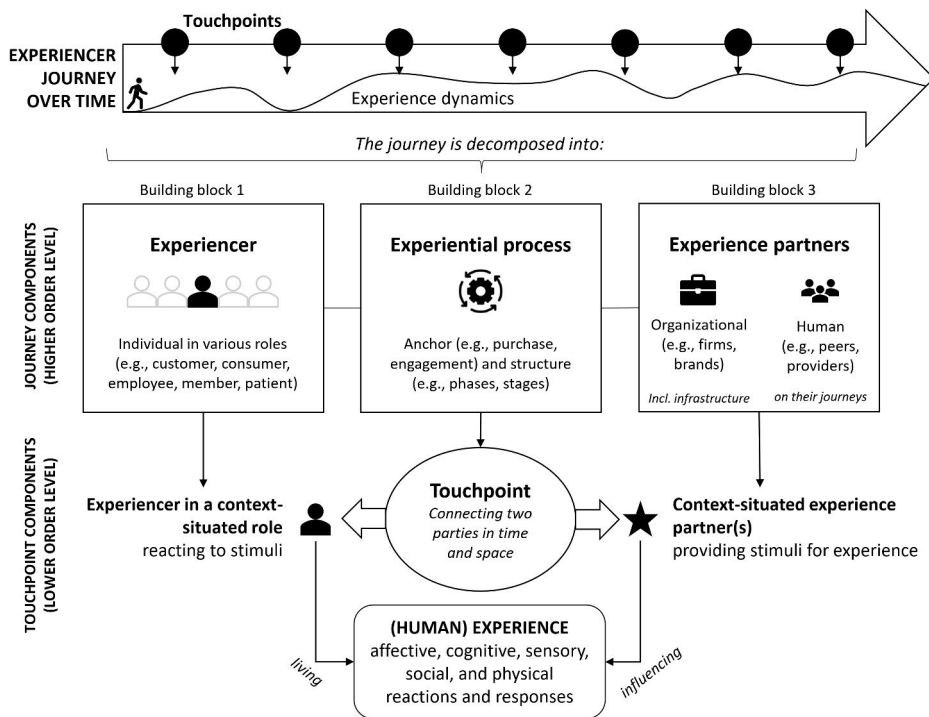


Figure 10. The experienter journey framework. Source: Gasparin (2026) (Article IV).

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter presents a summary of findings and explains how each article contributes to answering the research questions. It then outlines the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of the doctoral thesis, followed by a discussion of its limitations and directions for future research.

5.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis was motivated by the need to expand the understanding of omnichannel customer journeys (OCJs) in light of two important limitations in existing research (identified in Section 2.4): (a) a firm-centric perspective that frames the journey as a process involving a focal firm and its customers, overlooking moments in the journey that extend beyond firm-customer interactions (e.g., third-party touchpoints), and (b) a tendency to focus on customer evaluations of the overall journey, rather than on customer experience dynamics (i.e., how it emerges and evolves across touchpoints). To address these limitations, this thesis advocates a customer-centric and dynamic view of OCJs. Such a view emphasizes that OCJs are embedded in consumers' broader life journeys, thus involving touchpoints beyond firm boundaries, and acknowledges the experiences that consumers have along the way, dynamically shaped by interactions with market and non-market actors.

The purpose of this thesis was formally stated as *to develop an experience-focused understanding of OCJs*. To this end, three research questions (RQs) were posed. The following subsections explain how each article contributed to answering these questions, as summarized in **Table 7**.

Table 7. Answers to research questions and contributions of individual articles.

RQ	THESIS FINDINGS	CONTRIBUTION OF EACH ARTICLE
1. What does an OCJ entail from a customer-centric perspective?	From a customer perspective, an OCJ is a process for purchasing, accessing, or using an offering that involves multiple touchpoints (with	<i>Article 1</i> identifies two dimensions shaping customers' perceptions of OCJs: perceived consistency of retail mix elements and perceived connectivity of touchpoints.

RQ	THESIS FINDINGS	CONTRIBUTION OF EACH ARTICLE
	<p>varying degrees of integration), multiple market and non-market actors beyond the focal firm, and multiple interrelated processes (e.g., engagement, practice enactment) toward broader goals. Throughout this process, multidimensional experiences of varied valence emerge.</p>	<p><i>Article II</i> expands the substantive domain of OCJs beyond interactions with a focal firm to encompass multiple actors, including other organizations and consumers.</p> <p><i>Article III</i> reveals eight distinct roles of third-party touchpoints in shaping the trajectory of OCJs and influencing the customer experience.</p> <p><i>Article IV</i> introduces the experienter journey framework and its three building blocks (experienter, experiential process, experience partners) for understanding OCJs and related processes (e.g., engagement).</p>
<p>2. How does the customer experience emerge and evolve along omnichannel customer journeys?</p>	<p>Customer experience emerges at the touchpoint level as customers' reactions and responses to stimuli from a broader range of experience partners (including market and non-market actors). These experiences can be short-term reactions contained to a particular touchpoint, or have lasting effects that influence subsequent moments of the journey.</p>	<p><i>Article I</i> identifies the content of experiences beyond valence and shows how they arise from perceptions of journey consistency and connectivity.</p> <p><i>Article III</i> examines experiences emerging at third-party touchpoints and how they evolve depending on the roles these touchpoints play, often transforming from negative to positive over time.</p> <p><i>Article IV</i> introduces an experiential view of touchpoints as moments when the experienter perceives and reacts to stimuli from diverse experience partners, forming multidimensional experiences.</p>
<p>3. What affects omnichannel customer journeys beyond firm-controlled elements?</p>	<p>OCJs are influenced by a network of market and non-market actors beyond the focal firm. These actors serve as experience partners, providing stimuli that shape customer experiences and the journey's trajectory, regardless of whether they are under firm control.</p>	<p><i>Article II</i> demonstrates how a consumer-based view expands OCJs to encompass touchpoints beyond the firm's direct control, elevating them to an integral role in achieving customer goals.</p> <p><i>Article III</i> provides empirical evidence of third-party touchpoints that actively shape the journey and experience dynamics beyond firm boundaries.</p> <p><i>Article IV</i> broadens the conceptualization of OCJs by emphasizing that experience partners influence the journey because they provide experience-related stimuli, not because of their relationship with the focal firm.</p>

5.1.1 RQ1: Customer-Centric View of OCJs

RQ1 asked, “What does an omnichannel customer journey entail from a customer-centric perspective?” Findings across the articles delineate OCJs from the perspective of those experiencing them: as a process to purchase, access, or use an offering that involves multiple touchpoints (with varying degrees of integration), multiple market and non-market actors beyond a focal firm, and multiple interrelated processes (e.g., engagement, practice enactment) toward broader goals. Throughout this process, multidimensional experiences of varied valence emerge.

Article I identifies two independent dimensions through which customers perceive their OCJs: perceived consistency of retail mix elements and perceived connectivity of touchpoints. Empirical exploration of these dimensions reveals that OCJs often diverge from the consistent, seamless patterns commonly portrayed in the existing literature (e.g., Cocco & Demoulin, 2022; Herhausen et al., 2019). Importantly, while consistent and seamless OCJs tend to promote positive experiences, consistent with previous findings (e.g., Kuehnl et al., 2019), they do not need to score highly on both dimensions to yield positive outcomes. Customers can still experience benefits such as self-sufficiency and low effort in less integrated journeys. Thus, a customer-centric view challenges the assumption that OCJs necessarily entail a consistent retail mix (e.g., price, assortment) and effortless transitions across touchpoints.

Article II advances a shift toward a consumer-based perspective (Hamilton & Price, 2019; Hamilton, 2016) on omnichannel marketing, thereby delineating a customer-centric view of OCJs. A key step in building this view is expanding the substantive domain of OCJs beyond interactions with a focal firm to achieve purchase goals (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Neslin, 2022). Instead, OCJs encompass interactions with multiple actors, including other organizations and consumers, to achieve multilevel objectives (e.g., Becker et al., 2020; Bettencourt et al., 2022).

Article III highlights the distinct roles that third-party touchpoints play in connecting customers to a focal offering. These touchpoints actively shape how the journey progresses, as they, among other things, expand and refine possible routes or redirect the journey course. While some third parties operate under the focal firm’s control to some extent (e.g., delivery partners), a customer-centric view reveals a broader range of entities involved in OCJs, many of which are beyond the firm’s influence, such as family members, customer-to-customer platforms, and competitors. Furthermore, this perspective illuminates the diverse roles these touchpoints assume at different stages of the journey, adding nuance to existing typologies based on touchpoint control or ownership (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Article IV introduces the concept of the experienter journey as a temporally ordered configuration of touchpoints through which individuals (i.e., experiencers) seek goals or enact a practice. At each touchpoint, experiencers interact with various experience partners, including market and non-market actors. This experience-based view of the journey integrates approaches based on processes such as purchase, service delivery, and engagement, and delineates the building blocks of any journey. This conceptualization offers a higher-order framework for understanding not only OCJs as purchase journeys but also other interrelated processes happening simultaneously—thus facilitating a “helicopter”, multi-perspective view of journeys.

5.1.2 RQ2: Customer Experience Dynamics During OCJs

RQ2 asked, “How does the customer experience emerge and evolve along omnichannel customer journeys?” Findings across the articles provide insights into two aspects: (1) customer experience emergence at the touchpoint level, as customers’ thoughts, feelings, sensations, and other responses (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020) to experience partners that can be market and non-market actors, and (2) customer experience evolution, as some experiences have more lasting effects and continue shape reactions to subsequent touchpoints as the journey progresses.

Article I explores customer experiences emerging as customers navigate multiple touchpoints. It moves beyond the predominant focus on valence in the current literature (see a review in De Keyser et al., 2020) to identify the content of experiences. For example, “embarrassment” and “anger” represent negative experiences within the affective dimension, whereas “positive surprise” combines affective and cognitive elements. These experiences arise from customers’ perceptions of how their journeys progress in terms of consistency and connectivity of touchpoints. This emphasizes that experiences emerge not only from offering-related stimuli within touchpoints (e.g., atmospheric cues; Verhoef et al., 2009) but also from perceptions across and between touchpoints.

Article III continues to examine experience emergence but shifts the focus to responses to offering-related stimuli from an often neglected experience partner: third parties. Findings reveal how experiences arise at third-party touchpoints and how they evolve depending on the roles these third parties play. For instance, interactions with third parties that introduce obstacles and redirect the journey trajectory evoke complex and lasting experiences, often starting with negative emotions (e.g., frustration and annoyance) but later transforming into more positive ones (e.g., optimism about alternatives).

Article IV introduces a conceptualization of journeys in which the experienter is the individual who has experiences while seeking a goal or enacting a practice. It offers an expanded view of touchpoints as moments throughout the journey when

the experiencer (e.g., a customer) perceives and reacts to stimuli from an experience partner, thereby forming multidimensional experiences. This definition moves beyond firm-centric views of touchpoints as mere customer-firm interactions (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and emphasizes that stimuli for experience can originate from a variety of sources.

5.1.3 RQ3: OCJs Beyond What Firms Can Control

RQ3 asked, “What affects omnichannel customer journeys beyond firm-controlled elements?” Findings across the articles highlight the influence of numerous market and non-market actors beyond the focal firm. These actors act as experience partners, providing stimuli that shape customer experiences and, ultimately, the trajectory of OCJs.

Article II demonstrates how adopting a consumer-based view of omnichannel marketing expands the scope of OCJs to include multiple actors and touchpoints outside the firm’s direct control. This perspective elevates external touchpoints—traditionally considered peripheral in omnichannel marketing (e.g., Cui et al., 2020)—to integral components of OCJs, on par with firm-controlled touchpoints, as they help consumers progress through the journey and achieve their goals.

Article III develops an empirically grounded understanding of third-party touchpoints that lie beyond a focal firm’s control. These include private interactions invisible to firms (e.g., conversations with family members) and public interactions that firms can monitor or influence (e.g., discussions on forums). Crucially, these touchpoints are not secondary; they actively shape the journey’s trajectory and influence the dynamics of the experience. They do so by assuming properties of intermediation (i.e., passing meanings from one end to another) and mediation (i.e., transforming meanings) within networks formed between the customer and the firm.

Article IV broadens the conceptualization of OCJs beyond a process defined by what a focal firm can or cannot control. It emphasizes that experience partners, whether organizations or individuals, participate in the journey because they provide experience stimuli, not because of their relationship with the focal firm. This perspective underscores that OCJs are embedded in a network of actors whose influence extends beyond firm boundaries.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this doctoral thesis offer two central theoretical contributions to understanding the phenomenon of OCJs. First, it reframes the journey and its touchpoints as customer-centric and experience-based concepts. Second, it delineates the formation and evolution of experience throughout the OCJ. The

following subsections detail these contributions across the literature fields of customer journey, customer experience, and omnichannel marketing.

5.2.1 A Customer-Centric and Experience-Based View of OCJs

By challenging assumptions about how customers navigate OCJs and exploring their lived experiences, this thesis expands the understanding of OCJs from firm-centric purchase processes to customer-centric experiential processes. Although journey research has evolved through conceptual and empirical work, OCJs continue to be framed under a firm-centric logic, as a series of interactions (touchpoints) between a customer and a focal firm (De Keyser et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Mele et al., 2025). Such logic persists even when the focus is on customers' perceptions and evaluations of their journeys (e.g., Cocco & Demoulin, 2022; Rahman et al., 2022). Answering calls to advance journeys beyond metaphors for purchase processes (Steward et al., 2019) and to shift to a customer perspective (Akaka & Schau, 2019; Reitsamer & Becker, 2024; Tax et al., 2013), this thesis delineates OCJs and relates them to a broader conceptual world (MacInnis, 2011) that includes touchpoints and customer experience.

An expanded view of OCJs builds on insights from a multilevel perspective to journeys that acknowledge how customer purchase journeys are embedded in broader goal- and practice-based consumption journeys (Becker et al., 2020; Hamilton & Price, 2019; Schau & Akaka, 2021). This thesis advances this perspective by integrating journey approaches (e.g., engagement journey, employee journey, patient journey) into a higher-order framework grounded on the experience. It introduces the journey's building blocks and emphasizes that journeys are experiential processes that individuals undergo in different roles (e.g., customer, employee, patient) and with multiple experience partners (market and non-market actors), thus offering a robust framework for studying journeys across settings. Within this integrative view, the thesis reconceptualizes touchpoints as granular moments of interaction with diverse experience partners that provide stimuli for experience formation, including but not limited to offering-related stimuli (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). This expanded definition also encompasses journeys that unfold primarily in non-market settings (e.g., practice-based consumption journeys; Akaka & Schau, 2019), and contributes to ongoing efforts to reach a consensual understanding of touchpoints (Barann et al., 2020; Følstad & Kvale, 2018).

Applying a novel definition of touchpoints to empirical data, this thesis demonstrates that touchpoints beyond the firm's direct control (e.g., third-party touchpoints) are not peripheral, but can be as consequential as firm-controlled touchpoints because they help customers progress along their journeys. Extending

research that has examined specific third parties in customer journeys (e.g., firm partners; Kranzbühler et al., 2019; influencers; De-Juan-Vigaray & Cocco, 2025), it shows that the roles assumed by multiple third parties depend less on their nature (e.g., actor type) and more on situational and contextual customer factors, thereby broadening the determinants of journey progression beyond firm-controlled factors. These insights also answer calls to advance omnichannel theory (Salviotti et al., 2022). Whereas research on customer responses to omnichannel strategies has largely emphasized firm-controlled touchpoints (e.g., attitudes toward integration; Gao & Huang, 2021), this thesis shows how external touchpoints, including competitor touchpoints, mediate or intermediate the connection between customers and the offering, thereby shaping journey trajectories. This underscores the need to incorporate external touchpoints into omnichannel management and to design firm-controlled touchpoints that purposefully interact with those beyond the firm's control (Cui et al., 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020).

An expanded view of OCJs also extends the notion of journey integration. Prior work identifies smooth movement between touchpoints as a relevant dimension of customers' perceptions (Jaakkola & Terho, 2021; Kuehnl et al., 2019), but typically within the firm's sphere of influence. However, this thesis shows that customers value connectivity across all touchpoints they navigate, irrespective of who controls them. This widens the scope of integration assessment beyond the firm and its partners (Arkadan et al., 2024) and reinforces the importance of adopting the customer's perspective on the moments that comprise their journeys (Reitsamer & Becker, 2024) to improve journey design and management.

5.2.2 Experience Formation and Evolution Throughout the OCJ

Building on the customer-centric, experience-based view of OCJs, this thesis advances a dynamic account of how experiences form and change as journeys unfold. While theoretical frameworks emphasize the uniqueness of the journey concept to understand these experience dynamics (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2025; Steward et al., 2019), empirical research typically treats experience either as static and constrained *within touchpoints* (e.g., Baxendale et al., 2015; Herhausen et al., 2019; Pizzutti et al., 2022) or as an overall evaluation of the whole journey *across touchpoints* (e.g., Cocco & Demoulin, 2022; Gao & Huang, 2021). Both snapshots and summaries are insufficient for a dynamic view, as they fail to capture the temporal evolution of journeys. By studying OCJs through a processual approach, this thesis shows how experiences emerge at one touchpoint and transform as customers move to subsequent touchpoints. In doing so, it brings to light experiences that occur during the transitions customers navigate—*in between*

touchpoints. This much-needed dynamic understanding reveals how experiences change as the journey unfolds, including whether they carry over or fade over time (Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2021). The resulting framework delineates experience formation across distinct processes (at touchpoints, in transitions between them, and at the level of the unfolding trajectory), offering a foundation for future applications and operationalization of the journey concept.

This contribution advances customer experience research, particularly the underdeveloped stream that examines experiences and journeys together (Rehman et al., 2026). This thesis demonstrates the value of analyzing experience at two complementary levels: the touchpoint level, where experiences emerge (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; Gahler et al., 2023), and the journey level, where those experiences transform (De Keyser et al., 2025; Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2021). Combining this processual lens with a phenomenological perspective that views experience as co-created by multiple actors (Becker et al., 2023; Helkkula et al., 2012), the findings highlight how actors beyond a firm's control shape experience through multiple roles along the OCJ. This underscores the importance of studying experience within customers' lifeworlds and the broader actor ecosystems in which journeys are embedded (Lipkin & Heinonen, 2022). It also clarifies the distinction between experiences and overall journey assessments (Rahman et al., 2022), or proxies such as satisfaction (Le & Nguyen-Le, 2020), which can be useful as aggregate outcomes, but do not capture the dynamic, evolving nature of experience over the course of the OCJ.

Further, the empirical exploration of journey integration from the customer's perspective contributes to discussions on the optimal level of omnichannel integration (Cao & Li, 2015; Neslin, 2022). This thesis challenges the assumption that high consistency in retail elements (e.g., price, promotion) across channels is a necessary condition for improving customer experience. Instead, it shows that seamless transitions between touchpoints—an under-researched facet of omnichannel management—can foster positive experiences even when consistency in retail elements is low. This insight suggests alternative routes to effective omnichannel implementation that emphasize transition design and coordination over full standardization, thereby helping firms navigate the operational barriers that often constrain omnichannel marketing implementation (Cui et al., 2020; Hajdas et al., 2022).

5.3 Managerial Implications

This thesis makes several relevant managerial implications for customer journey management (CJM), customer experience management (CXM), and omnichannel marketing management. **Table 8** illustrates actionable strategies for designing, mapping, and managing OCJs.

First, the findings emphasize the need to expand CJM efforts beyond the current focus on firm-controlled touchpoints (Homburg & Tischer, 2023; Kuehnl et al., 2019) to include third-party touchpoints. This requires managers to think in terms of trajectories rather than isolated touchpoints, acknowledging that customers navigate across multiple actors and channels as they move toward their purchase goals. A necessary step in this direction is to enhance existing tools, such as journey mapping (Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Vakulenko et al., 2019), so that they capture touchpoints outside the firm's control. Practitioners are advised to combine such tools with a customer-centric view, which can help uncover relevant third parties from the customer ecosystem (Lipkin & Heinonen, 2022).

In addition, managers should consider the goals and practices surrounding OCJs, as these can reveal additional touchpoints with diverse experience partners. To this end, CJM should incorporate situational and contextual needs, not only product-related tasks, when analyzing how customers navigate their journeys. When managing OCJs, connectivity between touchpoints remains a key emphasis (Kuehnl et al., 2019), but it must be expanded to encompass all touchpoints along the journey, including transitions between internal and external touchpoints (Cui et al., 2020). Strengthening these transitions can support a seamless journey.

Second, regarding CXM, the findings indicate that managers need to pay closer attention to experiences at the touchpoint level, as overall journey evaluations (e.g., satisfaction, Net Promoter Score) are insufficient to capture these experiences (Harvard Business Review, 2022; Zaki et al., 2021). Examining touchpoint-level experiences alongside an overview of the entire journey provides insight into which experiences are short-lived and which persist and carry over to subsequent moments—patterns that firms can proactively amplify or mitigate. A comprehensive view of experience dynamics throughout the journey also helps identify points of friction, such as low connectivity between touchpoints, that managers can target for improvement.

Third, regarding omnichannel marketing management, the findings highlight the importance of developing a genuinely customer-centered perspective on OCJs, as this can reveal more cost-effective paths for firms adopting omnichannel business models. Managers are encouraged to reconsider the “integration imperative” and determine the optimal level of integration (Neslin, 2022) for their context based on experience insights. The findings show that a lack of full integration does not necessarily harm the customer experience; therefore, firms should prioritize designing the stimuli that promote experiences they want customers to have rather than striving to standardize retail mix elements across all channels. In their integration efforts, managers should place greater emphasis on connectivity and on building flexible systems that support multiple customer routes.

Table 8. Recommendations for designing, mapping, and managing OCJs

FOCUS AREA	RECOMMENDATIONS
<i>Journey design</i> (e.g., creating new touchpoints, modifying existing ones)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start with the experiencer, i.e., the individual navigating multiple journeys in various roles (e.g., customer, patient) • Define the scope of the process using appropriate journey anchors (e.g., service delivery, engagement) • Collaborate with typical experience partners in touchpoint design (e.g., delivery, payment) • Prioritize increasing the connectivity of touchpoints to facilitate customer transitions across touchpoints managed by different entities (e.g., firm-controlled and third-party touchpoints)
<i>Journey map</i> (e.g., identifying and visualizing touchpoints)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embrace the customer's perspective, including customer goals (e.g., moving home) and practices (e.g., sports) whenever possible • Identify key touchpoints in which the firm is a relevant experience partner, including journeys with competitors • Think about third parties involved in customer journeys beyond traditional partners: independent organizations, customer forums, and artificial intelligence agents • Combine multiple data sources to build journey maps, from big data analytics to ethnographic insights
<i>Journey management</i> (e.g., optimizing and coordinating touchpoints)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify elements that can be inconsistent across firm-controlled touchpoints, e.g., price online and offline • Integrate retail mix elements that customers expect to be consistent across touchpoints, such as core product information • Allocate resources to promote connectivity, not only consistency across touchpoints

5.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings of this thesis should be interpreted in light of a few limitations. First, the empirical scope of the journeys examined was limited to purchase processes in specific product categories such as electronics and fashion. Other approaches to journeys, such as engagement and B2B purchase, were addressed only theoretically. Future research should expand empirical examination to a wider variety of contexts and settings, including services such as healthcare, banking, and hospitality, to further refine the understanding of OCJs in light of the experiencer journey framework. Additionally, studies that address multiple levels of journeys, for example, those centered on specific goals (Becker et al., 2020) or practices (Akaka & Schau, 2019), and that explore how these levels intersect, would be particularly valuable.

Second, the data collection relied on recalled journeys. Although customers tend to recall the experiences that guided their behavior (Gahler et al., 2023), recall bias remains a potential limitation. Future research should therefore explore OCJs using alternative methods, such as real-time mapping and diaries (e.g., Baxendale et al., 2015), which can provide more immediate and fine-grained insights into the emergence and evolution of experience.

Third, this thesis examined journeys within the business and management domain. However, journey research spans many other disciplines (e.g., patient journey in health sciences; Hunter-Jones et al., 2020; Sudbury-Riley et al., 2020), which were outside the scope of this work but may offer relevant insights. Future research should adopt an interdisciplinary approach to the study of experiences during journeys, integrating theoretical lenses that illuminate experiencer roles, anchors of experiential processes, and the diverse experience partners that shape journeys across domains.

Fourth, although the empirical studies examined a wide range of experience partners with whom customers interact during OCJs (e.g., brands, employees, firm partners, family, friends), artificial intelligence agents such as ChatGPT were not included in the journeys investigated. Introduced during the development of this thesis, AI tools emerge as a distinct type of experience partner, combining characteristics typically associated with different actors (e.g., platform, friend, service provider). Future research should examine the specific roles that AI touchpoints assume as third parties in customer journeys and how they shape the customer experience. As these tools are adopted across many spheres of people's lives, future research on AI as an experience partner in various contexts (e.g., education, illness treatment, shopping) would also benefit from a multidisciplinary approach.

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