

Beyond the controllable: understanding and facilitating customer experience in non-owned touchpoints on social media platforms.

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, the concept of customer experience has become increasingly important. Firms are constantly striving to deliver a superior customer experience to create additional customer value. On the other hand, the number of digital touchpoints on social media is increasing, creating complexity within the customer journey. In the academic literature, customer experience is a popular topic. However, despite previous attempts by researchers to understand digital touchpoints, the complexity of non-owned touchpoints resulted in little research and a gap in the literature. Therefore, this study employs a dyadic perspective to clarify how the customer experience is shaped within non-owned touchpoints and how companies can facilitate it. To this end, a qualitative systematic combination approach was used to identify key patterns and dimensions that shape customer experience, resulting in an integrative framework and rules for facilitating customer experiences. The key findings show that companies cannot have complete control over digital touchpoints in the customer journey and can only exert influence in touchpoints. Moreover, the divide in who has control over a touchpoint is nuanced and lies on a continuum where both parties can also exert influence within one touchpoint. In addition, eight dimensions were discovered that affect customer experience formation and, based on these, four practical rules were created for managers to help them facilitate customer experience.

Keywords: customer experience, customer journey, (non-owned) touchpoints, social media

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research problem

Customer experience is a key concept in marketing and widely covered in academic literature and practice (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Since the shift in marketing logics from a goods logic (GL) perspective to service logic (SL), the customer has become a coproducer of service instead of a recipient of goods. Customer experiences gives firms insights in the expected experiences and emotions from service providers (Johnston & Kong, 2011). When offering superior experiences, value can be created through for instance high customer loyalty, positive word of mouth (Mascarenhas et al., 2006), and customer satisfaction (Sharma & Chaubey, 2014). Additionally, competitive advantage can be achieved from customer experiences by delivering superior experiences through new tools, new people, culture change, and technological know-how (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 1999; Shaw & Ivens, 2002; Voss, 2003; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). However, offering or delivering unattractive customer experiences can destroy value (Keeling et al., 2020; Echeverri & Skålén, 2021).

Customer experience is defined as “*non-deliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to particular stimuli*” by Becker & Jaakkola (2020, p. 637). Customer experiences are created over time, that is, across the customer journey. Marketing scholars use the customer journey perspective because customer experience includes a wide range of activities, also referred to as experiential perspectives of consumption in the academic literature (Palmer, 2010). Touchpoints, moments of interaction between firms and customers (De Keyser et al., 2020, p. 433), are crucial in creating customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Nevertheless, customer journeys are becoming increasingly complex due to the myriad touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Within the different touchpoints, a firm’s perspective reflects a brand-owned or partner-owned touchpoint. Conversely, a customers’ perspective reflects a social or external non-owned touchpoint. Both influence the experience of a customer (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer experiences are social in nature and can be influenced by peer customers, meaning firms have less control over the customer experience and customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Nowadays, the advent of social media has increased the number and complexity of touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Moreover, social media platforms have become a valuable and inevitable tool in understanding and enhancing customer experience (Adisu Fanta & Ayman, 2022; Ayoub & Balawi, 2022).

Firm controlled touchpoints are widely covered in academic literature in contrast to the non-firm controlled touchpoints (De Keyser et al., 2020). Hence, the touchpoints out of a firms’ control, like previous

experiences with service providers or advice from other customers, deserve more attention in literature (Siqueira et al., 2020). In addition, the effect of social media and its digital touchpoints on customer experiences leaves a gap in the literature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Despite slowly increasing recognition of non-owned touchpoints in the academic literature (De Keyser et al., 2020), the complexity of touchpoints on social media inhibits this advance (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Here, previous research also remains quite general. To illustrate, because the effect of non-owned touchpoints is complex and not directly measurable, it is argued that non-owned touchpoints are most beneficial for generating interest and increasing awareness of a company or brand. Further elaboration or explanation of the effect of non-owned touchpoints is lacking (Hallikainen et al., 2019).

A reason for this meager and general knowledge might be that firms only focus on touchpoints that they can fully control (Siqueira et al., 2020). Nonetheless, it is relevant to grasp more information about non-owned touchpoints on social media because this also influences the overall customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), positive (Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Sharma & Chaubey, 2014) and negative (Keeling et al., 2020; Echeverri & Skålén, 2021). In addition, the number of firms using social media to enhance customer experience has risen and at the same time the number of new social media users continues to rise (Ayoub & Balawi, 2022). Nevertheless, thus far no systematic description and empirical knowledge of non-owned touchpoints in a social media context exists yet. Therefore, this study focuses on non-owned touchpoints on social media to fill the gap in the academic literature so that among others, companies and scientists can better understand the entire customer experience and how service can be improved. This can ultimately create value for the consumer (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

This research will be applied to digital marketing agencies using social media to enhance its own and its clients’ customer experience. With digital marketing agencies using social media on a daily basis and social media changing rapidly, the need is high to gain as much insights as possible into these platforms and how to improve or prevent destructing the customer experience (Girchenko & Ovsianikova, 2016). Therefore, the aim of this study is two-sided. First, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of how non-owned touchpoints on social media shape customer experience. Second, a managerial insight in facilitating customer experience in non-owned touchpoints on social media will be aimed. This leads to the following two research questions:

RQ 1: How do non-owned touchpoints on social media shape valences of customer experience?

RQ 2: How can service providers facilitate customer experience in non-owned touchpoints on social media platforms?

In this research, a case study method with a qualitative research perspective will be used. Measuring customer experience considers contextual differences, meaning this is the best way to understand experiences (Palmer, 2010). Moreover, the meager data and lacking empirical knowledge relates to the main goal of qualitative research: understanding a phenomenon that is not well understood, to generate hypotheses or theory (Whitfield & Strauss, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2007). By contrast, the core of quantitative research is rather focused on testing than exploring data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2007). Since there is hardly any data to test, a quantitative approach is less appropriate. Thus, we deem an explorative qualitative design appropriate for exploring the nascent topic of shaping and facilitating customer experience in non-owned touchpoints on social media.

The study will start with a literature review by which connections between non-owned touchpoints on social media and valences of customer experience will be examined. Three forms of *valence* are distinguished within customer experience, positive, neutral or negative, that is, the *"nature of customers' reactions to interactions with the brand/company"* (De Keyser et al., 2020, p. 442). Next to the literature review, interviews will be the main method to gain practical information. Benefits such as the flexibility to discover clues to connect different elements (Whitfield & Strauss, 1998) or understanding human experience in specific settings (Rahman, 2016) will arise when conducting interviews. This study applies a systematic combination of an abductive and deductive approach, which is based more on refining existing theories than on inventing new ones (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). It is a *"process where theoretical framework, empirical fieldwork, and case analysis evolve simultaneously, and it is particularly useful for development of new theories"* (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 554). The combination of a literature review and interviews allows us to explore the valences of non-owned touchpoints on social media and extract knowledge from real-world situations. This approach creates *"fruitful cross-fertilization where new combinations are developed through a mixture of established theoretical models and new concepts derived from the confrontation with reality"* (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, p. 559). In addition, by applying a dyadic perspective, knowledge is gained from the perspective of online marketing agencies and from the perspective of the end consumer.

Guided by the research questions, this study contributes to the (digital) marketing field with five contributions, both theoretical and practical. On the one hand, first, the study contributes to the academic marketing literature by providing a solid foundation for a better understanding of customer experience shaped in non-owned touchpoints on social media. Second, new dimensions will be added to the literature which influence customer experience in non-owned touchpoints on social media. Finally, the marketing research domain will be enriched by providing empirical knowledge about non-owned touchpoints on social media that do not yet exist to fill the gap in the academic literature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; De Keyser et al., 2020; Siqueira et al., 2020). With this, marketing scholars will get new knowledge which in turn can be further investigated and (dis)confirmed in order to continue research in delivering the ultimate customer experience. Combined with the popularity of customer experience in marketing research, these contributions reflect high theoretical relevance. On the other hand, the practical contributions of this study relate to the managers' profound understanding of the phenomenon non-owned touchpoints on social media. Prior to that, we developed an integrative framework with eight dimensions which influence customer experience formation. These dimensions allow better consideration of whether and how to use social media to enhance their customer experience, which can be adapted to the social media strategy of service providers' clients (Siqueira et al., 2020). Moreover, the study will contribute to managers by providing four practical rules to help them facilitate superior customer experience and gain competitive advantage.

The previous paragraphs described the research problem, research goals, research question and its theoretical and practical relevance. To maintain the goal of this study, the next section will point out a theoretical background. After that, a methodology section will follow. Continuing with interview results which will be analyzed and after which a discussion and conclusion will be drawn.

2. THEORY

The various theories used in this study will be elaborated in this section. First, customer experience and the valences in which it occurs will be described. Second, the customer journey will be explained and the non-owned touchpoints that occur in it. Third, the touchpoints will be placed in the context of social media. Finally, the relationship between the valences of customer experience and non-owned touchpoints on social media will be presented in a theoretical framework.

2.1 Customer experience

In the marketing field, service is nowadays fundamental to economic exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). This has led to increasing academic marketing research concerning customer centricity and customer experience, which is actively facilitated by multiple marketing scholars around the world (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008, 2016; Kranzbühler et al., 2018). Moreover, *customer-centricity* is becoming increasingly central to creating competitive advantages for multiple businesses. With a customer-centric approach, customers are active actors in the marketing process and both offers and marketing processes are created and adapted by improving customer competencies (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Etgar, 2008; Payne et al., 2008; Lamberti, 2013). This customer-centric approach realizes *value co-creation* which has become increasingly important to ensure superior customer experience: a company's interaction with the customer that goes beyond just the transaction (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2016). Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that, along the customer journey value can be co-created through positive physical and mental experiences but also co-destroyed as a result of negative experiences (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). This is because customers are both value interpreters and value contributors, according to the close link and mutual shaping of value-creation and value-experience (Gummerus, 2013). The value experience is determined by the perceived value of the beneficiary (Vargo & Lusch, 2016).

Given the popularity and complexity of customer experience due to its broad applicability (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kranzbühler et al., 2018; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020), the amount of definitions and disciplines in academic research is broad. To illustrate, multiple literature fields address customer experience, e.g.: “*services marketing, consumer re- search, retailing, service-dominant (S-D) logic, service design, online marketing, branding, and experiential marketing*” (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020, p. 631). This variety of fields show that customer experience is diverse and is reviewed by different disciplines, hence making this concept complex. Followed by an extensive literature review, the following definition emerged as the most appropriate to use in academic research: “*non-deliberate, spontaneous responses and reactions to particular stimuli*” (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020, p. 637). Therefore, this study will adopt this definition.

A non-deliberate, spontaneous response or reaction from customers comes from either managerial stimuli or consumption processes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Hamilton & Price, 2019; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). These two research traditions have different views. Within the view of management research, the role of context is rather minor and often examines a limited number of contextual variables or rejects their

effect altogether (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). By contrast, the consumption process view puts more emphasis on the customer context and recognizes the role of complementary offerings and service providers. But there is also a focus on institutions and institutional arrangements and the customers’ goals in consumption (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Service design lies at the intersection of the two traditional research views mentioned above.. It is inherently focused on management, but has recently incorporated a systemic view of customer experience incentives (Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Hamilton & Price, 2019; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

Customer experience begins with offer-related stimuli, inside or outside a company's control (or some combination thereof). Here, five dimensions of experiences a firm can cause for its customers are distinguished (Schmitt, 1999; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020): sensorial experience (*sense*), affective experience (*feel*), cognitive experience (*think*), physical experience (*act*), and social identity experience, as a result of relating to a reference group (*relate*). These dimensions of experience can be implemented through so-called “*experience providers*” (Schmitt, 1999, p. 53) like social media for example. Experiences can also take different forms of valence. The popularity of valence in customer experience research is high. However, the use of valence results in a lack of specificity and explanatory power (Kranzbühler et al., 2019). Nevertheless, valence provides insight into the continuum between positive and negative (De Keyser et al., 2020), which can be used to summarize the effect of emotions (Kranzbühler et al., 2019). With this continuum, this research can provide insights on how non-owned touchpoints on social media shape customer experience. This shaping can occur in various ways such as perceived quality, level of satisfaction, and value-in-use (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). However, using these three outcomes as metrics to measure customer experience limits understanding of the true nature of the customer experience. Therefore, we must look at the spontaneous reactions of customers along the customer journey and measure them by the five forms of experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

2.2 The customer journey and touchpoints

The rising interest in customer centricity (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Lamberti, 2013) resulted in great attention to the so-called *journey* of customers, defined as a process that customers go through in experiencing and creating value. The stage before, during, and after transaction or service provision a customer goes through, is also related to this journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). These stages consist of multiple touchpoints designed by the service provider such as communication and service encounters, giving rise to the value creation,

value experience and ultimately the customer experience. Customer journeys have become increasingly important concepts in order to understand consumers' behavior and to gain insights in their experiences (Tueanrat et al., 2021). Additionally, customer journeys are considered as key resources in gaining competitive advantage in markets. Hence, by understanding the customer journey, superior experiences can ultimately be developed (Becker et al., 2020). Though, over the years, an incoherent and dynamic view on customer journeys resulted in some confusion (Tueanrat et al., 2021). In response to this inconsistency, Becker & Jaakkola (2020) presented premises to address the shortcomings in academic research and integrate multiple insights over the years. The customer journey is therefore defined as *“the series of firm- or offering related touchpoints that customers interact with during their purchase process”* (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020, p. 634).

Consumers undertake different journeys to achieve big and small life goals in response to various opportunities, obstacles and challenges (Hamilton & Price, 2019). Understanding true customer-centricity requires an understanding of the journeys to both big and small life goals (Becker et al., 2020). Here, a broad, goal oriented view of the consumers' journey instead of the customer journey can help firms develop compelling solutions and innovations and break free from a firm-centric focus ((Lipkin, 2016; Becker et al., 2020). This is because a customer's journey can be influenced by other customer journeys and touchpoints. On the one hand, by examining the interrelations between different customer journeys, obstacles or support in terms of the life goals can be detected. With these insights, firms can help customers to achieve their goals and therefore create value (Hamilton & Price, 2019; Becker et al., 2020). On the other hand, by identifying the touchpoints, a firm understands the customer's journey and can extend the customer orientation towards life goals of the customer (Hamilton & Price, 2019).

Touchpoints, interaction between the customer and the firm, are crucial in customer experience (De Keyser et al., 2020) because without any form of interaction (actual or imagined), no experience can occur (Hoffman & Novak, 2018). The series of touchpoints that occur in the customer journey across multiple channels and media has exploded these days (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Maechler et al., 2016). Therefore, firms must integrate various business functions such as information technology, service operations, logistics, marketing, human resources and external partners to be able to create superior experiences. The result of the touchpoint explosion is rising complexity to create, manage, and attempt to control experiences in the customer journey. Here, 'attempt to control' is deliberately mentioned because companies do not have all touchpoints in their control (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Who is in charge of the touchpoints between customer and the firm is named touchpoint control (De Keyser et al., 2020). Resulting from this, (De Keyser et al., 2020). First, the control of the touchpoint can be from a firm's perspective which reflects a brand-owned or partner-owned touchpoint, or from a customer's perspective which reflects a social/external non-owned touchpoint (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Second, the nature of the touchpoints can be either human, physical, digital, or a combination of. Finally, the stage of the touchpoint can be in the pre-purchase, purchase or post-purchase stage, as mentioned before (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020).

Most studies look at customer journeys through a specific product or service, a so-called inherent business perspective. However, this perspective offers few insights into touchpoints outside a company's control (Becker et al., 2020). Therefore, companies should also use another perspective to gain insights into these *non-owned touchpoints*, which are predominantly controlled by customers, influencers or other firms/brands, as they also contribute to the entire experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; De Keyser et al., 2020). Customers, for example, may act as a non-owned touchpoint by adopting the role of a brand ambassador, influencer or by sharing worth-of-mouth (De Keyser et al., 2020). An influencer, *“someone who posts on social media in exchange for compensation”* (Campbell & Farrell, 2020, p. 470), can be used by firms to promote a product or service via a social media post and have control over the final message that reaches the customer (Hughes et al., 2019). Next to the customer and influencer, other firms or brands in the same network can also influence touchpoints by past experience and should therefore be considered when managing customer experience (Kranzbühler et al., 2019).

2.3 Touchpoints on social media

In addition to touchpoints differing in stage and degree of control, there is also a difference in which nature a touchpoint occurs: human, physical, or digital. The attention for touchpoints can be divided into 1) control, 2) nature, and 3) stage brand-owned or partner-owned touchpoint social/external non-owned touchpoint the nature of the touchpoints can be either human, physical, digital, or a combination of the stage of the touchpoint can be in the pre-purchase, purchase or post-purchase stage digital touchpoints, like *“websites, email, search engines, chat, social networks, photo and video content communities, discussion forums and blogs”* (Hallikainen et al., 2019, p. 386), are rapidly catching up nowadays (De Keyser et al., 2020). One context in the digital nature with a rising importance in terms of enhancing customer experience is: social media (Siqueira et al., 2020). This is because social media is getting more and more users and

there are also more and more companies using it to broaden their customer experiences (Ayoub & Balawi, 2022). Examples of eight widely used social media platforms are WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Twitter, and TikTok (Hoekstra et al., 2023). Multiple academic definitions of social media exist. A literature review of approximately 60,000 definitions from 1994 to 2019 concluded that there is no single and commonly accepted definition. However, some have found broad acceptance in the academic literature (Aichner et al., 2021), which can be divided into two mainstreams: 1) before 2010 where social media was approached as a tool of “connectivity for people with common interest” (Aichner et al., 2021, p. 2020), and 2) after 2010 where the focus is on “creating and sharing user-generated content” (Aichner et al., 2021, p. 2020). This shift shows that social media users are becoming more important, and therefore a good understanding of social media users’ influence is crucial for companies using social media to improve their customers’ experience. (Siqueira et al., 2020; Ayoub & Balawi, 2022). This is especially true for non-owned touchpoints (from a company perspective) where consumers have influence on the customer experience and companies have little or no influence (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Digital touchpoints on social media provide firm information in the form of content such as photos, videos or text. Here, a distinction is made in 1) paid, 2) owned, and 3) earned content. First, firms can control content or interaction moments by paid activities undertaken by the firm itself or its agents. This paid content can be, for example, social media advertising (Klein et al., 2020). Meaning firms create media and are billed by the social media platform for displaying the paid media to consumers in the newsfeed of the social media platform (Mattke et al., 2019). However, even with this paid content, firms do not have full control over the execution. With advertising on social media, for example, companies cannot control which person the ad is shown to. They can only specify preferences for audience characteristics which can be at individual-level when “the personal information used in the message uniquely identifies or characterizes its recipient” (Bang et al., 2019, p. 1119) or at group-level what “utilizes information associated with a social identity that could appeal to a group of people” (Bang et al., 2019, p. 1117). Second, the owned content is also under control of the firm and is related to the brand, generated by the firm itself, and posted on the social media channel(s) controlled by the firm. Contrary to paid content, this content is not paid for and will be shown to consumers who ‘follow’ the firm on social media (Mattke et al., 2019). Third, customer- or peer-controlled “earned” media include indirect encounters with the firm, through other parties like customers, influencers or third parties (Klein et

al., 2020). Examples of these peer-to-peer interactions are worth of mouth, reviews of consumers, or reviews from experts which can be influencers (Klein et al., 2020). In doing so, influencers share self-generated photos or videos related to the brand or firm which will be shown to all influencer’s followers (Mattke et al., 2019). In addition to the firm’s exposed communication, peer’s communication exert an increasing importance on purchase decisions (Klein et al., 2020). Therefore, more and more firms are trying to control the peer’s communication (non-owned touchpoints) by engaging in partnerships with other firms, brands or influencers. However, complete control cannot be realized because always some control stays with the other party (De Keyser et al., 2020).

2.4 Theoretical framework

To clarify the aforementioned concepts, a framework is created. *Figure 1* shows the origin of the concepts: non-owned touchpoints on social media and the valences of customer experience. The framework is created combining various conceptualizations from the existing academic literature. *Figure 1* shows the customer journey process, divided into three distinct phases: the pre-purchase, the purchase and the post-purchase phase. During this customer journey various touchpoints occur. Regarding the scope of this study, the touchpoints are delineated to non-owned touchpoints with a digital nature in a social media context. On social media, companies can deploy different types of content to reach end users and create interaction, divided into paid, owned and earned content. Within a company’s control, they can create their own content, owned content, and they can pay money for their own created content to provide wide or focused publicity, paid content. Outside of a company’s control, earned media can be created by customers to share their experience with a brand. All forms of content can occur in both the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stage (Mattke et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2020).

Different stages in the customer journey and different forms of content on social media affect the valence of the customer experience. The customer experience can be divided into five different dimensions: sense, feel, think, act and relate (Schmitt, 1999; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Each of these dimensions can differ in valence. In other words, all dimensions can be positive, neutral or negative. Moreover, the different dimensions can also influence each other, thereby changing each other’s valence. Also, the experience at the different stages can change in response to the content with which the consumer interacts (Kranzbühler et al., 2019; De Keyser et al., 2020). These many possibilities and dynamics of different valences of the customer experience during the customer journey provides a good representation of the complexity of digital touchpoints on social media.

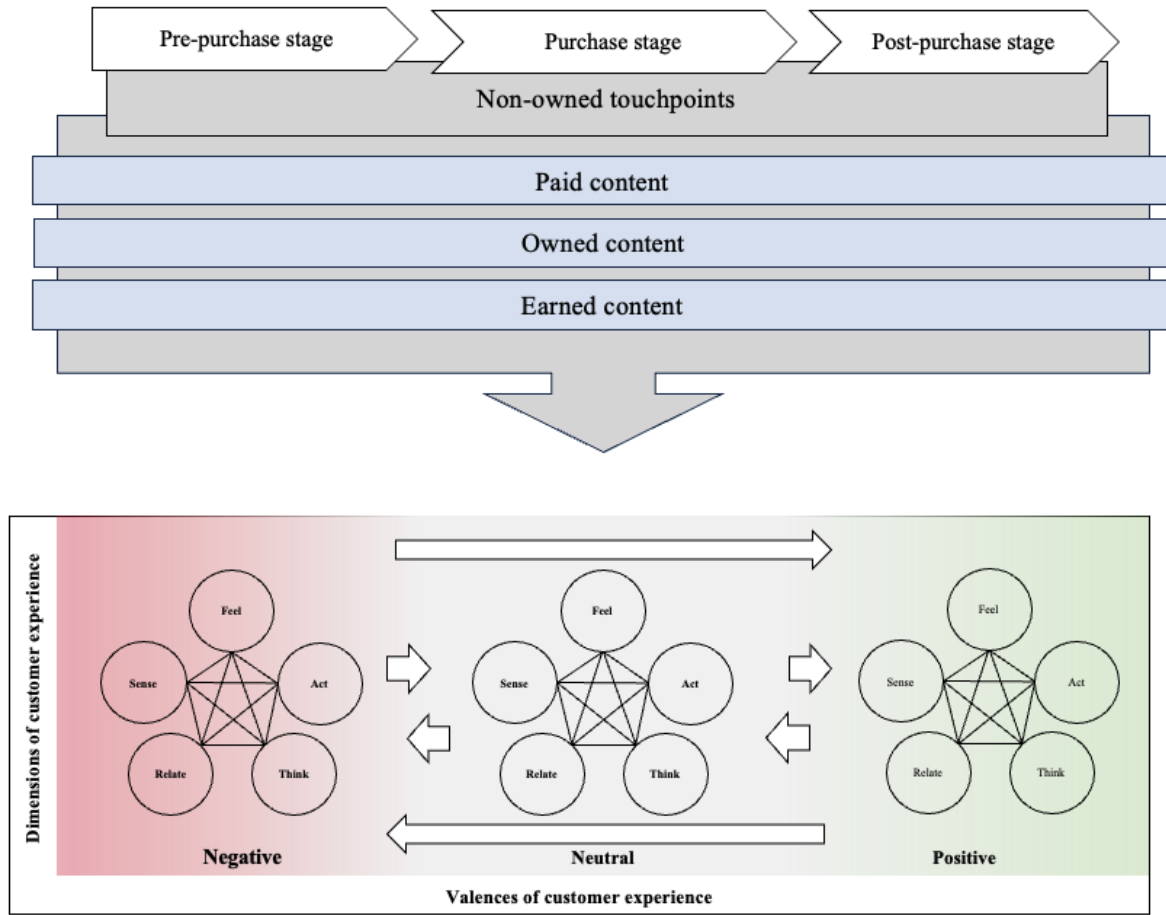


Figure 1 - Non-owned touchpoints on social media influencing valences of customer experience

Figure 1 shows the expression non-owned touchpoints and the different valences that can occur in the customer experience as a result of the journey walked through and content displayed. However, the way valences of customer experiences formed by non-owned touchpoints cannot be deduced from this framework and the academic literature, which relates to the first research question. In addition, the second research question on facilitating customer experience at non-owned touchpoints on social media cannot be inferred either. Therefore, more research is needed to fill the gap and answer the research questions. The methodology used for this research is explained in the next section.

3. METHODOLOGY

The concepts of customer experience and touchpoints mentioned in the previous section form a solid basis for this research. To extend this groundwork, this section describes the methodology used in this study through the research design, context, and data collection and analysis.

3.1 Research design

The aim of this study is twofold: on the one hand, it examines how non-owned touchpoints on social media shape the customer experience; on the other hand, it seeks a managerial understanding of facilitating customer experience at non-owned touchpoints on social media. To achieve these goals, a qualitative case study with a systematic combination approach is used and will gain a deeper understanding of non-owned touchpoints on social media (De Keyser et al., 2020) and the effect on customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The qualitative research method aims to understand a phenomenon that is yet not understood well such as non-owned touchpoints on social media (Whitfield & Strauss, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2007) and allows contextual differences which are necessary to consider for understanding and measuring (customer) experiences (Palmer, 2010). Qualitative research entails a process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation and emphasizes a relatively open approach to the research process in which surprises, changes in direction and new insights occur regularly (Bryman, 2006). Since the focus of this research is on exploring data rather than testing data (due to the meager data and lacking empirical knowledge), and the

consideration of contextual differences, qualitative research is most appropriate (Whitfield & Strauss, 1998; Easterby-Smith et al., 2007). In this study, applying a systematic combination approach reflects an established method for synthesizing research that can help address challenges in conducting research in complex areas, such as social media, and potentially generate new insights or knowledge (Dubois & Gadde, 2014). The nature of this qualitative research is exploratory and is developed through a case study. A case study incorporates a complex phenomenon in a specific context using a holistic view (Whitfield & Strauss, 1998). The complexity of touchpoints on social media today and its widespread use to improve customer experience makes a case study a good method to study the phenomenon (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). However, limitations such as a lack of generalizability and a reliance on single-case studies stem from a case study (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; 2014). These limitations are overcome by applying the systematic combination approach, which enables the use of abductive reasoning to generate hypotheses, the systematic search for relevant cases, and the transparent and iterative process of combining and analyzing data. Also, the research questions and theoretical framework are sequentially reoriented when confronted with the empirical world (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The next section will further discuss the context of this research.

3.2 Research context

This research focuses on the context of the digital marketing industry, where digital marketing involves the *“establishing correspondence and collaboration between the buyer and the organization so that the shopper is involved in the purchasing behavior to assist the brand directly on the web with strategies from traditional media and to further the brand in a roundabout way”* (Keke, 2022, p. 2580). The digital marketing industry reflects a dynamic environment dealing with rapid technological changes that bring challenges. The ability to adapt to these technological changes as quickly and well as possible, also called dynamic capability (Teece, 2010), is one of the main challenges (Oklander et al., 2018). In addition, these technological changes can impact the way of creating a superior customer experience (Barata et al., 2018). Therefore, digital marketing agencies must meet the challenge of rapid technological changes to continue to deliver a superior customer experience. With the rise in the number of users on social media and the number of companies using it to enhance customer experiences (Ayoub & Balawi, 2022), many companies are also turning to digital marketing solutions and offering digital marketing services (Oklander et al., 2018). To illustrate: by the end of 2022, there were approximately 27,000 digital marketing firms in the Netherlands (CBS Statline, n.d.).

This amount of digital marketing firms in addition to the daily use and expertise in social media platforms (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014) makes digital marketing agencies a good fit for this case study. The context of the study is limited to the Dutch market due to the time and scope of the study which in turn brings focus to the study.

In addition to the Dutch digital marketing agencies, several individuals are also approached. These individuals are end users of the digital marketing agencies' clients. The clients of the digital marketing agencies operate in both a business-to-business (B2B) environment and a business-to-consumer (B2C) environment. To illustrate: British Airways hires a digital marketing agency to manage its social media accounts. The individual (a consumer or a business owner/employee) who ultimately interacts with British Airways via social media is the end user. So this can be either a B2C customer or a B2B customer. However, not every digital marketing agency has both B2B and B2C clients, therefore the focus of this research lies on B2C end customers. The interaction moments that are not manageable for companies are, for example, communications from influencers or word of mouth from individuals to each other. By engaging with B2C end consumers, insights can be gained about the interaction moments not controllable for British Airways. End consumer opinion and experience can provide insightful knowledge that digital marketing agencies can use to improve British Airways' customer experience.

The combination of questioning companies and individuals (B2C) gives this research a holistic view and enables comparisons between two perspectives (dyadic perspective): from a firm's side and from an end consumer's side. This gives a complete picture of the external-owned touchpoints on social media and clarifies in what degree firms can influence this touchpoint. Having set the context, the next section will show the process of data collection and data analysis.

3.3 Data collection and data analysis

In this section is shown how the first-order data is collected, meaning data generated by interviews, observations or other field activities (Rowley, 2012; Mohseni et al., 2014). As mentioned before, interviews are the source of data in the field research of this study to gain practical knowledge. When conducting interviews, four forms can be applied (Alsaawi, 2014), namely: structured, unstructured, semi-structured and focus groups. This research applies semi-structured interviews which are common in social sciences. As the name implies, semi-structured interviews are partly structured but there is also room for questions that arise ad hoc to the interviewer. This has a positive effect on the depth and richness of the answer (Alsaawi, 2014). Because of the open-ended questions with no strict structure, the questions are

pre-tested. Another concern when conducting interviews is recording the conversations, as just taking notes is often not enough due to the large amount of information. Permission for this was sought prior to the interview given ethical considerations (Rowley, 2012). To ensure consistency across the interviews, an interview guide is created (Appendix 1), based on the guidelines mentioned in the article of Kallio et al. (2016), which assures all relevant topics are covered in each interview. The interview questions in the guide include a breakdown of the digital marketing agency and the individual. This ensures the dyadic perspective in the data.

Table 1 below shows that both Dutch digital marketing agencies (DMA) and end consumers participated in the interviews, a total of ten people. To get an equal split in data, half of the interviewees are conducted with digital marketing agencies and the other half with individuals. The participants are selected based on criteria, using a purposive sampling method, “*the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses.*” (Etikan et al., 2016, p.2) The following criteria are applied: the digital marketing agencies should be located in the Netherlands, the individuals should follow a client of one of the four digital marketing agencies on social media, and the interviewee of a digital marketing agency should be well known with the phenomenon of digital touchpoints on social media. The interviewees’ role is to help explain how the non-firm owned touchpoints on social media look like. Given ethical and privacy considerations, the names of the companies and individuals are not shown in the table below or further in the paper. Four of the ten interviews are conducted at the digital marketing agency office and the other six interviews are conducted online.

All interviews are transcribed and analyzed accordingly. The qualitative analysis approach *thematic coding* is widely used in social science and is applied to this research. This approach allows researchers to identify, analyze, and report themes/patterns (Alsaawi, 2014).

Table 1 - Interview participants

Interviewee	Who	Role
Interviewee 1	Dutch DMA 1	Owner
Interviewee 2	Dutch DMA 2	Head of marketing
Interviewee 3	Dutch DMA 3	Search Engine Advertising specialist
Interviewee 4	Dutch DMA 4	Search Engine Optimization specialist
Interviewee 5	Dutch DMA 4	Search Engine Advertising specialist
Interviewee 6	Individual	End consumer of DMA 1

Interviewee 7	Individual	End consumer of DMA 2
Interviewee 8	Individual	End consumer of DMA 3
Interviewee 9	Individual	End consumer of DMA 4
Interviewee 10	Individual	End consumer of DMA 4

The *inductive* approach for thematic coding requires three steps: First, the raw data (interview transcripts) is *open-coded or first-order coded*, meaning the data is reviewed by the researcher after which key text segments highlighting the theory are identified to determine broader themes or dimensions of the data. These first-order themes are labeled with a code (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Chandra & Shang, 2019). This first process contains “*interpretations of phenomena of the everyday world.*” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 81). The second step is *second-order coding or axial coding*, i.e. seeking for similarities among the broader themes of the first step. By combining similar codes into broader categories, first-order codes aggregate into higher-level codes (second-order codes). Next, these second-order themes are followed by aggregate dimensions or overarching themes, which summarize the data in a few themes (Chandra & Shang, 2019). In the end, the first, second, and overarching themes are used to identify how non-owned touchpoints on social media shape valences of customer experience and the level of control within the touchpoints. The next section further highlights the results of the interviews.

4. FINDINGS

The collected first-order data of the ten conducted interviews with five digital marketing agencies and five end consumers is interpreted in this section. By these interpretations of the first-order data by the researcher, second-order data is generated (Rowley, 2012; Mohseni et al., 2014). The interpretations result from the procedure of inductive coding in which first-order, second-order, and overarching themes are determined (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Chandra & Shang, 2019), as described in section 3.

4.1 Stimuli affecting customer experience

By looking at the transcripts of the interviews, patterns can be recognized when there is a correlation in the data. The interpretation of the data is broken down into the various overarching themes derived from the inductive coding process. A thorough data analysis revealed three overarching themes classified as: 1: overall experience, 2: customer centricity within social media, and 3: customer experience management. These overarching themes are based on eight second-order themes and twenty-three

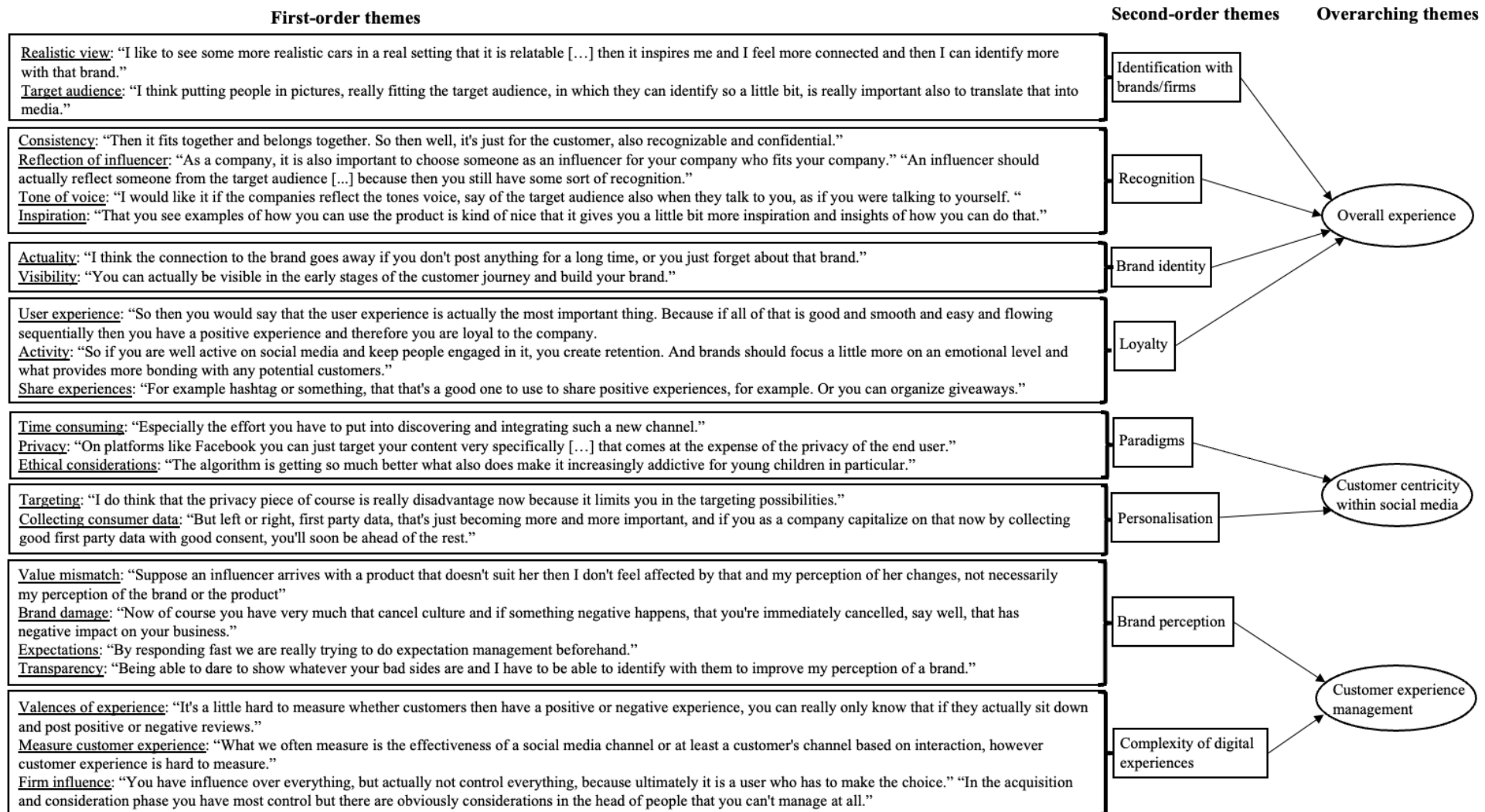


Figure 2 - Outcomes of thematic analysis

first-order themes (Figure 2). A further elaboration of the themes and influencing factors is discussed in the following subsections.

4.1.1 Overall experience

During the interview, some questions focused on customer experience and, in particular, on what makes the customer have a good or a bad experience. Remarkably, customers have a good understanding of what they like and do not like and are able to state this clearly. A regular answer to the questions about a positive experience was as follows:

“I like to see some more realistic cars in a real setting that it is relatable [...] when it inspires me I feel more connected and then I can identify more with that brand.” - Interviewee 9

“So it just has to be very actual. It has to be real. [...] You just have to stay very much with a target audience.” - Interviewee 7

Follow-up questions delved deeper into the topic of customer experience and included questions about the use of influencers in company content. The interviewees are aware of what they would like to see.

“Influencers who are similar to myself that you can identify yourself with [...] they have the same ideas. And well, that's where a brand comes in. Then I tend to look at that and listen to that.” - Interviewee 8

Apparently, end consumers perceive a positive experience when they can identify themselves with the person in the image or video, and when the content is inspiring, realistic and relatable. Indeed, consumers aim for self-identification with these persons. Moreover, when companies succeed in creating self-identification among end users, they create a stronger bond with the brand or company. Besides the questions about experiences among end users, digital marketing agencies, on the other hand, were asked about their reasons for using social media related to enhancing customer experience.

“From the perspective of an online marketing agency, social media is obviously very powerful because you can actually be visible in the early stages of the customer journey and build your brand.” - Interviewee 4

Visibility on social media appears to be a great motivator for companies. They use it to work on their brand identity, *“a set of strategic tools that companies maintain to increase recognition, differentiate themselves from their competitors and develop brand equity and customer*

loyalty” (Mao et al., 2020, p. 6). Ultimately, this helps them connect with the end consumer and create a better experience with the brand. Arguably, when companies apply recognizable content, this experience can be improved even more.

Another theme that appeared to be related to positive experiences of end consumers is loyalty.

“So then you would say that the user experience is actually the most important thing. Because if all of that is good and smooth and easy and flowing sequentially then you have a positive experience and therefore you are loyal to the company.” - Interviewee 7

“To make me loyal they should strive to interact more with customers.” - Interviewee 6

As the quotes above reveal, end consumer loyalty seems to depend on two things, user experience and interaction. Therefore, it can be stated that end consumers value an easy process and like to interact with a company to build a connection. From a firms' perspective, loyalty allows a sustainable relationship to be built with the customer which is an advantage for them. Because of this, it is not surprising that companies try various ways to encourage consumers to share their positive experiences and show their loyalty.

“For example a hashtag or something, that's a good one to use to share positive experiences, for example.” - Interviewee 3

“There are also quite a lot of contests that are used or a client of ours uses a hashtag to share their final result of their bed in the bedroom, so actually to collect user-generated content, but also positive customer experiences so they can share that on their own social channels.” - Interviewee 4

From these two comments, it can be stated that digital marketing agencies are actively collecting user-generated content for their own promotions. By this, they want to convince other consumers to get interested or make a purchase and gain loyalty and a positive experience. In addition, several digital marketing agencies stressed the importance of being honest in doing business.

“I think honesty just lasts the longest, in every respect and so sometimes you have to be honest with yourself or admit that we did not do that right in order to ultimately create a positive experience in the long run.” - Interviewee 1

Apparently, companies link the importance of transparency to creating a sustainable positive customer experience. By letting consumers know in advance where they stand, companies are still trying to influence non-owned touchpoints like reviews, for example.

In contrast to the aforementioned aspects leading to a positive experience, the valence of customer experience can also diverge to negative. End consumers perceive a more negative experience when companies are not up to date and when the content is perceived as unclear. In the comments below, this is clearly mentioned.

“The last things they added to the story have been over 60 weeks and then I think no real attention is being paid to it anymore ... then I think oh 60 weeks ago, yeah, I kind of snap at that.” - Interviewee 6

“If that takes longer for me to understand what the post is about, I would start unfollowing them, I think: you are no longer an added value to me. It feels unprofessional then.” - Interviewee 10

Moreover, digital marketing agencies show that the presence of negative reviews also affects the valence of customer experience. As a result, the valence of customer experience can turn from positive to negative, as it has been shown that negative reviews weigh more heavily than positive ones. Below, two quotes are stated.

“When you actually also see negative comments surrounding a product or something like that, yes, that can obviously deter you from purchasing a product.” - Interviewee 4

“I can read ten positives reviews into one negative, and I'm going to respond to the negative one, of course” - Interviewee 1

It is clear that the overall experience can shift between positive and negative and this depends on several factors such as a company's visibility and content, as well as reviews from other customers.

4.1.2 Customer centricity within social media

The interviews indicated that putting the customer centric will positively contribute to customer experience and a firms' competitive advantage. Firms are very much aware of this and want to capitalize on this with personalized content. Despite multiple end users arguing that they like personalized content, some others do not like this. For them, maintaining control seems more important than personalized content based on their unknown needs:

“I do like it when it kind of gets through that rhythm that I like in terms of content but I really just need to keep control, especially at such points, when I'm not yet familiar with my needs.” - Interviewee 9

Evidently, consumers find it important to first be self-aware of their needs, and only when they want to fulfill those needs, personalized content based on preferences and interests is desirable. On the other hand, companies indicated that they are actually trying to create a need among consumers in pre-purchase, as the quote below illustrates:

“We try in our socials to proactively actually give an affirmation or what they're buying, so we try to inspire, we try to be one step ahead of those customers.” - Interviewee 1

Interviews with the digital marketing agencies pointed out that they face multiple paradigms for creating personalized content on social media, like ethical and privacy considerations. This can be seen in their quotes below.

“Yes, personalization has a positive effect, because ultimately you just want them to confront that faster, so they're more likely to request that brochure, they're more likely to proceed to the test drive or they're more likely to proceed to a purchase.” - Interviewee 5

“The privacy issue that is a big disadvantage, because yes, platforms like Facebook, with that you can just target your content very specifically. Then again, that comes at the expense of the privacy of the end user.” - Interviewee 5

These quotes clearly illustrate a paradigm firms have to deal with: better conversion versus privacy violation. However, the change from second-party data to first-party data creates another paradigm.

If companies want to distribute paid content, they can include targeting, meaning they can indicate a preference of who they want their content to be shown to. However, this execution and thus control is in the hands of social media platforms involved such as Facebook, for example. In line with end-user privacy concerns and violations mentioned before, companies are increasingly faced with limited targeting capabilities. This has led nowadays to only broad targeting options with minimal opportunities to characterize the target audience, as opposed to the specific targeting they were used to. One way to respond to this change is with first-party data, which allows companies, with consumer consent, to collect their own consumer data

instead of collecting data through social media platforms. This way companies still can use personal data from end consumers to personalize their content. The interviews showed that first-party data is still in its infancy and online marketing agencies are investing in this since it seems to give them competitive advantage:

“I do think that the privacy piece of course is a real disadvantage now because it limits you in the targeting possibilities.” - Interviewee 3

“We are seeing a shift to first party data which, according to regulation, is less privacy-sensitive [...] but left or right, first party data, that's just becoming more and more important, and if you as a company capitalize on that now by collecting good first party data with good consent, you'll soon be ahead of the rest.” - Interviewee 5

Another paradigm companies face is the effort social media requires as opposed to what it gets them. The time and effort they have to pay seems to be a disadvantage for them but is not stopping them from using it to improve customer experience. The comments below illustrate this consideration.

“Well, especially the effort you have to put into discovering and integrating such a new channel.” - Interviewee 1

“Not really disadvantages apart from the fact that it takes us quite a lot of time internally.” - Interviewee 2

“So you really have a super large audience. Yes, you can just reach a lot of people and you have a lot of visibility.” - Interviewee 3

“You can actually kind of create a market, because you can reach people who are currently or not looking, and so then you can make sure that they get a need for your product.” - Interviewee 5

The quotes above show that companies understand the importance of customer-centricity and are trying to be customer-centric in many ways to improve the end user experience and are also willing to incur costs to do so.

4.1.3 Customer experience management

One of the goals during the interview was to find out if digital marketing agencies are able to facilitate customer experiences. In this regard, end users' brand perceptions proved to be important. Moreover, the digital marketing agencies pointed out that the valence of these perceptions can have major implications for the user's overall

experience and the value placed on a brand, which is illustrated in the quote below.

“Now of course you have very much that cancel culture and if something negative happens, that you're immediately canceled, say well, that has a negative impact on your business. I do think that negative experiences outweigh positive ones, because well, one negative reaction can obviously do a lot of damage very quickly.” - Interviewee 3

As companies realize that negative valences of consumers' brand perceptions outweigh positive ones, they try to influence end users' perceptions in various ways:

“By responding fast and really trying to do expectation management beforehand. [...] I think transparency or living up to your proposition and being able to make the right promises is important to the customer's perception.” - Interviewee 1

“Being able to dare to show whatever your bad sides are and I have to be able to identify with them to improve my perception of a brand.” - Interviewee 10

Evidently, many digital marketing agencies try to avoid bad brand perceptions by managing expectations in advance and by doing business transparently. In addition, companies try to influence perceptions with the use of influencers. However, the valence can become negative if the influencers' personal values do not match the company's values. However, interviewees point out that this change in valence has more to do with the influencer himself than with the company's brand perception:

“I blame this on the person promoting it rather than the brand, because they probably see a very nice amount of money in return. The brand then remains fine for me.” - Interviewee 6

“Suppose an influencer arrives with a product that does not suit her then I do not feel affected by that and my perception of her changes, not necessarily the brand or the product.” - Interviewee 7

It is also interesting that companies indicate that they do not have complete control over the use of influencers. One interviewee pointed out the following:

“An influencer, well, you can influence that, because if you paid the person for it, of course, they will be positive. But suppose, for example, they show an influencer without you knowing it, a product, for example, and they are very positive, then it can

already be very binding, but if they are negative, then it can actually be very detrimental and we cannot influence that.” - Interviewee 3

Apparently, companies have little or no control over the influencers they do not pay but these influencers can have an impact on how consumers perceive the brand. This adds to the challenge of facilitating positive customer experience.

In addition to the complexity of creating a positive brand perception among the end user, companies also report difficulties in defining and measuring customer experience, as the quotes below illustrate.

“What we often measure is the effectiveness of a social media channel or at least a customer's channel based on interaction, so customer experience is hard to measure, but I think that's a great indicator of how engaged people are with your brand.” - Interviewee 2

“You can of course just do those interaction analyses [...] that kind of thing you can do. But whether you then really get the customer experience with, I really wonder. [...] but experience still remains very elusive, because it is with the customer and also because with the customer there are so many channels.” - Interviewee 1

It is clear that there is no real method to measure customer experience and companies instead use interaction and the number of positive or negative reviews as indicators. Yet since negative reviews or reactions outweigh positive ones, drawing conclusions remains difficult and elusive.

Another factor that contributes to the complexity of customer experiences on social media is the degree of control companies have through the customer journey.

“You have influence over everything, but actually not control everything, because ultimately it is the user who has to make the choice.” [...] “In the acquisition and consideration phase you have most control but there are obviously considerations in the head of people that you cannot manage at all.” - Interviewee 4

“But actually, you never control how a customer goes through the customer journey, because you have so many touchpoints these days that it is very difficult to control, and all the more so because a consumer actually decides when they want to see what information.” - Interviewee 5

As seen above, the digital marketing agencies highlighted that they can only control certain aspects and moments in the customer journey. There are several moments that take place in consumers' minds that companies have no control over. Within these non-owned touchpoints for companies, facilitation of customer experience also does not seem to be possible. The following quote describes this phenomenon.

“Yes, facilitation I do not think. There remains, I think, always a choice with the customer himself and a part remains intangible and that lies with the customer. But you can influence part of it, of course.” - Interviewee 2

Influencing non-owned touchpoints seems very important and the only way for companies to change the customer experience beyond their control. However, this is made increasingly difficult by the advent of first-party data. One participant said the following about this:

“Because with those cookies disappearing, you can target people much less well and we lose control. [...] But I think actually in every phase there is something you cannot control.” - Interviewee 1

Limited targeting capabilities make companies lose control during the customer journey. However, on the other hand, when asking end users about their degree of control during the customer journey, they pointed out the following:

“In the end, I make the decision. So yes, that choice, it is in my control.” - Interviewee 9

Apparently, end users feel that they are in control at all stages, especially at the purchase stage. Surprisingly, this contradicts the companies' previously named statements, as does the following statement:

“Our control then is more towards the awareness phase, because that's where you can just actually put the posts in there to inspire and trigger people and inform a lot first.” - Interviewee 4

Companies use paid content to push messages in the pre-purchase phase so the end user gets to see it anyway. The companies experience this as having control. On the contrary, end users indicate that they have control because they can choose what they watch.

“I think I have a lot of control over that ... obviously I'm sure there are techniques by companies that they get more attention or that I get more triggered to

respond to them, but the control that I look at remains with me.” - Interviewee 9

The same contradiction in perception of having control happens in the post-purchase phase where both indicate they have control, as illustrated below.

“Yes, loyalty and recommending to friends, yes, that's partly in your control whether you actually do it, but this is something companies can also influence.” - Interviewee 7

Thus, it can be stated that companies and end users apparently both have different perceptions about who is in control through the customer journey.

In relation to control in the different phases, we also asked which phase is most important to companies. Here all companies agreed:

“Then I would say the last stage is the most important regarding customer experience, because customer experiences are just for potential customer, potential buyers, very interesting when they are considering purchasing a product.” - Interviewee 2

It seems that the experience shared in the post-purchase phase also matters for the pre-purchase phase. Indeed, these experiences can influence a new customer's perception when considering a purchase. The overflow of the post- and pre-purchase phases contribute to the complexity of customer experience on social media. Moreover, participants indicated that consumers may also walk part of the journey and get off earlier than the post-purchase phase. Therefore, it is not surprising that companies wonder to what extent true facilitating of customer experience is possible in non-owned touchpoints on social media regarding its complexity.

4.2 Interpreting findings towards an integrative framework

Emerging from the findings it is clear that the formation of valences of customer experiences within non-owned touchpoints on social media is multidimensional and depends on several interrelated factors. In order to integrate the obtained knowledge into the previously established theoretical framework, this section created an integrative framework (Figure 3) with the key dimensions in customer experience formation. The framework shows the interpretation of the empirical findings of this study and distinguishes three axes. First, as mentioned in the theory section, the *nature of touchpoints* can be distinguished into company-driven and customer-driven (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; De Keyser et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the results indicated that this dividing line is not so black and white and both parties can also drive the touchpoint. Therefore, the figure shows a spectrum from firm driven to customer driven. Second, the customer experience valence axis determines the "nature of customers' reactions to interactions with the brand/company" (De Keyser et al., 2020, p. 442) and ranges from positive to neutral to negative (De Keyser et al., 2020). Third, and finally, the axis of inclusion of experiential dimensions determines whether the five experiential dimensions sense, feel, think, act and relate are well aligned in the touchpoint (Schmitt, 1999; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Alignment ranges from more than adequate to barely at all. In addition, eight dimensions emerged that influence the formation of customer experiences and are located on these three axes.

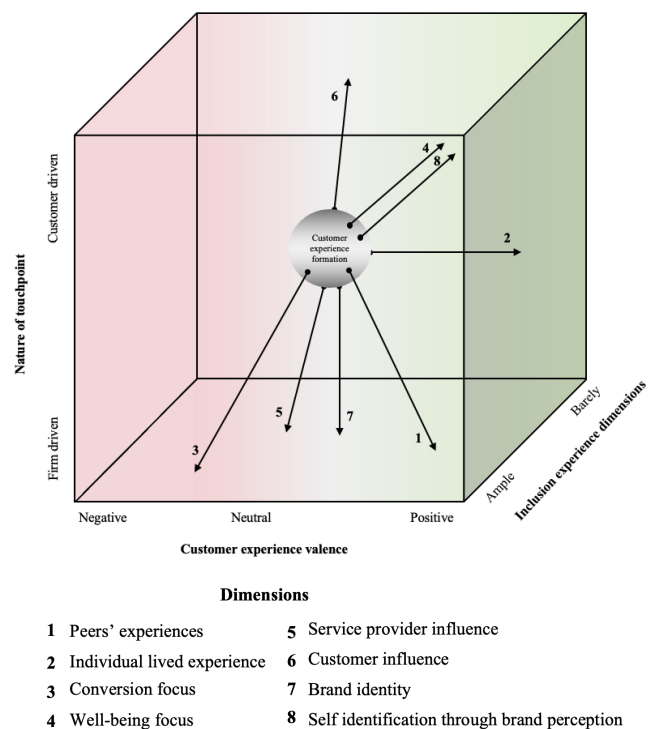


Figure 3 - An integrative framework: key dimensions in customer experiences formation within non-owned touchpoints on social media

The first two dimensions are related to the customer experience which can be influenced by experiences of peers (dimension 1) and, on the other hand, by the individually lived experience (dimension 2). Generally, peers' experiences relate to a company's earned content, like reviews, for example. However, companies can also share this earned content (reviews) themselves, making it their own content. This content will be shared by firms when it is positive in nature and when the five dimensions of experience are well aligned because this creates a positive valence of the company or brand. On the other hand, consumers individually live their own experience

and form their own perceptions about what they experience. This experience can be determined by both firm-driven and consumer-driven touchpoints. In addition, the valence determination is related to the degree of inclusion of the experience dimensions; the better the inclusion, the more positive the valence because the better all the dimensions are aligned, the better the entire customer experience is aligned (Schmitt, 1999; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

The choices firms make in creating content on social media vary between protecting conversion rates (dimension 3) and putting well-being concerns like ethics and privacy first to protect the consumers (dimension 4). This paradigm appeared to play a major role in the interviews today among companies. With the advent of new privacy laws, firms are being forced to be more careful about consumer privacy which relates to a positive customer experience and great alignment of experience dimensions. However, until this legislation is final, companies are faced with a paradigm between putting consumer privacy first versus putting conversion first to achieve greater returns. The conversion focus brings a negative valence because consumer welfare is not at stake. However, when companies focus on conversion, alignment on experience dimensions is very important and well aligned.

The degree of control across touchpoints was found to be more dynamic than the simple verification of brand-owned versus non-firm owned. The results of the interviews indicated that both companies and end users have influence during the customer journey. It was also indicated that the term ‘influence’ is better used instead of ‘control’ since both parties have no full control and can only influence phases of the customer journey. Therefore, in terms of the degree of control over touchpoints and their interpretation (paid, owned, earned content), customer experience influence can range from service provider influence (dimension 5) to customer influence (dimension 6), this is a dynamic process. Here again, when the five experience dimensions are well aligned, the customer experience valence will be positive and vice versa.

The last two dimensions relate to the brand identity (dimension 7) and how this identity is perceived by consumers (dimension 8). The brand identity is firm driven because this relates to the way they present themselves. However, on the other side, the use of influencers can also contribute to the brand identity because the influencers share their opinions about the company, bringing out an image of the company. The interviews turned out that the way consumers perceive this brand image depends on the alignment of the company’s and the influencers’ values. When the values match and the experience dimensions are well aligned, the customer experience valence will be positive (Rudkowski et al., 2020). Moreover, the level of

self-identification appears to be important to end consumers and the perception that they form is a dynamic process that varies at different stages of the customer journey and can change by coming into contact with content, whether paid, owned or earned.

In short, the combination of all the above dimensions makes the customer experience positive, neutral or negative. However, as demonstrated in the theoretical framework in section 2, this valence is dynamic and can vary and change throughout the customer journey. The fact that the customer experience determination takes place in the mind of the consumer adds to the complexity. As a result, it can be argued that customer experiences are largely elusive for companies. Nevertheless, companies can still influence customer experience formation and managerial rules have been established for this purpose which will be discussed further in the following section.

4.3 Rules for facilitating customer experience within non-owned touchpoints on social media

Following the integrative framework from which emerged eight dimensions that influence the formation of customer experience, four facilitating rules were defined. These rules can guide service providers’ facilitation of customer experience within non-owned touchpoints on social media (Table 2). The rules reveal the dynamics and complexity of digital customer experience, highlight the impact of all actions that a brand does on social media on the valence determination of customer experience, and define the extent to which firms can facilitate customer experience through the customer journey.

Table 2 - Rules for facilitating customer experience

A Brand identity: Ensure that the influencer's personal values and the image the influencer portrays match the company's core values.
B Privacy: Prioritize consumer well-being and protect their privacy by making the transition from third-party to first-party data and ask consumers for consent to store their personal consumer data. Use this first-party data for personalization of the content.
C Multidimensional experience: When creating content, make sure that the five dimensions of experience: sense, feel, think, act and relate, align well and all represent the brand core values.
D Self identification: The company’s content should represent a realistic and recognizable image. Consumers like to be able to identify with a brand and therefore become attached to your brand.

With the above rules, service providers will influence the forming of customer experience. Implementing the rules

into the social media strategy will help build lasting relationships with consumers, increase returns, and improve the overall customer experience within non-owned touchpoints on social media.

5. DISCUSSION

Firm owned touchpoints have been widely researched in the academic marketing literature, yet non-owned touchpoints lag considerably behind because of their complexity (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; De Keyser et al., 2020; Siqueira et al., 2020). Because non-owned touchpoints contribute to the overall customer experience formation, understanding this complex phenomenon is crucial for both scholars and companies (Siqueira et al., 2020). Therefore, this research conveys insight into understanding and facilitating non-owned touchpoints on social media.

Several things were striking during the research. Thus, while conducting the ten interviews with both digital marketing agencies and end consumers, a level of saturation was quickly reached which may be coincidence but may also indicate that all digital marketing agencies and, in addition, all end consumers are facing the same problem. Moreover, during the interviews it was indicated that when seeing negative reviews, the valence of consumer experience can change quickly to negative because negative reviews outweigh positive ones. The impact of these negative reviews turned out stronger than expected. In addition, when creating the integrative framework, it was surprising that the dimensions that determine the formation of customer experiences turned out to be opposite: half of the dimensions turned out to be customer-driven and the other half firm-driven. On the contrary, it makes sense that the findings of this study show how important it is for companies to understand touchpoints that are not controllable for them, as this has a major impact on the overall customer experience as mentioned in the literature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Following the aim of this study, four practical rules are introduced to help service provider managers facilitate customer experience. As a result, this research makes a contribution to the (digital) marketing field, providing three theoretical and two practical contributions. The details of the contributions are discussed below.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study contributes to the growing need to understand non-owned touchpoints, especially in the context of social media, and its relationship with customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Kranzbühler et al., 2019; De Keyser et al., 2020; Siqueira et al., 2020). By examining the phenomenon of non-owned touchpoints on social media from both service providers' and end users' perspective, using a dyadic perspective, we tried to

uncover its complexity and the formation process of customer experience.

First, the literature has shown that there is a separation in who has control over certain touchpoints, e.g., brand-owned or social/external non-owned (Grönroos, 2017; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020). This study built on this by investigating non-owned touchpoints. However, the findings of this study showed that this separation is more nuanced and the degree of control over a touchpoint is on a continuum. Within a touchpoint, companies, external parties, and consumers can all exert influence and none has complete control. These findings contribute to a solid foundation for better understanding the phenomenon of non-owned touchpoints on social media.

Second, this research contributes to the theory by adding eight key dimensions to the (digital) marketing literature that influence the formation of the customer experience on social media within non-owned touchpoints. In the marketing literature, it is well known that non-owned touchpoints are not controllable for companies (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Nevertheless, this research has shown that companies can still influence non-owned touchpoints on social media through the eight dimensions. By this, the research builds on the need to further investigate non-owned touchpoints in the context of social media (Grönroos, 2017; Siqueira et al., 2020).

The third theoretical contribution is from an academic point of view because this research has provided empirical knowledge about key dimensions that shape customer experiences within non-owned touchpoints on social media and therefore this research has helped to fill this gap in the academic literature and provide scholars and service providers with new knowledge (Hallikainen et al., 2019; Adisu Fanta & Ayman, 2022; Ayoub & Balawi, 2022).

5.2 Managerial implications

The findings of this study contribute to practice. The management implications are focused on service providers, but can ultimately be applied by all companies using social media to improve the customer experience. The research findings offer service providers opportunities to improve their social media strategy to strengthen their position and increase value creation for their end users. This research offers two management implications.

The first and most important premise for service providers in facilitating customer experience in non-owned touchpoints on social media is to fully understand the phenomenon in practice. To achieve that goal, managers need to know that customer experience within non-owned touchpoints are not mainly intangible to them, as named in the literature (Adisu Fanta & Ayman, 2022; Ayoub & Balawi, 2022). Instead of ignoring non-owned touchpoints as a result and focusing entirely on touchpoints that

companies can influence (Siqueira et al., 2020), we argue that it is possible for managers to influence non-owned touchpoints and thus customer experience formation. Hence, managers should not only focus on touchpoints they control, but also pay attention to non-owned touchpoints in order to understand customer experiences, as these touchpoints also contribute to overall customer experience formation (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this regard, we argue that marketing managers must grasp the eight dimensions mentioned in the integrative framework (Figure 3) to understand customer experience formation within non-owned touchpoints on social media. Moreover, companies need to talk to their target audience to gain insight into the customer experience at non-owned touchpoints. Because of the findings that negative reviews outweigh positive ones, companies cannot fully rely on them to determine the valence of customer experiences. So companies need to talk to their target audience to gain clear customer insights into non-owned touchpoints.

Second, in addition to a thorough understanding of the phenomenon, practical rules can serve as support for marketing managers to improve the customer experience. Nowadays, customer experience is often managed through touchpoints over which companies have control (Siqueira et al., 2020). One reason for this may lie in the complexity of non-owned touchpoints (Hallikainen et al., 2019; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). However, by including non-company driven touchpoints in the facilitation process, managers can have a greater impact on the overall formation of the customer experience. While this study expands the knowledge of marketing managers, we simultaneously offer four solid rules to help them facilitate customer experiences on social media, as mentioned in subsection 4.3. If managers adopt these rules and implement them in their clients' social media strategies, they are able to influence the customer experience formation more than before. Moreover, due to the fact that these complex touchpoints are often ignored (Siqueira et al., 2020), this also provides a competitive advantage over other service providers who do not pay attention to these touchpoints. In addition, this way service providers can ultimately ensure more value creation with the end customer (Mascarenhas et al., 2006; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

6. CONCLUSION

This section draws conclusions from the results of this study that include answers to the main research questions. In addition, limitations of this research are also presented.

6.1 Formation and facilitation of customer experience

This research shows that non-owned touchpoints on social media are complex phenomena. To this end, customer experiences of end users were examined and digital marketing agencies were asked about their methods of facilitating customer experiences to gain insight into the valence determination of customer experiences at non-owned touchpoints on social media. Exploring a dyadic perspective provided in-depth results on when end consumers experience a positive, neutral or negative customer experience and how companies can deal with this.

This study explored how customer experience is shaped by non-owned touchpoints on social media. Accordingly, the first research question posed was: *How do non-owned touchpoints on social media shape valences of customer experience?* This research question is addressed by a qualitative case study in the context of digital marketing agencies, from a dyadic perspective. By analyzing the information gathered from the literature and interviews, we were able to determine which dimensions influence the formation of customer experience. The research has shown that non-owned touchpoints are even more complex than stated in the literature (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). To illustrate, the literature clearly separates who has control over a touchpoint, namely brand-owned or social/external non-owned (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020; De Keyser et al., 2020). However, this research has shown that complete control is not at all possible at touchpoints, but influence can only be exerted. In addition, it has been shown that it cannot be said that consumers can only exert influence within non-owned touchpoints, in fact, companies can do so as well. The degree of influence reigns on a continuum where both parties can exert influence in the same touchpoints. The way companies can influence customer experience formation is summarized in eight dimensions named in the integrative framework (figure 3). Together, these eight dimensions represent the shaping of customer experience valences in non-owned touchpoints on social media.

In addition to the aim of unraveling complexity by gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, this study also aims to gain managerial insights into facilitating customer experience. Hence, the following research question is posed: *How can service providers facilitate customer experience in non-owned touchpoints on social media platforms?* This question was answered by interpreting the findings in an integrative framework and by offering four practical rules: A Brand identity: Ensure that the influencer's personal values and the image the influencer portrays match the company's core values. B Privacy: Prioritize consumer well-being and protect their privacy by making the transition from third-party to first-party data and ask consumers for consent to store their personal consumer data. Use this first-party data for

personalization of the content. C Multidimensional experience: When creating content, make sure that the five dimensions of experience: sense, feel, think, act and relate, align well and all represent the brand core values. D Self identification: The company's content should represent a realistic and recognizable image. Consumers like to be able to identify with a brand and therefore become attached to your brand. The rules grasp the complexity of customer experience in a simple way and help managers to understand and primarily facilitate customer experience within non-owned touchpoints on social media. Following these rules will ultimately help managers contribute to improving customer experience on social media.

6.2 Limitations and future research

The results of this study must be viewed in light of several limitations. First, this study involved a relatively small research population of ten interviewees. While this approach still allowed us to examine both the perspective of digital marketing agencies and end users, we recognize that a larger population would have contributed to greater validity. Although the digital marketing agencies and end users interviewed operate in random industries, it remains unclear whether the results of this study can be generalized to all industries. Other industries may yield different results. Therefore, it is suggested for future research to interview more digital marketing agencies and also survey companies operating in other industries. This may clarify the current ambiguity and complexity of valence determination of customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; De Keyser et al., 2020).

Second, the interviews conducted for this study were analyzed through thematic analysis and inductive coding. This involved defining different themes and establishing an integrative framework. The interpretation of the interview results was based on the personal views of the interviewed companies and end users. However, increasing the research population would help minimize the high degree of freedom in the interpretation of the research findings, which is a disadvantage in thematic analysis and this contributes to an increased reliability (Alsaawi, 2014).

Finally, this research has uncovered insights about the factors that influence the valence determination of customer experience within non-owned touchpoints on social media. As mentioned, a key discovery is that companies do not have complete control over touchpoints in the customer journey and can only influence them at certain levels. It would be interesting for future research to elaborate on this and investigate in practice how companies can best exert influence to get a positive customer experience. These results can then be applied by companies and translated into their social media strategy to create a superior digital customer experience. Despite the aforementioned limitations, we are confident that the

research on the formation and facilitation of non-owned touchpoints on social media will help marketing scholars and companies optimize digital customer experience and value creation.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview guide

Welcome	Hi [person's name], welcome to this interview. I would like to thank you for participating in this interview. I appreciate you making time for this interview. Before we begin, I would like to ask for your permission to record the audio of this interview. I will use this audio when transcribing the interview and it will be used for educational purposes only.
Introduction and structure	<p>First, I will briefly introduce myself: my name is Teska Heemskerk. I am currently studying at the University of Twente where I am doing the Master Strategic Marketing & Servitisation. For my Master Thesis I am doing research on customer experience. Here I focus on the context of social media and online marketing agencies. The purpose of the research is two-sided. On the one hand, the goal is to investigate how non-owned touchpoints on social media shape the customer experience. On the other hand, the goal is to gain managerial insight into facilitating customer experience at non-owned touchpoints on social media. To achieve the goal, I have created the following research questions:</p> <p><i>RQ 1: How do non-owned touchpoints on social media shape valences of customer experience?</i></p> <p><i>RQ 2: How can service providers facilitate customer experience in non-owned touchpoints on social media platforms?</i></p> <p>This research focuses on both online marketing agencies and the end users who get to see the marketing activities of the online marketing agencies. Therefore, the purpose of this interview is two-sided. On the one hand, the goal is to gain insight into how non-owned touchpoints on social media shape the customer experience, from both perspectives. On the other hand, the goal is to gain managerial insight into facilitating customer experience at these non-owned touchpoints on social media from the eyes of online marketing agencies.</p> <p>The structure of the interview is semi-structured, which means that there are open-ended questions and I can ask further questions on certain topics. First, I start with some introductory questions after which I move on to questions about the customer journey, touchpoints and customer experience optimization.</p>
Theoretical introduction	<p>I would like to share in advance some background information and the definitions of the main topics of this interview:</p> <p><u>Definition customer journey:</u> A customer journey is a journey a consumer takes during the purchase process of a product or service. It includes all the interactions a consumer has with a company, from the moment they become aware of the need for the product or service to the final purchase and aftercare. The customer journey includes several stages, including awareness, consideration, decision making, purchase and loyalty. At each stage, the customer has specific needs and expectations, and it is the company's job to understand and respond to them to increase customer satisfaction and increase the likelihood of repeat purchases. Consumer perceptions within this journey can be positive, neutral or negative.</p> <p><u>Definition touchpoints:</u> Touchpoints are interaction moments between the (end) consumer and a company. Touchpoints can be divided into 1) degree of control, 2) nature and 3) phase. The control of the touchpoint can be in the hands of a company/brand or can be in the hands of external parties, e.g. consumers or there is partial control. The nature of the touchpoint can be human, physical, digital or a combination thereof. The phase of the touchpoint can be before, during and after the purchase.</p>
Interview questions	<p>Interview questions digital marketing agencies:</p> <p><u>Background</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you briefly introduce yourself and say something about your role within the

company?

- In relation to customer experience, what do you think are the advantages of using social media for an online marketing agency?
- In relation to customer experience, what do you think are the disadvantages of using social media for an online marketing agency?
- What trends do you see in how online marketing agencies are using social media to improve the customer experience?

Customer journey

- How does [name of company] apply the customer journey in daily operations?
- What phases of the customer journey do you have no control over as a company?
 - What barriers do you experience here?
 - What are the consequences of this?
- Which phases of the customer journey do you, as a company, have control over?
 - What opportunities does this offer?
 - How does this contribute to the customer experience?
- How important are these non-controllable stages in shaping customer experience?
- How can companies monitor and measure customer experience on social media?
 - What challenges do you experience here?

Touchpoints

- What non-controllable touchpoints do you think play an important role in the customer experience on social media and why?
- How do these non-controllable touchpoints affect the customer experience on social media (positive, neutral, negative)?
- How does [company name] best try to facilitate the customer experience at non-controllable touchpoints on social media?
 - What barriers do you experience here?
- What non-controllable touchpoints are there before the purchase phase?
- What non-controllable touchpoints are there during the purchase phase?
- What non-controllable touchpoints are there after the purchase phase?

Customer experience optimisation on social media

- How important is optimizing the customer experience on social media for you as an online marketing agency?
 - What steps are you taking to make this happen?
- How could you try to facilitate customer experience through non-controllable touchpoints on social media even better to the extent possible?
 - What would you need in order to do this?
- How does [company name] try to ensure that non-controllable touchpoints contribute to a positive customer experience or improve the customer experience?
- What innovative strategies is [name of company] using to improve the customer experience on social media?
 - What role does personalization of end consumers play in this?
- How does [name of company] ensure that your customers' communications on social media are consistent with their brand identity?

General

- Is there anything else you would like to add about customer experiences on social media?

Interview questions end consumers:

Background

- Can you briefly introduce yourself and talk about your social media use?
- What social media platform(s) do you use the most and why?
- What is a notable brand/company that you follow on social media and why?
 - What platform(s) do you follow [company x] on and why?

Customer journey

- Can you tell something about a recent experience with [company x] on social media that you liked and why?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Can you tell me about a bad experience with [company x] on social media and why you think so? ● Which of these phases are you not in control of (on social media)? ● Which phases are you in control of (on social media)? ● How important is it to you that brand statements are consistent across channels and touchpoints and why? <p><u>Touchpoints</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What are ways you interact with a brand/company on social media? ● What types of content appeal most to you on social media and why? ● To what extent are you sensitive to the opinions of others and/or influencers? ● How do non-controllable touchpoints on social media such as reviews, recommendations from friends or influencers influence your opinion of a brand? ● How do you feel about (paid) influencers promoting a product? ● Does this change your perception of a brand (positive/neutral/negative) if so, how and why? ● Which interaction moment with the brand/company on social media do you find most important: before, during or after the purchase and why? <p><u>Customer experience optimisation on social media</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What improvements would you like to see in the way brands/companies engage with you on social media? ● What could brands/companies do about their social media presence to improve your experience with the company? ● Do you have suggestions for brands/companies on how they can better use non-controllable touchpoints (reviews, recommendations from influencers/friends) to improve your customer experience? ● How important do you think it is for brands/companies to know your personal data and preferences and act on them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How does that affect your experience? ● How do you think brands/companies can better engage their customers on social media and build loyalty with consumers? <p><u>General</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is there anything else you would like to share about your customer experiences in general with brands on social media?
Closure	Thank you for your participation. In closing, I would like to ask if I may contact you if I have any questions with answers you have provided. I will stop the recording.