Understanding health decision-making during early omnichannel service encounters: A single case study

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of communication technologies and the rise of Web 2.0 have created new avenues for healthcare providers to engage with customers and expand access to information and care resources. However, traditional communication strategies fail to meet the evolving needs of patients who prioritize convenience and efficiency. In response, this research paper investigates the impact of omnichannel customer experience strategies on health decision-making during early service encounters in the healthcare industry. Through a qualitive case study conducted using abductive reasoning, the study emphasizes the significance of addressing customers' cognitive, personal agency, and pragmatic needs to optimize customer value perception and firm value realization. The findings contribute to both theoretical understanding and managerial implication, by providing insights for healthcare providers aiming to enhance customer satisfaction, increase customer retention and improve health decision-making in an omnichannel environment.

1. Introduction

The growing utilization of advanced communication technologies and Web 2.0 is increasing the possibility of firms to communicate with their customers. Consequently, customers' access to information resources is expanding exponentially (Kannan & Gauri, 2022). As a result, various industries find themselves in a rapidly changing omnichannel context, including the healthcare industry (Dahl, D'Alessandro, Peltier, & Swan, 2018). Within this particular context, channel interactivity is facilitating customers to make more informed decisions about their health, while it simultaneously increases bargaining power prior to service encounters (Swan,

Dahl & Peltier, 2019). Traditionally, the healthcare industry is mainly concerned with a one-way communication flow with a focus on sickness and treatment, where information is gathered by means of service encounters during physical appointments (Lewis, Chang & Friedman, 2005). This 'producer-oriented' stance can negatively impact customer satisfaction and the experience of service offering (Parasuraman, 2002), due to the neglect of the patient's own decision-making process and weeklong waits for appointments (Lewis, Chang & Friedman, 2005). Consequently, continuing to rely on traditional communication models can make it challenging for health service providers to cultivate and maintain

their customers in an omnichannel environment (Dahl, D'Alessandro, Peltier, & Swan, 2018; Swan, Dahl & Peltier, 2019).

In response, scholars suggest aligning with customers' omni-channel behaviors while putting the experience of customers at the center of value creation (Swan, Dahl & Peltier, 2019). The customer experience is a phenomenon that helps render insights about customer needs to improve service offerings from a holistic point of view (Voorhees et al., 2017). It is a multidimensional construct that recognizes the importance of emotional indicators and aspects of decision-making (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), where the phases through which customers may engage is referred to as the customer journey (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Correspondingly, effective customer experience management improves customer satisfaction and enhances customer retention (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Homburg, Jozic, Kuehnl, 2017) while it simultaneously has the ability to increase competitive advantage (Halvorsrud, Kvale, Følstad, 2016). In contrast to traditional communication, omnichannel models are 'customer-oriented' and interact across both offline and online channels in order to increase value (Cui et al., 2022). In line with customer experience, an omnichannel approach seeks to create a seamless customer journey throughout the entire customer lifecycle, mitigating customer needs regardless of the channel through which they may want to interact (Swan, Dahl & Peltier, 2019).

To keep up with the shift in consumer power, health marketeers inevitably need to identify new ways of engagement throughout the entire customer lifecycle that is beneficial for both firm and customer (Dahl, D'Alessandro, Peltier, & Swan, 2018). With the aid of omnichannel recourses, traditional barriers of physical service encounters can be removed (Voorhees et al., 2017). Subsequently, the healthcare industry has the opportunity to improve customer satisfaction and service offering, by capitalizing the benefits of advanced communication technologies (Cui et al, 2022; Rahman, Carlson & Chowdhury, 2022) and by situating both the patient's needs and decision-making aspects as the predominant strategy of customer experience management (Swan, Dahl, & Peltier, 2019). Furthermore, capitalizing new communication technologies can especially be

helpful in the initial stages of the decision-making process, as this sequence is most challenging for firms to control (Ashman et al., 2015). To exemplify, the phases of decision-making during a customer journey are often categorized as pre, core and post (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In relation to the service research perspective, the continuum is formulated as pre-service encounter, service encounter and post-service encounter (Voorhees et al., 2017). Due to its unique share in information search and buying behavior, new technologies enable customers to eliminate service providers way before the actual service offering (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017). And while the entire omnichannel service encounter continuum is discrete, elements of impressions in the pre-service encounter phase are cumulative. Accordingly, the pre-service encounter phase is critical for health marketeers to grasp to be able to facilitate decision-making in accruing customer experiences, as well as subsequent outcomes of customer satisfaction (Voorhees et a., 2017).

However, despite the growing recognition of service literature for new customer experience strategies to effectively engage with consumers who are utilizing a growing number of omnichannel touchpoints (Voorhees et al., 2017; Dahl, D'Alessandro, Peltier, & Swan, 2018; Dahl, Milne & Peltier, 2021; Rahman, Carlson & Chowdhury 2021; Cui et al., 2022), the healthcare industry is not fully embracing this marketing trend: "*the health-care ecosystem often remains skeptical*" (Swan, Dahl & Peltier, 2019, p.12). Consequently, by restraining the integration of digital resources, health consumers are limited in their ability to make informed decisions about their own health outcomes. In this absence, service providers are subsequently overlooking the opportunity to enhance satisfactory outcomes of customer experience during the pre-service encounter phase (Halvorsrud, Kvale Følstad, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017). In line with this notion, the Marketing Science Institute's special issue on health emphasizes the incredible potential that exists to bridge the gap caused by the healthcare industry's resistance to embrace new customer experience strategies: "*Marketing science has the potential to touch, influence, and inform every element of this ecosystem*" (Ailawadi et al., 2020, p.1).

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to comprehend – through empirical research – how omnichannel customer experience strategies shape health decision-making during early service encounters. A deeper understanding of this is vital as unsuccessful marketing strategies can result in wasted resources and ultimately in increased customer retention (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Homburg, Jozic, Kuehnl, 2017). Thus, the following research questions are formulated:

1. How do health customers experience health-decision-making during early omnichannel service encounters?

2. How can healthcare providers leverage omnichannel strategies to facilitate the customer experience?

Empirically, this research identifies and interprets micro-level factors of behavior and engagement across pre-service encounter interaction touchpoints. These factors render valuable insights into the organizational-level performance of the healthcare provider under research by recognizing reoccurring pain points and opportunities. We adopted a single case study approach, typically valuable for framing and solving problems (Eisenhardt, 1989). We investigated health service provider "Herniacentre & Co" on how their patients experience health decision-making. Our research strategy w be qualitative in nature by making use of in-depth semi-structured customer interviews. The interview transcripts are analyzed and interpreted based on an abductive approach to thematic analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Bryman, 2016). This allows to deductively utilize theoretical preconceptions while simultaneously acknowledging empirical language by iterating new themes and incorporating inductive methodological observation (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

This research contributes theoretically to the very limited studies on customer experience in healthcare. Furthermore, while many conceptual articles on marketing and management regularly seem to overlook practical comprehension (Nenonen et., al. 2017), our study provides knowledge that can assist healthcare service providers in improving customer experience management and decision-making strategies. To encapsulate, by utilizing an abductive approach to empirical analysis, both academic rigor and practical relevance is achieved (Nenonen et al., 2017). Furthermore, this study discloses novel insights for customer experience managers in healthcare by infusing a marketing perspective, one that is oftentimes neglected (Ailawadi et al., 2020). Additionally, the results of our study may encourage healthcare providers to overcome any doubts and recognize the advantages of transitioning away from traditional forms of communication.

The outline of this paper consists out of the following chapters: theoretical background, research methodology, findings and discussion. First, the theoretical background structures and defines the key theoretical concepts that contribute to this research while subsequently providing a conceptual theoretical model. Second, the research methodology chapter summarizes the research design as well as the empirical data collection and analysis methods. The findings chapter critically reports the research results related to the research question. Finally, the discussion chapter provide an exploration of the results.

2. Theoretical Background

In this chapter we are diving more deeply into the main theoretical preconceptions relevant to our study by focusing on the omnichannel customer experience in which the services context occurs, the customer journey and the decision-making elements of a pre-service encounter phase, and the creation of value during service encounters by means of sustainable customer experience management. Based on these notions, we will develop a theoretical framework that will serve as a theoretical guide for our analysis.

2.1 Enhancing customer experiences

"What people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences" (Abott, 1955, as cited in Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p.2). Customer experience not merely focuses on selling a product, but rather recognizes every aspect of customer interaction and firm offering, encompassed by a broader view of

human behavior where customer experience is shaped by decision-making processes. This view is holistic in nature, underlining the importance of the customer's cognitive, emotional, physical, affective, and social-identity constructs in response to product or service provider (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Essentially, the customer experience is how users and potential users respond to your firm and product or service offering, as well as other actors and resources external to the firm. The customer experience is therefore a crucial driver and powerful tool for customer satisfaction, competitive advantage, as well as business success (Zolkiewski et al., 2017). Subsequently, the vast majority of literature on service stresses the importance of service offering in relation to customer experiences (Homburg, Jozic, Kuehnl, 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Zolkiewski et al., 2017; Voorhees et al., 2017). The ability to provide a service that is customer-centric, inevitably decides whether a service provider will foster sustainable customer satisfaction as well as customer loyalty (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In order to create a desirable customer experience, one should: (1) consider the context in which the experiences occur (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017), (2) identify pain points and areas for optimization in a particular stage of the decision-making process during the customer journey (Halvorsrud, Kvale, Følstad, 2016; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), and (3) create value by systematically improving customer interaction touchpoints utilizing strategic customer experience management (Homburg, Jozic, Kuehnl, 2015; Zolkiewski et al., 2017).

2.1.1 The omnichannel customer experience

The digital age has revolutionized the service context in which customer experiences occur: the borders between the online and offline world are fading. Consumers today are frequently immersed in an environment of omnichannel communication platforms, where firms are expanding the channels through which they communicate (Gao & Fan, 2021). As a result, consumers are able to move more freely between online and offline channels while simultaneously having more access to information resources, which has amplified channel interactivity (Cui et al., 2022). Consequently, power dynamics of customers are strengthened by having the ability to gather data and compare alternatives (Gao & Fan, 2021; Cui et al., 2022).

The advent of omnichannel communication platforms have therefore loosened the relationship between service providers and service users by enabling decision-making processes to be less dependent on face-to-face interactions. In the healthcare industry, traditional communication models often prioritize in-person interactions, giving the healthcare provider more power and control while ignoring the patient's own decision-making process. This can lead to weeklong waits for healthcare services, which can negatively impact both the patient's well-being and the overall customer experience (Lewis, Chang & Friedman, 2005) In contrast to traditional communication, omnichannel communication models are concerned with shared decision-making and emphasize the co-creation of value (Cui et al., 2022). By shifting towards omnichannel communication, it is therefore possible to better involve patients in their own healthcare decisions whilst improving service offering and customer satisfaction. In practice, an omnichannel customer experience strategy seeks to synchronize multiple touchpoints between the consumer and provider throughout the entire customer journey by means of micro interaction and engagement across both online and offline service context. It utilizes the customer lifecycle touchpoints to cause brand awareness, motivate action, maximize campaign effectiveness and to increase conversion rates while simultaneously creating a more seamless customer journey by delivering consistent messaging and service offering (Dahl, D'Alessandro, Peltier, & Swan, 2018; Dahl, Milne & Peltier, 2021; Cui et al., 2022).

Consequently, engaging health consumers via various touchpoints in an omnichannel environment has benefits for both patient and health provider. It can help to ensure that patient's needs are being met, which can lead to an increased overall customer experience. Additionally, solid customer experiences lead to higher customer satisfaction (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Zolkiewski et al., 2017) By proactively managing an omnichannel customer experience, the health provider in turn can reduce the

likelihood of negative reviews and customer retention (Voorhees et al., 2017; Dahl, Milne & Peltier, 2021; Gao, Li, Fan & Jia, 2021).

2.2 Customer decision-making

2.2.1 The customer journey

A customer journey in a service context, is a sequence of phases where customers make decisions to satisfy their needs, including the pre, core and post-service encounter phases (Voorhees et al., 2017). The customer journey map is conceptualized as a visual representation of a sequence of interactions (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017). In the service industry, customers are actively involved in shaping and creating interactions as they occur by means of time, physical effort, and mental energy. Resource integration and channel interactivity are therefore co-constructed by both producer and consumer (Parasuraman, 2002). In support of customer experience and service offering, customer journey mapping is often utilized as a valuable tool to visualize, analyze, and interpret interaction and decision-making during service delivery processes from a customer's point of view (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017). Understanding the elements of satisfaction, opportunities and pain points within the service delivery process is key to foster service innovation and to successfully design customer experiences (Halvorsrud, Kvale, Følstad, 2016; Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017).

According to (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017), a customer journey map is visualized with a vertical and horizontal axis. To construct the vertical axis, strategic categories should be developed that depict relevant events associated with "customer touchpoints". Customer touchpoints include the co-creation of direct and indirect interactions between customer and service provider during a moment of encounter. Literature distinguishes touchpoints into various categories. These categories are often classified based on the notion that both customer and firm can own and initiate contact. Accordingly, touchpoints can thus be distinguished as customer-owned and firm-owned (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Anderl et al., 2016; Leva & Ziliani, 2018; Keyser et al., 2020). Customer-owned touchpoints are for example Google search, price comparison,

alternative comparison, gathering peer information and appealing to third party websites. Examples of firm-owned touchpoints are SEO, SEA, website information, social media post, organic advertising, paid advertising, print, retargeting, e-mail automation and catalogues. However, it is possible for overlap to exist since both customers and firms can own or initiate (amongst others) customer reviews, affiliate marketing, community building and word to mouth promotion. In relation to touchpoints, the vertical axis regularly depicts the element "channels". While a touchpoint is a moment of encounter, channels are utilized as a medium to facilitate these interactions. An example of such is Facebook adds. In this case the firm-owned touchpoint is paid advertising while Facebook will be categorized as the channel (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Anderl et al., 2016) As previously mentioned, customers interact with the service provider to satisfy their needs. To understand why the customer is making certain decisions, it is important to acknowledge the goals they are trying to achieve. Furthermore, it is crucial to pinpoint obstacles or moments of friction within the journey of reaching that goal. In combination with emotional indicators, one can try to construct elements of opportunities. Overall, the key objective is to combine the categories of the vertical axis to track the customer journey while simultaneously developing an understanding of how the customer experience can be enriched for a higher level of service offering and customer satisfaction (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017; Leva & Ziliani, 2018).

According to marketing scholars, a customer experience is multidimensional, encompassing a range of touchpoints and emotional responses that occur during various stages of the customer's decision-making process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The horizontal axis of the customer journey map illustrates this process by depicting the various phases of the customer experience along a timeline (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017). This timeline represents the holistic view of the decision-making process that customers go through as they interact with a company during a particular service encounter phase. (Halvorsrud, Kvale, Følstad, 2016).

2.2.2 The pre-service encounter phase

As previously mentioned, the different phases of a customer journey are categorized as pre, core and post. In relation to retailing scholars often refer to purchase funnels and describe the sequence of events as pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. From a service research perspective, the sequence of events is typically depicted as pre-service encounter, service encounter, and post-service encounter (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017; Voorhees et al., 2017). Additionally, the pre-service encounter phase is a critical part of the customer journey. This is due to its integral share in information search, - and buying behavior. While much research has been conducted on customer decision-making in the early stages of purchase funnels, research into decision-making prior to service encounters is lacking (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015; Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017). According to Voorhees et al., 2017, this is surprising due to the cumulative outcome of customer's first impressions: "*While each service encounter is discrete, an element of customer impressions and satisfaction with the service provider is cumulative. Therefore, spillover of these outcomes from earlier service encounters accentuates the importance of a well-defined view of the overall service experience*" (p.270). To encapsulate, a positive pre-service encounter impression has the potential to significantly impact the decision-making process of both service encounter and post-service encounter. Hence, it is a crucial phase with interchangeable characteristics for the overall service offering, customer satisfaction and thus, customer experience.

To contribute to theory, this study examines the decision-making process in the pre-service encounter phase. The pre-service encounter phase is concerned with the time interval where firms can engage in micro interactions with customers (and vice versa) prior to the actual service offering. Significant to this time sequence are the stages of problem recognition, information gathering, negotiating alternatives, and identifying the best alternative. These stages occur throughout the entire omnichannel service (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al. 2017; Dahl, Milne & Peltier, 2021).

2.3 Customer experience management
2.3.1 Value creation in omnichannel context

To be able to examine the stages of the pre-service encounter phase while implementing strategic customer experience management accordingly, one should understand how value is constructed in an omnichannel service context. During the customer journey, consumers make decisions that serve a purpose related to the stages of problem recognition, information gathering, negotiating alternatives, and identifying the best alternative (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al. 2017). Subsequently, customer touchpoints reflect the array of micro interactions and moments of engagement that occur between provider and user. These touchpoints are important in shaping the customer experience, as without any interaction and engagement, there would be no customer experience. As previously mentioned, customer touchpoints can be distinguished based on the notion that both customers and providers can initiate interaction. While literature on customer experience management is predominantly focused on firm-owned touchpoints, recently a growing interest in customer-owned touchpoints is observed (Keyser, Verleye & Klaus, 2020). The importance of understanding customer-owned touchpoints for customer experience is supported by earlier literature on customer experience management, where scholars are increasingly focused on exploring customer experience from a value co-creation perspective. This perspective to customer experience values all actors involved in the customer journey as integral parts in the interaction process (Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007; Grönroos, 2017; Zolkiewski, et al. 2017; Storbacka et al., 2017). In this context, the consumer is not merely the recipient of value, but also an active participant in the creation of value. By obtaining and consuming resources while simultaneously using skills to integrate other existing resources, the role of the consumer is shifted towards that of the value creator (Grönroos, 2017). With reference to the omnichannel service context, resource integration is recognized as the key foundation for customer-owned information seeking and firm-owned service delivery during a value co-creation process. From this point of view, resource integration is essential to facilitate the

exchange of information and services across multiple channels in order to create value for both the consumer and the provider (Zolkiewski, et al. 2017).

2.3.2 Customer experience design

In relation to value co-creation, in order to succeed in a global market that is greatly impacted by the proliferation of channels, it is critical to establish sustainable competitive advantages across all customer touchpoints. This essentially means that traditional service management with a firm-owned focus solely on price, product and quality is getting obsolete and no longer viable (Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007). Furthermore, designing for efficient customer experience from a provider's focus alone is not sufficient, as there may be a discrepancy between the providers intended value proposition and the customer's perceptions of their actual experience (Ponsignon et, al. 2017). With reference to strategic customer experience management for service encounters, the role of the provider is to create a value proposition based on customer expectations to ensure the alignment between perceived and realized experiences. Including that customer experience is designed for desired customer decision-making outcomes in a way that satisfies the needs of both the service user and service provider, leading to higher levels of customer satisfaction and service offering as well as lower levels of customer retention (Ponsignon et, al. 2017; Keyser et al., 2020).

Furthermore, actional improvement of customer experience can be made when managers identify specific pain points and areas for optimization by periodically auditing their customer journey (Halvorsrud, Kvale, Følstad, 2016; Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017). In order to do so, the multidimensional construct of customer experience should be considered, where value co-creation is constructed by a set of emotional indicators and micro interactions of decision-making that drive both value proposition and value perception, as well as value expectation and value realization during the pre, core or post-service encounter phase of the customer journey (Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007; Voorhees et al., 2017). As previously mentioned, customer journey mapping is a common methodological technique used to understand and improve customer experience design (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017). To reach the desired customer experience and to gain insights into value perceptions and value expectations for managerial implication, customer feedback needs to be captured. Evaluating this data will provide valuable insights that can help the service provider to improve the value of its actions and recourses. This can be achieved through a deeper understanding of customer needs and preferences, and by tailoring actions and offerings to align with those needs (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017; Zolkiewski, et al., 2017; Keyser et al., 2020). Hence, in order for customer experience managers to employ decision-making strategies in an efficient manner, it is therefore relevant to observe and comprehend reoccurring micro behavior and interactions for customer experience design.

2.4 Theoretical framework

Drawing from the extant literature, in Figure (1) we describe a general, theoretical framework related to our study that outlines the connection between customer experience, emotional indicators, the exchange of value and the relationship between company and health consumer. The correlation between these concepts is also explored. The framework is inspired by theory as presented by Ponsignon et, al. (2017) as well as the value co-creation model as proposed by Gentile, Spiller & Noci, (2007). It suggests that the customer experience is a multidimensional construct of emotional elements as well as the continues interplay between company value creation and customer value creation. To facilitate the co-creation of value, the providers design intention (the value proposition) should be based on the value expectations of its targeting customers. By doing so, it is more likely that the value perception of the actual experience (value realization) is enhanced.
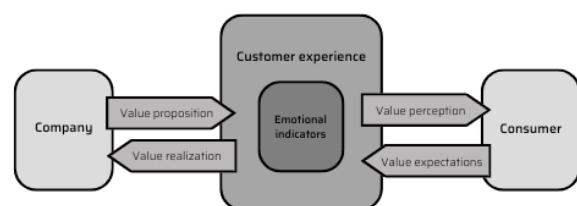
3. Research methodology

The methodology chapter provides a comprehensive explanation and detailed description of the research methods utilized in this study. It encompasses the research design, case company, data collection and analysis.

3.1 Research design

This research is designed to comprehend the impact of reoccurring individual-level interactions and behavior on organizational-level performance in an omnichannel environment. More in depth, the study aims to critically assess how patients experience health decision-making in early omnichannel service encounters of a single case study. Data is extracted based on customer feedback for theoretical deepening, which we required by means of semi-structured interviews (Nascimento & Steinbruch, 2019). To comprehend and interpret valuable insights and key indicators for customer experience construction, we utilized an abductive approach to thematic analysis (Bryman, 2016) to systematically combine a mixture of inductive and deductive assessment (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). Abductive approaches are common for qualitative research and according to literature, valuable because it can yield theoretical connections that are both novel and usable for managerial implication. Thus, incorporating abductive inquiries into data analysis can provide both academic rigor and practical relevance (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014; Nenonen et., al, 2017). Finally, we incorporated elements of a customer journey map into our interview guide to create a holistic perspective and to ensure that no significant touchpoints of the journey was overlooked. It helped us to systematically cover all relevant interactions, ensuring a well-rounded exploration of how health decision-making is experienced during the pre-service encounter phase (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017; Zolkiewski, et al., 2017; Keyser et al., 2020). A total of eleven interviews were conducted, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the topic under study. By the eighth interview, data saturation was achieved, indicating that a sufficient amount of information had been gathered to identify the customer experience constructs during the early stages of omnichannel service encounters.

3.2 Case company

Herniacentre & Co is a private healthcare provider who specializes in surgical services for patients with a lower back hernia or lumbar spinal stenosis. The company has embraced an omnichannel marketing strategy to revolutionize traditional communication methods in the healthcare industry. By integrating a range of offline and online channels, the company aims to augment the perceived value throughout the decision-making process of patients. Notably, their unique approach involves scheduling the initial face-to-face appointment as part of the actual service offering, wherein patients meet the surgeon the day prior to the surgery, having already committed to undergoing the procedure. Consequently, the majority of the interaction touchpoints throughout the service encounter continuum are experienced during the pre-service encounter phase. By conducting interviews with health consumers who have traversed this critical phase, we attempted to unveil profound insights into how customers behave and navigate decision-making during early omnichannel service encounters. Empirical research into this case study will therefore have the potential to contribute significantly to the knowledge base of healthcare providers, enabling them to optimize their communication and marketing strategies to enhance a seamless customer experience that aligns with the expectations and needs of health consumers.

3.3 Data collection

Purpose sampling is used to accommodate data collection. This type of unit selection for inclusion is based on the indication that a sample strategy should reflect the phenomenon under consideration while simultaneously providing in-depth information for research purposes (Bryman, 2016). In relation to our research, we have searched for a sample of health consumers who have already experienced an early service encounter with Herniacentre & Co and who therefore hold extensive knowledge about how health decision-making was experienced. Hence, our participant sample exist of Herniacentre & Co patients. Subsequently, a privileged technique of data collection in qualitative research is the conduction of

interviews. It is considered to be a non-standardized research procedure, both structured or semi-structured, with the aim to accumulate individual-level interaction and behavior on a specific thematic (Nascimento & Steinbruch, 2019). The source of data collection within this study is therefore semi-structured interviews. According to literature this is an effective methodological approach of open-minded verbal interchanges, that will allow for new concepts and ideas to emerge without response limitation, while simultaneously being able to ask questions based on a predetermined theoretical framework (Bryman, 2016).

3.4 Data analysis

The interpretation of data is a central practice in data analysis. To be able to execute this practice, it was necessary to audio record and transcribe the semi-structured interviews. This created a data set with analytical deepening. Fundamentally, this process was concerned with data reduction to facilitate the interpretation of the material. One of the main elements of qualitative data reduction for empirical understanding is coding. Coding allowes the researcher to capture relevant responses, to break down responses into their component parts and to summarize the data with the use of given labels (Nascimento & Steinbruch, 2019). To understand the coding approach, one must understand the reasoning of the study. Qualitative research distinguishes three different approaches to reasoning: inductive, deductive, and abductive. For this study, we made use of an abductive reasoning approach to thematic analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Bryman, 2016).

Literature about abduction breaks away from both inductive as well as deductive reasoning. An inductive approach privileges the emergence of a theoretical model unburdened by theorical preconceptions. A deductive approach privileges the development of hypothetical propositions based on current theory (Bryman, 2016). These approaches both fail to capture the importance of the continuous interplay between methodological observation and theory. Abductive reasoning, however, approaches the phenomena under study through the lens of a theoretical framework, while simultaneously highlighting the objective of discovery by

considering the emergence of additional theoretical concepts and themes (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014; Bryman, 2016). This stems from the notion that empirical data cannot be understood without theory and vice versa. Furthermore, due to the exploratory nature of case study research, scholars praise the utilization of abduction due to the unique interrelatedness of empirical language and theoretical context. This is often described as *systematic combining*: it combines the reality of the case study with theoretical preconceptions, while directing and redirecting based on empirical observation (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Consequently, the abductive approach to our case study made use of a preliminary theoretical framework as presented in Figure (2). To be able to understand health decision-making during early omnichannel service encounters, we leveraged the customer journey map as an initial deductive guide for our interview questions (Appendix A). This enhanced the depth of this research by facilitating a comprehensive structure to uncover valuable customer information. The construct of the customer journey map was conceptualized based on the theoretical preconceptions about omnichannel customer experience and the characteristics of the pre-service encounter phase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017; Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017; Keyser, Verleye & Klaus, 2020).
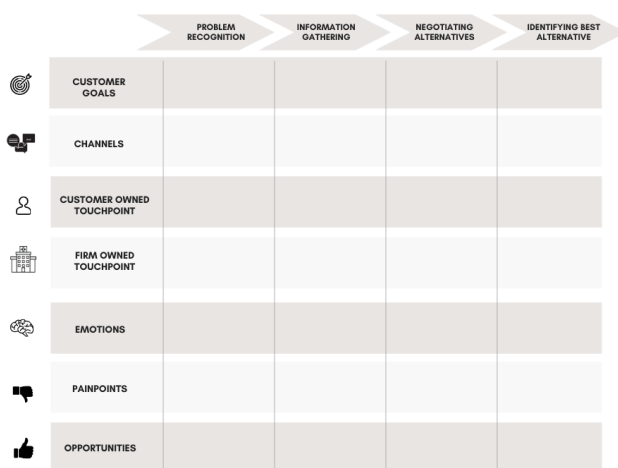

Figure 2. Pre-service encounter customer journey map

Simultaneously, we iterated new concepts and themes based on inductive interpretation. This

allowed us to revise the initial framework accordingly. The data set was reduced for interpretation with the application of open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding serves as the initial analytical step, allowing the researcher to break down the data analytically. Through this process, we were able to reflect by comparing and finding similarities within the data. Subsequently, conceptual labels were assigned to the identified patterns and concepts, facilitating the reduction of the data. Afterward, axial coding was utilized to enable the systematic aggregation of these concepts and to reveal broader themes and theoretical dimensions, ensuring comprehensive and novel insights with practical relevance for managerial purposes.

4. Findings

This section offers a comprehensive overview of the interview findings, delving into the outcomes of the data analysis to reveal the significant aggregate themes that emerged. It includes a thorough examination of interview citations to gain a deeper understanding of the characteristics associated with these themes. Additionally, an empirically grounded framework is presented, providing the interpretation of the findings and their implications.

4.1 Identifying customer experience constructs during early omnichannel service encounters

Through an extensive analysis of the data, multiple first-order themes emerged, which were further categorized into seven second-order themes. These second-order themes collectively formed three overarching themes that encapsulate the essence of the research findings (Figure 3). The overarching themes are classified as: cognition, personal agency and pragmatism.

4.1.1 Unveiling cognitive impact

The mental process involved in acquiring and processing information were found to have a significant importance on how credibility and reliability was perceived. Subsequently, interviewees expressed a desire to minimize their cognitive load by

addressing any confusion prior to the stages of an actual service encounter. To achieve this, factors such as convenience, reassurance, social proof, visibility, transparency, and consistency were identified as effective customer strategies for information assessment. Notably, a positive correlation has been observed between favorable assessments of credibility and reliability and positive customer experiences.

In healthcare, decisions can have a profound impact on well-being. Customers therefore consistently prioritized safety and positive outcomes. Emphasizing the significance of firsthand accounts and experiences shared by individuals who have already engaged with a specific healthcare provider, interviewees discovered reassurance and confidence in reading reviews from others who had similar experiences. The positive narratives of patients offered a sense of social proof, validating the credibility and reliability of the healthcare provider under consideration. By evaluating the information conveyed through customer testimonials, elements of uncertainty were diminished, thereby mitigating the perceived risk associated with selecting an unfamiliar healthcare provider. To encapsulate, by tapping into collective wisdom, customers found themselves to make more informed decisions while selecting the healthcare provider that was most likely to meet their specific expectations.

> *"The website had a lot of valuable resources that contained information about my condition. I also very much liked the videos on the website. By watching that video on the about us page I saw that the person behind this clinic had experienced the exact same thing, that gave me the feeling that I would be taken seriously. I had no idea what a PTED surgery was, and your website had a very informative video about it."*
> - *Interviewee 3*

Convenience: *"The website had a lot of valuable resources"*
Reassurance: *"I was reading through the customer reviews and found many stories that where recognizable"*
Social proof: *"I heard about you from my neighbor and my co-worker also head good experiences with you"*

Visibility: *"I didn't even look for other clinics, you were at the top on Google"*
Transparancy: *"I had no idea what a PTED surgery was, and your website had a very informative video about it"*
Consistency: *"I found that some information did not align with the information on the website"*

Empathy: *"You made me feel like a human again. I was no longer a number"*
Support: *"You listened to my personal preferences, and you acted upon that"*

Self-determination: *"I finally am able to regain control over my own life by having the ability to make choices about my own body"*
On demand: *"I was able to decide myself when, where and how to, for example, ask questions"*

Ease of use: *"Your website looked really professional and was super easy to navigate"*
UX: *"your online diagnose form was great"*
Accessibility: *"The option to download a brochure was also really nice, I could read it at my own time"*

Assesment of Credibility

Assesment of Reliability

Personalization

Autonomy

Usability

Cognition
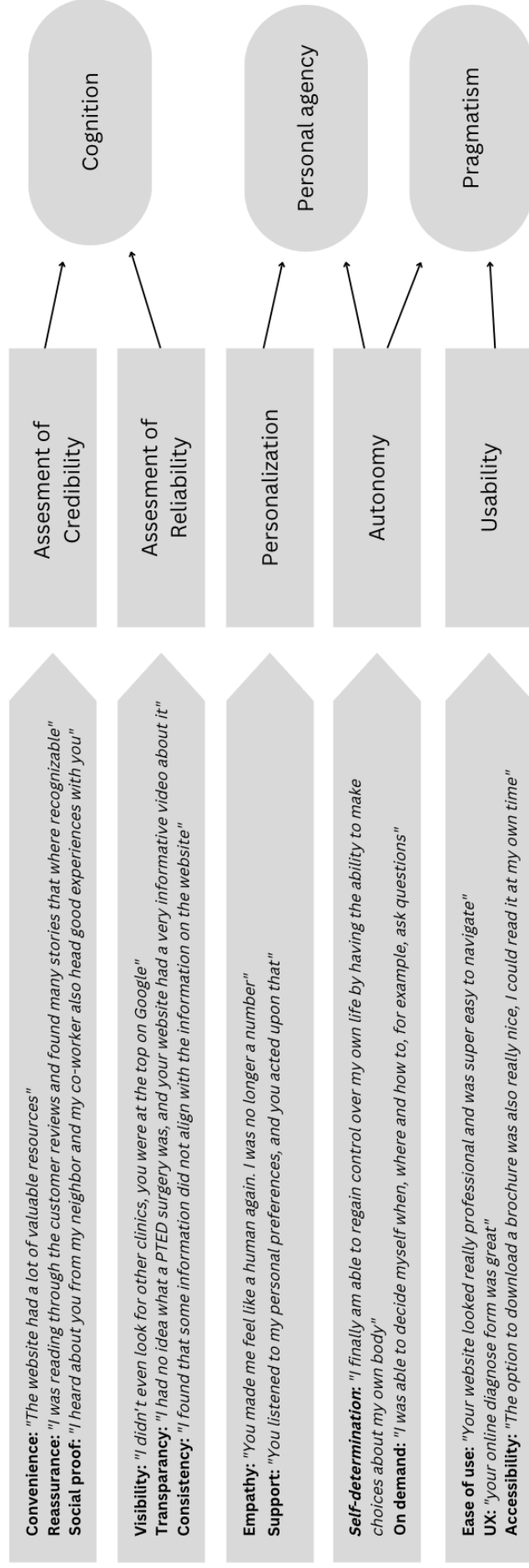
Personal agency

Pragmatism

Figure 3. Thematic Analysis

"I was reading through the customer reviews and found many stories that where recognizable and comparable to my own. When I read that these people were very well assisted and relieved of their pain, it gave me more confidence to choose the unknown as I would be in the right hands."
- *Interviewee 2*

Other findings revealed a noteworthy aspect regarding the importance of online visibility and high Google rankings. Many participants expressed a strong perception of trust when encountering Herniacentre & Co at the top of the search results related to their medical condition or the specific surgical procedure. More intriguingly, some participants disregarded competitors altogether, relying solely on the top-ranking outcome in Google as their primary and authoritative point of reference. As they perceived the health company to be a reputable authority in its field, they were more likely to consider that health provider as a viable option for their needs. Hence, the strong online presence of the company thereby influenced customers' perception and health decision-making. This finding therefore underscores the pivotal role of an omnichannel marketing strategy, where good SEO and SEA efforts helped shaping customers' cognition and behavior.

"I didn't know who you are, I just googled about possibilities for a surgery, and you kept popping up at the top in Google. Therefore, I knew you were a specialist in this area."
- *Interviewee 5*

"Well, I didn't even look for other clinics, you were at the top on Google, so I just went with you guys."
- *Interviewee 9*

"I think I looked at the website of 2 clinics, but you had the top position in Google, so I contacted you first. I thought you seemed more legit."
- *Interviewee 10*

While a comprehensive utilization of omnichannel communication can establish a strong online presence, maintaining consistency in disseminating information across all channels is essential for health providers to cultivate a cognitive process that supports positive health decision-making. Being consistent builds trust, avoids miscommunication and fosters a positive customer experience. While the majority of interviewees expressed satisfaction with the coherence of information, a subset of interviewees mentioned a lack of consistency, which caused them to question the provider's credibility and integrity. The presence of consistency and transparency could have nurtured a cognitive process that would have been more aligned with a satisfactory experience. Furthermore, if the health company had been more transparent in their messaging, it would have fostered a higher sense of confidence, supporting a more informed and positive health decision.

"At first, I thought that everything was perfect, your website had a lot of good information, the brochure was nice, the online diagnoses form was very extensive, etc. However, when I finally spoke to someone one the phone, I found that some information did not align with the information on the website (...) that's when I started to think that some things didn't really add up (...) I still went through with the surgery though because I really needed it, but in hindsight it did make me question how things were going to unfold."
- *Interviewee 1*

"You mention in all your online communications that the surgery will be covered by the insurance. This was a really important factor for me to choose a private clinic or not. However, I found out later on the phone that it was only going to be partly covered. Why not mention this upfront in your online statements? This gives a strong impression that you are very commercial, which I don't find to be a good fit for a health clinic."
- *Interviewee 4*

As a result, the findings within this theme emphasize how micro interaction and engagement with the

service and brand, both online and offline, can influence the cognitive process of individuals in shaping their value perceptions and subsequent customer experience. Ultimately, pain points or opportunities that occur during the customer journey have the potential to influence health decision-making. By understanding how cognition is shaped, customer experience managers can leverage these processes by realizing a more credible and reliable value proposition across all omnichannel touchpoints.

4.2 Cultivating personal agency

The interview also found personalization and autonomy to be critical factors for the enhancement of positive customer experiences. Personalization exhibited the ability of Herniacentre & Co to comprehend and value its customers as unique individuals, while autonomy encompassed the empowerment of customers to make decisions that aligned with their own objectives and values. Coining these second-order themes into the overarching theme "personal agency", it demonstrates how the cultivation of autonomy and personalization in marketing messages throughout the omnichannel customer journey can facilitate greater customer satisfaction while fostering a sense of self-directed decision-making.

> "I don't have any regrets choosing you guys because you know what? You made me feel like a human again. I was no longer a number, which was the case in regular healthcare. I felt that I was spoken to directly with your online communications, the online diagnose form was really personal and when it came to the interactions on the phone, you didn't just put me on a waiting list. You listened to my personal preferences, and you acted upon that."
> - Interviewee 6

As described by interviewee 6, Herniacentre & Co enabled personalization by means of empathy and support throughout their interactions. It emphasizes the transformative impact that a human-centered approach can have on customer experiences. By prioritizing empathy and support, customers felt valued, heard and respected. They no longer feel like mere numbers in the healthcare system, but rather as individuals with unique needs and preferences. When these needs and preferences are acknowledged and acted upon through genuine care, it humanizes the customer experience, fostering a stronger feeling of trust. This is vital, as it positively influenced the customers' perception of the health provider and their decision-making process. More in depth, by investing in personalization, health companies can create meaningful experiences that leave a lasting impact on customers, ultimately driving their own success and growth.

Additionally, some interviewees showed a high preference for autonomy in their decision-making processes. By deliberately utilizing an omnichannel strategy for customer experience, Herniacentre & Co fostered access to information, communication, and support, which simultaneously facilitated a sense of autonomy.

> "You know what I found to be really nice? In normal healthcare you have to surrender to the system, you can only come when they want, you can ask questions when they have time, you are helped months after discovering something. But with Herniacentre & co I was able to decide myself when, where and how to, for example, ask questions. I could go to the website for information, I could fill out the diagnose form and take my time, I could call anytime I want, and I would be spoken to every time I needed something, I think I even spoke to someone on Facebook messenger, it was like communication on demand.
> - Interviewee 5

> "Like, wow. I finally am able to regain control over my own life by having the ability to make choices about my own body, rather than being dependent on when or what my doctor is willing to do for me. It felt incredibly liberating."
> - Interviewee 8

Subsequently, we observed that when individuals have the freedom to seek information, ask questions, and actively engage in their own health decision-making process, they gain a greater understanding and

become more knowledgeable about their condition and treatment options. Increased health literacy therefore empowered them to actively participate, leading to better informed decisions. By fostering a collaborative process where concerns are addressed promptly and access to information is timely, the health provider constructed a customer-centric experience that was perceived as convenient. Subsequently, by promoting autonomy, the healthcare provider created a positive customer experience for both interviewees.

The observed phenomenon in the overarching theme of personal agency, reveals that value expectations were surpassed as individuals perceived their personal and autonomous existence genuinely being taken into consideration. This enhanced sense of control in health decision-making, signifies the importance of a value proposition that incorporates seamless communication and interaction across a continuum of online and offline channels. It shows that good executed omnichannel communication strategies can effectively facilitate a positive perception of value and subsequent customer experience during the initial stages of an omnichannel service encounter.

4.3 Pragmatism and pragmatic usability

While autonomy is highly related to personal agency, this second-order theme also unveiled correlations with perceived usability. The interview showed that being autonomous also involved to make active decisions based on what works best for your personal needs, rather than adhering to what seems to be normal practice. Consequently, the emergence of the third overarching theme "pragmatism", encapsulates how customers frequently make decisions by prioritizing practical outcomes that align with their individual needs. This theme stems from the interplay between the second-order themes "autonomy" and "usability". Communication ease of use, user experience and accessibility collectively played a pivotal role in shaping pragmatism. The following statements emphasize how the Herniacentre & Co utilized pragmatism to foster the alignment between customers' value expectations and their perception of value.

"I have seen ads before, which I found to be good looking. I clicked on it, and it went to your website. Your website looked really professional and was super easy to navigate. I also had a look at some other clinics, but the information was lacking, some looked really unprofessional, and some were just difficult to use. Overall, I had the best online experience with you guys so therefore I decided to use the "call me back form", and I was called back the same day."
- *Interviewee 7*

"(...) also, in comparison to the other clinic which I looked at, your online diagnose form was great. It had a lot of questions, it was easy to use, I remember I could even click on a little figure and indicate exactly where I had pain, what a great invention that is, I must say. And with the other one, it was just really difficult, and I didn't feel like dealing with all that fuss."
- *Interviewee 10*

A well designed and user-friendly website, as described by the interviewees, created a positive first impression as it immediately instilled confidence and trust in the company. Subsequently, an easy to navigate website encouraged exploration, fostered a positive interaction between the customer and health provider. Facilitating the individuals' ability to gather the necessary information for health decision-making, eliminated unnecessary pain points and allowed customers to achieve their desired outcomes with minimal effort. Hence, by catering to customers' pragmatic considerations and by offering usable features, a seamless omnichannel pre-service encounter experience was achieved.

Equally important in fostering a pragmatic and positive experience, was accessibility. By removing physical barriers, HerniaCentre & Co enabled access to healthcare services by allowing patients to engage in their health decision-making process without limitation. This efficiency aligns with pragmatic considerations of autonomy and usability as it saves time, minimizes disruptions of daily routines, and allows more individuals to access healthcare services easily and conveniently.

"It was nice to have something with a lot of information to go to. I obviously surfed on your website often because I wanted to learn more about my condition. What was also nice is that I could go back and forth anytime I wanted. Like, I came back a few days later and I could find back the information, something that you can't do with your doctor. The option to download a brochure was also really nice, I could read it at my own time and decide myself when I was going to undertake action."

- *Interviewee 11*

Hence, by aligning omnichannel value propositions with value expectations, the creation of a positive customer experience can be achieved through the provision of tailored and practical solutions designed to enhance ease of use, user experience and information accessibility. These solutions cater to the specific needs of customers who prioritize pragmatism in their decision-making process. Furthermore, this highlights the significance of healthcare providers to address these requirements, as they are more likely to fulfill the value expectations of pragmatic customers by empowering them to attain their desired outcomes.

4.2 Interpreting health decision-making during early omnichannel service encounters

This paragraph focuses on the discussion of customer experience constructs during early omnichannel encounters and their relationship to value creation. An empirically grounded framework has been developed to illustrate the interconnected nature of value creation and the dynamic process of health decision-making and how it is constructed by customer experience elements (Figure 4). The framework highlights the ongoing cycle of firm value proposition, value realization, customer value expectation, value realization, their underlying relationships and how it can impact how customers experience health decision-making. Following, we will explain how a seamless customer journey can lead to favorable health decision-making outcomes

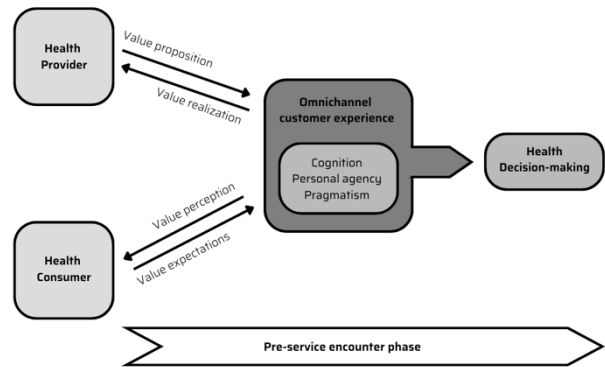through the recognition and alignment of value co-creation.

Figure 4. Customer experience of health decision-making during early omnichannel service encounters

4.2.1 The interconnection of value creation

This study found that customers' experience of health decision-making during early omnichannel service encounters is shaped by the constructs of cognition, personal agency, and pragmatism. Pivotal in the initial stages of the health decision-making process, is for customers to rely heavily on their cognitive abilities to assess the relevance and potential risks associated with deviating from regular healthcare services. Through cognitive evaluation, they assess the relevance, risk, and potential outcomes associated with different healthcare options. Simultaneously, personal agency emerges as a crucial factor, as customers prioritize the ability to make choices aligned with their preferences. This sense of control and involvement empowers customers to actively participate in their own health decision-making process. Pragmatism, on the other hand, emphasizes the practical outcomes individuals seek in their health decisions, where factors such as convenience, accessibility and timely access are essential considerations.

Together, cognition, personal agency and pragmatism contribute to customer value expectations. The fulfillment of value expectations is instrumental in shaping customer's perceived value. When the perceived value aligns with or exceeds their initial expectations, customers are more likely to have a positive perception of the value delivered by the healthcare provider. This perception in turn, is

influenced by the interplay of the omnichannel customer experience constructs. Customers cognitively evaluate the information presented, the degree of personal agency experienced and the extent to which the provider addressed their pragmatic concerns. The alignment or disconnect of these factors with the firm's value proposition contributes to the value perceived, which in turn has an impact on either positive or negative health decision-making experiences.

In the context of the firm's value proposition, the intricate dynamic between omnichannel customer experience constructs and firm value realization is imperative. Healthcare providers must carefully craft an omnichannel value proposition that caters to customers' cognitive, personal agency and pragmatic needs. By doing so, they can enhance the alignment between customer value expectations and the value perceived. Positive value perceptions in turn foster beneficial outcomes for firm value realization. To exemplify, the health provider under study offered a value proposition designed to create a seamless customer journey during early omnichannel service encounters, where individuals could navigate through various online and offline channels and touchpoints to seek information, compare options, and consider pragmatic aspects. This customer-centric approach encouraged personal agency and cognitive evaluation, allowing customers to assess the reliability and credibility of the value proposition presented to them. As a result of this assessment, customers were inclined to deviate from conventional healthcare and favor the healthcare provider examined in our case study. The data clearly indicated that the adoption of an omnichannel customer experience approach resulted in positive health decision-making experiences for customers. Consequently, this facilitated the realization of value for the healthcare provider, manifested in increased customer retention in further stages of the service encounter continuum.

To encapsulate, the interplay between omnichannel customer experience constructs, firm value proposition, customer value expectation, customer value perception and firm value realization shapes how customers' experience health decision-making processes. By recognizing customers' cognitive, personal agency and pragmatic needs, healthcare providers can optimize the omnichannel pre-service encounter phase and foster positive health decision-making experiences.

4.2.2 Aligning value creation for customer experience management

Hence, in order to enhance customer experiences in an omnichannel context, it is essential for managers to align the multidimensional construct of customer experience, value creation and the decision-making (Gentile, Spiller & Noci, 2007; Voorhees et al., 2017). This study demonstrates the role of customer experience managers within the healthcare industry, emphasizing the ability to orchestrate seamless integration across various online and offline channels and touchpoints and to create a cohesive and frictionless customer journey. By harnessing the power of omnichannel communication, these managers can effectively leverage omnichannel strategies to facilitate superior customer experiences during the pre-service encounter phase.

They can start by offering a unified value proposition through diverse omnichannel communication options and information resources. By doing so, customers are empowered to engage through their preferred channels, resulting in enhanced convenience and satisfaction. Consistency in branding and messaging across touchpoints is key, as it reinforces cognitive factors such as reassurance, social proof, visibility, and transparency. Tailoring these factors strategically can enhance credibility and reliability while it strengthens brand recognition and builds trust. This in turn positively influences customers' value perception and the realization of firm value. Secondly, by providing a comprehensive firm value proposition that includes various pragmatic features, information resources and customer support systems, healthcare providers can enable individuals to navigate their healthcare journey according to their own preferences, fostering autonomy and active participation in health decision-making. Subsequently, through personalization efforts, healthcare providers can go beyond the conventional approach and treat customers as unique individuals with specific needs rather than mere numbers in a system. This customer-centric approach creates more meaningful experiences, leading to increased customer value and advocacy for the healthcare

provider. Thirdly, easy channel navigation and access to relevant tools empower customers to make informed decisions based on pragmatic needs. By minimizing physical barriers and by providing practical resources, healthcare providers leverage the omnichannel approach to enhance pragmatic value, reinforcing the value proposition and fostering a positive perception of the service offerings.

In summary, implementing a streamlined omnichannel strategy that considers cognitive factors, reinforces personal agency, and addresses pragmatic aspects allows customer experience managers in healthcare to establish a comprehensive approach that creates value for both customer and firm. By leveraging the potential of such strategies, customer experience managers can optimize the customer journey, enhance customer satisfaction, and drive positive outcomes related to health decisions.

5. Discussion

This chapter aims to provide a final perspective while offering a concise summary of the overall argument of this research paper. We delve into the theoretical and practical contributions made by the study, while also acknowledging any limitations. Additionally, suggestions for future research directions will be discussed.

5.1 Reflection

The main purpose of this study was to critically assess how health consumers experience health decision-making in early omnichannel service encounters. A comprehensive analysis of individual-level interactions was conducted in order to obtain valuable insights into the omnichannel customer journey of the health provider under study, along with associated strategic insights for managerial implication. In order to capture the importance of the continuous interplay between methodological observation and theory, this study made use of abductive reasoning. With a focus on theoretical context as well as practical comprehension, we were able to identify three overarching themes that shape how customers experience health decision-making in an omnichannel pre-service encounter phase: (1) *cognition,* (2) *personal agency,* and (3) *pragmatism*.

With these themes an empirically grounded framework was created, which illustrates the dynamic process of how health decision-making is experienced through the ongoing cycle of firm value proposition, customer value expectation, customer value perception and firm value perception. This research found that customers rely heavily on their cognitive abilities to assess risk and relevance, while pragmatism emphasizes the importance of practical decision outcomes. Personal agency in turn prioritizes the ability to make choices aligned with pragmatic needs, empowering them to actively use cognition and participate in their own health decision-making process. When customer expectations align with the firm's value proposition, it enhances customers' perceived value, leading to positive health decision-making experiences and subsequent firm value realization. In order to optimize the omnichannel experience in a pre-service encounter phase, healthcare providers should therefore address customers' cognitive, personal agency and pragmatic needs.

5.1.1 Theoretical contribution

While a growing recognition of service and marketing literature for new customer experience strategies in the healthcare industry had emerged over the past decade (Voorhees et al., 2017; Dahl, D'Alessandro, Peltier, & Swan, 2018; Dahl, Milne & Peltier, 2021; Rahman, Carlson & Chowdhury 2021; Cui et al., 2022), the majority of conceptual articles on marketing and management had provided only marginal contributions to scientific knowledge while neglecting practical relevance. Giving the rapid advancement of marketing practices in recent years, this phenomenon is concerning (Nenonen et., al. 2017). Addressing this concern, our study is bridging the gap between theory and practice by providing a comprehensive understanding of the positive impact of omnichannel marketing practices on customer experiences in the healthcare industry. Despite the challenges of controlling the pre-service encounter phase due to its unique share in information search and buying behavior (Rosenbaum, Otalora, Ramirez, 2017), our research demonstrated the significant benefits of leveraging new communication technologies and omnichannel marketing strategies

in early health decision-making processes. Furthermore, by adopting a holistic perspective and by gaining insights into customer needs in a practical setting, our study was able to contribute to theoretical suggestions to move away from traditional communication models (Dahl, D'Alessandro, Peltier, & Swan, 2018; Swan, Dahl & Peltier, 2019). This type of analyses showed that the removal of physical barriers and the implementation of a customer-centric approach in the firm's value proposition enabled customers to actively participate in their health decision-making process, thereby facilitating access to healthcare services. This omnichannel strategy promotes efficiency, aligning with pragmatic considerations of autonomy and cognition. By streamlining the pre-service encounter journey, time is saved and disruptions into daily routines minimized. This enhanced accessibility to healthcare services ensured ease and convenience. Consequently, customer experience heightened satisfaction throughout the pre-service encounter continuum. Hence, in line with theoretical recommendations, the adoption of an omnichannel approach and departure from traditional communication practices in healthcare have been shown to yield positive outcomes for both the firm and customer. With this conclusion, this paper significantly contributes to existing theory by incorporating practical insights, thereby enhancing academic knowledge in an industry oftentimes overlooked (Ailawadi et al., 2020). The inclusion of perspectives adds rigor to our study, subsequently making it relevant for managerial implications.

5.1.2 Managerial implication

Despite the skepticism and resistance of healthcare providers to integrate digital resources into their customer experience strategies (Ailawadi et al., 2020), this study highlighted the great potential of omnichannel marketing efforts in pre-service encounter phases to reduce wasted resources, increase customer satisfaction and subsequent customer retention. By anchoring individual-level interactions and behavior, we created a deeper understanding in their dynamic capabilities to influence firm-level performance. By understanding the constituent elements of customer experience

constructs, we recognized the collective phenomena of how customer value expectations and value perceived affect firm value realization.

In conclusion, this study showed that the implementation of omnichannel marketing strategies can significantly enhance customer experiences. Subsequently, the establishment of a seamless customer journey in healthcare requires a cohesive alignment of content, messaging and information sharing with the core delivery of care. The adoption of an omnichannel marketing approach can therefore offer valuable managerial implications by creating a consistent online and offline content strategy that aligns with the firm's value proposition, resonates with customer's value expectations, and addresses individual concerns. This will tailor cognitive factors for brand reinforcement and the personalization of experiences while it enables convenient channel navigation with access to information resources and practical care.

Furthermore, in today's digital landscape, customers acknowledge the prioritization of convenience and efficiency, and traditional care delivery is continuously falling short in meeting these expectations. By leveraging omnichannel strategies for care delivery, customer experience managers can emphasize with patient needs and harness the benefits of digital tools to enhance convenience and efficiency. Ultimately, this approach leads to increased customer satisfaction and fosters positive health decision-making processes.

5.1.3 Limitations & future research

The utilization of a case study approach in researching health decision-making experiences in an omnichannel environment has revealed certain limitations, which can we address in the exploration of future research.

A notable limitation of this study is the relatively small sample size of 11 participants. While the case study provides valuable insights into the experiences of these individuals within a private healthcare setting, it might not capture the full spectrum of health decision-making experiences in the broader healthcare industry. Consequently, the findings may fail to represent the diverse perspectives and contexts of broader healthcare settings. In line

with this notion, the exclusive focus on a private healthcare company may lack generalizability in the findings. Private healthcare often operates under different dynamics and constraints compared to conventional healthcare systems. It can significantly differ in terms of access, regulations, and patient demographics. These differences can impact the decision-making process and the experiences of patients in these settings. Hence, the study might be influenced by specific characteristics of the chosen case and may overlook the unique aspects specific to conventional healthcare and might therefore not be representative of the entire healthcare industry.

To address the limitations and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of health decision-making experiences in an omnichannel environment, several avenues for future research can be explored. Firstly, a study can be conducted with a larger sample size that encompasses a diverse range of participants from various healthcare settings. This would increase the generalizability of the findings and improve the robustness of the conclusions. Subsequently, in line with future research avenue's formulated by academic research, applying research on a larger scale of participating health institutions will enable a better sense of the effectiveness of omnichannel strategies in healthcare services. Furthermore, it will facilitate a better understanding of effective strategies that foster the quality of care for patients on a larger scale (Moreire, Hak & Santos, 2023; Bessler et., al. 2023). Secondly, a comparative analysis can be conducted to compare and contrast health decision-making experiences between private and conventional healthcare who operate in an omnichannel setting. This comparative analysis would shed a light on the specific factors that shape decision-making in the omnichannel environment of different healthcare systems.

By addressing these avenues for future research, scholars can expand our understanding of health decision-making experiences in an omnichannel environment, ensure greater generalizability of findings, and provide actional insights that can guide the development of effective strategies to enhance patient experiences in the healthcare industry.

6. Acknowledgements

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