Master Thesis
Customer experience in digitalized touchpoints along the customer journey
of a B2B wholesaler of semi-finished goods

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ABSTRACT

Purpose this research paper aims to investigate how a traditional B2B wholesaler can optimize the customer experience in digitalized touchpoints within the B2B customer journey. It specifically focuses on understanding how customers of a Dutch Wholesale company of semi-finished goods, that operates in a traditional market, experience digitalized touchpoints.

Methodology the study uses a qualitative research approach through a case study design, focusing on a Dutch wholesaler called Coulisse, which operates in the window decoration industry. Data collection is done via semi-structured interviews in collaboration with Altuïtion, a customer experience consultancy agency. Purposive sampling is utilized to select participants, and interviews are transcribed, coded, and analyzed inductively to identify patterns, themes, and categories within the data.

Results the findings suggest that B2B customers are open to the integration of digital touchpoints in their journey, recognizing their advantages. However, several optimization opportunities are identified. First, it is of great importance for wholesalers to be transparent about delivery times and stock levels online in order to meet the customer expectations and reduce communication efforts. Second, the organization and display of product information on the website plays a big role, customers prefer a clean and uncluttered layout. Third, the integration of Application Programming Interface (API) solutions is seen as beneficial for seamless ordering processes. Lastly, marketing content is highly valued, only it should be considered to make this more personalized.

Research implications this paper contributes to the research in online customer experience in B2B context. It shows that B2B customers are expecting a more consumer-like experience and that they are positive with regards to digitalization of touchpoints as long as they are intuitive, seamless, and value adding.

Originality/value this paper investigates the specific case of customer experience in digitalized touchpoints in the context of a B2B wholesaler of semi-finished goods which is labeled as a very traditional market.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Exploring and understanding the business-to-business (B2B) customer journey is identified as a top research priority (Marketing Science Institute, 2020). There is an increased focus on customer experience and the customer journeys are getting more complex day by day (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Customer experience is comprised of value creation elements, cognitive responses, and discrete emotions at touchpoints along the customer journey (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). The customer journey can be defined as "the process the customer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints with an organization, comprising the customer experience." (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Despite its relevance to B2B markets, the majority of customer journey research focuses on the business-to-consumer (B2C) markets. The research into customer journeys in business-to-business (B2B) markets is still limited. This is striking as B2B customer journeys and experiences are far more complex than in B2C contexts (Lundin & Kindström, 2023).

Over the past decade, the role of digital technologies in customer experiences and journeys has increased. The number of touchpoints and different channels are increasing, which creates opportunities but also adds more complexity for organizations (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Sahhar et al., 2021). Although there are still traditional face-to-face touchpoints, digital touchpoints have become indispensable. The digitalization has enabled B2B customers to gain access to more information on potential suppliers worldwide and the experiences of other customers with these suppliers (Steward et al., 2019). . It is important to understand customer experience in digitalized touchpoints, because "widespread digital technology adoption and automation of many commercial interactions has affected the way businesses purchase products and services." (Gandhi et al., 2019, Para 2). It also reported by Salesforce, that 61% of B2B transactions start online. How you come across in that first online touchpoints is of great importance. To be able to manage the customer journey it is vital to understand how customers experience these digitalized touchpoints in B2B environments. However, research into the online customer experience in a B2B context remains relatively unexplored. Ultimately causing a theoretical gap between online customer journeys in B2C contexts compared to B2B contexts.

This paper applies the perspective of a B2B wholesale company by conducting a case study on a Dutch wholesale company of semi-finished goods that sells window decoration components. The window decoration market is a quite traditional one, the companies' customers are mainly assemblers. The reason why this specific case is interesting is because it is interesting and valuable to investigate how B2B customers of wholesalers experience the

digitalized touchpoints, in a largely traditional market in which digitalization is becoming more and more important. Zwijnenburg (2020) states that for wholesalers digitalization is of great importance because it provides more convenience, better service, and less costs. It makes wholesalers less dependent on tradeshows and showrooms. Furthermore, the case company itself is in the process of discovering how best to use digital channels as a means to optimize the customer experience but within what is considered as acceptable in this market dominated by face-to-face interactions between buyers and seller firms.

With this in mind, this thesis aims to explore how a traditional B2B wholesaler can optimize the customer experience in digitalized touchpoints. Hence, the following research question is formulated: "*How do customers experience the digitalized touchpoints in the B2B customer journey of a traditional wholesaler?*". To structurally explore this question, the following sub-questions are formulated and explored in section 2:

To what extent does customer experience vary between different customer segments?

What are the implications of managing a differentiated customer journey with both physical and digital touchpoints?

What is the impact of digitalization on the customer journey?

The study contributes to theory and practice in two ways. Firstly, this paper contributes to the theoretical and practical understanding of the customer experience in digitalized touchpoints in a B2B context, while existing literature mainly focuses on customer experience in B2C contexts (e.g., Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Homburg et al., 2017). Second, the study is based on a case company that is a wholesaler of semi-finished goods in the window decoration industry, which deepens the existing knowledge and understanding of customer experience in digitalized touchpoints within a traditional industry.

The outline of this study consists of five chapters which are the theoretical framework, the methodology, findings, the conclusion, and the discussion. In the theoretical framework relevant literature and theories for this research will be discussed. The methodology section will explain the methods used for this research to collect the data. The findings section will discuss the findings derived from the data analysis. This will be followed by the final section, which will include the implications, limitations, future research areas, and the conclusions.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, the theoretical foundations of the main concepts will be described. In the first subsection we will define customer experience. In the second subsection we will elaborate on the customer journey in general as well as in a B2B context. Then, we will touch up on the differentiation or personalization of a customer journey. Next, is customer experience management and lastly, the role of touchpoints and the impact of digitalization. These concepts will be synchronized into a theoretical framework that summarizes the main elements of this study.

2.1. Customer Experience

In recent years, having a superior customer experience has become a significant challenge for organizations. The first one to define customer experience was Abbott (1955) who believed "what people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences." (p.40). Pine & Gilmore (1998, p.97) were the first to apply this belief to marketing practice and argued that "as goods and services become commoditized the customer experience that companies create will matter most.".

Over time, the concept of customer experience evolved to be a multidimensional and holistic concept (Zolkiewski et al., 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). A widely accepted definition of customer experience adopted by many scholars is that it consists of a customers' cognitive, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a business offering along the entire customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This conceptualization is in line with the view that customer experience is a process rather than an outcome (Grönroos, 1998). Meyer & Schwager (2007) use a similar definition and say customer experience is the internal and subjective response to direct or indirect interaction with a company. They put more emphasis on the fact that experience can vary between individuals as it is based on opinions.

De Keyser et al. (2020), split customer experience into three overarching building blocks (TCQ). First, are touchpoints through which the customer and a company interact with each other. Second, is the context, which relates to "situationally available resources internal and/or external to the customer". The third building block is qualities, which relates to attributes that reflect the nature of customer responses and reactions to interactions with the firm. In this study we are specifically interested in touchpoints, which will be discussed in section 2.4.

Aspects that lead to a positive customer experience in a B2C context do not necessarily lead to a positive customer experience in a B2B context. A positive customer experience in a B2C context is considered to be engaging, robust, compelling, and memorable (Gilmore & Pine, 2002). A positive B2B experience "is not a thrilling one but one that is trouble-free and hence reassuring for those in charge." (Meyer & Schwager, 2007, para. 2). "In terms of defining "excellent customer experience" interpretations may differ among suppliers, partners (if involved), and customers." (Witell et al., 2020, p.12).

2.2. Customer Journey

The customer journey is a tool that has been widely adopted amongst marketing practioners and academics. It can be a valuable tool for improving customer experience (Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010) and is generally referred to as the path or sequence a customer goes through to access or use a business offering (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) defined the customer journey as the process the customer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints with an organization, comprising the customer experience. From a marketing perspective, the identification of the customer journey is vital in contemporary data-driven marketing, as data generation allows companies to advertise to their customers at a personalized level (Micheaux & Bosio, 2019). Lemon & Verhoef (2016) divided the customer journey into three different stages, namely the prepurchase phase, the purchase phase, and the post-purchase phase. Whereas Court et al. (2009) focuses more on the different decision phases in the customer journey, which are awareness, familiarity, consideration, and purchase, and eventually loyalty. Regardless that one has identified three phases and the other five, the journeys are still defined roughly the same. The awareness, familiarity and consideration correspond with and are a subdivision of the prepurchase phase defined by Lemon and Verhoef, the purchase phase they identified both the same, and the loyalty phase corresponds with the post-purchase phase.

B2C customer journeys are mainly product-, brand-, service- or purchase-focused and understood as a linear process with sequential stages and touchpoints (Sahhar et al., 2021). Lee et al. (2018) contradicts this and say that the customer journey should not be seen as a simple linear process, but rather as iterative and dynamic concept. When looking from a customer point of view, a B2C customer considers factors such as perceived quality, price, and attractiveness of a product before purchase (Ghandi et al., 2019).

In B2B customer journeys the focus is much more on relational processes (Witell et al., 2020). The business offerings are often more complex in B2B contexts, which causes an

increase in the number of interactions and the complexity of these interactions between business customers and business suppliers (Holmlund, 2004). Another factor to consider in the B2B customer journey is that the B2B customer usually consists of a buying party that often includes a decision-making-unit (DMU) involving multiple actors with various roles being active during different phases of the customer journey (Mikolon et al., 2015). The business buyer also has more complex requirements and is considering different factors than the B2C buyer, for example payment terms, legal and tax considerations, service levels, and logistical needs (Ghandi et al., 2019).

This study will consider awareness, familiarity, consideration, purchase, and loyalty as the predefined steps of the customer journey of the B2B customer. In this way we can have a more detailed insight in the prepurchase phase as it is subdivided in the three phases defined by Court et al. (2019). In this way we can investigate how B2B customers conduct digitalized touchpoints during each part of the prepurchase phase, instead of looking at the prepurchase phase as one big phase.

2.3. Differentiated/Personalized Customer Experience

There is relatively little literature available on differentiation in customer experience per customer or customer segment. Literature does suggest that purchasing behavior in B2B transactions show greater heterogeneity compared to consumer buying, primarily due to the significant variations in the buying process across firms and situations (Marvasti et al., 2021). Also, the greater complexity discussed in the previous section plays a role in this. From a business customers' perspective, the expectations have changed in the recent years as the need for B2B personalization is growing. According to research done by Accenture, 73% of B2B buyers want a personalized B2C-like experience (Kessinger, 2022). This is called "consumerization of customer experience" (Ghandi et al., 2019, para 2). A concept that is widely studied is the use of buyer personas. A buyer persona is a fictional representation of a customer group/segment and includes finding the trigger events and learning about the route that customers use to find their solutions (Lehnert et al., 2021). When buyer personas are defined an organization can respond to the specific customer needs of the various personas by being present with the needed content and service at the right times.

A differentiated/personalized customer journey can lead to a competitive advantage, but also has its implications. Organizations must heavily rely on analytics as it gathers, enriches,

and synthesizes customer data, reveals patterns, and illuminates sales and service opportunities (Ghandi et al., 2019).

2.4. Managing Customer Experience

Customer experience management (CEM) is an important and complex topic that has been studied widely in marketing literature. Literature suggests that is essential to foster positive and desirable experiences to attain customer satisfaction, customer retention, and trust (lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Homburg et al., 2017). Homburg et al. (2017) have a similar definition of CEM, "the cultural mindsets toward CEs, strategic directions for designing CEs, and firm capabilities for continually renewing CEs, with the goals of achieving and sustaining long-term customer loyalty." (p.384). In literature that focuses on the B2B context, CEM is defined as "a strategic, dynamic, and co-creation-oriented approach for understanding touchpoints value creation, discrete emotions, and cognitive responses" (Zolkiewski et al., 2017; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019; as mentioned in Dreierink, 2021, p4). Schmitt (2003) conceptualized customer experience management as the deliberate and strategic process of effectively overseeing and orchestrating every facet of a customer's interaction and engagement with a particular product or organization throughout the entirety of their journey.

Schmitt created a framework in which customer experience management consists of five steps: (1) analyzing the experiential world of the customers, (2) building the experiential platform, (3) designing the brand experience, (4) structuring the customer experience, and (5) engaging in continuous innovation (Schmitt, 2003; as cited in Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Terho et al., (2022) only identified three main activities for managing CX, which are analyzing, designing, and engaging. The first one is creating intelligence about the customer journey. This entails the formation of buyer persona's, mapping the customer journey, and analyzing the customer engagement. Second, is the need to create a portfolio with valuable content. The content should help their personas frame and solve their problems. And the third and final activity that they identified is to engage customers through content sharing. In other words, to make sure your customers find the right content at the right time. Purchasing decisions have multiple sources and timing of influence (Steward et al., 2019), so being present at the right time with the right content is extremely important. Rusthollkarhu et al. (2022) identifies all these steps as well but adds the step "guiding", which comes after analyzing, designing, and engaging. The goal of the guiding activity is to "to steer the prospect/customer to find the next step in the customer journey." (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022, p. 246). This paper will consider the

steps of Rusthollkarhu et al. (2022) in combination with the definition that CEM is a strategic, dynamic, and co-creation-oriented approach for understanding touchpoints value creation, discrete emotions, and cognitive responses as the first mentioned provides structure and the other tackles the contextual specificity of this study's purpose. The following section will elaborate on touchpoints and digitalization.

2.5. Digitalization of Touchpoints

The identification and prioritization of crucial touchpoints play a vital role in effectively managing customer experiences. Scholars highlight the fact that these interactions points provide opportunities for organizations to evoke desirable customer responses through giving the right set of clues (Lemon & Verhoef; Zolkiewski et al., 2017; Jain et al., 2017). While different conceptualizations exist, touchpoints are generally defined as the interactions between a firm and the customer at various stages of the experience (Homburg et al., 2017; Schmitt, 2003) communicating something positive or negative about the organization (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Others, refer to touchpoints as any interaction or contact between a customer and an organization (Wang et al., 2019). The existing literature presents various classifications of touchpoints. A very common classification is the one from Lemon and Verhoef (2016), they identify four different types of touchpoints: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external/independent (Lundin & Kindström, 2023).

Digitalization plays a major role in businesses all over the world and is affecting the customer journey and their touchpoints. Where before most touchpoints were physical, we now see that more and more touchpoints become digitalized. The number of touchpoints and channels has increased due to digitalization, which offers new opportunities but also more complexity (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Sahhar et al., 2021). "The goal of such digitalization is not necessarily to arrive at a completely digital customer journey but rather to meet the evolving needs of customers by leveraging the benefits of digitalization in different ways and at different levels." (Lundin & Kindström, 2023, p.3). Hofacker et al., (2020) emphasizes that digitalization amongst others impacts B2B branding and relationship dynamics. They state that due to digitalization B2B branding is co-created with business customers. For example, customers can share their positive or negative experience and opinions with your brand/organization online which will affect your brand. "The rise of digital media has made brand building multidirectional" (Hofacker et al., 2020, p.1165). Social media provides a platform for business

customers to share genuine, firsthand narratives, rather than solely serving as a channel for firms to convey marketing messages.

Overall, combinations of existing literature can propose an initial framework on how digital touchpoints can affect the B2B customer experience. However, literature lacks investigation of how a traditional wholesaler of semi-finished goods can utilize the possibilities of digitalized touchpoints. Therefore, this paper will explore how the customer experience of the digitalized touchpoints currently is in this market and how it can be optimized. To clarify this purpose, a visualization of the framework is displayed in figure 1. In this paper, the last stage loyalty often referred to as customer retention, will be excluded.
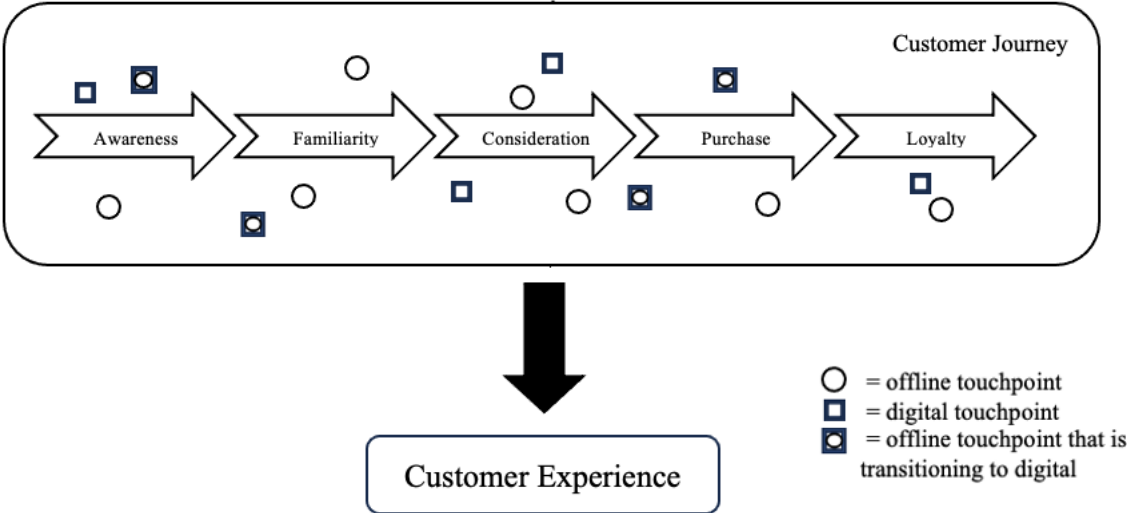

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology section will describe the research method that is used in this study. The following subsections are included, research design, case company, data collection, and data analysis.

3.1. Research Design

This study aims to explore how the customers of B2B wholesalers of semi-finished goods experience digitalized touchpoints across the customer journey, and in turn how this can be

improved. To answer the research question that was mentioned in the introduction section, a qualitative research design is chosen. "Qualitative research aims to address questions with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds." (Fossey et al., 2002, p.1). It has the potential to provide in-depth information on a subject and is known for the abundance of information it can provide (Gioia et al., 2013). The qualitative approach is suitable for this study because it concerns human experiences, which can be hard to put into numbers. To empirically explore the research questions, this study uses a case study. A case study provides an in-depth analysis of complex, real-life phenomena which could result in new insights (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

3.2. Case Company

The case company that is used for gathering the empirical data is a wholesaler of semi-finished goods in the window decoration industry. The company is called Coulisse, and its origin lies in the Netherlands. With offices in Miami and Sydney the company can be considered an international player in the window decoration market. Coulisse is a full-service company delivering a total solution, from system parts and fabrics, marketing services to MotionBlinds smart home technology (*Window Coverings | Coulisse,* n.d.). They have an inhouse R&D department that is responsible for all product development, an in-house design studio, and an in-house marketing department including an E-Business team. Coulisse is in the middle of the transition from a traditional marketing approach to a more digital marketing approach. They offer digital content packages to their customers, and have an online customer portal and a webshop. For example, In the coming years Coulisse wants to completely renew their webshop/portal, getting insights in the experience of their customers and their needs with regards to digital touchpoints is crucial for them.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. External Party

Due to the relevance of this project the case company decided to also include an external party within the project. The external party is Altuïtion, which is a customer & employee experience consultancy agency that is specialized in innovation projects in which the experience of customers, employees, and clients is the focus. It is a Dutch company and is located in s'-Hertogenbosch the Netherlands. Altuïtion makes the distinction between the phases of

becoming a customer in combination with being a customer and the phases of being a customer in combination with staying a customer. For the scope of this project is decided to focus on the first combination mentioned. These are parallel to the awareness, familiarity, consideration, and purchase phases identified by Court et al. (2009). Altuïtion will be responsible for conducting the interviews. Their focus for their own project is on mapping the whole customer journey plus developing buyer persona's according to these interviews. It will be combined with this study that explores the experience in digitalized touchpoints.

3.3.2. Collection Method

To answer the research question, data collection will be done through a qualitative research approach as mentioned in section 3. 1.. The original data will be collected through semi-interviews with customers conducted by the partner Altuïtion. Semi-structured interviews are more suitable for gathering more in-depth information compared to a survey (Wholey et al., 2010). Therefore, the interviews will be aimed at collecting data with regards to the full customer journey for the project of Altuïtion and to discover the customer experience of the digital touchpoints for this study. Another advantage of semi-structured interviews is that the interviewer can ask follow-up questions when useful, which results in more detailed information. The interview protocol is created collaboratively with Altuïtion, the questions regarding the experience in the digital touchpoints are in the probes, so when they have not been addressed while discussing the whole journey the respondent goes through, they will be asked additionally. This study used purposive sampling to select cases. "With purposive sampling you need to use your judgement to select cases that will best enable you to answer your research question(s) and to meet your objectives" (Saunders et al., 2012, p.301). The selection criteria used for this study was only that the customer should not be a customer for longer than five years, because then the orientation phase and the process of becoming a customer of Coulisse is still fresh in the participants' mind. Two needed to be from the AMER region and six needed to be from the EMEA region, because they want a representation of their entire customer base. As the majority of Coulisse's customer base is from the EMEA region, we decided to include more participants from that region compared to the AMER region. However, we were not able to find 8 customers that were a customer for less than five years, therefore we decided to interview three customers who were already customers for an extended period, but who did recently start purchasing a new product group. According to Saunders et al. (2012) the minimum non-probability sample size for semi-structured interviews is between 5 and 25. The sample size for this study is 8.

Table 1. Respondents

Job Title	Customer Region	Years as customer
Sales Director	EMEA	24
General Manager	EMEA	1.5
Import Supervisor	AMER	3
Purchasing Manager	EMEA	1.5
Owner	AMER	2
Sales Director	EMEA	25
Senior Buyer	EMEA	20
Co-Founder	EMEA	6

3.4. Data Analysis

To enable a detailed analysis of the collected data, the interviews are recorded, transcribed, and coded. The audio will be transcribed with Amberscript software and read to ensure that the transcriptions do not contain errors to ensure reliability. An inductive coding approach is applied. "Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis." (Patton, 1980, p306). However, as stated by Miles and Huberman (1994) an initial list of coding categories can be generated before, and you may modify them within the course of analysis as new categories may emerge inductively. The categories we already identified beforehand are the customer portal and webshop, and the digital content. The analysis and interpretation of the raw interview data is done according to two stages of coding. Open coding is the first step of the coding process. In open coding the researcher identifies different concepts and themes that are meant to be categorized (Williams & Moser, 2019). The next step is to see if there are emergent themes amongst the open codes, and further refining, aligning, and categorizing the themes, this step is called axial coding. The final step is selective coding, to create aggregate themes amongst the emergent themes. After the interviews are transcribed and coded it is possible to analyze the findings and draw conclusions.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings collected by qualitative research which consists of 8 semi-structured interviews, conducted with various customers of Coulisse. The qualitative data

collected was first transcribed and understood, then coded in an inductive manner, meaning we identified different concept and themes and categorized these in three aggregated themes that became evident through analyzing the data. We had to extent the beforehand identified categories. The themes after analyzing the data are orientation for new products, customer portal and webshop, and digital content.

4.1. Orientation for new products

Every customer journey starts with a customer having the need for a new product or service. Same goes for the customers of Coulisse. Whenever they have the need to expand their product line or experience some demands from their customer base, they start researching which supplier could fulfill their needs best. However, during this orientation phase they barely conduct digital touchpoints to find potential suppliers. Most first introductions take place at trade shows.

"Online we don't really do that much. Look, we attend a lot of trade shows and really know who is in the market and what they are selling."

The market is quite small, buyers are familiar with most potential suppliers. If they have the need for a new product, it is easy for them to directly contact the supplier and go directly to the company website. They do not really perform many cold searches.

"We know now who most suppliers are, we have seen them at trade shows, so now when we need something we would directly go to their websites and go from there as opposed to just Googling suppliers or fabrics."

The trade shows are also a means for a buyer to discover new innovations and keep track of the latest developments in the market. If they do see something new with great potential, then often that is the moment they go online and gather more information about the products they are interested in. The respondents indicated that the corporate website of Coulisse is quite impressive and overwhelming. It is hard to find the information they need at this point in the journey. Instances in which respondents turn to a search engine, is when they are looking to expand their product offering rigorously, and source a product outside their standard product groups. They are not yet familiar with the potential suppliers and therefore conduct e.g., Google.

4.2. Customer Portal and Webshop

The ordering process at Coulisse has mostly been digitalized. Once you become a customer, an account is created for you to access their customer portal, which also includes an online shop. This portal is a massive touchpoint for Coulisse, as many customers use it. Coulisse would like their customers to order through their webshop instead of through a sales representative. Most of the respondents indicated that they find it a great and intuitive development.

"I think their portal is very intuitive, it's not difficult to use and it's very close to online shopping."

By using the webshop they reduce the chances of errors during the ordering process, such as typos and entry mistakes. Now, the customer can add all the items they need to their shopping cart and order them directly, the order will come through at the customer service. Besides this, they also like that they can see an image of the products they are ordering.

"A big advantage of online is that it is even more difficult to make mistakes when you place an order online."

After the order is placed the customers receive a confirmation via email from their assigned customer service employee of Coulisse, if they are any special requests or needs this person will help them with that. Customer do really value this personal touch and find it important that it is maintained, in today's digitalizing world.

"I order through the online shop but get my confirmation from my contact person at the customer service. It gives that personal touch to it; it creates some sort of connection opposed to just completely automated."

Two respondents stated that they order via email. One of them placed their orders online until the 5% discount on online orders ended. And the other respondent stopped ordering online, because not all products are available through the online shop.

"I was told to order the new motors online, but they were not available for buying. If I am instructed to order something online, it should be available."

Customers are pro digitalization of touchpoints if they are intuitive and seamless, it has to add value for them. Despite most customers have positive experiences with the customer portal and webshop, there are also some things they perceive as less positive. First, customers experience the webshop also as cluttered due to the large number of items that are sold. So, when they are orienting for a new product, they are looking for a short and brief introduction of the product and it's USPs.

"If you look for specific information about a product, you would like to see a short introduction with some USPs, general information, overview of the product and a short video."

Second, the respondents indicated that stock is very important to a buyer, without stock they can't sell. Within the webshop there is no clear indication of the stock levels of Coulisse. When the customer's order more than that there is left in stock, they can still place the order. The customer service will notify them after placing the order that the stock levels are not sufficient to fulfill the order. This is frustrating for them, because when they cannot order then they also cannot provide their customers with products either. Third, customers would find it very helpful to see an indication of the shipment time, as this is sometimes unclear. For example, when a product is out of stock they can't see on the website when it will be in stock again. Fourth, customers would like to have other product suggestions when they have added a product to their shopping cart that go together with that product. Finally, the majority of respondents voiced the wish for an integration that ensures that when the customers stock level system detects that they are running out of stock and need to reorder, an order can be automatically placed with Coulisse. So, their systems are connected.

4.3. Digital Content

Providing digital content has been experienced as very valuable amongst the respondents. The respondents emphasized the added value of digital content. Coulisse offers a broad spectrum of marketing services which include amongst others collection books, e-manuals, introduction

videos, and photography. Especially video content is extremely helpful for the customer, the respondents indicated that text about products is easily interpreted differently amongst colleagues, a video makes the product clearer. Videos are not only used for their own understanding, the respondents also shared that they are also a great tool for communicating the product towards their own customers.

"Videos are a great tool for us as customers to communicate a product towards our own customer."

Respondents classify the marketing service as top notch and very much value adding even though they do not use it to the full extent. Coulisse has a content center through which they offer the customer a broad spectrum of content, which they can use for their social media channels and website.

"Their marketing team is very big and offer a lot of support and digital content, however we have a competitor here in Brazil who also uses their content. So that is not what we are looking for we want to be unique."

Customers want to be unique and different from their competitors, however some competitors are also customer at Coulisse, and there is a chance when using the content provided by Coulisse, they would look the same. That was a big reason why not all the respondents utilize this service.

"It is a great offering for smaller companies who do not have really have a big marketing team."

Respondents of the bigger companies indicated that they need more personalized content. It would enable them to still be unique and authentic, and differentiate from competitors, and at the same time save them time, energy, and money as they otherwise have to create it themselves.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Conclusion

The findings of this study touch upon the evolving landscape of B2B customer experience within digitalized touchpoints of a traditional wholesaler like Coulisse. The aim of this study was to answer the research question: *"How do customers experience the digitalized touchpoints in the B2B customer journey of a traditional wholesaler?"*. It is evident that B2B customers are open to the integration of digital touchpoints within their customer journey, recognizing the advantage they offer. However, there are also multiple optimalization points to enhance the B2B customer experience in the digitalized touchpoints. First, clarity about delivery times and stock levels is desirable because of the great importance of timely deliveries and transparent information regarding delivery schedules and stock levels for B2B customers. This way the customer can take this information into account while ordering, and it will prevent disappoint and frustration afterwards, because they know upfront whether it is in stock and on time or not. It also minimizes the emailing back and forth concerning the order. Second, due to the high number of product wholesaler usually sell, it is important that they find a way to have their website clean and uncluttered, so that customers can easily find what they need. There should be short introductions available with the USP's, a product overview and a video to easily understand the product. Third, the integration of Application Programming Interface (API) solutions has the ability to enhance the experience. Customers would find it ideal to not manually have to order their products through the webshop. Instead, there will be an integration between the customers stock monitoring system and the order system of the supplier. So, when the customer's stock level is low an order will automatically be submitted to the supplier. Fourth and final, providing content that the customer can use for their own channels through marketing services is highly valued by customers. However, most of them do not yet use this service because other customers of the wholesaler sometimes use this content as well. Therefore, it is important for the wholesaler to look at how it can offer more personalized content.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1. Discussion and Contributions

Over the last decade, digitalization has caused changes in the customer journey. The number of touchpoints and channels has increased due to digitalization, which offers new opportunities but also more complexity (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Sahhar et al., 2021). Where marketing literature widely discusses the online customer journey and its management in B2C context, literature on the online customer journey in B2B context is still scarce. This is striking as literature suggest that B2B customer journeys and experiences are far more complex than in

B2C contexts (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). This study explored the gap of the customer experience in digitalized touchpoints in the B2B customer journey, specifically in a traditional market. The results show that customers are positive about the development of digital touchpoints, and like the fact it more and more becomes an online shopping experience. This is in line with the research by Accenture, which stated that the majority of B2B buyers want a personalized B2C-like experience (Kessinger, 2022). People are so used to the online shopping experiences; they start looking for the same experiences in their buying journey at work. This offers B2B companies new challenges but also opportunities. Unless the fact that B2B customers are positive about digitalization, most of their journeys in this specific sector start at the physical tradeshows, and only then do they consult the internet to watch content and find information. It is extremely important for the company to than be present with the right content as Steward et al. (2019) stated, to convince them even more about your product and influence decision. In this sector it has become apparent that it is a combination of being present online and offline at the right times to influence the final decision of the potential customer.

These results contribute to the existing literature in several ways. First, this study contributes by reducing the existing literature gap between B2B and B2C literature. Even though B2B contexts are far more complicated (Lundin & Kindström, 2023; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) a lot more research has been done into the B2C context. This study contributes to narrowing this gap by diving into the online B2B customer journey and how this is experienced by business customers. This study shows that B2B customers of a traditional wholesaler are open to the digitalization of touchpoints, as long as they add value for them, for example if it makes the ordering process more smoothly or easy.

Second, this study contributes to the existing literature by focusing specifically on digital touchpoints along the B2B customer journey. Which is highly relevant in today's world as the number of touchpoints and channels has increased due to digitalization, which offers new opportunities but also more complexity (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Sahhar et al., 2021). The study gives an idea of what kind of digital touchpoints a wholesaler can incorporate and what the needs of the wholesale customer are. This is important because by leveraging the benefits of digitalization companies can keep trying to meet the evolving needs of their customer (Lundin & Kindström). E.g., it became evident that B2B customers desire API solutions to smoothen the ordering process, they want to be able to find information on stock levels online and prefer an uncluttered website. However, it is important that when a wholesaler decides to

digitalize a certain touchpoint it needs to be intuitive and seamless, otherwise the customers doesn't see the added value.

Finally, this study contributes to exiting literature because it deepens the existing knowledge and understanding of customer experience in digitalized touchpoints specifically in the context of the customer journey at B2B wholesaler of semi-finished goods.

6.2. Managerial implications

There are also some managerial implications for Coulisse that arise from this study. We have divided them into to subsection, managerial implications for the portal/webshop and managerial implications for the digital content.

6.2.1. Portal/Webshop

Coulisse is at the beginning of the project 'platform 2.0' which entails the development of a new shop and portal. This study provides valuable implications that Coulisse should take into account during the creation of this new platform. First of all, they should aim to create a clear and uncluttered website, where it easy for customers to find what they need. It should provide clear information about the different concepts. The customer desires a short introduction with the USP's containing general information, an overview of the product plus a short introduction video when they are looking for specific information about a concept, instead pages with long texts about a concept. Second, Coulisse is advised to better show the available stock in square meters instead of through the colors green, orange, and red on the product page. For customers the availability of stock is one of the determining factors for the relationship with their suppliers. Because when their supplier is unable to deliver, they cannot sell to their own customers. And in cases of low stock availability or products that are out of stock they want to be given an indication of whether the product will be in stock again. Fourth, it is recommended for the new platform to investigate the possibility of providing product recommendations based on what is already in the shopping cart of the customer. This could possibly lower the search efforts of the customers within the shop, as the additional product(s) he/she might need are already suggested. A fifth and final recommendation for the 'platform 2.0' is to research the possibility of adding an API solution. When integrating API they should think about whether they want to offer this to all customers or maybe only to a specific customer segment. API requires a lot maintenance and working hours and is a big investment, further research should be carried out to see whether the pros weigh out the costs.

6.2.2. Digital Content

Overall, the customers were very positive about the digital content that Coulisse offers. They should keep creating the high-end brochures, manuals, and videos about their products. However, one improvement they can make is to make the content that they provide customers with to use for their own channels more personalized. This will enable the customers of Coulisse who are competing with each other to still be able to utilize this service without putting out the same content as their competitor. To offer personalized content to every customers might not be feasible due to the costs involved. Coulisse should investigate for which customer groups this is feasible and adds value.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study attempts to explore the customer experience in the digitalized touchpoints of the B2B customer journey with a traditional wholesaler. While our research design aims to provide profound insights into this subject, it is important to acknowledge the limitations that might affect the results of this study.

First, this study has focused on Coulisse, a traditional wholesaler in the window decoration market. Due to the specific nature of the chosen case company our findings can be generalized to other industries or markets only to a limited extent.

Second, is the limited data from the field research. Due to the significance of the overall project, Coulisse decided to involve an external party, Altuïtion. Unless the interview protocol was set up collaboratively, there was not enough emphasis put on the questions concerning the online experience and digital touchpoints during the interviews. Further research is needed to explore the online B2B customer journey more thoroughly.

Third, is the limited scope regarding the touchpoints within this study. The primary focus has been on the brand-owned digital touchpoints along the customer journey, which allows for a deep exploration of these specific touchpoints. However, it leaves out the partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external/independent touchpoints. Future research should consider one of these or a broader spectrum of touchpoints for a more comprehensive understanding.

Finally, due to the scope of the project in this study the loyalty phase, also referred to as customer retention, is not included. Because this study focuses on the earlier stages of the journey, it leaves unanswered questions about the experience and the need of digitalized

touchpoints and how these could contribute to customer loyalty and retention. We therefore encourage other scholars to further investigate this.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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