



MANAGING OMNICHANNEL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE THROUGH CUSTOMER JOURNEYS IN THE AUTOMOTIVE INDUSTRY

Lappeenranta–Lahti University of Technology LUT

Master's thesis

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Emma Hietanen

Examiners: Associate Professor Anssi Tarkiainen

Professor Olli Kuivalainen

ABSTRACT

Lappeenranta–Lahti University of Technology LUT

LUT School of Business and Management

Business Administration

Emma Hietanen

Managing omnichannel customer experience through customer journeys in the automotive industry

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Due to digitalization, customers use various online and offline channels to interact with firms. It is increasingly challenging for firms to create a seamless, consistent, and personalized omnichannel customer experience. Omnichannel customer experience has been studied in the context of managing and designing touchpoints and integrating channels. Less research is done about holistically managing it through the customer journeys. The purpose of this thesis is to increase the knowledge on how to manage omnichannel customer experience through customer journeys in the automotive industry.

This thesis is done as a qualitative single case study focusing on a Finnish car importer and retailer. Five managers from the case company were interviewed through semi-structured interviews. The empirical data was analyzed using the content analysis method and an abductive approach was utilized to draw conclusions. The findings indicated that in the automotive industry, the omnichannel customer experience includes functional, emotional, and symbolic value that is delivered through digital and physical channels and through the brand. Omnichannel customer experience should be managed through customer journeys to get a holistic understanding of the customers. The actions should be conducted at three levels: customer experience, customer journey, and touchpoint levels. The customer experience level includes strategic actions, such as building a customer-centric organizational culture. The customer journey level includes managing the entire customer journey and integrating channels. The touchpoint level includes improving touchpoints based on customer data. A holistic understanding of the customer and its needs is required to offer a seamless and personalized customer experience. Customer data is essential as that contributes to offering personalized informational and transactional content through a variety of touchpoints.

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Digitalisaation myötä kuluttajat käyttävät useita online- ja offline-kanavia ollakseen vuorovaikutuksessa yritysten kanssa. Saumattoman, yhtenäisen ja personoidun omnichannel-asiakaskokemuksen luominen on yhä haastavampaa yrityksille. Omnichannel-asiakaskokemusta on tutkittu kontaktipisteiden johtamisen ja suunnittelun, sekä kanavien yhtenäistämisen kontekstissa. Kokonaisvaltaisen omnichannel-asiakaskokemuksen johtamista asiakaspolkujen kautta ei ole tutkittu niin paljoa. Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus on kasvattaa tietoa kuinka omnichannel-asiakaskokemusta voidaan johtaa asiakaspolkujen kautta autotoimialalla.

Tämä tutkielma on tehty kvalitatiivisena tapaustutkimuksena, jossa keskitytään suomalaiseen automaahantuojaan ja -jälleenmyyjään. Viittä yrityksen johtajaa ja päällikköä haasteltiin puolistrukturoidun haastattelun keinoin. Empiiriset tulokset analysoitiin sisällönanalyysimenetelmällä ja abduktiivista lähestymistapaa hyödynnettiin johtopäätösten luomisessa. Johtopäätökset osoittavat, että autoalalla omnichannel-asiakaskokemus sisältää funktionaalisia, emotionaalisia ja symbolisia arvoja, jotka tarjoillaan asiakkaille digitaalisten ja fyysisten kanavien, sekä brändin kautta. Omnichannel-asiakaskokemusta tulisi johtaa asiakaspolkujen kautta saadakseen kokonaisvaltaisen kuvan asiakkaista. Toimenpiteet tulisi suorittaa kolmella tasolla: asiakaskokemus-, asiakaspolku- ja kontaktipistetasolla. Asiakaskokemustaso sisältää strategisia toimenpiteitä, kuten asiakaskeskeisen organisaatiokulttuurin johtamisen. Asiakaspolkutaso sisältää asiakaspolkujen johtamista ja kanavien yhtenäistämistä. Kontaktipistetaso sisältää kontaktipisteiden kehittämisen, jonka tulisi perustua asiakasdataan. Kokonaisvaltainen ymmärrys asiakkaasta ja hänen tarpeistaan on välttämätöntä, jotta voidaan luoda saumaton ja personoitu asiakaskokemus. Asiakasdatan hyödyntäminen on erittäin tärkeää, sillä sen avulla voidaan luoda personoitua informatiivista ja kaupallista sisältöä useiden eri kontaktipisteiden kautta.

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In Helsinki, March 31st 2022

Emma Hietanen

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1 Introduction

The first chapter introduces the topic of the thesis - managing omnichannel customer experience in the automotive industry - and why studying it is important. First, the background and preliminary literature review of the topic are presented. Research gaps in the literature are identified which creates the foundations for the thesis and for the research questions. The theoretical framework and key concepts are defined, and the research methodology is briefly presented. Finally, the structure of the thesis is described to help the reader to follow the study.

1.1 Background of the study

The megatrend of digitalization and the growing usage of the internet, flat devices, and social media have been some of the main technological advancements that have changed the way retailers interact with customers and prospects (Shi, Wang, Chen, Zhang 2020). As customers can reach out to firms through multiple different online and offline channels, many companies have prioritized the creation of superior customer experience as one of their main management objectives (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Customer value is no longer created through differentiated products and services but through seamless and personalized customer experiences and therefore companies are investing in capabilities enhancing the creation and management of customer experiences (Jain, Aagja & Badgare 2017). Customers demand seamless experiences and purchase journeys regardless of the channel they decide to use based on their individual preferences and needs (Peltola, Vainio & Nieminen 2015). Consequently, the retailing landscape has moved from managing channels separately towards integrating multiple online and offline channels to enable seamless customer experience and to avoid inconsistency between the channels. This type of retailing is called omnichannel retailing. (Verhoef, Kannan & Inman 2015; Shi et al. 2020)

Customer experiences are created during customer journeys in which customers interact with the firm through different contact points that are called touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). In an omnichannel environment, these touchpoints can be physical or digital. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that despite its difficulty, it is worthwhile for managers to identify

the key touchpoints during customers' journeys in order to see which have the most influence on creating a positive customer experience. From a management perspective, a strategic tool for identifying touchpoints and possible pain points is called a customer journey map, which visualizes the journeys customers go through (Rosenbaum, Otolara & Ramírez 2017). Identification of crucial touchpoints can work as an efficient tool for managers to optimize touchpoints and to design customer journeys. Especially in the omnichannel context, the ability to integrate touchpoints in a logical way can enhance the delivery and management of a seamless customer experience. (Peltola et al. 2015; Homburg, Jozic & Kuehnl 2017)

Despite the growing academic and industrial interest in omnichannel retailing and management, omnichannel research is still in the early phases (Shen, Li, Sun & Wang 2018). On the contrary, a lot of research on customer experience has been conducted but it remains fragmented in the context of omnichannel retailing, and scholars have acknowledged the need to further investigate omnichannel customer experience to help practitioners in the implementation of it (Gerea, Gonzalez-Lopez & Herskovic 2021; Shi et al. 2020). It can be concluded that even though retailers understand the opportunities in omnichannel retailing, they have difficulties in practical implementation (Shi et al. 2020). In fact, the article of Forbes stated that 80 % of firms believe they are offering superior customer experiences but only 8 % of customers agree on that (Hyken 2018).

The lack of coherent conceptualization and the so far scarce academic research of omnichannel customer experience and its management leave a knowledge gap on the topic. The studies about omnichannel customer experience have mainly concentrated on the pre-purchase and purchase phase and so more knowledge on the topic during the entire customer journey is needed. (Gerea et al. 2021) Ostrom, Parasuraman Bowen, Patrício, and Voss (2015) highlight that it is essential to study more customer experience management through complex journeys that are built on several channels and touchpoints. Additionally, the current research has not taken into consideration the variety of touchpoints. For example, knowledge on how in-store communication, advertising, social media, and emails influence customer experience, and how those can be enhanced for an optimal journey in an omnichannel environment, is still absent. (Gerea et al. 2021; Li et al. 2018) Hence this thesis aims to create more knowledge on omnichannel customer experience and its management

through customer journeys. Thus, the theoretical contribution of this thesis is to contribute to the narrow research of omnichannel customer experience and its management.

This thesis is done in cooperation with a Finnish car importer and retailer working with a premium car brand. Studying customer experience in the automotive industry is necessary as the industry is changing drastically due to digitalization. The role of physical stores as the information source has decreased and nowadays customers might only visit the store once before the purchase. Internet and other digital touchpoints are now the main places where customers find and compare information about passenger cars. However, physical stores are still crucial as customers do want to see the car beforehand and test drive it. (Scherpen, Draghici & Niemann 2018) According to McKinsey's article, it is vital for automotive retailers to offer a seamless customer experience through customer journeys due to more demanding customers (Harald, Matthey, Praychs & Stöber 2019). Thus, the managerial contribution of this thesis is to study how a car importer and retailer can manage the omnichannel customer experience across the customer journeys and ensure the delivery of a seamless and superior customer experience in a changing industry.

1.2 Preliminary literature review

This chapter is divided into five sub-themes. They present what is known about customer journeys and their usage as a strategic management tool. Literature on customer experience, and its management, omnichannel retailing, and omnichannel customer experience is also presented. In addition, research gaps in omnichannel customer experience literature are discussed as they work as the foundation of this thesis and its topic.

Customer journeys

It is necessary to understand customer journeys when examining customer experiences since it has been recognized that they work as a tool to enhance and manage customer experiences from the customers' perspective. Furthermore, the customer journey is seen as the process where customer experiences are created. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) Consequently, literature on customer journeys has grown at a rapid rate during the past few years (Tueanrat, Papagiannidis & Alamanos 2021). Customer journeys can be defined as a customer's interactions

with a firm to achieve a goal, or as a series of touchpoints, a customer goes through during a service delivery or a purchase process. Touchpoints can be one-way or two-way interactions between a firm and a customer, and usually during the interactions, customer gains either knowledge about the firm or they do the purchase. (Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich & Rudolph 2019). Nowadays, journeys are complex as they include multiple direct and indirect touchpoints and channels, including digital and physical channels. Subsequently, the current customer journeys are not linear compared to the traditional decision-making models. (Norton & Pine 2013; Halvorsrud, Kvale & Følstad 2016; Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014)

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and Tueanrat et al. (2021) argue that the previous tools used to study customer journeys, for example, service blueprinting, focus on companies' perspectives and lack customer perspective. Therefore, customer journeys analysis as a tool is customer-centric as it should be done from the customer's point of view. That gives insight into customers' experiences during the journey by highlighting the critical touchpoints that have the most crucial results in customer outcomes (Canfield & Basso 2017; Følstad & Kvale 2018; Tueanrat et al. 2021; Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Moreover, the current literature has focused on the holistic customer journey, which includes not only the purchase stage but also the prepurchase and postpurchase stages (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). According to Voorhees, Fombelle, Gregoire, Bone, Gustafsson, Sousa, and Walkowiak (2017), it creates a competitive advantage for a firm that can focus on every stage in the journey compared to its competitors that invest only in the core purchase phase.

Usually, customer journeys are displayed in the form of customer journey maps, which are visual representations of the sequence of touchpoints the customer goes through in its journey (Halvorsrud et al. 2016). Customer journey mapping is used as a management tool because it helps firms to identify the opportunities and pain points at the touchpoints. In addition, the maps offer a way to optimize the service delivery process from the customer's point of view and consequently enhance the customer experience at each touchpoint. Thus, customer journey maps are not only a tool for visualizing customer journeys but also a way to design them according to customer needs. (Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Tueanrat et al. 2021) It is important for firms to map external influences as well since not all touchpoints are firm initiated and they can happen in offline and online environments (Lemon & Verhoef 2016;

Becker & Jaakkola 2020). Tueanrat et al. (2021) emphasize that owing to fragmented knowledge of customer journey mapping, a need to further investigate the topic exists.

Customer experience

The number of contact points between a company and its customers has increased due to digitalization and technological advancements leading to a growing focus on customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Gentile, Spiller & Noci 2007). Creating superior and memorable customer experiences has become a key objective for retailers and managers (Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, Schlesinger 2009) as the concept is recognized to be pivotal in creating loyal customer relationships, positive Word-Of-Mouth (WOM), and competitive advantage in the long-term in a highly competitive market environment. Among marketers, customer experience is a buzzword, and the literature about the topic has grown fast. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Gentile et al. 2007; McColl-Kennedy, Gustafsson, Jaakkola, Klaus, Radnor, Perks & Friman 2015).

Academic contribution to customer experience started already in the 1960s (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) but Schmitt (1999) has been one of the early scholars to emphasize the needed shift from traditional marketing to experiential marketing. Although there are multiple different conceptualizations of customer experience, some commonly accepted definitions exist. Customer experience is defined to be a multidimensional concept that according to Schmitt (1999), provides sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relation values for a customer. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) define the multidimensionality from customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to firms offering during the entire purchase journey. Customer experience is subjective (Gentile et al. 2007). Meyer and Schwager (2007) also conceptualize customer experience as customers' subjective and internal responses they have either on direct (i.e., during the purchase or usage) or indirect (i.e., advertising or WOM) contact with a company and its offering. Verhoef et al. (2009) add that firms can control some of the contact points but not all, for example, the influence of other people. These various touchpoints thus form the customer experience that comprises the total customer experience including prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages (Verhoef et al. 2009; Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

Customer experience management

Customer experience management is considered as one of the most critical marketing and management approaches responding to the rapidly changing consumer needs (Homburg et al. 2017). It covers the management and integration of everything that is related to the customer's experience, including the products or services, marketing, sales, and distribution (Stone & Liyanearachchi 2007). The main objectives of customer experience management are to improve customer relationships (Frow & Payne 2007) and to create and ensure long-term customer loyalty (Homburg et al. 2017). From a management perspective, the concept contains the company's cultural mindset emphasizing customer experiences, the ability to strategically design customer experiences, and having firm capabilities to enhance experiences. The last two, the ability to design customer experiences and firm capabilities are related to managing touchpoints in order to create valuable customer journeys and experiences. (Homburg et al. 2017) In addition, Verhoef et al. (2009) conceptualize customer experience management from the value-creation point of view; they argue that it is the strategy of retailers to design the experience so that it offers value not only to the customer but also for the retailer.

Some companies consider customer experience management as a part of customer relationship management (CRM) but scholars have emphasized the differences between the concepts (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). The main difference is that customer experience management examines particularly the experience and feelings a customer has about the company at different touchpoints whereas CRM concentrates on the already gathered knowledge and data about the customer. (Meyer & Schwager 2007; Verhoef et al. 2009) Designing customer journeys and touchpoints has also become a central dimension of customer experience management. It can be concluded that one of the aims of customer experience management is to design the journeys and touchpoints in a way that customers can have optimized and seamless experiences throughout the journey and across physical and digital channels. (Homburg et al. 2017) Necessary capabilities at the firm level to efficiently manage customer experiences include analytical skills and the ability to co-operate between cross-functional teams. One of the main underlining perspectives in customer experience management is customer-centricity as that contributes to improved customer experience. It has been noted that having

such capabilities and being customer-centric determine successful management of customer experience. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

Omnichannel retailing and management

The nature of customer experiences and journeys has changed in the retailing context due to the increased number of digital technologies and channels. Nowadays, most retailers do business in many different offline and online channels which were previously managed individually. However, retailers have shifted from multi-channel retailing towards integrating the growing number of channels. The new perspective is called omnichannel management or omnichannel retailing, where the focus is on managing and integrating all the channels and touchpoints in a way that enables a seamless overall customer experience across channels. (Verhoef et al. 2015). Customers can interact with firms through, for example, physical stores, websites, mobiles, tablets, and social media (Shen et al. 2018). Customers demand seamless experiences through different channels, as individual customers can start their journey from completely different channels (Tueanrat et al. 2021). Besides creating a seamless customer experience, omnichannel firms aim to integrate channels to increase the number of touchpoints. A greater number of touchpoints together with a seamless customer experience leads to more satisfied customers. (Chen et al. 2018)

Chen et al. (2018) divided the previous research on omnichannel business into four streams, which included their perspective and research orientation. Regarding perspective, they found that previous studies were done either from the retailer's perspective or consumer's perspective. Future research should study, for example, how all the multiple touchpoints could be combined in a way that enables delivering of seamless customer experience. (Chen et al. 2018) Peltola et al. (2015) also highlighted in their study the importance of integrating the touchpoints in a way that firms do not lose customers during their journey and, according to them, that makes the customer experience seamless. A seamless experience creates a better experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). In addition, personalization and personalized customer experiences are seen as a key issue in omnichannel retailing (Melero et al. 2016) and by engaging customers to co-create their journeys, firms can deliver more personalized customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Tueanrat et al. 2021). Despite the growth of omnichannel literature, Shen et al. (2018) argue that omnichannel research is relatively

scarce. Moreover, they state that the outcomes of executing an omnichannel strategy is largely depending on the customers and their behavior in the omnichannel environment.

Omnichannel customer experience

Even though omnichannel management is described to be the integrated management of the multiple channels to ensure a seamless customer experience through channels (Verhoef et al. 2015), omnichannel customer experience is a separate concept and it represents a major feature in omnichannel management (Gerea et al. 2021). Retailers have acknowledged the significance of omnichannel management, but executing an omnichannel strategy is difficult, and different channels are still managed separately. Moreover, the studies made of omnichannel customer experience do not offer a coherent conceptualization of omnichannel customer experience since the concept is new it needs further development. More academic knowledge is needed to assist retailers in managing the omnichannel customer experience. (Shi et al. 2020; Gerea et al. 2021)

Despite the lack of coherent conceptualization of omnichannel customer experience, different researchers have suggested definitions of the concept, and some of those share similar characteristics (Quach, Barari, Moudry & Quach 2020). Omnichannel customer experience is based on, according to Frazer and Stiehler (2014), the integration of channels where customers can move freely. Peltola et al. (2015) add that omnichannel customer experience means understanding customers' needs and preferences at different touchpoints and then integrating them based on the needs. Komulainen and Makkonen (2018) highlighted that in the previous literature, consistency, optimization, and easiness to use the service have been seen to create a positive omnichannel customer experience. One of the comprehensive definitions of omnichannel customer experience is made by Shi et al. (2020) who proposed five dimensions of omnichannel customer experience based on their literature review and quantitative analysis. The dimensions they defined are connectivity, integration, consistency, flexibility, and personalization. Quach et al.'s (2020) research findings indicated as well that service integration, including service consistency and transparency, has a significant effect on customer experience in the omnichannel environment. It was noticed that service integration enables customers to experience a seamless flow during their purchase journey and that leads to better omnichannel customer experience and customer loyalty. (Quach et al. 2020)

Omnichannel customer experience should be created and managed from the customer-centric approach as the basic element is to offer a seamless experience where customers can move across channels according to their preferences and get consistent information and value in every touchpoint. In addition, offering personalized content is characteristic of the omnichannel customer experience. (Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa 2017)

Customer experience has been studied by scholars and practitioners for a long time but most of the studies have not paid attention to omnichannel customer experience (Shi et al. 2020) and the conceptualization is fragmented (Gerea et al. 2021). Some of the digital touchpoints, including social media and emails, have been studied only in a few articles (Gerea et al. 2021). Social media is an important touchpoint in the omnichannel context because customers' interaction with other customers is central in omnichannel customer experience creation (Hilken, Chylinski, Keeling, Mahr, Ruyter 2018). Moreover, the knowledge about the role of brand advertisement and in-store communication as touchpoints in an omnichannel environment is scarce and more research is needed (Li, Liu, Lim, Goh, Yang & Lee 2018). The physical store, website, and mobile applications are mainly studied in the omnichannel customer experience context leaving a knowledge gap regarding other important touchpoints. Therefore, a more detailed analysis of all the touchpoints in the omnichannel journey is needed (Chen et al. 2018). Furthermore, omnichannel customer experience studies predominantly focus on the purchase intention and purchase journey, and hence a study that covers the holistic customer journey, including pre-, purchase, and postpurchase stages, should be conducted. (Gerea et al. 2021)

This study aims to answer the previously identified research gaps by deepening the understanding of omnichannel customer experience across the entire customer journey and including how to manage, for example, advertisement, social media, and emails as touchpoints to enhance omnichannel customer experience. The study is conducted from a customer experience management perspective and how a company can manage the critical identified online and offline touchpoints during customer journey in a way that enables a seamless, personalized, and consistent omnichannel customer experience in the automotive industry.

1.3 Research Questions

This study aims to increase the knowledge of omnichannel customer experience and its management through customer journeys. The number of channels companies are advertising and serving customers has increased rapidly due to technological advancements, and therefore customer experience has emerged as an important concept, especially in the automotive industry. Retailers and managers have acknowledged the significance of offering a seamless experience through all the physical and digital channels. However, academic research lacks a coherent conceptualization of omnichannel customer experience and managers have difficulties in creating and managing it. (Shi et al. 2020; Gereá et al. 2021) Moreover, there is a research gap in examining omnichannel customer experience during all of the critical touchpoints across the whole customer journey, including prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages (Gerea et al. 2021). To fill the knowledge gap, this thesis aims to contribute both theoretically and managerially to omnichannel customer experience management by studying how a Finnish car importer and retailer could manage omnichannel customer experience throughout the entire customer journey. Based on the aim of this thesis, the research question of the study is the following:

RQ: How to manage omnichannel customer experience through customer journeys in the automotive industry?

Three sub-research questions were formed to help answer the main research question. The first sub-research question is related to customer journey management since customer experience is conceptualized as customer's responses to touchpoints throughout the journey (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Meyer & Schwager 2007). The second sub-research question seeks to deepen knowledge on the concept and elements of omnichannel customer experience, and how it is currently managed in the case company. The last sub-research question concerns how to develop the management of omnichannel customer experience. Sub-research questions contribute to the main research question by combining gathered knowledge on them. The sub-research questions of the thesis are:

Sub RQ1: How are customer journeys managed in the case company?

Sub RQ2: How is omnichannel customer experience perceived and managed in the case company?

Sub RQ3: How to develop omnichannel customer experience management in the case company?

1.4 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is presented in figure 1. It presents the theoretical perspectives and concepts and their connections to one another. Customer experience is presented as Lemon and Verhoef (2016) conceptualize it in their study: customer's journey with a firm, including prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages. In this framework, customer experience management is the design and management of customer journeys in a way that the touchpoints are seamlessly integrated across offline and online channels, as Homburg et al. (2017) defined it. Integrating and managing both online and offline channels seamlessly reflects the omnichannel context. In the framework, this is presented as the line that integrates the numerous touchpoints. Additionally, the integrated line represents, that the content, information, or value offered in each touchpoint should be consistent and connected. (Verhoef et al. 2015; Shi et al. 2020) All these previously mentioned concepts contribute to the successful implementation and management of omnichannel customer experience (Melero et al. 2016). Utilizing the theoretical framework, it is easier to answer the research question about how to manage omnichannel customer experience through customer journeys.

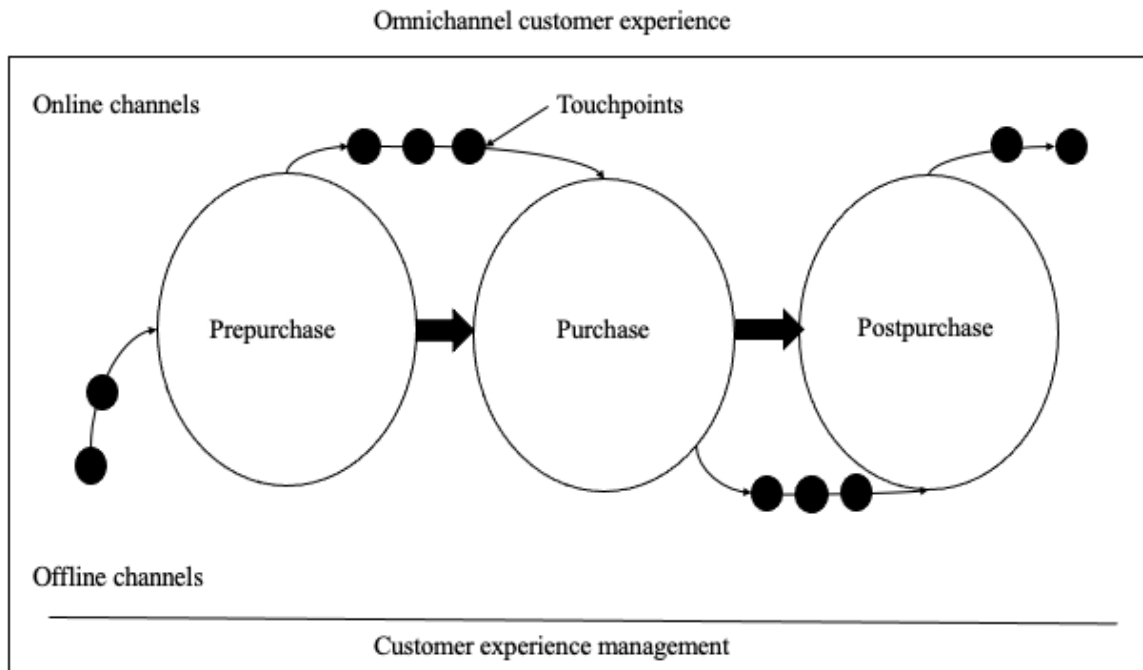


Figure 1: Theoretical framework

1.5 Definitions of the key concepts

Customer journey: Customer journey is mainly described to be a series of touchpoints that a customer goes through to purchase a product or a service (Norton & Pine 2013; Følstad & Kvale 2018) and in this study postpurchase phase is a fixed part of the journey. Customer journeys are related to customer experiences since it is seen as the process where customer experiences are created across the touchpoints in which customer interacts with the company or its offering (Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

Touchpoints: Touchpoints are the direct or indirect contact points in which customer interacts with the company during the customer journey. Direct touchpoints are usually customer-initiated and indirect touchpoints can include, for example, advertising or WOM. (Meyer & Schwager 2007) Customer experience is built from a series of touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

Customer journey mapping: A customer journey map is a strategic management tool that visually represents the sequence of touchpoints a customer could encounter during the customer journey. The aim is to identify the pain points and opportunities and by that improve the customer experience at each touchpoint. (Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Halvorsrud et al. 2016)

Customer experience: Customer experience can be understood as a concept including the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social reactions of the customer regarding a company. It is built from touchpoints that customer interacts with during their journey (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). The experience builds on two kinds of touchpoints: the ones a firm can control and the ones that are outside its control, for example, the influence of other customers (Verhoef et al. 2009).

Customer experience management: Customer experience management is a management approach that aims to create value for the customer and a firm and to build loyal customer relationships by designing and managing the customer experience through optimizing and integrating the touchpoints the customer encounters (Verhoef et al. 2009; Homburg et al. 2017).

Omnichannel retailing: Omnichannel retailing or management is described to be a management approach in which all the different physical and digital channels, and touchpoints are managed in an integrated way in order to offer a seamless and optimized customer experience (Verhoef et al. 2015).

Omnichannel customer experience: Omnichannel customer experience means that a customer can move freely across different physical and digital channels as they are seamlessly integrated and the touchpoints respond to customer's preferences and needs (Peltola et al. 2015). The elements of omnichannel customer experience include connectivity, integration, consistency, flexibility, and personalization (Shi et al. 2020).

1.6 Delimitations

This thesis has some delimitations which affect the generalizability of the results. First, the study is a single case study done for a case company operating in the Finnish automotive

industry and so the findings of this study are mostly applicable for the specific company. Yet, other automotive industry retailers could benefit from the results. The findings might not be generalizable for other industries because a customer journey of a car buyer is longer and different than, for instance, the customer journey of someone purchasing the daily consumer goods. This is because a more complex product makes the customer journey longer (Gerea et al. 2021). Studying a Finnish case company creates limitations regarding generalizability for other countries because consumer behavior across different countries can be different even within the same industry.

The second delimitation is related to the B2C retailing context. Customer experience and its management is most likely different in the B2B context where the purchase processes are longer and they usually involve more than one decision-maker (Webster & Wind 1972). Therefore, it can be assumed that the management of customer experience is more difficult, especially if there are physical and digital channels involved. In addition, studying omnichannel customer experience is most profitable for companies that were not born global (Gerea et al. 2021) because physical touchpoints are critical in an omnichannel environment and so the results of the study should be viewed keeping in mind the context of a traditional B2C retailer.

The third delimitation concerns the empirical part and data collection method of this study. For this thesis, it is necessary to find out, how the marketers of the case company perceive omnichannel customer experience and how it is currently managed and what are the critical touchpoints. To answer the sub-research questions, the most suitable way is to conduct qualitative research and interview the company representatives. However, to get more comprehensive information about how to design and manage touchpoints in a way that ensures a seamless omnichannel customer experience, it would be valuable to study customers and their perceptions of the current customer experience. Moreover, when conducting a single case study, it does not necessarily enrich the theory and case studies do not create generalizable results (Gustafsson 2017). Furthermore, to study the most critical touchpoints, it might be beneficial to gather data quantitatively from a large customer base as that might give more reliable results on the critical touchpoints and their effect on the overall customer experience.

The number of interviewees can also affect the results and their applicability. As the marketing and customer experience organization in the case company is rather small, the number of interviewees remains rather small as well and that has certain limitations on the results.

1.7 Research methodology and data collection plan

As the objective of this thesis is to find out how a Finnish company operating in the automotive industry can manage the omnichannel customer experience and by that deliver a seamless, personalized, and superior customer experience, the empirical research is done as qualitative research. Qualitative research is the most suitable method for this thesis since it aims to describe and explain experiences, meanings, and behavior from a person's point of view. Subjectivity plays a central role and that is why qualitative research does not contain statistics or quantification. Most often, qualitative research tries to answer research questions that involve *why* and/or *how*. Some of the most common data collection methods in qualitative research are interviews, surveys, and observations. (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson 2002; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 140)

A case study is an optimal method to gain intensive and deeper knowledge on a specific topic and then compare the results for the literature and existing research. Since this study is conducted for a Finnish company, this research is done as a single case study in which the focus is only on the specific company. (Gustafsson 2017) The data collection method is interviewing, and more specifically, semi-structured interviewing. In semi-structured interviews, the idea is to create a conversation with one respondent at a time. The questions revolve around pre-decided themes and the idea is to ask the interviewees open-ended questions. To gain a deep understanding of the topic, it is more beneficial to conduct the interviews individually and not in focus groups. This way individual interviewees can openly share their opinions and thoughts. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 66; Adams 2015)

This study is done from the firm and management perspective to find out how to manage omnichannel customer experience. Therefore, the interviewees are either working in marketing or customer experience organizations in the company. The chosen interviewees are interviewed one at a time and the interviews are recorded, transcribed, and translated to English. The interviews are analyzed utilizing an abductive approach. In an abductive approach,

the purpose is to analyze collected data based on the existing theory and literature and continuously exploit both to create conclusions. Content analysis helps to get compact and general results from the topic. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, 125 & 150) After doing the content analysis, it is possible to draw conclusions and answer the research questions.

1.8 The structure of the thesis

In this subchapter, the structure of this thesis is explained. This thesis includes five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, and it includes the background and preliminary literature review on the chosen topic. Research problems and questions are also presented and together with the background and literature review, they work as the basis of this thesis. The theoretical framework and the key concepts are defined to help the reader to understand the theoretical content. In addition, delimitations and research methodology is explained.

The second main chapter is the theory chapter. It presents main findings in the existing literature related to the key theories and concepts used in this thesis. The theories and concepts presented in the theory chapter are customer journeys, touchpoints, customer journey mapping, customer experience, customer experience management, omnichannel management and retailing, and omnichannel customer experience. In most of the chapters, the theories and concepts are studied from the management perspective.

The third chapter describes the research methodology and the data collection. Additionally, the analysis method is presented. The third chapter also discusses the reliability and validity of the method. The fourth chapter represents the empirical findings including analysis and direct quotations from the interviews. Lastly, the fifth chapter includes the discussion and conclusions of this study based on the theory and empirical findings. Furthermore, the theoretical contribution and managerial implications are explained. The final subchapters include an evaluation of the limitations of this study as well as suggestions for future research.

2 Literature review

This chapter presents a literature review of academic journals related to the thesis topic. The chapters and subchapters are parts of the theoretical framework, and they are presented in the logical order related to the research questions. First, customer journeys, touchpoints, and customer journey mapping are described. Next, literature on customer experience, customer experience management, and the customer experience in the context of the automotive industry is represented. Finally, omnichannel retailing and management and omnichannel customer experience is discussed. Mostly, the chapters discuss the relevance of the concept in the marketing landscape, the conceptualization, the current state of the research, and other relevant aspects of the theories and findings that are related to the omnichannel context.

2.1 Customer journeys

In order to manage customer experience, multiple authors have highlighted the importance of understanding customer journeys, (i.e., Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Tuenrat et al. 2021; Norton & Pine 2013) and the research regarding the concept and phenomenon has rapidly increased during the past few years among practitioners and scholars (Tuenrat et al. 2021). At present, customers do not follow linear, simple, or similar journeys to purchase a product or a service. This is the cause of the growing number of different digital and physical channels and individual customers may choose different paths to find information about products and to interact with firms. Consequently, for firms, it is more complicated to deliver superior customer experiences since it is difficult to identify, manage, and control complex customer journeys. (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014; Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

Previously, customer's buying processes were described by consumer decision-making models that were linear and it included hierarchical steps that customers would follow to do a purchase. Ever since customers have shifted to digital environments, the buying processes changed to be non-linear and they include all interactions customers have with the company, in both online and offline channels. (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014) Customer journeys can be defined as the series of touchpoints customer encounters to purchase a product or a service (Norton & Pine 2013). Herhausen et al. (2019) clarify that it includes all online and offline

channels and touchpoints, which are not necessarily initiated or controlled by the firm. A recent view of customer journeys is that it will not stop after the purchase is made but rather it covers prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages. The prepurchase stage includes the touchpoints that customer faces before the actual purchase, for example, visiting the company's websites to learn more about their offerings. The second phase may include, for example, ordering, payment, and service; namely the purchase touchpoints. Lastly, the post-purchase touchpoints are also vital, especially regarding customer experience formation. This stage includes, for example, the after-sales service. In the age of social media, posting the product to social media and reviewing it, is an important part of the postpurchase stage. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Rosenbaum et al. 2017)

One of the key causes for the interest in customer journeys may be the focus on customer-centricity. Compared to service blueprinting, the purpose of employing customer journeys is to follow how the customer goes through the purchase process including the actions after the actual purchase, and hence the focus is on the customer's perspective. Service blueprinting represents the plan of what a company offers for the customer, and so it is not created from the customer's point of view. (Halvorsrud et al. 2016) For companies, customer journeys work as a customer-centric management approach to enhance customer experience (Norton & Pine 2013).

Tueanrat et al. (2021) did a systematic review of the customer journey literature to identify underlining themes that most of the customer journey literature follows. After conducting a quantitative content analysis, they were able to find five themes, one of which was customer experience. The authors noticed that in academic literature, customer journeys have been seen as useful in evaluating and measuring the customer experience and satisfaction, and that may work as an efficient tool to manage customer experience. (Tueanrat et al. 2021) For instance, Trischler and Zehrer (2012) conducted a single-case study about an Australian theme park and as a result, they proposed a multistep qualitative approach for managers to analyze and assess customer experience. Their multistep approach included four steps, 1) dividing customers into distinct personas, 2) observing customers' emotional responses to touchpoints 3) asking customers to assess touchpoints and the experience 4) creating a customer journey map based on the results. By visualizing customer journeys, the researchers

were able to see how satisfied customers were in each touchpoint, and by that, it was possible to evaluate and improve the overall experience. (Trischler & Zehrer 2012)

Følstad and Kvale (2018) on the other hand provided a framework to monitor customer experiences throughout customer journeys by utilizing transactional Net Promoter Score (NPS) that measures how customers evaluate specific transactions with the firm. Similar to Trischler and Zehrer's (2012) study, they employed customer responses at particular touchpoints to gather feedback on the customer journeys to monitor customer experiences. (Følstad & Kvale 2018) Lemon and Verhoef (2016) agree that it is beneficial for firms to measure the customer experience at each touchpoint of the customer journey. However, according to the authors, the currently used metrics, like satisfaction or NPS may be supportive in measuring customer experience, but more metrics should be discovered. Because the research of the topic is still in its early phases, they suggest that future research should study what kind of metrics are needed to measure the holistic customer journey. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

Customer journeys are not only a way to evaluate satisfaction but also to identify pain points that may deteriorate the overall customer experience. Pain points are touchpoints where customers may be lost, and they drop out from their customer journey. (Rosenbaum et al. 2017). Identification of pain points was also highlighted in a study by Halvorsrud et al. (2016) who introduced a customer journey analysis (CJA) approach to analyze customer journeys. Their study showed evidence that CJA worked as a useful tool to identify the unsatisfactory events that may result in pain points. In a conclusion, they argued that by analyzing customer journeys, the pain points may be reduced, which contributes to customers continuing their journeys. (Halvorsrud et al. 2016) Another widely used customer journey management tool is customer journey mapping, which is created to evaluate and enhance individual customer journeys by identifying important touchpoints and pain points and creating actions for each touchpoint (Rosenbaum et al. 2017). Customer journey mapping will be further discussed in subchapter 2.1.2.

According to Tueanrat et al. (2021), another theme that many customer journey studies follow is related to channels and channel management. Nowadays, customer journeys are more complex due to the emergence of various digital channels. Customers search for information, purchase, and review firms, for example, on the internet, social media, mobile apps, and in

physical stores. Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) studied customers' shopping journeys in the cosmetics industry by collecting data from personal diaries and interviews. Their results demonstrated that the used channel also varies during different phases of the customer journey and most often the different phases include numerous channels. (Wolny and Charoensuksai 2014) Additionally, customers may start their individual journeys from any physical or digital channel and hence design their personalized journeys. Therefore, firms must understand the channels customers use during their journey because that helps in managing and designing optimal and valuable content for each touchpoint in customer journeys. That will contribute to the creation of a superior customer experience. (Herhausen et al. 2019; Parise et al. 2016; Tueanrat et al. 2021) One solution for managers is Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) proposition that states that since customers use different channels during their journeys, firms should identify customer segments that go through touchpoints and channels in a similar order. It would give firms more insight into why the identified segments choose specific channels at the different phases of customer journeys. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) That may help in two ways: targeting new customers with similar characteristics and optimizing the customer journeys in the most personalized way.

2.1.1 Touchpoints

Touchpoints are an important concept related to customer journeys and customer experience. Touchpoints can be seen as the events or interactions that a customer has with the firm or its products directly or indirectly during the customer journey. Some scholars simply define that customer journeys build up on touchpoints. (Halvorsrud et al. 2016; Herhausen et al. 2019) The number and formats of touchpoints have evolved and increased over the past few years, owing to the digitalization and usage of mobile applications (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). As mentioned, numerous customer experience and customer journey studies emphasize the importance of identifying, mapping, monitoring, designing, and managing touchpoints because they are directly linked to the overall customer experience. (i.e., Trischel & Zehrer 2012; Stein & Ramaseshan 2016; Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

Touchpoints can be physical such as visiting the store, viewing catalogs, or seeing an advertisement or they can be digital, like visiting websites, mobile apps, social media, or reading newsletters (Herhausen et al. 2019). Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) studied what kinds of

elements touchpoints include in the retailing environment in order to get more knowledge on customer experience formation. After analyzing the results from semi-structured customer interviews, the authors identified seven touchpoint elements. Atmospheric means the physical characteristics that appear in the customer journey, for example, store attractiveness and layout. The second was technological, meaning how convenient is to use a retailer's technology. The communicative element is firm-initiated communication. The fourth element was process elements, which includes the steps that customers must go through in a purchase journey. The next elements were employee-customer interaction and customer-to-customer interaction (i.e., reviews on social media). The last identified element was product interaction, for example, the quality of the product. The authors argued that if a firm can identify the elements in each of their critical touchpoints they can design and improve touchpoints by improving related elements. (Stein & Ramaseshan 2016)

In literature, touchpoints have also been divided based on who creates them and whether the firm can control them. Naturally, the ones that are outside the firm's control, are more difficult to manage. Meyer & Schwager (2007) divided touchpoints into direct and indirect touchpoints. According to the authors, direct touchpoints are customer-initiated whereas indirect touchpoints are a company or third-party (i.e., subcontractors or another customer) initiated. Direct touchpoints could be, for instance, purchase or usage whereas Word-of-mouth or advertising represents indirect touchpoints. (Meyer & Schwager 2007) On the other hand, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) defined four types of touchpoints, which are brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external. Brand-owned touchpoints include the firm-initiated ones that a firm can control, for example, advertising and websites. Partner-owned touchpoints represent the ones that are co-designed and co-managed by a firm and its partner(s), for instance, with a marketing or media agency. Customer-owned touchpoints are not under the control of a firm, for example, using of a product. The fourth type of touchpoint is the social/external ones, and these include recommendations from other consumers. Each of the four types influences the overall customer experience and the customer may encounter all of those in every phase of the customer journey. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) Aoki, Obeng, Borders, and Lester (2019) found in their research that companies should focus on creating positive customer experiences because then customers are more likely to recommend a firm. Hence, they state that although the social/external touchpoints cannot be controlled directly,

customers should be encouraged to share positive reviews by providing positive experiences. (Aoki et al. 2019).

This thesis studies customer experience in an omnichannel environment and thus it is necessary to represent what omnichannel literature states about touchpoints. Payne, Peltier, and Barger (2017) categorized omnichannel touchpoints into two categories: personal and non-personal. Personal touchpoints involve direct interaction with the personnel of a firm, for example, salespeople, a chat assistant, or a customer servant. Non-personal touchpoints do not involve direct human interaction, for example, advertising, emails, websites, or social media. (Payne et al. 2017) As a conclusion, touchpoints involve multiple elements (Stein & Ramaseshan 2016) and they can be divided based on the format; whether they are physical or digital (Herhausen et al. 2019), whether the company can create and control them (Meyer & Schwager 2007; Lemon & Verhoef 2016), or whether they involve direct contact with firm’s personnel (Payne et al. 2017). The multidimensionality of touchpoints is represented in figure 2.

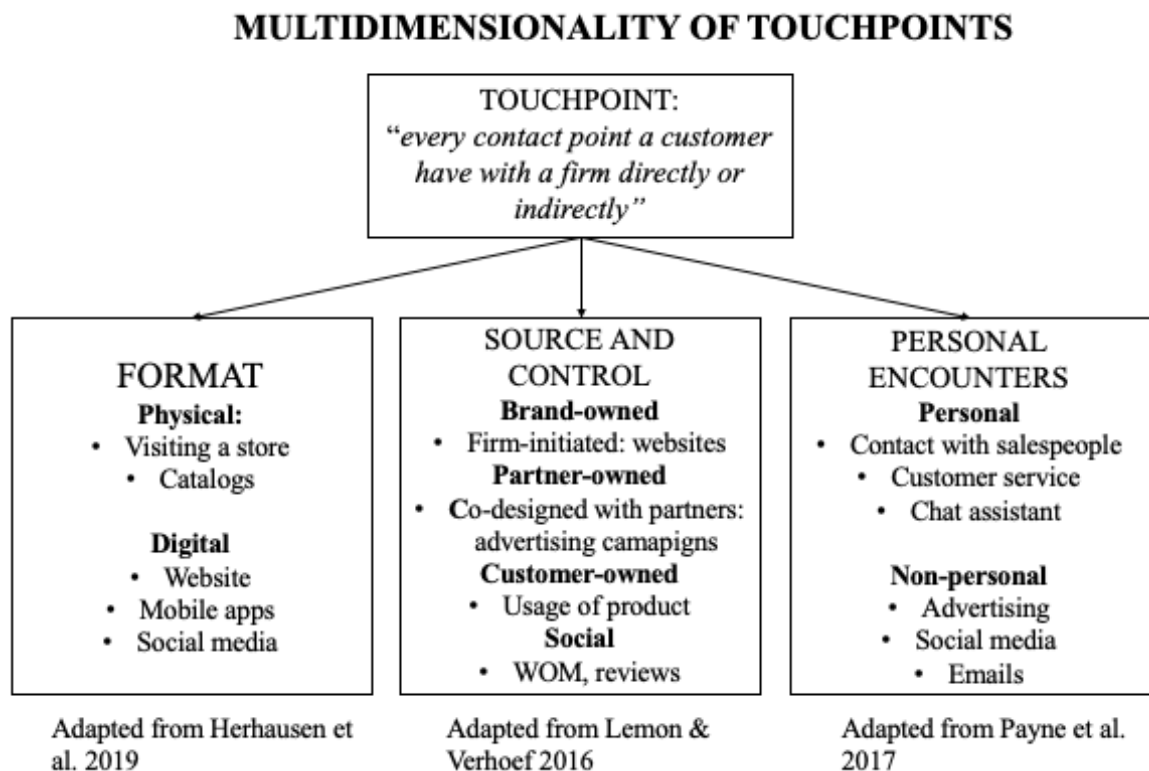


Figure 2: Multidimensionality of touchpoints, adapted from Herhausen et al. 2019; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Payne et al. 2017.

2.1.2 Customer journey mapping

To get an overview of customer journeys, managers can visualize the sequence of touchpoints through customer journey maps. Both academic research and practitioners have discovered the benefits of using maps as a strategic management tool to identify the most important touchpoints that influence positively to overall customer experience and to identify pain points where customers may be lost. After identification, it is possible to evaluate, design, and upgrade the customer experience at every touchpoint. (Rosenbaum et al. 2017) One of the advantages of using customer journey maps is to get a customer-centric view of the customer journey because it helps firms to understand what touchpoints customers face before, during, and after the purchase. (Tueanrat et al. 2021)

Rosenbaum et al. (2017) propose that visually, the map should be formed in the following way; 1) the journey should be distributed to prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages. Then 2) the touchpoints should be displayed on the map based on when it happens during the timeline. 3) Finally, in order to make improvements to the customer experience, the map should also include strategic actions within the critical touchpoints. Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) propose that the maps should represent the elements that each touchpoint includes (see chapter 2.1.1.) and the retail channels in which the touchpoints appear. Other researchers have also offered their versions of customer journey maps, for example, they could involve some information on the emotional side of the experience and customer satisfaction at each touchpoint (Trischler & Zehrer 2012). Canfield and Basso (2017) included a cultural background in their proposed customer journey map to see how it affects the perception of touchpoints during service delivery.

Rosenbaum et al. (2017) proposed a practical guideline for managers to create customer journey maps by conducting a case study on a mall. Their process started by doing customer research that would help them to visualize the touchpoints sequentially. (Rosenbaum et al. 2017) Customer data can be collected either quantitatively, for example, by utilizing analytics tools or surveys, or in a qualitative way, for example, by interviewing (Følstad & Kvale 2018). Rosenbaum et al. (2017) suggest avoiding generalization since customer journeys are different and therefore, they tried to analyze the journeys of customers with different characteristics. Lastly, they defined managerial actions for different organizational departments

at each important touchpoint that would enhance the customer experience. Tuenrat et al. (2021) add that the actions should be tailored to customers' needs and preferences.

One of Rosenbaum et al.'s (2017) key pieces of advice was that every strategic action should be implemented by cross-functional teams. This corresponds with the findings made by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) who also emphasize the cooperation between different organizational departments in customer experience management. Halvorsrud et al. (2016) found out that in the case companies they studied, none of the teams had the overall understanding of customer journeys and the teams were not even aware of every touchpoint. They argued that communication between teams would be easier if they understood the holistic customer journey. (Halvorsrud et al. 2016) Presumably, creating strategic actions for cross-functional teams at each touchpoint and throughout the customer journey seems reasonable since it 1) helps communicating between teams, 2) helps to integrate the information between different touchpoints, and hence 3) it makes the customer journey more seamless.

2.2 Customer experience

During the previous years, firms have focused their marketing and marketing management actions towards creating and delivering superior customer experiences. Customer experience has become a buzzword not only among practitioners but also among scholars and the research on the topic has increased rapidly (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Jain et al. 2017). The importance of creating memorable and superior customer experiences has emerged due to, for example, more demanding customers and advancements in digital technologies; customers interact with companies via multiple different devices and online and offline channels whenever they feel like it. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) Academic research has proved that creating a positive customer experience will contribute to customer satisfaction, positive word-of-mouth, and profitability (Verhoef et al. 2009; Jain et al 2017). Gentile et al. (2007) analyzed customer responses from a survey and found out that if customers have a positive consumption experience it will improve customers' loyalty towards the firm. Importantly, customer experience has been seen as one of the central factors in creating a sustainable competitive advantage (Gentile et al. 2007).

Customer behavior literature has discussed the experiential side of consumption from the 1950's but Schmitt's (1999) article "Experiential Marketing" has been one of the customer experience pioneers in the marketing landscape (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Jain et al. 2017). He stated in the article that a new trend of experiential marketing has emerged as a replacement for traditional marketing. Earlier on, consumers were seen as decision-makers that would make purchasing decisions based on the functional and quality-related features of the products, and hence they were assumed to make purely rational decisions. He proposed that consumers are also emotional and searching for memorable and pleasing experiences. (Schmitt 1999) Another vital turning point in customer experience literature was Pine and Gilmore's (1998) study "The Experience Economy" where they claim experiences to be something that consumers want to purchase instead of products or services (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Since then, customer experiences are not considered anymore as something the consumers would buy but rather as a firm's way to offer circumstances for customers in which their individualized experiences are created (Gentile et al. 2007). For example, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) suggested that firms should create an "experience environment" in which consumers co-create personalized experiences by having an ongoing dialogue with a firm.

Despite the growing research on customer experience, there is a lack of coherence concerning the conceptualization of the theory. Furthermore, customer experience has been mainly studied in the practical context contributing to the managerial implications for firms. Therefore, the academic research on the customer experience theory and its fundamental elements remains rather scarce. (McColl-Kennedy 2015; Jain et al. 2017) Yet, there are few conceptualizations which most of the research is referring to and those have been widely accepted (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Schmitt (1999) argued that firms should consider consumption situations as holistic experiences and hence marketer's focus should not be on specific items or products but on how the products can improve the experience. He defines experiences as something that offers sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral/physical, and relational values for consumers, who would appreciate those over the performance characteristics and product benefits. (Schmitt 1999) Gentile et al. (2007) also emphasized the multidimensionality of customer experience and based on their empirical findings they noticed that products that offer positive customer experiences include one or many components from sensorial, emotional, cognitive, pragmatic, lifestyle, and relational components which affect customers

on a personal level. Compared to Schmitt's (1999) conceptualization, they separated physical components and added that to the sensorial component. Furthermore, they introduced the pragmatic component that considers user experience (Gentile et al. 2007), which is important, especially in the highly digitalized world.

Verhoef et al. (2009) also discussed the multidimensionality of customer experience in their conceptualization and that it includes customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical feelings or thoughts regarding the retailer and its product, regardless of the channel it happens. In addition to that, they claim that it is holistic and solely personal and thus, it is not the same with other consumers. Meyer and Schwager (2007) considered also that customer experiences are subjective responses that are created in the mind of a consumer after having either direct or indirect exposure to a company. Direct encounters are mostly customer-initiated whereas indirect encounters could be, for example, advertising, WOM, or reviews. Verhoef et al. (2009) clarified that firms cannot necessarily influence the customer experience as a whole because some encounters are not in the control of a firm.

More recent studies have emphasized that customer experience is not only related to the purchase phase but rather is formed throughout the customer journey that contains pre-purchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages (Verhoef et al. 2009; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Jain et al. 2017). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) thus conceptualize that customer experience is the journey a customer goes through with the firm. During the journey, customer faces multiple different touchpoints that can positively or negatively affect the total customer experience. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) Customer experience formation is quite a complex process as the entire customer journey includes various channels in digital and physical environments. Besides, customers' attitudes and evaluations may change during the journey, which makes the management of customer experience even more difficult. (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2015)

Academic research has also attempted to define which factors affect and determine customer experience. Verhoef et al. (2009) created a conceptual model based on previous research. The model proposes the determinants of customer experience. An important notion is that they consider that the prior experiences will affect to current experience. In addition, the social environment, service interface, retail atmosphere, assortment, price, other channels,

and retail brand affect the total customer experience. (Verhoef et al. 2009) Inevitably, psychographic, demographic, personal, and cultural characteristics of customers are also found to influence the customer experience (Verhoef et al. 2009; Jain et al. 2017). Since customer experiences can be understood as a customer's journey with a firm over time, scholars have identified that all the phases in the customer journey may enhance or deteriorate the expectations customers have on the brand, and consequently, that can affect the current experience. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

Managers and marketers have also studied how a single touchpoint impacts the overall customer experience. Physical environment, elements of the marketing mix, delivery systems, and customer service are only a few touchpoints that function as a determinant of customer experience. (Jain et al. 2017) Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) found out that the quality and relevance of information in the touchpoints as well as the interactions with employees' effect on the experience in the retailing environment. Also, touchpoints outside the firm's control can have an impact on the customer experience. For example, customer-to-customer interaction plays a significant role in the age of social media and firms need to consider ways to manage that. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

Owing to the rapid digitalization, customer experience is changing (Lemon & Verhoef 2016), and therefore, one could assume that also the determinants of customer experience may change. Bolton, McColl-Kennedy, Cheung, Gallan, Orsingher, Witell, and Zaki (2018) studied innovations in the customer experience landscape, and they discussed that improvements in digital technologies, personalization, and integration of physical and digital channels can help firms to create more advanced experiences. By incorporating new technologies and customer data, a firm can create personalized content or recommendations for individual customers and therefore, improve the experience (Mosquera et al 2017).

2.2.1 Customer experience management

Like customer experience, so has managing it efficiently gained plenty of attention from scholars and especially from the practitioners during the last few decades (Frow & Payne 2007). In fact, customer experience management is considered as one of the most important

objectives of marketing, and firms are increasingly putting effort into competing with outstanding customer experience (Homburg et al. 2017; Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Besides creating superior experiences, the goals of customer experience management include improving customer relationships, creating customer loyalty, and growing the business in the long run (Frow & Payne 2007; Homburg et al. 2017).

Regardless of managers' and marketers' ambition towards delivering a superior customer experience, many companies face challenges in managing it (Meyer & Schwager 2007). According to McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015), one reason for that is the differences in customers' preferences, resources, and needs which makes it more difficult to satisfy customers at a personal level. Moreover, some firms do not necessarily understand what customer experience means, and it is sometimes considered as a synonym for good customer service (Berry, Carbone & Haeckel 2002). Yet, assumably, one of the biggest challenges currently is the increasing number of touchpoints in multiple different channels which makes customer experience management a complex task. For firms, this means handling and managing data from various sources and integrating channels and different business functions in order to deliver an excellent customer experience. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

In academic research, customer experience management has not been studied much, and so the conceptualization is quite incoherent among scholars (Homburg et al. 2017). From the value creation perspective, it means creating customer experiences so that it delivers value for the customer and the service provider (Verhoef et al. 2009). Customer experience management can be also understood as the integration of different business functions to manage the marketing mix elements, the brand, and customer-to-customer interactions. Each of them influences the customer experience formation. (Stone & Liyanearachci 2007) Jain et al. (2017) define customer experience management as identification of the key touchpoints throughout the holistic customer journey and exploitation of the gained information to design journeys which are later measured by suitable metrics. Homburg et al. (2017) did a study in which they did 52 in-depth interviews with managers who are involved in customer experience management. Integrating empirical findings with prior research, they provided a widely accepted and comprehensive conceptualization of the topic. According to the authors, it is

“a higher-order resource of cultural mindsets toward customer experiences, strategic directions for designing CEs, and firm capabilities for continually renewing CEs...” (Homburg et al. 2017, p. 377).

Recently, the focus in customer experience management literature has been transferring from managing individual touchpoints separately to managing the holistic customer journey, which entails multiple touchpoints and channels. The biggest difference compared to the previous, is that the touchpoints are managed concurrently, so it is possible to connect them. (Holmlund, Vaerenbergh, Ciuchita, Ravald, Sarantopoulos, Villarroel Ordenes & Zaki 2020) Also, Huré, Picot-Coupey, and Ackermann (2017) propose that managers should manage every touchpoint in an integrated way. The connection between customer journeys and customer experience management was acknowledged already in the early 21st century. Having data about customer journeys is needed to understand customers as they move through their journeys. (i.e., Berry et al. 2002; Jain et al. 2017) One of the strategies of customer experience management is to design the customer journeys optimally to improve customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Firms should build a long-term vision in understanding customers' actions when they are moving through the various used channels. A key asset for firms is customer data gathered from the critical touchpoints. The data helps to provide personalized and memorable customer experiences. (McColl-Kennedy et al. 2015) In addition, customer journeys include touchpoints that are partly or completely out of the control of the service provider, and hence data is required from partners, customers, and other external stakeholders (Holmlund et al. 2020).

As stated, identifying, designing, integrating, and managing touchpoints throughout customers' journeys is one of the widely used approaches in customer experience management literature. Homburg et al.'s (2017) conceptualization included organizational mindsets, strategic directions, and firm capabilities towards customer experiences. These resources contribute to managing and integrating touchpoints at an organizational level. Frow and Payne (2007) on the other hand did case study research to find out how a perfect customer experience is delivered. One of their key findings was that when the case firms managed each customer touchpoint by identifying the important touchpoints and pain points, it upgraded the customer experience. Additionally, their findings stated that providing a compatible experience across different channels by deploying an integration strategy within the necessary

teams, is a critical task for the managers to provide an outstanding experience. (Frow & Payne 2007) As firms are more present on the digital channels, it is important to integrate touchpoints and marketing within physical and digital channels (Melero et al. 2016).

Certain firm capabilities are recognized as necessary to successfully manage customer experiences. Having an organizational culture that emphasizes customer-centricity is vital in delivering a superior customer experience (Melero et al. 2016; Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Furthermore, understanding and knowing the needs and preferences of customers are needed to manage the customer experience (Jain et al. 2017), and this requires gathering customer data and making decisions based on that (Holmlund et al. 2020). Firm-level capabilities include having the know-how on designing touchpoints from the customer's point of view, modifying them when needed, monitoring their performance, and adapting them based on the results (Homburg et al. 2017). In the highly digitalized world, where firms can gather an enormous amount of customer data, cooperation between cross-functional teams is required to deliver a seamless and consistent customer experience. For example, IT, marketing, customer service, and sales should continuously work together. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

In line with the above mentioned, Stone and Liyanearachchi (2007) argued that big data and analytics capabilities are also vital in managing today's customer experience. Big data analytics in the customer experience management field has also been discussed in a recent study made by Holmlund et al. (2020). In the article, they created a strategic framework for managers to gain knowledge from customers through big data analytics and by that ongoingly improving customer experience. Their framework describes what types of data and capabilities are needed for customer experience management. According to the framework, the starting point includes capturing data from different touchpoints (i.e., social media posts, reviews, NPS results). They propose that data should be collected regardless of whether the touchpoints exist in the physical, digital, or social realm. The second part of Holmlund et al.'s. (2020) framework described different big data analytics methods. After capturing and analyzing the data, the firm has gained knowledge of the customer. Lastly, their framework presents that touchpoint monitoring, prioritization, adaptation, and journey design are firm-related capabilities that help to enhance the customer experience. (Holmlund et al. 2020)

2.2.2. Customer experience in the automotive industry

Customer behavior has changed and will be drastically changed in the automotive industry in the upcoming years due to digitalization. Scherpen et al. (2018) conducted case study research in which they examined how Daimler AG, one of the largest automotive manufacturers in the world, is responding to the market changes and how their sales strategy's focus is on the customer experience. Their article discussed changes in customer behavior, and they found that automobile manufacturers cannot rely solely on their brand anymore because customers can easier than ever compare different options. Nowadays customers utilize the internet as the information source more than physical dealerships, which were previously the main place to get information. (Scherpen et al. 2018) Also, a paper made by Deloitte (2016) predicted that future automotive consumers will use more digital services and appreciate seamless customer journeys. Thus, optimizing and integrating offline and online touchpoints in the automotive industry seems reasonable due to the importance of both channels (Scherpen et al. 2018; Deloitte 2016) and because customer journeys with complex products, such as cars, are likely longer and thus include plenty of possible touchpoints (Gerea et al. 2021).

However, the role of physical car dealerships remains important because customers want to see and feel the car in person and test drive it (Scherpen et al. 2018; Deloitte 2016). In addition, in retailing, physical store remains critical since they can offer an immersive experience for customers which may contribute to positive emotional and memorable experience (Bolton et al. 2018.) This is in line with Berry et al. (2002), who found that the customer experience will be the best if a company succeeds to deliver a customer experience that includes both functional and emotional benefits. Emotional benefits are more difficult to copy. (Berry et al. 2002) Supposedly, buying a car, especially a premium, or a luxury car, is largely dependent on the emotional side.

Scherpen et al. (2018) argued in their study that technological and offline innovations are needed in the automotive industry to ensure a superior customer experience. According to Deloitte (2016), salespeople should exploit technologies to offer a faster and more personalized, and more convenient experience to a car buyer. Parise, Guinan, and Kafka (2016) studied how firms utilize technology to improve customer experience and Bolton et al. (2018)

researched innovations in the customer experience landscape, and both studies referred to custom building and configuration of cars since it provides a personalized customer experience that integrates physical and digital environments. Many automobile manufacturers offer car configurators on their websites, i.e., Mercedes-Benz, Audi, BMW (Mercedes-Benz 2022; Audi 2022; BMW 2022).

Utilizing technology is not only related to prepurchase and purchase stages. As discussed, focusing on the postpurchase stage is critical in customer experience management and the automotive industry is no exception. Scherpen et al. (2018) studied how Mercedes me -application contributes to seamless and superior customer experience. For example, the system gives reminders to customers about upcoming service appointments and a customer may check some technical details about the car by just opening the application. In a conclusion, it offers added value for a customer. Deloitte (2016) stated that many automotive manufacturers have implemented similar services for customers, and they increase customers' willingness to return to the same service provider and increase customer loyalty. Moreover, the automotive manufacturers and retailers benefit from that since they can continuously be in touch with their clients and engage them. (Deloitte 2016)

A hot topic in the automotive industry is the electrification of automobiles. A study conducted by Ullah, Aimin, and Ahmed (2018) proposed a conceptual model based on the existing research that stated that smart automation and connectivity functions of electric vehicles, for instance, collision avoidance, emergency braking, and lane-keeping, will have a positive effect on the customer experience. Additionally, they proposed that the customer experience in electric vehicles is formed by rational factors (convenience, safety, economy, and driving range) and emotional factors (belonging, familiarity, security, gratitude, and compassion). (Ullah et al. 2018)

2.3 Omnichannel retailing and management

During the last years in the retailing landscape, firms have gradually increased their efforts in managing their multichannel strategies to address the changing consumer needs. Being present in multiple different online and offline channels has been considered important. However, due to the recent advances in digital services, mobile channels, and social media,

the fundamentals of managing channels and customer experience have changed. Therefore, the distinction between different channels has diminished, and being able to walk through different channels seamlessly is critical. Consequently, retailers have shifted their focus from multichannel to omnichannel retailing in which the channels are not managed separately but in an integrated way. (Verhoef et al. 2015) According to Frazer and Stiehler (2014), consumers have become more demanding in having a superior customer experience that integrates the physical touchpoints with relevant and informative digital content. The interest in omnichannel theory has increased considerably among academics and practitioners over the past few years (Li et al. 2018; Quach et al. 2020) and some scholars find the phenomenon to be one of the most critical strategic approaches for firms (Mosquera et al. 2017). Even though retailers have understood the significance of delivering seamless and integrated customer journeys and experiences, most companies face challenges in executing it in practice (Hoogveld & Koster 2016). Ostrom et al. (2015) argue that one of the reasons for its difficulty is that it is difficult to manage channels, like social media, since their customers search for help from others than the firm directly.

One of the widely cited definitions of omnichannel management is Verhoef et al.'s (2015) conceptualization: they propose that omnichannel management means managing multiple different online and offline channels and touchpoints in an integrated and optimized way. Omnichannel management strategy aims to provide a seamless customer experience regardless of the channels a customer decides to use. (Verhoef et al. 2015) In practice, this means that individual customers can start their journey in the channel they prefer; for example, on the websites, social media, or at the physical store. Therefore, a company should be able to provide a seamless and integrated experience at every touchpoint. (Peltola et al. 2015) Also, omnichannel management takes strongly into consideration that customers wish for personalized journeys and experiences (Frazer & Stiehler 2014; Mosquera et al. 2017). One of the traits of omnichannel retailing is also the increased number of touchpoints, which includes, for example, the store, websites, mobile channels, social media, print, TV, email, and search engines (Verhoef et al. 2015).

In fact, mobile usage has enabled consumers to interact even with multiple touchpoints at once. Nowadays, a consumer may enter a physical store to evaluate different products but at the same time, scroll through their mobile phones to find better offers or prices and to do the

purchase online. This is called showrooming. (Verhoef et al 2015) Showrooming happens usually during the prepurchase phase and with products whose physical features play an important role. The opposite to showrooming is webrooming in which the customer compares the prices, features, and reviews online but purchases the product offline. Webrooming takes place generally when a consumer has done the first exclusion of the product alternatives because then it is convenient to compare the important attributes from a narrow set of product alternatives. (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014) As showrooming and webrooming are characteristic behavior for omnichannel shoppers, omnichannel retailers should create strategies to control this behavior. Therefore, consistent information across channels is important. Unless they are able to do so, they are a risk of losing customers during their journeys. (Mosquera et al. 2017)

The integration of channels and coherently managing them is considered as one of the cornerstones of omnichannel retailing. Often the related literature claims that in multichannel management, channels are managed separately in silos and hence is not possible to provide a seamless and consistent customer experience. (Verhoef et al. 2015; Li et al. 2018) Therefore, implementing an omnichannel strategy may be more beneficial in terms of integrated channels (i.e., Frazer & Stiehler 2014; Shen et al. 2018).

The impact of channel integration on customer experience has been studied by a few scholars, and their findings indicate that it can improve, for example, customer satisfaction, trust, and retention (Zhang, Ren, Wang & He 2018; Li et al. 2018). Zhang et al. (2018) studied whether integrating channels affects consumer empowerment which leads to customer satisfaction and trust. The research was done by collecting data from a Chinese retailer that follows an omnichannel strategy. The scholars found out that if a firm can integrate the channels and thus offer more informative and relevant information in different channels, customers are empowered with a positive customer journey, which makes the experience more satisfactory. The empirical findings supported that channel integration indeed improves satisfaction and trust. (Zhang et al. 2018) Moreover, channel integration can assist firms in customer retention, based on a study made by Li et al. (2018) who also studied Chinese consumers who have bought something from an omnichannel firm. A third quantitative study made in China suggested that channel integration quality has a significant effect on perceived fluency which in turn positively affects using omnichannel services. In this

study, channel integration quality was built on channel choice breadth, channel service transparency, content consistency, and process consistency. In a conclusion, the scholars propose that firms should optimize and integrate the channels and offer consistent content throughout the channels. (Shen et al. 2018)

Tueanrat et al. (2021) argue that channel integration and implementation require an understanding of customer journeys and critical touchpoints. Picot-Coupey, Huré & Piveteau (2016) add that it is vital to recognize how touchpoints affect the customer experience and so they encourage omnichannel firms to map customer journeys. By mapping customer journeys, it is easier to integrate the identified touchpoints seamlessly across channels. Furthermore, both transactional, and informational touchpoints are needed to create a holistic and positive customer experience. (Picot-Coupey et al. 2016) Regardless of whether the touchpoint is transactional or informational, is vital that they provide transparent information because it encourages the customers to move on in their journeys. In other words, consistent information is required since that creates trust and assists the journey to proceed which leads to wanted customer outcomes. (Barwitz & Maas 2018) Nonetheless, identifying, integrating (Barwitz & Maas 2018), and designing touchpoints optimally (Picot-Coupey et al. 2016) throughout customer journeys remains challenging as customer journeys tend to be excessively complex in an omnichannel environment.

Some capabilities and resources have been discovered as useful for firms that aim to follow omnichannel strategy. According to Frazer and Stiehler (2014) and Mosquera et al. (2017) implementing an omnichannel strategy cannot purely be the responsibility of the marketing department since providing seamless customer experience requires that, for example, IT, logistics, pricing, and sales teams share relevant data across channels. Hoogveld and Koster (2016) proposed a conceptual framework that states that agile processes would aid in omnichannel management and enhance positive customer outcomes. Additionally, they identified that cooperation between cross-functional teams, creating a customer-centric organizational structure, and sharing customer data from different sources are the success factors that facilitate agile processes and omnichannel management. (Hoogveld & Koster 2016) The capabilities important for omnichannel retailers are quite similar to the capabilities regarding customer experience management presented in chapter 2.2.1. One reason for that could be

the fact, that customer experience scholars and practitioners have noticed the urgent need for firms to shift towards an omnichannel environment.

2.3.1 Omnichannel customer experience

The key objective of omnichannel retailing is to deliver a seamless and holistic customer experience through integrated offline and online channels and touchpoints (Verhoef et al. 2015). Nevertheless, omnichannel customer experience is not only equal to having a seamless experience; according to academic research (i.e., Shi et al. 2020; Komulainen & Makkonen 2018), the concept consists of other aspects as well. The research on omnichannel customer experience is not coherent (Gerea et al. 2021). Omnichannel customer experience can improve customer loyalty (Quach et al. 2020) and it is seen as one of the main objectives for future marketers (Melero et al. 2016). Thus, omnichannel customer experience calls for more research (Gerea et al. 2021). In order to succeed in omnichannel management, it is vital to deliver consistent quality in every touchpoint and channel to provide a memorable and joyful customer experience since omnichannel customers are more demanding and expect a certain level of quality (Mosquera et al. 2017; Shi et al. 2020).

Omnichannel customer experience is built up whenever a customer interacts with a firm through its numerous channels (Quach et al. 2020). Shi et al. (2020) provided a coherent conceptualization of omnichannel customer experience in their study. After conducting interviews and focus groups with omnichannel retailing managers and comparing the findings to current literature and quantitative analysis from customers, the authors were able to identify five omnichannel customer experience dimensions. The dimensions are connectivity, integration, consistency, flexibility, and personalization. These were related to how information and content are linked to each other and managed in an integrated way. Moreover, the flexibility to move freely from one channel to another and the ability to interact with consistent and personalized touchpoints are defining the holistic omnichannel customer experience. (Shi et al. 2020) On the contrary, Komulainen and Makkonen (2018) studied how customers perceived their omnichannel experience in the banking context. They found four categories of experiences, which were positive, negative, actual, and imaginary experiences. Additionally, they found out that omnichannel experience is highly related to past experi-

ences, which is in line with Verhoef et al.'s (2009) findings on customer experience formation. Some specifics Komulainen and Makkonen (2018) found, were the easiness to use digital services and whether the customer imagined itself being a modern customer in testing new technologies. According to the authors, the interesting finding was that by analyzing omnichannel customer experience from the customer's perspective, they noticed that customers did not emphasize seamlessness, optimization, or consistency of omnichannel services although those have been acknowledged as the elements of omnichannel customer experience from retailer's point of view. (Komulainen & Makkonen 2018)

The above-mentioned finding of a customer considering himself or herself as a modern customer is rather interesting since it proposes that omnichannel customer experience is not only about functional aspects, like seamlessness, connectivity, or consistency. Similar thoughts were proposed by Frazer and Stiehler (2014) who argue that a truly superior omnichannel customer experience takes also into consideration the multidimensionality of customer experience (see, for example, Schmitt 1999 and Verhoef et al. 2009) and considers emotions and feelings. Quach et al. (2020) on the other hand, used flow as one of the dimensions of omnichannel customer experience which took into consideration the enjoyment, captivation, and intensity of one's feelings. Melero et al. (2016) in turn proposed that to create an omnichannel customer experience, it is necessary to delight customers at the right channels and touchpoints. Therefore, besides integrating touchpoints seamlessly, every touchpoint should evoke customers' feelings and make them delighted.

Peltola et al. (2015) interviewed seven managers that work in Finnish retailing companies that were developing their omnichannel skills. One empirical finding was that it is not reasonable to predetermine customer journeys in an omnichannel environment. The better solution, according to the interviews, is to identify touchpoints and customers' needs and preferences in these touchpoints. Then each touchpoint may be enhanced by offering seamless and consistent omnichannel services and problem-solving content and information. (Peltola et al. 2015) Also, by identifying critical touchpoints, managers can improve the emotional cues touchpoints create in a customer (Frazer & Stiehler 2014). Finally, the touchpoints should be unified and managed consistently. Following this strategy, customers will most likely go ahead in their journeys, and regardless of the order of touchpoints, the experience

will be consistent (Peltola et al. 2015; Melero et al. 2016) From a practical perspective, collecting customer data from different phases of customer journeys will help in understanding customers' preferences which aid in improving touchpoints to match the customers' needs (Melero et al. 2016).

Peltola et al. (2015) emphasize that creating an integrated and coherent customer experience through digital and physical channels is one of the most critical issues in an omnichannel environment. Shi et al. (2020) propose that the channels should be integrated and optimized by creating connected and consistent information and content throughout customer journeys. It helps the customers to receive what they expect at each touchpoint and channel and help them to proceed in the customer journey (Melero et al. 2016). Also, Peltola et al. (2015) and Mosquera et al. (2017) emphasized that having unified product and pricing information and communications in different channels is necessary. Quach et al. (2020) on the other hand studied how service integration across different channels affects the omnichannel customer experience by analyzing data from customers who used omnichannel retailers. They divided service integration into two dimensions, namely service consistency, and transparency. Service consistency covers that information in different channels is consistent. Service transparency encompasses that firm offers honest information about its offering across channels. Their empirical findings indicated that both dimensions directly and significantly affect positively on omnichannel customer experience. Moreover, their findings show that both dimensions will encourage the customer to continue their journey and to enjoy it. (Quach et al. 2020)

Omnichannel retailing enables firms to gather data from customers and understand them better at different touchpoints, such as on social media or websites. This assists companies in creating personalized experiences by offering personalized content, recommendations, and offers for customers in the channels customers prefer. (Mosquera et al. 2017) Melero et al. (2016) and Shi et al. (2020) consider that personalization is one of the key aspects of omnichannel customer experience. They advise managers to invest in proper tools, technology, and cross-functional cooperation, so historical data can be collected from different channels and sources. Then it is possible to offer personalized content for individual customers through the proper channels. These findings are in line with Komulainen and Makkonen's (2018) study where they propose that customers and their value creation processes

should be understood better because then it is easier to integrate different touchpoints on a personal level (Komulainen & Makkonen 2018). One could argue that in an omnichannel environment, it is worthwhile to identify, personalize and connect critical touchpoints based on customer data. The touchpoints should be consistent regardless of the channel it occurs. In addition, the channels need to be integrated, because customers have different preferences regarding how they want to follow their journeys. With consistent and personalized touchpoints and integrated channels, it is possible to provide a truly omnichannel customer experience. The summary of the current omnichannel customer experience research has been compiled to figure 3.

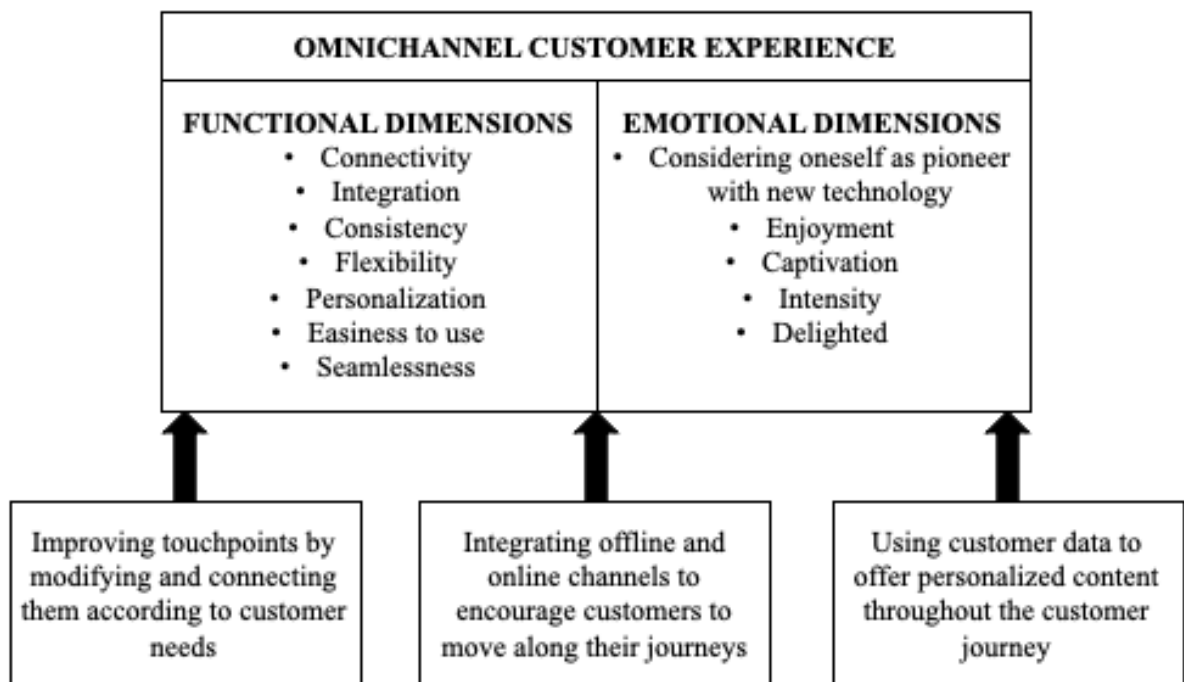


Figure 3: Summary of current omnichannel customer experience research

3 Research design and methods

This chapter presents the chosen research method for this thesis. The chosen method is qualitative research as that helps to understand how to manage the omnichannel customer experience in the automotive industry. First, qualitative research and single case studies as research methods are presented. Also, the case company is briefly introduced. Discussion on the data collection method, semi-structured interviews, and the chosen interviewees are followed. The fourth subchapter goes through the data analysis method, and finally, the reliability and validity of the thesis are analyzed.

3.1. Research design

This thesis aims to create more knowledge on *how* to manage omnichannel customer experience through customer journeys in the automotive industry. Whenever the research question includes why or how it is useful to conduct qualitative research. Puusa and Juuti (2020, p. 87-89) propose that usually in business research the researcher sets the research problem based on prior research and then gathers existing theory about the topic. If that procedure is followed, the next step is to gather empirical data which is compared to the prior literature. The findings may enrich academic knowledge and can also be applied for managerial purposes. (Puusa & Juuri 2020, p. 87-89) In this thesis, the same procedure was followed, and to answer the research questions, a theoretical framework was created, and previous literature was presented. Then the empirical data was gathered and analyzed. Finally, the data was compared to previous literature to enrich the knowledge about the topic. As the chosen research method should support the research questions and theoretical framework (Alasuutari 2011, p. 54), it was logical to choose qualitative research as the research method.

According to Alasuutari (2011, p. 27), quantitative research studies the statistical relationships between variables and their values to find out statistical regularities. Qualitative research on the other hand aims at describing, understanding, and explaining a particular phenomenon. It comprises the methodologies that study someone's subjective thoughts, experiences, and behavior. Hence the aim is not to do statistical generalizations. One of the char-

acteristics of qualitative research is that it aims to find new perspectives to study the phenomenon in the future. (Alasuutari 2011, p. 27; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 75; Juuti & Puusa 2020, p. 20)

Usually in qualitative research, the empirical findings and results are being compared to existing theory to see whether the findings support, complement, or differ from the current research (Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 25). Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, p. 14-15) emphasize that with qualitative research, the theory is necessary and it works usually as the foundation for empirical research. In this thesis, the theoretical framework was built on prior knowledge and the empirical research is conducted based on previous findings and research gaps. The topic is studied from the managerial perspective. Qualitative research gives the freedom to study different topics from various perspectives (Alasuutari 2011, p. 55).

A single case study is a suitable method for research that focuses on a specific topic within a certain unit or context (Gustafsson 2017). This thesis is conducted as a single case study because it focuses exclusively on a Finnish case company that operates in the automotive industry. In a single case study, many people can be studied from the same unit; in this thesis, the marketing and customer experience leaders and managers from the case company are interviewed and their thoughts and experiences are compared to each other. Gustafsson (2017) points out, that with single case studies, it is possible to gain a deeper and more precise understanding of the topic because, with fewer people, there is more time to focus on specific subjects. Consequently, the quality of produced theory and findings may have higher quality than with multiple case studies. (Gustafsson 2017) Mariotto, Zanni, and Moraes (2014) argue that in the management field, single case studies can be very useful even though generalizable results are not necessarily created. Conducting a single case study in this thesis provides unique value for the management of the case company.

3.2. The case company

This thesis is done in cooperation with a Finnish firm that operates as the importer and retailer of passenger cars, vans, and commercial vehicles. The firm focuses on one premium car brand that is globally recognizable and valuable. The case company sells new and used vehicles, offers service and repair, and operates in renting business as well. The company

has B2C and B2B customers but this thesis studies omnichannel customer experience in the context of B2C customers. The company has a long history in Finland and the Finnish retailing brand is also widely recognized. Recently, the company has expanded to a few nearby countries. The company consists of two organizations: importing and retailing organizations. This thesis aims to analyze omnichannel customer experience from both organizations' points of view because they both support each other in omnichannel management. As with many automotive firms, mobility and technology is also a major part of the current business.

Despite the strong brand, it is crucial to consider how to remain competitive in the automotive industry. Offering superior customer experience is necessary as automotive customers have become more demanding. Like Scherpen et al. (2018) stated in their research, in the automotive industry, the importance of a brand has diminished, and retailers should not purely rely on it anymore. Customers are no longer as brand loyal as they used to be. Therefore, the case company has stated that offering superior customer experience is one of their key strategic objectives in the upcoming years. In addition, a strong brand obligates superior customer experience. Customer experience management has become a strategic focus for the case company.

Normally, the physical store (a showroom or a dealership) has been of great importance to automotive firms. It has been the main place to look for information about new vehicles and to compare different alternatives. However, as in other industries, the customers gradually use digital channels. Yet, the physical store is still a major part of the customer experience because most people want to see, and test drive the car before the purchase. Besides, the cars need to be maintained and repaired physically. As the case company wants to offer superior customer experience, the digital customer experience and the seamless transition across online and offline touchpoints and channels are crucial. The case company sees omnichannel customer experience as one of the keys to gaining competitive advantage and therefore it should be studied more. A consistent experience should be delivered through the entire customer journey as that can improve customer loyalty. Furthermore, the brand sets high expectations, and therefore it is crucial that the case company can deliver a superior customer experience at various touchpoints.

3.3. Data collection method

In qualitative research, the data can be collected, for example, by interviewing, studying focus groups, or observing human behavior. Interviews are the most used qualitative data collection method. (Fossey et al. 2002) It is characteristic for qualitative studies that data collection does not aim to find the absolute truth on the topic but rather it focuses on the interaction between the researcher and the interviewee. It is important to recall that interviewer interprets the interviewee's responses and so the empirical results do not fully represent what the interviewee experiences or thinks. In order to interpret the interviewee's thoughts as holistically as possible, it is necessary to record the interviews, (Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 95-96)

Interviews have also been discovered to be beneficial in business and managerial studies because they work as an efficient way to get as much required information as possible from the interviewee's subjective perspective. The aim is to understand interviewees' experiences, feelings, emotions, and thoughts by having a discussion. One of the benefits of interviews is that the interviewee can explain and specify some of the answers if needed. (Puusa & Juuti, 2020, p. 99; Fossey et al. 2002) It was natural to choose interviews for this thesis because it is done from a managerial perspective and so one-on-one interviews work efficiently in gaining deeper and more professional knowledge on the topic.

3.3.1. Semi-structured interviews

The chosen data collection method for this thesis is semi-structured interviews. In this method, every interviewee is interviewed one at a time, to get an individual and subjective response. This method is different compared to, for example, focus groups, where multiple people are being interviewed in a group for a longer period. (Adams 2015) With semi-structured interviews, the researcher creates a list of questions about certain themes before the interview. With pre-determined themes and questions, it is easier to make sure that the interview follows the desired formula. (Fossey et al. 2002) However, semi-structured interviews enable a certain level of flexibility because the questions are open-ended and additional questions can be asked (Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 104-105). The themes are based on

existing knowledge on the topic that is presented in the form of a theoretical framework. The main objective is to learn about the interviewee's thoughts and feelings about the phenomenon. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 66)

In semi-structured interviews, the interviewee can answer freely, which is different compared to structured interviews in which there are certain response options (Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 104-105). As mentioned, there is the freedom to ask additional questions and/or specify some questions. For example, the interviewer may ask the interviewee to explain something in a more detailed way. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 66; Adams 2015) Puusa and Juuti (2020, p. 105) state that it is beneficial since the interviewee may bring up something that the researcher has not taken into consideration while designing the questions. Thus, a semi-structured interview reminds a regular conversational talk (Alasuutari 2011, p. 93), even though the themes and questions are pre-determined.

For this thesis, semi-structured interviews are the most adequate form to collect data. It is critical to have the individual thoughts and opinions on omnichannel customer experience management from the company's managers without others influencing their thoughts and opinions (Adams 2015). In addition, the interviewees may bring up something unique that is not on the list of questions. By having multiple conversations and comparing them to each other, a deeper understanding and better managerial implications can be created for the case company. In this thesis, it is vital to get a comprehensive picture of the topic, so open-ended questions are better than questions with pre-determined response options.

3.3.2. Interviewee selection

With qualitative research, it is important that the people who are being studied, have enough knowledge on the phenomenon so their subjective perspectives can contribute to the research. The number of interviewees does not play such a big role if the interviewees have the best possible knowledge on the topic in the chosen context. Also, usually, the amount of data will still be large even though there would be only a few interviewees. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 75; Fossey et al. 2002) This thesis is a single case study done from the managerial perspective and the topic is related to customer experience and marketing. Thus, the

best possible interviewees are managers working in the case company's marketing and customer experience organizations.

Five people from the case company were chosen as the interviewees. To get a holistic view of the customer experience management in the case company it was wise to consider distribution and retailing perspectives in the interviews. The case company had recently hired a customer experience director and it was natural to interview him. The marketing organization of the case company is divided into sales and after-sales service. This thesis studies omnichannel customer experience management through customer journeys so choosing marketing managers from sales and after sales was necessary. In a summary, the customer experience leader, the head of the case company's marketing, and three marketing managers were interviewed. The interviewees from the marketing organization had quite a lot of experience from the automotive industry whereas the customer experience leader had worked with customer experience responsibilities in other industries. Therefore, it was a great opportunity to gain insights into omnichannel customer experience without too much focus on the automotive industry context. More detailed information about the interviewees and their roles can be found from table 1 below:

Table 1: Details about the interviewees

Interviewee	Position in the case company	Organizational department	Duration of the interview
Interviewee 1 (male)	Customer experience director	Customer experience, import	55 minutes
Interviewee 2 (male)	Marketing director of the case company	Marketing, import and retail	46 minutes
Interviewee 3 (male)	Marketing manager, sales and after-sales service	Marketing, import and retail	54 minutes
Interviewee 4 (male)	Marketing manager, after-sales service	Marketing, import and retail	53 minutes
Interviewee 5 (male)	Marketing manager, sales	Marketing, retail	47 minutes

All the interviewees were approached either via email or via phone to participate in the interview. The topic and the objective of the research were explained before the interviews. Additionally, every interviewee got the interview questionnaire beforehand (see appendix 1.), so they were able to prepare for the questions before the actual interview. Furthermore, the interviewees were informed about the fact their identity was held anonym in this thesis.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted as one-on-one interviews via Teams due to Covid-19 situation and every interview was recorded. The interviews were held in Finnish as that is the native language of the interviewees. This way, a complete understanding between the interviewer and interviewee was possible to accomplish. The interviews took from 46 minutes to 55 minutes.

3.4. Data analysis methods

The interviews are recorded, transcribed, and translated to English. In this thesis, the interviews were done in Finnish because it is the native language of the interviewees. It ensures that every question is correctly understood, and the possibility of misinterpretations is reduced. The next step is to go through the data and describe and interpret the results that are meaningful in terms of the thesis (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 76-77). By analyzing the results, the researcher should be able to interpret and understand the phenomenon in the specific context based on the most important empirical findings. An important aspect of qualitative research is to compound the key results from every interview. (Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 130)

One of the comprehensive and widely used analysis methods with qualitative research is content analysis. Content analysis is a useful analysis method for analyzing data from various sources, for instance, from text or audio data (Stemler 2015). The process of content analysis starts by summarizing the important findings from the broad data and reducing the unnecessary parts. Then it is reasonable to categorize the key findings and try to find recurring themes. Finally, the key findings should be displayed in a compact form and the results should be interpreted by the researcher. (Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 135; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 88)

Puusa and Juuti (2020, p. 133) remind that it is essential that every interview is analyzed first individually before comparing interviews with each other. After comparing the interviews and results, the important similarities and possible differences between interviews should be analyzed because it enriches the research and makes it more trustworthy. The researcher should be able to justify and explain the interpretations that are created from data. After presenting and analyzing the empirical findings, it is possible to compare the key findings to the existing theory, and eventually, the researcher can conclude the phenomenon. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 92; Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 26, 133-135) For this thesis, content analysis is the best choice because the aim is to produce both theoretical and managerial implications and assist the case company with omnichannel customer experience management. To receive a holistic view, it is necessary to interpret and compare what the managers think about the topic in the case company. Furthermore, as different managers have different areas of responsibility, the answers can support each other.

The analysis approach defines how theory is utilized to draw conclusions. For this thesis, the abductive approach was chosen as the analysis approach since empirical findings should be supported by existing literature and both are important. The abductive approach takes into consideration both the collected data and the previous literature on the topic. They are compared to shape the current theory. The other choices would have been to emphasize the empirical data to create theoretical frameworks (induction) or use theory as the main source of data to guide the analysis (deduction) – abductive approach fits in the middle of these two approaches. (Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 137; Awuzie & McDermott 2017) Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, p. 100) discuss that the inductive approach develops new theories from empirical findings, whereas in an abductive approach the purpose is to use existing concepts and compare and include them on the data. Timmermans and Tavory (2012) argue that the prior theory has a critical position in an abductive approach when analyzing the empirical data because together they work as a tool to refine existing theories.

3.5. Reliability and validity

In every scientific research, reliability and validity are of great importance because the ultimate objective should be to produce trustworthy scientific results. Consequently, trustworthiness is discussed in the context of reliability and validity. Reliability means that the results

could be repeated and hence the results are not dependent on the researcher. The validity on the other hand encompasses that the research answers the research question and hence fulfills the research objective. However, it has been discussed that with qualitative research, validity and reliability may not be the best ways to evaluate trustworthiness because the focus is on subjective perspectives, experiences, opinions, and emotions. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018, p. 119; Puusa & Juuti 2020, pp. 159) Puusa and Juuti (2020, p. 159) suggest that in qualitative research validity refers more to understanding different phenomena and finding new perspectives from them. Regarding reliability, the authors argue that with qualitative research, it is more valuable to consider whether the results could be similar in other contexts as well. (Puusa & Juuti 2020, p. 159)

When it comes to the reliability of this thesis, it should be kept in mind that it is conducted with limited resources, and so reliability may be affected by the number of interviewees. Additionally, as Gustafsson (2017) stated, with single case studies, reliability may suffer. With single case studies, it is more difficult to create generalizable and reproducible results because they are limited by the context. Therefore, the results of this thesis might not be similar in other companies, industries, or countries because the focus is on a Finnish car importer and retailer. Gustafsson (2017) emphasizes that reliability with single case studies can be improved by utilizing prior research on the topic and comparing the empirical findings on that. To improve the reliability of this thesis, chapter 5 will compare and find similarities and differences across the empirical data and prior research.

On the other hand, in terms of validity, this thesis seems trustworthy. The interviewees represent the managers of the case company, and they work in either the marketing or customer experience departments. The customer experience leader knows the topic from other industries as well. Every interview was a one-on-one discussion that was recorded, so other interviewees could not affect the others' responses. Additionally, the interview questions were built based on the research topic and existing theory which supports the validity. According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2018, p. 123) data collection method, interviewee selection, and the interviewing situation among other things impact the trustworthiness of research.

Puusa and Juuti (2020, p. 164) propose a few things that would increase the trustworthiness of studies. To further improve the validity and reliability of this study, this chapter focuses

on describing the interviewing process. Moreover, when conducting the interviews, it needs to be remembered to act as neutral as possible, so the interviewees are not affected by the reactions and emotions of the interviewer. Another important thing is to make sure that interpretations are not distorted, and actually represent the interviewee's opinions. A vital thing is to be clear on when the empirical results represent the interviewee and when they represent the researcher. Therefore, in the analysis chapter, the interviewees are quoted multiple times to increase their reliability and validity. (Puusa & Juuti 2020 p. 164)

4 Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings from the five semi-structured interviews. The interviewees work in the case company, and four of them are in different marketing positions and one of them focuses solely on customer experience management in the case company. Having interviewees with different areas of expertise may create more versatile analysis. This chapter presents the interpretations of the interviewees' answers, compares them to each other, and at the end of each subchapter, a brief conclusion of the theme is presented.

The interviews were analyzed through the content analysis method and the key findings are presented in this chapter. The findings are divided into three main themes that are in line with the sub-research questions. The first theme presents interviewees' thoughts on customer journey management in the case company. The next theme aims to understand how omnichannel customer experience is perceived and managed from the firm perspective. Lastly, the third theme discusses the areas of development regarding omnichannel customer experience management

4.1. Managing customer journeys

The first sub-research question in this thesis is how customer journeys are managed in the case company and hence the first six interview questions were related to identifying touchpoints and pain points and how they are monitored and modified to improve customer journeys. Therefore, three sub-themes were created, and the first sub-theme focuses on discussing the identified critical touchpoints. The second sub-theme focuses on customer journey mapping and its usefulness in the case company. The third subtheme sheds light on how the touchpoints are modified and improved currently and how the interviewees would develop the management of customer journeys.

4.1.1. Identifying touchpoints

In the beginning, the interviewees were asked to identify from which touchpoints are customer journeys formed in the case company. Interviewee 1 argued that customer journey is

not, in his opinion, formed by touchpoints *per se* but rather from customer's needs and ways to satisfy the needs at different stages of customer journeys. Besides, he emphasized the importance of analyzing customer journeys from the customer's perspective.

Overall, everyone agreed that the customer journey consists of prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages. Three interviewees identified that the prepurchase starts when the customer sees an advertisement or other brand-related activity in either physical or digital channels. This first touchpoint creates certain expectations towards the brand. When the customer has become interested, usually, the next touchpoint is the importer website where the customer may find more information and personalize a suitable solution in the car configurator. Interviewee 3 mentioned that directing the customer to the configurator is one of the main objectives of prepurchase marketing.

“The first stage is when customers’ interest towards us arises and they start to look for information about us, from our channels like websites and different media. Besides, everything that is written about us online and how we are visible in events, or any channel shapes the image and expectations about us.” (Interviewee 2)

“After the customer has seen our online or offline advertisement, the next touchpoint is our websites... We can think about our websites as a funnel. First, the user searches for a specific product and enters its showroom. The next desired step is to go to our configurator and finish it. Then we want them to ask for an offer or test drive the car. Then the journey continues on the retailing side and in the physical environment.” (Interviewee 3)

Seeing articles or posts about the case company in the media and reading reviews from peer customers were also recognized. Yet, these were the only two touchpoints outside of the case company's control that was mentioned. One of the interviewees discussed that it would be valuable to map touchpoints outside the firm's control as the case company had not yet mapped them in their customer journeys.

The interviewees were asked what they thought were the most critical touchpoints in the prepurchase stage. Most interviewees considered information search from the websites as one of the critical ones. Customers want to find information conveniently and quickly from the internet. Otherwise, it turns into a pain point. Furthermore, two interviewees pointed out

that there are too many alternative vehicle models and details with every model, which customers might find too complicated and winding. The complicatedness of the website and models was also discovered as a pain point in the current customer journey.

“We have recognized from our customers that the first information search needs to be easy and convenient. If it is difficult the whole journey may stop there... Moreover, if a customer sees an ad and they click it to find more information and it is not found easily with every device, it is a pain point.” (interviewee 2)

The prepurchase phase was identified to continue from the import side to the retailing side and from the digital channels to the physical channels. The customer service in the physical store was found to be one of the most critical touchpoints during the customer journey, in every purchase stage. It was pointed out that the customer should immediately be served or either greeted in the store in an extremely polite way or otherwise it turns out as a pain point. Supposedly, if it turns out as a pain point, the customers might share their negative reviews with other consumers. The next identified touchpoint is test driving. The purchase touchpoints include negotiation with the salesperson and closing the purchase.

Next, the customer enters the postpurchase stage, which the interviewees refer to as the “owning” stage. Interviewee 4 mentioned that the touchpoints are not directly based on the customer’s need but rather the need of the car. Hence why interviewee 4 considered that one of the most important touchpoints in the postpurchase stage is that the customer is encouraged to connect the car with the company’s connectivity service (mobile application) which assists in recognizing the car’s needs. Personalized reminders and messages about car maintenance can be sent utilizing the data gathered from the connectivity service.

“Usually, when someone is purchasing a product, the need arises from the customer’s need. But with car maintenance, the need arises from the product...And that is why we have an optimal situation compared to selling new products... Therefore, digital touchpoints are critical for us, for example, connecting the car with the connectivity service. It aids us to contact the customer very conveniently. (Interviewee 4)

“I would not even call the connectivity services a singular touchpoint as that helps us to be in an ongoing contact with the customer.” (Interviewee 3)

When asked how the interviewees evaluated the customer journeys and the critical touchpoints, the answers varied a bit. Some had been working in the automotive industry for some

time and some relied on the data from the customers. It was also mentioned by the interviewees that the answers were based on their personal opinions. On the other hand, the principal had designed the postpurchase journey, which is followed in Finland.

Despite the interviewees identifying quite similar touchpoints throughout the customer journey, there were some slight differences in whether they thought digital channels are more important than physical channels. Interviewee 1 considered that digitalization and digital channels and touchpoints should be the core of the business. Self-serving has become increasingly popular and people tend to look for information and interact with the company on their own terms. Also, it was brought up that there should be a person, or a robot, assisting the customer in the digital channels. However, interviewee 1 emphasized that in the automotive industry, the physical channels and physical interactions are highly important as well. Interviewee 2 stated that in the automotive industry, the physical touchpoints and channels can create a completely different emotional and luxury experience, compared to the digital channels. Also, even though interviewee 2 considered digital channels important, it could be interpreted that physical touchpoints were more significant in this context.

In a conclusion, the customer journey should be seen as the customer's way of satisfying its individual needs throughout the journey. The needs are satisfied at different online and offline channels and every stage of the customer journey includes physical and digital touchpoints. Digital touchpoints have a growing importance for customers but in the automotive industry, it seems like physical touchpoints are, at least currently, more important in terms of customer experience. The identified touchpoints were mostly controlled or created by the case company and as discussed in the upcoming chapter, identifying external touchpoints could be valuable for the company. Overall, most agreed on the critical touchpoints, and therefore, they need to be looked after actively.

4.1.2. Mapping customer journeys

The interviewees had done customer journey mapping. Customer journey maps were considered as a strategic tool for managing a firm's capabilities. It seemed like others had done it more recently and two interviewees mentioned that they had not done it for a while. How-

ever, all the interviewees agreed and found customer journey mapping beneficial. Some interviewees thought it would be useful to map customer journeys regularly. According to the interviewees, it is especially important in the automotive industry as it is in constant change and the case company should be aware of the changing customer needs and behavior. In fact, not doing it regularly was seen as a weakness of the company. Interviewees thought that one of the advantages of customer journey maps is to visualize the critical touchpoints in which the case company measures or could measure customer experience. All in all, customer journey maps were found helpful in understanding how a customer perceives different touchpoints. From the firm perspective, one of the interviewees thought that it helps in allocating the resources:

“By identifying the critical touchpoints through customer journey maps, we can allocate the marketing resources better. Also, it helps in optimizing the content we deliver in the touchpoints and that creates added-value for the customer.” (Interviewee 5)

Customer journey mapping had been done from a few separate perspectives; the case company had created 1) image/brand journey 2) information search journey 3) buying journey, including entering the physical store, 4) postpurchase journey and 5) few journeys regarding the digital services. Nevertheless, every interviewee mentioned that there is a lack of holistic management of customer experience throughout the entire customer journey. It was emphasized by everyone that there is an urgent need to have a comprehensive understanding of the whole customer journey, and the entire journey should be visualized. Interviewee 1 raised two issues in the current customer journey maps:

“I find it valuable that we have done customer journey mapping. However, I find two challenges we face with our current maps. The first is the lack of a holistic view of the customer journey: we have done them only in certain areas, like sales or car maintenance. They are really important as well but mapping the whole customer journey would be even better. The other issue is that the maps focus on our company’s own channels. So, we need to extend the ones we already have.” (Interviewee 1)

Next, the interviewees were asked what information the customer journey maps include. The maps include various things, including the timeline, the channel, customer’s actions, the company’s actions, the internal systems involved, and who is responsible for the touchpoint. It was not clear whether the maps include the emotions and expectations of the customers,

but it was seen as important to map those as well. Additionally, it was pointed out that the map should include information on how it is possible to move on to the next touchpoint.

“The maps include the channel, what the customer wants to achieve at the touchpoint, how we enable that for the customer, what internal systems affect that, who is responsible for that and how one can seamlessly move on to the next touchpoint.” (Interviewee 2)

“We should consider the customer journey from the customer’s point of view. What are the customer’s needs, emotions, and expectations at every phase of the journey? Based on that we should design our own solution to match those needs.” (interviewee 4)

One of the essential parts which were recognized by a few interviewees was that the maps have a cultural perspective; it helps the one responsible for the touchpoint to understand their own relevance in the customer’s journey and experience. Therefore, customer journey mapping is valuable for the employees of the firm.

“By visualizing customer journey maps, everyone can understand what their influence in their own touchpoint is and on the next one as well... Without having it written down, no one can understand their own role in the big picture” (Interviewee 3)

To summarize the findings, mapping customer journeys regularly would help the case company to respond better to changing consumer needs at different touchpoints. This is possible if customer journey maps are analyzed from the customer’s point of view. A customer journey map works also as a strategic tool for managing customer journeys because it helps to identify touchpoints, measure them, allocate marketing resources, and understand customers better. Furthermore, they work as a tool for the company’s personnel to understand their role in the creation of customer experience. To fully exploit the benefits of customer journey mapping, the maps should be done from the whole customer journey. The customer journey maps consist of different kinds of dimensions, but the vital thing is to consider them from the point of view of the customer and its needs during various steps in the journey. Based on that, the touchpoints can be designed in a customer-centric way.

4.1.3. Modifying and improving touchpoints

As customer journey mapping and identifying touchpoints is not enough to manage customer journeys, the interviewees were also asked how the touchpoints and customer journeys are

modified and improved. Improving singular touchpoints and customer journeys were seen as part of the customer experience management and interviewees agreed that both are important. Interviewee 1 considered that customer experience should be managed in three levels: strategic, tactical, and operational level:

“For me, developing singular touchpoints is customer experience development on an operative level. Developing the customer journeys is part of tactical operations. The wider topics should be managed on the strategic level, for example, our business, channels and their relations to each other, and business models revolving around customers’ needs. Every level is needed, and they should be managed in an integrative way.” (Interviewee 1)

It seemed like managing it at three levels is the objective but currently, they are managed at two levels: in a strategic (customer experience) and operational (touchpoint) levels. As an interpretation, having resources to manage and develop customer journeys would be useful for the case company. It was pointed out in the interviews that there is no coherent understanding and management of the customer journeys. Regarding the operational level, the interviewees told that some touchpoints, mostly the physical ones, are continuously improved:

“We measure customer satisfaction at certain touchpoints, for instance, after a customer has been in car maintenance. We also do mystery shopping. Additionally, if a customer has received an offer but hasn’t made a purchase, we try to ask them why... Based on customer reviews and surveys we modify the touchpoints, and it has really helped us in succeeding better.” (Interviewee 3)

Some improvements had been done in the digital channels as well, but it was mentioned that the digital touchpoints are not measured as regularly as the physical ones. The company had cut off some models from their website to see whether it increases the possibility of the customer continuing its journey. Improving the website structure was seen as a long-term project that would improve the customer experience. On the other hand, interviewee 5 considered that the case company should have a continuous process of improving websites regularly. In addition, he pointed out that the websites should be improved by focusing on mobile optimization to respond to the changing customer needs better.

Few interviewees argued that there is neither a systematic process of improving touchpoints nor managing the customer journeys. It was brought up that currently, more focus is on improving singular touchpoints, but it is easily forgotten, how these touchpoints affect the next ones and on the customer's journey. Therefore, managing customer journeys as a whole, from prepurchase to postpurchase is necessary. It also helps to understand the customer and its needs better.

Based on the empirical findings, it seems like the case company manages customer journeys and experience at two levels: on a strategic, and operational level. The strategic level covers wider areas related to customer experience. The operational level includes measuring and improving singular touchpoints. One could argue that including an additional level, the journey level, is needed. It seemed like the successful implementation of journey management requires systematic processes. The case company measures customer satisfaction at different touchpoints and it has been working with physical touchpoints. Therefore, it would be reasonable to utilize digital touchpoints as well.

4.2. How is omnichannel customer experience perceived and managed?

The next theme revolves around sub-research question two: how is omnichannel customer experience perceived and managed in the case company. First, before studying omnichannel customer experience, it was reasonable to find out how the customer experience is formed and managed in the case company. After that, the detected dimensions of omnichannel customer experience were further investigated in the case company's context.

4.2.1 Customer experience and customer experience management

First, the interviewees were asked how they would define customer experience. The answers shared similar features: every interviewee emphasized the emotionality of the concept. Three interviewees mentioned that every touchpoint the customer encounters affects that. It was also noticed that customer experience is related to expectations that shape the experience. In addition, it was brought up, that customer experience is long-lasting - it starts before the actual customer relationship, for example, by seeing an ad.

"It is the sum of every feeling and touchpoint along customer's journey. It starts before the customer relationship has started." (Interviewee 1)

"It is everything how a customer experiences us and what kind of image is created based on the touchpoints they encounter." (Interviewee 2)

"It builds from every moment when a person interacts with the company." (Interviewee 5)

Next, the interviewees were asked how they feel customer experience is formed in the case company. Most of the interviewees highlighted that the brand creates high expectations towards them. The expectations are created through the firm's brand actions. To have a superior experience with the case company, the expectations should be exceeded at every touchpoint.

"Our brand makes the promise, and customer experience redeems the promise." (Interviewee 1 and 2)

Furthermore, the luxury feelings the brand delivers were brought up in one of the interviews and it was seen as an important factor in customer experience formation. Another interviewee mentioned that customer experience is also based on the customer's trust towards the case company.

As omnichannel retailing involves multiple integrated online and offline channels, it was logical to ask the interviewees how they see different channels affect the customer experience. Interviewees considered that online and offline channels create different kinds of value for a customer. Interviewee 1 classified the values into four categories: emotional, functional, economic, and symbolic value. However, few interviewees thought that both should create similar emotions and emotional associations, for example, trust, easiness, and luxury.

It was noticed by a few interviewees, that physical channels deliver mainly emotional value. That is because the product has several elements, for example, functionality, technology, and design, which affect the emotions of a customer. In the physical world, the brand can offer exceptional emotional value. In addition, the process of buying a car can create a lot of feelings in a customer, and with a premium brand, it is even more meaningful. Few interviewees brought up, that in the automotive industry, digital channels cannot yet fully create the same

emotional effects as physical channels and so physical channels should not be neglected despite the rapid growth of digitalization.

“When we consider the offline channels, like our physical stores or events, we can uniquely highlight our brand - for every sense. In the physical channels, we can create completely different emotional experiences.” (Interviewee 2)

The interviewees considered that digital channels deliver functional value. The words that were mentioned multiple times regarding the digital channels were easiness, speed, uncomplicatedness, seamlessness, and consistency. These are related to how convenient it is for a customer to scroll through the case company’s digital channels and find information. Few interviewees mentioned that emotionality cannot be forgotten in the digital channels because they also create emotional feelings and especially trust towards the case company.

“Based on our customer satisfaction data, we have received feedback about our digital channels and found out that our customers value easiness, seamlessness, and uncomplicatedness. They look for a service provider who is worthy of their time and trust.” (Interviewee 4)

Interestingly, advertising was also brought up by one of the interviewees. The difference between online and offline ads was discussed and interviewee 3 mentioned, that an offline ad needs to be designed so that it immediately affects the customer’s feelings and emotions so they would remember the ad. That is because the customer cannot necessarily continue the journey as easy as with digital channels. In the digital world, it is easier to encourage the customer to move forward only by clicking a button.

“If you have a static outdoor advertisement, you need to design it so that the customer would understand it immediately... In the digital form, the customer is more controllable... In an offline environment, the customer creates a feeling in the exact moment when they see the ad and we cannot maybe affect the customer again.” (Interviewee 3)

The current state of customer experience management was brought up by a few interviewees who have been working closely with customer experience. Interviewee 1 considered that customer experience management includes setting objectives, measuring customer experience, and designing ways of working. It was emphasized that customer experience should be managed especially from the strategic perspective. Interviewee 2 also discussed strategic perspective and how customer experience has been made a solid part of the company’s strat-

egy and decision-making. Interviewee 2 also discussed the operative perspective on customer experience management. Every business function has a leader who is responsible that customer experience is considered in the daily decision-making. Both interviewees emphasized the customer-centricity and its importance in customer experience management:

“One of my key objectives here [as customer experience leader] is related to the organizational culture: I aim to bring the customer-centric culture and shift the organizational mindset from product and process-oriented to customer-oriented.” (Interviewee 1)

In a conclusion, in line with customer experience literature, every interviewee considered that customer experience is highly related to one’s emotions and it is built on every touchpoint that customer encounters even before the customer relationship has started. In the case company customer experience forms instantly around the brand that represents luxury, premium, and trust. A premium brand increases the expectations that should be exceeded at every touchpoint. Different channels affect the customer experience in a somewhat different way: in the physical channels, the emotional value plays a significant role due to the physical product and the brand. In the digital channels, based on customer data, customers seek functional value, like uncomplicatedness and seamlessness. Summarizing the discussion about digital and physical ads, one could argue that with offline ads there is a possibility to create a strong emotional feeling, but it requires catching the attention of customers immediately. In digital channels, it is also important, but customers are more controllable. Managing customer experience includes setting objectives, designing the ways of working, and measuring performance. It should be implemented in different business functions, and it should be the basis of daily decision-making. To improve customer experience management, the firm should build a customer-centric organizational culture.

4.2.2. Omnichannel customer experience

Next, the interviewees were asked about their perception of omnichannel customer experience. The answers varied a bit but there were similar attributes in the answers. Having seamless transitions from one channel and touchpoint to another was found highly important. Seamlessness was also discussed in the context of expectations meeting reality; one of the interviewees emphasized that being seamless requires that advertising is based on reality.

Like being seamless, channel integration was found as one crucial enabler of omnichannel customer experience. It was noticed that it means an easy flow from one channel to another regardless of which channels a customer decides to use. Consistency across channels was also mentioned in the interviews as that helps to move along through different channels. Besides, it helps to evoke similar feelings throughout online and offline channels.

“I would describe the consistency as a downhill; when the customer gets excited about us and our cars, they should be able to get to the point when you close the deal as smooth as possible.” (Interviewee 3)

Personalization was also discussed and found important in omnichannel customer experience. With personalized content and services, customers’ individual preferences and expectations can be exceeded. Additionally, it was mentioned that to be seamless from the customer’s point of view, the customer journey and touchpoints require personalization. Every interviewee wanted the case company to increasingly invest in personalization. Internal systems and capabilities were acknowledged to be essential in creating a personalized omnichannel customer experience.

According to the interviewees, customer-centricity is vital since customers have different preferences. For them, being omnichannel means also satisfying individual customer needs at the channel the customer prefers. To offer omnichannel customer experience, the company have shifted their strategic mindset;

“Previously we thought that we have stores, systems, and channels in which the customer moves from one touchpoint to another. Nowadays we try to build these elements around the customer and its needs and preferences.” (Interviewee 2)

An interesting finding which had not been discovered in academic literature is that Interviewee 1 thought that the service should be distinguished from the channels. In practice, it means that first, it is relevant to think about how customers perceive the service and after that, the firm should consider in which channels the customer would like to gain information about the service and how it would be wise to communicate it for the customer. Additionally, Interviewee 1 discussed that in an omnichannel environment customer value chains are constantly changing. The incidence of different characteristics of omnichannel customer experience and its management is presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Incidence of omnichannel customer experience (and management) characteristics

Customer-centricity (x 2)	Personalization (x 3)
Seamlessness (x 3)	Expectations meeting reality (x 1)
Channel integration and consistency (x 3)	Distinguish the service/content from the channel (x 1)

Next, the interviewees were asked more closely about channel integration and its current management in the case company. With this question, the answers varied. Again, Interviewee 1 highlighted the importance of separating channels from the content so the case company could better respond to changing value chains. When the content or service has been fully understood from the customer's perspective, then the relevant information can be shared in the relevant channels;

“Omnichannel does not mean managing channels but managing the content that is served in a consistent yet personalized way in different channels.” (Interviewee 1)

The consistency of content and information was mentioned also in other interviews and many thought that it is the key to channel integration. As most of the interviewees represented the marketing organization, they considered that having a consistent and unified messaging across channels is the responsibility of the marketing teams and partners, such as marketing and media agencies. In addition, a few interviewees mentioned that channel integration means from the customer's perspective that it is easy to use and switch the channel, which should have a similar appearance. Moreover, the quality of service in each channel should be equal. From the firm perspective, it requires that the systems are integrated and managed in an integrated way.

When asked whether the company had succeeded in channel integration, interviewees agreed that when it comes to marketing and communications, the integration between digital and physical channels has been successful in both car sales and after sales. Content has been systematic and consistent, and touchpoints have been designed so that they would direct a

user to continue the journey. A concrete example is the number of people who asks for an offer after configuring a car in an online environment:

“Considering how complicated our industry is, we have succeeded in channel integration well... For example, we can see that quite many of our website users have configured the car in a configurator and they enter our physical store with the code from the configurator.” (Interviewee 2)

Despite the interviewees’ thought channel integration has been so far successful, every interviewee agreed that currently there is a lack of coherent management of the channels throughout the journey. As already discussed, the interviewees raised concerns that the management is not integrated across offline and online channels that involve other departments than marketing. A lack of integrated management between purchase and postpurchase channels was also discovered. It was recognized that having unified marketing channels is not enough, as every channel should be seamlessly integrated.

“I think we currently manage channels in silos. Maybe there is a lack of coherent vision of where we would like to be in the future and there is no holistic understanding and management of channels.” (Interviewee 5)

The interviewees were asked to explain what does personalizing touchpoints means in their firm. Currently, the firm does some personalization, but it is based mostly on vehicle data and not on customer data. Groups of customers are defined based on, for example, which year the car was bought or when was the last car maintenance. The objective is always to target people that are assumed to be interested in the message. The content is mainly similar in the defined group but, for example, an offer can vary based on predetermined rules. However, some interviewees hoped for more dynamic content based on individuals. Personalized digital messages are sent based on created customer journeys. Also, personalized direct marketing has been conducted and nowadays those are better monitored in the case company.

Interviewees were also asked how customer data is exploited currently in the creation of personalized content. Again, interviewees shared similar thoughts that currently the data covers mainly the vehicle. All agreed that they can get a valuable and good amount of data about the vehicles but they also all hoped for more data about the customer, its needs, history, and preferences. When the case company utilizes data in personalization they use CRM data,

which includes information about the vehicle and its condition. They also use third-party data which has helped the company to recognize certain characteristics of similar customers.

“Simply said, we utilize our CRM data to build our digital customer journeys and with [of-line] direct marketing we compound our CRM data to third-party data.” (Interviewee 4)

In a conclusion, omnichannel customer experience means similar things to the case company as academic literature has recognized. Customer-centricity is the basis of omnichannel customer experience. Being able to move seamlessly across integrated channels that offer consistent information and content was seen as important by every interviewee. Channel integration also covers offering equally good service in every channel and having similar systems that function conveniently. It is important to manage the content and services that are offered for customers in the channels they prefer to use. The case company has been successful in integrating channels, especially marketing channels. However, the interviewees wished for holistic channel management which covers every channel and touchpoint during the customer’s journey. Personalization was found a solid part of omnichannel customer experience and currently, digital content based on customer journeys is personalized. Additionally, direct advertising is sometimes personalized and targeted to predetermined groups of people. Vehicle data is exploited to personalize messages but using customer data seems a potential option for the future.

4.3. How to develop omnichannel customer experience management

As omnichannel customer experience and its management is still quite a new topic in the marketing landscape, and automotive consumers move increasingly towards being omnichannel (Deloitte 2016), it was reasonable to study how the interviewees would develop omnichannel customer experience management in the case company. Based on previous chapters, the case company has succeeded in some areas but there is no holistic management through the entire customer journey.

One of the objectives of this thesis was to gain more knowledge on the variety of touchpoints, like emails, social media, and advertising in omnichannel management. It was recognized by all interviewees that the above-mentioned channels are very important in terms of customer experience for many reasons; 1) they can offer added value for customers 2) they are

useful channels to personalize transactional and informational content, and 3) they enable to have a dialogue with a customer and thus helps the company to gain data about them.

“Currently we personalize our customer journeys [i.e., email]. In the future, we could use our CRM data to personalize social media and Google advertising. This would help us to complement our current communication.” (Interviewee 4)

Omnichannel customer experience is not only about the functional values, and different touchpoints should evoke feelings, especially in the automotive industry. Therefore, an interesting point raised by interviewee 3 was that in an omnichannel world, seamlessness also means exploiting the full potential of the used channel;

“The most important thing is to use every channel in a way that the full potential is utilized. For example, in radio, we should creatively use voice... Seamlessness and omnichannel mean also to talk about right things, at the right place, with the right kind of creative content.” (Interviewee 3)

Interviewees thought that these channels would work in offering personalized discounts or other transactional advertisements. This would enhance in serving the customers in the right channels at the right time, which makes the journey more seamless. Additionally, few interviewees brought up that these would be essential channels in providing informational content for the customers. As the industry is quite technical, it would be valuable to, for example, remind customers about certain functions of the car after a customer has purchased one. This would create added value for the customer and improve the customer experience. Another example was informational content based on electric vehicles. If the case company recognizes customers' interest in electric vehicles, educational content could be delivered via different channels. Interviewee 2 found educating crucial in terms of overall customer experience. Furthermore, with relevant content the case company can have a dialogue with customers to learn more about them and their preferences.

“Dialogue is the key because by that we can understand the meaning of relevant content for the customers... We could start offering relevant personalized content for customers, for example, after purchasing a car, and encourage them to ask for more questions or give feedback whether the content was found useful or not. This way we can get into dialogue.” (Interviewee 1)

Delivering informational content would also enhance the omnichannel customer experience in the postpurchase stage. As this thesis aimed to gain more knowledge on the postpurchase

stage's meaning in omnichannel customer experience, sending valuable and informational content and asking for feedback was found useful, especially in the postpurchase stage. Interviewee 5 mentioned that the salespeople should also contact the customers after the purchase to make sure everything is going well. This would most likely improve the trust for the case company. Additionally, interviewee 5 thought that it would be important to remind about the case company's value-added services as it has been recognized that many customers had forgotten them after purchasing a car.

Next, a few questions revolved around how personalization could be further developed in the case company. As discussed in chapter 4.2.2, the company has a large amount of data about the vehicles, and currently, the personalization of content is based mostly on that. Interviewees thought that more historical data about the customers, their needs, and past behavior is needed to personalize messages on an individual level. To create a seamless omnichannel customer experience, case company could combine their vehicle data with customer data since then the individual needs, as well as the needs of the car, is taken into consideration. Furthermore, it was found important that the content could be delivered at the customer's preferred channel at the right time, which would require being proactive. According to the interviewees, in an optimal situation, personalization would happen in many different channels; besides the current channels, the company could offer personalized content through social media and other digital channels.

“At its best, personalization would be done at an individual level. We could deliver content that the customer is personally interested in. This would probably require that we have more data and knowledge about the customer and its shopping behavior. Also, we would need knowledge on the channels they prefer and how often they use those.” (Interviewee 5)

“In an optimal situation personalization would be based on customer's historical data and the data would tell us what the customer is interested in. In practice, we could create micro look alike audiences that would help us predict the future based on their past interests. Then content could be targeted to the small audience in very personalized level in the right channel at the right time.” (Interviewee 2)

To enable personalization based on personal interests, Interviewee 1 suggested that motivation-based segmenting should be conducted. Interviewee 1 considered that if they can get knowledge on what kind of value (functional, symbolic, emotional) the consumer pursues, more data about the customer can be received, which helps in need-based personalization.

Another point was that personalization enables dialogue and feedback which enriches the data.

When asked about what the main difficulties in personalization are, data quality was mentioned a few times. Especially, the data quality regarding the customer was found as a challenge to conduct personalization on an individual level. Interviewee 2 mentioned that the problem may arise already when the data is collected. The internal systems create some challenges in utilizing customer data as efficiently as possible:

“Besides data quality, we have some issues with our internal systems, which are quite complex... Every piece of information does not necessarily flow seamlessly and is automated from one system to another. These are the current issues in why we are not yet in the optimal level with personalization.” (Interviewee 2)

However, it was brought up that data collection and data quality are not the only challenges because personalization requires multiple firm-level capabilities and resources. Data alone is not enough and understanding customers and creating content are equally important. Having high-quality data is an essential step but to utilize the full potential of data, the analysis and usage stage should not be neglected:

“I think our systems and CRM data give us essential technological resources for personalization. However, in order to operate with that, our company needs to combine technology, customer understanding, and content creation.” (Interviewee 1)

Omnichannel retailing is holistic management of customer experience and thus requires cross-functional teams to cooperate closely. Consequently, the interviewees were asked about how they perceive the role of other departments and how it could be developed. Everyone agreed that customer experience management is not only the responsibility of the marketing team and other teams are also crucial in managing it:

“Every department is responsible for customer experience even though to are not directly communicating with customers daily... Communication and cooperation between teams is the key.” (Interviewee 3)

Communication and cooperation between different teams were found important because the business revolves around many different functions that affect the end customer. To have a seamless, uncomplicated, and positive experience, the customer must have all the necessary

information at the different touchpoints. The cooperation between sales and after-service was emphasized because it helps the customer journey to be more seamless and integrated. All in all, in practice this requires that every team operates in a customer-centric way and understand why their role is important in delivering a superior customer experience.

Finally, the interviewees were asked to summarize what are the key issues on how to improve the omnichannel customer experience. A few things that were mentioned were the internal systems and how they must become more flexible, seamless, and simple to use as that would encourage the employees to collect more high-quality data. High-quality data should be collected also about customers and their interests because that helps the company to understand the customers better, which was also mentioned. Few interviewees highlighted that omnichannel management requires managing it through the customer journeys. Once again, it was raised that omnichannel customer experience management should not be equal to channel management, but rather the content and services should be managed through integrated channels. Lastly, as one of the most important points, measurement of omnichannel customer experience was brought up by interviewees 1 and 5. They thought that as the case company has not yet done it through the entire journey, that would be essential. Measuring singular touchpoints alone is not enough, according to the interviewees, because it does not give a full picture of how customers perceive the whole journey. The received metrics and data should be utilized as indicators for future improvements. Concluding thoughts on how to develop omnichannel customer experience within the case company can be found in figure 4 below. The discussed actions were divided into two categories: customer experience (strategic) actions and customer journey and touchpoint (operational) actions. The categorization is adapted based on the empirical findings.

Managing omnichannel customer experience

Customer experience/strategic actions	Customer journey and touchpoint/operational actions	
<div data-bbox="309 416 644 517">Deepening the customer understanding by doing motivation-based segmenting</div> <div data-bbox="309 539 644 607">Building a customer-centric organizational culture</div> <div data-bbox="309 629 644 730">Managing so that service and content are separated from the channel</div> <div data-bbox="309 752 644 819">Enhancing cooperation and communication between teams</div>	<div data-bbox="692 416 986 483">Managing through customer journeys</div> <div data-bbox="692 506 986 595">Offering informational and transactional content through different channels</div> <div data-bbox="692 618 986 707">High-quality customer data and utilizing the gained knowledge</div> <div data-bbox="692 730 986 797">Measuring whole customer journeys</div>	<div data-bbox="1059 416 1394 483">Integrating and simplifying internal systems</div> <div data-bbox="1059 506 1394 573">Focus on integrating purchase and postpurchase touchpoints</div> <div data-bbox="1059 595 1394 685">Personalization based on customers' needs and preferences</div> <div data-bbox="1059 707 1394 775">Providing consistent content through integrated channels</div>

Figure 4: Development areas in omnichannel customer experience management

5 Discussion and conclusions

This final chapter presents the discussion and conclusions of the research findings. The empirical findings are compared to existing literature to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. First, the sub-research questions are answered, and based on the conclusions, the main research question is answered. Then the theoretical contributions are presented, including the revised theoretical framework. Next, a chapter on the managerial implications is followed. Finally, the thesis is finalized with a discussion on the limitations and potential future research questions and ideas.

5.1 Discussion

The objective of this thesis was to find out how to manage the omnichannel customer experience in an automotive context as the industry is facing a lot of changes due to digitalization (Deloitte 2016). The academic literature on omnichannel customer experience is quite fragmented, despite (Gerea et al 2021; Melero et al. 2016), and therefore this thesis aimed to contribute to the concept, especially from the firm perspective. Furthermore, the current research had not focused on the whole customer journey and most of the literature had studied only a few channels; the physical store, websites, and mobile applications. (Gerea et al. 2021; Li et al. 2018) Overall, from the theoretical perspective, the objective of this thesis was to enrich the academic knowledge on omnichannel customer experience.

The empirical part of this study was conducted as a single-case study that focused on a Finnish car importer and retailer. Customer experience plays a significant role in the automotive industry, and consumers are demanding more seamless experiences regardless of their channel choices (Scherpen et al. 2018; Deloitte 2016). The case company aims to deliver a superior customer experience, and nowadays the focus is on delivering omnichannel customer experience. However, it was discovered during the interviews that the implementation is challenging, and a lot of resources, capabilities, and organizational changes are needed to fully offer a seamless, consistent, and personalized customer experience.

To achieve the theoretical and managerial research objectives, three sub-research questions were created. First, it was reasonable to study how customer journeys are managed in the case company, in order to support the holistic management of omnichannel customer experience. From the case company's perspective, it was necessary to identify key touchpoints and discuss the importance of customer journey mapping, and how the touchpoints are currently improved and modified. Multiple authors highlighted the importance of these actions when managing customer experience (i.e., Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Rosenbaum et al. 2017). The next sub-research question focused on deepening the knowledge on how omnichannel customer experience is perceived and currently managed in the case company since that would be the foundation for giving recommendations for the future. This theme concentrated on how customer experience is formed and managed in the case company, how different channels affect that, and what elements the interviewees considered important regarding omnichannel customer experience. Gereá et al. (2021) argued that currently, the conceptualization of omnichannel customer experience is incoherent and sub-research question two contributed to that as well. Finally, the sub-research question three was about how to develop omnichannel customer experience management in the case company.

5.1.1 How are customer journeys managed in the case company?

The case company found the relationship between customer journeys and customer experience crucial. Customer experience was described to build from every touchpoint a customer interacts with. The empirical findings are in line with, for example, Lemon & Verhoef (2016) whose study focused on understanding customer experiences through customer journeys. In fact, the authors defined customer experiences to be the customer's journey, during which the customers interact with the company at various touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Based on the empirical findings, managing, and understanding customer journeys was considered essential to manage the omnichannel customer experience comprehensively. Unsurprisingly, the literature agrees on that; Tueanrat et al. (2021) found that the increasing academic and practical interest towards customer journeys is based on the managers' and academicians' interest in customer experience.

The empirical findings proposed that customer journeys should always be considered from the customers' perspective. They should not be understood as generalized or predetermined

contact points that the company offers to customers but rather as customers' ways to satisfy their needs at different phases of their journeys. After understanding customers' needs, feelings, and intentions at different touchpoints, it was found reasonable to match the content and service to the needs. This is in line with Peltola et al. (2015) who proposed that especially in omnichannel context the key is to understand customers' needs at touchpoints and then integrate the touchpoints intuitively so that the needs can be satisfied. The customer-centricity was also highlighted by Norton and Pine (2013) who argued that managing customer journeys offers a promising tool for understanding customers better as they should always reflect customer behavior, and strategic actions should be created based on that (Norton & Pine 2013). It was emphasized in the interviews that more customer understanding is needed, especially on customers' motivation and needs.

Rosenbaum et al. (2017) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) stated that identifying touchpoints during customer journeys is important. Also, the interviewees found identification important in terms of the overall customer experience as it helps to understand customers at different phases of their journey. Based on customer data and experience from the automotive industry, the interviewees identified the main touchpoints from the company's customer journeys, which they divided into the prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages. This is in line with the current academic literature (i.e., Lemon & Verhoef 2016). The touchpoints were mainly categorized based on whether they are physical or digital, as Herhausen et al. (2019) did. Person-assisted touchpoints were also brought up and it was found important that digital channels involve person-assisted touchpoints just like physical channels do. Even though the physical touchpoints still seemed the most crucial ones in the automotive industry, just like Scherpen et al. (2018) claimed, the interviewees found the role of digital touchpoints increasingly important due to changing consumer needs. Interviewees thought that the critical touchpoints should be monitored and improved because otherwise, they might turn into pain points. The most critical touchpoints that were identified, included digital and physical, and they are based on easiness, good service, and caring for the customer. The touchpoints outside the firm's control were only brought up a few times and focusing on identifying them would be valuable for the case company. The case company could utilize, for example, the categorization made by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), who defined four categories of touchpoints: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social touchpoints.

Customer journey mapping was found very useful by the interviewees, and the need to do it regularly was acknowledged. Like in the literature, (i.e., Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Tueanrat et al. 2021), the empirical findings proved that customer journey mapping is a strategic management tool that should be done from customers' perspective. Rosenbaum et al. (2017) defined that the benefit of customer journey mapping is to identify the most critical touchpoints. The empirical findings proposed that besides that, other benefits are to understand customers at different touchpoints and to allocate marketing resources better. In addition, it has a cultural perspective; it assists the employees in different teams to understand better their role and relevance in the customer journeys. Likewise, Rosenbaum et al. (2017) proposed that strategic actions considering customer journeys should be implemented by cross-functional teams as that can assist in improving and designing services. Halvorsrud et al. (2016) on the other hand argued that analyzing customer journeys may enhance cross-functional communication. Communication between teams was also stressed in the interviews.

The company had mapped specific journeys, but they were missing a holistic understanding of the whole customer journey and it was seen as problematic considering the seamless and consistent customer experience. In line with that is Tueanrat et al.'s (2021) article that stated that to provide a superior customer experience, the firms should be capable of assessing and managing touchpoints through the whole customer journey. The customer journey maps made by the case company include firm- and customer-related factors, like the timeline, channel, company's and customer's actions, customer's needs and feelings, internal systems, and the employees who are responsible for the touchpoint. The visualization included similar characteristics that have been identified as important in the literature as well (Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Stein & Ramaseshan 2016; Trischler & Zehrer 2012).

The customer journeys seemed to be managed currently at a strategic and operational level. However, it was proposed that it should be managed on three levels: customer experience (strategic), customer journey, and touchpoint (operational) levels. The customer experience level covers, for example, building customer-centricity and managing the overall customer experience. The customer journey level involves managing customer journeys in the long run while the touchpoint level covers actions related to singular touchpoints. The findings indicated that currently there is a lack of holistic management of customer journeys through the entire journey and hence why the customer journey level should be implemented. The

touchpoints are improved based on, for example, customer satisfaction rate and mystery shopping which was found useful. The performance measurement covers mostly the physical touchpoints, but some improvements have been conducted also in digital channels. Yet, based on the findings, the digital touchpoints should be measured and monitored more often. Overall, the empirical findings indicated that it is more useful to manage customer journeys rather than singular touchpoints. This is contradictory to Huré et al. (2017) who encouraged managers to specifically manage every touchpoint. However, according to the findings, touchpoints should be monitored and improved regularly which affects positively the customer journeys. This is especially important in the case company, as they recognized that their premium brand creates high expectations, which should be exceeded at every touchpoint. In line with that is Holmlund et al.'s (2020) study, which stated that individual touchpoints can be measured and improved as it contributes to the customer experience, but it is more reasonable to manage the whole customer journey instead of touchpoints. Figure 5 below presents the research findings regarding sub-research question one.

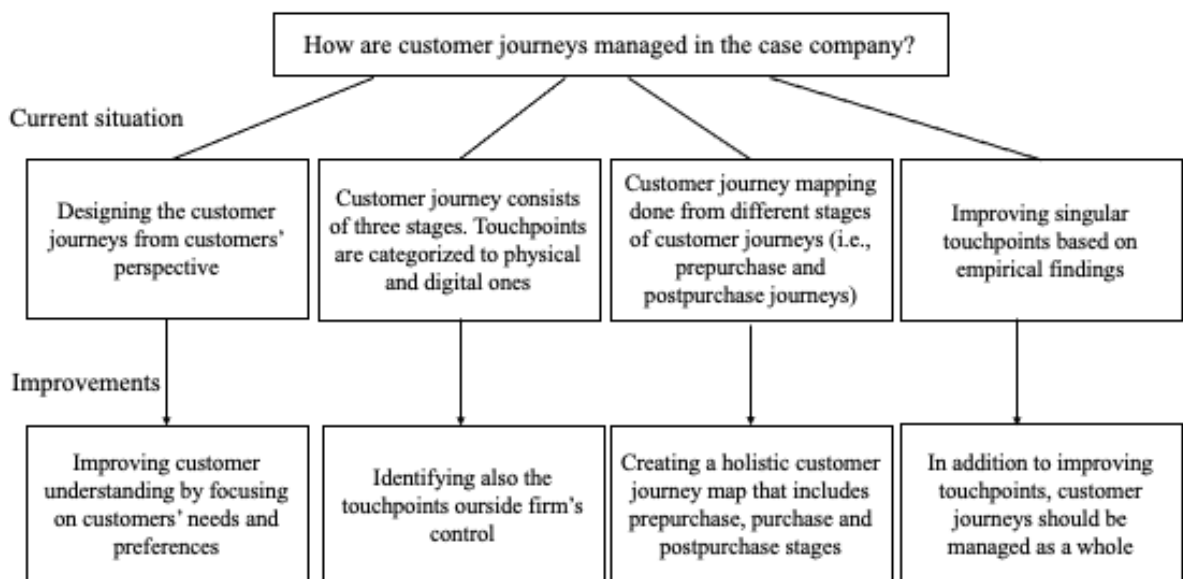


Figure 5: Research findings, sub-research question one.

5.1.2 How is omnichannel customer experience perceived and managed in the case company?

In the case company, the customer experience is largely dependent on the premium brand that the company represents. The brand sets a high level of expectations within the customers, and it was recognized that it should be exceeded at every touchpoint. Interestingly, Scherpen et al. (2018) found that automotive firms cannot rely on the brand as much as previously since customers are not as brand loyal anymore. The empirical findings indicated that despite their strong brand, they invest increasingly in customer experience. Also, the physical environment, brand-related items, customer service, and the easiness to use digital channels were found to build the customer experience. These are in line with Verhoef et al. (2009), who created a conceptual model that listed different factors that affect customer experience. In their model, the retail brand, retail atmosphere, and technology were a few acknowledged factors. (Verhoef et al 2009)

The empirical findings stated that digital and physical channels create different kinds of value for the customers. The brand itself creates symbolic value through different channels. Emotional value is more related to physical channels, and they should be more memorable compared to digital channels in which customers tend to be more controllable. The customer data had revealed that within digital channels, customers value seamlessness and easiness, and therefore, they search for functional value. This finding was also relevant in the banking industry, which Komulainen and Makkonen (2018) studied in the omnichannel context. The customers in their study also appreciated easiness to use digital services. The interviewees thought that currently, the physical channels can offer exceptional emotional value which cannot be delivered through digital channels yet. However, they may have to compete with digital services and innovations in the future to an increasing extent, as those can offer more advanced and high-tech experiences, as Bolton et al. (2018) proposed.

When interviewees were asked to describe how they perceive omnichannel customer experience, similar factors were discovered as in the literature. Customer-centricity, seamlessness, channel integration, consistency, and personalization were most often mentioned. The case company aims to provide a customer journey, where the customer can move freely and easily across channels they prefer. To provide content that matches the customers' needs at

each touchpoint, personalization was experienced as very important. The empirical findings are supported by, for example, Shi et al. (2020), Melero et al. (2016), and Peltola et al. (2015) who studied omnichannel customer experience. Shi et al. (2015) did a comprehensive study that combined managerial and customer perspectives whereas the other two studies focused on managerial perspective and therefore the empirical findings of this thesis seem promising. Yet, as mentioned above, the emotional value is essential, especially in the physical channels, and hence the firm should not forget its role in omnichannel customer experience, as Frazer and Stiehler (2014) argued. Moreover, Berry et al. (2002) highlighted that a superior customer experience offers both functional and emotional value. An interesting finding that was brought up in the interviews is that in an omnichannel environment, the service and content should be distinguished from the channels. This supports customer-centricity since the purpose is to consider how the information about the service should be provided across different channels in a way that responds to customer needs. If it is bounded to channels, then it does not support flexibility to have an individual journey. This is in line with Shi et al. (2020) who discovered flexibility as one of the dimensions of omnichannel customer experience.

The case company aims to deliver omnichannel customer experience and currently, the firm's customer experience management includes setting objectives, measuring the performance, and designing ways of working. Currently, the case company measures the performance of singular touchpoints, for example, by measuring customer satisfaction. Also, Holmlund et al. (2020) proposed that touchpoints should be measured and improved to enhance customer experience. The case company had started to build its stores, systems, and channels based on the customer perspective. This is in line with many authors, for instance, Homburg et al. (2017), Lemon and Verhoef (2016), and Melero et al. (2016) who suggested that being customer-centric is necessary especially if a company aims to offer omnichannel customer experience. However, a customer-centric organizational culture requires further development in the case company, and it will be discussed in the upcoming chapter.

As channel integration has been discovered to lead to a positive omnichannel customer experience (Quach et al. 2020), the topic was also covered in the empirical study. Channel integration was perceived as consistent and unified messaging across channels, having easy transitions across channels, and having consistent service in each channel. Also, Shi et al.

(2020) proposed that channels can be integrated by delivering consistent information and content through customer journeys. In the case company, the integration between marketing channels was found successful but consistency across the purchase and postpurchase phase and between marketing and sales channels were not considered as successful. Currently, there is no integrated management of all channels through the customer journey, and channels are managed in silos, which is typical for multichannel management (Verhoef et al. 2015). That was seen as a weakness that should be developed. Concluding the empirical findings, actions at the customer journey level could involve integrated channel management.

Regarding personalization, the case company does it with its digital customer journeys and direct marketing. Personalization is mostly based on vehicle data and every interviewee highlighted that they want to invest in personalizing content via multiple different channels based on customers' individual needs, preferences, and motivations. Melero et al. (2016) and Mosquera et al. (2017) considered personalization to be one of the key issues in omnichannel customer experience and that covers offering recommendations, offers, and experiences based on customers' individual needs. Sub-research question 2 is answered in figure 6 below:

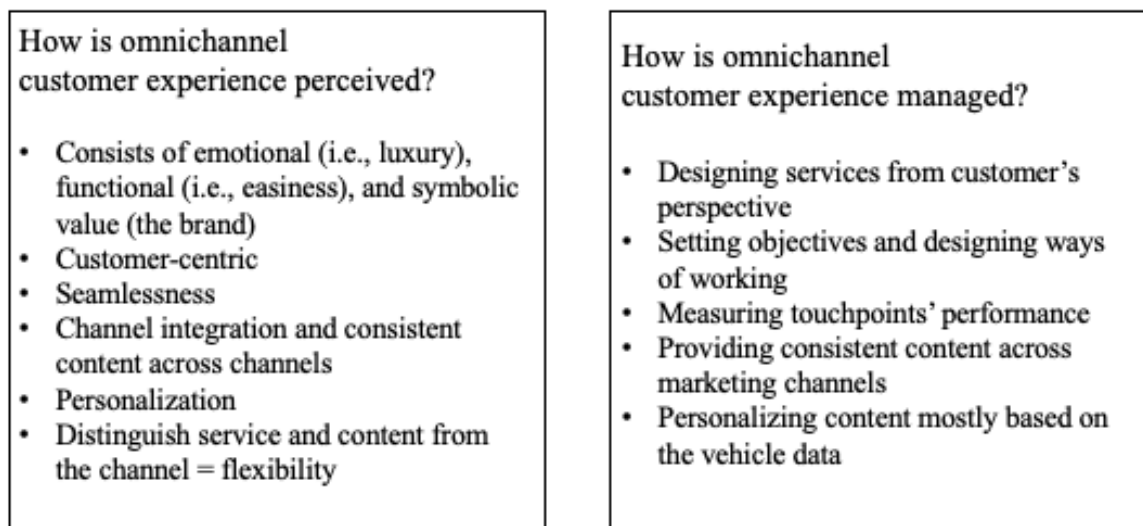


Figure 6: Research findings, sub-research question two

5.1.3 How to develop omnichannel customer experience management in the case company?

This thesis aimed to gain more knowledge on the variety of touchpoints and their role in the omnichannel customer experience. The focus was on emails, social media, and advertising. Interviewees found multiple benefits from these channels; they can offer added value for the customer in the highly technical industry. Also, the channels enable delivering transactional and informational content, which strengthens the current communication. This would enhance the seamless and personalized customer experience because the case company could deliver personal promotions via the channels the customer prefers. Besides, educational, or value-adding content was seen as a contribution to a positive overall customer experience during customer journeys, especially in the postpurchase phase. This is in line with Picot-Coupey et al.'s (2016) research, that states that transactional and informational touchpoints contribute to a seamless experience. To provide a pleasant experience at each touchpoint, every channel's full potential should be exploited. Furthermore, feedback should be gathered from different channels to get into dialogue with the customers and by that to gain more data about the customers and their preferences. Mosquera et al. (2017) claimed that an omnichannel environment provides beneficial circumstances to gather data from various sources, including interactions from social media.

Interviewees considered that personalization of customer journeys and experiences is vital to create an omnichannel customer experience. Despite the efforts that they have already done, personalization is not yet done at a personal level, and it is mainly based on vehicle data. There was a coherent understanding that there is a need to have more data about the customers, their needs, interests, and shopping behavior as it enables personalizing content at an individual level. One of the interviewees proposed doing motivation-based segmenting to find out whether the customer looks for emotional, functional, or symbolic value when they purchase a car from the company. Multiple authors have pointed out the importance of understanding and having data about the customers. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) propose that to understand customers, data about customers' actions and emotional reactions should be collected from the key touchpoints. Jain et al. (2017) claim that firms must gather data from the entire customer journey to get a more comprehensive understanding of the customer experience. Peltola et al.'s (2015) findings proved that omnichannel customer experience is

based on understanding the needs of a customer at a certain touchpoint and by providing content and services to fulfill the individual needs.

According to the interviewees, the data collection should be improved to get higher-quality data about the customers. It was pointed out the internal systems should be simplified as that would help the employees to collect data. However, it was highlighted that data alone is not enough, because personalized content also requires technology, analytics skills, customer understanding, and content creation. Shi et al. (2020) argue that firms should utilize technologies that would assist in predicting customer preferences and make recommendations based on those. Mosquera et al. (2017) and McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) argued that analyzing the collected data is a necessary organizational capability in customer experience management. It leads to customer understanding that is the cornerstone of personalization (Mosquera et al. 2017).

Even though the case company had shifted its operations to be more customer-centric, the empirical findings proposed that the organizational culture in the entire company should be customer-centric. Melero et al. (2016) claimed that having a customer-centric focus and providing outstanding customer value should be the main focus of companies aiming to be omnichannel. For the authors, it means to shift the focus from maximizing sales to building long-term customer relationships that contribute to customer experience (Melero et al. 2016). Another capability that was recognized by the interviewees was cooperation and better communication between cross-functional teams. Cross-functional cooperation has been highlighted also in the customer experience management context (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) and omnichannel management and retailing context (Hoogveld & Koster 2016).

It was emphasized in the interviews that omnichannel customer experience management requires managing it through the customer journeys and not managing touchpoints without a holistic understanding of the journeys customers go through. Also, performance measurement was found necessary, and the findings stated that measurement is needed from the whole customer journey. Touchpoints should also be measured but it was seen that it is not enough to measure singular touchpoints. The gained knowledge should be used to improve future performance and customer experience. The findings for the last sub-research question can be found in figure 7 below:

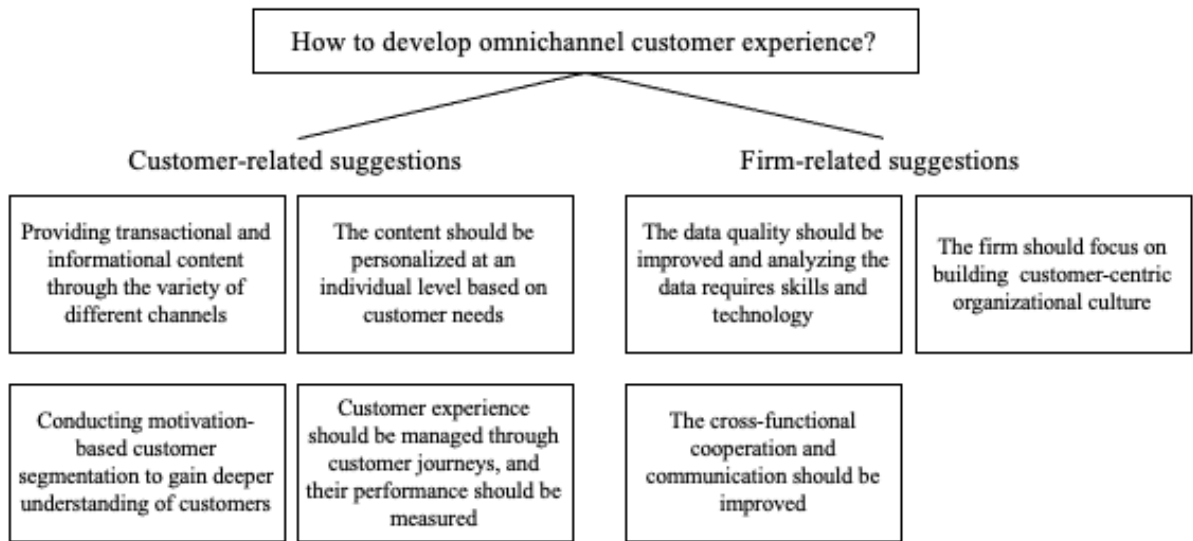


Figure 7: Research findings, sub-research question three

5.1.4 How to manage the omnichannel customer experience through customer journeys?

The purpose of this thesis was to find out how the case company can manage omnichannel customer experience through customer journeys. It was reasonable to study it in the context of the automotive industry as it has been forecasted that customers will require a seamless omnichannel customer experience throughout their journeys. Therefore, the importers and the retailers should cooperate more tightly so they could provide an omnichannel experience for their customers. (Deloitte 2016) Shi et al. (2020) reminded that many firms do realize why providing omnichannel experience matters, yet they have challenges in providing it. Therefore, it was necessary to interview the case company's marketing and customer experience leaders and managers to find out the current situation and what development areas they find important. This sub-chapter concludes the findings and answers to the main research question.

The first necessary step is to understand what omnichannel customer experience means in the automotive industry. It builds on emotional, functional, and symbolic value. The physical premium product and the highly valued brand should not be underrated, even in the omnichannel context. This finding is supported by Frazer and Stiehler (2014) who proposed that seamless customer experience requires emotionality and Melero et al. (2016) who claimed

that omnichannel firms should exceed the expectations of customers and thus create positive feelings in them. Yet, the empirical findings indicated that customers also value seamlessness and easiness, especially in the digital channels. The channels should be integrated, and every channel should deliver consistent service and content, and they should direct the customer easily to the next touchpoint. The touchpoints should be personalized based on the customers' needs and preferences. The firm should distinguish the service and content from the channels because otherwise, it is not possible to deliver content that responds to individual customer needs. Additionally, the flexibility to let customers move freely across their preferred channels will not happen. The importance of flexibility is supported by Shi et al. (2020).

To succeed in providing a customer experience that fulfills the above-mentioned criteria, it was concluded that actions are needed at customer experience, customer journey, and touchpoint levels. Customer experience level actions include strategic management actions, such as gaining a deeper understanding of customers and their needs by conducting motivation-based segmenting. Setting objectives, designing processes for customer journey management and touchpoint monitoring, and tightening the cooperation between cross-functional teams are necessary. All of these are part of the main strategic action: shifting the organizational mindset and culture towards being more customer-centric. These are capabilities that also academic literature has recognized (i.e., Melero et al. 2016; Hoogveld & Koster 2016; Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

The main customer journey level action is to manage the customer journeys as a whole. It requires more systematic processes. There was a need for a coherent understanding of the entire customer journey, and it is needed to deliver a seamless, integrated, and consistent customer experience through the prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase stages. This is in line with Tueanrat et al. (2021) who claimed that integrating touchpoints and channels demands an understanding of customer journeys. In the case company, the customer journey should be based on customer needs at different touchpoints and so it should be designed from the customers' perspective. Managing all the channels in an integrated way would contribute to having a consistent experience through the journey. Verhoef et al. (2015) agree that integrated management of channels enables seamless customer experience, and Zhang et al. (2018) proved that channel integration leads to customer satisfaction and trust, and

hence both studies support the empirical findings. Furthermore, the journey level actions involve measuring the customer experience through the customer journey, and this requires the development of performance metrics.

Both journey and touchpoint levels can use customer journey mapping as a strategic tool to identify the touchpoints. The empirical findings proposed that customer journey mapping should be done from the entire customer journey, as Rosenbaum et al. (2017) suggested. The performance of touchpoints could be measured also in digital touchpoints, as currently, the case company measures mostly the physical ones. This way singular touchpoints may be improved, which according to Rosenbaum et al. (2017) contributes to a better overall customer experience. The case company found it crucial to have more understanding of customers and their expectations, needs, and behavior. Therefore, in addition to motivation-based segmenting, data should be collected at different touchpoints, like Holmlund et al. (2020) proposed, because it gives more insights about customers. Customer data works as one resource for personalization. Various channels should be utilized to deliver personalized informational and transactional content, which contributes to delivering omnichannel customer experience. A summary of the main findings is presented in figure 8 below:

How to manage omnichannel customer experience through customer journeys in the automotive industry?

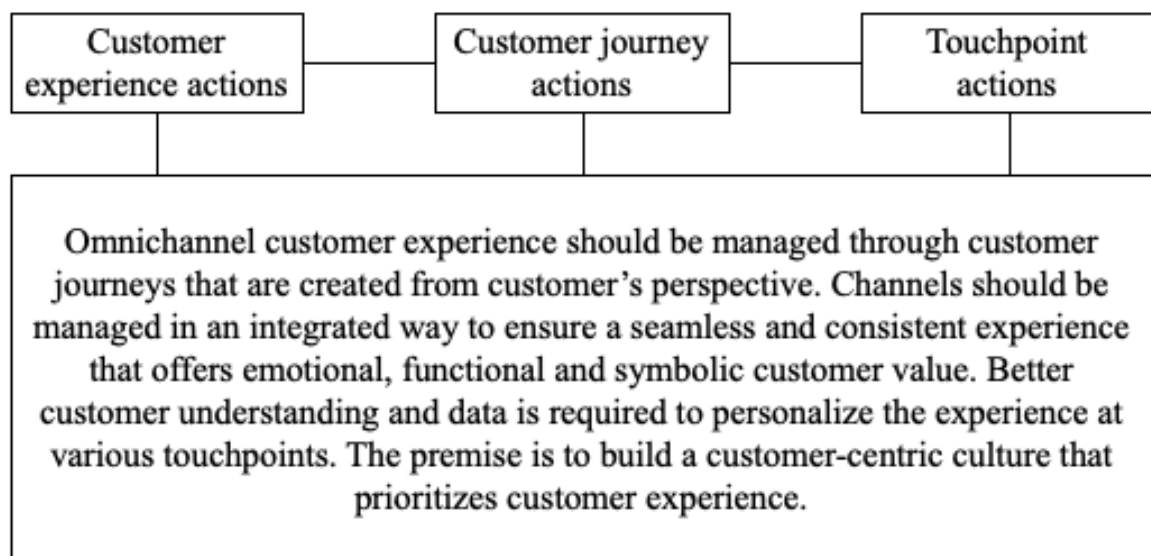


Figure 8: Summary of main research findings

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This thesis has theoretical contributions regarding different areas of customer experience management. The empirical findings mostly supported the earlier research on customer journeys, and a few new findings in terms of managing them were found. The findings also supported the literature on omnichannel customer experience, and how it is perceived from a firm perspective. Lastly, the findings on managing omnichannel customer experience were in line with the current research. Yet, new aspects were also discovered considering the variety of touchpoints and channels and managing omnichannel experience through the entire customer journey. Furthermore, as this thesis studied a company operating in the automotive industry, new academic findings were also found in that specific context.

The empirical findings indicated that customer journeys and mapping them are necessary for managing customer experience. Customer experience builds from the interactions that customer has with the company during its journey, and this supports Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) study where they defined customer experiences a similar way. Yet, the authors highlight that the interactions can be categorized into four categories, and all of them affect the customer experience, which is why they should all be taken into consideration (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). The case company had mapped mostly their own channels and touchpoints, and so they could utilize Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) categorization, which includes also the ones outside the firm's control.

In the case company, customer journeys were primarily seen as a tool and a concept that aims to understand customers' needs, feelings, and actions at each point of the journey. Halvorsrud et al. (2016) and Tueanrat et al. (2021) see customer-centricity as the main factor of customer journeys since the services should always match customers' needs. The empirical findings stated that customer journey mapping is a strategic tool that aims to identify the needs and to create actions to satisfy them at each phase. These findings support, for example, Lemon & Verhoef (2016) and Rosenbaum et al. (2017), who also remind that it is not useful to identify all the possible touchpoints, but rather the most important ones, and some touchpoints that occur often. To do that, they encourage to ask consumers about their satisfaction regarding the interactions with a firm. (Rosenbaum et al. 2017) One of the new findings was, that the interviewees thought customer journey mapping is valuable also to regular

employees and not only to managers. By visually seeing the different touchpoints, the employees understand better their contribution to customer experience.

An interesting new finding is to manage customer experience and journeys at three levels: customer experience, customer journey, and touchpoint levels. Whereas the customer experience level focuses more on strategic issues, the journey level focuses on managing the entire customer journey and channels in an integrated way. The touchpoint level on the other hand should assess and improve singular touchpoints, and thus the focus is on operational issues. Holmlund et al. (2020) had slightly similar managerial implications; they suggested that singular touchpoints can be monitored and adapted in the short term, but in the long term, the touchpoints should be managed simultaneously. The empirical findings stated that it is more useful to manage customer journeys than touchpoints and that most likely means ensuring that customer journeys should be based on customers' needs and that different channels and touchpoints are consistent and integrated.

The thesis also focused on deepening the knowledge of omnichannel customer experience in the automotive context. Similar to Verhoef et al.'s (2015) and Shi et al.'s (2020) findings on the dimensions of omnichannel customer experience, the empirical findings suggested seamlessness, consistency, integration of channels, and personalization forms it. Understanding customers and being able to satisfy their individual needs were also discovered important, just like Peltola et al. (2015) noticed. The emotional and symbolic value should not be forgotten, especially in the automotive context, as the products are physical, and the brand plays a critical role in determining the expectations towards the company. Also, Frazer and Stiehler (2014) discussed evoking customers' feelings in the omnichannel environment. However, emotionality has not been studied that much in an omnichannel context, and therefore the empirical findings of this study contribute to that. A new finding is that services and content should be considered separately from the channels, as it helps to consider how customers perceive them. By doing that, the company can actually provide customer-centric content.

Managing omnichannel customer experience requires multiple capabilities. The foundation for managing it is to build customer-centric organizational culture, according to the findings.

This is supported by, for example, Melero et al. (2016) who stated that the firm should primarily target delivering outstanding customer value and building long-term customer relationships, which enables managing omnichannel experience. Homburg et al. (2017) on the other hand claimed that cultural mindsets are a solid part of customer experience management, as they direct the organization to make decisions and act based on customers' journeys. Furthermore, as many functions within the case company affect the customer's experience, it was seen necessary to cooperate and communicate more closely with cross-functional teams. This is supported by Lemon & Verhoef (2016).

Personalization was found to be one of the most important factors in omnichannel customer experience, according to the interviewees. Personalization requires high-quality data, technology, skills, and content creation resources to analyze it. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) and Shi et al. (2020) considered the same and emphasized that data itself is not enough - analyzing it to understand customers better is the key. Additionally, the empirical findings propose that the case company needs a deeper understanding of their customers, so the personalized experience can be delivered on an individual level. Customer understanding does not only assist in creating personalized experiences - but according to Melero et al. (2016), it also contributes to the understanding of customers' channel choices which helps to deliver the content in the channel the customer prefers. The case company recognized that to understand customers better, it is important to gather data from the touchpoints. Furthermore, a new finding was to segment customers based on their motivation to purchase a certain car. By that, the case company could find out whether the customer seeks symbolic, emotional, or functional value.

This thesis contributed to the existing academic research on omnichannel customer experience and its management, as the research on the topic has been somewhat scarce in the context of the entire customer journey, according to Gereá et al. (2021). Moreover, the variety of touchpoints has not been taken into consideration (Gereá et al. 2021) The results of this study supported that to manage a seamless and integrated customer experience through the variety of touchpoints and channels, a holistic understanding and management of the entire customer journey would be beneficial. It aids in providing coherent and integrated content, information, and services at different channels, and therefore potential pain points and inconsistencies between different channels can be avoided. These findings support Peltola et

al.’ (2015) most important premises of omnichannel experience; it diminishes the possibility of a customer leaving from their journey because integrated channels encourage them to move forward. A new finding is that the focus should not merely be on the physical store and websites. The omnichannel retailers should remember that emails, advertising channels, and especially social media are fruitful channels to provide valuable transactional and informational content, which Picot-Coupey et al. (2016) found important in omnichannel retailing. These can be offers or recommendations or they can be reminders or other educational content that improves customers’ experience. Additionally, they are excellent channels to deliver personalized content and to encourage customers to continue their journey to the next preferred touchpoint. The revised theoretical framework is presented in figure 9 below.

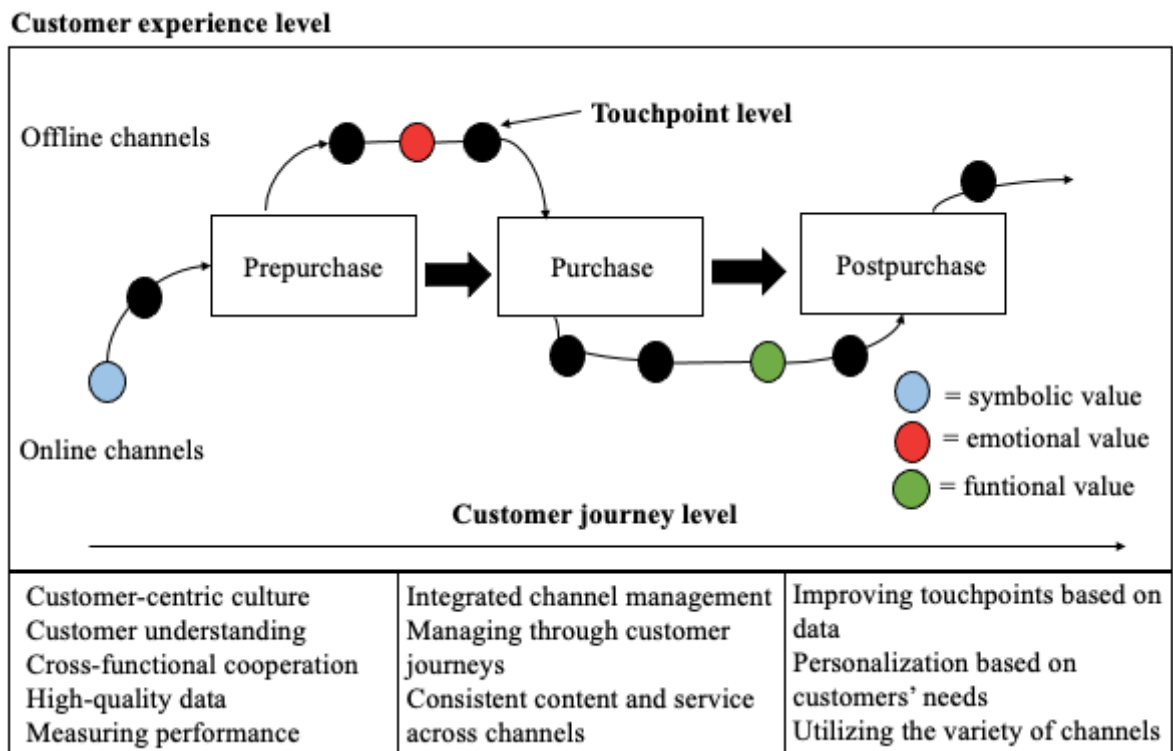


Figure 9: Revised theoretical framework

5.3 Managerial implications

This thesis provides suggestions for the managers of the case company, that would assist them to develop their omnichannel customer experience management. Currently, the case company aims to deliver omnichannel customer experience, and they have succeeded in specific areas. Yet, managing it in practice is challenging, and it requires further development, especially in terms of having a consistent, integrated, personalized, and seamless overall customer experience through the entire customer journey. The managerial implications presented next should also provide assisting information for other retailers aiming to deliver a superior omnichannel customer experience.

As discussed, managers are advised to manage omnichannel customer experience on customer experience, customer journey, and touchpoint levels. The first covers the strategic actions within the case company. The journey-level actions involve longer-term journey management actions, including managing channels in an integrated way. The touchpoint level actions are daily improvements that are happening in the responsible teams. Touchpoint improvements should be based on the performance and gathered data from touchpoints. All levels should work closely with each other as they all affect one another.

To begin with, it would be valuable to study customers' needs, emotions, and actions at different phases of the journey. To do it, the managers could interview customers and gather data from the current touchpoints. In addition, motivation-based segmenting can be valuable as it deepens the customer understanding within the organization. Customer journeys should always reflect the customer perspective and the touchpoints should be created to satisfy the customers' needs at different touchpoints. A useful strategic management tool for visualizing the identified touchpoints is a customer journey map. To get a comprehensive understanding of the customer's entire journey, the map should include the channels and touchpoints (also the ones outside the firm's control), customer's needs and actions, firm's actions, the responsible unit/person, and how it is possible to seamlessly move to the next touchpoint. The customer journey map must visualize the whole journey, and shorter journeys can support that. This way, a holistic understanding of the customer journey can be created, which helps the management of customer journeys.

It is essential that the meaning of customer experiences is shared across the organization, so employees understand their role better. A crucial strategic action is to build a customer-centric organizational culture that nourishes customer experience. Additionally, it is important to realize that every interaction within the customer journey can positively or negatively affect the customer experience. Therefore, tightening cross-functional cooperation and communication is important as it can contribute to a positive overall customer experience.

The customer journey level should be responsible for the seamless, integrated, and consistent customer journey. Also, integrated management of digital and physical channels can be the responsibility of that level. Even though it might not be relevant to manage channels *per se*, there should be an understanding of how the different services are communicated and shared across different channels, so that customers have the necessary information regardless of the channels they decide to use. Managers should build efficient processes to manage customer journeys. The customer experience requires monitoring and measuring, and therefore measuring the customer journey is important. Therefore, managers are advised to design metrics to measure the performance of customer journeys.

Singular touchpoints should also be measured and improved based on the gained data. Data should be collected from both physical and digital touchpoints. Managers should provide processes and capabilities to collect data from various touchpoints. Also, the performance of touchpoints (i.e., customer satisfaction, NPS, likes) should be regularly measured. Based on the findings, the touchpoint can be improved. This contributes to exceeding the expectations at touchpoints. Therefore, the managers should also consider which kind of performance metrics would fit at different touchpoints.

Offering personalized content at various touchpoints will contribute to providing an omnichannel customer experience. Hence why, the managers could invest in technology that assists in collecting high-quality data, especially about the customers' preferences. Technology and data alone are not enough and so the managers are encouraged to invest in personnel with analytical capabilities. Combining data, technology, and analytical skills with marketing capabilities enables providing creative and personalized transactional and informational content through various channels. For example, the managers could start producing informational content regarding the functionalities, specific issues, and value-added services that

come with the vehicle. This content could be personalized based on whether the customer is very technology-oriented or not. This would improve the customer experience, especially after the post-purchase phase when it is possible that the customer feels like the firm has forgotten it. Overall, every touchpoint should be created so that it encourages the customer to continue its journey.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This thesis comes with certain limitations and thus leaves gaps for future research to fill. First, this thesis is conducted as a single-case study which means that the results might not apply to other firms or industries. The case company operates in the automotive industry and the industry has its own characteristics, especially with regards to the physical product and the importance of a brand. Hence why omnichannel customer experience could be different in other industries, and thus it might require different management actions. Future research should study omnichannel customer experience management in other industries as well.

Another limitation is the similarity of the interviewees. This study focused on the marketing perspective and four of the interviewees represented the marketing organization of the case company. One of the interviewees was the customer experience leader. As different studies have proposed, customer experience management in an omnichannel context requires cross-functional cooperation, and so it would be interesting to study how managers from different departments of the company perceive their role in delivering superior customer experience.

This thesis was conducted from the firm perspective and while the interviewees' answers were sometimes based on customer data, the data was not directly utilized in creating this thesis. Therefore, this thesis creates a rather one-sided image of the topic. Future research could utilize mixed-method approaches to combine quantitative data from customers and qualitative data from the managers. It would be interesting to find out whether customers value similar factors to managers regarding omnichannel customer experience, and whether the valued factors are similar in different industries. For example, Komulainen and Makkonen (2018) discovered that what customers valued within omnichannel banking experience was contradict what the previous literature had found. Therefore, future research could study

how do customers perceive omnichannel customer experience compared to how do firms perceive it.

The case company sells a physical product. The automotive industry is not yet as digitalized as many other industries. It was pointed out that emotionality should not be neglected even though omnichannel customer experience is usually associated with words “seamless”, “integrated”, “personalized”, and “consistent”. Future research could study what is the role of emotionality in omnichannel customer experience in general. Do customers value easiness over friendly service, or seamlessness over luxury, in different industries? Also, it was mentioned in the empirical findings, that it is yet not possible to create a similar emotional experience in the digital channels than in the physical channels. Therefore, future research should study how can retailers whose products exist clearly in the physical world, deliver emotionally unique and superior experiences in the digital environment.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questions (in English)

Background information

1. What is your position in the case company?
2. How would you define customer experience?

How are customer journeys managed in the automotive industry?

1. From what kinds of touchpoints does the customer journey form in your company? (prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase) How do you justify your answer?
2. Have you done customer journey mapping? Why or why not – do you find it beneficial?
3. What are the most critical touchpoints that form the customer experience? Why?
4. How have you defined the most important touchpoints?
5. What kinds of pain points there are in the customer journey where the customer might be lost? Why?
6. How do you modify and improve touchpoints?

How is omnichannel customer experience perceived in the case company?

7. How is customer experience formed in your company?
8. How is customer experience managed in your company?
9. How do online and offline channels affect on the customer experience?
10. What does omnichannel customer experience mean in your company?
11. What does channel integration mean for your company? Are the channels managed in an integrated way?
12. What does personalizing touchpoints mean in your company?
13. How is customer data exploited in personalization?

How to develop omnichannel customer experience in the case company?

14. How do you/could you utilize email, social media, and advertising channels in omnichannel customer experience management?
15. How would you enhance the customer experience in the post purchase phase?
16. What are the challenges in personalization?
17. What would personalization be in an optimal situation in your company?
18. How would you improve the role of other business units (i.e. logistics, pricing, IT, sales) in the creation of omnichannel customer experience?
19. How would you improve omnichannel customer experience in your company?

Appendix 2. Interview questions (in Finnish)

Taustatietoa

1. Mikä on roolisi yrityksessä?
2. Miten määrittäisit asiakaskokemuksen?

Asiakaspolkujen johtaminen case-yrityksessä

1. Minkälaisista kontaktipisteistä asiakaspolku muodostuu yrityksessänne? (ennen ostoa, oston aikana, oston jälkeen) Esimerkkejä? Mihin vastaus perustuu?
2. Oletteko tehneet asiakaspolun kuvaamista/? Miksi / miksi ette; onko se ollut hyödyllistä?
3. Mitä ovat tärkeimmät kontaktipisteet asiakaskokemuksen kannalta? Miksi juuri ne?
4. Miten olette määritelleet tärkeimmät kontaktipisteet?
5. Mitä vaaranpaikkoja yrityksenne asiakaspolulla on, missä asiakasmatka saattaisi keskeytyä? Miksi?
6. Miten teillä muokataan ja parannetaan kontaktipisteitä? Konkreettisia esimerkkejä?

Asiakaskokemus, sen johtaminen ja omnichannel-asiakaskokemus

7. Miten asiakaskokemus muodostuu yrityksessänne?
8. Miten asiakaskokemusta johdetaan yrityksessänne?
9. Miten online- ja offline-kanavat vaikuttavat asiakaskokemukseen?
10. Mitä omnichannel-asiakaskokemus tarkoittaa yrityksessänne?
11. Mitä kanavien yhtenäisyys tarkoittaa yrityksessänne? Johdetaanko teillä kanavia yhtenäisesti?
12. Mitä kontaktipisteiden personoiminen tarkoittaa yrityksessänne?
13. Miten asiakasdataa hyödynnetään personoimisessa?

Omnichannel-asiakaskokemuksen kehittäminen

14. Miten sähköpostimarkkinointia, sosiaalista mediaa ja mainontaa voi hyödyntää omnichannel-asiakaskokemuksen luomisessa?
15. Miten mielestäsi ostotapahtuman jälkeistä asiakaskokemusta voisi parantaa?
16. Mikä on haastavaa personoimisessa?
17. Mitä personoiminen olisi optimaalisessa tilanteessa?
18. Miten parantaisit muiden liiketoiminnan osa-alueiden roolin omnichannel-asiakaskokemuksen johtamisessa?
19. Miten mielestäsi omnichannel-asiakaskokemusta voisi parantaa yrityksessänne?