

A framework to improve retail customer experience: a qualitative study exploring the customer journey.

Purpose: This study aims to construct an integrated retail customer experience framework with a single view across platforms and to suggest a new conceptualisation of the customer experience term.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative approach was adopted. Thirty participants were asked to simulate their customer journey in an established UK department store retailer. Their experience was captured through focus groups and analysed by thematic analysis.

Findings: The findings indicate that the existence of personalization and emotional attachment will enhance the customer experience. A new integrated retail customer experience framework is offered incorporating the traditional ‘7Ps’ of marketing and a proposed eighth ‘P’, which is conceptualized as *personal connection*.

Originality/value: To the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to use the notion of personal connection as a dialectic relationship between emotional attachment and personalisation as the central discussion in developing customer experience within a retail setting. This study captures this experience through a unique method of replication of the retail customer journey across multiple channels.

Keywords: Customer experience, personal connection, customer experience management, customer journey, qualitative research.

Paper type: Research

Introduction

Although improving the customer experience has gained the attention of both scholars and practitioners alike, there is limited research identifying how different touchpoints through the different stages of the customer journey contribute to the overall experience (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), and how these touchpoints relate to other marketing concepts (Homburg *et al.*, 2017). Whiles' acknowledging that customer experience can be influenced both before, during and post the interface with the service provider, the research scope has currently never expanded beyond the core experience (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017).

Due to technological advancement, firms are now enabled to interact with customers via various channels and adopting an effective omni-channel marketing strategy is a commonplace decision for most firms (Gao and Huang, 2021). The increasing complexity of the customer journey involving multiple channels and touchpoints and occurring at different pre, core and post-core stages of the journey has increased the need to understand the impact of touchpoints on overall customer experience and how this understanding can improve the management of the experience (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017; Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020). However, having more opportunity to interact with customers can have both positive and negative outcomes and understanding how different types of interactions across different channels contribute to the accumulated experience remains an important knowledge gap. Marketing Science Institute (MSI, 2022) calls for undertaking of further research to understand how customer experience can be evaluated and how technology might influence the customer journey. As such, this study responds to these questions through addressing the call for further understanding of how different elements of the retail offer impacts the customer journey experience (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020) and also responds to calls for further research to explore the complexity of controlled and non-controlled touchpoints across the customer journey and across a multi-channel journey (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020).

Retail has changed (Acquila-Natale and Inglesias-Pradas, 2020) a result of online shopping and differing consumer behaviour (Lambiri *et al.*, 2016). Delivering an integrated experience across channels has become an important consideration, accelerating the need to understand this concept and deliver it across multiple retail channels. To best gain this understanding, a qualitative study has been undertaken. Previous studies into customer experience have adopted quantitative or conceptual approaches (Lemon and Verhoerf, 2016; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017). We wanted to capture the retail customer journey and using a qualitative approach allowed us to

simulate this journey and gain understanding around the actions and experiences of our participants (Angelini and Gilli, 2021). Adopting an exploratory research method, this study sheds light on customer experience in the retail context.

The paper is structured as follows. To begin, we review the literature on customer experience before discussing the retail context for our research. The methodology adopted is outlined followed by our findings and discussion. Finally, we offer our contribution to theory and practice and suggest future qualitative research in this field.

Literature Review

Customer Experience

It has been over two decades since Pine and Gilmore (1998) argued the importance of customer experience as a key factor for positive firm- and customer-related consequences. Since then, both practitioners and scholars have paid significant attention to the notions of Customer Experience (CX) and Customer Experience Management (CXM). Although there exists a myriad of CX conceptualisation (Becker and Jaakkola's, 2020), there is a general agreement among authors that CX is a multi-dimensional concept with various definitions comprising some or all these dimensions. Schmitt (1999), Gentile *et al.* (2007), Hsu and Tsou (2011) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that CX comprise five dimensions, cognitive, affective, sensory, behavioural and relational. Particularly, Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p.70) defined CX as “*a multi-dimensional construct based on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey*”. This comprehensive definition has distinguished the CX concept from other similar concepts such as trust, commitment, satisfaction, and brand involvement, which only refer to a part of a customer's response to a firm's offerings. It can be argued therefore that these related concepts are either a component or a driver or a consequence of CX (Thakur, 2019; Lin and Bennett, 2014). However, studies in which CX is a construct to evaluate the quality of brand-related offerings, satisfaction or trust have been considered as a component of CX (Iglesias *et al.*, 2011; Hamzah *et al.*, 2014). Hamzah *et al.* (2014, p. 2037) conceptualised CX in another way and as “*a group of specific corporate brand values that are evoked by corporate brand-related stimuli*”. This definition recognises CX as a concept that measures overall values proposed by a corporate brand. Although there has been effort to conceptualise the CX term, this has not enabled managers to develop a comprehensive CX programme (De Keyser, 2020,

Keiningham *et al.*, 2020). Prior conceptualisations are either too broad (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020) or have ignored some dimensions of CX (Rose *et al.*, 2012) or ignored the whole customer journey where CX occurs (Hamzah *et al.*, 2014 or Gentile *et al.*, 2007). This lack of a clear conceptualisation has made it difficult for service providers to both comprehend and manage customer experience (Rageh *et al.*, 2013).

Customer Experience Management

Customer experience management (CXM) is concerned with the customers' interaction with service encounters across the customer journey (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020). Voorhees *et al.* (2017, p.270) define service encounter as “*any discrete interaction between the customer and the service provider relevant to a core service offering, including the interaction involving the provision of the core service offering itself*” which could occur in pre-core, core, and post-core stages of the customer journey. The primary needs of engaged customers are fulfilled via the core encounters, the time that firms focus on the delivery of the promised interaction. A large body of literature in service marketing has investigated the role of core encounters on customer experience (Mari and Pogessi, 2011; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017; Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020). However, there has been a shift in the focus of research since Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and Voorhees *et al.*, (2017) emphasised the need for a holistic view of the customer journey where pre-core and post-core stages are as important as the core encounter. The pre-core encounter include touchpoints that aim to motivate engagement with the core-encounters while post-core encounters are the period of the time in which customers evaluate their experience in previous stages (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017). Grewal and Roggeveen (2020) refer to this as pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages but suggest that this process is not always linear and when customers at pre-core stage use a product sample, they might simply jump to the post-core stage (Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020). Although these are three separate purchase stages, the perceived experience of the interaction with the firm is cumulative (Kranzbuhler *et al.*, 2018; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) and customer experience with each discrete touchpoint is a component of the overall experience through the entire journey. The experience unfolds as customers ‘touch’ the elements of the offering and the associated interface with physical, emotional and human factors across different channels and at differing times (Stein and Ramaseshen, 2016).

There have been attempts to characterise touchpoints into different groupings. For example, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) characterised four segments of touchpoints relating to brand ownership, partner ownership, customer ownership and containing a social and external

element (Wilson-Nash *et al.*, 2020). Stein and Ramaseshen (2016, p.18) identified 7 types of touchpoints; atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction and product interaction. These and other characterisations of touchpoints (Payne *et al.*, 2017) suggest that they can be a manifestation of the organization or the customer or a classification of human or non-human interactions. Traditionally, the design and thereby control of touchpoints lies with the firm (Verhoef *et al.*, 2009) and focused on physical attributes such as products, staff and store layout. The advent of technology touchpoints has spawned a plethora of multisensory, immersive interactions (Tueanrat *et al.*, 2021), which can enhance the customer experience online (Farah *et al.*, 2019). Ramadan and Farah (2016) highlight the role of social networking sites in facilitating the relationship between brand and customers, which can ultimately lead to enhanced customer experience and termed it a “social moment of truth”. Virtual Reality (VR) has also been explored as a promising technology in complementing the customer experience across the online journey (Farah *et al.*, 2019). However, the challenge remains in integrating both online and offline touchpoints, which subsequently aims to combine both channels, to try and deliver a ‘seamless’ customer journey. (Hilken *et al.*, 2018).

Touchpoints can be perceived as good, bad or neutral dependent on how well they have been delivered (Kranzbühler *et al.*, 2018) but good or bad, they all become the ‘building blocks’ of the customer journey (Folstad and Kvale, 2017; De Keyser, 2020). The journey, which is often systemized and planned, and which can be verbal or non-verbal (Duncan and Moriaty, 2006) now goes beyond a single channel to encompass online platforms, physical stores, emails, word of mouth, sales assistants and many other points of encounter typically made between a customer and a service provider (Leva and Ziliani, 2018; Booms and Bitner, 1981). Barann and *et al.*, (2022; p.7) define this encounter as “*a Stimulus fulfilling a specific role within the customer journey. It has an Interface, which grants access to the Stimulus and is mediated by a human, an analog object, or a technology situated in a physical or digital sphere*”. Managing the interface and thereby the stimulus becomes the challenge and CXM is both understanding and managing touchpoints while adopting a holistic view of the entire customer journey (Maechler *et al.*, 2016), a process known as Customer Journey Management (CJM) (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020). Homburg *et al.* (2017) suggest CXM should become a central management approach comprising three pillars of cultural mindsets, strategic direction, and firm capabilities. In a similar vein, Grewal and Roggeveen (2020) believe that having a systematic and integrated CJM system in place will be a key success factor for every service

provider therefore one of the aims of this study is to suggest an integrated framework, which serves as an essential tool for strategic direction for designing customer experience and its subsequent management. In addition to the importance of touchpoints in enabling CXM, there is general agreement among scholars of the importance of personalisation in delivering CX.

Personal Connection

A large body of literature has investigated the key role of personalisation in excellent CX delivery in the last four decades. Surprenant and Solomon (1987, p. 87) defined personalised service as “*any behaviour occurring in the interaction intended to contribute to the individuation of the customer*”. The extant literature has investigated the positive effect of personalisation on customer and organisation related outcomes. Bilgihan *et al.* (2016) suggest that personalisation positively affects online customer experience, brand engagement and positive word of mouth. Komiak and Benbasat (2006) found a positive effect on trust and Tyrväinen, *et al.* (2020) examined its positive relationship with loyalty. A report by KPMG (2020) stated that personalisation is the strongest pillar of customer experience that influences loyalty. Similarly, Vorhees *et al.* (2017) argue that personalised interaction is an effective way to earn attitudinal loyalty of customers. More recently, Schweidel *et al.* (2022) suggest the customer journey can be enhanced through personalisation, However, other studies show that personalisation does not always deliver an effective strategy for service enhancement. Shen and Ball (2009) and De Bellis *et al.* (2019) suggest that the effectiveness of personalisation depends on individual’s personality and cultural background and that personalisation affects positively through benevolence inferences. Similarly, Tyrväinen *et al.* (2020) discovered that the effect of personalisation on customer-related outcomes is through the emotional experience. And Zha *et al.* (2022) claimed that affective meaning for a brand is generated as a result of thematically integrated individual cues. Therefore, the aim of this study is two-fold. Firstly, to explore the retail customer journey and construct an integrated customer experience framework with a single view across platforms. Secondly, to suggest a new conceptualisation of the customer experience term, which would facilitate a customer experience management programme.

Context

An appropriate context not only provides focus for researchers and participants but also serves as a unique setting to critically apply the theoretical underpinning of studies (Simons 2014;

Ucbasaran *et al.*, 2001, Welch *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to explain and justify the context used to frame investigations as this strengthens the rationale for the study, improves the transparency of processes adopted which in turn supports the implications for theory and practice (Greenhalgh and Manzano 2021; Simons, 2014).

As this study aimed to explore the integrated retail customer journey involving in-store *and* online platforms, an appropriate context was required to frame the investigation. Therefore, the UK's leading department store chain which operates across the country from 34 stores served to contextualise this study. Our rationale for this was based on several factors. *First*, this retailer has recently invested heavily in improving customer experience across its omni-channel platform. For example, this retailer funded the rollout of a new dedicated in-store customer service initiative built around a physical in-store hub designed to be at the very centre of delivering an improved in-store experience. In addition, the UK department store chain has also invested in their online presence supported by a well-developed 'click and collect' system and now boasting to be a leading retailer in the UK for online shopping. Further, the retailer recently announced a 5-year plan to recover profit lost in the pandemic, laying the foundations for future growth and to accelerate change and growth through their blended omnichannel strategy as the chain anticipates a move to digital sales of 60% by 2025 whilst anticipating that their stores will serve to create memorable experiences for customers (Company Report and Accounts, 2020). The chain's blended omnichannel strategy is consistent with recent trends where retail goods and services, traditionally delivered via physical shops and face-to-face human interactions, now comprise one or more integrated channels which has given rise to an omni-channel retailing model, which can deliver a "unified brand experience" for consumers across channels (Cummins *et al.*, 2016, p.5). Shoppers frequently shop across channels; they can access information online and then purchase in *store* (Verhoef *et al.*, 2007) The use of multiple channels for customer shopping has provided opportunities to increase turnover and reach a wider customer base as new channels require additional touchpoints that encourage more interaction between the retailer and customers. The *second* factor that influenced our decision to focus on this UK department store chain related to its established positive brand reputation. For example, this retailer continues to an award-winning top brand for its customer experience by UK shoppers, consistently ranks highly in 'YouGov's Best Brand Rankings' index and maintains a positive reputation for service, satisfaction and product quality. *Third*, the department store chain has recently been voted as one of the most admired UK brands to work for by current staff and

prospective employees with positive associations for investment in staff training programmes and an environment which offers long-term support and ongoing professional development for all employees especially in customer service roles. Subsequently, our justified context not only serves to focus our study but also offers the opportunity to address the explicit calls for more understanding of how CE is enacted within service settings in different contexts and settings (Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020; Marmat, 2021). Further, we can confirm there was no conflict of interest or biases associated with the selection of context used to frame this study.

Method

As this study aims to generate a deeper holistic understanding of the customer journey and subsequent experience and assess the integration of the in-store and online touchpoints across the retailer from a consumer perspective, a qualitative interpretivist methodology was chosen for this exploratory study. Exploratory research is ideal for contexts and topics that have not been well studied and when the topic area is under-researched, under-developed or if there is limited understanding about the subject (Bloor *et al.*, 2001; Cayla and Eckhardt, 2007; Gillham, 2005). As outlined earlier, there is limited research identifying how different touchpoints through the related yet distinct pre, core and post stages of the customer journey contribute to the overall experience (Homburg *et al.*, 2017; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Existing research has failed to adopt a holistic approach beyond the exploration of the core experience (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017) and there is limited understanding on the impact of touchpoints on overall customer experience (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017; Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020). Further, there continues to be explicit calls for further research to explore the complexity of controlled and non-controlled touchpoints across the customer journey and across a multi-channel journey (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). Qualitative interpretivist research, which is consistent with exploratory studies, aims to reveal deep insight, delve beneath the surface and investigate attitudes, perceptions and feelings from a participant standpoint (Angelini and Gilli, 2021; Becker, 2018; Cunliffe, 2008) and can potentially address these customer experience knowledge gaps. Qualitative exploratory research also aims to uncover rich personal experiences and behaviours and does not make any claims to be representative of the sample and generalisable to the population at large (Alston and Bowles, 2007; Bloor *et al.*, 2001).

Sample

The study adopted a purposive sampling framework consistent with an interpretive approach and ideal for exploratory research (Daymon and Holloway, 2011). A purposive sampling framework allows the researcher to select “*the sample based on his or her judgement about some appropriate characteristic required of the sampling members*” (Zikmund, 2003, p.382). Further, a purposive sampling framework does not aim to infer generalisations to the population but to gain an understanding of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of specific groups of individuals (Pich *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, as we wanted to explore the customer journey and experiences of engaging with both in-store and online channels, prospective participants had to have shopped at the retailer either in-store *and* online in the last six months. Six months was considered a suitable and recent timeframe for participants to reflect on their experiences, attitudes and associations and longer than six months may have impeded the recollections. Further, the retailer’s funded rollout of its new dedicated in-store customer service initiative and improved online presence was initiated six months before the start of this study and this was deemed an appropriate timeframe to frame the sample. Therefore, pre-existing shopping experience with the retail brand was the only prerequisite for participation.

The research team adopted two approaches to recruit research participants. Firstly, researchers approached prospective participants to encourage participants to sign up to attend a face-to-face focus group discussion at a mutually convenient date. A participant information leaflet, which introduced the aim of the study, provided contact information, and set out key information such as anonymity and informed consent, was provided. Secondly, researchers posted a recruitment advertisement on a community social media site to encourage interest in the study. Due to its speed and convenience, the use of social media to encourage participation in research is becoming common practice (Benedict *et al.*, 2019). In total 30 participants came forward and were recruited to undertake three types and four stages of a data collection process. Participants were aged 18 -70 years, and all had shopped the retailer in-store *and* online in the last six months. All identifiable features were removed, and participants were given a pseudonym not only to act as an anonymous identify but also a way of withdrawing from the study if they no longer wanted to be part of the project. Table 1 details the participant sample.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age
Peter	Male	18-24 years
Sally	Female	18-24 years
Millie	Female	18-24 years
Steve	Male	18-24 years
Gary	Male	18-24 years
Billy	Male	18-24 years
Louise	Female	18-24 years
Helena	Female	18-24 years
Karl	Male	18-24 years
Michael	Male	18-24 years
Paul	Male	35-44 years
Maggie	Female	25-34 years
Nick	Male	35-44 years
Charlie	Female	45-55 years
Andrew	Male	25-34 years
Matt	Male	25-34 years
Simon	Male	18-24 years
Angela	Female	55-64 years
Tom	Male	25-34 years
Amanda	Female	18-24 years
Malcolm	Male	45-54 years
Alison	Female	18-24 years
Matthew	Male	45-54 years
Alice	Female	18-24 years
Ben	Male	45-54 years
John	Male	35-44 years
Kris	Male	45-54 years
Millie	Female	25-34 years
Claire	Female	25-34 years
Luke	Male	35-44 years

Table 1 - Sample Profile

Data Collection: Focus groups

Focus group discussions were considered a suitable method to uncover rich insights and generate a comprehensive understanding into the experiences, motivations, and imagery of participants (Bond and Ramsey, 2010; Jenkinson *et al.*, 2019). Focus group discussions tend to include four to twelve participants and can range from one to two hours in duration (Bloor *et al.*, 2001; Jenkinson *et al.*, 2019). Further, the method typically involves a facilitator or moderator to manage the interactive group discussion (Halliday *et al.*, 2021). The inclusion of multiple facilitators [e.g. note takers, observers] can improve the group-based discussion as it ensures the research team has an experienced and dynamic skillset, provides transparency and support into the research/facilitation process, which in turn can yield additional insight that may be overlooked or missed if groups are managed by solo facilitators (Jenkinson *et al.*, 2019). In terms of this study, three experienced researchers managed the discussions and rotated the three distinct roles. For instance, *one* acted as a facilitator and guided the participants through the overarching themes linked to the research objectives. The overarching themes represented a broad schedule developed from the existing literature and designed to manage the focus group discussion. Questions were phrased as neutral as possible and unbiased language was used to facilitate and probe the focus group discussion to ensure the mitigation of social desirability bias (Bergen and Labonte 2019; Larson 2019). The *second* researcher recorded notes, performed additional probing, and ensured the smooth running of all stages of the focus group discussions. The second researcher was also tasked with ensuring all participants were given the opportunity to share and elaborate on their positive and negative experiences, feelings, opinions and associations with their customer journey, which in turn put participants at ease. Further, the second researcher was tasked to pay close attention to any participants attempting to dominate the focus group discussions and manage the situation if it materialised to ensure all participants were given an equal chance to share their experiences (Bloor *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, the second researcher ensured all participants felt comfortable sharing their attitudes, opinions and experiences, which also went some way in mitigating of social desirability bias (Bergen and Labonte, 2019; Larson, 2019). The *third* researcher organised and administered the group discussion in terms of recruitment, room bookings, refreshments, and ensuring all participants were aware of the ethics process and completed an informed consent at the beginning of the sessions. Focus group discussions were carried out from February – April 2019. Focus group data collection ceased at 6 focus groups after the researchers reached theoretical saturation whereby no additional themes were uncovered from the discussions

(Saunders *et al.*, 2018). The duration of each focus group discussion was 1.5 hours, and all focus group discussions were audio recorded.

Replicating the Customer Journey

As the aim of our data collection was to replicate a typical retail customer journey and explore how experience was created through the journey, we devised a data collection strategy involving three types of data input over a four-stage process. First, all participants were instructed to individually visit the retailer's physical store over a specified two-week time frame. During this visit we asked participants to view the store, browse its various departments and identify potential purchases, a process often referred to within a retail context as research shopping or as searching for information in one channel, which could be instore or online, and then completing the purchase in another channel (Verhoef *et al.*, 2007). The second stage of the process involved 30 participants forming 6 focus groups of between 4-6 of mixed age and gender. In this stage, they were asked to discuss their instore experience of stage 1. Participants were asked questions on how they shopped, what they noticed about the store, what they typically purchased and how they felt both prior to their visit, during the visit and after the visit. The third stage of data collection involved participants being asked to individually access the store web site to browse products and services of their choosing in a simulated online shopping exercise, which was undertaken within a controlled IT environment. Participants were allowed up to 15 minutes to browse online, which was deemed sufficient to identify products and services of interest. A final stage brought participants back into focus groups where they were invited to discuss their total customer journey experience.

Improving Rigor and Trustworthiness

To improve the quality, trustworthiness and rigor, this study adopted two strategies including *piloting* and a *multistage analytical framework*. Firstly, a pilot study was carried out with our first focus group discussion as a test-run to assess the usability of our focus group guide before the full data collection phase was carried out (Halliday *et al.*, 2021). The pilot study allowed the research team to reflect and improve the focus group guide by examining and linking the initial findings/themes to the research objectives (Muijeen *et al.*, 2020). Further, the pilot study included capturing feedback on the content and structure of the focus group guide and individual participant experience, to reveal areas of development (Bell *et al.*, 2019). Based on our pilot study, very few changes to the focus group guide were required.

Our second strategy to strengthen rigor and trustworthiness with our methodology was the adoption of a multi-stage framework as part of our analytical strategy. This project adopted an *integrated deductive-inductive approach* to rationalise the theoretical constructs, develop the research objectives and justify the methodological framework and analytical process that underpinned the study (Singh, 2015). An integrated deductive-inductive approach involves two steps, which demonstrates the advancement of theory (Gambetti *et al.*, 2015). First, we identified clear gaps and under-researched areas within the customer experience and customer journey literature [deductive]. This was followed by carrying out thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts. Thematic analysis involves a systematic process of uncovering dominant themes and key patterns embedded in the findings, which in turn address the overall research objectives (Bell *et al.*, 2019; Pich *et al.*, 2020). To underpin our thematic analysis, the research team adopted the six phased analytical model developed from Braun and Clarke (2006) as set out in Table 2 [below].

Phase	Description	Process
1) Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.	Carried out by the three researchers-facilitators. Focus group discussions were transcribed within 3 weeks of focus groups taking place. Notes from the focus groups were also typed up and included in the analysis.
2) Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code	Researchers generated initial codes independently from the transcripts and additional content/materials.
3) Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.	Researchers generated initial themes independently from the transcripts and additional content/materials.
4) Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.	The three researchers came together for several meetings to discuss identified codes and themes before generating thematic maps. Independently, researchers identified 20 themes.
5) Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.	The three researchers collaboratively defined, refined, expanded and removed codes/themes to develop final number of themes. The 20 themes [phase 4] these were collaboratively redeveloped into 8 overarching themes [as part of phase 5]. A final thematic map was produced to illustrate how the data/findings underpin the themes.
6) Writing up	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis	The three researchers collaboratively reflected on the final overarching themes and evidence before writing the findings section of the article. The researchers returned to the additional materials and variety of sources as part of the data triangulation strategy to reaffirm the themes and illustrate examples in the findings chapter.

Table 2 - Reproduced and applied from Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 95) Applied Six Phased Framework of Thematic Analysis

Following the transcription of the focus group discussions, [transcripts ranged from 6000-8000 words in total], the researchers facilitated the focus group discussions reviewed and re-reviewed the transcripts independently [phase one] and then identified a series of themes and sub-themes [phase two and three]. All themes and sub-themes were developed and based on the interpretations of the researchers. After the independent analysis and interpretation, the three researchers collaborated by comparing/contrasting the themes and sub-themes [phase four] and developed, reduced, and refined the themes and sub-themes [phase five]. This was followed producing a final thematic map [table 3] to illustrate the findings and support writing up the findings chapter [phase six]. This pragmatic six phased approach framework highlights the process used to manage, identify, and interpret the themes from the data.

Results

Our initial finding was that identification and classification of the touchpoints in Table 3 suggest congruity and consistency between the in-store physical, and online virtual, customer journey. For retailers, typically operating across different channels, this congruity between channels is key to retaining customers as they move from one channel to another (Verheof *et al.*, 2007). The subsequent category analysis in Table 3 revealed that the identified touchpoints, corresponded with the 7 'Ps' of the marketing mix (Booms and Bitner, 1981), namely, place, product, price, promotion, physical evidence, process and people.

Participant Derived Codes: Instore	Participant Derived Codes: Online	Researcher Derived Sub Themes (Instore and Online)	Researcher Derived Core Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Quality and Specialist Products • Aspirational Brand Selection • Products Well Presented • Variety of Products • Trusted and Generous Guarantees • Gift purchase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of goods and services • Efficient Filtering • Theming Option • Guarantees and warranties 	<p>Quality</p> <p>Width of selection</p> <p>Variety of Brands</p>	<p>Product</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spacious Store Layout • Calm, Tranquil. Soothing Lighting • Freedom to Browse • Nice Ambience • Clear Navigation, signposting and Consistent Flow • Clean, Tidy, Well-Presented • Markers indicate department well before arrival 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impactful Visuals/Imagery • Sleek, Professional, Clean and Clear • Clear Functions such as 'Quick View' or 'Wish List' • Clear 'Search' Function 	<p>Inviting atmosphere</p> <p>Well-presented</p> <p>Clear functionality</p>	<p>Physical Evidence</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncrowded, Not Busy Collection point • Easy to find, • Central location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery updates • Order status • Easy to return goods 	<p>Accessible</p> <p>Convenient</p> <p>Location</p>	<p>Place</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpful, Polite, Efficient staff • Friendly, Happy, Supportive • Engaging • Approachable • Interactive if Desired • Presence of staff • Smart staff appearance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalised Hints and Tips • Informative emails [Out of Stock Items] • Personal shopping/edit option 	<p>Helpful</p> <p>Knowledgeable</p>	<p>People</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pricing perception • Offers and sales • Returns/Guarantees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actual stated price • Offers and reductions • Returns/Guarantees • Discounts clearly signposted 	Competitive Reasonable	Price
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertisements • Mail outs, catalogues • Loyalty Card 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emails • Customer reviews • Sale/discounts signposting 	Informative Clear	Promotion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisted by signage • Organised product displays • Efficient returns • Swift and service recovery processes • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease of navigation online • Clear features such as filters and search tools, • Logical online browsing process. 	Effective Easy to follow	Process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trusted, Reliable Retailer • Personal and Relational Connections • Aspirational Feelings • Feel-Good Factor • Emotional Relationship with the Brand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functions such as or 'Wish List' or details of recent purchases • Hints and Tips Informative • Emails to inform return to stock details • Personalised style options • Personal warranty information 	Personalisation Personal attachment Emotional	Personal Connection

Table 3 – Thematic Map Developed Following the Six Phased Analytical Process

The 7P mix was present not only as a holistic customer journey but multiple elements of the mix occurred at any one stage of the pre, core and post journey. Evidence from focus group participants, below, support this key finding.

Place

This attribute refers to the location of the service interaction such as a channel (store or online), and accessibility in terms of convenience of outlet locations (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). The case retailer was widely known and perceived to have a presence in most major UK cities. For the in-store shopping experience, 'place' was evaluated in terms of accessibility within a city. Once located, the retailer was considered to offer a '*quiet, professional space*' and a space, which had '*enough room to move around in*'. In addition, it was a place that '*you get a good feel for it compared to other stores.*' Another observation was that '*you'd feel sort of welcome to be there*'. 'Place' in this context was evaluated not only in terms of attributes such as convenience of store location and situational ambiance, but also on positive past experiences and brand reputation. It was evaluated cognitively through its physical availability but also emotionally on the welcome they felt during a store visit. On the online platform, 'place' was the store's website, judged on the ease of access to the site and subsequent navigation. This is consistent with conceptualisation of service performance by Banerjee (2014) that it is delivery of the service at the same level of consistency and quality and name it channel-service configuration. Hossain *et al.*, (2020) believe that channel-service configuration includes breadth and appropriateness of channels which support the result of our analysis. Availability of channels (store or online) ensure the customers that they can interact with brands conveniently (Lee *et al.*, 2019). Analysis of the data support that consistency across these different places contribute significantly in deliver of seamless experience (Sousa and Voss, 2006)

Physical Evidence

Defined as attributes, which include design, signage, and equipment (Wilson *et al.*, 2016), for participants, 'place' and 'physical evidence' were closely linked, particularly when shopping online. For the in-store journey, participants commented on the '*clean appearance*', a '*clear store layout*', '*everything is laid out nicely*' and '*good signage*'. The store layout appeared to be designed to take you through a '*logical journey*' with easy identified product features. Overall participants perceived that the store layout '*flowed in a sort of logical way*'. The online journey resonated with the in-store experience. Features such as clear graphics and uncluttered

visuals, which enabled ease of use and navigation of the website, and which encouraged cross channel shopping. Comments such as *'I normally use the website to check the product details and the price. I would then go to the store and ask someone to show them to me'* underline the importance of consistency of the store and the online customer journey and the way customers research shopping across channels (Verhoef *et al.*, 2007). Palmar (2006) highlights the importance of physical setting in the perceived service quality by customers. Specifically, customer experience from hedonistic perspective implies that the service attributes creative value for the customers. Gupta and Vajic (2000) show that aesthetic and functional quality of physical attributes in enhancing customer experience and this will be more effective when it is consistent across various channels.

Product

For a physical store offering, products are goods and services with features such as quality and branding adding to the product mix (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). For our case company, the in-store product was perceived as *'having lots of products'* and was *'good for gift purchases'*. The store was also considered to have a *'lot of brands which you cannot really get in other places.'* However, although both the quality of goods and the wide selection of brands on offer were positively perceived, there was also a perception that *'you can get them a lot cheaper elsewhere.'* Not only were product and price intertwined but the quality of the products was judged by associated guarantees and warranties, for example, one participant noted that *'It's more to do with the quality than the price. They are not the most competitive, but you know when you are buying from them that there's a guarantee and an assurance behind it.'*

For shopping online, 'product' was part of the navigation process with attributes such as filters, a quick view option and a favourites section all contributed to a 'seamless shopping experience'. *'It's really easy to navigate. It was easy to jump to sections for more information and related products. It's well set up'*. Participants also perceived the synergy across the two platforms with usage of the website as a browsing mechanism for products followed by a visit in store to secure the purchase supporting the view that customers frequently shop across channels.

Price

The findings highlighted touchpoints, which related to 'price', identified by participants as both an awareness of the retailer's pricing policy and through price discounts. Price perception acted as both a positive and negative touchpoint. Whilst reassured by the retailer's price promise and

aware of regular price discounts, the pricing positioning of the store generated the notion that you can ‘*get things cheaper elsewhere*’ and ‘*they only stock the high-end brands*’. However, additional product augmentation, such as warranties, ease of returns and the reputation of the retail brand, motivated customers to look beyond price to perceived benefits. ‘*I think I could have got (the phone) a lot cheaper elsewhere but they were offering the longest warranty so I bought it there.*’ The touchpoint of ‘price’ occurs at all stages of the journey in that price was a pre-determinate to select the store for the potential purchase. It was also an influencing factor during the core service and as a post purchase consideration for ease of returns and the promise of superior guarantees and warranties.

Process

Process is the flow of activities associated with a purchase together with notions of simplicity and or complexity of the activities (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). Process was most important in terms of enabling ease of shopping with well-planned navigation around the physical store assisted by signage and organised product displays cited as positive process elements. The store’s returns and service recovery processes were process features, which also contributed to positive customer experience. For example, one participant commented that ‘*I took them (headphones) back and there was no issue...they did not even question it*’. For online shopping, process related to ease of navigation and features such as filters and search tools, which enabled a logical online browsing process. In line with Itani *et al.*, (2022) consistency within integrated channels enhances the customer experience and link the customers. Hossain *et al.*, (2020) state that *process consistency* is related to service design, which refers to the consistency of various customer-facing elements that are relevant and comparable within different channels. Itani *et al.* (2022) point out that the consistency relates to both content and process and the ultimate goal of brands is to maintain this consistency across various channels (Sousa and Voss, 2006; Akter, *et al.*, 2016). In Figure 1, consistency is added to highlight that brands need to provide in omnichannel marketing in order to deliver seamless experience.

People

Service interaction requires participation by both customers and service suppliers and people within the 7Ps model is defined as not only service employees but also customers and the broader aspects of motivation, rewards and training (Wilson *et al.*, 2016). Positive service interactions within the in-store retail setting were identified as helpful and knowledgeable staff

with comments such as *'their product knowledge is good'* and *'the staff do look after you'*. This is in line with Wieseke *et al.*, (2007) view that customers appraise service quality by the manner that front-line employees deliver the service. Miao *et al.*, (2019) believe that the perceived service quality is resulted in the emotion that customers attach to their experience in interaction with the employees. The retail store is renowned for its staff expertise and for having a *'better level of customer service'*. For many participants this service was articulated as availability of staff for product or service advice *'I felt like if I was actually genuinely looking for something I knew there would be somebody there for me.'* Online, the role of knowledgeable staff is replaced by information provision on product specifications, product suggestions and information around stock availability. In addition, as highlighted by Kernbach and Schutte (2005), emotional intelligence shown by the staff leads to more satisfaction with the service interaction and enhance the customer experience. Kim and Drumwright (2016) believe this is because emotional intelligence enables staff to build better relationship with customers.

Promotion

Promotion within the marketing mix can include factors such as advertisements, publicity, emails and social media usage. Promotion of the store price matching policy was of note for many participants although many had never taken advantage of the scheme and one participant commented that despite the price promise *'you can still get things cheaper.'* The case company invests in large scale Christmas advertising, which participants had noted but which did not impact their experience. Online, promotion was often delivered in the form of customer reviews, which act as strong endorsements for products. *'I notice the customer reviews. It jumps out at you, what other customers think of the products'*. Emails from the store were also a positive communication vehicle. It was evident from the findings that to deliver a customer experience, retailers need to attend to delivering the 7Ps marketing mix in that the tangible elements of the service offering, are present and delivered to a good standard and that this is replicated in their online platform. However, further analysis of our findings suggests an eighth element that moves the service interaction from the expected delivery to a shopping experience. This eighth element we have termed as *'personal connection'*.

Personal Connection

The notion that customers have personal relationships was introduced to marketing as a concept for the association that can exist between customers and brands. It is created by the presence of attributes such as trust and satisfaction (Hess and Story, 2005) although our findings suggest

it can exist as an aspirational feeling in that the reputation of the retailer evokes a desire for a connection. As one participant noted, '*it is a very dependable British traditional place. It's steady and it's always there*'. This sense of trust and reliability towards the case retailer was a consistent thread throughout our research. There was also a warmth encapsulated by comments such as '*it feels like a nice place to make purchases*' and '*you get a good feel for it compared to other stores*'. The notion that '*there is no pressure to buy things*' also added to a positive in-store experience. This experience was also derived from a positive past interaction with the retailer and the expectation that this will be repeated in subsequent visits. '*It is wanting to feel valued. You want to go somewhere where you feel you are really important*'. This sentiment reflects Tyrväinen *et al.*, (2020) view that the effect of personalisation on customer-related outcomes is through the emotional experience.

Discussion

There is currently limited research identifying how different touchpoints through the different stages of the customer journey contribute to the overall experience (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), and how these touchpoints relate to other marketing concepts (Homburg *et al.*, 2017). In addition, the increasing complexity of the customer journey which involves multiple channels-touchpoints embedded within different pre- core and post-core stages of the journey remains a sought-after area of study (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017; Grewal and Roggeveen, 2020). This is supported by explicit calls for a holistic view of the customer journey (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees *et al.*, 2017) and explore the controlled and non-controlled touchpoints across the customer journey and across a multi-channel journey (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; MSI, 2022). Our research has addressed these gaps revealing findings, which suggest that delivering customer experience within a retail setting is embedded in the touchpoints of the 7Ps of marketing; place, physical evidence, product, price, process, people, promotion (Booms and Bitner, 1981). These touchpoints are intertwined and operate across both online and offline shopping channels. Rarely does one element of the 7Ps touchpoints exist in isolation of others although some elements adopt greater importance dependent on the nature and intent of the shopping experience. The 'People' element garnered a higher level of importance in-store than online, and 'Price' emerged as an important touchpoint at all stages (pre, core and post) of the retail interaction. As customers frequently shop across channels the seamless element of the non-technology and the technology touchpoints become essential to the customer journey (Cuomo *et al.*, 2020). However, we also unearthed an eighth P, personal

connection, created through trust and high satisfaction with the service provider, typically gained through previous encounters. The presence of this last touchpoint moves the customer interaction from a satisfactory encounter into a customer experience (Tyrväinen *et al.*, 2020). This study uses the term personal connection when a dialectic relationship exists between personalised interaction and emotional attachment.

Our findings also addressed both aims of our study. We wanted to explore the retail customer journey and construct an integrated framework with a single view across platforms and suggest a new conceptualisation of the customer experience term, which would facilitate a customer experience management programme. To address both aims we developed we developed a framework (figure 1), which illustrates the relationships between the different dimensions revealed in our research.

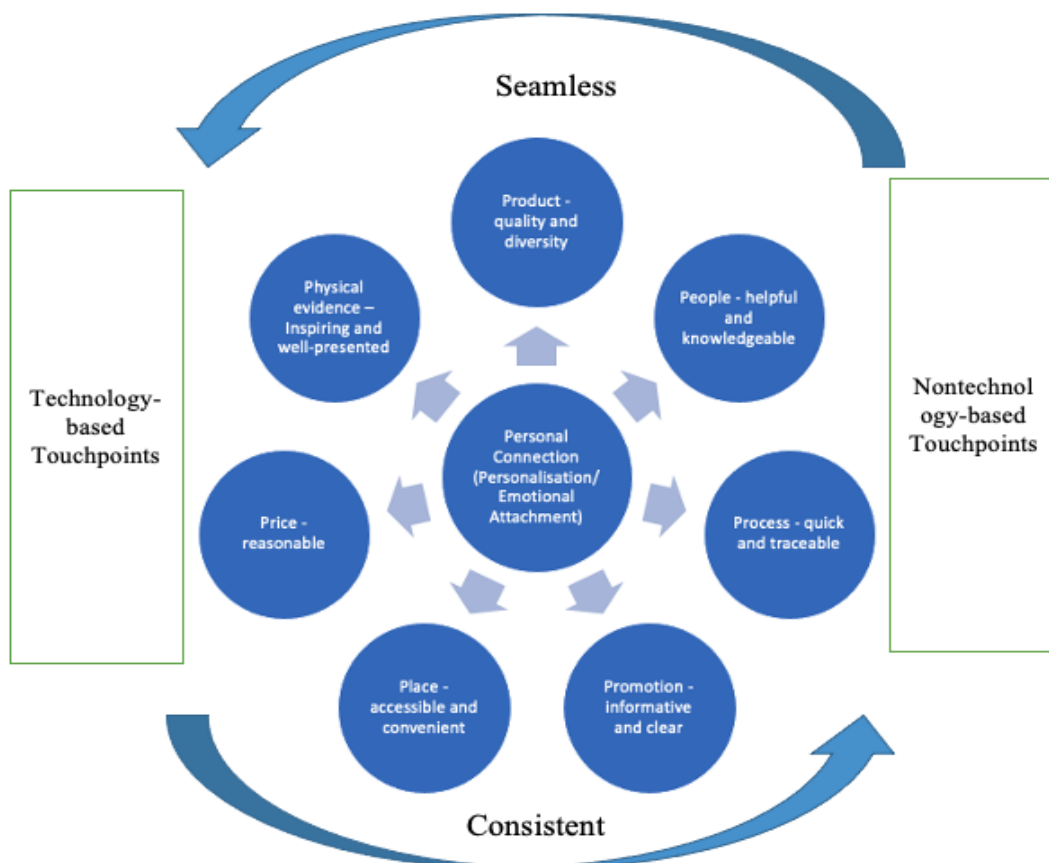


Figure 1 - Retail Customer Experience Conceptual Framework

The framework above suggests how retail customer experience can be conceptualised. It comprises the key touchpoints for customers, which reflect the 7Ps of the marketing mix and supports this link to a fundamental marketing model (Homburg *et al.*, 2017). It also identified an eighth principle, *personal connection*. This framework extends existing research in three ways. First, the framework demystifies the notion of CE and provides retailers with the means of creating and delivering a good experience to customers. Second, the framework posits that an effective customer experience management requires coordination across various functions within an organisation. Third, personal connection is at the centre of all these functions, which should be manifested throughout the customer journey. The framework also provides a strong basis to address the second aim of this paper, which was to propose a new conceptualisation of the customer experience. As illustrated, personal connection is the central theme in overall customer experience and can be reflected in any of the other 7Ps. It was clear in our study that customer experience was constructed based on the personal connection that customers feel through their interaction with the other 7Ps. Therefore, this study proposes the following conceptualisation of the term retail customer experience:

“Customer perception of a brand resulting from the degree of perceived personal connection through the engagement with technological and non-technological brand-related touchpoints”.

Customer experience management literature (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017; Roggeveen *et al.*, 2020) suggests that the experience created in each service provider and customer encounter builds on previous encounters. It is an accumulative effect and typically long, not short term. This supports our findings and the presence of an eight principle of personal connection. Personal connections are built over time (Schweidel *et al.*, 2022; Tyrväinen, *et al.*, 2020; De Bellis *et al.*, 2019; Shen and Ball, 2009), are related to loyalty (Voorhees *et al.*, 2017) and to subsequent repeat purchase (Reicheld and Sasser 1990). The proposed conceptualisation of customer experience provided above addresses the shortcomings of existing versions (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Morgan-Thomas and Beloutsou, 2013). It firstly offers a holistic approach in which all possible interactions through the journey are considered and secondly, it highlights the importance of the emotional attachment and personalisation in the perceived overall experience.

Conclusion

Our study aimed to construct an integrated retail customer experience framework with a single view across platforms and to suggest a new conceptualisation of the customer experience term. The findings indicate that if retailers can create personalization and emotional attachment for customers during their shopping journey, this will enhance the customer experience. We offer up a new integrated retail customer experience framework, which incorporates the traditional ‘7Ps’ of marketing and a proposed eighth ‘P’, which is conceptualized as *personal connection*.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to a rigorous development of an integrative view of customer experience and adds to the body of knowledge of CX in three ways. First, our findings have deconstructed CX, identified its component parts, confirmed its links to established marketing models, suggested a new conceptualisation and proposed a new CX framework. As asserted by De Keyser et al. (2022), CX is impacted by an ever-increasing complexity of the customer journey due to the various types of available touchpoints (Stein and Ramaseshen, 2016; Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). This complexity relates to both the nature - technological or non-technological – and who controls them – firm or customers (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The new proposed CX framework specifically contributes to better understanding of this complexity by identifying the nature of the touchpoints and the dynamic interplay between them (Bolton *et al.*, 2018). The proposed framework offers theoretical insights beyond the classification of the touchpoints (Aichner and Gruber, 2017; Cambra-Fierro et al. 2018) through which touchpoints have been considered from strategic marketing perspective. This enables the scholars to study the short-term and long-term effect of various touchpoints on overall customer experience (Cambra-Fierro, 2021). Second, this study contributes to the customer experience literature by exploring the role of personal connection in delivering an effective customer experience management programme. This has contributed to the existing literature by offering a model that captures, aggregates and analyses customer activities in all touchpoints (Berman, 2020). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to use the notion of personal connection as a dialectic relationship between emotional attachment and personalisation as the central discussion in developing customer experience strategy within a retail context. This supports the observation by Sandstrom *et al.* (2018) that the individual context is an important factor in perceived customer experience. Specifically, this study contributes to the body of knowledge that the individual context is acknowledged (e.g. Pucinelli *et al.*, 2009; Sandstrom

et al., 2018) by integrating personal connection that influence the CX in relation to each touchpoint. In addition, we are also proposing a new conceptualisation of the customer experience term, which can facilitate a customer experience management programme. This provides much-needed insights on how customer experience is constructed over the time and how personal connection manifests itself in perceived positive experience interactions with touchpoints through the whole customer journey. This new conceptualisation contributes to the ever-important body of knowledge about customer touchpoints by more fine-grained consideration of personal connection in the perceived experience. Clear conceptualisation of the touchpoints contributes to have a better common understanding of the concept.

Managerial Implications

Delivering customer experience in a retail setting is getting the marketing basics right, achieving consistency across all shopping channels, developing a trustworthy brand, and making customers feel valued. Retailers must aim for a digital version of their physical store, so the shopping journey is seamless and there is congruity and consistency from website to store and vice versa. Experience will be achieved through a customer's personal connection with a brand created through touchpoint interactions, which inspire trust and satisfaction. This is consistent with Leva and Ziliani (2018) view on positive relationship between touchpoints interaction and brand loyalty. Although marketing models are embedded in retail practices and are easily understood (e.g. Cambra-Fierro, 2021; Farah et al. 2019), however they struggle with the implementation of omni-channel management due to the complexity of it (Barann et al. 2022). The proposed CX framework offers the retailers to understand and manage touchpoints on a more fine-grained level (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Therefore, retail practitioners will be able to use the proposed integrated customer experience framework as a mechanism to understand the current customer experience and assess the dialectic relationship, which exists between personalised interaction and emotional attachment. The introduction of this integrated view of CX provides practitioners with a new and simple lens to make CX actionable. In addition, the conceptualisation of CX could be beneficial in the designing and optimising of complex customer journey management (Hilken *et al.*, 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

It must be acknowledged that all studies have limitations and acknowledging limitations will strengthen the ability to draw conclusions and highlight areas for future research (Farmer *et al.*,

2006). Qualitative research is grounded in the ability to capture new discoveries and enrich understanding of the phenomenon rather than verify predetermined hypotheses and make generalizable claims (Gummesson, 2005). This study does not make claims of generalisability rather it reveals deep insight into the lived experiences of the customer journey. Nevertheless, future research could adopt innovative exercises such as qualitative projective techniques to explore the CX in greater detail and capture additional perceptions, attitudes, and feelings. Projective techniques have the potential to reveal richer accounts and unlock additional understanding associated with customer engagement encourage greater elicitation capabilities than standalone focus group discussions (Pich and Dean, 2015). This may go some way in addressing the explicit calls for a new approach of evaluating the perceived CX in omnichannel marketing (Rahman *et al.* 2022).

In addition, the proposed framework needs to be adopted by future researchers to examine how each touchpoint contributes to the overall CX in different contexts. For instance, this study introduced the notion of personal connection as an important factor in perceived CX, future work is needed to investigate the trade-offs between personalisation and privacy considerations (De Keyser *et al.*, 2022). These considerations are crucial to be addressed as the new technologies such as AI are playing key roles in CX delivery. Future research should also be devoted to carrying out more comparative and longitudinal studies at national and international settings devoted to examining the holistic view of the customer journey (pre, core and post stages). Finally, further studies should adopt and assess the usability of our revised conceptualisation of the retail customer experience alongside the adoption of the developed *Retail Customer Experience Conceptual Framework* (figure 1). The conceptualisation and framework serve as a mechanism to explore how customer experience is constructed over the time and how personal connection manifests itself in perceived positive experience interactions with touchpoints through the whole customer journey.

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