

Customer Journey: Literature Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract: Previous consumer behavior research focuses on single-touchpoint interactions and mechanisms in shaping purchase decisions. However, consumer decision-making is influenced by cumulative effects across multiple touchpoints and multilayered factors rather than isolated encounters, making single-touchpoint studies insufficient for understanding complex decision processes. In the era of transformative marketing, customer journey research that integrates all touchpoints and omnichannel management holds substantial theoretical value and practical relevance. This study systematically reviews the international literature, synthesizes conceptual connotations and core research themes, and proposes an integrative framework encompassing the customer journey, customer experience, and customer well-being. We further outline promising directions for future research to advance theoretical development in this field.

Keywords: Customer Journey; Touchpoint; Omnichannel; Customer Experience.

1. Introduction

The customer journey encompasses distinct and concrete episodes within the customer lifecycle, as well as the entire process of customer experience. Using emerging technologies to deliver personalized content at each touchpoint and enhance the experience throughout the journey has become a strategic imperative for firms pursuing transformative marketing^[1]. Previous consumer behavior research focuses on single-touchpoint interactions and their mechanisms that shape purchase decisions. Consumer decisions are determined by cumulative effects across multiple touchpoints rather than isolated encounters. Multi-channel interactions have given rise to increasingly complex customer journeys, exemplified by show-rooming and web-rooming. With the proliferation of social media and accelerating

channel fragmentation, omnichannel management has emerged as a new marketing paradigm. Firms that fail to coordinate their touchpoints risk delivering inconsistent experiences that erode customer trust and loyalty. Effective customer journey design has become a critical source of customer value enhancement, and research integrating multiple touchpoints and omnichannel integration holds significant theoretical and practical importance for understanding complex consumer decision making.

This study uses a comprehensive review of the international literature to draw greater attention to this field. We adopted an inductive approach to address three core questions: What is the conceptual connotation of the customer journey? What are the dominant research themes and theoretical advances? What are the promising directions for future inquiry? We searched major databases, including Emerald, ScienceDirect, and SAGE, using customer journey, touchpoint, omnichannel, and customer experience as subject keywords, supplemented by snowball sampling. After systematic screening, a final sample of 88 highly relevant papers published between 2009 and 2025 was selected as the analytical basis. The review proceeds as follows. Section 2 traces the historical origins and conceptual connotations of the customer journey. Section 3 synthesizes four core research themes: touchpoints, omnichannel context, research methodologies, and journey experience management. Section 4 proposes an integrative research framework and outlines future directions.

2. Conceptual Connotations of the Customer Journey

2.1 The Origin of Customer Journey

Based on its underlying logic and theoretical lineage, this study conceptualizes the customer journey as an evolutionary outcome of customer-centric service blueprinting and visualization. First, customer-centric service

blueprinting. Shostack first introduced the service blueprint, mapping service delivery through tools such as the line of visibility and service evidence to improve management performance. Early service blueprints were designed primarily from the firm's perspective^[2]. Carbone and Stephan later extended this work with the experience blueprint and their customer experience engineering approach, using graphical notations to map customer experience pathways^[3]. In 1998, Oxford SM Consulting first coined customer journey mapping as a service design method during its work on the Eurostar high-speed rail project. This method has been widely adopted in the service design industry and has evolved into sophisticated customer journey design approaches.

Second, customer experience visualization is presented. Pine and Gilmore's thesis on experience competition has garnered widespread attention from both academia and industry^[4]. Parallel to the visualization of service blueprints, customer experiences began to be represented visually. For example, Shaw and Ivens developed a customer experience map for catering services that incorporated touchpoints, customer expectations, and emotional trajectories^[5]. Although it differs slightly in terminology from contemporary customer journey maps, its substantive content is largely consistent. The customer journey is often described as the entire customer experience process, and some scholars refer to it as the customer experience journey^[6].

2.2 The Characteristics of Customer Journey

Although the term customer journey is now widely used, it is often conflated with related concepts such as customer journey maps, customer experience maps, experience blueprints, and service journeys. Four key distinctions clarify its unique scope. First, the customer journey centers on the customer experience, whereas service blueprints focus on service execution with a strong managerial orientation. Second, the customer journey consists of discrete episodes within the customer lifecycle, emphasizing the experiential value of a single consumption episode rather than lifetime value. Third, customer experience refers to consumers' cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, and social responses to a firm's offerings^[7], whereas the customer journey represents the phased process through which this

experience unfolds. Fourth, a customer journey map is a visual representation of the journey using graphical symbols to depict the end-to-end experience.

In current usage, the customer journey encompasses two domains: a descriptive tool for the entire consumption process from need emergence to post-purchase behavior and a customer-centric methodology for holistic service process design. Some scholars define it by its collection of touchpoints, leading to labels like touchpoint maps or moment-of-truth maps^[8]. Traditionally viewed as linear, Court et al. argue that it exhibits nonlinear characteristics^[9], while Nichita et al. conceptualize it as more open-ended than the customer loyalty continuum^[10]. Based on the literature, this study summarizes five core characteristics. First, customer-centric concrete experience: the journey is experienced by individual customers and varies by personal characteristics and contextual factors. Second, complete touchpoint-connected journey: it encompasses all interactions from pre-purchase awareness to post-purchase advocacy, with touchpoints forming an interconnected network rather than isolated events. Third, the process is dynamic and iterative: customers may revisit earlier stages, abandon the journey, or restart after a period of inactivity. Fourth, there are multi-party omnichannel interactions: the journey involves not only the focal firm but also partners, peers, and social communities across multiple channels. Fifth, the duration is variable with repeatability and nonlinearity: journey length varies substantially across product categories and individual consumers, and repeat purchases may follow different pathways than the initial journey.

2.3 The Stages of Customer Journey

Prior research has depicted the consumption process as a sequence of coherent customer journey stages (as Table 1. shown). The literature offers diverse typologies, from Puccinelli et al.'s five-stage model^[11] to Lemon and Verhoef's parsimonious three-stage model^[7], tracing the classic AIDA model^[8]. Stage models are highly context dependent^[12]. Barwitz and Maas divided the automotive journey into eight stages^[13]; Lee et al. proposed a 16-stage needs-adaptive shopper journey model^[14]; Hamilton et al. introduced a six-stage social customer journey model^[15]; and Schau and

Akaka proposed a consumer-centric practice, community, and institutions in value consumption journey framework emphasizing creation^[16].

Table 1. Customer Journey Stage Models

No.	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	Source
1		Motivation	Information search	Evaluation	Decision	Satisfaction	Sharing			Hamilton et al. (2021) ^[15]
2			Pre-bid engagement	Value proposition	Implementation	Operation				Witell et al. (2020) ^[17]
3		Need recognition	Information	Evaluation	Purchase	Effectuation	Claim	Contract adjustment	Contract termination	Barwitz & Maas (2018) ^[13]
4			Awareness	Familiarity	Consideration	Purchase	Loyalty			Court et al. (2017) ^[18]
5	Attention/Arousal	Need recognition/Discovery	Browsing/Search	Evaluation/Decision	Purchase	Waiting/Usage	Post-usage evaluation	Advocacy(Criticism)/Sharing	Confirmation/Revocation	Lee et al. (2017) ^[14]
6				Pre-purchase	Purchase	Post-purchase				Lemon & Verhoef (2016) ^[7]
7		Problem recognition	Information search	Alternative evaluation	Purchase decision	Post-purchase evaluation				Belch & Belch (2015) ^[19]
8			Consideration	Evaluation	Purchase	Enjoyment	Advocacy	Connection		Edelman & Singer (2015) ^[20]
9		Problem recognition	Information search	Alternative evaluation	Product decision	Outcome				Solomon (2015) ^[21]
10	Awareness	Comprehension	Appeal	Purchase intention	Purchase	Satisfaction	Repurchase intention			Chernev (2014) ^[22]
11		Need recognition	Information search	Alternative evaluation	Purchase decision	Post-purchase behavior				Kotler & Armstrong (2012) ^[23]
12				Engagement	Purchase	Usage	Sharing	Completion		Richardson (2010) ^[24]
13		Need recognition	Information search	Evaluation	Purchase	Post-purchase				Puccinelli et al. (2009) ^[11]
14	Attention	Brand	Attitude	Intention	Purchase					Howard & Sheth (1969) ^[25]

Note: Centered on the “purchase” decision, the stages of customer journey models are described as nodes on a timeline (-4,-3,-2,-1,0,1,2,3,4).

3. Customer Journey Research Issues

3.1 Touchpoints

3.1.1 Types of Touchpoints

A touchpoint refers to each interactive episode between a customer and a firm's products or services, analogous to a service encounter and encompassing channels, physical environments, and contact events. This study defines touchpoints as all firm-consumer interactions that potentially influence consumer decision-making^[26]. Lemon and Verhoef identified four categories: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external touchpoints, with varying intensity across journey stages^[7]. Social/external touchpoints reflect the critical role of travel companions, whose influence is reciprocal^[15]. Herhausen et al. segmented shoppers into five groups based on touchpoint usage, finding significant differences in how satisfaction and incentives drive loyalty across segments^[27].

3.1.2 Attribution of Touchpoints

Identifying critical touchpoints and their interrelationships to inform budget allocation is known as purchase path or attribution modeling^[7]. Across touchpoints, experiential satisfaction follows an emotional fluctuation curve with peak and trough points. Attribution analysis identifies these critical touchpoints for targeted improvements. From a managerial

perspective, understanding peak satisfaction touchpoints allows firms to reinforce successful interactions, while identifying trough points enables proactive intervention before negative experiences escalate into churn. Traditional attribution models such as first-click and last-click oversimplify the complex interplay among touchpoints, and more sophisticated approaches incorporating time decay and position-based weighting have emerged to capture the dynamic nature of journey influence. Kranzbühler et al. examined whether brand outsourcing mitigates the negative impacts of unsatisfactory touchpoints, finding that outsourcing reduces the mental association between the original brand and outsourced touchpoint, shifting brand evaluations^[28]. Notably, outsourcing to a strong third party does not yield better evaluations than a weaker one when touchpoints are unsatisfactory, supporting the service ecosystem perspective that experiences with other firms spill over to focal brand assessments. This finding has important implications for firms considering partnership strategies, as it suggests that the reputational strength of a partner is less critical than the quality of the touchpoint experience itself.

3.1.3 Design of Touchpoints

Service organizations often concentrate on core performance while overlooking the holistic journey experience. Bolton et al. argue that small service details have a multiplier effect on

the overall experience^[29]. Rudkowski et al. conceptualize pop-up retail as a complex journey rather than a single encounter^[30]. Traditional dyadic service encounter theory cannot explain networked interactions with multiple providers; Tax et al. introduced the service delivery network perspective^[26]. Xu et al. modeled temporal dynamics of 37 touchpoints^[31]; Li and Kannan examined carryover and spillover effects^[32]; Märtin et al. demonstrated context-adaptive personalization's market potential^[33].

3.2 Omnichannel

Retail channel evolution followed single-channel (1990–1999), multi-channel (2000–2009), cross-channel (2010–2011), and omnichannel (post-2011) development^[32]. Customers may return via the same channel through a carryover effect or different channels through a spillover effect^[34]. Omnichannel retailing integrates diverse channels to satisfy consumers' holistic experiential needs for shopping, entertainment, and social interaction^[32]. Since Rigby's *The Future of Shopping*^[35], this concept has gained widespread recognition. Unlike multi-channel strategies that prioritize channel operations, omnichannel emphasizes seamless experience integration through cross-channel interactions, enabling unified data flow and higher channel synergy. The transition from multi-channel to omnichannel represents not merely an increase in the number of channels but a fundamental shift in how firms conceive of customer relationships, moving from channel-centric management to customer-centric journey orchestration.

3.2.1 Omnichannel Customer Journeys

Barwitz and Maas argue omnichannel journeys are individualistic, shaped by single-interaction, sequential, and pattern effects, driven by utilitarian, hedonic, cost-minimization, and relationship-building values^[13]. Hu and Tracogna found most insurance customers search via digital media but complete journeys through personal agents, identifying four journey types based on channel combinations^[36]. While digital channels dominate information search, they have not displaced personal channels for high-involvement purchases where trust plays a decisive role. Li et al. found channel choice differs significantly between hedonic and utilitarian purchases^[37].

3.2.2 Omnichannel Integration

Customer channel attitudes vary across purchase stages^[38–39]. Lemon and Verhoef identified lock-in effects, channel inertia, and cross-channel synergies^[7]. Anderl et al. characterized multi-channel paths as Markov walks, testing cross-channel interaction effects^[34]. Optimizing the marketing mix along the journey to deliver an integrated experience is a core challenge. Terblanche and Kidd found that the in-store experience positively relates to shopping trip value and mediates repurchase intention^[40]. Li et al. designed bidirectional revenue-sharing mechanisms for omnichannel coordination^[37].

3.3 Methodologies of Customer Journey Research

Følstad and Kvale distinguish two approaches: customer journey mapping as an as-is analysis of existing processes and customer journey proposition as a to-be approach for generative design, both presented visually^[41]. Commercial tools, such as DesigningCX and Smaply, now support visualization and real-world data integration. Journey mapping visualizes emotions, needs, and pain points, with standard elements including service context, stages, touchpoints, emotional trajectory, and opportunities^[42–45].

Customer journey design involves a future-oriented redesign using new technologies and organizational restructuring. Early work includes Steen et al.'s co-design approach^[46], Patricio et al.'s multi-level framework^[47], Clatworthy's touchpoint reorganization^[48], Kankainen et al.'s idealized journey concepts^[49], and Miettinen et al.'s service prototyping^[50]. Kuehnl et al. developed an effective journey design scale with three dimensions: thematic coherence, consistency, and contextual sensitivity, finding that it enhances loyalty via brand attitudes, with stronger effects on utilitarian brand attitudes^[51]. This scale provides a valuable tool for firms to systematically evaluate and improve their journey design efforts, moving beyond subjective assessments to measurable design qualities. Future methodological development should integrate quantitative journey analytics with qualitative design thinking to create hybrid approaches that combine the rigor of data-driven attribution with the creativity of human-centered design.

3.4 Customer Journey Experience and Management

3.4.1 Customer Journey Experience

Customer experience refers to the overall perception formed through cognitive, emotional, physical, sensory, spiritual, and social elements during interactions with market participants^[52]. McColl-Kennedy et al. conceptualize it as value-creating elements, discrete emotions, and touchpoint cognitive responses^[53]. Capturing and managing journey-based experiences has become a central marketing topic. Disney's MagicBand exemplifies unified touchpoint integration, reducing friction across the visitor journey. Consumers' purchases reflect holistic value perceptions formed through brand experiences^[20], and exceptional journey experiences serve as a durable competitive moat in an era where product features and prices are easily replicated. Emotional influences operate at nearly every decision stage^[11], yet Mende and Bolton found that satisfactory systems do not necessarily foster emotional bonds^[54], making emotional engagement cultivation critical.

3.4.2 Customer Journey Management

Journey management involves managing experience across the entire journey and responding to Berry et al.'s call for attention to interaction sequences^[55]. Klaus and Maklan proposed the EXQ scale with four dimensions: peace of mind, moments of truth, outcome focus, and product experience^[56]. Becker et al. cautioned that negative experiences can contribute to positive overall experiences and that averaging touchpoint satisfaction is misleading^[57]. This finding challenges the common managerial practice of treating all touchpoints as equally important and suggests that firms should focus on the sequence and configuration of experiences rather than simply maximizing satisfaction at each individual touchpoint. Witell et al. identified three B2B challenges: relational expectation misalignment, participant interaction misalignment, and experience dynamism^[17]. McColl-Kennedy et al. proposed a six-step management framework^[53], and De Keyser et al. introduced the TCQ framework covering touchpoints, context, and qualities^[52].

Scholars have examined journey management from diverse perspectives: Hamilton et al. found that social distance between travel companions and decision-makers matters^[15]; Grewal and Sridhar analyzed B2B social influence

structures^[58]; Bradley et al. proposed systemic UX balancing satisfaction for all users^[59]; and Santana et al. examined digital information processing strategies^[60]. Steinhoff and Zondag identified distinct loyalty program roles across journey stages^[61], while emerging technologies such as VR and AR reshape journey dynamics^[62-63].

4. Conclusion

The customer journey is cyclical and nonlinear, involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. As Figure 1 shows, this study proposes an integrative framework: the journey layer encompasses touchpoint interactions and omnichannel resource integration; the experience layer comprises service quality, dynamic value, and emotional trajectories; and the wellbeing layer includes subjective and psychological wellbeing.

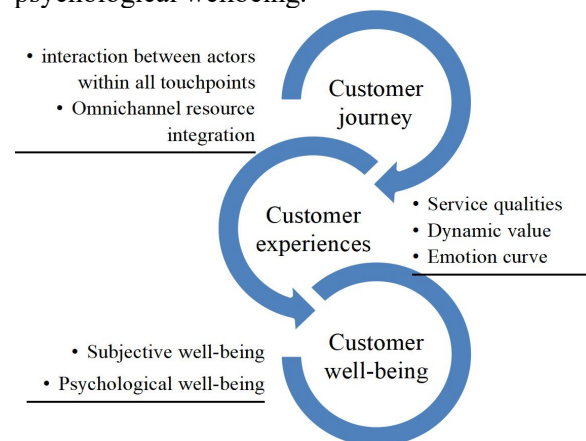


Figure 1. Integrated Customer Journey Framework

4.1 Deconstructing the Entire Customer Journey Process

Firms should prioritize end-to-end experience over single-touchpoint satisfaction. The dominant smooth journey pattern forms a predictable loyalty loop, while the sticky pattern drives greater engagement^[6]. Future research should explore new attribution methods beyond simplified first-click/last-click rules, including machine learning-based approaches, and adopt holistic perspectives on omnichannel experiences. Emerging technologies such as AI agents, cross-cultural variations^[64], omnichannel resource integration, and the tension between personalization and standardization warrant investigation. This question is particularly pressing for traditional retailers whose physical store networks represent both a valuable asset

and a potential liability if not effectively integrated with digital channels. Moreover, the rise of conversational commerce and voice assistants is reshaping how consumers navigate touchpoints, creating new research opportunities to understand how algorithmic intermediation influences journey outcomes and consumer autonomy.

4.2 Exploring Ways to Enhance Customer Experience Along the Journey

Siebert et al. proposed a journey-centric paradigm for experience management^[6]. Key questions include improving end-to-end service quality beyond the traditional gap model, which was developed to assess service delivery at specific touchpoints rather than across the cumulative journey. Realizing dynamic value co-creation as value connotations shift from static to dynamic, and managing emotional trajectories, which remain understudied despite being indispensable in design practice, represent promising emerging research areas. Future studies should also examine how firms can leverage real-time data and predictive analytics to intervene at critical moments in the journey, balancing the benefits of proactive engagement with the risk of perceived intrusiveness.

4.3 Exploring Customer Well being in the Journey

Consumer wellbeing research is divided into subjective and psychological paradigms. Existing journey research predominantly adopts a subjective well-being perspective, leaving psychological well-being underexplored. Transformative marketing advocates that firms enhance consumer well-being beyond narrow performance metrics^[1]. Becker et al. proposed a goal-oriented journey view emphasizing long-term goal pursuit, opening avenues for examining how journey experiences contribute to enduring life satisfaction and personal growth^[57]. Future research should explore how well-being emerges from the journey perspective, its mechanisms and boundary conditions, dynamic processes, and how subjective and psychological well-being integrate. Additionally, researchers should investigate the potential dark side of customer journeys, such as decision fatigue, information overload, and the exploitation of behavioral vulnerabilities through algorithmic manipulation, which may undermine rather than enhance consumer

well-being.

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