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## **Framing the Customer Journey: Touch Point categories and Decision-making Process stages**

### **Abstract**

#### **Purpose**

We seek to define and frame the understanding of customer journeys, associated areas of consumer decision-making process stages, and touch point categories based on an ownership perspective.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

The research is based on a detailed literature review of customer journeys, in peer-reviewed marketing and retail journals, within the last decade. The ABS academic journal guide marketing discipline list was used because it only includes peer-reviewed journals, based on an internationally accepted quality ranked list.

#### **Findings**

The detailed analysis of the journals identified three groups of touch points (brand owned, partner owned/managed, outside the control of brand owner/partner) and three decision making process stages (pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase) that informed a clearer definition and understanding of the customer journey.

#### **Research limitations/implications (if applicable)**

Limitations concern the ABS database used and 10-year date period selected, which may exclude some relevant journal articles, particularly those written in a language other than English.

## **Originality/value**

We have provided a revised definition of customer journey, clarified the decision-making stages and subsequent categorisation of touch points from an ownership perspective.

## **Keywords**

Customer journey; touch points; consumer decision-making process stages, customer engagement

## **Introduction**

There has been an increased focus on exploring customer journeys (Steward *et al.*, 2019), and in contemporary marketing where digital and social media have changed how consumers behave (Alves *et al.*, 2016), it is said to be one of the most recent and influential topics (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019). However, whilst this appears to be a widely used term, there is a lack of common understanding regarding what is meant by a customer journey (Folstad and Kvale, 2018; Kuehnl *et al.*, 2019). The customer journey has been defined as “the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touch points, that makes up the customer experience” (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). Rudkowski *et al.*, (2020) suggested that while there is a long history of research relating to customer experience, the related area of customer journey research is relatively limited. Developments in customer experience research since the 1960s onwards have involved a number of areas: customer buying behaviour process models (1960s-1970s); customer satisfaction and loyalty (1970s); service quality (1980s); relationship marketing (1990s); customer relationship management (2000s); customer centricity and customer focus (2000s-2010s); and customer engagement (2010s)

(Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, early consumer decision-making process models in particular provide a foundation for customer journey models (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Rudkowski *et al.*, 2020).

Within the field of marketing, consumer decision-making process models explore how consumers make purchase decisions (Folstad and Kvale, 2018; Towers and Towers, 2020). With customer journey analysis the focus is more on customer interactions with various touch points in order to improve the customer experience (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Baxendale *et al.*, 2015). Touch points are defined as “an episode of direct or indirect contact with the brand” (Baxendale *et al.*, 2015, p. 236), and “encompass all types of one-way or two-way interactions between customers and firms that involve any transactional or informational exchange, including customer-to-customer interactions” (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019, p. 11). These touch points become part of the overall customer experience, from prepurchase to postpurchase (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, most of the existing research has a focus on specific parts of the customer journey, rather than providing a more holistic view of all touchpoints in the whole customer journey (Baxendale *et al.*, 2015).

This leads to the aim of the paper, which is to frame the understanding of customer journeys and associated touch point categories. The paper reviews the range of terminology used in marketing and retail literature, the relationship with the consumer decision-making process and subsequent categorisation of touch points from an ownership perspective. Finally, we

review customer journey research undertaken using primary data to explore the context and research methods adopted.

In order to guide the review, we offer a threefold contribution. First, based upon a systematic and replicable article selection methodology, we provide a focused and targeted review regarding the use of customer journey in peer-reviewed marketing literature. Second, we advance a better understanding of touch points used within customer journeys and categorise three common themes relating to ownership. Third, we provide an insight into the methodological approaches used in the investigation of customer journeys that can give clarity for future research in this emerging subject.

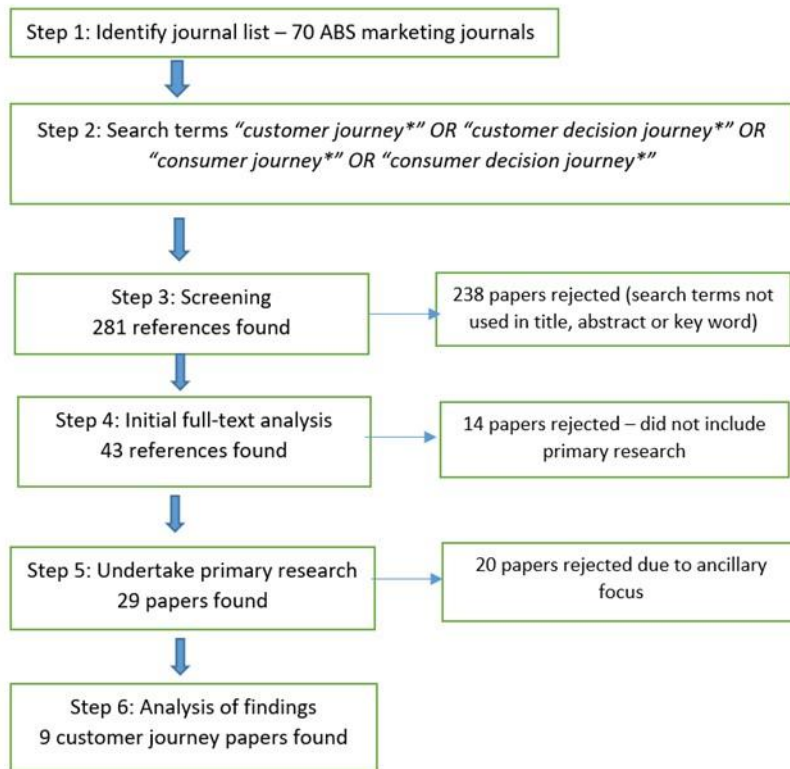
The structure of the paper is as follows: the approach to the review is explained, followed by a comprehensive review of relevant literature covering definitions and context of studies. This is followed by a discussion, which leads to the conclusion of the paper and suggested further research.

## **Methodology**

A transparent and replicable approach was undertaken in the review of literature in peer reviewed marketing and retail journals to identify the range of terminology used. We used guidelines for a systematic literature review, which was consistent with previous studies (for example see Tranfield *et al.*, 2003; Kranzbuhler *et al.*, 2018).

We identified relevant peer reviewed journals to be searched. We looked at a number of quality listings for marketing and retail journals to identify a relevant database. The Chartered Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide (ABS) 2018 provides journals listed by subject discipline including marketing, with retail as a sub-set. Journals at 4\* are the highest ranked, described as journals of distinction and are recognised as world-wide exemplars of excellence; 1 indicates journals of a more modest standard in their field, which meet normal scholarly standards (Chartered Association of Business Schools 2018). From our investigation we identified 70 ABS peer reviewed marketing journals, ranked 4\* to 1. We also considered other listings including the highly recognised Scimago journal and country rank guide which contained 177 marketing journals within four quartiles. The top two quartiles contained 93 journals which included the peer reviewed journals identified in the ABS Quality rank listing. Furthermore, the methodology we adopted extended a highly cited study (Finnegan *et al.*, 2016) which had focused on six highly ranked journals within a marketing/retailing context. We built on prior work from Folstad and Kvale (2018) that included marketing literature prior to 2013 on customer journeys, included an explanation of how the area has developed and also reported on seminal work.

We followed a six-step procedure (see Figure 1) where the first stage involved identifying a list of relevant journals



**Figure 1: Search strategy and selection process**

Second, to ensure relevance of our results, we considered which search terms to use, and dates of publication. An initial scoping exercise, revealed that “customer journey” and “customer decision journey” were popular terms, but sometimes authors used “consumer” rather than “customer”. The search terms we therefore used consisted of “customer journey\*”, “consumer journey\*”, “consumer decision journey\*” and “customer decision journey\*”. This resulted in a total of 281 journal articles where the term appeared somewhere within it. Only journals from 2009-2019 were selected (including those available online prior to formal journal publication). The search was conducted in October 2019. Folstad and Kvale (2018) have undertaken a similar comprehensive review of literature on customer journeys prior to 2013 and identified how this area has developed, including the

earliest peer-reviewed paper by Whittle and Foster (1991). Finnegan *et al.*, (2016) suggested a 4 – 20-year period as appropriate for capturing changes and trends within an area, and used a 12-year period within their literature search, whilst Bocconcelli *et al.*, (2016) use a 10-year period in their review.

Third, further work was undertaken to identify only those ABS ranked peer reviewed journal articles that had a main focus on this area: where one of the four terms appeared in the journal article title, abstract, or keywords (similar to an approach used by Kranzbuhler *et al.*, 2018; Bocconcelli *et al.*, 2016). This ensured a high relevance of the 43 journal articles that were reviewed.

Fourth, we assessed each of the 43 relevant journal articles and their contribution to defining customer journeys. This included consideration of links to the consumer decision-making process and also to touch points.

Fifth, to establish the context of existing primary research studies, of the remaining 43 papers, there were 29 relevant journal articles that (1) had customer or consumer (decision) journey\* in the key word, abstract or title, and (2) had undertaken primary research. Of these 29 studies, 20 had an ancillary focus on the customer journey, so they were excluded, leaving 9 papers to analyse further at the final stage.



## Review of literature

The review of literature is structured around a number of themes: evaluating definitions for customer journeys, considering alternative terms used, assessing decision-making process stages within customer journeys, and categorisation of touch points within customer journeys. This is followed by a discussion and conclusion, including limitations. *Evaluating definitions for customer journeys*

Kuehnl *et al.*, (2019) highlighted that there is a lack of a widely accepted definition of customer journeys, and indeed many of the journal articles reviewed here failed to clearly define the term. Table 1 below shows a selection of definitions for customer journey from the 43 journal articles reviewed to highlight a wide range of understanding of the term.

Author(s)	Year	Definitions
Rudkowski, Heney, Yu, Sedlezky & Gunn	2018	".. a process whereby firms map the customers' touchpoints along prepurchase, purchase and post-purchase stages from a customer's perspective". "touchpoints are critical to the customer journey".
Anderl, Schumann & Kunz	2016	"to include all contacts of any individual customer with a retailer over all online marketing channels, prior to a potential purchase decision".
Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich & Rudolph	2019	"customers' search and purchase usage of all online and offline touchpoints from various sources, including retailer-owned, competitorowned, and additional touchpoints".
Kranzbuhler, Kleijnen & Verlegh	2019	"consists of a series of firm-customer touchpoints that consumers perceive as satisfying or dissatisfying (or neutral) based on their execution or inherent nature".
Hildebrand & Schlager	2019	"pertains to all activities and touchpoints between consumers and firms, moving from consideration and search to purchase and post-purchase"
Anderl, Becker Wangenheim & Schumann	2016	"including all touch points over all online marketing channels preceding a potential purchase decision that lead to a visit of an advertiser's website".
Lemon & Verhoef	2016	"the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touch points, that makes up the customer experience" "customer journey analysis should understand and map the journey from the customer perspective and, therefore, requires customer input"

Steward, Narus, Roehm & Ritz	2019	“a customer journey is not a restatement of the buying process, but rather a conceptualization of a much more intricate and involved process by which a customer and supplier may embark that incorporates all of the experiential elements of the interactions and their flow over multiple periods”
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**Table 1: Summary of definitions for selected journal articles of customer/consumer (decision) journey**

The definitions highlight a close link with the stages within the consumer decision-making process and there appears to be some common agreement that customer journeys involve touch points. It was evident that the terms “consumer journey”, “consumer decision journey”, “customer journey” or “customer decision journey” were popular within the peer reviewed marketing journal articles.

The initial search revealed 281 peer reviewed marketing journal articles (i.e. appearing anywhere within the journal article, not just in the title, abstract or key word section). Of these results, the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services was top with 31 results, followed by the Journal of Services Marketing (23), Journal of Academy of Marketing Science (21), Journal of Retailing (18), Journal of Marketing Management (17) and International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management (13).

When considering those journal articles where the search terms appeared in either the title, abstract or key words, there were a total of 19 journals that had at least one *relevant* result, and 50 journals that had 0 results for *relevant* journal articles using the four search terms. The

Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science appeared the most popular, with 9 relevant journal articles (mainly due to the 2019 special issue on customer journeys).

In terms of journal ranking and number of *relevant* journal articles:

- 14 articles appeared in 4\*\* ABS ranked journals,
- 4 articles appeared in 4\* ABS ranked journals,
- 8 articles appeared in 3\* ABS ranked journals,
- 13 articles appeared in 2\* ABS ranked journals,
- 4 articles appeared in 1\* ABS ranked journals.

It should be noted there are currently no ABS 3\* ranked dedicated retail journals, which might explain why there is a wider spread in 2\* and 4\*/4\*\* ABS ranked journals.

Table 2 highlights the 43 relevant journal articles selected. Looking at which term was the most common, from the 43 relevant journal articles selected:

- used more than one term within the article (14 journal articles)
- customer journey (21 journal articles),
- consumer journey (11 journal articles), • consumer decision journey (4 journal articles), • customer decision journey (1 journal article).

With customer journey and consumer journey being the most common term, it is pertinent to review what the difference is between customer and consumer. Maringe (2011, p. 147) identified customers as “transaction based, the relationship tends to be transient”. Blythe

AJB rank	Authors	Year	Term used	Mention touch points	Definition given of touch points	Decision making process stages mentioned
4*	Lemon & Verhoef	2016	customer journey; customer decision journey; customer purchase journey	Yes	Yes, brand-owned, partner owned, customer owned and social/external.	Prepurchase stage; purchase stage; postpurchase stage
4*	Hughes, Swaminathan & Brooks	2019	customer decision journey	No	No	No
4*	Batra & Keller	2016	consumer decision journey, refers to path to purchase	Yes	Defines as marketing controlled and consumerdrive media, offline and online media, and sales force efforts	Before, during & after purchase. Needs/wants; knows; considers; searches/learns; likes/trusts; WTP; commits; consumes; satisfied; loyal; engages; advocates
4*	Boyd, Kannan, Slotegraaf	2019	customer journey	yes	direct/indirect: between customer & brand; peer-to-peer or social interactions about a brand	pre purchase; purchase; post purchase
4*	Kuehnl, Jozic & Homburg	2019	customer journey management; customer journey design	yes	brand earned & brand owned touchpoints. Highlights importance of thematic cohesion of touch points, consistency of touch points, context sensitivity of touch points	No
4*	Kranzbuhler, Kleijnen & Verlegh	2019	customer journey	yes	firm-initiated touchpoints: satisfier & dissatisfier touchpoints	No
4*	Nakata, Izberk-Bilgin, Sharp, Spanjol, Cui, Crawford & Xiao	2019	customer journey; consumer journeys	yes	yes - refers to 4 touchpoint categories highlighted by Lemon & Verhoef	yes: pre-purchase, purchase, postpurchase. Also mentions search stage.

4*	Hamilton, Thompson, Bone, Chaplin, Griskevicius, Goldsmith, Hill, John, MittaL, O'Guinn, Piff, Roux, Shah, Zhu	2019	consumer decision journeys	no	no	Information processing & initial consideration; evaluation of alternatives; choice; consumption experiences
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4*	Novak & Hoffman	2019	consumer journeys, but mainly refers to relationship journeys throughout. Also mentions relationship journey mapping.	yes	refers to Lemon & Verhoef, but only mentions touch points, not categories	yes, mentions different stages of the purchase process, but not clarified what they are
4*	Dellaert	2019	Uses consumer journey, but introduces consumer production journey	no	no	yes, the consumer decision making steps highlighted are: (1) search, (2) purchase, (3) experience, and (4) reflect
4*	Schamp, Heitmann & Katzenstein	2019	consumer decision-making journey. Also refers to decision funnel	no	no	yes, consideration phase, choice stage
4*	Hildebrand & Schlager	2019	consumer journey, mentions path-to-purchase	yes	company controlled touchpoints	mentions consideration and search to purchase and post-purchase
4*	Vredeveld & Coulter	2019	consumer journeys	no	no	no
4	Anderl, Becker, Wangenheim & Schumann	2016	customer journey	no - uses term of channels	firm-initiated channels (display, newsletter, retargeting, social media), customer-initiated channels (type-in, search, price comparison), customer/firm-initiated channels (affiliate, referrer, other)	no, but states 'different channels affect consumers in different stages of their decision process', and does mention search and purchase
4	Keyser, Schepers & Konus	2015	customer journey, customer shopping journey	no, refers to channels	no	yes, info search, purchase and after sales.

4	Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich & Rudolph	2019	customer journey	yes	online and offline touchpoints from various sources, including retailer-owned, competitor-owned, and additional touchpoints.	yes, mentions all stages
4	Anderl, Schumann & Kunz	2016	uses term customer journey and also path to purchase as meaning exactly the same	refers to contacts with marketing channels	" to describe these instruments that retailers use to reach potential customers on the Internet"	yes, but does not clarify or refer to any stages
3	Cortez & Johnston	2017	customer journey	no	no	no, but does mention the stages of the customer journey (without clarifying what this means)

3	Steward, Narus, Roehm & Ritz	in press	customer journey	yes, but also refer to interactions as being the same	no	refers to decision making process, buying process and stages only - no clarification
3	Ancillai, Terho, Cardinali & Pascucci	2019	customer purchasing journey	yes	no	refers to buying process or purchase journey and buying decisions. Mentions early stages, but no explanation given
3	Voorveld	2019	consumer journey	no	no	yes mentions stages but no detail given
3	Willems, Brengman & Kerrebroeck	2019	customer journey	no but discuss interactions	no	yes anticipatory stage, and post purchase stage mentioned
3	Parkinson, RussellBennett & Previte	2018	customer journey	yes	Mentions touch points in relation to engagement opportunities	yes, mentions different stages of the customer journey. Mentions early stage

3	Schroder, Falke, Hruschka & Reutterer	2019	customer journey	no	no	no
3	Barqwitz & Maas	2018	customer journey. Also refers to touch point journeys	yes	Mentions the design of touchpoint journeys, and customers engaging in interactions. Mentions personal and impersonal channels	yes, discusses from pre purchase, purchase to post purchase. Also eight distinct phases from need recognition to search, evaluation, purchase, in-force (contract duration), claim, and contract adaptation to contract termination
2	Farah & Ramadan	2017	Consumer journey	no	no	Purchase decision and marketing funnel stages mentioned as awareness, consideration, evaluation, and action
2	Jocevski, Arvidsson, Miragliotta, Ghezzi and Mangiaracina	2019	customer journey	yes	distinguishes between channels and touch points, stating that social media is a touch point, not a channel	yes, uses pre purchase, purchase and post purchase
2	Taylor	2016	customer journey	no	no	no

2	Rudkowski, Heney, Yu, Sedlezky & Gunn	2020	customer journeys	yes	Refers to Lemon & Verhoef, with examples Partner owned (signage, design), brand owned (staffing, product assortment, payment option), customer owned (word of mouth), social/external (word of mouth)	yes, pre-purchase (awareness, need recognition, search consideration); purchase (choice, payment); post-purchase (satisfaction, referrals)
2	Farah, Ramadan & Harb	2019	consumer journey in keywords, but article refers to shopping journeys - sees them as same	yes	customer-initiated (such as checking online reviews about a specific restaurant) or firm initiated (such as content or promotions available online or websites)	yes, awareness, consideration, engagement, purchase, loyalty
2	Farah & Ramadan	2017	consumer journey	yes	no	yes, refers to traditional journey marketing funnel stages of awareness, consideration, evaluation, and action when completing a purchase decision
2	Holliday, Ward & Fielden	2015	consumer journey	no	no	refers to 'all stages of the consumer journey'

2	Kuuru & Narvanen	2019	customer journey	no	mentions interactions	no, but mentions after purchase
2	Hemetsberger, Kreuzer & Klien	2019	consumer journey	no	no	no
2	Cheng, Anderson, Zhu & Choi	2017	decision journey or consumer decision journey, also path-to-purchase	yes	no	yes pre purchase, purchase, post purchase
2	George & Wakefield	2018	consumer journey, relationship journey	yes,	customer-owned and service-owned contact points	no, but refers to different steps of the journey
2	Paluch & Tuzovic	2019	consumer journey	no	no	no
2	Palmer & Bejou	2016	customer journeys, mapping customer journeys	no	no	no
1	Yrjola, Spence & Saarijarvi	2018	customer decision journey, consumer decision journey, decision journey	yes, but uses channels, customer touchpoints or mediums	no	yes, refers to different stages
1	Mortimer & Laurie	2019	customer journey	yes	no	yes, pre purchase, purchase, post purchase
1	Hilken, Heller, Chulinski, Keeling, Mahr & Ruyter	2018	customer journey	yes	Does not clarify what they are	Mentions a customer journey sequences these touch points into steps that customers go through when making a purchase
1	Crosier & Handford	2012	customer journey, customer journey mapping	no	no	yes, key stages may include: travelling to the retail center, identifying the store, entering the store, seeking assistance, assessing the display of product, navigation through the retail environment, product selection, payment

**Table 2: analysis of 43 journal article**



(2013, p. 439) defined a customer as “someone who makes the decision to buy a product”, and a consumer as “someone who enjoys the benefit of a product”, suggesting they consume it. Solomon (2009, p. 685) identified a consumer as “a person who identifies a need or desire, makes a purchase, and/or disposes of the product”, which appears to contain aspects of being a customer from the Blythe (2013) term used above. Whereas Barnett’s (2011) view in discussing services is that a consumer is simply the one that consumes a service. The American Marketing Association (2014, online) defined a customer as “the actual or prospective purchaser of products or services”, and a consumer as “traditionally, a consumer is the ultimate user or consumer of goods, ideas, and services. However, the term also is used to imply the buyer or decision-making as well as the ultimate consumer”. (American Marketing Association, 2019, online). Therefore, whilst there is some agreement that a customer is the person involved in deciding/purchasing, and the consumer the person using/consuming, there is also a level of contradiction/confusion of these terms, for example George and Wakefield (2018) use the terms interchangeably. Further, both customer and consumer journey appear interchangeable terms and are both keywords used in the research, although we use ‘customer journey’ as the term to describe how the consumer decisionmaking process and subsequent categorisation of touch points from an ownership perspective is understood.

### *Considering alternative terms used*

Whilst undertaking the review of literature it was evident that additional terms were used in marketing journals. Table 3 identifies a range of alternative terms used.

<b>Term used</b>	<b>Author(s) &amp; Year</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Consumption journeys	(Akaka and Schau, 2019)	“Identity projects that involve engagement with a practice through which one progresses from one stage to another”
	(Menda et al., 2019)	“Consumers engage in romantic consumption—the consumption of offerings that evoke romantic feelings and thoughts—on a frequent basis”.
Experiential consumption journey	(Nardini et al., 2019)	“A key aspect of the experiential consumption journey is how the experience is consumed”
Shopping/shopper journeys	(Farah et al., 2019: 137; Hall et al., 2017; Pathak and Pathak-Shelat, 2017)	Does not define, but highlights “online and offline touch points” and “various stages of the consumer journey”
	(Shankar et al., 2016)	“shopper decision journey's stages” (p42) and presents around: “motivation/goals, search and discovery, evaluation and choice, post purchase” (p39)
Path-to-Purchase	(Fulgoni, 2014; deHaan et al., 2018)	No definition given in either paper.
Path to online purchase	(Becker, 2017; Cheng et al., 2017)	No definition given in either paper
Cancer journeys	(Torres and DeBerry-Spence, 2019)	No definition, but refer to “traumatic experiences across long-term consumer journeys” and the context of “consumers’ cancer journeys where consumers experience extended service encounters with a variety of providers and a range of both positive and negative emotions, situations, and events” (p516)
Relationship journeys	(Novak and Hoffman, 2019)	No actual definition provided, but refers to customer journeys, mapping and touch points. Also highlights “the dynamics of relationship journeys in the context of consumers’ relationships with brands” (p235)
Customer purchasing journey	(Ancillai, 2019)	Not defined, but refers to touchpoints for building valuable business relationships
Consumers’ digital media journey	(Nystrom and Mickelsson, 2019)	Not defined, but refers to digital media and advertising, path to purchase and consumer journeys and “how the consumer moves along a path in the digital landscape” (p399)

Customer journey design	(Kuehnl et al., 2019)	“The extent to which consumers perceive multiple brand-owned touchpoints as designed in a thematically cohesive, consistent, and context-sensitive way”.
Customer journey mapping	(Crosier and Handford, 2012)	Uses Cabinet Office 2007 definition “the process of tracking and describing all the experiences that customers have as they encounter a service or set of services, taking into account not only what happens to them, but their responses to their experiences” and state it is “an easy to read graph that pinpoints where change is needed” (p196)
Consumer production journey	(Dellaert, 2019)	“Describes the consumer’s co-production process rather than the traditional consumption process and expands the consumer journey concept to explicitly take into account the fact that consumers create value for other consumers. Thus, this new concept allows us to connect consumer coproduction in various stages of the value chain (e.g., peer-to-peer sales, service production, consumer reviews)” (p239).

**Table 3: Examples of alternative terms used in marketing journals**

Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p. 79) stated that “customer journey analysis should understand and map the journey from the customer perspective and, therefore, requires customer input”. They differentiate this approach from service blueprinting, which they state has more of a focus on mapping the entire service delivery process, which is more internally oriented. Kuehnl *et al.*, (2019) differentiated between customer experience (management), customer journey management, and (experiential) service design. Similar to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), they mentioned service experience blueprints and customer journey maps as a focus of studies under (experiential) service design, and path-to-purchase as a focus of customer journey management. Customer journeys appeared as part of an effective customer journey design (CJD), although they define CJD “as the extent to which consumers perceive multiple

brand-owned touchpoints as designed in a thematically cohesive, consistent, and contextsensitive way” (Kuehnl *et al.*, 2019, p. 554). This suggests that the focus of CJD is on brandowned touchpoints only, whereas Rudowski *et al.*, (2020) also see touchpoints as an integral part of the customer journey, and reference is made to visual representations, and mapping planned and actual customer journeys. Crosier and Handford (2012) also focused on the mapping aspect of customer journeys. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) have highlighted that recently the role of partners and external influences are included within CJM. They also highlighted the importance of involving customers through a self-journey mapping exercise, or asking customers to develop their ideal customer journey.

A number of authors used path-to-purchase and customer journey terms interchangeably (Anderl *et al.*, 2016; Hildebrand and Schlager, 2019; Batra and Keller, 2016) which is adding to further confusion in understand the customer journey.. Although a number of authors discussed path-to-purchase, definitions are often not provided. However, Jones and Runyan (2018, p. 152) stated “A shopper is engaged in a subset of consumer behaviours, which is path-to-purchase (P2P) for a specific occasion”. They highlighted that once a shopper has identified a specific purchase need that they are in ‘shopper mode’, that this is an active process, involving a purchase decision outcome as a result of engagement with P2P. Jones and Runyan (2016) also suggested a number of authors support this view (for example they identify Bliss (1960); Shanker *et al.*, (2011); Mccollough *et al.*, (2000). Shankar *et al.*, (2016) discuss three broad stages of before purchase, during purchase and after purchase, and referred to a shopping cycle. However, Srinivasan *et al.*, (2016, p. 442) discussed “consumers on their path to purchase (P2P) beginning with awareness and knowledge-building (cognition

or thinking) to liking and preference (affective or feeling) to conviction and purchase (conation or doing)”. This suggests that the path-to-purchase sequence is not necessarily unique to shoppers, and that further clarity is required on the term. Furthermore, other alternate terms are used relating to experiences, referred to as consumption journeys/experiential consumption journeys (Akaka and Schau, 2019; Menda *et al.*, 2019; Nardini *et al.*, 2019). This highlights that the context is being used to determine the adapted term, as found with cancer journeys (Torres and DeBerry-Spence, 2019), and relationship journeys (Novak and Hoffman, 2019). Also seen are adapted terms relating to the media tools used, such as with consumers’ digital media journey (Nystrom and Mickelsson, 2019). Overall, there is generally a wide range of terms used associated with customer journeys, which highlights a lack of clarity and consistency and the need for better framing to understand the term.

#### *Assessing decision-making process stages within customer journeys*

Batra and Keller (2016) explored the development of consumer decision journeys, covering traditional consumer decision-making models such as the purchase funnel, AIDA and more recent developments of a consumer decision journey (for example see Court *et al.*, (2009)). Hamilton *et al.*, (2019, p. 532) cite the Court *et al.*, (2009) definition of a consumer journey as “an iterative process through which the consumer begins to consider alternatives to satisfy a want or a need, evaluates and chooses among them, and then engages in consumption”, which lacks any reference to touch points. Similarly, Schamp *et al.*, (2019), and Mortimer and Laurie (2019) also highlighted the traditional consumer decision-making models/stages when referring to the consumer decision-making journey. Herhausen *et al.*, (2019, p. 11) suggested customer journey research began in the 1960s relating to the buying process. They

highlighted that the digital era has created new touch points and resulted in the original linear representation of the buying process becoming a much more complex journey. Their definition of customer journeys is “customers’ search and purchase usage of all online and offline touchpoints from various sources, including retailer-owned, competitor-owned, and additional touchpoints”. Steward *et al.*, (2019, p. 296) explored customer journeys within the B2B context. They stated, “a customer journey is not a restatement of the buying process, but rather a conceptualization of a much more intricate and involved process by which a customer and supplier may embark that incorporates all of the experiential elements of the interactions and their flow over multiple periods”. They indicated that the process steps are basically still the same, however, that there has been a rebranding in terminology (e.g. buying process maps to customer journey maps, or buying process models to customer journey models). The implications of this is that critical aspects are captured relating to the network and relationships over multiple time periods. Rudowski *et al.*, (2020, p. 5) defined customer journeys as “a process whereby firms map the customers touchpoints along pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase stages from a customer’s perspective”. Although this suggests a strong link to the buying process, they also see a strong link to customer experience, a view supported by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), who also utilised the prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase stages within their customer journey model.

When reviewing the 43 journal articles, a substantial number did not refer to consumer decision-making stages (For example, Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Kuehnl *et al.*, 2019; Kranzbuhler 2019; Vredeveld and Coulter 2019), or only referred to some of the stages (e.g. Schamp *et al.*, 2019 who refer to consideration phase and choice stage). However, there were many

papers that did reference the stages as part of the customer journey (For example see Batra and Keller, 2016; Schamp *et al.*, 2019; Mortimer and Laurie, 2019; Herhausen *et al.*, 2019; Steward *et al.*, 2019; Rudkowski *et al.*, 2020; Shavitt and Barnes, 2019; Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Overall this analysis highlights that there was an inconsistent approach beyond whether the decision-making process stages were considered as part of the customer journey, but if they were considered, what stages were used.

### *Categorisation of touch points within customer journeys*

This leads into the consideration of whether touch points are an integral part of customer journeys. Within many of the definitions and related discussions, touch points are mentioned, for example, Kranzbuhler *et al.*, (2019, p. 308) stated “a customer journey consists of a series of firm-customer touchpoints that consumers perceive as satisfying or dissatisfying (or neutral) based on their execution or inherent nature”. They also highlighted the importance of exploring consumer perceptions of various touchpoints. Rudkowski *et al.*, (2020 p. 5) stated “touchpoints are contact points or encounters that occur between the customer, the brand, the firm and/or other influencers”. Furthermore, they clearly state “touchpoints are critical to the customer journey”, and highlighted that retailers tend to focus on individual touchpoints, rather than focus on the whole customer journey. Anderl *et al.*, (2016, p. 185) also explained touch points as “contacts of any individual customer with a retailer” and see them as an integral part of the customer journey. However, this definition is only referring to retailer controlled touch points. Steward *et al.*, (2019) focused on B2B journeys and highlighted a number of studies that referred to touch points in relation to customer journeys. Similarly Herhausen *et al.*, (2019), Anderl *et al.*, (2016), Hildebrand and Schlager (2019),

Shavitt and Barnes (2019), and Kranzbuhler *et al.*, (2019) mentioned touch points as part of their definition of customer/consumer journeys, and Kuehnl *et al.*, (2019) mentioned touch points in their definition of customer journey design. Batra and Keller (2016) referred to engagement with brands, rather than touch points. Herhausen *et al.*, (2019) suggested that touchpoints are more-or-less the same as channels, which is a view also held by Yrjola *et al.*, (2018), although channels was considered to be a broader term by Herhausen *et al.*, (2019). From this analysis there appears to be some agreement that touch points are an integral part of a customer journey.

There are a number of studies that categorised touch points (see Table 4), with *some* level of agreement. For example:

- Anderl *et al.*, (2016) identified firm-initiated or customer-initiated.
- George and Wakefield (2018) referred to customer-owned and service-owned touch points.
- Baxendale *et al.*, (2015) referred to brand owner touchpoints, retailer touchpoints and third party touchpoints.
- Lemon and Verhoef (2016) discussed brand-owned, partner owned, customer owned and social/external.
- Herhausen *et al.*, (2019) discussed retailer-owned, competitor-owned and additional

Therefore, not all touch points are under an organisation's control, but ownership is a key factor when determining categories. Steen *et al.*, (2011) suggested that organisations identify the most critical touchpoints for customers, and determine how these can be influenced to



improve the customer experience. Furthermore, Baxendale *et al.*, (2015) highlighted a lack of studies that provide a more holistic view of all touch points, including online and offline. Kuehnl *et al.*, (2019, p. 555) also highlighted a gap in existing research, stating “it remains largely unclear how consumers perceive the design of touchpoints throughout their customer journeys”. They explored three considerations important for effective CJD: (1) thematic cohesion of touchpoints (“the extent to which consumers perceive multiple touchpoints as sharing a common brand theme”); (2) consistency of touchpoints (“the extent to which consumers perceive a uniform design of the brand across multiple touchpoints along their customer journey”); (3) context sensitivity of touchpoints (“the extent to which consumers perceive multiple brand-owned touchpoints as responsive and adaptive to their specific goals, situational contexts, preferences and activities”. However, their work only considered brand owned touch points, whilst Rudkowski *et al.*, (2020) highlighted that retailers often only focus on individual touchpoints, rather than the customer’s end-to-end journey. Identifying those critical touch points that have the most significant influence on outcomes is important to establish. Table 4 below provides an explanation of each touch point category identified from a range of authors, which highlights a wide interpretation of touch point categories.

<b>Touch point type</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Example(s) given by author(s)</b>
Brand-owned	“Customer interactions during the experience that are designed and managed by the firm and under the firm’s control” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016:76)	Websites, loyalty programmes, any brand-controlled elements of the marketing mix (e.g. service, price, salesforce) (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Staffing, product assortment, payment option (Ruskowski et al., (In Press)
Brand owner	No clear definition given (Baxendale et al., 2015)	Brand Advertising (Baxendale et al., 2015)
Firm-initiated	“...customers do not actively trigger these contacts” (Anderl et al., 2016: 189)	Display, retargeting, affiliate, email (Anderl et al., 2016).

Partner-owned	“Jointly designed, managed and controlled by the firm and one or more of its partners” (Lemon & Verhoef 2016:77)	Marketing agencies, multichannel distribution partners, multivendor loyalty program partners, communication channel partners (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Signage, design (Rudkowski et al., In Press)
Retailer	No clear definition given (Baxendale et al., 2015)	Retailer advertising, in-store communications (e.g. shelf and display, feature ads, price-based promotions)
Retailer-owned	No clear definition given (Herhausen et al., 2019)	Physical store; online store; catalog (Herhausen et al 2019).
Competitor-owned	No clear definition given (Herhausen et al., 2019)	Competitor physical store; online store or catalog (Herhausen et., 2019)
Customer-owned	“Customer actions that are part of the overall customer experience, but that the firm, its partners, or others do not influence or control” (Lemon & Verhoef 2016: 78)	Customer postings online relating to brand, e.g. YouTube product instructional video posted by customer (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Word of Mouth (Rudkowski et al., In Press)
	“Actions taken by the customer to purchase that are beyond control of the service operator but may include co-produced value in terms of the customer attending and being part of the service production” (George & Wakefield 2018: 115)	Individual admissions, group admissions, playoffs admissions, package plans, quantity and price (Goerge & Wakefield, 2018)
Service-owned	“...include any elements of the marketing mix” (George & Wakefield 2018: 115)	Contact intensity, contact channel: textbased communication (email), or in person (George & Wakefield, 2018)
Third-party	No clear definition given (Baxendale et al, (2015)	Word-of-mouth received, peer observation, traditional earned media (e.g. editorial, expert reviews)
Social/external	“Recognize the important roles of others in the customer experience”. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016: 78)	Other customers, peer influences, independent information sources, environments: e.g. TripAdvisor, social media, reviews (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Word of Mouth (Rudkowski et al., In Press)
Customer-initiated	“...potential customers trigger the communication..” (Anderl et al., 2016: 189)	Branded (direct type-in; branded search) Generic (generic search, price comparison)

Additional touchpoints	No clear definition given (Herhausen et al., 2019)	Search engine, brand website, comparison portal, social media, new portals/newspaper, offline word of mouth, other touchpoints (Herhausen et al., 2019)
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**Table 4: Examples of existing touch point categories**

Despite the differences in viewpoints regarding categories, there are some common threads of understanding that help to identify common themes, which are discussed in the next section.

## **Discussion**

Having reviewed the literature, there are a number of considerations regarding the meaning and interpretation of the term 'customer journey'. We found there continues to be a lack of common understanding of what constitutes a customer journey, regarding terminology, use of the consumer decision-making process stages, and categorisation of touch points within it. To gain further insight we also undertook further analysis of the main contributory papers that included primary research into the whole customer journey. There were at least seventeen alternative terms found in the marketing and retail literature, which suggests a broad interpretation of the subject area. This leads us to framing our understanding of the relationship with the consumer decision-making process stages and the involvement of touch points from the customer perspective. The identification of all the categories of touch points used throughout the customer journey and a consistent use of the different terms for the consumer decision making-process stages is necessary for a universal definition. The touch points in a whole customer journey are brand owned, partner owned/managed, outside the control of brand owner or partner. Our definition of a customer journey is the customer

engagement with all touch points (brand owned, partner owned/managed, outside the control of brand owner or partner) used throughout the decision making process stages (prepurchase, purchase, post purchase).

After developing a common understanding of a customer journey, two key areas were incorporated in our review: (1) the use of the consumer decision-making process stages, and (2) the use of touch points. When evaluating the definitions of customer journeys highlighted in Table 2, a number of studies suggested that customer journeys often utilise the traditional decision-making process stages. However, a variety of stages were highlighted by different authors, reinforcing a lack of consensus regarding framing customer journey stages. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and Rudkowski *et al.*, (2020) are consistent with our definition of the three stages of prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase stages, whilst others such as Dellaert (2019) included search, purchase, experience and reflect, and Hamilton *et al.*, (2019) used information processing and initial consideration, evaluation of alternatives, choice and consumption experiences. Further, Farah and Ramadan (2017) referred to the stages as awareness, consideration, evaluation, and action. From our analysis, these differences can be accommodated through the use of the three definitive stages of prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase within the customer journey. Lemon and Verhoef (2018, p. 76) described the customer journey as 'iterative and dynamic', so by incorporating these three stages into our definition of a customer journey the process can provide clarity and consistency, and be more manageable when researching the topic.

The analysis identified that touch points need to be considered at each of these decisionmaking process stages, as customers often use multiple touch points at different stages during their journey (Kranzbuhler *et al.*, 2019; Keyser *et al.*, 2015; Lemon and Verhoef 2018). Our research highlighted a lack of consistency in both the terms and categories used in describing touch points. Furthermore, a number of journal articles with a focus on customer journeys did not mention touch points (for example, see Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Hamilton *et al.*, 2019; Dellaert 2019; Schamp *et al.*, 2019 or Vredeveld and Coulter 2019), emphasising the need for framing touch points as an integral part of a customer journey. Additionally, an alternative term of channels was also identified in the analysis (for example, see Anderl *et al.*, 2016 or Keyser *et al.*, 2015), further reinforcing the need for a consistent approach to how touch points are described.

There was some common agreement regarding ownership to distinguish between different categories of touch points, which included:

- Touch points owned/controlled by the brand owner
- Touch points that have an element of design, management and/or control by a partner
- Touchpoints outside the control of a brand owner or partner

The ownership perspective has been shown to be an effective approach to categorise a range of touch points (see Herhausen *et al.*, 2019). Our analysis has shown that there is no universal agreement on how many categories should be used, but there is agreement that ownership is a common feature for the development of touch point categories, and the three categories above are sufficiently broad to encompass all touch points. Whilst many previous studies focused solely on just brand owned touch points (for example, see Kuehnl *et al.*, (2019)) ,

there needs to be an increased emphasis on exploring all categories of touch points used throughout the customer journey to understand and improve the customer experience.

From our analysis the understanding of the customer journey has been clearly identified from a structured review of terminology, how it links to the consumer decision-making process, and the relationship it has with touch points. Additionally, we undertook further analysis of the whole customer journey of papers that included primary research to gain greater validity to our research, and as a result identify possible future research opportunities.

When considering the contextual data of existing primary research studies into customer journeys, Table 5 below summarised a range of methodological approaches and contexts. From the original journal articles used within the analysis, there were nine papers that undertook primary research with a main focus on customer journeys.

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Method/sample detail</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Rudkowski, Heney, Yu, Sedlezky & Gunn	2018	Qualitative, observational research at five mobile pop-ups. Eight completed observation forms, plus qualitative comments from two observers undertaking the research	Maps a range of touch points used by each person observed. Categorised at each stage of prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase. Photographs provided of pop-ups also.
Anderl, Schumann & Kunz	2016	Quantitative, using a data set provided by a German online fashion retailer. 350,719 customer journeys by 343,556 individuals, of which 42,297 featured conversions.	Online multichannel tracking via cookies. Considers eight channels and provides a quantitative picture of multichannel online customer journeys.

Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich & Rudolph	2019	Quantitative, questionnaire to 2,780 respondents in 2013, and 3,105 respondents in 2016. Asked to reconstruct their last customer journey at a multichannel retailer.	Develop five customer journey segments, based upon use of various touch points: store-focused segment, pragmatic online segment, extensive online segment, multiple touchpoint segment, online-tooffline segment.
Anderl, Becker, Wangenheim & Schumann	2016	Quantitative, analysis of 4 datasets from online retailers (travel agency, fashion and luggage). Minimum of 405,000 journeys per advertiser	Examines contribution of individual online channels (touch points), and explores the value attributed solely to the marketing channel directly preceding conversion (last click attribution).
Barwitz & Maas	2018	Qualitative, eight interviews with execs from leading insurance companies/industry experts, and two focus groups (6-7 people each) of German, Austrian and Swiss past purchasers of motor insurance	Examines what drives customers' interaction choices along the customer journey, explores customer journey patterns, and provides four omnichannel customer segments.
Farah, Ramadan & Harb	2019	Qualitative, fifteen Skype interviews with experienced industry sector people (e.g. digital marketing, VR headset development, gaming), plus faceto-face interviews with twentyfour consumers	Considers the potential of VR (virtual reality) technology across the stages of the shopping journey
George & Wakefield	2018	Quantitative, analysis of data of 7,757 National Hockey League customers	Maps customer journey over multiple years with a focus on understanding how consumers respond to contact strategies over time.
Crosier & Handford	2012	Qualitative, five – eight interviews (unclear), plus observation of same blind/partially sighted people.	Maps customer shopping journeys/ experiences from a blind/ partially sighted perspective.
Kuehnl, Jozic & Homburg	2019	Quantitative, questionnaire, 4,814 consumers in the USA and Europe.	Explores what constitutes the effectiveness of customer journey design from a consumer perspective. Covered 10 sectors.

**Table 5: Existing primary research studies with a focus on customer journeys within marketing journals: adopted methodological approaches and contextual data**

The primary research studies highlighted in Table 5 above show a small number of qualitative (x4 studies) and quantitative (x5 studies) approaches, which suggests only limited attention to the whole customer journey. These studies are strongly focused on retail, although George and Wakefield (2018) look at National Hockey League customers and Barwitz and Maas (2018) consider motor insurance. The remaining studies highlighted in Table 2 fail to capture all touch points used, or only focus on part of the customer journey. Although this may contribute to the research of this important topic, it does highlight a limitation in understanding whole customer journeys. Further, there is a need to gain greater knowledge of the influence of touch points at different decision making stages in customer journeys.

## **Conclusion**

Research into customer journeys has gained greater attention within the subject discipline of marketing and retail. We have addressed the issue of framing our understanding of customer journeys based upon a detailed analysis of peer reviewed published journal articles. In order to provide clarity, we proposed that the term 'customer journey' should be the dominant descriptor used by those exploring this topic. We have demonstrated that the definition of the customer journey incorporates the three decision making stages of pre-purchase, purchase, to post-purchase, and includes touch points used. We have highlighted that this area has increased attention from researchers, but we have shown that there is a need to ensure different types of touch points are considered, including both online and offline, and those outside the control of the brand owner.



This study has also highlighted a range of different types of ownership for touch points that consumers may interact with at various stages of their journey. This categorisation is an important contribution, as a brand owner only controls a limited number of touch points that are available. Based upon ownership, three important touch point categories emerged from our analysis: touch points owned/controlled by the brand owner; touch points that have an element of design, management and/or control by a partner; touchpoints outside the control of a brand owner or partner.

### **Limitations and future research**

There are some limitations to the qualitative approach we have taken in this research, which includes:

- The database used - ABS marketing discipline list excludes some general journals that might contain marketing related papers (for example, International Journal of Management Reviews, which is 3\* ABS rated) and some sector journals may contain papers relating to the topic area (for example, Journal of Service Research, 4\* ABS rated). Also, there may be journals relevant to the topic under investigation that are not listed in the marketing subject within the ABS ranking (e.g. Supply Chain Management: an International Journal, which is 3\* ABS rated). The ABS academic quality journal guide contains only peer reviewed journals, unlike other lists such as Scimago journal and country rank guide, which includes a much broader range and quality of publications. Further, some journals not written in the English language may also not be part of the dataset.

- The time period used - 10-year period limits reference to earlier work pre-2009 and therefore does not allow seminal work to be discussed, nor demonstrate how the area has developed. However, Folstad and Kvale (2018) reviewed literature prior to 2013, relating to customer journeys and how the subject area had developed.

Further research is needed, to understand a wider range of sectors and ownership types (e.g. different categories of retailers such as independent stores, co-operatives or franchises; notfor-profit or charitable organisations; or social enterprises). Using the definition, future research can focus on comparative analysis of customer journeys within different contexts, such as ownership types and different sectors. Future research should focus on the variety of touch points used from the customer perspective. This will then allow organisations to gain greater insight of those touch points that are critical to improving the customer experience.

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