The journey's front runners

An investigation into how sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies to form engaging consumer decision journeys

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Abstract

In modern day retail, the quest for dominance has become increasingly dependent on providing superior customer experience to the competition. In the omni-channel environment, it is no longer sufficient to provide a smooth customer experience that is complete without friction; consumers now expect retailers to create a memorable, personalised experience that cannot be matched by the competition. Sportswear is a significant retail sector to explore in light of this experience creation objective, given that sports retailers consistently top the charts for consumers' favourite brands and that consumers hold higher brand passion and loyalty to sportswear vis-à-vis other retail sectors. This research took theoretical explanations behind motivations for sports consumption and embedded these within the wider framework of consumer experience in the consumer decision journey. With this framework, this research set out to investigate how sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies in order to create engaging consumer decision journeys. For the purposes of this study, 8 experts working in the field of sportswear were interviewed. Their responses were analysed using theory-based thematic analysis in order to learn in-depth industry insights into how sportswear retailers consider and implement experience creation into their customers' decision journeys. Most significantly, this research revealed that sportswear retailers design and employ experience creation strategies to tap into the experiences, emotions, and lifestyles associated with sport, especially if products have a performance element to them. Whilst many retail sectors search for external inspiration to enhance their customer experience, sportswear retailers need not look further than using sports experiences as a guiding principle. Sport is in itself an experience product category, meaning that sportswear retailers have been granted a lucrative experiential foundation around which to design experience creation strategies. Sportswear retailers' ability to actively create memorable, personal experiences for their consumers could go towards explaining the augmented levels of passion and loyalty involved in sportswear, as well as the increasing integration of sportswear into daily attire.

Keywords: customer experience, sports retail, customer decision journey, experience creation, brand loyalty

Acknowledgements

As a lifelong fan and player of football, I have felt a close attachment to sportswear brands as long as I can remember. In my earlier years, I would rush into the nearest Sports Direct to stare longingly at Adidas and Nike's beautiful latest creations along the walls. I would become so attached to a new purchase that I would frequently wear them around the house for the first 24 hours to "wear them in", even going so far as to wear a select few pairs to bed. But this bond with sportswear brands did not subside with maturity. When Adidas set up an immersive experiential marketing space in my hometown of Brixton a few years ago, I jumped straight into the queue like I was a child again. I was so taken aback by the experience that I wanted to buy the boots on the spot; it absolutely brought me a step closer to the brand. These companies invest so much time and resources into understanding consumer psychology and the strategies required to create emotional bonds, yet we as consumers rarely stop to think twice about how or why we let ourselves become so attached to particular brands. When the opportunity arose to write a thesis exploring the strategies and driving motivations behind the successes in sports retail, I couldn't resist the chance to investigate how on earth I had been convinced to wear football boots to bed.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of modern technologies has completely transformed the world of retail, as well as the traditional brand-consumer relationship. The arrival of the Internet challenged the long-established business model of the physical store, as well as traditional notions of customer service (Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015). This development of multichannel retailing, understood as a scenario in which consumers use a variety of channels in their shopping experience to research and make purchases (McGoldrick & Collins, 2007), not only complicated the retail mix for brands; it drastically altered consumer shopping behaviour and trends, signalling greater consumer empowerment vis-à-vis retailers. The complexities of multichannel retail have only become more significant with the arrival of digital technologies as retailers are now given extensive opportunities to connect with consumers through the physical store, the online store, mobile, social media, as well as the Internet of Things (IoT), that together provide a nexus of channels between them and their customers (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Rahman, 2013).

With this nexus in consideration, multi-channel retail is now being reimagined as being *omni*-channel (Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014; Verhoef et al, 2015). Piotrowicz and Cuthbertson (2014) conceptualise omni-channel as an evolution of the multi-channel: multi-channel implies a divide between the channels; whereas in omni-channel, consumers move freely between inter-connected channels as part of one unified experience, regardless of the channels used. These authors argue that because the channels must be managed together, the interactions are with the brand, not with the channel itself (Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014). With the development of the omni-channel environment, the "distinctions between physical and online will vanish, turning the world into a showroom without walls" (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013, p. 2), which calls for a re-imagining of traditional brand-customer interactions. In an age of choice and consumer autonomy, retailers' focus has shifted from traditional notions of customer service to consider the holistic customer *experience* that is amalgamated across all channels combined (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Providing excellent customer experience is now understood as being an important area for differentiation amongst competing firms, which has resulted in a large shift in academic and managerial attention towards the discipline. In more luxury markets, establishing competitive advantage in modern retail depends on a

retailer's ability to actively create superior experiences that are difficult for rivals to replicate (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Edelman & Singer, 2015).

The literature exploring customer experience is predominantly conceptual or predictive in nature, and few offer any empirical insights into how specific retailer sectors design their customer experience. This research intends to address this gap by investigating experience creation in sportswear, as well as specific strategies employed by sports apparel retailers to enhance their customer experience. The reason that sports retail is such an interesting sector to explore further is twofold. Firstly, sportswear is a highly relevant retail sub-category due to its ever-increasing presence in daily fashion. Sportswear has had a significant influence in fashion in the past decade, shown by the profusion of sneakers and athleisure products entering into common daily attire (Lipson, Stewart, & Griffiths, 2020). Sportswear's influence in fashion is not set to subside anytime soon, as sports retail is forecast to be worth $108.7 billion by 2025, up from 84.1 billion in 2017 (Costello, 2019). Secondly, and perhaps more interestingly, there are significantly higher levels of brand passion and customer loyalty associated with sports apparel vis-a-vis other retail sectors (Pourazad, Stocchi, & Pare, 2019). Especially amongst younger generations, sportswear tops the list for most popular brands (Hershman, 2018). It is widely accepted that consumers who feel emotionally connected to a brand can become "brand evangelists" who are more willing to pay a premium price for branded products, are more likely to spread positive brand word-of-mouth, and are more loyal to a brand (Astakhova et al., 2017). Given that customer experience encompasses holistic emotional, cognitive, and social responses to a retail (Verhoef et al., 2009), it is a logical expectation that sportswear retailers must necessarily deliver excellent customer experience and superior experience creation in order to achieve these augmented levels of brand passion.

In order to better understand customer experience in omni-channel sportswear, this research will use the consumer decision journey (CDJ) as a framework to organise experience creation strategies throughout a consumer's buying process. The CDJ helps retailers to structure and design their customer experience, by indicating the most important stages in the buying process that must be managed. By implementing excellent customer experience at each stage of the journey, sportswear retailers can ensure that customers will have a positive holistic experience that could result in a loyalty loop (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Even more effective in the omni-channel retail environment is actively creating experiences at each stage

of the journey to provide a differentiated customer experience. An in-depth explanation of the CDJ will be discussed in section 2.2.

Hence, the objective of this research is to assess how sportswear retailers actively create experiences to improve their customer experience, using the CDJ as an organising framework. Given the intersection between sportswear's significance in modern society and the significance of experience creation in modern retail, respectively, exploring the motivations and strategies behind sportswear retailers' customer experience design is a highly relevant and fertile new area to study, with both academic and managerial implications.

1.1 Scientific relevance

This research aims to address a double-ended research gap between the literature on customer experience and the literature in sports retail, respectively. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) reveal how there is limited empirical research directly relating customer experience to the CDJ, especially from the perspective of the firm. These authors call on more work to be done to explore how customer experience is designed within the CDJ framework as a means to 'develop a stronger understanding of customer experience and the customer journey in this era of increasingly complex customer behaviour' (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 69). Customer experience literature predominantly explores the discipline from the customer's perspective in terms of their behaviour and responses to retailers (Verhoef et al., 2009). More work is needed to better understand how firms actively design their customer experience and shape their CDJs to capture consumers and build stronger relationships with their customers.

Furthermore, there is an even greater research gap focused on customer experience in specific retail markets; sports retail included. Pourazad et al. (2019) outline the fact that managerial strategies in sports apparel tend to only focus on consumer engagement at personal and social levels. These authors reveal that no studies have been conducted to explore the relationships consumers develop with sportswear retailers, and only a few studies have even attempted to explore the emotional connection that consumers have in sports apparel (Pourazad et al., 2019). In order to investigate how sportswear retailers design experience creation strategies to engage their customers and foster brand loyalty, this research will embed theory related to motivations for sports participation and spectatorship into the wider understanding of experience creation. Considering how sportswear retailers use the passion, experience, and lifestyles associated with sport to influence their strategies could

offer some interesting insights that could in part explain their superiority in regard to consumer engagement.

As previously mentioned, more work needs to be done to establish the reasons for why sportswear retailers are so effective at creating "brand evangelists" that are so loyal to their brands, given that loyalty is the ultimate goal of customer experience (Edelman and Singer, 2015); exploring sports retail as being a source of superior experience creation could be a promising start. With this in mind, this research will investigate *how sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies to form an engaging consumer decision journey*. State-of-the-art theory in the fields of omni-channel experience creation will be combined with insights into the role of experience within sport in order to establish whether there is a driving force permeating through the experience creation strategies employed by sportswear retailers (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). In order to address the gaps in research, the research question(s) posed are as follows:

RQ1: *How do sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies to form an engaging consumer decision journey?*

SQ1: *How do sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies to create awareness about their brand?*

SQ2: *How do sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies to capture consumers in the evaluation stage?*

SQ3: *How do sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies to maximise the ease-of-purchase?*

SQ4: *How do sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies to foster greater brand loyalty in the future?*

1.2 Societal relevance

Sportswear retailers are such an integral part of culture and society in the 21st Century, therefore investigating the strategies and rationale behind their success is relevant for wider society. In terms of managerial implications, major sportswear retailers are exemplary in terms of how they connect with their customers and foster brand loyalty (Pourazad et al., 2019), therefore this research does not have the intention to prescribe new strategies for sportswear brands that they have not already considered. However, it will certainly be interesting for these brands to learn the driving principles behind their most effective strategies, which could offer some insights into how new strategies might improve their customer experience. Emerging sportswear brands as well as other retail groups could certainly learn from the findings in terms of how to structure and design their customer experience according to the successes of incumbent sportswear retailers, as well as how to design superior customer experience in light of the challenges facing incumbents.

An important development in the contemporary retail environment has been the blurring of the physical and digital. Though the digital age has fundamentally changed the sports retail industry, and online remains the fastest growing channel (Brown, Farmer, & Ganenthiran, 2013), consumers still rely so much on the sight, touch, and feel of apparel to make their judgement; meaning that offline channels are not disappearing any time soon. Many contemporary studies have suggested that retailers must offer consumers a truly omni-channel experience, whereby online and offline channels are integrated and synergised to provide the most frictionless experience possible (Straker, Wrigley, & Rosemann, 2015; Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2014; Manser Payne, Peltier, & Barger, 2017). These studies tend to be heavily conceptual in nature, and do not offer explanations or address the feasibility of how to achieve such experiences. This research intends to offer empirical insights into how sportswear retailers design their omni-channel CDJs, whether they are currently able to offer the frictionless experience that is demanded of them, as well as industry insights into developments impacting sports retail.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Understanding experience creation for sports retail

Given the void in literature addressing experience creation in sports retail, it is first useful to explore the importance of experience within retail and sport respectively. In omni-channel retail, there continues to be increasing attention paid to providing superior customer experience as a means of establishing competitive advantage. Conversely, experience creation and management has long been a central pillar in sport, given sport's entrenchment in the experience economy. Hence, *combining* our understanding of the respective roles of experience in retail and sport provides a compelling avenue through which to explore the effectiveness of experience creation in sports retail.

2.1.1 Customer experience in omni-channel retail

The concept of consumer experience with a brand or product is not necessarily new, though focus on the consumer experience as a commercial management objective continues to receive greater attention, especially from a marketing perspective. Pine and Gilmore (1999, p. 3) conceive experiences to be distinct from goods and services, whereby consumers purchase experiences to "spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages… to engage him in an inherently personal way". Whilst this conceptualisation of experiences is very specific, referring to the tangible transaction of purchasing an experience, other authors posit a far broader view of experience, suggesting that every transaction or interaction with any company contributes to one's total customer experience (Schmitt, Brakus, & Zarontello, 2015). This latter perspective understands consumer experience to be a far wider, holistic measure of a consumer's interactions with a brand, "involv[ing] the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical responses to the retailer" (Verhoef et al., 2009, p. 32).

Because consumers now interact with firms across a myriad of touch points and media, it is of great importance for firms to effectively *manage* their customer experience in order to maintain an engaging, seamless experience across these channels (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Witcher, Swerdlow, Gold, & Glazer, 2015). Verhoef et al. (2015, p. 176) define omni-channel management as the "synergistic management of the numerous available channels and customer touchpoints in such a way that the customer experience across channels and the performance over channels is optimized". If retailers are successful in doing this, customer

repurchase intentions will be far higher, and will likely result in greater customer loyalty and success going into the future (Edelman and Singer, 2015).

The relative lack of control over indirect channels with consumers, such as word-of-mouth and user-generated content on social media platforms, makes it difficult for retailers to systematically manage their customer experience (Verhoef et al, 2009). Whilst retailers have significant control over their in-store experience or their online interface, social media engagement and other consumer-to-consumer communications are far more complex to manage. This challenge has been met by a growing phenomenon known as 'social commerce' (Liang & Turban, 2011; Hajli, 2015; Huang & Benyoucef, 2013). Social commerce can be understood as utilising core Web 2.0 features, such as user-generated content, content sharing, or co-creation to benefit a firm (Huang & Benyoucef, 2013, p. 246).

The social nature of Web 2.0 means that much potential success or failure for a retailer rests in the hands of consumers that communicate with each other online, leave reviews of products, participate in forums and, most importantly, share their experiences and recommend products or services (Hajli, 2015). If the experience that a consumer has with a brand is positive or memorable, then consumers will co-create value with the firm (Wang & Hajli, 2014). With this considered, firms that actively implement experience creation strategies could create significant added value with the aid of social commerce, which offers immense value for consumer experience and, subsequently, the relationship that a consumer has with a brand.

Two key patterns of consumer purchasing behaviour have emerged that further complicate omni-channel experience management, known as webrooming and showrooming (Flavian, Gurrea, & Orús, 2016; Rapp et al. 2015). Webrooming refers to the practice of browsing online for information and reviews about products, then purchasing in-store (Flavian et al., 2016), whereas showrooming is the practice of gathering knowledge and examining products in-store, then making the purchase online (Neslin et al., 2014; Flavian et al., 2020). Consumers that practice these behaviours perceive themselves to be "smart shoppers" due to their thorough research of the purchase, leading to greater satisfaction, which in turn enhances customer loyalty (Flavian et al., 2019, p. 1). However, providing these consumers with a truly seamless experience becomes complex as they move between channels. Rather than inhibit these behaviours to prevent free-riding behaviour, retailers should facilitate consumers' channel oscillation in order to keep purchases internal to the retailer (Piotrowicz

& Cuthbertson, 2014; Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Grewal & Roggenveen, 2020). Given the commercial potential of these "smart shoppers", as well as the prevalence of free-riding behaviour in this segment, academics and practitioners alike are calling for retailers to pursue strategies that will provide customers with a consistent, frictionless, and harmonised omni-channel experience (Hüseyinoglu, 2019).

2.1.2 Towards a harmonised experience

To achieve the objective of a harmonised experience, there are several challenges that must be overcome by retailers. Allowing customers to move freely between channels without friction is difficult to achieve in omni-channel retail and requires. One such strategy to achieve this Providing a consistent customer experience through cross-channel integration is therefore a key condition for a harmonised customer experience. Big data analytics plays a large role in fulfilling this, as this helps retailers connect their channels and identify customers better as they move their experiences on and offline.

In the omni-channel environment, firms must ensure they can create a consistent experience "both *within* and *across* channels" (Frow & Payne, 2007, p. 93). There are three conditions that retail experience designers must consider: that discount opportunities are available across channels; that purchasing, receiving, and returning items is possible through any channel, regardless of the point-of-purchase; and that all data is integrated across channels, pertaining to customers, pricing, and product consistency (Beck & Rygl, 2015). A key contributing factor to showrooming behaviour is the asymmetry between in-store and online pricing, as well as the greater choice and availability online (Rapp et al., 2015). Therefore, effective omni-channel design requires all informational and atmospheric elements to be consistent throughout the journey, otherwise consumer shopping behaviour will be adversely affected (Roggeveen et al., 2020).

Frow and Payne (2007) insist that firms should implement a comprehensive multi-channel integration strategy in order to achieve this consistent customer experience, supported by both management and staff. Given their "smart shopper" reputation, webroomers and showroomers will readily exploit any opportunity to find promotions or better alternatives in other channels, therefore omni-channel experience designers must ensure they are deterred from doing so (Hüseyinoglu, 2019). Having full control over channels is necessary for true integration, which can be seen in the volume of brick-and-mortar retailers

entering into the online sphere as well as the number of online retailers opening physical locations (Herhausen et al., 2015).

Within a harmonised consumer experience, an omni-channel consumer can make use of various channels before making a purchase, with reduced incentive to search outside the retailer's own channels (Li et al., 2015). Herhausen, Binder, Schoegel, and Hermann (2015) find that online-offline channel integration does not create cannibalisation between channels and that integration has no undesired effects on willingness to pay. Many other authors concur that effective cross-channel integration will greatly improve customer experience and increase likelihood to purchase by facilitating the search process and reducing friction (Rapp et al., 2015; Emrich, Paul, & Rudolph, 2015). Channel integration might include adding store locators in online channels or introducing online-enabled devices into physical stores, in order to facilitate movement between channels (Herhausen et al., 2015). Beyond this, integrating advanced or mobile technologies into offline and online environments could be an effective strategy to enhance customer experience and improve a retailer's value proposition (Petit, Velasco, and Spence, 2019), moving innovative retailers closer towards the ultimate omni-channel objective of creating "a showroom without walls" (Bryjolfsson et al., 2013, p. 2).

In order to effectively orchestrate an omni-channel customer experience, retailers must ensure to collect and analyse customer data. Brynjolfsson et al. (2013) insist that for all retailers, whether physical, online, or multi-channel, big data analytics is necessary to better understand customer needs and values. From developing marketing strategies to choosing the position of an image in the online store, collecting and analysing consumer data is required to help retailers develop actionable insights at even the most micro level.

Big data has helped retailers establish a causality between exogenous variables (eg. image position) and dependent variables (eg. revenue), which has greatly enhanced retailer profitability (Grewal et al., 2017). However, data is also needed to inform key executional actions that improve customer experience, such as personalisation and cross-channel integration (Kumar, Anand, & Song (2017). In the omni-channel environment, there is increasingly more consumer data available from the myriad of channels, but collecting this data is becoming increasingly complex. In order to innovate and improve their customer experience, retailers must first know how to measure and model customer experience (Spies et al., 2014). Customers soon expect to have a personalised experience across every touchpoint, therefore retailers must continuously test and measure technologies and

processes, and translate the data into actionable strategies in order to provide a truly seamless experience across channels (von Briel, 2018).

Finding this "perfect" customer experience will be a pressing challenge for retailers in the omni-channel environment (Frow and Payne, 2007). Any ability to leverage synergies between channels will prove to be key in keeping up with competition and allowing retailers to offer a high value proposition for their customers (Verhoef et al., 2015; Herhausen et al., 2015). Notwithstanding its importance, providing a seamless omni-channel experience is insufficient in itself for a retailer to achieve competitive advantage. Firms throughout various facets of retail are exploring ways to integrate their channels and reduce friction in the customer experience, which has set a benchmark in the industry. For this reason, it is important that industry-leading firms seek to cultivate superior capabilities in order to create a truly differentiated customer experience that sets them apart from competition. Actively pursuing strategies that create an enhanced consumer experience is therefore a key prerogative for retailers.

2.1.3 Experience creation strategies

Though managing customer experience is a prerequisite to compete in retail, Pine and Gilmore (1999) specifically address how important the creation of experiences is for firms. It is not enough to consider customer experience passively; many authors point to experience creation as providing a new and lucrative opportunity for firms, in the sense that creating memorable, superior or 'enriched' customer experiences will become a defining area of differentiation for competing firms (Verhoef, 2009, p. 38; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Drewal & Roggenveen, 2020). A differentiation strategy refers to when a firm seeks to be unique in its industry by excelling in specific attributes that are highly valued by customers; firms are thereby rewarded for their uniqueness vis-à-vis the competition (Porter, 1985). Based on Verhoef et al. (2009), an experience creation strategy can be understood as any experience-based differentiation strategy that is pursued by a retailer in order to create a superior customer experience to their competitors. Top-tier experience creation strategies actively create memorable experiences for consumers that are difficult or costly to replicate by the competition.

This idea of active experience creation was the founding principle for Schmitt's (1999) influential paper. He argues that, unlike traditional marketing that views consumers as rational

decision makers, experiential marketing views consumers as 'rational *and* emotional human beings who are concerned with achieving pleasurable experiences' (Schmitt, 1999, p. 53). To conceptualise his ideas, Schmitt developed five strategic experiential modules (SEMs) to form his framework for experiential marketing, which are: sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences, behaviours, and lifestyle (ACT), and social identity, resulting from relating to a reference group (RELATE). Though initially developed for the marketing discipline, these SEMs are now incredibly relevant in analysing how firms develop experience creation strategies to enrich their holistic customer experience. Firms could potentially create that point of differentiation if they can effectively integrate these SEMs into the customer experience; assuming that the experience is otherwise fully functional and frictionless.

2.1.4 Sport: an experience product category

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982, p. 134), suggest that "entertainment, the arts, and leisure activities encompass symbolic aspects of consumption behaviour that make them particularly fertile ground for research". As a leisure activity, sport participation can be considered as an emotional product category (Chanavat & Bodet, 2014). Sport is entrenched in the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1998), meaning that 'experience' and engagement are key constructs for both sport spectatorship and participation.

As Funk (2017) explains, "the importance and value individuals place on sport in *society* influences how sport consumers use and experience a sport product". Sport brings individuals together through establishing collective identity, connecting friends, family, communities (Woods, 2011). It motivates individuals to exercise, builds character, provides an emotional escape, provides role models, and transcends socio-cultural status (Funk, 2017, p. 7). General consumer experiences tend to be more transactional in nature, whereby an experience is curated which is subsequently met with some form of consumption. In the case of sport, it is the experience itself that plays the most important role; sports teams win and lose, but the experience is what keeps sports consumers returning in the future (Funk, 2017). Funk argues that the level of emotion, collective identity, and involvement of a sports consumer with a sports organisation is far more developed than general consumer experiences (Funk, 2017). Thus, based on Filser's (2002) classification, sport can be considered as a pure experience product category.

Holt (1995) identified four 'metaphors of consumption' to categorise sports enthusiasts' motivations for spectating or participating in sport. These are: consuming as *experience*, characterised by subjective and emotional reactions; consuming as *integration*, referring to fans' adoption of sport as a 'constitutive element of their identity' in the sense that sport defines them as individuals (Holt, 1995, p. 6); consuming as *play*, which addresses fans' desires to participate and enjoy themselves with others in the moment; and consuming as *classification*, which refers to how individuals use sport to create and shape their social identity vis-à-vis relevant others in society in order to be part of a community (Holt, 1995; Chanavat & Bodet, 2014).

2.1.5 The case for a multiplier effect

As laid out in the previous sections, the role of experience is fundamental, albeit different, in both retail and sport. Experience creation is a strategic objective for many aspects of retail, as firms seek to create distinctive customer experience that consumers cannot find elsewhere in the market. Sport, on the other hand, is in itself fundamentally experiential. The level of passion, emotion, and heightened experience is what keeps individuals coming back to spectate or participate in sport. With these two respective considerations in mind, a case can be made that there may be a multiplier effect on the effectiveness of experience creation in sportswear, as sportswear retailers are in the fortuitous position that they can utilise the experiential nature of sports as a guiding principle for their strategies.

Holt's (1995) metaphors were developed separately from Schmitt's (1999) SEMs, yet the two classifications are remarkably similar: experience, emotion, identity, lifestyle; these themes permeate through both authors' works. These seemingly parallel ideas pertaining to sports fans' motivations for consumption and experience creation in retail, respectively, provide fertile new ground to explore sports retail consumers as being particularly receptive to experience creation strategies.

Hence, sportswear brands could create superior value propositions to consumers by actively creating 'enriched' experiences centred around sport (Verhoef et al, 2009, p. 38). It will be interesting to analyse how sportswear brands and retailers design a superior customer experience for their consumers; especially how their experience creation strategies implicitly evoke Schmitt's SEMs.

2.2 Consumer Decision Journeys

In order to understand how experience creation strategies should be effectively considered and implemented within an omni-channel environment, academics and practitioners across all industries, especially retail, are looking towards the consumer decision journey (CDJ) as an organising framework (Court et al., 2009; Brynjolfsson et al, 2013).

Court et al. (2009) conceptualised the CDJ as containing four stages. The first stage, initial consideration, refers to when a consumer first considers an initial set of brands to purchase, based on their brand perceptions and exposure to recent marketing. Active evaluation is the subsequent process of researching a potential purchase; consumers add and subtract brands as they evaluate their options. The purchase stage is when a consumer ultimate decides on a brand at the moment of purchase. And in the post-purchase stage, consumers experience the product and build expectations based on their experience to inform their next journey. Since Court et al (2009) put forth their concept of the CDJ, others have been quick to alter and adapt the journey to current trends.

Recently, McKinsey updated the consumer decision journey to explain that brands have the potential to actively manipulate the touchpoints a consumer has with their brand in order to shape their CDJ and steer them towards a purchase, known as the "accelerated consumer decision journey" (Edelman & Singer, 2015). These authors argue that the CDJ itself has become a source of competitive advantage as firms seek to eliminate the consider and evaluate stages in order to create a loyalty loop; a brand's ultimate goal. Firms should therefore consider how 'enriched' experience creation strategies can be pursued to exploit omni-channel capabilities and instigate this accelerated journey (Verhoef et al, 2009, p. 38).

2.2.1. The CDJ: *SEE-THINK-DO-CARE* framework

One framework that is used to help firms design their consumer experience is Google's *See-Think-Do-Care* framework, which was closely adapted from the original CDJ to help develop experience-enhancing strategies from the firm's perspective (Court et al, 2009; Eriksson, 2015).

The first stage, *SEE*, refers to how a retailer must create awareness for consumers by communicating their brand message. The target audience of the message is considered to be anyone that could be a potential customer, therefore achieving broad reach and visibility are key components of this stage. With this considered, company-driven marketing is the most influential touchpoint for consumers in the *SEE* phase (Court et al., 2009). The second stage, *THINK*, regards the active consideration of consumers showing a higher level of commercial intent for a purchase. Important for this stage is to target consumers that are in the process of evaluating their options, as this marks a pivotal moment for retailers to increase conversion (Barwitz and Maas, 2018). The third stage, *DO*, refers to developing strategies that capture consumers with very high intention to purchase, for example, at the checkout. At the final stage, *CARE*, consumers that are satisfied post-purchase may grow fond of the brand and become repeat buyers (Eriksson, 2015). It is important to maintain a positive relationship with this customer group, as brand loyalty is the ultimate objective of the consumer decision journey for firms (Edelman, 2015). Therefore, if sufficient attention is paid to consumers in the final stage, this could lock-in a loyalty loop between *CARE* and *DO*. Eriksson (2015, paragraph 3) argues that the purpose of the *SEE*, *THINK*, and *CARE* phases is to "drive mental availability" of a brand, otherwise known as attention or awareness. This author suggests that the more a consumer thinks about a brand vis-à-vis the competition, the higher the likelihood of choosing said brand when they are ready to purchase (Eriksson, 2015). Unlike the other phases, *DO* is primarily concerned with strategies that "maximise ease-of-purchase" to increase conversion and reduce dropouts (Eriksson, 2015, paragraph 3).

See-Think-Do-Care provides a framework that helps understand and develop strategies from the firm perspective. Hence, *See-Think-Do-Care* will serve as the core framework for this thesis, in order to help consolidate the various strategies of sportswear brands into a tangible journey.

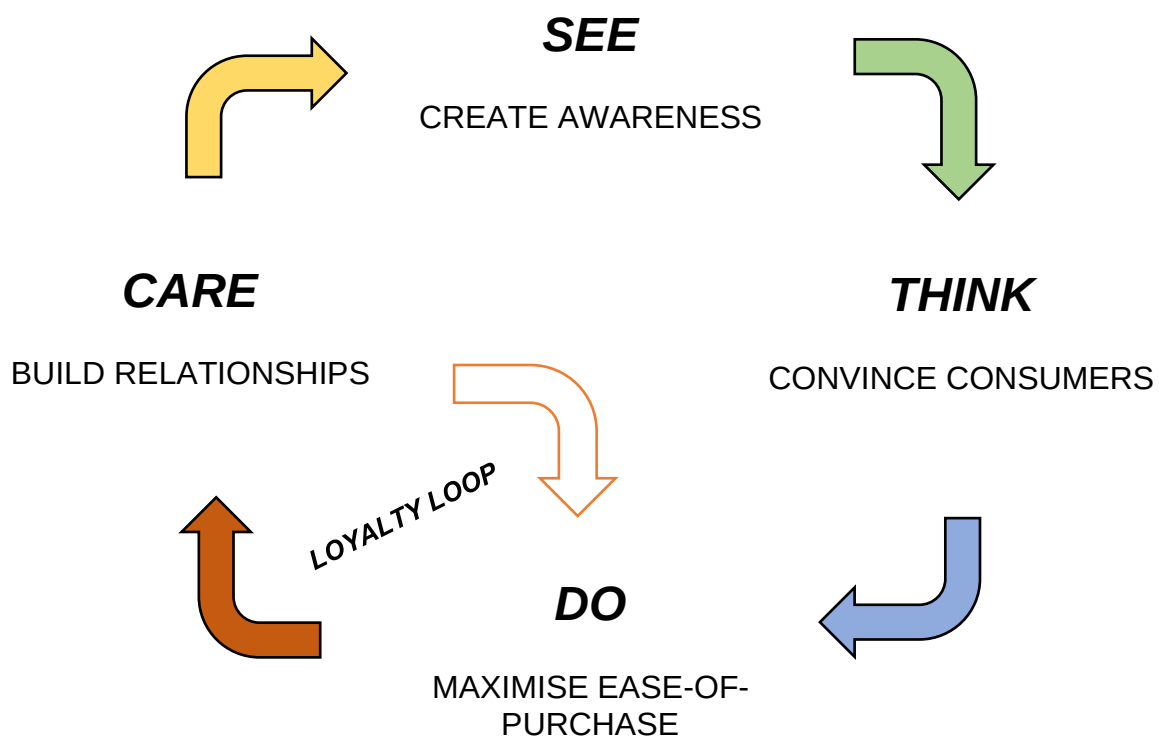

Figure 1. Visualisation of the CDJ (based on Eriksson, 2015)

2.3 *SEE* phase: Creating awareness

As mentioned, the *SEE* phase is entirely concerned with creating awareness, which is needed to help a brand stand out and augment sales in latter stages of the CDJ. The *SEE* phase predominantly involves employing conventional digital and non-digital marketing strategies to spread brand awareness. Advertising expenditure, prevalence, and effectiveness all increased in line with developments in communication technologies, and the advertising industry in particular benefited immensely from globalisation as local markets opened up (Sinclair, 2015). In the past decade, digital technologies have revolutionised the way brands communicate and engage with their customers; notably in the rise in digital marketing and the opportunities brought forth by social commerce (Rietveld, van Dolen, Mazloom, & Worring, 2020).

2.3.1 Targeted digital advertising

In the digital age, encountering targeted digital advertising has become the new norm in a typical user's online experience. When browsing online, users are met with an array of advertising across websites, search engines, and social media, but the advertising content itself differs user-to-user. Retailers use sophisticated, personalising advertising strategies to advertise their brand or product in an attempt to instigate users' purchase journeys (Hawkings, 2012). Using data collected from their own customers, as well as partner companies such as Google and Facebook, retailers can effectively tailor their advertising content and product offerings to individual users based on their past browsing experience and preferences (Angwin, 2012). Advocates of covert data collection argue that doing so greatly enhances the user experience and facilitates the user journey. The ability to incorporate past behaviour ensures that personalisation is far more accurate, resulting in mutual benefit for retailers and consumers (Aguirre et al., 2015). These marketing strategies have become so prevalent that big data has been dubbed the "life-blood of retail" (ibid, p. 34), as retail comprises the largest sector of online advertising spending (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2012).

Studies have shown that users will actually permit their data to be collected if this will translate into an enhanced user experience going forward (Gerber, Gerber, & Volkamer, 2018). However, data privacy and data collection are also pressing concerns for consumers (Pew Research Center, 2014). This dichotomy of data sharing behaviour and data privacy attitudes is understood as a "personalisation-privacy paradox" (Kokolakis, 2017; Gerber et al., 2018). Retailers must be wary not to over-personalise advertising content. Though consumers permit

data sharing when prompted, they will become annoyed or upset by the "creepy factor" of an advert if they are made aware that their own data has been used to target them (Shoenberger, 2017, p. 306). This will result in greater distrust towards a brand (Gerber et al., 2018). As consumers become more aware of their data being collected for commercial use, their distrust in targeted advertising increases. Though these strategies remain effective, brands have started turning to more organic methods of creating brand awareness, chiefly through the use of social media channels in order to boost consumer engagement.

2.3.2 Engagement marketing

Social media is an example of a digital technology that is becoming increasingly effective as a means of connecting consumers and brands together. Brands themselves now play an increasingly prevalent role in the network of visual information exchange, as over 75% of brands have an active Instagram account, with 80% of users following at least one (ibid). Stephen and Galak (2012) have argued that brand owned and earned media prove crucial for communicating with existing customers and creating awareness for potential new ones. Owned media is classified as brand-generated media activity that is distributed to brand-controlled media channels, e.g. its Instagram page; whereas earned media is media activity generated and distributed by third parties that still support the brand's promotional activities, e.g. user-generated post of a new purchase (Stephen & Galak, 2012).

Marketers leverage their owned media to reach significantly large audience at a far lower cost in comparison to paid media activity, such as advertising (Rietveld et al, 2019), and can inspire the sub-creation of earned media. Customers themselves are pseudo-marketers, often with greater influence, lower cost, and more effective reach than firms themselves (Kozinets et al., 2010). This power shift can be a significant threat, or potential opportunity for firms (Harmeling, Moffett, Arnold, and Carlson, 2017). Hence, understanding the driving factors behind customer engagement with owned media is crucial, as customer engagement initiatives are positively correlated with increased revenues (Beckers, van Doorn, & Verhoef, 2018; Rietvald et al, 2019).

Customer engagement marketing can therefore be defined as a brand's "deliberate effort to motivate, empower, and measure a customer's voluntary contribution to its marketing functions" (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 312). Customer engagement can take many forms, such as sharing content, creating brand-related content, writing reviews, or

recommending products (Rietvald et al., 2019). Effective engagement marketing can provide a more holistic view of the customer and more accurate measures of customer value (Kumar, 2013), as well as greater customer satisfaction, loyalty, and ultimately, commercial performance (Ranjan & Read, 2016).

2.3.3 Experiential marketing

In order to create awareness about a brand, interactive experiential marketing has proved especially effective for brands, especially when combined with engagement marketing. The strategic objective of having experience-related content shared via social media is known as 'social amplification', and is especially important when creating memorable, remarkable, live experience events (Hanover & Smith, 2016, p. 69; Batat, 2019; Smilanksy, 2017); 70% of brands agree that social amplification is a crucial by-product of experiential marketing (ibid). For example, Puma's launch of their IGNITE running shoe in Times Square garnered 125 million impressions online, and an estimated social media reach of 15.5 million (Hanover & Smith, 2016, p. 101). Typically, pre-event social amplification is used to drive awareness and attendance to an event, whereas post-event social amplification is concerned with reliving experiences and leveraging influencers to share and create awareness about the brand in general (Hanover and Smith, 2016).

Combining experiences and events with digital media means that the experience lives on into the future. Memorable interactive experiences will last long in the hearts and minds attendees, who will most likely create and share media content related to the experience; meanwhile, marketers can amplify the experience's engagement to thousands or millions not even in attendance via their owned media (Smilansky, 2017). Especially for experiential marketing designers, Schmitt's (1999) SEMs are employed liberally to engage consumers and create brand awareness by appealing to customers' emotions, senses, and identities (Schmitt, 2013). It will therefore be interesting to learn what role socially amplified experiential marketing plays as experience creation strategy to create brand awareness.

2.3.4 Partnership marketing

Partnership marketing is a well-established, effective tool that has long been employed by sportswear brands to spread brand awareness. Partnership is understood broadly as collaborating with others for mutual benefit and is here used as an umbrella term to include the strategies of celebrity endorsement, co-branding partnerships, and influencer marketing.

2.3.4.1 Celebrity endorsement

McCracken (1989) understands celebrity endorsement to be a process in which famous individuals use their public recognition and fame on behalf of a consumer good or brand through advertising. Celebrity endorsement has become a fundamental aspect of the marketing mix for various brands, with athlete endorsement being the most common type for sportswear brands (Sato et al., 2016).

Studies reveal that source credibility, source attractiveness, and celebrity-product congruence are necessary characteristics for endorsers (Kim and Na, 2007; Tzoumaka, Tsiotsou, & Siomkos, 2016). Source credibility is greatly influenced by perceived endorser expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise refers to the endorser's product-related knowledge, skills, and experience that reinforce their persuasiveness (Silvera & Austad, 2004; Sato et al., 2016), whereas trustworthiness refers to consumers' level of trust in the endorser and their message (Fink et al., 2012). Source attractiveness refers to the level of similarity, familiarity, and liking of an endorser, whilst celebrity-product congruence refers to how suitable a celebrity is to endorse a particular product (Kim & Na, 2007).

As athletes have all the above qualities, they make extremely effective product endorsers (Tzoumaka et al., 2016). Athletes are the most-used endorser category for *all* product types (ibid), but they are especially effective when marketing sports-related products due to their level of expertise and congruence with sports products (Sato et al., 2016). Athletes are used as endorsers due to their "universal popularity and clean images" (Boyd and Shank, 2004, p. 84) and "athletic star power" (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005, p. 244). Other studies also confirm that sports celebrities are admired far more intensely than other celebrity categories (McCutcheon, Lange, & Houran, 2002). An augmented level of admiration, paired with their expertise in and congruence with sports-related products, make athletes incredibly effective product endorsers for sportswear brands in building brand awareness. Athletes are used to

support and project sportswear brands' values pertaining to living a healthy lifestyle and being active in sport (Sato et al., 2016).

2.3.4.2 Co-branding design partnerships

Another important aspect of partnership marketing is through co-branding design partnerships. As an extension of celebrity endorsement, celebrity-branded and/or co-designed products are becoming more and more frequent in retail (Keel & Nataraajan, 2012); for example, Nike's Air Jordan product range with Michael Jordan, or Adidas' Yeezy collaboration with Kanye West. According to research, co-branded products are perceived to be of enhanced quality and value vis-à-vis mono-branded products (Helmig, Huber, & Leeflang, 2008). Crucial for the success of a co-branded product is the perceived fit between respective partners (Keel & Nataraajan, 2012). For athletes co-designing athletic products, the perceived fit is high, which explains the success of athlete-branded lines of sports products. However, as there is a non-linear relationship between brand fit and consumer evaluations (Walchli, 2007), the viability of a co-branding partnership is entirely subject to the individual case.

2.3.4.3 Influencer marketing

An emerging marketing strategy that is pervading contemporary commercial settings is the use of influencer marketing. Social media influencers can be understood as online personalities holding a large number of followers on one or multiple social media platforms that have notable influence over the attitudes or actions of their followers (Agrawal, 2016). Unlike archetypal celebrities that are well-known in traditional media, influencers tend to be "regular people" that accrued online fame and followers by creating and posting content related to their individual 'expertise' (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 58).

By extension, influencer marketing refers to how brands and marketers use these individuals to create and/or endorse branded content to their followers, which tend to be a brand's target consumers (Yodel, 2017). Influencers provide a unique and increasingly lucrative opportunity for brands, as they are content creators with celebrity status that are perceived to have more authentic connection with their fans (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencer-promoted content is particularly effective as it allows brands to connect with consumers "more directly, more organically, and at scale" (Talavera, 2015). Endorsements from influencers are likely to be interpreted as credible electronic word of mouth (eWOM) rather than paid advertising, as

their messages are likely to be “seamlessly woven” into their daily digital narratives (de Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017, p. 798). Given the higher authenticity and credibility of influencers’ messages, both avoidance and resistance to the message tends to be lower, allowing marketers to by-pass the pitfalls of traditional advertising (de Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012).

2.5 *THINK* phase: Evaluating the options

2.5.1 Search Engine Marketing (SEM)

When a consumer first enters the digital search and evaluation stage of the CDJ, they will typically use a search engine to look for products online. This makes search engines an important channel between retailers and consumers in the *THINK* phase (Baye, Santos, & Wildenbeest, 2015). For retailers, having their website visible to consumers on search engines is a vital starting point in the *THINK* phase, otherwise traffic can be lost before consumers even have the chance to evaluate their options.

SEM is therefore a key strategy that retailers pursue in order to maximise visibility on search engines. SEM encompasses various aspects of improving search visibility, but two key strategies are pay-per-click (PPC) advertising and search engine optimisation (SEO). PPC advertising involves retailers paying search engines to promote their site ahead of others using sponsored links (Baye et al., 2015). Retailers influence the position of ads, which are displayed and ranked according to a bidding process for key words (Baye et al., 2015). This allows retailers to be top of the search engine results, which is evidenced to return higher conversion rates (Jerath et al., 2014).

Though PPC advertising receives a lot of attention, the bulk of traffic that retailers receive via search engines is in fact unpaid, through organic links (ibid). SEO is an increasingly common strategy to improve the ranking and relevance of organic links. This involves optimising the retailer's own website to maximise its relevance to search engines' algorithms. Retailers need to maximise the quality of their website by ensuring that it contains the necessary information to be indexed by search engines, such as content, anchor texts, headings and meta tags are relevant (Baye et al., 2015), but other aspects such as quality of the user experience are also vital.

Given the competition involved with SEM, consumers greatly benefit from being shown the most relevant results to their search terms. This reduces information-related friction in the first part of the search phase, thereby improving the user experience. Once users find their way through the search stage and onto the retailer's web page, personalising the user experience is key to capturing consumers in the evaluation stage.

2.5.2 Proactive personalisation

For authentic, differentiated customer experiences, industry-leading retailers must have an understanding that consumers have wildly different preferences, tastes, and expectations; personalising experiences is therefore key to providing an enhanced customer decision journey that culminates in a strong relationship with a brand (Morey & Krajecki, 2016). With increasingly integrated technologies, such as smartphones, sensor networks, and the Internet of Things (IoT), pioneering brands are finding greater opportunities to interact with consumers in an inherently personal way (ibid). For consumers, being given a truly personal experience can be a deciding factor in choosing one brand over the other in the evaluation stage. Collection of personal data from past and current experiences is vital in realising the full potential of personalisation.

Retailers now have the opportunity to personalise the full digital experience for consumers on their web stores, using Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence algorithms based on this data (Zanker, Rook, & Jannack, 2019). Aside from established semi-personal technologies, such as recommender engines, Edelman and Singer (2015) suggest that a key opportunity for firms to differentiate themselves is by creating dynamic, real-time, personalised e-commerce experiences, using consumers' preferences to optimise their journey. This "proactive personalisation" can help retailers design the journey in a way that puts them back in control (Edelman & Singer, 2015, paragraph 13). These authors use the example of Kenneth Cole's website to explain how the retailers save each user's preferences and previous purchasing behaviour, which is then used to display a totally unique interface for future visits based on these preferences (ibid). The fundamental objective of proactive personalisation is to tailor each future experience based on past experiences and user data; the success of a retailer depends on providing consecutively improved experiences until a relationship is built and customers are steered into the loyalty loop (Edelman and Singer, 2015).

The importance of personalisation is not only reserved for the digital experience. The role of the physical store is evolving to become a more personalised experience space that allows brands to have an interactive, personal connection with their customers.

2.5.3 Emerging role of the physical store

A key driver for cross-channel integration has been the emerging new role of the physical store as an experience space to attract consumers to the brand in their evaluation stage. The physical store is no longer solely a point of sales location anymore, "it has become a place for interaction and entertainment through the creation of an experiential setting" (Alexander & Cano, 2018, p. 200). The sustained popularity of the physical store is due to the customer service (now customer experience) it provides that cannot be matched by digital channels; customers expect a far more engaging, personalised shopping experience (Moran, 2016). The store experience should be emotionally engaging in regard to entertainment, atmospherics, consumer engagement, and sensory aspects (Russo Spena et al., 2012); though it must provide utilitarian as well as hedonic experiences for the customer, as purely experiential settings lose focus of the brand's core offering (Spence et al., 2014). One such emerging utilitarian-hedonic trend is for physical stores to imitate real sport environments to allow consumers to test out products, for example, installing treadmills or basketball courts, which allows store employees to advise customers based on their physical experience in a replicated environment.

The flagship store constitutes an especially fertile petri dish for brands to test-drive in-store experiences, given that flagship stores have a stronger impact on brand attitude, attachment, and equity vis-à-vis brand stores (Dolbec & Chebat, 2013). Flagship stores are now being treated as 'third spaces' (Oldenburg, 1999), in the sense that they are neither home, nor work, but a comfortable space to browse, explore, and socialise; designed to delight customers and increase their time spent in-store (Crick, 2011). Creating these superior in-store experiences is fast becoming a point of differentiation for retailers in shaping consumers' decisions and capturing their attention in the evaluation stage of the journey. By encouraging customers to stay within the retailer's owned channels, brands can more effectively steer consumers towards a purchase, thereby reducing free-riding showrooming behaviour.

2.5.4 Leveraging technologies

As part of their reimagined experiential role, stores have started to adopt new technologies in order to facilitate the buying process and provide enhanced customer experiences. Technological advancement continues to revolutionise the retail industry, with simultaneous benefits to both consumers and retailers (Grewal et al., 2017). The most successful companies must experiment with and implement technologies that facilitate the interaction between consumer and retailer, enhance the customer experience, or both (Grewal, Noble, Roggeveen, & Nordfalt, 2020). Grewal et al. (2020) characterise technologies into a 2 x 2 typology, based on their level of convenience and their social presence for the consumer, respectively. Convenience is the level to which technologies facilitate a process (Hi-Co), whereas social presence refers to how a technology can trigger the feeling that a human being is present (Hi-So) (Biocca & Harms, 2002).

2.5.4.1 Mobile

Integration of digital technologies into the store, such as interactive screens, tablets, and interactive product displays is already commonplace in many stores in the digital age (Alexander & Cano, 2018). However, retailers are only beginning to realise the full possibilities offered by in-store mobile technologies, as cloud digital connectivity and cloud computing become more refined. Mobile is a core channel in its own right, but its use in-store as a facilitator between physical and digital retail is predicted to be significant for the future of retail (Grewal et al., 2017; Perry, Kent, & Bonetti, 2019). Smartphones have become an extension of the modern consumer's arm, "symbolically placing the retailer in the consumer's palm throughout the day and night" (Perry et al., 2019). Mobile devices are unique, in that they can be used outside the store much like a mobile desktop but are also used in-store to compare products and prices, read online reviews, or even make purchases from other retailers (ibid); purchases made in-store often involve some mobile comparison first (RSR, 2016).

An overriding theme of omni-channel management is to leverage synergies between channels, and mobile provides a lucrative opportunity to do so. Consumer-facing mobile technologies, such as mobile apps, QR codes, in-store Wi-Fi, beacon technology, geo-targeted promotions, as well as VR and AR are all becoming significant for retailers' omni-channel strategies (Perry et al., 2019); it will therefore be interesting to learn what role these technologies play in a sportswear CDJ. This cross-channel integration continues to help "blur

the distinctions between physical and online retailing" (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013), which is a key prerogative for omni-channel management.

2.5.4.2 Advanced technologies

As well as these more conventional, universally applicable technologies, fashion retailers are also looking towards specific advanced technologies that provide high social presence as well as high convenience (HiCo-HiSo) in order to enhance the customer experience (Grewal et al., 2020), especially in their flagship stores. Augmented (AR) is one technology that is becoming adopted by fashion retailers, which could provide significant opportunities to sportswear brands as they redesign their stores to become experience spaces. AR-enhanced "smart mirrors", most often seen in dressing rooms, is one example of how retailers are implementing HiCo-HiSo technology into the physical (Grewal et al., 2020). These mirrors connect customers to sales representatives remotely, and also give customers access to the store's online inventory, the ability to see alternative items, and the offer of styling tips (Grosman, 2017).

It is imperative that brands only seek to introduce technologies and facilitate channel integration if doing so adds value to the decision process and improves their customers' decision journey (Grewal et al., 2017). If new technologies are properly applied, the in-store experience and overall decision journey will be greatly enhanced (Pantano & Viassome, 2014; Grewal et al., 2020).

2.6 *DO* phase: maximising ease-of-purchase

As mentioned, strategies within the *DO* phase are entirely focused on maximising the ease-of-purchase for consumers. Unlike the three other phases, which seek to "drive mental availability" of a brand, the *DO* phase is primarily concerned with facilitating the actual point of purchase, by making payment as convenient as possible to maximise conversion and prevent consumers dropping out at the last moment (Eriksson, 2015, paragraph 2). A basic consideration for retailers is to provide sufficient level of choice and product availability to avoid customers dropping out, though there are specific strategies being implemented by retailers to enhance customer experience and facilitate the purchase process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

2.6.1 mPOS

Mobile points of sale (mPOS) is a technology that simultaneously empowers staff members and facilitates the purchase process by delivering a more convenient and personal payment experience (Alexander and Cano, 2018). Store employees can help customers in the evaluation and purchase stage of their journey by using a mobile app to search in-store product availability, availability online, as well as taking contactless payments and organising home delivery of products not available in the physical location. Nike employees, for example, can help customers decide on style and product options on the shop floor, then use mPOS technology to take a purchase once a decision has been made, without customers ever having to go to the register (ibid). With one employee helping customers make a choice and a purchase, there is far greater personal engagement in the buying process (Mastercard, 2016), which is argued to be a key point of differentiation for retailers in the digital age (van Osselaer, 2020).

2.6.2 Superior payment and delivery options

In order to compete in the omni-channel environment, it is important that retailers consider how to offer autonomy to customers over how they choose to pay and receive their goods. According to Krymov et al. (2019), comfortable payments and comfortable and fast delivery are two key principles of the modern retail market. Comfortable payments refers to how there should be a diverse range of secure payment methods that are not susceptible to fraud, whereas comfortable and fast delivery involves providing consumers with the fastest, most convenient way to obtain a product irrespective of location (ibid). Competition sets a high benchmark for these two principles; industry leaders must therefore seek to provide the most advanced payment and logistical options available in order to stay ahead. The online presence of information and options pertaining to payment and delivery has a direct effect on consumer purchase intentions (Nguyen et al., 2019). Offering a wide availability of options is insufficient in itself to provide customers with a superior customer experience; retailers must follow through on their promise of a timely delivery in order to encourage repurchase intentions. On-time delivery is well-known to significantly enhance customer satisfaction with a retailer (Xing et al., 2010; Blut, 2016). Gawor and Hoberg (2018) found that delivery speed and delivery method are the most important attributes for a retailer following total product price, therefore retailers must ensure that their logistical network is advanced enough to cater to the modern-day consumer.

To provide a truly seamless omni-channel experience, retailers are offering a wide variety of payment and delivery combinations to empower customers. Offering customers the choice to buy online, deliver home; buy in-store, deliver home; as well as to 'Click and Collect' (buying online, collecting in-store or at a pick-up point) is becoming an increasingly common strategy provide superior customer experience (Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2019). Leading retailers should have sufficiently advanced logistics to allow customers to pay and receive their products however they wish and on time.

2.7 *CARE* phase: building relationships

A retailer's job certainly does not end once a customer makes their purchase. Strategic objectives within the post-purchase *CARE* phase of the consumer decision journey are as important as the strategies designed to sell products to consumers. The purpose of the *CARE* phase is to provide a superior post-purchase brand experience in order to build long-term relationships with customers (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Brands that successfully provide an enhanced experience throughout the post-purchase phase will shrink many of their customers' decision journeys to the final two stages, creating a loyalty loop for the brand. As discussed, this loyalty loop is the ultimate management objective of the consumer decision journey, in the hope that consumers will jump straight to the *DO* phase once they are ready to repurchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

2.7.1 Consumer engagement

In true cyclical journey style, consumer engagement through social media and other channels resurfaces as a key strategy; but rather than creating awareness, developing customer relationships is the key purpose of engagement in the *CARE* phase. One key strategy to enhance customer-firm relationships is by building online brand communities (OBC) (Wu, Fan, & Zhao, 2018). An OBC is intrinsically linked to social media and is understood as the "social aggregation of a brand's users and the relationships among them" online (Wu et al., 2018, p. 259). Many OBCs are hosted and managed by the brand, such as their Instagram and Facebook pages, or online forums; but a large part of OBCs exist without any direct brand interaction and are fuelled by the fans themselves (Schultz, 2017). Community engagement, the core driver behind OBCs, is widely regarded as an effective strategy to enhance customer experience (Zheng et al., 2015). Companies use their brand pages to engage with customers, who co-create content and, hence, value with the firm (Pöyry et al., 2013). Customers that engage with brands and each other online, respectively, hold stronger brand relationships with brands (Hudson et al., 2015), are more likely to purchase products (Rishika et al., 2013), are motivated to help other customers (Pai & Tsai, 2016), and hold high brand loyalty (Zheng et al., 2015).

With the proper management of social media and OBCs, brands have the lucrative opportunity to convert customers into brand advocates, or fans, that interact with the brand, co-create value, and create awareness for other consumers. Consumer engagement's effectiveness is therefore multiplied: it creates loyalty loops for existing customers', but

simultaneously creates awareness to new consumers, thereby instigating new CDJs. Hence, adopting user engagement strategies is essential for successful omni-channel experience design.

2.7.2 Fitness applications

Given the extensive use of mobile in the digital age, retailers have started turning to apps as a means to connect and build relationships with customers. Sport and fitness apps are one of the fastest growing categories for consumers, with over half of all smartphone users reported to possess at least one (Byun, Chiu, & Bae, 2018). Given this trend, sportswear brands have started developing or acquiring their own technology-based services for their consumers. Examples are the "Nike+ Run Club" or "My ASICS", as well as Adidas and Under Armour's acquisitions of Runtastic and MyFitnessPal, respectively. These sportswear brands have evolved from offering solely physical products to also include digital services, which has great potential to enhance the customer experience and develop relationships with customers (Byun et al., 2018). By attaching a brand to these fitness applications, consumers associate their health improvements with the brand itself; in terms of relationship building, this is incredibly powerful. Customers' loyalty to and relationship with a brand will be significantly improved if the brand can help a customer to achieve their personal goals. Creating these mutually beneficial experiences to forge relationships in the *CARE* phase could be met with a loyalty loop and the reward of purchases going into the future.

2.7.3 Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

CRM can be understood as an approach made by organisations to effectively manage their relationships with customers (Galbreath and Rogers, 1999), which typically involves implementing specially designed systems to help firms target profitable segments, and improve customer service and retention (Josiassen, Assaf, & Cvelbar, 2014; Soltani & Navimipour, 2016). CRM generally involves integrating an organisation's marketing, sales, customer service, and supply chain systems in order to deliver enhanced customer value and ultimately provide a superior customer experience (Giannakis-Bompolis & Boutsouki, 2014). CRM systems, such as Salesforce and Oracle, are so valuable to organisations as they allow customer information to be seamlessly disseminated throughout the organisation, which helps identify and analyse customer needs, actions, and suitable individuals to be targeted with

follow-up marketing (ibid). Effective implementation of CRM systems is 'the strongest and most efficient approach to maintaining and creating relationships with customers' (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016, p. 667), as these systems provide the infrastructure that 'facilitates long-term relationship building with customer' (ibid, p. 670).

The emergence of Web 2.0 has facilitated a complimentary evolution of CRM, understood as Social CRM, which is a strategy that adds consumers' points of view or frustrations about products and services that have been shared via social media to the CRM mix (Orenga-Rogla & Chalmeta, 2016). For a firm, it is important to consider and address these eWOM statements as part their CRM strategy to better understand their customers' sentiment and intensify the relationship they have with a firm (Rosenberger, 2015).

2.8 Conceptual framework

Figure 2. (see p. 32) illustrates the conceptual framework that has been derived from theory. In order to compete in the contemporary retail environment, retailers must take action to overcome the challenges of omni-channel and provide consumers with excellent customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Retailers can differentiate themselves by actively creating positive customer experiences, as this is a key area of competition in modern retail. Sportswear retailers tend to have augmented levels of brand passion and customer loyalty compared with retail in general (Pourazad et al., 2019), therefore, exploring how they design and orchestrate their customer decision journeys is key to better understanding experience creation strategies and customer experience management in retail.

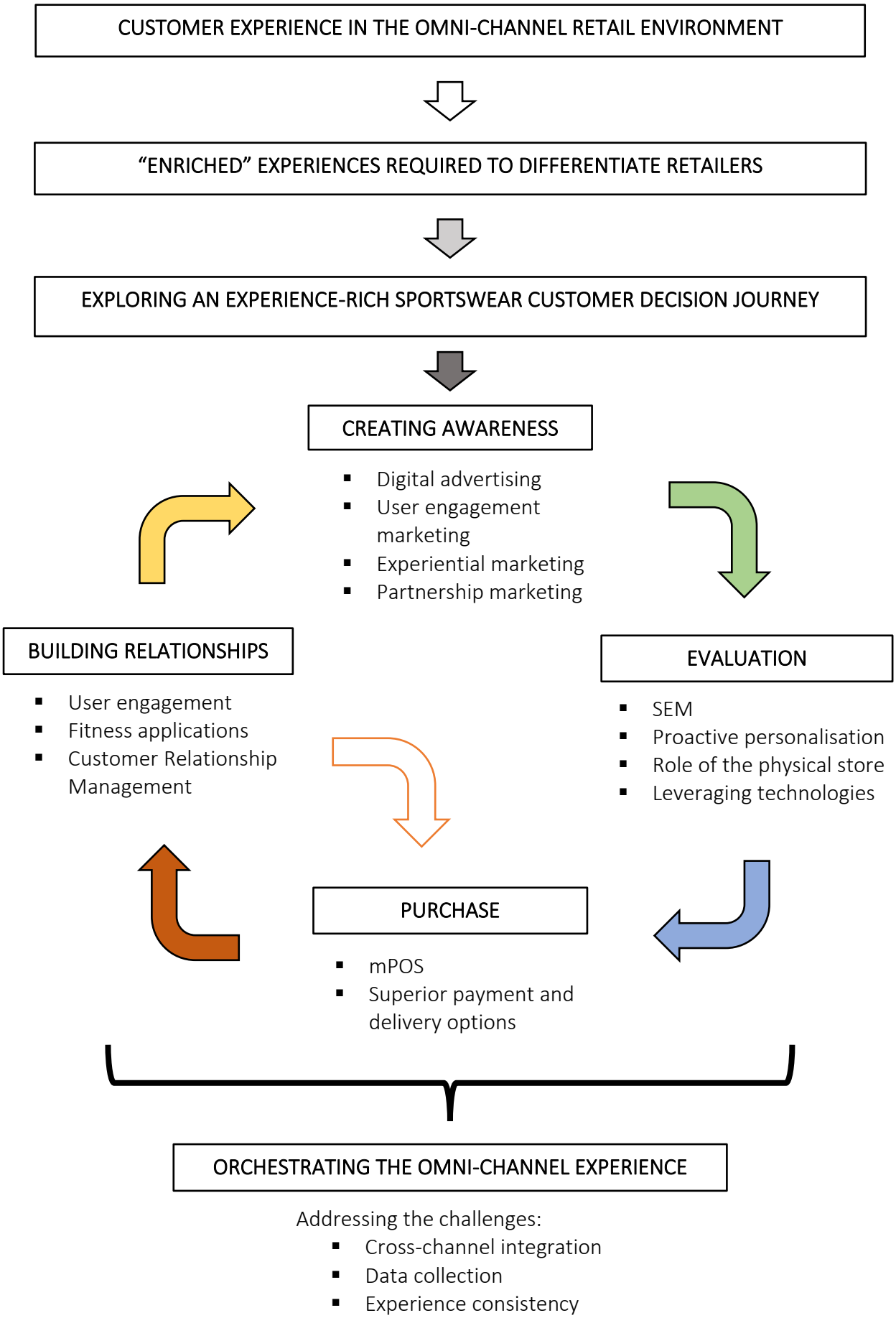

Figure 2: Conceptual framework

3. Methodology

3.1 Rationale for qualitative interview methods

This thesis will use the qualitative method of expert interviews in order to answer the research question and its sub-questions. There are several reasons for choosing qualitative method for this research. As the research question addresses how sports apparel firms employ experience creation strategies within their consumer decision journeys, the answers to this question require deep context and insight into specific business strategies that only expert professionals active in the industry could provide (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008). This thesis considers the perspective of sportswear companies; therefore, acquiring relevant data to answer the research question(s) demands knowledge from those with involved with making strategic creative decisions. Previous leading academic studies on the overall retail consumer experience and CDJ have been predominantly qualitative, as these topics take an overview of retail strategies and their holistic value creation, which is near impossible to quantify (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2009; Drewal & Roggeveen, 2020).

The retail industry is evolving at such a pace that insights into current best-practices within the industry quickly become out-of-date; consulting experts through an interview is therefore an effective way to procure empirical knowledge in order to gain a better understanding of contemporary experience creation strategies within the sports retail environment (Rabionet, 2011; Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Moreover, the interview design intends to gather insights into cutting-edge developments in experience creation processes and potential strategies, such as the adoption of advanced technologies; this information could not be obtained from quantitative methods.

3.2 Research design

Expert interviews were conducted in order to perform evaluative research to discover interviewees' expertise regarding a "phenomenon they have knowledge of" (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 224). Interviewing experts about their topic of specialisation will create new information to enter into the field of academia, which could not have been obtained through analysis of existing literature or case studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1997).

In order to gather the most in-depth and relevant responses from interviewees, the choice was made to conduct semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured form of interview allows the interview to be flexible (Turner, 2010), which provides the opportunity for questions to be adapted instantly (Dearnley, 2005). It also facilitates dialogue between interviewer and expert, helping the interviewer probe for maximum depth of answers (Cridland, Jones, Caputi, and Magee, 2015).

For a qualitative research method to be reliable, it must consistently "produce rich and meaningful descriptions of phenomena" if the research is repeated under similar conditions (Collingridge & Gantt, 2008, p. 390). Structured interviews are considered to be the most reliable and valid interview method, given the strict set of questions that must be asked to gain the intended information, followed by semi-structured interviews. The aim of a semi-structured interview is to generate answers that are "spontaneous, in-depth, unique, and vivid" (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016, p. 2960), using an interview guide to direct conversation towards the research topic in order to elicit relevant information (Cridland et al., 2015). In regard to expert interviews, an In regard to expert interviews, a semi-structured interview is the most effective research method to ensure maximum saturation of answers, as the interview guide helps the researcher to ask follow-up questions and dig deeper into interviewees' responses. This is significant, as experts may be inclined to hold back on specific detail, given their superior knowledge on a topic (Kallio et al., 2016).

An interview guide was developed from the conceptual framework, which helped structure a list of questions framed around the main themes of the research to help direct the interviewer and helps them ask the appropriate questions to answer their research question (Kallio et al., 2016). Though interviews will inevitably be unique, with different interactions and varying answers, the structure of the interview guide must be standardised nonetheless in order to keep answers on topic and within the framework of the research, thus maintaining the reliability and validity of the data (Kallio et al., 2016). Future research may elicit different

overall information, given the open nature of semi-structured interviews, but the interview guide ensures that rich and meaningful data is produced. It is the interviewer's responsibility to ensure responses are reliable by addressing the main themes of the research and asking follow-up questions to achieve maximum depth of answers related to the theory (Babbie, 2014).

Furthermore, it is preferable that interviews take place under the same conditions. Ideally, interviews will be synchronous in regard to time and place (ie. face-to-face), as physical presence is the most effective way to communicate and to take advantage of social cues between interviewer and interviewee (Opdenakker, 2006). The optimal interview scenario would be synchronous in terms of time and place, such as in a face-to-face interview, as it is the most effective form of communication and it allows the interviewer to take advantage of the interviewees' verbal and non-verbal cues that can provide additional insights into the respondent (Sin, 2003; Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014).

3.3 Sampling criteria and technique

Given the inter-disciplinary nature of the omni-channel retail environment, it was important to have experts from various inter-related disciplines in order to give a balanced perspective to the research. It was necessary that these interviewees were in a position of authority to make strategic decisions related to sports brands' user experience design. The sampling criteria for obtaining experts to be interviewed was as follows:

- an individual holding a senior (management/director)-level position at a sportswear brand, sports retailer, or an agency that works with sports retail
- at least at least 5 years' experience in a field related to consumer experience design, marketing, e-commerce, or digital strategies
- ~50% of experts employed internally by pure players
- ~50% of experts freelance or employed by agencies

Hence, the interviewees were chosen based on their conformity to the sampling criteria, and on the extent to which experts were deemed knowledgeable and useful for analysis (Babbie, 2014). In order to do this, the non-probability sampling method of purposive sampling was used in order to gather experts (ibid). Throughout the thesis process, I had been in contact with Adidas, who agreed to collaborate for the project by linking me to experts. Four of my interviewees were procured through this contact at Adidas. Other interviewees were found either through personal networks, or by reaching out to them via LinkedIn. Initial purposive sampling was later supplemented by the secondary method of snowball sampling; using expert interviewees' networks, further experts were gathered (Babbie, 2014). As this research was conducted during the Covid-19 outbreak of 2020, it was significantly more difficult to obtain interviewees. As a result of national lockdowns in which citizens were only allowed to leave their homes for exercise in many countries, sportswear suddenly became increasingly popular. As retailers were unprepared for the surge in e-commerce demand, multiple experts I had intended to interview no longer had the time to participate. Only 8 interviewees were obtained for this research, which is lower than the usual requirement of 10-15.

3.4 Expert selection

Expert Name Interview date	Experts' experience & relevance
Andy Walker 6/5/2020	Andy is currently the VP Creative Director Western Europe/CEE/Global Energy Marketing at Nike. With 20 years' experience working at Nike and Umbro in various Creative Director roles, Andy has a deep-rooted, holistic understanding of the developments in sports retail customer experience.
Roderick Gilbert 7/5/2020	Roderick Goedhart is Director of Creative Partnerships at OMM, a digital experience agency that has created many experiences for Nike, as well as Footlocker and Converse. His experience has given him a clear vision of experience creation strategies and their effectiveness for sportswear brands.
Constantine Garykov 8/5/2020	Constantine is the Global User Experience Director at Intersport. His expertise working in UX for Europe's largest physical sports retailer makes him a multidisciplinary expert in omni-channel experience.
Emily Catalano 8/5/2020	Emily is Converse's Digital Experience Manager for Western Europe. Her specialisation in digital content, experience, and performance marketing is particularly beneficial to better understand digital experience creation strategies in the CDJ.
Paul Stanway 14/5/2020	Paul Stanway is the Creative Director of XYZ, an experiential agency that has worked with many large brands, including Nike and Major League Baseball. With decades of experience designing experiences and marketing strategies for sports brands, he has a deep understanding of sportswear consumers and their response to experience creation strategies.
Serena Isone 14/5/2020	Serena Isone is a Senior Product Owner for Adidas, specialising in Innovation and Premium Guided Selling. Her experience designing Adidas's e-commerce strategy makes her a particularly interesting expert in better understanding experience creation within digital commerce.

Marianna Faynshteyn 18/5/2020	Marianna is a Director in Product Ownership at Adidas. Her current experience in e-commerce and past experiences in social media strategies have given Marianna very interesting insights into digital aspects of a sports retail CDJ.
Gary Murray 21/5/2020	Gary Murray is an industry leader in e-commerce and digital transformations, currently the Founding Managing Director of his own consultancy firm Rockstar Commerce. Gary has formerly been an executive global project manager for Nike and Adidas, Head of European E-commerce at Asics, as well as managing director of various agencies. His experience establishing e-commerce divisions for sports' biggest brands has given him deep, holistic expertise in every aspect of the omni-channel CDJ.

Table 1: List of experts

3.5 Data collection

In order to maintain the reliability and validity of the research, it was essential to secure some level of standardisation for the interviews. An interview guide was therefore created (see section 3.7) to ensure that the interview was kept directed towards the core themes of the research. To uphold the validity of the data collection, the questions formed for this guide were directly based on the themes of the conceptual framework seen in section 2.8 in order to ensure that the interview design was appropriate to elicit relevant data that could be used to answer the research question (Leung, 2015). This interview guide also ensures that, if repeated, rich and meaningful data could be obtained by other interviewers hoping to gather similar answers, thus maintaining the reliability of the research (Cridland et al., 2015).

Each interview was double recorded using Zoom's in-app recording and a phone, which ensures accuracy of the interview and allows note taking to occur (Opdenakker, 2006). Using the interview guide together with note taking, the interviewer can reach maximum saturation of answers in order to extract new information from emerging themes (Babbie, 2014)

Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews for the purpose of this thesis' data collection, as the research was conducted in April/May 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, almost the entire Global population was restricted to the confinements of their home, meaning that all interviews had to be conducted via online platforms, notably Zoom. Consent from the interviewees was therefore received through audio rather than a signed form.

3.6 Operationalisation

Derived from the theory and the conceptual framework, an interview guide was created to structure the interview according to the key themes of the research and help keep the interviewer on topic. The operationalisation can be found in Appendix A.

3.7 Data analysis

In order to analyse the data gathered from my expert interviews, all interviews were first transcribed *verbatim* in order to have the data presented in literary form. In order to extract meaning from the data, the qualitative data analysis technique of thematic analysis was then employed to code the data into a theory-structured coding frame. Using the qualitative data analysis tool Atlas.ti, thematic coding was used to assign the data according to theoretical constructs. The majority of data was coded according to aspects of the conceptual framework, though scope was allowed for emerging themes to be produced. Having personally conducted and transcribed the interviews, I already had a clear idea of the over-arching themes transcending the interviews, which helped code the data. By continuing to comb through the data, new strategies emerged that were interesting findings for this research; nonetheless, it was still reasonable to assign these emerging themes to broader theoretical constructs related to experience creation and stages of the CDJ. Using the final coding frame, clear themes were extracted from the interview responses that helped to make an informed conclusion and discussion of the findings regarding sportswear brands' experience creation strategies (Matthews & Ross, 2010).

4. Results

Before analysing the experts' testimonies regarding experience creation strategies throughout the consumer decision journey, it is important to first learn how these individuals understand the role of customer experience for retail in the digital era, and whether they perceive there to be a somewhat different role for customer experiences within sports retail specifically. Given the diverse backgrounds and careers of these sports retail experts, understanding their combined insight is key to understanding the reasoning for and effectiveness of experience creation strategies in sports retail. Following this, there will be analysis of how sports retailers can address the challenges posed by the omni-channel environment, before moving onto experience creation strategies throughout the four phases of the CDJ.

4.1 Customer experience in sports retail

4.1.1 Competing on experience

With regard to the role of customer experience in modern day sports retail, all of the experts stress the importance of providing an excellent experience as a means of retaining customers in the future. For many experts, customer experience is one of the most important considerations for retail. Customers are attracted by experience and retained through experience, explains Expert 5, hence customer experience is "number one" for a retail business. Others suggest that customer experience has moved beyond being simply important to being "mandatory" as Expert 2 claims. Expert 4 agrees and explains that "if your customer experience is not good enough… you're just gonna lose your customers and that's it." It is simply the nature of the times we live in, according to Expert 3. This supports the claims of Lemon and Verhoef (2009) that 'creating a strong customer experience is now a leading management objective' (p. 69).

What is most interesting further about these experts' answers is that creating these superior experiences has actually become a point of competition for retailers. For Expert 4, "customer experience at the moment is the baseline that basically differentiates yourself from the competition". In the same way that customer service in-store would differentiate the buying experience in years gone by, retailers must now learn how to compete on their holistic omni-channel customer experience. As Expert 2 explains:

> People are not loyal to one shopping destination. So, in order to retain customers, brands nowadays really need to not only deliver, but really execute to the best extent customer experience because we can't compete on price. You wouldn't want to do that.

Especially going into the future, Expert 8 thinks that "people will no longer think of physical vs non-physical retail. I think that we're probably just going to think about things in terms of what's most convenient." This is where customer and user experience design come in – success in capturing and retaining consumers will rest on a retailer's ability to compete on providing a superior customer journey. "If you're looking for a proper customer lifetime value and building long lasting relationships, this is where experience kicks in and adds up big time", as expressed by Expert 4. This is directly in line with Edelman and Singer (2015) and Bryjolfsson et al. (2013), all of whom argue that customer experience has become an area for differentiation in retail, which could potentially provide firms with a competitive advantage.

4.1.2 Sportswear's multi-dimensionality: Performance and Lifestyle

When it comes to the role of experience within sports retail, there is evidence from the experts' testimonies to suggest that the notion of customer experience is rather different for sportswear, especially when it comes to designing experience creation strategies; both when compared with other types of fashion, but also within different facets of sportswear. This is attributed to the multidimensionality of sports retailers, in terms of their presence in both performance and lifestyle product sectors, as well as the contrasting target audiences of different sports.

A clear theme that emerges from the expert responses, which confirms sportswear's differences to other types of fashion, is that sportswear products and merchandise exist on a "kind of scale if you want, where one side you have fashion, other side you have sport", explains to Expert 5. Products from sportswear brands and retailers can essentially be placed somewhere on this spectrum between performance and lifestyle, whereby "you will have sportswear performance products or categories, and you will have sportswear", says Expert 6. Expert 5 uses the example of Adidas: "Adidas has performance, which is pure performance, right? But they also have Adidas Originals, which is a massive category for them… but it's really a lifestyle product. It's a fashion product". Other types of retail do not have the same "distinct

polarising positions" as sports retailers according to Expert 6. They go onto posit that other types of retail "probably occupy a narrower bandwidth", whereas sports retail has "become more and more present in hybrid fashion".

Despite these two distinct ends of the sportswear spectrum, the 'hybrid fashion' that Expert 6 refers to is becoming more and more apparent in everyday life, as Expert 5 points out "athleisure is now a category. Which is completely blending sports and fashion… even through the definition of athleisure you know it's combined". In terms of fashion and sport, they continue to say that "normally people are somewhere in the middle. So I guess what you could say is that sports has actually embedded itself almost in every area of fashion nowadays". Sportswear's multidimensionality in the fashion world makes it an interesting case study to explore further in regard to how customer experience is considered and how strategies are implemented. Different elements of fashion have markedly different target audiences and consumer expectations to one another; therefore, the notion of experience creation could be multifaceted for sportswear.

4.1.3 A multiplier effect? Or a multi-dimensional experience?

Keeping the aforementioned product spectrum between performance and lifestyle in mind is crucial for sportswear brands in designing the appropriate customer experience according to where the product category falls on said spectrum. When questioned on the importance of consumer experience within sports retail specifically, Expert 4 replies "I wouldn't say that this is somehow more important than, for instance, luxury fashion or even fast fashion. The specifics are just different". Expert 7 agrees, saying that "there are different nuances for luxury goods, for instance, and sports goods, simply because of the nature of the product. Right?... [shopping for sportswear] is more of a specific and pragmatic experience". Expert 8 also agrees, saying that "with sport there's an element of performance… there's a difference between wanting to buy shoes that you wear to the office and shoes you intend to run with." What these experts have touched upon is the idea that designing a customer experience for sportswear cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. Expert 8 explains that different brands often have different strategies when it comes to communicating their brand through experience, in line with the understanding of customer experience being the 'cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical responses to the retailer' (Verhoef et al., 2009, p. 32):

> You can either focus on what your product has to offer… so they focus on what this product can do as opposed to how the product makes you feel. Right? Usually that's their focus, and other products and other brands they want to focus on how it makes you feel.

Sportswear is in a very different category to other types of fashion, in the sense that sportswear has a wide array of products that each have their consumer journeys designed to fall somewhere in between informative and emotional, depending on the respective elements of performance and lifestyle. For dedicated performance products that are designed to improve one's physical capabilities, the experience is "very performance driven" says Expert 7. Expert 4 agrees, saying that for more hardcore groups, such as running and outdoor professionals, "performance is the driving core element here for them; performance is the experience". Information about how the product will help enhance performance is most important in this case. Whereas on the other hand, Expert 6 believes that you will find "more lifestyle-oriented parts of the brand may have more in common with fashion retail and the consumer experiences and the consumer journeys that take place there".

Interestingly, the hybrid category 'athleisure', which has brought great success for sports retailers, places itself right in-between performance and lifestyle. "Inbetween, we've got this where people associate themselves with particular brands and with particular lifestyles as well" explains Expert 4. Sports retailers, according to Expert 5, "don't see the difference. They sell products. They sell performance products that you can wear every day." Sports products with any level of performance aspect, either pure performance or athleisure, are quite unique in the sense that the consumer experience associated with them is often designed to be both informative and emotional. Information about a product's physical attributes are conveyed to consumers wanting to improve their performance, but this simultaneously associates the product with the experience of an enhanced sports performance and the positive emotions that are linked with that. "You would probably look at using the product attributes and the product superiority, as it's sometimes called, as a rationalizing factor that backs up the more emotional, associational, leavers that you would be pulling," thinks Expert 6. Expert 5 concurs, saying that "they know that they can get an emotional connection with that consumer through sports performance. And it's that emotional connection that I think does give them an advantage." As Funk (2017) argues, the level of emotion, collective identity,

and involvement of a sports consumer is far more developed than other consumer experiences. Evidence from the interviews suggests that sportswear brands fully recognise sport as being an integral part of a sport retail consumer's identity and emotions. Using this awareness, they tap into a sports consumer's lifestyle and identity when designing sports retail experiences, as Expert 5 argues that:

> They also know that pretty much every day people are doing something with sports, especially younger people. It's much more of a part of their lifestyle rather than an addition to their lifestyle…. the experience, you know, that kind of empathic experience with people and the passion that they have in sportswear, in the sports experience, is a slight edge. I think that's important.

When it comes to designing an 'enriched' customer experience, sports retail strategies are directly in line Schmitt's (1999) SEMs, especially *FEEL*, *ACT*, and *RELATE*. Sports brands and retail actively tap into the emotions, lifestyles, and identities associated with sport experiences, which helps build the brand as an entity that supports and facilitates such positive experiences for the consumer. There is not necessarily a multiplier effect on the importance of experience in sports retail, as expressed in the theoretical framework, but it is clear that sports retailers leverage the experiential nature of sports as a means to enhance their customer experience, especially when performance-related aspects are involved. It will be interesting to learn how sport and the experiences associated with it are leveraged to form experience creation strategies throughout a sports retail CDJ, as sports consumers could indeed be more receptive to experiential strategies.

4.2 Orchestrating the omni-channel consumer experience

There are many challenges facing sportswear retailers in the contemporary retail environment in terms of managing the omni-channel customer experience and designing a frictionless journey. Overcoming these challenges requires great persistence and resources from sportswear brands if they are to provide consumers with the ultimate enriched customer experience.

4.2.1 Data collection

For many of the experts, the biggest challenge facing sportswear retailers is having a comprehensive understanding of each individual customer in terms of their preferences and profiles. Expert 4 stresses how it is “extremely difficult to connect the dots… you really need to identify that customer and that is the problem”. Expert 6 agrees, saying that the challenges facing retailers “comes back to knowledge of your audience and your consumer”. This Expert explains that it is very difficult to fully understand consumer preferences, as Expert 3 also explains “there's different consumer interactions and you have to be mindful of that”. Some consumers may come to make a purchase, whereas others might come to learn fitness tips. The challenge is understanding the consumer and when (or if) it is appropriate to sell to them. “You can do undo all sorts of good work by getting that wrong”, warns Expert 6.

These experts stress the importance of collecting and applying consumer data in order to get this right and provide the ultimate purchasing experience with a brand. Data plays a role in every aspect of the CDJ; from deciding where to host experiential marketing events, says Expert 5, to understanding the positivity of post-purchase engagement through sentiment analysis, according to Expert 6. Expert 5’s advice to sportswear retailers is “if you can capture data, capture it because… you don't know if it's just going to give you that little extra insight into your consumer behaviour”. Data collection is insufficient alone; it needs thorough analysis by experts to extrapolate strategies from the data, as Expert 6 explains that “it's about understanding the human story that that data gives you”. For e-commerce strategies such as personalisation and premium guided shopping, knowledge of the consumer is crucial. Expert 6 goes onto to warn retailers that “if you're not tailoring that online purchase experience towards what you know about your consumer, then you're being lazy or ineffective”. Expert 7 reveals that brands are investing heavily into encouraging consumers to join membership

programs, as this is the best strategy to capture consumer data and provide them with a superior customer experience thereafter.

4.2.2 Experience consistency: Cross-channel integration

Ensuring that each respective customer experiences a consistent, enriched CDJ is a crucial management objective for sportswear brands according to several experts. For Expert 2, they believe that it is vital "that the brand message that's being delivered to a consumer is the same no matter what channel you're on… it should still feel like one brand experience." To maintain brand and information consistency, Expert 7 explains that large retailers are separated into business units that "have a whole communication strategy around the product that they launch… what they do is to prepare a consistent journey throughout all of the channels". Expert 8 also explains how a "number of different categories have their own consumer profiles [and] own objectives". Each business unit, i.e. running or football, has a level of autonomy in how to market and sell their products, as well as how they vision the consumer experience to look like. This kind of corporate structure is important to ensure a retailer designs its customer experience to be consistent across channels.

In terms of providing a consistent experience as consumers move between channels, the experts were in agreement that sportswear retailers need to develop cross-channel synergies in order to track consumers and guide them through their omni-channel journey; though this is a significant challenge for modern retail. "You can imagine all the different touch points that people can enter our ecosystem… there's a gazillion different journeys. So, it's mapping that out… it's just very complex and I think that's the biggest challenge", think Expert 3. Expert 4 agrees, stressing that "it is very difficult to keep track of who's been researching online, purchasing online and vice versa". "We just need to make sure that all of these channels are communicating with each other… that's definitely the main challenge", agrees Expert 7. Lacking the technological connectivity to understand consumer behaviour across channels is a key issue, but for Expert 2, the issue is also "on the human management side". So many different departments, agencies, and technologies are involved in creating a single CDJ, that it is "almost impossible to have that seamless journey", says Expert 1.

However, the future of retail certainly shows hope of moving towards the seamless journey. An interesting development for mobile's role in cross-channel integration is the

application of geo-location services to reveal information about customers entering the physical store, which will be discussed in further detail in section 4.4.4.

4.3 *SEE* Phase: Creating awareness

In the *SEE* phase of the CDJ it is clear from the experts that there tends to be a global-local strategy for brands when it comes to building brand awareness, as well as the respective elements of performance and lifestyle. The reason for a global-local strategy is that a global strategy proves to be effective in creating far-reaching, surface level brand awareness across the globe, whereas local strategies create more meaningful connections with the brand. Combined together, a global-local strategy should result in far reaching, yet meaningful brand awareness.

4.3.1 Aspirational characters: Partnership marketing

4.3.1.1 Athlete endorsement

All the experts unanimously agreed that athlete endorsement is the most powerful tool that sportswear retailers have to create brand awareness. The use of athletes as product endorsers is "something that brands have been doing forever" says Expert 8. In terms of creating brand awareness, the overwhelming majority of experts still regard athlete endorsement as being the most important tool at a sportswear brands' disposal, given that athletes were and continue to be the original influencers according to Experts 3, 4, and 6. Athletes are so effective in the influencer marketing model because they are such aspirational individuals. Expert 6 explains that "society has set these individuals up to be heroes and heroines… you're looking increasingly at who the heroes are in those teams - who are the pinnacle athletes." "They are aspirational to absolutely everybody" agrees Expert 5. For this expert, they are not only aspirational because of their physical abilities, but also because "sport has been one of the traditional ways to break out of poverty… sport has been accessible to everyone". Put even more poetically, Expert 5 posits that "athletes have a global reach that transcends language. It transcends culture." For a sports brand, having athletes perform at a high level whilst endorsing their products is incredibly effective marketing, explains Expert 4. Sportswear brands benefit from using athlete endorsement due to the high level of "social proof" it brings, says Expert 7. This expert suggests that if consumers see athletes performing well in their respective field, "they want to emulate that… there's a lot coming from a pure psychological perspective". These explanations directly support the notion that athletes possess a high level of source credibility and celebrity-product congruence with sportswear, as reported by Tzoumaka et al. (2016).

Further than just sponsoring athletes, Expert 4 gives the insight that there is a deeper strategy for sportswear brands to actually "grow the athletes themselves and grow their brand as well". Expert 3 explains that athletes are moulded to "really embody the values of what we wanted to achieve and what we wanted to say as a brand", meaning that there is significant mutual benefit involved with sponsoring top athletes. Expert 7 agrees, saying that brands need "people who really live the brand". "They are, not least by the brands themselves, set up to be not just great athletes but supposedly great people and aspirational models for us" thinks Expert 6. Using aspirational athletes to endorse a brand directly taps into the emotions of admiration and adoration (Keltner and Cowen, 2017). These individuals communicate brand messages that encourage consumers to get active and live a healthier lifestyle, for example, Nike's "Just Do It" slogan. Sportswear brands therefore strongly evoke Schmit's (1999) *FEEL* and *ACT* SEMs when using athlete endorsers, making athlete endorsement a powerful and effective experience creation strategy in creating brand awareness.

4.3.1.2 Brand ambassadors

A very closely related strategy that sportswear brands use to build brand awareness is the use of brand ambassadors, as discussed by many of the experts. Brand ambassadors are typically highly popular and influential celebrities that "get more influence over areas than other people; [more] than maybe sports athletes" and are therefore equally, if not more, effective at promoting a brand and its values, according to Expert 1. They do not necessarily have a direct link with sports, as it is "a cultural thing. That's much more of a cultural thing", says Expert 5. Multiple experts use the example of Adidas and its close relationship with hip hop to explain the role of brand ambassadors. "In the eighties with Run DMC and everything else, Adidas was *the* lifestyle shoe [emphasis added]" explains Expert 8. For Expert 5, sportswear brands "understood that sportswear is absolutely embedded in street culture. And embedded in fashion now, so it's natural for them." Unlike athletes, brand ambassadors are far more effective due to their source attractiveness, explained by Kim and Na (2007). Typical of the performance vs lifestyle dichotomy in sportswear, brand ambassadors are used to promote the lifestyle side of a brand. Even the fact that the non-performance element of a sportswear brand is termed 'lifestyle' shows how sportswear brands evoke the SEM of *ACT* to convince consumers to behave in a certain way or follow a particular lifestyle, in line with this SEM's actual definition (Schmitt, 1999). Used in tandem, athletes and brand ambassadors are

effective in offering social proof and foster brand awareness for respective performance-lifestyle elements of a sportswear brand.

4.3.1.3 Influencer marketing

Aside from using globally recognised athletes and brand ambassadors to create brand awareness, many of the experts revealed that sportswear retailers also have a local strategy when it comes to partnership marketing, namely the use of local influencers. According to Expert 6, there has been much more of a "trend towards working with grassroots communities… and a lot more attention paid now to leveraging influencers with much more targeted groups". Expert 2 explains how there is been a "shift in the past year, two years in terms of doing more micro content, social content, having other people shoot your content". Influencers include both local athletes and lifestyle influencers, respectively. The effects of using influencers are markedly similar to using athletes and brand ambassadors in terms of their social proof elements, but in using influencers "your inclination to become interested I think is entirely different, or that much closer," thinks Expert 8. "In terms of awareness, there's more trust and I think there's more of an authentic message if someone else is talking about your brand", confirms Expert 2. This idea of influencers being a credible source of eWOM is directly in line with the theories from De Veirman et al. (2017), who argue that influencers' messages are organic and natural to consumers. Expert 6 explains that a global-local strategy when it comes to social proof is so effective because it "drives that awareness and that desire because you're seeing it both on the super high aspirational level, but also a much more community level."

4.3.1.4 Co-branding design partnerships

For the most successful and influential athletes, there is an extension of their value that includes designing physical sportswear products that are created as a collaboration. This is so effective because, as Expert 7 puts it, "once you see at the top of the pyramid there is someone that is sponsoring that product, then you're going to have a cascading effect." This is in a large part due to the perceived fit of athletes and their co-designed product, in line with Keel and Nataraajan (2012).

On the other hand, non-athletic products are also co-designed by ambassadors or other famous designers. According to Expert 4, this is because sportswear brands "want to bridge

two different worlds… to bridge lifestyle and make it sports style." Sportswear brands have been seemingly very effective in recent years at bridging this gap, seen in the prevalence of sportswear worn in everyday life. Expert 5 thinks that the effectiveness of co-design partnerships is because "even if we don't feel we can achieve what they've achieved, we want to at least kind of imagine ourselves in that lifestyle. We want to know what their lifestyle… it's aspirational again." From the experts' responses, it is evident that source attractiveness again plays a role in influencing the effectiveness of non-athlete co-designed products (Kim and Na, 2007)

4.3.2 Experiential marketing

4.3.2.1 Strategies and objectives

For many of the experts, experiential marketing strategies offer sportswear retailers a very powerful means to create memorable experiences and build strong brand relationships with consumers. Experiential marketing can take many forms. Expert 1 details how they created one for Nike involving 200 people watching a professional football match in an intimate event space. This expert also uses another contrasting example of pop-up shops, in which there is a far more experiential and personal experience compared with permanent physical retail locations. Expert 1 explains how, with experiential marketing, it is so important "to give something back to the people", as they will reward the brand with revenue and loyalty going into the future. For Expert 3, experiential marketing was "extremely successful for us – a crucial part of what we do. You want to create experiences for people to experience your brand. The values of your brand, your product, understand the stories that you want to tell." Storytelling plays a large role for experiential marketing in helping shape consumer attitude or behaviour post-experience. Expert 6 explains the purpose of experiential marketing in a sportswear brand's marketing mix:

> People are more interested in stories than they're interested in things… you've got to knit it together in a way that makes sense and is compelling to the person who you want to change the behaviour of… we're either establishing a new behaviour or we're amplifying existing beneficial behaviour for our clients.

In line with what has been laid out previously, the nature of experiential marketing is influenced by the level of performance vs lifestyle and the extent of global vs local. This is the same for experiential marketing. Expert 6 explains how they design experiences to suit the nature of the product:

> If we're launching a football boot, you are leaning heavily on what that boot does materially for your performance as a footballer… whereas if you were building an experience around say, Nike sportswear, there's a collection of apparel that's going to be much more influenced by the brand… as you drill down into that continuum

of performance and product, lifestyle and brand, you'll have different mixes of those elements.

This directly supports the notion that performance elements of sportswear require specific experience design attributes to tap into the lifestyle of a sportsperson. Expert 6 also reveals the insight that "generally you will find that more performance-oriented activations take place within the flagship stores and more lifestyle, more culturally influenced activations tend to take place in third party spaces where those audiences know, live and reside." This expert believes that more local locations provide greater credibility authenticity, which is important for lifestyle products given their place within community levels of society.

4.3.2.3 Experiential marketing's effectiveness for sports retail

For those present for the experience, experiential marketing is so effective because "you present a series of stimuli and it presents a cognitive reaction in your brain," explains Expert 6. This expert explains that experiential marketing is effective because the stimuli involved are designed in such a way to shape the desired sensory, emotional, and personal reactions that sportswear brands want individuals to experience.

However, many of the experts agree that experiential marketing would not be so prevalent if not for the ability to broadcast the experiences across social channels. Expert 6 explains how their agency intends to achieve the intersecting point of "a T diagram", whereby the vertical line is a deep, meaningful connection to the relatively few people that were physically present in the experience, and the horizontal line is a "low-depth, but broad reach". Those present at the experience will likely create content and share to their own social circles, whereas the brand themselves also share the experience via their own media. For those witnessing the experience online, Expert 3 suggests that it has an effect on them because of "FOMO"; an element of jealousy because they didn't enjoy the experience directly.

Expert 5 suggests the success of experiential marketing for sportswear brands is down the to "the fact that sports has a passion surrounding it generally. Definitely… as a consumer I think I'm probably more open to experiential design or experiential marketing". Again, the experiences of a sports fan - the emotion, lifestyle, and identity associated with the experiential nature of sport - plays into the hands of sportswear brands when it comes to experiential marketing. Experiential marketing directly seeks to evoke all of Schmitt's (1999) SEMs in

different ways, which is effective in bringing consumers closer to a brand. But interestingly, there is some evidence from the experts to suggest that sports consumers respond more favourably to experiential marketing than other types of consumer, which could explain why it is such a prevalent part of a sports retailer's marketing mix.

Multiple experts familiar with experiential marketing and its strategies did express concern about its future post-Covid. Organising large groups of strangers into a relatively small experience will become a more complex issue in the future, therefore Expert 3 believes that "the world will be a slightly different, I think experiential will become something else".

4.3.3 User engagement marketing

A key platform for creating brand awareness in the digital era is utilising social channels to engage with users, whereby brands subsequently benefit from having users share, tag, or create their own content in response to branded content. For Expert 8, "if you make good content, people will enjoy it. More than anything, all brands want to create content that generates positivity, that generates brand love". Using social channels to engage with consumers is an effective tool that sportswear brands have to generate hype and spread brand awareness. Expert 8 reveals that "something that we look at more is saves. This idea of like what people save this piece of content", as saving a piece of content shows a higher interest in the content and likely a higher desire to purchase in the future. There is again a global-local strategy in user engagement marketing; Expert 2 reveals how their company has a local strategy when it comes to "identifying target cities and target communities". This supports Rietvald et al.'s (2019) explanations that local strategies tend to result in more authentic consumer engagement, which is positively correlated with higher revenue.

What is often the case is that brands receive positive media attention that is out of their control. When users post online about a new purchase and tag the brand, this creates powerful third-party awareness for a brand. As Expert 8 explains: "People are 80% more likely to buy a product if they get a recommendation from someone they know… that's exactly how like user generated content has been used across so many brands… it is astounding how well that works." Brands are confident that earned media will be a by-product of their social content, which supports the notion that a brand's engagement strategy intentionally supports "customers' voluntary contribution to its marketing functions" (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 312).

4.3.4 Targeted digital advertising

The final strategy to create brand awareness was discussed by multiple experts. Expert 5 explains that targeted digital advertising's effectiveness is heavily reliant on analysing users' data, especially mobile data, given that consumers "have a screen in front of [them] almost 24 hours a day". Accessing user data allows digital advertisers to tailor adverts to different target audiences. For Expert 2, "we will target certain cities and target certain age brackets" if individuals haven't shown any prior interest in the brand, but they will also use "lookalike modelling", whereby they will target individuals that have similar broad interests to those that have shown interest in the brand. Expert 8 explains that, for simply creating brand awareness, the target audience is broad – typically based on location and broad interest. Whereas "when you're going further down the line, beyond awareness and you are looking for conversion, those tactics are entirely different." Tactics to drive conversion further down the journey tend to be far more specific and targeted towards specific individuals, according to Expert 8. Targeted digital advertising tends to be an effective means of spreading brand awareness and capture consumers, in line with the explanation from Hawkings et al. (2012), though its value as an experience creation strategy for consumers is not quite on the same level as other strategies at sportswear brands' disposal.

Whilst the use and effectiveness of targeted advertising is certainly apparent, the experts did stress the importance of user privacy in the digital realm. Expert 7 explains that "you have to be extremely careful and that's why steps need to be done". To avoid this privacy breach and the negative effects towards a brand that might result, Expert 2 reveals that brands install "frequency caps" to ensure that individuals are not being retargeted repeatedly. This is done to avoid consumers becoming frustrated and losing trust with the brand, which is a significant pitfall of over-targeting (Gerber et al., 2018).

4.4 *THINK* Phase: Capturing consumers' choices

Once sportswear retailers have successfully created awareness in the minds of consumers, it is important that they employ strategies to help capture consumers as they move through their journey into the search and evaluation phase. Within this phase, e-commerce takes an increasingly significant role thanks to the ease by which consumers can browse online; though the role of the physical store location continues to play an important, albeit different, role in capturing consumers.

4.4.1 Search Engine Marketing (SEM)

In regard to the online experience, many experts revealed how sportswear retailers employ SEM to increase visibility when consumers enter the search part of their journey. For brands, being present at the moment that consumers are looking to buy is key to being ahead of the competition. "Search engine marketing for a brand is very important. It's a big part of our traffic to .com" explains Expert 2. Expert 3 agrees, saying that "it's crucial in today's world to make sure that you're the top of mind, top of click". "From a conversion standpoint, it just works", states Expert 8.

Sportswear brands use PPC and SEO simultaneously in order to maximise their search visibility, though multiple experts explain that brands must be smart in how they allocate resources to PPC. Expert 2 explains that, because the cost of bidding for generic keywords is so high, "using brand keywords is definitely important… we don't do any non-brand." Expert 7 says that, with a bigger budget, their "strategy is to try to capture people who are genuinely looking for a given search query", rather than convincing consumers that had different purchase intentions.

However, ensuring a brand is visible through organic links is also important. In terms of the difference, Expert 8 explains that "SEM is meant to help steer you in a certain direction. And SEO is like creating breadcrumbs in order to get you there". "Natural search is super important and it's something that you always have to be monitoring and adjusting", reveals Expert 2. This expert explains that there are so many specific considerations with SEO, but it involves "many different factors that impact your ranking. It's even things like, monitoring your page load and your bounce rate and what type of texts that Google's able to crawl".

Expert 5 argues that "you've got to compete on Google. You gotta be in the top. If you're not paying then from an SEO point of view, you want to be in the top three." This expert

stresses the importance of increasing brand visibility through SEM strategies for a clear reason: "if you are not there telling your story, somebody else is… and probably telling your story in a way that you're not 100% happy with." These expert testimonies directly confirm the work of Baye et al. (2015) who argue that paid and unpaid SEM are important strategies to increase visibility and conversion for the search phase of the CDJ.

4.4.2 Premium e-commerce experience: Personalisation

From the collective responses from the expert interviewees, it was very clear that a superior online experience is not only very desirable to capture consumers in their evaluation phase, but also difficult to perfect according to Expert 4: "what's more important is that what they find when they land satisfies their expectations and they would stay. This is probably a more difficult part than actually catching the traffic." The objective of providing a premium .com experience is to make decision-making as easy as possible for consumers and to remove any friction that might impact the buying experience.

In terms of providing an enhanced user experience on a brand's website, the experts confirm that personalising technologies are becoming an increasingly effective means to offer consumers a truly unique and personal experience. Personalising the .com experience for consumers is an incredibly effective means of making content and information more relevant to consumers, which in turn will yield higher revenue. Expert 2 explains that proactive personalisation "allows you to have different content served up for different customer groups" depending on an individual user's data and previous purchase history, other users' data, as well as environmental factors. Expert 5 explains that brands are able to tailor content to different users based on their online user profile. For instance, the first five items shown on a consumer's page will be the most popular items for individuals with similar online user profiles. The key issue with proactive personalisation is that "it is impossible without AI and it is impossible without the proper way to track customer", says Expert 4.. Expert 7 explains that "if you want to try to get a little bit into more refined segments, then you have to go into logged in users and that is a very small part of the population". This expert explains that, as 80-90% of users are anonymous or not logged in, proactive personalisation on this level is very difficult. Expert 7 reveals that retailers are investing great resources into accessing consumer data in order to enhance the capabilities of personalisation, as "the most, important thing that you can monetize in the future is going to be consumer data." Though Edelman and Singer (2015)

suggested that proactive personalisation was set to be a key area for competition on CDJs in the future, it is apparent that this capability is still underdeveloped by many brands due to the complexities involved with big data analytics.

To bypass the resources and complexities of proactive personalisation, an emerging personalising strategy that is being implemented to help consumers make a decision is the use of conversational filters. Using a series of questions that are adapted from FAQs gathered from staff in physical store locations as well as other consumer research, Expert 7 explains that sportswear brands are now implementing conversational filter questions to mimic the presence of a store clerk on their website. Conversational filters ask consumers a series of increasingly specific questions regarding the intended purpose of their desired product. Answering these questions helps consumers "filter down the products onto the ones that are related to the purpose - why you are buying a running shoe", explains Expert 7. In line with Grewal et al.'s (2020) classification, conversational filters are Hi-Co/Hi-So; they mimic the presence of a physical store clerk being present, which helps consumers evaluate their options easier as unsuitable products are removed from their page. This Hi-Co/Hi-So typology makes them an interesting case study to explore in terms of an experience-creating technology.

4.4.3 Emerging role of physical retail

4.4.3.1 The physical store as experience space

For the majority of experts, there is wide agreement that there is going to be an emerging new role for physical retail in the omni channel retail environment. It is no secret that the prevalence of e-commerce has fundamentally altered consumer shopping behaviour thanks to the ease and available choice in shopping online. "What's the reason [to go to a physical store] when you can buy everything online?" asks Expert 3. However, the physical store is "still important because that's where you have the feeling of the brand and you can actually feel the physical product" assures Expert 1. This expert asserts that the physical location will be "where you can come to experience the brand and be immersed within the brand instead of just focusing on product selling". Expert 6 agrees, stressing that "if brands want to keep a physical footprint, that footprint has to change… physical retail needs to adapt from being just a transactional environment to one that provides the context and reason for purchase in the first place" in the future. "The physical store has become more experiential", confirms Expert 5.

In terms of helping to capture consumers in their evaluation phase, the experiential nature of the physical store will 'drive the mental availability' (Eriksson, 2015) of the brand and convince consumers to remain within a brand's channels to make a purchase, "even if the transaction doesn't take place store", believes Expert 6. These experts all directly confirm Alexander and Cano's (2018) predictions that the physical store is set to become a place for interaction and entertainment, and no longer solely a point of sales. This idea of the reimagined physical location means that, rather than inhibiting showrooming behaviour, sportswear brands are actually set to encourage and facilitate it. A characteristic of an effective experience creation strategy is giving consumers autonomy over their own purchasing decisions; the physical store's new role is an interesting development towards this.

4.4.3.2 The flagship store

Considering physical retail's new role as experience space, many experts concur that the flagship store plays a key role in that experience creation. For Expert 1, the flagship store "elevat[es] the experience that you can't really do in normal stores. So you actually give people the opportunity to live the brand and become brand ambassadors in their own way". As well as providing a superior brand experience that is designed to capture consumers with a purchase, flagship stores "are about establishing the brands, telling the story, creating the desire", thinks Expert 6. Whilst in-store experiences started off simple in the eyes of Expert 1, these have "become experiences where you actually participate in doing something". This expert uses the examples of an immersive football experience, or a running experience on a treadmill supplemented with screens all around – both include some element of challenge or record setting, which taps into the competitive element associated with sport.

Though a large majority of consumers entering the flagship do so with intention to purchase, the flagship store's role could also fall into the *SEE* phase of the journey, given "that they need to sell product, but they also need to sell the idea of the brand", according to Expert 3. For this purpose of selling brand values, experiential marketing and flagship stores tend to have a close relationship. Many experiential activations utilise the flagship store to test technologies and interactive experiences that creates both incentives to purchase for those in-store but also brand awareness for those strolling through or witnessing the experience online. The role of the physical store, especially the flagship store, has become one that no longer functions as a point of sales location, but also as a space in which consumers become

impressed by and attached to a brand. The experts confirm Alexander and Cano's (2018) explanation of the physical store's reimagined role to be an experiential, less transaction setting.

4.4.4 Leveraging technology

To fulfil this experiential nature of the physical store, a striking development in the future of retail is the implementation of both facilitating and advanced technologies to enhance the in-store experience, though some of these technologies are also present digitally. Mobile is cited as being an incredibly important channel that facilitates cross-channel integration in-store, whilst mobile is also used as a platform for other advanced technologies, such as augmented reality.

4.4.4.1 Facilitating technologies

Several experts revealed how important it is to have screens in the physical location that allow consumers to access a retailer's entire inventory online. "The standard thing, and this is the most basic really at this point, is your endless aisle", explains Expert 5. Expert 4 goes into more detail: "this interactive application that lets you explore the product, check the stock and even check the stock in the nearby stores… then order to your place or order here on your own… it's pretty advanced". This element of cross-channel integration greatly reduces the friction associated with physical retail, namely the relative lack of choice and availability of sizes. By integrating the digital into the physical, consumers enjoy a far smoother experience. Expert 7 explains that 'endless aisles' encourage consumers to stay within a retailer's own channels and reduces the negative impacts of showrooming behaviour. For retailers, the value of this technology is "never losing a sale", though this is heavily dependent on a retailer's logistics according to Expert 5. Integrating screens into the physical location is a movement towards blurring the distinctions between physical and online retailing, which is a key objective of omni-channel consumer experience (Bryjolffson et al., 2013).

4.4.4.2 Advanced technologies

The experts also reveal that more advanced technologies are also being leveraged by sportswear brands in order to enrich the consumer's experience and drive them to a purchase, both in a temporary experiential nature, but also as more permanent implementations for the consumer experience. Augmented and virtual reality continue to play a larger role for the in-store customer experience for sportswear brands. Expert 3 explains how sportswear brands "use VR for experiences that happen inside stores. So, if you want to be in the middle of the Camp Nou in Barcelona, you want to be in point of view of Ronaldo." Expert 1 helped create "an AR game for [a sportswear brand] where people can actually should shoot basketballs in the store. And then based on how they perform in the game, they can win discounts". Many AR and VR experiences are activated on a near constant basis in physical retail locations across the globe, and their value as experience creation strategies is impressive in terms of creating 'enriched' experiences for consumers (Verhoef, 2009).

On a more permanent basis, AR-enhanced smart mirrors are finding their place in retail and could be a significant development for sportswear retailers. These offer a more utilitarian application of AR technology by allowing customers to visualise items on themselves without having to enter a changing room. "I pick up five items, I can go to this mirror and I can, within seconds, try five different items on… it's helping me get to that next step in the funnel", explains Expert 5. Although their use is limited in the current retail environment, smart mirrors could provide a platform through which to provide a functional and hedonic experience for consumers, given their Hi-Co/Hi-So classification in retail technology (Roggeveen et al., 2020).

The implementations of these advanced technologies mark significantly important experience creation strategies that seek to evoke sport-related *SENSE* experiences (Schmitt, 1999).

4.4.4.3 Mobile

Mobile offers sportswear brands a lucrative platform for experience creation strategies, given the multidimensional application of mobile. "Mobile, mobile, mobile. Everything is going to be mobile", claims Expert 1. This expert believes that "for me, [mobile] is like the gateway to the consumer because everyone is on their phone 24/7". The usability and functionality of mobile applications provides significant opportunities to in facilitating cross-channel integration between the digital realm and the physical retail location. "We are creating in our app ways to

make sure that the online-offline experience is working and it's seamless", says Expert 3. Expert 4 reveals that they are working with Google "to help us track a customer from sitting in front of the screen or checking on the phone to the physical location", allowing store employees to see the preferences of customers walking in. Similarly, Expert 7 also explains that their brand is working on developing the same technology through their app.

Having this kind of understanding of which customers enter a physical store and their accompanying consumer data is a massive step in integrating the online and physical channels. If store employees know customers' preferences before they speak to a clerk, retailers can potentially provide these customers with an exceptional experience. The only issue with this, as pointed out by Expert 6, is that "these things required you to download a specific app", which means retailers can only provide this experience to certain individuals walking through the doors, likely returning customers.

QR codes play a key role in providing this information and guiding consumers. "[Scanning] QR code next to products, it will pop up with what that best styled, with products that are very similar, what the price is, a little bit more detail… all of that is enhancing the user experience", reveals Expert 3. Expert 1 also offers a similar explanation of their value. QR codes are useful in their own right in providing more in-depth information about products, though combining them with other advanced technologies can yield impressive results for a consumer. Mobile has become especially useful as being a platform for consumers to experience AR in their own hands. Expert 1 explains that web AR allows consumers to scan a QR code and be transported into an augmented reality through your phone. Expert 3 also reveals that their brand adds QR codes to each box that, if scanned, displays their sustainability initiatives in a visually augmented way. Rather than having smart mirrors, Expert 1 reveals that "AR can be used to actually see that sneaker… change colours on the go… because you can actually see straight away how that would look on your feet and you can redesign that sneaker". Being able to translate AR-activated experiences through a consumer's own mobile phone is incredibly impressive as an experience creation strategy, and likely something that we will continue to see more of.

4.5 *DO* phase: maximising ease-of-purchase

There are many strategies that are employed to reduce friction and improve the customer experience in the purchase stage. Given that many of these are utilitarian in nature, these strategies are widely applicable to all aspects of fashion and tend not to be unique to sportswear brands.

4.5.1 Mobile point of sales (mPOS)

One strategy frequently cited by experts that facilitates the act of purchase is the implementation of mPOS systems in physical retail locations. Expert 3 explains that, for their brand, "mobile point of sales… that's something that we're transitioning… we have a lot of people floating around now that can check out people out quickly". In Expert 4's retail location "you're going to go through the eCommerce experience, meaning that they will need to fill in the data". The benefit of mPOS is "speed and ease of use… everything is about, everything is about making it easier, faster for the consumer", explains Expert 3. For the physical location, eliminating the need to queue up at the check-out register greatly speeds up the purchase process, thereby reducing any dropouts from individuals pressed for time. This corresponds with Alexander and Cano's (2018) explanation of mPOS and its value to retailers. However, Expert 1 points out that mPOS "probably won't be used in the upcoming months" due to the current situation with Covid-19 that prevents people being within a 1.5 metre radius of one another, therefore it will be interesting to revisit the use of mPOS in future research.

4.5.2 A facilitating e-commerce experience

For the majority of experts, key to maximising the ease-of-purchase is creating a frictionless e-commerce experience. Expert 7 explains that if retailers simplify the relevant information on each page and make the steps to purchase "visible and very clear, then it's going to be a lot easier for consumers to arrive at the end of the funnel".

Once consumers do arrive towards the end of their funnel, it is important that multiple "payment methods and delivery methods [are] available", says Expert 4. Giving consumers autonomy over their payment and delivery methods is incredibly important to make it as easy as possible for them to actually make the purchase. Expert 5 puts himself in the shoes of the consumer, demanding to "let me pay in the way I wanna pay… let me have it delivered the way I want to have it delivered". Expert 4 explains that "competition sets this as a benchmark". The

importance of providing payment and delivery options, as stressed by the experts, is directly in line with the work of Krymov et al. (2019), who include comfortable payments and delivery, respectively, as being two of the four key principles in modern retail.

Expert 4 actually reveals how a new payment delivery method, Klarna, is becoming increasingly popular in retail. Expert 4 explains that Klarna is made for the 21st century consumer, as it allows individuals to "order as much as you want but pay for it up to 60 days after." They explain that this type of payment method gives consumers even more agency in their buying experience by removing the need to pay large sums of money upfront when consumers order multiple colours or sizes; a common shopping behaviour amongst consumers.

4.5.3 Contextual commerce

One of the key emerging themes that permeated through multiple experts' testimonies was the introduction of contextual commerce to retail. Expert 8 explains that contextual commerce is "not specific to online or offline… it's more just specific to this idea of you're basically offering a product for a consumer to purchase wherever they are". The idea of contextual commerce is that wherever a consumer might be, whether it's mid-way through listening to a podcast or walking past a billboard, the option to purchase will be made readily available to them on the spot. Contextual commerce not to be confused with contextual interaction, which refers to when retailers use information about a consumer to deliver them a next set of interactions that steer them through their journey (Edelman and Singer, 2015). Contextual commerce is specific to implementing opportunities to purchase wherever a consumer might be in their journey, which is significant in terms of maximising ease-of-purchase.

A key development in contextual commerce for fashion brands is that social media companies are themselves becoming payment platforms, allowing consumers to make purchases directly through social media content. Multiple experts revealed Instagram Checkout to be the most significant development for sportswear brands. Products are tagged within Instagram posts, giving consumers the opportunity to make a purchase on the spot through Instagram's own checkout process, rather than being transferred to a brand's e-commerce site. Expert 8 explains that "rather than having to click out of a place in order to do something, you have the opportunity to do that in that one place". Expert 4 thinks that having one location that saves consumers' details makes it far easier to make a purchase: "If it is

Instagram, you are familiar with that… it's a matter of pressing a button 'buy' and it's ordered to your home". This expert believes that this "is going to be a massive [game] changer" because "the journey becomes non-existent in terms of [the] checkout part of the journey".

Consumers can be essentially accelerated through the journey from awareness about a new product to purchase, completely skipping the THINK phase altogether. Expert 8 agrees, saying that Instagram Checkout "condense[s] the piquing the interest in everything else". Up to this point social channels have been communication platforms. Their evolution into payment platforms marks a significant development in our understanding of social commerce capabilities, meaning that previous literature in this discipline may need to be reviewed (Hajli, 2015). Brands that partner with these platforms will set a new standard for customer experience, and those that do not will likely be left behind by the competition. Being able to shrink the journey from *SEE* to *DO* in a few short steps will certainly be an interesting experience creation strategy to explore further in the future.

4.6 *CARE* phase: building relationships

Every expert agreed that, along with other types of retail, it is vital that sportswear retailers build and maintain positive relationships with their customers. “It's crucial. We want to make sure that we are developing long-term relationships… we just want to make sure that we keep people engaged in our brands, keep coming back, experience our brand in ways that they didn't think that they could”, says Expert 3. Expert 7 agrees, saying that “you want to make sure that you retain your consumers. Retaining consumer is six times more valuable than having to acquire new consumers”. “Those relationships are at the heart of everything”, claims Expert 8. There are multiple strategies that sportswear brands can use to build up these relationships with consumers.

4.6.1 Building communities

Community engagement is a strategy that was frequently mentioned by the experts. As is typical in the cyclical nature of the CDJ, user engagement is used to build relationships, as well as awareness. According Expert 5, key to post-purchase user engagement is ensuring that messages and strategies are “authentic” and not designed to drive a purchase: “as soon as the consumer thinks you're trying to sell [them] something you've lost [them]”. Expert 7 agrees, suggesting that the prevalence of storytelling sets relationship-building engagement strategies apart from those designed to create awareness. Storytelling “doesn't necessarily drive to purchase something, but it's just telling you something about the brand”. For this expert, post-purchase user engagement “is about building community… build your own customer loyalty through community”. This confirms that fostering community engagement is key to augmenting the customer experience, as discussed by Zheng et al. (2015).

Expert 8 stresses that brands should “release content that consumers would appreciate that leans into the positivity they have towards a brand without undermining it”. Examples of this type of content are revealed by Expert 3 and Expert 5, both of whom discuss viral challenge campaigns launched by brands to connect with their customers; not to promote any particular products or drive a sale. Expert 5 explains that “it's not about direct sell. They never follow it up with ‘You can buy our latest product or anything’”. This is key to the authenticity of the message. In building this sense of community, through storytelling or challenges, sportswear brands are again tapping into the emotions and identities that are associated with sports and

calling on consumers to act and complete sport-related activities. This taps into the fundamental aspects of Schmitt's (1999) *FEEL*, *ACT*, and *RELATE* SEMs.

4.6.2 Fitness applications

When it comes to building relationships with consumers through authentic means, multiple experts stressed the value of branded fitness applications as a means to connect with consumers and help them achieve their goals. As Expert 3 reveals, "we talk about how do you bring connection to your consumers? This is one way. You know we want to make people fit and healthy. That's a great relationship right there. That's a crucial point". "This is the best way to maintain relationships and actually retain customers", agrees Expert 4. Fitness applications are so effective because "it's authentic and it's ethical… you can basically be authentically ethical and build a community through that", thinks Expert 5. For Expert 4, fitness applications have "to bring value to you and not be pushy". "If you're only thinking of the point of purchase and everything else, then you're completely cutting out all the reasons for why consumers would become invested in you to begin with", agrees Expert 8. This is in line with Byun et al. (2018), who revealed that fitness applications have the potential to enhance customer experience and help build relationships with customers.

However, even if the strategy with fitness applications is to be authentic and help build relationships, there is certainly the expectation that they help boost sales. Expert 5 believes that when it comes to "which customers tend to buy Nike, I would pretty much guarantee you it'd be the ones using the Nike app." "They want to know how people are doing, how they're supporting [them] and having that extra action to sell more product", explains Expert 1. Expert 5 thinks that "it's subliminal almost in a way."

Fitness applications are an incredibly effective means of evoking Schmitt's (1999) *ACT* and *RELATE* SEMs, as they push individuals to improve their performance and live a more active lifestyle.

4.6.3 Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

The final experience creation strategy discussed by the experts was the implementation of CRM systems to help sportswear retailers maintain relationships with customers. “Any sort of CRM management of customer messaging is so important”, says Expert 2. Expert 3 explains that “we're learning all the time on how we communicate, how we make sure that we're top of mind of people, where we're in people's inboxes speaking to them”. Expert 8 also reveals that “there is a lot of consideration put into how we talk to our consumers… [to ensure] we're addressing their needs”. Using CRM software keeps a brand in the mind of consumers generally, but it also has the purpose of creating fresh brand awareness amongst previous customers.

A more powerful extension of CRM is implementing membership programs that reward loyal customers. “Loyalty programs are incredibly important”, says Expert 8. Expert 1 reveals how members are rewarded with exclusive access to events and experiences. “If you want to do any experience for [sportswear brand], you need to be a member.” Creating an effective and rewarding membership program is a key strategy in providing an enhanced customer experience, says Expert 7. The reason for this is twofold: firstly, customers like to be rewarded for their loyalty; but secondly, because of the volume of consumer data they provide. This data can be used to enhance the consumer experience going into the future.

The prevalence of CRM systems in sports retail, as well as specific membership programs, supports the notion that this is ‘the strongest and most efficient approach to maintaining and creating relationships with customers’ (Soltani and Navimipour, 2016, p. 667).

5. Conclusion and discussion

The purpose of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of how sportswear retailers design their customer experience; specifically, the main research question was: *How do sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies throughout their consumer decision journey?* By having a direct link with sport, it is clear that sportswear retailers are in an advantageous position vis-à-vis other aspects of retail in terms of always having a focal point around which to design experiences. Sportswear retailers employ experience creation strategies as a means of accessing and capitalising on the emotions, identities, and lifestyles associated with sport, notably in the *SEE*, *THINK*, and *CARE* phases of the CDJ; this is significant because these phases have the purpose of 'driving the mental availability' of the brand (Eriksson, 2015). The biggest challenge in designing sportswear CDJs is providing consumers with an enriched customer experience even as they move between physical and digital channels. With better knowledge of customers through data analytics, as well as improved cross-channel integration strategies, the future shows promising signs that sportswear retailers are on their way to creating a harmonised, frictionless, experience-rich CDJ.

5.1 Significant findings and theoretical reflection

Using thematic analysis to analyse the experts' interviews revealed fresh and interesting insights into sports retail. Some of these insights confirmed theoretical presumptions, whereas other themes emerged that mark interesting developments for the future of sports retail. It is first important to discuss the role of experience creation in retail and within sports retail specifically, as this discussion provides the driving force for the most significant strategies employed by sportswear brands. The experience creation strategies will then be structured according to the stages of the CDJ.

The experts unanimously agreed that providing excellent customer experience is one of the key objectives that sports retailers pursue, frequently being cited as *the* most important consideration for contemporary retail. Not only is it an objective, but it was revealed by several experts that retailers are allocating significant resources in order to compete on providing the best CDJ. Verhoef et al. (2009) correctly asserted that experience creation would become a key strategy in retail in the coming years, which was reaffirmed by Lemon and Verhoef (2016).

In line with managerial literature (Edelman and Singer, 2015), competing on CDJs is significant in sports retail.

In terms of customer experience and experience creation within sports retail, this research found some new evidence to suggest that, whilst many elements of customer experience are consistent with retail in general, experience *creation* plays a markedly different role in sports retail. A clear pattern emerged from the experts that the multi-dimensionality of sportswear is an influencing factor in regard to how experiences are created. According to how products fall on the performance-lifestyle spectrum, their respective nuances dictate the nature of their associated customer experience. Lifestyle products tend to have their CDJs designed in a similar vein to fashion retail, whereas it is clear from the experts that customer experience means something different for products with a performance element.

Sportswear retailers have a level of empathy with sports consumers and therefore know how to get an emotional connection with them through sport. Sport being an experience product directly plays into the hands of sportswear retailers, as they readily employ sport-centric experience creation strategies to capture the same market that spectate and participate in sport. Given these findings, this research makes an effective connection between literature addressing experience creation in retail (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Schmitt, 1999), and experience being a fundamental pillar of sport (Funk, 2017; Holt, 1995). Hence, experience creation strategies and CDJs are employed in such a way to tap into the emotional, aspirational, and lifestyle elements of sport, which corresponds with Schmitt's (1999) *FEEL, ACT*, and *RELATE* SEMs. This is evident throughout the omni-channel CDJ, as there are multiple examples of strategies being split between elements of performance and lifestyle to tap into different consumer groups.

In terms of creating brand awareness for the *SEE* phase, it is overwhelming clear that athletes are the most effective marketing tool at a sportswear brand's disposal. Given the level of admiration and credibility that sports consumers hold for athletes, using them to endorse a brand directly taps into the passion and identities involved with sport. This makes athlete endorsement a significantly effective experience creation strategy that evokes Schmitt's (1999) *FEEL* and *RELATE* SEMs. The co-existence of brand ambassadors to endorse the lifestyle side of the brand is a true embodiment of the nuances between performance and lifestyle. Furthermore, the global-local partnership marketing strategy sportswear brands have in employing influencer marketing is core to their experience offerings. Having two disparate

sources of endorsement amplifies the effects of WOM for the consumer. Athlete endorsement and other elements of partnership marketing are indeed very powerful avenues through which sportswear brands create brand awareness, which was an expected outcome given the extent to which endorsement has been researched as a marketing tool (Sato et al., 2016; Tzoumaka et al., 2016).

Although experiential marketing is a strategy employed by many companies in many industries, an interesting new finding emerged that confirmed suppositions that sports consumers could indeed be more receptive to experiential marketing due to their affiliation with the experiences associated with sport, which could be an interesting addition to the concepts and strategies discussed by Hanover and Smith (2016). Sportswear retailers' empathy with sports passion helps them to design interactive sports experiences in the confidence that they will be well received by their target audience, given their affiliation with the experiential nature of sport. This actually implies that there is indeed a multiplier effect on experiential marketing when it comes to sports consumers, as expressed in the theoretical framework, though this conclusion cannot be made until there is research comparing experiential marketing's success across different retail sectors. It is also clear from the interviewees that experiential marketing will have to adapt in the post-Covid world; we may see experiences take more digital forms, given the inability to host the same kind of experiential marketing events that sportwear brands are known for.

The experts were all in agreement that personalisation technologies are playing an increasingly significant role in capturing consumers as they move from awareness into evaluation. *Proactive* personalisation is the ultimate goal, though many experts point to the challenge of data collection in achieving this. he logistical and infrastructural capabilities required to successfully execute proactive personalisation are currently out of reach for sportswear retailers, meaning that they fall short of Edelman and Singer's (2015) expectation that retailers must provide this to compete. A new finding emerged from the experts related to how sportswear retailers are responding to challenges associated with proactive personalisation, namely the implementation of conversational filters to e-commerce. This is a complementary addition to the work of Roggeveen et al. (2020), given that these filters are Hi-Co/Hi-So, which is cited as being the most desirable typology for retail technology. Other companies struggling to personalise the digital experience for individual consumers could

certainly benefit from implementing these filters, as they do not require the same complex data analytics as proactive personalisation.

From the experts' testimonies, it became overwhelming clear how important mobile's role is in enhancing sports retail's customer experience. Mobile is not only set to greatly facilitate cross-channel integration by integrating online into physical; it also places advanced technologies like AR into consumers' own phones, which greatly reduces the need for retailers to install costly smart mirrors. This research confirms that sports retail's integration of mobile capabilities into the physical store is in line with the mobile strategies discussed by Perry et al. (2019). Bryjolfsson et al. (2013) also asserted that mobile was set play a key role in forming cross-channel synergies in retail going into the future, which has been reaffirmed by the experts. In line with Alexander and Cano's (2018) theoretical predictions, the experts were in agreement that the world will see a more experiential, less transaction role for physical retail going into the future. Physical retail, especially the flagship store, will be a place to live and experience the brand as a means of engaging consumers to drive future purchases. Sportswear retailers could benefit from accelerated their digital commerce capabilities as consumers use the channel increasingly less to help with deciding on purchases.

In terms of facilitating the purchase process and greatly improving the customer experience for consumers, a significant new finding that has emerged is the introduction of contextual commerce to the CDJ. By implementing an opportunity to purchase within various stages of the journey, the experts predict that contextual commerce is set to change the face of e-commerce and thereby set a new benchmark for retailers to compete on CDJs (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Though contextual interaction has been given some attention in managerial literature (ibid), contextual commerce is largely unexplored given its very recent development. Contextual commerce offers a rich new area to explore for CDJ research, as it could potentially remove the *THINK* of the CDJ for many consumers. If contextual commerce does indeed become a core aspect of retail in the future, the CDJ in its current four-phase form may have to be adapted for these new journeys.

Consistent with all aspects of retail, building relationships with consumers is an incredibly important part of sportswear brands' customer experience strategies. In terms of building relationships, engagement via social channels and fitness applications were cited as being key strategies to connect with customers. Post-purchase engagement and authentic messaging is crucial in effectively building these relationships. Though the importance of social

engagement is expressed in literature (Zhang et al., 2015), these authors do not directly explore the difference in messaging that is required for post-purchase engagement vis-à-vis engagement to drive awareness. This research found that sportswear retailers must ensure that their post-purchase messaging is authentic and credible in order to make consumers feel closer and more connected to the brand, rather than having content designed to drive a sale.

As well as community building via social channels, fitness applications offer sportswear brands a unique and lucrative platform through which to engage and connect with their customers. Extant literature largely focuses on consumer perceptions of branded fitness applications (See Stocchi, Michaelidou, & Micevski, 2019), rather than the strategic principles behind their success in building customer relationships. This research found that branded fitness applications are an authentic companion to customers by encouraging fitness and supporting a healthy, sport-centric lifestyle; again, sportswear retailers tap into the emotional and lived experiences associated with sport in order to guide the experience creation strategy.

This research contributes to the work of Lemon and Verhoef (2016), in which they explain that more research should be conducted to address how customer experience is considered within the framework of the wider consumer decision journey. Though sportswear retailers are certainly on their way, they still have a long way to go to achieve the harmonised, frictionless customer experience of a 'showroom without walls', as Brynjolfsson et al. (2013) predicted for the future of retail. Mobile was set to play an increasingly significant role in facilitating cross-channel integration, though it is very uncertain what the future role of physical retail is going to post Covid.

5.2 Limitations

The most significant limitations of this study come from the fact that the research was conducted during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, which greatly complicated data collection and reliability. The future of physical retail is even more uncertain in a post-Covid world, as consumers are less inclined to browse in shared physical spaces if there are digital alternatives; equally, digital strategies may be accelerated in their adoption by sportswear retailers in response to the crisis. In both respects, future research may find very different answers to the same questions posed in the interviews. Therefore, there is a high chance that the global pandemic caused by Covid-19 has fundamentally altered the reliability of certain findings in this research.

On a similar note, the pandemic greatly complicated the data collection process. As many countries were forced into lockdown and the majority of people went outside only to exercise, the demand for sportswear skyrocketed. Experts working for or with sportswear brands became incredibly hard to track down or too busy to allocate time for an interview. As a result, this research only managed to collect the reduced minimum of 8 interviewees. Due to the holistic nature of customer experience and the strategies involved, it is already very difficult to find individuals that can give rich answers to every question posed in the CDJ. Especially in such a broad topic as customer experience, it is necessary to have a high number of interviewees to ensure that there is a wide range of rich data available to analyse. However, with just 8 interviewees, only a few interviewees were able to confidently answer every question related to every strategy. The collected data was therefore not as rich and deep as would have been preferred.

Furthermore, due to the holistic and subjective nature of customer experience, there were certain times when experts either went slightly off-topic or spoke for an extended period of time in trying to explain their full point of view. A small number of interviews had to be cut slightly short as they ran over time for this reason, which affects the reliability of these interviews. It is the interviewer's duty to keep interviewees on track and ensure the intended meaning of questions are understood.

5.3 Societal relevance

Understanding how experience creation strategies are employed by sportswear brands and why these strategies are effective has several managerial implications for current and emerging sportswear brands in understanding how to improve their consumer experience. For sportswear retailers, understanding that performance related products require a blend of informative and emotional appeal is important to designing customer experience. If sportswear brands can effectively employ experience creation strategies to tap into and capitalise on the passion and experience associated with sport, they could ensure that their customer experience is both frictionless *and* experiential, which will increase revenue and customer loyalty, and could result in more consumers being captured from other aspects of apparel retail. Furthermore, the specific strategies employed by sportswear retailers could serve as a guide to other retail sectors in how to engage and connect with their customers to improve their own brand loyalty. For example, strategies to improve the e-commerce experience or improve post-purchase user engagement can be easily translated to other aspects of retail, if retailers take away the core value of these offerings.

The increasing popularity of sportswear has implications for wider society. Given that studies show that the clothing one wears influences physical activity (Adam and Galinsky, 2012), a higher proportion of consumers being attracted to sportswear could result, according to the law of large numbers, in more consumers incorporating sport as part of their lifestyle. Evidence of sportswear influencing physical activity is already evident from the influence of athleisure fashion; there became a new attraction to fitness because there was fashionable attire designed to support the lifestyle. Essentially, if sportswear retailers can design a customer experience that is superior to other aspects of retail, there's a logical extension that the level of sports activity will increase in society.

5.4 Future research

Given the circumstances in which this research was conducted, there is likely a great deal of findings that may need revisiting. This research understands that sportswear consumers' affiliation with sport experiences means that experiential marketing is particularly effective for them; however, it is not possible to make this conclusion without empirical evidence. Therefore, under different circumstances, an interesting area of research might be to conduct a quantitative study of experimental design to determine experiential marketing's effectiveness for sportswear consumers vis-à-vis other types of consumer. However, as expressed by experts, the future of experiential marketing is very uncertain; hence, it might be more advisable to conduct future research into how Covid-19 has impacted experiential marketing's effectiveness.

Similarly, future research into how Covid-19 has impacted the role of the physical store would also be worthwhile, as it is likely that physical retail's decline in popularity as a point of sales will be sharper than was previously thought. Mobile was tipped to be the future of in-store cross-channel integration; therefore, it would be interesting to review its role in the future. On one hand, mobile might become the only way to navigate, choose, and pay for products in-store as retailers discourage using communal screens. On the other hand, the popularity of the physical store might significantly decrease, meaning that resources could be directed away from mobile capabilities altogether.

Notwithstanding the future limitations for physical retail, the future of digital retail is promising. It will be interesting to investigate whether firms eventually become successful in employing proactive personalisation, given that many brands are struggling currently, as successfully mastering proactive personalisation would be a significant point of differentiation in online retail. Contextual commerce was a key finding of this research, and its continued development may be significant in affecting our understanding of the consumer decision journey. Future research should also be conducted into contextual commerce and whether its implementation turns out to be the 'game changer' that it is predicted to be by experts.

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8. Appendix

Appendix A: Operationalisation - Interview guide

Experience creation in for sports retail	
Consumer experience in retail	• What role does customer experience play in modern day retail?
Experience in sports retail	• Does customer experience play a different role for sportswear brands compared with other types of retail, and why? • How can creating *valued* experiences be a point of differentiation for sportswear brands?

Orchestrating the CDJ	
Orchestrating the experience	• What are the biggest challenges facing sportswear retailers in terms of managing consumer experience in the omni-channel retail environment? • Why is it so important to manage the overall consumer experience?
Journey consistency	• What are the challenges to keeping the journey consistent throughout the channels? • Is it necessary to integrate different departments to achieve consistency?
Cross-channel integration	• What role does cross-channel integration play for omni-channel experience management? • What are the challenges in creating cross-channel synergies?
Big data analytics	• What role does big data have in helping sports retailers manage the CDJ? • Are there privacy concerns involved with big data analytics?

Creating awareness: The *SEE* phase	
Awareness/marketing	• What are the most effective strategies that sports brands use to create brand awareness in the digital age?
Targeted digital advertising	• How can sportswear brands use targeted digital advertising to reach new consumers?
User engagement marketing	• What role does user engagement marketing have in spreading brand awareness?

Experiential marketing	• How do sportswear brands use experiential marketing to spread brand awareness? • What is the effect of experiential marketing in creating brand awareness for sportswear brands?
Partnership marketing	• How do sportswear brands use athlete and celebrity endorsement to create brand awareness? • How are co-branding design partnerships with celebrities or athletes used to create brand awareness? • What is the effect of endorsement or co-branding compared to other forms of marketing? • How is influencer marketing used to spread brand awareness?

Capture consumers: The *THINK* phase	
Search Engine Marketing	• What role does search engine marketing play in helping brands stand out to consumers in their search phase? • How do sportswear brands use paid search marketing strategies to increase visibility on search engines? • How do sportswear brands use SEO for the same purpose?
Proactive personalisation	• How do sportswear brands personalise the user's e-commerce experience whilst they are evaluating their options? • How does the development of *proactive* personalisation help capture consumers in the evaluation stage?
Role of the physical store	• How is the role of the physical store, notably the flagship store, changing for sportswear brands? • How does the store's new role help capture consumers in their evaluation stage?
Leveraging technologies	• How are in-store technologies being used to enhance the consumer experience when shopping in-store? • What role does mobile play in the store? • How can sports retailers implement advanced technologies to capture consumers - in-store or online?

Maximising ease-of-purchase: The *DO* phase	
Maximising ease-of-purchase	• What strategies do sportswear brands use to facilitate the actual point of purchase?
mPOS	• What role do mobile point of sales technologies play for sportswear brands at the point of purchase?

Building relationships: The *CARE* phase	
Relationship building	• How important is it for sportswear brands to build relationships with their customers?
User engagement	• How can sportswear brands use social channels to engage with their customers post-purchase? • Do you have a strategy when it comes to user engagement?
Fitness applications	• What role do fitness applications play in building and maintaining relationships with customers?
Customer Relationship Management	• How can sportswear brands use CRM to maintain relationships with their customers?

Final remarks	
Steering the journey	• How can sports retailers most effectively steer consumers through their journey?
Journey innovation	• Is it important to keep the journey dynamic through innovation? Why?
Ending questions	• Are there any other key strategies that haven't been covered that you think are important to discuss? • To summarise: how can creating enhanced experiences help brands stand out from the competition?