Artificial intelligence in digital marketing: use versus abuse?

A qualitative research into the ways digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands mitigate business and ethical considerations in their work

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ABSTRACT

In the last several decades, the field of marketing has witnessed a dramatic transformation due to the development of technology, which transferred many of its functions and channels into the digital format. As the digital acceleration continues, more and more technologies become engrained into the digital marketing eco-system, including the most recent use of artificial intelligence. On the one hand, introduction of AI has brough numerous advantages for the field of marketing, such as personalization of communication, more successful targeting, and optimization of workstreams. On the other hand, various ethical concerns arose around the use of AI, which affects data collection and management processes, notions of privacy, and fair targeting of consumers among others. At the same time, the regulatory landscape on how to manage the technology in Europe is also experiencing change – from the enforcement of GDPR in 2018 to the current development of the AI regulation legislation, marketing professionals must stay informed on the regulatory changes. As a result, digital marketing practitioners today must face dilemmas in their work on how to use the technology, and particularly AI, in a way, which is ethical, yet advantageous for the business – or decide which side to choose. The goal of this research was to examine how the practitioners in the field mitigate this newly arisen tension between approaching business objectives and ethics while using AI, and therefore the research question of this study is: *How do digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands balance business and ethical considerations while using artificial intelligence for marketing purposes?* In order to answer the research question, seven expert interviews with digital marketing practitioners of managerial level working in the Netherlands have been conducted. A thematic analysis of the data revealed that digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands undergo a complex decision-making process while using AI in their work, which features the crossover of opportunities technology brings into their work, but at the same time challenges and contradictory feelings that are triggered by the risks of AI. As a result, digital marketing practitioners balance business and ethical considerations in their work on the contextual basis, depending on the limits which affect ethics in a particular situation, and while activating external tools (law, company policies and company values) and internal tools (reflexivity, personal beliefs, and communication with stakeholders) that help them to make the decisions. The practical findings feature recommendations from digital marketing practitioners on the need of more stringent technological regulations (including improvement of GDPR enforcement) and improvement of digital literacy among users.

KEYWORDS: *AI marketing, AI ethics, business ethics as practice, ethical decision-making, strategic impact*

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1. Introduction

'I didn't know business had any ethics' (Bartlett, 2003, p. 223)

Despite artificial intelligence actively being on the media and public discourse radar especially in the last decade, "strategic use of AI technologies has not been well explored by literature yet", therefore, there is yet much "to investigate about the planning and management of the new generation of AI in different contexts at diverse scales and business scopes" (Borges et al., 2021, p. 13). This study aims to contribute to the literature on the meaning of business ethics as practice in the domain of marketing in the Netherlands, but from the use of AI angle – namely, what challenges digital marketing professionals in the Netherlands face in regards to balancing business objectives (i.e. using customer data for the purpose of better performance/result) and ethics in AI (*ab*using customer data for said activities), how they view ethical considerations, how they arrive at their decisions, which practices are employed, and what the relevance of emerging trends in AI for businesses is.

Rising from 1990s, digital marketing – "the application of digital media, data and technology integrated with traditional communications to achieve marketing objectives" transformed the way businesses interact with their audiences (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2012). With digital marketing, businesses started focusing on building successful strategy through stages of opportunity, strategy, and action, first step of which was identifying objectives through review of KPIs – key performance indicators of the company and competitors, arriving from data analysis (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2012). This shift that happened with technology allowing data-driven-decision-making meant that the more effective usage of data is, the more successful an organization can be. AI in marketing that started growing in 21st century has brought even more opportunities and transformed how "organizations create content for campaigns, generate leads, reduce customer acquisition costs, manage customer experiences", as well as "market themselves to prospective employees, and convert their reachable consumer base via social media" (Van Esch, P., & Stewart Black, 2021, p. 199). However, more ethical debates surrounding AI practices and customer privacy have started developing, such as concerns around "online tracking [of consumers' actions], big data collection, and targeted advertising" (Murphy, 2017, p. 88), eventually expanding both newly emerging considerations for marketing practitioners and

opportunities for research in marketing from the ethical perspective. With the possibilities of technological advances bringing the targeting of user data to an "enviable level", allowing to create "complete demographic, sociographic and psychographic profile[s]" of users and consequentially influence their behavior (Parlov et al., 2018, p. 105), the need for changes in the legal landscape also emerged – which was firstly tackled with the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018, and now going further with a currently progressing framework for ethical use of AI that is still in development (European Commission, 2019). Since businesses and practitioners using AI in marketing have now been faced with a dilemma of obtaining more data for strategic purposes and possibly crossing the line with data abuse versus handling this data ethically – all in the backdrop of new regulations being under development – this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on the topic.

In order to understand in which context marketing practitioners in the Netherlands are currently operating, which tensions they come across in their work and how they mitigate these tensions, this study draws on multiple theoretical perspectives arriving from three key landscapes of AI usage in marketing: business landscape, risk landscape, and ethical landscape. From the business landscape, this study will look at the changes in the marketing industry that arrived with the development of technology, and the benefits and opportunities they have brought for businesses. From the risk landscape, emerging risks around usage of AI in digital marketing would be examined, as well as current regulations that serve the purpose of mitigating those risks. Lastly, from the ethical perspective, this paper will look at the theories on how businesses should conduct their work ethically through business as practice overview, and how ethical decision-making process in the marketing industry takes place.

The study is very urgent due to AI's speedy, yet consistent expansion, as well regulations and technological ethical guidelines in the EU that are still in development and not set in stone, leaving room for improvements and suggestions in development, especially given the insights and recommendations from marketing professionals in the field. It is also very relevant to the field of media, as artificial intelligence in marketing is constantly opening more potential for use in the marketing field (Campbell et al., 2020), while ethical frameworks are still playing catch-up. As "strategy-as-practice research has not paid as close attention to the moral dimension of practices as one might have expected" (Tsoukas, 2017, p. 339), it is highly relevant to examine the meaning of emerging technological (AI) ethics in

the practical domain of media, especially while juxtaposing them to practices in business operations, objectives and opportunities. Given that "the nature of research on AI at this point" is still "nascent", "the full capabilities and limitations of AI in marketing are unknown" and academia is still in the early stages of "the research process of conceptualizing, theorizing, and researching the use and impact of AI" (Van Esch, P., & Stewart Black, 2021, p. 199), this study is serving the purpose of adding to the knowledge on how emerging AI uses in marketing are impacting the ethical decision-making of marketing practitioners, and offers potential for further development of ideas on how to approach the AI-enabled marketing work ethically.

Through seven expert interviews conducted with practitioners of various marketing specializations who have expertise in strategy in digital marketing in the Netherlands, the following research question is, therefore, set to be answered:

How do digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands balance business and ethical considerations while using artificial intelligence for marketing purposes?

To help to answer the key research question, the following sub-questions have been formulated:

- How do marketing practitioners use AI for business purposes?
- What ethical considerations/issues do they see when using AI for marketing?
- What balancing mechanisms do they use in their decision-making process when faced with ethical and business tensions while using AI in marketing?

Due to three constantly moving elements involved in this domain – changing regulations on AI, changing business landscape that is expanding with technological advances, and rising ethical concerns, this research was set to be highly explorative in nature. While theoretical overview of such concepts as ethical decision-making in marketing and conceptualizations of business ethics as practice serve as the backbone for answering the research question and sub-questions, research methods were deliberately chosen to be inductive, rather than deductive, in order to stay open and explore the operational context of marketing practitioners first. Before embarking onto the results this study provided, it is now important to overview the theory that guided this study.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to answer the RQ "How do digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands balance business and ethical considerations while using artificial intelligence for marketing purposes?", it is firstly important to discern the contextual elements that the question consists of, namely: business implications of AI in marketing, risks that consequentially emerged in marketing with the development of AI, and the ways through which ethical decision-making process takes place among marketing practitioners, serving as mechanisms to mitigate those risks. The purpose of this chapter lies in contextualizing these elements with the help of the literature overview, and explaining how these theories have been applied in order to answer the research question.

2.1. Business implications of AI in digital marketing

In the last several decades, digital transformation – the process of digital technological deployments in business contexts – has become "a critical influencing factor unleashing the next wave of enterprise business disruption", out of which marketing has experienced special intensity in the field change (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022, p. 38). As the digital transformation kept emerging, contemporary marketing started massively deploying new technologies and embedding them throughout "mainstream operations to ensure accelerated success" (p. 38). As a result, a domain of *digital marketing* emerged, with the term officiating in the 1990s – which started focusing on the marketing efforts of products and services with the help of digital technologies, including the Internet, mobile devices, displays and other digital media (Desai, 2019). One of the domains of technology that allowed the field of marketing to massively grow and digitize has been artificial intelligence, or in short, AI. AI, still being a "surprisingly fuzzy concept" with "a lot of questions surrounding it" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019, p. 15) can be used as an umbrella term for a "system's ability to correctly interpret external data, to learn from such data, and to use those learnings to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation" (p. 17). AI uses external data "as an input for identifying underlying rules and patterns by relying on approaches from machine learning" (p. 17), which then allows the technology to learn and perform without direct programming. In terms of digital marketing, AI functionality can be conceptualized as "technology operating in the domain of automation and continuous

learning, acting as the intelligence that drives data-focused analytics and decision making" (Kumar et al., 2019, p. 136), which in turn provides insights that help to build the business strategy. When it comes to conceptualization of AI and digital marketing for the purpose of this specific study, it is important to note that AI's use in digital marketing would serve as the umbrella term above, focusing on the use of algorithms, automation, and data-driven analytics and decision-making, rather than presenting AI as a "monolithic term" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019, p. 62). Additionally, the definitions of marketing and digital marketing would be used in the study interchangeably, however, the focus is always put on marketing activities embedded in digital channels and tactics, which creates the basis for digital marketing (Desai, 2019, p. 196).

When it comes to assessing how AI has changed the field of marketing, the literary overview suggests, the first key element that has drastically shifted the dynamic in the field were opportunities that the technology offered in regards to data collection. As Mogaji, Soetan and Kieu outline: "AI enables data collection at an enormous rate through chatbots, email, social media, websites, and location-based advertisements", which in the end generates big data and affects all the processes in the marketing strategy development (2021, p. 236). As collection of data is most of all concerned around users or consumers that are potential leads for the marketing efforts, a critical trend that emerged was personalization of marketing content and customer experience. According to Kumar et al., massive-scale collection of customer data that became possible through AI-powered tools, allowed to build a highly-focused customer approach in the 21st century marketing, which resulted in the creation of personal bonds between technology and marketing, which in turn, from the side of marketing, became an invaluable feature, as it allowed deep emotional connection stemming from a customer which helps in loyalty development and value creation (2019). The same important placement of personalization is outlined by Ma & Sun (2020) in their AI & Machine Learning marketing industry trends' model, which combines currently most notable AI-powered trends in the industry. They place personalization, which they describe as the process of a consumer becoming an individual segment, receiving tailored suggestions based on their behavior data, which allows for a better transaction and relationship between a company and a customer, alongside three other key trends – interactive & media-rich, customer journey focus and real-time automation (Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 489).

The latter aspect – automation of processes, which was triggered by a need for more efficient delivery of information due to the increasing customer's number (p. 490) – is also among the key defining features enabled by AI. According to Esch and Black, AI has provided the ability to automate the processes that previously humans did by themselves, which has allowed marketing professionals to spend less time on tedious, day-to-day tasks and focus more on activities of higher value (2021). Automations powered by AI allowed not only to start generating campaigns in a quicker, more efficient and cheaper fashion, but affected the whole value chain efficiency – the process of getting products to customers – through decreasing the human error and time in such activities as acquisitions, design and brand development (i.e. replacing logos, changing brand messages and communicating across markets).

Additionally, one of the key disruptive features that AI has helped to develop is a shift from the traditional "gut feeling" decision-making among marketers to a more data-driven approach (Brynjolfsson et al., 2011; Sundsøy et al., 2014). While previously having a majority of marketing professionals relying on their internal guidance on how to identify and approach the right audience, data-driven approach has led to "an increased efficiency" in campaign management, as well as a better delivery of the "right offer to the right customer", and leading to higher conversion rates (Sundsøy et al., 2014, p. 368). Additionally, for the side of marketing practitioners, AI has proven to provide "accurate forecasting, improved marketing insights, superior product quality, real-time customized campaigns, increased operational efficiency, and enhanced customer experience" (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022, p. 57). Given that improvement of decision-making with the purpose of achievement of better results is one of the key goals of data science, and improved decision-making is "of paramount interest to business" (Provost & Fawcett, 2013, p. 53), much more efficient data-driven decision-making has also been given way by the developments in artificial intelligence, allowing businesses to successfully grow. As a result of all advantageous purposes AI has brought into the field of marketing, it has now become highly beneficial for companies to invest into AI implementation due to its diverse success (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022).

To sum up the literature review, the following outstanding positive business purposes of AI in marketing can be outlined:

- Personalization of communication

- Better targeting for both marketers and consumers
- Operational efficiency due to automation
- Cost-efficiency
- Workstream optimization

Above overview of advantageous business purposes of using AI in marketing derived from the literature will help to identify correspondent patterns in which purposes digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands face in their work – which would play a key component in the practitioners' ethical-decision making, while facing business dilemmas, as clear business advantages can potentially influence a stance a decision-maker takes in the end.

2.2. Ethical concerns of AI in digital marketing

As technological developments in the last decades have been advancing, "data science [became] European research and innovation priorities with significant resources being directed towards solutions which may deliver economic and social impacts", among which use of AI plays a key role due to its data reliance and potential for economic growth (Kerr et al., 2020, p.1). At the same time, in the backdrop, usage of AI and its involvement with unprecedented amounts of data has brought various concerns on the societal level. In order to conceptualize these concerns and then be able to trace the patterns of risks identified by the digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands, the "scoping review of the existing corpus of guidelines on ethical AI" consisting of 84 identifiable guidelines on ethical AI across the world (Jobin et al., 2019, p. 6) can be applied. While the extensive review of the documents outlines a still present inconsistency across ethical AI guidelines in the world and shows that no issued document appears to be identical, it features five key converging principles that can be found across all documents: transparency, justice and fairness, non-maleficence, responsibility, and privacy (p. 7). For identification of patterns in AI concerns which digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands come across (which, in turn, may influence their ethical judgement in the decision-making process), the following principles can, therefore, be re-conceptualized from the risk perspective, since inherently guidelines serve to tackle risks.

The framework for concerns around AI can then be identified as the following: lack of transparency, bias, maleficence, poor regulatory frameworks and lack of privacy.

While addressing *the lack of transparency*, AI ethical guidelines aim to "increase explainability, interpretability or other acts of communication and disclosure", by encouraging bigger disclosure of information with the goal of minimizing harm by AI (Jobin et al., 2019, p. 8). While reapplying the lack of transparency to digital marketing, a critical area where not only customers lack understanding of how their data is being managed, but also which fails to "enable meaningful choices by internet users" is the concept of cookie consent (Graßl et al., 2021, p. 1). While the cookie consent form, that appears in the form of a banner on the website that an Internet user needs to examine and click with either agreement or disagreement for processing of their data, initially serves as a way for users to control their data, the design of these banners is oftentimes misleading, consisting of "dark patterns" that show pre-ticked boxes and can compromise user's freedom of choice (Forbrukerrådet, 2018, as cited in Graßl et al., 2021, p. 2). As a result of deliberate design, the forms are able to manipulate the user into consenting for collection and processing of their personal details without a full understanding of the process, as cookie consent banners by design assume that a user would make a well-informed choice. "Possibly undermining principles of EU privacy law", cookie consent banners thus have yet much potential to be redesigned in a user-beneficial way (p. 1), still remaining a high ethical risk in the digital marketing.

When it comes to *injustice,* the guidelines aim at tracking AI's influence on the labor market, society and democracy overall, as well as prevention of bias and discrimination (Jobin et al., 2019, p. 8). While reapplying the principle to AI in digital marketing, a massive concern that emerges is *algorithmic discrimination*, particularly, how wrong assumptions about customers can be made while processing collected customer data (Kumar et al., 2019, p. 143), therefore, arriving at "consequent discrimination" (Carter, 2020, p. 61). Bias and consequent discrimination in this case can be attributed to two trends: usage of training data by AI that may carry on contextual bias and existing historical and social inequalities (as this data is built to teach the algorithms to make decisions), and defective data sampling that leads to over- or underrepresentation of certain groups and features (Manyika et al., 2019). The tension around this risk is that due the amount of data that has already accumulated, returning to solely human-based decision-making is not a viable option, so alternative solutions need to take place, such as redefining *fairness* criteria in data processing and probing technology for

unnoticed or *unproven bias*. However, based on the current state, algorithmic bias still creates a big risk in the decision-making process, and therefore, the concept of injustice in this case can be conceptualized as algorithmic bias.

When it comes to *maleficence,* the focus of guidelines is put on prevention of intentional or unintentional harm, for example privacy violations or hacking, however, it mainly concerns technical use of AI and ensuring the systems are protected (Jobin et al., 2019, p. 9). While assessing the current state of cybersecurity in any industry where AI is deployed, absence of global, united legal regulation of technology management – of which AI is taking a bigger and bigger part – keeps contributing to possible loopholes in systems and puts the customer data at risk (Carter, 2020, p. 61). Given the amount of data digital marketing industry relies upon, the technical risks of data loss through leaks still remains high, therefore, putting *maleficence* among AI-enabled marketing risks as well.

The principle of *responsibility* differed among the guidelines, however, the uniting theme revolves around upholding the legal liabilities and whistleblowing in case something goes wrong (Jobin et al., 2019, p. 10). Therefore, in the context of AI in digital marketing from the risk side, it can be conceptualized as *poor regulatory frameworks*, that hold a possibility to be avoided and leave room for concealing of wrongdoings. When it comes to whistleblowing, when regulations on the legal level and self-regulations of companies are both poor, workers and whistle-blowers can serve as regulating mechanisms, disclosing revelations around use of data and AI technologies by the companies and governments, that can uncover problematic data practices or intrusive surveillance (Kerr et al., 2020). However, whistleblowing applied in the digital marketing would be an outstanding mechanism, while the preferred primary one would still remain to be proper regulatory frameworks.

Finally, a closely-tied risk to the principle of *lack of responsibility* is the *lack of privacy*, which is concerned about protection of data and security, such as ensuring access controls and designing and using AI with privacy in mind (Jobin et al., 2019, p. 10). While reapplying the risk to the field of marketing, the concern emerges around which types of data can be used and how – if – it can be fully removed, as well as how a user can control the data (Kumar et al., 2019). In order to solve these emerging risks of responsibility and privacy on the EU level, GDPR, General Data Protection Regulation, was implemented as the key regulation to data management. Introduced in 2016 and enforced since 2018, GDPR, the

purpose of which is to ensure that organizations are transparent about how customer data is obtained and that users provide consent for their data to be processed, has put "much greater demands on companies to address the rights of individuals who provide data", putting more control into the users' hands (Breen et al., 2020, p. 19). To enforce the purpose of protecting the user data, GDPR triggers fines for non-compliance, which can significantly affect business continuity, shall the fine occur, especially for smaller companies. Previously, "because of the discrepancy between the regulations and the actual use of personal data", digital marketing industry in particular has been notorious for violating such "fundamental rights [of consumers], as the right to privacy and the right to the protection of personal data" (Parlov et al., 2018, p. 105). The introduction of GDPR has obliged marketing industry to provide disclaimers of consent, thus, technically prohibiting "collection and processing of buyers' personal data without defining a transparent and unambiguous purpose" (p. 114), which in turn affected how marketing practices are carried out on the operational level and which rules marketing practitioners should be aware of. Nevertheless, the concerns around who in the end should own the data and how the data should be best managed still remain, thus, putting the lack of privacy as one of the key risks.

Last but not least, it is important to note that alongside the GDPR and while technology continues expanding, there appeared a need for more stringent control over artificial intelligence on the legal landscape that would be applicable to all fields – including digital marketing – as well. On the European level, the legal framework on AI regulation is just starting to develop, two of the key documents on which are currently "Proposal for an AI regulation" being the latest legal framework document released in 2021 (European Commission, 2021), and "Ethics guidelines for trustworthy AI" providing rules for the ethical conduct while using artificial intelligence (European Commission, 2019). As these regulations are currently in development and not yet as enforced as GDPR, it thus provides an opportunity to further examine how they may affect the digital marketing industry going forward. Despite the fact that these regulations are not reapplied in the study going forward, it is still important to note them as part of the critical developments in the field.

To sum up the literature review, the following emerging risks of using AI in digital marketing can be outlined:

- Lack of transparency

- Algorithmic bias
- Maleficence
- Poor regulatory frameworks
- Lack of privacy

Above overview of risks of using AI in digital marketing derived from the literature would also help to identify correspondent patterns in which risks digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands face in their work – which would again play a key component in the practitioners' ethical-decision making, as the risks serve as guiding posts throughout the process.

2.3.   Reconciling business implications and ethical considerations: Balancing mechanisms

As a result of rapidly emerging ethical risks, ethical guidelines, but at the same time, business opportunities, the need for marketing practitioners to navigate how to handle their work correctly starts to gain more prominence. In order to answer the research question on how digital marketing practitioners solve ethical dilemmas in their actual work, it is important to look at the two following theoretical pillars: what the literature suggests on the topic of conducting business ethically from the managerial perspective – since the study is concerned with digital marketing managers in the Netherlands, and how ethical decision-making process specifically in the field of marketing is conducted. Before embarking on the theoretical overview, it is important to outline the one unifying concept used in this study: ethics. Historically, schools of ethics could be divided into two categories: utilitarian and deontological (Ove Hansson, 2017). However, while the former focused on the "goodness or badness of alternative sources" and assumed that those can be numerically measured, the latter relied on a "set of duties or obligations", of which "acting rightly is [one's] duty" (p. 3). As the time passed, none of these schools could be applied in more practical matters to the day of a modern human being at work – especially with growths in business and technology. As a result, in the 1970s the school of "applied" ethics emerged – with the focus on research, business and computer (technology) ethics (p. 4). As artificial intelligence falls under the technological domain and marketing falls under the business domain, this study, therefore,

would be conducted under the applied ethics umbrella – meaning that it focuses on practical side of work, and rests upon ethical thinking that is concerned with translation of actions and meanings into practice.

2.3.1. Coping strategies: conceptualizing business ethics as practice

As mentioned earlier, this study is concerned with digital marketing practitioners of the managerial level working in the Netherlands, therefore, it is important to look at the strategies that theorists suggest for conducting business activities ethically from the managerial perspective. As a result, conceptualizations of what management-level coping strategies should be when it comes to ethical decision-making would help to better understand whether these are also met in the work of practitioners in the Netherlands. It is important to note the managerial level focus of this study, as while the opinions on which factors affect the ethical behavior in organizations, "one continuous theme is that managers are the most significant element of an organization's ethical culture and consequent member behavior" (Velthouse & Kandogan, 2007, p. 151), therefore, suggested ethical coping strategies from the managerial level are of utmost importance to this study.

In "Business ethics as practice", Clegg et al. (2007) bridge the gap between ethical theory and "what managers actually do in their everyday activities" (p. 107), by examining the concept of ethics as practice. According to the researchers' view, the ethical implications that organizations express in their practical work go through the "ongoing process of debate and contestation over moral choices", and therefore, the actions of managers result in "ambiguous, unpredictable, and subjective contexts" (p. 107). One of the key notions that researchers focus on is *ethical subjectivity,* which is born in the intersection of ethical theory and practical decisions – depending on contexts where this decision-making process is happening, which therefore, determines the choices the organization makes in the end. With this conceptualization, the researchers explore the relations between "rule following and rule violation; the interplay between subjects and rule systems, and the active and discursive construction of ethics and the power such discourse exercises" (pp. 107-108). Researchers "view ethics in organizations as an ongoing process of debate and contestation over moral choices" (p. 108) and outline that "dynamics of practice imply that future oriented action

cannot wholly be determined by the past" (p. 111), meaning that organizations – and particularly management in organizations – should engage in the process of reapplying ethics depending on the current discourse. As a result, the coping strategy for practitioners that the researchers suggest can be categorized as *contextually reapplying existing ethical norms.*

In another work "Organizational ethics, decision making, undecidability", Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes (2007) point out that "organizational rationality and knowledge can preclude ethics (viz. undecidability) in decision-making" (p. 403). According to Kelman (1973, as cited in Clegg et al., 2007), the following "three organizational attributes, at a minimum, make it easier to deal prejudicially with other people" and lift ethical responsibilities: "when the organizational action is authorized; when the actions that enact it are routinized"; and "when those who are the victims of the action are dehumanised by ideological definitions and indoctrination" (p. 403). The researchers argue that ethical choices are born within the context of indecisiveness (i.e. questioning the authority and rules), and organizational settings that are "routinized" and "authorized" don't leave space for ethical considerations – procedures merely reduced to technicalities. They conclude that the task of management in the organizations is to "enhance and maintain structures within which moral agents face, understand and act within the conditions of undecidability", and that codes of conduct actually restrict ethical decision-making, as those deprive opportunity and responsibility (p. 405). This coping strategy can be categorized as *stepping outside of codes of conduct.* Kornberger and Brown (2007) argue that organizational identity is "an outcome of relations of power" (p. 500) and that strict controls from the managerial side are generally only partially successful (Oglensky, 1995 in Kornberger & Brown, 2007). The researchers conducted a case study on how ethics were integrated into practices of one organization after its CEO announced ethics to be at the core of the business. They conclude that ethics was an "important vehicle" in building an organization's and employees' identity through acting morally and consciously in domains of "organizational processes of recruitment, selection, socialization, and the methodology for service delivery" (p. 510). The coping strategy by these researchers can be seen as *creating organizational and individual identity.*

Bevan and Corvellec (2007) look at business ethics from Levinasian philosophical lens, arguing that overall, because ethics rest upon focusing on the *Other* and adhering to responsibilities to the other, concept of corporate ethics does not hold a possibility to exist, as corporations would always pursue self-interest (p. 211-212). However, researchers note it is

still worth trying to establish well-functioning organizations and induce elements of ethics, so their suggestion is that "agents of management" should hold not corporate, but "individual practice of responsibility towards the Other" and practice "continual striving for justice in the presence of the Third" (Bevan & Corvellec, 2007, p. 218) – and that they should constantly answer to needs and changes of everyone in organization. In the view of Bevan and Corvellec, the coping strategy to ethical decision-making can be then seen as *leading stakeholder dialogue.* Finally, Haridimos Tsoukas, on the contrary, argues against the "separation fallacy", stating that "one particular perspective—stakeholder theory—stands out, especially since it has sought to explicitly incorporate ethics into strategy making rather than treat is as an afterthought" (2017, p. 326). In his work, he expresses that strategic management foremost must be concerned with "articulating a good purpose for the organization (values articulation work)" (p. 336), therefore, his coping strategy for ethical decision-making rests upon *articulating good purpose of the organization.*

While all of the aforementioned coping strategies are profound recommendations in the ethical business conduct, the study is concerned with the domain of marketing, therefore, it is also important to examine which factors specifically influence the decision-making process of marketeers in their work.

2.3.2. Ethical decision-making process in marketing

The last conceptualization that helps to guide this study is the ethical decision-making process particularly in the marketing industry. While the research question aims to answer how digital marketing practitioners balance dilemmas in their work, it is thus of utmost importance to conceptualize which factors are usually affecting the decision-making process of marketing practitioners.

Before diving into the decision-making process of marketing practitioners, it is firstly important to look at what ethical implications in marketing are. While providing a systematic review of the literature on marketing ethics, Nill and Schibrowsky outline that not only "fundamentally normative questions" [the ones determining what is *good*] in marketing are underrepresented in the literature, which results in neglect of development of "practitioner ethics" (2007, p. 272), but also that ethics in marketing continue being among the biggest

challenges for the practitioners in the field and academics alike (p. 256). As a result, researchers offer a framework for inquiry of marketing practitioners on the topic of ethical implications, out of which, four key elements have inspired the topic list for this study. The first element surrounds the inquiry around *ethical decision-making*, and the suggested line of questioning by researchers is "How are marketers making (or how should they make) decisions from an ethical perspective? What drives the decision-making process?" (Nill & Schibrowsky, 2007, p. 260). The second element features inquiry around *Ethical responsibility toward marketers' stakeholders– related issues,* and the suggested line of questioning is: "What ethical responsibilities do marketers have (or should they have) toward their stakeholders?". This line of questioning features a critical element of this study – the "relationship between ethics and profits" (p. 260) which would encourage the participants to critically evaluate the scale of their company's practices while being in direct conflict with pursuing profits or pursuing ethics. The third element that has been embedded into the questionnaire is concerned with *Ethical values–related issues*, and is suggested to be inquired as "How is ethics (or how should it be) defined? How can ethical values relevant for marketers be generated?" (p. 260). Finally, the fourth element surrounds the *Norm generation and definition–related issues,* and is suggested by the researchers to be framed as "How is ethics (or how should it be) defined? How can ethical values relevant for marketers be generated?" (p. 260). The lines of questioning above not only helped to guide the interview processes with marketing practitioners, but also allowed to add validity to the questionnaire that is exploratory in nature, by reapplying the topics suggested by Nill and Schibrowsky, which are popularly used in the research concerned with marketing ethics.

As mentioned before, while facing ethical dilemmas in their work, marketing experts need to go through a process of decision-making, which in the end will impact the business result. When it comes to discerning among models for ethical decision-making, Chau & Siu (2000) advise that while conducting the research employing decision-making models, the general suggestion is for researchers to choose a model "most appropriate to [their] research purpose" (p. 367). While there are established models describing ethical decision-making processes in detail – Dubinsky and Loken, 1989; Ferrell et al., 1989; Jones, 1991 (as cited in Chau & Siu, 2000) – among the most cited and used models of decision-making in the marketing field, there is a *General Theory of Marketing Ethics* model developed Hunt and Vitell (1986), which tests how humans arrive at their decisions during ethical dilemmas, rather than what they should *do*. The model rests upon the context where an "individual

confronts a problem perceived as having ethical content" (p. 7), and therefore the decision-making process is triggered by the dilemma and converges into the following steps (Figure 2.3.2).
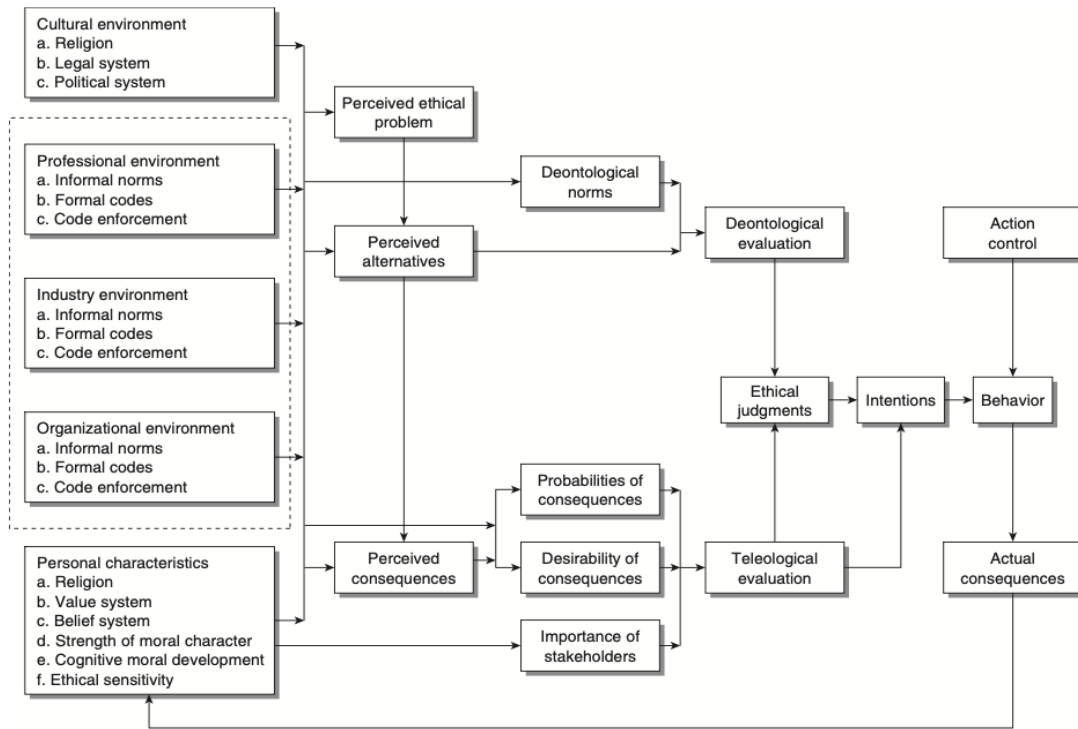
FIGURE 1   HUNT-VITELL THEORY OF ETHICS
SOURCE: Hunt and Vitell (1986, 1993). Copyright © 1991 by Shelby D. Hunt and Scott J. Vitell.
NOTE: The portion of the model outside the dashed lines constitutes the general theory. The portion inside the dashed lines individuates the general model for professional and managerial contexts.

Figure 2.3.2a Hunt and Vitell Theory of Marketing Ethics: Updated model (Hunt and Vitell, 2006)

As the research question for this study is based around *how*, for the purpose of this research, this model is applied in a way that examines which key factors guide the decision-making process of digital marketing practitioners working in the Netherlands, which are outlined on the left-hand side of the model. Hunt and Vitell list the following critical factors that will influence the decision on the contextual basis: cultural environment of the professional (religion, legal system, political system), professional environment (informal norms, formal codes, code enforcement), industry environment (informal norms, formal codes, code enforcement), organizational environment (informal norms, formal codes, code enforcement) and personal characteristics (religion, value system, belief system, strength of moral character, cognitive moral development ethical sensitivity) – with professional,

industry and organizational environment being factors solely within the professional setting, and cultural environment and personal characteristics being overall factors in ethical decision-making (2006). The model has been extensively empirically tested and it proposes that "the information-processing rules will differ across different people's personal moral codes" (Hunt & Vitell, 2006, p. 145), which puts a high emphasis on the marketing practitioners' internal character, that will eventually affect the decisions in the business context. Lastly, the model suggests that in case a professional possesses certain ethical beliefs in a certain ethical dilemma, but in the end has to make an alternative decision that would contradict those beliefs (regardless of the factors affecting that decision), the person would experience feelings of guilt (p. 146). All of the three notions above that are concerned with how ethical decisions in marketing are made – key factors, importance of internal morality, and inconsistency between beliefs and actions that triggers guilt – would help to determine how applicable these notions are to the decision-making processes of digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands.

Finally, it is still important to make a connection of the model to the emerging trends relevant to this study. To narrow down the usage of the model to the technological domain, Ferrell and Ferrell (2021) applied Hunt and Vitell's model onto the AI ethics – a cross-over domain to this study – and outlined that the core issue of ethical risks in AI is that autonomous decisions made by AI systems are based on rules and algorithms, and *not* through humans guided by the moral conduct. As a result, the researchers make a conclusion and a recommendation that AI systems should have ethical considerations embedded at the inception, rather than building ethical guidelines on how to manage the technology afterwards. As the goal of this study is to examine how (and if) marketing practitioners deal with AI in an ethical way, the conceptualization of contemporary AI lacking ethics by design would also be additionally used to analyze how practitioners view AI risks versus human management of those risks.

To sum up the theoretical framework, based on three key elements in determining how digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands balance out ethical and business considerations while using AI in their marketing work, the following conceptual model can be formed to help to guide the results of this research:

Elements of balancing ethical and business considerations while using AI in digital marketing work		
Business implications of AI in digital marketing	**Ethical concerns of AI in digital marketing**	**Balancing mechanisms**
- Personalization of communication - Better targeting for both marketers and consumers - Operational efficiency due to automation - Cost-efficiency - Workstream optimization	- Lack of transparency - Algorithmic bias - Maleficence - Poor regulatory frameworks - Lack of privacy	**Business ethics as practice as coping strategies:** - Contextually reapplying existing ethical norms - Stepping outside of codes of conduct - Creating organizational and individual identity - Leading stakeholder dialogue - Articulating good purpose of the organization **Factors in ethical decision-making in marketing (Hunt & Vitell, 2006):** - Cultural environment - Professional environment - Industry environment - Organizational environment - Personal characteristics

Figure 2.3.2b: Conceptual model

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

Since the research question aims to answer *how* digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands balance ethical and business considerations in their work, for this research, a qualitative method of expert interviews was employed – particularly, interviews with experts in the field of digital marketing that use AI, based in the Netherlands – which constituted the population of the study. As one of the key aims of interviews is to examine "meanings of and perspectives on some actions, events and settings" (Johnson, 2011), the method was suitable – through it, the tension that digital marketing experts might have between business objectives and AI ethics through their work actions, events and settings could be examined. When it comes to employing expert interviews in particular, research shows that "in the exploratory phase of a project [expert interviewing] is a more efficient and concentrated method of gathering data than, for instance, participatory observation or systematic quantitative surveys" (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 2). In this sense, experts serve as "crystallization points" (p. 2) that help access the insights and the "insider knowledge" within organization on a micro level and within the field of their expertise on the macro level, and, therefore, can serve as guides into a "social field" that is otherwise difficult to receive access to (p. 2). Additionally, recruiting experts for the interview helps the researcher to tap into the network of shared knowledge, otherwise again oftentimes inaccessible, which helped in this particular research with the purposive sampling and recruitment of other participants. As the crossover of ethics in AI, legal developments and business advantages is a domain rapidly developing and constantly updating, this research was deliberately set to be highly explorative in nature, and, therefore, the typology of expert interviews was also chosen to be exploratory. Exploratory interviews allow to "establish an initial orientation in a field that is either substantively new or poorly defined" (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 46), which corresponds with the constantly changing field of AI and its role in digital marketing, particularly from the ethical angle. It is suggested to conduct exploratory expert interviews in the way that is as open as possible, however, it is advisable to structure "at least the central dimensions" (p. 46) in the topic guide, after which these can be adjusted. As a result of this recommendation, a topic guide has been created under three key dimensions – *Business advantages of AI in marketing*, *Ethical concerns and risks*, and *Advantages vs. risks of using AI in marketing:*

Mitigation & Coping strategies – and then the questions have been readjusted in the process of each interview, to allow experts to share their unique insights and add on to the concepts shared in the process.

3.2. Validity and reliability

Additionally, in qualitative research, it is important to follow the notions of validity and reliability, where accuracy of results and their consistency are respectively addressed (Silverman, 2011). When it comes to validity, the problem of validity while interviewing experts can be "counteracted by references to information from other data sources during the interview" (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 12). While the experts themselves are considered as providers of insider knowledge in the industry (in case of this study, digital marketing industry), making references to the theoretical concepts, such as: privacy, ethics, and data-based decision-making, helped to ensure the data obtained from the interviews could be cross-referenced with existing theoretical notions and checked for their presence in experience of the marketing practitioners.

When it comes to reliability in the interviews, one of the techniques to ensure that uncertainty of coded data is avoided is by making sure that all respondents understand the concepts used in questions in the same way (Silverman, 2011). As mentioned before, from the researcher side, it was important to provide an additional explanation of how a central notion of AI is conceptualized within the study, to make sure participants share their insights and experiences in line with the umbrella definition. By discussing the conceptualization and providing theoretical transparency, as well as detailed explanations of the research design and structure upfront, reliability can also be achieved (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006), which was included as a step prior to beginning of the interviews. Lastly, since validity and reliability of data obtained through expert interviews can be ensured by the secondary analysis of data, "interview protocols" that in the case of this research are transcriptions of interviews have to be archived and made available (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 143). Thus, for the cross-reference of the obtained materials, full anonymized transcriptions are made available to the supervisor and the second reader.

3.3. Sampling procedure

Due to the nature of the expert interview method design, purposive sampling was used, as it allows to analyze a "collection of deliberately selected cases, materials or events" to study a phenomenon "in the instructive way" (Flick, 2007, p. 27). The sampling criteria included digital marketing experts based in firms in the Netherlands, contacts of which were obtained independently through research and inquiry within the network available to the researcher. Preference was given to digital marketing firms and professionals working in them, however, digital marketing experts working in an adjacent technology industry were also included in the sample. Due to limitations on the resources and network, the methods were: snowball sampling, which allows a known participant recruit other participants (Sarstedt et al., 2017) and convenience sampling which focuses on participants most accessible to the researcher (Flick, 2007). Because the sampling technique is purposive sampling, the size of the sample is typically determined upon the reach of "saturation" – "the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data" (Guest et al., 2006, p. 59). While the point of saturation is contextual and can be hard to predict in advance, research shows that in the sample of 60 in-depth interviews, meta-themes – "primary themes of interest to the researcher" (p. 78) – are already present at 6 interviews. For this reason and in combination with the limited accessibility of experts in the context of the research, the total number of practitioner employees recruited for the interview was 7, meeting the guidelines of ESHCC for the MA thesis.

The expertise of participants was set at the managerial digital marketing level employees in the Netherlands or if the role of the participant did not feature the title "manager", but involved managerial functions on practice, for example, through being a specialist with responsibilities of a managerial band, the participant was also viable. All participants had to speak English in order to be interviewed, however, their marketing work could be conducted in any language. As the notion of *ethics* – one of the central pillars of this study – is highly interpretative, the geography of the practitioners' work was set to be the Netherlands, to ensure the interviewees operated in the same cultural context. The age range was open, however, due to focus on the strategic level and the required expertise, the participants had to have at least one full year of strategic experience at their current workplace in order to share the insights they could have obtained. As the research in this case is interpretative, no limiting expertise criteria was set for the digital marketing practitioner –

on the opposite, diversity of niche functions was welcome. As a result, under the umbrella of a digital marketing practitioner, the expertise of participants ranged from performance marketing, to influencer marketing, to founder of the digital marketing agency – which allowed to gain insights from various angles of a digital marketing practitioner job. The overview of seven interviewees who participated in the study can be found in Appendix A. It is important to note that the full list of names of participants and their companies are known to the supervisor, however, all participants have requested to remain anonymous throughout the research process both in terms of their personal names and company names, logical in light of ethical concerns and sharing of information about sensitive company practices, that may jeopardize either the participant or the company.

3.4.   Data collection

For data collection, expert interviews served as a primary method and a unit of analysis. Interviews have been conducted individually by the researcher via a video-conferencing tool Zoom, as the location of participants ranged across the Netherlands, and interviews took place during working hours. Data has been gathered with the help of a voice recorder, so that the verbatim transcribing process via a Descript software could take place after. In order to meet validity and reliability criteria, conceptualization of the term AI has been explained to the interviewees, as well as the structure of the interviews that was in line with theoretical pillars, which served as the casket of the interview, as the nature of the interviews was exploratory. Interviews have been conducted in the period of 19 May – 2 June 2022. In total, seven practitioners from five organizations have been interviewed, and their transcriptions have been processed, anonymized and archived.

3.5.   Operalization and topic list

As mentioned before, seven semi-structured interviews have been conducted with practitioners in digital marketing in the Netherlands, from the exploratory interview perspective. As a result, though a topic list has been prepared prior to the interviews, each interview took different turns and directions, either diverting from the pre-established questions, or resting on the follow-up questions that appeared throughout the interview process. However, because of the explorative interview structure and paper direction, this

procedure was fitting – as leading conversations with experts in this way allows the researcher to chart new themes in the uncharted territory (Bogner et al., 2009). As exploratory interviews still need to have building blocks for guidance, questions centered around three pillars (excluding introductory remarks and general information collection) – *Business advantages of AI in marketing*, *Ethical concerns and risks*, and *Advantages vs. risks of using AI in marketing: Mitigation & Coping strategies* – and the list featured 28 guiding questions.

As a pre-theory collection part, *General* part featured questions about the interviewee's current role in the organization, responsibilities at work, tenure and current projects the interviewee is working on. The purpose of this part was to build rapport with the interviewee, as no previous connection was established with any participants, and the researcher had encounters with respondents for the first time.

After, the part *Business advantages of AI in marketing* featured questions about how the field of marketing has changed with the introduction of AI – and allowed to discuss such notions as personalization, data-driven decision-making and organizational strategy. In this part, participants were able to share their insights mainly as practitioners in the field and share their perceptions of how their field is developing and how it affects their work. This helped to answer the research sub-question on which changes the interviewees experience in their industry and how these affect their work as practitioners.

Afterwards, *Ethical concerns and risks* part has been discussed, which featured attitudes of practitioners towards perceived risks associated with AI, particularly around privacy and data management, and philosophically overall which impact the practitioners perceive AI to have in the society. In this part, the interviewees were mainly able to express their views slightly aside from their professional identity – which allowed them to take a step outside the "work" box and reflect upon which ethics and risks they think about as professionals and as individuals, and whether these coincide.

Finally, in the *Advantages vs. risks of using AI in marketing: Mitigation & Coping strategies* questions have been asked about how the previous two domains – changes and advantages in digital marketing, and risks posed by AI – are experienced, perceived and solved by the marketing practitioners. Questions mainly focused on which coping strategies interviewees employ (i.e. communication with their management, when a challenging ethical situation arises) while dealing with business vs. ethical tensions, as well as which motivations the interviewees hold for acting ethically (if they do), which tools affect the decision-making process (i.e. laws, ethics of conduct) and which recommendations the practitioners have for

conducting business activities ethically within their domain. This has allowed to answer the two other research sub-questions established at the beginning – about the situations where practitioners experience challenges, and which strategies they employ to manage these challenges. While this particular part was the most explorative out of all three, as it followed the goal of exploring decision-making processes, the underlying themes still rested around notions of ethical decision-making and business ethics as practice – though in this case, the discussion was more open, rather than based on strict theoretical notions. In this sense, participants were able to express their experiences and opinions outside the set academic theories (Bogner et al., 2009), and then these findings could be used for both gathering of novel findings and juxtaposition with the existing research.

The full topic list that was applied in the interviews with the respondents can be found in the Appendix B.

3.6. Data analysis

Transcript of each interviewee was processed through thematic analysis, which is grounded in "searching across datasets – including interviews – to find repeated patters of meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Thematic analysis is very useful for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes)" (p. 79), and can help to move from description of patterns to their interpretation and then connection to the previous literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84), which is very helpful due to the novelty of the topic on AI ethics and highly explorative nature of the research. The data obtained from the interviews was segmented, reassembled, and then coded (Boeije, 2010), using the Atlas.ti software. For coding, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding methods were used deliberately for the purpose of allowing the experts to discern the key elements in their work, and then comparing them to the theoretical overview. In open coding, data was fragmented, assessed in its relevance to the research, and then each fragment was coded under overarching themes (Boeije, 2010). Axial coding was then conducted to help with determining "which elements are dominant" and which are "less important ones" (p. 109), and then themes and sub-themes were developed on their hierarchy. During the process of axial coding, twelve core sub-themes have been identified. Lastly, selective coding was put in place to identify core themes combining sub-themes and what their key messages are in connection to each other (Boeije,

2010), which resulted in the development of three core themes. Throughout the coding process, a technique of "keeping close to the text and adopting the terminology of the interviewee" was used for codes which is common in the analysis of expert interviews, in order to ensure the codes corresponded to the coded material in the most valid way (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 36). An overview of themes and sub-themes that emerged in the process of open, axial and selective coding can be seen in the Appendix C.

3.7.   Research ethics

Finally, it was important to conduct research in an ethical way, therefore, a number of conditions have been fulfilled. Firstly, all respondents have been informed in advance about how the study would be conducted and agreed upon the digital medium of interview conducting and recording, as this suited them best due to the timing of the interviews during working hours. Secondly, an anonymity factor has been discussed with all respondents, who preferred to stay anonymous both in terms of their personal names and their company names, as aforementioned, due to the sensitive nature of the research that concerns ethical and unethical norms and practices by both employees and their respective companies. Thirdly, an EUR-standard Consent Form has been created and sent to all participants prior to the interviews, so they could give official consent to participation in the study, recording and processing of their insights derived from the interviews. All interviewees successfully signed the Consent Form, which can be found in Appendix D, and did not have any further objections, hesitations or conditions, except for keeping anonymity.

4. Results

After conducting the expert interviews and analyzing them via thematic analysis, three main themes have emerged in line with the theoretical structure, which featured a total of twelve sub-themes under them. The results have shown that both concepts central to the study – artificial intelligence and ethics – can take multiple meanings and interpretations, as one of the interviewees shared by drawing a comparison between ethical practices in digital marketing and addressing personal preferences in life: "But also I say, what is ethical at the end? You know, it may be for someone, is it really ethical to eat meat?" (Interviewee 6). Because of the subjectivity of the term, digital marketing practitioners kept referring to the concept of ethics from two sides of their identity – "me as a marketer" and "me as a person/regular user", oftentimes mentioning that while they are happy to share their personal views on ethics, they may not have the responsibility to determine what ethics is in their work, as one global digital marketing manager shared: "I don't think I have to try to find all the solutions to all the problems in this world" (Interviewee 5). When it comes to the use of AI in their work, two of the respondents – Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 5 – also were not sure if their jobs involved AI, despite explicitly outlining their direct work with, for example, Google Analytics, which is an AI-powered system, and applying machine-learning practices in their day-to-day routines. This shows that, indeed, as Kaplan & Haenlein outline, AI is still a "fuzzy concept" and can be interpreted in multiple ways (2019). While the conceptualization of AI particularly for this study – which was used as a broad, umbrella term for activities connected with automation, machine-learning, data analytics and data-driven decision making (Kumar et al., 2019) has been explained to participants and agreed upon, their confusion with the term is a good indicator that the conceptualization of AI in digital marketing is not set in stone, and thus, perceptions on how to use it, or how ethics should be applied towards it, also differ on the personal levels of practitioners.

In order to examine in more detail how digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands do balance ethical and business considerations using AI in marketing, results from the three key themes and twelve sub-themes are presented below.

4.1. Business implications of AI in marketing: Practitioners and a complex relationship with AI, that brings opportunities, challenges, and contradictory feelings

The first theme that emerged from the data analysis that has appeared in line with the theoretical framework around business implications of AI in marketing was the insight that digital marketing practitioners working in the Netherlands have a complex relationship with AI, as AI brings various opportunities, yet at the same time challenges, and contradictory feelings into their work as marketers. This theme has provided valuable insights into how the respondents perceive the introduction of AI into their work – from positive and negative sides, from the angle of their personal feelings towards technology, and from a neutral angle on how AI helps them to execute their jobs. As a result, the theme has provided the professional context in which marketing practitioners operate in and their feelings towards it, which at the end affects the decision-making processes in their work. The overview of four sub-themes that emerged can be found below.

4.1.1. AI accelerating opportunities in the traditional work of digital marketing practitioners

The first sub-theme that emerged among the responses of the interviewees revolved around positive implications that AI has brought to the marketing industry, and it revealed that AI has greatly accelerated opportunities for digital marketing practitioners in comparison to the traditional ways of leading marketing, which signified not only the changes in the industry, but also emphasized a full awareness among practitioners of these changes. Since all participants are working on the managerial level positions and the majority have also witnessed the technological shift that has appeared in the last decade, they were able to compare their previous work experience with the current processes in digital marketing. When it comes to the positive implications, participants were very aware of the changes and trends that corresponded with the literature review, stating that key trends that changed the industry have been personalization of content and its provisions (Kumar et al., 2019, Ma & Sun, 2020), better engagement with and targeting of the customers and focus on correct targets without "annoying other customers not interested in the products" (Interviewee 4)

(Sundsøy et al., 2014, Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022), and possibilities for more precise work due to data-driven decisions (Brynjolfsson et al., 2011; Sundsøy et al., 2014).

According to the codes, the number one trait that development of AI has brought to the table of the practitioners' work on an individual level is the efficiency and time saving, which is also in line with the findings by Chintalapati and Pandey who put the emphasis on the increased operational efficiency since the introduction of AI into the marketing field (2022). While all participants expressed their satisfaction when it comes to comparing old ways of leading marketing, participants also expressed a desire to push the technology even further: "With the AI I hope it actually can do our job, and I can just sit on the beach and do nothing. That's my job" (Interviewee 6). The key patterns that appeared within codes were focusing on the words *better* and *finding* – the participants shared that AI allows them to reach better sales, conduct better targeting, better address audience's needs; as well as find the right audience, find more interested clients and find similar customers that can be converted, which shows that AI in marketing has indeed allowed to improve the quality of work of marketing practitioners, which makes them more satisfied in their work and motivated to explore more opportunities that the technology has to offer. From this side, the respondents can thus view their relationship to AI in their work as positive.

4.1.2. AI creating challenges in the traditional work of digital marketing practitioners

Nevertheless, aside from the positive sides of marketing, practitioners have also mentioned the negative sides of it. The second theme that emerged revolved around business negatives of AI for marketing and it revealed that aside from positive implications AI brings to marketing, it also brings challenges into the work, which the practitioners set time aside to think about. This sub-theme is noteworthy, as the questionnaire did not explicitly feature questions about AI's negative sides for business operations (in comparison to perceived ethical risks of AI), yet, marketing practitioners chose to share their insights for both sides. This shows that all practitioners took the approach critically, and were able to assess the development of technology from two sides. From the business negatives that interviewees shared were examples of being intrusive in the processes of data gathering that has to happen on the massive scale while working with AI, as well as having standardized, homogenous marketing content which results in the placement of the audience to filter bubbles and less

creativity in campaign generation, as well as commonality of data leaking in the industry, as mentioned while talking about examples in the industry: "so [on this platform] the data was either sold through something else or leaked" (Interviewee 4).

However, an interesting insight emerged that while talking about positives and negatives of AI, the answers oftentimes appeared contradictory, for example, a clear conflict arose between the following items: while AI provides better targeting, business growth and provision of more quality services, at the same time, it can kill the market potential and exclude some audiences that otherwise would be potential customers. As one interviewee shared: "You think you need to reach this specific audience. But what if in this audience, in another one, they have people who you want to reach. It kills this potential for sure which didn't happen when we had a banner" (Interviewee 2). Additionally, while AI tools and applications used by the practitioners very clearly help with efficiency – a code richly mentioned among interviewees – at the same time, from the technical side practitioners sometimes struggle to understand how exactly the software is working and this leaves them confused in their work: "And then it [automation] goes like this and this and finish. And you're like, what on earth was just in between, but also like you really need to make sure it makes sense and it works" (Interviewee 4). This shows that the perception of business advantages versus negatives that AI brings into the work of practitioners is rather complex: the practitioners can clearly see the benefits, but at the same time they are still learning to navigate through these changes, which affects their day-to-day operations and decisions, as time needs to be set aside to sift through new challenges. From this side, the respondents can thus view their relationship to AI in their work as challenging with presence of negative experiences.

4.1.3. Digital marketing practitioners experiencing contradictory feelings towards AI

The third notable sub-theme that emerged within the conversations with interviewees revolved around practitioners' feelings about AI/technology and revealed that the practitioners share contradictory feelings when it comes to perceptions of AI in marketing, which shows a range of emotions that AI can trigger in a professional setting. This theme has also emerged outside the theoretical framework, and thus represents an interesting point that marketing practitioners perceive their work with AI not only solely through an operational,

technical lens (for example, as mentioned in the previous section – by having to learn how automations work), but also through having personal feelings attached to the work with AI and especially data.

While respondents recognized that AI tools do massively help their companies/businesses with sales and opportunities to compete in the market, practitioners are worried about the excessive data gathering and feel uneasy while talking about the practices of data processing their companies employ. An outstanding pattern that emerged during the interviews were the feelings that participants used to describe their attitude towards the AI in marketing. The ultimate most common code that appeared in the interviews was feeling "scared", as multiple examples show: "automations that are scary", "it's creepy it knows if I'm single or not" (Interviewee 4); "I'm kind of scared that companies are at some point going to start creating fake people, on a really big scale" (Interviewee 3); "the fact that we agree on cookies all the time and we don't even know what it means, kind of scares a bit, uh, me off" (Interviewee 2). At the same time, interestingly, throughout the conversation, participants switched their mode to describing that in the end they are "feeling fine", trying to express optimism while talking about general practices in AI and technological management – "people have reached this point where they're fed up with this stuff and it's getting better and it's slowly getting better from here" (Interviewee 3); and their own collection of information – "but I find it fine to be honest. I mean, it's our content, but stuff like Google [is not fine], right." (Interviewee 4).

As a result, data revealed that among digital marketing practitioners working in the Netherlands, there appears to be a strong sense of cognitive dissonance at presence, especially while talking in terms of "marketer vs. user". Several participants mentioned that they have a clear distinction of their role as a professional and their behavior as a regular user, when it comes to technology and data-processing, stating that they are working "on the dark side" (Interviewee 5) and that "every marketeer is kind of evil inside because we want to sell no matter if the product is good or bad" (Interviewee 2). As a result, practitioners struggle to blend these two identities together, trying to reconcile them mainly by shifting the responsibility of the final decision in the process to either their colleagues or managers directly involved in data management ("But generally I do think sometimes there're some things that I'm like, okay, wait, how did we get those contacts? But then also, usually I'm not the one getting them", Interviewee 4) or their clients:

Basically I tell them, okay, this is what you legally have to do. This is what I think you should do, but you can also do this. And it's your problem, like, it's your risk, it's your reputation. So I also don't take responsibility for whatever they do. Because it's up to them, but they do get an advice. (Interviewee 3, founder of the digital marketing agency)

As a result, the practitioners solve the feeling of cognitive dissonance through shifting the responsibility of the final ethical decision onto the stakeholders with more weight in the decision-making process (management, clients) and by switching the mode of *guilt* that appears when internal ethical standards of an individual are not congruent with the decision to be made (Hunt & Vitell, 2006), to the mode of *feeling fine, this is not my responsibility*, thus having emotions added as an additional complex layer towards their relationship with AI.

4.1.4. AI diversifying role functions of digital marketing practitioners

Finally, the last sub-theme that emerged revolved around AI's functions in marketing, and it revealed that AI has greatly diversified the functions and operations of the practitioners in comparison to traditional ways of leading marketing. This sub-theme is listed as the last, as it did not necessarily have a critical importance towards the answer to the research question, however, it was important for the purpose of practitioners' providing context of their work, which was then juxtaposed with the conceptualization of AI for this study. In comparison to sharing the positive and negative sides of AI in their work from the critical professional angle, as well as feelings associated with AI from the personal angle, interviewees also shared in a neutral way how AI helps to execute actions in their day-to-day work. As a result, practitioners listed the following functions of AI: audience analysis, automation, data storage, email management, campaign management, social media management, cookie management, and the umbrella function of data gathering. Juxtaposition of the following functions under the conceptualized AI's definition of "technology operating in the domain of automation and continuous learning, acting as the intelligence that drives data-focused analytics and decision making" (Kumar et al., 2019, p. 136) shows that the described functions of AI do fit under the conceptualized definition, therefore, the results of the study can be deemed capable as to answer the research question.

4.2. Ethical concerns of AI in marketing: Practitioners engaging in proactive familiarization of risks and ethical concerns of AI for their field of work

The second theme that emerged within the interviews was in relation to the ethical concerns of AI in marketing – which was the second element in the conceptual model on how digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands balance business and ethical considerations – and the insight revealed that interviewed practitioners engage in proactive familiarization of risks and ethical concerns of AI for their field of work. Although the theme corresponded with the theoretical structure of the study, throughout interviews many additional insights were found outside theoretical overview. The four sub-themes that emerged under this theme revolved around unethical practices by other companies identified by the respondents, unethical practices identified by the respondents that take place in their own company, gaps in user knowledge that marketing practitioners deemed important to note, and finally, potential risks of AI in marketing going forward. Since the interviews have been structured in the explorative matter, the initial topic list did not feature direct questions that asked to outline the unethical or questionable practices conducted by other companies in the filed or respondents' own company – the focus was rather set on talking about overall concerns around use of AI in the marketing industry. However, participants took a direction towards giving examples on practices other companies conduct that they disagree with from the ethical/risk standpoint, then, despite initial hesitation, which practices they have experienced in their work, then they identified gaps in user knowledge that continue contributing to the ethical tension around AI, and finally, their thoughts on what the future of their industry may hold, as AI is developing further. The results have revealed that awareness of AI-related risks among the practitioners indeed plays a crucial cautionary role in the decision-making process, and that practitioners set time aside to familiarize themselves with these risks that affect their field.

4.2.1. Digital marketing practitioners being aware of unethical practices by other companies in their industry

To begin with, the insights show that digital marketing practitioners proactively critically analyze which unethical behaviors other companies conduct in their industry, as

they were aware of the unethical *trends* and were able to label them as *unethical*. The key pattern that surrounded all responses was the focus on abusing the customer data through multiple techniques, such as selling of data, disclosing customer data and finding workarounds in GDPR law. While speaking about such practices executed by other companies, the respondents expressed strong disagreement from the ethical standpoint, and shared that the prominence of gray areas in marketing – such as versatile data management practices that are currently poorly regulated within the industry – contributes to their dissatisfaction as professionals: "This is a little bit gray in GDPR, but they sort of say, okay, we collect your data and do this and this and this with it, but we might change our minds in the future. And you also agree to that. Um, this is not fair to call it ethical behavior." (Interviewee 3). As a result, as interviewees note, the lack of proper regulatory enforcement, such as lack of provision of fines for improper data practices, contributes to existence of more unethical practices in the industry.

4.2.2. Digital marketing practitioners being aware of unethical practices conducted by their own companies

Being visibly more hesitant to share the practices they disagree with in their own companies, respondents nevertheless provided various examples, and shared how they felt about them, which signifies that the practitioners also proactively assess the ethical standpoint of their own companies, and not only of others in the industry. The two key patterns that emerged from the responses is the use of unethical (as defined by the respondents) software and data in their work, and questionable publishing processes.

When it comes to usage of unethical software and data in their work, Interviewee 4, who works in the same company as Interviewee 5, shared that there were cases where they used a cold-calling platform, which the respondent finds unethical: "I think my boss pays for that subscription and I'm like, come on, in my mind." (Interviewee 4), and that the company also almost became engaged in cold emailing practices. While the cold emailing "approach on LinkedIn where you can kind of send the personalized emails to people [you don't know] as an ad" has been in the end diverted, the cold-calling platform triggered in the respondent the conflict between being a user and a marketer, thinking about how these contacts are being obtained, and though they are useful for work, the internal question on whether this has been

done in the ethical way, still emerged. The same internal conflict was triggered in Interviewee 2, while she mentioned that her company also sometimes discloses customer data that is supposed to be concealed, however, instead it gets marked as private use. At the same time, interviewee mentioned that this is a common practice in the industry: "A lot of agencies, including us, send decks with kind of information that we cannot disclose with the mark that it's private. I think it's already kind of a gray area".

When it comes to questionable publishing processes, the interviewees shared examples from situations where their customers showed dissatisfaction with how the companies handled publishing of digital marketing content. Interviewee 4, digital marketing manager in Europe, shared that after one time their company published content about chip shortage threats in the security industry that directly affected the client company they worked with, without prior warning to the clients. Clients were "hella pissed" (Interviewee 4) by the lack of communication and felt that it threatened the signed NDA. From the company side, they thought it was a misunderstanding and since content focused on general trends in the world, it shouldn't have affected the clients, however, after losing several clients as the latter felt exposed, the company changed the strategy to always informing clients upfront, prior to publishing. Another example provided by Interviewee 7 focused on advertisements powered by Google Ads that accidentally automatically appears on questionable websites (which is impossible to predict in advance) and negatively surprises users: "I don't remember the name of the website, but it [was] something about political, radical stuff" (Interviewee 7). After such experiences, users reach the company via social media and ask why their advertisement is on politically-affiliated websites. As the solution, the company now directly responds to users with the explanation and puts such websites into the negative list, which removes the ads going forward. Revelation of the examples above by interviewees shows that they set time aside to critically examine the practices of their companies, and that sometimes such examinations do lead to feelings of internal conflict and frustration.

4.2.3. Digital marketing practitioners identifying gaps in user knowledge that emerge throughout technological advancements

One more sub-theme that emerged among the responses was the identification by the practitioners of the gaps in user knowledge that contribute to users either being scared of

technology (including AI), which in the end halts their ability to take full advantages of it, or the potential for users to be taken advantage of due to lack of digital literacy, for example, around how their data is being managed. The first key pattern around lack of digital literacy involved commentary about users not understanding the concepts of privacy. However, while interviewees do agree on the lack of digital literacy, responses interestingly differed in perspective: some interviewees expressed their wishes for more privacy (Interviewee 5: "As an Internet user, I'm more inclined towards preserving my privacy"), while some expressed a strong protective mode from the advertiser perspective and showed frustration with the users. As Interviewee 6 shared: "There is also a lot of users, I think lately that they start wanting to be private, but I just don't think that they understand why they want to be private. They just want to be private just because, you know, uh, it is a buzzword". Interviewee 7 also agreed:

> Most of users don't even understand how it works and they heard about this privacy stuff and started just to be paranoic… It sounds weird, but privacy, it's about privacy and all those information is private and nobody have access for the information except for advertiser.

This shows not only how personal values of marketers affect their stances on notions, which in the end affects their approach towards ethical decision-making as well, but also a yet again present conflict between "me as a marketer" versus "me as a user" mode.

Additionally, the practitioners have identified that sometimes privacy is being used as a marketing tool in itself, which again is possible due to the lack of understanding of the concept and overuse of the term. As Interviewee 5 noted: "Using privacy as a marketing tool… becomes kind of a competitive advantage".

The second key pattern involved commentary about general lack of knowledge around how cookie consent forms function ("when I accept cookies, I don't read what I'm accepting and that's wrong, but it's also annoying", Interviewee 4), and also frustration at the presence of workarounds for data collection, despite GDPR in function. As Interviewee 3 shared, even after cookie consent removal, the data still stays in the system: "They then send you a cookie notification, and then if you click, okay, then remove the cookie, but they'll still know who you are" (Interviewee 3). As this workaround is possible, some businesses then take advantage of it, as Interviewee 6 added: "There are many businesses that they do it, but they do it very difficult, to say, for you to opt out from the cookies". As a result, the practitioners expressed their desire "to bring more education to what it [cookie consent]

means" (Interviewee 2) and also adopt better legislation: "cookie laws in Holland, which in Europe.. don't make any sense of all at all, because 95% of the websites you visit start tracking you first and then send you a cookie code" (Interviewee 3).

As a result, the concern of marketing practitioners around misleading cookie consent practices falls in line with the notions of Forbrukerrådet (2018) and Graßl et al. (2021) about misleading structure of contemporary consent forms and needs for better design choices and regulatory guardrails.

4.2.4. Digital marketing practitioners proactively thinking about potential risks of AI for the future of marketing

Finally, the results revealed that digital marketing practitioners also take time to proactively think about and familiarize themselves with potential risks of AI for the future of marketing. There were numerous interesting insights provided by the respondents surrounding the potential risks of AI in their field going forward. Among the potential risks the following examples were shared: potential to influence purchase decisions even on a bigger scale than how the process is happening now, creation of fake profiles of users, development of more funneling (more stringent gate-keeping of customers), continuation of wrong predictions based on data insights that lead to assumptions, and absence of proper regulation of AI that would allow for more loopholes and unethical practices in the field. It is notable that from the theoretical conceptualization of risks, the aforementioned risks did correspond with the framework of conceptualized risks – creation of fake profiles that can be used as deception figures to sell products and services falls under the *Maleficence* risk that highlights creation of intentional harm (Jobin et al., 2019). More funneling and influence of decision purposes fall under the *Lack of transparency* risk, highlighting the disguise of marketing techniques to acquisition and management of customers (Jobin et al., 2019). Possibility of development of wrong predictions based on data collection that may eventually lead to discriminatory practices (for example, stereotypes of certain groups and consequential decisions to advertise them in a different way) falls under the risk of *Algorithmic discrimination* (Kumar et al., 2019, Carter, 2020, Manyika et al., 2019). Lastly, the absence of stringent regulations on how to manage AI ethically that can further lead to abuse of technology goes under the *Lack of responsibility risk* and consequentially is a risk of *Poor*

regulatory frameworks (Jobin et al., 2019, Kerr et al., 2020). The results show that the risks highlighted as important by the practitioners are, indeed, prominent in the landscape of development of ethical AI's guidelines, and that marketing practitioners – if not being able to find the solutions for these risks – at least think about the implications of technology.

The provision of potential risks of AI in the field of marketing shared by the respondents was also deemed integral to the results of this study, as this shows that the practitioners do think critically about how technology affects their field of work on the macro level and how it can potentially affect their work directly on the micro level. A notable pattern that appeared around sharing these risks is again the accompanying feeling of *fear* that the respondents expressed, as Interviewee 3 outlines in the aforementioned quote: "I'm kind of scared that companies are at some point going to start creating fake people, on a really big scale". This shows that the cognitive dissonance among the participants – a mixture of feeling excited about the new possibilities at work and feeling scared of where AI might lead to – is strongly present not only in their day-to-day work, but also while thinking about the future.

4.3. Balancing mechanisms: Practitioners undergoing a multi-dimensional ethical decision-making process, based on internal and external tools, and contextual limits

Finally, the last theme that emerged within the interviews corresponded with the theoretical structure of the balancing mechanisms that digital marketing practitioners activate, while facing unethical situations in their work, and it revealed that digital marketing practitioners undergo a multi-dimensional ethical decision-making process, based on internal and external tools, and contextual limits. The results of the theme and, as the result, of the ethical decision-making process and factors affecting it, emerged into four sub-themes, which revolved around: ethical practices by interviewee's company, limits and challenges ethics bring into marketing, external tools that can help the practitioners make decisions, and internal tools that help in the decision-making process.

4.3.1. Companies of digital marketing practitioners proactively engaging in ethical work conduct

While talking about ethics and how they are applied during the work of practitioners on the practical level, the interviewees once again showed their critical assessment of the ethical standpoints in their companies and shared that the companies they work in try to proactively engage in conducting the work ethically. As a result, the practitioners shared numerous examples on how usage of AI in digital marketing can be executed with ethical considerations. The two key patters that could be identified within those solutions were: proactive ethical communication and technical solutions.

Under the pattern of proactive, two-way, ethical communication, the following practices have been identified: allowing customers to unsubscribe from all content, providing apology to users, holding ethical discussions with management, not overwhelming the audience and informing clients on publishing content. With the use of the following communication practices, interviewees shared that their companies are trying to achieve a better relationship with all stakeholders affected in the process when it comes to ethical decision-making: management (that can be willing to find work-arounds when it comes to acting ethically), clients (that can probe for solutions that are not ethically-based), and users (that are on the opposing side, and sometimes come forward with complaints and dissatisfaction when they feel mistreated). While managing these relationships throughout the ethical navigation, there likely would be some party involved that is not satisfied with the process. For example, as Interviewee 4 shared, once her company made a mistake of resubscribing their users to the marketing content after they explicitly unsubscribed, they had to retract the action and apologize in order to keep the relationship: "I think it was just a mistake. So we apologized and said, I'm sorry, like we unsubscribed you right now". When it comes to navigation of relationships with management, Interviewee 6 shared that "it matters also a lot from what the business owners give towards you", meaning that the final say would always come from the top, however, it is important for marketing practitioners to express their ethical concerns through open communication. As a result, the strategies of the respondents to opt for open communication around ethics is correspondent with Bevan and Corvellec's conceptualization of as *leading stakeholder dialogue,* which suggests that the "strive for justice" should always be pursued proactively, if a business aims to conduct ethical work (p. 218).

Lastly, under the pattern of technical solutions, the following solutions have been identified by the interviewees: extracting publicly available data from LinkedIn instead of obtaining it through questionable sources, anonymizing the data, creating visible unsubscribe buttons on the websites and putting NDAs that restrict data disclosure in place. As can be seen, the key trend around these ethical mechanisms is feeling a concern around data protection and taking active steps to ensure it is handled in the safe way. While asking the participants what motivates them or their companies to employ these protective mechanisms, they shared that it stems from the company values and common practices, for example, as Interviewee 7 has shared: "It's quite strict here. We don't gather a lot of information about our users, and everything is anonymized". Additionally, such ethical technical solutions can help ensure the company is protected against possible lawsuits as well: "Signing these NDAs is a good solution to at least protect your company" (Interviewee 2). As a result, the motivation for companies to approach their work with data and AI ethically is two-sided: on the one hand, it revolves around communication of company values, which corresponds with the conceptualization of *articulating good purpose of the organization* as a crucial way to approach business ethically by Haridimos Tsoukas (2017); and on the other hand, it revolves around self-protection, which corresponds with the Levinasian philosophical approach that companies foremost always pursue self-interest, making the field of corporate ethics a utopian idea, as it can never be achieved through pure intentions (Bevan & Corvellec, 2007).

4.3.2. Digital marketing practitioners facing multiple limits when attempting to conduct work ethically

While talking about the ethical practices the companies of interviewees engage in, a notable theme emerged where participants mentioned the limits and challenges application of ethics can bring to their marketing work, which in the end affects the decision-making process in challenging situations. The two key patterns that emerged around limits were about loss – loss of sales opportunities and loss to competitors; and pressure from outside stakeholders – clients and management. When it comes to loss, the respondents foremost outlined a high level of competition in the industry, which leads to companies utilizing utmost opportunities to gain advantage in the market. As a result, those companies that decide to only conduct work out of the ethical manner, can lose on profit and clients:

What if you decide that you don't use a certain marketing tool, because it just, when you think, that it's not really appropriate. Not criminal, just inappropriate. Your competitors are going to use it, not you. They're going to get an advantage. You should always be aware of that when you are making these choices. (Interviewee 5)

As a result, there is a thin balancing line that the companies track and contextually adjust, depending on which situation they engage in. As Interviewee 6 summed it up:

At the end you don't want your business to go bankrupt, because you're way too ethical. And your competitors beat you because of this. But also from the other side, you don't have to be, you know, totally unethical. There is a balance.

When it comes to external pressures, interviewees mentioned that oftentimes clients and management would want to "cross the line" in business, and then the decision on how to execute the situation would be reliant upon stakeholders with the most power in the situation, however, interviewees still deem it important to either advise the clients on what is appropriate, or share their concerns with management. As Interviewee 6 shared his experience with the situation where his management was opposing placement of the cookie consent banners compliant with GDPR regulations on the site: "Maybe a manager is looking, you know, how to avoid it or how not to do things. Of course, they did their research. But I also express my feeling that this is not the correct way to do it" (Interviewee 6).

As a result, interviewees shared that the limits they face do affect their ability to tackle decision-making in corporate settings, which can trigger feelings of internal disagreement. However, all interviewees shared that in their respective companies they feel comfortable and safe to raise concerns in such occasions, however, whether these concerns would be taken into consideration or not, rests upon stakeholders of higher positions.

4.3.3. Digital marketing practitioners relying on external tools to help them make decisions

Additionally, interviewees shared that in their decision-making process they rely on a variety of external tools that help them execute the adverse decisions, which signifies the importance of outside guardrails that will guide the decision. According to the insights, these

tools serve as a helping hand for practitioners in easing the ethical decision-making process in the industry. The following patterns have been identified: from the existing tools in the arsenal of marketers – law, company policies (including NDAs), and company values; and from the desired tools that can improve the decision-making process – better technical capabilities, external audits, and establishment of the ethical committee.

From the existing tools, all interviewees spoke about the importance of GDPR in their work, ranging from implementing in back in their organizations in 2018, to learning how to navigate through it, to finding discrepancies in the law and lack of stringent enforcement. On the same note, it is important to mention that the level of satisfaction with current regulations around AI and technology in digital marketing (mainly, working with data) both on the macro EU/country level and micro company level among all participants was very low. They expressed various concerns around not only the fact that some smaller companies may still not understand how to properly implement GDPR, but also at the lack of policy enforcement, vague interpretations and possible loopholes to use: "I don't really think the small companies are checked, because I think we do GDPR rules because we have ethics. You also would be fine without it, and that's not fine. They really should be checked" (Interviewee 4); "…cookie laws in Holland, which is in Europe, which don't make any sense of all at all, because 95% of the websites you visit start tracking you first and then send you a cookie, it's really silly" (Interviewee 3); "what the GDPR says you can do, but some companies go beyond that and are super duper clear in what they say. And also the legislation is open for interpretation. Let's just put it that way" (Interviewee 3); "We have policies of course, but I don't know what these policies mean. You know. I don't know when I can activate those" (Interviewee 2). As a result, interviewees expressed their frustrations when it comes to the policy/law activation, and mentioned that while they try to be ethical in their work, because of the nature of regulations, others can avoid it and not be accountable for it, which makes the ethical decision-making process of interviewees feel as useless at times.

From the tools that do successfully help the practitioners resolve adverse situations, the most common ones were protective company policies, particularly NDAs in place, and existing values in the company. NDAs certainly help the participants to navigate through client work and not disclose data, even when it could be advantageous for the business (for example, to boost sales), as one participant disclosed: "We do have hella crazy NDAs though...We have a lot of data on a lot of customers that we have...So the NDA is very, very high and honestly, like they are our Bibles" (Interviewee 4, digital marketing manager in

Europe). Another participant said that despite the copious amounts of data they work with, NDAs also help to preserve confidentiality in situations, where other companies might sell the data of their customers: "signing these NDAs is a good solution to like at least protect your company" (Interviewee 2, creator operations manager).

From the desired tools that could ease the transition towards working more ethically that participants mentioned, establishment of more external audits for checking the company's activity has been detected ("because uh, you never know, who's ethical or not", Interviewee 4), but especially for smaller companies, since bigger corporations, such as Google and Meta are already on the governmental watch, though their practices such as having full control over users' data, are being labeled by the participants as unethical and also in need of more stringent interference. An interesting proposal was brought up by one of the interviewees, who mentioned that there is a need to link technology and philosophy, and establish a reviewing committee on the global level that will be overseeing and establishing the ethical guidelines of technology. From the authority point of view, the participant expressed the need for power redistribution and absence of government in the committee's role:

> I think it should be a collective of different people with different background. For sure. There, there should be technical people, scientific people, philosophers, I think it's needed. Uh, also we need some philosophy there. Better if it's not run by like political things, like no countries, no government involved, just professional, high-minded people, you know, um, open-minded people, that can see a better future, that can like lay the part for the, for also an ethical change maybe. (Interviewee 1, senior digital marketing specialist)

The participants also expressed their desire towards better technical capabilities, the current state of which is currently halting ethical practices in marketing, with several interviewees feeling the need for safer technical guardrails: "I don't think that there's yet a way that's not hackable or something like that, but yeah, I'll say if that's possible" (Interviewee 6, lead digital marketing specialist); "However, what is still problem is the regular algorithms that are not the advertising ones. Uh, they are of course still serving stuff, which, you know, can be pretty dangerous to maybe young women with anorexic problems" (Interviewee 3, founder of the digital marketing agency).

An interesting point of conflicted views emerged between two interviewees when it comes to the attitude towards self-regulation of companies, while working with AI and data: while one participant strongly advocated against corporate self-regulation: "I think it's the solution is that regulation, because I don't believe in self-regulation in the commercial industry" (Interviewee 5, Global marketing manager), another participant expressed his optimism towards the direction, where the companies are heading: "So that's, that's getting better, really fast. And they, the good thing is, is that companies are more self-regulatory on that part, uh, a lot more than when it comes to, uh, your data. Because that's their whole business model" (Interviewee 3, founder of the digital marketing agency). However, both participants in the end agree that changes in the legal framework are needed, and an updated, solid regulatory legislative framework should serve as the ultimate tool when it comes to the ethical implications in business.

4.3.4. Digital marketing practitioners relying on internal tools to help them make decisions

Finally, aside from external guardrails and mechanisms that the practitioners utilize, which affects their ethical decisions, participants have identified three key internal mechanisms that also help them decide while dealing with ethically-challenging situations: proactively holding conversations with clients, proactively starting conversations with users and using personal reflexivity in the process. All of the identified tools signify the importance of not only outside guardrails that help to guide the decisions, but also the importance of internal motivations that the participants hold.

Practitioners expressed their advice and current practices that are based around conversations with clients and potential users through two streams: their work experience and knowledge of what can happen in the business, should an unethical path be taken, and their placement of themselves in the position of the user's/customer's shoes. As one interviewee, the owner of the digital marketing agency stated, due to his knowledge of unethical practices in the market and knowledge of laws, he always holds conversations with clients on which practices they can engage in:

So I tell them again, this is a really nice way to do it. This is what you have to do according to the law. And this is what some really dirty companies do. Our clients are usually sort of the middle, but there's a lot of room for interpretation. (Interviewee 3, founder of the digital marketing agency)

When it comes to conversations with users, the practitioners often activated their "marketer vs. user" mode, mentioned previously. They expressed their need to practice ethics when it comes to management of user's data, and opening up channels for feedback from the user side. Finally, when it comes to personal reflexivity, several interviewees shared that in their work experience, they do check in with their personal values, however, the sources for the values differed. One interviewee mentioned that herself and her boss have ethical discussions at work, because they both come from the same culture, where ethics are not respected enough in the work environment, and therefore, the Dutch culture of ethical working resonates with their personality and opportunities to make professional choices much better:

My boss is also Russian as am I, and I think that's something that we kind of have because in Russia, there's not necessarily a lot of ethics in business. And I mean, the reason why we're in Netherlands could be partly that, um, but we want to have the ethics. And my boss also has like 20 years of experience in marketing and he talks with me about his experiences and when he didn't necessarily do all ethical things and he's like, yeah, that's not nice. So I think it's first of all, us having it, I think it's also, Netherlands itself. I think Netherlands is a very ethical country when it comes to data and I mean, Europe as well, right. (Interviewee 4, digital marketing manager in Europe)

Another interviewee mentioned that he believes family will always play the foremost role in how ethical the person would become and then how consequentially the professional in the digital marketing field would "grow up to be":

If like, personally and ethically, I don't know. This is more like how you grow with your family and your family and your surroundings. It's more like, you know, you also know things about your friends or you know other people that you don't like maybe, and depends how you use them. So it's more like, I think that it still comes mainly from your family and your friends and your sociology circle than anything else. (Interviewee 6, Lead digital marketing specialist)

Lastly, respondents talked about their internal guidance, for example, Interviewee 5, who is a Global marketing manager, indicated that he simply has his own internal compass for making ethical decisions: "I have, of course my kind of internal guidance, internal compass, like what's good". One more interviewee who is working with TikTok and influencers also shared her experience when it comes to dealing with adverse situations, where their clients represented by creators get taken advantage of by their clients represented by advertisers, and when sometimes creators would comply with adverse practices, for example, when it comes to payment for creators' content. She expressed that her internal moral compass does not allow *not* to interfere with the situation, and, therefore, she sometimes can put business needs aside and think only from her personal disagreement:

> And then the clients will say, yeah, cool. But we want 50 euros for all five. And I would say it's pretty unethical, especially the way they treat it saying, oh yeah, but we don't have a budget. And recently I started just saying no, and because before I was like, kind of trying and now I just say no. And yeah, I understand them as well because probably these agencies, they are data-driven so they need sales or clicks of use…[But] I would go, no, that's not okay. They're treating me like shit. I would say my personal slash professional thing. I'm not even thinking about our cuts. I'm just thinking about how they're getting treated. (Interviewee 2)

All of the findings above are notably in line with Hunt & Vittel's *General Theory of Marketing Ethics* model on the two levels – cultural environment and personal characteristics (2006). When it comes to the cultural environment, particularly the juxtaposition of the ethical working culture in Russia and choice of the interviewee and their boss to work in the Netherlands was prominent; and while assessing the importance of personal characteristics, several interviewees responded that their internal guidance and *moral compass* are stemming from family upbringing and having ethics in their own personal value system as an important step.

5. Discussion & conclusion

The purpose of this final chapter is to provide an overview of the results, theoretical and practical implications, as well as reflect upon the limitations this study has encountered, and provide suggestions for future research.

5.1. Main findings and theoretical reflection

This researched attempted to answer a research question "How do digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands balance business and ethical considerations while using artificial intelligence for marketing purposes?" by conducting a thematic analysis of expert interviews with seven managerial level digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands.

The basis for the research rested upon three theoretical pillars: business implications that emerged in the digital marketing industry with the introduction of AI, ethical concerns that AI has generated in the industry, and balancing mechanisms to reconciliate the two, which was analysed through the lens of ethical decision-making factors in the field of marketing and conceptualizations of business ethics as practice. The results of the research have revealed the following: digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands undergo a complex decision-making process while using AI in their work, which features the interplay of exciting opportunities technology brings into their work, but at the same time challenges and contradictory feelings that are triggered by the practitioners' awareness of current and potential risks of AI. As a result, digital marketing practitioners have to balance business and ethical considerations in their work on the contextual basis, depending on the limits which affect ethics – particularly, based on higher managerial and client decisions, and while activating external tools (law, company policies and company values) and internal tools (reflexivity, personal beliefs and communication with stakeholders) that help them to make the decisions.

First of all, it was important to examine how digital marketing practitioners use artificial intelligence for business purposes in their work, as this provided the context where the practitioners operate and how technological changes affect their roles. Thus, foremost the paper overviewed trends that are currently happening in the field of digital marketing with the introduction of AI. As the research shows, the key conceptualized pillars for changes in the

marketing domain for this study were: *Personalization of communication* (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; Kumar et al., 2019; Ma & Sun, 2020); *Better targeting for both marketers and consumers* (Kumar et al., 2019; Ma & Sun, 2020; Brynjolfsson et al., 2011; Sundsøy et al., 2014); *Operational efficiency due to automation* (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; Esch & Black, 2021; Ma & Sun, 2020; Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022); *Cost-efficiency* (Brynjolfsson et al., 2011; Sundsøy et al., 2014); and *Workstream optimization* (Kumar et al., 2019; Ma & Sun, 2020). All interviewees have mentioned the presence of all conceptualized trends in their work and particularly expressed their satisfaction with the introduction of technology when it comes to the efficiency of their work and ability to conduct more tasks with less time both on the business scale and their personal scale, as well as shared their excitement about opportunities for professional and business growth. However, when talking about their feelings towards AI advancements in the field of digital marketing, the majority expressed feelings of fear towards current practices of data management, and some towards potential risks AI can bring going forward – such as fake profiling and more stringent funneling. This has shown a complexity in the relationship between the practitioners and AI: from feeling excited about opportunities to feeling scared about risks, they have to navigate through a range of emotions in their marketing work.

Secondly, it was important to examine which ethical considerations or issues with AI digital marketing practitioners see in their work, as they constitute an important element in the decision-making process as well. The findings revealed that digital marketing practitioners indeed engage in proactive familiarization of risks and ethical concerns of AI for their field of work, which include awareness and assessments of unethical practices other companies in the industry conduct, as well as their own companies, gaps that users have in their digital knowledge and potential risks that AI can bring going forward. From the conceptualized model, all five risks were mentioned by the practitioners - *Algorithmic discrimination* (Kumar et al., 2019, Carter, 2020, Manyika et al., 2019) when it comes to wrongful decision-making; *Maleficence* risk (Jobin et al., 2019) when it comes to fake profiling; *Lack of transparency* (Jobin et al., 2019) when it comes to funneling, and the *Poor regulatory frameworks* (Jobin et al., 2019, Kerr et al., 2020) when it comes to the absence of stringent regulations. Only the risk of *Lack of privacy* (Jobin et al., 2019) triggered different opinions from the side of the practitioners, some of whom considered the risk to be a "buzzword", which signified that privacy was the notion most affected by the personal views and preferences of the interviewees.

To add on the risk of the *Poor regulatory frameworks,* one critical finding deserves a special recognition, and this finding is concerned around the practicality of the European regulatory landscape. When it comes to legal guardrails that have been introduced as tools to manage risks activated by technology, GDPR currently is the key regulation on the EU's territory for working with data obtained through technology, the implementation of which in 2018 was meant to bring more power and control over data to the hands of users (Breen et al., 2020). The work of marketing practitioners is indeed directly affected by GDPR which they have to gain expertise in learning how it works, however, as the results of the study show, despite GDPR's aim to more effectively control data management processes, digital marketing practitioners working with the regulation in the Netherlands express high levels of dissatisfaction upon enforcement of the regulation (i.e. presence of loopholes, absence of fine enforcement, big corporations selling data), as well as overall dissatisfaction with how little control over their data users have, and whether they even know what constitutes their data and which rights the users have to it. The practitioners expressed their desire and need for much stricter legal regulations, both within the space of GDPR, as well as other possibilities of solving the risks, such as limiting power of big data corporations and improvement of cookie consent practices – as the current state of the regulatory enforcement leaves room for unethical practices in the industry, which, in the end, also halts the motivation of competing companies to conduct business ethically due to losses in advantages.

As a result of working in the industry, knowing the data management processes and loopholes, and having no power to change the regulatory tools, this knowledge additionally gives the practitioners a strong feeling of cognitive dissonance and internal disagreement while reflecting upon their role as marketing professionals, which showed not only through direct expressions by interviewees, but indirectly while replying to the questions in the structure of "As a person, I understand this is bad, but at the same time…". In order to solve this cognitive dissonance, the interviewees often referred to deterrence of responsibility in their work, which was expressed in such aggregated replies as "At the end of the day, it is up to the client whether to act ethically or not" and "It is the client's reputation at stake, so I feel fine", which allowed them to make peace with internal disagreement and continue the discussion. While it is up to each practitioner on whether they feel this dissonance in their work or not, presence of it among managerial level employees is a significant indicator of needs for a more ethically-focused shift to happen in the industry, as well as opportunities for

academia to explore further how these mindsets can differ among marketing practitioners of various tenures, countries of their work, and their marketing specialty.

Lastly, examination of the ethical decision-making process among digital marketing practitioners, and which mechanisms they employ to solve the dilemmas in their work revealed that practitioners undergo a multi-dimensional ethical decision-making process, based on internal and external tools, and contextual limits, a combination of which affects the decision in the end. Among the external mechanisms that the practitioners refer to in their work are the laws, company policies and company values, which help to guide both the practitioners and stakeholders when a situation in question arises. Among the internal tools that the practitioners use were reflexivity, personal beliefs and communication with stakeholders. From the conceptualization model, three out of five theories have been detected in practices of the interviewees: *Contextually reapplying existing ethical norms* (Clegg et al., 2007) when it comes to accepting limits from management and clients*; Leading stakeholder dialogue* (Bevan & Corvellec, 2007) when it comes to proactive ethical discussions with management and clients; and *Articulating good purpose of the organization* (Tsoukas, 2017)*, which is conducted through company values and company stances on ethical uses of technology. The findings of the research also corresponded with the Hunt & Vittel's *General Theory of Marketing Ethics* model on the two levels – cultural environment and personal characteristics (2006), as well as proven the importance of the practitioner's internal character – or *moral compass*, as some interviewees shared; and feeling of guilt, which indeed is present among interviewees when the decision-making process is not congruent with their ethical stance.

5.2. Limitations

When it comes to limitations, one of the key limitations of this study was the populations' diversity in expertise, which did not focus on a single niche of digital marketing practice, but varied from performance marketing, to creator management, to standard diverse digital marketing functions, performed by interviewees on a daily basis. Focus on one of the niches in the field, for example, performance marketing, interviewees from which leaned more towards data-driven decision-making and were more in favour of technological advancements in the field, could have potentially produced more interesting, homogenous

insights relevant for a concrete niche and in case of performance marketing, added to the literature on ethics in performance marketing. Nevertheless, the whole population did fit under the domain of AI-powered digital marketing and all respondents proactively shared their experiences, concerns and internal approaches towards working with technology and how it affects their work. Moreover, all respondents were happy to be involved in the study and shared that they thoroughly enjoyed stepping outside their regular line of work to think about ethical considerations, therefore, focusing on the generalized field of AI-enabled digital marketing still produced interesting insights in the end.

Lastly, speaking about conceptualization of study elements, as outlined previously, two out of seven interviewees were at first confused by the notion of AI in marketing, and were not sure if their work involved any AI-related work. However, it has been explained throughout the conversation that for this study, AI-enabled digital marketing is used in a broad sense, and their activities, for example, using Google Ads for campaign generation and management, also falls under this umbrella. This was a notable point of reflection for the interviewees as well, however, it shows the limitation of understanding of and clarity on what AI-powered digital marketing conceptualization is, and how much it can differ in the perceptions of practitioners working in the same field. As Han et al. outline, "the term "AI" itself can cause confusion" (2021, p. 2469), which was proven to be true, so a more granular approach towards which precise functions of AI are employed by interviewees (rather than using AI as an umbrella term) can bring even more precise results on how the practitioners manage the technological and ethical challenges in their work. Similar approach can be applied to the conceptualization of ethics – it is important to reflect upon the fact that ethics by default of its nature is a highly interpretative notion, and thus, the geography of this study was set to the Netherlands, so interviewees could share their insights stemming from work in the same cultural context (as one of the interviewees explicitly outlined, for example, ethics in the Netherlands and ethics in Russia – her native country – differ). Nevertheless, despite having their data anonymized and despite providing examples of some unethical practices that the companies of interviewees engaged in, none of the interviewees were too critical of their companies on the matter of ethical conduct. This could be due to the fact that all interviewees are genuinely happy with their workplaces, but it also could stem from either inadvertent, intrinsic motivation to appear as a more *ethical* person or from fear for career jeopardy, so by default the participants would choose to be purposefully less critical in order to minimize consequences. However, the challenges of ethics being an interpretative concept

would follow any research on the matter, so being transparent on this from the researcher side and juxtaposing the findings to already existing literature helped to add validity to the research.

5.3.   Societal implications & future research

Lastly, it is important to reflect upon societal implications that this research can contribute to, and possibilities for the future research. As this study has been concerned with ethics as practice and examined decision-making of digital marketing practitioners in their professional settings, the research implications and potential for future research development are closely tied together. The results of the study revealed a complex relationship between marketing practitioners and three changing elements in their field: business implications that continue emerging with the development of AI and its uses in marketing, risks that stem from these implications, and changes in the regulatory landscape. The goal of the research was to examine how digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands manage all of these elements in their work. The key contribution of the research lies in uncovering which challenges and frustrations digital marketing practitioners face while conducting ethical decision-making processes, in the landscape of the Netherlands, which is a part of the European Union – which are: a need for more stringent legal regulations; presence of cognitive dissonance among marketeers within the "as a marketer vs. as a user" mindset and lack of digital literacy education among both users and professionals.

When it comes to the future research opportunities, the design of this study can be replicated on the larger landscape of the European Union, with the purpose of development of better AI and data management regulations, as the number one key frustration that the practitioners shared in regards to external mechanisms is that GDPR is not properly enforced in the field of digital marketing, leaving too much room for interpretation, which as a result contributes to unethical practices in the field. Additionally, a potential lies in examining whether the feeling of strong cognitive dissonance that grows among the digital marketing practitioners the further technology advances that the participants shared in this study is a trend on a larger European scale. If the feeling of cognitive dissonance is, indeed, a trend in development, it can inspire search for ways how marketing practitioners can manage this challenge better. Furthermore, digital marketing practitioners outlined a strong need for better

technological education, especially in such domains as data management, privacy and cookie consent, among both professional contexts (i.e. with marketing practitioners themselves not fully understanding how cookie consents are managed) and in educational contexts, such as in institutions, schools and universities. Lastly, as the guidelines for the more regulated use of AI on the European scale are still in development (European Commission, 2021) and will eventually have the potential to change the operational landscape of marketing practitioners, there is a potential to examine how new legislation will affect the decision-making process of digital marketing practitioners, as it can become an additional tool among the aforementioned external tools that practitioners activate in their decision-making.

Nevertheless, it is important to outline that while the majority of interviewees did express growing concerns and needs when it comes to a more ethical management of AI in their digital marketing work, they also do express hope and optimism that positive changes will take place. To conclude with the quote of the owner of the digital marketing agency on the question whether he believes changes will soon take place: "Oh yeah, I think so. Well soon, let's say soon in 10 years" (Interviewee 3). As societal and regulatory changes have a tendency to shape gradually and incrementally, a decade-long improvement prognosis might be a challenge worth taking upon.

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Appendix A: List of interviewees and their roles in the companies

Interviewee number, gender	Role (expertise) in the company	Company industry
Interviewee 1, female	Senior digital marketing specialist	Digital marketing
Interviewee 2, female	Creator operations manager	Digital marketing, influencer marketing
Interviewee 3, male	Founder of the digital marketing agency	Digital marketing
Interviewee 4, female	Digital marketing manager – Europe	Technology
Interviewee 5, male	Global marketing manager (digital)	Technology
Interviewee 6, male	Lead digital marketing specialist	Digital marketing
Interviewee 7, female	Digital marketing team lead	Technology

Appendix B: Topic list

1. **Introduction**
   - How are you today?
   - Explanation of consent, confidentiality, data collection procedure.

2. **General**
   - Can you tell me more about your current role in the company?
   - What are your responsibilities at work/can you describe your typical workday?
   - How long have you been working in the organization/in your role?
   - Can you briefly describe what are the current projects you are working on at the moment?

3. **Business advantages of AI in marketing**
   - In your opinion, how did personalization of marketing change the industry? How did it change client work? How did it affect the way marketing practitioners work?
   - What are the benefits of data-driven decision-making for the marketing business?
   - Which marketing activities does artificial intelligence help to execute in your organization?
   - In which ways does usage of AI in marketing activities affect strategy and objectives in your organization?

4. **Ethical concerns and risks**
   - In your opinion, what are the risks artificial intelligence poses overall?
   - What are the concerns around using AI in the marketing industry specifically?
   - In your opinion, what is the best strategy for handling customer data?
   - Do you believe that AI puts privacy under the threat?
   - Do you believe AI to be inherently dangerous for the future of our society?
   - Any other emerging themes.

5. Advantages vs. risks of using AI in marketing: Mitigation & Coping strategies

- How would you define "ethical" behavior in the digital marketing industry?

- Which traits should an ethical marketing practitioner have?

- Do you believe digital marketing today is leaning towards more ethical or unethical side of handling business?

- What would motivate you to uphold to ethical norms in your work?

- Which ethical guardrails does your organization have, i.e. code of conduct, etc. How (if) do they affect your work?

- Have you experienced a situation with external (clients) or internal (employees) stakeholders that, in your opinion, was unethical when it comes to marketing practices? Which decision was taken in the end? Who influenced this decision?

- Can you give examples, where there was a clear tension between business advantages and ethical risks in your work/project? How did you mitigate the situation?

- What would be your recommendation for the industry for reconciling the business advantages of AI in marketing and ethical concerns? And for marketing professionals individually?

- Do you have any expectations for AI in marketing going forward?

6. Conclusion

- Thank for participation, stop recording.
- Any other questions/remaining remarks?
- Switch off recording.

Appendix C: Coding tree

Open codes	Axial codes	Selective codes
Addressing audience's needs, relevant advertising, better sales, better targeting, democratizing marketing opportunities, efficiency, finding interested clients, finding the right audience, finding similar customers, getting target audience interested, reaching KPIs, limiting useless content, cheaper operations, understanding market potential, increased collaboration between departments, optimization	AI accelerates *opportunities* in the traditional work of digital marketing practitioners (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify how AI has broadened the amount of business opportunities in comparison to traditional digital marketing and emphasize practitioners' awareness of these changes)	Practitioners have a complex relationship with AI, that brings opportunities, challenges, and contradictory feelings into their work (Explanation: all of the sub-themes signify the complexity of the relationship between the practitioners and AI that consists of several elements)
Data leaks, filter bubbles, intrusion, killing the potential for more audiences, less creativity in generating campaigns, losing jobs	AI creates *challenges* in the traditional work of digital marketing practitioners (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify which challenges AI brought to the work of the practitioners in comparison to traditional digital marketing and emphasize practitioners' awareness of these challenges)	
Cognitive dissonance: marketer vs. user, internal disagreement, feeling confused, feeling fine, feeling frustrated, having fun, feeling hypocritical, feeling scared, feeling surprised, unhappy with current technical regulations, shifting	Digital marketing practitioners experience *contradictory feelings* towards AI (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify which feelings practitioners express towards AI, which range from fun, to confused, scared and unhappy, which signifies a range of	

responsibility	contradictory emotions)	
Audience analysis, automation, data storage, email management, campaign management, social media management, cookie management, data gathering	AI *diversifies role functions* of digital marketing practitioners (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify which functions AI diversified in the work of the practitioners in comparison to traditional digital marketing)	
Adding customers to different lists after unsubscribing, disclosing customer data, selling data, finding workarounds in GDPR	Digital marketing practitioners are aware of *unethical practices by other companies* in their industry (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify that practitioners analyze which unethical behaviors of other companies in their industry)	Practitioners engage in proactive familiarization of risks and ethical concerns of AI for their field of work (Explanation: all of the sub-themes signify that the practitioners set time aside to familiarize themselves with AI risks that affect their field and they analyze how these risks affect behaviors of their own companies and companies in the industry)
Cold-calling platform, cold emailing, publishing client-related content without client warning, publishing ads on adverse websites	Digital marketing practitioners are aware of *unethical practices conducted by their own companies* (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify that practitioners analyze the engagement of their own companies in unethical practices)	
Users not understanding privacy, users unaware of cookies, users panicking because of technology	Digital marketing practitioners identify *gaps in user knowledge* that emerge throughout technological advancements (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify that practitioners analyze which knowledge regular users lack when it comes to technology)	

Influencing purchase decisions, fake profiling, more funneling, making wrong predictions based on data, weak regulation allowing loopholes	Digital marketing practitioners proactively think about *potential risks of AI for the future of marketing* (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify that practitioners proactively familiarize themselves with risk trends of AI in their field)	
Allowing customers to unsubscribe from all content, apology to users, extracting data from LinkedIn, ethical discussions with management, informing clients on publishing content, not overwhelming the audience, unsubscribe buttons, anonymizing data, NDAs	Companies of digital marketing practitioners *proactively engage in ethical work conduct* (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify that practitioners analyze the engagement of their own companies in ethical practices)	Practitioners undergo a multi-dimensional ethical decision-making process, based on internal and external tools, and contextual limits (Explanation: all of the sub-themes signify that practitioners undergo a multi-step ethical decision-making process that involves rules from the outside, inside and external limits that affect decision-making in adverse situations)
Putting clients first, losing to competitors, losing on sales opportunities, management pressure	Digital marketing practitioners face *multiple limits* when attempting to conduct work ethically (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify that practitioners define limits that stop them from acting ethically in adverse situations)	
Company culture, company's legal department, country culture towards ethics, law/regulations, consent forms for user/client data management, making financial options for the user, allowing to withdraw consent, NDAs, better algorithms, centralized data storages, outside audits, technological literacy	Digital marketing practitioners rely on *external tools* to help them make decisions (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify that in the decision-making process practitioners rely on a set of rules coming from the outside)	

Ethical discussions with management, reflexivity: does it help my business?, reflexivity: me as a user vs. me as a marketer, gut feeling, transparent communication with clients/users, personal beliefs, previous expertise	Digital marketing practitioners rely on *internal tools* to help them make decisions (Explanation: all of the codes on the left signify that in the decision-making process practitioners also rely on a set of rules coming from the inside)	

Appendix D: Consent form

<u>**INFORMED CONSENT FORM**</u>

Project Title and version	**How do digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands balance business and ethical considerations while using artificial intelligence for marketing purposes?**
Name of Principal Investigator	Natalia Khozyainova
Name of Organisation	Erasmus University Rotterdam
Name of Sponsor	Erasmus University Rotterdam
Purpose of the Study	This research is being conducted as part of the Master thesis in the program "Media and Creative Industries". I am inviting you to participate in this research project about digital marketing and AI, and ethics in the interplay. The purpose of this research project is to gather experiences and insights from digital marketing practitioners in the Netherlands on how they approach business and ethical considerations in their domain of work.
Procedures	You will participate in an interview lasting approximately 1 hour. You will be asked questions about your experience and opinion on using artificial intelligence for marketing purposes and ethical and business considerations that derive from it. Sample questions include: *"What are the benefits of data-driven decision-making for the marketing business?".* You must be at least 18 years old and work in the digital marketing industry in the Netherlands.
Potential and anti-cipated Risks and Discomforts	There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time.
Potential Benefits	Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results to you. As a result of participating you may better understand ethical challenges marketing practitioners face in the industry. The broader goal of this research is to contribute to the growing knowledge on ethical use of AI and applications in marketing.

Sharing the results	If you would like to receive the full results of the study, once it has been conducted, please contact Natalia Khozyainova at natalia.khozyainova1@gmail.com.
Confidentiality	Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained research staff will have access to your responses. Within these restrictions, results of this study will be made available to you upon request. As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed segments from the audio recordings may be used in published forms (e.g., journal articles and book chapters). In the case of publication, pseudonyms will be used. The audio recordings, forms, and other documents created or collected as part of this study will be stored in a secure location in the researchers' offices or on the researchers' password-protected computers and will be destroyed within ten years of the initiation of the study.
Compensation	N/A
Right to Withdraw and Questions	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalised or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator: Natalia Khozyainova natalia.khozyainova1@gmail.com
Statement of Consent	Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. I have been given the guarantee that this research project has been reviewed and approved by the ESHCC Ethics Review Committee. For research problems or any other question regarding the re-search project, the Data Protection Officer of Erasmus University, Marlon Domingus, MA (fg@eur.nl). If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.

Audio recording (if applicable)	I consent to have my interview audio recorded ☐ yes ☐ no	
Secondary use (if applicable)	I consent to have the anonymised data be used for secondary analysis ☐ yes ☐ no	
Signature and Date	**NAME PARTICIPANT**	**NAME PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR** Natalia Khozyainova
	SIGNATURE	**SIGNATURE** [copy-pasted signature]
	DATE	**DATE** 19.05.2022