Leveraging Intelligence

AI's Disruptive Effect on Marketing Affordances and Customer Journeys for Premium Brands

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how premium B2C brands can strategically leverage artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance their marketing efforts throughout the customer journey (CJ). AI as a technology develops from invention to innovation, offering several implementation opportunities for marketers. To stay relevant in the market and gain a competitive advantage, brands need to leverage these affordances. This research project examines the broad opportunities of AI-enabled innovation within marketing, answering important strategic questions. By interviewing 13 experts from various fields like user experience (UX) design, digital innovation and CJ management, a cohesive view of the topic could be achieved.

The interview's analysis reveal several findings helping B2C premium brands to strategically leverage AI for their marketing efforts, closing a research gap. AI's foundational affordance lies in advanced data analysis, facilitating faster, more objective insights for real-time adjustments in content and strategy. Real-time content generation and personalization, driven by generative AI, enable hyper-personalized experiences. Real-time strategy adjustments, assisted by AI, allow for dynamic CJ mapping and predictive capabilities, enhancing responsiveness, automation and thus, customer satisfaction. Conversational agents are disrupting the CJ, offering seamless, language-based interactions that shorten the CJ and elevate the recommendation algorithm's and the brand's significance. Human-like UX becomes an objective achievable by brand-owned conversational agents.

This research offers strategic insights for AI's successful implementation for B2C premium brands. To ensure consistency, these brands must align AI innovations with their identity, necessitating a comprehensive large language model (LLM) strategy and strategic AI deployment. High-quality data and strategic data collection, achieved through cross-functional collaboration and AI-enabled CJ mapping, play a critical role in this process. For data sourcing, LLM training, and

ownership of the customer experience, collaboration with other companies is considered crucial. Brands should address consumers' desires for newness and choice, integrating these considerations into their recommendation algorithms. The findings highlight AI's crucial role in marketing and emphasize the importance of an AI-enabled unique value proposition beyond operational efficiency. Given AI's novelty and rapid evolution, this research provides a foundational base for numerous promising paths of further exploration.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Marketing, Customer Journey, Disruptive Innovation, Conversational Agents

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Preface

Thank you,

Nicole & Linda, for keeping me sane during insane times.

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"I think I finally know what area I want to work in."

Jana, Interviewee 0, mid-April 2024

Throughout my life, I have had a broad range of interests, varying from creative hobbies like painting and photography to a passion for biology and analytical tasks. Uncertainties about my future career, resulting from my variety of interests, led me to pursue a bachelor's degree in communication science, a field with numerous potential directions but few concrete pathways.

I am grateful that my master's program has provided a more defined framework around the "something with media" focus of my bachelor's degree. My class in media economics given by Matthijs Leendertse opened up a strategic, business-oriented perspective of media markets, revealing the extensive opportunities available to a graduate in media and business. Matthijs's lively and diverse use cases discussed in class, coupled with his professional experience and immense industry knowledge extending beyond traditional fields, highlighted career possibilities far beyond PR and social media management.

The topics offered within Matthijs's thesis project were as future-facing and innovative as I would have expected given the class's inspiring subjects. Therefore, it was clear that I wanted Matthijs to supervise my thesis. I chose to focus on AI in marketing, specifically for B2C premium brands, because digital strategy and the demand for extraordinary brand representation are, in my opinion, the most exciting topics. Matthijs has been an immense support in realizing my project, from our initial brainstorming session to addressing my last-minute questions. I am deeply thankful for his supervision, the professional network he opened up to me, and his inspiring ideas that encouraged me to strive for excellence and sharpen my mindset.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to my interviewees, whose passion for their work was truly inspiring. I will always remember their enthusiasm evident through the spark in their eyes as they spoke about their daily tasks as well as significant achievements and personal milestones. They demonstrated that it is possible to find a niche where creativity, strategic thinking, and technical excellence intersect to shape the future of marketing. In a few months, you will find me engaged in this creative chaos, striving for that same spark in my own eyes.

1. Introduction: The Future of AI-affordances in Marketing

> "AI is … enabling companies to … engage with individual consumers at scale. But in many ways, AI is still in its infancy."
> (Campbell et al., 2019, p. 240)

> "The explosive growth of media, channels, digital devices, and software applications has provided firms with unprecedented opportunities to leverage data."
> (Wedel & Kannan, 2016, p. 97)

> "Contemporary marketing is increasingly data driven, automated, and intelligent."(Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022, p. 38)

Artificial intelligence (AI), recognized as a disruptive technology with the potential to reshape entire industries, introduces new affordances within the marketing sector (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 227; Evans, 2017, p. 209). AI is expected to transform the marketing environment, it's application within this domain stands as one of the most significant commercial implementation of AI today (Shaik, 2023, p. 994). AI-enabled digital transformation changes the creation and delivery of value to customers throughout the customer journey (CJ) (Peltier et al., 2024, p. 71). To maintain competitive, firms must transform AI inventions into innovations, creating unique customer value across the CJ, with early adopters deriving significant benefits from its capabilities (Porter, 2001, para. 43; Shaik, 2023, p. 994). AI-enabled innovation triggers development through creative destruction, demonstrating how technological advancements transform industries (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 6; Schumpeter, 1942/2010, pp. 71-75). AI holds transformative potential of innovation, reshaping industries and underscoring the need for businesses to embrace disruptive technologies and adapt to maintain competitiveness (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 227; Reddy & Reinartz, 2017, p. 15).

Since its inception in the 1950s (Evans, 2017, p. 209), AI has encountered significant technological advancements, with scientists currently pursuing the achievement of general artificial intelligence, a cognitive capacity similar to human intelligence (IBM, 2023a, para. 5; Lauterbach &

Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 54). AI's contemporary applications are transforming marketing efforts through elevated and rapid data analysis, nuanced micro-segmentation, targeting consumers, and anticipatory analytics (Ameen et al., 2021, p. 1; Blueshift, 2018, p. 3; Davenport, 2020, pp. 25-26; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490; Miklosik & Evans, 2020, p. 101288; Zanker et al., 2019, p. 161). These advancements raise questions about the practical implementation for brands and how to transform the technology into differentiating innovations (Evans, 2017, p. 209; Lauterbach & Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 56).

For premium brands, the primary goal is to create an exceptional customer experience (CX) throughout the CJ, which includes all interactions and experiences leading to a purchase (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71). As CJs become increasingly complex with digitalization and a expansion of channels, companies are adopting holistic approaches to effectively engage consumers at critical moments, and thereby enhancing marketing effectiveness (Hu & Tracogna, 2020, p. 1; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490; Steinhoff et al., 2019, p. 386). By strategically mapping the CJ, businesses can better understand the consumer's decision-making process and track customer touchpoints (Court et al., 2009, p. 2; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 1). This study follows Lemon and Verhoef's (2016, p. 77) CJ model, including the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases. AI, with its transformative impact on significant factors within the CJ, can subsequently influence a firm's economic success. Consequently, integrating AI into marketing strategies is crucial for firms to secure a competitive advantage. Known AI-affordances include hyper-personalization of content in the pre-purchase phase, real-time pricing during the purchase phase, and enhanced customer service via chatbot in the post-purchase phase (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 228, 230-231, 235; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 491).

Especially within the B2C premium domain, it stands crucial for brands to strategically leverage AI for their marketing efforts. For these companies, the brand itself serves as the unique selling proposition, demanding substantial investments in marketing, branding, and customer relations to justify high prices and maintain their reputation (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003, p. 426; Phau & Prendergast, 2000, p. 122; Tabaku & Zerellari, 2015, p. 75). By enhancing the CX with AI-enabled innovations like personalized interactions, premium brands can not only reinforce their market

position but also deliver exceptional value aligning with their high-end image. Given the importance of excellent marketing in this domain, this thesis examines the critical role of AI in the marketing strategies of particularly premium B2C brands.

Considering the range of capabilities AI introduces to the marketing domain, firms must take into account several strategic implications. Firstly, AI's ability for hyper-personalization at scale introduces a personalization-consistency paradox. While personalized communication positively impacts brand attitude, loyalty, and revenue (Boudet al., 2019, p. 2; Chandra et al., 2022, p. 1530; Jain et al., 2021, p. 20; Smink et al., 2020, p. 483), maintaining a consistent brand image is crucial for a premium brand's reputation and customer trust (Frow & Payne, 2007, pp. 99-100; Kapferer, 1992, p. 1; Matthiesen & Phau, 2005, pp. 325 & 328). Secondly, the expansion of digital channels has transformed modern customers into sources of data (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 230-231; Wedel & Kannan, 2016, p. 97), necessitating its collection for customer-centric marketing and AI-driven innovation (Anshari et al., 2019, p. 95; Erevelles et al., 2016, p. 897). This study explores how B2C premium brands manage the demand for consumer data and potential collaborations with big tech companies or other stakeholders. The strategic use of these technologies shape a company's industry position and future aspirations (Matt et al., 2015, p. 340). Therefore, this thesis examines how premium B2C brands manage AI developments strategically without losing their distinct brand identity and the potential need for collaborations to enhance their innovation capabilities.

1.1. Scientific Relevance

Current scientific literature gives general insights into the possible applications of AI-affordances in marketing (for an overview: Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022; Peltier et al., 2024; Shaik, 2023). Yet, the scientific community also notes several research gaps when it comes to how companies can leverage AI to increase their marketing efficiency (Kumar et al., 2021, p. 873; Shaik, 2023, p. 995), how to elevate customer value by implementing AI-enabled innovation (Chintalapati & Pandey, 2022, p. 59), or in strategic questions like the marketers possibly to gather customer data (Vlačić et al., 2021, p. 198). Although there is some knowledge on optimizing existing marketing efforts, researchers stress the novelty of AI application in marketing and the uncertainty of new business opportunities arising with advanced AI-enabled innovation

(Campbell et al., 2020, p. 240; Kumar et al., 2021, p. 865). Peltier and colleagues (2024, p. 67) stress the "embryotic stage" of AI-affordances in marketing and identify a research gap concerning the future evolvement of AI in scientific literature. Given the rapid pace of AI development and the application of AI-enabled innovations in marketing (Evans, 2017, p. 209; Lauterbach & Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 56), scientific literature must stay current with the state of the art by consulting tech-leading experts to remain updated on rapid changes (Vlačić et al., 2021, p. 197). While various areas within firms have already adopted AI to their benefit, the scientific community has yet to thoroughly explore AI's transformational impact on marketing activities (Kshetri et al., 2024, p. 1).

To avoid "showing signs of excessive optimism regarding AI" (Grandinetti, 2020, p. 91), the specific strategic and environmental conditions of a distinct market need to be considered, since a useful adoption depends "on the nature of the firm and the industry it operates in" (Kumar et al., 2021, p. 872). While there exists a lot of scientific literature on luxury brands especially in the fashion domain and specific AI-enabled use cases like Metaverse (e.g. Bigi et al., 2024; Gao et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2023), there is a lack of literature on B2C premium brands and their AI-enabled marketing strategy detached from very specific use cases.

To address the research gap concerning the latest and forthcoming AI-affordances within a specific market, and to incorporate the significant strategic framework of CJ mapping, this thesis investigates AI's prospective role and potential across the CJ. It aims to research the challenges associated with implementing these capabilities by conducting expert interviews, thereby enriching the scientific discourse. To achieve this objective, the following research question will be explored:

> ***RQ****: How can premium B2C brands strategically leverage AI to enhance their marketing efforts throughout the customer journey?*

To answer the research question, qualitative expert interviews are employed. This method is chosen because qualitative approaches offer flexibility in data collection and analysis, enabling researchers to explore under-researched areas and gain comprehensive insights into complex topics without relying on pre-existing literature or statistical conclusions (Chandra & Shang,

2019, p. 3; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82). Specifically, expert interviews provide valuable, in-depth knowledge, which is crucial for understanding how B2C brands can leverage AI in their marketing strategies (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 658; Chandra & Shang, 2019, p. 4). The qualitative approach ensures that the study remains responsive to the dynamic nature of digital innovation, capturing nuanced insights essential for informed decision-making and advancing scientific knowledge in this fast-paced domain (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 84). To remain open not only in data collection but also in data analysis, inductive coding without predefined themes is employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83; Chandra & Shang, 2019a, p. 92).

1.2. Societal Relevance

This thesis explores AI-enabled marketing opportunities for B2C premium brands, offering valuable insights for marketing managers. The societal significance of these insights is emphasized by the fact that only a small amount of marketers feel adequately equipped to fully leverage AI capabilities, and business managers often misjudge suitable areas for employing AI (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; De Bruyn et al., 2020, p. 91). Generally, AI positively affects nonfinancial aspects, such as customer lifetime value, that impact financial outcomes (Peltier et al., 2024, p.76). Therefore, understanding potential AI-affordances like personalization is crucial for businesses, as they lead to increased revenue and marketing efficiency (Boudet et al., 2019, p. 2). Marketers with a deeper understanding of AI's advantages can guide their organizations on when and how to integrate AI into their marketing strategies (Peltier et al., 2024, p.75). Therefore, this research not only addresses an academic knowledge gap but also equips marketing professionals with insights that can be utilized to develop tools and new practices leveraging AI's capabilities in marketing. The results ultimately contribute to more informed and strategic decision-making influencing the firm's economic success.

1.3. Thesis Overview

Chapter two situates this research within evolutionary economics, discussing the connection between AI and creative destruction. It reviews current literature on AI-driven innovation in marketing and the strategic relevance and evolution of CJs. Additionally, it examines the objec-

tives of B2C premium brands at each stage of the CJ, highlighting the AI-affordances that facilitate the attainment of these goals. The chapter concludes with strategic considerations on the personalization-consistency paradox, consumer data sourcing, and potential collaborations for innovation.

Chapter three explains the study's methodology, justifying the use of qualitative expert interviews with a semi-structured guide to address the open-ended research question. It explains the research design, including the definition of experts in this context, reliability and validity criteria and their application throughout the research process, and the online data collection process. The sampling strategy and criteria, derived from the research interest and operationalized from the theory, as well as the standards of research ethics, are outlined. The chapter concludes with an in-depth explanation of the data analysis process, which combines thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach with Boeije's (2010) inductive coding methods, allowing themes to emerge from the data.

Chapter four presents the three themes and seven subthemes identified in the analysis through selective coding, linking them back to the theory. The first theme discusses disruptive AI-affordances in both the back-end and front-end of B2C premium brands, such as data analysis and hyper-personalization. The second theme examines the development of AI-enabled marketing innovations over time, with a focus on conversational agents as the next disruptive innovation and the importance of language within a B2C premium brand's marketing strategy. The third theme covers holistic strategic considerations, including CX and CJs, collaboration strategies, and potential challenges.

Chapter five concludes by addressing the research question, incorporating key findings such as AI-affordances like data analysis and content generation, and the impact of conversational agents on CJ and underlying objectives, into the theoretical framework. Additionally, the chapter discusses two limitations that slightly diminish the study's reliability. Practical implications for marketers are provided, highlighting strategic AI deployment and beneficial collaborations amongst others. The study concludes with suggestions for future research, aimed at expanding current findings on conversational agents and further effects of AI employment on related domains.

The appendix includes a list of experts with their job descriptions regarding the previously outlined sampling criteria, the interview guide employed for data collection, the informed consent form sent to the interviewees prior to the interview, the coding tree ensuring comprehensibility and reliability, and a declaration of the AI usage for this work.

2. Theoretical Framework

In qualitative research, triangulation of theories and ideas serve as a common practice to provide a deeper and more exhaustive perspective on the research topic, thereby enhancing its validity (Flick, 2004, p. 181; Steineke, 2004, p. 185; Yin, 2016, p. 87). This thesis is grounded in evolutionary economics, accounting for dynamic innovation in rapidly changing markets. AI enabling technological evolution in marketing connects seamlessly with evolutionary economics (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 240; Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 4). The strategic relevance of CJs and related fundamental concepts for the future of marketing are being explained, alongside an examination of the current literature on AI and management objectives for B2C premium brands. The theoretical framework concludes with holistic strategic considerations for B2C premium brands, addressing unresolved real-life implications.

2.1. Evolutionary Economics

Media economic theories facilitate a comprehensive understanding and analysis of media markets or industries employing media in its broadest conception. Extensive advancements and disruptive developments in digital media technologies influencing markets demand a dynamic economic approach that excels classical economic schools (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 4). Evolutionary economics, focusing on market transformation, accounts for technology's evolving dynamic nature and serves as a suitable theoretical foundation for research on AI-enabled innovation (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 6). Unlike classical economic theories emphasizing rational decision-making and equilibrium, evolutionary economics highlight "nonequilibrium processes that reshape economies and industries from within" (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 6). Technological inventions like AI embody intrinsic components of the economic system rather than external forces potentially introducing creative destruction, a fundamental principle within evolutionary economics, introduced by Schumpeter (1942/2010, pp. 71-75). Creative destruction refers to the phenomenon wherein innovation disrupts established market equilibriums, thereby catalyzing profound economic transformations, denoting business failure and economic progress complementary processes, reinforcing each other within the market (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 7). New technologies wield the transformative power to restructure organizations, industries, and markets, compelling firms to "disrupt their existing structures" (Reddy & Reinartz,

2017, p. 15) to gain value from new inventions and stay competitive (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 7). The innovation stream diminishes gradually, leading to a renewed equilibrium (Schumpeter, 1942/2010, pp. 71-75).

Schumpeter emphasizes entrepreneurial innovation as the fundamental driver of creative destruction, distinguishing it from mere invention. Invention entails developing new ideas or concepts, while innovation involves applying these, typically by introducing novel elements into a system through creative combinations of existing ideas, skills, and resources for economic success (Storsul & Krumsvik, 2013, p. 14; Witt, 2008, p. 555). AI, as an enabling technology, serves as a technological invention facilitating disruptive innovation, reshaping industries and potentially inducing a state of creative destruction (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 227; Evans, 2017, p. 209). Businesses avoiding AI innovations will face challenges in competing with those fervently embracing it, as they emerge as a strategic asset crucial to an organization's financial success and substantial competitive advantage (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; Davenport et al., 2020, p. 27; Lauterbach & Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 54; Mierzejewska, 2011, p. 20). Further, Porter (1996, para. 8) emphasizes that businesses must establish a distinctive strategy with a unique, difficult-to-replicate value proposition rather than mirroring competitors' innovations to maintain an innovation advantage and surpass competitors (Porter, 2001, para. 43), aligning with the concept of creative destruction (Miklosik & Evans, 2020, p. 101285).

2.2. AI Driving Evolution in Marketing

The development of AI initiated in the 1950s (Evans, 2017, p. 209), enters a new era marked by recent technological advancements. Initially constrained by structural limitations in computer programming, AI operates within tight parameters. The so-called *narrow AI* is designed for specialized tasks with limited decision-making capabilities (Lauterbach & Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 54) including generative AI and reactive machines like chatbots, lacking extensive memory (IBM, 2023a, para. 8-9). Contemporary scientific efforts prioritize achieving *artificial general intelligence*, aiming to develop thinking machines comparable to humans (IBM, 2023a, para. 5; Lauterbach & Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 54). The third form of AI, referred to as *super AI*, remains a theoretical construct, proposed to possess the capability to comprehend human emotions and de-

sires (IBM, 2023a, para. 7). With its capacities, AI transitions to an enabling entity for various disruptive technologies unconstrained by human-authored code, potentially transforming various industries, prompting critical questions for both scientists and business leaders regarding the speed and direction of AI progress (Evans, 2017, p. 209; Lauterbach & Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 56).

AI introduces several creative affordances within the marketing domain. As an important part of a company's overall strategy, marketing "strives to add value to a company's offering" (Yagnik et al., 2020, p. 229), creating a differentiating factor among competitors. The brand stands as a crucial component of a company's marketing efforts with several conceptualizations present in current literature (Maurya & Mishra, 2012, p. 123) and can be considered as a "direct consequence of the strategy of market segmentation and product differentiation" (Maurya & Mishra, 2012, p. 122). Effective brand management and branding involve actions aimed at enhancing a brand's image for customers, adding substantial value for both the company and the consumer (Maurya & Mishra, 2012, pp. 124-126; Yagnik et al., 2020, p. 227). Innovative efforts, conceptualized as applied creativity, play a crucial role by improving marketing messages, and thereby positively impacting sales (Van Gelder, 2005, p. 398; Yagnik et al., 2020, p. 229). This idea resonates with the concept of creative destruction, highlighting that continuous creative innovation is essential for maintaining competitiveness in any market (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 7; Schumpeter, 1942/2010, pp. 71-75).

AI's current innovative applications within the marketing domain include analyzing extensive customer data that exists in various types, such as numerical data, text, and images(Ameen et al., 2021, p.1; Blueshift, 2018, p. 3; Miklosik & Evans, 2020, p. 101288). By leveraging insights from the analysis, AI assists in effectively segmenting customers and enhancing interactions with them (Davenport, 2020, pp. 25-26), allowing marketers to deploy targeted marketing strategies and automating the communication with microsegments in real-time (Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490). Furthermore, AI facilitates the creation of accurate decision models and algorithms for predicting customer behavior, utilizing insights derived from data analysis and segmentation (Zanker et al., 2019, p. 161). While this paragraph describes the underlying technological capabilities and the high-level use cases of AI, the customer-facing AI-enabled innovations within the CJ framework are described in paragraph 2.3.2.

While AI as a disruptive invention is not novel, its integration within marketing is still "in its infancy" (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 240). Transitioning from invention to innovation, AI leads to creative destruction, carrying significant strategic implications for firms (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 227; Evans, 2017, p. 209; Porter, 2001, para. 43). As brands among all industries experiment with this technology (Amjad et al., 2023, p. 7; Chiu et al., 2023, p. 1), it is particularly crucial for premium B2C brands to strategically leverage AI throughout the CJ. These brands invest heavily in marketing, branding, and customer relationships to justify premium prices and maintain their reputation, since the brand itself serves as their unique selling point (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003, p. 426; Tabaku & Zerellari, 2015, p. 75; Phau & Prendergast, 2000, p. 122). Thus, this thesis explores AI-enabled innovation in marketing within the context of B2C premium brands.

2.3. Strategic Relevance of Customer Journeys

In this section, contemporary marketing concepts and principles are explained, alongside an exploration of the strategic significance of CJs and their evolution in recent times. Additionally, AI's affordances within the CJ framework and significance for B2C premium brands are described

2.3.1. Customer Centricity in the Experience Economy

Since the 2000s, marketing strategy shifts gradually from mass marketing to targeting specific audience segments, delivering tailored value propositions to individual customers, a concept known as customer-centricity (Sheth et al., 2000, p. 55). Due to its positive influence on customer lifetime value and the brand's long-term profitability, a customer-centric strategy is imperative for firms (Fader, 2012, p. xxvi). The focus on individual customers fully materializes with digitalization, facilitated by the widespread accessibility of vast amounts of individual-level customer data (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 73), a topic elaborated on in section 2.4.2.

Abbott (1955) argues that "what people really desire are not products but satisfying experiences" (p. 40), a statement supported by the increasing importance of CX in the age of technological advancements (Rekettye & Rekettye, 2019, p. 341). This particularly applies for premium brands, where a unique CX serves as a distinctive value proposition, differentiating them from competitors and influencing pricing and revenue (Atwal & Williams, 2009, pp. 341-342 & 344;

Pine & Gilmore, 2011, pp. 34-35; Rekettye & Rekettye, 2019, p. 341). Pine and Gilmore (2011, pp. 3 & 7) classify this as the "experience economy", describing experiences as a modern source of economic value. This aligns with evolutionary economics, recognizing consumers as not only rational, but also emotional individuals influenced by extraordinary experiences (Atwal & Williams, 2009, p. 344). Therefore, innovative CX design is a crucial marketing tactic in current and future premium consumer markets (Atwal & Williams, 2009, p. 345; Homburg et al., 2017, p. 398).

Touchpoints, interactions between brands and consumers, collectively shape the CX (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71; Rekettye & Rekettye, 2019, p. 342), underscoring the importance of the touchpoint's strategic management (Frow & Payne, 2007, pp. 98-99; Homburg et al., 2017, p. 384). Touchpoints can be classified as either brand-owned or partner-owned, with occasional instances of overlap, as observed in scenarios where a B2C brand collaborates with a technology company for app development (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, pp. 76-78). When collaborating with big tech companies for innovation, various strategic factors must be carefully considered, as discussed in paragraph 2.4.3.

2.3.2. Evolution of Customer Journeys

Particularly for premium brands, the central objective remains offering an exceptional CX (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 69; Pine & Gilmore, 2011, pp. 34-35). The CJ, defined as the sum of interactions and experiences across various touchpoints ending in a potential purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71), becomes a strategic focus (Varnali, 2019, p. 820). By cohesively mapping out a consumer's journey, marketers can effectively engage consumers at critical moments, establishing a connection with the most fitting message, marking CJ mapping a significant tool (Court et al., 2009, p. 2; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 1).

Empowered by digitalization, CJs have shifted from analog to primarily digital, resulting in a significant increase in complexity due to the growth of channels and the customer's freedom to switch between them (Hu & Tracogna, 2020, p. 1; Tueanrat et al., 2021, p. 344; Steinhoff et al., 2019, p. 386). This shift challenges traditional linear models as consumers navigate non-linear paths with diverse options (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 124; Court et al., 2009, pp. 1-2; Varnali, 2019,

pp. 831-832). To adapt, companies are using holistic views of the CJ, leading to enhanced marketing effectiveness and long-term strategies (Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490; Tueanrat et al., 2021, p. 345; Van Der Veen & Van Ossenbruggen, 2015, p. 202). Despite diverse models developed since the 1960s, there is still a lack of consistent understanding of consumer decision-making (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 122; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016, p. 75; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 10). This thesis follows Lemon and Verhoef's (2016, p. 77) CJ with three stages: the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phase, linking them to strategic objectives within each phase.

2.3.3. Customer Journey Objectives & AI-affordances

As noted previously, the consumer decision-making process has evolved and continues to transform, with various CJ models existing in academia. For this thesis, Lemon and Verhoef's division into pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases (2016, p. 77) is chosen for several reasons. Firstly, more detailed CJ models may be losing relevance due to rapid technological advancements and AI's disruptive impact (Hoyer et al., 2020, p. 57). Secondly, this approach remains timeless and independent from technological shifts, as it can be seen as a chronological division on a temporal level. In other words, regardless of technological evolution, these phases exist continuously within e-commerce. Therefore, this classification provides a robust foundation for operationalization and analysis. Lastly, this broader division allows for more flexible inductive coding, allowing for analysis beyond the limits of small-scale phases, which will be further explained in the methodological chapter.

It is imperative not only to comprehend the stages of the CJ but also to identify the consumers' needs, along with the strategic objectives derived by a firm for each stage (Frow & Payne, 2007, p. 99). These objectives can be seen as relatively stable and more static compared to the methods employed to achieve them. Linking them to the stages of the CJ model chosen, therefore further solidifies the stability and coherence of the chosen CJ framework. The strategic objectives and the relevant AI capabilities will be summarized in Table 1. While general AI-affordances such as analyzing big datasets were discussed previously, this section will delve into the customer-facing features of AI that assist in achieving the stated objectives.

Pre-Purchase Phase. Before consumers make a purchase, they undergo several decision-making processes initiated by a specific need. Firms benefit when this need aligns with their

brand, a phenomenon known as brand salience (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2004, p. 329). Brand salience reflects a brand's capacity to be recognized, remembered, or stand out in pre-purchase scenarios, including the depth and quality of consumer memory and associations with the brand (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2004, p. 327). This concept is especially important for premium brands, as it provides marketing advantages (Hoeffler & Keller, 2003, pp. 421 & 423-424), significantly influencing brand equity and economic success (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 131; Romaniuk & Sharp, 2004, pp. 328 & 330). Brand awareness, distinct from brand salience, is crucial when consumers initially consider a set of brands (Court et al., 2009, p. 3). This concept, defined as the "consumer's ability to recognize and/or recall a brand as a member of a product category" (Fuller et al., 2023, p. 363), impacts the decision-making likelihood of consideration and contributes to brand equity (Fuller et al., 2023, pp. 361-362 & 364). During this phase, consumers prioritize brand reputation, which enhances their willingness to pay a premium price, marking positive brand awareness as an important objective for premium brands (Fuller et al., 2023, p. 364; Venermo et al., 2020, p. 201; Özhan et al., 2023, p. 1). Within the pre-purchase phase, consumers gather information and refine their preferences (Court et al., 2009, p. 5). Marketers influence customers by highlighting benefits and excellence, strategically communicating and interacting to build positive perceptions and trust through the delivery of valuable information (Court et al., 2009, p. 5; Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 131; Venermo et al., 2020, p. 203). Nonetheless, conveying detailed information effectively poses challenges in today's fast-paced digital world, where attention spans are short (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 131).

In the pre-purchase phase, AI-driven innovations optimize marketing efforts through personalization, significantly enhancing effectiveness, particularly for premium brands seeking tailored relationships with customers (Yoo & Park, 2016, p. 5775). AI enables advertisement campaign optimization and streamlining content creation by personalized placement, timing, and keywords for interactive ads (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; Huang & Rust, 2021, pp. 40-41; Miklosik & Evans, 2020, p. 101288). Personalized websites set brands apart from competitors, and capture attention through engaging texts and images (Huang & Rust, 2021, pp. 40-41; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 491). Predictive personalization dynamically adjusts content in real-time to cater to individual user needs, enhancing the overall experience (Ameen et al., 2021, p. 5; Bilgihan et al.,

2016, p. 110), while real-time detection and response to customers' emotional cues improve engagement (Huang & Rust, 2021, p. 44). Customized recommendations, such as personalized product suggestions, aim to influence customer choices across digital channels (Ma & Sun, 2020, pp. 482 & 491; Konstan & Riedl, 2012, p. 104).

In summary, personalized ads, content, and recommendations are essential for providing relevant information and influencing consumer interest online (Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490). This holds significance throughout the CJ, especially during the pre-purchase phase, where establishing brand salience and awareness is crucial for consideration and evaluation (Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490). Given the dynamic nature of digital marketing, automation via AI streamlines marketers' efforts in this demanding, time-critical process (Huang & Rust, 2021, pp. 40-41), establishing the adoption of AI innovation as a competitive imperative.

Purchase Phase. The purchase phase marks the moment when consumers finalize their brand selection and purchase a brand's product (Court et al., 2009, p. 3). Within this phase, two key objectives emerge: ensuring a seamless process for an effortless conversion and maximizing sales by offering optimized pricing. Seamless transactions without technical obstacles are important for premium brands aiming for "functional excellence" (Allsopp, 2005, p. 194), enhancing CX (Steinhoff et al., 2019, p. 383). User-experience design (UX design) plays a crucial role for the digital touchpoints of the CJ (McCarthy & Wright, 2004, p. 42; Hoyer et al., 2020, p. 60). A well-designed UX is seen as a strategic advantage, influencing variables like the value proposition (Sward, 2007, p. 174). Pricing is particularly significant for premium brands, distinguishing them in the market (Allsopp, 2005, pp. 187-189) and profoundly impacting sales (Biswas et al., 2013, p. 63). Premium brand pricing strategies are intricate, influenced by factors beyond traditional supply and demand dynamics (Allsopp, 2005, p. 193), with consumer willingness to pay increasingly complex and individual (Allsopp, 2005, pp. 186 & 188-189 & 191 & 193).

AI is expected to play a significant role not only in predicting consumer preferences but also in enabling real-time personalization of product pricing and evaluating the effectiveness of promotional offers (Davenport, 2020, p. 32 & 35). Web-based personalization "is any action that makes web experience of a user personalized to the user's taste" (Krishnaraju & Mathew, 2013, p. 255), and could be an area suited for AI-driven enhancements.

Post-Purchase Phase. In the post-purchase phase, ongoing experiences shape the intention to repurchase and influence subsequent decision journeys (Court et al., 2009, p. 3; Park et al., 2012, p. 415), heavily impacting customers' confidence in both the product and brand (Kumar & Anjaly, 2017, p. 1278). As a result, the company aims to achieve customer satisfaction, occurring when experiences meet expectations (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 132). Additionally, the brand is responsible for addressing customer concerns, maintaining regular communication, and fostering loyalty for sustained engagement, ultimately aiming for cognitive lock-in (Kumar & Anjaly, 2017, p. 1284; Steinhoff et al., 2019, p. 369). When a brand successfully achieves these objectives, it results in highly satisfied customers who are more likely to repurchase without needing to repeat the entire decision-making process, thereby saving the brand's marketing resources (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 132; Court et al., 2009, p. 3). However, brand loyalty does not automatically translate into brand advocacy (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 132), which underscores the importance of fostering advocacy as an additional objective. Especially within the premium segment, word of mouth as a part of brand advocacy is crucial in influencing other potential customers (Bhati & Verma, 2020, p. 153; Park et al., 2021, p. 415).

In the post-purchase phase, AI chatbots leverage advanced speech recognition and natural language processing to transition customer service to self-service, leading to significant resource savings (Fluss, 2017, para. 4; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 491). AI-enabled automated follow-up content can be employed to maintain communication and enhance loyalty (Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 491). Furthermore, AI assists in predicting customer preferences, enabling retailers to adopt a proactive "shipping-first, shopping-later" approach, where items are proactively sent without requiring a formal order process, while still offering the flexibility to return unwanted items (Agrawal et al., 2017, para. 6). The effectiveness of this approach hinges on the advancement of predictive analytics to minimize returns (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 25).

Table 1
CJ Objectives and Customer-Facing AI-affordances

CJ (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77)	**Phase**	**Objective**	**AI-affordance** (Campbell et al. 2020, pp. 228 & 230-231 & 235)
Pre-purchase	- Need initiating the journey - Initial set of brands under consideration - Gathering of information and subtracting brands	- Brand salience (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2004, p. 327) - Brand awareness - Influence while conveying information (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 129)	- Personalized/targeted campaigns, websites, recommendations
Purchase	Selection of a brand	- Effortless conversion - Maximising revenue	- Real-time pricing
Post-purchase	- Experiencing product and forming opinion - Customer support - Reoder	- Gain loyalty - Maintain contact - Brand advocacy (Bhati & Verma, 2020, p. 153)	- Customer support via AI-chatbot - Personalized follow-up content - Automated reordering (Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 491)

Note. Unless indicated otherwise the source of this information is Court and colleagues (2009).

In conclusion, the digitization of e-commerce shifts the firms' focus toward customer-centricity, particularly crucial for premium brands leveraging experiential value for premium pricing across all touchpoints. CJ mapping serves as a strategic tool to ensure a seamless CJ. Within the CJ, AI offers affordances to enable a superior CX facilitated by accessible data, influencing consumer decision-making, and resulting in an increased customer lifetime value.

2.4. Holistic Strategic Considerations

In addition to the previously outlined AI capabilities, it is crucial to explore how upcoming opportunities can be leveraged. Exploring AI implementation, requirements, and implications for firms is essential. Further, its capability for hyper-personalization at scale and the objective of maintaining a consistent external brand image require expert's insights. Additionally, examining

the roles of major tech companies like Google and Meta, as well as creative agencies or consultancies, is crucial for understanding AI's future application in marketing.

2.4.1. Personalization-Consistency Paradox

Interdisciplinary literature on personalization within fields like psychology or computer science has grown over the last years (Chandra et al., 2022, p. 1530; Zanker et al., 2019, p. 106). Research shows that personalized communication influences variables like the consumer's brand attitude (Smink et al., 2020, p. 483), brand usage intention (Tran et al., 2020, pp. 10-11) loyalty and involvement (Jain et al., 2021, p. 20), and therefore impacts marketing efficiency and the brand's revenue (Chandra et al., 2022, p. 153; Boudet al., 2019, p. 2). These results can be explained by the self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 2018, p. 189), stating that the higher the alignment between the brand's and the own personality, the better the influence on revenue relevant variables. Embedded within this theory lies the assumption that consumers attribute human characteristics to brands that build the brand's personality, initially introduced by Aaker (p. 347) in 1997 and commonly employed in research (Ghorbani et al., 2022, p. 1965). Brand-self-congruity influences consumer behaviors and attitudes within all the CJ phases (Sirgy, 2018, p. 189), such as a preference, emotional attachment, brand trust, loyalty, and purchase (Ahmad & Thyagaraj, 2015, p. 41; Ghorbani et al., 2022, p. 1961; Sirgy, 2018, pp. 189 & 200). Personalization, perceived as a strategic tool "to gain a competitive advantage, including learning, matching, and delivering products and services to customers" (Chandra et al., 2022, p. 1531), can be facilitated by AI. Due to AI, personalized targeting and the adaption of a brand's personality to dynamic customer preferences is possible at scale by leveraging micro-segments, known as hyper-personalization (Kumar, 2007, p. 536; Kwon and Kim, 2012, p. 103; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490).

At the same time, preserving and protecting a consistent brand image represents a significant goal. In today's economy, Kapferer asserts that "the primary capital of businesses is their brands" (1992, p. 1). Particularly in luxury and premium markets, the brand can be seen as a unique selling point and distinguishing factor (Phau & Prendergast, 2000, p. 122; Roy et al., 2019, p. 245). The relationship between brands and consumers follows interpersonal norms of human-like relationships; therefore, violating these with inconsistency can lead to a negative perception of the brand. Brand consistency is recognized as a crucial component of a brand's reputation

and is important for "providing an outstanding customer experience" (Frow & Payne, 2007, pp. 99-100), affecting brand loyalty and trust (Luffarelli et al., 2019, p. 100; Roy et al., 2019, p. 250; Šerić et al., 2020, p. 341). Any inconsistencies in the brand image can undermine the brand's reputation and, consequently, its equity (Matthiesen & Phau, 2005, p. 325). Consistency in the brand image can be achieved via harmonized communication through all channels, delivering a stable message to both the global public and individual consumers (Frow & Payne, 2007, pp. 99-100; Matthiesen & Phau, 2005, p. 328).

In summary, a brand's communication needs to be "coordinated and coherent" (Frow & Payne, 2007, pp. 99-100) while also being "tailored to ... particular interests" (Frow & Payne, 2007, pp. 99-100). There remains an unresolved question regarding this contradiction, therefore this thesis investigates how B2C premium brands will strategically utilize AI-enabled personalization while maintaining a consistent brand image. This exploration seeks to find the balance between adaptation and coherence, and whether one of these aspects may diminish in importance in the future.

2.4.2. Big Data Sourcing

Digitalization, advancements in technology and the rapid expansion of devices, apps, and channels have led to a scenario where modern customers serve as a constant source of both structured and unstructured data (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 230-231; Wedel & Kannan, 2016, p. 97). Companies are collecting vast volumes of consumer data to enable customer-centric marketing and AI-driven innovation, improving CXs and offering greater value, ultimately leading to a competitive advantage and improved financial performance (Anshari et al., 2019, p. 95; Erevelles et al., 2016, p. 897; Wedel & Kannan, 2016, p. 97). The demand for extensive customer data has increased, recognizing data as valuable capital in modern markets (Erevelles et al., 2016, p. 897).

Data collection channels vary, including businesses' own devices and websites, as well as second or third-party sources (Schneider et al., 2017, p. 593). First-party data, acquired directly, can be combined with competitor's first-party data, known as second-party data, creating mutual value (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 25; Schneider et al., 2017, p. 594). Third-party data describes extensive datasets from aggregators like Google that lack a direct link to the business (Bernazzani Barron, 2022, para. 9; Hendrikse et al., 2022, p. 65). Notably, most of the big data is

collected by big tech companies like Google, Amazon, and Meta, granting them significant influence (Wedel & Kannan, 2016, p. 102).

This thesis aims to explore how B2C premium brands will address the growing demand for consumer data and their potential collaborations with other parties. Collaboration with big tech companies is not limited to data collection; it extends to the responsibility, competence, and potential assistance these companies can provide, as discussed in the subsequent section.

2.4.3. Invention and Innovation Ownership

The interaction between customer-facing brands and influential parties, such as big tech companies renowned for their advancements in technology (Edelmann & Palumbo, 2023, para. 6), and creative agencies or consultants, valued for their expertise, requires careful attention (Tekic & Koroteev, 2019, p. 688). Key players like Apple, Google, IBM, and Microsoft help companies to prepare for potential technological innovation by helping to leverage big data and AI (Evans, 2017, p. 217; Hendrikse et al., 2020, p. 63; Steinhoff et al., 2019, p. 375). Strategic utilization of technologies not only showcases a company's approach to innovation but also defines its position within the industry and shapes its future technological aspirations (Matt et al., 2015, p. 340). The decision to lead in technology adoption or stick to established norms for operational efficiency requires thoughtful consideration. While assuming the role of a technological leader offers a competitive advantage, it entails inherent risks and necessitates specific technological competencies (Matt et al., 2015, p. 340). Moreover, nowadays there is a high demand for creativity and entrepreneurial spirit among employees within the media domain, yet this talent may not always be readily available within companies. Knowledge-intensive consultancy services are crucial, especially in creative industries reliant on the innovative input of individuals (Müller et al., 2009, p. 153). Therefore, engaging creative agencies or consultancies for innovative projects could be advantageous. Given the yet unpredictable impacts of AI, this thesis seeks to investigate how premium B2C brands navigate ongoing AI development, including considerations regarding the need for potential collaborations.

In summary, this thesis explores how B2C premium brands can strategically leverage AI to enhance their marketing efforts throughout the CJ. The study highlights the crucial role of superior CX across all CJ stages in enhancing overall profitability and emphasizes the usage of AI innovations, data, and potential collaborations for shaping the future of marketing.

3. Methodology

This chapter elaborates on the methodology employed, accounting for the chosen method, explaining the research design, and outlining strategies used to ensure the reliability and validity of findings. Moreover, it explains additional details, including the specifics of data collection methodologies, the criteria guiding sampling procedures, the operationalization and research ethics. Finally, it offers a comprehensive explanation of the rigorous data analysis process employed in this study.

3.1. Choice of Method

The selected method for this research are qualitative expert interviews. This paragraph will explain the reason for choosing this qualitative approach and the research design built to address the research question effectively. Since qualitative methods are known for their inherent openness and flexibility, this chapter will explain the relevance of reliability and validity in this context. Moreover, it will describe how these standards were upheld throughout the course of this study, ensuring the quality of the findings.

3.1.1. Qualitative Approach: Expert Interviews

Qualitative methods in social sciences are known for flexible approaches to data collection and analysis, helping researchers discover new perspectives and understandings within complex and multifactorial topics (Chandra & Shang, 2019, p. 3; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82; Scholl, 2016, p. 17; Stebbins, 2001, p. 6). They are particularly valuable for exploring under-researched areas and aiming for a thorough understanding of the research subject without depending on pre-existing literature or findings from other studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 84; Van Audenhove, 2007, slide 11; Scholl, 2016, p. 17). Qualitative methods are suitable for exploring questions without aiming for statistical conclusions, enabling researchers to collect nuanced results that quantitative approaches might overlook. They prioritize providing comprehensive insights and explanations, taking into account specific contexts to evaluate their significance and implications (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82; Dworkin, 2012, p. 1319; Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 35; Tavory, 2020, p. 462; Yin, 2016, p. 103). Considering the qualitative nature of the research question addressed in the thesis, namely, how premium B2C brands can strategically leverage AI to

enhance their marketing efforts throughout the CJ, a qualitative approach is chosen. Qualitative research is proficient in investigating 'how' questions, given their demand for open-ended questions and nuanced responses, unlike the structured, numerical answers often associated with scales of quantitative methods (Chandra & Shang, 2019, p. 3; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 204). The depth of understanding facilitated by qualitative approaches is particularly crucial when researching complex subjects like the strategic leveraging of AI for B2C premium brands, where multifaceted factors need to be considered. Additionally, qualitative research offers flexibility in adapting to the topic of digital innovation, ensuring that the study remains responsive to the dynamic nature of the study's subject (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 84).

As qualitative research relies on specific data-gathering methods to gain detailed insights, employing strategies such as expert interviews proves invaluable in achieving initial understandings within emerging or vaguely defined fields (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 658; Chandra & Shang, 2019, p. 4). In the early and exploratory phases of research projects, engaging experts in interviews is considered a more efficient and focused approach to knowledge generation compared to alternative methods (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 2). Experts offer concentrated sources of insider knowledge, granting access to specialized domains (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 653; Helfferich, 2022, pp. 877 & 887). Their expertise, distinct from everyday knowledge, offers unique insights demanded in expert interviews (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, pp. 18 & 25; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4). Employing expert interviews to address the research question is justified, as this thesis seeks specialized knowledge about new and emerging topics inherent to market experts that are not accessible via other sources (Van Audenhove, 2007, slide 12). Thus, by employing qualitative methods, this study aims to provide a rich and comprehensive understanding of how premium B2C brands can strategically leverage AI to enhance their marketing efforts throughout the CJ, capturing the factors essential for informed decision-making crucial to a firm's economic success, while also contributing to bridging a research gap within this fast-paced domain, thereby advancing scientific knowledge.

3.1.2. Research Design

Expert interviews, a fundamental component of qualitative methods, necessitate semi-structured interactions with individuals renowned for their expertise within a specific field (Van

Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 179). This interviewing format fosters a responsive dynamic, allowing interviewers the flexibility to adapt questions in line with a "responsive interviewing model" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 30), enabling deep insights. Typically, these interviews employ open-ended questions, allowing for the collection of novel and unexpected information (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 661). In-depth expert interviews are particularly suited for gaining comprehensive knowledge beyond the scope of casual interviews, especially when dealing with complex expertise among multiple individuals or groups in the same field (Johnson, 2001, p. 107). Experts can be distinguished by their specialized knowledge acquired through professional experience (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 181), the exact sampling criteria for selecting these experts will be provided in paragraph 3.2.1. Subsequently, the data collected through qualitative expert interviews will undergo thematic analysis, a method suited for uncovering new themes, as explained in paragraph 3.3. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 79-80). By employing qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, this study seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of how premium B2C brands can strategically leverage AI to enhance their marketing efforts throughout the CJ. This method of data collection and analysis facilitates exploration of the field and yields deep insights into a novel topic, allowing themes and comprehensive information to emerge from the data.

3.1.3. Reliability and Validity

Qualitative research is renowned for its greater adaptability compared to quantitative research (Chandra & Shang, 2019b, p. 3; Scholl, 2016, p. 17; Stebbins, 2001, p. 6). Nevertheless, in high-quality qualitative research, this flexibility has to be balanced by adherence to systematic and rigorous procedures. Ensuring scientific rigor in qualitative research includes addressing both reliability and validity, widely recognized as fundamental criteria for quality (Morse et al., 2002, p. 14; Silverman, 2011, p. 360). While scholars hold differing perspectives on the applicability of validity and reliability in qualitative research (Lub, 2015, pp. 2-3), this thesis will utilize and adapt these concepts within the domain of qualitative research.

In qualitative research, reliability hinges on the transparency of the research process and the selection of a robust theoretical framework, which necessitates thorough planning and careful attention to the study's subject (Silverman, 2011, p. 360; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). To ensure rigor and reliability, the theoretical framework must be clearly articulated and logically

developed (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 81), underscoring the scientific relevance of the research question (Thomas, 2006, p. 237). Reliability in qualitative interview data collection is further upheld by employing low-inference descriptors, facilitated through the recording and transcription of interviews (Silverman, 2011, p. 365). Additionally, a self-reflexivity assessment conducted in paragraph 3.2.2. contributes to ensuring reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82; Tracy, 2010, p. 842). While the traditional approach of establishing intercoder reliability involves multiple researchers independently coding the same data, practical constraints within the master's thesis program make this approach impractical. Instead, clear and detailed coding guidelines are provided to ensure transparency in the coding tree and enable audit trails (Morse, 1999, p. 717).

In qualitative research, validity hinges on the persuasiveness and logical development of data analysis, aiming to offer a robust interpretation that accurately mirrors the real-world phenomena under investigation (Silverman, 2011, p. 368; Yin, 2016, pp. 88-89). The utilization of the triangulation of theories in this study serves to increase validity by supporting a more comprehensive understanding of the research subject (Silverman, 2011, p. 369; Yin, 2016, p. 87). This thesis is grounded in evolutionary economics, emphasizing dynamic innovation facilitated by AI and introducing the concept of creative destruction to underscore the imperative for companies to leverage AI to maintain competitiveness (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, pp. 6-7; Schumpeter, 1942/2010, pp. 71-75). Adding the concept of the experience economy justifies the objective of delivering exceptional CX for premium brands. The CJ serves as an organizing principle to structure AI-affordances and management objectives (Court et al., 2009, pp. 1-2; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71; Pine and Gilmore, 2011, pp. 3 & 7; Rekettye & Rekettye, 2019, p. 341; Varnali, 2019, p. 820). Strategic implications are further explored through the lens of self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 2018, p. 189), brand personality (Aaker, 1997, p. 347), and overarching models for digitization strategy (Matt et al., 2015, p. 340). This triangulation of theories not only facilitates a cohesive understanding of the topic but also plays a crucial role in scientific operationalization and data analysis, enabling the results to be effectively contextualized within existing literature. Additionally, validity is strengthened by explicitly showcasing how data interpretations were derived and supporting findings with direct quotes from the original raw data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 82). Furthermore, to enhance validity, the constant comparison method is employed,

prompting consistent comparison of cases and assumptions to gain more comprehensive insights (Silverman, 2011, p. 378). The coding process, as elaborated in paragraph 3.3., contributes to validity, emphasizing the provision of a detailed coding tree provided in Appendix D.

In summary, this research ensures scientific quality through systematic and rigorous procedures. Reliability is upheld by transparent research processes, a robust theoretical framework, and detailed coding guidelines, while validity is strengthened by persuasive data analysis, triangulation of theories, and constant comparison methods.

3.2. Data Collection

This paragraph comprehensively outlines the data collection process, including a thorough discussion of the sampling strategy and its criteria, the specific details of the data collection procedures, and an overview of the research ethics consistently applied throughout the study.

3.2.1. Sampling Strategy

To effectively address the research question regarding the strategic usage of AI to enhance a B2C brand's marketing efforts throughout the CJ, it is imperative to interview individuals with expertise in key domains such as marketing, branding, digitization, innovation, corporate strategy, and AI. The sampling criteria prioritize individuals with extensive experience and high competence in these fields, possessing relevant, exclusive, heterogeneous, and transdisciplinary knowledge (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 653; Helfferich, 2022, pp. 877 & 887; Meuser & Nagel, 2009, pp. 18 & 22). Recognizing the potential limitations of resources for digital transformations within companies (Tekic & Koroteev, 2019, p. 688), consideration is also given to employees of agencies, consultants, or freelancers overseeing companies in the B2C premium domain. In contemporary contexts, the traditional link between expertise and profession has become less rigid. Therefore, it is crucial to expand the criteria for selecting experts beyond conventional professional roles (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, pp. 19 & 23). By broadening the sampling criteria to focus more on expertise rather than profession, it is aimed to capture the diverse perspectives of professionals collaborating on topics relevant to the research question (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 22). Guided by the research question and theoretical insights, the sampling criteria include experts within the following areas:

- Digital Marketing
- E-Commerce
- UX Design
- Customer Journey Management
- Innovation Management

These sampling criteria are designed to ensure that participants possess relevant expertise and experience in the areas of interest. Employing a nonprobability sampling method, specifically the purposive sampling technique, allows for the selection of candidates based on predefined criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 223; Babbie, 2014, pp. 199-200; Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 184; Yin, 2016, pp. 93-94). The sampling strategy aims to maximize variation within the obtained information, known as "maximum variation sampling", to enhance validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 225; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 201). Snowball sampling was employed to find an additional participant, with experts identified through purposive sampling providing contact information to colleagues within the same field (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 225; Van Audenhove, 2007, slide 5; Yin, 2016, p. 95). Recruitment efforts were facilitated through the thesis supervisor's and the researcher's professional network. Additionally, experts were identified and approached using relevant search terms on platforms like LinkedIn or Google, such as "AI Marketing Strategist", and exploring agency websites for contact information. The study engaged a total of 13 experts, exceeding the university requirements for the thesis. An overview of the experts and a description of their profession concerning the sampling criteria can be found in Appendix A.

3.2.2. Data Collection Process

The cornerstone of a semi-structured expert interview is the interview guide, which serves as a systematic framework for designing interview processes. While maintaining fundamental openness, control over the interview process is necessary for rigorous data collection, ensuring consistency and comparability across interviews (Helfferich, 2022, pp. 876 & 881). The interview guide comprises elements such as prompts, pre-formulated open-ended questions, and keywords. These elements aim to strike a balance between openness and structure according to methodological decisions and research needs. This approach allows the interviewee to express

their own perspectives and thoughts freely, while also enabling the researcher to explore unexpected emerging areas of interest (Helfferich, 2022, p. 881; Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 31). The interview guide applied to this study's interviews can be found in Appendix B.

The semi-structured format of interviews allows for flexibility in data collection, necessitating the interviewer to pose insightful questions spontaneously. Therefore, conducting a thorough literature review before qualitative interviews is essential to gain in-depth knowledge of the research topic and current trends (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 188; Yin, 2016, pp. 30-31; Meuser & Nagel, 2009, pp. 31-32). This step aids in developing the interview guide and enhances the interviewer's credibility and familiarity with relevant terminology (Van Audenhove, 2007, slide 14). As part of the self-reflexivity assessment crucial for ensuring reliability, it is imperative to consider various factors influencing the interviewer's perceived competence, such as academic qualifications and gender biases: The perception of the interviewer, especially if they are a student, as knowledgeable, significantly impacts interview success. Experts are influenced by the interviewer's perceived competence, often shaped by factors like academic qualifications and institutional background as well as literature knowledge (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 34). Female researchers, particularly in male-dominated fields like tech, may encounter challenges due to gender bias, affecting their professional status perception (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, pp.34-35). To achieve equitable interaction, the interviewer needs to be perceived as a co-expert or as possessing expertise from a different knowledge culture, encouraging the use of specialized knowledge/vocabulary during the interview (Bogner & Menz, 2009, p. 68). Thus, maintaining professionalism and posing well-informed questions are crucial for fostering trust and conducting high-quality discussions (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 192). This is achieved by professional communication prior to the interviews, naming my institutional background and introducing myself including my professional and academic achievements. Further, a deep knowledge of the topic, achieved by an extensive literature review and embodied in the questions and follow-up questions posed during the interview process, is reflected in the participants' responses during the interviews (e.g., "You've asked all the right questions" - Interviewee 10, "Ah, that's an interesting one [question]" - Interviewee 5). Moreover, all participants expressed interest in receiving the research results, indicating their confidence in the research quality and the interviewer's professional and academic competence.

A total of 13 German and English interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams or Zoom within five weeks, with an average duration of 50 minutes, ensuring a professional setting conducive to productive discussions. The sample presents itself as international, consisting of individuals from various multinational companies with diverse headquarters locations. On an individual level, the sample also reflects international diversity, with interviewees originating from various nations. Due to the international scope and project time constraints, online interviews were conducted and recorded. Transcripts were initially generated using Microsoft's auto-transcript tool, followed by manual adjustment and correction. In the beginning of each interview, each participant was informed about the research goals, conversation scope, and data handling procedures, ensuring informed consent (Van Audenhove, 2007, slide 25; Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 32). The communication during the interview was conducted in a dialogue style, characterized by symmetry and substantial interaction while adapting the questions to the conversational flow (Van Audenhove, 2007, slide 14; Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 192; Bogner & Menz, 2009, p. 68). Interviews concluded with expressions of gratitude to the participants for their participation (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 193).

3.2.3. Operationalization

This paragraph establishes a link between the thesis's theoretical framework and the phrasing of interview questions. The operationalization (Table 3) comprises two primary components: the CJ and strategic considerations, along with six sub-components: pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase, brand consistency, data sourcing, and invention and innovation ownership. Qualitative research can be characterized as iterative, involving continuous comparisons between data and theory rather than following a linear path (Chandra & Shang, 2019b, p. 3; Boeije, 2010, p. 90). Researchers avoid predefining outcomes or restricting observations, allowing patterns to naturally emerge from the data. Consequently, some questions arising during discussions may not be explicitly listed in the operationalization but remain unstructured to facilitate in-depth exploration (Boeije, 2010, p. 5; Denny & Weckesser, 2022, p. 1166).

Given the flexibility of the qualitative research process, adjustments such as modifying questions during or after data collection are allowed to enhance the research instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82). Specific questions were selectively asked to achieve detailed and

comprehensive answers when needed. Further, the questions were slightly adapted to the interviewees' area of expertise, as the sampling criteria includes various fields, enhancing the quality of results (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2018, p. 192). Therefore, the operationalization relies partly on theoretical themes and partly remains open. The questions are phrased open-ended to allow diverse and unbiased answers (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 188; Yin, 2016, p. 142; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pp. 4-5).

Interview questions typically align with the research questions and are designed to be understandable to the interviewees, as reflected in this operationalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 230). The phrasing of the interview questions mirrors the descriptive yet exploratory nature of the research question, using "can" questions for descriptive and current aspects, and "will" questions for exploratory and future-facing approaches (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 34). The interview guide, which includes the interview questions along with prompts and an icebreaker question, can be found in Appendix B.

Table 2
Operationalization

Customer Journey	Operationalization
General Customer Journey	• How will AI impact current customer journey models for premium brands? • How will AI impact the strategic relevance of customer journey mapping?
Pre-purchase Phase	• How can AI be leveraged within the pre-purchase phase for premium brands? • How did the objectives for a premium brand before the purchase change with the advent of AI? • How will AI impact the pre-purchase phase of premium brands?

Customer Journey	Operationalization
Purchase Phase	• How can AI be leveraged within the purchase phase for premium brands? • How did the objectives for a premium brand in the purchase phase change with the advent of AI? • How will AI impact the purchase phase of premium brands?
Post-Purchase Phase	• How can AI be leveraged within the post-purchase phase for premium brands? • How did the objectives for a premium brand after the purchase change with the advent of AI? • How will AI impact the post-purchase phase of premium brands?
Holistic Strategic Considerations	
Brand Consistency	• How important is brand consistency for premium brands? • Has the importance of brand consistency changed with AI? • How can premium brands navigate between brand consistency and personalization?
Data Sourcing	• How will premium brands get the amount of data needed for leveraging AI? • What are important aspects to consider in terms of data sourcing?
Invention & Innovation	• How will premium brands gain the needed technological know-how? • With what stakeholders will premium brands collaborate to be able to utilize AI?

3.2.4. Research Ethics

Ensuring alignment with ethical standards in research is critical (Creswell & Poth, 2018; pp. 95-99). This study follows the Code of Conduct for Research Integrity established by the Netherlands Association of Universities (KNAW, 2018), aiming for ethical research, and prioritizing the well-being of both researchers and participants. Active consent, explained in the informed consent form (found in Appendix C), was obtained, providing participants with comprehensive information about the research objectives (KNAW, 2018, pp. 16-18; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 98). This fosters trust among participants (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019, p. 190) and upholds ethical research standards (KNAW, 2018, pp. 16-18; Yin, 2016, p. 49). Throughout the analysis, information was accurately represented, while sensitive data was handled with the confidentiality (KNAW, 2018, pp. 16-18).

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis transforms the raw data into results and findings (Boeije, 2010, p. 94). The transcripts containing qualitative data in text format were digitally stored, ensuring reliability through low-inference descriptors (Helfferich, 2022, p. 875; Silverman, 2011, p. 365). Thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach and Boeije's (2010) inductive coding methods were employed to carefully analyze interview transcripts. Thematic analysis, a widely employed qualitative methodology, involves the identification of patterns, known as themes, within the data. This approach yields a comprehensive, detailed, and rich portrayal of the data, all while maintaining theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 79-80, Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p.82). Qualitative coding is the process of refining the data while maintaining its significance and viewing it with a very open mind. It begins with a big volume of data and ends with a higher-level perspective (Al-Eisawi, 2022, p. 4). Acknowledging the exploratory nature and limited prior knowledge of the study's topic, inductive coding was employed within each block to discern meaning without predefined frames or biases (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83; Chandra & Shang, 2019a, p. 92). Inductive coding, as a data analysis method, involves the development of themes from raw textual data "from the bottom up" through interpretations grounded solely in the data itself (Chandra & Shang, 2019b, p. 91; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82; Thomas, 2006, p. 237). This approach relies on inductive reasoning, enabling themes to emerge through repeated

examination and constant comparison of the data, facilitating coding close to the data without influence from existing concepts or theories, Arranging the data inductively, and progressing towards more abstract units of information (Chandra & Shang, 2019a, p. 91; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82).

Inductive coding, following Boije's (2010) methodology, entails open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding involves deconstructing data into codes and identifying themes and fragments without predefined categories (Boije, 2010, p. 96). During this stage, I dealt intensely with the data, constantly comparing themes and fragments, and investigating deviant cases for reliability (Silverman, 2011, p. 378). Axial coding entailed transferring the codes into an Excel sheet and a digital white board, grouping them into categories and subcategories, and determining dominant codes that best represented the data (Boije, 2010, p. 108). The categories adopt the terminology from the interviews to ensure concurrence to the data (Meuser & Nagel, 2009, p. 36). These broad categories were then elevated to higher levels of abstraction, moving from particulars to general levels (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 88). The process of abstraction was facilitated by the author's terminology, with emerging concepts named accordingly (Chandra & Shang, 2019b, p. 4). Selective coding involves identifying relationships between relevant codes and interpreting the data to answer the research question (Boije, 2010, pp. 114–115). The coding tree provided in Appendix D illustrates this process comprehensively, contributing to the study's reliability (Morse, 1999, p. 717).

4. Results

Given the diverse range of experts interviewed, multifaceted perspectives on the topic were gathered, enriching the result's depth and comprehensiveness. Addressing the question of *how premium B2C brands can strategically leverage AI to enhance their marketing efforts throughout the CJ,* this chapter explains the three selective primary and the seven axial subthemes identified during thematic analysis. Although the CJ serves as a framework for operationalization, the themes that emerged through inductive coding presented themselves beyond this framework. Therefore, this chapter does not follow the structure of the three CJ stages. Interviews 8 and 11 are conducted in German; the direct quotations cited in this chapter are translated by the author. For an enhanced understanding the results will be contextualized with scientific literature; a more comprehensive theoretical discussion can be found in the conclusion. The coding tree, enabling reliability, is available in Appendix D.

4.1. Disruptive AI-affordances Enhancing CX

The first theme focuses on transformative AI capabilities in marketing, categorized into subthemes. One emerging subtheme is the enhancement of back-end functionalities, including data analysis improved by AI. This affordance enables real-time insights facilitating precise mapping of CJ and simultaneous adjustments in strategy, according to experts. Interviewees underscore that AI-supported data analysis serves as the foundation for customer-facing marketing capabilities, enabling precise segmentation, dynamic targeting, predictive analyses and automation in customer communication. Another subtheme emerging focuses on AI-enabled customer-facing features like hyper-personalization and generative AI. While the personalization of marketing assets has already been employed in the past, experts observe that AI enables scalability and efficiency improvements, which can be considered a disruptive development. Experts highlight generative AI producing high-quality content as an important advancement, transforming content creation processes when implemented effectively. These disruptive advancements are expected to change operational paradigms, significantly reducing time efforts, scaling capabilities, and substantially impacting marketing effectiveness, optimizing the overall CX. Companies failing to adapt to these AI-affordances risk lagging in competitiveness.

4.1.1. Data Analysis

Experts emphasize AI's crucial role in data analysis, highlighting its advantages over human efforts. Interviewees state that AI handles extensive datasets with minimal errors, accelerating analysis and enabling the restructuring of complex data types. Interviewee 6 highlights the disruptive potential of AI-enabled data analysis, noting that its speed facilitates real-time adjustments in strategy: "I think that's a big part of disruption.". Experts mention that AI-enabled data analysis uncovers complex relations in consumer behavior while maintaining objectivity, unlike humans, as Interviewee 13 notes: "AI can actually help you prioritize objectively... and make us more honest with ourselves.". Additionally, Interviewee 1 notes that AI serves as a source of collective knowledge, similar to a memory loss-free personal brain, enhancing historical data analysis. Overall, experts agree that AI surpasses humans in data analysis regarding speed, capabilities, error susceptibility, and objectivity, enabling marketeers to "understand customers like never before." (Interviewee 7). Applying AI in data analysis allows companies to "reach immediate benefits, ...making an impact that matters." (Interviewee 5).

Interviewees consistently highlight the disruptive impact of AI-enabled data analysis in facilitating consumer segmentation and targeting. Interviewee 6 emphasizes the challenge of accuracy inherent in traditional demographic-based segmentation, advocating for AI's alternatives. Interviewee 13 illustrates that AI-enabled dynamic segmenting enables individuals to transition seamlessly between predefined customer segments in real-time, transcending traditional binary categories. Interviewees state that AI enhances targeting by leveraging real-time data analysis, ensuring messages resonate with the "particular segment, moment of time and space where these messages are interesting for people." (Interviewee 6).

Experts indicate further AI-affordances within data analysis, including predictive analysis and automation. Interviewees highlight AI's role in enabling proactive decision-making through accurate and reliable predictive analytics. Interviewee 9 envisions a future where companies not only anticipate customer needs but also track the success of these predictions: "We want to look for leading KPIs to go into prediction.". According to the interviewees, AI's predictive potential combined with automation efforts allows companies to anticipate and prevent issues in customer service contexts. By flagging potential problems early, AI enables companies to intervene

before escalations occur, ensuring consistent extraordinary CX: “Nobody should have to be a hero to deliver good CX.” (Interviewee 9).

In summary, the AI-driven advancements in data analysis are disruptive. Companies that do not leverage AI for precise and real-time analysis miss the opportunity for dynamic segmentation and targeted and automated communication. Consequently, they need more resources to achieve potentially worse CX than brands leveraging AI.

Challenges. According to experts, AI’s promise in data analysis relies heavily on data accuracy. Many companies struggle with outdated or poor-quality data sources, as noted by Interviewee 13, limiting AI’s potential. High-quality data is crucial for valid results, as illustrated in the principle “GIGO: garbage in, garbage out.” (Interviewee 2). Interviewee 2 adds the necessity of standardizing data sets, pointing out that the lack of “holistic, coherent, harmonized data” is a significant challenge for B2C premium brands. Experts agree that data quality is more important than data quantity. Interviewee 8 illustrates that certain AI applications, like chatbots, can personalize effectively with minimal data because “language alone reveals a lot about a person (allein Sprache verrät schon sehr viel über einen)”. Interviewee 13 also emphasizes prioritizing data quality over quantity, advocating for targeted data collection that aligns with key brand differentiators. They warn against “drowning in data and not thriving on data”. By understanding critical aspects and “moments of truth” (Interviewee 9) in the CJ, brands can identify the specific data needed to enhance CX and achieving a competitive advantage.

CJ Mapping. Without AI usage CJ mapping is “costly, time-consuming, and there’s no way to easily update it.” (Interviewee 2). According to experts, challenges for big companies include disorganized CJ maps with limited effectiveness. Interviewee 2 notes that CJ mapping often becomes static: “It belongs in the museum because you do it once, everyone claps, you put it as a poster on the wall, and then it dies a slow death”. Interviewees highlighted various AI-affordances for solving these challenges. According to Interviewee 11, AI facilitates “tighter optimization cycles (engeren Optimierungszyklen)” and allows for developing an accurate CJ in less time, tailored to relevant audience segments (Interviewee 5). Interviewee 9 proposes a shift to dynamic AI-enabled CJ management, creating a “living document” that continuously updates in real-time and supports various cross-functional needs. Interviewee 2 describes this as a “green-

field", allowing multiple brand experiences to be represented simultaneously and disrupting traditional visualizations. As Interviewee 2 states, "You don't need the skill, time, or cost any more, which is disruptive.". All in all, AI-enabled CJ mapping stands as a disruptive affordance since it comes with efficiency and accuracy advantages for companies.

4.1.2. Hyper-Personalization & Generative AI

While personalization appears not a new concept, "not special in that sense", (Interviewee 2) the scale and focus achievable with AI is advanced. Interviewee 1 elaborates, stating that "the effort to personalize something was not corresponding to the reward you would get from it... leveraging AI this equation, this problem is gone". According to experts AI-enabled hyper-personalization, or "micro-targeting" (Interviewee 2) stands as a crucial AI-enabled trend, before the transition to agents, a development further explored in theme 2. AI enables hyper-personalization "on-the-fly" (Interviewee 13) across various touchpoints, editing campaigns, and content elements like copies and images in real-time. AI-enabled personalization aims to "truly understand every consumer on a personal basis" (Interviewee 3), utilizing individual customer data and responding to the individual's needs. Interviewee 10 emphasizes the significance of "natural UI", tailoring experiences based on geolocation data, digital behavioral data, and product usage data. Leveraging this knowledge for hyper-personalized and real-time adjustments in marketing efforts stand as a differentiating factor between brands and is therefore a disruptive opportunity. When employed strategically using high-quality data, "then you have a significant advantage over others." (Interviewee 13).

Content Creation. Experts indicate that generative AI transforms content creation across various media formats, including text, audio, video, and imagery, used throughout every stage of the CJ. Interviewee 4 praises the quality of generated content, describing it as "perhaps even better than what people can come up with.". Interviewee 6 describes AI as a "hustle-free" way to improve and increase communication. Interviewee 13 notes that content is more accessible due to untrained staff being able to produce it: "Even somebody who is ... not capable of visual design can just type a command and they get a beautiful image." However, experts raise concerns regarding the quality of AI-generated assets produced with AI's current capabilities. Interviewee

5 highlights ongoing challenges, citing instances of racist outcomes or misinformation in AI-generated content: “AI basically trains on datasets that have been filled by human beings, so they are prone to the same biases that the general population is prone to.”. Nevertheless AI “creates challenges, but then it’s also the solution to the challenge… So it always goes hand in hand almost.” (Interviewee 3), as it can perform quality checks on AI-generated assets, ensuring quality and correctness across a greater volume of content (Interviewee 8). All in all, hyper-personalization in combination with automated content creation stands as a disruptive AI-affordance since it saves time and effort, enabling faster and more dynamic production of engaging, high-quality content.

4.1.3. Summary and Contextualization Theme 1

The first theme emerging from the data discusses how B2C premium brands can strategically leverage AI for data analysis, hyper-personalization and content creation. AI efficiently manages extensive datasets, accelerating analysis and enabling real-time strategic adjustments, thus disrupting traditional methods, as anticipated in the scientific literature (Ameen et al., 2021, p. 1; Blueshift, 2018, p. 3; Miklosik & Evans, 2020, p. 101288). While scholarly sources stress the necessity of large datasets and data as capital (Anshari et al., 2019, p. 95; Erevelles et al., 2016, p. 897; Wedel & Kannan, 2016, p. 97), experts identify challenges such as data accuracy and outdated IT infrastructure, suggesting that strategic high-quality data collection may be more effective than sheer quantity. Internally, AI can transform CJ mapping, changing it from a costly and static process to one that is dynamic, real-time, efficient, and cost-effective. This CJ management capability is a novel contribution not extensively covered in the literature.

Another crucial AI-affordance for B2C premium brands is scalability in hyper-personalization, making each CX unique and real-time by leveraging individual, behavioral, and contextual data. While hyper-personalization is well-discussed in literature, particularly in the pre-purchase stages (Huang & Rust, 2021, pp. 40-41; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 491; Yoo & Park, 2016, p. 5775), experts emphasize its application across the entire CJ. Generative AI also transforms content creation, producing personalized assets at scale. Despite the potential for biased outputs, experts stress AI-enabled quality checks. The integration of predictive analysis and automation efforts,

mentioned in both scientific literature and expert opinions, stresses the synergy between anticipating consumer behavior and automating communication, thereby enhancing CX and reducing manual effort (Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490; Zanker et al., 2019, p. 161).

4.2. Foresight: AI-Enabled Innovations and Future Trends

The second emerging theme explains the evolution of AI-enabled innovation in the marketing sector. Experts emphasize that AI's implementation is not yet fully matured, since disruptive customer-facing affordances take time to be adopted by premium brands. Interviewees foresee an adaptation of AI-affordances, though they also anticipate a rising wish for manual marketing effort on the consumers' side and a resulting countermovement with value in non AI generated assets. Experts anticipate conversational agents as the next advancement, emphasizing their advantageous language-based and accessible nature, shortening the traditional CJ significantly. Experts mention strategic considerations that need to be taken into account when employing agents, like the generation of proactivity. According to interviewees, it is important to collaborate with external generic agents, ensuring correct and brand-coherent content within these.

4.2.1. Evolution of AI-enabled Innovation

Experts consistently emphasize that AI in marketing is still in its early stages of development. Interviewee 1 states, "It's still early days", indicating that the strategic implementation of AI remains unfinished. Interviewee 3 notes that current innovations primarily focus on improving internal processes rather than customer-facing ones. Interviewee 6 explains, "when it comes to really disruptive things…it takes a lot of time.". Looking ahead, Interviewee 10 states: "the next leap would definitely be in the space of generative AI and using conversational AI for browsing.", though the firm's readiness for conversational agents remains undetermined. Despite the unpredictability, there is consensus that the CJ will undergo significant disruption with the introduction of conversational agents, as Interviewee 3 suggests, "it's all going to go upside down for sure.". In summary, the evolution of AI-affordances in marketing can be described as recent and slow-paced, yet with a lot of disruptive potential for customer-facing affordances.

Countermovement. Experts foresee a divided future scenario following the personalization of the CJ and the widespread adoption of conversational agents. Interviewee 3 envisions "a world

where there are two extremes". Interviewee 8 concurs, suggesting that "in the medium term, the good use of AI will be your differentiator and when AI has become a commodity, it will be exciting to see whether it will then go back to real people and not AI. (Mittelfristig wird der gute Einsatz von KI dein Differentiator sein und wenn KI eine commodity geworden ist, dann wird es wiederum spannend, ob es dann wieder zu echten Menschen und nicht KI gehen wird.)". While AI is expected to partly replace human efforts in content generation, Interviewee 12 poses the question of whether there will be a status symbol in analog creation:

> Once all these companies figure out how to mass-produce content, there's going to be a status in not doing it. I think we're going to see a lot of handcrafted work... There's going to be nostalgia for the pre-AI age, and I think that's going to have value.

According to experts, this consideration is particularly important in the premium market, where authenticity is an important brand value. Interviewee 11 expresses a nuanced perspective, differentiating when customers seek human interaction versus AI-driven efficiency. In summary, it is foreseen that there will be an extensive adaption of AI within marketing, but at the same time, there will be value in manual efforts for particular use cases.

4.2.2. Rise of Conversational Agents

Experts anticipate that conversational agents, in interviews referred to as AI-agents or chatbots, aiming to facilitate innovative barrier-free and language-based interactions, disrupt traditional CJs: "the consumer journey is going to be very short and very different." (Interviewee 3). Interviewee 3 anticipates an efficient journey where AI and conversational interfaces significantly reduce the manual effort required by consumers. They describe a scenario where "instead of scrolling and filtering,... your AI or the conversational interface of a website will handle all that for you". Interviewee 8 described the application of conversational agents as a "decision-support along the whole customer journey (eine Art des decision-support entlang der Journey überall)", "like a concierge service, like a personal assistant" (Interviewee 12), offering "constant support (konstanter Unterstützung)" (Interviewee 8).

Advantages. “All communication is a conversation and I think the big goal with AI is to always be part of that conversation (Kommunikation ist alles ein Gespräch und ich glaube, die das große Ziel ist es, mit KI immer Teil dieses Gesprächs zu sein).” (Interviewee 8). Interviewee 8 hereby exemplifies the AI-agent’s key advantage, leveraging the conversational character of customer brand interactions for a brand-owned dialogue with the consumer at each touchpoint. According to Interviewee 8, one advantage is the barrier-free nature and accessibility, enabling users to obtain answers seamlessly with an easy way to express their needs: “to choose natural language is the easiest (natürliche Sprache zu wählen ist das einfachste)”. They explain that the use of natural language fosters a sense of intelligence and understanding: “Fluency has been associated with intelligence, someone who can communicate fluently must always be intelligent. With ChatGPT, however, fluency and intelligence are detached from each other because it has a perfect linguistic ability (Fluency ist mit Intelligence verbunden gewesen, jemand, der flüssig kommunizieren kann, muss immer intelligent sein. Durch ChatGPT ist aber Flüssigkeit und Intelligenz voneinander losgelöst, weil es eine perfekte Sprachbegabung hat)”. Moreover, Interviewee 6 describes conversational agents as a “brilliant idea” with significant potential for “implementation of innovation”.

Strategic Considerations. According to experts, implementing conversational agents in premium brands’ marketing efforts requires strategic considerations. Interviewee 8 notes that language as a “vehicle of communication (kommunikative Vehikel)” may not always suit consumer needs, especially for certain products, where visual appearance stands as an important factor. They also highlight a potential limitation of chats: users may not proactively engage unless they have an inquiry:

> The chat window might already be a hurdle because you still have to turn to the chat if you have a question. But if you don’t have a question, you don’t turn to the chat window, because you don’t know that you might need help. You can’t generate proactivity via a chat. And that’s why I promote…: think outside chatbox.
>
> (Das Chat-Fenster [ist] eventuell schon eine Hürde weil du musst dich trotzdem an den Chat wenden, wenn du eine Frage hast. Wenn du aber keine Frage hast, dann wendest du dich

nicht ans Chat-Fenster, weil du ja gar nicht weißt, dass du vielleicht Hilfe brauchst. Du kannst über einen Chat keine Proaktivität erzeugen. Und deswegen denke ich...: think outside chatbox.)

Further, Interviewee 8 raises a concern regarding the potential dominance of non-brand-owned conversational agents, which could compromise the correctness of the brand's data within these generic agents. They envision a scenario akin to Google's centralized search functionality heavily employed by consumers: "you can bring so many AIs to your website, it will be like Google, it's the search from a central platform that will decide the whole thing and not what you do on your website. (ihr könnt so viele KI auf eure Webseite bringen, es wird wie bei Google sein, es ist die Suche von einer zentralen Plattform, die das ganze entscheidend wird und nicht das, was du auf deiner Webseite machst.)". Hence, experts advise companies to establish their agents within their ecosystems but also try to maintain data accuracy within generic, overarching agents. Interviewee 8 advocates for providing a brand's plugin to ensure data correctness, aiming to deliver a premium experience characterized by accessibility and reliability, as they assert, "Premium is also accessibility, or the fewer hurdles, the more premium it is. (Premium ist ja auch barrierefreiheit oder: je weniger Hürden desto mehr Premium ist es.)" (Interviewee 8). Within this environment, a brand's competitive advantage consequently lies in factors such as: "correctness, reliability, speed and accessibility, and if that can take place outside your own platform, please, and if it can only be on your own platform for reasons, then just there. (Korrektheit, Verlässlichkeit, Geschwindigkeit und Barrierefreiheit und wenn das außerhalb der eigenen Plattform stattfinden kann, bitte und wenn es aber nur in der eigenen Plattform sein kann aus gründen, dann halt da.)" (Interviewee 8). According to experts, optimizing websites for the requirements and functionality of conversational agents is imperative for B2C premium brands. Interviewee 10 states that brands should "optimize like they optimize now for search, optimize for conversational AI". According to Interviewee 12, optimizing the brand's website for conversational agents is "definitely necessary, but there is not a lot of clarity on how to do that yet" (Interviewee 12). Experts agree that collaboration with generic conversational agents is crucial, despite resistance regarding data sharing: "Some brands are saying: we're not going to give our data to ChatGPT,

but there's just as much as not giving your data to Google." (Interviewee 10). In summary, conversational agents are expected to be the next AI innovation, necessitating strategic implementation.

4.2.3. Summary and Contextualization Theme 2

Experts agree that AI in marketing is in its early stages, mainly enhancing internal processes, as supported by literature (Campbell et al., 2019, p. 240). Experts assume a divided future, with AI innovation throughout the CJ potentially leading to a countermovement valuing handcrafted creations, especially in the premium market. While literature is currently focused on digital innovation and automation rather than the value of manually crafted work, it acknowledges the proud-to-be analogue strategy within the luxury market (Tekic & Koroteev, 2019, p. 688).

Conversational agents, a topic largely unexplored within the scientific community, are expected to transform traditional CJs by facilitating barrier-free, language-based interactions. Acting as decision-support tools, these agents will offer constant support and simulate nuanced, human-like interactions. Implementing conversational agents requires strategic considerations, including addressing the potential dominance of generic agents, which could compromise data accuracy and brand representation. Ensuring correctness, speed, and accessibility within this environment is crucial for maintaining a competitive advantage. These AI-affordances enable a seamless and effortless CX, a crucial aspect for premium brands (Allsopp, 2005, p. 194; Steinhoff et al., 2019, p. 383).

4.3. Holistic Strategic Considerations: Objectives, Collaborations & Paradoxes

The third theme emerging from the data addresses holistic strategic considerations. These include a company's objectives throughout and overarching the CJ. Experts mention that the methods of meeting goals evolve with the recent technical opportunities, but the strategic objectives for premium brands stay rather stable. In general premium brands should strive to mimic an in-store CX, as experts state. Interviewees underline the strategic relevance of CJ mapping for understanding the customer's decision-making process and simplifying the display of this process. Further, experts describe the CJ map as a means of communication that helps to unify the workforce.

Experts mention several strategic collaborations necessary for leveraging AI and staying competitive. Even though, according to the interviewees, the importance of first-party data rises, premium brands achieve a more cohesive picture of the customers-decision making process when integrating third-party data. Another collaboration mentioned by experts is needed for technical knowledge. Interviewees agree that premium brands should focus on their native capabilities and partner with external tech companies to achieve a future-facing AI-model strategy. Further, experts mention the need for CX ownership and illustrate how companies should partner with others to own the CX within a non-native environment. Interviewees consider brand consistency as well as personalization efforts as important and illustrate how brands can balance these two on the theoretical and technical sides, resolving this paradox. Further experts emphasize that accurate personalized recommendations do not account for the customer's desire for new experiences and a need for choice.

4.3.1. Customer Journey Objectives

Overarching Objectives and CX. Experts state that the company's fundamental marketing objectives remain consistent with the advent of AI, however, the tools and methods employed evolve: "I don't think the objective changes, rather the way of achieving it" (Interviewee 5). Interviewee 2 emphasizes the importance of integrating AI throughout the CJ for achieving the objectives, affecting acquisition, activation, and retention strategies: "In each of these major phases of our customer lifecycle,... AI can play a huge role".

The rise of AI and customer data necessitates strategy adaptations: "It has become increasingly important, as a consumer is leaving behind that huge trace of data, being able to build an experience around those data points." (Interviewee 7). Additionally, reduced time to engage with customer demands concise and effective interactions: "Interactions are going to be way more to the point in terms of what you need from a brand." (Interviewee 12). Prioritizing customers' time is crucial, as "you and me, we just want to buy something fast" (Interview 2), and the purchase process should be "very quick and seamless" (Interview 3). Thus, premium brands face challenges as customers expect personalized attention in less time: "People are buying these brands for the experience and how personal it is. But people are going to have less time... can we make it more personable but with less people and less time? It's hard." (Interviewee 12).

According to experts marketers aim to create a CJ that mirrors the in-store experience, making online interactions feel analogue. Interviewee 4 envisions an AI-assisted online experience resembling “walking into a store talking to a person about what you like.”. According to experts, AI enhances human-like connections: “A lot of people underestimate that the consumer relationship is going to become more human because of all of this, which sounds very counterintuitive.” (Interviewee 3). Ultimately, the human touch remains crucial, “it will be the human element that makes the difference. (es wird um das Menschliche gehen, was den Unterschied macht.)” (Interviewee 8). Interviewee 4 summarizes the goal of AI-enabled innovation to be emotionally intelligent: “The machines are taking over…but ultimately we want to mimic people, right?”. Interviewee 2 summarizes, “I love going to my cocktail bars…because they remember the cocktail I ordered the last time…they don’t need the AI to do that, they have organic intelligence to remember that.”. This subtheme describes the strategic consideration that the mean to achieve classic marketing goals like retention with AI-affordances is to mimic analogue experiences.

Strategic Relevance of CJ Mapping. Experts state that CJ mapping remains crucial for understanding consumer behavior and influencing decision-making: “we were trying to understand how many decisions you generally make and recognize that in every single decision, we might not be part of the conversation, but we want to be.” (Interviewee 2). CJ mapping provides a “linear, simplified representation of how your customer navigates daily choices” (Interviewee 2), which increases in importance due to the complex nature of modern, diversified CJs where at “any given moment…, you could go into a million different other touchpoints” (Interviewee 9). Therefore, experts state that CJ mapping offers valuable insights enabling brands to position themselves strategically at important touchpoints. CJ mapping also facilitates a “holistic, yet more segmented (holistisch aber segmentierter)“ approach (Interviewee 11), enhancing internal collaboration through fostering a common understanding among teams, according to experts. While these maps may vary depending on the product or service, their primary function is to visualize and communicate shared insights: “We are mapping something… to create a joint understanding. Visualizing that is just a way of speaking to one another.” (Interviewee 7). Experts mention that CJ mapping addresses the fragmentation often evident among agile teams, leading to

disjointed efforts. Interviewee 13 emphasizes that CJ management provides a holistic, omni-channel perspective that ensures "seamless handovers" and coordinated efforts across teams and touchpoints. Interviewee 6 argues that traditional CJ mapping is becoming less relevant due to AI enabling a more agile, lean approach to CJ management. With increased speed and volume of insights, organizations are shifting towards "learning on the go and experimenting on the go" (Interviewee 6) rather than relying solely on strategic planning and mapping, reflecting AI's dynamic nature and its capacity for real-time adjustments and more responsive customer interactions. In summary, AI-enabled CJ mapping stands as an important strategic tool that enables companies to make holistic strategic adjustments or track success.

4.3.2. Strategic Collaborations

Data Sourcing. The "ubiquity of behavioral data, that a brand can collect directly or through third-party sources" (Interviewee 2), is the foundation to leverage AI. Interviewee 3 emphasizes the growing importance of first-party data, recommending it as the primary source for training AI models. While first-party data is the most crucial form, Interviewee 12 highlights the limitations of relying solely on it: "With your own data, you cannot necessarily target or find new consumer segments in the market.". Experts mention that collaborating with big tech companies allow brands to access extensive targeting data, including detailed consumer profiles based on public information like political election results. Third-party data like geolocation data is also crucial for contextualizing consumer behavior. Interviewee 2 explains, "You will have to use third-party resources for anything you're doing. Even weather data is crucial, and weather data is not something you own". In summary, this approach ensures that brands can accurately capture the situational factors influencing consumer behavior and adjust targeting or personalization accordingly, therefore strategic collaborations within data sourcing stand as an important holistic consideration for understanding consumer decision-making.

AI-Models. Experts agree that premium B2C brands must partner with external companies for technical enablement. Interviewee 4 mentions the financial resources required to stay competitive in the space of AI-enabled innovation: "... you do not have the money to keep up with what's happening right now... companies like Microsoft are spending billions on AI.". Interviewee 2 elaborates on the strategic focus of non-tech companies: "If you're just making shoes or any

fashion items, do you really want to become a tech company?... If you're not a technology company, you will partner with a technology company.". They suggest that brands should focus on their core competencies for a competitive advantage. Experts often refer to large language models (LLMs), a form of generative AI that analyzes vast amounts of textual data and produces human-like text (IBM, n.d., para. 6), crucial for AI-enabled innovation like chatbots. Interviewees agree that most organizations lack the capability to develop these models in-house, necessitating investment in external solutions. Interviewee 3 discusses the strategic importance of custom AI models: "Every brand needs a model strategy... Everybody will have access to the same technology, meaning your custom data and your custom models will be the key differentiator between you and your other competitors.". This involves using foundational models from providers like OpenAI or Google, supplemented by brand-specific custom models, a "model garden" (Interviewee 3), to maintain competitive advantages. The collaboration with big tech companies for technical enablement and AI-models is therefore a necessity that needs to be considered for the company's overall strategy.

CX Ownership. According to experts, brands must ensure that they control and own the CX to maximize AI's potential. As Interviewee 2 illustrates, Apple owns the in-car experience for brands like BMW by integrating Apple Play into vehicle screens, creating an ecosystem where its technology is omnipresent, demonstrating how tech companies can dominate the CX without manufacturing the actual product:

> They understood that it's better than to build their own car, just to be in your car ... They're fundamentally a technology company, so they know how to do this, and they know that they need to be ever-present and build an ecosystem that forces you to forget that anything else exists in this world. (Interviewee 2)

Experts state that non-tech companies can secure their place in non-native environments through strategic partnerships. For instance, Nike could target customers on platforms like Zalando and collaborate to offer personalized sneaker orders directly through Zalando's interface. This approach allows Nike to maintain a strong presence without needing a direct-to-consumer setup, which is costly and complex, according to interviewees. Interviewee 2 emphasizes

the importance of being present in various applications: “Am I in your banking app, your marketplace app, or your mobility application? As a brand, can I offer something valuable to you there?”. The collaboration with other brands or digital platforms therefore stands as an important strategic consideration.

4.3.3. Resolving Paradoxes

Personalization-Consistency Paradox. As AI prospectively optimizes and personalizes every company’s CX and recommendations, experts indicate that brands emerge as crucial differentiators, influence consumer choices profoundly because “…that might be the only reason why you might pick one product over the other” (Interviewee 3). Given the increasing influence of brands, brand consistency is acknowledged as crucial for establishing loyal customers amongst experts, alongside the recognition of hyper-personalization’s significance. Interviewee 2 illustrates how to solve this personalization-consistency paradox: “you need to have sort of an abstract promise at the very top… a technically vague statement.”. This approach fosters unique consumer-brand relationships while maintaining a solid brand identity. “Consistency doesn’t mean rigidity” (Interviewee 2); it allows for personalization within a stable framework. On the technical side, enabling brand consistency alongside AI-driven personalization requires clear guidelines for LLM training and AI-automated checks, as experts state. Interviewee 3 highlights the necessity of establishing guardrails preventing excessive personalization, ensuring tailored experiences align with brand values. Automated checks are essential for maintaining consistency, as Interviewee 3 notes: “We can put automated guardrails and we can have automated checks because of AI that we can now keep that consistency.”. All in all, AI helps brands maintain a cohesive voice while delivering customized experiences within defined boundaries, resolving the personalization-consistency paradox when employed strategically.

Recommendation-Choice Paradox. AI’s predictive capabilities reduce the consumer’s perceived role in decision-making by suggesting recommendations so accurately that “you, as a consumer, are not making any choices anymore” (Interviewee 6). Therefore, enabling choice is essential because “you need to have choice in order for consumers to buy something” (Interviewee 6). In addition to offering choice, experts highlight consumers’ desire for novelty and ex-

ploration. Interviewee 7 states, “I am looking for something new, something refreshing, something that might be outside of my comfort zone, outside of the things that are based on my historical data, things that excite me.“. Brands must balance personalization with novelty, recommending familiar products while also “teasing you with some newness… understanding your appetite for it and adjusting to that” (Interviewee 10). Successful recommendations involve a mix of familiar and “an element of curiosity” (Interviewee 1) to keep consumers engaged and satisfied. Maintaining a “healthy mix” (Interviewee 10) ensures consumers experience both the comfort of familiarity and the excitement of discovery, enabling consumers to have the illusion of a choice at the latest since consumers “don’t need choice. You need confidence in your choice, right? So that’s what you can achieve” (Interviewee 2). Training the LLM with the influence of these strategic considerations is crucial for resolving this paradox between recommendation and choice.

4.3.4. Summary and Contextualization Theme 3

Theme three explains strategic considerations for B2C premium brands leveraging AI in marketing. Experts agree that while marketing objectives remain unchanged, methodologies are evolving. Retention is a key objective, as satisfied customers are likely to repurchase without revisiting the decision-making process, saving marketing budget, aligning with the literature (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 132; Court et al., 2009, p. 3). Situational factors like reduced engagement time demand for concise interactions, as stated within the literature (Batra & Keller, 2016, p. 131; Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 230-231; Wedel & Kannan, 2016, p. 97).

Particularly for premium brands, an exceptional CX is a key differentiator, as stated by experts. This aligns with the “experience economy” concept, recognizing consumers as influenced by extraordinary experiences (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 69; Pine & Gilmore, 2011, pp. 3 & 7, 34-35; Atwal & Williams, 2009, pp. 341-344; Rekettye & Rekettye, 2019, p. 341). According to experts the CX should replicate a human in-store experience. This goal might be achievable in the future since tech experts are developing s*uper AI* capable of understanding emotions to create a more personalized, human-like AI-driven CJ (IBM, 2023a, para. 5-7).

Experts emphasize the importance of CJ mapping in understanding consumer behavior, supported by literature stating its role in enhancing CX (Court et al., 2009, p. 2; Ma & Sun, 2020, p.

490; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 1; Varnali, 2019, p. 820). AI enhances CJ mapping with real-time adjustments and dynamic interactions, promoting a more agile, experimental approach. Additionally, CJ mapping offers a streamlined understanding between agile teams, a concept not extensively explored in literature.

Experts stress the importance of strategic collaborations for data sourcing, noting that while first-party data is crucial, third-party data enhances the understanding of decision-making by providing a broader situational context. The role of second-party data from direct competitors represents a gap in the discussion. For B2C premium brands lacking resources to develop LLMs independently, partnering with tech companies to create custom models on platforms like OpenAI is crucial, supported by literature emphasizing the expertise of these tech companies (Edelmann & Palumbo, 2023, para. 6; Evans, 2017, p. 217; Hendrikse et al., 2020, p. 63; Steinhoff et al., 2019, p. 375).

Experts stress the importance of owning the CX, whether in native or partner environments. Such collaborations allow brands to focus on their core expertise, while maintaining a strong market presence without the complexities of direct-to-consumer operations. Consistency and personalization need to be balanced, achievable by establishing guidelines and guardrails to maintain the brand identity while allowing for personalization (Chandra et al., 2022, p. 1531; Phau & Prendergast, 2000, p. 122; Roy et al., 2019, p. 245). Experts also address the paradox of personalized recommendations and user choice, a key AI-affordance highlighted in the literature (Ma & Sun, 2020, pp. 482 & 491; Konstan & Riedl, 2012, p. 104). They emphasize the need for users to have options and experience novelty, which can be achieved by training LLMs to understand and adapt to personal needs for choice and exploration.

5. Conclusion

This research addresses *how B2C premium brands can strategically leverage AI throughout the CJ to enhance their marketing efforts*. AI represents a technological invention enabling disruptive innovation within the marketing sector (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 227; Evans, 2017, p. 209). This rapidly evolving development demands attention from companies seeking a competitive advantage and from the academic community producing scientific knowledge within this domain (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 240; Evans, 2017, p. 209; Kumar et al., 2021, p. 865; Lauterbach & Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 56). The CJ serves as a theoretical framework emphasizing the significance of an exceptional CX at each touchpoint and shows the uniqueness of each CJ. It enables companies to coordinate their efforts to adopt a customer-centric and hyper-personalized approach. Further, CJ mapping enables the understanding of customer decision-making and underscores the necessity of potential collaborations for data and technology in modern marketing (Court et al., 2009, p. 2; Evans, 2017, p. 217; Hendrikse et al., 2020, p. 63; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 71; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021, p. 1; Steinhoff et al., 2019, p. 375; Varnali, 2019, p. 820). Especially for premium brands it is key to integrate AI-enabled innovation to provide an excellent CJ that reinforces their brand image but also justifies premium pricing, securing their premium market position (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 69; Pine & Gilmore, 2011, pp. 34-35). Neither do marketers feel equipped with enough knowledge to strategically leverage AI within their profession, nor do researchers know a lot about the rising field of AI-affordances in marketing (Campbell et al., 2020, pp. 240 & 228; De Bruyn et al., 2020, p. 91; Kumar et al., 2021, p. 865). To close this gap within the new and complex, multifaceted field and answer the research question, experts in fields such as UX design, CJ management, and digital innovation were interviewed using a qualitative, semi-structured approach (Chandra & Shang, 2019, p. 3; Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82). These interviews provided insights into current and future developments, opportunities, challenges, and considerations, thereby offering valuable results that help bridge the research gap and give practical implications for marketers.

This chapter presents an overview of the main findings, situating them within the research field and thereby answering the research question. Additionally, it discusses limitations and outlines the finding's practical implications, along with the future research agenda.

5.1. Main Findings and Theoretical Implications

When it comes to AI-enabled data analysis as a primary AI-affordance in marketing, this research's results are in line with existing literature (Ameen et al., 2021, p. 1; Blueshift, 2018, p. 3; Miklosik & Evans, 2020, p. 101288). Experts state that AI facilitates faster and more objective analysis, generating insights that allow for real-time adjustments in content and strategy, a result consistent with prior research (Ameen et al., 2021, p. 5; Bilgihan et al., 2016, p. 110). While these capabilities are well-documented within scientific literature, their concrete applications for B2C brands in particular in specific remain largely unexplored.

Real-time Content Generation and Personalization. Generative AI and its capabilities stand as a frequently discussed topic within the interviews and in the scientific literature (IBM, n.d., para. 6; Ma & Sun, 2020, p. 490; Zanker et al., 2019, p. 161). According to the results, it enables the creation of hyper-personalized content for targeted segments in real-time, a finding in line with current scientific literature (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; Huang & Rust, 2021, pp. 40-41; Miklosik & Evans, 2020, p. 101288). This affordance relies on individual customer data. In case this data is of inadequate quality, experts raise concerns regarding generative AI including the production the persistence of inaccuracies and biases in copy generation, aligning with literature (IBM, 2023b, para. 5-6; Thomas & Thomson, 2023, para. 5-27). AI provides the capability to test outcomes at a scale to address quality issues, a relatively new development in the field that has not yet been extensively emphasized in the scholarly debate. The literature defines first-, second-, and third-party data (Schneider et al., 2017, p. 593) and underscores the importance of high-quality data for effective targeting (Erevelles et al., 2016, p. 897). Yet, it has not been scientifically discussed which data types B2C premium brands are using to enable their personalized marketing strategy. Results show that for personalization efforts, companies primarily use first-party data enriched with third-party data, such as income and local weather, granting those who combine both an advantage due to a more comprehensive customer profile. All in all this research's results are in line with the scientific debate, supplementing important nuances for the specific B2C premium brand's context in terms of asset testing and data sourcing.

Real-Time Strategy Adjustments. This research shows that real-time data analysis affordances can be leveraged to measure KPIs and inform strategic decision-making, an ability

well-recognized in the literature (Stone et al., 2020, p. 191). CJ mapping gives a concrete framework for this affordance, organizing the collection of KPIs and retrieving insights on necessary strategic adjustments, as mentioned frequently. In this context, experts state that AI is enabling companies to change from static CJ mapping to dynamic, real-time CJ management. This shift helps to identify pain points and bottlenecks within a customer's CJ, facilitating immediate improvements. The implementation of a dynamic, green-field CJ map allows for agile experimentation with new UX design measures, enabling immediate observation of effects without long planning cycles, according to experts. The affordance of a real-time CJ map including all the strategic advantages stands as a novel insight adding to the literature of CJ mapping. AI-enabled data analysis not only provides real-time visibility into the CJ but also allows for predictive capabilities, anticipating and automatically counteracting potential issues, a result in line with the literature (Davenport, 2020, p. 32 & 35; Zanker et al., 2019, p. 161). These results add to the extensively discussed data-analysis affordance, adding concrete use cases within the native environment of B2C premium brands.

Looking ahead, beyond data analysis and hyper-personalization, this thesis's results add numerous insights that remain largely absent from current scientific literature.

Disrupting the CJ. A notable trend among the expert's answers entails the emergence of conversational agents set to disrupt the CJ. Though this aspect has not yet been extensively covered in scientific literature, recent creative agency publications, such as those by MediaMonks (2024, pp. 27-30), address this development. This thesis's results add thoughts on conversational agents' numerous advantages, including the ability to execute web-based tasks. Experts describe future scenarios, in which these agents could handle tasks like entering credit card details or synchronizing individual calendars to delivery schedules, creating a seamless purchasing experience. Results show that the CJ is likely to resemble a language-based conversation between the customer and the agent, making it accessible to all users. This research results showing the objective of a barrier-free, effortless interaction aligns with the seamless UX expectations of premium brands that can be found in the literature (Allsopp, 2005, pp. 187-189; Sward, 2007, p. 174). The results further show a significant influence on traditional CJs that are present within the current scientific debate (e.g. Court et al., 2009, p. 3). Conversational agents are expected to significantly shorten the pre-purchase phase, including brand consideration and evaluation, and

may even eliminate the initial need recognition, and anticipate needs before customers are aware of them. Improved recommendation algorithms are likely to shorten the consideration and evaluation phase, and the execution capabilities of conversational agents are potentially ensuring a smooth, seamless purchase process. AI therefore leads to the creative destruction of the CJ, forcing companies to adapt to stay competitive, according to experts and also can be found in the literature (Cunningham & Flew, 2015, p. 7; Schumpeter, 1942/2010, pp. 71-75; Reddy & Reinartz, 2017, p. 15).

Recommendations & Importance of Brand. Personalized recommendations stand as a crucial element of real-time personalization and constitute a longstanding practice for companies, extensively discussed in the marketing literature (Ma & Sun, 2020, pp. 482 & 491; Konstan & Riedl, 2012, p. 104). These results show that their importance is set to increase, particularly with the advent of conversational agents. A development adding to the literature is that as recommendation algorithms advance, the distinguishing factor between similar, preference-based products increasingly becomes the brand itself. Experts state that AI agents reduce the customer's time and effort, heightening the critical role of recommendation algorithms in our fast-paced world. All in all the results regarding the recommendations were in line with the literature, the results regarding the importance of brand add an important layer of knowledge.

Value of Human UX. While experts state that core objectives like brand awareness and retention remain the same as the ones in the literature for B2C premium brands, this research's results add a new overarching goal. Conversational agents aim to mimic the in-store CX, creating a more human-like interaction with technology. This approach calls back to Vertu's 2005 launch of a luxury phone, retailing at around $10.000, with a button directly leading to a human personal assistant, where users could give tasks via language in real-time with a single button press (Vertu, n.d., p. 6). The chief designer states that he wants to create a mobile phone that offers a "truly human experience, ... accessible for every age". (Vertu, n.d., p. 5). Due to AI, what was once a luxury experience reserved for a high-price segment is now accessible to a broader premium market, enabling a high-quality, human-like CX.

Data Quality & LLM Training. This research identified three significant challenges in the context of data quality. First, the rise of generic AI-agents necessitates optimization strategies similar to SEO, but tailored for AI scrapers. Since these scrapers do not yet operate in real-time (e.g.,

ChatGPT's periodic updates), companies have a window of opportunity to adapt. Second, addressing misinformation about the brand provided by generic agents represents a growing concern. Third, companies must train their LLMs with appropriate guardrails to ensure brand consistency, which is crucial for premium brands as the brand constitutes their unique selling point, as evident in scientific literature (Matthiesen & Phau, 2005, p. 325). Additionally, training the algorithm to maintain a balance between novelty and offering a range of choices for customers proves essential.

All in all the results show that B2C premium brands must leverage AI as an essential tool for their marketing efforts to stay competitive. AI-driven digital innovation relies on high-quality data, which brands should focus on collecting, analyzing and utilizing strategically. Internally, by using the CJ as a framework, AI can derive insights without human bias that can be translated into more effective marketing strategies. Externally, AI enables hyper-personalization and asset generation throughout the CJ. Further, B2C premium brands can leverage AI for predictive analysis and automation, enabling personalized communication on scale. Looking ahead, AI can enable conversational agents to provide a technical yet human UX. Companies can utilize LLMs that are well-trained to ensure on-brand communication and avoid misinformation. In summary, brands need to reinvent current approaches to customer interactions, leveraging AI's capabilities to innovate, disrupt and transform traditional communication methods. By integrating AI-enabled affordances, B2C premium brands can enhance their marketing efforts throughout the CJ and ensure they remain competitive and relevant in an increasingly AI-driven market.

5.2. Limitations

For this research, 13 qualitative expert interviews were conducted. This allowed for the collection of several different perspectives, providing an in-depth and multifaceted picture of the future of AI-enabled innovation in marketing with relevant theoretical and societal implications. Nevertheless, this research shows two limitations, both attributed to the novelty of the topic:

First, the sampling criteria for this research are chosen to be very broad, offering the advantage of a diverse range of insights, with all participants providing important opinions on various aspects of the research topic. However, this breadth in the sampling necessitated adapting questions to the expertise of each participant to collect their knowledge appropriately. While

qualitative research and semi-structured interview guides allow and even require this openness, the adaptation of questions posed during the interview somewhat diminishes reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82; Morse, 1999, p. 717).

Second, the operationalization of the research question and the interview guide was informed by an extensive literature review. The approach was guided by the CJ framework outlined by Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p. 77), using broader stages to maintain flexibility. This anticipation accounted for potential disruptions to the CJ, recognizing that a model with smaller stages might undergo significant changes. However, during data collection, it became evident that the marketing objectives and AI-affordances of B2C premium brands are not tied to specific stages, not even the broader ones. Additionally, the diversification of channels and current personalization efforts revealed that CJs can take on different forms depending on the market, the product, and each customer. While mapping these journeys represents an important strategic tool, they are not ideally suited as a basis for formulating interview guide questions. As the field advances, particularly with the rise of conversational agents, the scientific community needs to establish a more diverse model that accounts for forthcoming changes and remains immune to the disruptive effect of AI. Since the majority of questions stated in the operationalization were aligned with the CJ stages, further holistic strategic questions were added during the research process, which is allowed in qualitative research, but slightly diminished reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82; Morse, 1999, p. 717).

In summary, the research's operationalization and interview guide were designed considering all available information at the time given. Despite being formulated very openly, the questions posed could not fully account for the topic's development, thereby limiting its effectiveness. Furthermore, given the diverse expertise of the field's professionals, some specialists hold knowledge beyond the CJ, concentrating on relevant areas such as UX design. To prevent missing important information due to the framework's guardrails, additional questions were added, which increases the research's validity, yet diminishes reliability.

5.3. Practical Implications

This thesis's results offer several practical and concrete implications for marketers. AI can significantly enhance various marketing efforts, enabling efficiency in different areas. However,

to establish a competitive advantage, companies must create a distinct value proposition not solely relying on enhanced operational effectiveness. Purely exceeding in data analysis and hyper-personalization remains insufficient; they must offer an additional unique value proposition. (Porter, 2001, para. 43). Businesses that avoid AI innovations will struggle to compete with those that embrace them, as AI becomes a strategic asset essential for financial success (Campbell et al., 2020, p. 228; Davenport et al., 2020, p. 27; Lauterbach & Bonime-Blanc, 2016, p. 54; Mierzejewska, 2011, p. 20). Several differentiating factors identified in this study are crucial for offering distinct value and thereby securing a competitive advantage to remain successful in the market.

Strategic Deployment. Marketers of B2C premium brands must strategically utilize AI innovations that resonate with the brand's identity, ensuring consistency. For example, Dove, committed to representing "real" beauty, cautiously approaches AI-enabled image generation to maintain their dedication to showcasing real people with imperfections (Dove, n.d.). Additionally, marketers should consider their customers' preferences for non-human interactions within their digitization strategy, weighing efficiency and automation against the perceived value of human contact. It is imperative to integrate AI only when the quality of the outcome is high to avoid AI fatigue among consumers. In summary, achieving a balance between quick integration and thoughtful implementation remains essential. It is important to determine and focus on areas where AI adds the most value for the brand, rather than employing it everywhere possible. Strategic employment includes brand consistency, customer centricity, and readiness for deployment.

Data Collection. Data quality stands as a critical differentiator, impacting all AI capabilities. Instead of overwhelming themselves with excessive data collection, brands should focus on key differentiating moments that align with their brand identity and strategically collect data from those touchpoints. This data collection process should be orchestrated with cross-functional team collaboration, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the data. CJ mapping can serve as an effective communication tool to establish common understanding among agile teams. Additionally, strategic collaborations with big tech companies for third-party data should be considered to enable a more complete picture of the situational factors influencing decision-making.

LLM Training & Collaborations. Another key differentiator lies in how effectively brands can train their LLMs. This process includes not only ensuring data quality but also leveraging internal technical expertise or seeking external support to establish an advantageous model strategy. Brands have the option to either develop their own models or utilize generic models such as OpenAI's, which require further training to incorporate brand-specific guardrails. In a highly competitive market where customer engagement time is limited due to the shortening of the CJ through conversational agents, owning the CX at strategic touchpoints becomes imperative. Product brands need to establish strategies for collaborating with tech companies for expertise and data, and external retailers for CX ownership, while tech companies must devise methods to own the experience without manufacturing a physical product. Consequently, brands should engage in collaborations with other companies to create native experiences in non-native environments and aim to position themselves as life partners rather than mere product providers. Additionally, brands should collaborate with external generic AI agents, treating them similarly to modern search engines by optimizing for and engaging with them.

5.4. Research Agenda

While this study offers deep insights into AI's applications in marketing for B2C premium brands, it also raises questions for future research. Additional research questions need to be addressed to fully comprehend AI's affordances in marketing. These inquiries build on the current findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of AI's role and potential in this domain.

Extending the current findings to gain a more holistic view entails delving deeper into the complexities of the conversational agent's employment effects. While it has been established that retention remains the ultimate marketing objective, uncertainties remain regarding shifts in the significance of goals such as brand salience when employing a generic agent. Additionally, there are unresolved questions regarding companies' readiness for generic agents or AI scrapers and the specific optimizations required. Furthermore, while AI can reduce human cognitive biases in decision-making, there exists a bias within the internet itself due to its human-generated nature (Stone et al., 2020, p. 188). Consequently, companies question how to ensure data accu-

racy within generic agents. Moreover, for brand-owned conversational agents, uncertainties remain regarding their optimal integration within the CJ and the instances where customers prefer alternative forms of communication. Therefore, potential research questions include:

- How will the rise of conversational agents change the marketing objectives of B2C premium brands throughout the CJ?
- How will the rise of conversational agents affect traditional CJ models?
- In which parts of the B2C premium brand's CJ should brand-owned conversational agents be employed?
- How can companies optimize their marketing communication for external AI scrapers?
- How can the correctness of brand information be achieved within non-native environments?
- How can brand consistency be ensured within non-native environments?

Moreover, it would be beneficial to integrate broader perspectives that extend beyond the scope of the thesis's research, including a wider range of considerations crucial for understanding AI applications in marketing cohesively. Exploring how the analysis of marketing data impacts other aspects of the company, such as product development, could provide valuable insights. Additionally, it would be interesting to research how companies need to adapt their staffing strategies, with roles like UX designers shifting from *designing a conversation* to *designing the concept of a conversation* (Interviewee 8). This adaptation is likely influenced by the overall digitization strategy, determining whether brands position themselves as proud analog companies or digitalization leaders (Tekic & Koroteev, 2019, p. 688). Another critical yet expansive aspect revolves around ethical considerations. For instance, when implementing an AI-enabled "shipping-first, shopping-later" approach, questions arise regarding its alignment with conscious consumption and the potential ethical implications of increased overall consumption attributable to AI-affordances. Moreover, ethical concerns regarding consumer data security, often translated into legislation such as the European GDPR, must be addressed to fully understand the possibilities of AI-affordances in marketing. Hence, potential future research questions include:

- How can AI-enabled marketing data analysis impact product development?
- How must B2C premium brands adapt their human resources to leveraging AI for their marketing efforts?

- What ethical considerations must B2C premium brands consider when strategically leveraging AI for their marketing efforts?
- What legal considerations must B2C premium brands consider when strategically leveraging AI for their marketing efforts?

All in all, within these comprehensive research findings based on interviewing leading experts, it becomes evident that the CJ is undergoing disruptive change and will face further evolution in the future. The determinant of a B2C premium brand's success lies in the strategic and effective utilization of AI for marketing efforts throughout the CJ. Leveraging AI is no longer just an advantageous addition but a fundamental necessity for sustainable relevance in the competitive market.

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Appendix

Appendix A: List of Experts

Note: The order of the listing is random and does not reflect the numbering of the interview partners within the result section of the thesis to ensure anonymity.

Olga Bykova

Director Digital Transformation

Nike & former Disney

Olga is an international strategist with over 15 years of experience in consumer products. She holds an MBA from HEC Paris and specializes in developing strategies for digital transformation. Olga plays a strategic role in distributing resources, supporting projects, and aligning developments with global business objectives, while also holding several touchpoints with consumer marketing. Within her former role at Disney, she initiated cross-company projects, which unfolded new consumer segments, collaborating with marketing, creative, and digital. Within a previous role, she developed an AI-enabled solution for a fashion retailer, collecting expertise within this domain.

Gerrit Seebeck

Product Owner AI Vehicle Configurator

BMW Group

Gerrit is the Product Owner for the vehicle configurator at BMW, embodying the motto "Driving Conversations, Accelerating Conversions" and specializing in AI-enabled innovation. His expertise lies in integrating conversational AI into the configurator to enhance user experience. Previously, Gerrit led the introduction of an AI-based virtual assistant, a novel project in large language model-based assistants. He also established a marketing intelligence platform, leveraging data science to drive brand strategies. Gerrit's role involves collaborating with cross-functional teams to define product vision and conduct user research, testing, and validation.

Funs Jacobs

Senior Director of Innovation

MediaMonks

Funs is revolutionizing digital marketing and e-commerce by creatively leveraging trends, technologies, and innovation to engage new and younger audiences. His goal is to help businesses and brands elevate their content and experiences, ensuring high-quality content and that every interaction is meaningful and memorable. MediaMonks is a digital-first marketing and advertising services company connecting the dots across content, data & digital media and technology sectors, creating impactful experiences that resonate with people.

Vera Brouwer

Senior Consultant Digital Marketing

Deloitte

Vera is a digital marketing consultant helping clients to steer their customer experience, adding value to their customer relationships and enhancing their overall profitability. Her vision is to look beyond traditional advertising and uncover hidden customer needs that influence marketing activities. Currently, she mostly does analyses of her clients IT infrastructure, ensuring that they are ready for data-driven marketing strategies.

Alexandra Popova

Senior Director Digital Product

Adidas

Alexandra leads a team at Adidas responsible for crafting consumer experiences throughout the e-commerce shopping journey, focusing primarily on the upper funnel of digital touchpoints. She oversees the development of these experiences from the moment a consumer lands on any of Adidas' digital platforms. Alexandra's team curates the shopping journey by integrating Adidas marketing messages, brand storytelling, ongoing campaigns, and sporting events into the digital

experience, leveraging AI and newest technology. They also optimize search, filters, personalization elements, recommendations, and sales to enhance product discovery and promote engagement.

Regina Beyhl

Director of CX Design Strategy

Phillips

Regina Beyhl is the director of CX design strategy at Philips, renowned for her expertise in innovation and experience design. With a background in design thinking and business design, Regina advocates for the strategic use of design to drive meaningful change in businesses. She combines agile, co-create methodologies, and design thinking. Regina leads a team focused on designing data-driven paradigm shifts for customer-centric solutions at Philips.

Eva Eisenacker

Team Lead Customer Journey Development

BMW Group

Eva bridges the gap between achieving a seamless customer experience and meeting sales objectives. Eva's role involves aligning customer journey goals with sales targets, ensuring a cohesive approach that leads to desired outcomes, such as product purchases. She coordinates horizontally across various experts who work on specific tasks within their respective silos, steering the team towards a unified vision. Eva's strategic direction ensures that the customer journey is optimized to meet both customer needs and business goals.

Geert Eichhorn

Executive Innovation Director, Head of Labs

MediaMonks

Geert is an innovation director at MediaMonks, leading a dynamic team focused on research and development in emerging technologies. With a creative background and an eye for innova-

tion, Geert oversees concept development and art direction for a wide range of projects, including AI, VR, AR, websites, games, experiential activations, digital campaigns, and apps. In his role, Geert is responsible for driving the success of the team by exploring and experimenting with cutting-edge technologies. He leads initiatives to identify innovative solutions that can be applied to MediaMonk's own business processes as well as those of their clients. Geert's team stays ahead of industry trends and continuously pushes the boundaries of what's possible in digital creativity and technology.

Justas Petronis

Senior Product Manager

TheyDo

Justas is a platform development specialist, expert in building a customer journey management platform, that is revolutionizing how businesses map and understand customer interactions. Theydo provides a platform that seamlessly connects individual customer journey maps, providing a unified view of the entire customer lifecycle. With automated data ingestion and synchronization capabilities, it serves as the definitive source of truth for aligning organizational strategies. Justas has extensive knowledge in leveraging technology to enhance customer experiences and enable optimized seamless customer journeys.

Bart De Pelsmaeker

Product Manager & Design Lead

It's Bart

Bart is a product management and customer experience specialist. His role involves guiding B2B companies, especially those in the early stages, to achieve product-market fit and optimize growth strategies. He is an expert in analyzing data, UX architecture, and integrating technology-enabled innovations to enhance custom er experiences with a deep domain knowledge of AI.

Frank van Leeuwen

Lead Software Engineer & Architect

Wolfpack DCS

Frank van Leeuwen is an expert in bridging the gap between software development and business by developing an innovative platform that connects big e-commerce platforms and ERP systems. His cloud-based Omni Channel Retail Platform serves as the missing connection, empowering retailers to seamlessly manage their stock, product information, and orders across all online and offline sales channels. In addition to the platform, he is also experienced in exploring the potential of AI to enhance the offerings further. As the lead designer, he is playing a crucial role in shaping the future of retail technology, driving innovation and efficiency for several businesses.

Harald Lamberts

Founder & Speaker UX Management

Essense

Harald, CEO at Essense, brings a passion for customer-centric innovation and sustainable business development. With a background in customer research and experience at Microsoft and Vodafone, Harald specializes in service design, and lean startup innovation. In collaboration with his interdisciplinary team, Harald crafts overarching strategies that drive business value through various initiatives, ensuring products and services resonate with customers. Essense designs a holistic customer experience perspective across channels in order to consider the full context of users and all touch-points of their clients.

Renée de Leau

Senior User Experience Consultant

Bright Cape

Renée is an independent contractor specializing in UX research, product design, and graphic design. With over five years of experience, she focuses on designing human-centric ex-

periences for data-heavy digital products across various industries. Renée is experienced in optimizing user journeys for B2B products and internal tooling, resulting in improvements in customer satisfaction and user engagement. Additionally, within Bright Cape, Renée leads and mentors a team of several human-data interaction specialists, enabling a collaborative and inclusive environment for innovation.

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1) **Introduction of me and the research project**:

Hello, thank you for taking your time. My name is Jana, I am originally from Munich where I did my Bachelor's in communication science and currently I'm studying Media & Business on the Erasmus University Rotterdam. For my master thesis research, I would like to gain a better understanding of AI-affordances in marketing. In particular, I'd like to investigate how B2C premium brands can strategically use AI and AI-enabled innovations to enhance their marketing strategy and customer journey.

2) **Explain rights as a participant:**

First of all, I want to thank you for contributing to my research today and being willing to participate in this interview. I will now go over some of the rights you have has interviewee. Those are the same ones that I sent you via the consent form, however, I will go through three of them quickly. The interview will take about 45 minutes to one hour. During this time, you may take a break or stop the interview, if you wish to do so. If you wish to discontinue the interview, then you also have that right. Additionally, you are not obliged to answer all of the questions. Also, you should understand that there is no wrong answer. I want to understand your perceptions, so this is not a test of facts. For my research, I won't need any personal information, however, I would like to mention your name and professional title in my research paper. The data itself will be anonymized, however, the appendix would include name, professional title and description of job. Would that be alright for you?

3) **Consent recording:**

Finally, I would like to ask if you are ok with me recording this interview? But before we start: do you have any questions? We'll start now the interview.

4) **Icebreaker question:**

I saw that you are active in the field of [insert field of profession]. What is it exactly that you do within this domain?

5) **Interview questions:**

First, I will ask you a few questions about the **general relevance of the customer journey** before diving into the phases:

- How will AI impact current customer journey models for premium brands?

- How will AI impact the strategic relevance of customer journey mapping?

Now I will ask a few questions regarding the **phase before the actual purchase**.

- How can AI be leveraged within the pre-purchase phase for premium brands? (Personalized & targeted campaigns, websites, recommendations)
- How did the objectives for a premium brand before the purchase change with the advent of AI? (Brand salience, awareness, Influence)
- How will AI impact the pre-purchase phase of premium brands?

The next part will be about the actual **purchase phase**.

- How can AI be leveraged within the purchase phase for premium brands? (Personalized real-time pricing)
- How did the objectives for a premium brand in the purchase phase change with the advent of AI? (Effortless conversion, maximizing revenue)
- How will AI impact the purchase phase of premium brands?

The last part regarding the customer journey will be about the actual **phase after the purchase**.

- How can AI be leveraged within the post-purchase phase for premium brands? (Customer support via AI-chatbot, personalized follow-up content, automated reordering)
- How did the objectives for a premium brand after the purchase change with the advent of AI? (Loyalty, engagement, advocacy)
- How will AI impact the post-purchase phase of premium brands?

The second part of my questions will be mor about **holistic strategic considerations** and real-life implementation issues of AI and marketing.

The first part is about the tension between brand consistency and personalization efforts:

- How important is brand consistency for premium brands?
- Has the importance of brand consistency changed with AI?
- How can premium brands navigate between brand consistency and personalization?

The second part is about data and the need for data. Since most of the AI-affordances rely on consumer data it is an important consideration.

- How will premium brands get the amount of data needed for leveraging AI?(First, second, third party data)
- What are important aspects to consider in terms of data sourcing?

The last part of my questions are about **technology and innovation ownership** and potential collaborations.

- How will premium brands gain the needed technological know-how?
- With what stakeholders will premium brands collaborate to be able to utilize AI?

6) Room for additional questions that have been added subsequently

One final question for you: Do you feel like there is **anything left to add** in order to cohesively understand future AI applications within the marketing of B2C premium brands?

7) Ending:

Thank you for your collaboration. Next steps:

- I will conduct more interviews, I will analyze the interviews and write my thesis

- Would you be interested in receiving the results?

- We can talk about what aspects are most relevant for your company and your team & I can come and present it

- Do you have anyone in your network who could enhance my study?

If there are any questions in the meantime please feel free to reach out.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATING IN RESEARCH

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Jana Hartel, E-Mail: 677619jh@eur.nl

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in a research about AI-affordances in marketing. The purpose of the study is to understand how B2C brands can leverage AI to optimize their customer journey. Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to your expertise in the field of marketing and AI. Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview. I will use the material from the interviews and my observation exclusively for academic work, such as further research, academic meetings and publications.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

As far as I can tell, there are no risks associated with participating in this research. I will not use your name or other identifying information in the study. To participants in the study will only be referred to with pseudonyms, and in terms of general characteristics such as age and gender, etc. You are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take one hour. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your individual privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact –anonymously, if you wish— Matthijs Leendertse, leendertse@eshcc.eur.nl

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

If you sign this consent form, your signature will be the only documentation of your identity. Thus, you do not need to sign this form. In order to minimize risks and protect your identity, you may prefer to consent orally. Your oral consent is sufficient.

I give consent to be recorded during this study:

Name Signature Date

I prefer my identity to be revealed in all written data resulting from this study:

Name Signature Date

Appendix D: Coding Tree

Theme 1: Disruptive AI-Affordances

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code
Data analysis	Advantages	Speed, Efficiency Less errors Massive amounts Discover new connections Dynamic segmentation Real-time targeting Predictive analysis Automating efforts
	Challenges	Low quality first-party data Hurdles in collaboration for third-party data IT infrastructure Quality over quantity
	Affordance: CJ Mapping	Journey Management Cross functional Streamline several journeys Real-time Data-driven Quality Check
Hyper-personalization & Generative AI	Hyper-personalization	Personalization as an old concept Most used AI-affordance Different data types Recommendation enhancements Challenge: High-quality data
	Content Creation	Efficient creation of different contents Specific use cases Disadvantages Quality check

Theme 2: AI-enabled Innovation Development

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code
Evolution of AI-enabled Innovation in Marketing	Development	Early development, in the backend Time intensive Hyper-personalization Conversational agents Timeframe
	Countermovement	Value in handmade content Premiumness, brand
The Rise of Conversational Agents	Conversational Agents	Disrupt CJ Language as bridge Concierge service
	Advantages	Accessible Fluency
	Strategic Considerations	Lack of proactivity Correctness of information Optimization for AI scraper Collaboration with generic agents

Theme 3: Holistic Strategic Considerations

Selective Code	Axial Code	Open Code
Objectives within the CJ	Overarching objectives & CX	Goal development since AI Situational factors: amount of data, less time Retention CX More personal Similar to analogue CX
	Strategic relevance of CJ mapping	Mapping the decision making Facilitate common understanding Holistic view for internal organization Agile approach instead of mapping
Collaborations	Data Sourcing	First-party data most important Data collection via app launches Third-party data
	AI-Models	Stick to own capabilities Custom LLMs in collaboration
	CX ownership	Native environments Other environments
Resolving Paradoxes	Personalization-consistency paradox	Brand as key differentiator Brand consistency importance Overarching promise Guardrails in LLMs
	Recommendation-choice paradox	Freedom of choice Confidence in your choice Excitement and Newness

Appendix E: Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information
Name: Jana Hartel
Student ID: 677619
Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000
Supervisor Name: Matthijs Leendertse
Date: 25.06.2024

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools
I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:
- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT, Quillbot, Grammarly, DeepL, Epsilon, Scribbr in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Extent of AI Usage
☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Prompts that have been used, following the university internal Canvas page "Use of AI" (https://canvas.eur.nl/courses/45108/pages/use-of-ai):
"Can you summarize the most important thoughts in X words?"
"Can you check if this sentence is grammatically correct?"
"Can you give me synonyms for word X or expression X?"
"Can you put this in other words?"
"Can you sort these sources alphabetically?"

Signature:

Date of Signature: 25.06.2024