

Social Customer Journey Map: A Research on Communication Agencies

Sosyal Müşteri Yolculuğu Haritası: İletişim Ajansları Üzerine Bir Araştırma

Cudi Kaan OKMEYDAN* 

Işık ÖZKAN** 

Abstract

The aim of this study is to obtain in-depth information about the knowledge and experience of communication agencies regarding the concept of social customer journey. Based on a phenomenological research pattern, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven experts working in communication agencies operating throughout Turkey. Then, the themes emerging throughout the study were subjected to descriptive analysis. The findings revealed that agency-brand cooperation is extremely important in the planning process of social customer journey. It was determined that the agencies visualized the process by creating a customer journey map at the planning stage. In addition, it has been determined that all the problems that customers may encounter during the planning stage have been foreseen and solutions have been produced. Findings also reveal that communication agencies tracked customer movements on social media to provide a better experience to customers. Utilizing various online tracking and reporting software, these agencies monitored websites and received reports about consumer behaviour. Findings also demonstrate that it has become a necessity for agencies and brands to invest in Artificial Intelligence-powered automation systems in order to provide a better experience to customers and maximize interaction.

Keywords: Customer journey, customer journey map, social customer journey, social media, brand communication.

* Lecturer (PhD), Yaşar University, Faculty of Communication / Department of Public Relations & Advertising, İzmir, Türkiye, E-Mail: cudi.okmeydan@yasar.edu.tr , ORCID: 0000-0001-6669-0276

** Prof. Dr. Yaşar University, Faculty of Communication / Department of Public Relations & Advertising, İzmir, Türkiye, E-Mail: isik.ozkan@yasar.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-1494-7305

This research was carried out with the decision number 12344 approved by the Ethics Committee of Yaşar University on 28.09.2021

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı iletişim ajanslarının sosyal müşteri yolculuğu kavramına yönelik bilgi ve tecrübeleri hakkında derinlemesine bilgi edinmektir. Çalışmada fenomenolojik bir araştırma deseninden yola çıkarak Türkiye çapında faaliyet gösteren iletişim ajanslarında çalışan on bir uzman ile yarı yapılandırılmış mülakatlar gerçekleştirilmiş ve oluşturulan temalar betimsel analize tabi tutulmuştur. Ortaya çıkan bulgular; sosyal müşteri yolculuğu planlama sürecinde ajans-marka iş birliğinin son derece önemli olduğunu göstermiştir. Planlama aşamasında ajansların müşteri yolculuğu haritası oluşturarak süreci görselleştirdikleri saptanmıştır. Buna ek olarak planlama aşamasında müşterilerin karşılaşabileceği bütün sorunların önceden tahmin edilerek çözümler üretildiği tespit edilmiştir. Müşterilere daha iyi deneyim sunabilmesi adına çeşitli çevrimiçi takip ve raporlama yazılımlarından destek alınarak onların sosyal medya ve web sitelerindeki hareketlerinin izlenip raporlandığı ortaya çıkmıştır. Ortaya çıkan bir diğer önemli bulgu ise müşterilere daha iyi deneyim sunabilmek ve etkileşimi en üst seviyeye çıkarabilmek adına ajansların ve markaların yapay zekâ destekli otomasyon sistemlerine yatırım yapmalarının zorunluluk haline geldiğidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Müşteri yolculuğu, müşteri yolculuğu haritası, sosyal müşteri yolculuğu, sosyal medya, marka iletişimi.

Introduction

The customer journey refers to all the touchpoints that customers encounter until they reach the purchasing stage. Within this period, customers go through many touchpoints and expect a perfect experience at each one. For this reason, every touchpoint that customers go through should be designed in advance to offer a complete experience to the customer (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 82). In this design process, the process is visualized by creating diagrams called customer journey, and a journey story is created (Balboni, 2021). This map makes the planning more detailed and complete by shaping the frequent destinations in the purchasing journeys of customers with visual elements based on a story (Helito et al., 2020, p. 1). Thus, all interaction points where customers can come in contact with the brand and the things to be experienced at every interaction point as well as possible defects and their solutions are predetermined.

The customer journey concept has been adapted to social media as a result of the current developments in social media technologies and the opportunities offered by social media to brands and thereby, the social customer journey concept has emerged (Forbus, 2020, p. 93). As stated by Demmers et al., (2020) brands take the opportunity to interact with customers at every stage of the customer journey thanks to social media. This interaction offers many advantages to brands in terms of getting feedback, developing good and long-term relationships, and building customer loyalty. The customer journey process in social media and the interaction arising between brands and customers in this process has turned into a vital fact that must be understood and investigated by marketers and researchers (Hamilton et al., 2020, p. 2). The reason is that the social customer journey concept goes far beyond the traditional customer journey concept, eliminating time and space constraints and offering high interaction opportunities. This interaction-based structure of social customer journey also brings important opportunities in terms of developing good and sustainable relationships between the brand and its customers and building customer loyalty.

This study was conducted to better understand the social customer journey concept and to learn expert opinions on the subject. In this context, the research covers the professionals working in communication agencies specialized in the social customer journey. In the study which is based on a phenomenological pattern, semi-structured interviews were made with social media experts of eleven communications agencies operating across Turkey, and data saturation was achieved. As a result of the interviews, six themes emerged and these themes were subjected to descriptive analysis. The emergent findings were interpreted in comparison with the findings of a couple of studies in the international literature.

Related Literature

The customer journey is a strategic management tool applied in the process of enhancing customer experience (Rosenbaum et al., 2017, p. 145). According to this method, everything that the customer will go through in the purchasing process is identified and designed in advance. Although the customer journey concept was first brought forward by Whittle and Foster (1989) in the early 1990s, it is a concept still being studied and developed today due to changing customer profiles, sales channels, and communication technologies. Considering the current literature, it is seen that the customer journey concept describes the total customer experience covering the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, pp. 70-71).

The most strategic way followed to offer a good customer experience in the process of the customer journey is the mapping technique called customer journey map (Norton & Pine, 2013, p. 13). The customer journey map expresses all the points where the customer and service providers come in contact and interact. In other words, it describes the courses that customers follow at pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase and all the touchpoints they go through (Crosier & Handford, 2012, p. 68). In this process, everything that customers will experience before and during the purchase is planned by creating a customer journey map so that they can get the best experience. Figure 1 shows an example of a simple customer journey map.

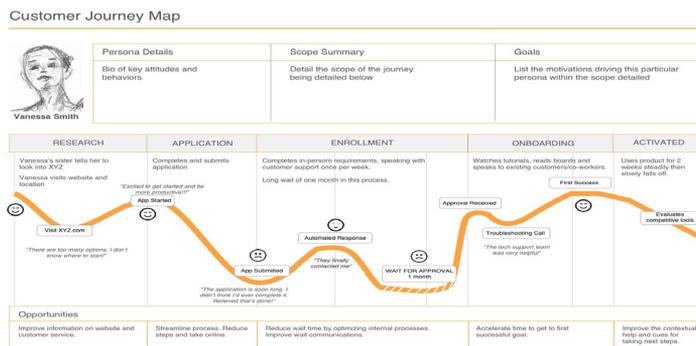


Figure 1. Customer Journey Map Example

Source: Treasure Data (2023). Think outside the funnel: How to create a custom customer journey map, <https://blog.treasuredata.com/blog/2023/01/17/think-outside-the-funnel-how-to-create-a-custom-customer-journey-map/>

As seen in Figure 1, the customer journey map shows the interaction process of a fictional character with her brand and the fictional events that the character may experience at each touchpoint. However, the steps in each customer journey map may vary depending on variables such as product or service type, sales channels and customer type.

Hamilton et al. (2020) pointed out that customer journey occurs on social media today, and they described the concept as “Social Customer Journey”. For them, this concept expresses the opportunities both to reach larger customer groups collectively and to offer a higher quality customer experience due to the collective and interactive nature of social media. Although there are some studies investigating the effects of social media on customer journey before Hamilton et al. are among the first ones cited in the relevant literature in terms of clearly calling the concept as “Social Customer Journey” (Forbus, 2021, pp. 94-95).

The increase in the use of social media gives customers the freedom to reach the brands through any channel and at any time they want. This allows for an exchange of values between brands and their customers (Breibach & Brodie, 2014, p. 593; Martin-Pena et al., 2018, p. 93). The researchers such as Marino and Lo-Presti (2018) and Yahav et al., (2019) assert that all services and activities offered to customers over social media such as social customer relationship management are effective on the journey of customers on social media. This sets forth that the social customer journey needs to be addressed more holistically. In this regard, an extensive process such as the interaction of customers with each other and the brand concerning a product, service, or brand on social media, the customers’ participation in or witnessing to activities carried out by the brand on social media, the online purchasing process, and the communication and support service ongoing with the brand over social media after the purchase refers to the social customer journey (Chougule et al., 2020, p. 107).

Stating that no traditional method can provide brands with a positive customer journey experience as much as social media, Demmers et al. (2020) underlined that social media content and interaction created by the brand play an extremely essential role in this journey. According to them, customers who have a good customer journey on social media are inclined towards the brand they interact with. Another significant advantage of the social customer journey is the introduction of online artificial intelligence practices into our lives with Web 3.0 technologies called the semantic web. Thus, Web 3.0 and social media sites enabling artificial intelligence support can offer a better customer experience by getting to know each internet user better (Onete et al., 2017, p. 36). At this point, Tanveer et al., (2021) pointed out in their study on the social customer journey that thanks to the artificial intelligence support offered by new generation web technologies, it is possible to know the customers better and to plan a perfect social customer journey by forecasting their wishes and expectations. Today, even ChatGPT, an AI-supported online software that can understand and answer the meaning of the questions asked, can be used in various customer relations applications, such as content creation on web platforms and dialogue creation on chatbots. Thanks to these capabilities, ChatGPT is able to respond to customer comments and questions, solve problems, and interact with customers in depth (Mottes, 2023; Zierock & Jungblut, 2023).

METHOD

The research aims to gain deep information on the concept of social customer journey map and its implementation from a professional point of view, rather than making inferences by generalization. For this reason, qualitative method and phenomenological design were used as the most convenient research method for the aim of the study, and the semi-structured in-depth interview technique was utilized as a data collection tool. Phenomenology is a pattern of qualitative research methods used to determine people's points of view on specific subjects, concepts, and facts, to learn their feelings, or to describe or explain their experiences (Rose et al., 1995, p. 1124). Interview, one of the data collection techniques frequently used in the phenomenological design of qualitative research methods, is a data collection technique mainly used to get information on people's attitudes, opinions and behaviors about the past, present or future (Güler et al., 2013, p. 112).

The interview technique is divided into three within itself; fully structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. A fully structured interview is the verbal form of written research and it is suitable for population or market research (Merriam, 2018, p. 88). Semi-structured interviews also enable participants to explain their perceptions and opinions. This method can provide richer data, specifically in studies such as expert opinion (Adams, 2015, pp. 493-494). An unstructured (informal) interview is a method that is used when the researcher does not have sufficient knowledge on the subject and that is not built and framed on designated questions (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 310). Notwithstanding that the researchers have sufficient knowledge on the subject in this study, they need the perceptions and perspectives of the participants as required by the aim of the research. Therefore, the semi-structured interview technique was used as the data collection tool in this study. Nevertheless, the flexibility offered by the semi-structured interview technique allows the elaboration of the responses of the interviewees and the in-depth investigation of subjective opinions and judgments (Yüksel, 2020, p. 549). In this context, it can be said that the features offered by the selected data collection technique fully correlate with the aim of the research.

Validity and Reliability of the Research

Unlike quantitative research, there are no tools to measure validity and reliability in qualitative research. In qualitative research, the expressions such as credibility, the accuracy of results, and competence of the researcher are used instead of validity and reliability expressions (Başkale, 2016, p. 23). In this regard, credibility is built on aspects such as long-term interaction, participant confirmation, expert review whereas reliability is met with data, theory, researcher, or method triangulation (Honorene, 2017, pp. 91-92). Thus, the accuracy of the research is increased with the presence of several data collection tools, methods, theories, or researchers.

One of the most important factors on the credibility and reliability of qualitative research is the correct analysis of data. In qualitative research, a comprehensive and systematic analysis process is expected to yield more accurate results (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 29). Nevertheless, Strauss (1987) argues that in some cases, a standardized, systematic analysis model may restrict the researcher in qualitative research and such a method is not functional for every research topic. In this study,

participant confirmation was provided to ensure the accuracy of the qualitative research, and two researchers worked together in the data analysis process.

Research Questions

According to Mattick et al., (2018), the framework of a well-designed research question should be well-drawn and narrowed enough, be authentic while addressing specific questions and contribute to the literature. In addition to all these, it is expected that the research questions will be convenient to the aim and method of the research and be created based on the literature (Ramos, 2009, pp. 1145-1146). In this study, the research questions were designed to meet the aim of the study and to be responded with the current methodology, based on the relevant literature.

Rosenbaum et al. (2017) state that the main purpose of creating a customer journey map is to build good relations between the customer and the organization and to plan each stage in advance with the help of images. Within this process, it is aimed that the customer will have a satisfactory experience when interacting with the brand or organization at the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. Thus, it is essential to analyze the demographic structures of the customers, to predetermine all the steps to be taken by the customers respectively and to predetermine and plan the customer expectations, perceptions, and factors that will provide customer satisfaction (Canfield & Baso, 2017, pp. 109-111). From this point of view, the first question of the research aims to reveal how the process in question is planned and managed on social media.

R.Q. 1: How is the customer journey planned and managed on social media?

One of the most important aspects when creating a customer journey map is to create and develop touchpoints. It is aimed to design each touchpoint dedicatedly and to offer the best experience to the customer. In this process, these touchpoints also cover various digital environments such as websites today as well as the physical environments such as sales points and stores of the brand or organization (Muret, 2013). In this sense, the second and third questions of the research focus on virtual touchpoints such as social media and aim to learn what can be done to provide the best customer experience with virtual touchpoints and the main differences between traditional touchpoints and virtual touchpoints.

R.Q. 2: How can social media accounts of brands be managed to offer a better customer experience?

R.Q. 3: What are the main differences between the traditional and social customer journey?

Research Sample

The research aims to create a sample that can represent the main mass and present sample data. From this point of view, the purposive sampling method was adopted to meet these requirements. Purposive sampling is a method that is frequently used in qualitative research methods and expresses the investigation of units convenient to predefined and predetermined aim when the researcher(s) have a comprehensive knowledge of the characteristics of the subject and population under research (Erdoğan, 2007, p. 176). It is essential to reach data saturation rather than sample size in studies

conducted over this sampling method (Creswell, 2019, p. 82). In this study, interviews were continued until data saturation was achieved. In this context, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven professionals who were selected with the purposive sampling method, specialized in social customer journey studies and working in communications agencies operating across Turkey, and data saturation was achieved.

Research Limitations

The research is limited to the data provided by a total of eleven participants working in communications agencies that operate across Turkey and two of which are based in Izmir and nine of which are based in Istanbul.

Research Ethics

The interviews conducted within the scope of the research were made with the free wills of the participants and the participants were informed in detail about the aim of the research, the questions to be asked in the interview, and the interviewer's privacy before the interview. As required by research ethics, the identity information of the participants and the names of the agencies where they work were kept confidential and all participants were numerically coded as Participant 1 ... Participant 11. The names of the participants were not used at any stage of the reporting process and the interview records were not seen by anyone other than the research executives. In addition to all these, the research was carried out with the decision number 12344 approved by the Ethics Committee of Yaşar University on 28.09.2021.

Findings

Within the scope of the research, data obtained from the interviews with eleven professionals were interpreted with an inductive approach and general inferences were reached by giving a place to the opinions of the participants within the framework of the themes determined in this process. As a result of the data obtained, six themes emerged and the interview findings were analyzed separately under each theme. In this regard, the themes that emerged as a result of the interviews made on creating a customer journey map on social media are as follows:

Theme 1. Agency-Brand Relationship on the Social Customer Journey

Theme 2. Importance and Selection of Social Media Platforms

Theme 3. Planning Process in Social Customer Journey

Theme 4. Requirements for a Successful Social Customer Journey

Theme 5. Main Errors in the Social Customer Journey

Theme 6. Differences Between Traditional and Social Customer Journeys

Theme 1. Agency-Brand Relationship on the Social Customer Journey

The participants stated that brands desire to be included not only in customer journey studies but also in the process of all communication studies developed for the brand. At this point, Participant 1, Participant 3, Participant 8 and Participant 9 underlined that specifically leading brands have their own strategies and in this case, they remain loyal to the current strategy. Similarly, Participants 2, 4, and 5 stated that agencies act more freely when brands do not have a strategy or want to change their image. Furthermore, all participants pointed out that when the brands they work with have relevant departments or units such as corporate communication and public relations, their business processes progress much faster and more efficiently.

The participants emphasized that brands should be involved in at least a part of the process to understand the expectations of the brand more clearly at the stage of creating a social customer journey map. At this point, Participant 3 explained the importance of including the brand in the process as follows: *“No one can know a brand better than itself, a strategy created over social media should be in line with the brand’s identity, values, stance, and personality. The brand itself knows this best, and cooperation is required between the agency and the brand in this process”*.

Stating that brands leave the final word to the agency when there is a division of opinion between the brand and the agency in social media studies, the participants emphasized that brands used to get the last word as customers. However, the participants expressed that due to the negative experiences gained, brands now trust agencies more over time. In this regard, Participant 2 pointed out the technical dimension of the fact: *“In studies with a technical dimension such as social media, it is necessary to trust the agency. Because various software and algorithms come into play at this point. In any case, if things do not go well in practice, the agency can see and intervene in this instantly”*.

The participants, who frequently laid emphasis on the importance of agency-brand cooperation in the process of creating a customer journey, stated that the decisive factor at this point is the goal of the brand. According to the participants, if the goal is a quick sale, the customer journey is created in such a way that directs the customer to purchase most shortly. If the goal is not a quick sale, but to establish long-term good relationships, a longer and much more interactive journey is preferred. All participants underlined that the second approach should be adopted to talk about a real customer journey.

Theme 2. Importance and Selection of Social Media Platforms

Participants stated that customers should not be directed to different social media platforms while creating a social customer journey map. According to the participants, one or two platforms should be selected according to the target group profile and the customer journey should be designed dedicatedly for each platform. In this sense, all participants stated that platforms such as LinkedIn and Twitter should be used in B2B (Business to Business) business processes while the platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook promising more entertainment should be used for fast-moving consumer goods.

Underlining that each platform has its specific characteristics, Participant 1 stated that a different platform is used for each message to be conveyed on social media and each media has its specific message. Participant 1 laid stress on the difference between an individual customer and a corporate customer in the social customer journey. According to Participant 1, a customer journey map can be created for corporate customers albeit rare. However, this map is very different from the map of individual customers. According to Participant 1, a corporate customer is a person who is more utilitarian, less emotional, has less time, and makes shopping for the company he works for. On the other hand, an individual customer is a person who acts more emotionally, does not have time problems in shopping, makes shopping for himself or his family, wants to have a good experience and time in this process, and expects a benefit both emotionally and financially from his shopping.

All participants stated that experience studies for corporate customers are extremely limited and rare and the customer journey map is essentially a concept for individual customers. In this regard, all participants laid emphasis on the importance of social media platforms with high interaction rates, promising entertainment to the end consumer. Furthermore, the participants pointed out the importance of giving customers a chance to have a pleasant time on social media and keeping the interaction at the highest level in this process, instead of making their purchases right away.

Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 10 and Participant 11 underlined that the field of activity of the brand and, accordingly, the customer target group are decisive in the selection of social media platforms. Both participants stated that an entertaining and interactive route should be created for the end consumer in social media, and the most interactive, colorful, and attractive social media environments should be preferred in customer journey studies. Both participants expressed that Facebook and Instagram can provide a good customer journey experience in this regard, but especially Instagram should not be ignored for the generation Z. At this point, Participant 4 also attached importance to a point: *“The customer journey should either be planned for a single platform or individually for each platform. It should be noted that each platform has a different target audience. Therefore, the social customer journey is usually planned for one or two social media platforms based on the target audience of the brand.”*

The most important finding that all the participants agreed on and comes to the fore is that the studies aiming at the end-consumer in the social customer journey process should be designed for popular, colorful, and interactive platforms that promise entertainment. However, the participants emphasized that the only way to enhance memorability and create a bond between the brand and the customer is through continuous interaction.

Theme 3. Planning Process in Social Customer Journey

According to the participants, the most important factor in the planning process is the goals and expectations of the brand. The brand can request a social customer journey for a sales campaign or image work. At this point, Participant 1 stated that the social customer journey map is created according to the expectations of the brand and explained as follows: *“It is a different strategy to show the customer an advertisement on a website or social media and raise awareness, then make them visit*

the brand's social media accounts, and direct them to online sales soon after. Here, the expectation of the brand is quick sales. However, it is a different strategy to ensure that the customer spends time on the social media pages of the brand, to build good relationships with the customer and to provide him with a good experience with various competitions or events, and to target sales in the longer term”.

Another important finding of the planning process is the good analysis of the target audience and the correct understanding of their wishes and expectations. The participants stated that support can be obtained from research companies in the target audience analysis process, but software that follows the target audience in digital applications such as social media and reports their demographic information and fields of interest gives faster and more accurate results. According to the participants, applications that monitor and report the browsing activities of internet users enable the agencies to make micro-segmentation (segmentation) in their work such as age, gender, income, place of residence, and interests.

All the participants stated that they created a customer journey map during the planning process, and the touchpoints for the brand in social media were predetermined and an experience was designed for each touchpoint. All participants pointed out that different touchpoints can be created even in a single social media account. At this point, Participant 4 gave the following example: *“To illustrate, we can use different Instagram tools as different touchpoints. We can make a separate planning for each Instagram tool such as reels, stories, explore, and sales”.* The participants, who stated that the social customer journey does not have to start on social media, drew attention to the fact that the process can also start with web advertising. However, what is important at this point is to direct customers to the social media accounts of the brand and to spend a lot of time there. Participant 3 explained the importance of directing customers to the brand's social media accounts as follows: *“The platforms where brands are most free are not websites, but social media accounts. Entertaining content, interaction, competition, and various events create invaluable customer experiences”.*

All participants put stress on that problems and undesirable experiences the customers may encounter should be predicted in advance and measures should be taken in this regard.

Participants underlined that many factors can adversely affect a perfect customer journey experience. Technical problems that may arise at this point, failure to respond immediately to the change in the agenda, and failure to manage a crisis that may arise are just some of the factors that may lead to a negative result in the customer journey. At this point, Participant 5 gave the following example: *“Imagine that all the stages of the customer journey were very positive, but the customer has a technical problem in the purchasing stage and cannot make the purchase. In this case, all the positive experiences until the purchase came to nothing. What kind of a plan do you have for such a situation? This is what matters in planning”.* Arguing that how to act against a changing agenda or crises that may arise should be planned in advance, the participants stated that in case of a negative situation such as an earthquake or forest fires in a part of the country, the way the brand will follow should be planned in advance.

Theme 4. Requirements for a Successful Social Customer Journey

According to the participants, first what customers want should be well known. The main purpose of customers who spend time on social media accounts of brands may be having fun rather than getting information about products or services. According to the participants, brands have to promise an entertaining journey to their customers on social media. At this point, Participant 1 considered the issue as follows: *“Unsuccessful customer journeys on social media are those that do not offer enough entertainment, fail to be creative, and do not offer a good time for the customer. Because the end-consumer wants to distract himself and have a pleasant time on the social media accounts of the brands”.*

All participants stated that for a successful social customer journey, a complete experience must be provided, and this experience depends on dialogue and interaction as well as entertaining content. At this point, Participant 1 likened social media to a physical store and considered the issue as follows: *“The same thing is valid for social media accounts of brands, just as a customer leaves the store angrily when he cannot find an answerer in the store. When the customer cannot find an answerer in the social media accounts of the store, he leaves there angrily and probably will not visit again.”* Participant 4 described the social media accounts of the brands as stores that will never close and gave the following example: *“A store has working hours, you have the opportunity to go and see the products and get information from the sales representatives during that hour. However, the social media accounts of brands are accessible 24/7. For this reason, the social media accounts of brands should be open to 24/7 communication and brands should invest in this issue. A customer who cannot find an answerer or receives a late return should be viewed as a lost customer”.*

According to the participants, a good customer journey map can only be created in line with the feedback from the customers. The same is valid for all activities on social media. Participant 5 expressed the importance of the feedback from social media as follows: *“In line with the feedback you receive, you make improvements in your planning and have the chance to offer a better experience. However, feedback provides opportunities for brands not only at this point but also in terms of developing better products and services.”*

Emphasizing the importance of measurement and artificial intelligence-powered automation technologies, the participants pointed out the fact that an activity that cannot be measured is made up of wasted money and time. At this point, Participant 2 stated that it is not possible to enhance any activity that cannot be measured. Participants emphasized that the first step of measurement starts with simple feedback such as customer comments and the number of likes from social media and is shaped more clearly with data and reports provided by measurement software with different algorithms.

Expressing the importance of artificial intelligence-powered automation software in addition to measurement, the participants stated that thanks to artificial intelligence, social media experts reduce their burdens and work more efficiently by sharing work with the software. According to the participants, there are different artificial intelligence-powered automation software that can be used in social media accounts or websites of brands. Every brand or agency that wants to be successful

has to invest in this automation. At this point, Participant 2 explained the subject as follows: *“Some keywords are determined. For example, when the price is asked, automation comes into play instead of the social media worker and it can reply and share prices, make small dialogues, and send emojis like a real person. Thus, the customer receives an immediate response and does not wait, and thereby, the workload of the social media worker is reduced.”* Participant 5 also expressed his views as follows: *“Artificial intelligence-powered automation is not an automatic response. They are traditional automation. Artificial intelligence-powered automation does not only communicate with customers on social media but also reports to the social media manager. It works almost like the assistant of the social media manager. Brands or agencies that do not invest in such systems cannot be expected to be assertive in the digital environment”*. The participants, who stated that a good experience in social media can be achieved with artificial intelligence-powered automation systems, forecasted that the importance of artificial intelligence-powered software will gradually increase.

Theme 5. Main Errors in the Social Customer Journey

Participants described the most important mistake made in the social customer journey process as insufficient interaction. According to the participants, another important mistake is the journey planning that does not promise a good enough experience. Participant 4 considered this as follows: *“The social customer journey is already done to raise the interaction. It is aimed to organize different content, different activities in different social media accounts, and interact with the customer. Thus, the blue touchpaper of long-term good relations is tried to be lighted. The more people you engage in dialogue with and the more likes you get in this process, the more successful your customer journey will be.”*

Pointing out the long texts as another important mistake in the social customer journey, the participants stated that they need more visual elements instead of text. According to the participants, people who spend time on social media for entertainment purposes should be reached through colorful and entertaining visuals or videos. Stating that the place where people are physically present while browsing social media can also contain distractions, the participants drew attention to the fact that such situations can also make reading difficult.

According to the participants, another important mistake is that the social media accounts of brands are far from content that can catch the attention of customers. In this regard, it is underlined that the use of social media accounts of brands with the logic of brochures and an approach that tries to direct the customer directly to sales is extremely wrong. According to the participants, brands should regularly share colorful content that may catch the attention of their target audience and plan various events at regular intervals. At this point, Participant 2 underlined that it is necessary to empathize by approaching the issue with the logic of an ordinary internet user or customer, and expressed the subject as follows: *“Why should I visit your social media accounts and spend time there? If you can answer this question, you can manage your social media well and plan a good social customer journey. At this point, it is necessary to create personas and capture ordinary consumer insight”*.

Drawing attention to influencer collaborations (influencer/social media phenomenon) as another important mistake, the participants stated that either not to cooperate with influencers or

to be very careful in choosing an influencer. According to the participants, the credibility of these people who work with different brands also decreases.

Theme 6. Differences Between Traditional and Social Customer Journeys

All participants stated that the traditional customer journey and the social customer journey adopt the same understanding. According to the participants, while the traditional customer journey consists of storefront or in-store applications, the social customer journey enables the development and maintenance of good and long-term relationships between the brand and the customer as well as provides a better experience.

The participants stated that the traditional customer journey focuses on in-store work and the aim here is to direct the customer to purchase. However, according to the participants, the process works differently since the purpose of social media is to develop permanent and long-term relationships with customers, rather than quick sales. Emphasizing that the traditional customer journey has lost its importance today, the participants also stated that traditional practices continue for some sectors. In this regard, Participant 1 gave the following example: *“To illustrate, you are a furniture brand, even if you start the customer journey on social media, you have to continue traditionally. Because customers buy furniture by trying it, not just by looking at the pictures or watching the videos”*. A similar example is given by Participant 2: *“If you’re selling products that customers have to physically try like IKEA, the traditional customer journey is necessary. The in-store customer journey map of IKEA is also famous.”* However, the participants, who stated that the customer journey should start on social media even for these types of products, attributed the main reason for this to the limited time people have. According to the participants, people form their pre-understandings on social media, filter among the options, and in the final stage, they visit the stores they have predetermined and experience the products physically even when choosing furniture.

All participants argued that today, the customer journey will not only yield results in traditional practice and the process should start digitally even if the traditional method is applied. In addition to this view, Participant 1 underlined that there may be exceptions depending on the sector. Although not very necessary according to Participant 1, the customer journey towards corporate customers may not yield good results on social media by itself. Participant 1 explained this issue as follows: *“Factors such as the best price and fast purchasing are important in B2B businesses. It works well by providing the end customer with an entertaining experience on social media, but this is not the case in B2B businesses. At most, you create some content on LinkedIn. Apart from that, you try to provide a good experience at the fairs, you create a big booth and make a part of it a cafe, welcome the visitors, and dedicate a part to the product experience”*.

Participants underlined that it is difficult to accurately measure the traditional customer journey, just like any business done through traditional channels. According to the participants, the customer experience can be continuously enhanced thanks to the data obtained from the measurement tools in social media. However, the difficulty of measuring in traditional applications and the failure to

make instant improvements in applications due to the nature of traditional media are the main disadvantages of traditional media.

The participants argued that the traditional concept of the customer journey has lost its validity today, and this practice is limited to in-store and storefronts. Expressing that the process should start on social media even in sectors where the traditional customer journey is necessary, the participants stated that the traditional customer journey alone is functionless.

Discussion and Result

The findings obtained within the scope of the research revealed that brands should cooperate with the agency in both social media and traditional works. The reason for this is the necessity of creating business outputs compatible with the current strategy of the brands. Furthermore, it has been determined that more efficient collaborations develop if the brands worked with have relevant departments such as corporate communication and public relations. Hence, the meeting of communication experts working on the corporate side and agency employees on the same professional ground can be interpreted as the main determinant of this situation.

It has been determined that the final decision is left to the agencies in the conflicts that arise between the agency and the brand. Specifically, in recent years, advertising and public relations agencies have started to be called communications agencies and they offer integrated communication services. In this process, agencies have started to employ professionals such as social media experts and web designers, as well as specialize in new communication technologies. This makes agencies more professional and reliable in the eyes of customers.

The findings revealed that the customer journey is not applicable to B2B, and very little customer journey study for B2B has been done. However, the results of some studies conducted outside of Turkey differ from these findings. According to studies conducted in Finland, social customer journey efforts for B2B companies are also extremely important. These studies indicate that a good customer experience on the customer journey influences corporate customers' purchasing preferences (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022, p. 254; Terho et al., 2022, p. 307). A study in Sweden again revealed similar results, emphasizing the importance of digital customer journeys for B2B businesses (Lundin & Kindström, 2023, pp. 8-10). Another study on B2B customer journey applications across the UK revealed that for corporate customers, these applications positively affect their preferences and provide a significant competitive advantage (Homburg & Tischer, 2023).

The research findings revealed that it is extremely important to choose and use social media platforms properly in the social customer journey process and the platforms with high interaction possibilities that promise more entertainment for the end consumer should be preferred. Within this process, Instagram catches the eye as the most popular social media platform today. It has been seen that several touchpoints can arise between the customer and the brand during the customer journey process, thanks to the different tools that Instagram has. In addition to this, it has been determined that the promise and personality of the brands play an important role in the social media platform preference. It is possible to interpret the fact that each social media platform has its distinct features

as an effective factor in the emergence of these findings. As stated by Alikılıç (2020), social media, which is seen as an umbrella concept, can be divided into main categories such as social networks, blogs, microblogs, wikis, and forums. Even, these categories can be increased with media sharing and bookmarking platforms with different features. Each platform in question has its message and user mass. In this sense, it is highly important to choose social media platforms that match the personality, promise, and communication goals of the brands in the social customer journey.

It has been determined that the most important finding concerning the social customer journey planning process is the goal of brand. In this context, it has been determined that planning can be done as a short or long journey to create quick sales or loyalty. Another remarkable point in the planning process is that the social media team foresees the problems that may arise and creates solution plans. Another important finding is that agencies visualize the process by creating a customer journey map in the planning process. Gusmão et al. (2020) also came to the same conclusion in a study conducted on the subject and pointed out that creating a map enhances the quality of work. Moreover, the findings revealed that support is received from some software while performing target audience analysis. In this process, it was determined that the target audience was analyzed clearly by getting support from various software that collects and reports data on the activities of the target audience on the web. In the implementation process, it has been seen that instant changes can be made in the applications by making continuous measurements and evaluations. In the light of these findings, the first research question (*R.Q. 1: How is the customer journey planned and managed on social media?*) is answered.

Within the framework of the research, it was revealed that a successful social customer journey depends entirely on entertaining activities, strikingly colorful content, and interaction. This finding is also consistent with the study of Demmers et al. (2020). In addition to this, it has been revealed that artificial intelligence-powered automation systems are highly important in providing a better customer experience, and such systems reduce the workload of social media managers. This finding also came to light in the studies conducted by Hamilton et al. (2020); Chougule et al. (2020), and Tanveer et al. (2021). Despite these findings, Grewal et al., emphasized the importance of artificial intelligence-supported voice assistants instead of artificial intelligence-supported automation systems in the online customer journey process and suggested that voice assistants that can appear at different touch points can maximize the customer experience. In addition, a study on Chinese executives discovered that using AI alone in marketing and customer relations does not yield the expected outcomes. The study contends that for marketing and customer relations studies to be effective, AI needs to be integrated into all company processes, such as supply chain and online sales processes (Yan et al., 2022, p. 145).

The findings for the main mistakes made in the customer journey mostly point out insufficient interaction. In addition, sharing that is not interesting in terms of content and design, and activities that do not encourage participation come to the forefront in the main mistakes. The findings pointing out both the essentials for a successful journey and the main mistakes answered the second research question (*R.Q. 2: How can social media accounts of brands be managed to offer a better customer experience?*)

During the interview process, some participants have noted that the traditional customer journey may still hold relevance for retail furniture stores like IKEA when compared to the concept of the social customer journey. According to their views, for products such as furniture that require physical experience, the traditional customer journey, albeit limited to in-store applications, can still maintain its validity. However, as mentioned in the interview, IKEA has developed various virtual customer experience applications. The most well-known of these is IKEA's augmented reality application that allows customers to virtually place and experience furniture products in their own homes. Through this augmented reality application, customers have various opportunities, such as real-time interaction with the company, instant access to product information, and the ability to make purchase and delivery preferences (Kazi et al., 2022; Radoičić et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022).

However, all participants have pointed out that due to the changing customer profile and evolving technologies, traditional customer journey practices have lost their validity. The inadequacy of measurement tools in traditional methods is also a reason for this. At the present conditions, it has been determined that traditional customer journey applications are limited to in-store only. In any case, it was emphasized that the social customer journey can offer different experiences to customers with different tools, make sales and maintain after-sales interaction with customers on a social media platform. Thus, the third research question of the research (*R.Q. 3: What are the main differences between the traditional and social customer journey?*) was answered.

As in every field, it is an inevitable reality that new developing technologies will replace traditional practices in communication and related disciplines. Just as traditional sales have turned into e-sales and customer relationship management into social customer relationship management, the adaption of the concept of the customer journey to social media and its inversion into a social customer journey is a matter of course for developing technology. It is a prediction that these concepts will continue to change in the context of developing web and communication technologies. In this sense, it is important to repeat this study a few years after with the introduction of new web technologies into our lives, in terms of the emergence of very different findings and comparing the development of the process.

Bibliography

- Adams, W. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. J. Wholey, H. Hatry, & K. Newcomer (Eds). In *Handbook of practical program evaluation* (pp. 492-505). Jossey-Bass.
- Alıkılıç, İ. (2020). *R Stüdyo ile çok uluslu medyalar arası gündem belirleme analizi*. İksad Yayınevi.
- Balboni, K. (2021). *144 best customer journey map templates and examples, user interviews*. User Interviews. <https://www.userinterviews.com/blog/best-customer-journey-map-templates-examples>.
- Başkale, H. (2016). Nitel araştırmalarda geçerlik, güvenilirlik ve örneklem büyüklüğünün belirlenmesi. *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Hemşirelik Fakültesi Elektronik Dergisi*, 9(1), 23-28. Retrieved June 02, 2022 from <https://dergipark.org.tr/download/article-file/753041>
- Breidbach, C.F., Brodie, R., & Hollebeck, L. (2014). Beyond virtuality: From engagement platforms to engagement ecosystems. *Managing Service Quality*, 24(6), 592-611.

- Canfield, D. S., & Basso, K. (2017). Integrating satisfaction and cultural background in the costumer journey: A method development and test. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing*, 29(2), 104-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08961.530.2016.1261647>
- Chougule, T.J., Nadkarni, S., & Patel, B. (2020, December 4-6). *Optimization of social media comments to improve customer journey using machine learning* [Conference presentation]. *IEEE Bombay Section Signature Conference (IBSSC)*, Mumbai, India. <https://doi.org/10.1109/IBSSC51096.2020.933.2188>
- Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Sage Publications Inc.
- Creswell, J. W. (2019). *Karma araştırma yöntemlerine giriş*. Pagem Akademi.
- Crosier, A., & Handford, A. (2012). Customer journey mapping as an advocacy tool for disabled people: A case study. *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 18(1), 67-76.
- Demmers, J, Weltevreden, J.W.J, & van Dolen, W.M. (2020). Consumer engagement with brand posts on social media in consecutive stages of the customer journey. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 24(1), 53-77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10864.415.2019.1683701>
- Erdoğan, İ. (2007). *Pozitivist metodoloji-Bilimsel araştırma tasarımı istatistiksel yöntemler analiz ve yorum* (2. bs). Erk Yayınları.
- Forbus, P. (2020). Commentary: The case for a healthier social customer journey. *Journal of Marketing*, 85(1), 93-97.
- Grewal, D., Ahlbom, C. P., Noble, S. M., Shankar, V., Narang, U. & Nordfält, J. (2022). The impact of in-store inspirational (vs. deal-oriented) communication on spending: The importance of activating consumption goal-completion. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14, 701-716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002.224.37221149508>
- Gusmão, L, Helito, H, Anarelli, T, Conceição, J.R, Ji, T, & Barros, G. (2020, September 28-October 2). *A customer journey mapping approach to improve CPFL energia fraud detection predictive models* [Conference presentation]. *IEEE PES Transmission & Distribution Conference & Exposition Latin America*, Montevideo, Uruguay. <https://doi.org/10.1109/TDLA47668.2020.932.6214>
- Güler, A., Halicioğlu, M. B. & Taşgın, S. (2013). *Sosyal bilimlerde nitel araştırma yöntemleri*. Seçkin Yayınları.
- Hamilton, R., Ferraro, R., Hawsi, K. L., & Mukhopadhyay, A. (2020). Traveling with companions: The social customer journey. *Journal of Marketing*, 85(1), 68-92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002.224.2920908227>
- Homburg, C., & Tischer, M. (2023). Customer journey management capability in business-to-business markets: Its bright and dark sides and overall impact on firm performance. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, (51), 1046-1074. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747.023.00923-9>
- Honorene, J. (2017). Understanding the role of triangulation in research. *Educational Evaluation & Research*, 4(13), 91-95. <https://www.srjis.com/assets/Allpdf/149.544.238718.%20HONORENO%20JOHNSON.pdf>
- Kazi, A., Desai, R., Paradhi, M., & Khadilkar, S. (2022). Augmented reality e-commerce application. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 10(4), 100-104. <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT0020020.pdf>
- Lemon, K. N., & Verhoef, P. C. (2016). Understanding customer experience throughout the customer journey. *Journal of Marketing*, 80(6), 69-96. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.15.0420>
- Lundin, L., & Kindström, D. (2023). Digitalizing customer journeys in B2B markets. *Journal of Business Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2022.113639>
- Luz Martin-Pena, M, Diaz-Garrido, E., & Sanchez-Lopez, J.M. (2018). The digitalization and servitization of manufacturing: A review on digital business models. *Strategic Change*, 27(2), 91-99. <https://doi.org/10.1002/JSC.2184>

- Marino, V., & Lo Presti, L. (2018). Engagement, satisfaction and customer behavior-based CRM performance: An empirical study of mobile instant messaging. *Journal Of Service Theory and Practice*, 5(28), 682-707. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSTP-11-2017-0222>
- Mattick, K., Johnston, J., & de la Croix, A. (2018). How to write a good research question. *Clin Teach*, 15(2),104-108. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.12776>
- Merriam, S. B. (2018). *Nitel araştırma-desen ve uygulama için bir rehber*. (S. Turan, trans.). Nobel Yayın Dağıtım.
- Mottes, C. (2023). *What is ChatGPT? An introduction to OpenAI's conversational AI Model*. Invgate. Retrieved 09.09. 2022 from <https://blog.invgate.com/what-is-chatgpt>.
- Muret, P. (2013). *Measurement in a constantly connected world*. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved 08.27.2022 from <https://hbr.org/2013/06/measurement-in-a-constantly-connected-world>.
- Norton, D. W., & Pine, B. J. (2013). Using the customerjourney to road test and refine the business model. *Strategy & Leadership*, 41(2), 12-17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/108.785.71311318196>
- Onete, C. B., Albăstroi, I., & Dina, R. (2017). Consumer between web 2.0 and web 3.0. S. Sabah (Ed). *Consumer Behavior* (pp. 29-43). Intech Open. <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.71268>
- Radoičić, J., Vujović, S., & Vujović, T. (2022). The influence of augmented reality on online user experiences. *TEME*, XLVI(3), 733-752. <https://doi.org/10.22190/teme210611039r>
- Ramos, H. (2009). Developing research questions: A guide for social scientists. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 34(4), 1145-1147. <https://doi.org/10.29173/CJS6675>
- Rose, P., Beeby, J., & Parker, D. (1995). Academic rigour in the lived experience of researchers using phenomenological methods in nursing. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 21(6), 1123-1129. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1995.210.61123.x>
- Rosenbaum, M. S., Otorora, M. L., & Ramirez, G. C. (2017). How to create realistic customer journey map. *Business Horizons*, 60(1), 143-150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.09.010>
- Rusthollkarhu, S., Toukola, S., Aarikka-Stenroos, L., & Mahlamäki, T. (2022). Managing B2B customer journeys in digital era: Four management activities with artificial intelligence-empowered tools. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 104(1), 241-257. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2022.04.014>
- Ryan, F., Coughlan, M., & Cronin, P. (2009). Interviewing in qualitative research: The one to one interview. *International Journal of Therapy And Rehabilitation*, 16(6), 309-314. <https://doi.org/10.12968/IJTR.2009.16.6.42433>
- Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge University Press.
- Tanveer, M., Khan, N., & Ahmad, A. R. (2021, April 6-7). *AI support marketing: Understanding the customer journey towards the business development [Conference presentation]*. 1st International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Data Analytics (CAIDA), Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. <https://doi.org/10.1109/CAIDA51941.2021.942.5079>
- Terho, H., Mero, J., Siutla, L., & Jaakkola, J. (2022). Digital content marketing in business markets: Activities, consequences, and contingencies along the customer journey. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 105(7), 294-310. <https://doi.org/10.12968/IJTR.2009.16.6.42433>
- Whittle, S., & Foster, M. (1989). Customer profiling: Getting into your customer's shoes. *Management Decision*, 27(6), 27-30. <https://doi.org/10.1108/002.517.48910132575>
- Yahav, I., Schwartz, D. G., & Welcman, Y. (2019). The journey to engaged customer community: Evidential social CRM maturity model in Twitter. *Wiley*, 36(3), 305-306. <https://doi.org/10.1002/asmb.2495>
- Yan, Y., Gupta, S., Licsandru, T.C., & Schoefer, K. (2022). Integrating machine learning, Yan, Y., Gupta, S., Licsandru, T.C., & Schoefer, K. (2022). Integrating machine learning, modularity and supply chain

- integration for Branding 4.0. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 104, 136-149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2022.04.013>
- Yüksel, A. N. (2020). Nitel bir araştırma tekniği olarak: Görüşme. *International Social Sciences Studies Journal*, 6(56), 547-552. <https://doi.org/10.26449/sssij.2099>
- Zierock, B., & Jungblut, A. (2023). *ChatGPT and content creation automation*. Retrieved 09.22. 2022 from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367559645_ChatGPT_and_content_creation_automation.