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Re-examining the Marketing Conversion Funnel considering the Phygital Path-to-Purchase: An analysis of the Mass-Fashion industry and Contemporary Purchase Behavior

Doctoral (GDBA) Thesis

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Industry Context

The global marketing industry plays an important role in supporting companies sell their goods to their target markets. Over the years, expenditure in this domain grew to a phenomenal \$1.7 trillion worldwide as reported by equity research firm Redburn and PwC (Dimitrioski, 2019). However, marketing wastage remains a very concerning topic to marketers who mention they spend 26% of their budgets on ineffective channels and strategies (Benes, 2018). In other words, this translates to \$442 billion going to waste. In order to optimize marketing workings, companies follow several popular processes of which the notorious marketing funnel. The Marketing Conversion Funnel (MCF) allows marketers capture the journey of different stages a (prospect) consumer goes through, thus helping them plan their marketing efforts and expenditure. With the tremendous changes that have affected the marketing industry driven by technology development and social changes, the original model followed by the MCF is still widely used. First introduced in 1898, Elias St. Elmo Lewis it outlines the steps within a customer's journey summarized as AIDA; it stands for Awareness, Interest, Desire, and Action (Lee, S. H., & Hoffman, K. D., 2015).

Marketing funnel basics have stayed the same since 1900s (Murgado-Armenteros, E. M., Gutiérrez-Salcedo, M., Torres-Ruiz, F. J., & Cobo, M. J., 2018) while academics and practitioners noted that it should be revised to better reflect today's reality and the multiple phygital (physical and digital routes) that connect a brand with customers. Those reflections and proposed revisions are further elaborated in the next chapters. It is important to review marketing, technology and social progress and developments beforehand, knowing their sizeable impact on consumer behavior.

The period before the digital boom was mostly marked by distinct and specific advertising channels such as print ads, television, and billboards. As technology evolved, these channels were supplemented or replaced by digital channels such as social media, email marketing, and e-commerce platforms (Davis, 2018).

As the world embraced the technological boom and its accompanying changes in both market and consumer behaviour; electronics, media, travel and retail were quick to embrace the digital era and develop robust e-commerce platforms. For example, Amazon was founded in 1994 as an online bookstore and quickly expanded to become the largest online seller of a wide range of products. The company's success in the early days of e-commerce paved the way for other industries to follow suit and was considered the first true disruption of the traditional marketing funnel as consumers began to find their purchases online (Vollero et al., 2021).

Souq.com, the local Amazon version that was later acquired by the latter, focused on localization efforts in order to cater to the preferences and cultural backgrounds of the residents of the UAE. By understanding and respecting local customs, Souq.com enhances the online shopping experience for its online customers, ensuring that the platform feels familiar and relevant and is considered the first online store in the middle east that did not have physical store to proceed and support its launch (Al-Omari et al., 2020).

The travel industry was another early adopter of digital technologies. Companies such as Expedia, Priceline, and Booking.com, which were founded in the late 1990s to provide online and remote means to find and book flights, hotels, and other transportation options, quickly became major players in the online travel booking market. These companies made it easy for consumers to book flights, hotels, and rental cars online, and they offered competitive pricing and easy cancellation policies to attract customers (Liu et al., 2020).

The media industry was also quick to embrace the digital era. Companies such as Netflix began offering streaming video services in the mid-2000s, allowing consumers to watch movies and TV shows online, causing a fundamental blow to the existing in-store rental and purchase options. These services disrupted the traditional TV and movie rental markets, and they have since become major players in the entertainment industry (Sun, 2022).

While these case studies share common themes, it is important to note that each company implemented unique approaches tailored to their specific industry, target audience, and competitive landscape. Their success stemmed from a combination of strategic vision, customer-centricity, technological innovation, and an ability to adapt and customize their phygital marketing strategies. Recognizing these unique approaches will enable a comprehensive understanding of the diverse ways in which companies can navigate the evolving retail landscape and effectively leverage the phygital shopping experience to drive business growth.

Amazon:

Amazon's focus on providing a seamless shopping experience across online and offline channels benefits both online and offline audiences. Online customers can easily explore products, read reviews, and make purchases, while offline customers can engage with physical stores and experience services like Amazon Lockers for convenient pickups and returns (Schaefer & Figliozzi, 2021).

Expedia:

The inclusion of user-generated content and reviews benefits both online and offline audiences. Online customers can make informed decisions based on authentic user experiences, while offline audiences can access reviews and ratings through mobile apps and then seeking local merchants who will have to know account for these reviews in their own stores. This also proves true for Expedia's offering of bundled travel packages appeals to both online and offline audiences. Online customers can easily book complete travel packages through the website or app, while offline customers can take advantage of package deals when interacting with travel agents or visiting physical stores (Liu et al., 2020).

Netflix:

When Netflix initially faced financial difficulties and considered selling the business to Blockbuster, they made a pivotal decision to change their approach. Instead of relying on physical DVD rentals, they embraced digital distribution and streaming as their primary business model. This shift allowed them to overcome the limitations of physical inventory and tap into the growing popularity of online media consumption.

Netflix's decision to forgo any physical presence and become a purely digital platform was a crucial factor in their success. By leveraging the power of the internet, they eliminated the need for customers to visit physical stores or wait for DVDs to be delivered by mail. This convenience and instant access to a vast library of content set Netflix apart from traditional rental services (Hastings & Meyer, 2020).

Mentioned companies, have individually, recognized the importance of integrating online and offline channels, where relevant, to create a seamless and personalized customer experience. They understood that consumers no longer operate solely in physical or digital realms but

expect a cohesive journey across both. By leveraging technology, data analytics, and customer insights, these companies successfully implemented strategies that bridged the gap between their online and offline operations.

The selected cases highlight the significance of agility and adaptability in the face of evolving consumer behaviour and market trends. Each company demonstrated a willingness to embrace change and experiment with new approaches. They continuously monitored consumer preferences, technological advancements, and industry dynamics to refine their strategies and stay ahead of the competition.

Furthermore, these companies recognized the need to re-evaluate the traditional consumer conversion funnel. In the phygital era, the journey from awareness to purchase is no longer linear. Instead, consumers interact with multiple touchpoints and channels, both online and offline, before making a decision. The listed approaches showcase how these companies effectively combined technological innovation, customer-centricity, and market adaptation to succeed in the Digital/Phygital era. By understanding the specific dynamics of their industries and target markets, they were able to differentiate themselves and create compelling experiences for their customers.

Compared to other industries, the fashion industry was slower to respond to the fast digital developments, particularly in the early 2000s. According to a report by McKinsey & Company, the fashion industry was initially slow to adopt digital technologies and e-commerce due to concerns about the impact on brand image, potential cannibalization of sales, and challenges with inventory management. In addition, many fashion brands had established relationships with traditional brick-and-mortar retailers and were reluctant to compete directly with them by investing in their e-commerce platforms (McKinsey & Company, 2019).

Despite the reluctance, in 2019, the fashion retail industry was forced to not only catch up with other industries in terms of digital adoption but also surpass them in some cases, given the Covid pandemic (Gonzalo et al., 2021). The restrictions put in place to slow the spread of the virus, like shutting down stores and prohibiting movement, greatly affected the way fashion retailers marketed their products and the associated consumer journey with each strategy.

For example, Zara's fast fashion approach impacted both online and offline audiences. Online customers can enjoy a frequent influx of new collections and styles, encouraging repeat visits to the website or app. Offline customers visiting physical stores can experience the excitement

of finding new items and enjoy a dynamic and ever-changing product selection. Zara's agile supply chain management benefits both online and offline audiences. Online customers experience faster delivery times, ensuring a seamless and efficient shopping experience. Offline customers visiting physical stores can find updated inventory more frequently, creating a sense of freshness and novelty during their in-store visits (Kato, 2018). Had the evolution from brick-and-mortar store to a digital presence been gradual in the fashion industry, it would have been accompanied by an equally gradual shift from the linear original marketing model to one that had developed in a procedural response to shifts in consumer behaviour over time. However, the 2020 pandemic forced a rapid acceleration of this shift, disrupting the traditional process of awareness to loyalty rapidly while trying to match the shifting consumer behaviour into new uncharted digital territory (Gonzalo et al., 2021b).

Literature Overview

In the fashion retail industry, one of the most obvious impacts of the pandemic, following the lockdowns and movement limitations, was the sudden shift toward online sales. With physical stores closed or operating at reduced capacity, many consumers turned to the internet to do their clothing shopping (Angus & Westbrook, 2021).

This swift behavioural shift forced fashion retailers to quickly re-evaluate their marketing strategies and embrace new models of promotion that did not align with the original marketing funnel's stages of consumer behaviour¹. Also known as AIDA (Lee, S. H., & Hoffman, K. D., 2015), it starts with Awareness as the first stage of the funnel, where the customer becomes aware of the product or service offered by the company. It is mainly driven by various marketing efforts such as advertising, public relations, and content marketing. The second stage is Interest; once the customer becomes aware of the product or service, he/she begins step two through their research of the product, its competitors in the market, and any other subjectively relevant information. This is also the stage where the customer starts to form an opinion of the product and the company. Third is Desire; after the customer has shown interest in the product, he/she starts to develop a desire to own it. In this stage, the customer starts to see value in the product and its purchase. The final stage is Action; the customer has made his/her decision and has taken the necessary actions to secure the purchase of the product (visiting the store, ordering the product online, seeking a local provider... etc.).

¹ AIDA: This model was amongst the first to codify the customers' journey into a defined process.

The AIDA Model is widely used to measure advertising and marketing efforts effectiveness. The customer journey, also known as the customer journey map, is similar to the traditional marketing funnel while accounting for the different touchpoints and channels that customers have contact with during their purchase journey. This model helps companies understand how customers interact with their brand to identify opportunities to improve the customer experience. That had suddenly become more complex as customers were increasingly exposed to a diversified set of marketing touchpoints and channels. The consumer decision-making process was also influenced by new and evolving factors such as personalization, reviews, social proof, and convenience. The development of new and remote means to reach consumers was accompanied by an increasingly interlinked web of approaches to marketing strategies, spanning different marketing models and employing their different elements interchangeably to secure the highest reach and impact, creating an omnichannel approach to consumer targeting (Berman, 2019).

Previously, customers were able to physically interact with products inside the store, try them on and make a purchase. The most recent market changes meant that brands had to secure new means of reaching their customers. This realization manifested itself in the optimization of websites, the creation of engaging social media content, the use of targeted email campaigns, and the development of mobile apps (Angus & Westbrook, 2021). This innovation ultimately led to changes in customer behaviour in juxtaposition with the traditional linear marketing trajectory (Team, 2022).

To illustrate, before the digital boom, a customer could first become aware of a product through a social media ad, prompting him to research the product on its brand's website, then seek third-party website and consumer reviews, promotions, and prices, before finally making the purchase on the brand's website or in a physical store (when possible). This meant that marketing models that applied to advertising or in-store awareness leading to physical purchase could no longer apply. The pandemic and the digital shift, drove a leap in consumer personalization as fashion retailers suddenly had access to vast amounts of data to target specific consumer segments, personalize the customer experience, and measure the effectiveness of their marketing efforts (Gonzalo et al., 2021).

This trend was also boosted by the increased purchase ability of a younger generation that was more inclined to seek these digital channels for their fashion purchases, for this particular reason, among others (Davis, 2018). The sudden rise of fashion retail demand and the

accompanying shift to e-commerce also triggered new waves of competition allowing for a growing divide in the fashion retailers' response to this new market.

The digital revolution empowered consumers' knowledge and various communication channels, informative means, lifestyles, and technology. Such developments dispute the classical marketing knowledge and are subject to review into more contemporary approaches (Ansari et al. 2019). In the same stream, marketing funnels are subject to review once estimating "the paths" a customer would adopt and end up with a purchase decision.

A **Marketing Conversion Funnel** (MCF) outlines the most straightforward process that a customer could follow on the road to purchase. The top of the marketing funnel represents buyers at the recognition stage, and the bottom represents buyers at the purchase stage. Marketing funnels are also crucial for building and retaining potential customers. It is all about attracting customers to a brand and helping them recognize and remember it. The goal is to ensure that a brand remains first on the list by using relevant interactions during the buying journey. Consumers interact with brands via several platforms. Far from being passive, communication has become more interactive, hence a two-way stream between the company and consumers (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011). The latter have, therefore, the possibility of responding, reacting, expressing an opinion of satisfaction or not. Consumers are more and more informed in such perspective due to their permanent access to social networks and virtual communities' reviews.

The greater a company develops a good reputation via consumers' recommendations and referrals, the stronger its influence on their purchasing decisions (Kircova & Esen, 2018). In the last decade, information and communication technologies have changed the way people communicate and their way of living and interacting online. Technology brought marketers closer to their audiences. Scholars like Todor (2016) stipulate that digital and traditional marketing do not compete. Some authors still emphasize using both marketing approaches (Watson IV et al. 2018).

Research Gaps

Blended marketing, that mixes offline and online, is practical to give more visibility to a brand inside and outside the network so the interaction with the consumer will not be solely established through the screens of mobile phones (Teixeira, N., Pereira, H. G., & Dionísio, P., 2018).

This neologism, physical and digital, is used to designate the meeting of marketing techniques between physical and digital. It consists of many activities along a series of stages to guide prospects through a customer journey. As such, multichannel marketing allows companies to develop an integrated experience for their customers. Today, physical and digital channels co-exist and aim for the same targets. They have altered the journey and empowered buyers, therefore forced a revision of the applied model.

Considering that a customer journey is not linear (Grewal, D., & Roggeveen, A. L., 2020), marketing funnel reviewers need to recognize that customers do not make their decisions straightforwardly or predictably and should not take a generic approach. Marketers need to create personalized content experiences that make the buying process as relevant as possible, no matter which path a customer adopts. This means that the content must address specific themes and ideas that interest audiences and address their most painful points at every customer journey stage.

In this regard, it is judicious to review the conversion funnel before building a marketing strategy to enhance customer relationships. In the same stream of reasoning, it seems essential to focus on the Marketing Conversion Funnel reliability, or where appropriate, on mixing a range of levers to meet contemporary consumption path(es) patterns. The compounded result of this measure is then used in major corporate decisions, like setting the marcom budget, deciding on marketing strategies, evaluating performance of internal departments and partner agencies amongst other things.

Ensuring proper and optimal implementation necessitates the deployment of appropriate measurements and metrics. However, several limits exist under this universal framework. First, it does not consider the difference between industries, and dissimilarities in their customers' paths-to-purchase are still neglected. Secondly, it overlooks the recent behavioral changes and dynamic journeys customers follow (Noble et al., 2010). Thirdly, it commoditizes prospects' movement ignoring the fact they can enter the process at any stage and move in any direction (Bonchek and France, 2014).

One of the main problems of the traditional marketing funnel consists of the "one size fits all" approach (Gedenk, K., Neslin, S. A., & Ailawadi, K. L., 2010). This involves consumers joining from the top of the funnel and following the steps until they are ready to purchase a product or a service (Colicev, A., Kumar, A., & O'Connor, P., 2019). According to Colicev, Kumar & O'Connor (2019), prospects can move in the marketing funnel at any stage of the purchase

process. Some have already identified a need and are ready to buy almost immediately, while others are already familiar with a brand and its benefits but have yet to identify the need it can fill, so there are several reasons to revise the funnel as much as possible.

Academics and professionals alike stated the need to review this model to better reflect the modern path-to-purchase, as it was not relevant anymore (Edelman, 2010).

Several propositions were made including the Customer Life Cycle (Noble et al., 2010), the Consumer Decision Journey (Edelman, 2010), the Customer Experience Journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), and more recently with the Messy Middle approach proposed by Google (Making sense of the messy middle, Google 2020) however they did not receive noticeable attention nor adoption by businesses as their authors/developers had hoped or expected, as practitioners were more comfortable using the habitual MCF in order to maintain previous learning and ensure continuity in their benchmarks and KPIs. Furthermore, academics not endorsing one revised MCF that caters to the phygital era added to the corporate hesitation and holding to their “comfort zone”.

Research Objectives

Understanding today's marketers use of the MCF and willingness to adapt or change it drove my interest in conducting this research titled “*Re-examining the Marketing Conversion Funnel considering the Phygital Path-to-Purchase: An analysis of the Mass-Fashion industry and Contemporary Purchase Behavior*” with the intention to add to existing knowledge and provide additional relevant insights that could contribute to future research around the MCF evolution and adaptation to meet today's market realities and the mass fashion industry specificities. I've also aimed to focus on the business side of the equation to capture their experiences and views on the topic and gauge their interest and readiness for a new or adapted conversion model that could pave the way for wider interest in customer focused research and theoretical approach(es) development.

Research Questions

The research analyses outbound and inbound marketing strategy benefits for companies operating in the fashion retail sector. From a macro to a micro level, the main research objective is to understand each conversion funnel's respective phases and its impact on retail companies' sales performance. Knowing that retail companies had operated through traditional marketing

techniques, it was assumed that such organizations strove to improve their marketing strategies and techniques. Therefore, it was understandable that mass fashion retail companies strove to benefit from consumers' belonging to two camps: the physical and digital ones.

In this perspective, the main research question I've studied is: *Does the universal and original Marketing Conversion Funnel truly supports Mass Fashion retailers in understanding the contemporary customer journey?*

In light of the principal interrogation, two main questions motivated this research development and bring elements of answer to the central topic:

RQ1: To what extent are marketers ready to review their funnels to cope with customers' evolving experiences and expectations?

RQ2: How have “phygital” developments in mass fashion retail been reflected in marketing and go-to-consumer strategies?”

Methods Overview

The study aims to explore Mass Fashion businesses' marketing practices and their use and views of the Marketing Conversion Funnel. Therefore, the selected methodology is Qualitative in-depth interviews since, while considering its inherent limitations detailed in the methodology chapter, it provides the flexibility to have an outlined yet open conversation with the concerned experts and executives. It also allows the researcher to collect rich, detailed data about experiences and perspectives of individuals in the industry, and to develop a deeper understanding of the studied question.

Creswell (2015) notes that qualitative research is useful in situations where the research question is complex and multi-dimensional, as it allows for a more in-depth analysis of the data.

This is particularly relevant in the context of this study, as the factors that influence consumer behaviour in the mass fashion retail industry are likely to be complex and multi-dimensional, and the experiences of the interviewed organizations' diverse and evolving knowing the market and technology changes during the last 5 years.

Significance of the Study

A conversion funnel is a tool for visualizing the results of the different phases of a customer journey and proposing strategies that improve one or more stages that guide a consumer for a purchasing process. When measuring customer behaviour, it is necessary to define the objectives to be achieved and segment each phase of the purchasing process. The funnel is a diagram that helps visualize the process as a whole, with the results of each phase showing where potential customers are leaving. At the retail and commercial level, the funnel allows companies to quickly visualize the areas for improvement and where it is necessary to increase the efforts of the teams to improve sales. The different KPIs define each of the funnel's stages. The number of steps in the funnel depends on the number of intermediate goals a company wants to include. The funnel models are diverse and depend on the company's objectives and the product or services sold. Indeed, some products and services require low customer engagement, and others demand high engagement.

Usually, the initial phase is when the first contact between the potential customer occurs and ends once the process ends, in this case, the sale.

However, and throughout the presence of retail fashion in physical and digital stores, the steps involved in the conversion funnel are to be reconsidered as far as they are assimilated for relevant indicators that measure sales effectiveness. In other words, funnels make it possible to detect incidents quickly or to understand more concretely improvement areas and those that will provide the highest return on investment in the shortest possible time.

In a time of excessive competition and fast market changes, designing and implementing a good conversion funnel strategy is vital since it helps companies become more efficient and sustainable over time by optimizing their customer retention/relationship efforts and advertising expenditure, and comparing their audience journeys vis-à-vis their competition.

Savvy marketers understand the power of the MCF and develop their strategies around it. They adapt their marketing plans according to the customer movement between the funnel stages and its significance during the brand or product lifetime. The approach is used across different if not all industries and provides the required insights and data in order to fuel marketing and communication strategies.

The MCF mainly impacts three valuable business practices:

- **Marcom strategies planning:** with the collected data on customer acquisition and

conversion throughout the funnel influencing the audience targeting and communication plans in order to increase converted numbers and acquire more buyers

- **Marcom budgets allocation:** the communication and media investments are linked to the MCF stages in order to identify their impact during the customer journey and therefore they are optimized in order to drive higher numbers to the bottom (Purchase)
- **Marcom department and partner agencies KPIs:** The higher the MCF conversion the better the Marcom strategies and investments are deemed to be as it means success in driving more customer. Subsequently, the work of involved departments and external agencies is valued accordingly. This leads to higher remunerations and contracts' extensions therefore several executives and experts are directly concerned.

The importance of this research stems from the value it can offer both academics and practitioners by highlighting the latest business practices and reviewing possibilities for future studies that could contribute to the evolution and application of the MCF approach.

In the next 6 chapters, I review related Marketing developments, analyse the original conversion model and a number of revisions that followed, highlight consumer behaviour and consumption changes and discuss my Research findings and implications.

Chapter 2: Foundations of Outbound and Inbound Marketing

In this chapter I explain the role and importance of marketing evolution and discuss the Marketing Funnel need and revisions that provide the background to my Research study and related questions. More precisely, I focus on contrasting outbound and inbound marketing while considering market needs and behaviour evolution. I also review processes that concern retailers' marketing strategies and that will illustrate the importance of discussing their application of the Marketing Conversion Funnel (MCF).

Marketing Concepts evolution

The marketing function has evolved progressively since the early days of the industrial revolution. Marketing did not even exist; sales were the common word for enhancing inventory turnover. Today, the marketing concept has evolved towards meeting consumers' satisfaction and needs to maximize long-term profits. In 2021, the primary goal of marketing remained the same as in 1920, which consists of acquiring leads or sales by promoting a product or service. However, since then, marketing tactics and techniques have evolved and questioned the efficiency of two marketing strategies: inbound and outbound marketing.

Outbound marketing concept

Marketing has become an academic discipline that tends to prove its evolution. Philip Kotler² (2014) definition refers to marketing as a set of studies and applications that aims for forecasting, ascertaining, arousing, renewing, or stimulating consumer needs while continuously adapting the production and commercial apparatus. In the stream of Kotler definition, the State of Inbound Marketing Report (Lockwood, M., 2013) describes Outbound Marketing or traditional marketing as a method used by companies to reach a large audience to receive a response from a small portion that generally does not exceed 3%. Outbound marketing consists of reaching out to the consumer by pushing marketing and sales actions towards him, seeking him where he is, or even chasing him in some instances when strategies are aggressive.

² Founder of marketing management.

Outbound marketing is the traditional form of marketing in which a brand sends its prospects and customers messages. In outbound marketing, brands operate with “traditional” levers related to media and non-media advertising: TV, press, radio, emailing and SMS campaigns, sponsored links, and “social” advertisements. In short, such strategies refer to “push marketing”.

Outbound to Inbound marketing strategies evolution

Companies have implemented different marketing or sales processes for a long time to acquire new customers. This process of conquest was often expensive and not very sustainable since the benefits did not last once the investments were stopped (Hawlk, K., 2018). Then came inbound marketing, a real revolution in acquiring brand image improvement prospects. Inbound marketing emerged in response to a decline in traditional marketing efficiency. It was theorized in the United States by Brian Halligan and Dharmesh Shah (2009), who took Seth Godin’s concept of permission marketing³ and added specific steps to it.

Inbound marketing reflects a new mode of interaction between a company and its clients and has disrupted marketing fundamentals. It is based on a content creation strategy that attracts visitors to convert them into leads and then into customers, using marketing automation, lead nurturing, and content creation techniques. The following figure contrasts both marketing strategies.

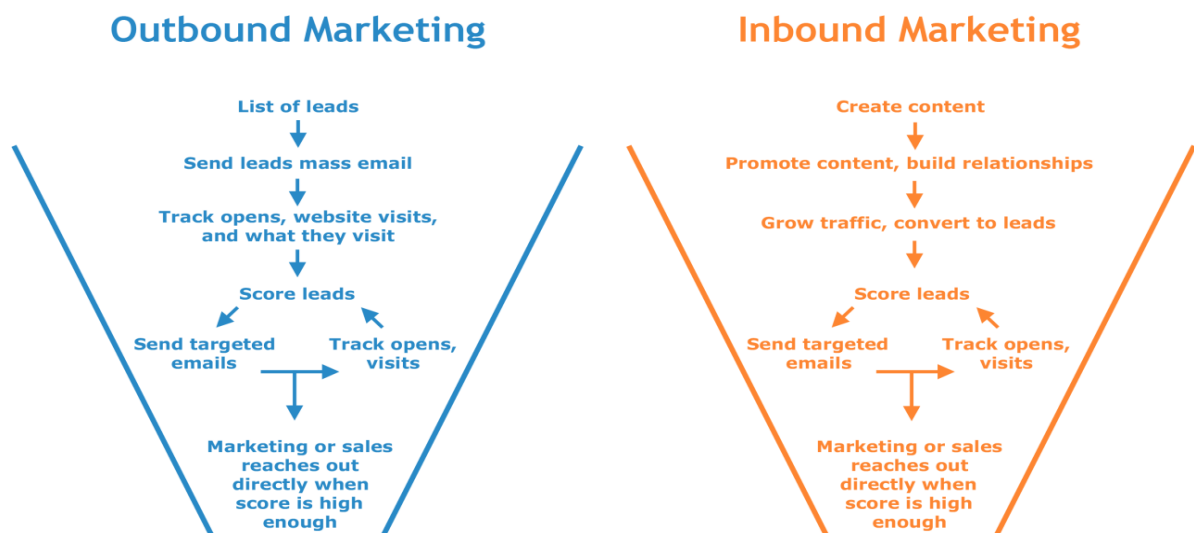


Figure 1: Outbound and Inbound Marketing Funnels. Source: <https://www.softwareadvice.com/>

³ Permission marketing is a term that refers to consumers opting to receive marketing offers and announcements from a brand.

A Marketing Conversion Funnel review from Outbound to Inbound marketing

A Marketing Conversion Funnel describes the customers' journey with a brand or product. First introduced in 1898, Elias St. Elmo Lewis model outlines the steps within a customer's journey summarized as AIDA; it stands for Awareness⁴, Interest, Desire, and Action (Lee, S. H., & Hoffman, K. D., 2015). It allows marketers to trace different stages that consumers go through in their journey to purchase a brand or a product. Therefore, it is a calculated process that helps companies plan their marketing efforts and expenditure and monitor the processes that lead to their customer acquisition. It supports the marketing shift from Outbound to Inbound in the sense that it measures the success of marketing strategies by looking at customer reach and conversion throughout the funnel. The higher the conversion the better marketing workings are deemed to be.

Marketing funnel basics have stayed the same since 1900s (Murgado-Armenteros, E. M., Gutiérrez-Salcedo, M., Torres-Ruiz, F. J., & Cobo, M. J., 2018). Conversely, no single model is universally accepted by all businesses. Marketing funnels simplify the customer journey and make it easier to follow up on businesses' objectives. These solutions map each step of their customer's decision-making process and plan the steps they want to take for each (Stankevich, A., 2017).

The AIDA model is a tool to describe the straightforward, funnel-like process that consumers go through when evaluating brands.



Figure 2: The AIDA model. Source: <https://www.researchgate.net/>

⁴ Or Attention

Customers learn about a brand, like it or not, decide whether to buy it and whether it is worth repeating the purchase or not. When treated all along the consumption funnel, the number of consumers who go through the process is reduced as they move to the next stage. That results from their hesitation or lack of needed information to proceed with a purchase action.

The below figure illustrates the circular process of a purchasing decision throughout the said funnel. It indicates where a consumer is brought, at each reiteration intention for a purchasing process, for proceeding or cancelling the purchasing decision.

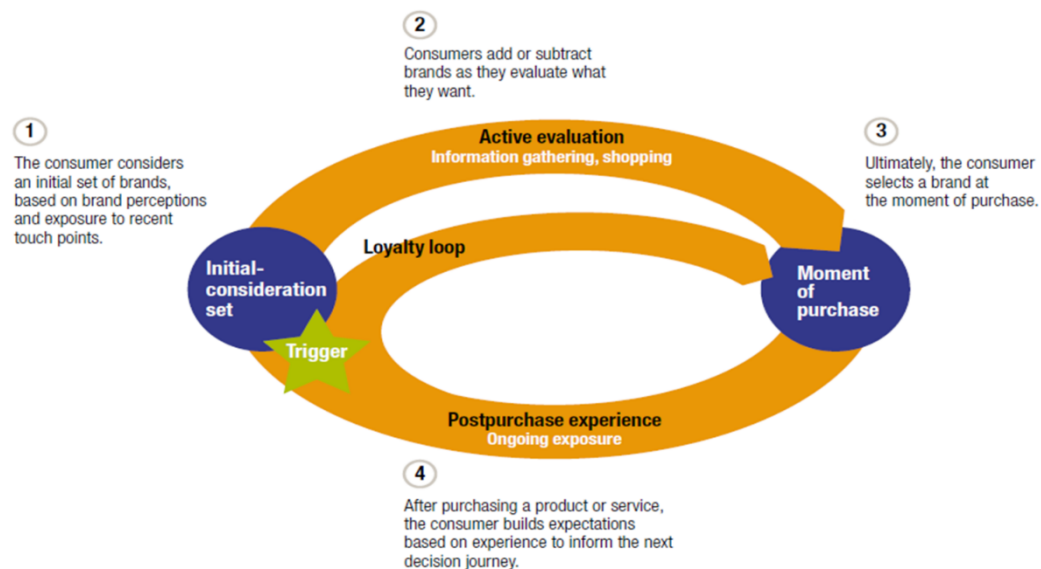


Figure 3: The Consumer Decision Journey. Source: Edelman 2010

One of the main problems of the traditional marketing funnel consists of the “one size fits all” approach (Gedenk, K., Neslin, S. A., & Ailawadi, K. L., 2010). This involves consumers joining companies’ campaigns from the top of the funnel and following the steps until they are ready to purchase a product or a service (Colicev, A., Kumar, A., & O'Connor, P., 2019). First, according to Colicev, Kumar & O'Connor (2019), prospects can move in the marketing funnel at any stage of the purchasing process. Some have already identified a need and are ready to buy almost immediately. Others are already familiar with a brand and its features but have yet to identify the need it can fulfil, so there is a need to nurture the funnel as much as possible.

Considering that a customer journey is not linear (Grewal, D., & Roggeveen, A. L., 2020), the same authors added that some would skip parts of the funnel to make a buying decision faster. Others can switch between the funnel's top, middle, and bottom contents multiple times before

purchasing. For such reasons, marketing funnel reviewers need to recognize that customers do not make their decisions straightforwardly or predictably and should not take a generic approach. Marketers need to create personalized content experiences that make the buying process as relevant as possible, no matter which path a customer adopts. This means that the content must address specific themes and ideas that interest audiences and address their most painful points at every customer journey stage.

The SEO⁵ funnel has three main parts. Some prefer to keep their model simple, using the "TOFU-MOFU-BOFU" strategy, which refers to the top of the funnel, the Middle of the funnel, and the bottom as separate elements. Others believe that adding "loyalty" and "advocacy" steps to the funnel improves the marketing strategy (Roy, S. K., Eshghi, A., & Quazi, A., 2014). The top of the funnel is when the company tries to capture potential customers (Roy, S. K., 2013). It refers to strategies for creating brand awareness. The Middle of the funnel refers to the second stage of funnel marketing. Its goal is to transform prospects into identified and qualified leads by establishing, among other things, a lead nurturing strategy. This is a decisive step in funnel marketing for consumers' intent to purchase action. Indeed, if a company does not arouse potential consumers' interest during this step, it will turn to its competitors (Montague, J., 2019). The bottom of the funnel, also known as the decision stage, is where the consumer is convinced to buy the product or service. All consumers have to do is choose a product and a supplier.

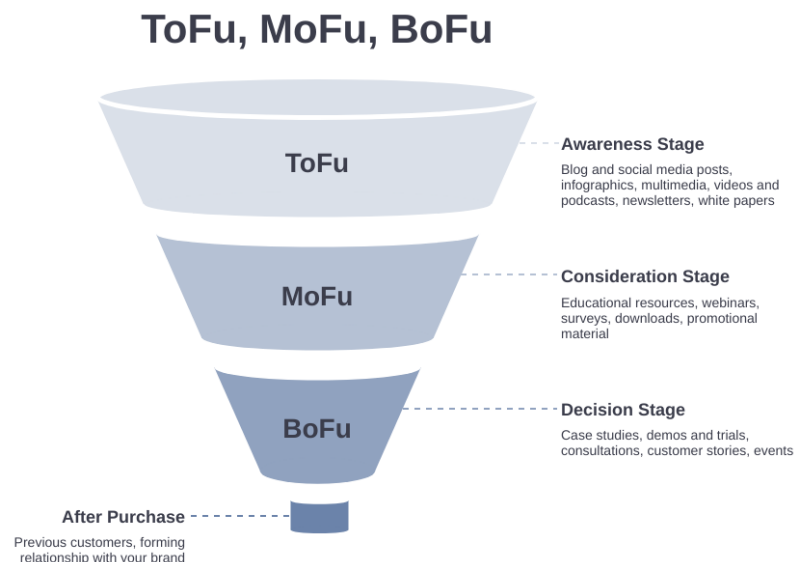


Figure 4: ToFu, MoFu, BoFu. Source: <https://online.visual-paradigm.com/>

⁵ Search Engine Optimization.

Traditional marketing presents some interesting strengths for an effective marketing strategy but is very limited because of observed social changes (Kumar, V., Choi, J. B., & Greene, M., 2017) especially with consumers spending more time online and being influenced by social media. The same authors added that it is very expensive, less accessible, and the target audience cannot interact with the brand or advertiser to collect information related to a particular product. Marketing wastage remains a very concerning topic for marketers, including those involved in mass-market fashion, who mention spending 26%⁶ of their budgets on ineffective channels and strategies (Benes, R., 2018). This translates to \$442 billion going to waste. For some, inbound marketing is a better strategy to adopt. For Dakouan, Benabdelouahed, and Anabir (2019), the two approaches, outbound and inbound, can complement each other and be part of an overall marketing strategy. Implementing an inbound marketing strategy is more about bringing prospects to a company rather than going out looking for them. Along with the unlimited Internet space, content marketing is an integral part of the inbound strategy. While content marketing consists of content creation and delivery, inbound offers a variety of methods to attract, convert and retain customers. Over the past three decades, a significant change has been noticed through the way consumers find and choose their products and services. To ensure consumers' attention, it was necessary to consider their needs and desires to design offers that meet their expectations. As such, the traditional sales funnel has shifted prospects from awareness to interest, then to desire, and finally to action. Thus, business owners would base their marketing activities around each funnel step.

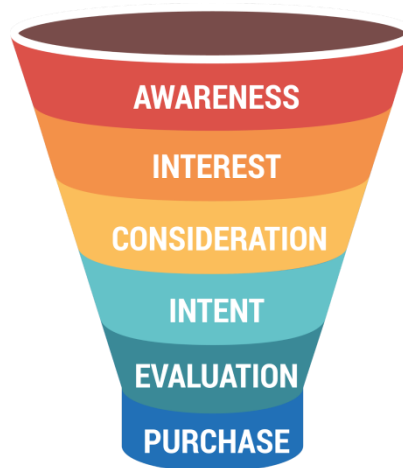


Figure 5: Association of the funnel model with AIDA concept. Source: <https://medium.com/>

The conversion funnel describes the individual journey elements. It is an essential tool in digital and social media optimization. It concerns conversion, such as when, for example, a visitor to an online store is converted into a buyer. As such, retail companies aim to enhance inbound marketing. Inbound marketing is a marketing strategy that aims to find and attract new customers. In that perspective and following digital marketing advantages, inbound marketing takes advantage of the Internet dissemination methods and revolve around tools such as the company blog, eBooks, newsletters, content dedicated to social networks. Contrasting the inbound strategy with digital marketing, the following figure shows consideration of SEO in inbound marketing.



Figure 6: Inbound Marketing Funnel. Source: <https://impulsecreative.com/>

Inbound marketing effectiveness has been tested on a company's site to measure its effect and assess changes in visitor engagement and conversion to customers. The effect of inbound marketing has been studied through content creation, SEO, and social media sharing to discover the effect of these practices on the conversion of visitors to customers (Dakouan, C., Benabdelouahed, R., & Anabir, H., 2019).

A Digital and an Inbound Marketing Combination

Digital Marketing was firstly introduced by Halligan in 2005 (Halligan, B., & Shah, D., 2009). In addition to being accessible to all types of businesses, digital offers an important consumer market. The brand/customer relationship is more interactive, and customers can have precise answers about a service or a product and search for several options. The choice between traditional and digital marketing must be made according to companies' objectives. Nowadays, there are 5.35 billion Internet users globally and 5.04 billion people using social networks (Statista, 2024). Hence the rise of digital marketing can be defined as the achievement of specific objectives to traditional marketing through digital technologies while seeking to establish a more extensive and personalized relationship with the customer (Chaffey, D. and Ellis-Chadwick, F., 2012).

The conversion rate of a business website is a significant competitive indicator in digital marketing. Visitors from inbound marketing channels are more likely to purchase because they were brought to a brand's site due to their online behaviour and monitored interest. Consumer-driven marketing is increasingly important in today's decision journey as customers seize control of the process and actively "pull" information helpful to them. Traditional marketing funnel limitations are no longer the best model for activating modern B2C content campaigns. Within a digital marketing conception, several dimensions intervene and complicate the understanding of itineraries that a customer can follow for an ending purchasing action. Moreover, throughout such itineraries, it is essential to note the communicated content, which plays a role in unlocking a customer relationship's value after purchase.

In digital marketing, the focus is on the customer and not only on the company's products. Digital marketing is perceived through bilateral communication, whereas physical marketing is approached through unilateral one. In other words, through a traditional or "physical" marketing perspective, the message is "pushed" towards the customer. It is a one-way relationship communication. Therefore, some techniques from traditional marketing are now considered obsolete and even aggressive. Since 2006, inbound marketing has proven to be the most effective method in digital marketing (Lehnert, K., Goupil, S., & Brand, P., 2020). This method seeks to attract consumers by distributing quality content on digital media and channels like the internet, mobile, and social networks. It is why digital marketing experts now consider this new approach as the most successful strategy for generating qualified leads. By putting (potential) customers at the centre and focusing the marketing strategy on converting them to buyers, companies have better chances of successful transactions and customer retention.

Consumer behaviour concept evolution

Whether online or offline, businesses have always perceived the consumer as the biggest challenge and priority, especially in an unstable, unforeseen, and purely competitive environment (Łysik, Ł., Kutera, R., & Machura, P., 2014). It is essential to position a company's functions and offers towards customers' satisfaction. It reverts to consumers' knowledge, to their behavioural understanding, and factors that generate their needs, influence and after that, their purchasing action. Understanding online shoppers' behaviour allows marketers to collect data that facilitate proper commercial strategies' development and identify obstacles that retail companies face throughout customer journeys; from prospecting, managing the relationship to driving loyalty. Following different channels and means of communication a consumer relies on, the latter asks for interactive communication and dialogue (Bowden, J., & Mirzaei, A., 2021). Consumers are part of the media sphere while generating a large mass of information that needs to be managed and structured to understand their needs (Jacobson, J., Gruzd, A., & Hernández-García, Á., 2020).

It would be legitimate to underline that the relationship between marketing and consumers has changed in this context. The Digital revolution empowered consumers and has put them in the influencer seat. The current marketing approach questions classical models and past certainties, particularly in consumer behaviour. Various developments in knowledge, communication, and information are still disputing the foundations and classic marketing paradigms and driving them to convert to marketing dialogue, oriented towards a client who is more unpredictable.

Consumer knowledge improvement

A consumer is defined as *"being an individual who has the capacity for buying goods and services, offers for sale, intending to satisfy needs, wishes or desires"* (Reed II, A., Forehand, M. R., Puntoni, S., & Warlop, L., 2012). Customer knowledge plays a decisive role in customer relationship management and is one of the critical issues in direct marketing (Migdadi, M. M., 2020): it is the first step that brands must take before developing and implementing any relationship strategy. Customer knowledge is more important as it conditions the experimental phase of strategy success. In order to set up an effective marketing plan and limit the risks of failure, retail companies must know the environment in which they will be introduced and the customers with whom they will be interacting (Grosso, M., Castaldo, S., & Grewal, A., 2018). Consumers today search and learn about products and services by reading online reviews,

comparing features and prices and discussing opportunities and bargains with other individuals on forums and social networks. To reach individuals looking for credible online content, Dakouan, Benabdelouahed and Anabir (2019) recommend starting with a simple content creation process focusing on a single medium, such as blogging an example. The most important aspect is that high-quality content can be measured to monitor consumers' progress properly. Such advancement considers the MCF assessment while emphasizing consumer behaviour evolution and on practices review for renewing the reflections of marketing on organizations value.

Consumer Centric approach

Individuals do not consume in the same way. For this reason, it is essential to emphasize on the distinction between the terms consumer, customer, and user. "A customer always purchases a product or service but might not be the end user. A consumer is always the end user of a product or service but might not have purchased it. A customer becomes a consumer if they make a purchase and use the product or service themselves" (Needle, F., 2022). The modern-day consumer is increasingly buying due to digital access and ecommerce and wants companies to produce for him/her. He/she wants to be a co-creator and to be listened to. In a social media and digitalization era, marketers should review marketing determinants and roles, which change when control over content and information has left the hands of organizations and moves to customers. Communications are ruled by consumers and address the resistance of traditional marketing theories and practices that face the test of validity and relevance in the contemporary world of social media. This approach to marketing value considers the consumer as a "rational" agent; it places reasoning at the center of the decision (Elsäßer, M., & Wirtz, B. W., 2017). This reflection does not question the marketing approach or the basis of its approaches and models. However, companies must engage in improvements and a rigorous analysis of consumer requirements by adopting effective methods to analyse more advanced behaviours and consumption. Academically, perceived value has undergone significant developments. In particular, developments have been carried out in B2B and B2C, leading researchers to recognize these two fields as a fundamental axis for structuring the literature devoted to value (Chang, C., & Dibb, S., 2012).

Current Trends in Consumer Behaviour

Fashion customers are mostly aware of latest trends and news, and their desire for consumption follows this constant evolution. Consumer behaviour analysis seeks to identify endogenous and exogenous factors⁷ that influence it (Foxall, G. R., 2010).

It is related to how individuals choose, buy products, services, or experiences to meet their needs. The purchasing process is particularly complex and dependent on many criteria. Marketers must identify to whom the products are addressed and the consumer's actions towards them. Consumer behaviour and attitudes allow companies to adapt while offering the most relevant products capable of satisfying consumers effectively and over the long term. A relevant study can help guide decision-making, primarily by preparing marketing operations and actions. Adequate knowledge is an excellent means of optimizing operational marketing actions.

This chapter highlighted the progress in Marketing practices, where consumer centricity drove the transformation from outbound to inbound strategies putting the end user at the center and enabling higher engagement activities, such as digital, in order to drive purchase. This movement impacted the way this conversion is measured and resulted in critics suggesting the review of the original Marketing Conversion Funnel (MCF) with several more contemporary models being proposed.

Evolving consumer behavior continues to be the catalyst behind Marketing concepts' revisions. In the following chapters, I discuss the incremental impact that Social Media is having on consumer behavior and the growing importance of engagement. I then start looking into what this means for the Mass Fashion industry specifically in the midst of the phygital evolution.

⁷ I.e., needs, motivations, obstacles, expectations, choice criteria, etc.

Chapter 3: Consumer behaviour and marketing challenges

Business marketing efforts aim to generate more revenues and get more leads down the funnel to improve sales. Today, the customer journey is hybrid, unpredictable, and is no longer homogeneous. With the abundance of information at their fingertips, customers now own their journeys, so no two customer journeys are alike. Using both offline and online platforms for long-term success became critical for businesses if they wish to capture their audience and increase their chances of converting them. Recent events, like the global coronavirus pandemic, increased that urgency for all sectors alike. It radically transformed consumers' purchasing behaviours and pushed masses to the online space which created an additional and sometimes unfamiliar playing field for many companies.

Consumer experience and behavioural evolution

The coronavirus crisis has brought about many changes in the way people consume. Since the confinement period, a significant trend has influenced consumer purchasing behaviour: a new digital explosion. In this regard, purchasing behaviours evolve, and business operations must be structured accordingly.

Online and Offline consumer experiences

Online, the world is changing as fast if not faster than it is offline. In early March 2020, marketing media The Drum reported on a study that showed that while annual advertising growth rates were expected to drop from 7% to 3.9% in 2020, eCommerce advertising spending was expected to increase by 17.7%, and social media spending by 22.2%. The digital marketing strategy complements traditional marketing techniques by improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the latter. It makes it possible to cover a larger radius of consumers while creating new business models, providing them with added value and therefore better profitability for the company.

Social media is a central hub for selling and branding products and services on the internet. Companies can directly connect with their prospects and customers and engage in an interactive manner. That helps increase their awareness and offers them a positive image by

showing that they care about their customers' opinions. Several brands have made significant efforts to improve their social media presence and marketing. This appears to reflect changes in the behaviour of consumers moving from offline to online shopping. In this regard, Copley (2015) has noted that a strong relationship exists between attitudes toward the brand and attitudes to the communication about the purchase intent long established in the consumer behaviour textbooks.

Frambach, Roest & Krishnan (2007) investigate consumer preference across the three stages of purchasing, namely, pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. Based on 300 consumers data analysis, Roest & Krishnan (2007) indicate that, in both the pre- and post-purchase stages, the online channel usage intention is higher when consumers have a better Internet experience. In the purchase stage, online shoppers prefer the offline channel over the online channel, regardless of their Internet experience. According to brand-loyal, customers buy both in physical stores and online because they already identify with the brand; they know what looks good (Rodríguez, P. G., Villarreal, R., Valiño, P. C., & Blozis, S., 2020). Conversely, Blázquez (2014) noted that the lack of experiential information and physical interaction with the product is one of the main barriers to buying fashion online.

The shift between online and offline channels reverts to the complexity of the searched product/service. That seems more evident as online shoppers move through these three stages. First, a customer discovers and identifies a problem and seeks information. The purchase is very rational, as efficiency and expertise are the primary benefits sought. It is the prospects in the discovery phase that must be attracted in order to turn them into leads and then into customers. To this end, engaging content is provided on the first level of information to help them identify their problem. Finally, the final decision puts all the offers in competition. The success and differentiation of inbound marketing strategies lie in accompanying the potential customer during the different phases of their purchase process, creating personalized experiences, and closing the transaction.

Branded content and social media influence on consumer behaviour

According to Scott (2009, p. 202), good content is considered the most critical element of inbound marketing. Exciting and quality content never struggles to get many visits without too much effort or investment. Today, online reviews are an integral part of the consumer buying journey and, more broadly, of a brand's overall customer experience. Social networks used for commercial purposes become appropriate for companies wishing to promote a brand and a

more meaningful image on the internet; social networks offer online retail companies advertising opportunities on their platforms (Pratono, A. H., 2018). Online reviews and ratings have always visibility products, services, or experiences quality. Consumers rely heavily on these to save time and gain insight before making a buying decision. So, lead cultivation or lead nurturing is an inbound marketing strategy that establishes a personalized and long-term relationship with the potential consumer, providing them with valuable and attractive content at the most opportune moment.

At that level of interaction between the company and online users, social media enhances customer knowledge improvement and undertakes new relationships to influence consumers. Such changes lead marketers to develop a new approach to segmentation. The conversion funnel analysis allows businesses to measure the efficiency of customers' navigation journey. It allows estimating their targets at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of consumers buying or visiting journey. The inbound marketing conversion funnel is divided into four stages: attract (strangers), convert (visitors), close (leads), and delight (customers to become businesses ambassadors).



Figure 7: Attract, Convert, Close, and Delight. Source: responsify.com

Over the years, brands have taken on greater importance. Their concept has evolved and has come to offer experiences exceeding functionality, representing a lifestyle and even a dream or aspiration, hence their emotional relevance to consumers.

The fashion apparel industry developed significantly, particularly in the last 20 years. The changing dynamics of the fashion industry have forced retailers to desire low cost and flexibility

in design, quality, and speed to market - key strategies for maintaining a profitable position in an increasingly demanding market (Bhardwaj, V., & Fairhurst, A., 2010). The changes produced in Fashion Marketing and the fashion clothing industry have been cited since the 1990s (Navia, C. R., Khire, R. U., & Lyver, M., 2021), highlighting the emergence of a fast-to-use fashion concept. However, Hayes & Jones (2006) analyse, for the first time, the associated benefits of retail fashion and social media as consumer influencers. When it comes to fashion consumers in particular, it largely depends on consumer demographics. The two main impacts on fashion-related decision making are age and gender (de Acedo Lizárraga, M. L. S., de Acedo Baquedano, M. T. S., & Cardelle-Elawar, M., 2007).

Women, for example, are more affected by fashion influencers, as in general, they are more adept of fashion trends compared to men (Chetioui, Y., Benlafqih, H., & Lebdaoui, H., 2020). It is also noticed that online trends and social media influencers further influence younger consumers. Digital natives are more affected by influencers (Childers, C., & Boatwright, B., 2020). In recent years, the fashion, luxury, and beauty industries have been disrupted by digitally native brands, also known as v-commerce brands, attracting younger audiences with direct-to-consumer business models (de Regt, A., & Barnes, S. J., 2019). Until recently, understanding Gen Z and how to reach them had been puzzling established brands. Now they are taking the lead in e-commerce and allocating their marketing budgets to activities targeting younger consumer groups.

Along with previous advancements, it is evident that the Internet offers a wide range of exchange relationships between operators in the sector and fashion consumers. With the development of the electronic market, warming between supply and demand is marked by dynamic adjustment processes that are enriched in information and carried by proliferating intermediaries. Consumers are likely to participate actively in producing information by posting product reviews on e-commerce sites or on sites designed to collect their opinions. Online shoppers, thus, weaken traditional marketing methods by providing professional criticisms about the online reviewed products. Such an approach examines the activity of intermediaries, understood not as neutral transmitters of information but as mediators who shape and frame market interactions. In this sense, marketers should consider the quality of the online audience, its size, and its socio-demographic composition.

From Customer Attraction to Customer Engagement

Companies increase their potential customers by exposing their portfolio of products and services, using marketing techniques to convert strangers into potential customers, and after a series of steps into loyal customers. This dynamic approach is prevalent in companies in any market sector. It presents different difficulties in its implementation, ranging from the development of an adequate strategy adapted to market needs to the timely and effective execution of said methodology. However, knowing and adapting user recruitment methodologies is not enough since it is necessary to innovate methods that allow companies to know their customers more effectively and offer alternatives to their needs.

The attraction ratio is the natural ability to stimulate customers to be persuaded to enter the store. That is, it will depend on the application of various techniques, increasing this indicator that will allow a retail company to increase its sales exponentially. After that, moving from customer attraction to customer satisfaction consists of generating quality traffic by sending relevant, expected, and personalized information to companies' targets. Making sales is an integral part of Inbound Marketing processes and best practices. The main ideas behind this concept are clear: create content, distribute it and make it easy to share. In this regard, a content strategy is to be developed. The more quality content is relevant, the more valuable it will be for online shoppers. Social networks disseminate content and reach out to users through digital channels within social media. The primary purpose of social networks is to connect and develop interaction between Internet users. It should also be noted that 79% of consumers like and follow brands on social media to obtain more information about the company, its products, and services (Rakic, B., & Rakic, M., 2014). This peer-to-peer dialogue and connection with customers create more online trust and loyalty (Jaiswal, A. K., Niraj, R., & Venugopal, P., 2010).

Fashion customers: psychosocial and behavioural determinants

Customers rarely buy by chance. Consumption behaviours result from internal and external determinants that are necessary to be known and understood for optimizing marketing decisions. Internal variables are related to personality, values, self-representation, as the external ones refer to brands communication, social, economic, and cultural environment.

Converting Fashion Customers into Leads

Today, some marketers continue to find a substantial handicap in developing the strategy in social networks, since at first glance, it is difficult to translate the results obtained and align them

with the overall marketing objectives (Klepek, M., & Starzyczna, H., 2018). In this mode of retail distribution, it is the consumer who buys and not the merchant who sells.

In other words, customers do not convert, on their own, into leads. At this point, it is essential to make it clear that social networks alone do not sell. They are the ideal platforms to increase notoriety and strengthen relationships with existing consumers. The textile fashion sector is always at the forefront, and this includes how they create their marketing campaigns to stay in consumers' minds, increase their sales and retain their customers. Two out of three companies use Inbound Marketing tools without knowing it; this allows a high degree of interaction with customers that generates engagement. Through Inbound Marketing, fashion brands can expand their database by posting relevant and targeted content on their websites and social media. So, businesses need to create opportunities and help them be part of the funnel as far as their interest in the company starts growing. Ideally, a business's presence on the Internet should be associated with a "call to action"⁸ in order to turn anonymous visits into identifiable ones (Poels, K., & Dewitte, S., 2019).

The CTA (Call to Action) can be a form to fill,⁹ documents to download, access premium content, or contact the company. Then, companies must transform visitors into leads (during the evaluation phase) and then into customers¹⁰ (during the decision phase). Since not all qualified leads are ready to make a purchase immediately, addressing their interest via personalized emails helps increase the conversion.

Fashion Retail and Online Customer Experiences

Single-brand stores consist of e-commerce platforms that focus on a single brand. The most appropriate thing is to complement the two strategies: online and offline. Online stores are very similar to the physical business and others that exist online only (Kumar, A., & Kim, Y. K., 2014). Online stores are generally integrated into a website dedicated to disseminating and selling products. It also offers other services designed to generate a community of users and retain customers. As with outlets, concept store websites can be advertising or offer online sales. Zara, for example, revolutionized its business project with the opening of its online store in 2010. It was one of the first brands to enter e-commerce with successful expectations. After obtaining positive results, the Inditex group decided to implement it for the other brands such as Massimo Dutti, Pull & Bear, or Bershka. Those brands have a corporate website and online store.

⁸ A call to action creates a conversion opportunity.

⁹ CTAs can also be expressed in Social Media engagement or a newsletter subscription.

¹⁰ considered as qualified leads

They provide the consumer with information such as order monitoring and status, access to information in various languages, newsletters, invoices, etc. In the case of Mango and its website, it launches each year the quemepongobymango.com microsite through which fashion and styling advice is given to users. The page is made up of videos where users can be advised and create their outfits to create interaction with the consumer through dialogue and exchange of experiences.

Fashion Retail and Inbound Marketing: Focusing on consumer needs

In line with the contrast between outbound and inbound marketing concepts, the present section aims to approach the fashion retail sector with inbound marketing. The literature review analysis will shed light on the fashion evolution contrast between online and offline shoppers. The fashion sector is always at the forefront. It includes how retail companies create their marketing campaigns to keep a presence in consumers' minds, increase their sales, and retain their customers. Inbound Marketing or engaging and relevant content to attract the customer in a non-invasive way, is an excellent digital marketing strategy for brands that operate in the fashion sector (Bleoju, G., Capatina, A., Rancati, E., & Lesca, N., 2016). According to The State of Inbound Marketing report (2013), attracting visitors into an Inbound Marketing sales funnel produces very high conversion rates, simply because users land on the company's site and will, by following a logical path, going from the request on the search engines to the click on the link of the web site, while passing by a personal sorting of the information made available to them. Today's consumer demands that companies position themselves intelligently to capture their interest through engaging and relevant content. Through Inbound Marketing, fashion brands can expand their database by posting relevant and targeted content on their website and social media. This allows a high degree of interaction with customers that generate engagement. Social networks have an essential role within the Inbound Marketing strategy. They have become a channel to interact with consumers and another tool to measure brand perception. They are the perfect channel to get leads.

Chapter 4: Marketing channels and their impact on Consumer Purchase Decision

The advent of e-commerce has brought about two transformations: the consumer transformation into a user of technology and the store transformation into a virtual place. Today's customers want everything: the advantages of digital offering for a wide selection, detailed product information, customer reviews, and sensorial and personal experiences of physical stores, such as services, the ability to touch products, and shopping entertainment. Nevertheless, the need to buy digital or physical remains convenient to buyers who select each route based on their perceived benefits. In Chapter 4, the literature review will focus on technology, the Internet, and the latest Covid-19 pandemic impacts on the mass-fashion industry. It centres on traditional customer behaviour mutation and needs to digital ones.

Fashion evolution: online versus offline controversy

Fashion creates its change dynamic. Fashion is seasonal as companies drive customers to renew their wardrobes occasionally, hence it's momentary or of fleeting nature. Retail companies invest in internationalization strategies that position their fashion brands close to consumers (Hauge, A., Malmberg, A., & Power, D., 2009). In the Fashion sector, the global online share of revenues already reached 20% in 2018, but the segment's growth will continue in the following years (Statista, 2021).

For Blázquez (2014), the fashion industry was slower than other sectors to adopt e-commerce. The main reason was the difficulty of translating the in-store experience to the online environment. However, with the expansion of the pandemic crisis of Covid-19, in 2020, the Fashion Transparency Index stipulates that people were forced to stay at home, and retail stores were closed around the world. As such, Covid-19 enhanced demand for clothing from a traditional way to an online purchasing trend. However, and following Statista 2021 statistics, the dominance of offline consumption over online was still evident throughout the coming years.

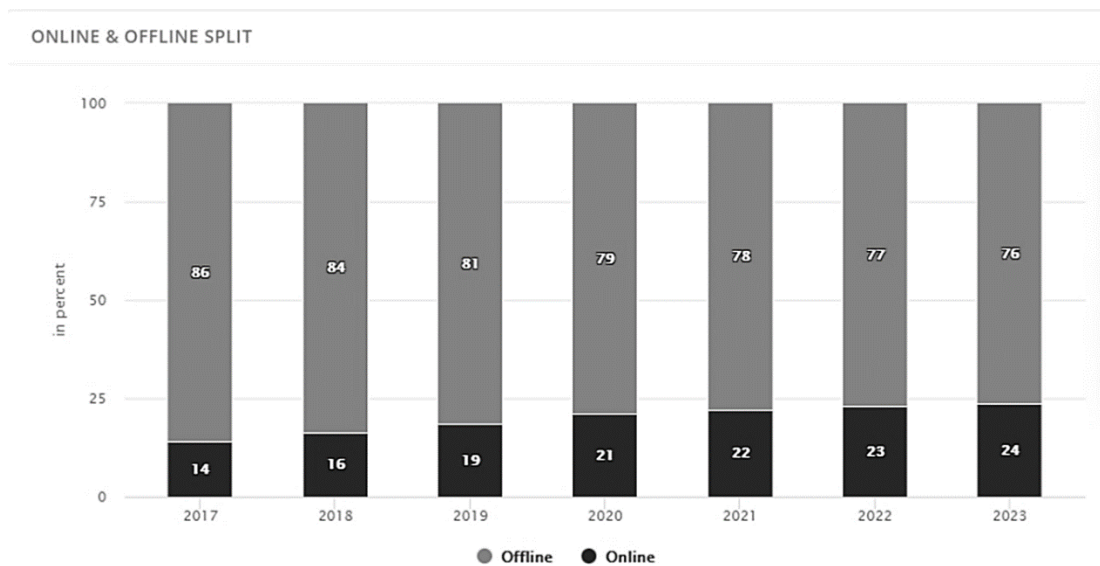


Figure 8: Online and offline split. Source: Statista, 2021

Simultaneously, Lafontaine & Sivadasan (2020) investigate and confirm an e-commerce increase.¹¹ Thus, the focus on omnichannel or multichannel in the fashion sector is becoming increasingly important. The online fashion sector exploded in the last few years, driving many shoppers from real to virtual worlds and expanding their experiences in both areas.

Fashion marketplaces gained momentum, and their rising prominence is due to their unparalleled reach. These platforms serve as hubs that draw millions of new customers, and represent a valuable asset that fashion retailers can leverage to increase sales and brand exposure.

Amazon, for example, is the leading apparel retailer in the US. In 2020, it generated \$30 billion in sales, with 87% of listings coming from third-party vendors, in addition to close to 6 billion monthly visitors and the opportunities are enormous.

Zalando, a Germany-based online fashion marketplace, generated an impressive revenue of nearly €8 billion in 2020. It operates across 23 European markets and boasts a substantial customer base of around 50 million. What further makes it successful is its ability to gather insights and shopper journeys and accordingly adapt to customer preferences.

¹¹ The most popular social network for the fashion sector right now is Instagram, since it is the one that works best among influencers and fashionistas. The incorporation of Instagram Shopping, which allows tagging products and displaying prices, refers to the sales website to complete the transaction. This path goes from the time a user sees the product on networks to the online shopping cart.

Digitization also enriched shoppers' physical experience, allowing them to compare multiple brands at the same time. Consumers today can interact with a brand through various channels, so cross-channel strategies must be used to deliver content that enhances the experience.

The concept of Omnichannel became imminent and central to customer focused strategies, and in order to capture the multi-dimensional shopping journeys and optimize conversion measurements. It brings together all customer interaction points, including physical locations, e-commerce, email, and social media, and sees them as a single, integrated path-to-purchase journey.

An omnichannel approach ensures that the customer purchase experience is always consistent and frictionless. This could mean providing them with the same products and pricing across all channels so their brand expectations are clear and matching. It also yields enriched data around every buyer which allows marketers to seamlessly switch between channels so the conversation continues with minimal interruptions and as per the customer's preference.

A solid and well-integrated technology platform and environment is required in order for the omnichannel operation to function properly. It should host information about customers, like their profile, preferences, behaviors, media consumption and purchase history. Technology would then track customer data across multiple brand interaction channels and make it available for specific and targeted omnichannel tactics all aimed at increasing the conversion across the MCF. For example, it would identify customers who enter the MCF at Awareness stage but don't progress into Interest such as Clicks/Visits nor Purchase. That kind of knowledge would be valuable to marketers who can act upon and aim at tackling roadblocks for every customer, or use multiple marketing tactics in order to push them into the lower part of the funnel and score their purchase.

Fashion retail and ecommerce

Considering the context of the study, it is undeniable that e-commerce and the fashion industry are closer than ever. Fashion buyers expect to be seduced by the design and experience of the sellers' websites and the frequently updated collections. Design, usability, content, and customization require significant attention for your store to deliver a rich, immersive, and intuitive online experience. Although it is fascinating, e-commerce in fashion is a highly competitive online business. Consumers can be inspired through different means such as personalization and recommendations. Moreover, social influencers play an essential role in the fashion sector. An example of services beyond standard online shopping is curated shopping; individual

garments are made by personal style consultants (Blázquez, M., 2014). For information, the West was no longer the global bulwark of fashion sales. More than half of clothing and footwear sales originated outside of Europe and North America for the first time. The primary sources of growth are the emerging market countries of Asia-Pacific and Latin America (McKinsey & BOF, 2017). The European market represents 26.1% of the world market, and the US has a 19.0% share (Bohnhoff, T., 2016). The significant internet population and high penetration of online shoppers combined with high purchasing power make these high numbers possible.

Fashion ecommerce is at the heart of modern retailing, and it is worth reflecting upon its ongoing growth and transformation. Statista predicts it will experience a CAGR of 14.2% between 2017-2025, with an expected valuation of \$1 trillion by 2024.

Clothing, footwear, and accessory sales have significantly increased worldwide and this upward trend is anticipated to continue. As such, consumers will allocate billions towards fashion online purchases which makes this business channel highly important.

Social media and online experiences in the fashion sector

Today, it is common for consumers to use the Web as a source of information for a brand or a category of products or services that they then buy from conventional channels¹². One of the primary motivations for businesses to use inbound marketing is the cost of acquiring customers who make an act of purchase. This is much lower than that resulting from the use of traditional marketing methods such as advertising, for example¹³.

Inbound Marketing complements purchase decision-making by as more consumers are using the Internet to learn about the products they want to buy and are most likely to meet their needs (Dakouan, C., Benabdelouahed, R., & Anabir, H., 2019). The application of Inbound Marketing methods within the company aims to provide it with all the necessary means to attract potential customers to its website while developing lasting relationships with them on the Internet.

Social media is driven by consumers. These platforms provide online communication channels to create communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content. Studying online consumer behaviour goes beyond the traditional field of marketing (Pavlou, P. A., & Fygenson, M., 2006), and in turn, has become a research stream in its own right. Online shopping popularity has increased exponentially, and the number of businesses that opened

¹² Retail stores.

¹³ The State of Inbound Marketing report (2013) conducted a study based on a sent survey to 644 marketing professionals. The study shows that businesses using Inbound Marketing channels have a 61% lower cost per lead than those using Outbound Marketing channels.

online stores multiplied (Ogonowski, A., Montandon, A., Botha, E., & Reyneke, M., 2014). Although positive growth prospects are clear, online fashion product sales are not without challenges. It is difficult to judge the quality of products online; many fashion products are considered image items and therefore require a personal inspection by the customer to make a purchase decision (Heuer, D., Brettel, M., & Kemper, J., 2015). The inability to inspect and try fashion products when purchased online implies a higher risk perception than when purchased in physical stores. Customers therefore refer to peer reviews in their online purchases (Ye, S., Ying, T., Zhou, L., & Wang, T., 2019). Social media improves customer knowledge. According to Cha (2011), surfing the Internet is a learning process that allows shoppers to know more about brands, their features and benefits prior buying, whether offline or online. It helps develop communities around subjects of interest where consumers can exchange their views about specific brands and products, therefore (potentially) influencing each other choices. Marketers should leverage their social media tools to encourage customers to engage in both online and offline purchases (Omeisha, F., Alrousanb, M., Alghizzawic, M., Aqqadd, A., & Al Daboubd, R., (8) 2024).

Branding and Consumer Experience

Brands are required to integrate consumer experience and performance expectations; therefore, establishing an online brand requires establishing a good record of consumer experience (Chen, H. L., & Mathews, S., 2013). Brand attitude is an essential factor in evaluating the brand value and refers to the consumer's impression of a brand (Liu, F., Li, J., Mizerski, D., & Soh, H., 2012). Online consumer attitude is affected by website experience characteristics associated with brand results, such as loyalty (Chen & Mathews, 2013; Zheng & Chi, 2015). Consumers' attitude towards the portal website has a positive relationship with their attitude towards the electronic brand store (Chen, H. L., & Mathews, S., 2013). On the other hand, Ramanathan, Subramanian & Parrott (2017) described that the concept of "brand satisfaction" consists of three elements measured, such as brand availability, customer's relationship with the brand, and his recommendation of the brand.

Research shows that customer satisfaction is significantly affected when promotions interact well with service operations. While social media reviews and service operations are positively related to customer satisfaction, the path ratio between brand satisfaction and customer satisfaction is insignificant. This indicates a low level of importance of the retail brand to customer satisfaction. Therefore, the promotion of branded products alone will not help improve

the retail network sales; instead, it is important to ensure that the customer has a positive experience when shopping in the virtual store, as customers trust product reviews and retail stores more than sales promotions. As such, retail outlets can leverage customer satisfaction by combining unique service operations with promotions and paying particular attention to social media reviews.

SMO and digital marketing development

The social network is the most important post-sale digital marketing tool. It allows the consumer to monitor the brand and report new trends and products. Instagram, Facebook, among others, allow a direct relationship between the brand and the user. Besides, social networks also allow users to share opinions in publications or on walls, so the consumer with social networks is informed of both trends and products and the opinions of other users who have purchased the products.

SMO and SEO strategies

SEO (Search Engine Optimization) and SMO (Social Media Optimization) are two essential basic strategies of online marketing, as the SMO provides actual data and information that could be useful for reviewing the marketing funnel. Taking advantage of the current understanding of a "connected society" and the importance that online users' give to the Web, it is identified that the vast majority of search engines consist of locating information of interest, which leads to "nurturing" the use of an SEO.

User generated content is increasingly relevant for an SEO. SEO leverage is widely used in digital communication plans and, therefore, in web marketing strategies with a view to commercial performance. In addition, search engines provide advertisers with numerous tools. Therefore, the company can, in addition to propagating its offers, provide information on points of sale or products straightforward and in addition to offering discount codes. Due to this, companies are encouraged to follow a new branch of content marketing that produces high-quality, engaging, and compelling content that is shareable, and that people want to distribute within their network (Dolega, L., Rowe, F., & Branagan, E., 2021). Reviewed information will cause a change in content optimization¹⁴. Today, due to the popularity of SMO, all social networks have their search engine optimization included¹⁵ (Sahai, S., Goel, R., Malik, P.,

¹⁴ Content should not be optimized for search engines but people's interests and reviews.

¹⁵ SEO on social media is called Social Media Optimization (SMO).

Krishnan, C., Singh, G., & Bajpai, C., (2018). SMO will make part of the SEO to review the three main parts of the funnel and improve the marketing strategy.

Customer-oriented online marketing experience

Investing in interactive experiences brings online shoppers all along the marketing funnel process and permits knowing them better and converting them into potential buyers. To bridge the gap between marketing channels, some companies went beyond customers' expectations and invested in augmented reality and 3D virtual models to improve the online shopping experience (Blázquez, M., 2014). For example, the virtual changing rooms are evidence of the change taking place in the technology of the fashion sector. The virtual changing room allows the seller to know the clothing fitting preferences and patterns in conjunction with them in the purchase of consumers (Guercini, S., Bernal, P. M., & Prentice, C., 2018). These testers need several technological applications to offer a high-definition screen and a recognition system, allowing the buyer's image to be recorded by detecting their movements. Virtual reality allows the buyer to choose the colour of skin, hair, eyes, body structure, and the type of features, making the most similar and fundamental to the avatar. Once the profile is created, online users can try on clothes to add other accessories to save the looks or share them over social networks. Sharing information and belonging to groups is as much related to the use of the Internet as other new means of communication. "Fashion giants like Converse, Zara, Ralph Lauren, Louis Vuitton, H&M, Burberry, Chanel, and GUCCI are embracing AR/VR technologies to revolutionize the way they sell clothes, shoes, and accessories" (Cicek, 2023). Today fashion websites are not only a catalogue of products but also offer a multitude of functions to attract consumers, providing them with a unique shopping experience, making them act like a "normal shopper." As such, customer-oriented marketing has gained strength in recent years as an effective way to put companies in customers' shoes and align with the Inbound Marketing methodology. For Wang & Kim (2018), four main marketing factors influence virtual store traffic and sales volume in e-commerce. They focus on online store advertising, service quality, warranty policies, and brand reputation. The virtual store traffic refers to the quantity of circulation that the store receives, that is, the number of browsers that visited the store, which is considered a significant indicator of the store performance. The logic is that the increase in traffic implies more sales opportunities. Many retailers have adopted innovations in delivery,

such as shopping online, picking up in-store¹⁶ (Lim, S. F. W., Jin, X., & Srai, J. S., 2018). Consumers have greeted e-commerce and retail trend because they prefer to search for product information online when they have time and order from home, and then pick it up later at the retail store pickup point.

Customer-oriented online satisfaction

Kalia, Arora & Kumalo (2016) research study reported that in the case of electronic services, customers place less importance on expectations as a standard of comparison. Instead, they use experience-based norms and traditional services as benchmarks. On the other hand, Cha (2011) highlighted that perceived utility, ease of use, enjoyment, security, social norm, flow, and gender affect purchase intention. Cha (2011) specifically noted that social norms and gender are predictors of the intention to buy virtual items. It should be noted that e-marketplaces are competitive venues and pose both challenges and opportunities for e-retailers to retain customers. The main challenge is the Web as a channel, as it opens the industry for an upward competition. Second, the customer can easily switch to other providers due to intelligent search agents and low search costs.

However, e-retailers enjoy higher customer loyalty. Balabanis, Reynolds & Simintiras (2006) reported that repeat loyal shoppers account for half of the e-retailer sales. Eventually, they all have similar products and brands with almost similar competitive prices, leaving little room for differentiation. However, in this scenario, the quality of the service can act as a differentiator when the customer can experience it throughout the process, that is, before and after the purchase. For example, Kalia, Arora and Kumalo (2016) report that when measuring the perceived quality of the online retail service, the dimension of reliability / immediate responses becomes the most important of online service quality that affects online consumer satisfaction and future purchase intention. To improve purchase intentions, reliability / fast responses and ease of use/care are conspicuous factors, followed by accessibility and credibility/security. Indeed, the findings suggest that customers expect reliable, accurate, fast, punctual, and personalized service.

The customer wants e-retailers to maintain a website that is easy to navigate, well organized, structured with concise content, and easy to understand terms and conditions. Online consumer satisfaction acts as a mediator between the dimensions of online service quality and future purchase intention. Therefore, it can be understood that online customers create future

¹⁶ In the fashion known as the "Click & Collect" service.

purchase intentions based on their past shopping experience satisfaction. This affects your future shopping activities with that particular website (Kalia, P., Arora, D. R., & Kumalo, S., 2016).

Customer-oriented online purchase decisions

Hall, Towers & Shaw (2017) suggested that it is essential for an organization to understand the most appropriate combination of communication tools to reach its target audience, and they highlight that not all consumers are interested in being active in social networks channels, even if they are digitally active on multiple online devices. Goel & Goldstein (2014) argued that the more traditional ways of identifying segments to target do not work appropriately for social networks, since they cannot identify who will respond to the content against someone who may not. They affirm that the Marketing campaigns are often generic. Hall, Towers & Shaw (2017) investigated that for organizations to effectively reach their target audience during the decision-making process; they must understand the level of expectation that consumers have regarding the communications of the brands they direct towards them (Ashley, C., & Tuten, T., 2015). It is suggested that consumers expect more real-time communications, instant responses, more open and less formal interactions between brand owners and consumers. The buyer and his decision-making process allow thinking strategically about what should be done in the different stages of the consumer's decision process (Hall, A., Towers, N., & Shaw, D. R., 2017). The implication is that Internet users are active in their buying behaviour, show brand loyal behaviours, and are prepared to compare purchases to find the best value. They can balance the desire to shop around with the practical consideration of making a convenient purchase or looking for the best possible deal. What is clear is that it can be tricky to specifically target these distinct consumer buyer segments, as their purchasing behaviours are not easily shared (Jayawardhena, C., Wright, L. T., & Dennis, C., 2007). Online purchasing decision making is a dynamic and highly flexible process with individuals making decisions that lead to different journeys (Karimi, S., & Naghibi, H. S., 2015). Namely, when buyers have a certain level of rationality, due to a large number of decisions that are often required, they can suddenly change and become highly irrational (Mix, L., & Katzberg, J., 2018). Furthermore, it is well documented as for the influence of other people such as friends and family within the decision process. However, "friends" can have a much broader definition within the digital age with connections to many hundreds of "friends" through social media sites. Additionally, electronic word of mouth (eWOM), which may have taken place at a post-purchase evaluation stage by others, can

significantly affect the way decisions are made.

Online product ratings and online reviews have recently taken on a much more significant role in the broader decision-making process of consumers during the purchase process (Moe, W. W., & Trusov, M., 2011). Each user can use many different channels to search for products.

Users can perform numerous activities before making their final purchase decision, search for content from different retailers, request social validation of their decision on their social networks, both online and offline, which is often out of sight of the retailer or brand (Hall, A., Towers, N., & Shaw, D. R., 2017). They also have the potential for very diverse, long, and complicated journeys before buying a product.

Consumers prefer interacting with fashion brands when considering a purchase. They seek advice, guidance, and opinions from a wide range of friends, family, co-workers, and broader contacts for them to choose from. Furthermore, they use different mobile devices, apps, and a mix of different online and offline retailers looking for their desired purchase. This provides a diverse and detailed set of challenges that a retailer must consider in order to capture “the selling” for a highly knowledgeable customer.

Consumers actively seek novelty, insight, and inspiration, but shoppers employ a variety of interactions over a more extended period to proceed with their online purchasing decision. Therefore, research has shown that retailers need to understand the details involved in a digitally connected buyer journey. Hall, Towers & Shaw (2017) back this up and suggest that retailers review their focus from brand-driven messaging to authentic online content and interactions. The recent explosion in customers’ phygital (physical and digital) engagement in the concerned sector implies the need for a multichannel strategy for brands to protect and grow their market shares.

Conclusion: The need for Research

The literature review noted the evolution on the Marketing front where Outbound thinking was replaced with Inbound one, highlighting the critical importance of the customer and his/her central role for any successful strategy. The one-way communication was replaced by a dialogue deploying several channels and routes, especially Digital and Social Media, in order to formulate an Omnichannel approach that yields higher retention and better results. The latter are measured in different ways where propositions were made, as reviewed, in order to better reflect the multi-dimensional customer journey.

Ensuring proper and optimal implementation necessitates the deployment of appropriate

measurements and metrics, the most popular of which is the Marketing Conversion Funnel (MCF). However, several limits exist under this universal framework. First, it does not consider the difference between industries, and dissimilarities in their customers' paths-to-purchase are still neglected. Secondly, it overlooks the recent behavioral changes and dynamic journeys customers follow (Noble et al., 2010). Thirdly, it commoditizes prospects' movement ignoring the fact they can enter the process at any stage and move in any direction (Bonchek and France, 2014).

Academics and professionals alike stated the need to review this model to better reflect the modern path-to-purchase, as it was not relevant anymore (Edelman, 2010). Several propositions were made including the Customer Life Cycle (Noble et al., 2010), the Consumer Decision Journey (Edelman, 2010) and more recently the Customer Experience Journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), however they did not receive a noticeable attention nor adoption by businesses as their authors/developers had hoped or expected. The MCF remained a universal and industry agnostic measure, and a useful tool for marketers (Saikia, P., & Ahmed, S., 2017), that requires further review and, probably, sector and market adaptation in order to improve its relevance and applicability in the new phygital world. My Research aims to support this direction by focusing on the Mass Fashion retail in Dubai.

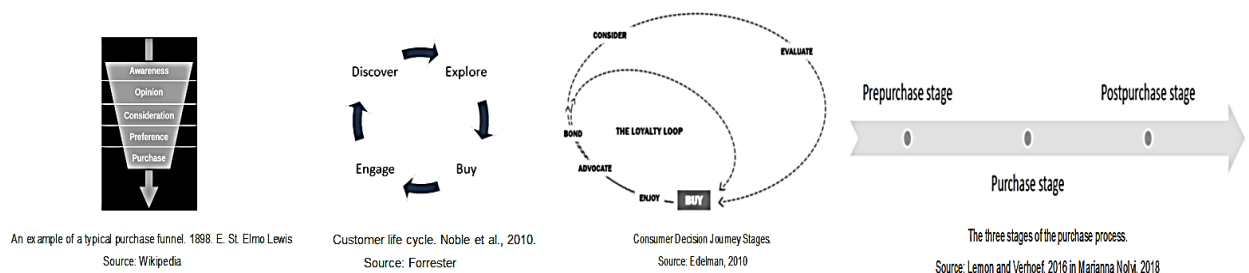


Figure 9: A timeline of some Marketing Funnel revisions/propositions

Chapter 5: Research Methodology

The fashion industry can be broadly divided into two categories: Mass and Luxury. Mass fashion retail refers to fashion brands that offer affordable, trend-based clothing and accessories to a wide range of customers. These brands typically target a younger, price-sensitive audience and are known for producing large quantities of products in a short amount of time. Mass fashion retailers aim to offer stylish, fashionable items at a low cost and often rely on volume sales to generate profit (Amatulli et al., 2016). Luxury fashion retail, on the other hand, refers to high-end fashion brands that offer premium, designer clothing, and accessories. These brands target a more affluent, fashion-conscious clientele and are known for their focus on quality, craftsmanship, and exclusivity. Luxury fashion retailers aim to offer the finest products and experiences and often rely on high-end pricing to maintain their premium image (Pietrzak, 2019).

Consequently, the main difference between mass fashion retail and luxury fashion retail lay in the target audience, the price point, the quality of the products, and the overall brand image. While mass fashion retailers focus on affordability and fast fashion, luxury fashion retailers emphasize exclusivity, quality, and luxury. And while both mass fashion retail and luxury fashion brands have had to adapt their marketing strategies to this new digital landscape, some key differences between their responses are crucial for defining the scope of this study.

When it comes to adopting digital technology and e-commerce, the luxury retail industry was initially hesitant to embrace the digital boom, but eventually began to adopt e-commerce in response to changing consumer behaviour. Luxury fashion brands initially viewed e-commerce as a threat to their exclusive image and original channels, such as brick-and-mortar stores and high-end department stores (De Azevedo Rosa, 2019). However, as consumer behaviour shifted towards online shopping, luxury brands began to adopt e-commerce platforms to maintain their market share. For example, Burberry launched its e-commerce website in 2006, followed by other luxury brands like Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Prada in subsequent years (Cabigiosu, 2020).

However, despite their early adoption of e-commerce, the luxury fashion industry was slower to adapt to the sudden digital explosion that was triggered by the Covid 19 pandemic. Luxury fashion brands were initially wary of the potential impact of digital technology on their high-end image, and they took a more cautious approach to e-commerce and digital marketing compared to mass fashion retailers (Aiolfi & Sabbadin, 2019). This was due in part to their focus on maintaining a premium, exclusive image, and in part to the more complex and sophisticated nature of their business (Rangel & López, 2022).

Mass fashion retailers, on the other hand, showed a quicker response to market trends, when compared to luxury fashion retailers (Escobar, 2016) and they were able to leverage digital platforms to reach a wider audience and generate sales at a faster pace. They were some of the first fashion brands to establish a strong presence on social media, and they were quick to embrace e-commerce and mobile shopping (Aiolfi & Sabbadin, 2019). Mass fashion brands like Zara, H&M, and ASOS were able to meet the demands of the online marketplace.

This could be seen on the level of Inditex, parent company to mass fashion clothing brands Pull & Bear and Massimo Dutti, and Zara, who reported that its revenue hit €6.99 billion (about \$8.25 billion) between May and July of 2020, a 7% increase over the same period in 2019. As such, Inditex regained its spot as the biggest clothing retailer in the world. Inditex largely attributed this quick recovery to its early investment in online fulfilment (Barkho & Barkho, 2022).

The swift shift in marketing strategies and models adopted by the mass fashion industry is at the core of why this segment was chosen to represent the theories of this study. The mass fashion retail industry was chosen as a representative case study due to its relevance to the period under consideration, which is the fashion retailer before, during, and after the pandemic, and its proven successful response to the associated pandemic shifts in consumer behaviour. It offers a wider reach given that it is widely accessible to a larger portion of the population, and as such is a more representative sample of consumer behaviour. It is characterized by rapid changes and a high degree of innovation. It is a more cost-efficient segment to analyse as the luxury fashion industry operates under different constraints, including higher prices and a focus on exclusivity, which can result in different consumer behaviours and marketing strategies (Rangel & López, 2022).

Advantages of Focusing on Mass Fashion Retail

By focusing on the mass fashion retail industry, the researcher can understand more accurately the impact of changes in consumer behaviour and the associated marketing models used to understand and measure these changes in light of the traditional, henceforth referred to as the “original” marketing funnel.

As previously presented, the linear original marketing funnel model is a classic model used to describe the stages a consumer goes through from Awareness to Loyalty. The stages typically include Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action, and Loyalty. The goal of marketing efforts is to move consumers through each stage, eventually leading to a purchase and repeat business. The model assumes a linear sequence of events, which may not accurately reflect the complex and non-linear nature of consumer behaviour in a digital world (Reinartz et al., 2019).

As consumers become more engaged with brands through multiple channels, including online, in-store, and mobile, the original conversion funnel became more fragmented, with consumers moving in and out of different stages at different times. Increased Customer Control meant that consumers seized control of the buying process, using digital channels to research products and make informed decisions. This shift in the discovery process meant that retailers had to adapt their marketing efforts to meet these new behaviours, shifting from a push to a pull approach. The rise of omnichannel shopping made it more challenging to measure conversions using traditional models like the original marketing funnel or the AIDA model. To address this, mass fashion retailers had to be more flexible in adopting multi-touch attribution models that took into account the various touchpoints a consumer could have with a brand before making a purchase (Gonzalo et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the increased emphasis on the remote customer experience as the pandemic evolved meant that mass fashion retailers had to create new seamless experiences across channels and personalize their offerings to meet the unique needs of each customer in high demand, high production, the context that was not reflected on the luxury retail level during this period. This was also accompanied by the recognition of the importance of data and analytics in understanding consumer behaviour and measuring the success of marketing efforts. Mass Fashion Retailers had to invest in new technologies and processes to collect, analyse, and act on data. As more consumers moved online towards mass fashion given their adapted remote and online sales modalities, mass fashion retailers have had to shift their marketing

expenditures towards digital channels such as social media, e-commerce platforms, and email marketing.

Consequently, the study explores the shift from physical to digital and to the current phygital consumer journey with the objective to understand if fashion retailers still apply the original marketing conversion funnel, review the evolving consumer behaviour and technology developments and understand the length of their influence on applied conversion models.

Research Methodology and Procedures

The selected approach for this study is Qualitative research. Qualitative research is a method of inquiry that is concerned with understanding and interpreting human behaviour, experiences, and perspectives. It is particularly useful in exploratory research when the goal is to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon or explore new areas of inquiry (Lewis, 2015).

Qualitative research is well-suited for this study because the research questions seek to understand the mass fashion retail experts' views on the specific research questions and address the factors that are influencing the industry. It allows the researcher to collect rich, detailed data about the experiences and perspectives of individuals in the industry and to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. According to Silverman (2016), qualitative research is particularly useful when the research question is exploratory and seeks to understand the social world from the perspective of the participants (Silverman, 2016). In addition, Creswell (2015) notes that qualitative research is useful in situations where the research question is complex and multi-dimensional, as it allows for a more in-depth analysis of the data. This is particularly relevant in the context of this study, as the factors that influence consumer behaviour in the mass fashion retail industry are likely to be complex and multi-dimensional.

Furthermore, qualitative research is appropriate when the researcher wants to collect data in a naturalistic setting, rather than in a controlled laboratory environment (Creswell, 2015). In this study, the researcher conducted interviews with individuals who have experience in the mass fashion retail industry, which provide a more naturalistic and realistic understanding of the factors that influence the sector in this context.

The qualitative method is, for its part, carried by an interpreter's paradigm, which assumes that the meaning attributed to social facts is not the result of theoretical frameworks of interpretation

but is based on the experience of the actors mediated by the perception of the researcher, who is responsible for fully grasping the meaning and significance of acts attributed by the participants. Thus, the researcher reformulates the ideas developed by the opinion maker during the interview and offers a synthesis accordingly. From there, it becomes known to grasp the opportunity for understanding a phenomenon.

By adopting back-and-forth operations between the interpretation of empirical data and existing theoretical constructs, an understanding, and explanation of the observed phenomenon can strengthen the validity of the results to a higher conceptual level. The qualitative analysis ensures the internal validity of the research findings (Kapborg, I., & Berterö, C., 2002). It strives to reflect the subject reality that the quantitative method cannot achieve. However, such a method is incapable of assuming the generalization of research results, particularly because of the selection of fewer case studies or participants on behalf of the empirical investigation. In this sense, the methodological perspective specific to a qualitative approach is the opposite of the quantitative approach. The grasp of social facts must be carried out independently of the representations of those who experience them. This is how the basic philosophical principles on which the qualitative method is built are phenomenology and symbolic interactionism.

The iteration and recurrence of the interviewees' experiences are not represented through a statistical dimension. For this fundamental reason, qualitative analysis is fundamentally an interpretive and constructivist method insofar as the ultimate objective is to disentangle social phenomena from the modes in which the actors give them meanings.

Advantages of the Qualitative Approach

One of the main benefits of qualitative research is that it allows for a deeper understanding of respondents' attitudes, motivations, and behaviours. Through methods such as in-depth interviews researchers can gain a more holistic understanding of how the fashion retail industry is dealing with market and consumer behaviour developments.

This can provide valuable insights into whether or not the original marketing funnel is still relevant and how it may need to be adapted to fit the current market (Brandner, 2022). The original conversion funnel is a widely recognized and accepted model in the world of retail, and the factors that influence its applicability in the mass fashion retail industry are likely to be

complex and interrelated. The qualitative approach lets the researcher explore these factors in-depth, through detailed and nuanced data collection and analysis.

Secondly, the qualitative approach allows for a rich and detailed exploration of the research topic, which is useful in identifying the factors that may not be readily apparent in a quantitative analysis (Agius, 2013). For example, the approach enables the researcher to explore the contextual and environmental factors that may influence the applicability of the original conversion funnel, such as the impact of social media or influencer marketing on consumer behaviour. This type of detailed and nuanced exploration is likely to produce findings that are more accurate and comprehensive, providing a better understanding of the research topic.

Thirdly, the qualitative approach is particularly useful in business when exploring the subjective experiences and perspectives of those who determine certain processes, which is relevant in the context of this study (Turner et al., 2021). The original conversion funnel is a model that represents a standardized view of the retail process, but the experiences and perspectives of consumers and industry experts will likely vary considerably. The qualitative approach helps the researcher explore these subjective experiences and perspectives and identify the factors that may influence them.

Fourthly and finally, the qualitative approach is well-suited for exploratory research, as it allows the researcher to develop new insights and theories about the research topic (Clark et al., 2021). Findings from this study may contribute to the development of new theories or approaches on the Marketing Conversion Funnel that are more appropriate for the mass fashion retail industry.

Methodology Limitations

This Research has been designed following a specific market representation. Interviews have been conducted with a number of industry executives and experts, during a defined period hence prone to time-bound developments' inference and at a specific location, Dubai.

The used methodology, Qualitative depth interviews, does not allow for broad representation, findings' extrapolation, or statistical analysis however is an appropriate approach for the exploratory nature of this study. This research could provide a framework or invite future papers and other researchers that would expand its margins.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured qualitative interviews have been chosen as a technique for collecting field data (McIntosh, M. J., & Morse, J. M., 2015). Such technique contributes to knowledge development by favouring interpretative approaches. A semi-structured interview was conducted without being systematic on previously defined questions. At that level, it is essential to note that interviewees were allowed to express their ideas even if they were not in the order of the interview guide. The purpose of the interviews was to gather rich, detailed information about the participants' experiences and perspectives on their previous, current, and future approaches to their marketing strategies for existing successful mass retail brands. The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions, but the interviewer did also have the flexibility to follow up on interesting points that emerge during the discussion. The interview concluded with a set of closed-ended questions meant to reflect attitudes and inclinations quantitatively.

Open-ended questions allowed participants to provide more in-depth, unstructured responses. These types of questions are usually used to explore complex issues and understand the perspectives, experiences, and attitudes of participants. The results from qualitative questions were analysed using qualitative methods, such as content analysis or thematic analysis, to identify patterns and themes in the data.

Closed-ended questions, such as "most likely" to "least likely" questions, are quantitative measures and were used accordingly. They provide a limited set of response options, such as a rating scale or multiple-choice answers, which can be easily quantified and analysed using statistical methods. Results were blended with the Qualitative findings and not reported separately due to the small sample size, in order to enrich learning and support directions in the output.

The semi-structured interview comprises of four sections. After the preliminary biodata is collected, the first section explores the marketing strategy and associated consumer journey during the pre-covid era. The second one centres on the transition into new marketing strategies during the covid restrictions and the third section focuses on the current trend and approaches for marketing strategies and any recommendations moving forward. The final section of the interview is a set of closed questions about the overall themes identified in the literature review of this study. Each interview lasted approximately 45 mins to 1 hour and was administered orally by the researcher, concerning the safeguarding mechanisms mentioned below. Interviews were recorded, when respondent consent was granted, and answers were transcribed and stored.

Data collected remains under confidentiality and consent from the respondents (Appendix 2). It is the sole property of the researcher and was saved on two external hard drives in order to ensure the data safety. It will be deleted after 2 years from the research completion.

Survey structure and information areas

This study aimed to gather insights into the marketing strategies, expenditures, and conversion tracking practices of mass fashion marketers before the digital boom, during the COVID-19 lockdown and digital shift, and in the current age of mass fashion commerce. Each interview lasted for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and comprised of the following sections while the detailed questions are included in appendix 1.

Section 1: Marketing Strategy Before Covid-19:

In this section, we explored marketing strategies that mass fashion marketers used before the digital age. This provided the baseline to compare the shifts in marketing strategies and MCF usage over time.

Section 2: Marketing Strategy during the COVID-19 Lock Down and Digital Shift:

In this section, we examined the changes in marketing strategies and MCF applications that mass fashion marketers adopted during the COVID-19 lockdown and the digital shift. This provided a deeper understanding of how the pandemic and the shift towards digital influenced marketing strategies and conversion measurement.

Section 3: Marketing Strategy in the Current Age:

In this section, we explored the current marketing strategies and MCF(s) used by mass fashion marketers in the phygital age. We looked at how they are adapting to the changes brought about by the pandemic and the digital shift, and how they view their usage of the original MCF or later versions, and their recommended revisions/adaptations in order to make it more relevant.

Section 4: the Speed round

Ten brief, multiple-choice close-ended questions were asked about specific topics like Augmented Reality, Personalization and the future of Mass Fashion retail. This section was supplementary and was not considered central to the analysis being of quantitative nature in a qualitative study and on a very small sample.

Two pilot tests were conducted in order to assess the survey clarity, flow and length, and collect respondents' feedback post of which it was finalized and used for the remainder of the sample.

Peer reviews were also sought after, where 2 colleagues were asked to act as reviewers with regard to all aspects of the methodology and survey. My direct Research Supervisors were also engaged throughout the study development and provided their valuable feedback and recommendations that were incorporated during progress.

Sampling

The process of "case selection" or "sampling", in qualitative research, involves choosing cases or participants that are most likely to provide rich and diverse data that can help answer the research question or objective (Ishak & Bakar, 2014).

The selection matrix is a tool that can be used to guide the case selection process. It usually includes criteria or characteristics that are important to the research question, such as demographics, experience, or behaviours. The matrix can help ensure that the selected cases are relevant, and representative of the population being studied (Shaheen et al., 2019).

Once the cases were selected, the researcher developed the interview guide, which is the structured set of questions used to gather data during the qualitative interviews. The interview guide has been designed to elicit information that is relevant to the research questions or objectives and was flexible enough to allow for follow-up questions and exploration of unexpected themes or ideas.

Snowball Sampling

For the Qualitative interviews, Snowball sampling was used to recruit the respondents. It is a non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting a small number of initial participants who can then refer other potential participants for inclusion in the study. This approach is particularly useful when studying hard-to-reach or marginalized populations or when the research topic is sensitive in nature (Naderifar et al., 2017).

One of the benefits of snowball sampling is that it allows researchers to access a wider range of participants than traditional sampling techniques, as individuals who are not typically included in research studies are more likely to be reached through referrals (Shaheen et al., 2019).

Another advantage of snowball sampling is that it allows for flexibility in the number of interviews to be conducted. Since the number of potential participants is unknown at the outset, researchers can continue to recruit new participants until they reach a point of saturation, where no new information or insights are being gained. This approach ensures that the final sample size is based on the abundance of collected input and the satisfaction level of the researcher rather than a predetermined number of interviews.

Overall, snowball sampling can be a valuable technique for conducting research in certain contexts. By being flexible in the number of interviews and focusing on input abundance and satisfaction level, researchers can ensure that they are capturing a diverse range of perspectives and experiences, which can contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the research topic.

Selection Criteria

The selection of a good sample and the establishment of clear selection criteria are crucial steps in ensuring the reliability and validity of the study. A good sample refers to a subset of individuals, groups, or organizations that are representative of the population being studied. The sample should be carefully chosen to provide relevant and insightful information that can be generalized to a broader context (Datta, 2018). Thus, clear selection criteria are essential for defining the characteristics and attributes that potential participants should possess to be included in the study. These criteria help researchers identify individuals who have the necessary knowledge, experience, or perspectives to contribute valuable insights to the research topic (Palinkas et al., 2013). By establishing specific selection criteria, researchers can ensure that the sample consists of individuals who can provide rich and relevant data, enhancing the depth and breadth of the study's findings.

In the context of exploring the current application of the original conversion model in mass fashion retail, as the world embraces a physical shopping experience, having a good sample and clear selection criteria becomes even more critical. Given the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of the retail industry, it is essential to select participants who have a comprehensive understanding of both the traditional and phygital shopping environments.

By carefully defining the selection criteria, such as considering the expertise and experience of participants in the field of mass fashion retail, the researcher enhances the credibility and generalizability of the research findings, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of

the topic and facilitating the development of informed recommendations and implications for both academia and the industry.

Several examples within the field of mass fashion retail and other industries evolved from a physical based approach to understanding the consumer journey and incorporating digital progress. As this research is exploring consumer behaviour in the transition from traditional brick-and-mortar stores to a phygital environment, the sample had to include carefully selected representatives based on their experience and familiarity with both shopping modes. This ensured that the sample consisted of individuals who could provide valuable insights into the factors influencing consumer decision-making and the effectiveness of the conversion model. Similarly, examining the implementation of the conversion model across various mass fashion retail brands, the selection criteria entail identifying participants with expertise in marketing, retail operations, and technology integration. This deliberate approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by different brands in their pursuit of a successful phygital shopping experience.

A list of sample selection criteria for the depth interviews was developed. The sought-after executives and experts fit the following profile:

- A. Expertise in data-driven marketing and personalization for both digital and physical channels, particularly in Mass Fashion Retail.
- B. Experience in social media marketing, influencer partnerships, and traditional advertising methods (e.g., print, billboards, TV commercials).
- C. Knowledge of loyalty and referral programs, as well as customer retention strategies in physical retail environments (e.g., in-store promotions, events, loyalty cards).
- D. Background in managing digital marketing strategies for companies with unique practices in their respective industries, alongside understanding of traditional marketing strategies and their integration with digital marketing.
- E. Expertise in omnichannel marketing, including the seamless integration of digital and physical customer touchpoints (e.g., online-to-offline strategies, click-and-collect, in-store digital experiences).
- F. Familiarity with the challenges and opportunities of balancing online and physical retail presence, including the impact on supply chain management, customer experience, and overall brand perception.

- G. Experience in assessing the effectiveness of marketing campaigns across digital and physical channels, including measurement of key performance indicators (KPIs) and return on investment (ROI).

Based on these criteria; the sample chosen for conducting the semi-structured interviews comprised of Marketing Executives and/or CRM professionals in the Mass Fashion retail industry, for their deep understanding of their marketing landscapes. They are well-versed in the latest marketing strategies and technologies and have a wealth of experience in implementing marketing initiatives.

The interviewees (Table 1) have direct experience in measuring the success of marketing expenditure and understanding consumer behaviour. They have their perspectives on how different marketing conversion models have been applied in practice and the limitations of each model in the context of the mass fashion retail market. These individuals are also well-positioned to provide valuable insight into the impact of the digital age on consumer behaviour, and the role of marketing expenditure in shaping consumer behaviour. They can provide an in-depth understanding of how their marketing strategies and conversion models have been adapted to the digital age and their relevance in the mass fashion retail market.

	Role/Job	Mass Fashion Retail - Company profile	Years of experience
1	Marketing Manager	Local Franchise	8
2	Marketing Director	International Retailer	12
3	Customer Relationship Manager	Local Franchise	6
4	Marketing specialist	International Retailer	7
5	Marketing specialist	International Retailer	8
6	Marketing Manager	International Retailer	7
7	Marketing Manager	International Retailer	9
8	Digital Manager	Local Franchise	6
9	Marketing Manager	Local Franchise	5
10	Digital Manager	Local Franchise	7
11	Customer Retention Lead	International Retailer	8
12	Digital Senior Manager	Regional Brand	7
13	Marketing Manager	Regional Brand	6
14	Marketing Director	Local Franchise	10

Table 1. Interviewees Profiles

Interviews continued until additional data was no longer deemed complementary or adding richness to the research. Market representation was ensured, knowing that the interviewed companies in this survey represent more than 80% of the concerned market share of sales.

The study progressed based on the following timeline:

	Q1, 2023	Q2,2023	Q3,2023	Q4,2023	Q1,2024
Research Method development (Post Literature Review Completion and Acceptance)	X	X			
Research Survey Development		X	X		
Research Survey Testing/Pilot Tests			X		
Sampling			X	X	
Data Collection				X	
Transcription				X	X
Data Analysis					X

Relevant Geography of Dubai

As it developed, the city of Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, established itself as a thriving hub for fashion retail as well as digital innovation. Today, Dubai is considered the "flagbearer and benchmark" for fashion retail and will continue to uphold this role given modern world-class malls and e-shops offering top-end consumer experience (H. Narayan Rao et al., 2021). Marketing managers and B2B experts in this city have a unique perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing the industry in this region. The city of Dubai can be considered a relevant and reflective location choice for these reasons (Rao et al., 2021).

A Robust Fashion Retail Market: Dubai is considered the fashion shopping capital of the Middle East, and has a thriving fashion retail market, with a high demand for mass fashion

products. This makes it an ideal place to test the current marketing models being employed and build an understanding of how consumer behaviour in this market is impacted by marketing expenditure (H. Narayan Rao et al., 2021).

A Diverse Consumer Base: Dubai has a highly diverse consumer base, with residents from all over the world. This diversity makes it a great place to understand the impact of marketing efforts on consumer behaviour in a variety of cultural and demographic contexts.

An Advanced Digital Infrastructure: Over the last few years, the number of online retailers has steadily climbed in the MENA region, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) constituting the biggest share of the region's e-commerce market. Dubai, in particular, is known for its advanced digital infrastructure and is a leader in the region in terms of technology and innovation (Faccia et al., 2023). This makes it easier to test different marketing conversion measurements and models in the context of the digital age, and to understand how consumer behaviour is impacted by digital marketing efforts.

A Varied Phygital Consumer Experience: Dubai has a mall oriented and remote consumer population, which makes it a good selection to assess the impact of marketing expenditure on consumer behaviour. This is especially relevant in the context of the mass fashion retail market, where consumer behaviour is now split between the digital world and the physical world. The pandemic had a core role in helping Dubai solidify its acceptance of the digital world of commerce after customers who had been hesitant to use online channels discovered how safe and convenient it was using Amazon and Carrefour (H. Narayan Rao et al., 2021).

Applicability as a foundation for a larger global study: The projection of this study is that it can be applied to a larger global one in several ways (Faccia et al., 2023). Firstly, Dubai is an international business hub, attracting businesses from all over the world. Therefore, the strategies used by fashion retailers in Dubai to cater to a diverse and multicultural population can be applied to other cosmopolitan cities with similar demographics, such as London, New York, or Tokyo. Secondly, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many fashion retailers have been forced to shift their focus from traditional brick-and-mortar retail to e-commerce, and the use of digital marketing strategies has become more critical than ever on a global level thus making Dubai representative of a larger market.

Consequently, by conducting semi-structured interviews with the chosen sample in Dubai, we can gain a deeper understanding of the local developments and how they influence marketing efforts and expenditure in the mass fashion retail market.

Finally, my personal experience and presence in Dubai makes the sought-after insights and industry experts within reach. It helped me use my professional network in order to contact required professionals for the interviews.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in the analysis of the interviews provided that the purpose was to gain in-depth insights into marketing strategies, marketing funnel evolution and adaptations from industry experts. Thematic analysis is well-suited for understanding experiences, perspectives, and processes. It looks at patterns of meaning in a data set and groups insights according to similarities or themes. These themes allow us make sense of the content and draw meaning from it.

Semi-structured depth interviews were conducted to collect open-ended, qualitative data. The research questions were grouped under 3 defined periods: Before, During and Post Covid in order to capture progress and longevity in the data. Respondents were asked to discuss their marketing work throughout, talk about customer retention and measurement, and review a number of proposed Marketing Conversion Models and discuss their views.

After familiarizing with the full interview transcripts through repeated reading, initial codes were generated by systematically tagging relevant passages with descriptive labels. This iterative, inductive approach enabled themes to emerge directly from the raw interview data through careful coding and analysis. The coding matrix was developed after thoroughly reviewing the interview transcripts, identifying common topics and ideas that emerged, and categorizing them into broader themes. As the researcher went over the transcripts, he tagged relevant passages with descriptive codes representing the core concept or idea being discussed. These initial codes were then examined for overlap and redundancy, and grouped into higher-level themes that captured the main ideas coming out of the interviews. The final codebook (Table 2) contains these higher-level themes, a description of what each encompasses, and examples of quotes from the interviews that were tagged with codes related to that theme. This coding process allowed for the systematic analysis of the qualitative data from the interviews, and to identify key takeaways.

The codebook was developed following an inductive coding approach. In inductive coding, the researcher aims to develop a theory or develop codes and themes on the go and codes are derived from the data with no preconceived notions of what the codes should be (Bazeley, P., & Jackson, K. (Eds.), 2013).

My codebook includes the following 4 key components:

- Reference to source IDI
- Theme/code heading
- Code definition or description
- Examples or key quotes

Reference	Code	Description	Example Quote
IDI 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 12	Original Funnel still used	References to still using traditional marketing funnel	"This is a very traditional funnel."
IDI 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14	Funnel adapted	Mentions of adapting or evolving the funnel model	"We were going by these points but maybe with a slightly different way"
IDI 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 12	Omnichannel	Discussion of omnichannel or integrated channels	"Online and social media are one team, and there is another team for offline marketing."
IDI 3, 5, 6, 8, 9	Personalization	Talking about personalization or custom experiences	"We also focus on putting our creative graphic designs on billboards"
IDI 1, 4, 9, 13	Digital critical	Emphasizing importance of digital channels	"Digital marketing employees are more."
IDI 2,4,5,8,9,11,14	Social media	Specific discussion of social media strategies	"They were publishing many reels and stories about buying online"
IDI 1,3,8,12	Measurement	Comments on metrics, testing, tracking performance	"Everything is detailed and organized."
IDI 4,7,8,12,14	Innovation	References to innovating on strategies and technologies	"I think we need more time to interact with AI."
IDI 1,2,3,6,9,11	Customer focus	Remarks on convenience, experience, satisfaction	"The customer journey should be smooth."

Table 2. Codebook

My analysis followed the interpretivism theory, whereas the researcher's experience and views would have informed the process of data collection, interpretation and analysis. Furthermore, findings are culturally and historically situated, based on respondents' experiences and their understanding of them (Ryan, 2018).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the evolution of the consumer journey from physical to digital and the current trend towards "phygital" experiences, particularly in the mass fashion industry. The study aimed to assess the extent to which fashion retailers still adhere to the traditional marketing funnel and how they applied or adapted it to measure customer conversion in their contemporary marketing workings.

Chapter 6: Qualitative Research Findings

I review in this chapter the qualitative findings gathered from the in-depth interviews conducted with fourteen marketing and customer retention experts in the Mass Fashion retail sector in Dubai. Those discussions served as a cornerstone for the findings in this paper, offering insights and different perspectives on the rapidly developing consumer and technology landscapes and the deliberate adaptations in both marketing strategies and budgets in order to keep up with these changes.

Before diving into the collected data, I include some observations on possible and potential revisions on the conducted survey that could further enhance its output. They could serve future researchers who'd choose to build on this study:

- Covid 19 has been a periodic and time-bound event which impact should be discounted as it limits findings' extrapolation or longevity
- Reduce repetition in the questions that would not lead to additional findings
- Increase the focus on Omnichannel and the impact of Artificial Intelligence and Augmented Reality being two influencing factors on the future of marketing and consumer engagement
- Further explore the phygital integration and review its multiple interpretations and actionability

Going back to the research findings, the overall research question of this Thesis is: *Does the universal and original Marketing Conversion Funnel truly supports Mass Fashion retailers in understanding the contemporary customer journey?*

At the core of this study lay two pivotal research inquiries. First, it investigates the preparedness of marketers to adapt their conventional funnels in response to the dynamic shifts in customer expectations and experiences. Second, it explores the fusion of physical and digital advancements within Mass Fashion retail and their consequential impact on marketing strategies and consumer engagement tactics.

RQ1: To what extent are marketers ready to review their funnels to cope with customers' evolving experiences and expectations?

The interviews reveal that marketers are still finding value in the core marketing funnel concepts but recognize the need to adapt to changing consumer behaviours. As one respondent stated, "This funnel is essential. You will follow it for everything related to marketing" (Transcript 1). However, they also acknowledged that models need to be more nuanced now, noting "we still use this model, and maybe we have developed it in a way or another using certain software and techniques" (Transcript 1). Furthermore, a recurring theme was balancing innovation with retaining aspects of traditional strategies, suggesting marketers are reviewing funnels but also seeking continuity.

The Thematic analysis of the fourteen interviews conducted across the board revealed four core themes relevant to RQ1.

I. Recognition of Changing Consumer Behaviours:

- Acknowledgment that consumer behaviours and preferences have significantly shifted due to digital channels and social media.
- Example: Interviewee 1 emphasized the dependence on AI and social media, highlighting the digital shift.

II. Willingness to Adapt Funnel Models:

- Openness to reconfigure original funnel models to align with modern consumer journeys.
- Example: Interviewees expressed reservations about the current relevance of established funnels.

III. Importance of Data and Analytics:

- Utilization of data and analytics to track shifts in preferences and digital behaviours for funnel optimization.
- Example: Interviewees mentioned increasing reliance on AI data, and digital channel reports and measurements to guide marketing strategies.

IV. Adaptive Mindset and Experimentation:

- Advocacy for a flexible and experimental approach to funnel innovation.
- Example: Interviewee 4 emphasized a mindset shift rather than rigidly following funnel models.

Theme 1: Recognition of Changing Consumer Behaviours

There was widespread recognition among the interviewees that consumer behaviours and preferences have shifted significantly, especially due to the rise of digital channels and social media. The interviewees acknowledged that the original Awareness-Interest-Decision-Action Funnel was outdated in some respects. They noted that awareness is now a given for most products due to the impact of social media and the passing of generational awareness for long standing brands. The funnel was more focused on interest, decision, and action stages. As Interviewee 10 explained it, “during covid, it was different, we removed the awareness point, we kept the interest, decision, and the action. We removed the awareness point, since we are talking about perfumes, people are aware about such products, and even regarding fashion; so, they are asking for the price, the quality; so, we took the shortcut to what the client is interested in”.

The interviewees expressed an understanding of how consumer behaviours have evolved, especially due to digital disruption. This suggested that marketers recognized consumer experiences were transforming. Interviewee 5 highlighted increased post-COVID prioritization of digital channels like TikTok¹⁷ to reach modern audiences, explaining “TikTok wasn’t a choice for us before COVID-19, but now it’s a strong platform”. This exemplifies adapting strategies to match younger demographics' social media preferences.

Furthermore, the variations in the relevance of marketing conversion models to capturing and measuring today's consumer journey and marketing efforts were identified as follows:

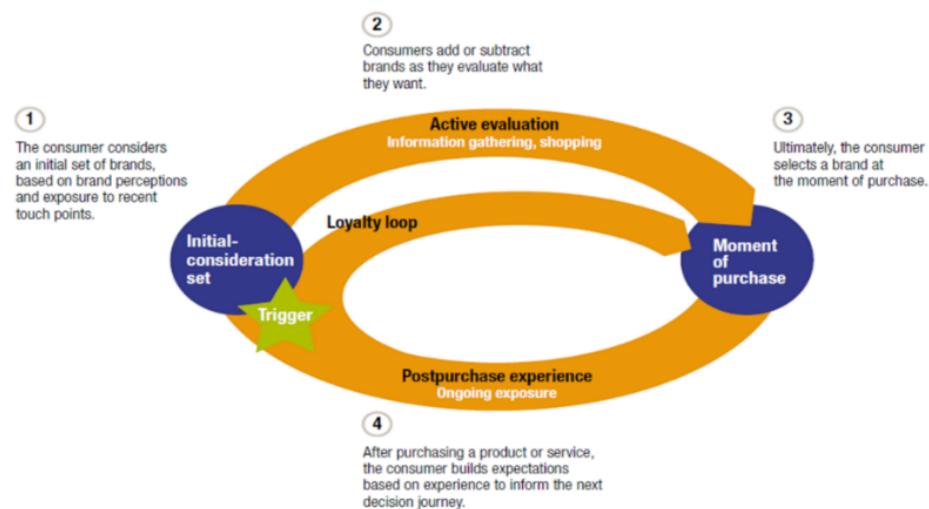
a) The Traditional Marketing Conversion Funnel Model:

Some interviewees indicated that the original marketing conversion funnel model was considered relevant, especially before the digital boom, as it provided a structured approach to

¹⁷ TikTok is a video based social media platform where users can post videos and other can interact with said videos.
<https://www.tiktok.com/about?lang=en>

understanding consumer behaviour and guiding marketing strategies. However, during the COVID-19 period, adaptations were made to the funnel, such as removing the awareness stage and focusing on the decision and action stages, reflecting a shift in relevance during challenging circumstances.

b) The Consumer Decision Journey:



The relevance of the consumer decision journey model was perceived differently among interviewees. Some considered it highly relevant, particularly in the post-COVID period when the focus shifted towards understanding consumer interests and needs rather than solely focusing on the direct conversion. This adaptation reflected a nuanced understanding of the evolving consumer journey. For others, this model is not flexible enough in reflecting today's realities, especially the speed at which consumers choose brands even without comparing to others since they can order and return with ease from their homes. Therefore, brand perceptions could not always be the initial stage in the purchase decision, mainly when the brand is new for the customer.

c) The AIDA Model:

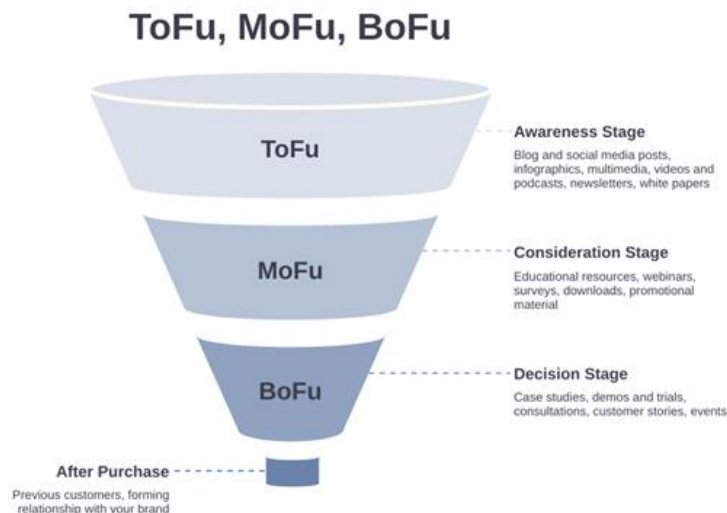
Responses regarding the AIDA model varied, with some interviewees rating it as somewhat



relevant. The model's relevance was particularly evident in the context of influencer marketing and the role of influencers in guiding consumers to the decision-making stage, aligning with the original AIDA framework. Nevertheless, it was limiting and simplistic for most marketers/experts knowing the phygital and more complex consumer journey today.

This highly corresponds to Noble et al., (2010) interpretation of the model as it overlooks the recent behavioral changes and dynamic journeys customers follow, and their freedom of movement with the fact that they can enter the process at any stage and move in any direction (Bonchek and France, 2014).

d) The ToFu / MoFu / BoFu Model:



When it comes to the ToFu / MoFu / BoFu model as a marketing model, it ranked high among the interviewees being perceived as highly relevant. The digital age had provided tools that had revived the applicability of the ToFu / MoFu / BoFu Model as its stages were much easier to

apply with current technological advancements. It is seen as an enhanced or updated version of the AIDA model with phygital categorized stages:

i. ToFu (Top of Funnel):

These are cold leads that have little to no awareness of the brand. They are at the awareness stage. This is reflected in the digital age through: Emails/ads to convert sales.

ii. MoFu (Middle of Funnel):

These leads have some awareness and consideration for the product. They are evaluating options with increased focus on new innovative channels and content to bring awareness such as the use of influencers and Tik-Tok.

iii. BoFu (Bottom of Funnel):

These are hot, sales-ready leads. They have awareness and interest and are ready to purchase. This is where having a seamless frictionless purchase experience from the comfort of one's own home became crucial and easier in the digital age.

e. Inbound Marketing Funnel

The inbound methodology (Halligan, B., & Shah, D., 2009) attracts marketers by producing content matched to their needs at each funnel stage, in contrast to "outbound" advertising, cold calling, and interruption marketing. It focuses on being helpful first rather than promotional. The inbound funnel grows awareness, nurtures relationships over time, and delights customers to drive organic, quality leads.

The Inbound marketing funnel was also ranked high among the interviewees, with one pointing out, "This [referring to the Inbound Marketing Model] is much deeper. Strangers and visitors are in the awareness stage. Visitors and leads are under interest.



Here the client is interested. When there are leads, it means you have data like email, number, and these things. So, now you can do an email campaign. You do a call of action; you send the client to the landing page. Here, you would have a customer who wants to buy. Then, he can do word of mouth and tell his friends. When the client likes the product, he will promote it for you. They would tag you in posts and tell their friends. They become the promoter. They promote the product”.

The discrepancies in ratings and perspectives among interviewees emphasize the diverse approaches and interpretations of marketing conversion models in capturing and measuring today's consumer journey and marketing efforts. The examples provided demonstrate the nuanced application and adaptation of these models in response to changing consumer behaviours and market dynamics.

Overall, interviews' responses reveal differing perspectives on the applicability and relevance of marketing conversion models in the current marketing landscape, emphasizing the need for adaptive and customized approaches to effectively capture and measure the evolving consumer journey in the mass fashion retail industry.

Theme 2: Willingness to Adapt Funnel Models

The shift in marketing mindset towards a customer-centric approach embeds an understanding of the value of building and maintaining lasting relationships with consumers.

“The typical or traditional marketing funnel is oversimplified” (Gedenk, K., Neslin, S. A., & Ailawadi, K. L., 2010) and “focused on driving a single purchase” as mentioned by several interviewees. This design fails to recognize the value of attracting and retaining loyal customers, which is critical for long-term business success. That implies that companies would not consider the value of customer retention and simply focus on converting leads into buyers. It yields missed opportunities for repeat business and referrals.

The interviewees expressed openness to reconfiguring original marketing funnel models, where they are still being used, if deemed essential to align with modern consumer journeys. As Interviewee 2 shared, “I don't think it's reflective of the reality” regarding today's relevance of the established funnel. Interviewee 3 was willing to enhance the original funnel but still found aspects relevant now. This suggests readiness to review and update funnels.

Interviewee 4 explained not strictly adhering to the academic marketing funnel concept, but still following the same underlying awareness to action progression. This indicates a pragmatic orientation focused more on meeting evolving customer needs rather than textbook theory.

There was a general willingness expressed to reconfigure marketing funnel models if deemed essential to align with modern consumer journeys. As Interviewee 7 stated, "That didn't change because the customer is still the same". But Interviewee 6 was open to adding steps to better reflect current realities.

Although a number of interviews revealed some contradiction between the MCF evaluation being inappropriate anymore and current practices still having it followed for different reasons "no other available globally endorsed models, lack of historical benchmarks, unclear perspectives on results new approaches could yield", the general (intended) direction implies readiness to review funnels by either adapting the existing one or blending it with other models in order to improve the measurement and render it more relevant to today's shopper journey.

Theme 3: Importance of Data and Analytics

Using data and analytics to quantify changes in preferences and digital behaviours was cited as key for determining when and how to update marketing funnels. As Interviewee 1 noted, "measurements will allow us to track and know if we are doing good or not". "Google Analytics is a great tool for digital marketing funnel analysis and optimization, it offers detailed insights into how users interact with our website and campaigns". Interviewee 8 explained relying on "reports" regarding website traffic and application engagement metrics to guide strategies. Using data and analytics to quantify changes in customer behaviours and preferences was also cited by some interviewees as key for determining when and how to update marketing funnels. As Interviewee 1 noted, "measurements will allow us to track and know if we are doing good or not". Interviewee 3 similarly emphasized using data analysis to shape strategies responsive to evolving consumer patterns. As Interviewee 8 explained, "We have reports on all of that" regarding website traffic and application engagement metrics and their presence in the decision-making process. "We use Salesforce in order to integrate our data sets and that helps us track our different customers' journeys and align with our marketing tactics". By analyzing consumer interests and where they stand in the buying journey or their experience feedback, marketers feel better equipped to understand the complexities of the shopper's behavior and therefore adapt their strategies to derive the highest possible returns.

Theme 4: Adaptive Mindset and Experimentation

“Customers have wealth of information now” (Interviewees). In other terms, they are no longer simply passive recipients of marketing and communication messages, but proactive researchers who are capable of building their purchase decision on well thought buying processes.

“Companies must adapt to this shift by embracing the modern customer journeys” (Interviewees). By understanding the “modern complexities” (Interviewee 2) and aligning their strategies accordingly they can effectively connect with consumers at different stages of their decision-making journey, ultimately leading to greater retention and financial gains.

Some interviewees advocated maintaining a flexible, experimental approach regarding marketing funnel innovations rather than rigidly clinging to legacy models. As Interviewee 4 shared, “We don’t view it as a funnel and say what to do; we’re dealing with this funnel as a mindset” emphasizing adaptability.

Interviewee 3 discussed adopting a more experimental mindset rather than rigidly following legacy funnel models, stating “I think it’s going to reach that level we already have thought of smart shelves where they move themselves”. This suggests openness to more radical innovations that align with shifting consumer expectations.

Reflecting on Theoretical Foundations

Each thematic finding from the interviews draws a parallel to specific theoretical foundations. The acknowledgment of changing consumer behaviours mirrors the transition from outbound to inbound marketing strategies. The willingness to optimize funnel models aligns with the critique of original funnel limitations. The emphasis on leveraging data and analytics resonates with the evolving retail fashion landscape, while the call for an experimental mindset mirrors the adaptive nature required in both funnel evolution and the changing retail fashion space. These connections affirm the relevance and interplay between empirical findings and established theoretical frameworks, signalling the need for adaptive, consumer-centric marketing strategies.

A. Recognition of Changing Consumer Behaviours (Theoretical Foundation: Inbound vs. Outbound)

Inbound marketing, grounded in customer-driven interactions, represented a change in basic assumptions from conventional outbound strategies (Lockwood, M., 2013). The findings from

interviews resonate with the essence of inbound marketing, highlighting a clear recognition of the digital transformation's influence on consumer behaviour. For instance, the assertion that "everything is digital now" reflects the alignment with inbound marketing principles. Customers increasingly rely on digital channels and AI for information, marking a departure from traditional outbound tactics. This echoes the fundamental shift from intrusive outbound methods to customer-centric inbound approaches, wherein consumers actively seek relevant information.

The findings from the interviews resonate with the paradigm shift from outbound to inbound marketing tactics. Interviewees recognize the significant impact of the digital transformation on consumer behaviour, echoing the principles of inbound marketing. The increased reliance on digital channels reflects a bottom-up approach where customers drive interactions, aligning well with the fundamental concept of inbound marketing.

B. Willingness to Optimize Funnels (Theoretical Foundation: Evolution of Marketing Funnels)

The original marketing funnel, exemplified by the AIDA Model, has come under scrutiny for its inability to capture the intricacies of modern consumer journeys (Ansari et al. 2019). Interviewees expressed a willingness to optimize or enhance funnel models, acknowledging the need to adapt to contemporary consumer behaviours. Statements like "I don't think it's reflective of reality" accentuate the critique of the limitations of original funnel models, emphasizing the necessity for evolution. This aligns with the evolving nature of consumer behaviours and the imperative to craft funnel models that mirror these complex journeys accurately.

The interviewees expressed openness to enhance or add steps to the original marketing funnel, which mirrored the need to evolve and adapt funnel models to fit contemporary consumer journeys. Statements like "we reuse it because it's the base. But then we amplify it... because customer behaviour, spending expenditure, everything has changed post Covid", echo the critique of the limitations of original funnel models. This reflects an understanding that the linear funnel model may not accurately capture the complexities of the modern consumer decision-making process, indicating the necessity for an evolved funnel structure that aligns better with current consumer behaviours.

These insights collectively illustrate the proactive stance of marketers in optimizing marketing funnels to better align with evolving consumer behaviours and the dynamic realities of the mass fashion retail industry.

The provided examples demonstrate the nuanced application and adaptation of marketing strategies, emphasizing a willingness to embrace digital channels, integrate AI-driven insights, and customize marketing models to effectively capture and measure the evolving consumer journey.

C. Leveraging Data and Analytics (Theoretical Foundation: Retail Fashion Evolution)

The retail fashion sector serves as a vivid illustration of the convergence of physical and digital realms, where technology and shifting consumer behaviours exert a profound impact. The findings concerning the emphasis on data and analytics resonate with the evolving landscape of retail fashion, wherein digital behaviour comprehension becomes pivotal. The industry's reliance on metrics and reports echoes the overarching theme of technology and digital channels dominating the retail landscape. This evolution emphasizes the importance of aligning marketing strategies, including funnel models, with the changing dynamics of the retail fashion sector.

The emphasis placed on the importance of data and analytics within the interviews aligns seamlessly with the evolving landscape of retail fashion. Understanding digital behaviour has become crucial in the fashion industry, much like the essential role of data analytics in tracking shifts in preferences and behaviours. The interviewees' mention of using metrics and reports to guide marketing strategies directly correlates with the fashion industry's emphasis on technology and digital channels for understanding consumer behaviour.

D. Maintaining an Experimental Mindset (Theoretical Foundation: Evolution of Marketing Funnels and Retail Fashion Evolution)

Traditional models, exemplified by the Marketing Conversion Funnel (MCF), have come under scrutiny for their inability to capture the intricacies of modern consumer journeys. Interviewees expressed a willingness to optimize or enhance funnel models, acknowledging the need to adapt to contemporary consumer behaviours.

The call for an experimental mindset within the interviewees' responses resonates strongly with the need for innovative strategies both in the evolution of marketing funnels and the rapidly changing retail fashion landscape. Concepts like "dealing with this funnel as a mindset" echo the evolving nature of funnel models and the experimental approach required in adapting retail fashion to changing consumer behaviours. This experimental mindset mirrors the need for agility and adaptability in both marketing strategies and retail experiences.

RQ2: How have “phygital” developments in mass fashion retail been reflected in marketing and go-to-consumer strategies?

Analysis suggests that marketing strategies have begun to rally around digital based approaches while still seeing benefit in coordinated physical engagement. Social media and integrated omnichannel sales are rising areas of focus and resource allocation for phygital marketing approaches in the mass fashion retail industry. As per the data collected, fashion retail marketing strategies are increasingly phygital - blending online and offline channels while leveraging technology to interweave digital and physical touchpoints into more unified customer journeys. Marketers are especially focused on quantified measurement of integrated consumer engagement patterns.

The rise of omnichannel marketing was a prominent theme, indicating a phygital approach. As one interviewee stated, "Now, everything is generated online and there is software that will make the job easier. Simply, you can get measurements with one click" (Interviewee 3). Another referenced their use of "a tracker in the store to count the people who have entered the store, spent time there, and how many people left". (Interviewee 1)

Email marketing was referenced as a retention strategy across channels, and multiple respondents emphasized the importance of social media for brand awareness. Providing a seamless experience between online and offline was noted, with comments like "people would take screenshots of a product and go ask about it [referencing a store visit]. After COVID-19, people hesitate to visit the actual store. People search online and get recommendations then buy". (Interviewee 3)

Phygital mixes the convenience of online shopping with physical interaction. It aims to simplify the transition between the two environments so shoppers can effortlessly move between browsing online, checking in-store, and finally purchasing at their convenience.

By leveraging cutting-edge technologies like augmented reality (AR) (Lin, Z., & Yang, J., 2024) and virtual reality (VR), brands are able to offer more engaging and interactive customer journeys. Benefits extend beyond the shopping experience. For example, click-and-collect and QR codes for product information, provide valuable data on customer behavior and choices. This real-time feed allows businesses to refine their product offerings and marketing strategies.

The Phygital approach fills the gaps between traditional brick-and-mortar and online, and results in a complex buying journey with variable stages along the way.

In summary, the analysis indicates that the original marketing funnel prevails, but with increasing emphasis on adapting it to reflect omnichannel strategies, data-driven personalization, and other evolving realities of the modern consumer journey. Marketers recognize the limitations of siloed funnels, but practical progress remains gradual.

Further innovation in holistic measurement, organizational collaboration and customer-centricity may be needed to transform mass fashion retail strategies.

Most of the respondents converged around 4 main themes that are marking the industry and influencing their practices:

Theme 1: Adoption of Omnichannel Sales Strategies

A predominant theme across interviews was increased usage of omnichannel strategies that coordinate online and offline touchpoints. As Interviewee 1 shared, “If the customer wants an item that is not available in the store, we will order it online”. Interviewee 5 also stated, “Sometimes I ask the influencer to promote the physical store, where people would get discounts when they visit the store, and sometimes I ask her to promote the online pages”.

And Interviewee 8 described increased budgets for understanding and implementing new technologies like virtual try-ons to blend digital and in-store engagement. This signals a growing investment at the intersection of physical and digital.

Theme 2: Social Media Emergence as a Lead Channel

The interviews highlighted the significant role of social media (Omeisha, F., Alrousanb, M., Alghizzawic, M., Aqqadd, A., & Al Daboubd, R., (8) 2024) as a lead channel, with a strong emphasis on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook for product discovery and consumer engagement. The increased focus on social media aligns with the evolving marketing strategies in the post-digital boom and post-COVID period, reflecting the industry's adaptation to changing consumer behaviours.

The rise of social media was cited by most interviewees as significantly impacting marketing approaches. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok have become lead discovery channels for many fashion brands. Interviewee 3 explained, “Our Instagram and Facebook accounts are still active...we built more trust through those platforms”.

Theme 3: In-Store Experiences Continue to Provide Value

Despite the digital boom, physical stores still seem to provide value, especially for customers to examine products before purchasing (Blázquez, 2014). The interviews indicated that in-store experiences continue to provide value, allowing consumers to see and try on products, receive personalized recommendations, and make purchases in person. This emphasis on in-store experiences highlights the enduring significance of physical retail spaces in the mass fashion industry, complementing the digital advancements. As Interviewee 2 shared, “I think people still prefer purchasing from shops”. Interviewee 7 similarly stated, “Regarding the underwear, the customer likes to touch the product with his hands”. Interviewee 7 also highlighted post-COVID attempts to drive consumers back to physical stores through offerings like travel-themed in-store experiences, indicating phygital coordination remains vital.

Interviewee 8 explained collecting both online and in-store sales data into an integrated analytics system to holistically quantify performance. This demonstrates comprehensive phygital metrics tracking.

Theme 4: Increasing Budget Allocation to Digital Initiatives

The interviews revealed an increasing budget allocation to digital initiatives, reflecting a strategic shift towards digital marketing strategies, including influencer partnerships, personalized shopping experiences, and AI-driven insights. This shift underscores the industry's recognition of the importance of digital channels and technology-driven approaches in enhancing customer engagement and optimizing marketing expenditures.

Many interviewees indicated increased budget allocations towards digital marketing since the COVID-triggered e-commerce surge. Interviewee 6 discussed increased usage of webinars and virtual events to engage business audiences during COVID when in-person marketing was restricted. This illustrates digitally driven strategy pivoting.

Reflecting on Theoretical Foundations

The empirical insights resonate strongly with established theoretical framework, affirming the need for adaptive, customer-centric marketing strategies. For instance, the expressed willingness to optimize funnels mirrors academia's critique of limitations of conventional linear models. Similarly, having this access to mass data regarding individual consumer journeys reinforces the industry's direction towards quantifying digital behaviours within an omni-

channelled multilayered model, which is inclusive of the many diverse strategies and channels being adopted.

1. Marketing Funnels and Evolution

The findings emphasize the evolution of marketing strategies in mass fashion retail, particularly the shift from original marketing funnels towards a more integrated approach. This supports the theoretical discussion regarding the need to review and adapt the original Marketing Conversion Funnel (MCF) due to its limitations in accommodating modern customer journeys.

2. Phygital Integration and Customer Journey

The findings reflect the significance of integrating physical and digital realms in marketing strategies. This corresponds to the theoretical discussions about the importance of phygital strategies in the retail sector. It also validates the need to explore Customer Experience Journey models to understand and adapt to the evolving customer behaviour influenced by technology and digitalization.

3. Multichannel Strategies and Evolution of Retail

The findings highlight the adoption of omnichannel sales strategies, the emergence of social media as a primary channel, and the continued value of in-store experiences. This corresponds directly to the theoretical discussions about the evolution of retail fashion marketing channels and their impact on consumers' purchase intentions. It also validates the need to revamp the MCF to incorporate the changing dynamics of consumer behaviour across various channels.

4. Budget Allocations and Technology Integration

The findings about increased budget allocations towards digital initiatives align with the theoretical exploration of the need for businesses to adapt to the digital era. They also support the notion of incorporating innovative technologies into the retail sector, as discussed in the theoretical framework, such as virtual try-ons and smart shelves.

5. Customer-Centric Approach and Holistic Measurement

The findings emphasize the importance of a customer-centric approach and the need for holistic measurement methods. This mirrors the theoretical discussion regarding the significance of understanding customers' beliefs, expectations, and path-to-purchase in the context of the mass fashion retail sector.

6. Hybrid Phygital Events and CX Enhancements

The discovery of private phygital events and plans for voice-activated smart shelves directly aligns with the theoretical exploration of a hybrid path-to-purchase reality in the mass fashion retail industry. This demonstrates practical implementations of the concepts discussed theoretically.

Interpretations

The Thematic analysis approach (Ryan, G. & Bernard, H.R., 2003), used to analyze the qualitative data, followed a structured process:

Step 1: Data familiarization

Each interview was transcribed and therefore following reading all transcripts, I started highlighting repetitive answers, counting keywords (Table 3) and noting similarities and differences in order to identify possible patterns



Table 3. Word Cloud of Key Words captured in the interviews

Step 2: Initial set of codes development

Developing a code, which is a brief description of collected information, was the next step and the first level towards organizing the data into meaningful categories. With the help of NVivo, I

started applying the same code to sections that represent the same meaning like Funnel Adaptation, Customer Focus, Omnichannel Strategy....

The code book was therefore developed, as described in Chapter 5: Research Methodology, Table 2, in order to group similar verbatim and develop major codes that mainly describe findings.

Intercoder Reliability (ICR) (O'Connor, C. & Joffe, H. 2020) was applied by allowing 3 fellow researchers and colleagues to review the code book in light of the transcribed keywords and topics and provide their understanding of the listed codes and feedback. They were also provided with 2 random and anonymized transcripts to review a sample of the collected data. The final code book was decided following the Researcher's evaluation of the collected input, whereas consensus where possible or majority guided the final design.

Step 3: Themes search

Themes were then developed by grouping several codes or Sub-Themes that fall under the same meaning or purpose.

Step 4: Themes review and refinement

The final stage was to fine tune the Themes by ensuring that there are identifiable differences between them, and that they are clear and reflect the collective meaning of the codes and topics they represent (Table 4)

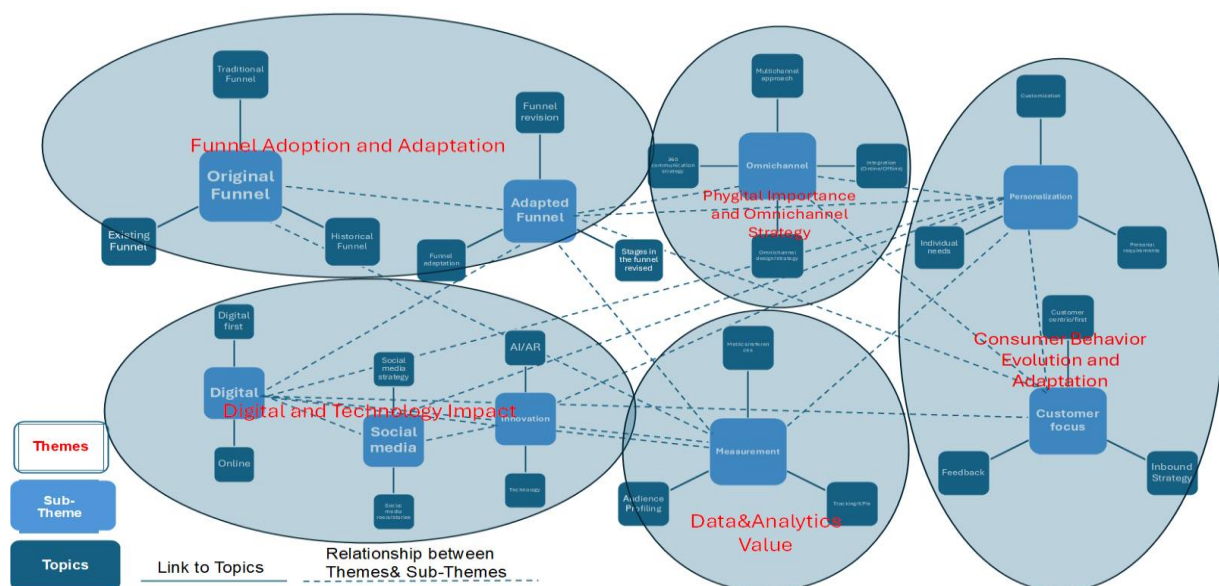


Table 4. Thematic analysis map

Findings reflected the entrenched status of the original funnel as a foundational starting point but also indicated a need and willingness for a more comprehensive phygital based model. The analysis also reflected the versatile role of social media, struggles with personalization and measurement, the ongoing evolution of phygital strategies, and customer-centricity remaining more theoretical than practical currently. While marketers acknowledge the need to evolve original funnels, they struggle with making significant changes in practice due to organizational silos, entrenched strategies, lack of capabilities and data limitations. The analysis suggests incremental adaptation rather than radical transformation of funnel models.

Unified Vision

- i. **Marketing Conversion Funnels Still Widely Used but Adapted to Suit Modern Needs:** Traditional funnel stages (awareness, interest, decision, action) remain relevant but have evolved to reflect the non-linear consumer journey. Marketers recognize the need to adapt strategies while acknowledging the effectiveness of the core funnel concept.
- ii. **Shift Towards Omnichannel and Personalization Marketing Strategies:** There is a significant increase in omnichannel marketing, integrating online and offline touchpoints seamlessly. Personalized recommendations and custom experiences are now driven by sophisticated data analytics. Marketers target specific customer preferences and behaviours, providing a unified experience between digital and physical shopping channels.
- iii. **A New Digital and social media Critical Role in Current Strategies:** Digital and social media platforms play a pivotal role in building brand awareness and engagement. Marketers leverage influencers and user-generated content to enhance discovery and trust. Email marketing is utilized for both customer retention and driving sales. Constant monitoring of online activity and data is integral for refining marketing strategies.
- iv. **Measurement and Testing Remains Key:** Continuous measurement of marketing performance is deemed essential, with tools tracking metrics such as website traffic, sales, and ROAS. However, there are no codified processes in place to effectively track all the different engagement and conversion channels.

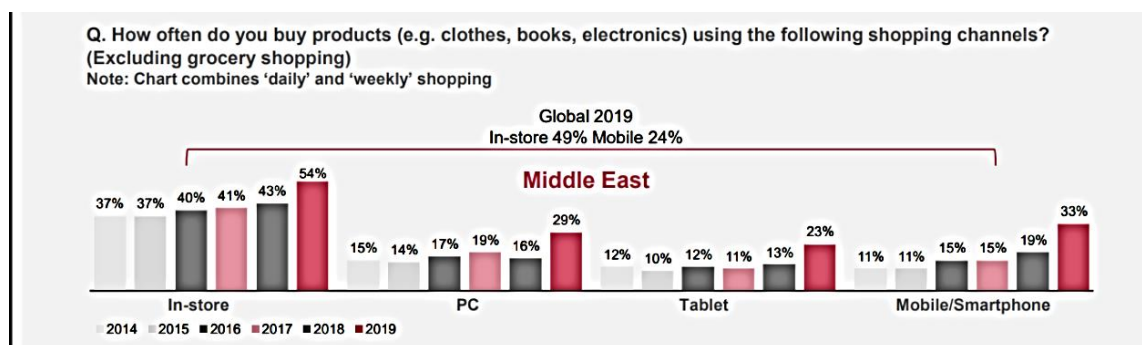
- v. **Agility and Innovation Still Needed:** Acknowledgment of the ever-evolving nature of consumer behaviour, particularly among younger demographics, necessitates ongoing innovation in strategies and technologies. Marketers show a willingness to experiment with virtual experiences and AI personalization, focusing on enhancing convenience and delivering seamless experiences across channels.

Adapting to Change

The original marketing conversion funnel is no longer a one-size-fits-all model. It is as if each brand has taken hold of the funnel's blueprint and moulded it to fit their unique contours. This adaptation is not just a subtle tweak; it is a radical reimagining, where conformity to the tradition linear module is suddenly pushed back with individual brand strengths and strategies.

What is becoming evident is the demise of a singular, defined direction in marketing. It is no longer about following a prescribed path; rather, it is about carving out a specific route that aligns with each brand's vision and resonates with their target audience. The funnel, once a guiding principle, now finds itself facing a multitude of divergent paths, each leading to one destination, conversion to sales (Berman, 2019).

Based on a 2019 Global Consumer Insights Survey (PwC, 2019), in-store sales were still dominant in the Middle East region, with smartphone purchases being the next most popular channel. Smartphone growth for shopping is at a 54% CAGR from 2016-2019 in the Middle East. This is particularly relevant as the rapid growth of smartphone shopping means customers may skip or abbreviate some traditional funnel stages given the convenience and ease of purchases through this channel.



Source: 2019 Global Consumer Insights Survey (PwC, 2019)

The same study was repeated in 2023 and confirmed the growing phygital shopping trend in the region, with 49% of respondents preferring in-store visits while a close 43% prefer to shop online via mobile phone and 31% via personal computers (PWC, 2023). The in-store experience remained an important factor in shopping in the Middle East, especially enhancing engagement through store layout, digital connectivity, and personalization. This highlighted that even for mass fashion, the customer experience spans both online and offline channels, rather than fitting neatly into a linear funnel.

Furthermore, the report showed that social media heavily influences buying behaviours in the region compared to elsewhere in the world, with 60% of Middle East respondents saying it impacted their fashion purchases. Social media introduces more touchpoints across the journey, with inspiration, recommendations, and endorsements shaping purchase interest and decisions.

Q. Thinking about social media channels and how you use them, which of the following activities best describes your online behavior?

**Influence of Social Media on purchases
2019**



Source: 2019 Global Consumer Insights Survey (PwC, 2019)

Moreover, recent surveys revealed that technology had greatly accelerated and condensed the traditional customer journey. Customers now have instant access to information and could purchase products immediately, bypassing much of the traditional awareness, interest, and desire stages of the funnel. “The arrival of the ‘no-patience generation’” and “Technology has condensed those agonizing days into the blink of an eye” (Lindstrom, 2019).

However, anticipation still played an important role in enhancing the customer experience. Even though customers have instant access, eliminating stages like anticipation may undermine emotional engagement and satisfaction. "Apparently, anticipation had played a major role in their perception of the experience" reflecting a dependency on keeping the emotional engagement stage of the funnel and adapting it to meet the frictionless fast paced needs of the new age consumer (Lindstrom, 2019).

This fragmentation of the linear consumer journey has challenged the very foundation of how we have traditionally understood and approached marketing strategies. The academic view of the funnel, once a foundation stone in marketing theory, now appears inadequate and outdated. The call for a more comprehensive approach is resounding, demanding a framework that does not just address the gaps emerging from individual adaptations but celebrates and documents these unique approaches. This diversity is both exciting and challenging, as it necessitates a revaluation of how we analyse and interpret data in the context of marketing.

The need for an overhauled data analysis framework becomes apparent. It is no longer sufficient to rely on a standardized model that overlooks the multilayered linkage of touchpoints that define a brand's journey. A new framework, one built on layers of diverse marketing touchpoints, becomes imperative. This revised approach promises to capture the displayed ins and outs of consumer behaviour, market trends, and the unique brand-specific strategies that shape the landscape of Mass Fashion retail.

Enabling Technology Advancements

As mentioned, phygital approaches are created to seamlessly blend the physical and digital worlds, creating a more engaging and interactive experience for customers. With the current AI advances, the integration of technology is becoming more creative as fashion retailers aim to create the most frictionless personalized shopping experience. This was demonstrated in real-time by the innovative approaches that were being applied by those in the industry as supported by the interviews.

Private Phygital Events as a Differentiator

Interviewee 9 discussed how after COVID restrictions eased, they started hosting "private phygital affairs" - small in-person events that also have an integrated virtual component for online audiences. The interviewee explained these hybrid physical/digital events helped

reassure still cautious consumers about returning to stores in person while also broadening reach, constituting an innovative phygital marketing approach.

Voice-Activated Smart Shelves to Enhance In-Store CX

Interviewee 11 touched on long-term plans to implement voice-activated "smart shelves" in brick-and-mortar stores that can provide recommendations and product information on command, merging in-store convenience with an artificially intelligent digital experience. This exemplifies cutting-edge phygital efforts to unite physical store frictionless-ness with personalized digital technology perks. Smart shelves are embedded with sensors and RFID tags,¹⁸ and can automatically track inventory levels and trigger re-stocking when needed. They can also display product information and personalized recommendations to customers browsing the store. This is supported by current Mass Fashion Retail giants like Nike who deployed smart shelves in some of its flagship stores in 2019. They helped automate inventory, reduce customer wait times for assistance and provide helpful information including size availability and customer reviews (D'Onofrio, 2019).

AI-powered outfit suggestions

By analysing customer data and preferences, AI algorithms can generate personalized outfit suggestions. This can help customers overcome decision fatigue and discover new styles they might not have considered before. This is also supported in the field as more mass fashion retailers are moving towards using augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI), virtual try-on technology allows customers to see how clothes would look on them without physically trying them on. This can be done in-store through dedicated screens or at home using smartphones and tablets (Dharpan.Ai, 2023).

Automated inventory management

AI-powered systems can track inventory levels in real-time and automatically trigger replenishment orders. This helps to prevent stockouts and ensures that customers always have access to the products they want. Smart inventory management and automated processes can help retailers reduce costs, improve efficiency, and optimize profitability. AI can help retailers collect and analyse valuable data about customer behaviour and preferences. This data can

¹⁸ **RFID tags** are a type of tracking system that uses smart barcodes to identify items.

then be used to personalize marketing campaigns, improve product offerings, and optimize store layout and design (Takyar, 2023).

Dynamic Convergence

One core finding stemming from the interviews was what I would refer to as the "dynamic convergence" between the old and the new.

Traditionally, the funnel was perceived as a linear progression, guiding customers from awareness to purchase. However, with the diverse adaptations by brands, a new paradigm is emerging—a dynamic convergence of multiple paths, each tailored to suit the unique brand identity and consumer landscape. This concept of dynamic convergence acknowledges that while the original funnel might seem obsolete due to its inability to capture the complexity of modern consumer behaviour, it is not entirely defunct. Instead, it is undergoing a metamorphosis, adapting, and converging with various customized trajectories established by individual brands.

The original marketing funnel has long been upheld as a standard, linear model - a step-by-step awareness-to-purchase path that customers progress through, and its basics have stayed the same since 1900s (Murgado-Armenteros, E. M., Gutiérrez-Salcedo, M., Torres-Ruiz, F. J., & Cobo, M. J., 2018). However, the interviews reveal a departure from this rigid perspective (Ansari et al. 2019). Rather than strictly following the textbook funnel, brands seem to be taking its fundamental blueprint as inspiration, not doctrine. They are moulding the stages and touchpoints to create customized processes tailored to their unique identities, target consumer segments, channel strategies and resources. One brand may fully integrate an intricate loyalty loop to reflect retention campaigns. Another may forego portions of the awareness phase due to existing brand dominance. A third may incorporate new steps tied to virtual try-ons or user-generated content amplification.

While seemingly fragmented on the surface, a closer look suggests an adaptive form of convergence is at play. The stages may vary, but there is an underlying adherence to the same core funnel vision. Awareness, interest and consideration, decisions, and actions - these anchors remain consistent even as the paths between them divert across brands. It can be likened to a self-adjusting GPS framework in a car. The start point and destination stay aligned to the marketing funnel, but the suggested routes between them differ based on the unique conditions and variables applicable to each brand vehicle/consumer making the journey.

The emerging concept of a flexible, adaptive marketing funnel template converging with a multitude of customized brand approaches represents a potential paradigm shift. It suggests that the future of consumer journeys lies in this interactive balance between the original marketing funnel frameworks and the specific parameters that can account for individual brand strengths and customer contexts. In this context, the funnel would no longer represent a static, rigid model anymore. Instead, it would function as a framework that flexes and moulds itself to accommodate the diverse strategies and approaches adopted by distinct brands. This adaptability would reflect a fundamental shift in the way we would perceive and utilize marketing frameworks. The aim then would not be to discard old models but to evolve them to embrace the diversity and dynamism inherent in the modern marketing landscape.

This unique insight of dynamic convergence answers my Research question “RQ1: To what extent are marketers ready to review their funnels to cope with customers’ evolving experiences and expectations?” in the sense that it suggests that the funnel is not dead but rather evolving into an active, adaptive system that converges with the countless paths carved out by brands and consumers, and the rapidly evolving technology that is affecting this evolution. As interviewed professionals expressed, it is about recognizing and harnessing this convergence, understanding that the future of marketing lies in the constructive collaboration between a flexible framework and the multitude of tailored strategies and customer journeys within the Mass Fashion retail sector. Considering the survey was conducted in Dubai, where market dynamics and marketers’ experiences could differ from other parts of the world and therefore influence the results, it was interesting to view that findings undeniably support the reviewed theories stating the need for change (Edelman, 2010) in order to improve the MCF relevance and capacity to provide the required data. Interviewees suggested adaptation as they believe the overall approach remains appropriate and required as a framework, however flexibility of movement between the funnel stages (Bonchek and France, 2014) and customization (Colicev, A., Kumar, A., & O’Connor, P., 2019) are needed to better fit today’s brands and consumers’ realities, and the phygital journey.

The directional summary of the collected data and analysis could be visualized in a **Dynamic Phygital Marketing Conversion Funnel (DPMCF)** conceptual framework (Table 5) for a proposed dynamic funnel that recognizes customer free movement during the process, captures the phygital impact across offline and online touchpoints, and is prone to adapting to macro developments (Technology & Behavioural).

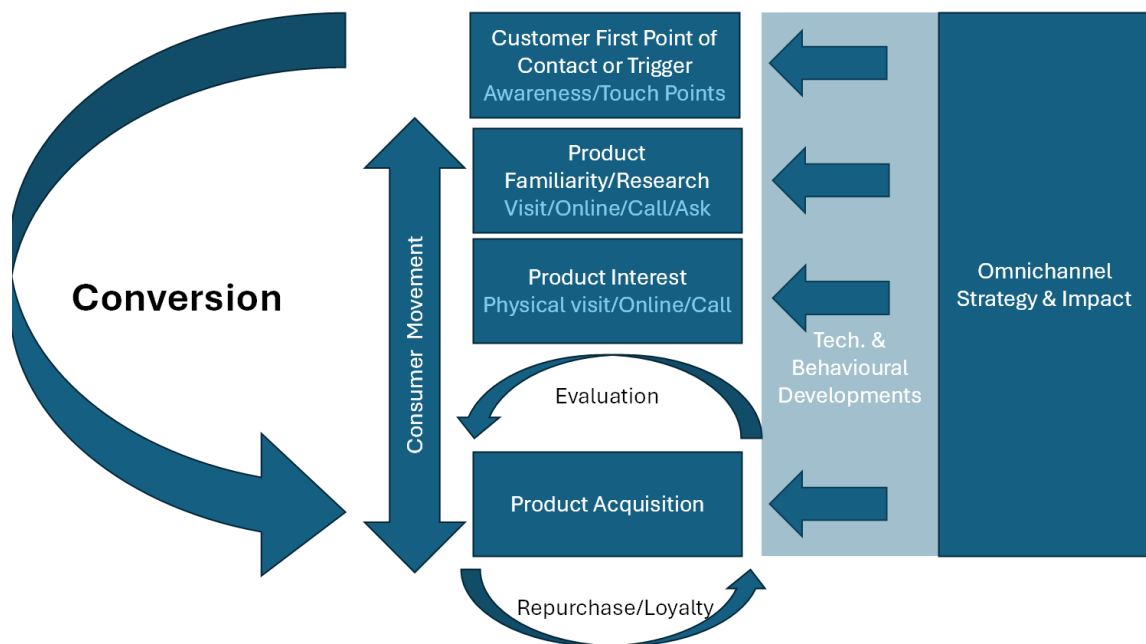


Table 5. Conceptual Framework

Further large-scale quantitative research into consumer behaviour in the mass fashion sector and beyond, would help enhance this proposition and bring in scientific representation of contemporary facts.

Chapter 7: Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research

Summary of Findings

“Troubles are plentiful in retailing as measured by recent filings for bankruptcy” (Berman, 2018).

The quote from Berman (2018) highlights the ongoing struggles and bankruptcies faced by fashion retailers, emphasizing the need for evidence-based insights to guide new marketing strategies. As linear shopping journeys transform into multifaceted omnichannel experiences, traditional marketing conversion funnels (MCF) prove inadequate in supporting Mass Fashion Retailers in understanding and measuring contemporary customer journeys. Findings highlighted key developments demonstrating the need to re-examine them. For example, the digital revolution has empowered consumers with more knowledge, communication channels, and control over their journey (Ansari et al., 2019). This challenges marketing foundations based on predictable linear funnels. Additionally, consumer journeys now integrate multiple digital and physical brand interactions, requiring coordinated omnichannel strategies versus siloed approaches (Grewal, D., & Roggeveen, A. L., 2020).

As Farah et al. (2019) noted, funnel stages needed to be redesigned or combined to reflect modern non-linear journeys spanning both online and offline touchpoints. For mass fashion brands, optimizing advertising plans and boosting ROI depended on benchmarking against conversion models that accounted for omnichannel realities. As discussed in the findings, one core insight that emerged from the expert interviews is the concept of "dynamic convergence" between traditional funnel frameworks and customized brand approaches. This notion of convergence rather than divergence from the original funnel models represents a potential paradigm shift in how marketing strategies could be envisioned.

The original Research question ” **RQ1: To what extent are marketers ready to review their funnels to cope with customers' evolving experiences and expectations?** “ revealed room for adaptation and readiness to evolve current approaches. Findings suggest retaining the funnel as an adaptive framework that flexed and evolved to accommodate diverse brand strategies tailored to unique identities, target segments, channel capabilities, and consumer contexts. As some of the interviewed executives showed engagement in using customized and

adapted MCF versions yet revealed to be still following the usual model, RQ1 could have been more elaborate by dwelling further into constraints and understanding their nature (Financial, Corporate, Applicability, Technical....) in order to provide concrete elements to be addressed by businesses to ease transformation and adoption of enhanced MCF models.

Research Question “ **RQ2: How have “phygital” developments in mass fashion retail been reflected in marketing and go-to-consumer strategies?**” captured market developments’ impact on corporate strategies and mirrored the offline-online marketing approaches applied in order to improve customer engagement and business outcomes.

Omnichannel, personalized approaches are rising, underpinned by analytics. Digital and social channels permeate all stages of the consumer journey, and though in-store experiences endure, phygital coordination is key. Marketers have expressed willingness to keep innovating with technologies like virtual try-ons and smart shelves to engage impatient yet experience-focused consumers.

Omnichannel behaviour

PwC's (2019) Global Consumer Insights Survey showed that in the Middle East, in-store purchases still dominate but smartphone shopping is rising rapidly at 54% CAGR from 2016-2019. This implies customers may skip or shorten some funnel stages given the convenience of mobile purchases. However, enriching in-store engagement through layout, digital connectivity and personalization remains important, highlighting that even for mass fashion, the experience spans online and offline channels beyond a linear funnel.

According to Lindstrom (2019), technology has greatly accelerated and condensed the traditional customer journey as customers now have instant access and can purchase immediately, bypassing awareness, interest, and desire stages. However, anticipation remains important for emotional engagement, so retaining adapted funnel stages that meet the fast-paced, frictionless needs of today's consumer is key.

This confirms that the fragmentation of the linear journey has challenged traditional marketing foundations but is still reliant on its definition of stages and impact. While limitations exist in terms of industry and geographic focus, the study makes important theoretical and practical contributions. For academics, it provides empirical evidence on funnel evolution and documents proposed alternatives like the fluid funnel model. For practitioners, it offers actionable insights into optimizing channel integration, metrics, and budget allocation based on how consumers

now research, evaluate, purchase, and engage with fashion brands seamlessly across digital and physical environments.

Contributions

The Qualitative research with business executives offered an exploratory phase and findings that set the stage for the consumer centric study. It yielded constructive findings but also surfaced inherent boundaries in scope and methods. While the qualitative insights make valuable contributions, there are opportunities to build on this preliminary investigation through expanded research.

Three main contributions emerged from this research:

- Contribution to Theory: with the number of reviewed papers and proposed models, I've discussed their contemporary use and injected some thoughts and opinions from collected data.
- Contribution to Method: by analysing Case Studies and conducting Qualitative semi-structured interviews, this research converged two distinct approaches and integrated findings in order to derive the sought conclusions.
- Contribution to Practice: the proposed revision or adaptation of the MCF into the DPMCF inspired from the conducted depth interviews with industry professionals offers practitioners a concrete roadmap from which further research and testing are possible

Contribution to Theory

DPMCF: A phygital conversion model to mirror the omnichannel consumer behaviour

While still an indispensable framework, the linear marketing funnel has gradually and subjectively been moulded to reflect modern customer journeys and brand-specific strategies. However, progress appears to be more incremental and situational than transformational. Consequently, this research concludes by proposing a conceptual framework - a "dynamic phygital conversion" catering to both physical and digital journeys while allowing for their differences and interlinkages. This model would empower fashion retailers to map authentic customer journeys by embracing the coexistence of physical stores and e-commerce, and the

freedom consumers now had to switch between both worlds and engage with multiple brands simultaneously. The envisioned convergence marketing funnel would blend online and offline stages into coordinated omnichannel experiences. It would quantify touchpoints across diverse channels through digital analytics, providing a comprehensive view of the path-to-purchase. By mirroring the non-linear, omnichannel nature of modern fashion retail engagement, the revised funnel could enable data-driven personalization, optimized channel strategies, and integrated metrics for evaluating ROI.

A **Dynamic Phygital Marketing Conversion Funnel (DPMCF)** would address a significant knowledge gap in academic literature around quantifying omnichannel fashion retail strategies. It would also offer actionable guidelines for fashion marketers to optimize budgets, boost performance, and gain competitive advantage through revamped conversion frameworks tailored to contemporary market realities (Edelman, 2010), consumer behaviours and expectations. The implementation of the proposed approach would depend on the implementation of a wider quantitative consumer study, set forth previously, as it would integrate the required buyer's contemporary consumption and behavioural data into the design to make it more relevant and increase the conversion potential.

The concept of dynamic convergence puts forth an innovative yet pragmatic vision for shaping the future of marketing strategies - one that builds on the foundations of proven models while embracing adaptation. Based on the research, a revised fluid marketing funnel framework is proposed that allows for multiple entry and exit points, loyalty loops, and coordination of online and offline elements. This model better accommodates the non-linear (Grewal, D., & Roggeveen, A. L., 2020), iterative journey today's consumers follow across brands, platforms, devices, and locations.

The future might not lay in discarding established models but rather in embracing the interplay between conventional funnel concepts and the multiplicity of pathways forged by distinct retail fashion brands. This ability to converge the old with the new could enable marketers to balance standardization with customization, and structure with flexibility.

Through an extensive literature review tracing the evolution of marketing strategies and conversion models, and qualitative interviews with industry experts, findings revealed that while the core funnel concept remains relevant it requires adaptation to reflect the omnichannel realities of today's consumer journey (Interviewee 2). The qualitative phase uncovered key themes related to recognition of changing consumer behaviours, willingness to optimize funnels,

increased reliance on data and analytics, and maintaining an experimental mindset. This highlighted the need for a more integrated, iterative, and customizable approach to conversion models that crosses digital and physical boundaries as supported by the literature. Primarily, the in-depth qualitative interviews directly captured rich perspectives from marketing practitioners on the frontlines of digital disruption. This real-world expertise added authenticity and actionability to the findings. The specific emphasis on marketing strategies also provided granular funnel-related data that may have been lacking in a broader investigation. Furthermore, the focus on current and emerging consumer and technology trends ensured timely, relevant insights. Conceptually, the proposed notion of dynamic convergence presents an innovative model for funnel optimization that informs future research directions. Methodologically, systematic and thematic analysis of interviews uncovered resonant themes and actionable recommendations. The blending of academic and field-based data within a multidisciplinary context expanded the research focus. While not universally generalizable, these multifaceted strengths reveal crucial dynamics around optimizing marketing funnels for an increasingly complex consumer journey.

Contribution to Practice

Since this research was conducted with fashion retailers in Dubai, it aimed to provide practical insights that could be used by practitioners.

The proposed DPMCF could help with the following business cases:

- Practitioners expressed the need to have the MCF better reflect the phygital consumer behavior in order to increase its usability and effectiveness. The DPMCF could improve customer conversion by clearly mapping the dynamic buying journey and phygital touchpoints in line with today's reality
- As marketers follow the original MCF or an adapted form of it to optimize their marcom expenditure, the DPMCF could help enhance results and improve expenditure in support of the most efficient mediums driving customer conversion
- Remunerate concerned teams and partners based on the DPMCF results which would better highlight the phygital convergence and compensate integrated efforts without disregarding specific marcom activities on both ends (Physical and Digital)

The unified findings lead to the development of specific implications that I state hereafter;

- i. **Marketing Conversion Funnels are Still Widely Used but Adapted to Suit Modern Needs:** The proposed DPMCF takes into consideration shared marketers reviews of the MCF and their need to maintain key stages (awareness, interest, decision, action) or the overall framework but evolving it by allowing consumer's free movement within the conversion and integrating both Physical and Digital touch points (Email, social media, gaming, search ads, website, print, mobile apps, SMS, OTT video, display ads, SEO, TV, CTV, radio, out-of-home, in-store, etc) to reflect today's shopper journey.
- ii. **Shift Towards Omnichannel and Personalization Marketing Strategies:** The significant increase in omnichannel marketing has offered more personalization to customers. Marketers are able to target specific customer preferences and behaviours, providing a unified phygital experience. The evolved measurement approach should be dynamic and allow for customization based on identified key consumption patterns so it better captures real behaviors.
- iii. **A New Digital and social media Critical Role in Current Strategies:** With Digital and social media platforms playing a pivotal role in building brand awareness and engagement and their direct impact on purchase, marketers should be able to leverage their impact on the MCF. Key Social Media touch points could be integrated into the new framework so their effect is directly compounded with the collective marcom and weighed on the consumer conversion
- iv. **Measurement and Testing Remains Key:** Marketing and Technology are fast evolving and interviewed retail professionals shared a number of tools they are currently deploying to capture and analyze customer data. A new developed MCF approach would require longitudinal testing and measuring conversions should remain consistent for a certain period in order to calibrate the model and account for as many consumer journeys as possible
- v. **Agility and Innovation Still Needed:** Marketers were willing to experiment with VR/AR, Internet of Things, computers, smartphones, in real life and other customer engagement technologies. Once they gain scale, they would provide

rich and live data that should be considered in the overall data lake and reflected during the measurement of media/technology impact on consumer conversion throughout the DPMCF.



Table 6. The growing cloud of consumer touchpoints

The buying journey has collapsed and expanded, and with innovations in shoppable media, it has contracted. “If you reach a consumer at the right time and place, you can walk them through discovery to consideration and purchase all in one sitting. Anyone who's bought something after seeing a social media ad can relate to that” (Yuen, M. 2024).

The opportunity of a nonlinear, fragmented path to purchase should entice brands and retailers to think about how they bridge the gap between physical and digital experiences. The proliferation of digital touchpoints is a chance for marketers to facilitate product discovery - and even conversion - throughout the purchasing funnel.

Instead of recreating the traditional linear marketing funnel and trying to dictate the customer's path to purchase, the proposed DPMCF approach prioritizes a customer's individual experience across a range of touchpoints—both physical and digital.

While the qualitative insights gathered from interviews with marketing experts make important contributions in the evolution of marketing funnels, there are inherent limitations to note regarding the research scope and method that could be enhanced in future studies.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations for this study were objectively identified to ensure that the conclusions and findings were contextualized within a framework that offers them the most validity and credibility. The study offered an exploratory snapshot rather than an exhaustive analysis, lacking longitudinal data on funnel transformations over time. Critically, the research is anchored in marketer perspectives only without capturing dynamic consumer opinions and journeys. The emphasis remains on current strategies rather than statistically verifying marketing outcomes and impact; and given the rapid pace of change, emerging technologies could further disrupt the already unsettled marketing funnel.

As I've followed the interpretivism theory, my research naturally holds the researcher's influence from his/her own perspective and experience (Ryan, 2018). This influence could happen during research design, sample selection and findings' interpretation. My own expertise in the marketing and communication domains and former consultancy work with Mass fashion retailers might have impacted the analysis of this research, though this was aimed to be limited through a member checking process duly explained in this paper.

A list of limitations and future Research propositions was identified and is detailed hereafter;

Geographical scope

Limitation: The research uncovered the increased usage of digital and social media marketing channels and their impact on purchase habits, which can reach broader demographics beyond local geographies. Although the study is limited to a specific location, Dubai, some of its findings around omnichannel marketing may apply beyond its geographical context. In their latest study edition, PwC (2023) showed that the Middle East is moving in the same direction as the global markets concerning phygital shopping with "68% of regional consumers (vs 63% globally) purchasing directly from a brand's website", therefore the research can have wide applicable ranges in different countries in the Middle East region and beyond.

Future Research: Conduct research across multiple geographical regions to improve generalizability of findings beyond Dubai/Middle East context. Notably, the traditional dominance of the West in fashion sales has waned, marking a significant shift. For the first time, over half of clothing and footwear sales originated from regions outside of Europe and North America. The emerging market countries in the Asia-Pacific and Latin America regions are identified as the primary sources of growth in this industry (McKinsey & BOF, 2017). This reflects the wide applicability of an extended study on the region and its reaching impact to a, possibly, global shift in approaches to marketing strategies.

Sample size

Limitation: The in-depth qualitative interviews provided rich details and themes however with a defined business sample. Common trends were identifiable across the literature and collected data and would benefit from an extensive expanded exploration. Consequently, and while not conclusive, the detailed insights reveal important dynamics.

Future Research: A larger-scale survey with consumers could build on these initial discoveries so findings are not exclusively representative of the Mass Fashion Retailers.

Customer perspective

Limitation: The research remains limited without the inclusion of the consumer study, as findings revealed increased personalization and use of customer data analytics to improve experiences. This implies a customer-centricity that needs to be delved into as it can help develop a more holistic approach to refurbishing the traditional Marketing funnel into its modernized version. Despite its indirect nature, strategies centred around the customer indicate that preferences play a pivotal role in shaping these approaches. Establishing a favourable reputation through consumer recommendations and referrals significantly strengthens a company's influence on purchasing decisions (Kircova & Esen, 2018).

In the contemporary landscape, advancements in information and communication technologies have transformed how people communicate and engage with each other online, thereby bringing marketers closer to their audiences allowing for a direct investigation into customer behaviour in the phygital age would provide a more nuanced understanding of their evolving journey. Direct customer research would provide further understanding to how their journey has changed in the phygital age.

Future Research: Incorporate direct customer perspectives through quantitative methods, by deploying surveys and ethnographic research to gain firsthand insights into evolving customer journeys. Online consumer satisfaction, acting as a mediator between dimensions of online service quality and future purchase intention, indicates that customers base their future purchase intentions on past shopping experiences. In essence, the study emphasizes the critical role of customer-centric strategies in shaping the success of e-retailers and influencing customers' future interactions with online platforms (Kalia, P., Arora, D. R., & Kumalo, S., 2016). Understanding expectations, pain points and decision influences would enable more customer-centric funnel optimization.

Conducting a large-scale quantitative descriptive study (Williams, T. 2021) with consumers would help understand their brand engagement and purchase behaviour. It would also validate or complement the qualitative findings as the latter's use remains limited being solely representative of the business side of the equation (Mass Fashion Retailers). Large quantitative sample sizes and statistical analysis would further substantiate the themes and dynamics uncovered in the business interviews.

Snapshot vs Longitudinal study

Limitation: Interviewees emphasized taking an adaptive and experimental approach to keep pace with changes over time. This implies acknowledgment of the ongoing evolution. The findings indicate recognition of the longitudinal nature of changes and the need for flexibility over time. This has been supported by the literature (Colicev, A., Kumar, A., & O'Connor, P., 2019), where prospects have the flexibility to enter the marketing funnel at any stage of the purchasing process. Some may have already identified a need and are ready to make an immediate purchase, while others may be familiar with a brand and its content but have yet to recognize the need it fulfils, necessitating thorough funnel nurturing. This indicates that having a multilayered approach that examines each part of the funnel separately and then find the overlap would offer rich insights into formulating a more dynamic funnel. Furthermore, as consumer behaviour, technology and business inventions evolve this study should have periodic runs in order to stay abreast of the latest changes and adapt to remain relevant and effective.

Future Research: Adopt a longitudinal approach with periodic assessments over an extended timeframe. This would provide richer data on how marketing strategies and consumer behaviours shift over time in response to emerging technologies and other market forces. It would be prudent to supplement the expanded study by exploring cross-industry comparisons to determine wider applicability of findings across retail, technology, finance, and other sectors impacted by digital disruption. Copley's (2015) observation on the relationship between attitudes toward the brand and purchase intent communication can be a foundation for exploring changes in brand-consumer dynamics over time. Rodríguez (2020) highlight the importance of online channel usage intention in the pre- and post-purchase stages (Rodríguez, P. G., Villarreal, R., Valiño, P. C., & Blozis, S., 2020). A longitudinal study could track the evolution of consumer preferences for online channels based on their internet experience. By understanding how and why consumers shift between physical and online channels, marketers can tailor strategies to retain loyal customers while attracting new ones. Conversely, Blázquez (2014) identifies the lack of experiential information and physical interaction as barriers to buying fashion online. A longitudinal study can track changes in these barriers over time, helping marketers understand if and how these challenges are being overcome. This insight is crucial for designing online shopping experiences that address consumer concerns.

As the pace of digital and technology developments continues to accelerate, it is imperative that academia parallels this transformation through ongoing exploration of evolving purchase behaviours. Future studies could aim to provide some conclusive and consumer tested recommendations in order to develop customized and converged funnel frameworks tailored to different retail fashion brand identities, resources, and consumer segments. Testing personalized models would further the "dynamic convergence" concept through the inclusion of emerging technologies like virtual reality and artificial intelligence into research methodology to capture cutting-edge consumer experiences. This could reveal new dimensions of behaviour and engagement.

Finally, it is critical to maintain an adaptive, iterative mindset acknowledging that research insights may need ongoing refinement as new technologies and consumer habits continue to emerge. Regularly updating recommendations would ensure their relevance and supporting practical application would amplify this research impact. This can be done by translating findings

into an applied toolkit, guide or training programs to allow fashion retailers successfully implement phygital and dynamic funnel strategies.

The main objective remains to continuously refine our understanding and adaptation(s) of the marketing funnel as consumer behaviours, brand strategies and enabling technologies progress*. With strategic expansion in scope, diligent outcome measurement, and an adaptive mindset the complexities of the modern customer journey could be effectively mapped, using Dynamic Phygital Marketing Conversion Funnels that are adapted to the diversity of the mass fashion retail sector, and eventually other industries.

* "Google Cloud today debuted several new AI and generative AI-powered technologies to help retailers personalize online shopping". NEW YORK, Jan. 11, 2024 /[PRNewswire](#)/

Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi-Structured Qualitative Interview Guide

The interview covers four sections, three about the pre, inter, and post-digital boom, with a concluding portion covering current practices.

Introduction for Interviewer:

Hello and thank you for agreeing to participate in this semi-structured interview. The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the marketing strategies, expenditures, and conversion tracking practices of mass fashion marketers. The study aims to understand Mass Fashion retailers' strategies in terms of Marketing and evaluation of related expenditures and activities' success on shoppers' purchase journey. This will be looked at for the periods before, during, and post-Covid.

Section 1: Marketing Strategy Before Covid-19:

In this section, we will be exploring the marketing strategies that mass fashion marketers used before the digital age. This will give us a baseline to compare the shifts in marketing strategies over time.

Section 2: Marketing Strategy during the COVID-19 Lock Down and Digital Shift:

In this section, we will be examining the changes in marketing strategies that mass fashion marketers adopted during the COVID-19 lockdown and the digital shift. This will give us a deeper understanding of how the pandemic and the shift towards digital influenced marketing strategies.

Section 3: Marketing Strategy in the Current Age:

In this section, we will be exploring the current marketing strategies used by mass fashion marketers in the phygital age. We will be looking at how they are adapting to the changes brought about by the pandemic and the digital shift.

Section 4: the Speed round

This would be our final round with ten easy multiple-choice questions, to sum up, your thoughts on our discussion.

Safeguarding Measures:

To protect the confidentiality of our interviewee, we will not be disclosing your identity in any form. We will be using encrypted communication channels to conduct the interview and will be storing the data securely. Additionally, we will be asking you to sign the presented consent form to protect both our best interests and your confidentiality. We thank you once again for your time and contribution.

Background

(To prepare before the interview with exception of the highlighted segments)

May I please start by asking you a few questions about yourself, your role, and your company:

Name:	Enter the full name of the interviewee
Title:	Title of interviewee
Representative of:	Current Employer
Since:	Date of most recent employment
Gender:	Male / Female
Age:	30-35
Might you specify to which age group you best fit	36-40
	41-45
	46-50
	51-65

General introduction:

This is what I'd like to call a general section where we discuss your business, and you tell me a bit more about your background


1. What is your business?	<p>Please explore the below:</p> <p>What do they sell?</p> <p>To whom do they sell?</p> <p>What is the predominant market (age and gender)?</p> <p>Where do they operate?</p>
2. What are your customary, go-to-market, touchpoints and channels?	<p>Please explore the below:</p> <p>How do they operate?</p> <p>How do they reach their target audience?</p> <p>What are their Go-to-Market touchpoints?</p>
3. How is the company marketing structure (Traditional and digital)	<p>Please explore the below:</p> <p>they're split or unified? When this happened and are they involved in both or one?</p> <p>Who is in charge of dealing with each of the above marketing touchpoints and channels,</p> <p>Ask if there is an org chart of marketing functions or a head count of who is responsible for what.</p>
4. Accordingly, how do they measure consumer conversion and marketing success?	<p>Use 1 model per medium (digital vs offline activities) or a combined one and can they share details</p>

Section 1: Period Before Covid 19:

In this section, we will be exploring the marketing strategies that you used before the digital age. This will give us a baseline to compare the shifts in marketing strategies over time and better understand the evolution of marketing practices in the fashion industry.

I would like to ask you some questions about the marketing strategies you used before the digital age, including your target audience, the channels you used to reach them, and the methods you used to measure the success of your campaigns

<p>1. How did customers use to find and buy your product:</p>	<p>(Key words to look for and associated themes)</p> <p>Physical stores: People would visit brick-and-mortar stores to see and try on clothes in person.</p> <p>Catalogues: Fashion brands would send out catalogues showcasing their latest collections, which customers could use to place orders by mail or phone.</p>
<p>2. How did you deploy your marketing strategy and touch points during this period?</p>	<p>Word of mouth: Recommendations from friends, family, and personal stylists were a key way that consumers discovered new fashion.</p> <p>Magazines: Fashion magazines were a popular source of inspiration and information for consumers, offering articles, editorials, and advertisements for fashion brands.</p> <p>Runway shows: Consumers who attended runway shows were able to see the latest fashion collections up close, often months before they became widely available to the public.</p> <p>(Any other outlets to be highlighted)</p>
<p>3. How did you monitor the impact of your marketing strategy during this period?</p>	<p>(Please ask specifically about each strategy mentioned by the interviewee. Some core themes or keywords from above to ask about in case of lags of discussion)</p>
<p>4. How did you measure the success of your marketing expenditure?</p>	<p>Physical store sales: This measures the direct impact of a marketing campaign on sales at a physical store location.</p> <p>Catalogue circulation: This measures the number of catalogues distributed to potential customers, providing insight into the reach of a marketing campaign.</p>

	<p>Word of mouth: This was more difficult to quantify, but could be measured through customer surveys or focus groups to gain insight into the impact of personal recommendations on sales.</p> <p>Magazine advertising: This measures the impact of advertising in fashion magazines, such as the number of people who saw the advertisement and the response rate to any call-to-action included.</p> <p>Runway show attendance: This measures the impact of a runway show on sales and interest in a fashion collection, taking into account the number of attendees and any media coverage generated.</p>
<p>5. The following model has been adopted by both academics and professionals as the original marketing conversion model. did you use it during that time?</p>	<p>(Ask if they used to follow this funnel while stopping at each stage to Ask for details. If he says no explore further their process of assessment and why not)</p> 


Section 2: During Covid Restrictions

In this section, we will be focusing on the changes in marketing strategies that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown and the shift into predominantly digital approaches. The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures had a profound impact on the fashion industry and forced many companies to pivot their marketing strategies to adapt to the

changing landscape. I would like to ask you about the changes you made to your marketing strategies during this time, including the channels you used to reach your target audience, any new methods you adopted to measure the success of your campaigns, and any challenges you faced during this transition.

<p>1. How did people use to find and buy your products during this period?</p>	<p>(Key words to look for and associated themes)</p> <p>Online Retailers: With the rise of the internet, online retailers such as Amazon and Asos, SHEIN, and those who offer online services emerged as a convenient and accessible way for consumers to purchase fashion items.</p> <p>Social Media: Social media platforms such as Instagram, and Pinterest, Facebook became key discovery channels for fashion, with influencers and brands using the platforms to showcase their products and build a following.</p> <p>Mobile Apps: Mobile apps such as ASOS and Zara launched, making it possible for consumers to shop for fashion on the go.</p> <p>Virtual Styling and Try-On: With advancements in augmented reality, virtual styling, augmented reality, and try-on technology allowed consumers to see how clothes would look on them before making a purchase.</p> <p>Personalized Shopping: The use of data and artificial intelligence has enabled retailers to offer personalized shopping experiences, with recommendations based on a consumer's previous purchases and preferences.</p> <p>(Any other outlets to be highlighted)</p>
<p>2. How did you deploy your marketing strategy and touch points during this period?</p>	<p>(Please ask specifically about each strategy mentioned by the interviewee. Some core themes or keywords from above to ask about in case of lags of discussion)</p>

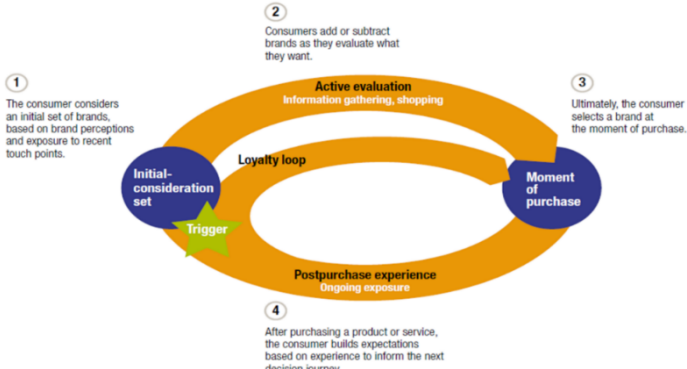
	<p>Online Retailers: Websites, email newsletters, online advertising.</p> <p>Social Media: Social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest), influencer partnerships, sponsored posts.</p> <p>Mobile Apps: Mobile apps, push notifications, in-app advertising.</p> <p>Virtual Styling and Try-On: AR technology integrated into websites and mobile apps, virtual styling tools.</p> <p>Personalized Shopping: Personalized recommendations based on customer data, email or in-app notifications, and personalized advertisements.</p>
3. How did you monitor the impact of your marketing strategy during this period?	<p>Online retail sales: This measures the direct impact of a marketing campaign on sales through an online retailer's website or mobile app.</p> <p>Conversion Rate: This measures the percentage of visitors to a website or mobile app who make a purchase, providing insight into the effectiveness of a marketing campaign in driving sales.</p>
4. How did you measure the success of your marketing expenditure?	<p>Social Media Engagement: This measures the level of engagement with a brand's social media posts, such as likes, comments, and shares, providing insight into the effectiveness of a social media marketing campaign.</p> <p>Influencer Partnership Performance: This measures the impact of an influencer partnership on sales, website traffic, and social media engagement.</p> <p>Return On Ad Spend (ROAS): This measures the return on investment of an advertising campaign, comparing the revenue generated to the cost of the campaign.</p>

	<p>Customer Lifetime Value (LTV): This measures the value a customer is expected to bring to a business over their lifetime, taking into account their future purchases and the cost of acquiring and retaining them.</p>
<p>5. How relevant was the marketing funnel to measuring consumer retention and marketing expenditure success during the Covid period? Were you using it? why/why not?</p>	<p>(Ask if they could still follow this funnel while stopping at each stage to Ask for details. If the interviewee says no, explore further their process of assessment and why not.)</p> 
<p>Section 3: Current Approaches</p> <p>In this section, we will be focusing on the current marketing strategies used in the phygital age of mass fashion retail. The fashion industry has continued to evolve and the current landscape is characterized by the integration of digital and physical approaches.</p> <p>I would like to ask you about the marketing strategies you are currently using, including your target audience, the channels you are using to reach them, and the methods you are using to measure the success of your campaigns</p>	
<p>1. How does your customer currently find you and buy your product?</p>	<p>(Some keywords and core themes)</p> <p>Online: Consumers can discover and purchase products through e-commerce websites and mobile apps. Online shopping provides consumers with a convenient way to</p>
<p>2. How do you deploy your marketing strategy and</p>	

<p>touch points during this period?</p>	<p>browse and purchase products, compare prices and products, and read product reviews.</p> <p>Social Media: Consumers can discover products through social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok and Facebook, where they can follow their favourite fashion brands and influencers, see product posts and advertisements and make purchases through integrated shopping features.</p> <p>Physical Stores: Consumers can still visit physical stores to see and try on products, receive personalized recommendations from sales associates, and purchase items in person.</p> <p>Omnichannel: Consumers can also engage in omnichannel shopping experiences, where they research and discover products online, receive personalized recommendations from store associates, and purchase items either online or in-store.</p> <p>Influencer Marketing: Consumers can discover and purchase products through influencer marketing, where fashion brands collaborate with influencers to showcase their products in a more relatable and personal way.</p>
<p>3. How have your marketing expenditures shifted (pre, during, and, post covid) and how do you see it moving forward?</p>	<p>(Please ask specifically about each strategy mentioned by the interviewee. Some core themes or keywords from above to ask about in case of lags of discussion).</p>
<p>4. How do you currently measure the success of the Marketing expenditures?</p>	<p>Omnichannel sales: This measures the total sales across all channels, including physical stores, online retail, and mobile apps, providing a comprehensive picture of a brand's overall performance.</p> <p>Website Traffic: This measures the number of visitors to a brand's website, providing insight into the reach of a</p>

	<p>marketing campaign and the effectiveness of website optimization.</p> <p>Mobile App Downloads: This measures the number of downloads of a brand's mobile app, providing insight into the effectiveness of a mobile marketing campaign and the level of engagement with a brand.</p> <p>Social Media Engagement: This measures the level of engagement with a brand's social media posts, such as likes, comments, and shares, providing insight into the effectiveness of a social media marketing campaign.</p> <p>Influencer Partnership Performance: This measures the impact of an influencer partnership on sales, website traffic, and social media engagement.</p> <p>Return On Ad Spend (ROAS): This measures the return on investment of an advertising campaign, comparing the revenue generated to the cost of the campaign.</p> <p>Customer Lifetime Value (LTV): This measures the value a customer is expected to bring to a business over their lifetime, taking into account their future purchases and the cost of acquiring and retaining them.</p> <p>In-Store Customer Experience: This measures the level of customer satisfaction with the in-store shopping experience, providing insight into the impact of store design and customer service on sales.</p>
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<p>5. We return to the funnel again, what do you think about it, and is it reflective of the current reality of marketing and consumer journey?</p>	 <p>(Why do you believe so? why not?)</p>
<p>6. (If not satisfied with the current model) Can you draw a model that you believe would better reflect the reality of marketing and consumer journey? And help you better optimize your Marcom expenditures?</p>	<p>MarCom short for Marketing Communications refers to the various ways in which an organization communicates with its target audience. This includes advertising, public relations, branding, events, promotions, and sales collateral. MarCom encompasses all the various channels and methods through which a company sends messages to its customers, prospects, and other stakeholders</p>
<p>Section 4: Conclusions and Rapid Questions:</p> <p>This is the last portion of this interview; it is meant to be a fast round of multiple-choice questions regarding your current marketing approach. I will ask you the questions and provide you with four choices that reflect your inclination or lack thereof.</p>	
Questions	Scorecard Grading
<p>1. How often do you currently use the traditional marketing conversion funnel model in your marketing strategy?</p>	<p>Frequency of use of the traditional marketing conversion funnel model:</p>

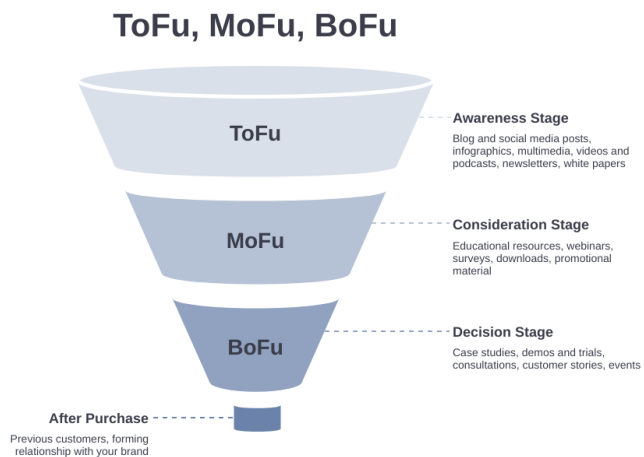
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never 	<p>The responses to this question can be scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being "never" and 4 being "often"</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rarely 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often 	
<p>2. How effective do you think the original marketing conversion funnel model is in today's fashion retail industry?</p>	<p>Effectiveness of the traditional marketing conversion funnel model:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not effective at all 	<p>The responses to this question will be scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being "not effective at all" and 4 being "highly effective". (Add graph)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somewhat effective 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderately effective 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly effective 	
<p>3. Rank the below marketing models consumer and marketing conversion models in terms of relevance to today's consumer and marketing realities in Dubai</p>	<p>We would like to show you different marketing success measurement models, that have been suggested by academics or practitioners during the last decade. We would like to know from you how you would see them as being relevant to today's reality from both a marketing and customer journey.</p> <p>After going through the deck might I ask you to rank them from most relevant to least relevant to your current business/marketing activities and</p>
<p>A. The Consumer Decision Journey</p>  <p>① The consumer considers an initial set of brands, based on brand perceptions and exposure to recent touch points.</p> <p>② Consumers add or subtract brands as they evaluate what they want.</p> <p>③ Ultimately, the consumer selects a brand at the moment of purchase.</p> <p>④ After purchasing a product or service, the consumer builds expectations based on experience to inform the next decision journey.</p>	


B. The AIDA Model



the customer journey? Please include your current model in the rankings.

C. The ToFu / MoFu / BoFu



<p>D. Inbound Marketing Funnel</p>  <p>The diagram illustrates the Inbound Marketing Funnel with five stages: Strangers, Visitors, Leads, Customers, and Promoters. Above these stages are four primary goals: Attract, Convert, Close, and Delight. Below each stage, specific marketing activities are listed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strangers (Attract): Strategic Blog Articles (customer-centered, search engine optimized), Social Media Posts (promoting content). Visitors (Convert): Call-to-actions, Landing Pages, Premium Content Offers (customer-centered). Leads (Close): Lead Nurturing Emails (promoting content), Call-to-actions, Landing Pages, Premium Content Offers (customer-centered). Customers (Delight): Lead Nurturing Emails (promoting content), Call-to-actions, Landing Pages, Premium Content Offers (customer-centered). Promoters: (No specific activities listed). 	
<p>E. Their Model</p>	<p>(Allow the interviewee to explain how they measure customer conversion through a layered explanation of their model)</p> <p>Ask why they chose not to use any of the above.</p>
<p>4. How much emphasis do you place on online channels (e.g., website, social media, email) in your current marketing strategy?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None • Little • Moderate • High 	<p>Emphasis on online channels:</p> <p>The responses to this question will be scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being "none" and 4 being "high".</p>
<p>5. How much emphasis do you place on offline channels (e.g., physical stores, and in-person events) in your current marketing strategy?</p>	<p>Emphasis on offline channels:</p> <p>The responses to this question will be scored on a scale of 1 to</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None 	4, with 1 being "none" and 4 being "high".
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High 	
<p>6. How often do you use virtual reality tools (VR, AR) in your current marketing strategy?</p>	<p>Use of Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality such as Virtual:</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Never 	<p>Virtual Reality (VR) tools:</p> <p>Virtual Showrooms: Retailers can use VR to create immersive showrooms that customers can explore.</p> <p>Virtual Runways: Fashion brands can use VR to create virtual runway shows, allowing customers to experience fashion events from the comfort of their own homes.</p> <p>Virtual Fitting Rooms: VR fitting rooms allow customers to try on clothes virtually, saving time and increasing convenience.</p> <p>Augmented Reality (AR) tools:</p> <p>AR-Enabled Catalogues: Retailers can use AR to enhance their product catalogues, allowing customers to see how products look in their homes or on their bodies before they buy.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rarely 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often 	

	<p>AR-Enabled Mirrors: AR mirrors allow customers to try on clothes virtually in the store, providing a more engaging and interactive shopping experience.</p> <p>AR-Enabled Product Visualization: Retailers can use AR to provide customers with an interactive, 360-degree view of their products, providing a more immersive shopping experience.</p> <p>The responses to this question will be scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being "never" and 4 being "often".</p>
<p>7. How important do you think the use of personalization is in today's fashion retail industry?</p>	<p>Importance of personalization:</p> <p>The responses to this question will be scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being "not important at all" and 4 being "highly important".</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not important at all 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somewhat important 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderately important 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly important 	
<p>8. How do you measure the success of your marketing campaigns for your Product</p>	<p>Measurement of campaign success:</p> <p>The responses to this question can be scored by assigning different points for different options. For example, 1 point for</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sales 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traffic 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Other (please specify)	"sales", 2 points for "traffic", 3 points for "engagement" and 4 points for "other"
9. How fast do you normally adapt your marketing strategies to changing market realities and consumer behaviour?	Adjustment of marketing strategy: The responses to this question will be scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being "we do not adjust our strategy" and 4 being "we make significant adjustments".
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very Fast	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Somewhat fast	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We take our time to assess the changes but usually pick up speed	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Very slow (Why?)	
10. How do you think the fashion retail industry will change in the next 5 years in terms of the design and strategy of their marketing communication channels?	The expectation of changes in the fashion retail industry: The responses to this question will be scored on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being "it will stay the same" and 4 being "it will change significantly".
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It will stay the same	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It will change slightly	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It will change moderately	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It will change significantly	
Why? And what will change?	Allow for 2 minutes of open narrative

Concluding the Interview

Thank you for participating in this interview and sharing your insights and experiences on marketing strategies, expenditures, and conversion tracking in mass fashion marketing. Your contributions are valuable and will help us gain a better understanding of the evolution of marketing practices in the fashion industry.

I would like to remind you that all information collected from this interview will be used for research purposes only and your identity will remain confidential. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated and has helped us gain valuable insights into the industry.

Once again, thank you for your time and participation in this study. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Appendix 2: Consent Form

The below consent form will be printed out and presented at the beginning of the interview, for the signature of the interviewee, after the introductions have been made.

Consent Form

Purpose:

This study aims to gather insights into the marketing strategies, expenditures, and conversion tracking practices of mass fashion marketers before the digital age, during the COVID-19 lockdown and digital shift, and in the current age of mass fashion commerce. The information collected from this study will be used for academic research purposes only to contribute to the wider knowledge and improve industry applications of the marketing conversion model.

Procedure:

You have been asked to participate in a semi-structured interview, which will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. During the interview, the researcher will ask questions related to your marketing strategies, expenditures, and conversion tracking practices. The interview will be conducted via encrypted communication channels and recorded for transcription purposes.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will remain confidential and will not be disclosed in any form. The data collected from the interview will be stored securely and only used for research purposes.

Risks and Benefits:

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. The benefits of participating in this study include contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field of mass fashion marketing.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may choose to discontinue the interview at any time without any consequences. If you choose to participate in the interview, your verbal consent will be recorded.

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information provided in this consent form and that I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the semi-structured interview.

Participant signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Researcher signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Appendix 3: Case Studies

The five selected case studies - Amazon, Expedia, Netflix, Inditex, and Souq.com (a Dubai based company later acquired by Amazon) - represent some of the most successful and influential brands in the physical, digital, or phygital marketing and e-commerce landscapes. These companies have not only demonstrated impressive growth and profitability in their respective industries but have also leveraged technology and data to transform the way that consumers interact with their brands providing best practices and lesson in the digitization of the consumer journey. As such, studying these cases can provide valuable insights into the strategies, challenges, and opportunities of digital marketing and e-commerce versus the traditional brick and mortar approaches, as well as the impact of AI on these industries. By examining these case studies, we can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that have contributed to their success, the lessons learned from their failures, and the best practices for building and sustaining a competitive advantage in the digital age. Additionally, these case studies can serve as a source of inspiration and guidance for businesses of all sizes and industries, as they navigate the complex and ever-evolving landscape of digital marketing and e-commerce.

1. **Amazon:** Amazon is a globally recognized household name and a dominant player in the e-commerce and technology industries. Jeff Bezos founded the company in 1994, starting out as an online bookstore, and has since developed into one of the largest and most influential companies in the world. With a market capitalization exceeding \$1 trillion and operations in numerous countries, Amazon holds a significant presence in the business world and has established itself as a leader in the industry (Pereira, 2023a). Amazon has used a data-driven approach to develop personalized product recommendations and tailored marketing campaigns, leveraging the power of machine learning to understand customer behaviour and preferences. (Vollero et al., 2021).

S.W.O.T Analysis of AMAZON	
Strengths	Strong brand recognition: Amazon has become a globally recognized brand with a strong reputation for reliability and customer service as well as being an industry disrupter with its early adoption of technology as foundation of its business.

	<p>Extensive product offerings: Amazon offers a wide range of products, including electronics, books, clothing, and groceries, among others, providing customers with a one-stop-shop for all their daily needs.</p> <p>A healthy operational logistics and distribution network: Amazon has invested heavily in its logistics and distribution network, enabling it to provide fast and reliable delivery to customers across the world.</p> <p>Advanced technology: Amazon is known for its advanced technology, including its AI-powered recommendation system and voice-activated assistant Alexa, which enhance the shopping experience for customers and has given it an advantage with the sudden boom in technology and AI.</p> <p>Diversified revenue streams: In addition to its e-commerce business, Amazon has diversified into other areas, including cloud computing with Amazon Web Services (AWS) and streaming services with Amazon Prime Video.</p>
<p>Weaknesses</p>	<p>Dependence on third-party sellers: Amazon heavily relies on third-party sellers to offer a wide range of products, which could negatively impact the customer experience if said sellers were to offer shoddy or low</p> <p>High shipping costs: Amazon's free shipping policy has been a significant factor in its success, but as transportation costs continue to increase Amazon may not be able to sustain this model which could impact customer satisfaction and discourage customers from purchasing from the site.</p> <p>Limited physical presence: Amazon has limited physical stores, which could limit the company's ability to reach customers who prefer in-store shopping.</p> <p>Controversies surrounding worker treatment: Amazon has faced criticism for its treatment of workers in its warehouses and delivery drivers, which could negatively impact the company's reputation.</p>

	<p>Regulatory challenges: Amazon faces regulatory challenges related to data privacy, antitrust concerns, and tax issues in various markets.</p>
Opportunities	<p>Expansion into new markets: Amazon has the opportunity to expand into new markets, including emerging markets with growing e-commerce markets.</p> <p>Investment in technology: Amazon can continue to invest in technology to enhance the customer experience, such as implementing drone delivery and expanding its Alexa capabilities.</p> <p>Acquisition of new companies: Amazon can acquire new companies to expand its product offerings and gain a competitive edge as in the example of Souq.Com below.</p> <p>Expansion of Prime services: Amazon can expand its Prime services to increase customer loyalty, including offering new services and benefits.</p> <p>Investment in sustainability: Amazon can increase its focus on sustainability by reducing its carbon footprint and implementing eco-friendly initiatives, which can appeal to environmentally conscious customers.</p>
Threats	<p>Intense competition: The e-commerce market is highly competitive, with both local and global players competing for market share.</p> <p>Economic downturns: Economic downturns and rising cost of living could negatively impact consumer spending on e-commerce, which could impact Amazon's revenue.</p> <p>Security threats: Amazon's digital foundations make it vulnerable to security threats, including cyber-attacks and data breaches, which could negatively impact customer trust.</p> <p>Shipping and logistics challenges: Amazon is vulnerable to shipping and logistics challenges, including transportation disruptions, which could negatively impact its ability to deliver products to customers on time.</p>

	Changes in regulations: Changes in regulations related to e-commerce and data privacy could impact Amazon's operations and profitability.
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- 2. Expedia Inc:** founded in the late 1990s. Expedia was among the first e-commerce platforms to provide online and remote means to find and book flights, hotels, and other transportation options. It quickly became one of the major players in the online travel booking market. The company has won prestigious awards for its quality and leadership, including Forbes' "Favourite General Travel Site" and PC Magazine's "Editors' Choice". Expedia has also localized its website to cater to at least 150 travel booking sites in 70 countries, with language options for 31 countries (Rahman, 2013). Expedia offers travel services ranging from budget to luxury, catering to both leisure and business travellers. Expedia is considered a leader in the adoption of digital marketing channels as it has transformed the travel industry through its use of digital technology. Expedia was one of the first travel companies to offer online booking and has continued to innovate with its use of mobile apps, personalized recommendations, and social media marketing. In addition, Expedia has developed sophisticated data analytics capabilities, allowing it to analyse customer behaviour and preferences and help them through a hassle-free customer journey shift in (Liu et al., 2020).

S.W.O.T Analysis of Expedia Inc.

Strengths	<p>Strong brand recognition: Expedia is a well-known brand in the travel industry, which helps to attract and retain customers and has proven to be a true competitor to traditional travel agencies and airlines by eliminating third party involvement in their consumer journey.</p> <p>Wide range of travel services: Expedia offers a wide range of travel services, including flights, hotels, car rentals, vacation packages, and activities, providing customers with a one-stop-shop for all their travel needs without having to seek different channels for one simple task.</p>
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	<p>Advanced technology: Expedia is an early investor in technology, including its online booking platform, mobile app, and AI-powered chatbot, which enhances the customer experience.</p> <p>Strong partnerships: Expedia has built its platform upon the strong partnerships with hotels, airlines, and other travel providers, which helps to offer customers a wider range of options and access to exclusive deals.</p>
Weaknesses	<p>Dependence on third-party suppliers: Expedia relies heavily on third-party suppliers for its travel services, as delays, changes in flights and as other grievances can impact customer satisfaction.</p> <p>Intense competition: The online travel industry is highly competitive, with numerous players such as Trivago, Momondo and Booking.com vying for market share, which could make it difficult for Expedia to differentiate itself.</p> <p>Vulnerability to external factors: Expedia is vulnerable to external factors that impact the travel industry, such as natural disasters, political unrest, and global pandemics.</p> <p>Limited control over the travel experience: Expedia has limited control over the travel experience, which could negatively impact customer satisfaction if suppliers provide poor service.</p>
Opportunities	<p>Expansion into new markets: Expedia has the opportunity to expand into emerging markets with growing demand for travel services as a new digital savvy generation gain purchasing ability while they enter the workforce.</p> <p>Investment in technology: Expedia is also an early investor in technology to enhance the customer experience, such as implementing virtual reality experiences and expanding its AI capabilities.</p> <p>Expansion of loyalty programs: Expedia can expand its loyalty programs to increase customer retention and encourage repeat</p>

	<p>bookings as well as incorporate AI to design custom travel plans that suit different budgets.</p> <p>Offering sustainable travel options: Expedia can focus on offering sustainable travel options, such as eco-friendly accommodations and carbon offsetting options, which can appeal to environmentally conscious customers.</p>
Threats	<p>Economic downturns: Economic downturns could negatively impact consumer spending on travel, which could impact Expedia's revenue.</p> <p>Competition from online travel agencies and direct suppliers: Expedia faces competition from other online travel agencies, as well as direct suppliers such as hotels and airlines, which could impact market share and profitability as they can choose to offer lower rate for those seeking to buy directly from the hotels or the airlines themselves.</p> <p>Cybersecurity threats: Expedia, given its primary digital presence, is vulnerable to cybersecurity threats, including data breaches and hacking, which could negatively impact customer trust and lead to financial losses.</p> <p>Changes in regulations: unexpected changes in regulations related to the travel industry, such as visa requirements and taxes, could impact Expedia's operations and profitability.</p>

- 3. Netflix:** Netflix is often cited as an example of disruptive innovation, targeting consumers in ways that traditional Hollywood studios were not and at a more affordable price. Founded in 1997 as a DVD rental-by-mail service. Netflix almost considered selling to business, to the video giant Blockbuster, at the time due to its failing numbers before changing its approach to business and forgoing any physical presence and adopting a purely digital platform and business model (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). Netflix's success can be attributed to its early recognition of the potential of digital distribution and its ability to adapt to the changing landscape of media consumption.

Netflix evolved from a mail-order DVD operation to an online streaming distribution platform for third party films and series, and then became a prolific content producer itself. This has had a knock-on effect on the industry as a whole, as other players have moved to mimic some of Netflix's strategies and actions (Green, 2023). Netflix and other over-the-top platforms have moved upmarket while preserving their early logistical advantages, mostly related to greater accessibility. Within the theory of disruptive innovation, the streamers are an example of "new-market footholds" or disruptors, which create a market where none existed (Sun, 2022).

S.W.O.T Analysis of Netflix	
Strengths	<p>Strong brand recognition: Netflix is a household name and has a strong brand identity that is recognized worldwide with one of the most notable logos in the world.</p> <p>Original content: Netflix has invested heavily in creating its own content, which has become popular and has won several awards thus reducing its dependency on external content and the complicated procedure of licencing content.</p> <p>Large subscriber base: As of Q1 2023, Netflix has over 279 million subscribers worldwide, giving them a significant advantage over their competitors.</p> <p>User-friendly interface: Netflix's easy-to-use interface and personalized recommendations make it a popular choice for streaming services.</p> <p>Global presence: Netflix is available in over 150 countries, giving them a significant advantage over their competitors.</p>
Weaknesses	<p>Dependence on original content: While Netflix's original content has been successful, the company is heavily reliant on it. If the quality of the content decreases, it could negatively impact the company's growth.</p>

	<p>High production costs: Creating original content is expensive, and Netflix has been known to spend billions of dollars on content creation. This high production cost could impact the company's profitability in the long run.</p> <p>Limited content availability: Some content is not available in all regions, which could lead to dissatisfaction among subscribers.</p> <p>Increasing competition: The streaming market has become increasingly crowded, with new entrants such as Disney+ and HBO Max. This could impact Netflix's subscriber base in the future.</p> <p>Limited monetization opportunities: Netflix's revenue is primarily derived from subscription fees, limiting their ability to monetize their content through advertising.</p>
Opportunities	<p>Expansion into new markets: Netflix has the opportunity to expand its services to new markets, especially in developing countries where internet access is increasing.</p> <p>Partnerships with content creators: Netflix can partner with content creators to produce new and exciting content that can attract more subscribers.</p> <p>Investment in technology: Netflix can invest in new technologies to enhance the user experience and offer new features to attract and retain subscribers.</p> <p>Diversification: Netflix can diversify its services by offering music and gaming services to its subscribers, which can increase revenue streams.</p> <p>Expansion into live events: Netflix can consider expanding into live events such as concerts and sports to attract a wider audience.</p>
Threats	<p>Competition from established players: Established players such as Amazon Prime and Hulu could pose a significant threat to Netflix's market share.</p>

	<p>Piracy: Piracy remains a significant threat to Netflix's revenue as illegal streaming services continue to grow in popularity.</p> <p>Regulatory changes: Changes in regulations related to internet service providers, net neutrality, and copyright laws could negatively impact Netflix's operations.</p> <p>Economic downturns: Economic downturns could negatively impact subscription rates as people may cut back on discretionary spending.</p> <p>Changing consumer preferences: Changes in consumer preferences and habits could negatively impact Netflix's subscriber base if they are not able to adapt quickly.</p>
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4. **Inditex:** Inditex, a global fashion distributor and retailer, boasts an impressive portfolio of eight brands: Zara, Pull&Bear, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, Stradivarius, Oysho, Zara Home, and Uterque. The company's scale is staggering, with 7,475 stores across 96 markets, 49 online markets, and a direct workforce of 171,839 people. Inditex began as a small family business in La Coruña, a town in Galicia, northern Spain in 1963. Amancio Ortega, the founder, launched the company's flagship brand, Zara, in 1975, which pioneered the fast fashion model and completely disrupted the traditional fashion industry. Zara's success is attributed to its logistics and efficiency (Kato, 2018).

S.W.O.T Analysis of Inditex	
Strengths	<p>Strong brand portfolio: Inditex has a diverse brand portfolio that includes Zara, Pull & Bear, Massimo Dutti, Bershka, and other popular fashion brands that are spread over a diverse audience of clients.</p> <p>Vertical integration: Inditex has control over its entire supply chain, from design to production to retail. This allows them to respond quickly to changing trends and customer demands and allows them to adopt swift changes in the channels of marketing and distribution.</p>

	<p>Fast fashion model: Inditex's fast fashion model allows them to offer trendy and affordable clothing at a fast pace, keeping up with the latest trends and fashion in a fast passed technological.</p> <p>Global presence: Inditex has a presence in over 93 markets with over 7,000 stores, giving them a significant advantage over their competitors.</p> <p>Strong financial performance: Inditex has consistently delivered strong financial performance, with high revenue and profit margins.</p>
Weaknesses	<p>Dependence on Zara: While Inditex has a diverse brand portfolio, Zara remains its most significant brand, accounting for a significant portion of its revenue. This makes the company vulnerable to changes in the Zara brand.</p> <p>Labour issues: Inditex has been criticized for labour issues in its supply chain, including low wages and poor working conditions which may reflect negatively on the company given the rising cancel culture generation.</p> <p>Limited e-commerce presence: While Inditex has an e-commerce platform, it is not as extensive as its physical store network and has competition in the more established platforms. This could negatively impact the company's growth in the future.</p> <p>Limited sustainability initiatives: Inditex has faced criticism for its environmental and social impact, with limited sustainability initiatives.</p> <p>Dependence on a few key suppliers: Inditex relies on a few key suppliers for a significant portion of its production, making the company vulnerable to supply chain disruptions.</p>
Opportunities	<p>Expansion into new markets: Inditex has the opportunity to expand into new markets, especially in emerging economies where there is a growing middle class.</p>

	<p>Investment in e-commerce: Inditex can invest in its e-commerce platform to improve the online shopping experience and reach a wider audience.</p> <p>Expansion of product lines: Inditex can expand its product lines to include accessories, beauty products, and home decor, which can increase revenue streams.</p> <p>Sustainability initiatives: Inditex can invest in sustainability initiatives to reduce its environmental impact and improve its social responsibility.</p> <p>Integration of technology: Inditex can integrate technology into its retail stores to enhance the shopping experience, such as smart mirrors and mobile payments.</p>
Threats	<p>Intense competition: The fashion industry is highly competitive, with many established players and new entrants, which could impact Inditex's market share.</p> <p>Economic downturns: Economic downturns could negatively impact consumer spending on fashion, which could impact Inditex's revenue.</p> <p>Changing consumer preferences: Changes in consumer preferences and habits could negatively impact Inditex's sales if they are not able to adapt quickly.</p> <p>Supply chain disruptions: Inditex is vulnerable to supply chain disruptions, including natural disasters and political instability.</p> <p>Regulatory changes: Changes in regulations related to labour and sustainability could negatively impact Inditex's operations.</p>

- Souq.com (Amazon.ae):** Souq.com was the primary e-commerce website in the Arab world and offers over 400,000 products across categories such as electronics, fashion, household items, watches, and perfumes, among others. With over 23 million visitors every month, the website is rapidly expanding owing to the increasing number of online shoppers in the Arab region. Often referred to as the "Amazon Middle East," the site

functioned as a retail hub for third-party vendors, offering a safe and user-friendly shopping experience with options like online payment, cash on delivery, and free returns (Misra, 2017). Souq.com was established in 2005 as an auction site and was linked to the Arab Internet portal Maktoob. Following Yahoo's acquisition of Maktoob in 2009, Souq.com separated from the portal and remained under the Jabbar Internet Group. In early 2011, the site shifted to a market model that allowed fixed-price selling, and later in 2011, its retail division was launched. In 2017, Amazon acquired the platform and gained access to a well-established e-commerce platform that had a significant customer base and an extensive logistics network in the UAE, one of the largest and richest countries in the GCC (Rajawat et al., 2019). This gave Amazon a competitive advantage over other e-commerce companies that were looking to enter the Middle Eastern market. As of 2019 Souq.com's name was changed to Amazon.ae (Al-Omari et al., 2020).

S.W.O.T Analysis of Amazon.ae	
Strengths	<p>Strong brand recognition: Amazon as a mother company is a globally recognized brand with a strong reputation for reliability and customer service.</p> <p>Extensive product offerings: Amazon.ae offers a wide range of products including electronics, books, clothing, and groceries, among others, providing customers with a one-stop-shop in a steadily more delivery dependent audience based in the UAE.</p> <p>Robust logistics and distribution network: Amazon has invested heavily in its logistics and distribution network, enabling it to provide fast and reliable delivery to customers across the UAE.</p> <p>Advanced technology: Amazon is known for its advanced technology and has been able to benefit from the existing Souq.com framework to integrate seamlessly in the UAE e-commerce network.</p>

	<p>Strong financial performance: Amazon.ae has consistently delivered strong financial performance, with high revenue and profit margins.</p>
Weaknesses	<p>Limited regional presence: Amazon.ae only operates in the UAE, limiting its market reach compared to competitors who have a wider regional presence.</p> <p>Limited local product offerings: Amazon.ae has limited local product offerings, which could make it less appealing to customers who prefer to buy locally produced goods.</p> <p>Dependence on third-party sellers: Amazon.ae relies heavily on third-party sellers to offer a wide range of products, which could negatively impact the customer experience if sellers offer poor quality products or poor customer service.</p> <p>High shipping costs: As Amazon offers free shipping to its customers, it is in the danger of losing its margins with the global increase in transportation costs.</p> <p>Limited physical presence: Amazon.ae has limited physical stores, which could limit the company's ability to reach customers who prefer in-store shopping</p>
Opportunities	<p>Expansion into new markets: Amazon.ae has the opportunity to expand into new markets in the Middle East and North Africa region, where there is a growing e-commerce market.</p> <p>Investment in local production: Amazon.ae can invest in local production to offer a wider range of locally produced products and support local businesses.</p> <p>Increased focus on sustainability: Amazon.ae can increase its focus on sustainability by reducing its carbon footprint and implementing eco-friendly initiatives, which can appeal to environmentally conscious customers.</p>

	<p>Investment in technology: Amazon can invest in technology to enhance the customer experience, such as implementing drone delivery and expanding its Alexa capabilities.</p>
<p>Threats</p>	<p>Intense competition: The e-commerce market in the UAE is highly competitive, with both local and global players competing for market share.</p> <p>Regulatory changes: Changes in regulations related to e-commerce and data privacy could impact Amazon.ae's operations.</p> <p>Economic downturns: Economic downturns could negatively impact consumer spending on e-commerce, which could impact Amazon.ae's revenue.</p> <p>Security threats: Amazon.ae is vulnerable to security threats, including cyber-attacks and data breaches, which could negatively impact customer trust.</p> <p>Shipping and logistics challenges: Amazon.ae is vulnerable to shipping and logistics challenges, including transportation disruptions, which could negatively impact its ability to deliver products to customers on time.</p>

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