

# The millennial customer journey: a Phygital mapping of emotional, behavioural, and social experiences

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The wider possibility of connectivity offers additional opportunities for customers to experience value propositions. The online world is only one side of the customer experience. The integration of digital technologies, social presence and physical elements increases the complexity of customer journey. This paper aims to map the phygital customer journey by focusing on millennials.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study adopted a qualitative methodology to investigate 50 millennials from Italy. Millennials had to describe, in two phases, a journey they had recently made. First, they used sticky notes with no restrictions on expressing their feelings and structuring their CJ. Second, customers transferred the sticky notes' contents, consider the information provided and map the journey with additional details using the Uxpressia software.

**Findings** – This paper frames the Millennials customer journey as a cycle of four moments: connect, explore, buy and use. Each moment enacts the customer experience as a mixture of emotional, behavioural and social responses. Online and offline interactions blur the boundaries between the physical and digital world (i.e. phygital): millennials move back-and-forth or jump from one action to another according to the evolving path of emotions and interactions.

**Originality/value** – The phygital customer journey provides an alternative understanding of customer journey occurring as a fuzzy process or loop. A phygital map develops as a circular path of moments seen as phenomenological microworlds of events, interactions, relationships and emotions.

**Keywords** Millennial customer journey, Phygital mapping, Social interactions, Emotions, Moments

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In 2019, for the first time in history, most of the global population was connected online (Forbes, 2019). The wider possibility of connectivity offers additional opportunities for customers to experience value propositions, making customer behaviour more complex (Bolton *et al.*, 2018). Research on customer experience (CX) has increased recently, converging on understanding customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioural, sensorial and social responses to a provider's value proposition (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Becker and Jaakkola, 2020). Interest has emerged in academia and business regarding the understanding of the CX alongside the customer journey (CJ) (Altimeter, 2018; McColl-Kennedy *et al.*, 2019), also known as the customer's path, via touchpoints, from the need to the use of offerings (Halvorsrud *et al.*, 2016; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Traditional customer decision-making models are unable to interpret what happens in practice. On the one hand, new media, multiple touchpoints and fragmented channels increase the digital complexity of the CJ. On the other hand, the relationship between digital and physical shopping requires a deeper understanding of how it impacts CXs

(Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The concept of 'phygital' has been proposed in business studies to depict the "symbiosis of physical space and virtual space" (Ballina *et al.*, 2019, p. 658).

In this evolving context, how customers experience a multiplicity of stimuli alongside their journey has not been fully investigated (Varnali, 2019). This paper aims to map a phygital CJ by focusing on millennials. Gen Yers have been recognised as important customers and extensively studied (Neuborne and Kerwin, 1999; Stewart *et al.*, 2017). They differ in several ways from Gen X, the previous generation (Valentine and Powers, 2013; Lissitsa and Kol, 2016). Most millennials are technologically savvy and have grown up with the internet, using it for product research, purchasing, and experiencing (Nash, 2019). The age or life-stage of this generation makes it distinctive from other cohorts, leading to a symbiosis of physical space and virtual space (Bilgihan, 2016).

Calls have been made for research on the evolving expectations and emotions of millennials' experiences during their interactions with a brand via mobile and social networks (Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Lissitsa and Kol, 2016). However, detailed studies on the CJ of millennials are lacking (Valentine and Powers, 2013; Butcher *et al.*, 2017).

The present study adopted a qualitative methodology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), to investigate 50 millennials from Italy, with the aim to understand actions, intentions, and emotions

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(Johnston and Kong, 2011). This paper contributes to framing the millennial CJ as a cycle of moments, and each enacts the CX as a mixture of emotional, behavioural and social responses. A phygital map develops as a circular path of moments seen as phenomenological microworlds of events, interactions, relationships and emotions.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, we present a literature review on the CX, CJ, and CJ mapping. Second, we shift our focus to millennials. Then, we illustrate the methodology and findings. The article concludes with a discussion and implications for further research.

## Customer experience

CX has been defined as “value that is directly or indirectly experienced by customers within their phenomenological lifeworld contexts” (Helkkula et al., 2012, p. 61). The online world offers the possibility of a real-time experience in which a more empowered customer interacts with a service provider and other customers at any place and time (Rose et al., 2011). Scholars have proposed several concepts, such as e-service experience (Rowley, 2006), online CX (Rose et al., 2012) and online shopping experience (Trevinal and Stenger, 2014). The digital context is only one side of the experience phenomenon. Different types of customer responses arise at the intersection of the digital, physical and social realms (Bolton et al., 2018). The integration of digital technologies, social presence and physical elements increases the complexity that providers must manage (Varnali, 2019).

In such evolving contexts, the experience is depicted as a multidimensional construct including affective, cognitive, sensorial, social, symbolic and temporal dimensions (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Kranzbühler et al., 2018). The cognitive state relates to processing information (Rose et al., 2012) or acting on diverse touchpoints (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). The focus is on the customer’s mental process (Martin et al., 2015) as a utilitarian evaluation of shopping as well as his/her capabilities to use new technologies (Chen et al., 2019). Instead, the affective state refers to emotions or feelings that the customer experiences (Jain et al., 2017), such as joy, surprise, sadness and fear (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2019). Moreover, the customer perceptions of online contexts (ease of use, functionality and connectedness: Martin et al., 2015) are important in affecting their experiences (Rose et al., 2012) and shopping behaviour (Trevinal and Stenger, 2014).

Social dimension of CX stresses the role of interaction with friends (on socio-digital networks) and the importance of peer-review-driven components (Singh et al., 2017). The focus shifts to the social experience network with connections achieved through social media (Martin et al., 2015). McColl-Kennedy et al. (2019) proposed the integration of customers’ emotions and cognitive responses to analyse how “customers create value with a firm through CXs, specifically by integrating resources at multiple touchpoints in context through activities and interactions” (p. 10). The focus shifts from the CX as an outcome to the “dynamic process (that) flows from pre-purchase to purchase to post-purchase” (pp. 74–75), which is seen as part of a wider CJ (Bolton et al., 2014).

## Customer journey

The CJ is a sequence of events that customers undergo to learn about, purchase, and interact with company offerings (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The journey concerns real and virtual contexts and includes a multiplicity of phases, relationships, touchpoints and channels (Halvorsrud et al., 2016; Rudkowski et al., 2020).

Traditionally, CJ has been understood as a “funnel—a linear path that ends with one purchased offering from a set of potential brands, (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Currently, fuelled by the contribution of digital technologies, CJ is depicted as a non-linear process “punctuated by dynamics such as feedback loops, channel switching, and dropouts” (Kranzbühler et al., 2018, p. 447); the funnel concept is no longer valid for capturing all the touchpoints (Grewal et al., 2020). In line with this novel view, the CJ is described as a loop depending on continuous flows of information brought by multiple sources (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020).

Customers have endless online and offline options for researching, comparing, and buying products and services. The impact of digital technologies on the CJ can be summarised (Flavián et al., 2019) as finding information and comparing it to make better decisions in the pre-purchase stage, increasing the cognitive or affective experience within the experience itself, and, in the post-purchase stage, to evaluate and create content related to the experience (Halvorsrud et al., 2016). A dynamic rather than static process emerges in which customers “can evaluate their journey cognitively, affectively and through their senses over time” (Kranzbühler et al., 2018, p. 434). The CJ appears as “a complex non-linear system” (Varnali, 2019, p. 821) characterised by path dependency and autopoiesis and in which touchpoints can be configured as having a “helix-like structure” (p. 826).

Customers select touchpoints following diverse orders and a rigid sequence is less real for customers who “follow their own particular journey” (Spiess et al., 2014, p. 7). A journey can even last months and cover different touchpoints affecting the extension in time and length (Hall and Towers, 2017). To depict how customers interact with touchpoints and contexts, scholars have proposed customer decision-making models (Stückdorn and Schneider, 2010) particularly, CJ mapping.

## Customer journey mapping

In marketing literature, there is an intense debate on methods and labels to depict customer decision-making processes. Seminal works investigate mainly the purchase phases (Schmidt, 2003). The service blueprinting model (Bitner et al., 2008) provides a useful design technique for the characteristics and purposes of the CJ (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) by visualising the service process as a sum of customer actions, onstage/visible contacts, employee actions, backstage/invisible contacts, support processes and physical evidence (Bitner et al., 2008). This model has gained popularity due to its flexibility and useful role in connecting provider and customer perspectives on service processes.

Service design scholars recognise the need to adopt a holistic view of the CX and propose multilevel service design and CX modelling. The first offers a hierarchical level on which to analyse value constellation, service systems and service

encounters (Patricio *et al.*, 2011). The second suggests shifting the focus from single elements affecting an experience to their orchestration (Teixeira *et al.*, 2012). A third group of studies claims that the route customers choose and take needs to be mapped (Wolny and Charoensuksai, 2014; Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017). While a service blueprint captures the service delivery process across touchpoints, including the backstage and front stage of the service delivery, CJ maps are more experience-centric (Trischler *et al.*, 2018). Such maps are designed as a loop (Paul and Rosenbaum, 2020) referring to the post-purchase stage, where customers can either repurchase or start the process anew (Edelman and Singer, 2015).

Rather than being based on commonly shared conventions, the use of a map can differ according to design needs (Følstad and Kvale, 2018). Scholars focus on stage and touchpoints (Trischler and Zehrer, 2012), social media (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2013), motivations and goals (Harris *et al.*, 2018), customer job (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) and customer-company interactions (Richardson, 2010). Academics and practitioners call for more empirical research on CJ mapping to capture what the customer does, thinks and/or feels (Trischler *et al.*, 2018).

## Millennials

Millennials, also known as Gen Y or digital natives, are the generation that grew up in a media-saturated, brand-conscious world (Sullivan and Heitmeyer, 2008; Bilgihan, 2016). Marketing literature denotes various delimitations of this generation cohort, as the people born between 1977 and 1994 (Butcher *et al.*, 2017) but also as those born from 1980 to 1999 (Lissitsa and Kol, 2016) or from 1982 to 2000 (Moore, 2012). Millennials have grown up with the Internet; they are considered to be massive online shoppers (Bilgihan, 2016) and technology makes them a global homogeneous group (Moore, 2012). Studies have focused on the values, characteristics and behaviours of Gen Ys (Bolton *et al.*, 2013; Lissitsa and Kol, 2016). Particularly, the dimensions of value perceptions (i.e. utilitarian, hedonic and symbolic) have different effects on young people's attitudes towards consumption (Hwang and Griffiths, 2017). The cognitive state of millennials is concerned with the efficient and timely purchase of products with increasing irritation if they do not meet their goal. They heavily use new technologies embracing mobility in their daily lives as they are multi-taskers, they simultaneously use various devices and combine emerging information (Lissitsa and Kol, 2016; Nash, 2019).

In their shopping experience, Millennials seek a hedonic value based on fun and an enjoyable environment (Ladhari *et al.*, 2019). Gen Y has been raised in an era in which shopping has taken on new entertainment and/or experiential dimensions. According to Chuah *et al.* (2017), Gen Yers "are the most value- and emotion-driven cohort" (p. 124). They are individualistic but group-oriented, well-educated, sophisticated, materialistic, better-travelled and focused on social causes and social responsibility (Valentine and Powers, 2013; Bilgihan, 2016). A strong characteristic is their "want it all" and "want it now" approach, as they belong to the so-called trophy generation, seeking recognition in work and life (Ng *et al.*, 2010; Butcher *et al.*, 2017). Millennials make extensive

use of social media to interact with others and seek approval from their peers (Klein, 2015; Nash, 2019); such social media use affects their psychological, emotional and physical well-being and social engagement (Bolton *et al.*, 2013).

Despite the increasing literature, how Gen Y creates experiences when acting online and through technologies must be understood in detail (Bilgihan, 2016). Particularly, the debate over the millennial CJ is almost non-existent (Muskat *et al.*, 2013).

## Method

The research adopted a qualitative methodology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), which is suitable for dealing with the customer's point of view, especially if the goal of the investigation is the understanding of actions, intentions and emotions (Johnston and Kong, 2011). The authors followed the suggestions for adopting a descriptive, and unobtrusive method, such as visualisation tools (Lim and Kim, 2018), given the need to track the back-and-forth movement of CJ (Canfield and Basso, 2017) and to avoid affecting the data (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Snapshots of every relevant moment were encouraged, as each of them was considered worthy of evaluation (Canfield and Basso, 2017). A qualitative view is more suitable for combining multiple methods of collecting and analysing CJs (Stein and Ramaseshan, 2016), and the description of evidence through excerpts and quotes can clarify the evidence offered (Kandampully *et al.*, 2018).

## Data collection

Data collection involved the CJ of 50 millennials (Table 1) as a method for visualising processes from the customers' perspective (Richardson, 2010). A convenience sample was set up, involving millennials fluent in English and attending a digital business academy in Italy. This choice allowed us to overcome the weakness of the sampling procedure because of the focus on a group of individuals (Given, 2008) and to shape a sample with the right skills to deal with the software for the data collection. The identification of 50 respondents allowed for "a depth of understanding rather than a breadth" (Boddy, 2016, p. 430) and supported the saturation of our processes with a cohesive sample (Given, 2008). The aim was to have respondents fulfil specific tasks rather than simply answer questions; we stopped extending the sample when it became apparent that no new themes were emerging (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). As suggested by Butcher *et al.* (2017), our respondents included customers aged 21–32 at the moment of data collection.

The variety of socio-demographics led to more solid results, as the sample was not affected by a single typology of occupation.

We asked the millennials (Table 1) to describe, in two phases, a journey they had recently made. First, they were asked to use sticky notes with no restrictions on expressing their feelings and structuring their CJ. This gave them the chance to analyse the real experience they recalled and offer insights on a CJ as a process. The table also provides insights into the brand, product/service they engaged with. To avoid bias, the respondents were asked to choose the brand they desired to recall freely; thus, various companies represented the entire

Table 1 Main features of the millennials

N.	Gender	Age	Education	Employment	Purchase	N.	Gender	Age	Education	Employment	Purchase
1.	Male	30	High school	Construction worker	Fossil - Watch	26.	Male	26	High school	Entertainer	Samsung - Tablet
2.	Female	27	Master	Teacher	Phillips - Hairdryer	27.	Female	30	Master	Financial specialist	Volkswagen - Car
3.	Female	28	Bachelor	Waiter	Douglas - Perfume	28.	Female	27	Bachelor	Administrative employee	Sal De Riso - Cake
4.	Male	25	Master (attending)	Student	Apple - Tablet	29.	Male	23	Bachelor (attending)	Student	Apple - Earbuds
5.	Male	26	Bachelor	Entertainer	Samsung - Headphones	30.	Female	25	Master (attending)	Student	Piquadro - Backpack
6.	Male	32	High school	Construction worker	Opel - Car	31.	Male	22	Bachelor (attending)	Student	Ideabellezza - Perfume
7.	Female	27	MBA	Manager	Samsung - Mobile phone	32.	Male	27	Master	Teacher	Gamestop - Videogame
8.	Female	25	Master (attending)	Student	EA - Videogame	33.	Male	25	PhD (attending)	Student	Breil - Watch
9.	Male	21	Bachelor (attending)	Student	Eastpak - Backpack	34.	Female	32	MBA	Manager	Ikea - Kitchen
10.	Male	24	Master (attending)	Student	Converse - Sneakers	35.	Female	26	Master (attending)	Medical intern	Il Sole 24 Ore - Master course
11.	Male	28	Bachelor	Teacher	MamaClean - Laundry service	36.	Female	25	Bachelor	Entertainer	Rowenta - Hair straightener
12.	Female	25	Master (attending)	Student	Pandora - Bracelet	37.	Male	28	PhD	Researcher	Breil - Chronograph
13.	Female	31	PhD	Lecturer	Desigual - Dress	38.	Female	26	MBA	Manager	Samsung - Tablet
14.	Male	23	Bachelor (attending)	Student	Samsung Mobile phone	39.	Male	27	Master (attending)	Student	Xiaomi - Mobile phone
15.	Female	26	Master	Waitress	Dodo - Bracelet	40.	Male	24	Bachelor (attending)	Student	Samsung - Headphones
16.	Male	27	MBA	Manager	Zara - Coat	41.	Female	25	Master (attending)	Student	Groupon - Happy hour
17.	Male	24	Bachelor	Student	Playstation - Game controller	42.	Male	30	Bachelor	Administrative employee	Renault - Car
18.	Male	22	Master (attending)	Student	Hp - Laptop	43.	Male	27	Master	Back office employee	Vans - Sneakers
19.	Female	25	Master (attending)	Student	EA - Videogame	44.	Male	25	PhD (attending)	Student	Asus - Laptop
20.	Male	23	Bachelor	Waiter	Timberland - Boots	45.	Female	31	Master	Teacher	Pandora - Bracelet
21.	Male	27	MBA	Researcher	Apple - Earbuds	46.	Female	24	Bachelor	Waitress	Phillips - Hairdryer
22.	Female	28	PhD (attending)	Student	JustEat - Dinner	47.	Female	26	Master (attending)	Student	Swarovski - Earring
23.	Male	24	Bachelor	Back office employee	Apple - Mobile phone	48.	Male	25	Master	Manager	Nike - Shoes
24.	Female	25	Master	Teacher	UniEuro - Oven	49.	Female	30	PhD	Lecturer	Stroili - Ring
25.	Female	27	Bachelor	Housewife	Piquadro - Bag	50.	Female	27	Bachelor	Administrative employee	Sony - TV

research context. Based on suggestions from [Bellenger et al. \(2011\)](#), a research context shaped by multiple brands and products would avoid bias related to one category. This choice mirrors what we previously stated about the unobtrusiveness of the research ([Lim and Kim, 2018](#)) ([Figure 1](#)).

Second, customers were asked to transfer the sticky notes' contents, consider the information provided, and map the journey with additional details using the Uxpressia software. We chose Uxpressia from the alternatives due to its ease of use, the quality of its graphical outcomes, and its compatibility with multiple operating systems. Scholars ([Richardson, 2010](#)) have encouraged the use of software to investigate CJs. Uxpressia supports the Italian and English languages and allows users to overwrite sections. The questions focused on their preferences, needs, desires, feelings and emotions. Compared to sticky notes, the software appeared to be more flexible, as the customers were free to choose the number of phases and fill in

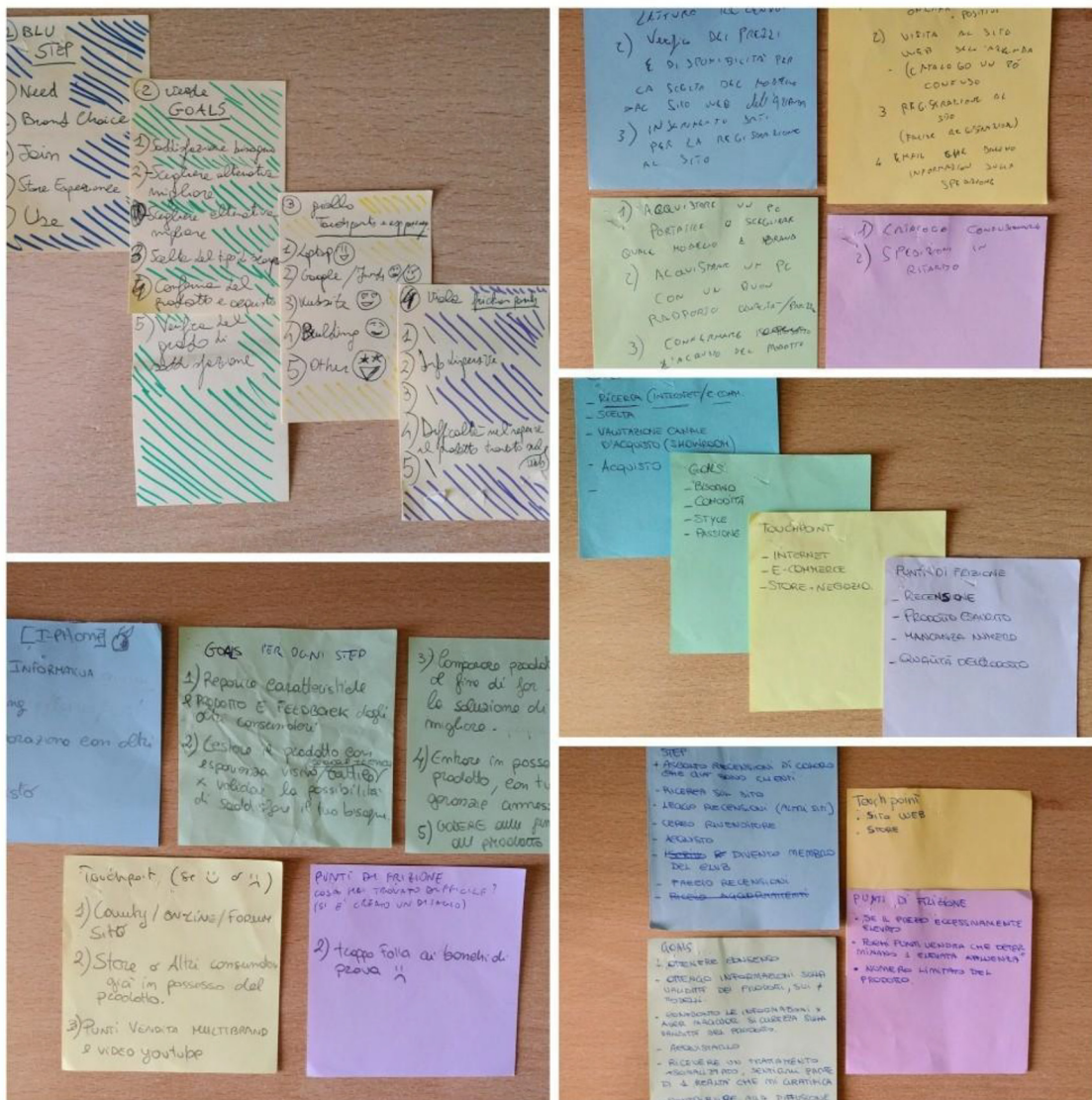
the space to describe what they had felt through sentences, arrows, emojis and notes ([Figure 2](#)).

The use of methods is in alignment with the suggestions of [Halvorsrud et al. \(2016\)](#), as the use of solely sticky notes or diaries highlights only the most critical moments of a CJ, whereas the use of an additional means can encourage the inclusion of other elements, including feelings.

**Data analysis**

The research team started analysing the CJs through the sticky notes and the Uxpressia output. By comparing and differentiating words, and notes, the analysis moved from a single journey to multiple journeys ([Guba and Lincoln, 1994](#)). We discarded incomplete outputs from the software and the related sticky notes. The transcribed information was reviewed to highlight the key elements and their ties—actions, feelings and social interactions.

**Figure 1** Sticky notes: some examples



Discussions among the researchers determined the key aspects on which to focus, such as the emotions and the emojis used. This process was repeated until a satisfactory agreement was reached. This method’s key advantage was the chance to achieve emotion mapping (Johnston and Kong, 2011) as individuals described their personal experience. The analysis of in-depth descriptions and unobtrusive data collection favoured a natural process of expressing feelings and emotions that may otherwise be challenging.

Specifically, a content analysis (Wheeler, 1988) was adopted to detect word usage frequency and concordance analysis to grasp the contextual meaning. After lemmatising the content and discarding useless data (i.e. words such as article and symbols), we identified 25 words with a higher occurrence (Table 2).

Most of these words described actions (search, choose, suggest, shop, think, share, help, decide), information and sources (feedback, tutorial, mobile, reviews, options, websites, videos), people with whom to interact (community, friend, relatives) and feelings or evaluations (need, happiness, positive, negative, stress, sadness). Such analysis allows for the emergence of four main moments labelled with the words most used by millennials: connect, explore, buy and use. A *phygital* map of emotional, behavioural and social experience was

constructed as the millennial CJ. To obtain feedback, we presented the results at two meetings with scholars and practitioners (Creswell, 2002).

**Findings**

The mapping of CJs allowed for the detection of key features and the interplay of online and offline contexts (Table 3). Four key moments—connect, explore, buy and use—identify factors affecting the CX: actions, emotions and social interactions.

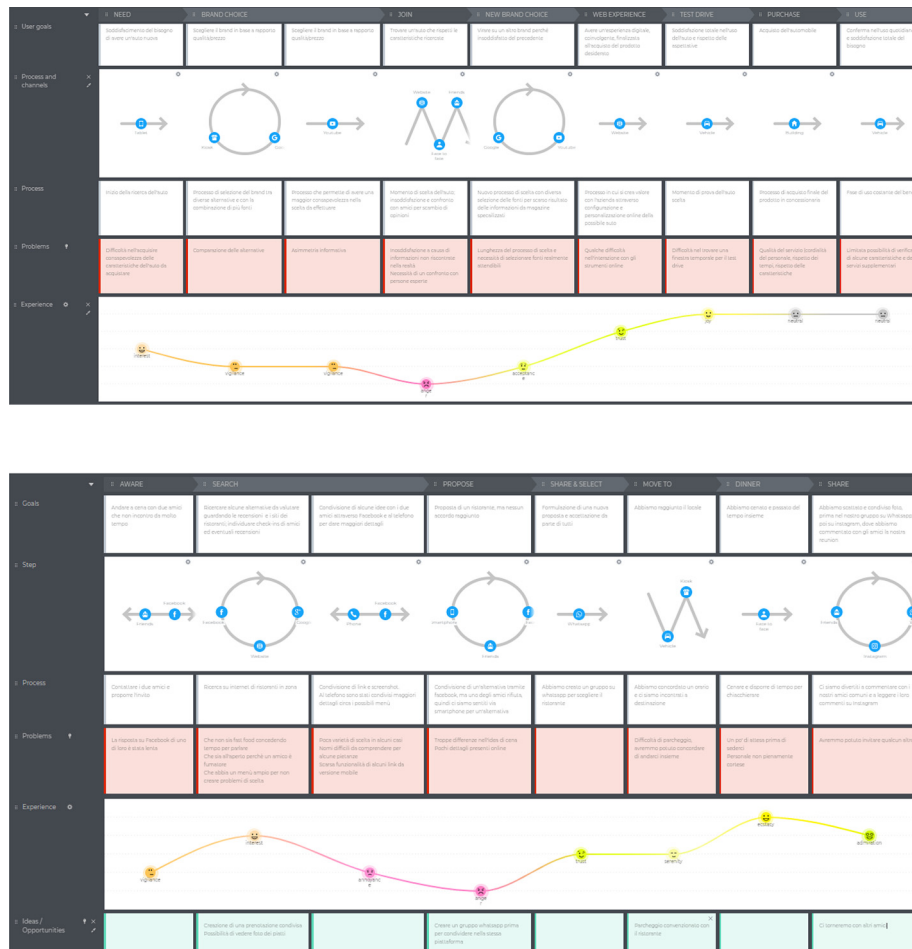
**Connect**

The “Connect” moment refers to the customer’s intention to engage or stay engaged with value propositions. In some instances, when using social media, subjective perception of a need arises to know more about specific offerings. In other instances, it was a conversation with friends or family that caused latent needs to emerge:

*After lunch, I used to spend some time on Instagram following fashion influencers, and last week, I was haunted by a bag and started to look for some information about price, store, etc.*

[source: excerpt n.25 - female, housewife]

Figure 2 Software pictures: two examples



*One of my friends told me about a new model he bought. He seemed so excited that I could not resist thinking about it. I was not sure I really needed a new laptop because mine was still working properly; anyway, I became extremely curious about some new features my friend described.*

[excerpt n.18 - male, student]

Customers began to search for providers—online and offline—who offered what they wanted. Touchpoints helped them identify ways to leverage connections to close the loop with their specific needs. Often, word-of-mouth and websites provided customers the opportunity to activate connections in their own way by acting more autonomously and personalising their engagement. The awareness of what customers wanted became apparent because they aimed to understand whether the journey was about to start in a way they would enjoy:

*Something in my mind pushed me to keep my old car. Anyway, due to my job, I travelled quite a lot; thus, I started to search for some comfortable models online and asked friends for suggestions on brands and models.*

[excerpt n.06 - male, construction worker]

After an initial feeling of excitement and urgency, the respondents often experienced puzzlement, fear, and confusion due to their lack of knowledge and competence; these feelings were mirrored by the emojis they used, with a higher occurrence of negative ones, like grief, boredom or fear. Customers diagnosed the broad problems and searched for ways to reduce their anxiety. When experiencing stress or difficulties, customers solicited social connections and feedback from other customers based on customer ratings or information from blogs, tutorials and other media:

*I needed to move to another city to attend a master course. The idea of change made me so nervous, and I decided to ask for suggestions from communities, and their advice lightened up my mood.*

[excerpt n.35 - female, medical intern]

Inadequate knowledge and competence caused emotional frustration that spurred customers to reduce the gap by collecting information and, thus, engage in the “explore” moment. Otherwise, the urgency to immediately obtain the offering prompted them towards the buy moment.

**Table 2** Most frequent words from the content analysis

25 most frequent words (frequency in %)							
Search	6.7%	Mobile	5.2%	Happy (-ness)	4.2%	Share (-ing)	3.6%
Information	6.3%	Suggest (-s, -ion, -ions)	4.8%	Option (-s)	4.1%	Negative	3.4%
Feedback	5.7%	Review (-s)	4.7%	Positive	4.1%	Help	3.3%
Choose (chose)	5.6%	Need (-s, -ed)	4.5%	Think	4.0%	Video (-s)	3.3%
Community	5.4%	Friend (-s)	4.1%	Website (-s)	3.9%	Decide (-sion, -sions)	3.1%
Tutorial	5.2%	Shop (-s, -ping)	4.3%	Relative (-s)	3.9%	Stress	3.0%
						Sad (-ness)	2.9%

**Table 3** Customer journey

Moments	Actions	Emotions	Social interactions
Connect	Recognising need	Puzzlement	Soliciting other customers' experiences
	Recalling previous experiences	Excitement	Triggering/Being triggered by social media
	Searching for information	Confusion	
	Recognising a knowledge gap	Frustration	
	Recognising a competence gap	Urgency	
Explore	Learning about offerings	Fear	
	Evaluating alternatives	Vigilance	Comparing concurrent experiences
	Increasing trust	Pensiveness	Comparing reviews
	Requesting information	Stress	Asking friends and experts for specific insights
	Reducing the knowledge gap	Emotional ups and downs	Looking at tutorials
Buy	Acquiring the offering	Disappointment	
	Evaluating the purchase	Anxiety	Engaging in in-store interactions
		Enjoyment	Posting on social media
		Confusion	Asking for reviews and incentives
Use		Surprise	Comparing reviews
	Evaluating offerings	Happiness	Triggering/Being triggered by social media
	Becoming confident with the offerings	Surprise	Comparing expectations and reality
	Integrating the offering with other resources	Frustration	Sharing the experience on online communities
		Disappointment	Looking at tutorials
		Anger	Creating videos or new tutorials
			Posting on social media

## Explore

In the “explore” moment, customers wanted to learn more and seized further control of their decision-making process. Recognising that they had a knowledge and competence gap, they sought alternatives to explore, compare and organise helpful information. By searching for content that inspired them to make their choice, they became open to being influenced by different sources. Customers explicitly recalled friends’ suggestions, interactions in online communities, comments on websites and other sources:

*I wanted to buy a videogame for my boyfriend, but I knew how bad I am with such a choice. After bothering most of my friends and relatives, I decided to look for information online; I got very friendly suggestions from some communities. There were so many fanatics of specific games. I learnt a lot!*

[excerpt n.19 - female, student]

Influential touchpoints during this stage involved websites and in-store interactions. Customers trusted online stores and groups to obtain insights and suggestions from people who had already experienced a similar journey but also opted for a physical in-store experience to test offerings if possible. Comparing information online and offline was useful for gleaning visual insights into what was most suitable for them. Customers appreciated entertaining and inspiring content offered authentically, mainly if they were unfamiliar with the product; when the product was experienced first hand, they realised what they could be missing. In reducing such confusion, the role of companies, and especially of tests or tutorials, was a determinant in some cases:

*I tested the product, as I wanted to be sure about what I had read online. Thus, I visited a shop and tested the product; this was useful to verify that I had found what I saw in the digital store. I decided to test the same product once more to verify some features. This led me to choose the product with fewer doubts.*

[excerpt n.02 - female, teacher]

This moment appeared to be incredibly confusing, as customers described themselves as feeling puzzled and worried because they repeatedly thought about the ongoing moment. Often, customers felt confused because they were missing key information or felt stressed due to information overload. The notes and the emojis they chose when describing this stage included question marks, back arrows and erasure marks. The most used emojis in this phase were those representing pensiveness or apprehension as well as joy or serenity due to the up-and-down feelings that their confusion caused. As a result, when customers connected with multiple touchpoints, two main effects were detected: frequent changes in emotions felt and shifts back-and-forth during the journey:

*I compared all the information about alternatives retrieved through websites, social networks, and friends, but was still uncertain. Then, I found a company website allowing an online experience to design the car with all my desired options. However, at the end of the configuration, I felt sad, as I could not spend much money. I restarted with the digital tool and designed a more affordable car. The test drive was essential for me, so I went with the saloon car, but felt frustrated, as I could not find the model of the vehicle with the options I had selected online.*

[excerpt n.42 - male, administrative employee]

Customers were vigilant and sought useful conversations supporting their decision-making process. This moment took place in an enjoyable way when it was perceived as being easily manageable. However, there were also negative examples, such

as when the online community presented too many options, leading to increased complexity in the selection process. In turn, customers felt disappointed by a lack of support from others:

*I was sure about the bracelet I wanted and felt so enthusiastic. However, I found an online forum that attracted my attention, and the opinions about the quality of the jewel and clasp were contrasting. As I was disoriented, I decided to visit the official store, hoping to be reassured by the shop assistants.*

[excerpt n.45 - female, teacher]

Customers collecting information independently or with the support of others reduced the knowledge and competence gap, lowered levels of emotional frustration and spurred entrance into the next moment. In some cases, this also prompted customers to reflect on the moment, extending their interactions and exploring different solutions. However, in the presence of excessive information or too many options, the confusion sometimes increased, and the customer felt stuck.

## Buy

The “buy” moment occurred when customers made their purchase decision. It was a turning point in customers’ minds when the quest for value opportunity and convenience intersected with the appropriate information and selection levels. What customers felt at this moment influenced their decisions down to the very last moment before purchase.

Having access to the correct information from different influential sources represented key aspects, helping customers choose exactly what they were looking for. Any additional insights found online or offline might have changed their ideas about buying something while they were in the final step of their decision. Influential touchpoints were the facilities in the shop, sections in the online stores and chatbots. There were multiple interactions, as customers wanted to be more confident about the offering:

*I was choosing between two cars. Even though I received a fair offer from the first dealer I changed my mind when I visited the second dealer. I had used car magazines, watched videos, and exchanged chats with friends and colleagues. Still, once there, I had the chance to use a tool for customisation and understood that there were many items I could personalise. The car salesman helped me learn how to use the software, and I decided to buy very different car from what I had planned.*

[excerpt n.27 - female, financial specialist]

Positive emotions were coupled with anxiety due to the customers’ expectations of the consequences of their decisional processes; emojis such as vigilance, interest, trust and joy were most used. Customers had the opportunity to leverage the social side of this moment too, by comparing suggestions received from communities and frontline employees in the shop during the experience. There was a mix of expectations and on-site and real-time feelings, leading to a combined physical and digital context:

*When I finally bought a mobile phone, I felt so excited—the stress faded away. This started while I was still in line to pay; I felt an urgent need to thank those I had been in touch with for their support. I did so and messaged a friend who has long supported my choice. It seemed like I had combined the efforts of everyone I had interacted with before visiting the shop, in addition to the traditional support from shop assistants.*

[excerpt n.39 - male, student]



Moreover, the customers confirmed their choices by posting on social media. Sharing the experience increased enjoyment and prompted customers towards the use moment. Often, customers oscillated between the explore and use moments to reduce anxiety and seek wider approval. Customers shared what they did when buying something and the immediate feeling during the purchase. In this way, they activated a mutual exchange and emotions:

*I was in my favourite bakery to pick up the cake I had ordered for my first wedding anniversary. I posted a picture of the cake on Facebook, and in a few minutes, a new photo of a beautiful cake was posted by my best friend. A famous cake-designer made it. I also asked my pastry chef if he knew [the other baker] and his design technique. I began to get confused until I saw the heart emoji that my husband had posted on my photo. I just wanted to run home and enjoy our cake together.*

[excerpt n.28 - female, administrative employee]

## Use

In the “use” moment, customers became confident about whether and how their expectations are satisfied. A customer’s emotional response arouse with either a positive experience or frustration; the emojis used showed ecstasy or admiration in the positive cases, and rage or anger in the opposite ones. In the case of disappointment, customers expected help, both online and offline. The community assisted by illustrating how customers could better use products, thereby confirming the rightness of the choice or casting doubt on the option:

*I bought a new and expensive laptop, but after a few days, I felt lost. My old machine was slower but easier. I looked for video tutorials and suggestions on an online community, but it was not enough. Therefore, I called one of my colleagues, as he is very skilled. He was patient in offering me his help and giving me the chance to learn about how to use the new laptop.*

[excerpt n.44 - male, student]

Customers converted their experiences, positive or negative, into the content on social media and other sharing platforms, to share with more than one friend/acquaintance. They expressed personal feelings and emotions, communicated their buying history and shopping preferences and provided real-time product recommendations:

*I spent the first hours with my virtual assistant by discussing it with a community I had been in touch with. I felt thankful for those who had helped me. Now, I can confidently state that my initial doubts have disappeared, and it feels great to have found a solution, without much effort and with a series of interactions I particularly enjoyed.*

[excerpt n.32 - male, teacher]

Customers expected solutions with evolving content that was personalised and shareable. They became loyal to solutions that made their lives easier and wanted to tap into personalised assistance when needed. The positive responses triggered customers to stay in contact through multiple touchpoints with service providers. The journey seemed to continue:

*I love my kitchen. It is my favourite place to be. I decided to buy a new oven when the previous one stopped working. Before using it, I read all the information, but I was not comfortable when I used it. By searching on the Internet, I found great company videos that helped me. I registered myself for the newsletters, and I downloaded the mobile app to receive continuous suggestions for cooking. I have always liked cooking for my friends, but now I love experimenting with new dishes. I recently bought an oven accessory.*

[excerpt n.24 - female, teacher]

## Discussion

CX is a top priority for academia and businesses (Verhoef et al., 2009; Altimeter, 2018). The rise of Millennials has made traditional decision-making models obsolete. There have been attempts to determine the CJ and CX in less linear ways to capture their complexity (Varnali, 2019).

With a focus on Gen Y, this study contributes to the recent debate by framing how CX emerges through emotional, behavioural and social responses throughout a journey that customers perceive as being a blended online and offline path. In line with the call for a comprehensive approach to the multiple features of these responses (McCull-Kennedy et al., 2019), the phygital CJ involves overlapping moments and touchpoints. Each of them provides a context where different emotions flourish and affect customers’ decisions and actions. Three main theoretical contributions come from the research.

First, in line with recent studies (Trischler et al., 2018), CJ occurs not as a linear sequence but as a fuzzy (Varnali, 2019) process or loop (Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020) performed by customers. The *recursiveness* of the journey deploys in a blended context of online and offline actors, touchpoints, channels, etc., thus, a phygital context. The millennial CJ develops as a dynamic path of four moments – connect, explore, buy, use – seen not as simple touchpoints (Google, 2015) but, rather, as phenomenological microworlds (Ingliš, 2010) of events, interactions, relationships and emotions (Figure 3). The expression “phenomenological microworld” highlights the construction of the visible and invisible, physical and digital sphere of everyday life where CX occurs as a mixture of emotional, behavioural and social responses. “Connect” refers to the customer being engaged with brands, products/services and seeking interactions to find solutions; “explore” depicts the time when customers learn more about offerings and have more control over their decision-making process. “Buy” relates to a customer’s purchasing action; in “use” customers become confident about how the offerings meet their expectations. Online and offline interactions are mutually influential, blur the boundaries between the physical and digital world (i.e. phygital); millennials move back-and-forth or jump from one action to another according to the evolving path of emotions and interactions. Together, the four moments depict the CJ as a complex fuzzy experience, with rollercoaster emotions, contrasting effects and multiple social interactions (Figure 3).

The second contribution addresses the multidimensional experience construct. Each moment of the phygital journey entail a deeper-level experiential journey with multiple online and offline touchpoints and several activities and interactions that affect emotions and behaviours. This aspect also mirrors the opportunity to customise CJs (Spiess et al., 2014). The intended journey is changed by what customers discover during the journey, what their emotions lead to, what insights they gain during interactions (online and offline) and even the consequences of the activities they perform. A journey that can last any length of time occurs in multiple interrelated contexts and is infused with the social, emotional and cognitive spheres. The journey turns into a *phygital* experience.

The third contribution refers to the emotional map as a complementary side of the phygital journey. The emotional dimension of an experience is not a one-way road. Customers

feel puzzled and vigilant (especially at the beginning), happy and joyful (mostly when they first use the product), and angry or disappointed (because of the problems experienced during the research, the evaluation of their options or the use moment). Emotional responses are affected primarily by social interactions and social media, especially Facebook and Instagram. In line with Singh *et al.* (2017), the pivotal role played by peer reviews emerges. Still, it is important to add that the reviews show a two-way process, as customers look for reviews during the journey – mainly in the connect and explore moments – while, in turn, offering their insights at the buy and use moments. The search for reviews is enriched by different emotions (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016), as the high number of online opinions makes customers excited during the connect and explore moments. Still, this sentiment cause confusion and stress during the buy moment, followed by a return to enjoyment and excitement in the use moment, when customers share their experiences with other social actors. Thus, customers move back-and-forth emotionally during the four moments. Behavioural, emotional, and social responses do not emerge as a linear trend. There are dynamic loops according to the continuous change in customers' mood and expectations that shape their holistic lived experience. Each moment can expand into another. The journey is not only unpredictable (Halvorsrud *et al.*, 2016) and non-linear (Kranzbühler *et al.*, 2018); it is also twisted and circular because the use moment can affect the next moment in the journey due to the feelings experienced and shared reviews posted by customers, and the chance to activate word-of-mouth. Moreover, customers recall

information collected in previous moments, comment on the usefulness of the interactions (both online and offline) and update their preferences for the future. In contrast, other customers prefer to disengage from the process and, consequently, from the relationship, especially when they experience negative feelings and effects from use. This initiates a new journey.

In sum, by blurring the boundaries between digital and physical contexts, a *phygital* map develops as a circular path of moments seen as phenomenological microworlds of events, interactions, relationships, and emotions. Each moment is an experiential journey with multiple touchpoints and several interactions that affect customers' emotions and behaviours.

## Implications

Framing the millennial CJ mapping as a set of moments that enact emotional, behavioural and social experiences offers several implications for scholars and practitioners (Table 4).

Scholars can use the visual CJ map to see how millennials interact with a company, brand or product and how they become engaged through different moments and let experience emerges in a *phygital* context. The maps allow us to determine the interplay of social, emotional and behavioural states along the journey.

The millennial CJ must be considered a loop evolving through intertwined moments, amplified, and influenced by multiple touchpoints and social interactions. As CX research increasingly incorporates the dynamism and complexity of digitalisation, the visualisation of the CJ represents an appropriate conceptual approach for explaining its evolutionary

**Figure 3** Millennials customer journey mapping

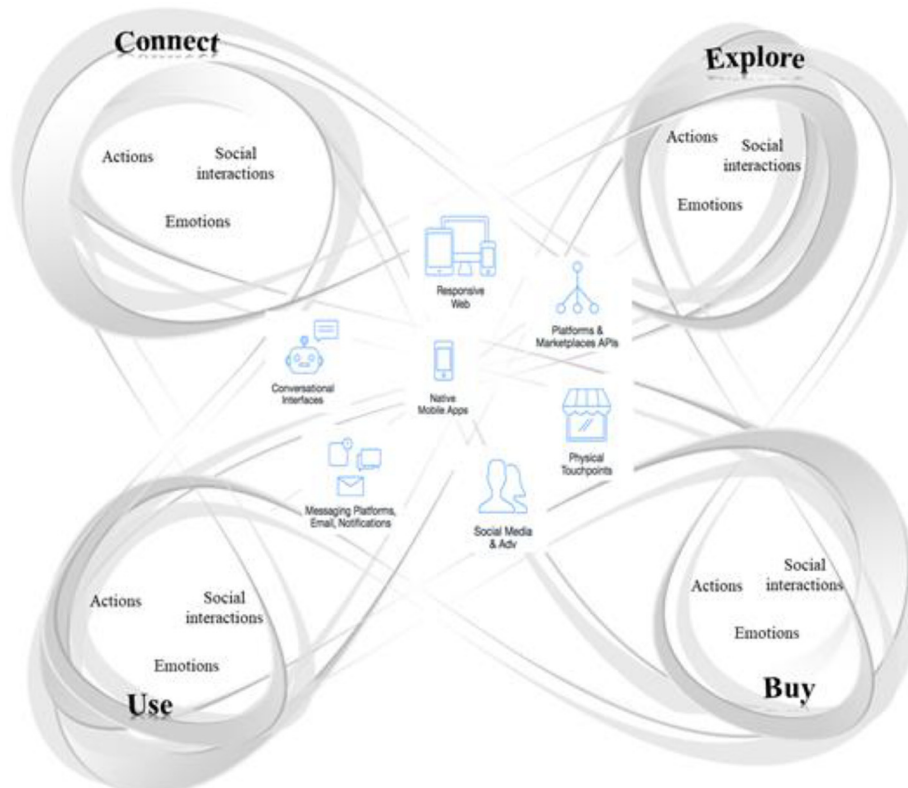


Table 4 Main implications

<b>For scholars</b>	Overcome the divide between the physical and digital by adopting phygital mapping Understand the customers' microworlds Look at the enablers and constraints of the connect, explore, use, and buy moments Improve the understanding along the journey of behavioral, emotional, and social states Use the emotional map
<b>For practitioners</b>	Understand the customers' microworlds and shape value propositions to enhance the experience Design and orchestrate the moments to personalise the customer experience Overcome the divide between the physical and the digital and develop phygital mapping Offer enablers and remove the constraints on the connect, explore, use, and buy moments Improve the interplay among touchpoints to increase and facilitate customer interactions Update information and provide real-time data Recognise the role of peers and offer a guide through the plethora of reviews and online information Offer thresholds of conversion rather than direct response funnels Use the emotional map, take care of the emotional state, and fuel the positive emotional response
<b>For policymakers</b>	Face the tensions of the digital divide and generation gap Understand the next societal challenges that are mirrored by the shift in millennials' behavior Address the conflicts and tensions caused by the digital and the connected urgency Explore ethical implications of personal data management and sharing

path. Further research can focus on the enablers and constraints of the four moments. Moreover, a more dynamic and holistic approach centred on customers' microworlds and their interplays must be embraced. Such microworlds are contexts that mesh human interactions, emotional and social states. The development of the emotional map can be of help in this endeavour.

Also, practitioners must achieve accurate visibility and a proper understanding of the path that millennials take to capture what they think, do and feel. Efforts to visualise the CJ are useful for reversing its increasing unpredictability and better supporting the development of a provider's value propositions. Managers' efforts should understand how customers connect to companies and their value propositions and how they proceed through the other moments.

It has become a significant issue in the digital era to collect, analyse and interpret real data and dynamically map the journey within a customer's ecosystems. The key is to change managers' linear mindset, understand how customers make decisions in interconnected and social contexts and design and orchestrate moments accordingly to enable a unique CX. Each CJ is different and is steered towards creating the most personalised experience possible based on emotional, social and behavioural dynamics involving multiple interactions and touchpoints. Different customers' microworlds, made up of human interactions, emotional states and touchpoints, constitute and are constituted by the CJ. Unexpected circumstances and intentions can influence the back-and-forth movements during the moments. Understanding these changes and facing these challenges will lead companies to improve CX through a new way of designing and orchestrating the CJ as an unstructured path tailored to fit customers' microworlds. Companies must offer thresholds of conversion rather than direct response funnels.

### Limitations and further research

This study has some limitations that can inform further research. First, visual mapping of CJs can be seen as a subjective and interpretative technique (Rosenbaum et al., 2017), as authors

grasped meaning from what respondents described through sticky notes and the software, while some elements, such as the motivation beyond an action, may still be hidden. Additional information from field research and techniques may capture the CJ in its real setting. Further research can opt for mixed methods and offer additional insights.

Second, the study focuses on millennials, thus adopting a singular perspective. Further research can include different generations of millennial cohorts to analyse the influence of the individual features on CJs. Millennials tend to be more self-sufficient than older generations and want to figure out things for themselves. New technologies, social media and sharing opportunities are the main reasons millennials are self-reliant because of their feedback. Thus, the differences in personality traits, attitudes and values according to the different age ranges could be analysed in-depth as discriminating factors of behaviours.

Third, previous works conclude that experience is context-dependent (Edvardsson et al., 2018). Although this study recognises the crucial role of the environment, there is no evidence of how it affects CJ. Future research could analyse social, symbolic and natural contextual elements.

Moreover, the investigation considers the role of digital devices and platforms. The development of smart technologies could offer further analysis to push forward the opportunities for memorable experiences (Mele et al., 2019). There is a need to stimulate a systematic discussion on both human and non-human elements and their impacts on different moments and if and how cognitive technologies will open new avenues for CX.

Finally, our research context is shaped by respondents from Italy. Therefore, the expansion of the research context and the chance to compare other backgrounds could widen the relevance of results and lead to consideration of culture as a key element in CJs.

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