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Artificial Intelligence in B2B Marketing: Managing the Customer Journey in the Digital Age

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Abstract (ENG)

This thesis examines how artificial intelligence is being adopted in business-to-business marketing and how it shapes the management of the customer journey. Based on four semi-structured interviews with professionals from German firms, mainly in IT and one in defence, the study explores drivers of adoption, applications across prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase phases, organisational shifts and customer outcomes. Findings show firms typically start with efficiency goals (automation, faster execution) but evolve toward value creation through personalisation, predictive analytics and improved coordination between marketing, sales and service. AI adoption triggers upskilling, process formalisation and cross-functional collaboration, yet also faces resistance, tool overload and ethical concerns regarding data protection, bias and transparency. For practice, the study argues that AI should augment, not replace, human relationships; selective use cases deliver the greatest impact. The thesis contributes by providing an empirical account of AI-enabled CRM in B2B contexts and by outlining implications for responsible, trust-preserving deployment.

Titolo (ITA)

Intelligenza Artificiale nel Marketing B2B: la gestione del customer journey nell'era digitale

Abstract (ITA)

Questa tesi esamina come l'intelligenza artificiale venga adottata nel marketing business-to-business e come influenzi la gestione del customer journey. Basandosi su quattro interviste semi-strutturate con professionisti di aziende tedesche, prevalentemente nel settore IT e una nel settore della difesa, lo studio esplora i fattori che guidano l'adozione, le applicazioni nelle fasi di pre-acquisto, acquisto e post-acquisto, i cambiamenti organizzativi e gli effetti per i clienti. I risultati mostrano che le imprese iniziano generalmente con obiettivi di efficienza (automazione, maggiore rapidità di esecuzione), ma evolvono verso la creazione di valore attraverso la personalizzazione, l'analisi predittiva e un miglior coordinamento tra marketing, vendite e servizio clienti. L'adozione dell'IA innesca processi di sviluppo delle competenze, formalizzazione dei processi e collaborazione tra diverse funzioni aziendali, ma incontra anche resistenze, sovraccarico di strumenti e preoccupazioni etiche relative alla protezione dei dati, ai bias e alla trasparenza. Dal punto di vista pratico, lo studio sostiene che l'IA dovrebbe integrare, e non sostituire, le relazioni umane; i casi d'uso selettivi generano il maggiore impatto. La tesi contribuisce alla letteratura offrendo un'analisi empirica del CRM abilitato dall'IA nei contesti B2B e delineando implicazioni per un'implementazione responsabile e orientata alla preservazione della fiducia.

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List of Abbreviations

AI	Artificial Intelligence
B2B	Business-to-Business
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
EU	European Union
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
KAM	Key Account Management
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
SLA	Service Level Agreement

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly transformed the way firms operate, compete and interact with their customers. Among these technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) has gained particular prominence as a driver of innovation and efficiency. AI is no longer confined to technical domains such as data processing or automation but is progressively embedded into marketing, sales and customer management practices. Especially in business-to-business, or B2B contexts, where transactions are complex, relationships are long-term and contracts often involve high value, AI offers opportunities to reshape how firms manage customer interactions and build sustainable competitive advantage.

Although the use of AI in business-to-consumer, or B2C, marketing has been widely studied, the B2B domain has received less attention in both academic and managerial discussions. Yet, the potential impact of AI in B2B markets may be even greater. Unlike consumer markets, B2B exchanges involve smaller numbers of customers, longer decision-making processes and deeper relational dynamics. In this setting, trust and tailored communication are essential. AI can assist firms in collecting and analysing vast amounts of data, identifying patterns, anticipating customer needs and enabling forms of hyper-personalisation that would be difficult to achieve otherwise. However, AI also raises challenges such as data security, maintaining authenticity in customer relationships, and internal resistance to technological change.

The growing adoption of AI in B2B marketing reflects external pressures, such as increasing customer expectations, competitive intensity and regulatory requirements, and internal motivations, including efficiency gains, process optimisation and innovation. At the same time, firms differ in how they implement AI, ranging from basic automation in lead generation to advanced applications in customer service, account management and strategic decision-making. Understanding the drivers, practices and consequences of AI adoption in B2B marketing is therefore a timely and relevant research goal.

From an academic perspective, there is still a knowledge gap regarding the concrete ways in which AI is integrated into B2B marketing and how it affects the customer journey. Existing research has often focused on the technical aspects of AI tools or on consumer-facing applications, leaving open questions about their role in B2B environments. Moreover, although scholars have explored concepts such as Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Key Account Management (KAM) as frameworks for managing customer interactions, less is known about how AI can be embedded into these established practices to support firms.

This thesis seeks to contribute to filling this gap by examining how AI is applied in B2B marketing to manage the customer journey and what implications arise for firms and their customers. To guide the investigation, the study is structured around the following research questions:

1. What are the drivers and motivations for companies to adopt AI in B2B marketing?
2. How is AI applied across different phases of the B2B customer journey?
3. What benefits and challenges do companies observe from using AI in customer journey management?
4. How do these applications influence customer relationships and perceptions of value?

These research questions are addressed through a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with managers and professionals from companies primarily operating in IT-related fields in Germany, alongside one case from the defence sector. The study aims to make two main contributions. First, it offers an empirical account of how AI is currently being used in B2B marketing, shedding light on operational and strategic applications. Second, it provides implications for B2B marketers and KAMs and highlights the opportunities that AI creates and the organisational, cultural and ethical challenges that accompany its adoption. By doing so, the thesis contributes to the broader discussion on how digital technologies reshape customer management in the digital age.

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical background, discussing the specificities of B2B marketing, the role of customer relationship management and key account management and the potential of AI applications along the customer journey. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, including research design, data collection and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings structured around drivers of adoption, applications across journey phases and observed outcomes. Chapter 5 discusses these findings in light of the existing literature and outlines implications for B2B marketers. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis, summarising the key contributions and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Background

This chapter presents the theoretical background of the thesis. It first outlines the characteristics of B2B exchanges and explains why CRM and KAM provide suitable frameworks for managing relationships (Section 2.1). It then defines AI in marketing and discusses its core capabilities and applications (Section 2.2). Lastly, the chapter outlines how the concept of the customer journey has been adapted to B2B contexts, highlighting its phases, iterative nature and orchestration challenges (Section 2.3).

2.1 Characteristics of B2B Marketing and Customer Relationship Management

2.1.1 What Makes B2B Contexts Different

Business-to-business markets differ from business-to-consumer markets in ways that change how demand is created and how relationships are managed. Suppliers sell to organisations that integrate the purchased solution into their operations, unlike B2C transactions aimed at individual end users. For this reason, demand is often derived from the needs of downstream industries and the purchase often goes beyond a single item. It is typically a bundle that brings together products, services and integration work. Decisions are not taken by individuals but by teams under formal procurement procedures that compare options based on price and also on risk exposure, interoperability and life cycle cost.

Another important distinction pertains to what the customer journey looks like. In B2C markets, much of the process is visible to the supplier, whereas in B2B many of the early stages of the customer journey such as searching for information, comparing suppliers or discussing options internally, take place across digital channels without the supplier's direct involvement. This leaves the supplier to infer the stage of the journey an account has reached from indirect signals such as repeated visits to its website or multiple downloads from the same corporate domain. The challenge is to consolidate these disconnected signals into a coherent account profile and

turn them into timely actions grounded in evidence while still complying with data protection requirements (Marvasti et al., 2021, p. 127).

B2B exchanges also extend far beyond the initial transaction. The relationship continues from pre-purchase through purchase to utilisation and service, and it typically involves two distinct groups inside the customer organisation: the buying centre that selects the supplier and the usage centre that creates value in operations. Recent research highlights that this journey is not linear but rather iterative and customer-centred, as deployment, service and post-sale collaboration are just as important as the initial purchase—a clear distinction from B2C contexts (Purmonen et al., 2023, p. 80). Customers also interact with several functions of the supplier—marketing, sales, delivery, service—thus cross-functional coordination inside a firm is crucial. In many industries, a technology provider is also part of the picture, working alongside supplier and customer. This triadic structure increases interdependence and requires joint planning and clear governance (Li et al., 2021, p. 106).

These conditions (multi-actor decisions, longer and less visible cycles, value realised after the sale and interdependence within networks) explain why relationship governance and coordination are at the heart of B2B relationships. They also explain why CRM and KAM serve as central frameworks for relationship management and illustrate why, when enhanced by AI, they provide a firm with the ability to detect signals earlier and to convert evidence-based insights into coordinated actions along the customer journey.

2.1.2 CRM in B2B Contexts

Customer Relationship Management, or CRM, has been defined by Payne and Frow (2005, p. 168) as "a strategic approach that is concerned with creating improved shareholder value through the development of appropriate relationships with key customers and customer segments. CRM unites the potential of relationship marketing strategies and IT to create

profitable, long-term relationships with customers and other key stakeholders." Buttle and Maklan (2019, p. 17) reinforced this view by calling CRM "the core business strategy that integrates internal processes and functions, and external networks, to create and deliver value to targeted customers at a profit." Despite the influence of these definitions, the literature has not converged on a single understanding of CRM. As Zablah et al. (2004, p. 476ff.) observed, CRM has been conceptualised in at least three distinct ways: as a philosophy that guides customer-centric thinking, as a set of organisational processes and as a technological system that enables coordination. This diversity of perspectives shows that, although in practice CRM has often been reduced to its technological dimension, research has long emphasised its broader nature. Scholars stress that effective CRM requires the integration of people, processes and technology (Chen & Popovich, 2003, p. 672f.), which positions it as a comprehensive managerial framework rather than a purely technological application.

Building on these definitions, this thesis considers CRM as an integrative and cross-functional framework that spans the entire life cycle of the relationship, from customer acquisition to long-term account management, so that marketing, sales, delivery and service work together for both buying and usage centres. Established frameworks describe four layers within this process: Strategic CRM, which defines customer-centred strategy, account prioritisation, value propositions and governance; Analytical CRM, which translates data into insights; Operational CRM, which deploys and automates processes; and Collaborative CRM, which aligns activities throughout channels and organisations (Buttle & Maklan, 2019, p. 6ff.; Saura et al., 2021, p. 163).

Because the B2B process involves several participants and extends beyond the order into use and service, the challenge lies in connecting and coordinating all the points of contact with the customer. Marketing, sales, delivery and service need to come together so that the relationship develops as an integrated whole rather than a chain of independent efforts. Industrial market

research shows that businesses achieve improved results when they integrate tools and data in a manner that inputs from one phase inform the subsequent step, and when marketing and sales align to one single view of the account (Rustholkarhu et al., 2022, p. 241). Technology alone cannot guarantee this alignment; its achievement depends on organisational capabilities, for example, establishing clear rules for how customer data are handled, making sure key account decisions have defined ownership, and establishing routines that promote learning and interdepartmental collaboration.

Where such capabilities are in place, marketing analytics enhances a firm's ability to detect opportunities and risks, to act in time and to adjust processes as conditions change. Combined with AI, these practices become a source of competitive advantage (Hossain et al., 2022, p. 245). Evidence supports this view: firms that implement AI-enabled CRM with high quality, meaning that the systems are aligned with organisational skills and norms, report higher performance and better competitive positions (Chatterjee et al., 2021, p. 214).

As a whole, these points support CRM as a relationship strategy that integrates data into the routines and teams that manage the account, with AI as an enabler within that framework rather than as a strategy in its own right. Since customer contributions to value creation differ, CRM strategies often concentrate on a smaller set of accounts that carry strategic weight. This is where Key Account Management provides the organisational focus for turning customer strategy into structured practice.

2.1.3 Key Account Management as the Relational Core of B2B Strategy

Key Account Management, or KAM, gives organisational form to a firm's focus on its most important customers. It creates dedicated structures and allocates resources so that these relationships are managed in a systematic way. KAM works best when responsibilities are clearly defined and when collaboration across departments becomes part of everyday practice

rather than an ad hoc effort. Under these conditions, account teams can mobilise internal resources to make sure that products and services remain aligned with customer expectations, and they translate the customer's requests into concrete requirements that other teams inside a firm can implement, which helps maintain continuity between what is promised before the contract and what is delivered afterwards (Homburg et al., 2002, p. 44f.; Workman et al., 2003, p. 3ff.).

KAM extends beyond the initial sale: once a deal is signed, KAM steers the relationship end to end. The account team plans jointly with the customer, adapts the solution to specific contexts, oversees delivery and support operations with both the buying and usage centres. Given that a substantial portion of the value is realised following the transaction, KAM safeguards continuity between the commitments made in the proposal and the results experienced by customers during usage. To achieve this result, KAM relies on formal procedures such as service-level agreements (SLAs) that specify targets and responsibilities, as well as regular reviews.

Artificial intelligence does not alter the purpose of Key Account Management; it changes how the work is conducted. Account choices across the journey can be based on up-to-date data and decision-support systems rather than solely on intuition. This sharpens priorities and helps teams detect risks earlier, giving them more time to adjust strategies. Such benefits, however, only materialise when accountability is assigned unambiguously and when continuity is maintained across process steps so that each handoff has a clear owner. Equally important is that the tools used at the customer interface—whether CRM dashboards, service portals or account review systems—keep human judgement visible and accountable, so that automation supports rather than replaces responsible decision-making (Prior & Marcos-Cuevas, 2025, p. 81).

Understanding how KAM operates in practice requires clarity on structures and governance,

but also on the different levels at which relationships unfold. The next section introduces these levels and the analytical lenses used to interpret their outcomes.

2.1.4 Governance, Risk and Trust as Relationship Enablers

In B2B most of the value is created after the sale, during use and service, so relationship outcomes depend less on the initial contract and more on what the supplier knows about the account and on the quality of subsequent decisions in interactions with the customer (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2022, p. 249ff.). When AI is used in CRM systems, the system occupies the middle ground as the point of interaction where teams update and retrieve the customer record and where they receive guidance on account choices. The platform stores sensitive data and automatically triggers predefined actions, for instance generating a renewal quote or initiating a support case. In this sense, it mediates between internally managed information and the actions directed at the customer, linking data handling to concrete actions taken in managing the relationship. Without explicit governance, a firm is exposed to the risk of losing visibility over how data have been handled, how important decisions have been authorised and on what grounds recommendations have been accepted. To prevent such gaps, firms implement clearly defined policies that list who can see or modify customer data, ensure that every modification has an auditable history and require customer-facing decisions such as price or service adjustments to be subject to predefined approval paths with recorded justification when managers override the system's recommendation (Saura et al., 2021, p. 161f.; Chatterjee et al., 2021, p. 207).

However, internal governance alone is not sufficient, as even well-designed systems can still produce biased results. Biases may enter through the training data, for example, when certain customer segments are over-represented and others are missing. Biases may arise from the model, if its design focuses too much on certain variables, or from deployment, when

recommendations are made mechanically without consideration of the customer's situation. If left uncorrected, these issues accumulate: some accounts may receive consistently poorer service or pricing may become inconsistent between customers. To reduce such threats, firms assign specific responsibility for data and models, conduct regular fairness checks with documented results and set predefined responses when anomalies occur (Mehrabi et al., 2021, p. 3ff.). Nonetheless, technical protections are not the whole story: adoption remains a challenge, as managers may be reluctant to rely on AI recommendation systems unless they are given a rationale for why a recommendation was produced. Explainable AI addresses this problem because it makes the factors behind a recommendation transparent and offers managers the option of overriding the response with a documented justification if the context requires it, thereby building trust within the system and increasing managers' willingness to embrace AI in work operations (Gaczek et al., 2023, p. 128ff.).

These challenges concern how AI functions inside a firm. At the network level, there are other exposures that arise as technology providers collaborate with buyers and suppliers. If an AI platform intermediates customer data and channel access, it makes transactions easier and, at the same time, manages the flow of information and the channels through which the customer may be reached. In this way, the provider now acts as a gatekeeper, which can shift bargaining power and make it harder to assign responsibility if anything goes wrong. The resulting risks are concrete: firms may lack transparency into how recommendations are generated, accountability may weaken when fault is shared among several parties, and reliance on a single platform can create lock-in to the provider's ecosystem (Keegan et al., 2023, p. 228ff.). To mitigate these risks, KAM programmes undertake governance actions outside the boundaries of a firm. They utilise contractual clauses that secure data access and portability, they maintain audit rights over processes involving the provider and they implement technical safeguards that guarantee visibility into the operation of the platform. This keeps responsibility visible even

when part of the relationship is mediated by a third party (Prior & Marcos-Cuevas, 2025, p. 78f.).

Beyond firm and network precautions, firms also operate under external constraints. In the EU, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, Regulation (EU) 2016/679) defines the limits of customer data collection and processing in CRM. Its core principles (lawful basis, purpose limitation, data minimisation and access control) require firms to explain why they are processing data, limit themselves to what is absolutely necessary and keep access under control. Where processing is likely to pose significant risks to individuals' rights, e.g. by means of mass profiling, systematic monitoring or other automated decision-making with significant effects, Article 35 of the GDPR requires a Data Protection Impact Assessment to anticipate such risks and set out how they will be mitigated.

Compliance with regulation is necessary, but that does not imply that decision-makers will perceive the system as trustworthy. For AI in CRM to be credible, it must perform consistently, and this involves more than meeting formal requirements. Models trained on past data may lose accuracy as behaviour and market conditions evolve, and managers may hesitate to act on recommendations if they cannot see the reasoning behind them (Gaczek et al., 2023, p. 128). Research shows that firms address these challenges through sustained practices: they track how models perform in deployment, make the logic underlying recommendations explicit so users can assess their applicability, and construct feedback loops that turn errors into learning opportunities (Khvatova et al., 2024, p. 13859).

What emerges from this discussion is that governance, risk management and compliance form the ground rules of B2B relationships. They make sure that customer data are handled responsibly, that decisions remain open to scrutiny and that accountability is preserved even when technology providers are involved. This provides the basis on which AI-enabled CRM and KAM can function in a sustainable way.

Overall, Section 2.1 has shown how the specific conditions of B2B exchange make relationship governance, coordination and trust central to performance, and why CRM and KAM serve as suitable organising logics. This groundwork now allows the discussion to shift to the role of artificial intelligence and how it is defined and applied in B2B marketing.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence in Marketing: Definitions, Core Capabilities and Applications

2.2.1 Defining Artificial Intelligence in a B2B Marketing Context

Artificial intelligence has gradually moved from being treated as a purely technical concept to a managerial concern that reshapes how firms compete and create value. In its most general sense, AI has been defined as "the use of computational machinery to emulate capabilities inherent in humans, such as doing physical or mechanical tasks, thinking, and feeling" (Huang & Rust, 2021, p. 31). This broad characterisation stresses that AI extends beyond simple automation, encompassing functions of reasoning, adaptation and interaction. In the marketing domain, however, the meaning of AI cannot be reduced to a single definition. Scholars underline that it should be understood as a constellation of techniques (including machine learning, natural language processing, deep learning) that enable organisations to interpret large volumes of data and transform them into actionable knowledge (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 26ff.). This perspective shifts attention from technical performance to the ways in which firms integrate AI into marketing processes, where its value emerges through the capacity to translate information into knowledge that informs customer management.

Although definitional debates provide a useful starting point, it is the managerial interpretation of AI that reveals its practical significance. Marketing scholars increasingly argue that the role of AI is not to replace human intelligence but to augment it, offering decision support that broadens the scope of managerial judgement (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 27f.). AI systems are particularly effective at uncovering hidden regularities in vast datasets. Their outputs, however,

only gain relevance once managers interpret them, connect them to strategy and align them with the specific business context and customer expectations. Accordingly, AI does not operate as an isolated technology but as part of an organisational learning system, where model-driven insights are filtered through human judgement and embedded into processes that influence how firms create and capture value in B2B markets (Paschen et al., 2020, p. 403ff.).

This perspective highlights that AI in marketing acquires significance only within the organisational setting where data, processes and relationships intersect. Its relevance depends less on the sophistication of algorithms than on the ways in which managers embed their outputs into strategic choices and customer interactions. Artificial intelligence strengthens B2B marketing by combining a technical layer, where data-driven systems identify patterns and generate predictions, with a strategic layer, where managers interpret these insights to adjust processes, direct resources and refine offerings that address stakeholder needs. In effect, AI operates through the micro-foundations of dynamic capabilities (sensing, seizing and transforming), enabling firms to adapt in uncertain environments and translate analytical insight into sustained competitive outcomes (Mikalef et al., 2021, p. 81). For the purposes of this thesis, AI in marketing is therefore defined in relational terms: as a set of technologies and organisational practices that transform data into insights, and as a governance-dependent process in which trust and human interpretation remain central.

2.2.2 Core Capabilities of AI in Marketing

The value of artificial intelligence in marketing is best understood through the specific capabilities it brings into practice. Although the terminology used by scholars may differ, three broad areas appear in the literature: predictive and prescriptive analytics, process automation and knowledge generation for decision support. These capabilities explain why AI has become a central driver of innovation in marketing and, increasingly, in B2B contexts.

Predictive and prescriptive analytics represent the most established field of application. Predictive models employ machine learning techniques to detect patterns in data and forecast outcomes such as demand fluctuations, customer churn or shifts in customer needs (Huang & Rust, 2021, p. 31f.; Chatterjee et al., 2023, p. 165). In B2B markets, where contracts are high in value and decision cycles can be lengthy, such forecasts enable firms to plan resources more effectively and to prepare for extended negotiations. On this basis, prescriptive analytics go a step further, pointing managers towards possible courses of action such as tailoring an offer to the customer, adjusting pricing strategies or prioritising promising leads (Paschen et al., 2020, p. 408ff.; Akter et al., 2020, p. 260). Rather than replacing human judgement, these tools structure the options available and clarify trade-offs, giving managers a firmer basis for decisions under uncertain circumstances.

A second important capability is process automation. AI makes it possible to streamline marketing operations, from campaign management and performance reporting to customer service interactions. This is visible, for instance, in the use of AI bots that handle routine customer requests, in systems that automatically segment large client databases or in programmatic platforms that manage the bidding of digital advertising space (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 25f.). In B2B settings, the contribution of automation lies less in replacing personal contact and more in reducing administrative burden in pre-sales and service activities. By handling repetitive or time-consuming tasks, AI frees managers to concentrate on relationship-building and other strategic decisions that remain essential in complex buying processes (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 26; Syam & Sharma, 2018, p. 139).

The third capability is knowledge generation for decision support. AI systems are particularly effective at consolidating fragmented signals that firms collect from multiple sources such as digital platforms, customer service or market intelligence. When these signals are connected, they form a more complete picture of the customer, one that can orient both immediate

marketing actions and longer-term strategic planning (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 25). In B2B contexts, where much of the customer journey takes place out of sight of the supplier, this ability to generate insights from scattered information becomes particularly valuable. It helps firms detect opportunities earlier, coordinate account teams more effectively and maintain alignment between customer expectations and the solutions delivered.

Overall, these three capabilities show how AI extends the analytical and operational reach of marketing. More importantly, they show that the real contribution of AI is not limited to faster data processing: it lies in helping managers make better-informed decisions and sustain long-term relationships in complex B2B environments.

2.2.3 Applications across Marketing Functions

Artificial intelligence is changing how marketing activities are carried out in B2B settings. While the previous section focused on core capabilities, their practical relevance becomes clear when applied across specific functions. A first domain is CRM and KAM. Here, AI supports firms in managing complex relationships by consolidating and analysing large amounts of customer data. Sales teams gain support in developing more accurate profiles, identifying hidden account dynamics and prioritising opportunities (Fehrenbach et al., 2025, p. 1ff.). At the same time, the integration of AI into CRM is not purely technical: it requires robust data governance, organisational change management and mechanisms to transfer tacit knowledge (Ledro et al., 2023, p. 56ff.). Without attention to these socio-technical aspects, efficiency gains may come at the cost of confidence and long-term relational stability (Keegan et al., 2022, p. 41).

In sales and lead management, artificial intelligence plays a key role in identifying and prioritising prospects. A central application is predictive lead scoring, where algorithms combine structured information, such as demographic attributes or transaction histories, with

unstructured data like emails or website interactions to estimate conversion likelihood. Companies such as Dell have successfully applied this technique to increase the efficiency of their sales force (Paschen et al., 2020, p. 408). Beyond prospecting, AI also supports the pre-approach and approach stages of the sales process by enabling targeted advertising and automating first contact through chatbots (Paschen et al., 2020, p. 408f.). These tools help firms engage potential clients more effectively and tailor communications to their interests. Still, the human role remains indispensable: as Paschen et al. (2020, p. 408ff.) emphasise, sales professionals are needed to interpret AI-generated outputs, validate suggested leads and conduct negotiations, where empathy and trust remain decisive.

Another important application of AI is customer journey management. Khvatova et al. (2024, p. 13854ff.) show that AI technologies can collect and integrate data from multiple sources, enabling firms to build more accurate customer profiles and deliver personalised interactions. These capabilities provide the foundation for mapping and optimising the customer journey. However, many firms struggle to realise this potential, as organisational resistance to process change and the difficulty of integrating data sources slow down adoption in practice (Khvatova et al., 2024, p. 13854f.). Similar challenges arise in campaign and content optimisation. AI-powered tools can generate customised material and dynamically adjust targeting to reach the most promising audiences (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 25ff.). Although these advances accelerate decision-making and increase precision in targeting, Pantano et al. (2024, p. A1f.) stress that managerial oversight is essential to ensure that AI-generated content remains consistent with brand values.

Beyond individual functions, differences between consumer and business markets further shape how AI technologies are applied. In consumer markets, AI applications tend to be customer-facing and designed to deliver personalisation at scale. By contrast, in B2B contexts the buying process is typically longer, involves multiple stakeholders and depends heavily on inter-

organisational relationships. This makes the deployment of AI more complex, as predictive insights must be embedded in collective decision-making structures rather than targeted at individual customers (Paschen et al., 2020, p. 407).

To sum up, AI applications span CRM, sales, customer journey management and campaign optimisation, offering firms powerful tools to strengthen data-driven marketing. Their impact, however, depends as much on technological sophistication as on organisational readiness and on safeguards that guarantee ethical integrity and relational trust.

2.3 B2B Customer Journey Phases

The concept of the customer journey is a central framework for understanding how firms interact with their customers across different touchpoints. Though it is shared across business and consumer markets, where in consumer contexts purchase decisions are typically quick and individual, its adaptation to the B2B domain reveals a far more complex reality. B2B customer journeys unfold over extended time horizons, involve multiple decision-makers from different organisational units and are deeply embedded in long-term inter-organisational relationships (Purmonen et al., 2023, p. 77; Andersson et al., 2024, p. 161). They are rarely linear: instead of progressing smoothly from need recognition to purchase, firms may revisit earlier stages due to changing needs, renegotiations or challenges during implementation (De Keyser et al., 2025, p. 8). For this reason, studies portray the B2B journey not as a stepwise process but as a cyclical, relational and orchestrated phenomenon, shaped by inter-organisational ties and by the way managers coordinate activities across digital and personal channels (Purmonen et al., 2023, p. 78f.; De Keyser et al., 2025, p. 4).

2.3.1 The Phases

Although non-linear in practice, scholars commonly distinguish three overarching phases that

provide a useful organising structure for analysis: prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase.

Prepurchase. The journey begins when organisations recognise a need or opportunity. Triggers are usually internal, such as efficiency targets, technological transformation or regulatory compliance, rather than consumer-style drivers like advertising. Once a need is articulated, buyers enter a prolonged process of information search and supplier evaluation (Purmonen et al., 2023, p. 77ff.). Andersson et al. (2024, p. 161f.) show that digitalisation has dramatically reshaped this stage: buyers now complete much of their assessment independently, consulting industry reports, white papers, peer networks and online platforms before contacting suppliers. This shift decentralises the process, as many decisive touchpoints lie outside supplier control. Purmonen et al. (2023, p. 81) highlight that these include both direct interactions, such as demonstrations or consultations, and indirect ones, such as reviews or professional discussions. For suppliers, the challenge is to sustain credibility and visibility across this fragmented landscape, ensuring that digital marketing efforts complement rather than replace personal expertise.

Purchase. Moving from evaluation to commitment is typically a collective and highly formalised step, as multiple individuals from the buying organisation, such as procurement officers, financial managers and technical experts, are usually involved in the decision process (Andersson et al., 2024, p. 163). Although digital tools support comparison and documentation, Andersson et al. (2024, p. 163) emphasise that personal contact remains decisive, especially for complex or high-value solutions. They also distinguish between different buying situations: when a firm is facing a new task, building trust through face-to-face interaction is crucial; in modified rebuys, digital tools can speed up the process but cannot replace human input; in straight rebuys, automated routines often suffice. De Keyser et al. (2025, p. 4) note that what makes these processes successful is not only technical agreement but also convergence between the goals of the buying organisation and the supplier's capacity to adapt solutions.

Postpurchase. In B2B markets, what happens after delivery is often the decisive factor for the future of the relationship. Implementation, integration, training, maintenance and performance evaluation all shape whether customers remain satisfied (De Keyser et al., 2025, p. 7). Positive outcomes can lead to renewals or deeper collaboration whereas failures can prompt a search for alternatives and damage the supplier's reputation. Purmonen et al. (2023, p. 79) show that experiences in this stage frequently trigger new purchase cycles, making the journey circular. Specifically, they describe the emergence of "loyalty loops," where satisfied customers bypass the lengthy evaluation phase and return directly to trusted suppliers. Beyond retention, positive postpurchase experiences can also strengthen loyalty loops and lay a foundation for expanded collaboration between buyer and supplier.

2.3.2 Iterative and Relational Nature

Although analytically divided, these phases are fluid and interdependent in practice. Pilot projects may generate results that re-open earlier evaluations, whereas regulatory shifts can impose new requirements and force firms to reconsider their options. At the same time, shifting organisational priorities may alter the relative influence of stakeholders, reshaping how decisions progress. Purmonen et al. (2023, p. 79) describe the B2B journey as a web of overlapping paths taken by members of the buying centre and end users, each pursuing distinct objectives and criteria. This multiplicity explains why the process is rarely linear and why boundaries between phases are constantly crossed.

The journey is embedded in long-term inter-organisational relationships. Past interactions, accumulated trust and established routines strongly shape current decisions, while relationships with other suppliers influence perceptions and bargaining power (Purmonen et al., 2023, p. 78f.). Within this relational context, convergence in goals and operational coordination is what turns repeated exchanges into durable collaboration (De Keyser et al., 2025, p. 8). Consistent

with this mechanism, Andersson et al. (2024, p. 168f.) show that repeat customers familiar with a supplier's systems often migrate to digital channels, whereas first-time or complex buyers continue to rely on intensive personal interaction.

2.3.3 Orchestration and Digitalisation

Because of this complexity, suppliers cannot simply react to customer decisions but must actively orchestrate the process. Rustholkarhu et al. (2022, p. 241) identify four key managerial tasks: analysing customer data, designing tailored processes, engaging through relevant content and guiding customers across digital and personal channels. These activities cut across all stages of the journey and guarantee continuity and coherence.

Digitalisation both enables and complicates this orchestration. It allows firms to reach potential buyers earlier, facilitates more transparent comparisons during negotiations and opens possibilities for continuous support after delivery. Yet its impact is contingent on context: as Andersson et al. (2024, p. 168f.) note, digital tools should not be viewed as substitutes for personal selling, since their effectiveness depends on the buying situation, the maturity of the relationship and the knowledge base of the customer.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted in this thesis. It first presents the research design (Section 3.1), explaining why a qualitative study was selected and how it aligns with the research objectives. It then describes the data collection process (Section 3.2), which made use of semi-structured interviews to guarantee depth and breadth of insights. Finally, the chapter details the data analysis procedures (Section 3.3), which clarify how the collected material was processed to generate the findings presented in Chapter 4.

3.1 Research Design

The thesis employs a qualitative research design aimed at exploring how artificial intelligence is adopted and integrated into B2B marketing practices and, specifically, how it supports the management of the customer journey. A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate because the research questions focus on understanding processes and managerial perceptions and experiences, rather than measuring predefined variables. Instead of measuring outcomes through standardised indicators, the study seeks to uncover how managers perceive AI, which organisational processes are affected and what kinds of benefits and challenges emerge in practice.

A qualitative design provides the opportunity to investigate phenomena that are not yet fully understood in the academic literature and to capture the nuanced perspectives of professionals who are directly involved in implementation. It is particularly suitable given the complexity of the B2B environment, where decision-making involves multiple actors and where the application of AI is still in flux.

The empirical setting consists of German companies primarily in IT-related fields, alongside one case from the defence sector. This inclusion was the result of limited availability of interview partners rather than a deliberate sampling choice, but it still offers a valuable

comparative perspective on how AI adoption unfolds across different organisational contexts.

3.2 Data Collection

The core of the empirical research consisted of four semi-structured interviews with professionals from German companies, primarily in IT-related fields with one case from the defence sector. This composition contributed to capturing different perspectives on the adoption of AI in marketing and customer management. The interviews were prepared on the basis of a questionnaire with open-ended questions and a shorter version of it, covering themes such as motives for AI adoption, areas of application across the customer journey, internal changes, customer-related outcomes and anticipated challenges and opportunities.

The recruitment process relied on several channels. Companies were first contacted directly through e-mail and LinkedIn, but the research also benefitted from the support of intermediary contacts who facilitated access by introducing the project to firms and encouraging participation. This network-based approach proved particularly effective in reaching decision-makers in relevant positions.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted online via Microsoft Teams or Zoom. At the beginning of each session, participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the strict anonymisation of their contributions. With consent, the interviews were audio-recorded to guarantee accuracy. Afterwards, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, which allowed the material to remain close to the original wording and tone of the respondents.

Throughout the process, the principle of confidentiality was strictly observed. No company names, personal identifiers or commercially sensitive details were reported. All data were anonymised, and in the analysis, interviewees are referred to only in general terms. Participation was voluntary, with full assurance that no identifying information was retained.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected material was analysed through a manual qualitative content analysis. This approach made it possible to work closely with the interview transcripts, ensuring that key themes were identified and interpreted with care. The process followed several steps:

1. Preparation of the material – All interview recordings were transcribed immediately after the sessions. The sources of data were anonymised and formatted in a consistent way to make comparisons easier.
2. Initial reading and familiarisation – The transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the content and to gain an overall impression of the recurring topics. Notes were taken on first impressions and preliminary observations.
3. Development of categories – A set of categories was developed to guide the analysis. Some categories were derived directly from the interview guide (e.g., motives for AI adoption, challenges, phases of the customer journey, benefits). Additional categories were created inductively when new themes emerged during the reading process.
4. Manual coding – Relevant sentences or passages were underlined and assigned to one or more categories.
5. Grouping and comparison – Once all data had been coded, the categories were grouped into broader themes, such as internal vs. customer-related benefits or strategic vs. operational applications of AI. These themes were then compared across companies to identify similarities and differences.
6. Interpretation of findings – In the final stage, the main themes were interpreted in light of the research questions. Interview quotes were selected to illustrate important points.

4. Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study based on semi-structured interviews with managers and professionals from German companies, primarily in IT-related fields with one case from the defence sector. The purpose is to explore how artificial intelligence is being adopted in B2B marketing and how it shapes the management of the customer journey. The analysis is organised into five sections. Section 4.1 examines the motives and drivers that led firms to adopt AI. Section 4.2 focuses on applications across the customer journey and describes how AI supports activities such as lead generation, sales, customer service and key account management. Section 4.3 discusses the internal changes and organisational effects triggered by AI adoption, such as the development of new skills, cultural adaptation and collaboration across teams. Section 4.4 analyses the customer-related outcomes, looking at how AI influences transparency, personalisation and trust in B2B relationships. Finally, Section 4.5 outlines the future outlook and challenges, reflecting on opportunities, risks and the need for continuous education and ethical awareness.

4.1 Motives and Drivers for AI Adoption

Across all interviews, respondents emphasised that the initial motivation for adopting AI in B2B marketing and customer management was often efficiency. Companies view AI as a way to automate repetitive tasks, reduce manual workload and optimise internal processes. As one participant explained, the main reason for adopting AI is: “its efficiency and also effectiveness when it comes to personalisation.”

This perception of AI as a tool for cost savings and faster execution is particularly strong in firms under pressure to “do more with less,” a context often shaped by limited resources and staff. Another professional reflected: “The most common reason, in my opinion, is to save time, money, resources. We’ve seen, especially in the tech sector, that a lot of people have been laid

off. There were firing waves just because the need for automation is there."

Yet, the findings also indicate that efficiency alone is rarely sufficient to sustain interest in AI over time. Once firms experiment with AI applications, many realise its potential extends well beyond automation. Some interviewees described how AI began to drive value creation and innovation, enabling forms of personalisation and customer engagement that had not been possible before. One manager explained this shift clearly: "They [firms] usually start with the efficiency but there's a big, big, big potential for you as a brand to use AI to stand out." And further: "We use, for example, a multi-agentic system. AI helps us to stand out what we couldn't do. For example, if you have a newsletter which is highly personalised, right? It's written for you, it's written for me and so on, instead of having one newsletter who fits everyone. And that makes a huge difference in how our customers see our brand or the brand of our customers."

This evolution, from efficiency-oriented adoption to innovation-oriented adoption, suggests that AI can be perceived as a cost-saving technology but also as a strategic enabler. For some firms, AI offers a competitive edge in crowded markets; for others, it is a way to differentiate services or to better align with customer expectations.

Drivers of adoption also vary significantly. In smaller organisations, founders or CEOs often act as direct promoters, recognising early the potential of AI and pushing implementation forward. In contrast, larger companies tend to rely on innovation or IT departments to pilot and scale projects. Bottom-up initiatives were also mentioned, especially when employees experiment with tools in their daily routines and later convince management of their usefulness. In other cases, top-down initiatives were the reason for AI adoption. As one respondent noted: "Who promoted the adoption of AI within your company? Actually, it was internal [...] the owner of the company is a tech specialist, he saw the trend of AI ten years ago and implemented the department nine years ago or so [...] in order to understand how AI is functioning and how can be adapted in our processes or in our tools, and how can we profit from AI."

At the same time, the introduction of AI was not without resistance. Employees often questioned its reliability or feared that it might reduce the relevance of their roles. Concerns about trust, data security and ethical implications were widespread, especially in the early stages. One participant recalled: “Five years ago, the trust in AI was not that big as it is today. [The main problem we faced was:] are we able to solve our problems with AI?” Another emphasised that acceptance required time and proof of benefits: “At first, as people did not understand what's behind how it is functioning, a lot of employees were against such a department [dedicated to AI]. But now, nine years later, they see the benefits of having this department and we are like a pioneer.”

Overall, the interviews reveal that motives for AI adoption are dynamic. Companies often begin with operational concerns such as cost reduction and process efficiency but gradually discover AI’s potential to redesign customer interactions, facilitate personalisation and drive innovation. The combination of competitive pressure, leadership vision and employee experimentation creates a complex set of drivers that shape how AI is introduced and integrated into B2B contexts.

4.2 Applications along the Customer Journey

The interviews highlight that AI applications are already present across multiple phases of the B2B customer journey, though the intensity and scope vary considerably between firms. Most respondents agreed that the earliest and most frequent applications appear in lead generation and prospecting, where AI tools assist in identifying potential clients, qualifying leads and prioritising outreach efforts. One manager explained: “The main part was prospecting, identifying the right customers and reaching out.” In some cases, LinkedIn data and automated search tools are used to support sales teams in building contact lists and initiating personalised communication with prospects.

Another area where AI has been widely implemented is marketing and content creation. Firms reported using AI for drafting marketing texts, newsletters, LinkedIn posts or even podcasts, often as a way to speed up production and maintain a regular online presence. As one interviewee described: “[An AI assistant] is writing all my LinkedIn posts [...], he has access to my LinkedIn page and he's able to post it.”

Others emphasised that AI provides support for brainstorming and idea generation, although outputs often require careful review and editing. One professional admitted: “At the beginning I was super excited about automating everything [...], but then I realised what customers appreciate is the personal contact.” This tension between automation and authenticity was a recurring theme, with some managers stressing that although AI can accelerate content production, it cannot fully replicate the personal touch required in B2B relationships.

In the sales and onboarding phases, AI is often used to improve personalisation and efficiency. Recommendation engines and predictive analytics support sales teams suggesting tailored offers or forecasting customer needs. One participant underlined how AI supports customer portfolio management: “We use it to track and predict certain KPIs for the health of our customers.” Some companies also reported using AI to coordinate communication across departments and prepare account plans, particularly in key account management. Reportedly, these tools help to warrant consistent interactions with clients and reduce the administrative burden on sales staff.

Customer service and support emerged as another domain where AI is increasingly relevant. Chatbots and automated response systems are used to handle standard queries, allowing human employees to focus on more complex cases. However, some respondents warned that the quality of customer experience depends heavily on how AI is embedded into service processes. As one professional remarked: “I feel like for basic things like replicating frequently asked questions, customer support, it can be used.” She continued: “But also here people somehow sense it if it's

pre-generated and AI written or if it's a real person."

Finally, a few firms highlighted emerging applications that go beyond individual customer touchpoints. For example, AI as a tool to connect insights across the entire journey, from early prospecting to long-term relationship management. This integration was still at an early stage, but a manager pointed to the potential of multi-agent systems or "AI swarms" to manage complex tasks in the future. As one respondent imagined: "I believe in agent swarms [...] having 1000 agents who try to solve a task together, like bees or ants do it in nature."

Overall, the findings suggest that AI is used across the customer journey primarily to increase efficiency, improve targeting and support personalisation. Yet, firms remain cautious about relying too heavily on automation, especially in areas where trust, authenticity and human relationships are crucial to sustaining long-term B2B partnerships.

4.3 Internal Changes and Organisational Effects

In addition to direct applications along the customer journey, the interviews revealed that the adoption of AI has led to important organisational changes. These transformations concern processes and structures but also employee skills, collaboration and even company culture.

One recurring theme was the development of new skills. Some respondents stressed that the introduction of AI pushed employees to learn new platforms and tools, which increased digital literacy but also placed additional pressure on staff. As one interviewee explained: "I'm constantly learning new tools, new platforms, new ways of prompting [...], people have become more aware of the different steps of processes."

This learning process is seen both as an opportunity for professional growth and as a challenge, since employees have to adapt to a faster pace of technological change. Some managers pointed out that AI encouraged a greater process orientation: tasks that used to be performed informally now need to be mapped, structured and optimised in order to be automated.

Cultural adaptation was another important issue. Some companies experienced initial resistance, with employees fearing replacement or questioning the reliability of AI systems. Over time, however, positive outcomes helped to reduce scepticism. As mentioned earlier, one respondent recalled: “At first, [...] a lot of employees were against such a department [dedicated to AI]. But now, nine years later, they see the benefits of having this department.” This evolution highlights how trust in AI often builds gradually, once concrete results demonstrate its value. Still, the interviews show that acceptance is not automatic: employees need reassurance and training to feel empowered to fully benefit from it.

AI adoption also redesigned collaboration in more practical ways. In some firms, managers noted that new tools helped teams to work together. As one interviewee explained, “AI helps us a lot to keep information updated and also to create that sort of playbooks”. Another respondent described how an AI assistant “gather[s] together information about [the] customer and writes that into the CRM”, giving shared access to data across the organisation. In others, however, interviewees stressed that the real difficulty was not the technology itself but the organisation around it: departments at times struggled to coordinate responsibilities or to adjust existing routines so that AI could be embedded in daily work. As one participant observed, “it needs a different way of working and also maybe some different organisational cultures that we don’t have yet to make the best use of AI”. Another explained that many companies initially treat AI adoption as an IT task, but soon “learn more and more that IT cannot solve this problem [...] So we see departments in marketing, in sales, operational parts, financial parts”, showing that successful implementation depends on the involvement of multiple functions rather than on IT alone.

At the same time, interviewees warned against an overestimation of AI’s role. A few noted that, although automation can save time, it sometimes creates additional workload due to the need for supervision and corrections. One professional described this experience candidly: “It’s not

the wonder weapon that solves all your problems. […] [Sometimes] after losing two hours, you suddenly realise, oh, I could have just sat down for 20 minutes and done it myself." This observation reflects a broader learning curve: companies are still experimenting with where AI brings real value and where traditional methods remain more effective.

To sum up, the organisational impact of AI adoption is twofold. On the one hand, it stimulates upskilling, process formalisation and cross-team collaboration. On the other, it exposes firms to resistance, cultural challenges and the risk of inefficiencies if tools are poorly implemented. These findings suggest that the success of AI in B2B marketing depends on the technology itself, but also on the ability of organisations to manage change, support employees and balance automation with human judgment.

4.4 Customer-Related Outcomes

A central question in the interviews was how AI affects customer relationships and, more broadly, the customer experience. Across cases, respondents generally agreed that AI can bring significant improvements, particularly in terms of personalisation, transparency and responsiveness.

One participant emphasised how AI supports a more open and trustworthy relationship with clients: "It creates more transparency and therefore a better relationship, I would say." Others highlighted the role of AI in speeding up interactions and providing more targeted communication, thereby strengthening the perception of professionalism and reliability. For example, meeting summaries, automated reminders and personalised recommendations were frequently mentioned as ways to sustain customer engagement over time.

At the same time, respondents also underlined the limits of automation in B2B contexts, where trust and personal contact remain central. As one professional put it: "We do have a business where you need a lot of personal contact [...]; AI [...] needs to be embedded in a personal

experience to be valuable." This view was echoed by another interviewee, who warned that over-reliance on AI could harm customer trust if not carefully managed: "The cost of failure in my case, in my business is pretty high because if I lose the trust of a customer because there is a weird response or something, I lose more than I gain by saving, I think, two minutes or three minutes."

The interviews also revealed that AI's customer-related outcomes are not always direct. In some cases, benefits were seen more indirectly, through improvements in organisational culture and employee collaboration, which ultimately translate into better service quality for clients. One respondent explained: "If you're creating a better organisational culture, people are happier, they can collaborate better and of course their customers will notice that."

In terms of measurable outcomes, some firms reported higher conversion rates and better targeting. One interviewee highlighted that the use of AI "increase[d] the conversion rate of their customers on their website" and enabled "a better reach of goals by targeting a lot of different people." Others emphasised more qualitative improvements, such as enhanced customer satisfaction and the avoidance of negative experiences. For example, one respondent explained that AI "creates more transparency and therefore a better relationship," while predictive analytics were used to "discover potential customer losses or friction points," thereby helping to reduce complaints. At the same time, another participant warned that "the more organisations [...] just have chatbots [...] [the more] their customer trust and satisfaction score is going down," stressing the need to combine automation with authenticity to avoid negative outcomes. Interestingly, interviewees noted that B2B customers, compared to B2C, expect faster service and also strategic support and personalisation that reflects a deeper understanding of their business. As one manager described, many firms move beyond efficiency to "writing a hyper-personalised newsletter for each customer," showing that the true value of AI lies in creating smarter and more personalised experiences.

Overall, the findings suggest that AI's contribution to customer relationships is twofold:

- It enhances efficiency, personalisation and transparency, creating a smoother and more professional experience.
- Yet, it cannot replace the human element of trust, empathy and authenticity, which remains indispensable in B2B settings.

4.5 Outlook and Future Challenges

When asked about the future of AI in B2B marketing, interviewees expressed both optimism and caution. On the opportunity side, many pointed to AI's potential to enable greater personalisation, scalability and new forms of customer engagement. As already mentioned, one participant even envisioned AI as a collective system of "agent swarms," comparing it to bees or ants working together in nature. This vision reflects a broader belief that AI will increasingly move beyond isolated tools to become an integrated ecosystem that supports entire workflows and business strategies.

Another recurring theme was the expectation that AI would become essential for maintaining competitive advantage. Respondents stressed that firms unable to adopt and integrate AI effectively risk falling behind. As one manager argued: "If you have skills, you're not afraid anymore. And second, if you have that skill, you're able to make an impact on the organisation [...] and have an edge in comparison to your competition."

However, interviewees also revealed challenges and risks. A major concern was the over-abundance of tools and the difficulty of selecting and integrating them strategically. As one professional put it: "Having too many tools is a huge disadvantage", and the real challenge is to identify and focus on the right use cases. Another challenge is guaranteeing ethical and responsible AI use: issues of data protection, bias and transparency were frequently mentioned. One interviewee reflected on the importance of careful adoption: "It will be a lot about ethical

AI, reducing biases, but maybe also how to protect your data and how to use it in a good way." Finally, respondents stressed the importance of continuous education and training. Since AI technologies evolve rapidly, employees need constant upskilling to avoid fear of replacement and to ensure successful integration. As one participant concluded: "The best remedy for fear of replacement is education and competencies [...] really educate people on a daily basis, lifelong, to learn how to leverage AI."

Considering the findings as a whole, it becomes clear that the future of AI in B2B marketing will be shaped by a delicate balance: firms must embrace innovation and scalability, without falling into over-reliance, fragmentation or ethical pitfalls. Success will depend on technological choices and on strategic vision, organisational learning and cultural adaptation.

5. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to existing research and practical implications. Chapter 4 presented the empirical results in a descriptive way; here, the purpose is to interpret them more broadly and connect them to the theoretical debates and managerial challenges introduced in the literature review. The discussion therefore moves on three levels. First, the results are interpreted in light of the existing literature on artificial intelligence, B2B marketing and customer relationship management, identifying points of convergence and divergence with previous studies (Section 5.1). Second, the implications for practice are examined, with particular attention to what the findings mean for B2B marketers and key account managers who are directly involved in managing customer relationships in increasingly digital environments (Section 5.2). Finally, the chapter reflects on the limitations of the present research and suggests avenues for future studies that could build on and extend its contributions (Section 5.3).

5.1 Interpretation of Results

The empirical findings presented in Chapter 4 reveal how firms in B2B contexts approach the adoption and use of artificial intelligence in marketing and customer management. When interpreted through the lens of the existing academic literature, several patterns emerge that both confirm prior insights and extend them with new nuances.

One of the clearest results of the interviews is that firms often begin their AI journey with a strong focus on efficiency, automation and cost reduction. This resonates with the literature, which consistently identifies efficiency as a key driver of AI adoption. Moradi and Dass (2022, p. 304), for example, emphasise that the primary value driver of AI-enabled solutions for B2B firms is precisely their ability to enhance efficiency, automating repetitive tasks and increasing productivity. Similarly, Bag et al. (2021, p. 179ff.) argue that AI, particularly when combined

with big data analytics, acts as a decision support system that removes operational bottlenecks and enables firms to undertake complex tasks and make more well-informed decisions.

Nevertheless, the interviews also indicate that efficiency alone is rarely sufficient to sustain interest in AI. Many firms soon realise that AI provides broader opportunities for innovation, personalisation and differentiation. This recalls Mikalef et al. (2023, p. 5ff.), who conceptualise AI as a technological tool and also as a competence that allows firms to reconfigure their marketing capabilities, ranging from information management to planning and implementation. In this sense, the interviews align with the theoretical shift in the literature: AI adoption is not merely a cost-saving mechanism but a strategic enabler that strengthens firms' competitive positioning. The interviewees confirmed this evolution, noting that efficiency was often the entry point, but personalisation and value creation emerged as the lasting drivers of AI adoption.

The findings also show that AI is applied at multiple stages of the B2B customer journey, from lead generation and content creation to onboarding, service and retention. This reflects Moradi and Dass's (2022, p. 306) framework, which situates AI applications along the life cycle phases of reach, acquisition, conversion and retention. For example, the interviewees' use of AI for prospecting and lead qualification mirrors the "reach and acquisition" functions identified by Moradi and Dass. Similarly, recommendation engines and predictive analytics used for portfolio management and upselling align with "conversion and retention" functions.

At the same time, the interviews add an important nuance: the tension between automation and authenticity. Whilst AI can accelerate content production and automate responses, many respondents warned against losing the personal touch that is central to trust in B2B relationships. This complements Rusthollkarhu et al. (2022, p. 253), who point out that both automation (e.g., chatbots, automated reports) and augmentation (e.g., content suggestions for professionals) play a role in customer journey management, but that these tools must be embedded carefully to preserve human-centric interactions. The interviewees' reflections thus

reinforce the literature underscoring the delicate balance between efficiency gains and relational authenticity, which remains underexplored in existing models.

Another major theme from the findings concerns the organisational transformations triggered by AI adoption. Respondents emphasised the need for new skills, cross-departmental collaboration and cultural adaptation. These elements reflect the organisational changes required to renew capabilities in dynamic environments and strongly resonate with Mikalef et al. (2021, p. 81f.), who argue that AI enables and enhances the dynamic capabilities through which firms sense opportunities, seize them and transform their structures. The interviews confirm that AI adoption requires reconfiguring processes and promoting continuous learning, with a strong emphasis on training and upskilling, illustrating how firms turn experimental tool use into stable routines, consistent with the sensing–seizing–transforming cycle.

Moreover, the emphasis on training and gradual acceptance aligns with Mikalef et al. (2023, p. 3), who stress that AI-related skills are key organisational assets. They demonstrate that having the right infrastructure, the ability to connect AI across business functions and a proactive attitude helps to explain why some firms translate AI use into better performance. This is consistent with the interviewees' accounts of how employee upskilling and cultural adaptation shaped the success of AI initiatives.

Finally, the interviews indicate that managers perceive AI as both an inevitable driver of competitive advantage and a source of new risks. This dual view reflects broader debates in the literature. On the one hand, studies such as Moradi and Dass (2022, p. 313) and Mikalef et al. (2023, p. 1f.) stress that firms unable to build AI competencies will lag behind competitors. On the other hand, the concerns voiced by respondents about tool fragmentation, ethical risks and employee resistance are in line with Raisch and Krakowski (2021, p. 4), who stress that overemphasising either automation or augmentation risks negative outcomes, whereas value emerges when organisations manage the paradox by combining the two.

Overall, the findings lend support to established claims in the literature: efficiency often serves as the entry point, whereas innovation and personalisation emerge as the main sources of impact, with AI functioning as a dynamic capability. They also bring out additional aspects such as the need for authenticity in business relationships, the indirect cultural effects of adoption and the practical challenges of tool fragmentation and ethical concerns. Furthermore, the study helps to narrow the distance between theory and practice. Existing models offer structured views of how AI should work, but practitioners' accounts show how these processes play out in real contexts, sometimes in line with theory, sometimes in more complicated ways. This comparison underlines the importance of qualitative insights for broadening our understanding of AI in B2B marketing and for pointing to new avenues of research.

5.2 Implications for B2B Marketers and Key Account Managers

The findings of this study carry several important implications for professionals working in B2B marketing and in the management of customer relationships.

One of the clearest messages from the interviews is that firms often turn to AI first for efficiency. Sales and marketing teams use it to take over routine work, particularly in situations where resources are stretched and "doing more with less" becomes unavoidable. For marketers and account managers, however, the implication is that automation should be only a starting point. Efficiency gains may be appealing, but they alone cannot guarantee stronger customer relationships. As one respondent put it, "At the beginning I was super excited about automating everything [...], but then I realised what customers appreciate is the personal contact." Efficiency, therefore, matters less as an end goal than as a way of creating room for higher-value activities whether building trust, engaging in consultative exchanges or tailoring solutions for strategic accounts.

The interviews also indicate that once companies move past basic automation, AI opens the

door to new forms of value creation. For B2B marketers, this means the ability to generate hyper-personalised content and to spot shifts in customer needs earlier. For account managers in particular, personalisation is crucial: AI tools can help to monitor client-specific KPIs, anticipate problems and shape offers around the client's specific situation. As one participant explained, "It's not just writing a newsletter faster, but a hyper-personalised newsletter for each customer." However, the interviews also make it clear that this only works if customers view the result as genuine. Personalisation adds value when it feels authentic, which means AI insights must be filtered through human judgment so that interactions remain credible and relationship-driven, not just another automated output.

A consistent finding across the interviews is that AI cannot replace the relational dimension of B2B interactions. Trust, empathy and credibility remain fundamental for long-term relationships. One professional stressed: "AI [...] needs to be embedded in a personal experience to be valuable." For account managers, this means using AI to augment, not automate, human interactions: tools such as automated reminders, meeting summaries or predictive insights can make their work more efficient, but they do not replace strategic conversations or the personal contact needed to build lasting relationships. The implication for practitioners is clear: the human element should remain at the centre, with AI as a supportive layer that enhances the effectiveness of customer interactions.

The interviews also made clear that adopting AI requires an organisational change process. Some participants described how employees need to learn how to use new tools and gradually reshape their routines to adjust their ways of working. For marketers and account managers, this translates into a stronger focus on digital capabilities and the ability to judge AI outputs critically. Training emerges as central: it helps to ease fears of replacement, reduces resistance and gives teams the confidence to work with AI in a productive way. As one participant concluded, "The best remedy for fear of replacement is education and competencies [...] really

educate people on a daily basis, [...] to learn how to leverage AI."

Another implication concerns the selection and integration of AI tools. The interviews revealed that companies often experiment too many platforms at once, leading to "tool overload" and inefficiencies. For B2B marketers and account managers, the lesson is that AI adoption should be guided by a clear strategy: not every tool adds value and chasing the "latest shiny object" can distract from core customer needs. Instead, a more effective approach would be to concentrate on a limited set of applications that support the customer journey, fit the organisation's priorities and can grow over time.

Finally, the interviews show that worries about data security, bias and ethics are never far away in B2B contexts. Since account managers often deal with sensitive client information, the way AI is implemented has a direct impact on trust. Ethical and transparent use of AI can itself become a differentiating factor. One professional observed that, beyond performance, an important challenge is "how to protect data and how to use it in a good way." For B2B marketers and account managers, this implies being clear on compliance, data governance and ethical standards, and communicating these practices clearly to clients. Responsible use of AI is therefore not just about limiting risks, it is part of the value proposition offered to customers.

Taken together, the findings indicate that AI adoption pushes marketers and account managers to rethink their role. Automation can make work faster and lighter, but its real value emerges when combined with the human side of B2B relationships. For marketers, AI offers opportunities to improve targeting and design more relevant content; for account managers, AI can support stronger ties with clients through better insights and support. What ultimately matters, however, is how these tools are embedded: authenticity must remain central, people need the skills to work confidently with AI and firms have to be selective and transparent in their choices. Those that manage this balance are better placed to turn AI into a lasting competitive advantage in the digital age.

5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As with any empirical study, this thesis is subject to a number of limitations that must be acknowledged. At the same time, these constraints open promising avenues for future work on the role of artificial intelligence in B2B marketing and customer management.

The first limitation lies in the small sample and its narrow geographical focus. The study is based on a small number of interviews with professionals in Germany. Even though this design provides detailed insights, it cannot capture the full diversity of industries, countries or organisational settings where AI is being applied. Future work could broaden the scope through cross-country comparisons and a wider dataset would strengthen generalisability and shed more light on contextual differences.

Second, the reliance on a qualitative research design brings both advantages and limitations. Semi-structured interviews gave respondents the chance to share detailed views and experiences, but the analysis inevitably reflects the researcher's interpretation. In addition, manual coding, despite its systematic nature, cannot remove subjectivity entirely. Future research could combine semi-structured qualitative interviews with larger quantitative surveys or with experiments that test AI adoption under controlled conditions. Such approaches would help to triangulate findings, providing stronger validation of patterns and therefore giving a clearer picture of AI's effect on outcomes like customer retention or satisfaction.

A third limitation is that the study mainly reflects the perspectives of managers and employees involved in AI adoption. Their insights are important, but they do not capture how customers themselves experience these changes. Some interviewees explained that AI improves transparency and personalisation, but direct customer feedback was not collected. Future studies could therefore incorporate the customer perspective, investigating whether end clients perceive AI-enabled interactions as trustworthy and effective. Including both sides of the relationship would give a fuller picture of AI's role in B2B exchanges.

Another limitation concerns the maturity of AI in the firms studied. Some are still using AI only in a limited way. As one respondent said, “It’s a nice-to-have, at the moment because we’re not doing it at scale yet.” Some findings therefore reflect early experimentation rather than established practice. Future research could take a longitudinal view and trace how adoption develops over time, how resistance is addressed and how AI becomes part of longer-term strategies.

Finally, although the study touched on concerns about ethics, privacy and data protection, these aspects could not be investigated in depth. Given the rising relevance of EU regulations such as the AI Act and GDPR, future studies might explore how compliance and ethical considerations influence adoption and customer trust. It would also be worth investigating how firms balance the tension between regulation and innovation, and whether strict compliance eventually supports or limits the use of AI in B2B settings.

In summary, the limitations of this study—its small sample, qualitative-only scope, emphasis on managerial perspectives, early stage of AI maturity, and limited treatment of ethical and privacy concerns—point to several paths for future research. Scholars in this field could widen the empirical base, bring in the customer perspective, use mixed methods and follow firms over time to capture the evolving nature of AI adoption. On this basis, future research can build on this study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how AI transforms B2B marketing and the management of customer relationships.

6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how artificial intelligence is transforming B2B marketing and the management of the customer journey in the digital age. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with managers and professionals from German companies, primarily in IT-related fields with one case from the defence sector, the study has offered a closer look at how organisations perceive, adopt and integrate AI in practice. The evidence demonstrates that AI is not a uniform phenomenon, but rather a set of capabilities whose value depends on the extent to which it is integrated into organisational processes and long-term strategies.

One of the clearest patterns that emerged is that companies often approach AI with efficiency in mind. Automation of repetitive tasks, support for prospecting, assistance in drafting communication or handling customer requests are typically the entry points for adoption. These applications are relatively easy to implement and promise quick gains, which makes them attractive especially in contexts where resources are constrained and competitive pressure is high. Yet, the findings show that efficiency is rarely the final destination. Once firms experiment with AI, many realise that its true potential lies in value creation and personalisation. Hyper-personalised content, predictive analytics for customer portfolios or tools that enable better coordination across sales and service functions are examples of how AI moves beyond cost reduction to become a source of strategic differentiation.

At the same time, the study highlights how central human interaction remains in B2B relationships. Automation may speed up communication, but it cannot replace trust and personal contacts. Some interviewees warned that AI-generated content can easily be perceived as impersonal or artificial, with the risk of undermining customer trust if not managed carefully. This tension between efficiency and authenticity runs through many of the findings: AI offers scale and consistency, but the strength of B2B relationships still depends on empathy and mutual understanding. For B2B marketers and account managers, the implication is that AI

must be used to augment, not replace, human interactions.

On the organisational side, introducing AI touched directly on how people work. The interviews revealed that bringing AI into daily work requires people to develop new skills, get used to new tools and rethink established processes. Initial resistance, often linked to fear of replacement or lack of trust, is common but it tends to fade once employees see concrete benefits. What emerges is a broad cultural and organisational shift. Training and continuous learning help to ease concerns and to give staff the confidence to leverage the potential of AI. Some participants pointed out that AI even forced their firms to formalise processes: workflows that had long been handled informally had to be mapped and documented before they could be automated. In this way, AI served as a trigger for organisational learning and professional growth.

The customer-related outcomes of AI adoption were generally seen as positive, though with important nuances. Respondents pointed to improved transparency, faster response times and enhanced personalisation as benefits that strengthen customer relationships. At the same time, they also stressed that these benefits only matter when integrated within a personal experience. In B2B contexts, where relationships are long-term and stakes high, customers look for trust and understanding, not just efficiency. AI can support these expectations through more accurate insights and more responsive interactions, but it cannot replace the relational foundation of B2B exchanges. Interestingly, some respondents observed that the benefits of AI were not always direct: when collaboration improved or the organisational culture grew stronger, service quality and client relationships also improved.

Looking to the future, the interviews conveyed a mix of optimism and caution. On the one hand, AI is expected to become far more sophisticated, opening the door to forms of personalisation and scalability that remain out of reach today. Some participants even envisioned entirely new ways of organising work, with “agent swarms” collaborating like collective intelligences to solve complex tasks. On the other hand, respondents were aware of risks: too many tools can

slow firms down instead of helping them, ethical issues related to bias, transparency, data protection and privacy. To navigate these risks, firms will need strong ethical frameworks and compliance mechanisms to guarantee a responsible use of AI systems, besides strategic clarity about which tools to adopt.

The study also points to the role of education. As one interviewee put it frankly: the best antidote to fear and scepticism is competence. When employees gain digital skills and learn to work with AI in a confident way, they stop seeing it as a danger and start treating it as a chance to innovate. Training, therefore, is not a side issue but a condition for adoption to succeed.

Naturally, this dissertation is not without limitations. The sample was small and restricted to Germany, and the qualitative design means that the findings reflect the perspectives of a select group of professionals instead of a broad statistical representation. Moreover, some of the firms studied are still in the early stages of AI adoption, meaning that the findings capture a moment of experimentation and not fully institutionalised practices. Nevertheless, these limitations also open opportunities for future research. Larger cross-country studies, longitudinal analyses and research that includes the customer perspective could provide a fuller picture of how AI is shaping B2B marketing over time.

What this study ultimately reveals is a gradual process of adjustment in which firms learn to work with new technologies while holding on to the relational practices that make B2B exchanges distinctive. Artificial intelligence is already relieving companies of repetitive tasks and helping them to act on data more quickly, but its real significance lies in how it opens new space for personalisation, responsiveness and deeper engagement with clients. These possibilities, however, only become reality when companies succeed in integrating AI into the everyday routines of marketing and account management without losing sight of trust, credibility and human judgment. The firms in this study remind us that relationships in B2B markets do not depend on speed or scale alone, but on professional expertise and the willingness

to invest in long-term collaboration. If companies manage to integrate AI in ways that reinforce these qualities, they will be better placed to compete in a marketplace that is becoming ever more digital and uncertain.

Appendix

Annex 1: Interview Guide 1

Introduction and data protection

- Welcome and introduction of the interviewer.
- Confirmation of anonymisation of personal data and start of recording.

Personal background

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself and your professional background? (name, job title, brief professional background)
2. Could you please describe your company? (company name, industry, products/services)

Motives for using artificial intelligence

3. Based on your experience, what are the most common reasons companies turn to AI for marketing and customer management?
4. What were the main motives for adopting AI in your company? (e.g. cost savings, better decisions, competitive pressure, customer expectations)
5. Who promoted the adoption of AI within the company? Were there any internal or external drivers? (e.g. bottom-up vs. top-down, innovation and strategy departments, IT, individual champions)
6. Have there been any internal concerns about using AI? If so, which were they? (e.g. data security, job relevance, complexity, ethical concerns)

Fields of application (use cases)

7. If you think about your typical working day, what tasks do you use AI-based systems for?

8. In which phases of the customer journey (e.g. lead generation, sales, onboarding, retention) do you see the highest impact from AI tools?
9. Which AI-based solution(s) are currently used in your company? (e.g. chatbots, recommendation systems, marketing automation tools, predictive analytics) And which others (if any) have you evaluated recently?
10. For the customer journey phases mentioned earlier, can you explain how these tools are applied in practice? (e.g. what each tool does and the stage where it is most useful)
11. How long has your company been using these AI solutions and how frequently are these AI-supported activities performed? (e.g. occasionally, regularly, continuously)
12. What goals do you expect when using AI in these tasks and what concrete benefits have you observed so far? (e.g. efficiency, insights, improved customer targeting)
13. Would you say the task(s) supported by AI are more operational or strategic?
14. Firm level: How is AI used to manage the overall customer portfolio (e.g. segmentation, forecasting, prioritisation, resource allocation, pricing)?
15. Customer / Key account level: For your most important customer, how do you use AI to plan, personalise and coordinate across functions over time?
16. Situation level (task): In a specific scenario (e.g. entering a new industry or preparing an account plan), how would AI support you step by step?
17. Can you describe a specific situation or customer case where AI made a significant difference?
18. Do you use any internal systems for customer data protection or GDPR compliance? (e.g. Data Loss Prevention, encryption, access control, audit trails)

Effects of use

19. What internal changes have resulted from the use of AI? (e.g. changes in intraorganisational

collaboration, changes in knowledge/skills, changes in processes)?

20. In your opinion, how and how much does AI affect your customer relationships in general? And with strategic key accounts (e.g. trust, communication, personalisation, coordination)
21. Can you give an example of how AI supports the development or retention of a key account?
22. To what extent is the use of AI in your industry important in terms of value creation for the customer and the customer experience?
23. Where does AI give you a competitive advantage and which KPIs do you use to track it at account and firm level?
24. Based on your experience, has the use of AI in your services had any visible impact on your customers' customers? (e.g. increased satisfaction, better service quality, higher engagement with your client's brand)

Summary and outlook

25. In summary, would you describe your company's use of AI in marketing/customer management as successful? Why?
26. What future developments and which challenges do you foresee in your industry related to AI and customer management?
27. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't discussed?

Annex 2: Interview Guide 2

Introduction and data protection

- Welcome and introduction of the interviewer.
- Confirmation of anonymisation of personal data and start of recording.

Personal Information

1. Could you briefly introduce yourself and your professional background?
2. What is the mission and core activity of your company?
3. Who are your typical clients and what kind of services do you offer to them?

Observations on AI adoption in B2B marketing

4. Based on your experience, what are the most common reasons companies turn to AI for marketing and customer management?
5. In which areas of the customer journey (e.g. lead generation, sales, onboarding, retention) do you see the highest impact from AI tools?
6. Can you name some of the most commonly used AI tools or platforms that your clients are adopting?

Implementation patterns and strategic use

7. What organisational roles or departments are usually the main drivers of AI adoption in your clients' companies?
8. Do you see any typical concerns or barriers to AI adoption (e.g. data privacy, lack of know-how, resistance to change)?
9. In your view, does AI mostly support operational efficiency or can it also drive strategic differentiation in customer relationships?

10. How do companies you work with typically manage long-term B2B customer relationships or key accounts?
11. Have you seen AI being used explicitly to support relationship-building, loyalty, or key account coordination?

Real-life examples and reflections

12. Can you share an example of a client or situation where AI had a significant impact on customer experience or business results?
13. Do you observe differences between SMEs and large enterprises in their approach to AI for B2B marketing?
14. How do you assess the level of awareness and readiness among companies when it comes to AI for customer management?

Future outlook

15. What are the most exciting developments you foresee in the next 2–3 years in the field of AI and B2B marketing?
16. If you could give one recommendation to B2B companies starting their AI journey, what would it be?

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