EMPATHY IN ACTION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE INTERSECTIONS OF DESIGN THINKING AND MARKETING

EMPATIJA NA DJELU: KVALITATIVNA STUDIJA SJECIŠTA DESIGN THINKING KONCEPTA I MARKETINGA

MARKET TRŽIŠTE

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores a theoretical and practical intersection of design thinking and marketing. The primary emphasis is on comprehending how the fundamental principles of design thinking can be effectively utilized within the broader marketing context to improve customer focus.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The research study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with industry professionals and academic researchers.

Findings and implications – Research findings reveal a clear connection and compatibility between design thinking and marketing, particularly in the context of customer-centricity. The study suggests that design thinking can provide a fresh perspective on and an innovative approach to traditional marketing strategies, potentially leading to more effective and customer-focused outcomes. The study's implications are significant for both practitioners and academics, highlighting the potential for interdisciplinary research in this area.

Limitations – The study limitations include a relatively small and industry-specific convenient sample and the explorative nature of the methodology employed. Therefore, the generalization of findings for other industries is limited.

Sažetak

Svrha – Cilj je ovog rada istražiti dodirne točke design thinking koncepta i marketinga. Primarni je naglasak na razumijevanju kako se temeljna načela design thinking koncepta mogu učinkovito koristiti u širem kontekstu marketinga kako bi se poboljšala razina usredotočenosti na kupca.

Metodološki pristup – Korišten je kvalitativni istraživački pristup uz pomoć tematske analize prikupljenih podataka putem polustrukturiranih dubinskih intervjua sa stručnjacima iz industrije i znanstvenicima, istraživačima.

Rezultati i implikacije – Rezultati otkrivaju jasnu vezu i kompatibilnost između design thinking koncepta i marketinga, posebno u kontekstu usmjerenosti na kupca. Rad sugerira da design thinking može ponuditi svježu perspektivu i inovativan pristup tradicionalnim marketinškim strategijama, što potencijalno dovodi do učinkovitijih ishoda usmjerenih na kupca. Implikacije rada značajne su i za praktičare i za znanstvenike naglašavajući potencijal za interdisciplinarnim istraživanjima u ovom području.

Ograničenja – U istraživanju je korišten prigodni uzorak relativno male veličine te specifičnog sastava, a određena ograničenja proizlaze i iz korištenja kvalitativne metodologije. Rezultati se mogu ograničeno generalizirati na druge djelatnosti.

MARKET
TRŽIŠTE

Originality – This explorative research study provides new insights into the potential integration of design thinking and marketing, addressing an identified gap in the literature and offering valuable contributions to both fields of study.

Keywords – design thinking, marketing approach, customer focus, qualitative study, theory-practice gap

Doprinos – Ovo izviđajno istraživanje pruža nove uvide u potencijalnu integraciju *design thinking* koncepta i marketinga rješavajući utvrđeni jaz u literaturi i nudeći vrijedne doprinose za oba područja.

Ključne riječi – *design thinking,* marketinški pristup, usredotočenost na kupca, kvalitativna studija, jaz teorije i prakse

1. INTRODUCTION

Design thinking, as an approach that emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and iterative prototyping, has its roots in various disciplines and historical developments (Abookire, Plover, Frasso & Ku, 2020). User-centered design, popularized by Donald A. Norman in the 1980s, laid the foundation for design thinking (Auernhammer & Roth, 2021). It focused on understanding user needs and preferences to create compelling products. Design thinking has become a widely employed approach in problem-solving and innovation across various domains, encompassing executive management, product design, education, and community services (Nguyen, Pham & Tu, 2021). Customer centricity of design thinking also resembles fundamental principles of marketing. Yet, given their disparate origins and applications across distinct scientific fields, academic researchers have not scrutinized these two disciplines sufficiently (Reinecke, 2016). This lack of academic focus is intriguing, especially considering the potential for these two fields to intersect and benefit from each other.

This research study is aimed at investigating potential correlations between design thinking and marketing by analyzing their respective theoretical frameworks. In order to achieve a thorough comprehension of the relationship under investigation, a rigorous empirical study was undertaken. It involved the participation of industry professionals and academic researchers who possess specialized expertise in the field of marketing. By incorporating multiple perspectives, the aim was to uncover and explore potential intersections between design thinking and marketing, as well as the potential advantages of implementing a design thinking approach in the field of marketing.

2. CONVERGENCE OF DESIGN THINKING AND MARKETING

2.1. Fundamentals of Design Thinking

Design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation that integrates the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success (Brown, 2008). It is a methodology used by designers to solve complex problems and find desirable solutions for clients (Cross, 2006). Nevertheless, instead of concentrating on finding a perfect solution, the emphasis is placed on pinpointing the correct problem that needs to be addressed (Gasparini & Culén, 2017). However, design thinking transcends its traditional role as a mere instrument for designers. It functions as a strategy for resolving problems that do not require participants to possess innate creativity but, rather, encourages the growth of creative thinking (Guaman-Quintanilla, Everaert, Chiluiza & Valcke, 2022). Design thinking represents a more comprehensive strategy for addressing problems and fostering innovation that can be utilized across various fields. Renowned corporations such as IBM, Apple, and Google use a design thinking approach in creating user products and experiences (Fanguy, 2018).

Design thinking deals with "wicked problems." These problems are seen as complex, multifaceted issues that resist single, straightforward solutions due to ambiguous information and stakeholders' conflicting values (Bardone & Secchi, 2017; Buchanan, 1992). They are often systemic, involving a multitude of stakeholders with diverse and often contradictory perspectives (Elia & Margherita, 2018). In fact, stakeholders can potentially disagree on the definition of problems, which leads to subjective perspectives on proposed solutions (Schoder, Putzke, Metaxas, Gloor & Fischbach, 2014). The inability to address these problems often stems from a narrow focus on individual behaviors, overlooking the broader social system within

which these behaviors occur (Wallack, Dorfman, Jernigan & Themba, 1993). Therefore, addressing wicked problems requires a willingness to engage in dissensus, opening up the possibility of consensus (Jamal, Kircher & Donaldson, 2021). The approach to wicked problems posits that nearly all design problems are fundamentally indeterminate, except for the most rudimentary ones that have been simplified to determinate or analytical problems by eliminating their "wickedness" (Buchanan, 2010).

Design thinking is often considered a process-oriented approach, providing a structured framework for sparking innovation and solving complex problems. The five-step process of design thinking, often referred to as the Stanford model, is a systematic approach to problem-solving that encourages creativity and innovation (Dam & Siang, 2020). According to this model (Stanford, 2023; Dam, 2022; Dam & Siang, 2020), design thinking comprises the following steps:

1. Empathize: Designers observe and engage with users to understand their problems and motivations.

2. Define: Information from the Empathize stage is analyzed to define a user's core problem.

3. Ideate: A wide range of ideas to solve the problem is generated, encouraging out-of-the-box thinking.

4. Prototype: Scaled-down versions of the product or its features are produced to investigate the proposed solutions.

5. Test: The final product is tested using the best solutions from the Prototype stage, often leading to product refinements and deeper user understanding.

The five-step design thinking process is a flexible approach that can be adapted to various problems and domains. It is not strictly linear, with designers often iterating between different stages as necessary (Dam & Siang, 2020). These stages are not always sequential, so de-

sign teams often run them in parallel, out of order and iteratively repeat them (Balcaitis, 2019). Although empathy is explicitly included in the first step, it is vital to emphasize empathy as an inherent and inevitable component of the design thinking process and all five stages (Brown, 2008).

2.2. Essential Role of the Customer in Design Thinking

With its foundational principles, design thinking inherently emphasizes the consumer, consumer centrism, and customer co-creation (Aris, Ibrahim, Abd Halim, Ali, Rusli, Nabila & Hassan, 2022). It sets itself apart from traditional design methodologies by its strong user-centric focus, which is seamlessly integrated with the pursuit of technologically feasible solutions and viable business strategies (Gasparini & Culén, 2017).

The consumer is not merely a passive recipient in the design thinking process but is actively involved (Kwon, Choi & Hwang, 2021). In the realm of design thinking, the concepts of customer centrism underscore the importance of placing the customer at the core of the design process (Eraslan Taşpınar, 2022). This approach involves empathizing with customers to gain deep insights into their experiences, needs, and challenges (Kouprie & Sleeswijk Visser, 2009). Design thinking informs the ideation and prototyping stages, developing solutions with the customer's perspective in mind (Dorst, 2011). It is about generating consumer value, ensuring that solutions are functional and meaningful (Cross, 2006). Ultimately, design thinking is aimed at enhancing the customer's overall experience (Achmadi, Rahayu & Indra Kurniawan, 2022).

Customer co-creation is another integral aspect of design thinking (Aris et al., 2022). It encourages customers to participate in the design process, enabling them to contribute their unique ideas and insights (Ranjan & Read, 2021). This collaborative approach has been shown to foster more innovative and effective solutions. It allows for a more dynamic and interactive relationship between the company and its cus-

tomers compared to traditional market research techniques (Witell, Kristensson, Gustafsson & Löfgren, 2011). Furthermore, in the realm of design thinking, customer co-creation can extend into a social context, where customers interact with each other to co-create value (Pandey & Kumar, 2020). This interaction can occur across various social layers, ranging from detached customers to ongoing neo-tribes while adding another layer of complexity and richness to the design thinking process (Rihova, Buhalis, Moital & Gouthro, 2015).

2.3. Customer Imperative in Marketing

Marketing, as a business orientation, represents an evolution from focusing on selling products to understanding and meeting customer needs and wants (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Over time, it evolved even further into the concept of societal marketing. This concept emphasizes the satisfaction of customer needs and the consideration of society's wellbeing as a critical element in marketing strategies (Livas, 2021; Crane & Desmond, 2002;). Therefore, marketing can be considered a societal function and a comprehensive process that proactively generates, communicates, and delivers value to customers while managing relationships in a way that benefits local and global stakeholders (Shultz, 2007). In essence, marketing not only involves activities that create value but also surpasses the company's relationship with its customers by focusing on the analysis of value-creating activities that link the company with its broader environment (Skålén, Cova, Gummerus & Sihvonen, 2022; Gummerus, 2013).

In the realm of marketing, the predominant paradigm is customer orientation, which is also visible in marketing definitions. Despite the evolution of marketing definitions since the 1960s, which have expanded to encompass all pertinent stakeholders and environments, the focus on the customer, their needs and wants (or value) has consistently remained a central determinant of both marketing practice and academic

study (Gamble, Gilmore, McCartan-Quinn & Durkan, 2011).

Over the past few decades, the marketing paradigm has further transformed, placing a greater emphasis on fostering and sustaining long-term relationships with customers as a means of ensuring customer retention (Dorotić, 2005), with additional focus on these relationships in online environment utilizing digital technologies in recent years (Mainardes, Rosa, & Nossa, 2020; Gáti, Mitev & Bauer, 2018; Larsson & Viitaoja, 2017). Therefore, we can find different approaches to customer focus in marketing studies, such as relationship marketing, customer experience, or customer journey mapping.

Relationship marketing, first introduced by Berry in 1983, is a key strategy in customer focus, shifting from traditional marketing tactics towards fostering strong customer relationships (Boulding, Staelin, Ehret & Johnston, 2005; Berry, 1983). It involves customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders in a company's development and marketing activities, fostering close, interactive relationships (Boateng, 2019). This approach enhances customer satisfaction, as a crucial factor for gaining a competitive advantage in today's market (Abtin & Pouramiri, 2016). Furthermore, it emphasizes customer loyalty, a valuable asset for any company, and seeks to improve profitability through effective customer relationship management (Hallikainen, Savimäki & Laukkanen, 2020).

The marketing field has increasingly recognized the importance of customer experience as a key determinant of business success in both B2B and B2C contexts (Zolkiewski, Story, Burton, Chan, Gomes, Hunter-Jones, O'Malley, Peters, Raddats & Robinson, 2017; Komulainen & Saraniemi, 2019). Customer experience encompasses various customer responses and reactions, which can vary in nature and strength (Bettiol, Capestro, Di Maria, & Micelli, 2021). This understanding allows enterprises to tailor their marketing strategies to elicit specific customer responses, thereby enhancing value creation (Forlani & Pencarelli, 2019). The strategic empha-

sis on customer experience in marketing fosters customer satisfaction and loyalty while also providing a competitive edge in today's dynamic and customer-centric business environment (Becker & Jaakkola, 2020).

Customer journey mapping is another critical aspect of marketing, providing valuable insights into a customer's experience with a brand across multiple touchpoints (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). It is a strategic tool that outlines the steps customers take when engaging with a company to obtain a product or service. With the advent of multichannel and omnichannel retailing, understanding the customer's journey has become even more complex and crucial (Lynch & Barnes, 2020). The integration of Big Data and Artificial Intelligence has further enhanced the potential of customer journey mapping, offering effective support to decision-making systems and reducing the risk of poor marketing decisions (D'Arco, Lo Presti, Marino, & Resciniti, 2019). Identifying the customer's journey is essential in understanding their needs and wants, which ultimately leads to improved customer satisfaction and business success (Pantouvakis & Gerou, 2022).

2.4. Convergence of Design Thinking and Marketing

The fundamentals of design thinking involve a deep interest in understanding the people for whom designers create user-oriented products, services, or experiences (Eraslan Taşpınar, 2022). This interest involves empathy, which is the centerpiece of a human-centered design process. Empathy allows design thinkers to set aside their own assumptions about the world to gain insight into users and their needs (Kouprie & Sleeswijk Visser, 2009). Similarly, customers with their needs and wants are the central marketing paradigm (Gamble et al., 2011). This customer-centric approach in marketing, much like in design thinking, allows marketers to tailor their strategies and offerings to meet their target audience's unique needs and preferences. Furthermore, it fosters the development of

long-term relationships with customers, as a crucial aspect of modern marketing strategies (Koponen & Julkunen, 2022).

Knight (2021) suggests that further parallels exist between certain design thinking principles and marketing, such as comprehending the consumer's needs, product testing, and refining based on consumer feedback. Obviously, these two disciplines share certain theoretical fundaments, and there is a potential for exchange of principles and concepts between them (Reinecke, 2016). As already said, design thinking deals with "wicked" problems (Elia & Margherita, 2018). However, marketing must also address complex problems while developing solutions that will result in competitive advantage and satisfied customers (Husić-Mehmedović, Pavičić, Gnjidić & Drašković, 2016). In the realm of social marketing, wicked problems are often associated with societal issues that require a broader lens as well as the engagement of various actors in the marketplace (Brennan, Previte & Fry, 2016; Domegan, McHugh, Devaney, Duane, Hogan, Broome, Layton, Joyce, Mazzonetto & Piwowarczyk, 2014). Therefore, the following research question can be proposed:

> RQ1: Are design thinking and marketing perceived as compatible approaches to a better understanding of customers and their needs and wants?

While both marketing and design thinking prioritize customer focus, their process-oriented approaches exhibit notable differences. The traditional marketing (planning) process, as outlined by Kotler (2011), encompasses six steps: Situational Analysis, Goal and Objectives Setting, Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning (STP), the 4Ps (Product, Price, Place, Promotion), Implementation, and Control. This intricate process integrates both strategic elements (i.e., strategic goals and STP) and tactical aspects (i.e., the 4Ps) (Melović, Pavičić, Gnjidić & Drašković, 2019).

By contrast, the design thinking process, which is more streamlined and primarily focused on the tactical/operational level, proposes a five-

step approach as the ideal progression for innovation or new product development. This process commences with Empathize and concludes with Testing, iterating until a satisfactory solution is achieved (Reinecke, 2016). The juxtaposition of these two processes could potentially highlight their compatibility. The entire marketing process is customer-centric, with each phase designed to cater to customer needs and wants, and promote societal wellbeing (Kotler, 2011). Empathy is not confined to the initial step in the design thinking process but is instead a fundamental component permeating the entire process (Stanford, 2023).

While design is frequently employed as a tool in marketing, whether in product development or to create promotional visuals, a discernible gap exists between the perspectives of designers and marketers (Brambila-Macias, Sakao & Kowalkowski, 2018). This divide becomes evident in practice when manufacturers often overlook marketing considerations during the design phase (Kindström & Kowalkowski, 2014). In a similar vein, this gap has also been acknowledged in academic research (Krishnan & Ulrich, 2001; Kuijken, Gemser & Wijnberg, 2016). Given its inherent characteristics, design thinking could potentially offer the necessary compatibility to diminish or bridge this gap on the tactical level (Reinecke, 2016). Consequently, the following research question is proposed:

RQ2: Can the principles and processes of design thinking be effectively applied to marketing mix elements to enhance customer focus?

In the exploration of compatibility between two theoretical concepts, such as marketing and design thinking, two primary stakeholders can provide valuable insights: academic researchers, who aim to develop new theories and refine existing ones, and practitioners, who stand to benefit from improved concepts and tools for understanding customer needs and wants. Traditionally, there has been a divergence in the views and perspectives of researchers and practitioners in the field of marketing (Hughes,

Tapp & Hughes, 2008; Hansotia, 2003). This is often due to a need for more communication and understanding between the two groups, resulting in a gap in applying research findings in practical settings (Anand and Shachak, 2020). Clearly, there is a need for a more collaborative approach between researchers and practitioners to bridge this gap, with a particular emphasis on involving practitioners in academic research processes (Gillespie, Otto & Young, 2018). Similarly, a coherence gap exists in understanding design thinking among academics and practitioners (Carlgren, Rauth & Elmquist, 2016). Therefore, the following research question is proposed:

RQ3: What are varying viewpoints and perceptions by industry professionals and academic researchers regarding the compatibility of design thinking and marketing as approaches to better understand customers and their needs and wants?

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Research Methodology

This study employs an exploratory qualitative research methodology to delve deeper into the compatibility between design thinking and marketing. The exploratory approach is chosen owing to its ability to uncover new insights and generate knowledge about these two disciplines despite certain limitations such as the relatively small sample size. This approach is particularly useful for understanding the participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, 2022).

The qualitative research methodology used in this study is grounded in the principles of thematic analysis, a method frequently employed in primary qualitative research (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic analysis effectively synthesizes qualitative findings from various sources and provides a structured approach to conducting qualitative research (Bargate, 2014). It involves identifying patterns or themes within the data,

which aids in understanding the meaning and significance of the data. This method ultimately provides a rich and detailed understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The thematic analysis in this study adheres to the six-step process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) and Nowell, Norris, White & Moules (2017). These steps include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This systematic approach ensures a thorough and rigorous analysis of the qualitative interview data collected through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its flexibility and depth (Chambers, Gardiner, Thompson, & Seymour, 2019).

3.2. Sample

The primary research was conducted on two separate convenient samples. The first sample comprised 12 industry professionals who utilize design thinking and its principles in everyday work. These professionals are sales managers and business developers in the road construction industry. The sample for this group included participants from a range of countries, including Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Czechia, Austria, France, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, and Romania, all employed by a leading company in the industry. Such a diverse sample allows for a broad perspective on the application of design thinking across different cultural and geographical contexts, yet with potential generalizability limitations due to the specific industry context.

The second sample consisted of academic researchers, primarily specialized in marketing but also with a deep understanding of design thinking. The sample size for this group is seven, with participants from Croatia, Bosnia, Denmark, and Slovenia. This sample provides a scholarly perspective on the research questions, complementing the industry perspective provided by the first sample.

3.3. Research Procedure

The research involved conducting semi-structured interviews with each respondent, guided by a research agenda containing a list of discussion topics (i.e., customer focus in marketing and design thinking, application of design thinking principles of design thinking within the individual elements of the marketing mix, and overall compatibility of design thinking and marketing). Interviews with 12 industry professionals were conducted in person in 2022, with short follow-up interviews conducted with three respondents due to time constraints that prevented covering all research agenda topics. The interviews with seven academic researchers were conducted in 2023, primarily via video conference, with three interviews conducted in person.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews are a commonly used method in qualitative research to gather rich and detailed data. According to Stuckey (2013) and Irvine, Drew, and Sainsbury (2013), this flexible method allows researchers to probe deeper into participants' responses, enhancing their understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Participants are given a set of open-ended questions but also have the flexibility to discuss additional topics. This approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the research topic and allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences (Lune & Berg, 2017).

4. PRIMARY RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1. Evaluating the Compatibility of Design Thinking and Marketing in Customer Understanding

Practitioners find design thinking to be an incredibly valuable approach that they can seamlessly integrate into their daily work. They genuinely appreciate how it places the customer at the center, enabling them to understand their

needs and wants better. Moreover, they recognize the critical role that design thinking plays in driving market success and ensuring long-term sustainability:

Design thinking helps me understand customers better and really focus on what they want… We can create innovative solutions that resonate with our target market by incorporating design thinking principles. [Industry professionals: respondent 10]

By adopting design thinking principles, we can gain a deep understanding of our customers' desires and pain points. This knowledge allows us to develop products and services that truly meet their needs, improving our competitiveness in the market. [Industry professionals: respondent 5]

Design thinking is widely recognized among practitioners as a valuable tool for improving interactions with internal and external stakeholders, especially considering the specific nature of the industry. However, certain organizational functions may prioritize different aspects that go beyond purely commercial considerations. Nonetheless, respondents also noted that design thinking could serve as an eye-opener for individuals within the organization who may lack strong customer focus, providing a method to expand their perspective:

In any organization, each team has its own priorities, yet I firmly believe that design thinking holds universal value. By applying design thinking principles, we can nurture a customer-focused mindset and cultivate an innovative culture that positively impacts the entire company. [Industry professionals: respondent 1]

Both groups of respondents recognized that design thinking emphasizes customer focus, which is also recognized as a fundamental marketing concept. In their discussions, they highlighted significant parallels between design thinking and marketing, as both approaches share a common objective of gaining profound customer insights and providing tailored solutions:

We can all agree that customer focus is the heart of design thinking. It aligns perfectly with our company's marketing efforts to develop customized solutions that meet customer needs uncovered through research. [Industry professionals: respondent 3]

Despite different origins and terminology, design thinking and marketing are inherently compatible. Both are aimed at understanding customers and providing tailored solutions deeply. [Academic researchers: respondent 4]

I see no fundamental difference between design thinking and marketing… I would even say that design thinking borrowed certain concepts from marketing, such as consumer research and customer focus. [Academic researchers: respondent 2]

I consider design thinking as marketing for non-marketers. It basically introduces marketing concepts to the non-marketing audience. [Academic researchers: respondent 2]

As a sales manager, I firmly believe integrating design thinking's customer-centric perspective with our marketing strategies and market research can be a game-changer. This approach helps us meet changing customer expectations and ensures our offerings appeal to our audience, setting us apart from competitors. [Industry professionals: respondent 12]

4.2. Application of Design Thinking Principles to the Marketing Mix

Once the vital link between design thinking and marketing has been established, respondents were asked to consider the potential application of the design thinking approach in the context of the marketing mix. Obviously, the most significant alignment of design thinking and marking was noticed in the context of a product, especially among practitioners, as the following quotations show:

The design thinking process mirrors our approach to developing new products and services for our clients. It is a reflection of our

product development process. [Industry professionals: respondent 3]

Product development and innovation fall under the first P – the product in marketing. Design thinking can be easily integrated into our company's innovation and product development processes to improve customer satisfaction. [Industry professionals: respondent 6]

Successful innovations often stem from client collaboration and understanding their needs. Thus, the new product development process, as part of the marketing mix, can benefit from design thinking principles. [Industry professionals: respondent 7]

When the discussion moved to the other marketing mix elements, industry professionals had certain difficulties connecting design thinking with a price. However, academic researchers intuitively described the application of design thinking in the contexts of distribution and price within the marketing mix. The existence of this discrepancy is illustrated by the following quotations:

In marketing, the focus has shifted from price to value. It is about the value companies provide and what they charge for it. For example, some consumers willingly pay up to EUR 1,500 for a smartphone as it denotes their status. Thus, companies must empathize with consumers to better understand this perceived value. [Academic researchers: respondent 4]

In terms of pricing, our strategy is based on our cost structure and market conditions. We do not typically empathize with our clients at this stage. However, if a lower price is necessary to secure a project, we strive to find common ground with our client. [Industry professionals: respondent 1]

We invest significant time and effort in negotiating prices with our clients. The outcomes can vary based on market conditions. I'm not sure how design thinking could be beneficial in this context. [Industry professionals: respondent 5]

Determining the right price can sometimes be challenging. It requires a sense of what price level the customer will find acceptable. However, our customers can sometimes be overly price-sensitive, with little regard for our service quality. [Industry professionals: respondent 11]

For both industry professionals and academic researchers, the compatibility of design thinking is evident in the context of distribution and promotion. Industry professionals are aware of the importance of consumer convenience when distributing their products. Additionally, the need to take into consideration customer needs and wants as well as other characteristics when communication is planned, designed, and executed:

When crafting marketing communication campaigns, understanding our target audience is crucial. We need to cater to their preferences and attitudes, which is where empathy and design thinking come into play. [Industry professionals: respondent 2]

To satisfy customer needs and wants, timely and accurate delivery of our products is essential. […] Customized communication ensures the customer interprets the message correctly. […] Clearly, design thinking principles can help. [Industry professionals: respondent 7]

Customer convenience is vital in distribution. Understanding customer preferences for delivery impacts satisfaction. […] Customized marketing communication is crucial for hitting the target. […] Using a design thinking approach would result in customized marketing channels and meaningful communication. [Academic researchers: respondent 4]

4.3. Comparing Industry and Academic Views on the Intersection of Design Thinking and Marketing

The industry professionals and academic researchers participating in this research study unanimously acknowledged the similarities and compatibility between design thinking and marketing. They perceive design thinking's empathy and the customer focus in marketing to be the

same or very similar concepts. Industry professionals appreciate the customer-centric approach of design thinking and see its integration into their daily work as valuable. They believe that design thinking can drive market success and ensure long-term sustainability. They also noted that design thinking can be an eye-opener for individuals within the organization who may benefit from a more robust customer focus.

Academic researchers also acknowledged the inherent compatibility between design thinking and marketing, despite their different origins and terminology. They see design thinking as a tool that can enhance the understanding of customer value, which is a shift from the traditional focus on price. However, some of them also expressed certain skepticism towards the concept of design thinking, which was not pronounced among industry professionals:

I do not consider design thinking to be something new. Everything that design thinking promotes, we know from marketing. For example, empathy is explored in the field of consumer behavior. [Academic researchers: respondent 1]

Design thinking looks more modern than marketing, but that is only because it was conceived more recently than marketing. [Academic researchers: respondent 4]

As anticipated, academic researchers generally displayed a deeper understanding of the theoretical concepts. However, industry professionals were more inclined to implement design thinking within the marketing context than academics. For academic researchers, incorporating design thinking into their studies may be viewed as stepping out of their comfort zone, which may not always be embraced willingly. The demand for an interdisciplinary approach in research seems to pose a challenge within academia, whereas practitioners commonly embrace and leverage such an approach:

Design thinking is a common approach used by engineers. While in a company context, interdisciplinary teams are widely used when solving complex problems, that is not the case in

academia. We prefer to stick to our playground. [Academic researchers: respondent 1]

5. DISCUSSION

The literature review identified common traits shared by design thinking and marketing that basis, despite their distinct origins, emphasize the significance of focusing on customers as a shared theoretical. However, the literature review also highlighted a gap between design thinking and marketing (Brambila et al., 2018), suggesting a need for interdisciplinary research in this area (Reinecke, 2016).

The findings of primary research provide valuable insights into the compatibility of design thinking and marketing as well as how these two disciplines can be potentially integrated to enhance customer understanding and meet their needs more effectively. Addressing the first research question (RQ1), for both practitioners and academics, there is a clear connection and compatibility between design thinking and marketing in the context of customer-centricity, which is in line with the suggestions of Reinecke (2016). It is evident that the findings provide empirical support for the notion that the synergy between design thinking and marketing enables organizations to gain comprehensive customer understanding and effectively address their needs and wants.

Concerning the second research question (RQ2), the findings indicate that implementing design thinking in the marketing mix context leads to an improved emphasis on customer needs and preferences. Industry professionals align design thinking with the product aspect of the marketing mix, particularly in product development and innovation and appreciate its customer-centric approach. However, they find it challenging to connect design thinking with the price aspect, suggesting a need for further exploration. Conversely, academic researchers describe the application of design thinking in distribution and pricing within the marketing mix, recognizing its compatibility with market-

ing. They see design thinking as a tool to enhance customer value understanding, offering a fresh perspective compared to traditional marketing strategies and potentially leading to more customer-focused outcomes.

In addressing the third research question (RQ3), the study revealed that both industry professionals and academic researchers acknowledge the compatibility of design thinking and marketing. Industry professionals value design thinking's customer-centric approach and its application in product development but find it challenging to connect it with price in the context of the marketing mix. While recognizing design thinking's potential to enhance customer value, academic researchers express some reservations and criticism. In line with the reviewed literature (Anand & Shachak, 2020; Gillespie et al., 2018; Hansotia, 2003), the findings suggest a potential gap between theory and practice, with industry professionals being more inclined to implement design thinking within the marketing context compared to academics.

6. CONCLUSION

The present research study suggests that there may be a discrepancy between the application of design thinking in marketing theory and its actual implementation in practice. It indicates that industry professionals are more inclined to adopt design thinking in marketing, whereas academics appear to be more reserved and critical of its effectiveness. This finding emphasizes the importance of conducting additional research to better understand and integrate design thinking into all aspects of marketing. Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach to research is needed to properly address the theoretical gap between the two disciplines.

The study's findings suggest that design thinking can be a valuable tool for practitioners, particularly those in the marketing functions and non-marketers. Its application can enhance customer-centricity, as an essential aspect of successful marketing strategies. The study highlights not only the potential of design thinking in product development, but also its potential application within the broader context of the marketing mix.

Due to the specifics of the research design, this study has particular limitations. First, a qualitative research methodology and a small sample size limit its generalizability. Furthermore, the fact that the sample of industry professionals is limited to a single industry whereas the sample of academic researchers includes only scholars from the marketing field, narrows its perspectives on the topic, so further research would need to address that.

The future of design thinking in marketing holds immense potential and offers numerous possibilities. Interdisciplinary research is necessary to bridge the gap between design thinking and marketing. Furthermore, companies are increasingly seeking a comprehensive understanding of their customers and their needs, so a combination of design thinking and marketing can be a powerful tool to achieve this. However, further research is required to comprehend and exploit this interdisciplinary topic fully.

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