

Liquid Consumption and Marketing Agility in the age of Digital Transformation: joining the two sides of the coin

Abstract

Both scholars and practitioners acknowledge the crucial role of digital transformation in leading a marketing agility effort. However, it also contributes to the rise of liquid consumption—an ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized form of consumption that diminishes customer loyalty and brand attachment. This creates a paradox: while marketing agility enhances responsiveness to customer needs, it may also inadvertently encourage more fluid, less committed consumer behaviours. Despite the salience of this topic, empirical and theoretical research on how marketing agility connects with liquid consumption is severely lacking. Through an exploratory multiple-case study involving four Hungary-based companies operating in the food sector, this research uncovers the mechanisms linking marketing agility and liquid consumption, synthesized in the AgiLi theoretical framework. We identify the key theoretical dimensions that explain how marketing agility nurtures liquid consumption and *vice versa*. We also put forth several propositions that summarize our results, as the starting point for future theoretical and empirical research in this nascent line of inquiry. This study has important implications for managers striving to compete in the digital era, offering useful guidelines to effectively balance marketing agility and liquid consumption from a practical perspective.

Keywords: marketing agility; liquid consumption; digital transformation; multiple-case study.

1. Introduction

Frida is relaxing on her sofa, scrolling through her phone and deciding on dinner. She starts by using the Tesco app to do her weekly food shopping. The app uses data and machine learning to provide personalized recommendations based on her search history and location. Next, Frida orders sushi through Just Eat, which also uses AI to suggest restaurants that match her preferences and budget. While waiting, she checks out Jamie Oliver's Facebook and Instagram pages for Italian cooking tips, where customized content is again offered based on her interests. Despite these activities seeming separate, they are connected by advanced digital technologies that analyze Frida's habits and predict her preferences, resulting in a tailored experience across platforms. Frida's daily routine exemplifies how firms adapt their offerings in real-time to match Frida's preferences prioritizing access, convenience, and personalization rather than ownership or long-term commitment.

This dynamic adaptation highlights how Digital Transformation (DT) is reshaping firm-customer relationships, facilitating new forms of communication, collaboration, innovation, and value creation (Verhoef et al., 2021). However, DT has also boosted the speed, complexity, and uncertainty of the market. On the one hand, firms have developed *marketing agility* (MA), allowing them to quickly adapt to evolving customer needs and preferences (Moi & Cabiddu, 2021a). MA refers to "*the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market*" (Kalaigianam et al., 2021, p. 36). On the

other hand, DT has empowered customers with unprecedented access to information, choices, and experiences, leading to an emerging phenomenon known as *liquid consumption* (LC). LC refers to an *ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized form of consumption* (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) that results in the elimination or “liquidation” of goods, as opposed to the accumulation of solid goods (Binkley, 2008). Today, consumers can effortlessly explore numerous online and offline channels, each offering a unique and tailored buying experience. Regardless of the medium they choose, they can seamlessly find products or access services that perfectly align with their needs (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2016; Goraya et al., 2020).

This creates a paradox: while MA helps companies be responsive to customer needs, it simultaneously propels LC, making customer retention a pressing concern. Businesses need to find a balance between being agile and building customer loyalty to counter the challenges of LC. However, while the literature acknowledges how DT affects both companies’ marketing strategies and customers’ purchasing behaviors, there remains a gap in understanding the intricate interplay between consumer LC behavior and a firm’s MA. Particularly, how these two concepts mutually influence each other in a dynamic feedback loop remains underexplored. DT has pushed firms to bolster their capacity to quickly and flexibly respond to changing customer needs (MA) (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaignanam et al., 2021; Moi & Cabiddu, 2021a), but it has also fuelled access-based and dematerialized forms of consumption, making it more fluid, with less loyalty and brand attachment (LC) (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Understanding the relationship between LC and MA is crucial for businesses aiming to align their strategies with today’s consumer landscape. Without this understanding, firms risk falling behind in an increasingly fluid and competitive market, where the ability to retain customers is more challenging than ever.

With this article, we seek to explore the underlying mechanisms that tie LC to a firm’s MA. The resulting research questions are the following: “*How do MA and consumer LC mutually influence each other?*” “*How can firms adapt their strategies to align with the evolving dynamics of LC and MA?*” We use a theoretical sampling logic (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 1989) and conduct an exploratory multiple-case study that focuses on four Hungary-based companies operating in the food sector (Yin, 2009).

From a theoretical perspective, we extend the literature on MA and LC by investigating the underlying mechanisms that connect these phenomena and how they shape each other. Our findings provide the empirical and theoretical dimensions that characterize such relationships organized in the AgiLi framework. We also put forth several propositions that summarize our results, as the starting point for future theoretical and empirical research in this nascent line of inquiry. Studying the relationships between LC and MA holds significant managerial implications for firms striving to compete and thrive in the digital era, where consumers enjoy unprecedented access to information, choices, and alternatives. In particular, we seek to uncover the strategic adjustments firms must make to remain competitive in an environment where consumer behavior and marketing practices are increasingly fluid and interconnected. As companies increasingly invest in MA and create more consumption opportunities, paradoxically, they may inadvertently spur consumers’ engagement in LC, presenting a complex challenge for firms to navigate. The study offers useful guidance for

managers and practitioners on how to effectively balance these dynamics as an opportunity for innovation in their strategic approaches.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Liquid consumption

DT profoundly impacted the society, transforming the labor market, consumption patterns and social relationships (Dholakia & Firat, 2019). DT allows consumers to seamlessly utilize online and physical channels to complete transactions or engage with firms, switching from one channel to another as needed (Huré et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2018; Shi et al., 2020). The physical and virtual worlds are increasingly integrated and provide consumers with a consistent consumption experience regardless of the purchasing channel used (e.g., website, app, in-store) (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2016; Gao & Su, 2020; Goraya et al., 2020).

This post-modern era, called “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000), is marked by the weakening and transformation of traditional social norms and institutions. In this context, life becomes more privatized, social connections loosen, and society becomes less transparent. Consumers now navigate an uncertain and highly mobile environment, where adaptability and flexibility are crucial skills (Bauman, 2000). One key outcome of liquid modernity is the emergence of LC (Bauman, 2000), an ephemeral, access-based, and dematerialized form of consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017).

Ephemeral and access-based consumption implies that consumption is short-lived, with a focus on temporary experiences rather than long-term ownership. Instead of owning goods, consumers now prefer temporary access to products and services, with ownership remaining with the provider (Schaefer et al., 2016). For example, platforms like Xbox Game Pass allow gamers to play video games via streaming without needing to purchase physical copies or download large files. They can access a library of games on demand and stop their subscription at any time. Moreover, services like car-sharing platforms offer the convenience of renting vehicles for short periods without the long-term commitment or costs of ownership. Similarly, Revest allows consumers to rent luxury fashion items, offering a rotating wardrobe without the need for permanent ownership. Consumption through temporary access reduces financial, social, or psychological risks (Morewedge et al., 2021). With access (psychological possession), consumers do not strive for the best choice but for a satisfactory choice, accepting even lower quality, as their commitment to the product is intermittent and poses less risk to them (Lawson et al., 2021). Lower expectations about the quality of a product or service can result in higher satisfaction during consumption (Lawson et al., 2021). This satisfaction can lead to a positive evaluation of the product tested in access-based consumption, which can later result in a purchase, i.e., a deferred choice commitment (Lawson et al., 2021).

Another dimension of LC is *dematerialization*, which means that the need for physical goods is reduced as digital alternatives take their place, such as digital services or products, digital art, informational products (software) (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). For instance, with the rise of NFTs (Non-Fungible Tokens), people can buy, sell, or trade digitally without owning a physical piece. The ownership is based on blockchain

technology, which provides proof of ownership of a digital asset, but the consumer may only have access or display rights to the digital artwork.

LC reflects the need for personal mobility, variability, and changeability for consumers by eliminating or “liquidating” goods, as opposed to the accumulation of solid goods (Binkley, 2008). Liquid modernity and LC result in the rise of *hyper-individualistic* consumers (Adorno, 2001; Bauman, 2000), personalized and convenience consumption. In LC, the focus shifts from the value in exchange to the value in use (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). While utilitarian benefits are emphasized, hedonistic motivations like enjoyment, convenience, staying on trend, or even environmental concerns also play a significant role and may become more important (Hamari et al., 2015; Minami Luri et al., 2021). In the context of liquid modernity, consumers prioritize experiences and personal fulfilment over materialistic consumption (Lawson et al., 2016). LC caters to consumers’ desire for variety and innovation without requiring long-term commitment to a particular brand or style (Lawson et al., 2016).

While LC is characterized by low loyalty and frequent switching (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), it does not entirely replace solid consumption. Instead, both forms coexist, offering consumers a broader range of options to satisfy their rapidly changing needs and preferences (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017).

2.2. Marketing agility

Marketing studies highlight the importance of MA for firms (Moi & Cabiddu, 2021a, 2021b; Moi & Cabiddu, 2022). By enabling organizations to readily adjust their strategies, tactics, and operations according to environmental changes, MA helps “embrace change” (Hagen et al., 2019; Osei et al., 2019; Rigby et al., 2016).

Recent studies have delved into specific aspects of MA (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaighnam et al., 2021). *Sensemaking* involves defining contextual or strategic trajectories of priority actions to anticipate or contextualize market trends and developments and invest resources in new developments (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaighnam et al., 2021). *Iteration* entails continuously reframing marketing efforts through small, adaptive adjustments to better align with changing marketplace needs (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaighnam et al., 2021). Scholars argue that MA is “the ability of any firm to be able to really quickly identify any initiatives, be able and nimble to execute them, get the feedback, and refine the initiative [...] The rapid evolution and iterative process to perfection [...] of marketing agility provides the company all the ammunition it needs to tackle the ever-changing market landscape” (Kalaighnam et al. 2021, p. 38). Therefore, iterations and twists enable to discover new directions and to reframe marketing decisions more effectively. *Speed* refers to the ability to rapidly adjust marketing actions and realign a firm’s strategy to meet consumer needs (Kalaighnam et al., 2021). It facilitates the identification of new opportunities or issues in the marketplace, enabling organizations to take prompt actions and develop and test new ideas for enhanced consumer experiences. MA is deeply *customer-centric*, as it prioritizes timely and effective responses to customer-related changes to provide the most value and fulfil customers’ requirements and expectations successfully (Moi & Cabiddu 2021a, 2021b; Moi & Cabiddu, 2022). *Marketing decisions* are about the

multiple areas in which MA impacts, such as advertising spending or product development (Kalaighnam et al., 2021). Deploying MA then requires a *flexible* organizational structure which fosters cross-functional teams, knowledge sharing, and integration among different departments (Kalaighnam et al., 2021; Moi & Cabiddu 2021a, 2021b).

DT has brought a series of strategic and organizational changes into customer value propositions, operating models, and business networks (Hess et al., 2016; Warner & Wäger, 2019), thus accelerating and amplifying market uncertainty and complexity. Indeed, many organizations fail with DT because they do not develop adequate plans and strategies in line with advancements in digital technologies (Bresciani et al., 2021). Therefore, scholars acknowledge that firms necessitate MA as a crucial dynamic capability to succeed in their DT process (Beretta & Smith, 2023; Hutter et al., 2023). DT requires organizations to be inherently agile in continually sensing and responding to market changes and meeting customer demands (AlNuaimi et al., 2022; Warner & Wäger, 2019). Drawing on MA, they ensure the constant renewal, enhancement, and innovation of resources and capabilities to deliver higher customer value through a flexible and adaptive approach (Moi & Cabiddu, 2021a). Therefore, by harnessing digital tools, organizations can swiftly and flexibly respond to market shifts, delivering personalized experiences that align with ongoing changes in consumers' needs and preferences, thus optimizing marketing strategies for maximum effectiveness (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaighnam et al., 2021; Moi & Cabiddu, 2021a). Simultaneously, DT facilitates seamless access to products and services through various channels (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2016; Goraya et al., 2020), contributing to heightened LC (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). DT, with its multidimensional impact on MA and LC, emerges as a pivotal force in today's ever-changing business environment. However, while DT facilitates both MA and LC, their roles in enhancing customer relationships are distinct. MA empowers companies to be responsive to customer needs and deliver consistent value while simultaneously propelling LC phenomenon through convenience and ease of access. Understanding the interplay relationship between these two concepts is important for organizations to develop comprehensive strategies that leverage the potential of DT while balancing both MA and LC effectively.

3. Methodology

We adopt a multiple-case study design, as such methodology helps address our exploratory research questions (Yin, 2009). Moreover, the multiple-case study method enables an in-depth empirical understanding of complex social phenomena, such as the ties between customer LC and firm MA (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Also, a multiple-case study allows replicating emergent findings in several cases to achieve better generalizability during the theory building (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

3.1. Research Sample and Case Selection

In this research, we adopt a purposeful theoretical sampling approach to choose cases "which are likely to [...] extend the emergent theory" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 537). The study draws insights from firms operating in the food industry, which represents an excellent context for studying the links between customers' LC and MA.

One key aspect is the frequent and rapid changes in consumption habits. Consumer preferences in the food industry can shift quickly due to various factors such as health trends, cultural shifts, and dietary choices. Another crucial factor in the food industry is its competitive market dynamics. With numerous brands and products competing for consumer attention, MA becomes essential to staying relevant and meeting evolving consumer demands. Moreover, digital technology, such as e-commerce and platforms, has significantly impacted the food industry. Online food delivery platforms, meal kits, and food subscription services have risen in popularity, offering variety and accessibility to consumers. These platforms generate valuable data through extensive customer transaction data, loyalty programs, and online interactions on consumer preferences and purchase patterns. We focused on firms based in Hungary, where food delivery has experienced significant growth in recent years¹. This growth has driven broader shifts in consumption habits while also pushing firms to innovate, stay competitive, and meet evolving consumer demands. To aid case selection and reach theoretical saturation, we opted for snowball sampling (Patton, 2002). To access respondents, we relied on the personal contacts of the research team and academic peers.

3.2. Data Collection

We collected firms' primary data through semi-structured interviews with key informants selected for their knowledge about the firms' marketing strategies and customers' consumption habits, and are "able and willing to communicate about it" (Kumar et al., 1993, p. 1634). Interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol comprising 15 open-ended questions to investigate how firms shape MA strategies and manage customers' LC. Interview questions include: *How quickly does your firm react when customers unexpectedly change consumption habits? Do you have a category of products in which customers' needs and consumption habits change so quickly that it is hard to chase?* Finally, we recorded and transcribed all interviews, and we invited the interviewees to review and modify the interview transcripts to ensure accuracy. We conducted 5 interviews through 4 cases in October-November 2023 lasting between 67 and 80 minutes. Also, we collected secondary data such as companies' social networking sites, official websites, and archival documents (e.g., reports and press reviews). This secondary data enabled us to enrich the information needed to investigate the firm's marketing strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1984) (see Table 1). We employed secondary data to supplement and ensure data triangulation, increasing the robustness of our research findings (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

We interrupted gathering primary and secondary data when we obtained theoretical saturation (Saunders et al., 2018). We reached saturation when collecting additional data did not lead to new theory. Therefore, we became empirically confident that our theoretical framework includes all key constructs and related relationships (Saunders et al., 2018). Finally, we followed a homogeneous line of inquiry to reduce the potential for misinterpretation (Yin, 2009), and to enhance the in-depth understanding of the

¹ <https://www.statista.com/outlook/emo/online-food-delivery/hungary>

phenomena investigated (Hagen et al., 2019).

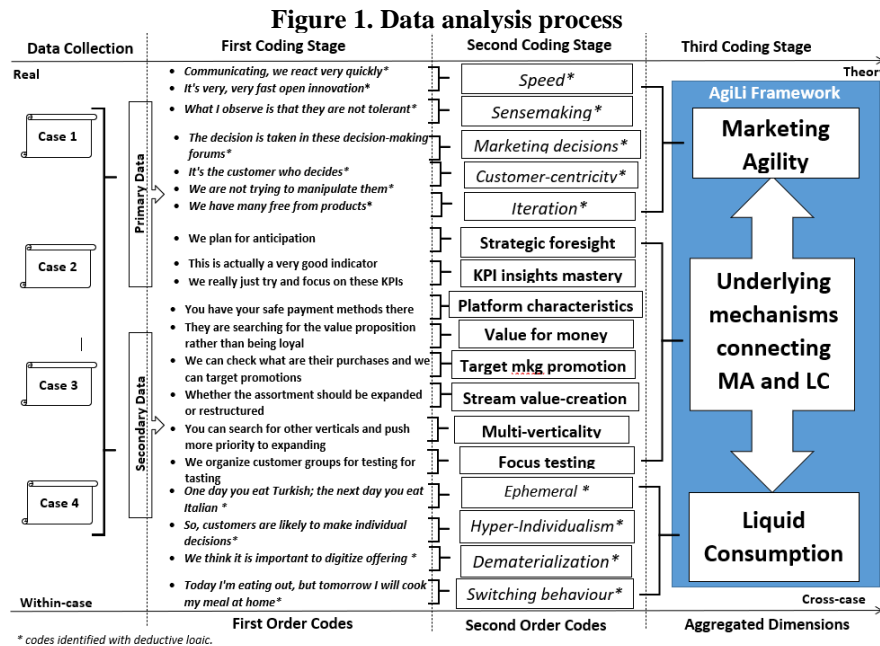
Table 1. Overview of the selected firms

Case study	Business area	Informant	Interview duration (minutes)
Case 1	Restaurant chain	Purchasing expert	67
Case 2	Food broker	Brand Manager	71
Case 3	Food and groceries retail	▪E-commerce / Mobile App Marketing Manager ▪Market research manager	80
Case 4	Food and groceries delivery	Product manager	58

Although no ethical issues arose from this study, the firms have preferred to keep anonymity. Thus, the data we gathered cannot be traced back to individuals, and neither direct access to secondary data (e.g., links to their website and reports) to prevent confidentiality.

3.3. Data Analysis

We followed a theory-building approach and made case summaries merging primary and secondary data. While constructing the case summaries, we performed both within- (between different interviews) and across-analysis (across multiple sources for a given case) to triangulate data sources (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). We ran NVivo 10 software for data analysis across three coding stages, moving from the details of the cases to the general theory (Saldaña, 2015) (see Figure 1).



To prevent confounding, two co-authors (the coders) independently analyzed the dataset. For each of the three coding stages, the coders compared their classification to validate the codes by running the NVivo *coding comparison query*. To ensure the robustness of findings, first, the coders discussed the inconsistencies between the codes and found agreed solutions until the value of the k coefficient was above 0.75. This level of agreement is considered substantial according to Landis & Koch (1977). Second, the coders applied across the data analysis credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability qualitative research criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

An abductive process was implemented throughout the data analysis. On the one hand, the deductive approach relied on former literature on LC and MA to explore and understand the raw data (see the codes with the * in Figure 1). On the other hand, the inductive approach enabled us to uncover emerging novel theoretical concepts (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018).

The initial phase of the analysis involved open coding, where we closely examined the data for recurring patterns, phrases, and behaviors. From this process, we identified several first-order codes, which represent distinct observations in the data. For example, *“clients are likely to individual decisions”*, which reflects consumers’ desire for highly personalized products and experiences, was drawn from both our data and theoretical insights from relevant LC literature.

In the second phase, we began grouping the first-order codes into higher-level categories that reflect theoretical insights. This phase required looking for relationships between first-order codes to develop more abstract interpretations. For instance, *“strategic foresight”* emerged as a second-order theme capturing how firms anticipate trends and proactively adjust their marketing strategies in response to ephemeral and access-based consumption (see Table 2).

Table 2. Constructs, Definitions, and Illustrative Quotes

Construct	Definition	Illustrative quote
Strategic foresight	Planning for the future by creating and analysing various scenarios, anticipating market trends, and studying competitors to identify opportunities and threats	<i>“You have to watch for anticipation We are constantly monitoring it, but to forecast it too much (...) What we do to keep up with changes, I think we do quite a lot of market research and we keep an eye on how the market is changing” (Case 3)</i>
KPI insights mastery	Synthesizing and analysing collected data to create a comprehensive view of customer behaviours and preferences	<i>“There are a lot of different metrics (...) the main KPI I would say is the reorder rate (...) it’s also important to segment these users into different buckets when analysing these information (...) And reorder frequency is another one because if you see that these segments are decreasing in frequency, that’s a pretty good sign that something is not going well” (Case 4)</i>
Focus testing	Team-based assessment of new ideas by gathering samples, conducting customer tastings, and analysing feedback to decide whether to pursue	<i>“And if the internal team together, purchasing and marketing and operations believe that it is something worth trying, then of course, we always try to gather more information about it and of course to have samples. Once we have the samples, we organize customer groups for testing, for tasting, and we</i>

	or discard ideas	<i>collect the information from these tastings and put together whether it is something worth digging in and trying to get more information out of it or focus or organizing more, let's say focus groups, but it's like a focus testing, or just leave it because it's already from the first input, it sees that it's not worth it"</i> (Case 1)
Targeted marketing promotion	Crafting engaging loyalty programs (e.g., games, coupons) to incentivize and retain customers	<i>"For retention, so for example, we have this loyalty program. You can do challenges. If you complete the challenges, you get points or even a voucher. And based on the collected points you can buy spreadsheets which would provide you a randomized voucher"</i> (Case 4)
Multi-verticality	Expanding offerings (e.g., new winning partnerships) for sales activation	<i>"The other win that you can take is also winning back partners who are either not on your platform now or they are less popular currently on your platform. But in the meantime, they are popular with the customers. So if you can combine these two activities, winning back users with communication and winning back restaurant partners by both promising and pitching them a good opportunity to be highlighted on our platform and trying more traffic towards them"</i> (Case 4)
Value for money	Balancing novelty/quality seeking and fair prices	<i>"(...) the product volume inside the basket is decreasing, so people are buying less for the same money as two years ago (...) we need to really put in the budget and the effort to find the innovation solutions which are helping our customers because I think that's the most important for our customer satisfaction is basically absolutely innovation and the best service in every touch point"</i> (Case 3)
Platform characteristics	Looking for key aspects like platform safety/familiarity, and its technical stability	<i>"A lot of users are loyal just because they are already used to the platform throughout many, many years. And if you don't do something really bad or they don't encounter something so ordinarily pure experience, then they are just going to stay on the platform"</i> (Case 4)
Streamlined value-creation	Cross-functionality to ensure efficient and effective resource allocation, aligning teams on maximizing customer value	<i>"There are several management meetings (...) at the same time there is a summary, prepared material, for example, on a topic of animal food, whether the assortment should be expanded or whether it should be restructured, and these are presented at these management decision-making forums (...) then a decision is made (...) this much should be taken from the area, or this much should be given to the area. So from then on, the operational work is to expand the assortment, but it is up to the purchasers to decide in what direction. So the decision is taken in these decision-making forums, in higher decision-making forums"</i> (Case 3)

In the third stage, we synthesized the second-order themes into broader, theoretical categories known as aggregate dimensions. These dimensions represent the highest level of abstraction and are the main conceptual contributions of this study. We identified two primary aggregate dimensions: Liquid Consumption Dimension, which

encompasses consumer behaviors related to temporary, fluid, and digitalized consumption experiences (e.g., ephemeral/access-based consumption, switching behavior, hyper-individualism), and Marketing Agility Dimension, which reflects the agile responses of marketing strategies to these liquid consumption patterns (e.g., customer-centricity, marketing decisions; speed). Finally, we grouped the dimensions which connect LC to MC and *vice versa*. For example, we identified strategic foresight which links MA and LC as follows: ephemeral/access-based consumption drives the need for strategic foresight within marketing agility, as firms must proactively identify trends and quickly adapt their marketing strategies to align with the temporary nature of consumer interests (see Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of the identified constructs and relationship

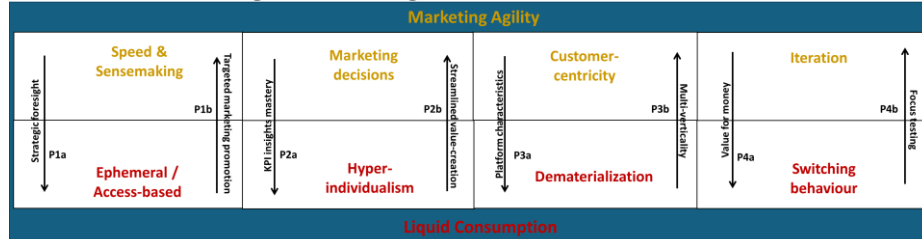
Liquid Consumption Dimension	Influence on Marketing Agility	Marketing Agility Dimension	Influence on Liquid Consumption
Ephemeral/access-based consumption	Strategic foresight: Drives the need to proactively identify trends and quickly adapt their marketing strategies to align with the temporary nature of consumer interests	Speed & Sensemaking	Targeted marketing promotion Enables the creation of time-sensitive and tailored promotions to incentivize repeated purchases and retain customers
Hyper-Individualism	KPI insights mastery Facilitates data-driven decisions focused on a comprehensive picture of customer dynamic needs	Marketing decisions	Streamlined value-creation Enables data-driven, cross-functional decision-making to ensure efficient resource allocation and maximize customer value
Dematerialization	Platform characteristics Facilitates interactions with customers among several digital options/alternatives, leveraging platform safety, ease of use, and technical stability	Customer-centricity	Multi-verticality Expands the range of potential solutions to fulfil evolving digital buying experiences
Switching behaviour	Value for money Counterbalances consumers' demand for innovative solutions by offering quality at fair prices	Iteration	Focus testing Allows offering to be aligned with consumers' actual demands

4. Toward the integration of Marketing Agility and Liquid Consumption: an integrative framework

Our findings highlight the multiple connections between various dimensions of MA and LC. The interactions and relationships among these dimensions form critical

strategies for firms to swiftly adapt to market shifts, anticipate consumer needs, and sustain a competitive advantage in an increasingly fluid and dynamic consumption landscape. Based on our findings, we have developed the AgiLi framework (Figure 1). We also advanced propositions regarding the connections among the identified constructs.

Figure 1. The AgiLi theoretical framework



4.1. The Interplay between Ephemeral/Access-based consumption, Speed and Sensemaking through Strategic Foresight and Targeted Marketing Promotion

Following existing literature, **ephemeral** and **access-based consumption** refers to a consumer preference for fleeting experiences over long-term commitments or ownership (Schaefers et al., 2016). Instead of owning goods, consumers now prefer temporary access to products and services, with ownership remaining with the provider (Schaefers et al., 2016). As stated by one respondent: “It’s different that (...) one day you eat Turkish, the next day you eat Italian (...) today I’m eating out, but tomorrow I won’t and I will organize it for myself at home (...) So it’s also different markets, different products” (Case 1). This transient nature of consumer behavior significantly influences a firm’s **speed and sensemaking**—key dimensions of marketing agility—in adapting marketing actions and realigning strategies to meet evolving consumer needs (Kalaighnam et al., 2021): “and to be honest, since COVID, this purchasing and supply chain business is totally up and down (...) very fast learning and open to innovations” (Case 1). Speed enables businesses to capitalize on short-lived trends, while sensemaking involves understanding and defining the strategic priorities needed to anticipate or contextualize market trends and developments, thereby guiding resource investment in emerging opportunities (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaighnam et al., 2021). As the following quote exemplifies: “And we see what’s going on in the world and listen to all kinds of research and try to come up with a solution (...) innovation is really something we think is important in the online digital application work” (Case 3).

To effectively address the ephemeral and access-based consumer consumption, and its impact on speed and sensemaking, firms need to develop **strategic foresight**. This involves planning for the future by analyzing various scenarios, anticipating market trends, and studying competitors to identify opportunities and threats. As one respondent noted: “You have to watch for anticipation. We are constantly monitoring the market to forecast it. What we do to keep up with changes, I think we do quite a lot

of market research and we keep an eye on how the market is changing.” (Case 3). Strategic foresight allows companies to be proactive rather than reactive, enabling them to stay ahead of trends and quickly adapt their marketing strategies to align with the momentary nature of consumer interests.

When companies successfully integrate strategic foresight into their marketing agility—encompassing both speed and sensemaking—they are better equipped to design and execute **targeted marketing promotions** that resonate with consumers seeking ephemeral and access-based consumption experiences. These strategies deepen brand-customer connections and drive repeat purchases. More importantly, they increase customer retention and create higher engagement. As one interviewee shared: “There is a loyalty promotion, so when you order through the application, then you can gather so-called crowns in the system based on your purchases. There are different levels. If you reach one level, then you are, I don’t know, the prince. If you reach the next level, you are the king and so on. Thus, we know that they are the heavy users. And we can check what are their purchases and see their sales results [...]. In the app, you can use coupons and it’s a very good way to boost the sales. I see some great uplift based on this couponing. It is helping us to change our products and offering.” (Case 1). Targeted marketing promotions and loyalty programs—such as gamified experiences, coupons, and challenges—facilitate the creation of time-sensitive campaigns, thereby reinforcing ephemeral and access-based consumption. Based on our findings, we advance the following propositions:

***PIa:** Ephemeral and access-based consumption enhances a firm’s speed and sensemaking, necessitating the development of strategic foresight.*

***PIb:** A firm’s speed and sensemaking influence ephemeral and access-based consumption through the implementation of targeted marketing promotion.*

4.2. The Interplay between Hyper-Individualism and Marketing Decisions through KPI Insights Mastery and Streamlined Value-creation

Hyper-Individualism refers to the growing trend where consumers increasingly seek personalized and unique experiences that align closely with their individual preferences and identities (Lawson et al., 2016). As stated by one respondent, “we are trying to look for such products that it’s not so easy to prepare at home, but give you the home feeling (...) we have a concept and we have a mindset that we would like the customer to feel themselves at home” (Case 1). This shift in consumer behavior significantly impacts a firm’s **marketing decisions**, affecting areas such as advertising spend, product development, and customer engagement strategies (Kalaighnam et al., 2021): “We actually invest into marketing activities and responsible recipes where we try to extend how the products can be used to give some inspiration. Because that’s one way to increase consumption to just widen the horizon and how they can eat it and make it more variable” (Case 2).

To effectively address the challenges posed by hyper-individualism in a firm’s marketing decisions, companies must excel in **mastering KPI insights**, which are crucial for making data-driven decisions that enhance adaptability. It implies synthesizing and analysing collected data to create a comprehensive view of customer

behaviours and preferences. As one interviewee explains, *“There are a lot of different metrics (...) the main KPI I would say is the reorder rate (...) it’s also important to segment these users into different buckets when analysing this information (...) And reorder frequency is another one because if you see that these segments are decreasing in frequency, that’s a pretty good sign that something is not going well”* (Case 4). A data-driven strategy enables businesses to remain competitive in saturated markets and respond dynamically to evolving market trends: *“we have researchers, market researchers from top market research companies in this country. It’s a primer information for us and we also analyse our own data, offline and online. We also use our different KPIs and trends. Based on these data, we try to make the best decisions.”* (Case 3).

Incorporating KPI insights into marketing strategies allows firms to **streamline value-creation** processes while addressing hyper-individualist consumption patterns. By leveraging KPI insights, firms have a deeper understanding of their customers, which is essential for making informed marketing decisions. Therefore, they can focus more effectively on the key aspects and allocate resources more efficiently, ensuring that all teams involved are aligned with strategic goals and directly contribute to value creation. As one interviewee explained, *“In terms of cross-functionality (...) it’s always a lot of departments included (...) We have multiple marketing campaign managers who work on different scopes on the platform. For example, one is specialized in restaurant promotions, one is specialized in user acquisition and retention (...) these require completely different communication methods and insert device methods. So you are not going to be in a customer with the same communication if the customer never ordered from shops on our platform. So you’re not going to bring them over with restaurant communications, but you have to communicate something in front of them (...) there are specializations within the marketing team, but they are always cross-functional”* (Case 4). Therefore, we advance the following propositions:

P2a: *Hyper-individualism requires firms to make marketing decisions through KPI insights mastery.*

P2b: *A firm’s marketing decisions address hyper-individualism through the implementation of streamlined value-creation processes.*

4.3. The Interplay between Dematerialization and Customer Centricity through Platform Characteristics and Multi-verticality

Dematerialized consumption refers to the trend where the reliance on physical goods diminishes. Instead of accumulating solid goods (Binkley, 2008), consumers can now easily explore various online and offline channels, each offering a personalized buying experience. No matter the platform, they can quickly find products or services that meet their needs. (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2016; Goraya et al., 2020). Dematerialization leads to a shift in how firms engage with customers and develops a **customer-centric** approach that prioritizes timely and effective responses to customer-related changes to fulfil customer requirements and expectations successfully (Moi & Cabiddu 2021a, 2021b; Moi & Cabiddu, 2022). As one respondent explains, *“So they are much more demanding for quality and they are not a lot less*

tolerant towards poor products (...) they are really quick to jump to another option if something is not going well (...) I think that's the biggest difficulty" (Case 4). In this context, retaining customers becomes more challenging: *"The consumer decides, but you give them the choices"* (Case 1); *"So we need to really put in the budget and the effort to find the innovation solutions which are helping our customers because I think that's the most important for our customer satisfaction is basically absolutely innovation and the best service in every touch point"* (Case 3).

Firms must focus on key aspects such as platform safety, user familiarity, and technical stability, which facilitate dematerialization but enhance customer-centricity. These **platform characteristics** are key differentiators for customer loyalty. They foster a sense of comfort among users, reducing the friction of switching between platforms and encouraging customers to continue engaging with the service, even in the face of minor issues: *"In general, you wouldn't shift [to another platform] until you encounter a bad experience because you are used to the platform. You don't want to start learning something new. You also have your safe payment methods there. You also have your previous orders, so that is what you use (...) A lot of users are loyal just because they are already used to the platform throughout many, many years. And if you don't do something really bad, then they are just going to stay on the platform. But in general, I think people are becoming less loyal to the platform. They are less tolerant with the issues. It's not really about loyalty because a lot of customers now have both platforms. I keep saying both because we mainly only have one competitor"* (Case 4).

When firms incorporate such platform characteristics into their customer-centric marketing strategies, they are better positioned to implement **multi-verticality**, aligning with consumers who favor dematerialized consumption. Multi-verticality involves expanding offerings to include multiple digital alternatives. As firms need to diversify their offerings to maintain growth, multi-verticality enables the expansion of the range of products or services through new partnerships, which helps businesses reach different market segments, create multiple streams of revenue, and explore new market opportunities or collaborations. As one interviewee highlighted: *"When you reach a point where you are not able to grow, you can try to grow vertical to expand quickly and keep up. If a strong competitor starts stealing customers, shift priorities back to your original scope and optimize it. This back-and-forth brings new customers without affecting existing ones. When growth slows, tighten your existing operations and optimize marketing, but be ready to expand again when conditions improve [...] The other win that you can take is also getting back partners [restaurants]. If you can combine these two activities, winning back users with communication and winning back restaurant partners by both promising and pitching them a good opportunity to be highlighted on our platform and trying more traffic towards them"* (Case 4). Therefore, we advance the following propositions:

P3a: *Dematerialized consumption strengthens customer-centricity by emphasizing platform safety, familiarity, and technical stability as key factors in maintaining customer loyalty.*

P3b: *Customer-centricity favours dematerialized consumption through multi-verticality, expanding offerings by diversification and creating strategic partnerships.*

4.4. The Interplay between Switching behaviour and Iteration through Value For Money and Focus Testing

Customers exhibit high **switching behavior** by frequently moving from one channel to another in search of novel solutions (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). This has a significant impact on a firm's marketing agility, especially in its **iterative** processes through which it continuously refines marketing efforts thanks to small, adaptive adjustments to better align with evolving marketplace demands (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaighnam et al., 2021). As one respondent noted, *"we always listen to our customers and they need something else or something should be different or in the application something should not that look like that or work like that that is working as it is now. We try and solve it as fast as we can, do a development or recreate something in the app, which maybe it's not that easy to use and people try to find maybe an option in the app and because it's not that visible for them and we try and put it to a more visible place"* (Case 3).

To address the challenges posed by consumer switching behavior impacting interaction—key dimension of marketing agility—firms must consider delivering a great **value for money** in their offerings, as customers prioritize a good balance between novelty and quality with fair prices, especially in challenging economic times such as COVID-19 and price inflation. One interviewee observed, *"Now [the market competition] is basically all about prices and good value and good proposals, good promotions, loyalties. So people are trying to find all the way they can spend less basically and get more [...] they go where they get the best value [...]. What we do as a company, we react really fast and try to come up with all kinds of solutions based on price decreasing and communication to have a solution for our customers. What we can provide is quality products on a reasonable price, so that's what we try to do"* (Case 3).

As firms iterate to meet customer needs and preferences, **focus testing** becomes crucial to extract value from changing consumer demand. Focus testing is essential for validating and refining new ideas before full-scale implementation. By gathering samples, conducting customer tastings, and analyzing feedback, firms can identify potential issues early and make necessary adjustments. This approach reduces the risk of market failure and ensures that final products align with customer preferences. One interviewee highlighted, *"If the internal team made of purchasing, marketing and operations members believe that it is something worth trying, then of course we go for it. We always try to gather more information about the trends and create samples. Once we have the samples, we organize customer groups for testing. We collect the information from these tastings and put together whether it is something worth digging into it or just leave the project because already from the first test it sees that it's not worth"* (Case 1). Therefore, we advance the following propositions:

P4a: *Consumer switching behavior supports a firm's iteration through the focus on value for money.*

P4b: *A firm's iteration reduces consumer switching behavior through focus testing.*

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study enhances our understanding of how DT shapes both marketing strategies and consumer behavior. While previous research has explored how digitalization affects MA and LC (e.g., Kalaighnam et al., 2021; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017), there remains a gap in understanding the intricate interplay between these two streams of literature. This work's main contribution extends prior literature by introducing the AgiLi framework, which maps out the multiple mechanisms that tie MA and LC, including how they mutually influence each other and how firms can adapt their strategies to align with their evolving dynamics. Our framework builds on existing literature in important ways.

Notably, prior literature has explored several aspects characterizing MA (e.g., speed, flexibility, marketing decisions) (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaighnam et al., 2021) and LC (e.g., dematerialization, hyper-individualism) (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). However, these two fields of research are silos-like and hardly influenced each other. As a result, the underlying mechanisms between the MA and LC main characteristics were largely ignored. This study delves into the dynamics connecting such dimensions.

In particular, previous literature refers to ephemeral and access-based consumption as a consumer preference for fleeting experiences over long-term commitments or ownership (Schaefer et al., 2016). We observed that this influences a firm's speed (capitalize on short-lived trends) and sensemaking (understanding and defining the strategic priorities needed to anticipate or contextualize market trends and developments) (Kalaighnam et al., 2021). Therefore, we contributed to current knowledge by discovering that strategic foresight (planning for the future by creating and analysing various scenarios, anticipating market trends, and studying competitors to identify opportunities and threats) influences the impact of ephemeral/access-based consumption (LC) on speed and sensemaking (MA), as it drives the need to proactively identify trends and quickly adapt their marketing strategies to align with the temporary nature of consumer interests. On the other side, targeted marketing promotion (i.e., crafting engaging loyalty programs, such as games or coupons, to incentivize and retain customers) influences the impact of speed and sensemaking on ephemeral/access-based consumption, as it enables the creation of time-sensitive and tailored promotions to incentivize repeated purchases and retain customers.

Moreover, prior research defines hyper-individualism as the growing trend where consumers increasingly seek personalized and unique experiences that align closely with their individual preferences and identities (Lawson et al., 2016). We argue that this shift in consumer behavior significantly impacts a firm's marketing decisions, affecting areas such as advertising spend, product development, and customer engagement strategies (Kalaighnam et al., 2021). Thus, we extended previous studies by suggesting that KPI insights mastery (i.e., synthesizing and analysing collected data to create a comprehensive view of customer behaviours and preferences) influences the impact of hyper-individualism (LC) on marketing decisions (MA), as it drives the need to proactively identify trends and quickly adapt their marketing strategies to align with the temporary nature of consumer interests. On the other hand, streamlined value-creation (i.e., cross-functionality to ensure efficient and effective resource allocation,

aligning teams on maximizing customer value) influences the impact of marketing decisions on hyper-individualism, as it enables data-driven, cross-functional decision-making to ensure efficient resource allocation and maximize customer value.

Furthermore, earlier research suggested that dematerialized consumption refers to the trend where the reliance on physical goods diminishes. Instead of accumulating solid goods (Binkley, 2008), consumers can now easily explore various online and offline channels, each offering a personalized buying experience. No matter the platform, they can quickly find products or services that meet their needs. (Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Cummins et al., 2016; Goraya et al., 2020). We found that dematerialization leads to a shift in how firms engage with customers and develops a customer-centric approach that prioritizes timely and effective responses to customer-related changes to fulfil customer requirements and expectations successfully (Moi & Cabiddu 2021a, 2021b; Moi & Cabiddu, 2022). Accordingly, we expand current knowledge identifying that platform characteristics (i.e., looking for key aspects like platform safety/familiarity, and its technical stability) influence the impact of dematerialization (LC) on customer-centricity (MA), as they facilitate interactions with customers among several digital options/alternatives, leveraging platform safety, ease of use, and technical stability. On the other side, multi-verticality (i.e., expanding offerings, e.g., with new winning partnerships, for sales activation) influences the impact of customer-centricity on dematerialization, as it expands the range of potential solutions to fulfil evolving digital buying experiences.

Lastly, earlier studies showed that customers exhibit high switching behavior by frequently moving from one channel to another in search of novel solutions (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). We found that there is a significant impact on a firm's marketing agility, especially in its iterative processes through which it continuously refines marketing efforts through small, adaptive adjustments to better align with evolving marketplace demands (Hughes & Rajesh, 2021; Kalaighnam et al., 2021). Hence, we stretch current knowledge showing that value for money (i.e., balancing novelty/quality seeking and fair prices) influences the impact of switching behavior (LC) on iteration (MA), as it counterbalances consumers' demand for innovative solutions by offering quality at fair prices. On the other hand, focus testing (i.e., team-based assessment of new ideas by gathering samples, conducting customer tastings, and analysing feedback to decide whether to pursue or discard ideas) influences the impact of iteration on switching behavior, as it allows offering to be aligned with consumers' actual demands.

All in all, this study contributes to extending prior research by unveiling the multiple ways through which firms can adapt their strategies to align with the evolving dynamics of LC and MA. This study adds depth by advancing several MA-LC connecting dimensions (strategic foresight, targeted marketing promotion, KPI mastery, streamlined value-creation, platform characteristics, multi-verticality, value for money, and focus testing). Compared to prior research, these strategies specifically explain what is required by firms when dealing with contexts in which consumer behaviour is liquid because of several digital options that allow consumers to have increasing convenience and ease of access to multiple ways to satisfy their needs. Such elements are crucial to navigating these dynamic and volatile circumstances.

Concluding, we contribute to advancing prior knowledge by exploring how the identified concepts connect to each other. By doing that we have built the preliminary bridges which link the MA to LC. These relationships have been formalised in some key theoretical propositions which result in the AgiLi theoretical framework.

Studying the relationships between LC and MA holds significant managerial implications for firms striving to compete and thrive in the digital era, where consumers enjoy unprecedented access to information, choices, and alternatives. As companies increasingly invest in MA and create more consumption opportunities, paradoxically, they may inadvertently spur consumers' engagement in LC, presenting a complex challenge for firms to navigate. By understanding the complex interplay between MA and LC, managers can develop more effective strategies to engage and retain customers who enjoy unprecedented access to information, choices, and alternatives. The study seeks to uncover the strategic adjustments firms must make to remain competitive in an environment where consumer behavior and marketing practices are increasingly fluid and interconnected, balancing these dynamics as an opportunity for innovation in their strategic approaches.

Although our findings provide a good theoretical and empirical understanding of the mechanisms connecting MA and LC, we acknowledge that the study is subject to limitations that could be addressed by researchers in the future. Future research may investigate whether the study's conclusions can be extended to other organizational settings (e.g., fashion industry). Also, this study examined the firm's perspective without considering the customer's point of view. Future research could extend this topic by looking at customers' perceptions. The results of this study are summarized into several theoretical propositions, which could be used as a starting point for further theoretical and empirical studies on this topic.

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