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# Investigating the Pre-Purchase Phase of the Customer Journey

An Exploratory Study in the Home Furnishing Retail Industry

by

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# Abstract

The purpose of this research was to generate new insights of what causes consumers to recognise needs, how they search for information, and how they evaluate the alternatives during the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey. The selected topic is of relevance, as consumer behaviour has gone through significant changes in recent years as a result of developments in everyday technology. To fulfil the purpose described above, the present study made use of both deductive and inductive approaches to the research, while looking at the subject from subjectivist epistemological and constructivist ontological viewpoints. The exploratory research design further allowed obtaining relevant insights with the help of qualitative data collection techniques, and the empirical investigation focused on home furnishing retail.

The study accomplished its objectives by generating new knowledge of each of the three parts of the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey: need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives. It was found that mainly two things lead consumers to recognise needs; either a radical shift in a consumer's life situation or a realisation that the current product does not live up to the consumer's standards. Furthermore, the study gained substance to the understanding of how unsought inspiration shapes consumers' need recognition, as today's consumers are exposed to an extensive amount of inspiration and information that causes them to recognise more needs. Moreover, channel selection seemed to have to do with their frame of reference, which was created by their initial criteria for the desired product. It was further found that consumers are very keen to listen and read reviews, and highly value peers' opinions when evaluating alternatives. Lastly, although technology has helped consumers in searching and evaluating alternatives, the end decision was in many cases still based on seeing the product at a traditional retail store.

Keywords: Consumer behaviour, customer journey, pre-purchase behaviour, need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, home furnishing

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

A commonly used model to explain the consumer decision-making process was developed by Engel, Kollatt and Blackwell (EKB-model) in 1968, and consists of five steps: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluation of the outcome (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). For decades, this model helped to depict the steps a consumer takes when preparing to purchase a product or a service. Furthermore, it was assumed that the consumer rationally goes through these steps in the same order every time when shopping (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). It was also suggested, that most of the information search and evaluation of the alternatives before the purchase take place inside the retail store (Löfgren, 2005). These assumptions held for many years.

However, the world has changed a lot since the development of the EKB-model. For example, consumers now have almost unlimited access to information, are exposed to countless promotional messages each day (Marshall, 2015; Bandt, 2016; Saxon, 2017) and use multiple devices simultaneously (Dias, 2016). Furthermore, new retail concepts such as second-hand shops and customer-to-customer markets have created an even more complex environment for marketers to understand and more options for consumers to choose from (Gullstrand Edbring, Lehner & Mont, 2016). As a result, an understanding grew that the actual events that a consumer experiences before the purchase differ from what the general EKB model suggested. Based on the model, the concept of customer journey grew up to capture the consumers' actual path to purchase in detail (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Still, the EKB decision-making model is relevant in portraying the overarching process and its general components (Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001). Because it roots back to the EKB-model, the customer journey is explained to contain the same five steps, further simplified into pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase phases. In this conceptualization, the pre-purchase phase contains the first three steps of the EKB-model (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016): need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives. In this thesis, we use the label pre-purchase phase to refer to these three steps collectively. We believe that all of the five steps still occur during the time a consumer interacts with a brand, which is why we structure the paper around the first three of them. However, we also believe that each step contains nuances and details that previous research has left unknown. Using the commonly accepted general steps, that also previous research on customer journey has accepted, will help to structure and contextualize the data collection and findings.

### 1.1.1 The Pre-Purchase Phase of the Customer Journey

Need recognition is explained as a form of an unrecognised want or need that is usually awoken through advertisement or promotion (Bruner & Pamazal, 1988; Solomon, Bamossy & Askegaard, 2006). The factors that trigger need recognition have, however, changed over the years. Along with asking peers in the near circle and seeing television adverts, consumers of today are also affected by magazines, catalogues, store displays and constant online interaction (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). This evolution indicates that consumers are exposed to a vast number of promotional messages each day (Marshall, 2015; Bandt, 2016; Saxon, 2017), which means that advertising is not effective on its own anymore. Thus, it is important to seek knowledge about how needs initiate in the present day.

When a consumer has recognised a need, he or she aims to find information about how to fulfil it and scans the available choices in the market (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). However, the way consumers seek information today differs from that of before. Traditionally, consumers were more prompt to search and evaluate their alternatives at the same occasion, which usually took place in a retail store (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). In contrast, consumers today often already know what price range, style, colours and other attributes exist for the product in question before even entering the retail store (Shen, 2012). Nowadays, consumers listen to more informal voices online, share their personal experiences with the brand through ratings, reviews, recommendations and product descriptions as well as find inspiration through blogs, search engines and social media services (Park & Cho, 2012; Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Simonson & Rosen, 2014). It has been found that half of consumers start their purchase process through an online search engine (Perry, 2013) rather than by the shelf in a retail store.

Consumers of today also show strong tendencies to search for information on multiple devices simultaneously (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). For example, many consumers use a smartphone, a tablet or a computer while they watch television (Dias, 2016). This behaviour highlights the obstacles marketers now face when measuring the effectiveness of their campaigns (Lecinski, 2011). However, it is important not solely to focus on the digital search process consumers go through. The physical environment should not be neglected because consumers still find it important to touch and feel the products physically both during information search and when evaluating which alternative to finally choose (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). In other words, the consumers very often know a great deal about the product category and the alternatives before evaluating their final options (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015).

Once the consumer has conducted enough information search and narrowed down the options to several considered alternatives, also known as the consideration set (Alba, Lynch, Weitz & Janiszewski, 1997; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015), the evaluation of these alternatives begins. According to Breugelmans, Köhler, Dellaert and Ruyter (2012), consumers of today narrow down their consideration set with the help of different online tools such as reviews, polls and comparison sites. The rapidly developing virtual reality technology can also help consumers to make purchase decisions faster (Huang & Liu, 2014). In conclusion, the consumers' needs have remained rather unchanged, but the new technology can result in consumers recognising more needs and satisfying them in new ways through increased

amount of available information (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). As the barriers to access information have vanished, and the information search and decision-making moments now extend far beyond of the traditional retail store, investigating consumer behaviour during the customer journey is more relevant than ever before.

## 1.2 Problem Formulation

As explained above, changes in the social environment have affected consumer behaviour in many ways. As a result, the way consumers interact during the customer journey has also diversified. More specifically, customer behaviour during the pre-purchase phase has been under a significant turbulence as explained above. As there are no signs of stagnation in the technological development, it can be assumed that customer behaviour before, during and after the purchase will keep evolving. Brands do no longer steer the desired message and image of themselves because consumers nowadays trust other consumers more (Grave, 2012). Therefore, power has shifted from brands to the consumers (Labrecque, von dem Esche, Mathwick, Novak & Hofacker, 2013), and, many of the touchpoints that a consumer encounters during the customer journey are no longer under the control of firms (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As more channel options are introduced to the market, more detailed understanding of the customers' multichannel shopping behaviour is needed (Kwon & Jain, 2009). Therefore, it is of interest to understand the current customer behaviour during the different phases of the customer journey.

Of further interest is the lack of depth in describing the different steps within the pre-purchase phase in current customer journey literature. Both scholars and trade press highlight the importance of further investigating the consumer behaviour during need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives (Han, 2011; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). Moreover, today's consumers are more educated than ever before: 62% of millennial shoppers know what they want to buy even before entering the store because of online research, and 84% of consumers are influenced by consumer written reviews (Bazaarvoice, 2013; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). As shopping is a decision-making process that is more and more driven by a powerful social collective of consumers interacting with each other, more inductive research is needed to uncover how consumers end up with different alternatives (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). However, these kinds of studies remain limited.

Consumer behaviour during the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey is still in need of further research, (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015) and will, therefore, be the focus of this study. More specifically, consumer behaviour in this phase remains under-researched in the academic context when taking into account the recent societal developments, pointing out a gap in the current knowledge (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). Depicted below is a visualisation of the customer journey (see Figure 1.) that consists of three parts – pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase phase. The emphasis of the gap in current knowledge lies in the limited amount of research that has been conducted on the pre-purchase phase of

the customer journey after the recent significant developments that have shaped customer behaviour as discussed above.

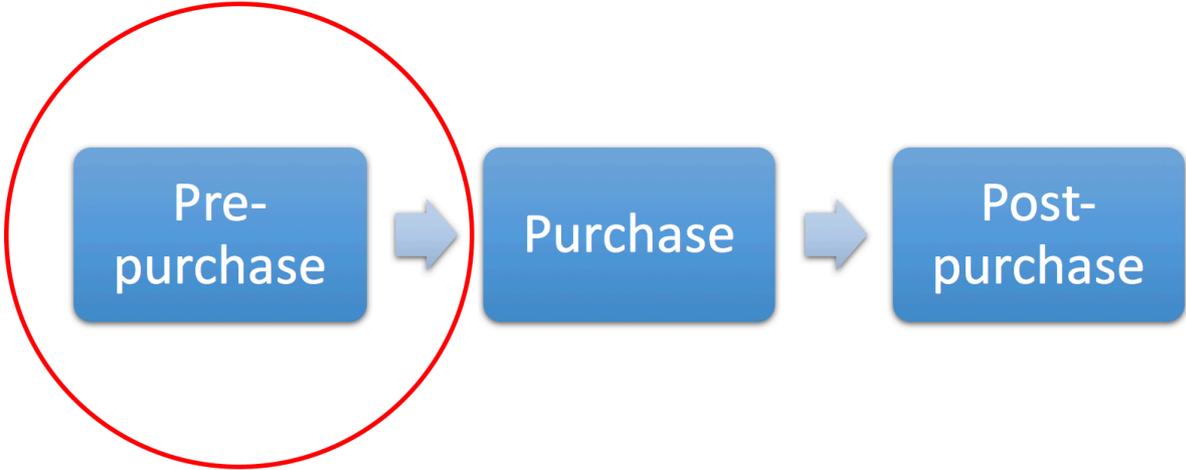


Figure 1. Focus area of the Customer Journey

Figure 2. illustrates a close-up of the main components of the pre-purchase phase: Need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives. The present study will use previous knowledge about these steps as a frame to collect data on how consumers interact before the buying decision during each one of them.



Figure 2. Focus areas of this study

### 1.3 Research Purpose

Building upon the discussion above and referring to Figure 2, the purpose of the study is developed and presented.

*The present study aims to generate new insights of what causes consumers to recognise needs, how they search for information, and how they evaluate the alternatives during the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey.*

More specifically, the current research seeks to answer the following questions:

- Why and how is the need recognition developed?
- How do consumers perform their information search?
- What alternatives do consumers take into consideration when evaluating alternatives?
- How do consumers select the final option from their consideration set?

The above research questions are asked in an exploratory manner to allow rich insights to surface. The purpose and the in-depth approach aim to generate contributions that are discussed below.

## 1.4 Intended Contributions

Previous research on customer journey has mostly been conducted from a positivist departure with a deductive research approach (Engel, Kollatt & Blackwell, 1968; Dennis, Jayawardhena & Papamatthaiou, 2010; Emrich, Paul & Rudolph, 2015; Bezes, 2016; Chiou, Chou & Shen, 2017; Arce-Urriza, Cebollada & Tarira, 2017). The reason for this might be the fact that the concept of consumer journey was originally based on the EKB decision-making model, which for a long time was regarded as a generalizable and transferable process across consumers and contexts, making the application of conclusive research design suitable (Engel, Kollatt & Blackwell, 1968; Engel, Blackwell & Miniard, 1995; Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001). However, the conclusive view has been criticised by several researchers, who argued that each customer experiences their own journey and motivations for making a decision, hence the need for a constructionist approach to reveal deeper insights about consumer decision-making during the customer journey (Seth, 1981; Bozinoff, 1982; Ozanne, 1988; D'Astous, Bensouda & Guindon, 1989; Harrel, 1990; Du Plessis, Rousseau & Blem, 1991; Lofman, 1991; Bettman, 1993; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000; Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001). The positivist stance has also led to many general studies about the customer journey, rather than focusing on a particular product category. It has therefore been suggested that focusing on one product category could reveal more insightful conclusions about the decision process (Seth, 1981; Ahtola, 1984; Harrel, 1990; Lofman, 1991), which is why the present study concentrates only on a selected area of the retail industry.

Still, a couple of methodological exceptions exist in the previous literature about customer journey. For example, Halvorsrud, Kvale and Følstad (2016) analysed customer journeys, and Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) mapped customer journeys in multichannel decision-making, creating customer journey typologies with the help of qualitative data collection techniques. These investigations demonstrate the stream of more recent research on the customer journey that approached the subject constructively. This is also the stream in which the present study will position its theoretical contributions.

Previous research has highlighted that there is room for exploratory research within the domains of consumer decision-making and customer journey (Erasmus, Boshoff and Rousseau, 2001). To fulfil the purpose described above, the present study makes use of both deductive and inductive approaches to research, while looking at the subject from subjectivist

epistemological and constructivist ontological viewpoints. The exploratory research design will further allow the participants to spontaneously share experiences, emotions and thoughts when nearing a decision (Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001). Moreover, this thesis aims to focus on a particular area of retail to find interesting insights among the participants. Due to the untraditional approach to the chosen field, we believe that this study will help unveil interesting insights into how consumers think, feel and behave before making a purchase decision. The findings of this research will be of relevance to researchers in the fields of customer journey and multichannel retail practices. Furthermore, this study aims to provide directions for future research in these fields.

Along with theoretical contributions, the present study seeks to generate several practical implications. First, the insights created will help retailers to understand better how consumers recognise needs, search information, evaluate alternatives and make decisions while having access to an almost unlimited amount of information. Second, the findings aim to challenge retailers to rethink their existing views on customer journey, as a consumer's actual behaviour prior to the purchase can be rather complex. These points are important because understanding customer journeys can help in optimising resource allocation, measuring channel attribution and managing the multichannel customer experience (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Lastly, as the empirical focus of this study is on home furnishing, retailers in that industry will especially benefit from the empirical findings of this research.

## 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 1 outlined the background and rationale to conduct this study. Problem discussion, research purpose, research questions and the intended contributions were also discussed. Next, Chapter 2 will explain the philosophy framing this study, describe the chosen research design, approach to data collection and the used data collection techniques. Chapter 2 also includes discussion about the ethical considerations and reflection on trustworthiness and the possible limitations associated with the chosen methodology. Chapter 3 will review the theoretical background, with the aim of identifying relevant concepts from the literature to be measured. As a result, a preliminary framework will be constructed to guide the inductive part of data collection. Chapter 4 consists of presenting and analysing the findings of the empirical study in relation to the preliminary framework. Chapter 5 then discusses the findings in relation to the purpose, research questions and previous research. The final chapter (Chapter 6) concludes this thesis by presenting the achieved theoretical and practical contributions, main limitations and avenues for future research.

## 2 Methodology

This chapter describes the philosophical assumptions, research design and strategy, selected data collection techniques, sampling approach and analysis methods that were used to craft the data of this thesis. In addition, ethical considerations, trustworthiness and potential limitations of the selected methodology will be reflected upon.

### 2.1 Research Approach

#### 2.1.1 Research Philosophy

Researchers should first define their philosophical assumptions, namely their epistemological and ontological assumptions in order to define their research design, strategy and data collection techniques (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Furthermore, doing so can increase the quality of the research and the creativity of the researcher (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Considering the purpose of this thesis, we view customer journey as a complex phenomenon, that consists of different circumstances and individuals. To fulfil the purpose, rich insights need to be generated in narrative rather than statistical form, in order to not to lose rich insights into this complex world (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). As we also aim to enter the social world of the research subjects and understand rather than explain customer journey from their point of view, we follow the interpretivist epistemology (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2011).

As stated above, we consider customer journey to be a social phenomenon that is created through social interaction between different parties (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). More specifically, we believe that customer journey is co-created by the customer, firms, the customer's own peers, online communities, journalists and many other entities. Customers interact with their environment and seek to make sense of it through their interpretations of their own interactions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Thus, no definite customer journey can exist, because this phenomenon is in a constant state of revision (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Moreover, as the way consumers perceive different situations depends on how they view the world, the reality that a retailer has about customer journey most likely differs from the reality that the customers perceive (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Thus, as the current research seeks to understand the subjective reality of the customers, this thesis follows the subjectivist (also known as constructionist) ontology.

In conclusion, the current study demonstrates the interpretive paradigm as it aims to understand rather than change the existing state of affairs (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill,

2009). These assumptions about the theory of knowledge (epistemology) and the nature of reality and existence (ontology) create grounds for research design (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), which will be discussed next.

### 2.1.2 Research Design

Before starting the research activity, it should be explained what will be observed and how, in order to achieve goals that the research has set out to pursue (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). According to Malhotra (2010), research designs are frameworks for conducting a marketing research project and can be broadly divided to conclusive and exploratory. Conclusive research is more structured, while exploratory research process is more flexible and aims to create insights and understanding before an approach can be developed (Malhotra, 2010). Exploratory design mainly benefits from qualitative data collection techniques, because it is not concerned about testing a theory; rather, it is relatively unstructured in order to create new insights (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bearing in mind the stated objectives and research questions of this thesis, an exploratory design was chosen because it enabled capturing the small nuances of the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey and thus discovering new insights (Malhotra, 2010). This design was also in line with the philosophical assumptions outlined above.

Moreover, the present study made, to some extent, use of both inductive and deductive approaches to the research process. Inductive, also known as a bottom-up approach is based on collecting data and drawing explanations based on them (Burns & Burns, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Conversely, research that starts with a theory or hypotheses that will be tested is referred to as deductive or a top-down research design. (Burns & Burns, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2011). In this thesis, deduction was used to create a preliminary framework based on existing research to serve as a basis to obtain empirical data. In practice, this was done by reviewing literature from the fields of customer journey and multichannel practices. An inductive approach was then used to adjust this preliminary model based on insights gathered from the research subjects. This pragmatic perspective allowed us to combine features from both inductive and deductive standpoints.

Thus, the present study differed from many of the previous studies on customer journey, as many of them have been conclusive and mainly made use of deductive approach as discussed in Subchapter 1.4. The selected research design set grounds for defining the research strategy, which will be discussed next.

### 2.1.3 Research Strategy

Following the philosophical paradigm and research design discussed above, an often used strategy in exploratory research – multiple case study strategy – was selected (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The main reason for this choice was the need to obtain rich information from many different situations (cases), and our view of customer journey as dependable of the context where it takes place (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). As the

data collection in the present study occurred during a specified point of time and data was obtained from each participant only once, it can be characterised as a cross-sectional study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This strategy makes use of more than one case from which patterns of association can be drawn from (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Considering the available time and resources, the chosen strategy enabled to answer the research questions and fulfil the purpose of the current study, while being consistent with the philosophical underpinnings (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In conclusion, the selected philosophical assumptions, research design and strategy helped to establish premises to undertake the process of data collection, which will be described next.

## 2.2 Data Collection

To create rich insights from the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey, two methods were used to understand the complexity of the phenomenon better. Furthermore, using more than one source of data, also known as triangulation, is often employed in a case study research strategy (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2011). The present study made use of triangulation to offset the limitations associated with one type of method with the help of another (Bijoux & Myers, 2006). The two different data collection methods used in the present study were semi-structured interviews and solicited email diaries. Both of these techniques were in line with the chosen philosophical departures, the exploratory approach to research design and selected research strategy. This part will discuss the how these methods were used in the current study, along with their main features, advantages and limitations.

### 2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews are the most common method of obtaining qualitative data (Opdenakker, 2006; Malhotra, 2010; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Doody & Noonan, 2013). The method is an unstructured, direct and flexible data collection technique, which allows a conversational style (Malhotra, 2010; Doody & Noonan, 2013). Contrarily to focus groups, the interviews of the present study were conducted on a one-to-one basis (Malhotra, 2010), thus they were synchronous in time and space (Opdenakker, 2006) with an exception of two of the interviews conducted via telephone. An interview can be either structured, semi-structured or unstructured in format (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Structured interviews are often the most suitable for quantitative research, while semi-structured and unstructured interviews consist of open-ended questions and are therefore a fit for qualitative research strategies and the present study (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The interview is an appropriate technique when understanding of the respondent's world has to be made (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Thus, as the aim of this thesis was to gather accurate customer insights about the pre-purchase of the customer journey, it was appropriate to make use of the semi-structured interviews to get insights from people who have recently made a purchase that they can still recall. Furthermore, conducting semi-structured interviews was a suitable technique to obtain insights that allowed answering the research questions

provided in the first chapter, while following the philosophical stance, research design and strategy discussed above.

Semi-structured interviews aim to acquire rich, detailed answers, which is why more room is left to the respondents' perspectives (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Even though the direction of the interview is determined by the participant's answers (Malhotra, 2010), the researchers can make use of a rough outline that lists the topics to be covered (Malhotra, 2010; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). After explaining the purpose and objectives of the study, the interviewed participants of the present study were first asked to tell about the last time when they bought home furnishing products. This broad, general question was asked to encourage the participant to talk freely before advancing to more detailed questions, as recommended by Malhotra (2010). This order resulted in stories that differed from each other in many ways, such as the described product and the themes that the participants stressed as being important. The rest of the interview then concentrated on breaking down the pre-purchase phase customer journey for this particular purchase, along with other general questions for example about inspiration and style. Thus, the interviews made use of an often deployed technique called the critical incident technique (CIT), where the respondents are asked to recall the past retrospectively (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Overall, this method enabled a diverse mix of perspectives to surface during the interviews.

Planning the outline of an interview, known as the interview guide, can help to create comfortable interaction with the participant as the researcher is already familiar with the issues to be addressed, and can thus concentrate on listening the answers better (Doody & Noonan, 2013). A general interview guide was crafted for the present study (Appendix A), and it consisted of the topics to be covered in each interview. Furthermore, the guide was planned to minimise asking leading questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Before the actual interviews, the interview guide was slightly adjusted after testing it in a practice interview where both of the researchers were present. Planning the interview guide and practising how to use it turned out to be important because as the answers were rather spontaneous with no significant time delay in answering, the researchers had to pay close attention to them (Opdenakker, 2006).

Despite planning ahead, the interviewers used slightly different wordings depending on the participant's replies and asked further questions to gain elaboration on certain answers (Malhotra, 2010; Bryman & Bell, 2011, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In the present study, the actual questions asked were based on the participants' answers to the broad question that was asked in the beginning. After the first question, the participants were asked to elaborate on certain themes depending on their answer. This motivational technique known as probing helped the respondents to enlarge, clarify or explain their answers (Malhotra, 2010; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). It was a key technique when conducting interviews because even though most participants were willing to provide information, they required guidance about the number of details required (Doody & Noonan, 2013). This kind of flexibility helped to avoid turning the interviews into structured interviews with open-ended answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

In general, the length of an interview varies but is usually set from 30 minutes to more than one hour (Malhotra, 2010). However, short interviews can also be quite revealing (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In the present study, the length of the interviews ranged from 21 minutes to over one hour. Following the best practices, each interview was also recorded and transcribed (Malhotra, 2010), because doing so helps to correct memory limitations, review what exactly was said and how, and open data to public scrutiny and to be reused by same or other researchers (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Opdenakker, 2006; Doody & Noonan, 2013). Whenever possible, the interviews should be conducted in the language that will be used in the study. Otherwise, translating might initiate linguistic, sociocultural and methodological problems (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In the present study, three languages were used to conduct interviews: English, Swedish and Finnish. The reason for this decision was to encourage the participants to share as much as possible, which in some cases was easier in their native language. The potential drawbacks associated with translating the listed above languages were mitigated by careful procedures in the data analysis stage. These measures are described in detail in the Subchapter 2.4.

As all data collection methods, semi-structured interviews come with some limitations. First, the quality and completeness of the results relies heavily on the interviewer's skills (Malhotra, 2010; Doody & Noonan, 2013). As the aim of the in-depth interviews is to uncover meanings and hidden motives, a fully objective view is not possible, and bias is present based on the researcher's own views in moderation and interpretation (Malhotra, 2010; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The researcher might unintentionally affect the participant's answers for example by expressing surprise or disapproval (Doody & Noonan, 2013). In addition, people tend to rationalise their past actions, when asked to recall previous experiences (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). To mitigate these limitations, another method was used in this thesis to gain insights about the pre-purchase process as it happens. The other method used in the present study, the solicited email diary, will be discussed next.

### 2.2.2 Solicited Email Diary

Whenever conducting qualitative research, using more than one data collection method adds rigour, richness, depth and creativity to the research (Bijoux & Myers, 2006). In order to gain additional insights about the actual behaviour during the pre-purchase phase, another method was used to complement the findings from the semi-structured interviews. The selected method for the present study was the solicited diary method, in which the participants actively reported about their actions, experiences and behaviours based on the questions provided by the researchers (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015).

Solicited diaries are a useful data collection method when prolonged participant observation is not practical (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005), which was the case with this thesis. Diaries allow researchers to collect more detailed descriptions of personal experiences, because they are less subject to memory problems (Bryman & Bell, 2011) than for example interviews, and thus create a rich source of data in an unobtrusive way (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Furthermore, this method provides an individual with an opportunity to express themselves creatively (Alaszewski, 2006) and describe events as they happen, thus

enabling researchers to capture deep, insightful and accurate experiences from the participants (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Considering the purpose of this study, this method provided a way to get a sense of the events of the pre-purchase phase almost in real time and thus improve the richness of insights. In addition, this method allowed participants to craft their answers at their own pace (Opdenakker, 2006; Bartlett & Milligan, 2015), which enabled not only capturing detailed descriptions of events, but also the feelings associated with those events (Alaszewski, 2006).

One of the main limitations of a solicited diary method is that the participants have to be able to read and write in the language that the study is conducted (Wiseman, Conteh & Matovu, 2005; Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). This requirement indicates that the method is more suitable for better-educated people, and can thus result in a biased sample (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). The participants of the present study were asked to reply in English, which might have limited the number of details in the replies since none of the participants was native in English. Furthermore, one of the most reported challenges with diaries is respondent fatigue (Bryman & Bell, 2011), referring to the fact that submitting answers every day can be exhausting, and result in decreasing quality of the responses (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Thus, a level of participant commitment and dedication is needed to succeed collecting data through diaries (Bolger, Davis & Rafaeli, 2003). However, no apparent decrease of the quality of the answers was detected in the present study. In addition, memory recall problems cannot be completely avoided (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To mitigate these limitations, it has been suggested that the optimal length of data collection period should be kept relatively short, between 1-2 weeks (Keleher & Verrinder, 2003; Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). In the present study, the diaries lasted between 11 and 14 days. Along with the relatively short length of the diary-keeping period (Keleher & Verrinder, 2003), follow-ups and reminders sent by the researchers during the data collection increased participation and the volume of data (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005; Bartlett & Milligan, 2015).

As a result of the widespread usage of internet, new technologies have been introduced to replace the traditional techniques of collecting diary data (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). Jones and Woolley (2014) found email-diaries to produce the advantages of traditional pen and paper diaries. In addition, they found that this approach to data collection is easier for the participants: no training was required because the members were familiar with email writing, and they could write their entries flexibly in a variety of locations. This flexibility was seen in the present study too: all participants were familiar with writing emails and used computers, smartphones and tablet computers to write and submit their entries. Furthermore, the email diary also alleviated the challenge of transcribing, as the entries were already written in an electronic format (Piasecki, Hufford, Solhan & Trull, 2007; Jones & Woolley, 2014). Overall, the email-diary provided solutions to some of the problems associated with the traditional diary methods, and the ease of submitting diary entries via email encouraged participation and completion (Jones & Woolley, 2014).

As the success of the diary method depends much on a trusting relationship between the researcher and the diary keeper (Wiseman, Conteh & Matovu, 2005), the concepts of confidentiality and informed consent are essential with this method (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Jones & Woolley, 2014). It is also worth pointing out, that knowledge about the effect of diary-keeping itself on the participants' experiences and responses remains limited (Bolger,

Davis & Rafaeli, 2003). Lastly, the analysis of the diary data might possess challenges, as different people keep diaries in many different ways (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015). For example, replies from the participants of the present study varied from a few individual words to multiple paragraphs of full, well-written text. Furthermore, some participants did not reply every day, resulting in incomplete diaries with the total of 12 entries missing. In total, the four participants of the solicited email diary generated 42 diary entries. Therefore, an overall completion rate of 78% was achieved.

The present study made use of the solicited email diary approach to gain insights from people who were in the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey, considering to buy home furnishing products. The participants were first provided with information about the study, followed by instructions on how to write and submit their entries (Appendix B). An email with simple, open-ended questions was sent to the participants every day to remind them regularly (please see an example in Appendix C). Additional reminders were sent in cases where the participant did not remember to submit their answer on time. Similar to the interviews, the diary questions sent were mostly similar in the beginning, but slightly adjusted for each participant later on depending on their replies. Furthermore, the respondents were encouraged to ask any questions about the study that might emerge. Lastly, participants were asked to provide the researchers with their internet browsing history from the period of the diary to further support their diary entries. It was explicitly underlined that these records would only be used for this study and remain confidential. Still, not every participant agreed to submit this evidence.

In conclusion, the solicited email diary provided a mean to create rich data and thus complement the insights acquired from the interviews. These two methods were used in parallel with the aim of creating data that enables fulfilling the purpose. To further enhance the relevancy of data in regards to the purpose and objectives set to this study, great care was taken when selecting suitable participants. The approach to sampling and characteristics of the sample used in this thesis will be outlined next.

## 2.3 Sampling Approach

Because the purpose of this study was to examine in great detail consumer behaviour during the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey, it was important to collect the data from participants that would be able to provide relevant insights (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In other words, the criteria for selecting the participants consisted of people who had recently made a purchase and could recall their experiences, and people who were considering to buy; thus in the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey. Regarding the empirical focus of this thesis, only people who had purchased or were about to buy home furnishing in Sweden were eligible to participate. Thus, the present study made use of purposive sampling, as the participants were selected in a strategic way to fit a certain description (Malhotra, 2010; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Even though this non-probability approach is convenient, it does not allow generalising the results to a population as it is quite subjective and selecting the participants is dependable on the researchers' judgement (Malhotra, 2010). However, keeping

in mind that the present study is designed to be exploratory and did not aim to generate conclusive results, purposive sampling was appropriate.

In practice, the participants were recruited through directly asking the researchers' peers to get in touch with people who fitted the criteria. Moreover, both researchers posted the criteria to their personal social media accounts to reach suitable participants. The potential participants were contacted and asked whether they already bought home furnishing, or are currently planning to buy. This was done in order to find out whether the potential participants fulfil the criteria outlined above and to determine which data collection technique – semi-structured interview or solicited email diary – would be more suitable to obtain the most relevant insights from each one of them.

The data collection period extended over three weeks, during which the interviews were conducted and diary entries collected. The final sample consisted of 15 people, from which 11 were interviewed and 4 participated by writing the diary. Even though purposive sampling does not allow generalising the results of a study to a population (Bryman & Bell, 2011), considering the variety of the characteristics of the sample is important to consider how the final sample looks like in relation to the larger context from which it was drawn (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The participants in this study varied in terms of key characteristics, i.e. age, gender, occupation, marital status, household size and education (Table 1). The characteristics of the participants of the present study that are listed in Table 1 suggest that the sample drew insights from many different life situations. Still, it is of importance to mention that more women than men volunteered for the study, and most of the participants were under the age of 30. Furthermore, most of the participants had done university studies, agreeing with the argument by Burns and Burns (2008) that volunteering participants tend to be of a higher social class, more intelligent, more extroverted, less conforming and have a higher need for approval. Still, we believe that a sufficient number of perspectives was included, as it is an important criterion when evaluating the validity of a constructionist study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In conclusion, the sample was small and non-representative, as it is often the case when conducting exploratory research that aims to generate maximum insights rather than conclusive findings (Malhotra, 2010). The data that was obtained from the sample was rich and provided grounds to fulfil the purpose of this thesis. The next part focuses on discussing how the data was analysed.

*Table 1. Characteristics of the sample of this study*

Participant number	Age	Gender	Occupation	Household size	Marital status	Education	Data collection technique	Interview Duration	Number of Diary Entries	Data collection language
1.	25	Female	University Student	2	Not Married	University	Semi-structured interview	30 min	–	English
2.	25	Male	University Student	1	Not Married	University	Semi-structured interview	37 min	–	English
3.	32	Female	Bank	4	Married	University	Semi-structured	1h 8 min	–	Swedish

			Worker				interview			
4.	26	Female	Hospital Physician	2	Not Married	University	Semi-structured interview	21 min	–	Swedish
5.	31	Female	Project Coordinator	2	Engaged	University	Semi-structured interview	1 hour 5 min	–	Swedish
6.	29	Female	Human Resources Manager	2	Informally Married	University	Semi-structured interview	1 hour 5 min	–	Swedish
7.	28	Female	Buyer	2	Married	Private Design School	Semi-structured interview	34 min	–	Swedish
8.	24	Female	Hairdresser	2	Not Married	High School, University Studies	Semi-structured interview	41 min	–	English
9.	25	Female	University Student	1	Not Married	University	Semi-structured interview	25 min	–	English
10.	57	Female	Sales Manager	4	Married	University	Telephone interview	22 min	–	Swedish
11.	26	Female	IT Consultant	2	Informally Married	University	Telephone interview	45 min	–	Finnish
12.	25	Male	Purchaser	2	Informally Married	University	Solicited email diary	–	10	English
13.	26	Female	Civil Servant	1	Not Married	University	Solicited email diary	–	7	English
14.	32	Female	Office Worker	5	Married	University	Solicited email diary	–	14	English
15.	26	Female	Marketing Coordinator	2	Informally Married	University	Solicited email diary	–	11	English

## 2.4 Data Analysis

As qualitative data collection techniques usually generate large sets of data (Bryman & Bell, 2011), following careful procedures when analysing it in regards to the purpose was vital for the present study. Before analysing the data collected for this thesis, it was organised and filed systematically as recommended by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015). In addition, the researchers first agreed on file formats and naming conventions in order to keep the data stored in a consistent fashion.

Organizing the data was conducted as follows. First, the interviews were transcribed word to word by both interviewers. Second, the transcripts were checked in order to minimize the loss of rich data. Third, the interviews that were conducted in other languages than English were translated word by word to English, and the translations were once again proofread. Moreover, field notes that were taken during the interviews were checked to include additional comments about the interview situations. These steps were done right after each interview, when each interviewer still had the social setting and nuances of the interview in mind (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Even though the emails containing the diary entries were already in an electronic textual format, they were prepared for the analysis in a similar manner as the interview transcriptions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The text was copy-pasted from the emails to text documents, and the replies were arranged in chronological order. In addition, it was made sure that personally identifiable information such as email addresses or participants' names were not included in the data. Lastly, the internet browsing history and images that were provided by the diary participants were labelled and organised.

After all data was transcribed and formatted, both researchers read the transcripts multiple times independently. In order to identify and classify categories from this non-standardised data (Saunders Lewis & Thornhill, 2009), relevant themes were identified with the help of the preliminary framework, which will be introduced in the Subchapter 3.3.2. This framework was formulated before the data collection, and it allowed distinguishing and grouping themes that were related to the purpose of the research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). As the framework was constructed based on existing research and each concept in it was operationalised to answer different research questions, it bridged the gap between theory, empirical data and our purpose (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In practice, both researchers highlighted and underlined all sentences that were related to the concepts defined in the framework. Insights that could not be connected to the predetermined concepts were retained, to later see if any patterns emerge from them. Moreover, the researchers wrote marginal notes on the printed transcriptions and gradually refined those notes into codes to later group themes accordingly (Bryman & Bell, 2011). More specifically, the researchers color-coded each of the three measured concepts congruently. Notes were thereafter compared, and quotes grouped according to the concepts. Therefore, as we systematically sorted the data according to predefined concepts, the analysis process was deductive. However, the process was concurrently inductive, as we also evaluated themes that did not fit the preliminary framework.

In conclusion, the above analysis procedures undertaken for this study were consistent with our philosophical standpoints, research design and strategy. Moreover, they allowed us to produce a well-structured approach to pursuing the analysis, answer the research questions and fulfil the purpose set for this study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

## 2.5 Ethical Considerations

The fundamental principles of research ethics consist of protecting the research subjects and the research community (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As presented by Diener and Crandall (1978) in Bryman and Bell (2011), these principles can be further broken down to four dimensions: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and deception.

First, it should be made sure that the research does not cause harm to the subjects. In the present study, the main possible harm could be the stress that the participants experience during data collection (Malhotra, 2010). To relieve the stress inherent in the data collection, the participants were informed that there are no right or wrong answers when briefing them before the data collection took place (Malhotra, 2010). Furthermore, as the participants have a right to anonymity and confidentiality (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Burns & Burns, 2008), their identities and records were maintained confidentially throughout the research process (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In addition, their full names or other personally identifiable information were not included in the results of the study. Moreover, the participants' right to choose whether to participate or not was respected, as was their right to end their participation whenever they wanted (Burns & Burns, 2008). These procedures ensured the privacy of the respondents when collecting data for this thesis.

The concept of informed consent assures, that the participants will receive detailed information about the study before partaking (Burns & Burns, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). To ensure that the participants of this study were provided with the necessary information, the participants were offered with a written consent form (Appendix D) beforehand (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As suggested by Burns and Burns (2008) and Bryman and Bell (2011), the form stated the real purpose of the research, a statement that participation is voluntary, description of the data collection techniques, information of the extent to which confidentiality will be maintained, option to choose anonymity, a description of risks and benefits to the participants and the intended uses and storage of the collected data. Lastly, the form contained an option to agree or refuse to participate and contact details of the researchers to reach out for more information (Burns & Burns, 2008). Before the interviews, it was told that recording equipment would be used. Similar to the consent form used in the interviews, the diary participants were given general information about the study and its ethical dimensions (Appendix B), followed by detailed instructions on how to write and submit their replies (Appendix C). All this information reduced the risk of deception, which refers to presenting the study as something that it is not in order to acquire more natural responses (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

With regards to the political aspects of a research project, it should be considered that marketing research includes four key stakeholders: the researcher, the client, the respondent and the public (Malhotra, 2010). It is important to be aware that each of these stakeholders may want to influence the direction and the results of the study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Ethical issues arise when the interests of the different stakeholders are in

conflict (Malhotra, 2010) and the sources of funding and support should be declared to increase transparency (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It should be noted that the present study was done in cooperation with IKEA. Thus, it was carefully considered from the start that this corporate stakeholder did not have an influence on for example what kind of questions were included in the study, as that might have resulted in ‘contaminated’ results (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). However, IKEA did not determine the topic of the study, nor did they provide the researchers with any incentives. Furthermore, even though IKEA provided each of the participants with a gift card as an incentive to take part, it was stressed that the study does not focus on IKEA. In conclusion, the nature of the relationship between the research and the corporate stakeholder cannot be held as compromised.

Designing the interview guide and the diary questions also posed possible pitfalls that could have undermined the ethics of this study. When forming the questions, biased wording and statements were avoided (Malhotra, 2010). For example, IKEA or any other specific firm was not presented as a favourable brand in comparison to the competitors, as this would have been likely to affect the answers. The researchers were also careful with collecting sensitive data, such as information about the participants’ ethnicity, political opinions, religious views, physical or mental health and sexual orientation (Burns & Burns, 2008). This kind of information was not in the scope of the present study; thus it was not collected. The present study was delivered to the participants via email, as it is considered ethical to inform the participants about the outcomes of the study (Burns & Burns, 2008).

In conclusion, this subchapter described, how ethical aspects were considered when crafting this work. Overall, we took a universalist stance, meaning that ethical precepts were respected throughout the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To conclude the Chapter 2, trustworthiness and the potential weaknesses associated with the selected methodology will be discussed next.

## 2.6 Reflection on Trustworthiness and Potential Weaknesses

In order to evaluate research, it is essential first to consider the underlying philosophical assumptions, as they define the criteria for judging the quality of it (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the present study has taken an interpretivist stance in epistemology and subjectivist view in ontology. Moreover, the research was designed in exploratory manner making use of both deductive and inductive approaches, and data was collected with qualitative techniques. In the context of qualitative business and management research, the concepts credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are held as commonly accepted criteria (Bryman & Bell, 2011), and thus can be used to evaluate this study. Moreover, using these concepts fits the selected research design and strategy. These four criteria listed above are commonly held as equivalents of reliability, replicability and validity that are used to evaluate quantitative research, and thus used in this chapter to reflect on trustworthiness and potential weaknesses of this thesis. Doing so ensures that the research stands up stronger for outside scrutiny (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Credibility refers to evaluating, how believable the findings are (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To end up with plausible findings, this thesis made use of triangulation, i.e. using more than one data collection technique. Even though triangulation can be undertaken within and across research strategies (Bryman & Bell, 2011), the methods utilised in this thesis followed the same, qualitative research strategy. Still, as discussed in the Subchapter 2.3., the used sampling approach resulted in findings that are not generalizable. On the other hand, creating generalizable results was out of the scope of this study, and cannot thus be considered as the main limitation.

Regarding transferability, which means evaluating how the findings could apply to other contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2011), the present study is limited for the same reasons as credibility. As the data was collected from only a small number of people, the results are orientated to the contextual uniqueness and cannot thus be directly generalised to other industries or markets (Bryman & Bell, 2011). We consider the transferability to be a responsibility of the researcher who conducts the generalising. Thus, thoroughly describing the research assumptions and methodology provides grounds for other researchers to attempt transferring the findings of this study to other settings.

Dependability helps other researchers to evaluate the trustworthiness of a study through explaining its context (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Evidence from every step of the present study was documented and stored and are available on request, enabling a possible critical audit to our processes later on (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For example, earlier versions of problem formulation and literature review, along with interview notes, recordings and transcripts were retained to increase the transparency of the research process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

Confirmability of the present study – evaluating whether the researchers allowed their values to intrude to a high degree (Bryman & Bell, 2011) – is hard to estimate. Still, efforts were made to minimise the bias that could potentially undermine the results of this study. For example, to standardise the way data the collection techniques were used, a practice interview was held before the actual interviews with both researchers being present. Moreover, both researchers were present in the first two actual interviews. Furthermore, the diary instructions were loosely based on instructions used in previous research. Even though English was not the first language of neither the researchers nor the participants, it was used to collect data from some participants (see Table 1 in Subchapter 2.3.) in order to reduce the strain of translating in the analysis phase. It was, however, made sure before the data collection, that each of these participants was capable of expressing themselves in English, to verify that no insights would get lost because of linguistic limitations. After the data collection was done, the recordings were transcribed from word to word to make sure no data was lost. Following the same logic, the interviews that were conducted in Swedish and Finnish were first transcribed from word to word and then translated with the same approach. Overall, we believe that the measures described above enabled us to transmit the individuals' views rather accurately, while at the same time minimising our biases. Thus, the study gives access to the experiences of the people who were in the research setting (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In conclusion, the chapter 2 described in detail the approach and techniques that were used to conduct this study. Furthermore, ethical considerations, trustworthiness and possible limitations were critically discussed. Besides these methodological grounds, it is important to understand the theoretical framework that this study was built on; a topic that the next chapter seeks to clarify.

## 3 Literature Review

A literature review helps to provide a context and refine the topic of a study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In this chapter, the theoretical background of the current study will be discussed. First, the large domain of consumer behaviour will be examined, as it gives a context for the things to follow. Second, recent developments in technology and their impact on consumer behaviour will be discussed. Third, previous research on decision-making will be presented, leading to the concept of the customer journey. The current understanding of the pre-purchase phase and its main components will be examined, along with relevant insights from multichannel literature. The chapter is concluded by deducting relevant concepts from the literature, making up our preliminary framework that was used for data collection and analysis.

### 3.1 Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is the discipline that views people as consumers and is concerned about “the products and services they buy and use, and the ways these fit into their lives” (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg, 2006, p.4). More specifically, this broad domain includes studies about processes that individuals use when selecting, purchasing, using and disposing of products or services to satisfy their needs (Solomon et al., 2006). Thus, it is the overarching frame that also includes research areas of consumer decision-making and customer journey. Understanding consumer behaviour has become more prominent in the last couple of years. Marketers are becoming more eager to find out what is going on in a consumer’s minds when making decisions (Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001) because products and services no longer fill only functional but also symbolic purposes (Solomon et al., 2006). Marketers who can understand how consumers make decisions and what needs and wants they have, win in the long run (Solomon et al., 2006).

Following our philosophical underpinnings discussed earlier, we view individuals as constantly interacting with their environment and interpreting it through their own interactions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Therefore, the environment has an impact on how the consumers see the world and adjust their behaviour. During recent years, development of everyday technology has been faster than ever, resulting in many new ways of consumption that have had major effects on consumer behaviour. These developments are briefly discussed next.

### 3.1.1 The Impact of Modern Technology on Consumer Behaviour

In recent years, technological advancements have changed the way consumers shop and what prompts them to make certain decisions (Rigby, 2011). As the popularity of internet grew, the power that consumers possess began to increase (Labrecque, et al., 2013). Individuals now access both marketer and consumer content, create and distribute content and form communities on crowd-based platforms (Labrecque et al., 2013). The internet has not only allowed more interaction among consumers, but also increased choice options by enabling the interaction with brands that are physically distant (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). The increase of options has also led to more possible decisions consumers can make and thus increased competition among brands (Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). Furthermore, retailers use new technology to change ways of shopping: their mobile applications, self-checkouts and smart-shelf technologies have driven consumer behaviour to new directions (Grewal, Roggeveen & Nordfält, 2017)

The development of web 2.0, which refers to platforms that enable consumers to respond, interact, create and share content instead of one-way communication to consumers (Belk, 2014), has affected brands too. It has been found, that consumers have become influential creators of brand stories, as experiences and opinions are easy to share online (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins & Wiertz, 2013). Also known as user-generated content (Singh & Sonnerburg, 2012), these brand stories are a new, powerful form of word-of-mouth. In summary, the internet as we know it today has major effects on brand building, as brands are forced to listen to their customers more (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

Furthermore, the proliferation of mobile devices has resulted in many consumers using multiple devices simultaneously, for example using a smartphone or a tablet computer when watching television (Dias, 2016). This dynamic consumption of media has found to affect advertising recall and recognition (Angell, Gorton, Sauer, Bottomley & White, 2016), as a frequent trigger for using a mobile device when watching television is keeping occupied during the commercial breaks (Dias, 2016). However, an advertisement on the television might also cause the consumer to seek more information online (Dias, 2016). Recently, virtual reality solutions have gained popularity. This technology has obvious consequences on shopping too, as consumers are increasingly able to visualise and try virtual versions of products before buying them (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). As a result, the popularity and the role of traditional retail stores might change.

Technological advancements have also resulted in the development of the “participatory culture”, meaning that consumers rather turn to other consumers for help, than going directly to the brands (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). This culture has allowed community building and sharing items, thoughts, opinions and inspiration through many different channels (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). Moreover, it has initiated many crowd-based business models that have disrupted many existing industries, as consumers together have pooled resources to make their own ideas come true (Labrecque et al., 2013). This phenomenon that was born during the internet age is still growing in popularity (Belk, 2014).

In conclusion, the cultural shift initiated by technological developments has caused consumers to recognise more needs and satisfy them in new ways through increased amount of available

information (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). Moreover, these changes have caused the traditional way of selling and buying to transform into omnichannel retailing, meaning that firms face the challenge of meeting the customer in countless numbers of channels (Rigby, 2011). These developments indicate that the way consumers select, purchase, use and dispose products or services has changed significantly during the past decade. More specifically, of the components of the customer journey, the consumer behaviour has changed the most during the pre-purchase phase. Still, as mentioned in part 1.4., the existing research on customer journey has mainly been conclusive. As a result, insights about customer journey from the customers' viewpoint are missing, when taking into the account the many changes discussed above. Thus it is of interest to investigate it in more detail. To understand how customer journey is defined in the present study, the concept of it will be discussed next.

## 3.2 Customer Journey

Building on the broader context of consumer behaviour discussed above, this part provides a review of the development and definition of the concept of the customer journey. In addition, this chapter discusses what is already known about the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey in order to construct the preliminary framework used for guiding the data collection process.

### 3.2.1 The Consumer Decision-Making Model

The concepts of consumer decision-making process and customer journey share many similarities but should be separated from each other to better understand consumers' shopping behaviour (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). In previous literature, the most established and cited model to describe the steps that a customer takes consists of five parts: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluation of the outcome (Solomon et al., 2006; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015; Goworek & McGoldrick, 2015). This model, also known as the EKB consumer decision-making model, is almost 50 years old (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015), and assumes that consumers follow this linear path to make rational decisions (Solomon et al., 2006; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014).

Other scholars have argued that despite the fact that this holistic view is more detailed, dividing the decision-making process to three steps – pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase – makes the process easier to manage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the three-step-conceptualization, pre-purchase phase includes need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives; thus everything that happens before the actual transaction. Purchase phase consists of every customer interaction during the event of purchase, such as ordering and payment. Finally, post-purchase covers all interactions after the two previous stages, namely consumption of the product or a service (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

However, because these approaches to decision-making were developed in pre-internet days, it has been argued that they cannot capture the actual customer journeys of today in full detail (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Research has shown that consumers do not always follow the five-step -process logically (Solomon et al., 2006). For example, the consumer of today might conduct more information search after the purchase (Court, Elzinga, Mulder & Vetvik, 2009). Thus, time spent on each of the five stages differs, and the model cannot capture this kind of nuances. Still, this model is useful in portraying the overarching process of consumer decision-making (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). For the present study, the five-step model is essential in order to structure the analysis with the help of simplifying stages and sequences to a manageable number of elements. Furthermore, the three-step model will help us to refer to the steps of the pre-purchase phase collectively.

### 3.2.2 The Concept of Customer Journey

Despite the efforts by previous research, consumer decision making in terms of activities and considerations during the different stages remains complex (Sonnenberg & Erasmus, 2005), and “cannot be generalized over the wider spectrum of consumer goods” (Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001, p.89). Thus, how the decision-making process happens in reality should be studied in detail.

Whereas the consumer decision-making models discussed above help to understand the purchase process in a broader context, the customer journey literature has concentrated in attempting to describe the same phenomenon in more detail. The main argument for this practical approach is that the actual behaviour does not in most cases follow the linearity portrayed in the decision-making models (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Rather, each consumer has their own, personalised journey (Kolsky, 2016), and therefore a consumer’s real journey from a need recognition to purchase cannot be illustrated as a linear, universal funnel (Court et al., 2009). In other words, different journeys might result in different customer experiences even if the end decision was similar (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Moreover, while the decision-making models assume that consumers make only rational choices with the help of their cognitive abilities, customer journeys also take into account the emotional and behavioural drives (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014).

As encapsulated by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014), customer journey mapping is concerned with involving every touch point and channel that the customers engage in during their shopping. Another definition of a customer journey concludes that the term refers to the sequence of events that customers experience to learn about, purchase and interact with a firm’s offerings (Norton & Pine, 2013). It is also important to separate customer journeys from the concept of service blueprinting. According to Halvorsrud, Kvale, and Følstad, (2016), service blueprints represent what the organisation plans the customer to do, and customer journey maps represents what happens from a customer’s viewpoint. Still, “service blueprinting can provide a solid starting point for customer journey mapping” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 86).

As the barriers to access information have practically disappeared (Lecinski, 2011), consumers interact with brands in multiple channels, resulting in more complex customer

journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) where customers change their paths regularly (Kolsky, 2016). For firms, capturing the actual customer journeys in full detail is important in order to “optimise resource allocation, help measure channel attribution and manage the multichannel customer experience” (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014, p. 325). Furthermore, understanding the sequence from a customer’s point of view can help to define the role of each channel better, and to illustrate the different journeys consumers can take when navigating through the increasing number of channels (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). In conclusion, “mapping the relationship between the customer journey and company strategy provides a coherent structure for the business model” (Norton & Pine, 2013, p. 14).

Even though every customer experiences their own journey (Kolsky, 2016), there have been attempts to identify similarities and create customer journey typologies. For example, Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) used an inductive research approach to categorise customer journeys to impulsive, balanced and considered journeys. According to them, impulsive journeys are characterised by less time spent on information search, relying on previous experience and making rapid decisions. These journeys occur for example when relying on simplifying heuristics when making repeated purchases in a grocery store (Spanjaard & Freeman, 2012; Valenzuela & Raghubir, 2015). Furthermore, balanced customer journeys are triggered by aspirational or reference groups such as friends, bloggers or celebrities and contain extended information search and evaluation on multiple different channels and platforms (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). The final type of a customer journey according to Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) is a considered journey, where very extensive information search and evaluation take place. Despite the effort put into the process, there are no real buying intentions yet. Rather, the information is used later when purchasing the product becomes relevant (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Even though this broad categorization provides a general description of how customer journeys can differ from each other, more research is needed to uncover the variety of reasons of why these differences occur.

Overall, the concept of customer journey has built on the customer decision-making models to capture the consumers’ actions in a more detailed fashion. The decision-making models also provide a way to place the consumers’ actions on a broad timeline, which is why we next explore the focus area of this thesis, the pre-purchase phase interactions, with the help of the terminology from the decision-making literature.

### 3.2.3 Pre-Purchase Phase of the Customer Journey

As discussed above, a commonly held assumption is that a consumer recognises a problem, searches for information and evaluates alternatives before making a purchase decision (Solomon et al., 2006). These events can also be called together the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As this phase is the focus of the present study, this section aims to define each component of it for the preliminary framework that was operationalized to collect data.

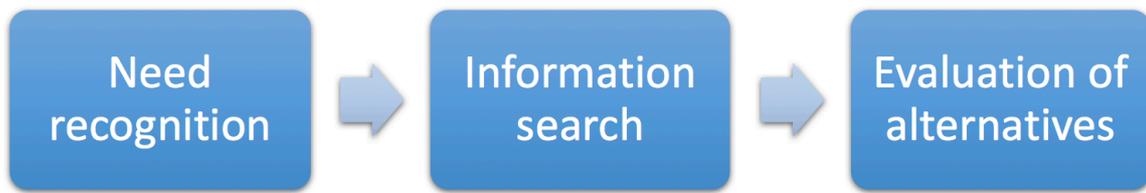


Figure 3. The main steps of the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey

### 3.2.3.1. Need recognition

Need recognition takes place when a consumer experiences a difference between his or her current state of affairs and ideal state (Solomon et al., 2006). When the difference is significant, it becomes a problem which the consumer then seeks to solve. The dissonance between the actual and desired state of mind can arise after running out of a product, buying an unsatisfactory product or detecting a new need (Solomon et al., 2006). In order to persuade consumers to buy their products, marketers try to stimulate these reasons and change a consumer's ideal state. It is also known, that the awoken unrecognised want or need is usually awakened by an advertisement or promotion and is often steered by psychological factors such as attitudes (Bruner & Pamazal, 1988; Solomon et al., 2006).

Whereas the need recognition was traditionally triggered by marketers' efforts via sources like television advertising and catalogues, the consumers of today are constantly influenced by interacting online and opinions by their fellow shoppers (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). Because consumers are nowadays exposed to a vast amount of information all the time (Marshall, 2015; Bandt, 2016; Saxon, 2017), they, in fact, store the information in their memories for future reference and are thus already shopping without being aware of it themselves (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). In addition to advertising, this information is obtained for example from packaging and sales promotion activities (Solomon et al., 2006). This unconscious behaviour plays an important part in the next step of the pre-purchase phase, information search.

Based on the above descriptions, the present study defines need recognition to consist of two main parts:

1. The consumer experiences a difference between actual and ideal state of being, and a problem occurs that needs to be solved
2. The consumer is constantly exposed to inspiration and information that he or she did not ask or search for actively.

### 3.2.3.2. Information search

After a consumer has recognised a need, a process of information search begins. During this process, the consumer both scans his or her memory and actively searches outside sources for information (Solomon et al., 2006) about the available choices in the market (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). As mentioned above, the consumer's memory contains lots of information to which he or she is exposed to each day (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). Furthermore, he or she might have searched for similar information or experienced some of the alternatives before (Solomon et al., 2006).

In addition to previously acquired information, many channels are utilised for extra resources to support in evaluating the available options (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). For example, a consumer might use online search engines, social media, and review and comparison websites (Lecinski, 2011). In addition, referrals from friends and relatives have been reported as important sources of information (Costa, 2013). Still, in some cases, consumers are already so educated about a product category that no active search is initiated (Solomon et al., 2006) and an impulsive journey occurs (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). In general, the search is more extensive when the purchase is important, and the consumer is more involved in the purchase (Solomon et al., 2006).

The information search was traditionally conducted through sources that were considered reliable, such as information from family members and close friends, along with advertising on television and magazines (Palmer, 2000). Many consumers also relied on past experiences of brands and were more loyal to them because of the ensured quality and reliability they could offer (Bettman & Park, 1980; Simonson & Rosen, 2014). However, the way consumers seek information today differs from that of before. Nowadays, consumers listen to informal voices online, share their personal experiences with the brand through ratings, reviews and recommendations, and product descriptions as well as find inspiration through blogs, search engines and social media services (Park & Cho, 2012; Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Simonson & Rosen, 2014; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015).

Consumers of today also show stronger tendencies to search for information on multiple devices simultaneously (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). For example, many consumers use a smartphone or a tablet computer while they watch television (Dias, 2016). This behaviour highlights the obstacles marketers now face when measuring the effectiveness of their campaigns (Lecinski, 2011). It is therefore of growing interest for marketers to understand the consumers' information search process and to better understand through which channels to catch their attention (Lecinski, 2011). However, it is important not solely to focus on the digital search process consumers go through. The physical environment should not be neglected, because consumers still find it important to touch and feel the products physically both not only during the information search process but also when evaluating which alternative to finally choose (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015).

Some scholars have argued that consumers are willing to collect as much information as possible, as long as the process is not too time-consuming or troublesome (Solomon et al., 2006). Others have proposed that the number of brands consumers consider initially has in fact reduced (Court et al., 2009) and that consumers tend to trust retailers' judgement instead of going through an exhausting process of information search (Sonnenberg & Erasmus, 2005). One reason for these latter arguments might be that the vast number of options can actually be rather exhausting rather than liberating (Alba et al., 1997). A smaller number of alternatives as a result of the information search helps the customer in the final step before making a decision, evaluation of alternatives.

Based on the above descriptions, the present study defines information search to consist of two main parts:

1. After recognising a problem, the consumer actively searches for inspiration and products from many different sources
2. The criteria that the consumer has in mind helps the consumer to find suitable alternatives

### **3.2.3.3. Evaluation of Alternatives**

The final step of the pre-purchase phase, evaluation of alternatives, consists of narrowing down the search options to several considered alternatives, also known as the consideration set (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). It has been assumed that the number of potential brands in the customer's mind decreases towards the purchase (Court et al., 2009) and that consumers form small consideration sets of available options and then inspect only these alternatives in more detail (Alba et al., 1997). The consideration set usually contains alternatives that share similar features, from which the consumer then picks the one that the best fits his or her criteria (Solomon et al., 2006). Moreover, it has been found that a product is unlikely to be returned in the consideration set once the consumer has removed it once (Solomon et al., 2006). However, it has been suggested that today's consumers add and remove brands in their consideration set throughout the whole pre-purchase phase before ending up with the final choice (Court et al., 2009).

Traditionally, consumers were more prompt to search and evaluate their alternatives at the same occasion, which usually took place in a retail store (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). In contrast, consumers today often already know what price range, style, colours and other attributes exist for the product in question before even entering the shop (Shen, 2012). According to Breugelmans et al., (2012) the consumers also narrow down their consideration sets with the help of different online tools such as reviews, polls and comparison sites. The rapidly developing virtual reality technology can also help the consumers to obtain information by trying the virtual version of a product (Huang & Liu, 2014; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015).

Once the consumer has constructed the final consideration set, the ultimate decision happens with the help of decision rules. Simple non-compensatory rules are used as shortcuts to make swift choices and do not allow a product with a weak performance on one attribute to make it up by being better on another (Solomon et al., 2006). A consumer using these rules eliminates all alternatives that do not correspond his or her primary criteria. In turn, compensatory rules give each option a chance to make up for its defects and are used when the consumer is more involved in the purchase (Solomon et al., 2006). Once the consumer has made the final decision, he or she moves on from the pre-purchase phase to the purchase phase of the customer journey, where the actual transaction takes place (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Based on the above descriptions, the present study defines evaluation of alternatives to consist of two main parts:

1. The consumer constructs a final consideration set consisting of similar products for making the final selection
2. The consumer selects the final option from the consideration set and decides to buy it

### 3.2.4 Multi-Channel Retail Practices

Closely related to customer journey research, another growing stream of literature has specifically concentrated on touch points and channels. In other words, it is concerned with multichannel retailing, a concept that refers to searching for information on one channel and purchasing on another (Kumar & Venkatesan, 2005; Verhoef, Neslin & Vroomen, 2007). In this context, channels usually refer to a broad division between online and traditional brick and mortar stores as distribution channels (Kollman, Kuckertz & Kauser, 2012; Bezes, 2016), even though some studies also include catalogues and kiosks as channels (Schoenbachler & Gordon, 2002; Berman & Thelen, 2004; Goldsmith & Flynn, 2005; Pookulangara, Hawly & Xiao, 2011; Chiou, Chou & Shen, 2017). However, these studies do not take into the account the effect that a customers' peers, such as word-of-mouth information and feedback from family and friends might have on their customer journey. Moreover, this literature often categorises information search and product comparison on the internet simply as 'online', even though there can be several different ways of doing these activities within 'online'.

Along with channels, some studies have concentrated on identifying touch points, "that each have direct and more indirect effects on purchase and other customer behaviors" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that some touch points are under a firm's control and some are not, and categorise them into four groups: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external/independent touch points. In this conceptualization, the brand-owned touch points comprise of all interactions that are designed and managed by the firm and under its control, such as the product or a website. Closely related are the partner-owned touch points, that are jointly "designed, managed, or controlled by the firm and one or more of its partners" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 77), for example, multichannel distribution partners. Customer-owned touch points refer to all interactions under the customer's control, for instance selecting a payment method or consumption of the product (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The last category, social/external/independent touch points, include for example peer influence, other customers, social media, third-party review sites. Identifying touch points and determining the extent of which they can be controlled, is important for a firm to improve their customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). For the present study, understanding the plethora of available touch points helps to underline the fact that the customer encounters a brand in many different ways throughout the customer journey.

#### 3.2.4.1. Moments of Truth

Scholars have further argued that it is important to distinguish critical touch points, the so-called moments of truth, which have significant effects on the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Traditionally, the concept of customer journey described above has seen to contain two critical touch points: the first moment of truth and the second moment of truth (Löfgren, 2005). After recognising a need, the first moment of truth happens in a store when a consumer makes the final decision on which product to buy (Löfgren, 2005; Lecinski, 2011). The second moment of truth refers to the actual usage situation of the purchased product when the consumer becomes either satisfied or not based on the expectations set on the first moment of truth (Löfgren, 2005; Lecinski, 2011). It has been argued, that the total customer experience is created in these two moments because the first moment of truth creates expectations that are discovered to be true or not during the second moment of truth (Löfgren,

2005). However, these conclusions assume that customers do not conduct any information search before entering the store and purchasing.

Later on, it has been reasoned, that both the first and the second moment of truth are still valid, but that the pre-purchase phase has grown its importance (Lecinski, 2011; Kinley & Brandon, 2015; Ritson, 2016), contradicting the belief that the information search and evaluation of alternatives take place in the store. Lecinski (2011) proposes, that a new critical decision-making moment that takes place before the first moment of truth has developed. He calls it the zero moment of truth – a moment or a period when extensive information search, comparison, and a decision-making process on whether to buy or not takes place. During this time, a consumer actively searches information from online search engines, browses catalogues, explores rating and review sites, browses social media, watches videos and discusses opinions with friends and family (Court et al., 2009; Lecinski, 2011). In other words, these arguments demonstrate that the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey has expanded to become one of the key determinants of customer experience.

### **3.2.4.2. Multichannel Shopper Classification**

Lastly, research on multichannel retail has also demonstrated an interest in characterising the so-called multichannel shoppers by creating shopper typologies (Rohm & Swaminathan, 2004; Kollman, Kuckertz & Kayser, 2012; Kumar & Venkatesan, 2005; Hsiao, Yen & Li; 2012). A rather simplifying characterisation has been based on the multichannel shopping behaviour, where the behaviour is divided broadly into four different types (Verhoef, Neslin & Vroomen, 2007; Chiou, Chou & Shen, 2017). These types have been described as customers use the retail store to search information but the online store to make purchases, (2) customers use the online store to search information but the retail store to make purchases, (3) customers use the retail stores to search information and make purchases and (4) customers use the online store to search information and make purchases (Verhoef, Neslin & Vroomen, 2007; Chiou, Chou & Shen, 2017). Even though many of the previous studies have differentiated between an online shopper and a traditional shopper, more recent studies have found that online shoppers are in fact more similar to traditional shoppers than they are different (Ganesh, Reynolds, Lockett, Pomirleanu, 2010). This finding indicates, that as multichannel shopping is becoming an increasingly common practice, segmenting the customers according to the channel they prefer is not justified. However, it has been argued that the number of channels is growing and that retailers should seek to understand their target groups according to their pre-purchase behaviour in the multichannel environment (Kwon & Jain, 2009). Therefore, more research is needed in order to provide businesses with tools to categorise their customers based on shoppers' behaviour before the purchase.

## **3.3 Chapter Summary**

Reviewing previous literature helped us to identify relevant concepts, that were extracted and operationalized to guide the data collection and analysis. In addition, breaking the concepts down to measurable items helped to connect the theory to the research questions, the purpose of the current study and previous research. In order to categorise and structure our data

collection and analysis, we divided the focus area of this study, the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey, into three steps: need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives. To explain, what those steps precisely consists of in our study, we define them as follows.

First, we define need recognition to consist of a change between actual and ideal self, which results in a problem that the consumer aims to solve. Furthermore, this stage includes the consumer being exposed to inspiration and information that the consumer did not ask or search for actively. Second, we define information search as an active search for inspiration and products after the consumer has recognised a problem. Furthermore, we define this search to be guided by the criteria that the consumer set for the desired solution. Lastly, we define evaluation of alternatives as the consumer constructing a consideration set and selecting the final option from it. The table below summarises these concepts, how they were measured during the interviews and which research questions did they allow to answer.

### 3.3.1 Preliminary Framework

Table 2. Preliminary Framework

Concept	Definition of the concept	Authors	Interview Questions	Diary Questions	Research question(s) that the concept allows us to answer
Need Recognition	The consumer experiences a difference between actual and ideal state of being, and a problem occurs that needs to be solved. The consumer is constantly exposed to inspiration and information that he or she did not ask or search for actively.	Bruner & Pamazal, 1988; Solomon et al., 2006; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015.	Tell me about the last time you bought a home furnishing product – walk us through your process. What were the reasons to why you wanted to buy a new piece of furniture? Where do you find inspiration for home furnishing?	Did you look for home furnishing inspiration today? From where? Did you ask for or hear opinions or experiences about the product today? From who?	Why and how is the need recognition developed?
Information Search	After recognising a problem, the consumer actively searches for inspiration and products from many different sources. The criteria that the consumer has in mind helps the consumer to find suitable alternatives.	Bettman & Park, 1980; Palmer, 2000; Sonnenberg & Erasmus, 2005; Solomon et al., 2006; Court et al., 2009; Lecinski, 2011; Park & Cho, 2012; Costa, 2013; Simonson & Rosen, 2014; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015; Dias, 2016.	Tell me about the last time you bought a home furnishing product – walk us through your process. What criteria did you use when searching for options? How did you start your search? How much time did you spend on the information search?	Did you search for information on a specific home furnishing product today? From where? Which Product?	How do consumers perform their information search?
Evaluation of Alternatives	The consumer constructs a final consideration set consisting of similar products for making the final selection. The consumer selects the final option from the consideration set and decides to buy it.	Alba et al., 1997; Solomon et al., 2006; Court et al., 2009; Breugelmans et al., 2012; Shen, 2012; Huang & Liu, 2014; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015	Tell me about the last time you bought a home furnishing product – walk us through your process. How many alternatives did you consider throughout the search process? How did you make the final decision?	Which product options do you consider the most today? Why? Which product options do you consider the least today? Why?	What alternatives do consumers take into consideration when evaluating alternatives? How do consumers select the final option from their consideration set?

# 4 Empirical Presentation

## 4.1 Empirical Focus

Several researchers have highlighted the need for an in-depth understanding of the customer journey within a specific product category as it allows comparison between consumers as well as detecting for deviating behaviour (Seth, 1981; Ahtola, 1984; Harrel, 1990; Lofman, 1991). In this thesis, the customer journey is examined in the context of home furnishing. Previous research on this retail area has mainly looked through a business-to-business perspective with a focus on processes and production (Herman & Henneberger, 2001; Reimer & Leslie, 2008; Waal & Roobol, 2014). Little attention has so far been given to the consumer's home furnishing consumption and customer journey, highlighting the need for inductive customer journey research within this growing industry (Burnsed & Hodges, 2013; Euromonitor International, 2016).

Previous home furnishing research from the consumers' perspective have found that consumers buy furniture that tells a story by conveying a message above the functionality of the furniture and promote a "way of living" rather than practicality (Clow, James, Sisk & Cole, 2011; Kinley & Brandon, 2015). Moreover, consumers shop furniture that conveys the image they want to transmit to their peers, and often buy furniture that communicates a favourable image of the self and creates inviting atmosphere for the family and guests to enjoy (Hassan, Maheran, Muhammad & Bakar, 2010; Burnsed, Strubel & Moody, 2016). Therefore, many consumers rely on peer-to-peer interaction as an inspiration source and a channel, which in turn plays an important role in the decision making process (Hassan et al., 2010; Burnsed, Strubel & Moody, 2016). However, the most influential factor for consumers purchase motivations, priorities and type of furniture's bought has shown to be age. This finding has been explained by the customer's life situation affecting the purchase decision (U.S. International Trade Commission, 2001; Burnsed & Hodges, 2013; Burnsed, Strubel & Moody, 2016). Previous research has also found the most important criteria affecting the consumer's purchase intentions to be style, price, excellent service, durability, quality and comfort (Allegrezza, 2010; Burnsed & Hodges, 2013). Price- and style-conscious consumers have found to prefer IKEA, while consumers who value quality and durability mostly end up selecting other furniture brands (Burnsed & Hodges, 2013).

The stimulus that ignites the information search in the context of home furnishing products is either a need for a specific product or a desire to make decorative changes (Van Der Merwe & Campbell, 2008). Furthermore, consumers can make everyday choices in less than a second, but when shopping for products with higher involvement – such as home furnishing – the decision-making process becomes significantly longer (Milosavljevic, Koch & Rangel, 2011). In fact, in most cases, the average time spent on information search and evaluation extends up

to three months in the categories of kitchen and bathroom furnishing (Costa, 2013). Thus, it is increasingly important for home furnishing retailers to understand, what goes on in the mind of the customer during this period.

In conclusion, more research needs to focus on narrow areas of the retail industry, such as home furnishing. The empirical investigation of the present study indeed found some characteristics that seem to be typical for the customer journey in the context of home furnishing. These findings are presented next in relation to the purpose and theory outlined afore.

## 4.2 Findings and Analysis

### 4.2.1 Pre-Purchase Phase

#### 4.2.1.1. Need Recognition

Just as explained by Solomon (2006), our data indicated that need recognition occurs when the consumer experiences a significant difference between their actual and ideal state. In some cases, an event in life such as moving to a new apartment or not having any furniture, caused this dissonance and led to urgent action, while some participants recognised needs by finding their existing furniture not aesthetically pleasing. Below quotes from the eleven in-depth interviews will be discussed and analysed, complemented by findings from the solicited email diaries.

##### *4.2.1.1.1. Recognition of the problem state*

Need recognition is a complex occurrence that varied between participants and was dependent on the situation they were facing. Some of the participants had recently moved to a new city for a temporary period and explained the need to be urgent.

*“My most recent experience was when I moved here to Sweden, and I knew I had to buy new furniture because I was renting a room that didn’t have any.”- P1.*

Participant 6 discovered her need in a similar manner, also when moving to Sweden for a temporary time, and therefore her need recognition was rather obvious:

*“I knew, even before I came that I had to buy these things. But I didn’t really deal with it at that point.”- P9*

These insights showed the rather unengaged effort put for solving the need in advance. The reason might be the participants’ temporary life situation that did not require extensive information search and evaluation of alternatives, and therefore other factors were more important when deciding on fulfilling the need. Participant 1 explains:

*“to be honest, for furnishing that one specific room it was not that much of importance for me. Because I knew it was only going to be for a specific period of time. One year.”- P1*

Participant 5 told about a similar situation. Because the couple had to furnish a home from scratch, they explained that finding an affordable and effortless solution was preferred. However, they expressed plans to replace those products later with better ones:

*“When we moved in we had absolutely no furniture (...) we had to practically buy everything at once and then we became more price conscious. (...) Our thoughts were more about if we should buy everything at IKEA at once and then slowly but steady upgrade to more quality products along the way.” –P5*

For participant 8 the need was not as urgent because it was not caused by a life-changing situation such as moving to a new place. Therefore, it took a longer time for the need to develop and be recognised for her:

*“I had been processing in my mind for [a year] that I wanted to change the old table. I bought a table from IKEA. I had been thinking about it since I first got my last table from my grandfather, I didn’t buy it myself, I’ve been thinking about buying a new one.”- P8*

Participant 10, who was tired of the beds in her bedroom and wanted an update, reported similar experiences. What is interesting to note about participant 10 is that she was not entirely conscious of the inspiration that led her to recognise the need:

*“I was thinking about changing the beds for one year. The source that decided how my bedroom would look like was actually a blog. It was on the internet after all! It was Krickelin’s blog (...) I think the blog really pushed me to finally change [the bedroom]. The colour of the walls really steered what style I wanted.”. – P10*

This answer indicates that consumers themselves can, in fact, be rather unaware of the sources that help them recognise needs. For participant 10, reading a blog without intentions to specifically seek for inspiration further resulted in triggering the idea of re-furnishing the bedroom. The information that consumers are exposed to on a daily basis can cause unconscious dissatisfaction that causes them to re-evaluate their belongings and thus start orientating them for a particular type of customer journey, impulsive, balanced or considered (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Participant 3 encapsulated this ignition as follows:

*“I would say the moment we feel so done with our current furniture, and we can’t stand another day in them, that’s when it’s time to look for furniture for real.” – P3*

Participant 3 also explained that when one cannot stand a piece of furniture anymore, it has to be changed. This finding gave clues about yet another way a need can develop; when style preferences evolve over time, the gap between the actual and ideal state starts to grow slowly:

*“Our first apartment was completely IKEA inspired and when it was time for us to change furniture we realised that our taste for furniture design had changed and matured. This was affected by what we saw from others, e.g. friends, and how they had furnished their apartments, what we saw online, what we saw in physical shops (...)” –P3*

#### **4.2.1.1.2. Exposure to Unsought Information**

Consumers are constantly exposed to marketing efforts and other information via different channels, which cause consumers to recognise needs (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). The sources can be traditional marketing channels such as TV, magazines or non-brand owned channels such as blogs and social media accounts (Brandt, 2016), and even friends and family (Solomon et al., 2006). Considering our data, we identified constant on-going inspiration that the participants were exposed to. This inspiration was recovered from their memory later when they needed that information. Participant 9 demonstrated this occurrence by explaining that IKEA was her only considered choice when she wanted to buy new furniture for her student apartment in Sweden:

*“I’ve been going there since I was young, like about ten, I would say. In the beginning, I started to go there with my family, and then I started to go there with my best friend, even if we didn’t buy anything. Or we didn’t plan to. So I think it’s just familiar, and I know they got everything, and it’s kind of cheap, so they have a lot of decoration items and stuff. So you can just make your home nice.” – P9*

The stored inspiration was grown and strengthened every time she had visited IKEA. She described how she even used to go to IKEA without looking for anything specific to buy. This insight indicates that sometimes the store only served as a source of inspiration. Participant 9 made use of the inspiration she had collected throughout the years and referred to it to make a quick decision. However, we believe that since humans are selective with the information they accept (Solomon et al., 2006), the information will catch their eyes only if the consumer unconsciously feels that the information is relevant. An example of information that the consumers do not actively look for was described by participant 8:

*“Because of my work, I always have magazines and people talking to me about what’s in and what’s out. So I’m very like... I get a lot of opinions. And that affects me of course.” –P8*

Other participants explained that information from mail or social media had given them information that they did not expect at a particular moment. Participant 12 explained how he usually is alarmed by notifications from buying and selling groups on Facebook, which has many times caused him to look at what other group members are selling, even though he was not actively looking for anything. This insight gives clues about how new marketplaces that have developed as a result of web 2.0 and participatory culture (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015) create needs via the information that they offer. Another participant that was considering of buying a new sofa looked into a newspaper that she usually did not read, and noticed an advertisement promoting a furniture sale:

*“[I found my sofa by] pure chance in this ad. I don’t usually look in the local newspaper and especially not for furniture, and this newspaper is rather boring otherwise, but somehow my eyes were caught on this ad because it was the exact time I was looking for furniture.” – P4*

Another example of finding unsought information is explained by participant 5. She told how looking for one item often led to find other things that she also needed:

*“I look actively when I know I need something, but usually I also tend to find other stuff along the way that I like.” – P5*

This finding was further supported by other participants. Interesting to note was that some participants highlighted that they tend to become distracted by other needs recognised when they shop in a physical store, and therefore also experienced unsought information exposure. The reason to this might be the vast amount of products that the consumer is exposed to in a physical store in comparison to an online store. Participant 5 explained that she tends to become distracted in the physical store, and therefore conducts the initial information search online. Participant 3 had a similar view and described that she has many times done unplanned buys in physical stores due to the sensory experience that triggered the more impulsive buying behaviour. Impulse buys caused by unsought information, and the responsiveness to these messages seems to some extent be related to the mood the consumer is in. Participant 3 told about products that she has spontaneously bought when visiting the physical store:

*“We don’t, however, have this behaviour when we are shopping online, we don’t buy things spontaneously but rather wait and evaluate even if something is on sale. I think that the “shopping” mood disappears faster when online” - P3*

Many participants also told the passive exposure to inspiration to shape their “mental image”. Many participants brought up this theme, which they tried to explain as the many things that have shaped their desired vision of what they want their home to look like. Some of the explanations are listed below:

*“I think my style overall has been very affected by my friends’ styles” – P8*

*“the search process starts with inspiration, then creating a mental picture, google it, and then go out and look in physical stores.” – P3*

*“I would describe it as there being an initial process to create some kind of mental reference, and this is done through different inspirations from magazines, friends, commercials, blogs, etc.” – P7*

*“[my mental picture came from] Instagram actually! I’ve got a lot of inspiration from home-furnishing accounts on Instagram.” – P4*

*“But also, if I’m bored, I occasionally look through, when I do online shopping at H&M I also look what they offer for the home furnishing. Like decoration. Or when I look at bloggers, they usually have [pictures of their homes]” – P1*

The mental picture the participants had was constructed of information from many different sources. Many of the participants did not know how this mental image developed, but mentioned that scrolling through social media helped them to adjust it further. This example demonstrates how exposed consumers are today by constant messages and inputs that they store for later usage. As reported by participant 14, inspiration is gathered all the time regardless of whether or not the consumer wants to receive it at a specified time and place:

*“I didn’t actively look for inspiration but saw quite a few home furnishing pictures on Instagram while looking through my feed” – P14*

Another fascinating insight noted through the data collected, was that many participants referred to a specific style when they spoke about home furnishing. The style they were looking for helped them in choosing furniture and determining how the home should look like overall. The sources that the participants had found the style they referred to were many, mostly websites, social media or their peers.

*“[My friend] She has like a really, really nicely furnished apartment. With like very minimalistic design. So, that kind of gave me inspiration, maybe you don’t need as much” – P1*

*“(…) pretty much always just Scandinavian furnishing style that I really like appreciate.” – P2*

*“We knew already from the beginning that we want the “new England style” in the bedroom. Where I’ve heard about the “new England style” is from magazines, when I’ve been reading in fashion and styling magazines and from friends and social media” – P3*

*“I have seen more updated- industrial styles on social media that has affected the way I see my current dining table” – P7*

*“I listen to people who I consider having a good eye for interior design.” – P13*

Further interesting insight was that many participants had found inspiration from sources that have not been reported by previous research. Examples of new sources that came up during the interviews were TV programs that were not about furnishing, babysitting in someone else’s home and from real-estate pages such as “Hemnet”.

#### **4.2.1.2. Information Search**

The information search process can happen fast when the consumer searches for alternatives intensively for a limited period of time. Contrarily, it can also take a longer time and include more inspiration search and sporadically going to a physical store or web-shops to experience products. The passive information search happens when consumers retrieve information from their memory, past experiences, or from experiences of family or friends (Solomon et al., 2006; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). The active information search, in turn refers, to a process where the consumer actively goes through different channels to acquire information about their objectives that could satisfy the need (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). The channels come in many forms, for example, search engines, social media, magazines and TV

(Lecinski, 2011). Previous research has also found that consumers do not want to waste too much time or resources when searching for alternatives (Solomon et al., 2006).

#### ***4.2.1.2.1. Approaching the Problem***

When the consumers have recognised needs, they tend to approach that need before actively starting to fulfil it. The fulfilment of the need usually requires gathering some information, to ensure that the consumer is making the best choice possible. First, it is of interest to understand the initial part of the information search, namely how consumers acknowledge and approach the recognised problems. As previously explained, acknowledging a need can happen when the consumer experiences a life changing situation, such as moving to a new home. Participant 6 gave an example about the process of acknowledging the need to actively approaching it:

*“There was such a long time between when we bought our apartment and that we moved into it. During that time, we had some time to spare on looking for furniture and finding out what we needed and how we would like our apartment to look like.” – P6*

The participant explained that conducting the information search started between the moment she and her partner understood that they were going to move and the moment that they moved in. During this time, they were also much more responsive to information, and she explained that she was more responsive to external information, such as when visiting a friend’s house or when scrolling through her social media feeds. She also deliberated a lot with her partner, and they both were engaged in finding the best options for their new home.

Another way to approach the problem was identified from the discussion with participant 3, who explained how recognising the need of renovating the kitchen led to approaching the problem. The need was caused by the feeling that the previous kitchen was old and ugly, and therefore an update was needed. She explained that she had seen friends’ kitchens that she liked; hence she and her partner wanted to do something about theirs. What was, however, interesting to note was the conflict between acknowledging the need and finding arguments to justify why they should approach the need:

*“Then I can be honest and say that we justified our decision based on that the other kitchen was old, but actually it was just ugly, so we stilled our conscious by telling ourselves that we were not doing a bad thing changing our ugly kitchen, even though it worked perfectly fine.” - P3*

This insight might explain why they eventually spent over three years planning the perfect kitchen and searching for all information that was available. The couple told that during those three years they made sure to make the best decision possible to minimise the potential risks included in the decision since this need was based more on emotions about the previous kitchen rather than not having a kitchen at all.

Many of the participants explained that they had found lots of inspiration for their next purchase, but that they wanted to wait a bit longer before taking any actions. Some explained that it was not the right time now because they had just bought a new piece of furniture, while others told that they still wanted to look for more options before taking action. Furthermore,

some participants had been inspired through different channels that triggered a want to replace a piece of furniture. Participant 4 summed her reasons for approaching the problem:

*“The reason for the change of furniture should mainly be because the furniture is broken or it doesn’t fit with the rest of the furniture or the style overall. The worst is if a piece of furniture bothers you and is not good looking anymore and you’re just thinking “Oh god, I really need to change this piece of furniture”. – P4*

It is worth pointing out that participant 4 explained needs to derive from urgency (broken furniture), but also highlighted emotional reasons (the style is not in line with the rest of the furniture). The interviews of this study indicated that one of the main reasons to why the participants fundamentally wanted to change a piece of furniture was because of the style did not fit the other items they possessed. Therefore, some participants aimed to justify their approach to a need by other factors such as the furniture being broken or old. Social media and other channels of inspiration help the participants to speed up the process of recognising a need and approaching it by constantly receiving suggestions of other styles. Participant 7 gave clues of how social media boosts the feeling that a product has to be replaced:

*“The dining table we have now fits with our current style and there is nothing wrong with it, but I’m just tired of it and think we have had enough of it now. I have seen more updated styles on social media that has affected the way I see my current dining table.” –P7*

#### **4.2.1.2.2. Information Search Frames**

The information search frame helps consumers to frame their decisions when shopping. The frame is usually outlined with the help of certain criteria that an alternative has to fulfil to later become one of the considered options in the evaluation phase. Depending on what the consumer values and how involved they are in their purchase decision, will affect if they value price before style or other factors. With the help of various tools online, such as comparison sites or filters, it is easier for consumers to find alternatives that fit inside their frame. Understanding the frames of reference that consumers have can help explain why they choose different channels and what steers their information search.

Participant 6 explained that she and her partner are very interested in interior design and that her partner works as a carpenter. For this reason, the couple mainly focuses on the style and the material that they are interested in, rather than first discussing a price range as the main frame. Their frame of reference is therefore explained as:

*“We first discussed what type of style we were interested in, and there came the conversation about making use of more natural materials, etc. I think the quality is the most important and with that I mean that it’s ageing in the right way and that the design is timeless.” – P6*

For participant 8 the most important criterion for buying a new table was socialising because she wanted to be able to invite more people to her home:

*“I wanted to be able to gather a lot of people around it so the size of it as well. The old one was just too small for that.”– P8*

Further interesting to note was that criteria not only have to do with the product but also the channel and place a consumer prefers to buy the products from. For participant 8, one of the main prerequisites for her purchase decision was to buy her products from IKEA. She explains this reason to derive from the feeling, that this particular brand represents something more than a furniture brand. She connected the brand with the proud national feeling and familiarity.

*“The thing about IKEA is that it’s like mentally... like since you’re a child in Sweden, people are very proud of IKEA, and I think that’s the main factor why we... why I bought lots of stuff from IKEA. And I find the warehouse really nice as well when I go there. It’s nice to go shopping there.”– P8*

Participant 8’s focus was less on price and more on social factors, as she wanted to be able to gather her friends around the table and buy furniture from a place that she feels emotionally connected to. Therefore, these criteria steered her information search. She further explained that most of the information search was conducted through IKEA’s channels and she did not consider any other supplier when searching for information.

As discussed earlier, participant 1 moved to Sweden for one year. For her, the price was the most important criterion in her purchase decision. She used the filtering function when searching for products, and chose to only buy through the IKEA website based on previous experience as a reference. Using price as her main reference point when comparing alternatives helped her to exclude the most expensive options:

*“Well, I knew my budget. I tried to fit every piece of furniture that I needed into the budget. And that worked. And basically, when I looked at the IKEA website I knew I needed a bed, I didn’t look at the most luxurious options. I just looked at the basic ones.” – P1*

Solomon et al., (2006) explain that consumers do not want to go through a difficult journey or waste time when searching for alternatives. In the case of participant 1, this meant seeking options based on price.

Many of the participants found the style to be the most important criterion when looking for furniture and had usually a sense of a certain style they wanted to fulfil, e.g. a minimalistic or Scandinavian style. An interesting insight was provided by participant 3 who explained how she and her partner usually stroll around in IKEA to find inspiration. Still, she stressed that she does not have any intentions of buying any furniture from IKEA, as in her view the quality of the products is not at a sufficient level. This finding is important for retailers who make significant investments in their store environment: for some consumers, an attractive store only acts as a source of inspiration and does not convert them to buy anything from there. Participant 3 further used IKEA as a reference point to get a sense of a reasonable price range for a certain product. Her technique was also supported by participants 1, 8, 9 and 10:

*“We looked at IKEA and what it should have cost there as a reference point, knowing they have affordable prices, and then compared with other prices and chose the one in the middle.” - P3*

Furthermore, participants usually started their search online to scan the offerings to build the frame of reference. This was generally done with the help of filters that could assist them achieve the criteria they were looking for. Participant 4 elaborated on this insight as follows:

*“It is easier to look online because you can look at multiple sites at the same time, and I find online to be very user-friendly in the sense that I can filter what I want if I have a specific colour in mind. What is furthermore positive is that I can look at the same type of sofa but on different sites and see which one is the cheapest one.” – P4*

#### **4.2.1.2.3. Inspiration Search**

Consumers spend lots of time searching for information, which has often been a focal point in the existing research on the customer journey (Lecinski, 2011; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). What is however also essential to understand, is how consumers collect the inspiration that often lays grounds for their information search. The inspiration search can be done through many different channels, and is therefore fascinating to consider since consumers today are exposed to many different sources of inspiration (Park & Cho, 2012; Wolny & Mueller, 2013; Simonson & Rosen, 2014; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). Contrasting the unsought inspiration discussed earlier, the inspiration we are referring to in this chapter is the active collection of inspirational sources that the participants reported.

Many of the channels participants tended to use for inspiration search were social media channels, such as blogs or Instagram accounts. Few of the participants collected inspiration from firms' web pages or channels. However, participant 3 explained that she prefers to go to the physical stores to find inspiration with her partner:

*“IKEA, for example, has a lot of inspiration and we have been walking into their stores to get inspired and thought “wow, this is so nicely furnished”, but it hasn't resulted in us buying any furniture from IKEA. We have got a lot of inspiration from IKEA for our children's rooms, they have so many ideas and think about details that inspire me.” – P3*

Participant 3 and her partner went to IKEA just for the inspiration's sake but were not interested in IKEA as one of the considered brands when searching for actual alternatives.

Earlier in the analysis was discussed what the participants referred to as a “mental image” that helped them to surface an unrecognised need. The mental image was referred to as something that had been developed passively. Contrarily, participant 6 explained the development of her and her partner's mental image as an active process developed from inspiration:

*“I make use of the internet to collect things, e.g. on Pinterest I save a lot of pictures and inspiration of everything I want, and then I let it “rest” a bit and leave it to mature. Then I go back again, and I start deleting pictures, add new pictures, and when some weeks have passed then I have been able*

*to narrow down the mental picture I have to help me better look for what I want.” – P6*

The active adding and removing of inspirational images on Pinterest helped them in their information search once the mental image had been set. Participant 3 had a similar approach when she and her partner searched for different pictures on Google search, Instagram and Pinterest until both of them shared an understanding of what they were looking for in terms of colours, details and materials. Participant 5 also explained a similar situation where she and her fiancé created a shared mental image by sending screenshots of products they liked to each other. For the couples, agreeing on a similar view of the common style was paramount. Participant 3 also highlighted that their mental picture of the kitchen was based on what they had seen at friends' houses. Therefore, it is vital to not forget the power of inspiration that lies outside of companies marketing efforts.

Furthermore, lots of inspiration comes from physical interactions, such as from visiting department stores or real estate property presentations to have a look at fully arranged rooms:

*“Sometimes I go to really fancily furnished houses and just walk through and look around”–P2*

Many participants mentioned the importance of being able to see a fully furnished room and see how different parts of it fit with each other. That also was the reason for participant 3 walking through the IKEA store only for inspiration with no buying intentions. Participant 6 mentioned that she often uses social media to be able to see how other people furnish their homes. Furthermore, she also gets very inspired when she looks into magazines and finds out for example how different colours look like with different materials. On the other hand, participant 10 said that she did not prefer to use the internet to find inspiration for home furnishing. She did not feel comfortable with looking on the internet and said it might have to do with her age, as she was over 50 years old. She stated that she prefers to search for inspiration physically, such as by visiting stores and browsing magazines.

*“I love browsing furnishing and interior magazines and also furnishing reportage, and I have a genuine interest for furnishing, so I’m always looking into these magazines that I subscribe to.”- P10*

#### **4.2.1.2.4. Information Search**

Many different ways allow consumers to access information such as search engines, comparison sites, television, and friends and family (Palmer, 2000; Lecinski, 2011). The way consumers conduct their information search is furthermore different from pre-internet age, as consumers today search through multiple devices simultaneously (Dias, 2016). The data of this study indicated that the search for information is usually conducted after a participant had found enough inspiration to begin with. Many times, there was constant alternation between searching for inspiration and information.

The information search was according to participant 6 done after the mental image had been established through inspiration search:

*"when [the inspiration] phase is established, and we know what we are looking for, then we start actively looking for that type of mental image online and offline"- P6*

However, constant alternation between online and offline could be detected. Many participants had started their search online to find the different alternatives that were offered on the market, after which they decided which options were worth searching in the physical stores:

*"we usually go to a physical store if possible, just to get a personal and physical contact with the furniture (...) if the quality is as imagined then we go home and scan the internet again for similar products to get a feeling if there is anything better and to reflect upon if."- P3*

Participant 8 explained the same process when she bought her table from IKEA. She only looked for alternatives on the IKEA online store, but the information process took some time before she decided upon three options to look for in the physical store:

*"I searched online first. Then I found the table and went to IKEA personally and I bought it, within IKEA (...) I had three options." – P8*

Solomon et al., (2006) explained that the more time consumers put into their information search, the more involved they become in their purchase process. An example was given by participant 9 who conducted information search at an IKEA store:

*"I had just like one day to buy it. And then I wanted to go to IKEA. Because I know IKEA, the products they have (...) I knew that they would have everything that I wanted. I didn't really look in advance, or compare prices, or do anything like that because it was just practical." - P9*

Participant 9 explained that her journey involved no online searching. Her whole pre-purchase phase was rather short, since the search, evaluation of alternatives and purchase happened at the same time, indicating her low level of involvement in her purchase (Solomon et al., 2006). In this case, the first moment of truth in the store (Löfgren, 2005) affected the purchase decision more than the zero moment of truth before entering the store (Lecinski, 2011).

Participant 10, who saw herself as slightly more mature explained that she and her partner conducted all of their information search in the physical retail stores:

*"We occupied a sales person in each store and tried everything, from different mattresses to different beds and asked them everything there was to know about beds, from the comfort, how to know that we are laying in a good position for our back and bodies, and through doing this we also understand what the total cost may go up to." – P10*

She and her partner felt more comfortable after talking to the sales people in the various stores rather than relying upon information online, agreeing with the findings by Sonnenberg & Erasmus (2005). They also appreciated the knowledge and personal contact offered by the sales people. It is important for the consumers to searching as a convenient process, and if it becomes too complicated, the consumer usually finds other ways to conduct the information

search (Solomon et al., 2006; Court et al., 2009). This was demonstrated by participant 4 that valued a smooth and convenient way of searching for information:

*“I was looking through “Furniture Box”, but I think that website is a bit chaotic and it’s not a smooth process to look for furniture on their web page. It’s important that a website is user-friendly otherwise it’s not fun to even stay there.” – P4*

Most of the participants valued a relaxed state of mind and situation when searching for information, and also wanted a smooth and convenient search process (Solomon et al., 2006). This became visible in the interviews when asking the participants to describe the setting they prefer to search product information:

*“Usually between eight and ten in the evening, when relaxing. Or then in a subway when commuting, with my phone.”- P11.*

*“In the evening, after eating dinner. That’s the best time just to chill and scroll through the phone. I tend to get inspired by bloggers when I am chilling.” – P3*

*“I search a bit anytime, e.g. when I’m out of work or when there is a commercial on TV and I’m in my pyjamas.” P5*

*“Most of the time it needs to be when I’m off. And it needs to be a good light in my apartment.” –P8*

Lastly, the internet browsing history records provided by the diary participants gave some additional insights about behaviour during the information search. First, the history records indicated that the participants searched for inspiration and product options separately. This finding indicates that establishing the frame of reference and scanning the market is important before actively looking for alternatives. Second, searching for products was done on many relatively short occasions, and each occasion included only a couple of online stores at once. This finding indicates that the participants made it easier for themselves to cope with the vast amount of available information by simply limiting the channels that they used for searching. Therefore, even though the technological development described in chapter 3.1.1. have provided consumers with an increased amount of options to choose from, they still want to make the search process easy for themselves.

#### **4.2.1.3. Evaluation of Alternatives**

After the consumer has done the search and found a sufficient number of alternatives, the evaluation of different alternatives is conducted. This stage of the customer journey consists of narrowing down the search options to the most considered alternatives, also known as the consideration set (Court et al., 2009; Ashman, Solomon & Wolny, 2015). The consideration set is based on the alternatives that best fit the criteria the consumer set as a frame of reference in the beginning of the information search (Solomon et al., 2006). Consumers have different methods and tools to use in this phase, such as reviews, comparison sites and filters (Breugelmans et al., 2012).

During and after searching, the participants of the current study demonstrated many different approaches for narrowing down their options towards the purchase. Some participants narrowed their consideration set with the help of the criteria they had in mind when searching for the alternatives, and others limited their options already at the beginning of the search by only looking at options provided by a familiar brand (Bettman & Park, 1980; Simonson & Rosen, 2014). Furthermore, hearing opinions of their peers, visiting the retail store and seeing the item helped some participants in the evaluation. Lastly, future expandability and resale value were considered when adding and removing options from consideration sets.

#### **4.2.1.3.1. Addition and Elimination of Alternatives**

Throughout the search process consumers tend to add and eliminate various choice options to finally narrow down their search. There are different factors for why a product is eliminated from a consideration set while another one is being added. The reason could be hearing bad things about a considered product or finding a product that better fits with the frame of reference that the consumer outlined earlier.

Several participants explained that they started their search for alternatives online and used a filter to make sure that the search results satisfied their criteria. Participants also highly valued going to the physical store to try out several products that they had found online to see if they matched their expectations:

*“We have been looking online for a long time and decided on IKEA furniture for our bathroom, then we went to look at the furniture in the physical store and didn’t like it at all, and the quality looked very cheap, so we had to change our minds, which was a bit frustrating as we had spent a lot of time searching online and decided on this product. Now our search has stagnated” – P3*

This answer gave a hint about a theme that the previous research on customer journey has not brought into the discussion: a journey that after need recognition and extensive information search comes to a stop. With this participant, it remained unknown if the journey is to be continued later. The encounter in the physical store helps consumers to evaluate products better and better know what aspects are important to them. In the online environment, consumers see pictures of the product and cannot go beyond the description of the product and must accept and imagine how it would look. Participant 6 explained how the physical encounter helped her when evaluating her alternatives:

*“For me, when I see something online I’m less demanding of the offering I will get and usually think that “it will probably turn out fine”, but when you get to see something physically that’s when you start comparing different aspects, and you see the differences even more, which makes you pickier and I didn’t want to compromise on our decision.” – P6*

This view was further supported by other participants. Participant 2 made his decision based on which products he could see physically and which he could not. For him, it was crucial to physically experience the products when he had put much time and effort into his constructing his consideration set. Together, these findings indicate that the store is still a critical touch point that has a significant impact on the outcome (Löfgren, 2005; Lecinski, 2011). However,

because the participants had conducted extensive information search prior to the store visit, that moment cannot be defined as the first moment of truth as described by previous research (Löfgren, 2005).

*“In the end, I had four wardrobe options, two that I could see in a physical store and two that were only online. Therefore, I had to eliminate the two options that I couldn’t see because I didn’t want to risk ordering a wardrobe that I then had to send back. I went to the physical stores and chose one of the wardrobes I could see and touch” –P2*

This answer gives a clue that trying the product before the final decision is important when the consumer is highly involved in the decision-making process. Participant 10 also stressed the importance of a product trial when shopping for a bed:

*“We had three alternatives before we made a final decision. The ultimate question we wanted to find out was: how does it feel to lay in these beds? How much does it cost and the relationship between the different beds. It took some weeks for us to do this, and ultimately we spent one whole day on the weekend for each alternative. I was convinced that the bed we chose was much better than the other alternative because it cost more and partly because we tried it for so long, but also because the sales people were so good!” – P10*

Participant 10 also mentioned that the sales personnel played an important part in her evaluation phase. She and her partner had spent over one year looking at different alternatives and wanted to make sure that they chose the right product. Therefore, it was vital for them to be able to try the bed and hear opinions of experts to confirm their assumptions.

Many participants made use of the shopping basket of an online store to narrow down their search and choice options (Court et al., 2009). They explained that adding products to the basket, and later eliminating one when they found a better option, reassured that they did not lose any potential alternatives along the way. After adding and removing options for a while, the participants ended up eliminating more and more products until only a handful of choices were left. Many participants also did this while they were looking for bundled options, helping them to get a more holistic view of their products, overall style and combined costs.

*“I created this list online on IKEA, where you can do like a wish list where I just put all the objects that I could think of. And then every time I came back I added something that came to my mind which I also needed and removed something I did not like anymore.” – P1*

The participants that lived together with a significant other explained that they had to make sure that their partners were included in the evaluation of alternatives and kept a constant conversation between them.

*“Since I am living with my girlfriend she is very involved in the decision on what table we want to buy, so all the tables are always discussed with her.”- P12*

*“it is usually me who brings the options on the table, and then we discuss those together.” – P11*

Other rather unexpected findings came up when the participants critically evaluated the durability of a product and its future benefits. Along with other criteria, such as the design and price, participants took into the account the future use of the product in different ways:

*“The aesthetic was the main thing. It was cheap as well. But it was the most expensive one of the three. But it was also the one that I saw that I could actually bring along to my apartment and even further on in life.”-P8*

*“If you buy design things, you still maintain the margin in them, and you can resell them. This enables to buy new stuff as well if it comes to mind. But I have to say, that if I buy something that is of good quality, I think that it will last long. They really are long-term investments.”- P11*

*“I think the quality is the most important and with that, I mean that it’s ageing in the right way and that the design is timeless that I don’t feel that is ugly after few years.” – P6*

*“I am trying to find [a stool] used online as it is quite expensive as new and can be quite charming with some ageing.” – P15*

Contrasting the above quotes, some participants did not find furniture as important. These people valued lower prices and convenience of buying, demonstrating that the criteria and involvement for shopping vary depending on the situation and its urgency. Interestingly, these participants all had found IKEA to be able to provide the added value they were looking for:

*“we searched for IKEA online because we wanted something a bit cheaper and a supplier that could send it to us fast, and we knew that design furniture or other brands take a long time to receive.” -P5*

*“I wanted to go to IKEA, and I knew what I had to buy, and I knew that they would have everything that I wanted (...) it was just practical (...) and, it’s kind of cheap.” - P9*

*“[IKEA] gives you suggestions from the same line (...) So I tried to fit every piece of furniture that I needed into the budget. And that worked.” -P1*

In addition to the determining criteria discussed earlier, participants that valued other things than price also found practicality of both the product and process decisive:

*“I like furniture that is practical, but that also look really good.” - P7*

*“So I didn’t really look in advance, or compare prices, or do anything like that because it was just practical [to order from IKEA]” - P9*

*“And that’s the thing with IKEA as well because you know that everybody has IKEA furniture. But you don’t really care because it suits people, and it’s easy and convenient.” - P8*

*“He also drew the kitchen through IKEA’s program but what determined the company we went with in the end was the physical closeness to the shop.”- P3*

As indicated in the last quote, some of the participants found interactive planning tools helpful when evaluating their options. Even though none of the participants mentioned anything about the latest technology such as virtual reality, some of them had found retailers’ planning tools supportive when shopping for more permanent solutions:

*“What we really appreciated was when we wanted to buy our kitchen, and there was a 3D program for OUR kitchen and the measures and shape for our kitchen where we could get a real picture of how the things would look like for us. Not all kitchen suppliers enable the possibility for you to draw a kitchen on their site, which is a pity because that was also the reason for why we chose to not go with some brands.” – P3*

*“We draw a lot on [IKEA]’s program on their website, and then we planned our kitchen (...) it was not a lot of hassle to create our dream kitchen.” – P7*

What further helped participants to evaluate their choice options were reviews found both online and from peers. Several participants described that they valued bad reviews more than good reviews since they are genuine. Moreover, some participants were concerned about good reviews being written by the companies themselves. A bad review was therefore considered more important because it restrained them from considering an unwanted choice option and helped them to avoid a risk of making a bad decision.

*“When we chose white goods, we spend a lot of time reading reviews, we only looked at 4-5 star products. If a product had bad reviews or no reviews at all, we tended to skip that alternative because we didn’t feel comfortable with the uncertainty of the quality and service” –P3*

In this case, reviews that were below their standard caused the participant to eliminate a product from the consideration set. What was more important than a review was what friends and family had experienced. All participants agreed that if they heard bad things about a product from their peers, even if the reviews were good, they would listen to their peers:

*“if [my friends] tell me they had a bad experience, or they tell me this is really good quality, or this is not good quality, I tend to trust them more than for example what online reviews say. – P1*

*“We really trust what our peers say, rather than reading on the brand’s pages and making up our minds about the service and quality.” –P3*

Another interesting finding was that quite a few participants did not care that much about personalization. They cared more about having a comfortable and representative home rather than a very unique home. Participant 2 deviated in his answer, explaining that he preferred going to more exclusive shops when he bought furniture because he did not want to have a home that was similar to anyone else's:

*“I don’t like this mass consumption, like the products that everybody has. I don’t want to have my living room and like the door next to me, the guy has the same living room as I have.” – P2*

For most participants, it was very important that their family and friends feel comfortable in their home. This was also an important criterion already when looking for furniture. Several participants said that it was more of value for them that their guests felt comfortable than hearing that they have a nice taste in furniture.

*“We think it is important that when we have our family over, that they think that it is very nice and comfortable that our sofa is so big, that we can all fit in the sofa and that the atmosphere is cosy and comfortable, that has been very important and a reason to why we chose the sofa we did in the first hand - for our peers to fit.” - P3*

#### **4.2.1.3.2. Final Evaluation of Alternatives**

The section above explained the factors that affected the participants’ interactions when evaluating different alternatives and narrowing down their consideration set. However, it is interesting to acquire a better understanding of what ultimately led the participants to choose the final option.

Several participants mentioned it to be critical that the furniture they would choose should not be delicate because they wanted to be able to live without worries with the furniture. The initial criteria that were used to find the alternatives were also used when removing alternatives to find a product that best fits them (Solomon et al., 2006). Many highlighted the style to be very important. Functionality was also seen vital, as long as it did not compromise the looks. A mix of price, style and functionality helped the participant 7 to make the final decision:

*“it has to be very good looking furniture, but not fine ones that I cannot use in reality, I mean they have to be practical as well, so there has to be a good ratio between looks and functionality. Price is rather important too” - P7*

A handful of participants thought about the future when making their final decision. Even if the price was higher, they justified it with being able to resell it later or to carry on to their next apartment:

*“The aesthetic was the main thing. It was cheap as well. But it was the most expensive one of the three. But it was also the one that I saw that I could actually bring along to my apartment and even further on in life.” –P8*

The most deviating reason when evaluating different alternatives and criteria affecting the final decision was brought up by participant 10:

*“the sales people were so good! They were really knowledgeable, and they had a good customer psychology and knew when they should leave us alone and when they should approach us – I really liked this!” – P10*

As mentioned earlier, a reason to this could have been participant 10's more mature age, which caused her to prefer acquiring all information directly from the sales personnel rather than looking for the information online herself. Therefore, having a lot of information is important when deciding, especially when spending a lot of time and money into the decision. Therefore, we can conclude that for participant 10 it was the information about the product that helped her and her partner to make the final decision.

Participant 3 valued having the shop geographically close when buying a new kitchen. She told that in case something with the kitchen went wrong, she would be able to consult with the sales personnel faster and have their problems fixed with less effort:

*“what determined the company we went with in the end was the physical closeness to the shop. In summary, it was simple, convenient and was comfortable to make a decision. At the end of the day we just want it to be convenient.”- P3*

As explained in the previous section, the physical contact with the products often helped with evaluating the alternatives. Many participants either liked the product or changed their minds when they saw and were able to touch and feel the item. An example of this was provided by participant 8 who explained that she already made up her mind when she saw the product online, but still wanted to be sure before buying it. In this case, seeing the product in a store confirmed her assumptions about the product, and made her to decide:

*“But in a way we had already decided, I just wanted to see if I like it in person. And I did like it in person (...) we weren't in the store for more than an hour. We were there for a very short time. Because I had already made up my mind.” –P8*

Finally, three participants were considering copies of designer furniture when evaluating different alternatives. All three of them ended up buying the copies because of the high quality they got for an affordable price.

### **4.3. Chapter Summary**

In conclusion, this chapter briefly discussed the previous research conducted in the context of home furnishing and presented the most significant findings of the empirical study. As discussed in part 2.4., the data was collected with the help of the preliminary framework and structured accordingly in this presentation. With the help of carefully planned data analysis procedures, we were able to identify interesting and unforeseen themes. These insights will be next discussed in relation to the research questions and previous research.

# 5 Discussion

This chapter summarises the above findings and analysis, and discusses how they appear in comparison to previous research. In addition, this section presents how the findings answered the research questions outlined in the first chapter.

## 5.1 Need Recognition

Even though the participants could not always fully recall how they recognised a new need, they were still able to provide insightful viewpoints of why and how the need recognition was developed. The participants that went through an obvious life-changing situation found it easier to remember what led them to recognise a need. These were mostly participants that had moved to a new home either temporarily or for a longer term. The participants who wanted to replace one of their existing pieces of furniture because it was broken or because they did not find it attractive anymore, found it a bit more challenging to recall what led them to their need recognition. After some thinking, they often referred to having seen a new style through friends, blogs, magazines or social media.

Solomon et al., (2006) explain the need recognition as consumers wanting to move from their current state to their ideal state, which our study indicated too. Therefore, our findings are in line with the study conducted by Van Der Merwe & Campbell (2008), who found that the consumers start their search for new furniture after discovering a need for either a particular product or when wanting to make decorative changes in their homes. Our study further found that a consumer's life-situation plays an important part in the need recognition phase. Therefore, we suggest to separate need recognition in the context of home furnishing to derive from two main reasons: 1. A consumer's life situation and 2. a consumer's desire to make decorative changes in their homes.

### 5.1.1 Life Situations

This study found that participants who experienced an urgent need for furniture after moving to a new home engaged less in thinking and planning how their future home would look like. Instead, they sought to fulfil the need at one specific point in time to increase convenience and save time and money. The behaviour further differed between the participants who were planning to buy home furnishing urgently but for a temporary home and the ones who were planning to buy home furnishing urgently but for a long-term home. The participants who moved to a temporary home wanted easy and cheap solutions and did not intend to engage in further furnishing after their needs were fulfilled. The participants that experienced an urgent

situation of moving to a long-term apartment found temporary solutions to save money and time, but at the same time already planned on changing the furniture to more durable ones over time. In conclusion, two types of life situations were found to cause needs to emerge: The urgent-temporary situation and the urgent-long-term situation.

### 5.1.2 Need for Decorative Changes

In contrast to the participants that recognised a need due to an apparent situation in their lives, other participants wanted to simply replace or add furniture in their current homes. The participants that wanted to replace or buy additional furniture experienced difficulties to retrieve memories of what initiated the idea. Many of the participants reasoned that their furniture had become old and ugly and thus needed to be replaced. Several participants also mentioned that they could not stand when their furniture did not fit with the rest of the home decor. When the participants succeeded in remembering how their need recognition was created, many of them mentioned styles they had seen in friends' homes, the inspiration that they had discovered through their social media feeds and magazines that they had been browsing. For many of the participants the inspiration they found pushed them to take actions in fulfilling their needs, but it seemed to take some time between acquiring the inspiration and using it actively.

What was further interesting was that the participants found excuses to why they needed to change their current furniture. Some participants justified their need by saying that their old furniture was ugly or too small when in reality they just wanted to update the style. The style was an important factor mentioned by several participants, who mentioned styles such as Scandinavian, industrial, minimalistic and natural style. They further told about finding various styles in inspirational material and through friends, agreeing with studies by Hassan et al., (2010) and Burnsed, Strubel and Moody, (2016), that highlighted that peer-to-peer interactions were important inspiration sources and channels for decision making. Furthermore, we found that consumers tend to become more inspired and distracted by other products when they shop in physical stores than in online stores – a finding that has not been mentioned in previous research to our best knowledge. This conclusion was derived from answer saying that the participants tend to buy furniture and decoration to a higher extent spontaneously when exposed to many products at the same time.

## 5.2 Information Search

The literature has described the information search to be the next step a consumer takes after acknowledging a need (Solomon et al., 2006), which can be found through our study. However, what was interesting to note was that in the need recognition phase the participants experienced passive absorption of inspiration and information that they were not aware of. In the information search phase, the participants continued acquiring inspiration and information but did that actively themselves. Many participants started their search online to gain a more

holistic view of what was offered on the market, and utilised online search engines, websites and social media, just as the study by Lecinski (2011) found.

Furthermore, some participants constantly alternated between online and offline channels when searching for information. Participants usually started with searching for products online to understand the available offerings. After narrowing their options down, some of them wanted to look at the options in physical stores. For some participants, this was enough information, while others returned online to seek even more information and opinions. This finding is interesting in the light of previously presented ways to classify multichannel shoppers that were described in the chapter 3.2.4.2. Instead of the clear patterns suggested earlier (Verhoef, Neslin & Vroomen, 2007; Chiou, Chou & Shen, 2017), it seemed that consumers alternated between online and offline channels constantly during their information search.

What further steered consumer's information search was their level of commitment to the purchase process. Participants who looked for more durable solutions searched for more information and focused more on style and inspiration than participants that wanted to fill a temporary need by looking for cheaper and more convenient solutions. This finding partly agreed with Burnsed and Hodges (2013) study saying that price conscious consumers choose IKEA, while quality and durability focused consumers look for other options. In our study, this pattern was not completely visible. Several participants did not only decide on what products they wanted when searching for information but also where their products would come from. Contradicting Allegrezza (2010) and Burnsed and Hodges (2013), our study found that several participants chose IKEA as their preferred brand because they felt emotionally connected to it, which made the brand act as an important component in their frame of reference.

### 5.2.1 Frame of reference

In the need recognition phase participants spoke about passively being exposed to inspiration that steered their needs. In the information search phase, we detected that participants actively searched for information and inspiration to generate a holistic picture of what they were looking for. This frame had usually been constructed through the help of inspiration online, but also through deciding upon criteria that were important to the consumer. We found that all participants had some guiding criteria when conducting their search, e.g. price range, specific style or the durability of a product. With the help of filtering functions on websites, consumers were more prone to find what they were looking for and followed their criteria. Participants of the present study spoke about the mental image they tried to create. Creating such a notion was found to be especially beneficial for couples, who shared ideas with each other to generate a common agreement of what they were looking for. Thus, the aim of reaching a consensus with a partner can have significant effects on how an individual's style changes over time. Several participants further mentioned the importance of acquiring inspiration from fully furnished rooms, which they inspected either on the internet or in a physical retail store.

### 5.2.2 Physical interaction

One participant conducted her search by visiting IKEA to see products and get inspired by the showrooms, without any intention of buying anything from IKEA. This finding highlighted the importance to touch, feel and see the furniture, even though technology has helped in creating more convenient ways of looking for furniture. This finding agrees with Wolny and Charoensuksai, (2014) and Ashman, Solomon and Wolny, (2015), who highlighted that the physical environment is a vital component for consumers in their information search. Our study showed a more nuanced view of this by finding different motivations of going to the physical store. One motivation for visiting the physical store was mentioned by most of the participants. These participants started their search online with the help of their frame of reference, after which they went to the physical store only to anchor their search and reassure themselves of the final alternatives they were considering to buy. These participants valued the ability to touch and feel the products physically, rather than the contact and expertise of the sales people. The other motivation for going to the physical store was mentioned by the elder participants who preferred to conduct all information search offline. Furthermore, the more mature participants valued the interaction and expertise of the sales personnel, which could only be experienced in a physical store.

## 5.3 Evaluation of Alternatives

The evaluation of alternatives has been described as the last step before the purchase after the consumer has found a sufficient number of suitable options (Solomon et al., 2006). The addition and elimination of alternatives is a constant activity that occurs throughout the pre-purchase phase but is more definite in this part of the pre-purchase phase. Our findings showed that the evaluation of alternatives occurred after a participant had engaged in extensive information search, made use of online shopping baskets to add new products that they were fond of, and eliminated the ones that did not measure up to their criteria after finding better options. The virtual shopping basket was also mentioned as a useful tool by the participants who wanted to buy bundles and therefore were interested in the total price.

The participants of this study further gave insights about how they evaluated different alternatives. The evaluation phase included reading ratings and reviews about the product, and bad reviews and the opinions and experiences of peers were considered especially helpful. The participants found reviews helpful when searching for the best ratio between their most important criteria, and the alternative that the best matched these criteria was usually chosen. The first step of the evaluation was in many cases done online by filtering products based on the initial criteria. The second step was seeing, trying and touching the product physically. Many participants changed their minds or confirmed their decision when experiencing the product in a physical store. Most of the participants conducted extensive information search before going to the physical store and rather valued the reviews they found online and through peers than trusting the retailer's judgement. This finding contradicts with Sonnenberg and Erasmus (2005) who found that sales personnel were an important criterion when consumers evaluated alternatives. However, two more mature participants made their choice and

gathered information based on the sales personnel's superior expertise. Participants also spoke about how important it was to have a store geographically close by, especially when preparing for a high-involvement purchase such as a new custom-made kitchen. Many participants also valued durability and quality, that could better enable them to resell the furniture or use them in another apartment. The factors that determined the final decision for the participants were mainly based on functionality, price and style. In addition, it was very important for the participants to feel good and comfortable at home.

### 5.3.1 Various Forms of the Customer Journey

The most interesting finding in regards to the evaluation of alternatives was that not all pre-purchase phases lead to an actual purchase, contradicting Lemon and Verhoef (2016). One participant explained that she stopped her journey after she had been looking for a product online, tried it in the physical store and decided not to purchase it. She explained that she gave up on the idea of buying that item. Another insight was that some participants had a lengthier pre-purchase phase that could last up to a couple of years, while other participants took just a few months to go through their pre-purchase phase for the same type of product. This finding contradicts Costa, (2013) who suggested the customer journey to last up to three months when purchasing kitchen furniture.

### 5.3.2 Comfort and Practicality

Further interesting was that above all some participants were looking for practical and convenient solutions and preferred those aspects over the style. Our findings contradict Clow, James, Sisk and Cole (2011) as well as Kinley and Brandon (2015) who argued that consumers look for a "way of living" rather than practicality. A similar view was exclaimed by Hassan et al., (2010) and Burnsed, Strubel and Moody, (2016), who proposed that consumers look for furniture that helps them convey an image that they want to transmit to others and highly value compliments from peers. Our findings did, however, show the opposite: the participants were rather concerned about their guests feeling comfortable when visiting than the guests giving compliments around the aesthetic dimensions of the furniture.

### 5.3.3 Technology in Evaluation of Alternatives

Another insight that derived from our data was that none of the participants mentioned using electronic customer service, such as chatting with retailer representatives on an online store. Furthermore, only two participants mentioned that their ultimate choice was based on the 3D drawing technology their supplier offered. These findings leave conclusions by Huang and Liu, (2014) and Ashman, Solomon and Wolny, (2015) aside, as they explained that the recently developed virtual and augmented reality technologies helped consumers to make better choices when shopping.

## 5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed our most important findings in relation to the research questions and previous literature. Based on the data we collected, we found interesting themes that were related to all three steps of the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey: need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives. We found need recognition to occur as a result of two situations: either a radical change in life situation or the desire to make decorative changes at home. Moreover, we found that frames of reference created with the help of criteria helped the participants to search suitable alternatives and that interaction in a physical retail store is still valued for various reasons. Finally, we distinguished clues about previously not discussed forms of the customer journey, the importance of comfort and practicality and the usage of new technology in the evaluation of alternatives. The next chapter will conclude this thesis by presenting the achieved theoretical contributions, practical implications, main limitations and promising avenues for future research.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study was to generate new insights of what causes consumers to recognise needs, how they search for information, and how they evaluate the alternatives during the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey. As a result of an exploratory investigation that made use of both deductive and inductive approaches, while looking at the phenomena from subjectivist epistemological and constructivist ontological standpoints, the present study fulfilled the purpose as follows.

Our study found that mainly two things lead consumers to recognise needs. First, consumers' shifting life situations caused urgency to move from the actual state to the ideal state of being (Solomon et al., 2006). These consumers sought for cheaper and more convenient solutions. Second, consumers who valued durability and aesthetics recognised needs after conceiving that their current products did not live up to their standards. The study further gained substance to the understanding of how unsought inspiration shapes consumers' need recognition, as today's consumers are exposed to an extensive amount of inspiration and information that causes them to recognise more needs. Consumers employ many different channels to search for information, such as search engines, websites and social media. Channel selection seemed to have to do with their frame of reference, which was created by their initial criteria for the desired product. It was further found that consumers are very keen to listen and read reviews, and highly value peers' opinions when evaluating alternatives. Although technology has helped consumers in searching and evaluating alternatives, the end decision was in many cases still based on seeing the product at a traditional retail store. These findings helped to find new, interesting dimensions of the customer journey and therefore contributed to an updated version of our preliminary framework (Table 3).

*Table 3. The most important findings in relation to the three steps of the pre-purchase phase*

Concept	Definition of the concept	Main Findings
Need Recognition	The consumer experiences a difference between actual and ideal state of being and a problem occurs that needs to be solved. The consumer is constantly exposed to inspiration and information that he or she did not ask or search for actively.	Needs were found to ignite as a result of two things: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Radical change in a consumer's life situation</li> <li>2. Dissatisfaction with aesthetics or functionality of an existing product</li> </ol>
Information Search	After recognising a problem, the consumer actively searches for inspiration products from many different sources. The criteria that the consumer has in mind helps the consumer to find suitable alternatives.	It was found, that the consumers' search for products is guided by frames of references that are based on the most important criteria set for the purchase. Consumers today value convenience, practicality and the ability to touch, feel and experience products before making a buying decision

Evaluation of Alternatives	<p>The consumer constructs a final consideration set consisting of similar products for making the final selection.</p> <p>The consumer selects the final option from the consideration set and decides to buy it.</p>	<p>Consumers constantly add and eliminate products from their consideration set while searching for suitable alternatives, and consider technology to help in decision-making. Some consumers end their customer journey after searching and evaluating their final options, and never advance to the purchase phase.</p>
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Therefore, this study succeeded in generating new insights of the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey. The study further succeeded in contributing to the findings of two more recent studies within customer journey conducted with qualitative methods, namely Halvorsrud, Kvale and Følstad (2016) and Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014). Not only did this paper aim to give insights from a consumer perspective of the customer journey, but also to investigate a specific industry, which has been proposed to be done by several authors (Seth, 1981; Bozinoff, 1982; Ozanne, 1988; D’Astous, Bensouda & Guindon, 1989; Harrel, 1990; Du Plessis, Rousseau & Blem, 1991; Lofman, 1991; Bettman, 1993; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000; Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001).

This study contributed theoretically to the literature streams of the customer journey and multichannel retail practices. These contributions will be presented in Chapter 6.1., followed by managerial implications in Chapter 6.2. and finally suggestions for further research and limitations of this study in Chapter 6.3.

## 6.1 Theoretical Contributions

The previous customer journey literature has lacked in studies that give deep insight into the journey consumers experience when preparing to purchase a product. Many of the previous studies have made use of conclusive research designs, which has resulted in generalising the way customers move throughout their journey. Several researchers have exclaimed the need for more in-depth insights of how consumers recognise needs, search for information and evaluate alternatives prior to their purchase (Seth, 1981; Bozinoff, 1982; Ozanne, 1988; D’Astous, Bensouda & Guindon, 1989; Harrel, 1990; Du Plessis, Rousseau & Blem, 1991; Lofman, 1991; Bettman, 1993; Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000; Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau, 2001). It has further been suggested by a number of researchers that gaining insights about the customer journey within a specific retail sector should be considered. Doing so would allow comparison between consumers for the same product category (Seth, 1981; Ahtola, 1984; Harrel, 1990; Lofman, 1991). This study was able to provide findings that are vital for understanding the complexity of the customer journey but also some of the many reasons for this complexity.

### 6.1.1 Contributions to the Customer Journey Literature

This study found that the three steps of the pre-purchase phase – need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives – exist and roughly follow the structure suggested by Engel, Kollatt and Blackwell (1968). However, we found indications of the

steps blending and repeating without a logical order. Furthermore, we found clues of journeys that were not completed after the first two steps. In other words, extensive information search and evaluation of alternatives do not always lead to a purchase. This finding of stagnated customer journeys has not been mentioned in previous research, which is why we believe it to add value to understanding the dynamics and complexity of the consumer behaviour prior to a purchase. Further found was that the consumers constantly alternate between the three steps during the pre-purchase phase. Therefore, in the light of evidence created by this study, we believe the customer journey to take different forms each time an individual advances towards a transaction. In other words, the same consumer can experience many different kinds of journeys depending on the nature of the purchase the level of involvement. Moreover, it was found that the steps within the journey can vary in length, as in some occasions it takes longer to recognise needs than search for information and evaluate alternatives. It is therefore suggested to not take the simplified customer journey models for granted.

Further contributing to the theoretical grounds of the customer journey, we found that modern technology helps customers to search information and evaluate alternatives. However, the latest innovations such as virtual reality technology have not yet been adopted to the extent that consumers would benefit from those during their customer journey. Despite the new ways of consuming as a result of the technological advancements, consumers still value the physical contact with the product. This finding was demonstrated by many of our participants, who conducted their information search online but did not make a complete decision before they had touched, felt and experienced the product.

### 6.1.2 Contributions to the Multichannel Literature

One of the most recent qualitative studies within the stream of multichannel literature was conducted by Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014), who characterised three different types of customer journeys: impulsive, balanced and considered. Even though they succeeded in creating differing typologies, their study lacked in depth in explaining what caused these differences to occur. Our study can, therefore, help to give understanding to why some customers are more impulsive in their journey, while others prefer to search and evaluate for longer. Our study further contributes by challenging previous simplifications of multichannel consumer behaviour, that have aimed to characterise consumers based on their search and purchase channels (Verhoef, Neslin & Vroomen, 2007; Chiou, Chou & Shen, 2017). Our study found that this type of classification is not entirely valid, because not only is it valuable to know how consumers search and purchase products, but it is also vital to know how they find inspiration for taking these steps. An example of this was given by participant 10, who conducted searching and purchasing offline but had found the initiating inspiration from a blog that pushed her to pursue this decision. Moreover, as discussed before, we found that customer journeys can be different for each time an individual prepares to buy something; hence it is not proper to categorise consumers according to their channel usage. Therefore, this study helped in gaining understanding of why thinking around customer journeys should not be generalised. Importantly, the present study also resulted in several recommendations for industry managers.

## 6.2 Managerial Implications

Along with the theoretical contributions outlined above, the present study generated a number of practical implications, which are of relevance for managers working in the retail industry. As it was found, that consumers have many different habits of beginning their customer journeys, it is important for retailers to ensure availability in all channels that their desired target groups prefer using at different stages of their customer journey. In addition, finding out which part of the pre-purchase phase takes the most time and effort for the consumers to navigate through can be helpful in order to provide better service. Moreover, creating brand awareness is important in order to increase the likelihood of being included in the initially considered options that the consumer decides to turn to when searching for alternatives. It was also detected, that even after significant leaps in the usage of technology, traditional media still plays an important part when consumers recognise needs, search for information and evaluate alternatives.

It was also found, that consumers value different store formats for differing reasons. For example, consumers still appreciate the physical retail store experience today as it can offer a sensory experience that online stores cannot challenge. Further interesting was to note that consumers expect the assortment in the online store and the physical stores to be uniform in cases where the retailer operates through both channels, and not finding a product offline for final evaluation could result in eliminating that option completely. In addition, the geographical proximity of a retail store was found to make the retailer more approachable for some consumers. Lastly, ratings and reviews were found to ease decision-making and increase the reliability of online stores.

As suggested at the beginning of the paper, the practical implications discussed above can help managers of multichannel retail firms to make strategic decisions about resource allocation, channel attribution and multichannel customer experience (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). To complete this thesis, we will next discuss the main limitations of the current study and outline lucrative paths for other researchers to explore in the future.

## 6.3 Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

Diverging from the methodological limitations discussed in Chapter 2, this part discusses the main limitations of our findings. In addition, we give suggestions for topics to be further researched in the future. First, as already discussed in part 2.3., the age of the participants in our sample did not vary significantly. During the data collection and analysis process we detected, that the answers of the elderly respondents differed from those of the younger ones. Therefore, the field would benefit from a similar study, that made use of a more diverse sample. Furthermore, as the present study was carried out in Sweden, investigating another market in a similar manner could create more valuable insights.

Second, we suggest further studies concentrate on the need recognition part in the very beginning of the customer journey. The current study was not able to completely investigate that component of the pre-purchase phase, as memory limitations became a major obstacle. Therefore, researching need recognition with another type of methodology could paint a more accurate picture of this rather under-researched phenomenon that initiates customer journeys.

Third, we propose future studies to further investigate the new findings that this research generated in an exploratory manner. For example, it would be of value to examine how different life situations exactly affect decision-making. Moreover, researching the reasons why some customers ended up not buying after an extensive period of information search and evaluation of alternatives could add new contributions to the existing knowledge about stagnated customer journeys. In addition, conducting studies that focus on couples could help both the academic community and industry policy-makers to understand how households collectively make buying decisions and steer each other's' customer journeys. We did not find any indications of how consumers view the role of the latest technological innovations, such as virtual reality, in relation to their decision-making before purchase. Therefore, future research could help to shed light on the customer journey from this angle.

Finally, the current study found support for some conclusions presented by previous research. For example, our findings of the most influential sources of inspiration were coherent with findings by earlier research. Therefore, we suggest validating these findings with further conclusive studies.

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# Appendix A

## Interview Guide

- Age
- Gender
- Occupation
- Household
- Marital status
- Education
  
- Main question:
  - Tell me about the last time you bought a home furnishing product – walk us through your process.
- Follow-up questions for the main questions:
  - What were the reasons to why you wanted to buy a new piece of furniture?
  - How did you start your search?
  - What criteria did you use when searching for options?
  - Exploration questions:
    - How much time did you spend on the information search?
    - Where do you find inspiration for home furnishing?
    - What channels do you use when you search for alternatives? Why these channels?
    - How many alternatives did you consider throughout the search process?
    - What affects your perception in a good/bad way when you see a piece of furniture?
    - What might change your mind about a furniture purchase preference in a good/bad way?
    - How did you make the final decision?
- Additional topics to discuss if time allows:
  - Which devices do you use for searching?
  - When would you go online and offline?
  - Could you tell about another furnishing purchase that was different from the one discussed?
  - Did you conduct any information search after the purchase?
  - What kinds of expectations did you have for the product when you bought it? How were the expectations met when using it?
  - Ask an opinion about second-hand furniture

- Exit question:
  - Anything you would like to add?

# Appendix B

## Email Diary Guidelines

You have decided to participate in a study by Lund University School of Economics and Management. We would like to start by thanking you for participating, as we have been planning this study for a long time. Please read this email carefully, and reply by submitting the information listed at the end of this message. You will then receive instructions on how to write and submit your answers.

The purpose of this diary is to give the researchers a way to see how you behave on a daily basis when planning on buying home furnishing product or products. The overall purpose of the study is to expand the understanding of how consumers make sense of searching and comparing home furnishing products before purchasing. You will be asked questions by email every day for 14 days, after which you will be asked to provide the browsing history of your internet browser(s) from that period of time.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. The collected information will only be used in this study and will be only accessed by the researchers working on this project. There are no anticipated risks or discomforts in participating this research.

You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may leave the study at any time without consequences of any kind. You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. Furthermore, you can refuse to submit your internet browsing history at the end of the study. You will be provided with the complete study after it is finished if you wish so.

We kindly ask you to submit the following information listed below. This information will only be used to categorise and compare the data when doing the analysis.

- Age
- Gender
- Occupation
- Household
- Marital status
- Education level

By taking part you understand your rights described above. If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can reach out to one of the researchers at all times.

The contact information for the researchers:

- Aapi von Creutlein: aa7444vo-s@student.lu.se

- Ermelinda Nici: [ermelinda.nici@gmail.com](mailto:ermelinda.nici@gmail.com)

Looking forward to hear from you!

Best regards,

Aapi & Ermelinda

# Appendix C

## Diary Questions

You will receive a couple of questions every day by email. Please submit your diary entry at the end of each day by replying to this email. To help you with writing your answers, it can be helpful to write down notes about your thoughts whenever thinking about something that relates to home furnishing. The diary-keeping will end after 14 days, or when you get the home furnishing solution that you were looking for during the diary period. In the latter case, we kindly ask you to mention that and answer a couple of additional questions. Please feel free to ask any questions from the researchers at any times by email.

The following list contains the questions we hope you will answer today. Please note that the researchers might ask for elaboration after submitting your answers. Please also include daily screenshots of your internet browsing history.

- Did you look for home furnishing inspiration today? From where?
- Did you search for information on a specific home furnishing product today? From where? Which Product?
- Did you ask for or hear opinions or experiences about the product today? From who?
- Which product options do you consider the most today? Why?
- Which product options do you consider the least today? Why?
- Any other thoughts or comments that you want to bring up?

# Appendix D

## Consent for Participation in an Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Ermelinda Nici and Aapi von Creutlein from Lund University. The purpose of the research is to find out. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about how customer behave before a purchase decision when shopping for home furnishing. I will be one of approximately 20 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, there will be no repercussions.
2. Participation involves being interviewed by researchers from Lund University. The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio tape of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I do not want to be taped, I will not be able to participate in the study.
3. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any questions or to end the interview.
4. I understand that my participation in this study will remain confidential. Furthermore, I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
5. I understand that the researcher will collect information concerning my age, gender, occupation, household, marital status and education. This information will only be used to categorise and contextualise the data, and my anonymity as a participant will be maintained.
6. Administrators, faculty staff of other students from Lund University will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes, transcripts or personally identifiable information. This precaution will prevent my personal comments from having any negative repercussions.
7. Participating in this study does not pose any likely harms. As a reward, a gift card will be given subsequently.
8. I understand that I can contact the researchers at all times for more information by sending an email to the address [aa7444vo-s@student.lu.se](mailto:aa7444vo-s@student.lu.se) or [ermelinda.nici@gmail.com](mailto:ermelinda.nici@gmail.com).
9. I have read and understood the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
10. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

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My Signature

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Date

---

My Printed Name

---

Signature of the Investigator

