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The real [estate] customer experience journey

A study of customer experience journeys within the Swedish real estate industry

by

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Abstract

Title: The real [estate] customer experience journey - a study of customer experience journeys within the Swedish real estate industry

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Keywords: Customer experience, customer experience journey, customer experience management, real estate, complex durable goods, millennials.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to analyze how millennials perceive the customer experience journey of purchasing newly built apartments, and also to suggest appropriate ways to innovate and improve the customer experience journey within the real estate sector.

Methodology: Our research derives from a social constructionism orientation. Since the purpose is to understand and analyze millennials' perceptions we conducted a qualitative study where we interviewed eight Riksborgen customers concerning their experiences.

Theoretical perspective: In order to better understand customers' perceptions and put it in a context, a framework for customer experience journeys was the basis for this study. The model includes three stages: prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase, which we will investigate from a real estate perspective.

Empirical data: The empirical material, which is the base of the analysis, is divided into the three stages of customer experience journey - prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase. In each part, we highlight how millennials perceive the customer experience journey.

Conclusions: The main conclusion and suggestion of this study is that an identified sub-stage, the customization sub-stage, would be necessary in the customer experience journey within the real estate industry. The customization sub-stage is a sub-stage to the purchase stage and describes the actual customization of the apartment concerning interior designs. The fact is that millennials and companies have different attitudes and conceptions towards the sub-stage.

Furthermore, the thesis shows how technology such as Virtual Reality could create better conditions for simplifying the customer experience journey and thus creating a more positive customer experience. The final conclusion concerns millennials' wishes to be led through a complex purchase process of buying a newly built apartment, whereupon a guide is suggested.

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1. Introduction

The first part of this thesis aims to present brief background information and previous research contributions about customer experience journeys. Furthermore, the chapter also declare the problem formulation of the thesis, as well as the used research questions, purpose, contributions and disposition.

1.1 Background

Designing a successful customer experience journey has become one of the most observed and leading management objectives during recent years (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). An increasing academic attention has been drawn to customer experience as a phenomenon beyond regular customer service (Lemke, Clark & Wilson, 2010). This has led so far that top management teams for international companies have created and initiated special departments working with customer experience journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The concept of customer experience journeys can be described as all touch points, where customers interact with the company, during a purchase (Richardson, 2010). The customer experience journey is an important mission for companies, and during recent years, it has become even more interesting due to the appearance of customer to customer interaction on social media platforms (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This new phenomenon makes the customer experience journey even more complex since the increasing share of customer touch points has reduced companies' control (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Therefore, companies need to integrate all business functions in order to deliver a positive customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

According to Klaus and Maklan (2012), the customer experience journey aroused in the wake of the management shift going from goods-centered to a service-dominant logic. In order for companies to differentiate themselves from each other, they started competing on service level, which in the literature is measured in terms of customer satisfaction, loyalty and word-of-mouth (Klaus & Maklan, 2012). Since these factors are reviewed and executed on so many different levels and touch points, companies have much less control of the outcome (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As a response, some companies try to create their own customer experience path, instead of

reacting to the journeys the customers devise themselves, and by that trying to lead the experience journey instead of following (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Considering that, companies have a greater chance, and power, to lead the customer into the next interaction they should pursue with the company (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Edelman and Singer (2015) also suggest companies to develop the journey with innovations such as technology and services that may create better opportunities to extend the customer relationship. Further they argue that the customer experience journey could be seen as a product delivered to the customers and this is partly why customer experience journeys has become, and will become even more important in the future (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Grewal et al., 2017).

A concept that describes the process of controlling and managing customers is customer experience management (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This concept acts as a tool to create great customer experience journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). It was developed in order to lead the customers' experience during the purchase and in the long run achieve customer loyalty (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). They further argue that customer experience management is about trying to understand customers perception and thoughts, which will lead to a better structuring of the process and thus implement adequate innovations to improve the total customer experience journey. Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl (2017) mean that due to the fact that processes are becoming self-service oriented and online, it puts even more pressure on companies to create a seamless experience across all channels during the customer experience journey.

1.2 Problem formulation

More avenues for future research is suggested within the field of customer experience journeys (Grewal et al., 2017). The Marketing Science Institute (2014; 2016) classify customer experience journeys as one of its most important research topics during the upcoming years due to the complexity of an increasing number of customer touch points requires more knowledge, and the belief that great customer experiences will result in improved business performance. Furthermore, Verhoef et al. (2009) argue that the customer experience journey is much talked about by practitioners, but the concept lacks empirical research on different areas and products. Also, the few previous studies on customer experience management are focused on the service context at

the actual purchase moment (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017) and not all purchase stages, which makes customer experience management a field that requires more attention in order to improve customer experience journeys. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) confirm that previous research is lacking in case based examples from relevant industries, instead previous literature has been characterized by conceptual discussions regarding the customer experience journey. Although, previous research on the customer experience journey has tried to focus on mapping different journeys within niche areas such as airport services (Nijhuis, 2013), train services (Van Hagen & Sauren, 2014), cafe businesses (Sukwadi, Yang & Fan, 2012) and libraries (Andrews & Eade, 2013). These niche areas involve products or services that Koklic and Vida (2009) describe as convenience products. They make it clear that there is a significant difference between customers' decision making process when buying convenience products compared to buying complex durable goods. Buying durable goods involves a strategic decision making process (Koklic & Vida, 2009), which according to Gronhaug, Kleppe and Haukedal (1987) refer to the process of deciding on purchases with long-term commitments of resources and decisions that may affect individuals' budget for other goods and services. It is said that those purchase decisions also imply a larger amount of perceived risk since purchases of durable goods often involves larger financial obligations (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Gibler & Nelson, 2003; Gronhaug, Kleppe & Haukedal, 1987; Mitchell, 1999). Strategically important purchases such as buying a car, a house (Bazerman, 2001) or deciding on financial investments (Henry, 2005) are consumer situations that involves complex and strategic decision making (Koklic & Vida, 2009). Compared to decision making on convenience products, consumers find complex and expensive purchases, that requires high involvement, as more traumatic and riskier (Chaudhuri, 2001; Mitchell, 1999), since the outcomes of the purchases are unknown in advance (Koklic & Vida, 2009) and trial-error learning is uncommon when buying complex durable goods (Bazerman, 2001).

Further, Buskirk-Cohen, Duncan and Levicoff (2016) mean that it is of great importance to understand and see the differences between different age groups in order to act accordingly to these groups preferences. Different age groups possess unique characteristics, such as beliefs, values and attitudes which subsequently leads to different behaviors (Inglehart & Carballo, 1997). These characteristics have been shaped by specific events, innovations and economic situations (Buskirk-Cohen, Duncan & Levicoff, 2016). Millennials is a specific group of interest due to a few reasons. Hur, Lee and Choo (2017) conclude that millennials are more likely to engage in

technological processes in the consumption situation. Millennials also manage technology easier than other consumer groups (Hur, Lee & Choo, 2017). Furthermore, Obal and Kunz (2013) argue that millennials do not trust companies to the same extent as baby boomers, instead millennials search for affirmation among peers on social media platforms. Millennials are also more likely than baby boomers to trust digitized processes of the purchase as millennials are “digital natives” and baby boomers are seen as “digital immigrants” (Obal & Kunz, 2013). Another fact is that according to statistics from SCB (2014), millennials accounts for approximately 20-25 percent of the Swedish population. And Morton (2012) claims that this group possesses a strong purchasing power today, but it will be even stronger in the future, at the same time as they have a strong impact on the family purchasing decision. Smits and Michielin (2010) also mention how parents nowadays support their adult children both information-wise and financially with purchasing for example their first household, which consequently leads to millennials being a strong target group. Additionally, this is often a group of customers that has not started to consume more complex and expensive products, for example: millennials have in many cases not bought their first apartment or house yet, which makes it an uncertain and an unmapped group for companies. According to SCB (2014) the most common form of housing between the age of 20-30 is rented housing, while the customer usually buys an apartment or house after turning 30 years old. Therefore, this group represents a major future purchase group within the real estate industry.

As further case based research on customer experience journeys is suggested (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), and since the phenomenon lacks empirical research on different markets and products (Verhoef et al., 2009), this thesis will investigate the customer experience journey in relation to buying newly built apartments. More specifically, since Buskirk-Cohen, Duncan and Levicoff (2016) mean that it is of importance to understand how different age groups behave and act accordingly, the thesis will add another dimension and put focus on how millennials perceive the customer experience journey when buying newly built apartments. Moreover, previous research within customer experience management contribute with insights at the actual purchase moment (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017), but less attention has been given to how great customer experience management can improve the customer experience journey through all customer touch points. Going more into detail, this research will use the real estate industry as a context and the purchase of a newly built apartments as a case example, since housing is classified as durable goods (Bazerman, 2001). The thesis has the aim to enrich the understanding of how millennials

perceive the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment and what expectations they have on the buying process through all touch points. By understanding how millennials perceive the customer experience journey when buying a newly built apartment, potential advancements and improvements, in terms of customer experience management and technology, will be presented regarding how to innovate the customer experience journey of the real estate industry.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to increase the understanding of how millennials perceive the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment. We use the real estate industry as the context of the study. The thesis will result in a mapped customer experience journey related to the purchase of an apartment, as well as suggestions for ways to improve the journey in an innovative manner. Thus, the purpose of the study is to increase the understanding and extend the knowledge within the research field of customer experience journeys related to durable goods, more specifically the purchase process of a newly built apartment, combined with how millennials as a specific customer segment perceive this complex customer experience journey.

1.4 Research questions

This thesis covers two research questions that will be used in order to reach the aim and purpose of the study:

- How do millennials perceive the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment?
- How can the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment be innovated and improved?

1.5 Contributions

The theoretical contribution of this study is that we have enriched the understanding of how millennials perceive the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment and how to innovate this process. Since previous studies within customer experience journeys has focused on conceptual discussions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and convenience products, this study serves as an extension to previous academic research as well as entering an unexplored field of research. This gives the research field a deeper understanding of customer experience journeys with a focus on newly built apartments and a specific customer group. The managerial contribution of this study is that companies within the real estate industry can benefit from having the knowledge about how millennials perceive customer experience journeys when buying newly built apartments, as well as to understand how to innovate this process. By enhancing these aspects, firms may be able to deliver a positive customer experience journey, while simultaneously improve the ability to tailor company activities in order to meet millennials' needs and demands.

1.6 Disposition

Following the above background and problem discussion of the subject, as well as an account of the purpose and the research questions of the study, the theory chapter follows. In the theory section we present the concepts and theories that underlie our essay. Furthermore, a method section is presented, where we motivate the methodological choices made to answer our research questions. In the method section, we also mention how our sample and interviews are designed. After the method section, the findings of the study are presented, where the interviewees' perceptions are described. Thereafter, the essay's analysis section follows, where theory and previous research are discussed in relation to the empirical data. The chapter is divided into two parts, the first part discusses the first research question and the second part discusses the second research question. The thesis ends with a presentation of the main conclusions drawn from the

analysis, and a reasoning of its importance for both theory and practice. Finally, limitations of the thesis as well as proposals for future research are presented.

2. Theoretical review

This literature review will present previous knowledge within the field of customer experience journeys. First, an introduction of how customer experience journeys arose will be described, starting from the customer experience perspective. This will be followed by existing theory about customer experience journeys and customer experience management, as well as a definition of decision making in relation to durable goods. Lastly, we will conclude the chapter by presenting the most important findings to be aware of when continuing the reading of this thesis.

2.1 Customer experience

According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), the roots to customer experience can be traced back to the 1960's. Since then, contributions have been made constantly, which has developed the notion of customer experience. Successful concepts have been; customer buying behavior process models, customer satisfaction and loyalty, service quality, relationship marketing, customer relationship management, customer centricity and customer focus and lastly customer engagement (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

2.1.1 Customer buying behavior process models

The most influential model in this regard is the model founded by Howard and Sheth in 1969 (Hunt & Pappas, 1972). It describes the purchase journey, going from need recognition to actual purchase to evaluation of the purchase (Hunt & Pappas, 1972). The early model of decision making process has worked as a breeding ground for future research in the field and it has created the recent notion of customer experience journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

2.1.2 Customer satisfaction and loyalty

Customer satisfaction is defined as the overall experience of the products and services a firm offers (Cogin, Sanders & Williamson, 2018). Studies have proved that customer satisfaction is an important aspect for a company, since it works as an indicator for future financial performance (Cogin, Sanders & Williamson, 2018). There have been multiple studies on how to measure customer attitudes and perception of company offers and the concept of customer satisfaction is well established in the field of marketing (Shahzadi et al., 2018). Although, customer satisfaction has experienced some opposition, whereupon new theories have been conducted in order to change or complement the existing framework of customer satisfaction (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

2.1.3 Service quality

The first model to measure service quality has been Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's model from 1988, named servqual (Chao-Yang & Yu-Jia, 2017). The model includes five variables which measures service quality. Since its discovery, the model has been well cited as well as questioned among researchers, whereupon the model has been tried to be developed and redesigned (Chao-Yang & Yu-Jia, 2017). Service quality has lately also been a topic for online businesses (Kalia, 2017). At the same time, he argues that there has been extensive research in the field. Unlike the traditional way to conduct business, where the company meets the customer face-to-face, online retailers are facing difficulties in reaching high customer loyalty (Kalia, 2017). Basically, because it is easier to change to another provider online (Kalia, 2017). He further argues that due to the lower personal service online, customers are less like to pay a higher price for a product.

2.1.4 Relationship marketing

Rasul (2018) argues that relationship marketing is one of the most important issues for companies today, since it includes all relations with stakeholders. He means that the concept aroused when companies realized that retaining customers instead of acquiring new is cheaper, which the traditional marketing perspective has not been focused on. It was at this time, customer service

became a more illuminated topic for practitioners (Rasul, 2018). In conclusion, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argues that relationship marketing has been important in order to understand how emotions can be attached to customer relationships.

2.1.5 Customer relationship management

Due to the recent growth of social media usage, that created an even stronger relationship with the customer, customer relationship management was needed (Rasul, 2018). Studies in the customer relationship management era questioned the fact that “customers are always right” and that companies should take care of their customers instead of acquiring new ones (Rasul, 2018). Instead, it was found that long-term relationship not necessary imply profitability (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Since then, researchers have discussed the optimal distribution between retaining customers and acquiring new customers (Lemon & Verhoef, 2018).

2.1.6 Customer centricity and customer focus

Customer centricity has been in focus in the early 2000’s, and it assumes that customer profiles, or customer ideals, are beneficial when forming your offer. Instead of targeting a broad mass, companies should identify their key customers. This customer identification has been developed through careful market research, thus segmented consumer groups, that possess different characteristics, are created (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

2.1.7 Customer engagement

Information technology has resulted in customers consulting each other rather than consulting companies about issues related to a planned or completed purchase (Wagner & Majchrzak, 2006). For example, if a customer is in a position of buying a product, the customer asks other customers for preferences and suggestions, rather than a company (Wagner & Majchrzak, 2006). They further argue that this is enabled through social media forums online, where customers exchange

experiences and opinions. Social media forums can also be displayed as a platform where joint-production processes can be arranged, mainly due to the fact that if companies utilize these platforms in the right manner, it could be beneficial (Wagner & Majchrzak, 2006). Moreover, they explain that shared experiences and ideas can be used by firms to improve products and services. However, the experiences and ideas shared on social media forums can be both rewarding and problematic (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

This background theory and contribution about how customer experience journeys have evolved through time, and how both academicians and practitioners have perceived customer experience in the past is helpful to be aware of in order to understand how customer experience journeys has evolved from previous theories of customer experience.

2.2 Customer experience journey

Richardson (2010) describes customer experience journey as the second step, after defining customer experience. Customer experience journey is a detailed mapping of all customer touch points before, during and after a purchase (Richardson, 2010). In similarity, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) mean that customer experience journey work as a tool to ensure that the customer experience is positive. Previously, customer experience journey has been studied from the front-facing customer interactions to back-office work, which is a major topic in the service management literature. Lately, with new technology emerging, companies have identified new touch points apart from the traditional customer experience journey. Mainly due to e-commerce, social media and mobile shopping have experienced a prosperous development. Because of this development, all channels (e.g. advertising, in-store purchase, e-commerce, social media et cetera), are becoming more integrated in each other. For example: customers search for products in-store but purchase the product online. The fact that different channels are becoming more integrated does not necessary imply problems. However, it puts pressure on businesses to become more streamlined (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

In order to break down the customer experience journey and make it more manageable it was divided into different stages, which are; prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase (Lemon &

Verhoef, 2016). The prepurchase stage can further be divided into need recognition, information search and evaluation (Puccinelli et al., 2009). In that way, prepurchase can be characterized by every single step before the actual purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Puccinelli et al. (2009) describes need recognition is something that can either be triggered by intrinsic reasons such as hunger or it can be extrinsically triggered from marketing communication. Information search can to a large extent be explained by previous experience and information from other people, it could also be affected by free gifts and trial pack (Puccinelli et al., 2009). Further, they argue that evaluation is very much depending on a balance between cost and benefit. The next step is the purchase stage, which encompasses all touch points in the purchase itself (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). More specifically, it describes choice, ordering and payment (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This stage has been analyzed in a myriad of studies previously, mainly focusing on what aspects that could influence the purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the field, there are areas such as servicescape and service environment. For example, Voorhees et al. (2017) argue that the purchase decision is more likely to take place inside the store if the perceived service level and service environment is positive. As a measurement of this phase, notions such as decision satisfaction and purchase confidence have been helpful. The third stage is the postpurchase phase, which includes the actual usage and consumption of the goods, as well as customer intention to return and purchase something else (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Successful concepts on this matter are customer engagement, service recovery, loyalty loop, word of mouth et cetera (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Puccinelli et al. (2009) highlight service recovery and compensation as important when mistakes and misunderstandings occur, otherwise customers intention to repurchase or spread positive word of mouth is limited. Lastly, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that the customer not necessarily need to go through each step gradually, but instead go back and forth between different stages during the customer experience journey.

2.2.1 Different types of touch points

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) make a clear distinction between different types of touch points, depending on who owns the specific activity. These activities are divided into four categories; brand owned, partner owned, customer owned and social/external. These variables can be displayed in each step of the model above (prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase). Brand owned

implies that the company itself owns and control a certain activity in the customer experience journey. For example; marketing activities, service, loyalty programs, et cetera. Partner owned includes all interactions with partner companies to the firm, for example; marketing agencies, delivery companies and communication channel partners. Customer owned touch point refers to all activities that the customers themselves control and manage. It could be the need and desire for a service, the payment options as well as the actual usage of the product. Lastly, social/external touch points during the customer experience journey are aspects that the company has very little influence over. For instance; other customers opinions and behaviors, independent information sources and environmental factors. All these touch points illustrate the complexity of the customer experience journey, since all touch points may not be controlled by the firm (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

In Figure 1 below, the total customer experience journey framework by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) is displayed. It contains of previous experience with a brand, product or service, current experience as well as future experience. In more detail, each step is divided into prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase. All stages include the touch points (brand owned, partner owned, customer owned and social/external) that have been presented above. The model will serve as a framework when analyzing the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment.

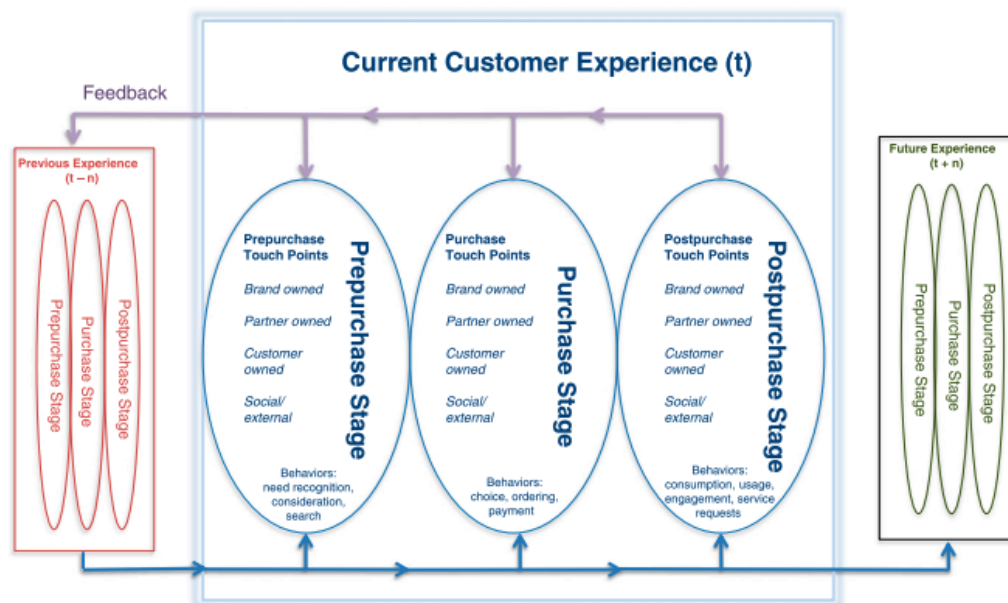


Figure 1: framework for customer experience journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016)

2.3 Customer experience management

Customer experience management has been highlighted by practitioners as one of the most promising management approaches for targeting the digitalization (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) mean that customer experience management consists of five steps: “(1) analyzing the experiential world of the customers, (2) building the experiential platform, (3) designing the brand experience, (4) structuring the customer experience, and (5) engaging in continuous innovation” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p. 82). Customer experience management is further developed into customer journey and touch point design, the role of alliances and network partners, and the internal organization (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer journey and touch point design aims to analyze all customer touch point, for example; identify potential service failures and investigate self-service technologies and their effect on the total customer experience (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017). Researchers have recently also discussed how online and offline channels either complement or misfavour each other, the findings have been characterized by different conceptions (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The second step - the role of alliances and network partners - describes the entire service network, which implies all external stakeholders that may affect the customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). They mean that It could be everything from the community a company operates in, to collaborators. Therefore, customer experience can be exposed to uncertainty and result in low control. The last step - internal organization - is about designing an action plan for how to deal with customer experience (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017). This is done by implementing a customer-centric approach in all touch points during the customer experience journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

It is of importance to be aware that customer experience management acts as a tool to improve the total customer experience journey, which makes it essential for practitioners to understand which stages they must put focus on in order to secure a better quality journey and how to innovate the process.

2.4 Strategic decision making on durable goods

As mentioned in the introduction, Koklic & Vida (2009) mean that there is a significant difference between customers' decision making process when buying durable goods compared to convenience products. Their research show that compared to decision making on convenience products, purchases of durable goods requires an extensive strategic decision making process as durable goods involves a larger amount of perceived risk and trauma for customers due to the fact that such purchases involves larger financial obligations (Beatty & Smith, 1987; Gibler & Nelson, 2003; Gronhaug, Kleppe & Haukedal, 1987; Mitchell, 1999). Gronhaug, Kleppe and Haukedal (1997) define it as a strategic decision making process on durable goods refers to the process of deciding on purchases with long-term commitments of resources and decisions that may affect individuals' budget for other goods and services. This may be strategically important products such as buying a car, a house (Bazerman, 2001) or deciding on financial investments (Henry, 2005).

Koklic and Vida (2009) did their research in interest of consumer behavior since customers are most concerned about "big" and "strategic decisions" when buying strategically important and durable goods. They define the characteristics of a strategic important purchase as: long-term commitment of resources, high involvement in the process and truncated budget available for other goods and services. Their study was conducted with the theme 'Consumer House Buying Behavior' since the purchase of a house or apartment could be perceived as a strategic decision. According to Koklic and Vida (2009), strategic purchases imply many important categories of decisions, such as:

- "Decisions with regard to allocation of the household budget, namely, how the household's economic resources are influenced, e.g. for traveling, visits to restaurants etc.;
- Categorization of alternatives means choosing either from various product groups (e.g. apartments or houses) or defining a narrower product category (e.g. houses of a given size);
- Decision making within the defined product category takes place once the product group is specified." (Koklic & Vida, 2009, p. 77)

Through their research, they found that consumers have limited knowledge of housing and that they are unaware about how the buying process will work, which therefore requires strong motivation and high involvement by consumers (Koklic & Vida, 2009). Koklic and Vida (2009) further conclude that the prepurchase stage is very important for companies to focus on since excellent information regarding the house and the buying process, as well as a great prepurchase experience can diminish the perceived risk. The company representatives' interaction with consumers are therefore perceived as crucial in the prepurchase phase in order to contribute to consideration set formation and consumers' early decision makings in the process (Koklic & Vida, 2009).

These definitions, arguments and insights are important to be aware of in order to understand that buying a newly built apartment implies a strategic decision making process, often characterized by high consumer involvement and high perceived risk.

2.5 Theoretical summary

In this section we will briefly present the theoretical framework of the study. Studies of customer experience can be traced back to the 1960s. Since then, the concept has evolved during the decades. The second step of customer experience is customer experience journey, where the idea is to map all activities that occurs between the company and the customer. The customer experience journey consists of three stages - prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase, and each of these comprise different kinds of touchpoints which are brand owned, partner owned, customer owned and social/external. The evolution of internet and social media have increased the amount of touch points dramatically which subsequently has led to companies not being able to control all touch points. In a response to this, customer experience management was founded. Customer experience management work as a tool in order to create a positive customer experience journey and is seen as the key aspect in order to respond and handle the digitalization. In order to illustrate how a customer experience journey of a newly built apartment can differentiate from other products, the concept of decision making when it comes to durable goods is presented. It describes the significant difference between durable goods and convenience products in terms of risks, financial obligations, decision making et cetera.

3. Methodology

This chapter will outline the research philosophy as well as the methodological approach towards the research. More specifically, the method chapter will address how the study has been conducted and what material that is the root of the study.

3.1 Research philosophy

A brief description of epistemology is - the knowledge perception which helps the researcher to understand the nature of the world (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Since the purpose of this study is: the purpose of this study is to analyze how millennials perceive the customer experience journey of purchasing newly built apartments, and also to suggest appropriate ways to innovate and improve the customer experience journey within the real estate sector - the epistemological standpoint of this study is social constructionist (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson (2015) describe the main characteristics of this research approach as: observer is part of what is being observed; the aim is to increase the understanding of the social world the interviewees lives in; the research only includes a small number of cases or respondents et cetera. By that being said, we do not seek an objective truth, instead, we want to understand how individuals perceive situations and happenings. Thus, it is not problematic with interpreting, since the understanding is more important than the explanation (Thurén, 2007). Although there are advantages, there are also disadvantages of such an approach. Have reasonable interpretations been made or could a certain content be understood differently? Thurén (2007) argues that the most important thing to consider in this matter is to successfully put it into the right context. Considering the ambition to understand how our interviewees perceive the customer experience journey of buying newly built apartments, we adopted a relativistic ontological approach. Ontology describes the nature of reality and existence, while a relativistic approach of ontology is described as a notion which greatly consider different people's perceptions and perspectives of reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, no single reality or truth can be identified, since there are many perspectives on a certain topic (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In our study, we do not seek to find only one objective reflection of how

millennials perceive and experience the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment. Instead, we will try to identify common experiences among interviewees and accordingly suggest potential ideas about how to innovate and improve the customer experience journey.

3.2 An iterative approach

An overall aspect to take into account when designing a research is the relationship between theory and research (Bryman & Bell, 2015). There are two primary approaches, which are inductive and deductive. An inductive approach relies on grounded theory, where theory is generated through empirical data (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). A deductive approach on the other hand implies that data is generated through theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). After analyzing our empirical information, which was based on theory, we had to add more theory in order to get a bigger picture and greater understanding of the topic. By doing so, we used an iterative approach, which Bryman and Bell (2015) describe as an approach where the researcher goes back and forth between theory and empirical data. Thus, an iterative approach works as a combination between the two primary approaches described above (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

3.3 Research strategy

When conducting a research, one of the first things the authors have to consider is whether to go with a qualitative or quantitative method, which is depending on the research question. Qualitative research seeks to understand the underlying reasons behind why people act in a certain way. Quantitative research, on the other hand, is rather focused on numeric and statistical concerns, where the author can identify and clarify a certain relationship. The research questions of this study are: how do millennials perceive the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment? And: how can the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment be innovated and improved? Since the interest and ambition is to understand customers perceptions and experiences, a qualitative study is the most suitable. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson

(2015) mean that when a researcher seek to understand why and how, a qualitative study should be applied. Kvale (1997) agrees on this point, he argues that the best way to understand people's thoughts and opinions about something is to talk to them. Furthermore, Eisenhardt (1989) writes that the general differences between qualitative and quantitative research is that quantitative research tries to clarify what is happening, while qualitative research seeks to understand why something is happening. Therefore, quantitative research will not be able to provide the depth that this study seeks. As Burns and Burns (2008) state, qualitative research reach the parts that quantitative research cannot.

3.4 Case company Riksbyggen

To be able to answer our research questions, we analyzed a leading real estate firm in the Swedish context, Riksbyggen. We used Riksbyggen's customers in order to conduct empirical data regarding customer experience journeys within the real estate industry. Riksbyggen is a company owned by the building unions, housing associations (local housing associations) and by other national co-operative associations (Riksbyggen, 2018). The company has approximately 2300 employees and had in 2017 a yearly turnover of 8377 million Swedish SEK and is therefore one of the biggest facility management firms (Riksbyggen, 2018). Their business includes selling and renting out apartments in all parts of Sweden (Riksbyggen, 2018). The research question of this study is in line with the desideratum of the real estate industry in general and Riksbyggen in particular, since they sell newly built apartments.

We started with having a start-up meeting together with representatives from Riksbyggen, more specifically the Sales and Marketing Manager of Sweden, Tobias Dysenius, and the Regional Manager of Sweden South, Ulrika Nyström. They described their upcoming challenges and why they had the interest of taking part of our conclusions of this study as well as how they can contribute by letting us get in touch with their customers. We tried to ask as many questions as possible in order to gain an understanding of the real estate industry. During the process of writing this thesis, Riksbyggen has been very helpful with finding suitable respondents for interviews and sharing useful customer surveys which has helped us to gain a deeper understanding of the

customer experience journey, the industry as a whole and what millennials demand when purchasing an apartment.

As an example of how a customer experience journey may look when buying complex durable goods, our case company Riksbyggen has mapped up the customer experience journey their customers are experiencing, from need recognition to product usage. However, the journey is just a description of all touch points where the customer can or may interact with Riksbyggen throughout the whole buying process. In detail, the journey is divided into the traditional three stages (prepurchase, purchase and postpurchase) in similarity to the customer experience model above, which could be found in the article written by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). In line with the scarce knowledge about how consumers perceive the customer experience journey when purchasing complex durable goods, Riksbyggen argues that a customer-centric approach of the customer experience journey is missing (Tobias Dysenius, 2018). General understandings of which journey the customer may take already exists, although their knowledge is lacking in terms of deeper understanding of why the customers behave in a certain way, how they perceive the customer experience journey they are experiencing and how the customer experience journey can be improved in an innovative manner.

In the first stage of the customer experience journey, all potential customer interactions in the stage where the consumer discover Riksbyggen are displayed. These touch points are for instance; social media, homepage, brochure, a sign in the street and several others. Once the customer has decided to choose Riksbyggen, the purchase phase is initiated. The phase includes for example; informational meeting before moving in, apartment viewing, meeting for selecting specific attributes of the apartment, customer newspaper et cetera. The last step in the model illustrates the process when the customer moves in. Examples of postpurchase moments in this phase includes; functional meeting, occupation, meeting with customer responsible for Riksbyggen, inspection and so on. After the actual occupation there are several touch points during a year, where the customer not necessary take part of, due to its voluntary nature. Among many activities, there are; customer club evenings, annual governance report, general meetings and so forth.

3.5 Selection criteria and sampling

By taking the research question and the purpose of the study into consideration, it was natural to interview people with recent experience of purchasing an apartment. Carson et al. (2001) and Bryman and Bell (2015) describe this sampling method as purposive sampling. Since this thesis focuses on millennials, it was of high importance to reach young customers that have experience of buying a newly built apartment. These were the only selection criteria used, that the respondents should have experience of buying a newly built apartment and that they were born in the 80's and 90's, qualifying as Millennials. Our intention was to have an equal distribution of gender among the respondents, though this was not a criterion since we valued their experience and age higher in order to reach the most suitable respondents for this study.

3.6 Finding the respondents

When searching for respondents, Riksbyggen helped us getting in contact with appropriate interviewees that fulfilled the selection criteria. We conducted an email and sent it to a representative at Riksbyggen who forwarded the message to appropriate Riksbyggen customers in southern Sweden. The message contained information about the research topic, how the interviews were planned to be executed and what expectations we had on the interviewees participation. We clearly informed the respondents that they did not have to prepare anything before the interview more than their own thoughts and reflections about their previous customer experience journey. Through a link, attached in the email that received the sample, customers could declare their interest of participating. We followed this by contacting the respondents to book in an interview. This process was perceived as hard, since the customers' interest of participating was not high. The incentive offered for the respondents to participate in the interview was two cinema tickets, which we believe was highly appreciated. In summary, we interviewed eight millennials with experience of buying a newly built apartment. The distribution among the genders were equal.

3.7 Why individual semi structured interviews?

For this study, the authors conducted eight semi structured interviews. Semi structured interviews consist of a set of prepared questions, but the technique facilitates for further questions around a certain topic (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The benefit with semi structured interviews is that it allows the researcher to be flexible (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Another potential strategy that qualitative studies can take is to conduct focus groups. Focus groups implies a group of people discussing a topic, where a moderator asks questions and the respondents interact with each other around the given topic (Carson et al., 2001). Since we are more interested in gaining insights and understand how individuals perceived and experienced their customer experience journey, a focus group would not add a layer of understanding. Focus groups are carried out in order for people to argue for a specific topic, but in our case, we are more interested in individuals own perception of their experience. General experiences, in this case about their perception of buying their apartment, cannot be questioned in a focus group in the same way as opinions about a topic. Therefore, we abstained from conducting focus groups.

3.8 Execution of interviews

When executing the interviews, we were invited to the interviewees apartments to conduct the interviews. Some interviewees did not have time to meet up, which forced us to have some interviews through phone. Also, some interviews were conducted on local cafes. The interviews lasted for about an hour each, which Ryen (2004) argues is the minimum for an interview not to be superficial and meaningless. We recorded all the interviews and then transcribed them in order to use the empirical data in the analysis. One of the benefits of recording interviews is that there is no need to take notes during the interview. Instead, the interviewer can focus on asking questions and follow-up questions, which is a prerequisite for the interviewer to be aware and show interest for the interviewee. The recording also reduces potential uncertainties of what has been said (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Furthermore, the interviews were based on a predetermined interview guide that was divided into a number of themes. The interview guide was used consistently through

all interviews in order to make legitimate comparisons of what has been said through all the interviews. We shared the role as an interviewer for the interviews but both of us participated during all of them. During the interviews, follow-up questions were allowed, partly to clarify and partly to develop what the interviewees said in order to increase the understanding. All interviews were rounded off with a shorter section where we asked the respondents if they would like to add or change something, which in the literature is called respondent validation (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We were very clear that their participation was anonymous and that they would be given a fictitious name in the thesis.

3.9 Data analysis

Before analyzing the qualitative data, researchers should structure and organize the data in order to make it manageable (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). This was done by transcribing the data and structure each transcription in a similar way to simplify the comparison. More specifically, we marked different quotes in the transcription with different colors in order to structure the quotes in a chronological order according to the customer experience journey model by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). Further, we divided the results in groups in order to sort the answers and create an overview of the data, which is described as one of the initial steps when structuring semi-structured interviews (Lundahl & Skärvad, 1999). After sorting the material and getting an overview, the data was related and analyzed in relation to previous research and theoretical concepts. The most important aspect in this phase is to figure out how the collected content makes sense in relation to the research topic as well as analyzing if the empirical data confirms or deviates existing knowledge (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Normally, this process is very iterative as the researcher goes back and forth between the identified empirical data and existing research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), which also was the case for us.

3.10 Reliability and validity

When a research survey is based on a qualitative method, Bryman and Bell (2015) argues that both reliability and validity may be limited. These concepts are often related to quantitative research methods, which are based on measurement. This study, however, is based on a qualitative research strategy, and thus we have chosen to focus on the concept of trustworthiness, which together with authenticity are two alternative criteria for assessing the quality of a qualitative research study (Bryman and Bell, 2015).

Reliability and validity, in qualitative research, is divided into four sub-criteria: credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity) (Bryman and Bell, 2015). In order to increase the credibility of this research, we have chosen to use respondent validation. This means that the interviewees have received the results of the study to ensure that we as researchers have perceived the interviewees correctly. By recording the interviews and transcribing them, the risk of misunderstandings is also minimized. In order to increase the possibility of the transferability, we strived for thick descriptions, which means that we make a clear account of the details contained in our essay, to enable other people to assess our studies transferability to other environments and situations. Dependability in the study is achieved by being clear and transparent in our essay. The essay has also been reviewed by external parties before submission, in order to assess whether the theoretical conclusions are justified. Finally, it is important for a study to be as objective as possible, by deliberately not allowing personal opinions and values to control or affect the purpose of the study. Instead, the experiences of our interview persons together with relevant literature have been the basis for the conclusions drawn. By doing so, we could strengthen and confirm that our study has been conducted in good faith.

4. Findings

The following section will present the empirical results from the eight interviews that have been carried out with young customers. The results will be presented in the same order as the model described earlier. Thus, we will initially present the result from the prepurchase stage, followed by purchase stage and postpurchase stage. Lastly, overall perception about the journey in general will be presented.

4.1 Prepurchase stage

As described earlier, the prepurchase stage implies all activities before the actual decision and purchase. From the interviews that have been conducted, a clear distinction between the different touch points have been identified. The prepurchase stage is initiated with a need recognition, where the customer in this case experiences an interest of moving to a new household. What has emerged during all interviews is the fact that people most often look at Hemnet, a Swedish gathering website for all Swedish real estate agencies, when searching for potential apartments on the market. One interviewee said the following: *“I have Hemnet as a base, there I can see the final price on apartments and areas and what it costs. They are the biggest”* (personal communication, 27 April 2018). Furthermore, another interviewee mentioned that Hemnet is the one and only option for her when she initiates the process of searching for potential apartment. She said: *“Hemnet is the only place you get linked to, it is like a box of candy”* (personal communication, 2 May, 2018). The search involves searching for many different kinds of product groups since millennials search for both houses, traditional apartments and newly built apartments. One respondent described this very well:

We did not know what we wanted to have. We looked on Hemnet for houses out on the countryside. There was no talk about Malmö. We went to three or four showings. We participated in biddings. We thought that we wanted it [a house on the countryside] but then we realized that we wanted a newly built apartment in Malmö (personal communication, 2 May 2018).

After gaining more insights of the actual opportunities on the market, the first contact with the real estate agency is established. According to the interviewees' answers, the customer experience journey can be initiated in two different ways. Either with Riksbyggen directly or with a partnering real estate agency. One of the interviewees mentioned that his first contact with Riksbyggen was through Hemnet when he saw that there was a model apartment staged in the same neighborhood as he is now living in. According to him, the model apartment was the reason why he finally decided to move in with Riksbyggen. He expressed the following: "*They should have a model apartment from the very beginning, it was decisive for me*" (personal communication, 27 April 2018). When he visited the model apartment, he also established his first contact with the seller of the project. Another interviewee expressed the following concern regarding the importance of being able to visit a model apartment in the early stages of the customer experience journey:

You did not know what you are getting yourself into, you buy a map for a certain amount of money. It is scary to buy an apartment without seeing a model apartment, especially due to the fact that it is our first apartment (personal communication, 2 May 2018).

Not only the financial obligations involve extensive concerns, but also the fact that the customer does not know what to expect in terms of quality and appearance. Another important aspect in the consideration phase in the prepurchase stage, is the relation with the real estate agent or the seller from the partnering firm. All of the interviewees believe a good relationship with the real estate agent is crucial for gaining trust and reliable information, which subsequently lead to a purchase decision. Jesper said:

Peter, the real estate agent, was a huge part of my final decision. He was knowledgeable and gave the security that Riksbyggen was a good contractor, and he pushed and said that there was a big demand on the apartments (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

The security from the real estate agent is something that Greta also appreciated, it provided a security in the consideration and evaluation process. She argues that the support from the real estate agent was one of the factors that led to the decision to buy the apartment. She describes it like this:

I would have liked continuous information. But the contact with the real estate agent has been appreciated. I never felt annoying, instead I felt that the real estate agent was happy to come in contact with me. She was definitely a huge part of my decision (personal communication, 7 May 2018).

At the same time, there are shared opinions about whether the real estate agent plays a major role in decision or not, despite the fact that Maria was dissatisfied with her real estate agent, it led to a purchase. Her answer to the question of her experienced contact with the real estate agent she says: *“It was not the best experience. I would not use the same real estate agent today”* (personal communication, 2 May 2018). Thus, there are shared opinions about the real estate agent’s importance and influence in the purchase of complex durable products. Furthermore, some respondents argued that it is not only an important factor with a competent real estate agent that can provide security during the purchase, but also being a guide that can suggest appropriate apartments. Greta felt that it was positive to skip the stages of searching for apartment and instead evaluating the suggestions she received from the real estate agent. She expressed it like this:

Yes, it was very nice. It was positive. It is very easy to miss an apartment, I would never have found the one I am living in today if it was not for the real estate agent. It can also be apartments that I would not even look at without my real estate agent suggesting it (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

In line with this Filip said:

We bought the apartment through an external real estate agent and the only thing we needed to do ourselves was to get a loan permission and a contact on the bank. Apart from that, we did not need to do anything (personal communication, 7 May 2018).

Despite the high financial payment, it appears that some young customers show relatively low involvement in the whole journey from need recognition to purchase. In spite of the low interest regarding the actual searching for potential apartments by some respondents, all of the interviewees consulted relatives in order to make a good decision. Both in terms of financial sacrifice, but also to gain more insights in how the actual purchase decision is working. Many of

them meant that they always consulted their parents on a regular basis during the purchase of their apartment. In relation to this Simon said:

Especially when it comes to bigger decisions in life, then I always consult my parents. Mainly because I want to hear another perspective. If I only talk to Peter, the real estate agent, he will affect me to think in a certain way. It is also a great feeling to have the opinion of someone outside, it leads to more security in the purchase (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

Another interviewee also expressed that she consulted both her mom and a colleague in order to make sure her apartment decision was the right. She expressed the following in this regard:

Good question, I actually believe I consulted a colleague about the pricing per square meter, but we also calculated ourselves. We discussed a lot, but we also talked to my mom, you want to confirm (personal communication, 2 May 2018).

The fact that young consumers consult friends and family to make the right decision when purchasing a newly built apartment is no isolated phenomenon in the few examples presented above. All respondents had at any time consulted a relative. One major reason according to the interviewees is due to their limited knowledge and previous experience of buying an apartment. One interviewee, among many, said that he perceived his parents as more knowledgeable and wise when it comes to such complex products (personal communication, 7 May 2018).

4.2 Purchase Stage

The first event appearing in the purchase stage is the customers' final decision making process which is followed by signing the purchase agreement. In similarity to the customers' consideration phase during the prepurchase stage, the relation with the real estate agent was perceived as important in the process to make the final purchase decision. Simon explained that the real estate agent was the crucial factor in his decision making before signing the purchase agreement since he found his support trustful (personal communication, 3 May 2018), but Greta and other respondents also stressed that friends and family in the social context also was an important factor

to take the final decision (personal communication, 3 May 2018). More specifically, when it regards the financial obligations of the purchase, Greta explained how she preferred to have her father actively involved to support her in her decision making:

It is a private part. It is also a complex process. It is not just about income and assets today but also what I can afford in the future. What I can down prioritize, for example. Me and my father has better insight in that than the real estate agent. There are many questions like that, that matters. He could suggest that if I deposit 25 percent in cash instead of 15 percent, I will have these benefits... so it is a different discussion than if I did it through Riksbyggen. Then it would have felt more like a sales meeting from their side (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

When the purchase agreement is signed, the customers' have taken their final decision to buy the apartment and to move on in the customer journey. But the purchase stage is not completed yet since the construction of the apartment can take up to two years. In the meantime, between the agreement signing and the occupancy, the purchase stage continues in which the customers have to make interior decisions and orderings related to the apartment purchase and construction. This process requires high involvement by the customers, but also much waiting time, and involves various touch points with the firm and other stakeholders. For instance, interior materials meetings, informational meetings and general email conversations between Riksbyggen and the customer, are all examples of events that appear in this process. The general perception among the respondents of this process was that there is sometimes a lack of, and need of more, information. The customers wish to be led in this process and receive continuous information about the process and the construction situation in general, instead of asking for fruitful information themselves. One respondent argued: *"I have experienced that there has been a relatively low information flow. I have been forced to actively search for new information"* (personal communication, 3 May 2018). Anna confirmed this by describing her perception:

I have searched a little bit too actively. It would have helped if they guided me through their process. It is a bit of a thrill to wait that long... If you are going to wait for 15 months, then you want to know what is happening and what you can look forward to... I am a person that like to visualize... It could be good to know that 'now I stop, this will happen

in stage six'. You get a different feeling, you do not live in uncertainty (personal communication, 7 May 2018).

Greta argued regarding the same topic:

... I would have appreciated an informational email containing information about how the process is going - 'we are building the bathroom' or 'the construction of the fifth floor is now starting' or something like that... Then I would have known where they were in the process (personal communication, 3 May 2017).

Simon further said:

... but two information emails during one and a half year, that is not so much. They lack in their informational communication. They are inflexible in that, I have to say (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

Despite of just receiving fruitful information, one of the most distinguishing events in this process is the interior selection and interior ordering together with Riksbyggen. Here, the customers are heavily involved by attending informational meetings and ordering the interior online. This process generally received negative criticism by the respondents. Both regarding the arrangement of the meetings and the tools provided to facilitate an easy decision making of the interiors. Simon explained:

The meetings. My opinion is that they could have arranged them in another way. They had 50 people in one room that is as big as this kitchen, no not really, but it was very crowded. Everyone did not get seats and there was a lack of oxygen. There was a bunch of different speakers who stood in the front of the room and you did not understand what everyone was doing there (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

Sara further described:

I thought it was hard since we could not put all the things together and maybe take a photo and see 'this is how we would like to have it'. 'Should we have black or grey'. We could

not decide because we had not put the things together (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

The respondents explained that they had difficulties to visualize the final interior look when deciding on specific materials such as cabinet grip and kitchen tile. The main reason was that they were not provided any facilities that could visualize, for instance, the kitchen as a whole, which made their decision making harder. David explained: *“It was not assembled. There was one tile, it was nice, but how does it look on a wall?”* (personal communication, 7 May 2018). Maria continues: *“Yes, you had to think and visualize yourself. That is also good, but imagine that there are only some tiles on a table and you should decide on which you want to have. I mean, really”* (personal communication, 2 May 2018). Greta argued like this:

... they could have used high tech instruments. There is technology available today. It could not be so hard to construct a program where you can sit and play a little bit on your own. ‘This is how a room looks like, how does it look if I add this? It does not have to be very advanced, I mean they have the floor plan. It is hard to choose from one tile. It can be a difference if it is a small or a big tile (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

Greta’s answer leads us into the use of technology. A majority of the respondents wished that they would have had access to a visualizing program or Virtual Reality when deciding on interior materials. Simon explained this thoroughly:

She works with furnishing and have ease in visualizing things, since she is working with that. I do not have that skill, so I have not been able to visualize this apartment beforehand. So that [Virtual Reality] would have facilitated for me. It would have been amazing to go in here [in the apartment] before it was constructed... I was on another showing with another company. There you could see [in a program] when the sun rose and set, how that looked from the balcony. You could walk around in the apartment and take a look, that is very good. That was actually not Virtual Reality, it was only 3D, but you could still walk around (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

Jesper said that he had to take help from Riksbyggen's supplier in order to get a grip of the final interior look and visualize his kitchen as a whole when deciding on interior:

I figured out which company it is that is constructing the kitchens. It is Marbodal. What do you do then? Well, then you go to the Marbodal store in Svågertorp. Otherwise it is not possible to visualize (personal communication, 27 April 2018).

However, the customers thought that the online program where they at last ordered their interior selections were satisfying and good. Anna described:

The program we got to use was pretty easy to manage. The actual selection process when you should press on the computer which [interior] you would like to have, that was pretty good in my opinion (personal communication, 7 May 2018).

It was also important for the respondents that the real estate agents or company representatives were dedicated and supportive in the interior selection process, since this created trust and a sense of security according to some of the respondents. This was especially requested by customers that bought their apartment alone, without a cohabitant:

... she attended the information meeting and watched. If you are two, like many are, then it is easier to discuss. You can share ideas. That I could do with the real estate agent. 'Is this one nice, but look at this one'. She was very dedicated (personal communication, 7 May 2018).

A final observation regarding the interior selection was that some respondents thought there were too few interior materials to choose from, tiles for instance. They also perceived the interior look to be too strict and that they were not able to influence how their new apartment would look. Sara said:

They were pretty inflexible. We wanted to paint the apartment in different colors, but then they said 'no we can just paint the apartment in one color... You have very few choices to make. They say 'buy with us - set your own style', but all the apartments look the same here. We had three cabinet grips to choose from, one oak door, and then there were no more options (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

However, the respondents' general perception of all information meetings they were invited to, whether they concerned interior selection or not, is that there was a reasonable number of meetings. Some respondents went on every meeting, other skipped certain meetings, but more meetings were not requested. *"I went on one and skipped two or three, I think"* (personal communication, 27 April 2018), Jesper said. Though, the meetings were requested to be more personal:

But I feel that there is not a need of more meetings. Two was enough, but if they would have added a more personal and private meeting and have the bigger meetings in minor groups instead (personal communication, 7 May 2018).

It has not to be more meetings in groups, but I think that it would have been nice to get a personal meeting with Riksbyggen to ask some personal questions and that they can go through their processes. I think this would have been a good idea to have pretty early (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

To sum up the purchase stage, the respondents explained that they were in contact with other companies as well during this process before the occupancy. More specifically, they contacted multiple companies when they searched for furniture to their new apartments:

Then I started to, for instance, search for furniture and things to fill up the apartment with. Of course, I looked forward to move in. It was a lot of searching on the internet for furniture and a lot of store visits. I bought basically everything before the occupancy (personal communication, 7 May 2018).

4.3 Postpurchase Stage

The postpurchase stage, which starts with the occupancy and the customers' usage of the apartment, was perceived very differently by the respondents. This stage begins with the actual occupancy, which all the respondents appreciated due to the support from Riksbyggen in this process. Greta said that she appreciated the attention given from Riksbyggen: *"I also like that you, after the occupancy, feel like an appreciated Riksbyggen customer"* (personal communication, 3

May 2018). When moving in, the customers were all given a moving-in-kit with necessary goods for the occupancy as well as a housewarming gift. This was very appreciated by all customer and Maria said:

It was really nice of them. Just a small thing, but still so nice. Toilet paper, ten points out of ten. It is nothing for them, but it is so significant to another (personal communication, 2 May 2018).

Greta also explained her perception about the time during and directly after the occupancy:

I received information about which day I would have access to the key... It worked out well, but, that is not surprising when so many people are moving in at the same time. I was very happy for the small kit with things such as dish-brush and a chocolate. That was nice. You felt welcome. Later, they sent a public transport card where it said that they hoped that I enjoyed my apartment and that they encourage public transportation. It was more positive after the occupancy compared to the buying process. After the occupancy, I had more of the feeling that they were happy that I have bought an apartment with them (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

One difference among the experiences in the postpurchase stage were that not all customers felt that they were appreciated customers, and some perceived the contact and presence of Riksbyggen as lacking: *“Oh, it is [the contact] completely dead. No contact. I receive emails from time to time though”* (personal communication, 7 May 2018). Maria also explained:

... I heard that there was going to be a half year inspection. It would have been nice to know when that is happening and what it implies. I would also appreciate an email where they wish me good luck with the occupancy, or information about how to contact the customer service in case of any issues (personal communication, 2 May 2018).

The first event in connection to the occupancy was the first inspection. Here, the respondents had similar perceptions and experienced the inspection to be good and professional. Simon explained:

Then we went through the apartment. I thought it [the inspection] was very professional. He [the inspector] was very thorough. They brought the inspector and a construction

worker that went through the apartment and marked [errors] (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

Other than the occupancy and the inspection, the postpurchase stage imply the actual usage and the customers living in the apartments. Almost everyone has experienced minor problems or errors in their apartments which they have reported to Riksbyggen. However, their experiences differ when it regards error reporting and service requests. Some argued that Riksbyggen has taken their issues seriously and handled functional problems carefully. Others mean that the company's feedback and error support has been deficient. Though, they all confirmed that they found the online error reporting system on Riksbyggen's website efficient and that they prefer to report their issues and service requests online. Sara explained: *“My opinion is that it has worked pretty well to report the errors and that you can do that online. But then we have not received so good feedback”* (personal communication, 3 May 2018). Simon further said:

I think that they have a very good thought there. You probably know the program we get access to. You log on to your page and there you can do error reports. I think that is very good, that is no problem. The issue is that you do not receive any feedback when you submit issues (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

To sum up the postpurchase stage, the respondents confirmed that they mainly engage with Riksbyggen when it comes to service requests and error reports. Other than that, they are not very actively engaged despite from receiving general customer information from Riksbyggen through email.

4.4 General perceptions about the customer experience journey

There are also general perceptions of the total experience with Riksbyggen as well as broader questions not related to a specific phase in the process. When the interviewees were asked about their general conceptions of the process the answers differed in some aspects, although the general message was almost the same. All of them believed that a general guide of the process and continuous information would have been beneficial for their total experience and to diminish the

perceived risk and uncertainty. In some cases, interviewees even believed it would have limited misunderstandings:

The only thing was that the information about the inspection came very suddenly causing us not being able to attend. We had booked a trip, so it was very bad of them to suggest a time slot with such short notice... A guide would have been very useful for reducing the amount of misunderstandings (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

David faced the same problem:

That's exactly what I have been requesting [a guide]. If I would have received a guide I would have understood the phase I was in and which phase that is next. If I knew that all decisions regarding choices of interior design have to be made on February 23 for example, then I would have made the decision on time [decision to remove a wall]. Especially with the dates I think it's really important. Because of this, we have lost the control along the way, because we have not been informed. We have been misinformed, or yes, or what to say. We have not been informed of things we should have been informed about (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

This illustrates the lack of guidance during the process. Even though some interviewees experienced and perceived the information flow as limited, other interviewees (a minority) argued that it was sufficient and that a lot of information would have been excessive and unnecessary. However, the interviewees, that requested more information, were asked about how they would like to receive information and what kind of information. They responded that it just has to be a general guide in the very beginning of the process, phone calls during the process if something changes in schedule or general information and pictures about how the process progress. An example of this is Simon's thoughts:

It was not much happening. Only two mailings in one and a half year, which is not enough... I would like to receive information such as “we are working with this at the moment” ... Some pictures of what is going on inside the apartments could have been useful to diminish stress and uncertainty (personal communication, 3 May 2018).

Many customers highlighted the importance of continuous information when buying a product, especially when buying such a complex product with an extended process of almost two years. Therefore, customers were asked about how they perceive the waiting time of almost two years. The interviewees perceive that the process is long and that it is characterized by uncertainty. Although, they mean that it can be limited if Riksbyggen takes adequate measures, at the same time, it will not eliminate all risks due to the financial sacrifices. Maria expressed the following:

I believe that a model apartment would reduce the uncertainty but regardless, it is two years. You can go through a divorce and get married again during that time. You can get a job in another city, life events so to speak. You have signed a contract and no matter what you are obligated to pay the money (personal communication, 2 May 2018).

Greta also reflected over the long process and the uncertainty it implies:

I am thinking of the uncertainty on the real estate market in general, you do not know if a financial downturn is coming or not. This has resulted in less control over my possibilities to sell my previous apartment because I was dependent on whether Riksbyggen will stick to the schedule or not... I also believed that it is crucial to update the customers when the process is almost 2 years. Especially during the time the house is built they even said that they will inform but they did not (personal communication, 2 May 2018).

According to the interviewees, there are both uncertainty regarding how the actual process works and about the future financial outcome. A reason for uncertainty might also be related to the lack of knowledge millennials possess, whereupon they often consult people in the acquaintance in order to make a correct decision. One interviewee summarized the knowledge gap in the following way:

I would say that my knowledge is very limited because I have never bought an apartment and especially not an apartment that is not built yet. And that is probably why my relation with them [Riksbyggen] has crashed, I have probably expected something that they cannot deliver... Due to my lack of knowledge and what I can expect in a purchase like this, I

have asked people in my acquaintance, mostly my parents (personal communication, 2 May 2018).

5. Discussion

Eternal discussions and conclusions could have been made from the extensive information gathered, however, the following discussion will be divided into two parts. The first section will discuss and analyze the first research question of the thesis: how do millennials perceive the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment? The second section will address and highlight the second research question which is: how can the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment be innovated and improved? The discussion will be based on both previous research as well as our findings.

5.1 How millennials perceive the customer experience journey within the real estate sector - an identified sub-stage

In this section, we will discuss our findings in relation to the literature review and analyze how millennials perceive the customer experience journey within the real estate sector. During the collection of the empirical data, we firstly identified both occurring touch points and customer pain points, but we also observed how unique the structure of the customer experience journey within real estate is compared to journeys of other products and the theoretical model presented by Lemon and Verhoef (2016).

The structure difference of the real estate customer journey is most visible in the overall journey structure considering where certain events occur and how customers progress in the journey. However, the touch points and customer behaviors mentioned in the model by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) are the same, although they take shape in the context of a real estate purchase. Our findings show that the customer experience journey within the real estate sector is much more rigid, similar to a fixed path, where customers constantly progress forward in the journey. This is in opposition to what Lemon and Verhoef (2016) say, since they argue that customers may progress freely in the customer journey by moving back and forth between different stages and choose their journey. Our findings clearly indicate that there is an existing sub-stage which is not presented or named in the theoretical model by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). By that, we have explored how customer

experience journeys within the real estate sector differs from the theoretical model and how the theory can be extended by naming and describing the characteristics of this sub-stage, *the customization sub-stage*. The customization sub-stage is visualized in Figure 2 below, where the blue boxes describe the stages that already exists in Lemon and Verhoef’s (2016) theoretical model and the yellow box describe what the identified customization sub-stage includes. Moreover, the empirical data further show that millennials value other attributes during certain events and touch points within the customer experience journey compared to what existing theory argues for.

Below, based on the findings in the empirical data, we will discuss how and why customer experience journeys within real estate are different compared to the theoretical model and journeys of other products by analyzing the occurring touch points throughout every stage. Also, we will justify the importance of the customization sub-stage and how this stage may help real estate firms to increase the quality of their customer experience journeys. This will give a holistic and extended view of the real estate customer experience journey in all purchase stages, which according to Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl (2017) is needed in order to develop the theory of customer experience journeys.

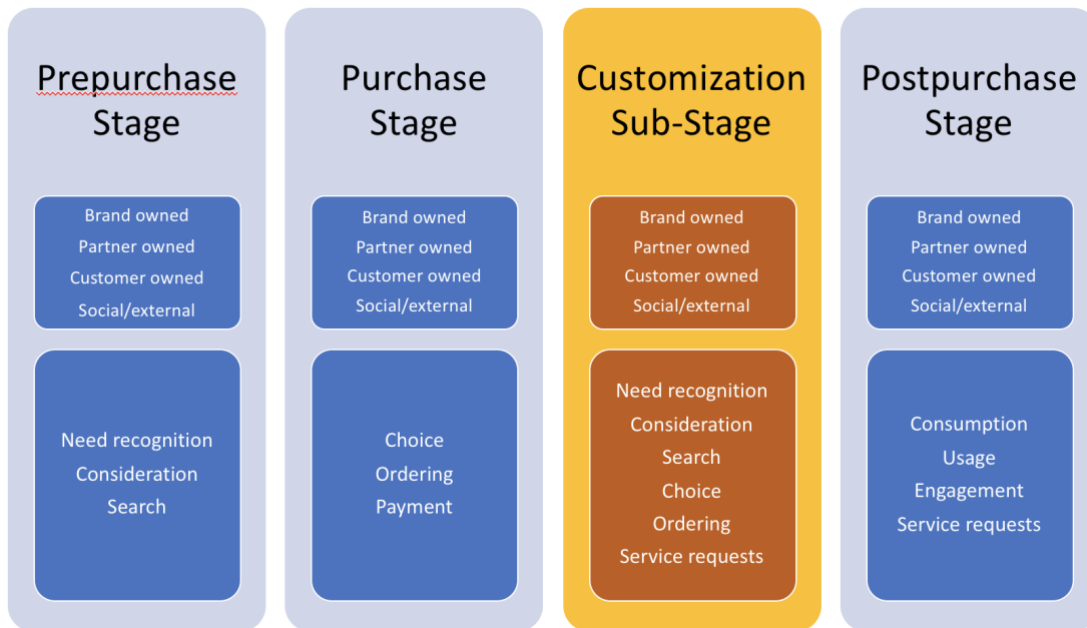


Figure 2: customer experience journey model for real estate

5.1.1 Prepurchase stage

When millennials enter the customer experience journey in the prepurchase stage, the journey is initiated with a need recognition (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), which in this case implies a need to move to a new home. In the beginning of their search they have not always decided which product group they are interested in yet. They may search for both houses, traditional apartments and newly built apartments, and they form their desire in regards to the listings they find appealing. This is similar to what Koklic and Vida (2009) argue for when they say that categorization of alternatives implies choosing from various product groups. Millennials' search for a new apartment mainly implies a partner touch point. Our findings show that millennials primarily use Hemnet, the online platform where real estate agencies publish listings, since they perceive the internet channel to be the simplest way to find new apartments. They are, in similarity to what Obal and Kunz (2013) and Hur, Lee and Choo, (2017) say, familiar with the use of technology which results in less search through other market channels.

When they have found an appealing apartment, they either contact the housing company directly or a partnering real estate agency, depending on which company that has the sales responsibility for the construction. This means that the first contact may be both brand owned or partner owned. Our findings further show that millennials have insufficient knowledge about housing and the buying process, which confirms Koklic and Vida's (2009) argument. Due to their lack of knowledge, millennials take help from their social network by asking friends and family for input, help and support regarding the purchase. This is mainly because they find the purchase of an apartment as a major decision in life and which has a big impact on their daily budget, similar to what Gronhaug, Kleppe and Haukedal (1997) argue for. Thus, they have difficulties to envision the outcome of the purchase in advance since many millennials have not bought an apartment before. By that, they search for confirmation via social/external touch points regarding their potential apartment purchase. This is also mentioned by Koklic and Vida (2009) whom say that housing purchases is hard to envision before the actual purchase and Bazerman (2001) further means that trial-error learning is uncommon when buying complex durable goods. Considering this, millennials wish to see a model apartment in the prepurchase stage in order to visualize the final product and by that diminish uncertainty. Our findings show that millennials argue that this also can take shape in implementing innovative technological tools in the journey that enables

them to visualize the apartment. This is similar to what Edelman and Singer (2015) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016) say when they suggest firms to implement adequate innovations and technology within the journey to increase the quality.

Moreover, the findings show that millennials value a good relationship with the real estate agent in their search and consideration process since this increases trust and diminishes uncertainty. This is consistent with what Koklic and Vida (2009) explain when they argue that an excellent prepurchase experience can diminish customers' perceived risk. This makes the relation with company representatives crucial, and the importance of the brand owned experience is therefore proved. Thereby, if a credible relationship is not established or in the case that a model apartment is not provided, the likelihood that millennials will continue the journey decreases. However, when buying apartments, millennials do not use social media platforms to search for affirmation among peers which Obal and Kunz (2013) argue for. Obal and Kunz (2013) are correct that customers trust peers more than a company, but when considering an apartment, they talk directly with friends in person rather than online. Millennials mean that companies main desire is to sell, which creates the need to consult people they know in order to get fair assistance during their journey. Lastly, our findings show that as a result from millennials insufficient knowledge about the purchase journey, they wish to be provided a guide which describes how the purchase journey will progress. This is consistent to what Edelman and Singer (2015) mean, that companies should try to lead the journey instead of following the customers paths, since excellent information about the buying process can decrease perceived risk (Koklic & Vida, 2009). The findings show that this is particularly important in such a complex purchase journey as the real estate journey, considering the request of the customers to be led throughout the journey.

5.1.2 Purchase stage

Further, the customers enter the purchase stage, and they initiate the process to make their final decision to buy the apartment they have found through their search, similar to Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) model. The decision making is followed by the ordering of the apartment and customers confirm their purchase by signing the purchase agreement. Similar to the prepurchase stage, millennials value the relation with the real estate agent in this process since it creates trust

and can diminish perceived risk, consistent to what Koklic & Vida (2009) say. The brand owned touch point and the experience with company representatives are therefore further important. Though, our findings show that the social network is a factor that is equally, if not even more, important when making the final decision. Especially when it regards the financial obligations that the purchase implies. Millennials perceive this to be a private question that they rather consult their family about. The findings thereby show that both the brand owned touch point and the social/external touch point is frequently used by millennials when making their decision and ordering their apartment. However, the purchase decision to buy an apartment is, unlike what Voorhees et al. (2017) argue for regarding convenience products, not made within a store. By that, the findings show that service environment and servicescape, areas which Lemon and Verhoef (2009) mention within the purchase stage, are not perceived to be important when making the final purchase decision. This makes the outlook of a retail store a non-existing factor in a real estate journey, and our findings suggest that real estate firms should therefore firstly consider the relation with the customers when managing the brand owned experience.

However, it is after this process the difference in the journey structure appears compared to the model presented by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). Practically, the customers sign the purchase agreement without knowing how the final product will look or function. Compared to other convenience products and durable goods, for instance the purchase of a TV or a car, customers most often know how the final product will look when they make their final decision to purchase the product. The findings show that this is not the case when purchasing a newly built apartment due to the fact that the apartment is not built yet. This is also one of the reasons for why customers have difficulties to visualize the apartment in advance. Moreover, the customer has further decisions to make regarding the final look of the apartment considering the interior selection. Our findings have identified that this is done in an extensive process which starts after the purchase decision, and which we have named the customization sub-stage, where the customer constantly moves forward in the purchase process. The fact is that this sub-stage is present in customer experience journeys within the real estate sector, but it is not mentioned in previous literature or in the model presented by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). Considering that the customization sub-stage exists after the purchase decision, one could argue that it should be included in the postpurchase stage. But our findings show that customers and firms seem to have different views and attitudes to this stage. And considering the customers' perceptions, our findings show that this

is a sub-stage in the purchase stage since they find the customization process to be the most important stage and since they have further purchase decisions to make. This process implies other kinds of customer behaviors within other contexts, such as need recognition, consideration, search, choice, ordering and service requests, which does not preferably fit into the purchase stage in the way as presented in the model by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). These are displayed in the yellow box in Figure 2. Considering this, our findings show that customer experience journeys within real estate is so unique that there is a need to name the interior selection as the customization sub-stage. Below, we will describe millennials' perceptions of this sub-stage as well as what it implies.

5.1.3 Customization sub-stage

The customization sub-stage starts after the agreement process. The customers continue their experience journey by selecting the interior design in a brand owned process with the housing company in order to decide the final outlook of the apartment. Similar to what Chaudhuri (2001) and Mitchell (1999) say, this process requires high customer involvement. In this process, new need recognitions appear, but this time they concern the interior design and not the desire to find a new home. Thereby, it is another kind of need recognition in a new context compared to the initial need recognition which Lemon and Verhoef (2016) place in the prepurchase stage. It may for instance be need recognitions regarding tile color, kitchen cabinets or cabinet grips. During the customization sub-stage, the customers attend several meetings where the interior designs are displayed. Our findings show, once more, that millennials find it difficult to visualize how different interiors will look in a final context since they can only choose from, for instance, different pieces of tiles that are not assembled in the context of a kitchen. In order to improve the interior selection, our findings show that millennials wish to implement technology in the customization sub-stage which enables them to see their potential choice of interior in a full room context. This confirms what Hur, Lee and Choos (2017) and Obal and Kunz (2013) mean, that millennials are likely to engage in and trust technological processes in a consumption situation. The result of that technology, such as Virtual Reality, is not provided in this process is that millennials are uncertain during the consideration of their choice. This has led to that millennials take help from partner touch points by visiting the suppliers' stores where the interiors are assembled in a full context.

The difficulty to envision the outcome of the purchase is by that also occurring in this stage, similar to what Koklic and Vida (2009) argue for.

Similar to previous stages, millennials value the relation with the real estate agent during the customization sub-stage and they find a dedicated agent in the process as important in order to create trust and security. This is consistent with what Koklic and Vida (2009) say during the prepurchase stage. But here, the findings show that the importance of a good relation with the customer stretch further into the customer experience journey. In fact, the findings show that millennials perceive the contact with the real estate agent sometimes is insufficient during the customization sub-stage and they perceive the information to be lacking regarding how the process will proceed. They further believe the interior process is too less personal and customized for them as an individual customer, since this process is completed together with many other customers. This indicates that customers and firms have different attitude towards how the customization sub-stage should be completed. The respondents mean that the customization sub-stage is a very important stage in the customer experience journey and they have high expectations on how the real estate firm should guide and support them in this process. However, our findings have identified a gap, since the company seems to not put in the effort that the customers expect in terms of support and information sharing. This creates misunderstandings and customer uncertainty. Real estate firms should adapt to customer behaviors and customers' expectations, otherwise there is a potential risk that a poor experience will affect their total customer satisfaction of the overall journey. This is consistent to what Cugin, Sander and Williamson (2018) also say. As a result of a poor experience, firms may have difficulties to create a positive loyalty-loop and word-of-mouth for future customers and recurring customers as well as secure future financial performance (Cugin, Sander & Williamson, 2018). Especially, when customers' social network is much involved in the customer experience journey by consulting the buyer, a poor customer experience can spread to a wide group of potential customers by negative word-of-mouth in future customers peer information search (Puccinelli et al. 2009) and thereby influence the previous experience stage in Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) model. This is crucial since one of the main purposes of customer experience journeys is, according to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), to achieve customer loyalty. Real estate firms should therefore be aware of that, in such a complex purchase process, they compete on service level as Klaus and Maklan (2012) argue for. By this, our findings show

that there is a need for real estate firms to put focus on the customer as an individual during the customization sub-stage in order to increase customer satisfaction.

Further, service requests occur in the customization sub-stage, similar to what Lemon and Verhoef (2016) describe in the postpurchase stage. Customers believe that the number of interior designs options are too few and by that they might, for instance, request different wall colors in the apartment. However, requests to change specific interiors, that are not part of the original optional process, are not always accepted by the company which also can create low customer satisfaction. Lastly, customers finish this sub-stage by searching for furniture to their new apartment, similar to the search in the prepurchase stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

5.1.4 Postpurchase stage

The postpurchase stage can be seen as a result of the experience in the previous stages (Dellarocas & Narayan, 2006; Puccinelli et al., 2009). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that successful concepts within this stage have been service recovery, word-of-mouth, loyalty and customer engagement. Our findings show that error reporting is not always taken care of, and thereby the real estate company's service recovery is perceived to be insufficient. There are many ways to report an error and the customers find the online program, where errors are reported, easy to use. But when it comes to the actual compensation and recovery, it leaves a lot to be desired. Especially the feedback and the time it takes to compensate the error is considered to be the biggest problem in the postpurchase stage. Puccinelli et al. (2009) argue that there is a high risk if a company is not compensating, which subsequently will damage the brand reputation. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) mean that companies run an even bigger risk with the emerging social media platforms, where people can spread negative publicity to a large audience. However, according to our findings, customers tend to not seek information and evaluate real estate companies through social media. Instead, family and friends are the most important advisors, which makes this a minor risk for real estate companies. However, since the customers' social network is much involved in the journey, it is of high importance that their experience also fulfills the expectations in order to create a positive word-of-mouth effect and secure loyalty. By that, companies must be aware that their customers' experiences will be the opinions of family and friends in the long run and that future

customers' information search can be affected by their opinions since Puccinelli et al. (2009) argue that previous experiences are one way of searching for information before a purchase.

5.2 How the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment can be innovated and improved

As described above, we have identified different touch points and pain points in the customer experience journey within the real estate sector. In order to innovate and improve the customer experience journey, our findings show that there is a need of new services and technologies that may ease the customers' journey as well as potentially decrease the pain points of the customers. Edelman and Singer (2015) as well as Lemon and Verhoef (2016) also suggest companies to develop new services and technologies and implement these in customer experience journeys. The findings show that millennials are positive to integrate technology to ease the visualization of both the apartment as well as the interior designs, but also to improve the total customer experience journey. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), customer experience management is the tool to use for companies in order to redesign and increase the quality of customer experience journeys. They, as well as Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl (2017), argue that the first step is to map and analyze the experiential world of the customers. This analysis of millennials' perceptions is now completed and established through our research, since our findings describe how millennials perceive their customer experience journey within real estate. By using customer experience management theory, companies should further focus on the following steps: "(2) building the experiential platform, (3) designing the brand experience, (4) structuring the customer experience, and (5) engaging in continuous innovation" (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016, p.82). It is up to each real estate firm how they would like to design their journeys, but our findings and analysis can favorably be used in this process. Thereby, based on our findings and analysis, companies within the real estate sector could use this five step model to further establish how they would like to build, design and structure their unique customer experience journeys within their company. Below, we will describe the customers' main perceptions and pain points that our findings have identified, which companies in the real estate sector favorably can take into consideration when developing and improving their customer experience journeys.

As mentioned before, our findings show that millennials are requesting technology such as Virtual Reality in the customer experience journey, since they perceive that it would ease the visualization, consideration and decision making of both the apartment as a whole and the interior design selection in the customization sub-stage. Due to the fact that millennials are technology and digital natives (Obal & Kunz, 2013) and more likely to engage in technological processes (Hur, Lee & Choo, 2017), real estate firms may have to consider implementing and integrating Virtual Reality in the customer experience journey. When Millennials are not provided with advanced technology, our findings show that this results in uncertain customers who perceive their decisions to be risky. To provide technology such as Virtual Reality would therefore potentially decrease the amount of uncertainty.

Our findings show that millennials also request to be led during their customer experience journey and purchase process of a newly built apartment. This is further something real estate companies should pay attention to when developing their customer experience journeys and new services. Edelman and Singer (2015) confirm this aspect by arguing that companies should try to lead and create their own customer experience path, instead of reacting to journey the customers devise themselves. As the findings show, a wide range of service failures was caused by misunderstandings due to millennials' limited knowledge of the purchase process in combination with insufficient information flow. This can, according to Homburg, Jozić and Kuehnl (2017), damage the total customer experience journey. Millennials are therefore positive towards a journey guide which clearly describes each step of the journey and in which order certain events will be completed. Uncertainty and misunderstandings may be eliminated by implementing a journey guide that leads customers through the customer experience journey.

Considering control and the structure of the customer experience journey, another issue companies in general are facing is that some touch points may not be brand owned (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), which is something that our findings show is present in the real estate industry as well. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that companies sometimes are dependent of what alliances and network partners do, since the entire service chain has many stakeholders. Our findings show that, in the real estate sector, customers may enter their journey both through a brand owned touch point and a partner owned touch point. They can either contact the housing company (brand owned) or a partnering real estate agency (partner owned) and continue the journey with each party, which

makes it essential for real estate firms to be aware that they need to control both journeys. This is what Lemon and Verhoef (2016) describe as the role of alliances and network partners, which implies all external stakeholders that may affect the customer experience. Through internal organization management, real estate firms should favorably have an action plan for how to deal with customer experience (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017) in order to decrease the risk for customer uncertainty (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

To summarize, the implementation of Virtual Reality and a journey guide are two innovations and improvements that our findings suggest real estate firms to consider. Moreover, we have also highlighted the importance of that real estate firms should have an action plan of how they will manage both a brand owned and a partner owned customer journey to secure high customer satisfaction in both journeys, since customers may enter this unique customer journey with both parties.

6. Conclusion

In this final chapter, we will summarize the study's conclusions as well as discuss the theoretical and managerial implications, the limitations and suggestions for future research. In the first part of the conclusion the two research questions will be divided into two separate sections.

6.1 How do millennials perceive the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment?

In similarity to previous research, millennials perceive the purchase of a newly built apartment as traumatic, risky and uncertain. Since it is the first purchase for many millennials, the reason to the perceived uncertainty is they have insufficient knowledge of housing and the purchase process as a whole. Moreover, they have difficulties to visualize the outcome of a newly built apartment if technological instruments, such as Virtual Reality, are not provided. The thesis extends previous theory by identifying and naming the customization sub-stage and stating that customer experience journeys within the real estate industry is more rigid and fixed. Millennials find the customization sub-stage, where they choose interior design, as the most essential and important process in regards to purchase. The research show that real estate firms and millennials do not have the same attitude towards this sub-stage, since millennials find the support in this process as insufficient and too less individualized. Further, the relation with the real estate agent is essential to diminish risk and uncertainty throughout the journey, and thereby, the importance of a great brand owned experience is proved. Lastly, social/external touch points occur frequently throughout the journey. Due to millennials' lack of knowledge in real estate and newly built apartments, they consult family and friends for support and confirmation rather than social media platforms as previous theory has mentioned.

6.2 How can the customer experience journey of buying a newly built apartment be innovated and improved?

As previous research has proved, millennials are technology friendly and appreciate using technology in their purchase. Simultaneously, our research show that millennials request more technology in the prepurchase stage and customization sub-stage in the real estate customer experience journey. Since millennials find it hard to visualize and make interior design decisions, they find technology such as Virtual Reality to be a beneficial innovation in their journey. Further, the research show that millennials prefer to be led in their customer experience journey when buying a newly built apartment due to their insufficient housing and purchase process knowledge. The research has concluded that a guide, that clearly describes the purchase process, would be an improvement in order to reduce perceived uncertainty, risk as well as mistakes and misunderstandings along the way.

6.3 Theoretical implications

Whereas previous research on customer experience journeys mostly have focused on the actual purchase stage, our research gives a holistic view of the customer experience journey within the real estate sector, from prepurchase stage to postpurchase stage. Several studies have been conducted on customer experience journeys in broad, but case based research on journeys within real estate has not yet been researched. The thesis clearly offers new insights into customer experience journeys, and extends the previous theoretical model by identifying and naming a present sub-stage in the real estate journey, the customization sub-stage. By identifying the customization sub-stage, the research has explored how real estate journeys are different to previous theory. Moreover, the research has identified that customer experience journeys within real estate is more rigid and fixed compared to journeys of other convenience products and durable goods. Additionally, specific findings concerning the customer experience journey within real estate are contributed by offering detailed insights regarding customer behavior and perceptions in this context. Thereby, specific contributions to the research topic of customer experience journeys are provided.

6.4 Managerial implications

The findings of this study suggest that companies need to guide and lead their customers in the journey due to the fact that a customer experience journey within real estate is rather fixed and rigid, which cause the customer to not being able to make their own way through the customer journey. Furthermore, the findings show that companies need to pay attention to technological innovations, such as Virtual Reality, and utilize these in order to achieve higher quality in the customer experience journey. Moreover, the customization sub-stage needs to gain more focus by companies and their partners since millennials consider this sub-stage the most important stage when evaluating the total experience. Firms should therefore adapt their approach to this sub-stage and structure the process accordingly to the customers preferences. If not, a poor experience with low customer satisfaction might affect loyalty and customers' next prepurchase stage. The last action firms should take is to treat and handle every customer uniquely, because millennials preferences might differ significantly from other customer groups.

6.5 Limitations and future research

The limitations of this paper are, above all, the possibility of generalizing to the real estate industry as a whole due to the fact that the context of this thesis is newly built apartments. Customer experience journeys of houses and traditional apartments would probably be different since they exist at the time of the purchase. Further, our research is limited to a Swedish context. Millennials in other countries with different conceptions and point of departures may perceive of the customer experience journey differently. Lastly, our empirical data involves millennials' perceptions from one real estate firm only. Other customers perceptions and experiences may be different depending on which company they buy with.

Considering this, research which includes customers from other real estate companies might thereby also be of great importance. Also, research that put focus on other customer groups in relation to real estate customer experience journeys, such as baby boomers, could increase the understanding of different customers' perceptions. Further, to compare customer experience journeys of durable goods and convenience products, a comparative study would have been

necessary to analyze how customer experience journeys differs in relation to the characteristics of the product. Lastly, a quantitative approach would be necessary for future research in order to confirm or reject our recommendations and findings, but also to make it possible to generalize. Our research could act as a springboard for future research within customer experience journeys and real estate, a field that deserves more attention.

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Appendix A

Interviewee (Fictional name)	Gender	Date
Jesper	Male	27/4-2018
Maria	Female	2/5-2018
Greta	Female	3/5-2018
Simon	Male	3/5-2018
Sara	Female	3/5-2018
Filip	Male	7/5-2018
David	Male	7/5-2018
Anna	Female	7/5-2018