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Convenient Consumption in a Platform Economy

A Qualitative Study on Service Convenience and Community Platforms

by

Gustav Kibe & Leo Sondén Karestrand

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Supervisor: Jens Hultman

Abstract

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Keywords:	Community Platforms, Convenience, Customer Journey, Customer Experience, Retail
Thesis purpose:	This study aims to explore how community platforms for services can be integrated and used in the customer journey in order to enhance consumers' perception of convenience.
Methodology:	Due to the study's explorative nature, the study utilised a qualitative method conducted in the context of the Swedish furniture retailer IKEA.
Theoretical perspective:	The thesis was based on prior research covering platforms, customer journeys, and service convenience.
Empirical data:	The empirical collection took departure in semi-structured interviews with customers and a representative from IKEA, knowledgeable in the customer experience on the Swedish market. The findings were then followed up and further explored through focus groups.
Conclusion:	Findings from the study revealed consumers to perceive inconvenience when their need of independence or control had been violated. Through collaboration with community platforms, IKEA can offer customers greater flexibility in home deliveries and thus allowing the customers to gain increased control. Throughout the research, concern for the environment was expressed and positive attitudes towards a community service for recycling of broken furniture were also made evident.

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Gustav Kibe

Leo Sondén Karestrand

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1 Introduction

The first chapter will begin by giving a brief background on how the retail landscape has changed due to digitisation, followed by the outcomes and challenges it brings. It will further touch upon how convenience has become a greater priority for consumers. This will lay a foundation for the thesis' research purpose and introduce the research questions that this paper will be centred around. The chapter will end with a presentation of intended contributions, both normative and theoretical promises.

1.1 Background

There have and will continue to be crucial times when industries face episodes of disruption, circumstances that may lead to either complications or advantages for operators in the market. These situations are often associated with uncertainty and originate from different types of changes (Gilad, 2004). New technology, new competitive behaviour, and new demographics/social trends are three categories of change drivers that can drive evolution of industries (Gilad, 2004). These dimensions are also mentioned in work of Hamilton and Webster (2009) along with Montgomery and Weinberg (1979) to be worth monitoring in order to avoid surprises and possibly discover opportunities. In similar manner, Bower and Christensen (1995) describe technological shifts to often cause challenges for companies in how to keep their positions. Competition may emerge unexpectedly through rival firms who manage to adopt technology in controversial ways and through this disrupt the market. Charitou and Markides (2003) named this "strategic innovations" and explain it as a disruption causing change to the existing rules of how business is performed within the industry.

During the last century, the retail industry has gone through rapid change and development due to the technological evolution, moving from brick-and-mortars into the necessity for retailers to implement online strategies (Goworek & McGoldrick, 2015). With the entry of E-commerce consumers accessed a new level of convenience where they could shop anything, at any time, from anywhere (Chen & Chang, 2003; Goworek & McGoldrick, 2015). Due to its nature the Internet provides users with transparency and accessibility beyond the traditional store format. Consumers can efficiently browse and compare functional attributes, such as price and delivery times. These characteristics of online shopping can be seen as a service quality, with a positive correlation to customer satisfaction (Jun, Yang & Kim, 2004). In response to the increasingly competitive environment, many retailers expanded into ‘bricks-and-clicks’, operating in numerous channels, referred to as multi-channel (Goworek & McGoldrick, 2015). Since both spheres possess unique advantages, the argument for an integration of these is legitimate, culminating into omnichannel. This is a strategy that through complete integration of multiple touchpoints, blurs the distinction between offline and online and consequently provides consumers with seamless experiences (Rigby, 2011).

In an increasingly digitised society, where 20% of the consumers represent early digital adopters, changes in consumer behaviour can be observed (PwC, 2018). Technology is embraced, payments are made with phones and social media is given greater influence (PwC, 2018). Digital devices have empowered the consumers and enabled them to make purchasing decisions at minimum costs (Faulds, Mangold, Raju & Valsalan, 2018). All of this has caused consumers to show a less loyal behaviour towards brands (Court, Elzinga, Mulder & Vetvik, 2009; Edelman & Singer, 2015). Where retailers’ actions previously been rather reactive to consumers’ behaviour, they now regain control by making their customer journeys appealing and individually customised to maintain customer satisfaction (Edelman & Singer, 2015). However, it becomes increasingly challenging to create holistic and satisfying customer experiences as consumers’ expectations rise. Aspects such as short delivery times, a variety of flexible shopping alternatives, and immediate replies are from the customer’s point of view the bare minimum (Conick & Steimer, 2018). Further, as much as one third of consumers are prepared to abandon a brand which they previously valued highly, based on one single bad experience (Clarke & Kinghorn, 2018). Hence, a favourable customer experience is extremely vital to avoid customer loss and decreasing profits in today’s highly competitive business environment.

Since consumers’ expectations increase, retailers must identify which factors are of highest importance. Consumers recognise convenience, speed, expertise guidance and caring service as the most essential features of a positive customer experience (Clarke & Kinghorn, 2018). Similarly, extensive scope of research agrees upon the fact that convenience in retailing is of growing importance and call for a greater understanding of the concept. Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002) acknowledge convenience to be an increasingly vital desire for consumers and illustrate its relation to time and effort required in purchasing decisions. In agreement, Nguyen, DeWitt and Russel-Benett (2012) propose convenience to function as a competitive advantage for companies operating in industries where customers' expectations are ever-changing, which is the case for the increasingly digitised retail industry. Summarised by the author Shep Hyken (Conick & Steimer, 2018, p.41): "Convenience is the next big wave of customer service, and it's going to be a revolution".

It has for long been recognised that complementing products with additional services will enhance the value offered to customers (Grönroos, 2008). Hence, retailers who provide consumers with the greatest level of service will succeed (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). Consumers' expectations are becoming more demanding and companies are at risk of not being able to fully offer services meeting the high criteria. Where service quality in the online context primary been related to the website's ease of use together with the retailer's attentiveness and availability (Jun, Yang & Kim, 2004), new times call for new actions. This creates a need to identify how to offer maximum convenience and increase service capacity in an increasingly complex customer journey.

Digital platforms have appeared with the aim to facilitate and stimulate consumers' everyday life in different ways. The main characteristic of these platforms is their capability to digitally connect participants, something which is already present in various industries (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). Among other purposes, users can interact with community platforms for information (Reddit, TripAdvisor), entertainment (YouTube), socialisation (Facebook, Instagram), shopping (eBay), or services (Airbnb, Uber). Although the platforms are maintained by the platform owner, they exist on the basis of users' willingness to participate and contribute with content (McKee, 2017). This business model has enabled community platforms such as Airbnb and Uber to pose a threat to their corresponding industries, without holding a single property (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016). Platforms assist users to get in touch with each other under secure circumstances, automatically providing consumers with better access to products and services (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). Although platforms recently arose, their ability to possess convenient solutions for consumers is of relevance to explore further in connection with shopping experience in an omnichannel context. Community platforms for services may be used to enhance the perception of convenience for consumers, and result in valuable competitive advantages for omnichannel retailers. As can be seen, due to the technological paradigm shift, strategies how to enhance convenience may be achieved through new innovative methods.

Since no previous research has been conducted to further understand the relationship between retailers and community platforms for services, there is a need to inductively explore the potential this proposal possesses. To understand this phenomenon, research should take departure in empirical case driven research where valuable and deep contextual information can be accessed and thus, enabling new theories to emerge.

1.2 Purpose

Where retailers in an increasingly digital society continuously face challenges in providing discerning consumers with satisfying and convenient customer experiences, it calls for new and innovative approaches on how to please the modern consumer. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore how community platforms for services can be integrated and used in the customer journey, in order to increase the perceived convenience. Considering the technological adaptation, the authors aim to cover retailing in the context of multi-and-omnichannel.

To be able to approach and answer the purpose, the following research questions are stated:

- What obstacles are perceived by customers in the current customer journey and why?
- What role can community platforms play in helping customers overcome such obstacles?
- What attitudes towards the usage of community platforms for services do consumers possess?

1.3 Intended Contribution

The intended contribution of this thesis is twofold, with both normative and theoretical promises. Since the purpose of this paper is to explore ways to enhance convenience in customer journeys through the integration of community platforms for services, a beneficial aim would be to conceptualise an understanding, facilitating the corporate decision-making process. These findings will support retailers in identifying what dimensions in the customer journey that are of relevance to invest resources in. By first mapping perceived obstacles in customer journeys, this thesis will provide valuable insights on what elements to take into consideration in order to increase consumers' satisfaction. With further exploration of how to enhance consumers' perception of convenience through community platforms, findings will provide guidance to companies in how to do so in an optimal and practical manner. Finally, by identifying possible ways to enhance convenience, support for an improved general customer experience can be given. Hence, indirectly creating a better everyday life for the many people.

To the authors' knowledge, there is no previous study made that tries to integrate the two elements of convenience and community platforms for services into the customer journey. This paper is therefore to be understood as an original contribution to the existing literature on the subjects and as a bridge between the different research areas. To this day, most of the research on service convenience has been conducted with a quantitative research focus (Seiders, Voss, Godfrey & Grewal, 2007; Jiang, Yang & Jun, 2013; Lloyd, Chan, Yip & Chan, 2014). The researchers have concentrated either on the physical retail landscape or on E-commerce, but never have there been studies on the perceived service convenience where the retailer is operating in both channels simultaneously. Hence, there is a gap in the literature of research that takes the omnichannel into account when measuring convenience. Since the retail industry is increasingly moving into the multi-and omnichannel paradigm, where combined channels are the rule rather than the exception, this gap is problematic. The number of touchpoints influencing consumers' perception of convenience, is soaring, and as most of them appear in connection with the fast-moving technology, there is a lack of research that incorporates these into the varied conceptualisations of journeys and convenience. To understand how customers perceive service convenience by omni-channel retailers, new empirical case driven research with access to firms' internal information is needed, where a speculative and inductive focus has to be present. This, as new insights are sought to be explored, rather than more data-driven, deductive studies, limited in their ability to incorporate these new touchpoints.

2 Literature Review

This chapter will go through the previous research on related topics to this thesis. In particular this chapter will cover three distinct sections: the first section aims to provide an understanding of the recently emerged platform economy and its opportunities. The second section will cover the historical development of the consumer decision process and its transition into customer journeys. Finally, the third section reviews prior research in service convenience and how consumers perceive convenience when shopping. The areas of research and models presented will also function as the theoretic foundation of this thesis and be used to structure the empirics and analysis.

2.1 The Platform Economy

Technological advancements have led to new conditions for actors operating in the retail sector (Goworek & McGoldrick, 2015). Internet has created an additional marketplace and competition has increased due to the emergence of online retailers (Mehra, Kumar & Raju, 2017; Reinartz, Wiegand & Imschloss, 2019). To strengthen their position, traditional retailers have started to implement digital touchpoints in the customer journeys, hence, new technology can be observed to change the practices of retailing (Rigby, 2011). Technological developments continue to manifest its presence in society, where the rise of digital platforms has emerged as a new era, titled the Platform Economy (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). This economy is characterised by the abundant existence of platforms, such as Amazon, Google, Facebook and Uber. Scholars has acknowledged the term Platform Economy which is preferable to use since it is both neutral and generalising, despite the diverse functions of platforms (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). The term platform is rather complex to define as there is no one-size-fits-all model and platforms differ from each other in terms of purpose, operationalisation and organisation (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016; Kenney & Zysman, 2016). Instead, platforms can be seen to represent a new business model that, with the use of technology, connects producers with users in order to bring mutual value to its participants (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016). Platforms' capability to digitally connect participants to create value is what platforms are built upon and therefore it is its main characteristic, which has been implemented across many different industries (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). This diversification can easily be observed in the market, with platforms dedicated to either services, products or information (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016; Kenney & Zysman, 2016). Previous research of platforms is rather scattered and treats the phenomenon differently depending on if it is being investigated as a retail marketplace (e.g., Hänninen, Smedlund & Mitronen, 2018) or as a service provider (e.g., McKee, 2017).

From a retail perspective, digital platforms (e.g., Amazon) have arisen to facilitate the relationship between suppliers and consumers, where consumers can access countless of brands through one single platform (Hänninen, Smedlund & Mitronen, 2018). As retail platforms expand and start to become the primary marketplace for a considerable number of consumers, brands might feel forced to exist on the platform to avoid a potential decrease in sales (Hänninen, Smedlund & Mitronen, 2018). Due to the brands' lack of other options the retail platforms can keep total control in how the brands' products will be displayed on their website (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). Both barriers and the platform's engagement vary between different platforms. Therefore, suppliers may need to carefully consider its decision on which platform to start selling on (Hänninen & Smedlund, 2019). On the other hand, from the consumers' point of view, favourable outcomes can be achieved by direct mediation of platforms. Because of their superiority within logistics, retail platforms can cut lead times, resulting in more efficient and frictionless customer experiences (Hänninen & Smedlund, 2019).

Not only have platforms caused disruption for retailers, it is also possible to see how the business model has changed in different service industries, arisen from users' need to find similar offerings to lower costs (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). For example, both Uber and Airbnb have managed to offer serious competition to their origin industries through their platforms, reliant on users' willingness to participate (McKee, 2017). The fact that platforms do not require any inventories or other resources bound to the platform owner is part of its rapid success (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016). In contrast to the historical distinction between a dominant producer and a consumer, anyone can become a producer today (Lusch & Nambisan, 2015). Platforms who aim to connect users for certain services have been referred as either online platforms allowing "peer-to-peer exchange" (McKee, 2017) or "service-providing platforms" (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). However, their purpose is not much different from the interaction between internet users, communicating through online communities (Stanoevska-

Slabeva, 2002). According to the Oxford Dictionary (n.d.) a community is "a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common". Thus, these virtual communities may be seen as a community platform, connecting participants of common interest.

Although community platforms have similarities with the so-called Sharing Economy, these platforms are not built on lending something for free, instead they are centralised around earning money through participants' services and assets (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; McKee, 2017). Thanks to participants' cooperation, the platform companies function as mediators and gain profit through commissions (McKee, 2017), described as a Consumer-to-Consumer (C2C) market by Gielens and Steenkamp (2019). The C2C market, implemented in a digital context, offer convenient solutions for participants through secure transactions between individuals (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). Most of all, the platform company create trust for participants to interact with strangers, which otherwise might have been experienced as odd (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016). Furthermore, platforms often include the possibility for users to give feedback or comment based on their experiences, verifying the quality for others (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016).

Since the Platform Economy just recently appeared, its direction is still difficult to predict. However, it has been declared to not be a temporary movement and is foreseen to change the conditions for how firms will pursue work and create value for consumers (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; McKee, 2017). Additionally, McKee (2017) propose that even though platforms might be a new phenomenon, the idea behind them reflects a liberal view of the market which already existed. Despite the notable success platforms has had for tech firms, Kenney and Zysman (2016, p.62) stress that it should not be taken for granted and, no matter what platforms represent, the key is to successfully "digitalise value-creating human activities". Simultaneously, community platforms for services constitute a risk of growth in unstable employment forms without legal protection and benefits for workers (Kenney & Zysman, 2016). McKee (2017) describes how service platforms face legal obstacles (transactions, competition towards origin industries, and labour law) and how proponents hope authorities will embrace platforms to a greater extent to facilitate their business, believing platforms offer value in shape of efficiency. In agreement, Lusch and Nambisan (2015) believe platforms has created a new arena, imprinted by innovation and introduced an improved level of efficiency.

Consequently, as community platforms still are such new phenomena, many practical aspects concerning them are still obscure and uncertain. While platforms within the retail industry currently is associated with big selling platforms, there is yet to find out the potential for how community platforms for services will be integrated to the customer journey.

2.2 The Customer Journey

The consumer buying process as a concept has its roots in the academic field of consumption behaviour but been used in a variety of disciplines. Models to describe the buying decision process have for long been developed and implemented, as there is a need for companies to understand how consumers choose, use, and dispose products (Kotler & Keller, 2016). The starting point of a considerable amount of research conducted within consumer behaviour builds upon the decision-making model by Engel, Kollatt and Blackwell from 1968 (Ashman & Solomon, 2015). They divided the process into five different stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. In line with society's evolvement, the model has been updated and re-constructed. For instance, where environmental concern has become of greater importance to consumers, an additional staged, typically called divestment, has been added by Blackwell, Miniard and Engel (2000), covering the disposal part of the consumption act.

Where consumers decisions previously followed a process similar to a funnel, starting with a number of options which is narrowed down to one brand, Court et al. (2009) called for a more advanced approach. They claimed digitisation had resulted in an abundance of touchpoints and modern consumers being informed to a greater extent. Therefore, the authors developed a more sophisticated model, referred to as the consumer decision journey. Court et al. (2009) divides the journey into four phases: initial consideration set, active evaluation, moment of purchase, and post-purchase experience. In contrast to previous models, Court et al. (2009), visualised the customer journey as something circular, which will be repeated if the consumer express loyalty towards the brand, here defined as a loyalty loop. The customer journey has later been conceptualised by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) into merely three phases; pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. Although a bit simplified, it still covers the overarching steps consumers go through when making a purchase decision, in accordance with Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1968) as well as Court et al. (2009). In their framework, consumers go through the stages of search for information and consider available options, into choice and financial transaction, and finally, usage and evaluation which will affect future behaviour (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Furthermore, Court et al. (2009) recognised a shift in marketing, where companies who previously performed traditional marketing methods had to develop an ability to influence touchpoints that were not explicitly owned by them. They found that a majority of the touchpoints consumers interact with during the journey are consumer-driven, such as word-of-mouth and reviews online. In agreement with Court et al. (2009), Lemon and Verhoef (2016) find the overwhelming number of touchpoints to cause complex scenarios for companies, from an organisational perspective, but also in terms of less control. Based on this, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) encourage companies to identify the touchpoints consumers face along their process to make sure they are used properly and will convince consumers to purchase. They clarify that the key is to influence consumers to make favourable decisions through these touchpoints, enabled through strategic usage of mobile technology (Faulds et al. 2018). Faulds et al. (2018) recognised the customer journey in the same way as Lemon and Verhoef (2016), consisting of three phases, and describes how mobile technology has empowered the consumer in the shopping process. In response, companies may use technology to interact with customers at critical touchpoints along the journey (Faulds et al., 2018). By doing so, reducing customers' time and effort spent during the shopping process. The advantage of technology is also notable in the work of Edelman and Singer (2015), advocating automated processes, customised recommendations based on preferences, contextual interaction and continuously implementing innovations with the purpose to enhance the customer experience.

Edelman and Singer (2015) acknowledged the consumer decision journey visualised by Court et al. (2009) and believe the company who can offer the most efficient journey will succeed. Moreover, they suggest companies to consider reorganisation to assure the customer journey is in focus and shall be treated as a product, where it is crucial to have the best offering on the market. Pine and Gilmore (1998) early described the relevance of providing consumers with experiences and, portrayed how companies aspire to increase sales and strengthen position with extension of their original offering through experiences.

In conclusion, some marketers and researchers have conceptualised the decision process as a linear model, or funnel, where customers starts at one point, to undergo a series of different stages, and end up in the other end. Others see it as an ongoing, circular process, reinforcing favourable customer experiences. Regardless, the stages consumers go through in the decision process are all similar with the intention to divide the customer journey into processes which take place before, during, and after purchase. However, as observed, digital technology has caused a tremendous number of touchpoints, few of which companies are in charge of. In response, researchers in unison argue for firms to identify critical touchpoints and interact with consumers to encourage purchase decisions. This also opens up the question whether community platforms for services could become implemented in the customer journey and how it can result in favourable outcomes in terms of convenience.

2.3 Service Convenience

According to Willman-Iivarinen (2017), our oversaturated information society have caused a greater need for convenience in consumers' decisions. Where variation in quality and price is small, but the offer yet experienced as overwhelming, greater emphasis is placed on other values (Willman-Iivarinen, 2017). Already in 1958, Kelley predicted convenience to become a pivotal factor in consumers' purchasing decision due to similar price offerings. Besides the monetary price, Kelley (1958, p. 32) explained consumers to evaluate the cost of convenience, described as "the expenditure of time, physical and nervous energy, and money to overcome the frictions of space and time, and to obtain possession of goods and services". In similar fashion, Yale and Venkatesh (1986) argued convenience to be of greater importance due to expansion in product alternatives and societal changes, which called for goods that enabled households to save time.

Since consumers do not have the capacity to process all available information when evaluating different options, they aim to minimise the effort required in decision scenarios (Bettman, Luce & Payne, 1998). With other words, faced with a more complex question consumers aspire to experience the purchasing decision process as convenient as possible (Willman-Iivarinen, 2017). In terms of measuring service convenience in the retail sector, the work of Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002) has laid ground to much of the contemporary research (e.g., Nguyen, DeWitt & Russel-Benett, 2012). The authors' conceptualisation of service convenience consists of the time and effort consumers spend when purchasing or using a service. The less time and effort required from the consumers, the greater the convenience. Consumers' perception of service convenience will vary depending on the individual's preferences and influences from companies (Berry, Seiders & Grewal, 2002). Furthermore, they illustrate how service convenience can be examined through five dimensions; decision, access, transaction, benefit, and post-benefit. All dimensions reflect different stages of consumers' decision process, but still vaguely elaborated. Based on the author's conceptualisation, Seiders et al. (2007) later developed a measurement tool, the SERVCON scale, which possess the ability to fully measure perceived service convenience. SERVCON is based on the measurement of 17 items, reflecting different phases of the previously identified five dimensions. For example, how consumers perceive the transport process and localisation of products inside the store. In contrast to the work of Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002), Seiders et al. (2007) present a more distinct definition of the dimensions. Where benefit convenience previously been fairly abstract, it is now clarified to represent how consumers experience certain moments when present in the physical store.

The lack of consistency in items measuring convenience in previous research has been criticised by Reimers (2014), demonstrating the absence of a universal model. However, the priority among attributes related to store convenience may soon shift, due to the last decades of evolution in the retail sector since the birth of E-commerce. The retail sector has faced new challenges, as well as opportunities, where consumers experience greater convenience when shopping online in comparison to offline (Chen & Chang, 2003; Chiang & Dholakia, 2003). In addition, innovations in self-service technology are being implemented to satisfy consumers through increased control, correlated to perceptions of increased value and reduced risk (Lee & Allaway, 2002). These services, e.g. self-scanning methods, make the consumers less dependent on service personnel and create a more frictionless experience. Thus, implementation of new technology in traditional stores aims to facilitate the service delivery for both customers and retailers (Walker, Craig-Lees, Hecker & Francis, 2002). Collier and Sherrell (2010) observed consumers' willingness to use self-service technology being connected to their want to gain control and access convenience, made especially evident in the transaction stage of the customer journey.

As consumers perceive online shopping to be more convenient per se (Clemes, Gan & Zhang, 2014), it is of relevance to see how the online experience can be evaluated in terms of convenience. Consumers' perception of service quality in online shopping has been investigated before (Jun, Yang & Kim, 2003), but research on service convenience online is scarce. Since the items measured by SERVCON mostly are customised for shopping experiences at physical stores, Jiang, Yang and Jun (2013) conducted research to identify which convenience dimensions are of interest when shopping online, a process differentiating from traditional retailing. They were able to identify five dimensions designed for an online context; access, search, evaluation, transaction, and possession/post-purchase. Although both access and transaction is part of Berry, Seiders and Grewal's work (2002), they explain the valued attributes still differ. The access convenience dimension in an online context relates to the website's ease of use and transaction convenience is connected to flexible and smooth payment methods. Notable, convenience within online shopping is largely linked to the website's functionality, the availability to browse between products to compare, and the delivery process (Jiang, Yang & Jun, 2013).

Furthermore, consumers are not only asking for, but demanding increased convenience (Berry, Seiders & Grewal, 2002). Besides being sought after, findings by Chang, Chen, Hsu, and Kuo (2010) indicate that service convenience may influence consumers' perception of companies and result in favourable attitudes. They stress the need to look beyond competitor's prices and instead focus on providing service of quality to a legitimate price. Similarly, Grönroos (2008) explains that it is not possible to compete solely on physical product offerings in the long run as no customer relationship can be achieved from them. Grönroos (2008) clarifies the key instead is to master the process of service management, in which the product, and all activities around it, are transferred to a service, adding value to consumers. In agreement, Lusch and Nambisan (2015) describe how the distinction between innovative products and innovative services becomes less relevant as products themselves start to function as a mediator of a service. Thus, greater emphasis will likely be put on how retailers sell products, rather than what kind of products.

Although there is no universal established definition of convenience in previous research, most conceptualisations of the phenomena mainly focus on the linkage of consumers' perception of time and effort. Service convenience has in prior research been examined in physical stores and E-commerce separately, however the dimensions evaluated are fairly similar. In our modern society, there is less distinction between these channels (Rigby, 2011), thus it is of relevance to simultaneously take both channels into consideration when measuring service convenience.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Previous relevant literature in the academic field has been presented in this chapter, starting with community platforms and its current era, followed by a section focusing on customer journeys, and lastly on the literature on service convenience. By taking all this research into consideration simultaneously, one can create a holistic understanding of the underlying phenomena and enable exploration of the previously stated research questions.

Digitisation keeps on influencing the retail sector, escalating the number of available touchpoints consumers can connect with. The customer journey consequently becomes more and more complex as multi- and omnichannel experiences consolidate in the business, creating challenges for today's retailers (Court et al., 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Simultaneously, the need for convenience is rapidly increasing (Willman-Iivarinen, 2017). Hence, the key to success is to deliver a frictionless shopping experience. In this paper, inconvenience is treated as obstacles that must be overcome in order for the consumer to reach a perception of convenience. To answer vital questions such as how convenience is perceived in the new retail landscape and understand what causes consumers' feelings of inconvenience in this context, additional research has to be conducted. This as previously research on what service convenience is perceived through, either focuses on an online- or physical context, the need to combine such dimensions and build on the theories is palpable considering the technological development. Moreover, the literature review illuminates the opportunity to use technological advances, in particular community platforms, to prosper in the current era. Naturally creating an inquisition of first exploring obstacles in the omnichannel context and then analysing opportunities for how such obstacles could be resolved through community platforms for services. Considering the novel nature of platforms, the connection between these and customer journeys is in the academic literature seemingly non-existent.

To understand which dimensions that are necessary to take into consideration, when outlining consumers' perception of convenience from an omnichannel-retailer, previous research will function as brief guidance. This paper will therefore combine the fairly recognised dimensions of Seiders et al. (2007) with the more recent dimensions, adapted to online retailers, by Jiang, Yang and Jun (2013). It is difficult to identify an optimal order of these in the aspect of omnichannel as the touchpoints become more fluent and occur in varied manner dependent on consumers' preferences. However, these dimensions reflect the phases of the customer journey by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and can be categorised as taking place either before, during, or after purchase. Thus, being illustrated in a rather logical and intuitive order. Moreover, since the disposal process take place relatively long afterwards the purchase and also become increasingly important in a more conscious society, this stage has been distinguished from the post-purchase dimension, in agreement with Blackwell, Miniard and Engel (2000).

Table 1. Theoretical Framework

Consumer Journey		Service Convenience	
Blackwell, Miniard & Engel (2000)	**Lemon & Verhoef (2016)**	**Seiders et al. (2007)**	**Jiang, Yang & Jun (2013)**
Need Recognition Information Search	Pre-Purchase	Decision Convenience Access Convenience	Access Convenience Search Convenience
Evaluation of Alternatives		Benefit Convenience	Evaluation Convenience
Purchase	Purchase	Transaction Convenience	Transaction Convenience
Post-Purchase	Post-Purchase	Post-Benefit Convenience	Possession/Post-Benefit Convenience
Disposal			

3 Methodology

In this chapter the methodology of the thesis will be reviewed. First a general research strategy, establishing the authors' stance on ontology as well as epistemology, is discussed. How these philosophical assumptions about reality and how it is experienced are further shaping the research approach is then being argued. The chapter moves on to reflect upon how to further access the research purpose of the study with a case being introduced as the context. Following is a section discussing the empirical material collection procedures and overviews of interviews taken place. Lastly, a reflection about the analysis method and the validity and credibility of the study is ending the chapter.

3.1 Research Strategy and Philosophical Assumptions

Having an understanding of the philosophical assumptions that are upheld, is often useful to guide the process of constructing a method (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). An understanding facilitates research design choices such as what evidence should be gathered to best answer the research question and makes the contribution to the field of marketing more resourceful (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Furthermore, since philosophical factors often influence how satisfactory the outcomes of the research are, these should be thoroughly considered (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012).

As the ontological stance depends on the topic of enquiry and preferences of the individual researcher, the purpose and aim of this thesis should be revisited. As mentioned, this research strives to mainly from a customer perspective, explore community platforms' roles in customer journeys, and through it conceptualise an understanding to be used as a tool for enhancing consumers' perceived convenience. Since customers and their perceptions are the main focus of study, the results will be highly dependent on their varying viewpoints. With the conviction that the politics of business and commercial resources have a high likeliness to influence respondents' answers (Knorr-Cetina, 1983) and that observations found when conducting studies in research areas depending on people and zeitgeist, often are inconsistent (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012), the enquiry of this thesis is built upon the belief that not all customers experience the same journey in a similar manner nor have the same perception of the convenience. Especially as digitisation is recreating the retail market place in a rapid fashion. No single unifying understanding that also is supposed to be fixed through time is expected to be found; thus, the ontological nature of this enquiry can be said to be relativistic.

Concerning the epistemological stance, once again the disruptive digitisation changing effect on the customer journeys and convenience can be used to demonstrate how these concepts can be seen as socially constructed. Considering that E-commerce changed the dynamics of shopping and convenience, the terms have gotten completely new meanings in the minds of the consumers compared to what they once had when traditional retailing and physical stores were the dominant forms. In order to answer the study's purpose and come up with elaborate conclusions, a better understanding of the rather complex general situation has to be created. The focus needs to lie in interpreting people's' varying thoughts about journeys, community platforms, and convenience. Hence, this study will approach a social constructivist epistemology.

The method choices in following sections are therefore based on, to a large extent but not limited to, these philosophical assumptions.

3.2 Research Approach

As constructionists, the research approach is often based on the belief that tangible observations may be subject to diverse interpretations, and the focus of the study should be to see how the different conceptions of truths are constantly constructing new forms of realities (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Studies of such kind are centred around direct personal observations and contacts, often through interviews. They are also focused around a single organisation with multiple individuals as sampling frames, which are used as the source of data during a period of time (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Research methods of this character tend to be qualitative. Qualitative research methods are concentrated on creating a deeper understanding of participants' opinions, behaviours, and values (Bryman & Bell, 2018). By interpreting answers given by interviewees, new theories and knowledge can be generated and developed. Here, the focus lies on the interviewee's point-of-view, rather the researchers' (Bryman & Bell, 2018). Since this is a research method that facilitates the exploration this thesis' purpose and aim, a qualitative research method has been adopted. This approach enables an in-depth understanding of respondents' perceptions and experiences of convenience, in contrast to quantitative methods which better fit other research purposes. Although quantitative methods enable researchers to gather a greater range of data in an efficient manner, they are often built upon what already exist and not as applicable in understanding and generating new perspectives (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Therefore, findings from this method tend to not be as helpful when the research's aim is to identify new suggestions for future implications. Nor can it provide equivalent in-depth understanding of respondents' beliefs and attitudes that this study intends to investigate.

Since there is currently no specific research linking community platforms with customer journeys and its relation to convenience, new theories had to be developed. Even though there are research on customers' perception of service convenience along the customer journey (Seiders et al., 2007; Jiang, Yang & Jun, 2013), there is no existing knowledge of how community platforms can be used to overcome these. Therefore, the authors aimed to bridge this gap. Theory on these consumers' perceptions and attitudes subjects could be created and conceptualisations generated by comparing and expanding related research (Sunday, 2008). To achieve this, an inductive approach was considered suitable, in agreement with Sunday (2008) as well as Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012) and therefore applied.

3.3 Scope of Study

To be able to locate obstacles along the customer journey, it was important to locate several consumers with a long history as customers at a retailer, so long that their perception and experience of their customer journeys would be extensive and insightful. As quickly realised, interviewing customers about their opinions about customer journeys, convenience, and platforms in a general context, would partly be very time-consuming and partly only provide vague answers. Likely, it would also only provide findings that would limit chances of comparison and consequently a weaker analysis. Therefore, to approach and concretise the relatively broad and complex research questions, the choice of studying them within the context of a relevant retailer was made. Not because of an interest of intrinsic value in studying a particular case on its own, but rather because that sometimes, more can be learnt by exploring a detailed instant (Taber, 2014).

The choice fell on the Swedish furnishing retailer IKEA because of the belief the context of IKEA would be best suited to answer the research questions. First, as IKEA being one of the world's biggest and leading retailers, many people are well aware of the company and have much experience in shopping there. This increased accessibility and eased the selection of legitimate respondents with pronounced opinions. Second, IKEA is a company operating in multiple channels, selling products both online and in physical stores. As an aim of this thesis is to conceptualise perceived service convenience in a multi- or omnichannel context, this part was vital to be fulfilled by the retailer of choice. Third, the IKEA company makes a fitting representation and illustration of the problematisation behind the intended goal of visualising how community platforms for services can be used to overcome inconvenient obstacles in the customer journey. This, since IKEA recently has started to integrate community platforms into their existing service offer, having acquired the service community platform TaskRabbit (Angulo, 2018). TaskRabbit is today mainly used for implementing assembly services to consumers in North America and the United Kingdom (Angulo, 2018). Seemingly, there is an opportunity in exploring how such community platform could be implemented in the Swedish consumer market.

The need to gather specific local knowledge and create theory that are not developed to be generalisable to several different geographical areas are emphasised by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson, (2012). The authors state that since some practices may be locally unique, research should focus locally in order to have theoretical value. In a similar way, the authors argue that behaviour depends on cultural contexts. Thus, shall a managerial model only try to encapsulate the local practices and behaviours. Further, it should not be too dependent on other empirical studies and market research done in countries of deviant culture. Considering this, IKEA should not rely too much on their own previous data and research conducted for TaskRabbit in other cultures. Hence, relevant new insights into the Swedish market would be of interest for them. Consequently, IKEA had motivations and willingness to participate in the study which enabled us to study them directly and gather interesting data useful for the study's purpose. A pre-understanding of the Swedish IKEA customers' shopping experiences in general and their thoughts about community platforms in particular is consequently of importance. Therefore, Swedish IKEA customers will compose the major context of the study, which will mainly have a consumer perspective.

3.4 Research Design

The material for this thesis was gathered through eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with eleven IKEA customers, a semi-structured interview with knowledgeable professional at IKEA, and lastly through two focus groups with other IKEA customers.

The purpose of the fieldwork and initial interviews with IKEA customers was to create a better understanding of how they experience the process of shopping at IKEA and generate insights into what obstacles they may perceive as inconvenient throughout the customer journey.

The interview with IKEA functioned as a complement to the findings from the interviews with the consumers, but also a chance; to get their views and opinions of the Swedish market and the customer experience. Furthermore, another large portion of the purpose of the interview with IKEA was to see what kind of processes IKEA already is practicing overcoming these identified obstacles, eliminating the chances of coming up with similar ideas and thereby ensuring that the managerial contribution of the research would be more relevant.

The main purpose of the follow-up focus groups was to gain Swedish customers opinions and attitudes towards the possibility to bridge the obstacles, located through the first two steps, with the use of community platforms for services. Being the most unexplored area of research, this third part of the study is of an even more inductive character, where the discussion in the focus groups in particular was grounded in the initial interviews.

3.4.1 Interview Processes

Although the interviews with consumers took place before the interview with representative of IKEA, they were structured in similar manner and will therefore be described in parallel.

Sampling

In total, eight in-depth interviews with eleven Swedish IKEA customers were conducted. The selection of respondents was made through convenience sampling, favourable when resources and time are limited for a project (Burns & Burns, 2008). Therefore, the selection of respondents was made through a non-probability sampling design, where the researcher chooses respondents on the basis of subjective and/or personal judgement (Burns & Burns, 2008). Hence, the respondents for these interviews were chosen by the authors with the belief that they were likely to contribute and be of relevance for the purpose. The geographical scope for the location of included respondents was consequently limited to the western and southern parts of Sweden, where the authors could without too much struggle reach the interviewees. Locations where the interviews took place were, listed in chronological order, Gothenburg, Tjörn, Borås, and Lund.

Further, as mentioned, the scope of the study was limited to the context of IKEA and retailer's customers. Since, TaskRabbit is a community platform that will be introduced in the Swedish market, only Swedish consumers were of relevance as respondents to ensure managerial implication of the findings. In addition to Swedish nationality, the respondents must have shopped at IKEA at least twice within the last twelve months. This ensured the respondent's memory of an entire shopping experience at IKEA was extensive and detailed, which improved chances of obtaining valuable insights and find solutions. Since individuals who live together also are likely to shop at IKEA together, the authors strived to conduct interviews made with the entire household simultaneously to get insights of complete experiences.

After eight interviews, theoretical saturation was considered to be reached and the empirical basis was considered adequate in terms of extent. For integrity reasons as well as making the respondents more relaxed, thus able to answer more honestly, they were on beforehand told they would be anonymous. Hence, the names presented in this paper are not the respondents' actual names.

Table 2. Overview of Respondents

Name and Age	Length of Interview	Location of Interview	Living Situation
Maria, 25	31 min	Gothenburg	Employed/Student, Single, Rental
Greta, 54	29 min	Tjörn	Employed, Married, 2 kids out-of-nest, House
Johan, 30 & Julia, 28	55 min	Borås	Employed, Relationship, Rental
Molly, 28 & Elias, 28	54 min	Borås	Employed, Relationship, House
Emma, 35	28 min	Borås	Employed, Married, 2 kids (4 & 6), House
Jenny, 40	19 min	Borås	Employed, Married, 4 kids (2, 4, 6 & 9), House
Cornelia, 27	29 min	Lund	Student, Single, Rental
David, 40 & Michelle, 38	45 min	Borås	Employed, Relationship, 2 kids (7 & 10) every other week from previous relationship, Rental

After briefing the initial contact persons, the desire to complement findings with internal knowledge on the Swedish consumer market, the selection of an appropriative representative, likely to contribute towards the thesis purpose, was facilitated by personnel at INGKA thanks to their internal network. This optimised the process of finding a respondent with adequate expertise in line with the aims of this paper. Thus, a meeting with a business developer for the Swedish customer experience was arranged and held at IKEA headquarters located in Helsingborg.

Table 3. Overview of Interview with IKEA

Name	Length of Interview	Location of Interview
Sarah	1h 5 min	Helsingborg

Interview Guide

In accordance with recommendations by Bryman and Bell (2015), an interview guide was designed to support the format of a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A). This format provides a structure which covers the main themes of the interview, while still allowing the interviewer to freely move between questions and also add new supplementary questions during the process, depending on the interviewee's answers. Questions that could be answered with only 'yes' or 'no' as well as guiding questions were sought to be avoided. Prior to the studies, a pilot interview was held to evaluate the interview guide in terms of understandability, logic flow, and order. This enabled an edit of the questions, consequently increasing the quality of the following interviews as some questions initially were considered vague or did not make any sense to the respondent. Hence, the findings from pilot study was chosen to not be included in the empirical material of the thesis. The pilot study was also a way for the authors to get used to the role of an interviewer. This experience created an important realisation of the balance between timed follow up-questions and being silent which sometime forced out more elaborated answers.

A similar interview process, as mentioned above, was used in this interview as well. However, the respondent was in advance provided with more information on the interview's content in order to be well prepared, which resulted in a brief presentation of the company's strategic actions and insights at the beginning of the interview. New questions were formulated for the occasion in advance (see Appendix B), on the basis of previous literature and findings from prior interviews with consumers. Further, the presentation held at the beginning of the interview, naturally created additional questions related to this as well.

Execution

To make the interviews feel even more comfortable, several methods were used beside anonymity. For example, the interviews were conducted in places where the interviewees felt relaxed and during a time when they did not feel stressed nor was in a hurry. As an interviewer should be open, enthusiastic, and positive to make the interviewee comfortable, which in turn tends to make the interviewee provide more honest answers (Justesen & Mik-Meyer, 2011), these types of behaviour were striven to be uphold during the interviews. In accordance with Bryman and Bell (2015), the choice of language used during the interviews was the one most relevant and comprehensible for the interviewee, which in all of the cases was Swedish. Further, as the used language was aimed to be comprehensible to the interviewees, academic phrases and concepts were referred to in colloquial terms. The purpose of the thesis was only revealed to the respondents after that the interview had taken place. This to make sure that given answers were not tendentious or biased.

The interviews with two representatives of a household simultaneously present, as well as the interview with IKEA, were all performed with both researchers present due to these interviews being more extensive. Remaining interviews were divided among the authors to facilitate the process due to geographical spread and limited time, thereby enabling larger scopes and empirics to build analysis on. The decision to have all interviews face-to-face was made to enable interpretation of body language and made it easier to understand and respond if a certain question was not fully understood by the respondent. Even though all interviews took place face-to-face, the entire length of all the interviews was taped after that an oral consent from the interviewee had been given. The recording was done to make sure the answers given would later be interpreted with maximum objectivity and made it possible for the interviewers to focus on conducting the interviews instead of taking notes. The recordings also enabled revisits to the interviews so that they afterwards could be transcribed. All interviews were meticulously transcribed, even laughter and pauses were included in the transcriptions as such sounds, or lack of, might in certain cases provide additional context to what is being said.

3.4.2 Focus Groups

The final phase of the empirical collection was to observe attitudes towards community platforms for services and how these could be implemented in IKEA's customer journey in order to overcome perceived obstacles. For this purpose, two focus groups were held, and the researchers conducted data from group discussions on pre-selected themes (Morgan, 1996), in line with the topic of this paper and based on findings from previous held interviews with consumers and IKEA. This method enabled access to information of selected individuals collectively, rather than a representation of a broader population (O Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick & Mukherjee, 2018). A greater understanding of what aspects to take into consideration could be achieved as participants could elaborate on their reflections together as one unit and provide detailed descriptions on why they feel as they do, a primary and beneficial characteristic of using focus groups (Bell, Bryman, & Harley, 2019). Furthermore, due to limited time resources at the final stage of the thesis, the use of focus groups became an efficient strategy to obtain multiple perspectives simultaneously, in contrast to other qualitative interviewing techniques.

To avoid a fragmented representation with risk of difficulty to analyse gathered data, a uniform target group was to prefer. Therefore, respondents in the age group 20-25 were of interest as this category was likely to represent a generation of digital adopters, suitable for the era of community platforms. In similar manner to the first semi-structured interviews with IKEA consumers, only Swedish respondents were of interest. This because of the previously mentioned aim of increasing the managerial contribution by aiding IKEA's implementation of TaskRabbit in the Swedish market. Conversely to the individual interviews, it was not of the same importance the respondents participating in the focus groups had purchased at IKEA recently. However, all respondents had shopped at IKEA at least once during the last year and were familiar with the retailer's concept.

On the basis of findings from previous interviews and identification of obstacles perceived in the customer journey, an interview guide was constructed (See Appendix C). In addition to the introduction phase, the interview was divided into three parts to create a natural flow and maximise the comfort for the respondents. The first part invited participants to share their perceptions and experiences of shopping at IKEA, followed by their previous usage and current attitudes towards community platforms, to finally integrate this into how community platforms for services could be implemented to overcome pre-selected obstacles in the current customer journey of IKEA. After asking the participants how they defined a platform, the authors presented a generalised description, based on literature and a shared perception of the term was used in the discussions. Both researchers were present in the room during the focus group and moderated it together to assure what participants said was captured and could be clarified if needed, careful not to affect the group's opinion. Both focus groups were recorded with the respondents' approval and guaranteed anonymity, to afterwards be transcribed and analysed.

Table 4. Overview of Respondents in Focus Group 1

Name and Age	Length of Interview	Location of Interview	Occupation
Cecilia, 24	48 min	Lund	Student
Alexandra, 24			Student
Erika, 23			Student
Eskil, 24			Student
Jonathan, 24			Student

Table 5. Overview of Respondents in Focus Group 2

Name and Age	Length of Interview	Location of Interview	Occupation
Nora, 22	59 min	Lund	Student
Marcus, 24			Student
Mikael, 23			Student
Hanna, 23			Student

3.4.3 Secondary Material

In addition to the information achieved through the IKEA representative, secondary data has been collected and reviewed in order to create a broader understanding of the retailers' obstacles and strategies. This material consisted of published interviews, accessed through online searches.

3.5 Analysis Method

For the analysis of the findings, a template analysis approach was chosen, as this type of thematic analysis is useful in qualitative studies that aims to expand on previous theories. The method also allows the researcher to explore features of data in real depth (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015). By using this analysis technique, revelations of patterns in the data can be found by constructing a template including both predetermined codes as well as emerging ones (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). This makes the analysation of the material rather flexible and adaptable to a certain study, but at the same time rather structured when processing the transcribed data (Brooks et al., 2015). Even though the use of predetermined codes based on previous literature might provide the study with some reliability and validity, the primary motives behind including such codes in the template were to create discourse and minimise the time-consuming aspects of coding. Thus, emphasis should be put on that the predetermined codes were used tentatively.

In accordance with Huberman and Miles (1994), the analysis process started with a sortation and transcription of the findings into separate documents for each interview. This was done to make the extensive material gathered from the interviews comprehensible and analysable, and visual notes could be taken, facilitating the analysis process. As promoted by (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012), some kind of organisation had to be present in these documents in order to analyse them. Then, as proposed by King (2012) the following procedures were performed:

First, familiarisation with the data was necessary. Hence, the entire data-set was carefully read through by both authors. Then the preliminary coding of the data was initiated. In this thesis, a code will represent, in accordance with Charmaz (2014) and Saldaña (2015), a summary of similar sentences or related statements by interviewees, so that clarity in vast data is created. Comments of particular interest that could benefit the thesis purpose and contribute to the understanding was first highlighted. From the literature review, and the theoretical framework constructed from it, several predetermined themes that were considered to likely be of relevance were on beforehand identified. However, being a template analysis, these codes were as mentioned merely considered speculative and preliminary.

The next step was to systematise the emerging codes from the first interviews (Brooks et al., 2015). A system was thus created after the first four interviews. Clusters of themes were created as well as primary links how the themes relate to each other in these groupings. Some codes were linked to not only one group, but many, or even the bigger picture. From this, the first draft of the template was created in a spreadsheet. The template was then applied to the rest of the interviews, where the codes from the first template were adjusted and complemented with additional themes so that the majority of the considered relevant data given was represented by at least one theme in the template. Phrases that were highlighted in the individual transcription documents facilitated the iterative process of comparing the preliminary template themes with the findings. The modification process was continued until it represented broad interpretations of the data, in the sense that uncontroversial or unique findings of potential relevance, also could be coded. Lastly, the modified latest version of template was then applied to all of the interviews.

3.6 Quality of Research

It is of importance to guarantee that the conducted research is of high quality, determined by its validity, reliability and generalisability (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). However, the perspectives on these definitions vary depending on the epistemological viewpoint (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). From a constructivist outlook, the research should ensure that enough perspectives have been taken into consideration, show similarities to findings from other research, and may be applied and bring value in other contexts (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). Research was performed with consideration to perspectives of consumers and IKEA. This triangulation was done since the assumption of the existence of several different possible realities in this study is uphold. Interviewees' motives for given certain answers in an interview are not always clear, and their answers may be heavily influenced by their will to for example impress the interviewer (Maxwell & Chmiel, 2014). Hence, it was necessary to gather data from different types of sources in order to reduce chances of such biases and increase the credibility and validity of the observations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). The researchers have put emphasis on including multiple perspectives from consumers by performing both semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This format of structure has enabled a greater understanding of respondents' answers and avoid the risks of misconception, which allows the analysis of individual's responses to be made on the same terms and strengthen the possibility for generalisation. The fact that the focus groups represent a particular target group and therefore not applicable to the overall consumer is taken into consideration by the authors when performing the analysis. Further, the researchers have during the whole process reflected upon their responsibility to stay objective and ensured the respondents' viewpoints are in focus. Thus, potential presumptions the authors had on the chosen company had to be ignored. In order to not influence the result in any way and allow the participants' conceptions to guide the empirical collection, the researchers have shown neutral expressions during the interview. Instead, the semi-structured format allowed the interviewer to ask further questions if something was unclear or could be relevant to elaborate further. Additionally, to verify findings of interest for the company, the representative of IKEA has been involved in validating the obstacles that had potential to further explore with platforms.

In order for the findings to be convincing, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012) advocate the need for researchers to provide a detailed and transparent description of used methods and further to include a reflection upon the results. Similarly, Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) clarify quality of constructive research to be justified by the conviction that the researcher possess a deep understanding of chosen topic, that it lies in line ongoing research, and also encourage readers to criticise presented findings. According to Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), these factors represent validity. Through this method chapter, the authors aim to provide a comprehensive and transparent description of the research process. By a high level of transparency, the authors believe readers can form opinions on chosen processes and moreover, by motives stated in this chapter, understand the authors' choices.

4 Understanding IKEA Consumers' Perception of Inconvenience

Findings from the semi-structured interviews will be presented in this chapter, starting by introducing how the Swedish consumer market differentiates from other markets. Obstacles linked to consumer's perception of inconvenience is later described from the perspective of the values independence and control. Followed by an identification of which obstacles that have potential to further explore.

4.1 Peculiarities of the Swedish Market

Worldwide, IKEA has for long been associated with big warehouses located outside the city centres but has lately been forced to explore alternative store formats due to a changing customer behaviour emerged from digitisation. (Milne, 2017). To attract citizens living in urban areas without access to cars and staying competitive against online actors, Jesper Brodin, chief executive, acknowledges that IKEA must reconsider their original business model (Milne, 2018; LaFrenz, 2019). With a strong identity bound to the physical store, IKEA was seen to be behind in its adaptation of multi-channel strategies but has now recognised the need and is now showing a growth in digital innovations (Handley, 2019). Barbara Martin Koppola, chief digital officer, believes IKEA can provide customers with improved and convenient offerings by putting the customer first (Handley, 2019).

Similarly, the interview with Sarah at IKEA revealed technology had influenced the construction of the Swedish customer journey. In agreement with prior research (Court et al., 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), Sarah, found the customer journey to be increasingly complex and rather difficult to illustrate: "It's kind of all over the place, all the time [...] The customer journey kind of doesn't exist." Moreover, Sarah declared that her understanding of the customer journey does not resemble a linear model. Customers are not necessarily performing the shopping in a certain order of stages. For example, customers might examine services provided at the final shopping stage in the beginning of a decision process. IKEA is consequently at risk of losing customers if unable to present satisfying information on e.g. delivery options. Thus, to meet the customers' demands, it is important to have a holistic perspective and be transparent.

> *Looking to the past, you can see that payment solutions primarily are driving customers' behaviours. Like Swish and BankID, they've entirely changed the way we shop [even before locating a product]. "I first check if Klarna exists on the site, then I shop. If not, then it's extremely annoying and I'll not proceed with the shopping." - it's like that customers behave.* (Sarah)

According to Sarah, the Swedish consumer market shows a great digital adaptation and is recognised to be ahead of other markets. Every year IKEA has 143 million interactions with the Swedish consumers through a great variety of touchpoints, where two-thirds of the interactions take place online. Considering the number of citizens living in Sweden, it is said to be a rather impressive number. The fact that IKEA has its origin and a long history in Sweden is seen to influence consumers, shown in interviews with respondents who expressed high confidence in IKEA. Exemplified by Cornelia, "I think [IKEA] is so well ingrained as part of our Swedish identity." Thus, all respondents think of IKEA as something more than just a storage of flat packages. Instead, many illustrated an experience which includes stops at the restaurant and the inspirational showrooms. Thereof, the Swedish consumers represent a rather unique target group for IKEA. Furthermore, their cultural values distinguish them from other markets.

> *Sweden is completely out of place [...] [Sweden] has a different position even in comparison to Norway, Denmark and Nordic neighbours you would expect to be rather similar to us, but they aren't. It's partly because we're super secular and we're very individualistic as a people.* (Sarah)

A pattern that emerged from the individual interviews concerning what types of obstacles they experience in the customer journey, was that their cultural values tended to construct their perception of convenience. Every time a participant described an aspect or process in the customer journey as inconvenient, it was possible to note that a violation of the customer's independence or control had occurred. Previous research has explained convenience to represent the relationship between time and effort (Berry, Seiders & Grewal, 2002), however, in addition to this perspective, this research has noted other underlying themes to be of similar importance. These are more in line with findings by Lee and Allaway (2002), as well as Collier and Sherrell (2010) who propose enabled control and independence from self-services result in favourable attitudes among customers. In other words, to minimise time and maximise efficiency, consumers must seize control of the process and be allowed independence.

> *I sometimes think that it's a bit annoying to go to a store that I'm not familiar with. Now I often go the same one, but when you visit another store then…. Like, last time I was at another IKEA, I'd to go back all the way because I realised there was no marketplace downstairs in [that store], that all products were on the top floor instead, so we had to go back to the department, which meant we'd to go all the way back until I found what I was looking for. By then I was pretty annoyed, when it was not the way I was used to. And I was not either prepared that I later had to wait unreasonable long to receive my package from the warehouse. I'd expected to be able to pick it up myself, it's more efficient in that way.* (Emma)

Consumers' desire for independence is led by their unwillingness to depend on others, and thus they long to be autonomous. The need of being in control represents consumers' experience of discomfort in unstructured situations and thereof an aspiration to avoid uncertainty. Besides being apparent in interviews with respondents, these aspects are also connected to Swedish cultural values. It is therefore reasonable for the values independence and control to be prominent within respondents' perception of convenience along the Swedish IKEA customer journey. The Swedish society is being influenced by the individualism, which can be seen to reflect the consumers' behaviour. There is a certain pride in doing things on your own.

4.2 Independence

The need to feel independent in the customer journey was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. One of the most frequently noted associations with IKEA in terms of inconvenience was that IKEA is a loud and crowded place. Even if many respondents said to enjoy walking around and check out the inspirational showrooms, the experience becomes less joyful if the store is filled with too many people. The store layout, which by many were referred to as a maze, "is a nightmare if you are stressed" due to other customers standing in their way and slowing down the shopping process.

Similarly, going to IKEA without having access to a car is another obstacle linked to the infraction of independence since the respondent then becomes dependent on others. If larger products were being purchased, public transport was not an option and instead participants had to organise a trip together with friends or relatives. Even if one can argue that the car makes it possible to load more products, it also gives customers the freedom to go whenever they want.

Although respondents did not have any problems with locating personnel in store, they were rarely in need for help. Occasionally, when so was the case, it was often associated with waiting for other customers to be served first and seen as a time-consuming activity, found to interfere with the participants' personal space. Therefore, it was only done if it felt absolutely necessary to the participant. It was made evident that all respondents performed research online in advance and therefore capable of taking care of themselves in the store.

> *We've looked everything up in advance. You can even find out exactly at what shelf the product is. We're a team my husband and I, haha. I find out where things are located, and he runs to get it. We're certainly as most efficient when we're at IKEA. IKEA has organised it so that you can be efficient there.* (Jenny)

The interviewees' unwillingness to depend on others and unconscious will to minimise interaction with personnel was a continuous theme, in particular within the transaction dimension. All respondents used the self-scanning checkout instead of the manned desks since they experience the queue to be shorter in the former case. Moreover, self-scanning ensures that customers are also given full authority, speed, and personal space. In a similar manner, the respondents expressed a gratitude towards IKEA's personnel in the sense that they do not actively try to interact, socialise or sell, as some competitors do. It becomes clear that the IKEA stores are built in a way that facilitates the customers to be fully independent if they want to and has acknowledged the certain service culture, existing in Sweden. Illustrated by David, "...In a sense, that's perhaps a service in itself. That you can get through the store without being too dependent on other people." Similarly, through Michelle's eyes:

> *[The store] is like a assembly line. They've made it possible to handle almost everything on your own. You pay on your own, and well... everything. So, in that sense, I think they managed to remove the need of service personnel. You don't really need humans, the information is already at hand. You can't compare that to a little boutique, where they like take care of you.*

Further argumentation for how independence influences convenience, can be observed by looking at respondents' positive attitudes towards the customer's assembly process of IKEA furniture. Respondents showed a certain prestige in being involved in the assembly process knowing, that they could rely on themselves and had contributed with something of value. Cornelia described it in the following manner: "I believe you perhaps put a lot of pride into putting it together on your own”. Johan argued in a similar way: “You feel like you have...like affected the process. Not just bought something, but actually constructed something”.

Provided that the respondents had a car at hand, the disposal process was mostly preferred to be managed by themselves without involving others. Otherwise, participants recognised it as a rather cumbersome process as they in some way had to organise the item to be transported. Even if having someone come to the door to pick up products for disposal could be a convenient service, Molly described her preferences in the following manner:

> *Now, we’ve a car and that’s convenient… you can [throw away garbage] whenever you want. I don’t really like to book up time... to have someone else coming and pick up the stuff.*

4.3 Control

The other theme made evident was customers’ need of being in control. The strive for control can be observed in customers’ behaviour prior to departure. All respondents announced they went online before visiting IKEA, entering either the website or the app, in order to browse through the company’s assortment. Different aspects, such as price, were often evaluated on beforehand through information accessed from the website. Customers usually looked at size, primarily to easier imagine the product at home, but also to assure that the size of the package would go into the car. Furthermore, customers usually make certain that their desired product is in stock before going to the IKEA store. It is possible to observe that the distance to the store requires careful preparation by the respondents, to avoid the risk of returning empty-handed and experience the feeling of a long trip being wasted. Thereof, most visits can be acknowledged to be of planned nature, where the customer already have a clear mission in mind on what to buy.

Furthermore, the sense of control gained by being familiar with the concept of IKEA, can be seen to influence the consumers’ decision process and makes it easy for the respondents to choose going to IKEA. How IKEA is seen as their primary destination for home-interior and preferred over other retailers is exemplified by Maria, “I believe I go to IKEA out of pure tradition … It is basically THE place where you go to shop furniture.”

Similarly, due to a consistent concept and layout in their stores, combined with the fact that respondents usually visit the same one, the respondents know what to expect when they arrive and there are no unpleasant surprises. This familiarity creates a feeling of control and is notably the most outstanding aspect influencing the respondents' perception of convenience when visiting the physical store.

> *In some way, you know what you'll get there, you kind of know the product range. In that sense it's a very trustworthy store. It is very clear.* (Maria)

> *I think it's quite easy to locate the products. […] You've been there like thousands of times, so you… it doesn't feel like they change the concept, and everything is where it's always been. We have good track of everything.* (Molly)

When in store, participants used mobile devices to locate the products in the store increasing the chances of a total independent and frictionless shopping experience by being in control.

Additionally, basically all respondents showed a certain scepticism towards purchasing online from IKEA. When it comes to IKEA, customers want to a higher degree see, touch, and feel a product in reality before purchasing it. By buying in the store, they avoid surprises, minimises risks and take control.

> *Preferably, I want to see what the product looks like in real life. I think it's hard to judge on the basis of a picture. I believe I often return the things I buy online. I'm often dissatisfied.* (Greta)

The risk of ordering something online, which afterwards might be unsatisfying is simply not worth it. Especially larger and more expensive products, which equal larger risks. Even if the website is seen as functional by the majority of the respondents, the visual display of the products is for some not good enough. Molly and Elias, who have been planning project of larger scales in comparison to other respondents, expressed a frustration over the difficulty to get a quick overview of all associated pieces.

Further, ordering online is also associated with the inconvenience of home delivery and the consequence of having to be home on standby for the delivery to arrive. As the current service offered today is seen as unpredictable and unreliable by the respondents, it makes customers lose control of the situation. It is not on their own conditions. Some respondents acknowledged this factor, in relation to high expenses, to make them avoid this service, although they would like to. Similarly, a loss of control can be illustrated from when Molly and Elias had problems with the return process of a product purchased online.

> *First, we'd been granted a time when they'd come and collect the damaged wardrobe door. It was a Friday, between five and eight. [...] You'd to leave work early to be home and wait for them, but then they called and informed us that they didn't have received a delivery time. So, it got cancelled! [...] In the end I called everything off and drove it back myself.* (Elias)

4.4 Underlying Themes of Inconvenience

What can be observed in this explored context is that the phases a customer journey is built upon is similar to the ones in prior literature: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase, post-purchase evaluation, and disposal (Blackwell, Miniard & Engel, 2000). However, the phases are not as clearly distinguished from each other as customers' behaviour is being influenced by technology. The empirical material gathered from this study can therefore instead be seen to support the conceptualisation of customer journeys by e.g. Court et al. (2009), where digital touchpoints have made it more fluid. Further, digitisation has empowered the customers, who are now able to move across channels to perform pre-evaluations of services happening in final phases (Rigby, 2011; Faulds et al., 2018). This requires IKEA to understand how consumers might examine the whole purchasing process at an early stage. Customers having constant access to online features increases the opportunity to go through the stages of customer journeys in a more dialectical way, noted to facilitate and improve the customer experience. Thus, when customers chose to combine online and offline, it provides them with better overviews over the entire shopping process at IKEA. Consequently, giving them more control, and also an increased perception of convenience, which could be observed in findings from the interviews in this study.

In agreement with Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002), the findings of this study reflect the conceptualisation of convenience as the time and effort it takes to acquire a product or service, where a minimisation of both time and effort is perceived as convenient. Although the time spent was a factor often mentioned by respondents, it was possible to observe that the frustration they felt was not limited to the time aspect. Rather it was because they could not control it. The desire to be independent and avoid unnecessary disruptions which would slow down the respondent was clear, for example everyone praised the self-checkout with the explanation to save time. Thus, in accordance to findings in previous research (Lee & Allaway, 2002; Collier & Sherrell, 2010), convenience and minimisation of time are achieved by having control. Similarly, waiting for occupied personnel to become available also caused dissatisfaction. Where Collier and Sherell (2010) found costumers' use of self-service technology in stores was led by their want to be control, this study observed how consumers gain control already at the preparation stage.

Noted in this study, the key to avoid these unwanted distractions is therefore to gain control by preparations, allowing the consumers to be completely self-reliant. Exemplified by performing research online in advance and also by using devices in the store, this study observed that the respondents reduce the uncertainty and reinforce the image of being independent and in control. The understanding of convenience to be something more than just customers' perception of time and effort can be traced back to the work of Kelley (1958), where convenience also was linked to the expenditure of physical and nervous energy. As stated by Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002), the perception of service convenience will vary depending on individual preferences. Hence, it is possible that preferences can reflect cultural values and in this study on the Swedish consumer market it becomes apparent. In this context, the values of independence and control seems to be connected to the creation of negative energy in particular, which would be in line with Kelley's (1958) understanding of convenience. Undeniably, there is still an existing link between time and effort to convenience. However, to enable consumers to minimise time and effort, they must be given control and be allowed independence. When these two values are violated, consumers experience inconvenience. Therefore, situations of inconvenience occurred more often among respondents without access to a car since IKEA's distant location becomes a barrier in itself when you need to be dependent on others to access the store.

The belief that online shopping offers more convenience in comparison to traditional stores (Chen & Chang, 2003; Chiang & Dholakia, 2003) was not confirmed with the respondents' image of IKEA. Although using, and satisfied, with the first online dimensions conceptualised by Jiang, Yang and Jun (2013), respondents used these in a preparatory purpose before going to the store. This demonstrates the complexity of multi-and omnichannel stores which neither Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002) nor Jiang, Yang and Jun (2013) take into consideration. In opposition to showrooming (trying clothes offline before ordering online), this study found that IKEA customers seem to organise their purchases in advance with help from the website, but shop at the store. Thereof, they are moving between both spheres to tailor a customer journey of their preference (Rigby, 2011). The reason why respondents chose not to continue their journey online and order the product there, is noted to be connected to avoid uncertainty. Since the process of home delivery requires consumers to be available most of the day, and also perceived as fairly expensive, it was not seen as a relevant option Where online shopping may provide consumers with control over certain processes, other aspects are lost. For example, an accurate evaluation of furniture appearance becomes rather difficult. This is easier to achieve in the physical store. Although the requirement of a car, and the loud and crowded visits could be overcome by shopping online, the option was of seemingly low relevance to the respondents. Moreover, respondents' strong preferences for shopping at physical stores seemed to be rooted in a habitual tradition taking departure in IKEA's long Swedish history and a willingness to avoid troublesome home delivery processes and the risk to misjudge products online.

Notable, although the consumers often use the advantages of both offline and online in their customer journey to reinforce their independence and control, there are still processes that are seen unpredictable or force customers to rely on others.

4.4.1 Obstacles to Explore Further

Insights into which types of obstacles that were most frequently perceived as inconvenient, were gathered after reviewing all individual interviews. However, the purpose of the thesis is focusing on exploring community platforms' role in overcoming these obstacles, therefore, a limitation of only furthering explore identified obstacles outside the store was set. So, even though a portion of the respondents experienced aspects of inconvenience inside the store, these obstacles were of less practical and implicational interest.

With this limitation in mind, there are three moments along the consumer journey that were significantly causing inconvenience. These three obstacles were: transportation to and from the store, home delivery, and getting rid of products once they had served their purpose or had broken.

> *The products aren't the most troublesome, it's to get the products to oneself so to speak. And getting to the store.* (Cornelia)

> *Well, that's what's tricky with shopping furniture, that's the process of it being ungainly, heavy... hard to transport. That's what mostly makes me go gaaaah... Well it's annoying.* (Maria)

> *Well, at the same time, there's also a cost of going to [the recycling station] and throw things. [...] And also it costs time.* (David)

From here on these obstacles will be referred to as: Transportation, Home delivery, and Disposal. Next chapter will continue with the exploration of how these could be overcome through the integration of community platforms for services.

5 Exploring Community Platform for Services' Potential to Enhance Convenience

In this chapter, consumers' attitudes towards community platforms will be investigated. The obstacles - transportation, home delivery, and disposal - identified from previous chapter will constitute the areas of value to observe. After the findings from the two focus groups been demonstrated, a reflective analysis of what potential community platforms for services has to overcome these obstacles is presented.

5.1 Attitudes Towards Community Platforms for Services

All participants in the focus groups had in some way used a community platform for services and expressed a fairly positive attitude towards the concept. However, they were also associated with many problems. Among the focus groups, there was an existing belief, that the quality of services provided through community platforms could be inconsistent. The possibility to use rating functions in community platforms such as Uber and TripAdvisor to validate the quality and reduce uncertainty, was looked upon with scepticism. Jonathan in one of the focus groups, described it as:

> *Well, I think it's good if it's handled in a correct manner, because you can very easily sabotage for people when you rate them...Like it might be customers that act like pigs and then rate their chauffeur badly. So, it has to be a way to filter out these ratings and that's a really hard thing to do. But, if you could know which ratings that are genuine and which one that are written by idiots, then you could use ratings as a way to help future users and that's really good.*

Similarly, Alexandra argued:

> *The [ratings] are a bit weird because you've so different expectations. They don't always match... I think I often experience that good restaurants have bad ratings because many people perhaps think that the price is too high.*

Therefore, the respondents confirmed to read reviews, but showed an eagerness to criticise what was written. When a service had a consistently positive or negative comment section, the respondents felt as the information might be manipulated or false. Furthermore, a certain apprehension towards the aspects of trusting regular people instead of authorised personnel could be noted. Participants appreciated to verify users on beforehand, lowering the feeling of uncertainty by gaining control and thus being more likely to proceed the interaction with a stranger. In contrast to respondents' scepticism towards using rating as a verification of quality, they still believed reviews may help them to feel safe when going to interact with someone they have not met before. Thus, showing an ambiguous attitude towards how vital previous reviews are. Much of the communication with the other part is seemingly taken place solely online but could also require meetings in real life. Sometimes these interactions were associated with awkward situations. "Last time we had [an Uber driver] who said he was deaf, but he wasn't. He just didn't want to talk to us, haha.", Alexandra said.

Moreover, when the platform only function as a mediator and conversation primary is taking place with another participant, it might become difficult to understand who to hold responsible in case of faults.

> *It was very easy to get in contact with [the hosts], they gave us a map some days before departure and informed us where the key was and all that stuff. So, it was very easy and convenient, but then the radiator didn't work so we emailed them to have it fixed [...] It was never solved.* (Hanna)

On the other hand, community platforms possess obvious advantages and was therefore embraced by users in the focus groups. It was apparent that the strengths of community platforms lie in people's belief that they provide a service that in comparison to the traditional corresponding offer, is both cheaper and sometimes even more convenient.

> *The best feature of a platform is that they can remove some of their expenses and therefore, potentially, provide a better service and better...like, more quality for the price. If you don't need to pay for a big hotel, you only have to pay for the service of connecting people, then you can charge a smaller fee in comparison to the hotel. So, everyone can have a better experience. Potentially, I mean.* (Jonathan)

Community platforms are perceived as smooth since they are easy to access through apps in phones and the process often described as quick and simple. In connection to the transactional stages, respondents showed a need to have control. They seized this control by overviewing the entire process, so when certain websites did not provide that opportunity, the control was lost.

> *It's to be very visual, so that I clearly can see what's happening; what I'm currently doing and what's next in the process. I hate it when I'm paying online and don't know what's going to happen when I press 'Next'. Am I receiving an invoice or am I going to pay with my card? I'm not really sure what's going on. I really like when you can see "This is what is happening, this is what's going to happen in the next step."* (Hanna)

This is however an overall perception of community platforms usage for services, the respondents' experiences and attitudes towards specific platforms differed depending on their purpose.

5.2 Transportation

Many of the respondents in the first set of interviews perceived the transportation to and from the IKEA store as a current obstacle in the customer journey. The stores are located far away from the cities and customers who did not own a car experienced inconvenience when not being able to go to IKEA whenever they wanted. Going to the store with public transportation was not seen as an attractive option, as this takes longer time, creates more struggle and is hard to transport packages on. So, at first sight, the opportunity of IKEA integrating a service through a community platform to facilitate this process, naturally felt intriguing.

Interestingly, the focus groups saw higher risks of becoming dependent on others by using community platforms for transportation. Even though there are some environmental benefits of carpooling with people already going to the store, respondents predicted many complications to arise. It was explained as likely to cause stressful situations, knowing that you must adjust your visit to someone else, or find yourself waiting for the person driving to finish their shopping. Where respondents in the focus groups acknowledged they usually went to IKEA with help from their family members, they clarified to feel more comfortable when going with their relatives in comparison to complete strangers. The time spent in the store is difficult for customers to estimate and if being forced to organise the practical arrangement in advance, they would no longer be independent. The respondents thought this would take away the charm of shopping at IKEA. Further, other questions of the practical arrangement arose:

> *But if you're going with somebody else, who'll get most of the space in the trunk? Like, "I can most likely not buy that shelf because it'll not fit into the car of those I'm here with".* (Mikael)

Hence, to integrate the customer journey with a community platform for carpooling was unanimously rejected as it could not provide the level of independence and control required. Solving the logistical aspect of minimising waiting times was according to the focus groups the most challenging part. The opportunity to implement a transportation service which would be both efficient and sustainable was according to the focus groups unlikely. Moreover, the respondents often drew parallels to the existing platform Uber when visualising how such services would look like. This illustration demonstrates an oversaturated market where consumers already have access to similar services.

> *It's the carpooling to and from the store that's of value to distribute, and that's somehow already possible to do with other platforms, such as Uber for example.* (Jonathan)

Thereof, the implementation of such service in the customer journey of IKEA, was met with great scepticism.

5.3 Home Delivery

The initial interviews with respondents revealed that IKEA's service of home delivery was perceived as problematic. Firstly, the cost was seen as too expensive to justify the benefits it provides. Secondly, the service is seen to be not flexible enough as it demands customers to be available for larger parts of the day. The issue is acknowledged by Sarah: "We aren't good enough. Absolutely not. We need to create narrower time intervals and greater possibilities to adjust [delivery location and time]."

In response to this issue, IKEA has in some parts of the country introduced certain pick-up-centres, located within shorter distances from the city centres than the stores. Here, customers are able to collect their orders at their time of choice. Although this service offers greater flexibility in contrast to home delivery, it still requires participants to have access to a vehicle and can therefore not be considered as a universal solution. It also lacks the benefit of having the products delivered directly into the house without having to carry them yourself.

Few respondents of the focus group could see how a home delivery with unspecified time of arrival would be preferred over going to the store at a later time. The reluctance was expressed in agreement with customers from the first interviews, emphasising the uncertainty of what time the delivery would arrive.

> *How often do you really need an IKEA furniture piece at this instant, right? The annoying part would then instead be more like standing and waiting for the furniture to be delivered.* (Cecilia)

What is of priority is not to instantly get access to products, but an ability to specify the time of arrival. The annoyance of having to wait for the delivery to arrive for an uncertain amount of time is an established problem as it often forces the consumer to be on standby in their homes for a longer time span. The frustration is exemplified by Erika: “It sucks! ‘I’ll drop by between 09-16 today.’ - ‘Well okay, good, because I‘ve no life’, haha. Yeah, it sucks”. Once again, the obstacle is emerged from the customer’s loss of control and dependence on others. Therefore, it was declared to be a superior advantage if a community platform for services could enable shorter time intervals. Additional functions, such as being able to geographically track the delivery, was also desired. Even though IKEA has added the opportunity for consumers to collect order at pick-up-points, the focus groups clarified such strategy to not be of relevance without cars.

If IKEA would offer customers to have their delivery taken care of through a community platform, the focus groups saw no problem with the fact that the retailer would promote a service which was technically not owned by them. Due to the trust respondents have in IKEA, they would be confident in using it and assume IKEA had verified the quality in advance to meet the retailer’s criteria. Seemingly, the respondents would not be able to distinguish the service provider from IKEA and therefore still perceive it as the delivery was done by IKEA. Thus, all processes relating to the ordering or receiving goods would automatically be associated with the retailer.

> *It's also a challenge, since you have such strong associations to IKEA, it's convenient and it's safe. You know what to expect. There is much to lose if a service like this would fail. It would perhaps affect the brand, like super negatively… in comparison to what they could gain.* (Markus)

> *But although IKEA is responsible of organising the delivery, you can't ignore the fact that they're still in charge until the order is delivered. I don't know how you could outsource such process without IKEA being held responsible for the delivery.* (Mikael)

The focus groups showed concern of the environment by expressing a want that such service would not encourage unnecessarily car trips by platform users. Although there might be some potential in a community platform that connects users with people going to IKEA, taking up orders and deliver them on the way back, disbelief was shown.

> *...It's difficult to predict for how long they'll stay, so there I think we would have the same problem again [with unspecified times]. Otherwise you must have somebody who transports your products exclusively - a private chauffeur. But that would be pretty… I'd see it as quite unnecessary. In terms of costs, but I'd neither be comfortable with a car driving around with my chair back and forth.* (Alexandra)

Furthermore, the service of having something brought directly into your home is highly praised as both "a luxury" and "super convenient" as this "emancipates much time that could be used to other things". Cecilia stated that if she had the money, she would probably use home deliveries even more, consolidating that money is an important factor in the decision making of using services.

5.4 Disposal

IKEA takes the disposal dimension into consideration when mapping the customer journey and encourages consumers to behave in a sustainable manner. In addition to inspire customers to redesign their old furniture, Sarah explained the C2C second hand market to be an interesting aspect in how to prolong the life-cycle of products. Referring to existing online platforms where customers can get in contact with potential buyers, she demonstrated how IKEA not necessarily needs to solve all problems as consumers often possess abilities to do so themselves. The individual interviews showed the disposal dimension to include some obstacles, in particular when the respondents did not have access to a car.

For participants in the focus groups, sustainability was of main concern when talking about products that had fulfilled their purpose. The need of merely having a service which helps consumers throwing used furniture was recognised as appealing by the respondents and gave emphasis to the sustainable aspect of it. They made comparisons to different clothing stores where consumers can hand in old textiles to be recycled and advocated for a similar service for furniture to exist. However, for practical reasons, these products had to be picked up at home.

> *Would somebody come and get them? I'd be all in for that! I mean, really. I know my parents have like three drawers that are heavy and ungainly which they now are just staring at and don't know what to do with. If somebody would say "We'll drop by and pick up your furniture" - I'd reply: "Welcome!". I've handed in clothes to [a clothing store] because it's easy and convenient. It's really good.* - Hanna

Even though the recycling aspect was recognised to be important by the majority, they valued even more if they could sell or give the used products to someone else. Participants held C2C platforms that enabled them to sell their products at reasonable prices in high regard and appreciated when the buyer picked up the sold item at their place. To prolong a product's life cycle was always preferred if possible, as this "increases the utility for the society" and make consumers feel as they have contributed to something good. In accordance with Sarah, the focus groups concluded that although they would like their furniture to go to new homes, there is no need for IKEA to collaborate with a community platform to facilitate this since the available buy-and-sell platforms fulfil their purpose. Besides the risk of encouraging customers to take part in a wear-and-tear culture, respondents believed it could disrupt the business for charity stores which are run through customers' donations of second hand furniture.

When respondents discussed the potential to include a service which would collect consumers' used furniture, they were concerned that it could lead to functional furniture being wasted. Therefore, the service should primarily focus on recycling broken products, as customers expressed greater acceptance of them being thrown. This would be especially beneficial for those having problems with transporting bigger products to the recycling station or without access to a car. This type of service would also provide IKEA with more associations to sustainability, which some respondents meant would be in-line with IKEA's already sustainable image, but according to other respondents, would help IKEA in overcoming the image of facilitating a wear-and-tear culture. The idea of having someone to come to your house and pick up your old furniture, was met with ambivalence. The thought Once again showing that control and independence cannot be violated for a community platform to be lucrative.

> *If I'd have to pay for it, it definitely has to be easy and smooth. Then, it can't be any struggle or a premise that I'd have to stay at home an entire day for someone to come fetch my stuff. [...] They should come, and they should carry… I shouldn't have to do anything myself, someone has to come and get it.* (Hanna)

> *It should be like...everything has to be gone, when you come back home.* (Marcus)

5.5 Qualities of Importance in Community Platforms for Services

As stated by Kenney and Zysman (2016), platforms are built on offering users corresponding services at a lower price, which also is the primary reason why participants of the focus groups are using them. Similarly, what can be noted in the empirical collection is that for community platforms for services to be of relevance in the IKEA customer journey, they have to offer a service at a lower cost than the traditional competition.

One of the other most prominent observations was the users' requirement to feel safe when interacting with an unknown individual through a platform. Validation was often achieved through available comments and reviews written by other participants, where the platform enabled enough trust for respondents to proceed, in agreement with statements by Parker, Van Alstyne and Choudary (2016). Additionally, it is possible to observe a need of security in terms of financial transactions, another aspect platforms aim to provide (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019), where familiar payment methods were of preference.

Furthermore, in order for a community platform for services to be accepted, emphasis should be given to being easy and convenient to use. The perception of such characteristics is given by introducing the user to as few steps as possible while simultaneously illustrate the process so that the user can obtain a holistic view. By doing so, the consumer will feel confident and know what to expect. Similarly, as mentioned in the previous chapter, this provides the user with a feeling of control and therefore will perceive it as convenient.

In conclusion, to ensure that a community platform for services is attractive to the consumers of IKEA, it should meet the criteria of affordable and secure services through ease-of-use functions. These findings are in line with the general qualifications of a platform stressed by previous literature (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016; Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019).

5.6 The Potential with Community Platforms for Services for IKEA

Existing obstacles in the customer journey are primary bound to infraction of consumers' independence and control. Those in connection to transportation, home delivery, and disposal have, based on findings from individual interviews, been considered appropriate to explore further in the setting of community platforms. As concluded, there is seemingly low potential for IKEA to implement services connected to community platforms to facilitate consumers' transportation to and from the store. Such service does not meet the criteria of independence and control required for customers to perceive convenience. Instead there are greater opportunities in exploring how home-delivery and disposal could become more convenient. If IKEA can enhance customers' perception of convenience within these areas, competitive advantages are likely to be achieved (Chang et al., 2010).

Findings from the collected data show that customers feel that being available most of the day to receive an order is unreasonable and time-consuming, thus inconvenient according to the conceptualisation of Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002). Since the distribution process constitutes a vital factor within the dimensions of convenience perceived in online shopping (Jun, Yang & Kim, 2003), it is important to meet consumers' requirements on delivery. Precise delivery times are prioritised over speed, exemplifying how consumers value their own time consumption. Consumers will experience greater control if they have the possibility to adjust the time of delivery based on their preferences. This will reduce the current risk perception of using home delivery and is likely to result in increased customer satisfaction (Lee & Allaway, 2002). Besides the received goods, the service to access them becomes a commodity itself and brings added value to the customer (Gröönros, 2008). Confirmed by Sarah, the logistic point of view causes challenges how to meet consumers' criteria on flexibility, while online sales continue to increase. This finding reveals potential for how to improve the distribution process by including community platforms. By collaboration with a community platform specialised in delivery services, participants connected to the platform could collect consumers' orders and deliver them at the door. Since platforms benefit from assets of participants, no further investment in inventories are required for IKEA, instead it could be compared to outsourcing (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016). These drivers would be individuals who already have access to vans or other transport vehicles, and function as additional resources for IKEA to distribute orders. Simultaneously, likely to have a more favourable attitude towards flexible working hours in comparison to logistics companies operating directly under IKEA, enabling the requirement of consumers to be in control of the exact delivery time. Packages could be picked up by the participant at either pick-up-points or IKEA's online warehouses. This is an approach not so different from the business of platforms such as Uber (McKee, 2017).

To avoid unnecessary middlemen, communication should take place between participants, without involvement of IKEA, regarding preferred delivery time and take place in the app of the platform provider. This would strengthen the perception of a frictionless customer experience, necessary to create a convenient customer experience (Edelman & Singer, 2015). Data from the empirical collection reveals it is important to know who to contact in case of faults, if not, consumers might experience frustration and uncertainty. Further, users are seen being unlikely to separate IKEA from the platform, which could result in confusion on who is responsible if a problem with the service would occur. Thus, clear contact information on available customer service is essential where the retailer might be at risk if not having good strategies in how to have work closely with the platform. Confidence for IKEA is expressed, and consumers will therefore have trust in using a service distributed through a community platform in connection to shopping at IKEA, judgement they would base on IKEA's recommendation.

Exploration within the disposal dimension revealed findings of mixed character. With a saturated market of platforms where consumers can sell their old furniture, along with a concern to outcompete charity stores, there is no legitimate reason for IKEA to cooperate with community platforms with emphasis on second hand. With dedication to sustainability, recycling of broken furniture was seen to have a more sincere motive. Collected data shows the process to discard damaged furniture to be a fairly bothersome process due to the time and effort required in going to the recycle station. However, similar to findings made present for home deliveries, consumers who owned a car valued the freedom to go whenever they wanted. The prime obstacle is for those without car who instead must depend on others to help them.

Where all respondents were in favour of sustainability, their opinions on IKEA' contribution to it differed and was described to be both an ambassador and a provocateur. No matter of what perspective, IKEA's position would be strengthened by the inclusion of a community platform for services which facilitates for consumers to take care of products' final phase in a decent manner. Mutual value between participants achieved through platforms is usually associated to a win-win situation between user and producers (Parker, Van Alstyne & Choudary, 2016), however, here it is possible to observe another scenario of shared value. IKEA can benefit from spill overs of showing to take responsible for the environment as well as the products through the implementation of a community platform focused on recycling products that no longer fulfil their purpose.

6 Concluding Chapter

In this final chapter the research questions are answered, and conclusions are drawn. Further, the chapter presents the theoretical and practical contributions of the study. Lastly, limitations of research and suggestions for future research is presented.

6.1 Conclusion

This thesis commenced by illustrating the increasingly competitive retail environment and the need to provide consumers with greater level of convenience. Since community platforms for services have been adopted by the society through offering efficient solutions, the potential for retailers to integrate these along the consumer journey has in this study been proposed. By investigating consumers' perceptions and attitudes on the Swedish consumer market, findings will be presented based on following research questions:

- What obstacles are perceived by customers in the current customer journey and why?
- What role can community platforms play in helping customers overcome such obstacles?
- What attitudes towards the usage of community platforms for services do consumers possess?

This study has shown that consumers perceive inconvenience in phases of the customer journey whenever obstacles interfere with their independence and control. IKEA is seen as a less joyful store to visit when it is crowded since customers must adjust to other visitors and processes might take longer time than estimated. Besides the moments of inconvenience that occurred in the physical store, three obstacles in the consumer journey were made salient. These were: transportation to and from the store, home delivery, and disposal.

To facilitate the process of overcoming these obstacles, inclusion of community platforms for services possess some potential. However, it became evident no such potential existed in terms of transportation to and from the store since it would not enable the required level of independence and control. Moreover, consumers can already access similar solutions on their own and thus no need for IKEA to adapt similar services. Instead, community platforms tied to home delivery or discard of broken furniture are noted to have greater chances of being well received by users.

Consumers strive to control the precise delivery time of online orders, a criterion that IKEA does not meet with their current services. In addition to their existing delivery procedures, a community platform with participants, willing to collect packages and deliver these to consumers at more flexible hours, could therefore be implemented. This could be functioning as a strategy to provide consumers with value in terms of more control hence experiencing the home delivery process as more convenient.

In regard to sustainability and charity stores, it was found not to be relevant for IKEA to implement any further services facilitating the consumers' process of getting rid of functional furniture. To avoid encouragement of throwing away furniture which instead could go to good causes, and thus going against the want to let products live on as long as possible, acceptance was shown to broken products only. Consumers aim to recycle in appropriate manner, while throwing furniture requires both time and effort, and becomes a burden without access to transportation vehicle. Thereof, the service to have someone who takes care of it for you indicates potential. Further, by collaboration with such community platform, IKEA shows responsibility for the environment, hence is likely to achieve favourable attitudes from users.

Furthermore, this study revealed an overall positive attitude towards community platforms for services and associated them with receiving corresponding quality to a lower price. Most of all, respondents must feel safe using a platform, where uncertainty is reduced by providing the user a good overview of required steps together with familiar payment methods. There is a hesitation to interact with strangers, however feedback and comments by other participants can lower the barrier.

6.2 Practical Contributions

This study reinforces the recommendation for retailers to ensure that consumers are provided with a high level of convenience. A broader understanding of what situations causing feelings of inconvenience has been presented, describing the need for consumers to be independent and in control. These insights have some merit to them, as they can be beneficial for retailers to have in mind when shaping customer experiences and making them as convenient as possible. Further, the authors have reinforced price, ease-of-use and security as characteristics of importance for users of a community platform for services.

This thesis has further contributed with empirical data on consumers' attitudes towards community platforms for services in the IKEA customer journey. The results are of direct practical relevance for IKEA. In particular, how the implementation of platforms can be used to overcome obstacles experienced by their customers. This study reveals potential for IKEA to integrate community platforms for services in the phases of home delivery and disposal. Thus, the authors recommend IKEA to further, with more resources, analyse the opportunities there is for these departments to implement such strategies, and what type of community platforms that could be of relevance to include in the Swedish market, for example TaskRabbit.

6.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study's primary contribution to the academic field is its exploration of how community platforms for services can be integrated and used in retailer's customer journey. In accordance with previous authors, community platforms for services possess much potential in how to enhance convenience for its users. However, the phenomenon has not previously been investigated within the context of a retailer's customer journey in order to facilitate customers' experience. Therefore, findings from the case driven empirical material brings value to the field for how community platforms for services may be implemented Moreover, the study has through qualitative methods identified obstacles and explored possibilities to use community platforms as resources to overcome them, where a deeper understanding of what types of aspects and circumstances are influencing the potential has been obtained. Moreover, it demonstrates how consumers' acceptance to use a service provided by a third party is dependent on the retailers' reputation in terms of trust.

Where much prior research has landed in a certain conceptualisation of convenience based on time and effort, this study has provided the academic field with argumentation for an extension of the universal theoretical conceptualisation. This thesis' understanding of what causes consumers' perception of convenience is in line with previous research but does also demonstrate the themes of independence and control to be of importance. Hence, contributing with supplementary knowledge how convenience is achieved by inclusion of these values. Further, as previous research merely studied service convenience in either an offline or online context, this study aimed to fill a gap where convenience in a multi-and omnichannel was explored. Even when consumers are moving between the online and physical, it was found that consumers' behaviour is in accordance to previous framework. Thus, this study confirms the previous works, while simultaneously illustrating how these can be used in contexts where distinctions between the physical and digital is increasingly abstract.

6.4 Limitations

As noted, this study has taken place within the Swedish retail context of IKEA. Hence, the findings from this study has most merit in related areas of business operating on the Swedish furniture market.

The study has been limited to a number of eight interviews with eleven customers, one key individual at IKEA and only included a sum of nine participants in the focus groups. Even though, these numbers were satisfying in terms of quality and data saturation, an even bigger number would increase the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the study has been geographically limited with a majority of the respondents living in small-or-medium sized cities and might therefore not represent the opinions of consumer groups living in bigger cities. Similarly, the focus groups were restrained to participants of a certain age and occupation, and might therefore not be able to capture a general understanding of consumers' attitudes towards community platforms for services in the IKEA customer journey.

6.5 Future Research

This study has been conducted within the scope of the large furniture and home-interior retailer IKEA in Sweden. More research is required to establish a comprehensive understanding in what potential community platforms for services possess in an omnichannel context. Initially, it would be of relevance to recreate the study in another geographical location, where IKEA is not as entrenched in the citizens' consumption culture. Considering that this study has treated convenience as a social construction and as the findings point towards it being influenced by cultural values, it would be of interest for future studies to also study the subject within another culture to see how the conceptualisation of perceived convenience might differ.

Several questions remain to be resolved, in particular whether consumers' attitudes would be consistent when exploring a retailer of another product category and/or company size. With the knowledge that IKEA customers often purchase bigger furniture when shopping, the transportation and delivery aspect has in this case been influencing the types of community platforms. This might not be the case in other retailer's customer journeys.

As this study indicates, the omni-channel elements of the customer journey have some potential to influence customers' perception of convenience. Thereof, it calls for a new framework for measuring service convenience as the old frameworks might fail to capture the entire range of service in a multi-channel context. It may provide retailers with further insights into how they can measure and enhance service convenience in a digitised and modern society.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide for Customers

Background

- How often do you shop at IKEA?
- Do you shop in store or online?
- Are the store visits usually planned on beforehand?
- Why do you shop at IKEA?

Decision Convenience/Search Convenience/Evaluation Convenience:

- Before going to IKEA, how do your preparations look like?
- Do you already know on in advance what to buy?
- Do you search for any information in advance?
- Do you check stock status?
- When ordering online, how do you perceive the credibility that the product will correspond to reality?

Access Convenience:

- What do you think about the process of going to IKEA?
- How do you perceive the opening hours of IKEA?
- How do you experience the website?
- What digital device do you use?

Benefit Convenience

- What do you think about the shopping experience at IKEA?
- What do you think about shopping in general?
- When in store, how do you experience the process of locating the products you want?
- What are your thoughts about the time required to shop at IKEA?
- Is it possible to shop quickly at IKEA?
- How do you perceive the availability of personnel/customer service?
- How do you perceive the service provided by IKEA?

Transaction Convenience

- How do you experience the payment process at IKEA?

- What payment method do you prefer?

Post-Benefit Convenience

- How do you experience the home transport of goods after purchase in store?
- What do you think about the assembly process?
- How do you perceive the possibility to return/reclaim a product?
- How do you perceive the offer of home delivery?
- When the life cycle of a product from IKEA is finished, how do you proceed?
- How do you experience this process?

Ending of Interview

- What do you perceive to be convenient with shopping at IKEA? Why?
- What do you perceive to be inconvenient with shopping at IKEA? Why?
- Is there anything you find to cause anxiety with shopping at IKEA?
- Is there anything else you wish to add, related to the shopping process at IKEA?

Appendix B: Interview Guide for IKEA

1. Could you tell us a bit more what your position involves?
2. What does the term ‘customer journey’ mean to you and for IKEA?
3. From a Swedish consumer market perspective, are there different versions of the customer journey?
4. What does a typical customer journey look like?
5. Has the customer journey changed due to digitisation? How?
6. What challenges exist within the customer journey?
7. How is IKEA currently working to provide customers with a convenient customer experience?
8. Many of our respondents associated ‘shopping at IKEA’ to be bound to shopping at the warehouse and see it as an experience which includes visits to the restaurant and the showrooms, before they enter the storage area. Is this behaviour something that is representable for a ‘typical Swedish consumer’?
9. Although many of them experience the visit as mainly positive, there are negative comments of the visit often taking longer time than estimated. Is it possible to observe how consumers experience the required time when shopping at IKEA?
10. How is it possible for consumers to perceive shopping at IKEA as convenient without having access to a car?
11. To what extent do Swedish consumers shop online at IKEA?
12. Although some of our respondents experience the warehouse to be located far away and less enjoyable when crowded - elements that would disappear if they ordered online - it is still possible to note they perceive a barrier to shop online since they, as previously mentioned, so strongly associate IKEA with visiting the warehouse. Is it a challenge for IKEA to be so well associated with the warehouse to the extent that the web shop ends up in the background?
13. What does the experience look like when a Swedish customer orders a product online, from the moment the customer sent in the order?
14. Is there anything customers experience less satisfying with the online ordering process?
15. How can the experience of ordering online be improved?
16. Some of our respondents expressed a frustration towards home deliveries since it requires them to be on hold for a large part of that day in order to receive the order. Are there any plans on how this will be improved?

17. Does IKEA take into consideration what customers do with their furniture after the products' life cycle has ended?
18. Does IKEA have any insights in how consumers experience the process of getting rid of their furniture?
19. From a consumer perspective, what process within the customer journey is perceived to have the greatest potential to be improved?
20. What expectations does IKEA believe customers will have in the future?

Appendix C: Interview Guide for Focus Groups

Experience of Shopping at IKEA

- What associations do you have regarding shopping at IKEA?
- How do you experience the shopping process at IKEA?
- How do you experience the process of going to and from the warehouse?
- Have you ever used a home delivery service from IKEA?
- What do you do with furniture when their life cycles have ended? How do you experience that process?

Attitude Towards Platforms

- What is a platform to you? What associations does it bring?
- Have you ever used a platform for a service before? How did you experience it?
- How come that you use platforms for services?
- Are there any obstacles in using platforms?
- Why do you think others use service platforms?

Transportation

- Do you think IKEA would be able to use platforms for services related to transport to and from the warehouse?
    - Is there a need for IKEA to fill using platforms for services related to transport to and from the warehouse?
    - How would such a service look like?
    - Are there any negative or positive aspects of using community platforms for services related to transport to and from the warehouse?
    - What would be important in that type of service?
    - What risks could there be for IKEA to include third party firms in that service? How can one overcome these?
    - How should this service be communicated to consumers?
    - Where should information on this service be available?

Home Delivery

- Do you think IKEA would be able to use platforms for services related to home delivery?
    - Is there a need for IKEA to fill using platforms for services related to home delivery?
    - How would such a service look like?
    - Are there any negative or positive aspects of using community platforms for services related to home delivery?
    - What would be important in that type of service?
    - What risks could there be for IKEA to include third party firms in that service? How can one overcome these?
    - Instead of having products delivered to the home, it is beneficial for consumers to collect their order at a pick-up-point which in comparison to the warehouse is within closer distance. Despite this service, would it still be relevant to explore the possibility to include platforms for services to facilitate for consumers to receive their order?
    - How should this service be communicated to consumers?
    - Where should information on this service be available?

Disposal

- Do you think IKEA would be able to use platforms for services related to disposal?
    - Is there a need for IKEA to fill using platforms for services related to home delivery?
    - How would such a service look like?
    - Are there any negative or positive aspects of using community platforms for services related to disposal?
    - What would be important in that type of service?
    - What risks could there be for IKEA to include third party firms in this service? How can one overcome these?
    - IKEA is currently testing the service of collecting consumers' e.g. old sofa in relation to the purchase of a new one. Despite this service, would it still be relevant to explore the possibility of including platforms for services to facilitate for consumers to get rid of their old furniture?

- How should this service be communicated to consumers?
- Where should information on this service be available?