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SNAKES & LADDERS:

S-T-O-R-I-E-S of The Physical Store

A qualitative study referred to the role of the physical store in the high involvement products industry.

by

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Abstract

Title: Snakes & Ladders: S-T-O-R-I-E-S of The Physical Store. A qualitative study referred to the role of the physical store in the high involvement products industry.
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Thesis purpose: This research aims to identify the role of the physical store within the high involvement products buying process in the context of an omnichannel customer journey. Furthermore, we aim to recreate an entirely new customer journey based on the importance of creating epic customer experiences, both in-store and online channels, by integrating an omnichannel strategy in the furniture industry.

Methodology: Based on a social constructionism stance and by applying an ontological relativism; we perceive that people are social actors, that influence in the role of the physical store in retail. We used an abductive approach, combining theories and empirical findings, to identify the role of the physical store in an omnichannel environment for the furniture industry.

Theoretical perspective: Related to the customer journey, we focused on collective journeys, purchase stages, the loop of customer experience, and multiple roles of the touchpoints. For the omnichannel we focused on those theories related to the impact of the technological advancements in the retail channel that creates seamless and holistic customer experience. We explored the impact of customer service. We used the theories mentioned before to find the role of the physical store.

Empirical data: We performed a single case study based on IKEA. We applied a multi-method qualitative study in a cross-sectional time horizon. To ensure the validity of our research, we performed a triangulation technique collecting data from in-depth interviews, diaries and netnography.

Findings/conclusions: We found three fundamental roles of the physical store in an omnichannel environment in the furniture industry. We named these roles as *"Business is Business", "Living the dream"* and *"Enlighten me!"*. Moreover, we created a new concept that explained the role of the brick-and-mortar concerning touchpoints, omnichannel and customer service, called ***S-T-O-R-I-E-S* (*S*ocial, *T*rialability, *O*perations, *R*evelations, *I*nspiration, *E*xperience, *S*ervice**).We have recreated a new customer journey framework. A circular view of the purchase stages, that refer to the infinitive loop of the customer experience.

Practical implications: First, the company strategy needs to evolve into an integrated omnichannel. Second, customer service is a crucial aspect for shoppers. Third, the physical store, design and ambience play a significant role for the customers. Last, practitioners can use our "S-T-O-R-I-E-S" and "Snakes & Ladders": Customer Journey model" frameworks, as tools to create their physical store strategies and customer journey mappings.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

1 Introduction[1]

Let us start this journey with two stories. Maria & Juan are a young couple who lives in Spain. They have been married for ten years and have two kids, 8 and 6 years old. Maria and Juan work every day, from 8 am to 5 pm. Maria likes to decorate the house; hence she is always looking for new styles, Juan is more passive in this aspect, but he is still involved in big buying decisions.

Furthermore, an essential aspect for them is to buy comfortable and functional furniture for the whole family. Maria loves to browse online, looking for the newest styles and trends while getting some inspiration. Juan prefers to read the reviews and compare prices. Moreover, they like going to their favourite furniture stores where they can get inspired by showrooms and a variety of products. This in-store experience is what motivates them to purchase.

Now let us introduce Anna & Frederik's story. They are newly weeds, without kids who live in Sweden. Both Anna and Frederik work from Monday to Friday from 9 am to 4 pm, but they do not spend that much time at home but instead prefer to go out together and meet their friends. The young couple's style is minimalistic, and this is reflected in their home decor. They prefer how things look, rather than how things feel. The couple visits physical stores sometimes because they like to check new styles in real spaces. Nevertheless, they rarely buy at the stores, but rather adore buying online, getting home delivery. When they buy furniture, the assembly part is one of their favourite activities, where the newly weeds can have fun together.

These two stories represent different customer journeys relating to furniture shopping and different approaches to the physical store. Recently, there has been a growing interest among practitioners related to the significance of the brick-and-mortar (von Briel, 2018) in an omnichannel (Alexander & Alvarado, 2017) environment and how this influences the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and translates into excellent customer experience and will enhance company performance and achieve great results (Norton & Pine, 2013).

[1] This text may contain parts of the Research proposal presented for BUSP 37 Research Strategy. IMBM 2019-2020. Lund University. Authors: Mihaela Pavalache & Sara Christensen

1.1 Background

We are focusing on the importance of the physical store in the omnichannel along the customer journey. Hence, we will introduce the background of these concepts briefly.

1.1.1 Physical Store

Several studies are tracking the latest changes in the retail market (von Briel, 2018). One of the topics that are getting more considerable attention is the role of the physical store (Alexander & Cano, 2019). In this study, we are defining the role of the physical store, as the function or purpose that brick-and-mortar has for the customers and how it influences the consumers along the customer journey. Up to 2015, there was a decreasing tendency of in-store consumer shopping, replaced by the online shopping channels, and some studies were predicting the death of the "brick-and-mortar" and the growth of the digital era (PWC, 2017, 2019). Nevertheless, recent studies are demonstrating that physical stores are still relevant for customers (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020), and according to the US Census Bureau, almost 90% of the retail sales were done in physical stores in 2019 (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2020). Even more, from the year 2016, there is a growing tendency among in-store and digital channels sales simultaneously (PWC, 2017, 2019). This tendency indicates that retailers understand that the brick-and-mortar needs to evolve by creating customer experiences that will continue attracting customers (Rigby, 2011; Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020).

The understanding of the phenomena of how customers are looking for valuable experiences allows the retailers to get knowledge about the role of the physical store, that is not only for buying purposes but to get involved in unique customer experience (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006; Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020). Besides, this will give the customers the possibility to get inspiration in the store and, respectively, share their experience on social media and other channels (Argo & Dahl, 2020; KPMG, 2019). By doing this, the customers show an engagement with the retailer and participate as co-creators in the customer experience (Ostrom et al., 2015). To fulfil the customers' expectations regarding physical stores, we believe the retailers have to focus more on customer experience and customer journey. Even more, recent studies corroborated the importance of the customer journey as a source of value creation towards the customers (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020).

Online channel integration is another crucial topic involved in the role of physical stores (Bell, Gallino & Moreno, 2014; Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017). New functions as “click-and-collect,” “ordering in-store,” “delivering to home,” “order online, return to store” are now giving a new sense to physical stores, bringing them back to action, being relevant for customers who are looking for a total experience across channels (Alexander & Cano, 2019; Bell, Gallino & Moreno, 2014). Indeed, in 2019 some digital companies experimented by opening physical stores after customers' requirements of having the in-store experience (Deloitte, 2020). As an illustration, online retailers such as Amazon, Alibaba, Zalando, and eBay, among others, are pioneers opening physical stores integrating technological tools that provide the customers with freedom like online shopping but with the in-store convenient experience (Wijnand, 2018). We concede that the opening of physical stores by well-known on-line retailers represents an opportunity and challenge for the traditional retailers to focus on increasing their in-store performance, which can boost its convenience for the customers.

The strength that traditional retailers have to fight against the incursion of online retailers in the physical world is their experience in delivering personal service (Carr, 2017). Face-to-face customer service is and will continue being one of the competitive advantages of the physical stores that also enhance the engagement of the customers with the retailers while perceiving personalize and unique experiences from the staff members (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006; Carr, 2017).

1.1.2 Omnichannel

Nowadays, there is a close relationship between physical stores and digital channels. According to Beck & Rygl (2015), "*Omnichannel Retailer* sells merchandise or services through all widespread channels, whereby the customer can trigger full channel interaction, and the retailer controls full channel integration" (Beck & Rygl, 2015, p.175). For becoming an omnichannel retailer, it is necessary to cross along a path of integration of different strategies and do some tactical changes inside the companies to cope with this goal (Brynjolfsson, Jeffrey & Rahman, 2013). Becoming an omnichannel retailer is not something done overnight; it is the result of hard and conscious work, a conscious change, and the adoption of new strategies that brings fresh opportunities to the market (Kassim & Hussin, 2019).

Omnichannel retailers are those that are open to the latest technology integration with the brick-and-mortar knowledge and experience, combining these two satisfactorily to deliver a holistic experience to the customers (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018); experiences that generate value and allow the retailers to offer seamless satisfaction and clear communications (Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017) across different channels, strengthens their customer journey and creates a bond with their shoppers (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Morse & Johnson, 2011; Pantano & Viassone, 2015). By doing so, we believe that retailers can generate customer retention, loyalty, and repurchase (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Ou & Verhoef, 2017). Moreover, retailers could increase their sales because they understand that it is not crucial through which channel the customer completes the purchase, the important aspect is that they complete the shopping in one of the channels that they provide (Brynjolfsson, Jeffrey & Rahman, 2013).

The omnichannel strategy based on a well-defined customer journey represents an intangible asset that can also serve as a competitive advantage amongst the companies (Alexander & Alvarado, 2017). We, therefore, believe that creating an integrated omnichannel strategy enhances the importance of the physical stores along the customer journey and can strengthen the company know-how and business strategy.

1.1.3 Customer journey

Bringing back "Maria & Juan" and "Anna & Frederik" stories, we want to introduce some general concepts related to the customer journey that will be used along with the master thesis, and they will also clarify the purpose of this study. "Maria & Juan" and "Anna & Frederik" are what is called "personas" in marketing terms. It is easy to understand customer behaviour if we see the different types of users characterized by personas with a lifestyle, name, families, jobs, among others (Constantin, 2006).

A Customer Journey, according to Lemon & Verhoef (2016), is the process in which a customer encounters different touchpoints along with the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases that create a customer experience. It is essential to mention that there are different customer journeys, and they vary according to the type of product that is being bought and the industry to which that product belongs to (Norton & Pine, 2013). Customer journeys can be collective or individual; collective customer journeys are those that are done by families, a group of friends, or colleagues (Thomas, Epp & Price, 2020).

Both customer journeys in the introduction stories are presented in the furniture industry. Furniture is classified as a high involvement product, meaning this range of product needs comprehensive analysis to be involved due to their price range and functionality. Thereby the consumer needs to take into consideration a multitude of internal and external factors before eventually making a final buying decision (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Moreover, in the case of highly involved goods, the customer requires prior information about the items that are yet to be used only as an initial step in the buying process and usually complemented with a physical store visit (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). The physical store serves as a point of interaction between business and customers, where the customer can fully explore the product range by engaging with different items (Avery et al., 2012; Medrano et al., 2016).

Consequently, customers rely on previous engagement with products before finishing the shopping process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Thereby the experience that the customers have with the products is valuable in the way that they can create a bond with the item that is going to be part of their daily life and will serve them and their families (Edelman Marc, 2015). Hence, the physical store plays a vital role in being the vehicle to get access to that experience (Rigby, 2011). When people are thinking about getting a new piece of furniture, they try out not just one piece, on the contrary, they look in different channels for several options, and then find out what they want and proceed with the shopping (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Even if the purchase is made online, the experience provided in the physical store makes a difference in the shopping decision (Flavián, Gurrea & Orús, 2016; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014).

In the case of "Maria & Juan" and "Anna & Frederik", both are using different channels to complete their shopping journey. On the one hand, Maria & Juan's Customer Journey starts when they watch design videos and TV programs. Then the couple's journey continues when they go to physical stores to purchase. The videos that the family watches, and the brick-and-mortar stores (physical) are types of channels. Each channel has different touchpoints; a *touchpoint* is "any customer interaction or encounter that can influence the customer's perception of your product, service, or brand" (Patterson, 2018, p.1) the interactions or encounters can be online, on the brick-and-mortar, or social contact (Voorhees et al., 2017).

On the other hand, Anna & Frederik's Customer Journey starts when they look into fashion magazines and continue browsing online for inspiration, then they visit the physical store to interact with products, and return home to make the final choice and purchase online. In this customer journey, another player is involved, and it is the delivery service that can be part of the selling company or a third-party one (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016).

1.2 Research Purpose & Research Question

Nowadays, it is common to hear that the physical stores are destined to disappear, and personnel service is taken for granted, but how much right is this statement? Can this statement be applied to the furniture industry? How necessary are digital tools in the physical stores? The last decade retailers have experimented with quick changes not only related to technology but also on customer behaviour (Brynjolfsson, Jeffrey & Rahman, 2013). Shoppers are empowered now with information, and in exchange for sharing that information, are demanding better convenience, and personalized services (Avery et al., 2012; Medrano et al., 2016). Customers are looking for 360 experiences, and this is what is making the difference in retail (Microsoft & PSFK, 2019).

Academics are not exploring the role of the physical store in the relation between customer journey, customer service, and omnichannel, and it is a topic that is being demanded by the practitioners to be researched (Alexander & Cano, 2019). Even more, customer journey mapping is yet to be explored in greater depth, as there is a noticeable lacuna in this area (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). The customer journey, as one of the most noteworthy research subjects in the following years, involves more expertise due to the complexity of the overwhelming number of channels and touchpoints and how this affects the physical stores (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Verhoef et al., 2009). Good customer experience is perceived that will increase the company's performance (The Marketing Science Institute, 2014, 2016). Hence, personal customer service in both physical stores and online is an essential aspect of the customer experience that sometimes is taken for granted.

Still, it can make a massive difference in customer perception (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006, 2017).

Furthermore, we believe there is an existing gap in academic research regarding the physical store role in the high involvement products industry that requires more empirical findings and scientific analysis. The role of the physical stores has been left behind (Alexander & Cano, 2019), giving more relevance to the online channels (Bell, Gallino & Moreno, 2014; Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017). Nevertheless, according to literature, the experience that customers have when they visit the physical stores can not be compared with the online experience (Rigby, 2011; Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020).

Consequently, this research aims to identify the role of the physical store within the high involvement products buying process in the context of an omnichannel customer journey. We want to explore the role in terms of (1) why customers are still going to physical stores when they can buy from the comfort and convenience of their digital devices? Moreover, (2) what are the main triggers that influence customers to visit the physical store? Furthermore, we aim to recreate an entirely new customer journey based on the importance of creating epic customer experiences, both in-store and online channels, by integrating an omnichannel strategy. Service will play a crucial role in the creation of those experiences and connections between the customers and the retailers.

To reach the aim of this proposal, we formulated the following research question:

RQ: *Which role does the physical store play in the omnichannel customer journey in the furniture industry?*

1.3 Contributions and Delimitations

This project will contribute to the retail market, by helping the companies within the high involvement products, to understand the significance of the physical store and the importance of omnichannel integration. Furthermore, these findings will enhance the retailer's activity regarding the entire customer journey as a part of customers' experience, where in-store and online service has to be perceived as an essential key factor to retain more customers and register growth revenue.

Additionally, we consider that the findings of this study can contribute to a better understanding of the importance of the physical store in an omnichannel environment within the customer journey for practitioners from different industries. To ensure a successful application of the customer journey, it is essential to be individually tailor-made for a particular company. The present research can be used as a guide to follow a path that will simplify this process. This master thesis is limited to the high involvement products retailers. The results of the present study can be applied to different industries within these types of products, but having in mind that it would require further analysis due to our focus on the furniture industry.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six main sections. Chapter 1 is the introduction of our master thesis and to our research topic, including the background, aim, and objectives of the study, followed by a research purpose and research question. Chapter 2 reviews literature related to physical stores as the main topic divided into three different movements, literature focusing on touchpoints and customer experience, literature focusing on omnichannel theories, and literature focusing on customer service. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of our research. This chapter includes the research design, the data collection, and the analysis. Chapter 4 and 5 present the findings of the study and engage the reader into analysis and discussion, contrasting the theories presented in chapter 2 with the findings. Finally, Chapter 6 presents conclusions according to the aim and objectives of this study and also the recommendations based on findings.

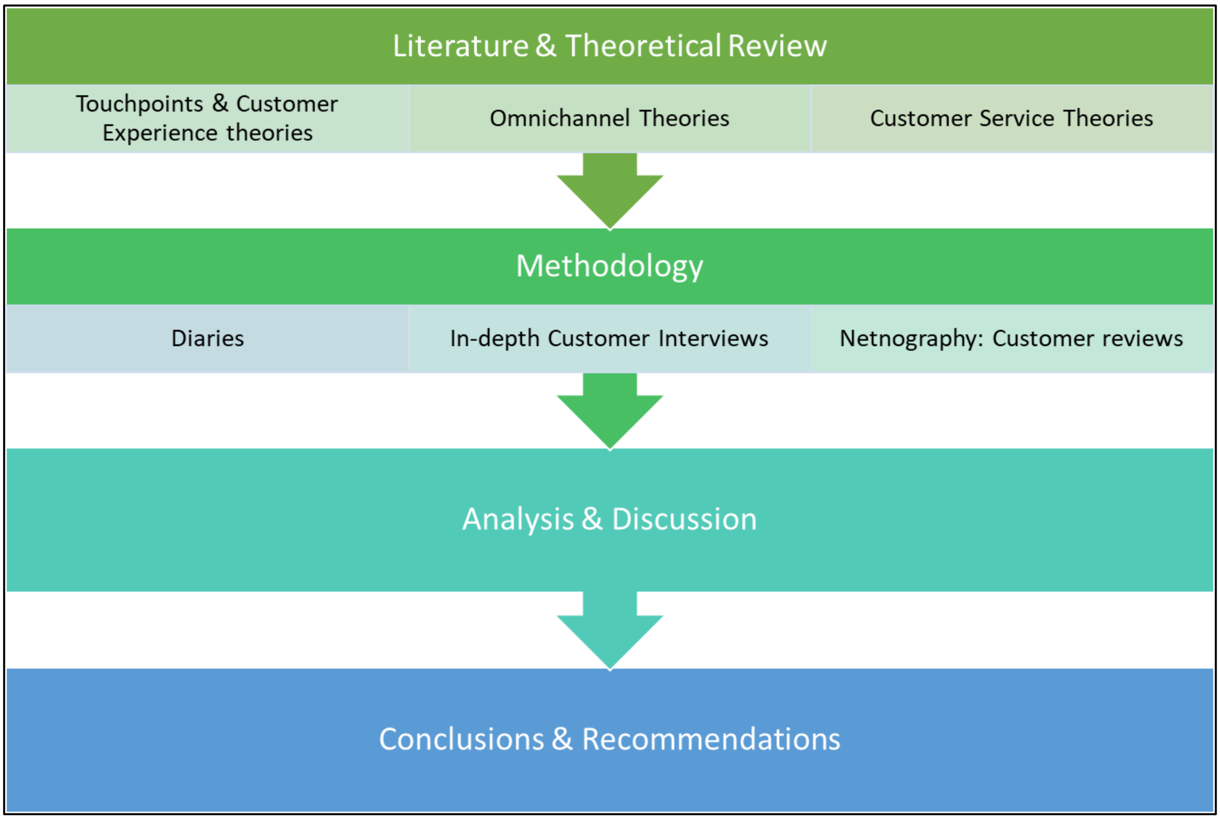

Figure 1. *Master Thesis Outline (own illustration)*

2 Literature review

The literature about physical stores is full of different approaches and theories that bring different angles to introduce and understand the concept. To illustrate a sharp and clear literature review for answering our research question, we designed a systematic and comprehensive method to present the literature findings that will encompass previous research about Touchpoints and Customer Experience; Omnichannel; Customer Service; and how the interaction between those concepts are defining the role of the Physical Store. These four approaches are the main concepts that we are researching in our master thesis and will be introduced in subchapters that are going to discuss theoretical principles and current expertise about these approaches.

We are leaving behind other theories regarding our main topic because we consider that they are not relevant for our aim to define the role of the physical store. Due to those theories are not really about what the brick-and-mortar represent for the customers within the furniture industry. For example, going deeper in digital advancements and technological tools for retailers, we considered those because are part of the omnichannel, although, we did not explore them in great detail. Store location studies, it is an important theory to study but not at this phase. Multichannel theories, because we believe that customers are looking for a seamless experience across the channels and not independent ones. Innovations theories, because we want to focus on the fundamental roles in this study.

We considered that nowadays, it is impossible to deny the importance and impact that the digital channel has on shopping behaviour. People use digital channels along their shopping journey, and companies are developing more channels to offer an omnichannel strategy to their customers (Alexander & Cano, 2019). Thus, we believe that there is a close relation between touchpoints, omnichannel, and customer service, which can be digital or physical. We concluded that the interaction between these three aspects is the key to draw the new role of the physical store towards one common goal, which is to provide the best customer experience (Figure 2).

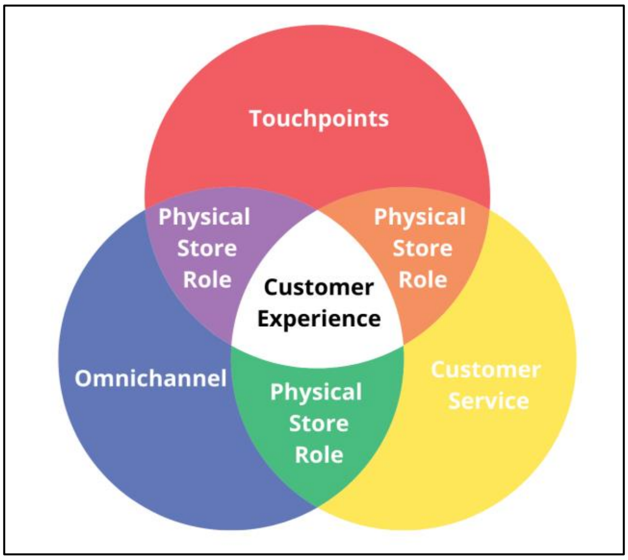

Figure 2. *Topics of the Literature review (own illustration)*

In our investigation towards finding the role of the *physical store*, we started by researching customer journey mapping. Different theories have been formulated about this topic. Følstad & Kvale (2018), demonstrated in their article "Customer journeys: a systematic literature review", inconsistent use of *customer journey terms, customer experience, touchpoints, and shopping process stages*. Hence, to avoid confusion in this master thesis, *customer journey mapping* is defined as the route drawing as a result of the identification of touchpoints along the purchase process (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). The *shopping or purchase process* is considered in three stages, *pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase* (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Neslin et al., 2006; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2009). Likewise, *touchpoints* are the different interactions that customers encounter with brands, products, retailers, peers, or third parties that can influence their shopping process along the purchase stages (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). The impression that these touchpoints create in the shopper is *customer experiences* (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006).

Similar to the proliferation of concepts found in the literature related to the customer journey, the *omnichannel* concept is also used in different variations (Beck & Rygl, 2015). Hence in this literature review, we are focusing on those articles that introduce the omnichannel concept along the whole shopping process. In the same way, we will use the literature related to the *customer service* approach, meaning that we strive to gather literature arguments to answer our research question and have strong bases to identify the role of the physical store.

2.1 Role of the physical store

Physical stores play a pivotal role in the retail industry, besides omnichannel evolution and higher use of digital tools (von Briel, 2018). Furthermore, the brick-and-mortar is a destination where customers, beyond having sensorial experience, have the opportunity to make those part of an exceptional personalised service (Avery et al., 2012; Medrano et al., 2016). Treadgold & Reynolds (2016) mentioned five aspects of the physical store to achieve a competitive advantage. These are: "*Value, Convenience, Immediacy, Problem-Solving* and *Superior Experience"* (Treadgold & Reynolds, 2016, p.151). Although we agree with Treadgold & Reynolds up to a point, we cannot accept their overall conclusion that to be competitive the physical stores must excel in just two aspects, simultaneously. In contrast, we believe that for these aspects to be considered competitive advantages, the retailer should have the five aspects at the same time, because the interconnection between all the five is what creates a truly customer experience.

The inclusion of new technologies in the physical stores by the retailers constituted another essential topic that caught the attention of the researchers (Bell, Gallino & Moreno, 2014; Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017). Technology is reshaping how customers approach physical outlets (Bell, Gallino & Moreno, 2014). New functions as “click-and-collect”, “ordering in-store”, “delivering to home”, “order online, return to the store”, are intertwined the brick-and-mortar and online channels (Alexander & Cano, 2019; Bell, Gallino & Moreno, 2014). Moreover, the integration of new channels, especially in the retail industry, is generating phenomenon such as showrooming and webrooming, which are causing mixed feelings among the retailers, while some of them perceived them as a threat to their business, other ones perceived them as an opportunity to generate more traffic and increase their sales (Gensler, Neslin & Verhoef, 2017; Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017). Showrooming is when the customers visit physical outlets to try products, but in the end, they complete the purchase in an on-line channel (Flavián, Gurrea & Orús, 2016; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Webrooming, on the contrary, is when the customers' research products on-line but complete the purchase in the physical store (Flavián, Gurrea & Orús, 2016). Thus, the physical store must be enhanced by technology advances in order to stay ahead (Alexander & Cano, 2019). We concede that both showrooming and webrooming concepts deliver value equally important. The difference between them is that shoppers are attracted to webrooming because it can make them more accessible, adding and deleting products to the shopping bag; besides, the price factor, which most of the time is lower than in the physical outlets. Consequently, it becomes convenient to order and get it at the customers' door (Flavián, Gurrea & Orús, 2016). On the other hand, showrooming enhances the customer's possibility to try, feel, and touch the products before buying (Gensler, Neslin & Verhoef, 2017). On top of that, they can get access to immediate customer service from well-trained sales associates that will give meaningful and professional advice on their purchase (Alexander & Cano, 2019). Consumers are fascinated by the unique environments to explore, to see real merchandise, and chat with real people (Blázquez, 2014). This can be applied to both showrooming and webrooming concepts; therefore, we acknowledge that the retailer's main objective has to be yet the assurance of an integrated environment, where customers can get immediate quality help and service.

According to Lemon & Verhoef (2016), the customer experience encompasses all the levels of the customer journey and also the customer's state of mind, such as feelings, reactions, social or perceptual attitudes towards the retailer. Hence, one of the essential touchpoints along the customer journey remains to be the physical store (von Briel, 2018). Moreover, Lemon & Verhoef (2016), argue that retail ambience designed in the store represents a significant factor of influence amongst the shoppers' perceptions and behaviours. We recognise that the physical store ambience could enhance the customers' experience in the outlets by engaging them and converting them into consumers. Nevertheless, we concede that there exists a set of challenges occurring in keeping the brick-and-mortar meaningful, delivering memorable and unique customer experiences to the shoppers. The physical stores shifted from being just a transactional place to being gathering places, where people can have pleasant encounters by interacting with others and technological devices at the same time (Alexander & Cano, 2019).

A novel finding is the one presented by Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger (2020), who introduced the “design–ambient–social–trialability (DAST) framework for retail atmospherics” (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020, p.128). This framework is a pioneer in the integration of the different touchpoints categories not only for the in-store but also for the online experience. The *design* includes the physical aspects of brick-and-mortar like the layout but also on-line design as the wireframe[2] and UXD[3]. The *ambient* refers to the outlet environment, such as store signage and lighting, and in the digital channels refers to the visual design. The *social* aspect is related to customers, personnel, and other people involved in the retail service, both in-store and on-line. The *triability* refers to the opportunity that the customers have to try the product or service, in the store this trialability is physical, but on-line can be through digital tools such as AR (augmented reality) or VR (virtual reality) among others (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020).

Nonetheless, we concede that the DAST framework is one that integrates and recapitulates most of the concepts presented by different authors. However, more academic research is needed related to this topic.

[2] Wireframe: The skeletal outline of the layout of a web page. This can be rough and general, or very detailed (Stokes, 2018, p.89).

[3] UXD: The process of applying proven principles, techniques and features to create and optimise how a system behaves, mapping out all the touchpoints a user experiences to create consistency in the interaction with the brand (Stokes, 2018, p.89).

2.2 Touchpoints and customer experience

Aiming to define the role of the physical store is necessary to understand the customer journey in-depth, focusing on the touchpoints and their importance regarding customer experience (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). From this perspective, Stein & Ramaseshan (2016), introduce an excellent starting point to this understanding by classifying the touchpoints under different topics that are considered relevant in the customer experience. According to this view, the authors proposed a classification of the touchpoints under atmospheric, technological, communicative, process, employee-customer interaction, customer-customer interaction, and product-interaction elements (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). Along the same line, Payne, Peltier & Barger (2017), introduced another type of touchpoints categorization. They classified the touchpoints as personal and non-personal, defining personal as those touchpoints that implies a direct contact between the consumers and the representatives of the brand or retailers, in-store or on-line. While the non-personal ones are those touchpoints that do not require human interaction (Payne, Peltier & Barger, 2017).

Another interesting point of view of touchpoints is the one introduced by Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson (2015). They categorized the touchpoints under six categories "brand advertising, retailer advertising, in-store communications, word-of-mouth, peer observation (seeing other customers), and traditional earned media" (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015). The authors measured the touchpoints' impact by frequency and positivity according to the nature of the interaction encounter (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015). On the one hand, according to the authors, the frequency of exposure to touchpoints has an impact on brand consideration, which means the customer purchase intentions towards the brand or retailer. The positivity, on the other hand, has an impact on the repurchase intention and spending budget, which is also related to customer loyalty (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Ou & Verhoef, 2017). Although we agree with the authors up to a point, we consider that there is another category that they have not explored. The category related to the touchpoints created by third parties involved in the shopping process (transportation services, assembly or customer support) which are usually not part of the brand or the retailer, but are part of the customer journey and needs to be taken into account when the customer experience is evaluated (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Although we agree with the touchpoints classification made by the authors mentioned above, we believe that there is an existing gap regarding this categorization, there still is a lack of a framework that integrates all the touchpoints categories.

When it comes to the topic of the customer journey, most of the literature refers to individual journeys. However, Thomas, Epp & Price (2020) brought up a novel concept of collective journeys. Collective journeys are those made by a group of people with something in common, for example, families, friends, or colleagues. The authors also explain the complexity of different touchpoints along these collective journeys, and the importance to the retailers, because once a touchpoint has captured the attention of one of the group members, this member acts as an influencer to the rest of the group, impacting the shopping decision (Thomas, Epp & Price, 2020). Argo & Dahl (2020) also discussed the collective journeys and detailed how the influencing of friends or family members can determine the duration of the visit in the retailer, the spending budget, and purchase quantity, among other factors (Argo & Dahl, 2020). From these perspectives, we believe collective journeys can be considered an opportunity to engage customers and serve as a starting point later on in proceeding to individual journeys. Nevertheless, we concede that these journeys can also harm the customer experience, if the members of the group can not agree upon the purchase decision or if one of them is a negative influencer.

Once companies identify the touchpoints and classify them, they are ready to create customer experience from these encounters (Puccinelli et al., 2009). The collection of touchpoints creates the customer experience that connects the customers with the retailers in a rational, emotional, and social way (Verhoef et al., 2009). Our view is that the path that the customers follow through the touchpoints along the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages, are what constitute the customer journey. Along these journeys, customers can encounter all touchpoints or avoid some of them, but in the end, it creates value for both the retailer and the customer and is considered the customer experience (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). Hence, the touchpoints that brands and retailers can control aim to create value, thus, it create an engagement that keeps the shoppers into the loop of the customer experience that generates loyalty and repurchase intention creating a win-win-win situation for shoppers, retailers, and manufacturers (Edelman Marc, 2015; Shankar et al., 2011). The touchpoints that are out of the retailers and brand control, like WOM, peer observation, among others, can influence the customer behaviour positively if they are coming from a positive customer encounter, and this is another reason to keep the customer into the loop of experience (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015) along the shopping process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

The goal of creating this loop of experience or customer experience, as we mentioned before, is to generate value for shoppers, manufacturers, and retailers alike (Shankar et al., 2011). How the value it is created for the customers or shoppers is through the generation of positive memories that causes the desire to revive that experience one time and another, and also, to spread the good news around (WOM), show commitment, and willingness to share personal information with the retailers (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018). For the manufacturers and retailers, the value is the conversion of the customers' desires into loyalty, and their goal is to translate that loyalty into repurchase and more spending, the way that they can do that is through creating consistent customer journeys with touchpoints design based on their customers' preferences (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017a).

Researches have long assumed that customer journeys are linear. For instance, eminent scholars of marketing (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) introduce a "process model for customer journey and experience" (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p.77) (Figure 3). They propose a framework in which the customer journey goes along the purchase stages; starting in the pre-purchase when customers encounter multiple touchpoints; the authors described the customers' behaviour during this stage as need of recognition, consideration, and search. The next stage is the purchase in which customers reencounter touchpoints, and the behaviour is towards completing the purchase by choosing, ordering, and payment. The last stage is post-purchase, in which encountering multiple touchpoints, customer behaviour is actively towards consumption, usage, engagement, and service request. The touchpoints that the customers' encounter can be from the brand, retailers, other customers, social and other actors. These touchpoints can be different or the same for each stage, but the interaction is what continually changes. The authors also mentioned that the feedback of the whole journey could be the starting point of a new journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

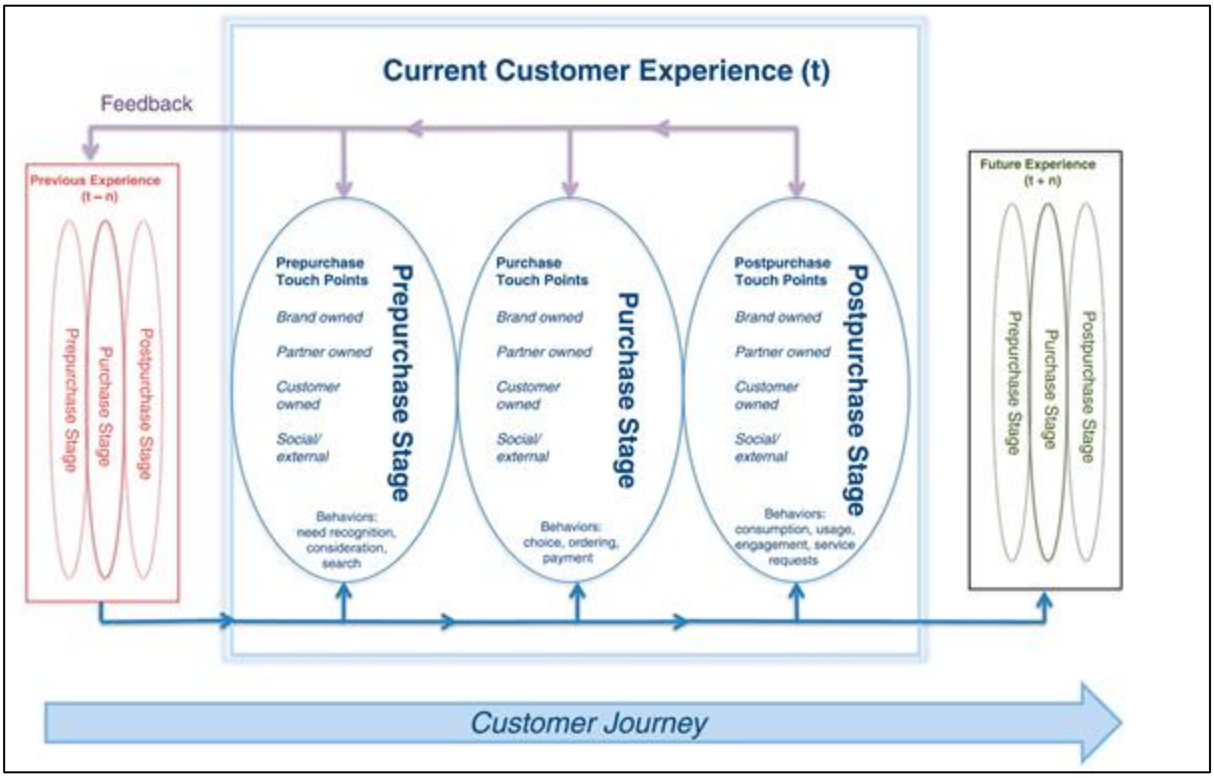

Figure 3. *Process Model for Customer Journey and Experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, p.9)*

Nevertheless, a new body of research shows that customer journeys are not always linear, and they can start in any purchase stage or jump from one to another being nonlinear. Nonlinear is one of the topics that (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020) explained in their last article. According to the authors, customers can start their journey from the post-purchase and jump directly to the purchase stage without any pre-purchase touchpoint encounter. Even though (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020), bring a pivotal topic introducing nonlinear customer journeys, we concede that there is yet research to be done about it, and more empirical investigations are still needed.

2.3 Omnichannel

The omnichannel phenomenon has become one of the most significant business strategy developments in the past decade, including both theoretical and practical dimensions (Brynjolfsson, Jeffrey & Rahman, 2013; ed. Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2019; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015). Hence, omnichannel is a crucial element in the role of the physical store.

The omnichannel concept portrays a type of retailing that enable customers to engage with the brand in different places at any time, using multiple channels and providing them with a unique, comprehensive and cohesive shopping experience that disintegrates the boundaries between the digital dimension and brick-and-mortar (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Melero, Sese & Verhoef, 2016; Rigby, 2011; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015). From this perspective, we believe that omnichannel should be a preferred retailing strategy by different companies. Nevertheless, we recognise that this is not the actual situation for many retailers that are still struggling with the understanding of this new concept.

Although industries are now talking about omnichannel strategies, it is a fact that multichannel strategies are still in the scope of many companies (Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015). The transitions between these two retail strategies are relatively slow in comparison with the proliferation of new channels alternatives (Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015). We conclude that while some retailers are already executing omnichannel strategies, providing seamless shopping experiences to the customers, others, on the contrary, are still delivering different messages across the channels. This, instead of driving the customers to a shopping experience, is driving them to other retailers that provide them with an integrated omnichannel approach along the customer journey.

Technological advancements and connectivity have contributed to an increasing number of channels in which customers can get in contact with the retailers (Melero, Sese & Verhoef, 2016; ed. Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2019; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015). Some of the challenges that companies are facing in this new omnichannel environment are related to data management and new strategies that can be flexible and adapted to the new channels (Neslin et al., 2006). Thus, we believe that retailers that adapt their traditional contact channel to these new technologies are the ones that succeed in the omnichannel strategy. In addition to brick-and-mortar and digital channels, the evolving technologies and touchpoints such as smartphones, social media channels, and other smart gadgets are also shifting customer preferences and their buying behaviours by changing in this way the entire purchase cycle (Melero, Sese & Verhoef, 2016; ed. Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2019; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015).

In the transition from multichannel to omnichannel strategy, companies are lost, and brick-and-mortar stores are left behind (Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015). Due to the lack of technological and digital knowledge, physical outlets are failing in this transition and are closing doors of traditional stores (Rigby, 2011). Nevertheless, others are being successful in this integration and adoption of an omnichannel strategy, thanks to the perception of this transition as an opportunity to expand their business and offer an epic and seamless customer experience (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Morse & Johnson, 2011; Pantano & Viassone, 2015). Though we agree with the statements mentioned above, we still insist that the adaptation process to an omnichannel strategy, for the traditional retailers, should be based on the knowledge that they have about the physical stores. Alexander & Alvarado (2017) mentioned that retailers are transforming their traditional outlets into integrating the online channel advantages, as usability functionality and accessibility with the advantages of the physical stores as personal service, sensorial experience and products disponibility (Alexander & Alvarado, 2017). Furthermore, it is a challenge for the practitioners to select suitable channels according to their business nature, not all the channels are designed for all types of industries, and some suits better than others (Chen & Lamberti, 2016).

Omnichannel represents a key step in the shopping transformation and is yet to deliver a holistic experience that combines the digital and physical dimensions (Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017). To succeed in an omnichannel setting, retailers may integrate multiple touchpoints and online platforms in combination with the offline channels creating journeys that guided the customers along the shopping stages: pre, purchase, and post-purchase (Ostrom et al., 2015). One important factor is that when all channels are connected, customers have the opportunity to start their customer journey in one channel and end it in another one (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). This action ensures the creation of an epic experience that increases satisfaction and commitment (Alexander & Alvarado, 2017; Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). Nevertheless, omnichannel retailing is the target of many companies and is being one of the topics that are being researched by academics. However, there is still a gap in empirical investigations that provide a framework that helps the retailers in the process of adaptation digital channels with the brick-and-mortar growing at the same time.

2.4 Customer service

Memorable customer experience comes from a combination of factors in which customer in-store and online service play a significant role. In many cases, service is taking for granted. Still, it nowadays is crucial for customer decisions in cases where the price and quality are very similar. Excellent service creates a difference and a new path in the customer journey (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006, 2017; Ostrom et al., 2015). Customers desire more than just the offer, distribution, and consumption of products and services; they are actively looking for exceptional and unforgettable experiences that inspire them to use and consume those products and services

(Edelman Marc, 2015; Pine & Gilmore, 1999). In recent discussions about customer service, the influence of technology is catching the attention of academics and practitioners (van Osselaer et al., 2020). Service technology is creating multiple choices for customers and providers alike; these innovations can be found along the customer journey encompassing the pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase, shopping stages (Ostrom et al., 2015).

Over the years, the role of the personnel has been shifting (van Osselaer et al., 2020). In the beginning, it was significant in the retail industry, the sales associates to be happy, welcoming, and pleasant (Ballantine Paul W., Jack Richard & Parsons Andrew G., 2010; Flint, Blocker & Boutin, 2011). However, in the retailers' perception, sometimes the personnel service is relegated by the importance of the store decorations, store signals, and payment services (Ballantine Paul W., Jack Richard & Parsons Andrew G., 2010). In contrast to this, we acknowledge that now shoppers perceive customer service more like an experience provided, implying extra information about a particular product, help regarding technical aspects or advice on product maintenance. These factors create value for the customer, which can lead to superior levels of customer satisfaction (Flint, Blocker & Boutin, 2011). Moreover, by delivering epic customer service, can drive to higher customer retention, positive feedback, customer loyalty and higher revenue (Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017a). Even more, service can be considered as a competitive advantage in an environment where the need of differentiation is a must, and it is also a source of growth as a business (Ostrom et al., 2015; van Osselaer et al., 2020).

Value creation from customer service is one of the advantages of implementing a service design strategy (Andreassen et al., 2016). Service design is defined as strategic planning of the organization towards a customer service policy, in which customer service is reflected not just in the relations with customers and shoppers, but also with providers and third parties, in order to create a remarkable customer experience (Andreassen et al., 2016). We concede that a service design implementation is essential for the retail industry since this will enhance extraordinary customer experience and will also create stronger relationships between the customers and the retailers. Besides, the consistency of a customer service experience in a digital or physical environment relies on how good the service design is combined with the personnel service (Andreassen et al., 2016; van Osselaer et al., 2020). This combination creates surefire touch points towards the customers, involving them into the loop of experience and customer value creation (Andreassen et al., 2016; Patrício et al., 2011).

According to (Ostrom et al., 2015), “value creation is a fundamental goal of service. It is characterized by substantial complexity involving the integration of roles and resources” (Ostrom et al., 2015, p.138). The actors involved in this value creation are customers and personnel. These actors, in combination with technological resources, lead to the creation of successful in-store and digital strategies (Ostrom et al., 2015; van Osselaer et al., 2020). The authors also highlight the empowerment that the customers have regarding experience; customers are co-creating this experience with the retailers. Another role of the technology in service experience is the possibility that it provides to the customers to engage with the retailers through social media and other digital channels, giving them the ability to provide an immediate response to the service encounters through reactions, reviews and share comments within different online communities (Patrício et al., 2011). We believe this instant feedback constitutes a strategic advantage for the retailers in improving their service level, reaching their goals in terms of seamless value creation and epic customer experience along the customer journey.

With the development of technology and rise of the internet, customer feedback became a source of valuable information for companies, including customers' feelings about particular products or their experience as a whole along the customer journey (Voorhees et al., 2017). These feedbacks are directly influenced by the service experienced by the customers along the touchpoints encountered (Bone et al., 2017). Feedbacks, being negative or positive are precious for the retailers because they work as a thermometer of the level of engagement that the customers are experiencing with their stores, products and services (Bone et al., 2017). One of the most valuable feedback resources nowadays are the reviews and comments that the customers can post in different social media channels and other platforms specific for customer feedback (Tronvoll, Edvardsson & Möllerskov-Jonzon, 2019). We believe that feedback channels, such as social media, and feedback platforms, enhance retailers' experience to collect instant reactions from the shoppers' posts about their customer experience. These online contents generated by consumers can influence other customers' perceptions about a product, service or retailer in general (Tronvoll, Edvardsson & Möllerskov-Jonzon, 2019).

Self-service is another topic that is being explored as a part of customer service (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014). The replacement of human service in the stores by self-service machines seems to be attractive to the customers that preferred to solve their questions by themselves in a fast manner rather than queuing for personal service at the retailers' stores (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014; van Osselaer et al., 2020). This self-service can also be found during the pre-purchase stages when customers do their research of products and collect all the information needed, and in the post-purchase stage is when they look for video tutorials to learn how to use or install their new products, instead of getting into contact with customer service (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014). These self-service encounters provide a feeling of freedom to the customers and a sensation that they are in control of their experience, not leaving spaces for being unsatisfied (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014). Whereas Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll (2014), provides ample evidence that self-service is highly used and valued by the customers. Rigby (2011) and Grewal (2019), convince us that human encounters can not be replaced with technological devices, face-to-face service creates strong bonds between the customers and the retailers, and this constitutes one of the major key aspects of the physical stores.

Voorhees et al. (2017) illustrate the concept of the service along the customer journey through *pre-core service encounter, core service encounter and post-service encounter.* The authors present a framework that introduces the concept of *"holistic service experience"* that encompasses all possible encounters with the retailers (Voorhees et al., 2017, p.269). Through adopting a holistic service experience along the customer journey within pre, core, and post-service, retailers have the opportunity to enhance the relationships with their shoppers by converting them into loyal customers (Voorhees et al., 2017). Furthermore, this will increase their customer satisfaction, customers' thoughts regarding the firm's performance and, as a consequence, boost sales, and spread the positive WOM (Voorhees et al., 2017). All the service encounters along the different stages constitute moments of truth that influence customer satisfaction (Bitner & Wang, 2014; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017). We find fascinating the author's point of view, agreeing that service is a holistic experience. Moreover, we presume that the three stages in which the authors categorize the service encounter being quite similar to the three purchase stages can be integrated to the pre-purchase, purchase and pos-purchase, enriching the understanding of the customer journey as a whole (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017).

The face-to-face customer service provided in the retail outlets has a significant impact on sales quality and customer experience. This concept is confirmed by the researchers, Bäckstrom and Johansson, who wrote two different papers. They conducted their first research in 2006 and the second one in 2017, and some of the findings are quite similar, although there have been ten years between each other, and there has been a decade of digital and technological advancements (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006, 2017). In their papers, they are illustrating the significance of face-to-face service and how it changes over the years to a more professional support service, in which they provide the customers quality encounters from their expert knowledge (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006, 2017). This expertise makes a face-to-face service valuable over the encounters that they can have with self-services machines or digital technologies (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014; Ostrom et al., 2015). We concede that there is a lack of research regarding the importance of the stores' personnel in the retail industry. At the same time, more attention regarding this topic is given to the service provided by digital devices.

2.5 Chapter summary

The role of the physical store is a subject that is continually catching the attention of the researchers and practitioners, as we mentioned before. We, therefore, recognise there is yet a need for more empirical investigation regarding this topic. In this master thesis, we aim to integrate all the relevant theories collected above into a framework. In this way, we expect to provide new insights related to touchpoints, customer experience, omnichannel, and customer journey and how, from this, we can define the role of the physical store in the high involvement products, focusing on the furniture industry. Our investigation is focused on the following theories from our literature review.

Related to the customer journey, the theories that catches our attention and that we used along our investigations are related to collective journeys (Thomas, Epp & Price, 2020; Argo & Dahl, 2020), purchase stages (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), the loop of customer experience (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015); and multiple roles of the touchpoints (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). For the omnichannel we focused on those theories related to the impact of the technological advancements (Melero, Sese & Verhoef, 2016; ed. Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2019; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015) in the retail channel that creates seamless (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Morse & Johnson, 2011; Pantano & Viassone, 2015) and holistic (Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017) customer experience. We have also explored in our investigation the impact that the customer service has on the consumers along with the pre, core and post encounters (Voorhees et al., 2017), the importance of the customers' feedback (Tronvoll, Edvardsson & Möllerskov-Jonzon, 2019) and the relevance of face-to-face service (Rigby, 2011; Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020) and guidance provided by experts. Finally, we used the theories mentioned before to find the role of the physical store. For this reason, we explored in depth the DAST theory (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006; Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020) and other phenomenons that are gaining popularity in the relations existed between physical and digital dimensions as showrooming and webrooming (Flavián, Gurrea & Orús, 2016; Gensler, Neslin & Verhoef, 2017; Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017), click & collect, ordering in-store, home delivery (Alexander & Cano, 2019; Bell, Gallino & Moreno, 2014), among others.

In the following figure, we exemplify how we integrated all the theories analysed and how we considered they can be integrated along with our master thesis. This figure is the core of our research in terms of theories, and it is the base of how we structured our findings and how we performed our analysis and discussion (Figure 4)

In the figure, we have in the middle our three big topics, touchpoints, omnichannel and customer service. Around each of the big topics, we have the theories from our literature review; we selected to use along with our research. The interactions between the three big circles, drawn the role of the physical store and in the middle, we placed all the theories related to customer experience. Around the theories, we have three arrows that represent the purchase stages; pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. According to the Lemon & Verhoef (2016) framework (Figure 3), these stages are always followed in order along the customer journey, and on each stage, the customers had encounters with multiple touchpoints.

Nevertheless, we put another circle around, the green one, which is related to the theory of the non-linear customer journeys propose by Grewal & Roggeveen (2020); they argue that the customers' journeys not necessarily follow the purchase stages order and also that the customers can start their shopping journey at any stage. Moreover, customers can jump from one stage to another back and forward. At the end of our research, we aim to see how this framework change according to our findings.

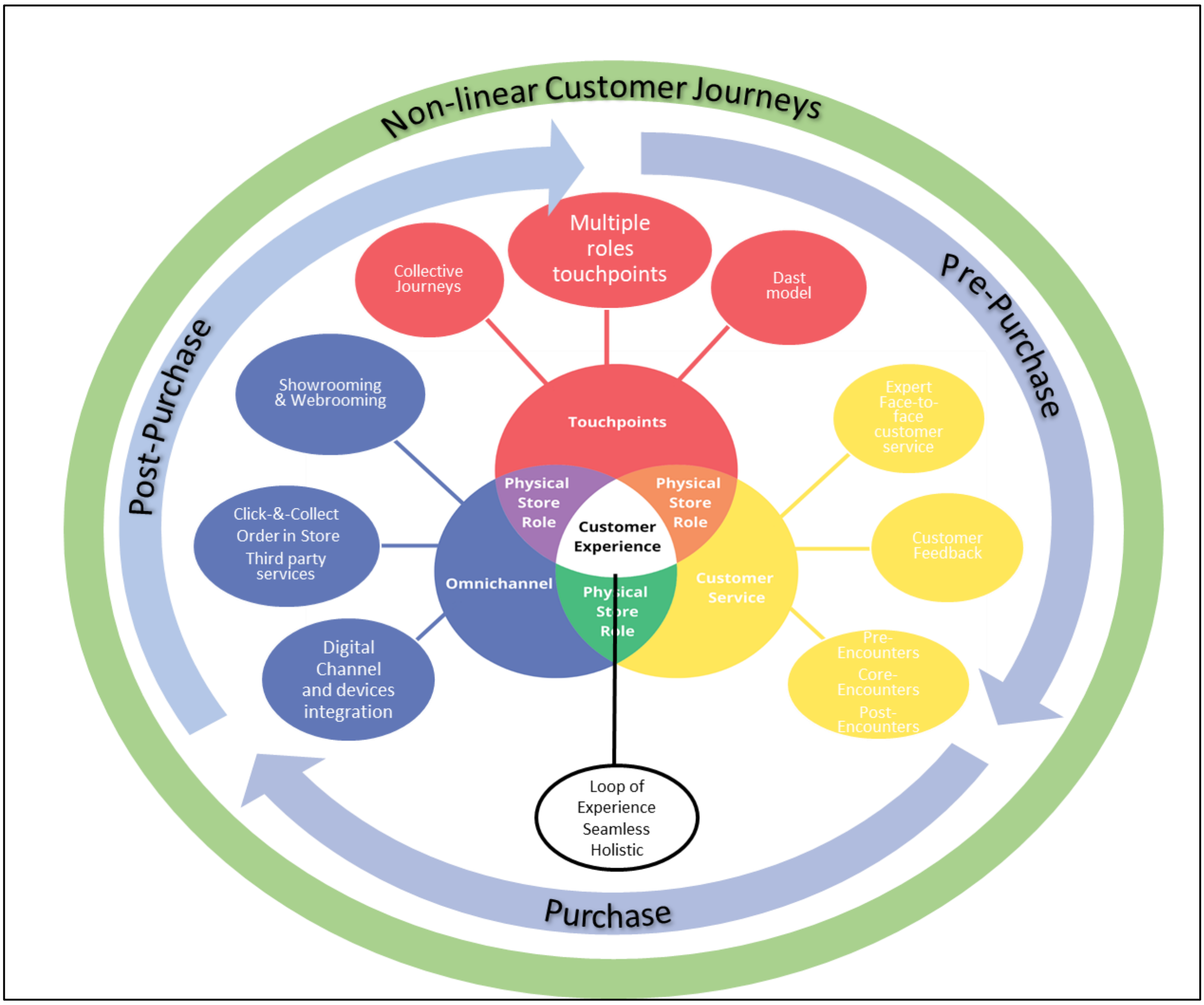

Figure 4. *Theoretical framework (own illustration)*

3 Methodology

In this chapter, we illustrated various techniques of study that are applied, addressing our research question. From the beginning, our focus is on the description of the research philosophies, such as *ontology and epistemology.* Additionally, we presented a detailed explanation of how we *designed, collected,* and *analysed data*. Later on, we critically examined the *credibility* and *transparency* of our data collection. Furthermore, we presented the *ethical* values taken into account by us while performing the research as well as the *limitations* of this paper.

3.1 Research Philosophy

We started by discussing the chosen philosophy of our research. The concepts describe our beliefs regarding the facts that were investigated. It guided us through the whole process and ensured that everything that was written was logical and coherent.

According to our research question, we performed exploratory research that focuses on high involvement products, specifically in the furniture industry. Hence, we used IKEA as a case study. For this purpose, we started with a description of the beliefs and philosophies applied to the investigation, beginning with ontology. An ontology represents how we view the reality of the research performed (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). We applied a relativism ontology that implies that reality is built up by people (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The choice of epistemology for our paper is social constructionism. “The idea of social constructionism focuses on the ways that people make sense of the world – especially through sharing their experiences with others via the medium of language” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015, p.52). We believe that people have an impact on the development of the high involvement products industry and, in this case, specifically on the furniture industry.

By applying an ontological relativism, we perceive that people are social actors. They influence and share different opinions and have different perspectives regarding the role of the physical store in retail. Hence, this implies the existence of different truths built upon facts according to people's points of view (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). By taking a social constructionism stance, we aimed to understand how people perceived, interacted, and expected from the physical store and how they interpreted its meaning in their purchase behaviours. We perceived the participants of our study as social actors who influence the situation, being customers who shared their experiences with us. Based on their experiences, we did data analysis, and we identified patterns that allowed us to answer our research question. The chosen stance for this research was subjective since it represents individuals' opinions and experiences regarding a specific topic (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019) in this case regarding the role of the physical store in the omnichannel environment (Figure 5).

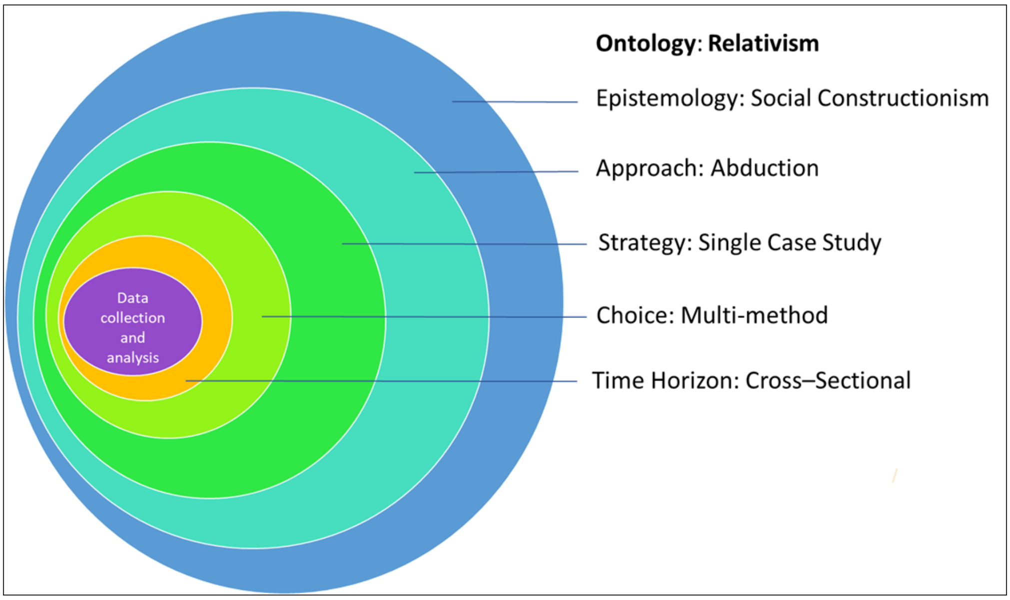

Figure 5. *Research Onion (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019) (own illustration)*

3.2 Research Approach

For this master thesis, we have used an abductive approach, which is a combination of induction (ground theory) and deduction (testing the theory). This implies that an abductive approach is reverting from one approach to another one, moving from theory to data and vice versa (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019; Suddaby, 2006). In our research, we started with the analysis of the theory that we collected in the literature review regarding the physical store, omnichannel, customer service, touchpoints, and customer journey. From this analysis, we identified different patterns and concepts related to the influence that omnichannel, customer journey and customer service has in the definition of the physical store role. We used these concepts and patterns to analyse the collected data. Nevertheless, we were open to new insights, and we went back and forward between theories and data. When we found new insights that complemented the theory, we included them in our results and conclusions, answering our research question.

3.3 Research Strategy

The customer journey is a topic that is being researched a lot. Nevertheless, there is no actual research on the physical store and the influence on how people go about it on the customer journey. Even though we did an extensive literature review, and we learned about different theories, we could not find a concrete answer to our research question. We observed there is still a lacuna in the area of what role the physical store plays in the omnichannel environment. For this reason, we decided to perform qualitative research that will provide us with the necessary data to develop a model that allows us to achieve the aim of our master thesis. We believe the qualitative method of research fits the best. We were considering that qualitative research is a method that tends to recognize a subject in more detail and implies the solution of a paradox (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2015), indicates that when a researcher aims to understand how people interact, then a qualitative study fits the best. Moreover, we believe that talking to people enhances the chance to understand their thoughts and experiences regarding the role of the physical store.

3.3.1 Case Study

Our strategy is to perform a single case study. “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomena are not evident” (Yin, 2014, p.18). Since our aim from the beginning was to investigate the role of the physical store in the high involvement products, we brainstormed about different industries that offer a compelling case to be studied. In this brainstorming, we decided to focus on the furniture industry, which is a vast market to be explored, where the physical store has a significant role (Alexander & Cano, 2019; Grewal & Roggeven, 2020). The main reason for this is that when people are looking for new furniture, there is a complex process behind, which requires some planning, depending on many variables that can influence their decision towards the purchase and allow them to make an in-depth comparison (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Moreover, when people are buying furniture, they can create a connection with products that are going to be a part of their daily home life. Moreover, when people are buying furniture, they can create a connection with products that are going to be a part of their home and daily life. Some of those variables are budget, age, life cycle stage, lifestyles, suitability, and quality (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Moreover, customers require more knowledge regarding products and need to touch, feel, and experience before making an actual purchase. This offers a great scenario to study the importance of physical stores and how the role of this is changing along the years with the incursion of the digital channels and new technologies (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2016), drawing at the end a new path in the traditional customer journey.

Thereby the experience that the customers have with the products is valuable in the way that they can create a bond with the item that is going to be part of their daily life and will serve them and their families

Since we are in Sweden, and this is the company hub of one of the largest furniture retailers, we agreed upon taking IKEA as a case study. IKEA is a multinational company, founded in 1943 by Ingvar Kamprad in Sweden (IKEA, 2020a). The company is a leader in the furniture industry and home accessories (IKEA, 2020b). IKEA's vision is “to create a better everyday life for the many people” (IKEA, 2020b). Ikea is recognized for being one of the company's pioneers in ready-to-assemble furniture and for its design and affordable prices, which allows many people to access design products (IKEA, 2020c). The retail sales FY2019 reached Euros 41.3 billion, with more than 433 stores opened, in 50 markets and more than 211 000 co-workers, and it continues growing and expanding in new markets (IKEA, 2020d). Besides the fact that Ikea is one of the biggest furniture retailers worldwide, one of the main reasons that justify our selection of IKEA as a single case study is that there is a high number of people who have at least one shopping experience with IKEA, which gave us the possibility to gain access to a more significant and diverse sample. We believe this will ensure a high validity of our research. The IKEA case serves as a vast information source for researchers on different topics. Thus, it provides an exciting model to be followed for further physical store research and customer journey for the furniture industry.

Many companies who are traditional retailers are lost with the introduction of new digital channels and technologies in their business models, and as a result, the role of the physical store in this omnichannel environment is not clear (Alexander & Alvarado, 2017; Alexander & Cano, 2019; Inman & Nikolova, 2017). To take a case in point, IKEA illustrates an example of this, struggling in the integration of their physical stores in their omnichannel strategy.

3.3.2 Methods and Techniques

To gain comprehensive expertise about our main topic, which is the role of the physical store in an omnichannel environment, we proceeded with a *multi-method qualitative study*. A multi-method approach implies the combination of different research techniques such as interviews, observation, diaries, and netnography (Easterby-Smith, 2018). Furthermore, by using different techniques allowed us to gain holistic expertise about our topic and also enhanced the process of gaining more reliable results. The time horizon for this study was *cross-sectional* since we focus on the recent situation, and we had limited time for performing the research according to our master studies schedule. We are conscious that qualitative study can be biased if we just focus on one technique. For this reason, from the beginning, we conceived the idea of a multi-method to enhance our credibility and validity using triangulation.

“*Triangulation* is the use of two or more independent sources of data or data collection methods within one study to help ensure that the data are telling you what you think they are telling you”

(Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019, p.614). We perform triangulation to ensure the validity of our research by using various techniques to get data on the same subject (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Moreover, the triangulation increased the confidence and transparency of our data collection.

The triangulation in our research is based on diaries, in-depth interviews with customers, and netnography. Since we aim to explore the role of the physical store along the purchase stages, we collected data through the diaries, which gave us information regarding the purchase stage. The in-depth interviews were focused on the pre-purchase stage, and the netnography was focused on the post-purchase stage. We choose those techniques, among others, because we believe that with the diaries and the interviews, we could get more details from the participants getting more in-depth answers than the ones that we could get through a focus group, for example, where there is always time pressure. It is challenging to go deep in the answer of one participant without losing the interest of the other ones. Moreover, netnography is an excellent technique to get in-depth customer feedback and reviews.

3.4 Target Group/Sampling

For empirical data collection, we agreed upon using a combination of non-probability sampling between *purposive and convenience design*. Purposive sampling implies that the investigator has a clear picture of what sample units are required for the analysis and then addresses prospective sample participants to verify that they fulfil eligibility requirements (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The convenience sampling refers to the easy access to the sample (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015).

In our case, a purposive sample is reflected in the fact that we establish that the participants should meet the requirements of our target group, and of course, they should be IKEA customers. Due to the coronavirus outbreak[4], we had to find a more natural way to get access to a sample, which reflects the convenience sampling design. We, therefore, have used our knowledge about a Facebook group of "*Expats in Scandinavia*" that we are part of as well, and we posted a message about our master thesis situation and requirements and asked for volunteers to participate in our research. Then according to the volunteers' inquiries, we select them for diaries or in-depth interviews. We guarantee representativeness in the sampling design because, in this Facebook group, we can find couples from all around the world, with different backgrounds and social status, which just one thing in common, and it is that they lived in the Scandinavian countries.

The target group is young families with and without children. The ages are between 24 to 45 years old. One of the characteristics of our target group is that they are IKEA customers. The reasons

[4] The **coronavirus pandemic** is an ongoing pandemic of coronavirus disease 2020 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).

for choosing this target are that new families are starting a new life together, and they need to furnish their homes or kids' rooms. Moreover, in this age group, we have different economic situations. These aspects added variety in our sample.

On the one hand, those families in which the members are at the beginning of their career path or still studying might have limited budgets. On the other hand, those families who already have professional careers might have more flexible budgets. Also, the factor of having or not kids changes their priorities towards purchases.

In the case of netnography, we applied another technique to establish our sampling, without having in consideration the target group. We used the Trustpilot[5] platform to gather netnography data. We retrieved the data for IKEA.com from Trustpilot, and we found 6.308 reviews[6], we decided to filter the results to get the right sample. First, we filtered by language, due to this study being conducted in English, we selected the reviews in this language only; as a result, we got 1.002 reviews. Second, we filtered by date, because we wanted recent reviews and also to avoid the influence of the coronavirus outbreak, so we filtered the reviews from January 2019 until February 2020. Third, we filtered by channel, according to our research purpose, we decided to focus only on those reviews that talked about a physical store shopping experience; as a result, we got 111 reviews. Finally, we filtered by content, which means that we selected only those reviews that tell a story; as a result, we end up with 45 reviews.

3.5 Data collection

Data collection is a way of gathering the relevant information for the study to proceed in doing analysis and applying theories (Easterby-Smith, 2018). Our paper will be based mainly on primary data, which represents a set of articles, books, and the collected information through the chosen techniques. For this paper, we collected data in two stages, pilot study and research. Moreover, for the data collection techniques, we applied the *Critical Incident Technique (CIT)* (Flanagan 1954). CIT is a technique used to get immediate access to specific data that is expecting to be collected, going directly to the primary purpose of the investigation, avoiding unnecessary gathering data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In our study, the CIT will enhance us to get into the customers' experiences and thoughts around their latest shopping experiences at IKEA.

The pilot study was done in February as the first stage of our research project, in which we applied two techniques, in-store observation and in-depth interviews at the customer house. As a result of

[5] Trustpilot.com is a consumer review website founded in Denmark in 2007. Trustpilot is the "The world's most powerful review platform, free and open to all. Our mission is to be a universal symbol of trust" (Trustpilot, 2020).Trustpilot hosts more than 85 millions of businesses reviews worldwide and more than 360.000 web pages reviewed. They have more than 800 employees in 7 offices around the world (Trustpilot, 2020).

[6] This information was extracted from Trustpilot.com, on the 22th of April, 2020.

this pilot, we got valuable insights that helped us with further research and guided us through the path to focus our investigation (Figure 6).

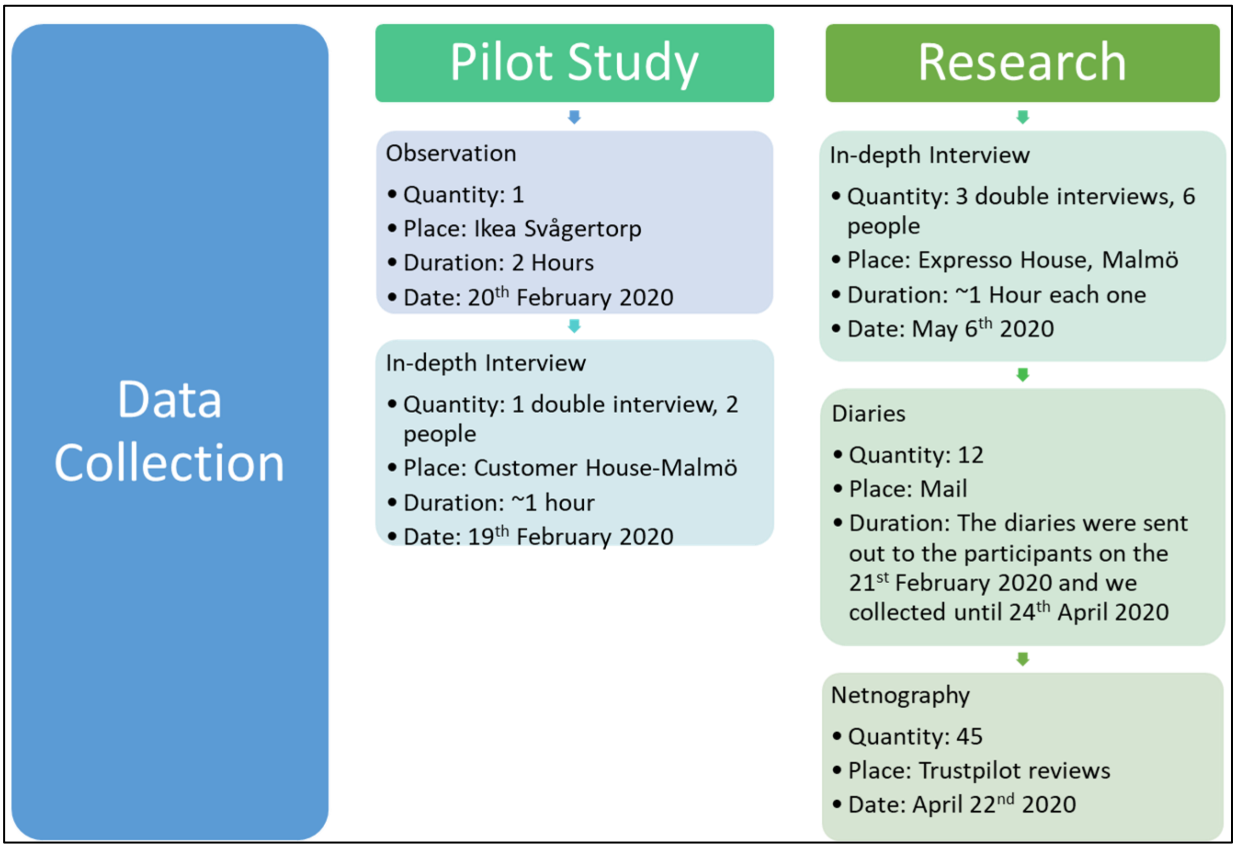

Figure 6. *Data Collection Techniques (own illustration)*

3.5.1 In-depth interviews

Interviews are a data collection technique that is based on conversations between a participant and an interviewer about a specific topic (Lofland, 2006). Interviews vary from ordinary discussions except that they are focused on a list of questions that serve as clear intent, typically a detailed analysis regarding a specific subject or experience (Charmaz, 2006). In our data collection, we decided to proceed with *in-depth qualitative interviews* applying a combination of *semi-structured* and *unstructured* techniques (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). We have divided our interview into two phases. In the first one, we used semi-structured interviews. In the second phase, we used an unstructured interview. Furthermore, we applied the *critical incident technique (CIT)*, due to that, we expected to get spontaneous answers about the customer shopping experiences.

For all the interviews, we have designed a script to guide the participants during the interview. The script was divided into four sets of questions; for these questions, we used colloquial language, non-technical, easy to understand for any person without marketing knowledge. We planned a schedule for the interview, that should not be longer than an hour, as we are well conscious of the time pressure for families, especially those with children. The interview started with the self-introduction of the students explaining the intention of the interview and a brief description of how the gathered information will be used. From the beginning, they explained the interview structure and continued with the script.

The first sets of questions were very general, such as age, occupation, country of residence, and personal styles, among other questions that allowed us to build up their persona profile. Afterwards, we continued with shopping behaviour questions regarding the shopping plan, including prior research, budget, and product characteristics. *Storytelling* was the third part of the interview, in this question, the participants were asked to tell the story behind the ultimate shopping experience at IKEA, the participants described the process from the identification of the necessity until the actual use of the product. Lastly, customers were asked about their experience; these questions were formulated to get a deeper understanding of their shopping behaviour and to clarify some possible gaps in their storytelling (for further information, see Appendix 1).

During the interviews, the whole conversations were recorded. Hence, we did not have to stress out about taking notes or missing out on the information, and we could listen to the recordings later. After the interviews were conducted, all the info was transcripted.

The first interview was conducted on the 19th of February 2020 as part of our pilot study. The goal of this interview was to test the performance of the script that we designed for the research. The participants were chosen aleatory from the recruited group from a Facebook page, that we have mentioned above. Firstly, we have invited the couple for a Fika [7] in the city of Malmö, at Espresso House. However, the respondents proposed that we interview at their home since they want to feel more relaxed and calmer because they have a baby. This made us extremely pleased and constituted an excellent opportunity for us to do additional observations of the participants in their place and how they used the IKEA products at home.

During the research, we conducted three more interviews with couples. We conducted the interviews face-to-face in an Espresso House in Malmö. The participants were chosen from the same Facebook page, as we did for the pilot study. First, we contacted them through the chat to book an appointment to conduct the interview. We were very open to our schedule, adapting us to their preferences on time and date. We also offer them different locations to do do the interview, and we invited them to a Fika. Once we agreed upon an appointment, we prepared the interview.

We decided to use the same script that we already tested during the pilot study, after gathering valuable information and having successful results with it. The interviews were performed without any setbacks, we kept the social distance, and we were delighted with the results due to the current

[7] Fika is a swedish word often translated as "a coffee and cake break", it is a tradition that means making time for friends and colleagues to share a cup of coffee (or tea) and a little something to eat (www.sweden.se).

circumstances. We conducted the interviews with the couple at the same time, so this gave us more insights about how they act as a family regarding shopping decisions. The interviews were recorded and transcripted for later analysis. More details about the interviews participants can be read in the following table (Table 1).

Participants Names	Age	Home Country	City and Country of residence	Children	Occupation
Erika Fredrik	34 36	Mexico Sweden	Malmö, Sweden	1	Engineer-Unemployed Radiologist
Emilia Mohamed	39 42	Romania Egypt	Malmö, Sweden	1	Farmacist IT employee
Greta Johan	42 40	Austria Sweden	Malmö, Sweden	1	Student IT Engineer
Soley Sasha	36 33	Colombia Sweden	Malmö, Sweden	0	Unemployed Boat worker

Table 1. *In-Depth Interviews Participants*

3.5.2 Customer Diaries

Diaries represent a technique of analysis used to gather qualitative data about customers' behaviours, characteristics, and experiences over a specific time and generate comprehensive and detailed information about the customers' intentions, buying needs and preferences (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). We chose to proceed with the application of the diaries technique according to the limitation that we encountered due to the coronavirus outbreak since we were not able to continue with in-store observations and employee interviews. Hence, we found that this technique provided us with significant inputs regarding the investigated topic and also gave flexibility to the respondents of writing about their experiences without time pressure and with the freedom to express themselves spontaneously, without being guided by the interviewers. Also, the diaries enabled us with the opportunity to proceed with other data collection methods simultaneously while the participants filled out the diaries on their own.

We designed the diaries templates to be sent to the participants in a word document. First, we put an introduction about us, and we described the intention of the study and the disclosure about how the collected information will be used. Then, we gave the participants some instructions on how they should fill out the template. The template had three parts. The first part was general information about age, gender, occupation, personal style, values, and hobbies. The second part was focused on the shopping plan, budget, and sources of inspiration. Finally, the third part was a space where the participants should include a description of their shopping experience, including their feelings and sensations of the entire IKEA experience (for further information, see Appendix 2).

In total, we collected 12 diaries with diverse participants in age and backgrounds. The diaries were filling out by the couple. At a second stage when we received the written diaries, we called the couple, and we did a shorter interview just to go deeper in those aspects that they did not write about and that were important for our research. More details about the participants can be read in the following table (Table 2).

Participants Names	Age	Home Country	City and Country of residence	Children	Occupation
Julia Ville	43 44	Colombia Finland	Helsinki, Finland	1	Unemployed Engineer
Lidia Pablo	28 30	Spain Spain	Stockholm, Sweden	0	Chemical Engineer PHD Student
Tudor Paula	25 24	Moldova Moldova	Copenhagen, Denmark	0	Civil Engineer Bachelor Student
Andreea Ruta	34 25	Romania Lithuania	Copenhagen, Denmark	0	Entrepreneur Pharmaceutical Director
Caroline Per	38 39	Germany Sweden	Malmö, Sweden	0	Hairdresser Musician
Hunor Minija	34 31	Hungary Lithuania	Copenhagen, Denmark	0	IT Student Marketing Manager
Valeria Anders	42 40	Mexico Sweden	Malmö, Sweden	2	Housewife IT engineer
Max Emilia	28 24	Sweden Russia	Malmö, Sweden	0	Pilot Master Student
Cecilia Noel	38 39	USA USA	Malmö, Sweden	0	Master Student Game Designer
Sergiu Maria	44 45	Moldova Moldova	Grindsted, Danmark	2	Veterinarian Veterinarian
Catalina Alex	30 31	Romania Romania	Malmö, Sweden	0	Restaurant Service Transport Service
Constanza Jan	39 45	Colombia Denmark	Malmö, Sweden	2	Marketer IT Engineer

Table 2. *Diaries Participants*

3.5.3 Netnography

"Netnography is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communications" (Kozinets, 2002, p.62). Netnography collects information that is freely accessible on various online platforms, and it can be used as a strategic research technique to detect and understand the customers' needs and requirements toward a specific product or service

(Kozinets, 2020). Moreover, netnography represents an inexpensive and more time-efficient technique to be performed than focus groups or other techniques (Kozinets, 2020).

To complete the triangulation of our data collection, we decided to apply a *netnography* technique to analyse the feedbacks and reviews written by IKEA customers on the web. To complete this data collection, we had selected the platform Trustpilot. The reason behind choosing Trustpilot customers reviews for our netnography data collection is that we can rely on the quality of the data that the platform provided.

The research on Trustpilot begins with the access of their website and type in "IKEA.com" in the search bar. By doing this, Trustpilot provides us with all the feedback and reviews of IKEA. Once users get back the information about the company that they retrieve, Trustpilot provides a simple graphic that shows the distribution of the reviews according to the rating provided by the customers. The best rating is five stars, and the worst one is one star. In the IKEA case, the overall rating is two stars, which is poor. More than 55% of the reviews are bad ones, and only 23% are excellent. Hence, the analysis of this data collection is focused on the main reason that triggered the customers to provide evaluations.

3.5.4 Observation (Pilot Study)

Observation is a research technique that consists in observing the participants in a specific situation during a period (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). In our *observation* performed during the pilot study, we adopted the *observers-as-participants* stance (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). We acted like regular customers who allowed us to mimic with other customers and performed our role. The observation was conducted in the IKEA store located in Malmö on the 20th of February 2020.

During the observation, we acted ethically by avoiding asking any questions to the customers or stalking them during the shopping process instead of acting as regular customers interacting with products. Moreover, to skip suspicions while doing observation in the store, we avoided the traditional way of encrypted notes, and all the comments were registered on the Smartphone in the notes section.

The observation started from the entrance of the store, checking the transportation options selected by the customers, then at the entrance hall. We observed how customers decided which path to follow in the store; at this point, we decided to focus on our target group that is families with and without children. It is essential to mention that this focus did not prevent us from observing at the same time, other target groups who follow a different path through the store.

Later on, the observation continued to the restaurant area and from there to the exhibition and inspirational floor, where all the encounters with the actual products take place, and the customer can try them. We continued following the path to the first floor, which is divided into two parts, the retail area where the customers can take the products directly from the shelves, the other part is the warehouse, where the big furniture is located—finalising at the cashier points, grocery, and cafeteria areas. The observation ends following the customers to the transportation method selected to go back home.

3.6 Data Analysis

Since we have applied three data techniques such as in-depth interviews, diaries, and netnography, we expected to gather the information that confirms the data that we found in the literature theories, and also collect insights from the stories told by the customers, to enhance our research and findings. We use a storytelling technique, which facilitates the collection of information and provides the participants with the freedom to tell their stories in a sequence involving different actors and expressing their values, ideas, and beliefs (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). We were cautious organising and sorting the data to be analysed (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015), always having in mind that this data analysis aimed to understand the role of the physical store in an omnichannel environment.

Once we collected the data through the different techniques we transcribed, and we started to sort into three categories according to our theoretical framework focusing on *Touchpoints, Omnichannel,* and *Customer Service*, along the customer journey, phases *Pre-purchase, Purchase* and *Post-purchase* (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). More precisely, we have classified quotes with different colours in the transcription to organise the quotes into categories. For the Pre-purchase category, the keywords were *inspiration, ideas, search, compare, need, like, prefer, check on-line, check-in different stores, browsing, looking for, style, design, comfort, convenience, functionality, child friendly, desire.* The keywords for the purchase category were: *decide, shopping, buy, try, feel, smell, touch, detailed information, measures, face-to-face customer service, payment, prices, self-service, grab, take, choose.* The keywords for the Post-purchase category were: *delivery, experience, assembly, customer service, feedback, reviews, transportation, satisfaction, recommendations, quality issues, return, guarantee, money back, loyalty.* When we classified these categories, we also used the keyword variations. For example, we take the keyword "recommendations," but we also use the variations of this keyword like recommend, recommended, recommendation, among others.

The information gathered from the diaries was the first one that we sorted, and we found that most of the data was related to the purchase category. Then we continued with the in-depth interviews, and the information was classified along the customer journey, emphasizing the pre-purchase stage. Finally, we sorted the netnography, which was more regarding the post-purchase category, due to it being based on customers' reviews. When we have all the data sorted into categories and subcategories according to our framework, we coded the information into specific themes related to omnichannel, touchpoints, and customer service. At this point, we started with the reduction of the data. We did a categorical reduction (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), selecting the data that was related to our research topic, the *physical store*. Furthermore, we had identified which information was related to the theories and that one that brought nuances to the research and allowed us to answer our research question. During the whole process, we went back and forward between the theories and the findings, comparing and arguing simultaneously (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

3.7 Trustworthiness and Authenticity

In the same way that in quantitative studies, validity and reliability are measured, in qualitative ones, these measures are translated to *trustworthiness and authenticity* (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Trustworthiness refers to the level of trust the study provides, and it can be measured in four ways credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2015). *Credibility* refers to how the data is presented to the readers in a comprehensive and trusty way (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In our research, we use the triangulation method, which enhances the credibility of our investigation. We applied the triangulation method that allowed us to collect data using different techniques, which assures the identification of different findings of multiple topics, enhancing the level of credibility in our research. *Transferability* refers to the relevance of the findings to other studies or researches (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We considered that the transferability of our research findings is high due to the methods and techniques that we applied. The research serves as a guide to other researches that are investigating different industries within the high involvement products and the furniture industry in general.

The main *limitation* of this project is *analytical generalisability*. We did the research specifically for the families with and without children in the furniture industry. This means that the role of the physical stores that we found can change for other target groups. Moreover, this can be different for other industries within high involvement products. For these reasons, if intended to apply to other industries within the high involvement products needs the respective adaptations and customisation. Nonetheless, it is not recommended for the industries not related to the high involvement products, since the role of the physical stores can change dramatically.

*Dependability r*elates to the accuracy of the research results and the extent to which the analysis process is reported, which would allow the outside readers to observe, inspect and make critiques (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We tried to ensure the dependability of our research through constant documentation of all actions regarding the research techniques which we applied for our paper. All the information collected was recorded, written, transcripted, and copied in a specific file and would be saved as proof of our work. During the research, we acted as transparent as possible, by registering every single thought, but never changing or modifying anything. *Confirmability* refers to the objectivity of the studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015). During the research, we ensured to act objectively by not exposing our thoughts, feelings, or values, that may affect the results positively or negatively. We aimed to keep ourselves as far as possible from the research and regularly act, by assuring the confirmability of our data.

Authenticity refers to the level of knowledge that the researcher has about the investigated topic and is also a criterion to confirm the validity of the investigation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). We argue that the validity of our research study is high since we used a triangulation method to enhance our authenticity. We consider that we have the knowledge required to complete this investigation, the fact that we are using an abductive approach, increases this appropriately considering that we are always referring to the theories from the literature founded in this topic and connecting our findings with that. Finally, this abductive approach, also, enhances our critical capacity to determine which findings are novel during our research, and not just a confirmation of previous theories.

Nevertheless, we were conscious that it is hard to demonstrate the trustworthiness and authenticity of qualitative research. Some will probably argue that there are some better options to perform the present study and others would certainly take issue with the argument that we could misinterpret the information gathered in the data collection and that we could choose better sampling techniques. However, we had to adapt our data collection and sampling due to the circumstances that the coronavirus outbreak imposed on us. We, therefore, selected the most convenient options. Hence we applied a triangulation method to assure the high validity of our study.

3.8 Ethics

Ethical concerns should be taken into account when performing qualitative research (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Our research involved the *voluntary* participation of individuals. Hence, it is highly essential here to describe the ethical aspects that would serve as a base for our investigation. Along the research process, we act with integrity from the sampling process, while performing the data collection, as well as how we present the information and our findings. The idea is to provide *veridic* and *transparent* information.

To select the participants for our research, we asked a group of people who volunteered without any obligations, no reward or compensation for participation. All the parties involved have to be adults, meaning that we selected only those above 18 years old. Before we perform the interviews and hand in the diaries, we explain to the participants the purpose of the investigation, and we assure them that it is only for academic purposes and not commercial intentions. We have promised and guaranteed to the respondents that their *private* information will be kept in *anonymity* and *confidentiality.* We only use the data that counts with the proper *consent* of the respondents.

Besides, we will not cause *any harm* to the respondents, do not ask intimate questions or other questions regarding their economic status, and they have the right to refuse to answer those questions that they considered inappropriate. Lastly, we will assure to avoid any *misleading* information or false reporting regarding our data collection, and the analysis will be done without manipulating the data.

It is also important to mention that we are independent of the project, meaning that IKEA or any other institution does not fund us for this project, and the purpose of this study is merely to complete our master studies.

4 Findings

This chapter illustrates the result of the empirical data, based on twelve diaries, four in-depth interviews, netnography analysis, and one observation. To get a better understanding of this process, we focus on the three big circles in our figure (Figure 2), "Touchpoints," "Omnichannel," and "Customer Service" (Figure 7). Then we organise the findings into the three shopping stages along the Customer Journey. We intertwined the findings with the theory from the literature review, and we also presented the novel findings. Quotes were used to support our arguments, to explain concepts, to demonstrate experience, to stimulate emotion, and to provoke responses. We considered all the voices in our research, the majority and the minority ones, in order to keep the qualitative characteristics showing the variety of the study. Moreover, we showed examples of all the voices through the quotes.

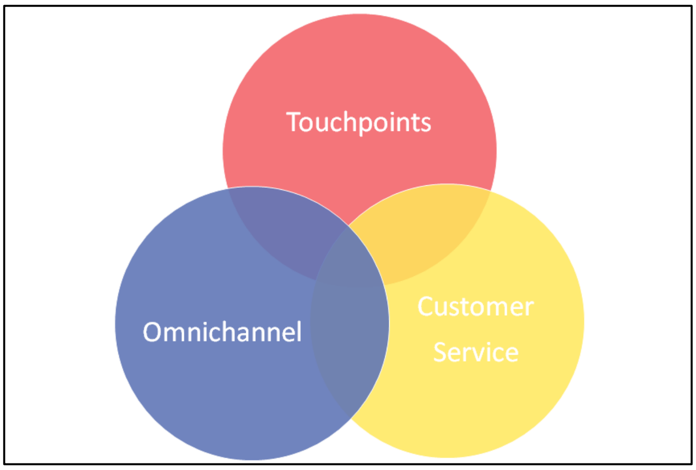

Figure 7. *The categorisation of the findings (own illustration)*

4.1 Touchpoints

As we have mentioned before, for a better understanding of the significance of the physical stores' role, it is crucial to explain the touchpoints and customer experience along the purchase stages. As a general finding, we can mention that specifically for this target group, families with and without children, the customer journeys are collective (Argo & Dahl, 2020; Thomas, Epp & Price, 2020). Customers considered the visit to IKEA as a family plan, in which they can do different activities for the whole family. They usually visit the restaurant as a first stop, and then they complete the journey through the store, finding special activities for each family member.

"Visiting the store is always fun and something that we enjoy as a family, there is always something new to check, and the product exhibitions are amazing, even when we don't buy other types of furniture, there is good as an inspiration. And we enjoy the cafeteria!"

(*Constanza & Jan, Colombia - Denmark)*

As a part of the collective journey, families are more into consensus shopping, meaning that before making a purchase decision, each family member has an active voice about their preferences. This sometimes creates indecision and ends up in a second visit to the shop, until everybody agrees upon a final selection and purchase.

"When it comes to the big furniture things, we kind of discussion between us and get some kind of agreement, so occasionally is something that I want more occasionally is something that Erika wants more, but we keep it quiet civil[...]so we tried to make a common decision."

(Erika & Fredrik, Mexico - Sweden)

Along the shopping process, customers encounter different touchpoints that can enhance their experience, or oppositely can stop them and make them reevaluate or rethink their purchase. It is essential to mention that not all the touchpoints connect with all the customers, some of them can be avoided, this is why it is necessary to have multiple touchpoints along the journey, so the retailer assures to have a connection with all the customers at some point (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). During the shopping, journey customers create a rational, emotional, and social connection with the retailer (Verhoef et al., 2009). In the IKEA case, for instance, the catalogues are a significant touchpoint for some customers, while for other customers, a very valuable touchpoint can be the cafeteria. Each customer must be perceived as an individual, considering their background, nationality, or interests.

"I am a very inspired person. Before, I had a big passion for home design, and I had a collection, catalogues. Even the IKEA catalogues I had."

(Emilia & Mohamed, Romania - Egypt)

"I don't like to look into any types of catalogues or magazines. I find it a bit boring. "

(Emilia & Max, Russia - Sweden)

"We enjoy eating there with our son, it is so family-friendly, and we love that."

(Valeria & Anders, Mexico - Sweden)

"I don't like the food there, so I/we don't eat there."

(Caroline & Per, Germany - Sweden)

4.1.1 Pre-purchase

Customers get inspiration from different touchpoints like magazines, the internet, catalogues, and physical stores. They used to check different stores to look for the items that they wanted. They don't limit to just IKEA, even if they end up buying there, customers used to check advertisements that they get from other stores. They do this to get some inspiration and compare prices and designs.

"I love going there and seeing what new things they have. And just imagine how I can fix my son's bedroom with whatever they have."

(Greta & Johan, Austria - Sweden)

People have self-categorizations of the stores according to their needs and preferences. For example, IKEA is categorised as basic, simple, and affordable, and XXXLutz[8] is more luxurious, premium quality, expensive and unique products.

[8] With more than 320 stores in Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Croatia, Switzerland, Romania, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Hungary, the XXXLutz Group is now one of the largest furniture retailers in the world.The company was founded in Haag am Hausruck in 1945.At first, the focus was on Austrian craftsmanship.

"XXXlutz...I like the food very much in the cafeteria, and the kind of furniture they have is a little bit more luxurious for certain items, I like going there. IKEA is Uhm...Well, I'm sure you can find costly things. But when I look for affordable things, I go to IKEA."

(Greta & Johan, Austria - Sweden)

Stein & Ramaseshan (2016) brought up the importance of the different touchpoints around the store regarding ambience and design. A significant finding from the data collected is that for customers, these aspects are fundamental, especially for furniture.

"Especially for furniture. You want to see a nice display and see what things you can do with the furniture that they have. And we like good lighting so we can see things really and have a good idea. For example, they have some things for the garden, and they have very good light there. So you can imagine that you're outside, and you can have a better idea of what you're buying, how it will look."

(Greta & Johan, Austria - Sweden)

People like to use both non-personal and personal touchpoints (Payne, Peltier & Barger, 2017) around the store. The Self- Service points to design wanted products, to have it customized, but they also require personal service to accomplish their goals.

“They have these standing computers where you can figure out how to imagine the new closet with all the materials that they have around. So, we have used it, and we just ask some of the desk people to help us with some options in the program that they have for design.”

(Soley & Sasha, Colombia - Sweden)

Information about the products is essential for the customers, especially for those with children. They are aware of the importance of buying child-friendly products and family-friendly products. Thus, the information provided by the store is crucial in terms of letting the customers know more about what they are buying and how it will match with their necessities.

"I love...I like to go there and see the things that they have, to see how it could look like, To get ideas of how it could be, maybe with their items or some other store items. But it's nice to see what they have because maybe I never thought it could exist and is useful for what I want. So, I like that! It opens your mind."

(Soley & Sasha, Colombia - Sweden)

4.1.2 Purchase

The stores inspire customers, and for them, it is essential to see products live when it comes to furniture. Customers expressed that it is not the same experience when they can not use their senses to decide about an item like furniture that is going to be part of their daily life.

"Sometimes the pictures that you are seeing there are not reflecting exactly the quality, the colour, the texture and maybe you can find out that you buy a product, we are talking about furniture here, and it's not exactly what you want. I prefer to see, to feel, to touch."

(Emilia & Mohamed, Romania-Egypt)

Before making a shopping decision, customers prefer to go and visit the store for more than one time, just to be sure that they are making the right decision and to see the product live. Whenever customers visit the store, they buy more than they planned.

"...So it was on our third visit when we finally bought the items from our list [...]Of course in each visit we bought something that we weren't looking for, but that we found nice and good to have at home, nothing big, just things like glasses, containers and kitchen accessories."

(Constanza & Jan, Colombia - Denmark)

Touchpoints that are related to price are very valuable in the purchase stage. People perceive IKEA as a value for money, so they consider that they are making a good business buying at IKEA because of the price-quality relation.

"I have IKEA products in every room at home. I think they are good value for money and they look good."

(Julia & Ville, Colombia - Finland)

"We looked at prices, styles, and durability."

(Minija & Hunor, Lithuania - Hungary)

Customers find it important that IKEA provides financial support so that they can pay every month for their products. This allows them to buy the products they desire, not thinking that much about money.

"One good thing at IKEA is that they have this financial support, you can buy it with credit, and you can pay every month. So, that was one of the good things, because when you buy a lot of

things, you have your budget or you find something that is over your budget, so at that time you can use that IKEA card.“

(Emilia & Mohamed, Romania - Egypt)

When buying furniture, a crucial aspect for the customers is to get technical information and advice from an expert. This increases their level of knowledge and confidence before purchasing the product, especially if it is an expensive one.

“I wanted to schedule a technician ($80 service fee) to measure our kitchen space for a remodel. Which means that I am a customer about to drop $10,000-$30,000 for a brand-new Ikea kitchen.”

(Trustpilot.com, USA)

For the customers it is crucial the store layout, the ambience, the lighting, colours, smells and to have the right signing ((Bäckström & Johansson, 2006; Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020) because sometimes they just want to go and grab things quickly, but if the in-store layout is confusing, this would increase their shopping time and make the experience a bit inconvenient, for those in a hurry. Nevertheless, for those without time pressure, it is an opportunity to get inspired.

“Another thing we liked was that things were arranged regarding their function so that you could find everything related to the kitchen, like cups, plates, forks, knives, etc. in the kitchen department. It’s very easy to find everything you need. Colours and signs that are used in the store are very important to use. It feels good to be there.”

(Paula & Tudor, Moldova)

“It feels like a maze inside the store, with usually one way in and one way out. Knowing where to exit out of each department to leave is frustrating sometimes.”

(Cecilia & Noel, USA)

"Everything it's very important to me! This can create perceptions and feelings, and if you have this feeling of familiarity. You know you are going there like home. The smell is nice, and the light is appropriate. You will buy more in the end. It's something strategically there. If you have a place to go, for example, If you have a baby car. Everything it's important. How they manage the place, fix the scene, how they arrange it. "

(Emilia & Mohamed, Romania- Egypt)

For customers, IKEA is not just a furniture store. It is more like a universal store, where they can even go grocery shopping.

"In IKEA, we like to buy more than furniture. Most of the time, we buy food and drinks. In our opinion, this is quite cheap."

(Paula & Tudor, Moldova)

"We have a shopping list for IKEA, and we had accumulated three specific things that we were looking for that we wanted to buy from there. They were baby bibs, a can opener, and coffee-flavoured chocolate."

(Valeria & Anders, Mexico - Sweden)

4.1.3 Post-purchase

Customers mentioned that going to IKEA is more like an experience. They usually planned their visit and have some list, but they are always open to new options, and they want to be inspired along the whole journey. They think that IKEA is more than just shopping; it is an overall experience, where they can enjoy with their family from the beginning to the end (Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017). For this reason, it is so vital that the entire journey is consistent in terms of enjoyment and creating a seamless experience (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Morse & Johnson, 2011; Pantano & Viassone, 2015). Because if there is something that is not aligned, it erases the excellent experience, and the aftertaste is bitter (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015)).

"Exciting, interactive, because you can go there and try things on your own, and different in a good way, different from the other stores, you got experience there that you just don't get in other places, so I think it is good as different."

(Erika & Fredrik, Mexico - Sweden)

Another critical aspect of the post-purchase touchpoints is that they create an emotional attachment to the retailer through their loyalty programs and reward memberships. In the IKEA case, they have the IKEA family card. These touchpoints create value and engagements towards the customers to go back to the store and repurchase, which can be translated into loyalty and keep the customers into the loop of experience (Edelman Marc, 2015; Shankar et al., 2011).

"I think its value and its kind of emotional attachment because you feel like a part of a group. You feel like you get something. It's more like self-identification with a brand community."

(Emilia & Mohamed, Romania - Egypt)

When customers have memorable experiences from a store, they tend to show commitment by sharing their personal experience on social media or other channels. They are willing to write reviews and feedback, which are touchpoints for different customers (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018).

"I wrote on social media. And a lot of times I repost some kinds of things that I find interesting. My feedback was on social media. I have never done it on their website. And sometimes this is a way to say thank you and to support because good feedback always gives others the chance to understand that they can find good products or services there."

(Emilia & Mohamed, Romania - Egypt)

Touchpoints in the post-purchase stage are mostly related to side services that the company provides, like delivery, assembly, click and collect, warranty, and return policies. Those customers without a car, prefer to have home delivery because it is more convenient for them to get all at once, without being worried about how to bring it with them. For them, it is easier and cheaper just to wait for the delivery at home, and Ikea offers different options for home delivery. Customers with cars prefer to go by themselves and pick up the products from the physical store.

"We have a big car, and all packed we go together with our children to IKEA. Since we have a car, we prefer to pick the products by ourselves, and there is no need for delivery here."

(Maria & Sergiu, Moldova)

Regarding assembling, most of the customers do not need assembly services, since they think it is easy to build up the products by themselves when it is about basic furniture. Customers believe that IKEA furniture is easy to assemble, and they found that it is an excellent family activity that they enjoy. They also think that the instructions are simple and good enough.

"Once at home is when the fun part starts, because it is the funny assembly time! It is a project in which the whole family participated and that we enjoyed together."

(Constanza & Jan, Colombia - Denmark)

Nonetheless, those tailor-made products, like kitchen and closets, prefer to hire the assembly services to be sure that they have the right warranties.

"We used IKEAS services all the way, from planning with their kitchen planners (in person at store) to hiring their company they work with for measuring and also assembling the product. Since we also wanted new floors in the kitchen and hallway, we decided it would be a perfect time also to get this work done in one go. We used the same company as IKEA recommended"

(Caroline & Per, Germany - Sweden)

However, the customers would like to have some of the extra services as complementary, due to, especially when they pay a large amount of money. Moreover, sometimes they found that the delivery services are even more expensive than the products itself, or they considered that they are so costly according to the distance between their homes and the stores.

"Trying to charge someone £40 for delivery when the item itself is £35 is greedy and disgusting."

(Trustpilot.com, UK)

"I explained to her this is a 50 dollar problem and we paid 2500 they should be able to deliver the correct item for us as a courtesy."

(Trustpilot.com, USA)

4.2 Omnichannel

Most of the findings regarding omnichannel, were related to the use of different channels, to be inspired, to shop or to get support (Beck & Rygl, 2015; Melero, Sese & Verhoef, 2016; Rigby, 2011; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015), in these aspects customers do not want to find the difference between the channels options. Nevertheless, sometimes they do not see coherence between the information offered by IKEA in the different channels. This revealed that IKEA does not have a fully integrated omnichannel strategy yet.

"We have previously bought our furniture from IKEA, so we were used to the acquisition procedure. Normally, we love to go to the nearest IKEA store, which is located in Gentofte, but due to COVID-19, we have placed an order online, and we went to pick up our three curtains from the shop (picking area)."

(Andreea & Ruta, Romania - Lithuania)

"Put items in the basket, 25% not available, decide to order what I can. Press confirmation for the order a different 25% now not available. Only available in 3 stores in the UK."

(Trustpilot.com, UK)

Sometimes, customers can start their shopping journey in one channel and end it in another one (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). This illustrates the importance of channel integration to create an epic customer experience (Alexander & Alvarado, 2017; Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020).

"After choosing all furniture and creating a shopping list online, we decided not to buy it yet and go personally to Ikea the next week to double-check the design, colours, and measurements. All pieces of furniture were as we expected, as we saw in the online catalogue. Anyway, we decided to improvise and change a couple of them."

(Lidia & Pablo, Spain)

Customers who are using digital channels used different devices to navigate on the retailers' webpage ((Melero, Sese & Verhoef, 2016; ed. Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2019; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015)). Even more, they are using the retailer APPs, and they have different moments for each specific digital tool according to the circumstances (Chen & Lamberti, 2016).

"I usually visit the webpage several times before buying, either online or at the store. I use the IKEA application on my phone and tablet, although I prefer to check the website on my laptop."

(Julia & Ville, Colombia - Finland)

4.2.1 Pre-purchase

Channel selection varies depending on customers' preferences. Nowadays, the interconnection between digital and physical channels offers different options to customers who are looking for seamless experiences. Nevertheless, when it is about high involvement products, and in the IKEA case furniture, customers prefer the physical stores to explore with all their senses the products and create a liaison with them, imagining how they would fill out those spaces in their homes.

"...furniture we would rather see live to see how strong it is, or how it looks, how it feels, but not online, we usually don't look for furniture online."

(Erika & Fredrik, Mexico - Sweden)

The online channels are used by customers and perform an important role. Still, due to the type of bond that exists between the furniture and the lifestyle of the consumers, the physical stores are a fundamental point to try, feel, touch, smell, and get inspired towards a critical purchase.

"Because they have something looking like a room, like a library and then you can see how they display all this furniture, so things hold together. OH! this is nice!"

(Soley & Sasha, Colombia - Sweden)

"I usually check the first IKEA website, even if I plan to go to the shop to see the products. The website has lots of pictures where I get ideas for my projects, and I also find additional products that I have not previously considered, for example, organizing boxes. For this project, I am considering online shopping and use the click & collect service."

(Julia & Ville, Colombia - Finland)

"I browsed through Ikea's website to see what is new, and I chose some of the items, but because it is important to see it and feel it as well, we have decided to visit Ikea."

(Valeria & Anders, Mexico - Sweden)

Customers that are using online channels to get inspired are looking for furniture that can match their limited spaces, budgets, and styles. Nevertheless, it is not easy to get this type of product from other stores, but IKEA seems to be the right provider that matches these requirements. First, because the furniture is affordable, second, the design is smart, and third, the aspect that everything is assembling in individual parts gives the customers more flexibility on how they can create their spaces. This is something that the customers can check online and instore in the inspiration rooms. IKEA provides different options with the same piece of furniture that is adaptable to the customers' necessities.

"Noel was browsing through IKEA's website and found a similar style that we like... We are excited because it looks like the style we want. The wood looks nice, and the cushions look comfortable. The price point is also affordable, and we can buy the furniture in pieces, so it doesn't have to be one long bench."

(Cecilia & Noel, USA)

4.2.2 Purchase

Customers are purchasing from different channels. However, they prefer to go to the physical store to buy furniture instead of on-line shopping. Online shopping is a perfect option when they want to repurchase an item that they had a previous encounter.

"Because I like to see the item that I want to buy first. If I already know the name of the item and how it looks like, maybe I can order it online. But if I have no idea and I just want to go and see what they have, I prefer to go physically than just look at their online page because I can have a better idea of the materials and the true colours and the dimensions."

(Greta & Johan, Austria - Sweden)

Customers check products online in different stores, but when they check IKEA's webpage and see that they can customise some of their products according to their requirements, they choose to go to the IKEA store and get a tailor-made design for their specific spaces.

"We checked online on different stores, the colour, and the size of the closet to see if it matches where we want to put it. And we usually, for our closets, we go to IKEA. So, once we saw it and we liked it, we went there, and then we designed the interior of the closet."

(Greta & Johan, Austria-Sweden)

Customers expected to have the same consistency in their online shopping and in-store shopping experiences, but they get very disappointed when this is not happening. Hence, in this case, they prefer in-store shopping to be sure about their purchase.

"We have never ordered online before, but this time we decided to try it out. It was quite difficult to find what we want online; I think their website is not updated and is hard to navigate on their website."

(Emilia & Max, Russia-Sweden)

For some customers, when it is about furniture and they want to do online shopping, in the end, they just decided to save their shopping list and check-in person the products that they have selected. When it comes to furniture, it is a big decision, and they want to be sure that they are making the right selection of colours, shapes, dimensions, and designs. Thus they are doing webrooming (Flavián, Gurrea & Orús, 2016) because they still believe that the physical experience provides them with a better shopping decision experience.

"Most of the time we shop online, but IKEA is special for us, so we prefer to go to the physical outlet, there is a different atmosphere. "

(Minija & Hunor, Lithuania - Hungary)

The customer that are using online channels is expecting to click and get the products in their baskets. Still, it seems that the IKEA webpage is not actualized with their actual stocks, and just went customers want to order, they realize that the items are not available, so this makes them feel that they are wasting their time.

" For so many years, I've turned to Ikea stores for everything. Years ago, I furnished two homes with so much Ikea products that people would comment that I lived in an Ikea showroom! And,

back then, I couldn't have been happier with quality, price, selection. In the past six months, I've had cause to re-furnish a new home and went directly to Ikea (on-line this time). From tea-lights to table-tops, the experience has been nothing less than horror."

(Trustpilot.com, USA)

Customers find it challenging to navigate on different channels since the website of IKEA is not designed to be app friendly. Some of the customers find the use of IKEA application essential but not very practical in terms of navigation on it, for example, saving products if they create several lists and want to save diverse categories.

"I like to go around the shop, and only a few times have been there just to pick up what I have on my shopping list. I use the shopping list from the application, but I find it not very practical to save products if I create several lists and want to save different categories. For example, I have a bedroom and kitchen lists, and when I visit the page, I see all kinds of products and add the ones I like to the lists, but I have to go to the list option and switch between lists. While on the website, I can choose the list where I want to add the product."

(Julia & Ville, Colombia-Finland)

4.2.3 Post-purchase

Customer service is one of the most significant factors in the post-purchase stage. Customers expected to have excellent customer service in all the different channels. They expected seamless service.

"Customer service on the phone says one thing, Customer service in-store says another and argues with you, and their manager just disappears for not wanting to Meet the customer, which she was employed to deal with."

(Trustpilot.com, Canada)

"Sent me the completely wrong order, and it took at least three hours of queuing on the phone and a visit in-store to sort order and get a refund."

(Trustpilot.com, Germany)

"The products are cheap and look decent, so we usually deal with the issue, but IKEA could improve on their delivery services and customer service experience for online products."

(Cecilia & Noel, USA)

When people are using different channels to complete their purchases, they are expecting that everything is clear and the information is complete enough to be satisfied with the experience. Nevertheless, it seems that IKEA is not entirely transparent with the policies between its different channels, and this is being perceived as an inadequate integration.

"Click and collect programs are garbage. I received an email stating that my order was ready for pick up. That's all it said, two days later I showed up at the store to pick up my order, and it had been refunded and returned. Because I didn't pick it up that same day, I got the email. The email said nothing like I have 24 hours to pick up the items, or they're being returned. The things I bought were on sale, and they are not honoring the sale price of me having to go back and buy them again. They also never communicated that the items are being refunded and returned. I still have not been refunded on my credit card. They said they would process the transaction eventually. They need way better communication and customer service. I wouldn't recommend using the click and collect service. Unless you're waiting by your email for the notice to go get your items immediately."

(Trustpilot.com, Belgium)

4.3 Customer Service

The findings regarding customer service show that shoppers prefer to have a face-to-face service (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006, 2017). Face-to-face service is what they want to have when they are buying furniture. They are expecting to have support and accompaniment along their shopping journey (Voorhees et al., 2017). They want to have proactive customer service and not always being them who look for assistance. These aspects enhance their shopping experience and generate trust in the retailer. Nonetheless, according to consumers, face-to-face service needs to be extraordinary. This means that the personnel should be able to solve different requirements with an expert level. Moreover, they should be trained accordingly and have proper knowledge of IKEAs products and their policies.

"I expect them to know very well the item to be able to answer if not all, most of my questions about the item."

(Greta & Johan, Mexico - Sweden)

"So, it was on our third visit when we finally bought the items, it was always challenging to pack everything in the car without personal help. We will appreciate having that kind of help from the store, but that's what you get when you buy in IKEA… customer service is almost invisible."

(Constanza & Jan, Colombia - Denmark)

"After waiting for about 25 minutes, one employee came with the products. He asked my husband to confirm the reference number and left the products. I have to admit that the service was not the best one. The employee didn't even ask if we need help to put them in the car or if we need anything else. Nothing! "

(Emilia & Max, Russia-Sweden)

Shoppers perceive customer service as something that will help them to resolve their issues related to their purchases. Still, when the customer service is complicating their lives and is not a smooth and secure process, they consider that it is poor customer service and it affects the overall rating of the entire shopping process even though their pre-purchase and purchase experience were excellent and satisfactory (Voorhees et al., 2017).

"Don't get me wrong. I love IKEA when we go to the store. However, the online and delivery part of IKEA needs serious improvement. We ordered several products for delivery, and the delivery dates changed constantly. 2 items are still not delivered. They may never be delivered due to the manufacturer not making any more of the product. I thought IKEA was the manufacturer? Also, why sell something when you know it may never be available again? I will stick to buying in stores from now on."

(Trustpilot.com, Austria)

4.3.1 Pre-purchase

In the pre-purchase stage, customer service is more about solving quick questions that will help the customers to decide between products. In this stage, customers are expecting personnel to be able to answer their questions when they have doubts about the items. They expected a certain level from the personal and knowledge about the different items, getting expert advice (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006, 2017). Besides, if the customers do not have enough information from the store, they do some research on other channels about the products, and they consider that this availability of information is also customer service.

"We love IKEAs service, the staff is very friendly, but sometimes it seems like they lack knowledge, and they can not answer our questions. Therefore, it is always necessary to research the products before."

(Andreea & Ruta, Romania - Lithuania)

"We like to buy in IKEA, we are satisfied with the stuff that we got from them, so overall it is a good experience, but we would like to have better customer service, that would be great! Sometimes we feel that the personnel there are not well prepared, and when you are buying furniture, you expect to have expert level service, sadly that's not the case."

(Constanza & Jan, Colombia - Denmark)

Another critical issue in the pre-purchase stage related to customer service is how easy it is to access it. Customers are expecting to find personnel quickly to get the right guidance.

"It's a bit hard to get them to help, sometimes. They do not always have people. They don't have enough staff. You have to wait very long sometimes."

(Greta & Johan, Mexico - Sweden)

According to the products that customers are buying, they are expecting to have an expert service more like a consultation (Flint, Blocker & Boutin, 2011) when it comes to particular furniture. They want to be sure that their purchase is going to satisfy their needs. They are expecting help to make a shopping decision from an expert point of view.

"There are so many options there, and then a friend told me that when you buy a bed in IKEA, you can book a time with the experts, that they make a consultation for you and they see what you need, what do you want and from there they help you choose. This is perfect because you need that."

(Soley & Sasha, Colombia - Sweden)

4.3.2 Purchase

In the purchase stage, customer service is vital. Customers are making their final decisions, and if they have doubts about something, they want quick and precise answers, they are willing to wait or queue for service because it is an important decision. They want to be sure regarding the item that they are acquiring. However, if the service that they are getting is not right, or if they consider that the service person lacks knowledge, this can drop off the entire shopping process, or affect the whole shopping experience.

" It's hard to find an employee around the store and ask the wanted questions. But finally, waiting for about 15 minutes, we saw one girl, who was an employee there. She helped us, but it felt like she didn't have enough knowledge about the products. So, we were a bit disappointed."

(Maria & Sergiu, Moldova)

"One thing about Ikea that we think can improve is service. There is always a lack of personnel around the store, and it's annoying when you want to get some quick service, they are never there."

(Minija & Hunor, Lithuania - Hungary)

Shoppers think customer service is essential when you buy furniture since most of the time, and furniture is an expensive item. Moreover, they prefer face-to-face customer service to get more knowledge about the product functions such as material from which it is made, texture, sustainability, and ecological aspects of it.

"If it's furniture, then you have lots of questions about it. So, I think in the areas where there are big things, it should always be personal to take care of people who have questions, I think."

(Erika & Fredrik, Mexico - Sweden)

However, self-service points (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014; Ostrom et al., 2015)4))are not helping a lot when it is about furniture, they give limited information about it, and not any piece of professional advice regarding what best suits the consumer.

"I am not using it. I prefer personal service if I have some questions."

(Emilia & Mohamed, Romania - Egypt)

Nevertheless, some customers find that the self-service cashier points (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014; Ostrom et al., 2015)) are handy, especially when the store is crowded.

"Some of the customers prefer to pay in the self-service cashier."

(Soley & Sasha, Colombia - Sweden)

When customers are paying to get a service, they are expecting to have the best one, especially if it is something for what they paid in advance. They are expecting high-quality service and professionalism. They do not want to lead with waiting times and lack of compromise.

"We've approached Ikea for remodelling our kitchen. They've suggested paying 3000 so that the planner would visit our home and take the measurements and give us the design and we wouldn't have to visit the store until the selection of the countertop and other products. As told, the planner has visited along with other personnel and taken the measurements (which also happened after many follow-ups). They've sent us the plan which didn't include the whole kitchen but a part of it (which also was done late). Later after contacting the planner, she said she would send the whole plan the very next day, but it has been weeks that there is no progress nor the design was sent. They have not replied to calls or emails. Such poor service. Didn't expect such a bad service from them."

(Trustpilot.com, Poland)

4.3.3 Post-purchase

In the post-purchase stage, the retailer must have a clear and transparent return and warranty policies. This is an aspect that customers value from their favourite shops, and that creates a special bond with the store, because they feel that they can rely on the retailer, and this triggers new purchases. However, if the case is the opposite, and the customer thinks that they can not trust or rely on the shop, likely, they will never return to the store again.

"So, IKEA has this 365-day return, right? Complete scam... this is just to attract customers to their shop and screw them up later. I purchased a the Vemile sofa from Ikea, four-seaters. After about 150 days, when I was returning it since it was very uncomfortable and for its extremely low/bad quality, I called the customer service. I asked if I can return back the sofa, stating that I used it for 150 days, I don't have the original package since the return was not planned, and that if I can get refund to the original method of payment, my CC they said yes. So I rented a truck and disassembled the sofa, and took it there to be faced with these scammers. IKEA customer service kept me holding and arguing with them for 4 hours 6:00 pm till 10:00 pm and be faced with these scammers on the counter that didn't want to return the sofa. Why? because they said, it's used, and I don't have the original packaging stating that they only take it if it is with the packaging to PUT BACK ON SHELF & SELL IT TO OTHER PEOPLE."

(Trustpilot.com, Canada)

Customers find it important to share their shopping experience in order to inform others about their experience and also give feedback to the company itself (Voorhees et al., 2017). This kind of comments is made on social media or feedback platforms.

“I can check on pricerunner, to see prices and to see what people recommended or the experience they had or the item.”

(Erika & Fredrik, Mexico - Sweden)

When a customer is satisfied with the shopping experience along the purchase stages, they are willing to write positive reviews, and through this, they want to show gratitude regarding an excellent job. However, to find good reviews is not as frequent as to find bad ones, that sometimes are written with anger and are not 100% objective (Tronvoll, Edvardsson & Möllerskov-Jonzon, 2019).

“Most of our shopping experiences at IKEA are quite positive, so sometimes we feel the need to share this with the others, and what we do is writing reviews, most of the time on Trustpilot or Facebook.”

(Paula & Tudor, Moldova)

“But there are some people that are just saying lies about an article when in the end the article is not that bad actually. So, what I mean you can not be fixed just because there is just one really bad review, because maybe that really bad review is written by someone that was having a bad day. And just want to tell the anger on the article, so I think that if you are gonna check reviews, it is important to check it all and just make a comparison and if it's just a couple of people saying that is bad.”

(Erika & Fredrik, Mexico - Sweden)

Customers are expecting a holistic experience (Voorhees et al., 2017) with IKEA. It does not matter if they are getting service from a third-party company that is partnered with IKEA. In the end, they are getting the service from IKEA. Hence when issues about warranties, or lousy customer service occur, for the customer to be transparent who made a mistake, for them is IKEA who should be the response to solve the problem. Thus, they are expecting to have a seamless service, no matter who is in charge, they will say that it is IKEA service at the end.

“The only problem/bad experience we had with IKEA and the new kitchen was that the recommended construction company made a few mistakes that nobody wanted to stand up for in the end. We argued a long time with both IKEA and the construction company, and in the end, received compensation of circa 4.000sek from IKEA.”

(Caroline & Per, Germany - Sweden)

"They came without a blueprint of any description of what we ordered, expecting us to provide photos of what we ordered. This, in my opinion, should be prepared by IKEA and provided to the assembler team as it was built using a virtual program in store. As there was no blueprint, they ended up building a wardrobe that was not in the arrangement which we agreed on in-store."

(Trustpilot.com, USA)

"Customer experience of dealing with IKEA and their subcontractors has been terrible."

(Trustpilot.com, Greece)

When customers are buying furniture, they are aware that they will spend a massive budget to get what they want. Nonetheless, they are expecting to have something in return for their significant transaction, like complimentary services, something like free delivery or assembling. Unfortunately, this is not an IKEA case, and sometimes they have to pay even more for these types of complementary services than for the products itself, and this can be translated in a bad experience.

"Afterward, we had to decide upon the delivery. I thought, if we leave nearby, may they will charge us cheaper, but apparently, I was wrong. The delivery cost was 499 and 599 with delivery inside the home. That is insane, I exclaimed! The delivery cost is like the cost of one cabinet".

(Emilia & Max, Russia-Sweden)

4.4 Chapter Summary

To summarised all our finding, we found evidence that confirms the theories that we used in our literature review (see Figure 4), and we also found some novel concepts that we will integrate into the next chapter.

Touchpoints Findings: families prefer collective journeys that individual ones; multiple touchpoints creates social, emotional and rational connection; inspiration from multiple touchpoints; categorization of the stores according to their purposes; the physical store layout is important, DAST model (Design, Ambience, Social, Trialability); personal and non-personal touchpoints; holistic and seamless experience; loop of experience; and non-linear customer journeys, customer go back and forward between purchase stages, and they can start journeys at any stage as well.

Omnichannel Findings: customers jump between channels, starting shopping in one and ending in another, showrooming and webrooming; customer expect channel integration, inclusive with third parties; tech customers expect devices integration, click-and-collect, order-in-store.

Customer Service Findings: customer prefer face-to-face customer service at an expertise level; customers are willing to use self-service points for a certain task but expect personnel guidance regardless; customer service along the shopping process is expected, pre-encounters, core-encounters and post-encounters; and customers are writing and reading feedback and reviews and this influence their shopping behaviour.

Novel Findings: Customers see the physical stores as a social point; some touchpoints are not important for all the customers but others; product information is valuable; multiple visits to the stores are done to complete the journeys; customers expect good business (value for money); for customers visits to the physical stores create a memorable experience; customer service must be a smooth process; third party customer service is part of the retailer customer service (integration); clear and transparent return and warranty policies; complimentary services are expected as part of significant transactions, and customers check different stores, but they choose the one which gives more customer service options.

5 Analysis and Discussion

In this chapter, we will analyse and discussed the empirical findings from the data collection. We focused this part of our thesis in the connection between the theories (see Figure 4) and the empirical findings in order to answer our research question. According to this, bringing back our main figure, we are focused on the common points between the three big circles (Figure 2), and from these common aspects, we found three fundamental roles of the physical store in an omnichannel environment in the furniture industry. We named these roles as *"Business is Business", "Living the dream"* and *"Enlighten me!"* we explained them below.

Moreover, we created a new concept that explained the role of the brick-and-mortar concerning touchpoints, omnichannel and customer service, with the novel findings. We called this new concept ***S-T-O-R-I-E-S (S****ocial*, ***T****rialability*, ***O****perations*, ***R****evelations*, ***I****nspiration*, ***E****xperience*, ***S****ervice*), in this concept we include all the voices (majority and minority ones) from our findings chapter and it is explained below.

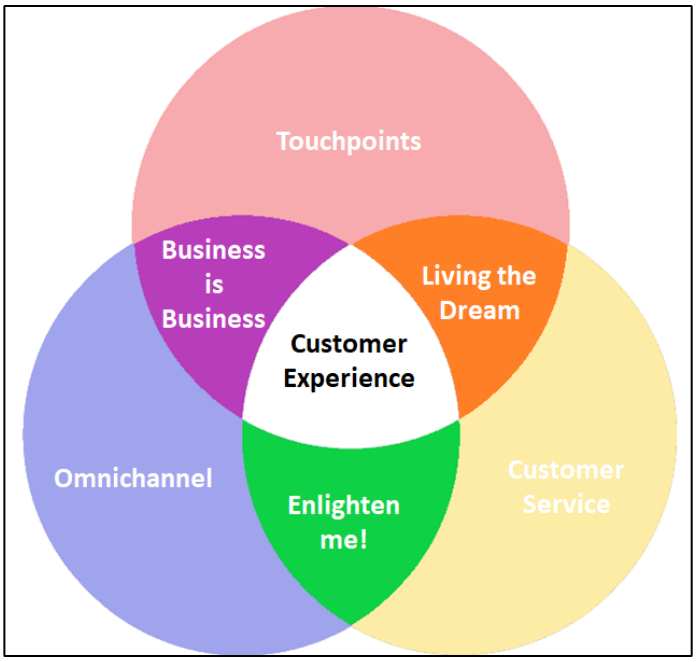

Figure 8. *Roles of the Physical Store (own illustration)*

5.1 Business is Business: Transactions

Analysing the findings presented in the previous chapter; we found a common pattern along the data collected related to what the physical store is for the furniture shoppers. As a result of combining the findings between Touchpoints and Omnichannel, the first thing that they mention is buying, they wanted to buy something, and this is translated as *transactions*. The physical stores are places where the retailers offer products and services to be sold to the customers, and customers want to make “good business” (value for money) and are expecting complimentary services in return for their transactions. This is a basic function of the physical store, and it does not matter how many new digital channels exist, customers prefer to do these transactions in the brick-and-mortar. When customers are looking for “good business”, they often visit more than one store encountering multiple touchpoints, in the end, they choose the store that offers them the best deal. Moreover, those who complete the purchase in digital channels had visited the physical outlet at least once during their journey. Even more, if they encounter digital touchpoints that lead them to a smooth digital buying experience when it is about the furniture, they want to visit the physical stores to complete their purchases. It is just under the circumstances like COVID-19 when customers prefer to complete the purchase online, without visiting the physical store at least once during their journey.

5.2 Living the dream: Trialability

When we combine the findings regarding touchpoints with the customer service ones, the second role of the physical store is clear. Customers like to get a real shopping experience. Once they are in the physical store, they want to have a live and memorable experience. They want to materialise their dreams and somehow make them real by *trying out* the products, feeling the textures, strengths, robustness and sensations that the different materials produce. Product information regarding materials and components is valuable for the customers. While they try, they are captivated by smelling the fabrics, woods and other materials that bring them back to good memories or make them close to those that they want to live. Trying products, they want to see scenes that inspire them to dream more and to picture themselves and their families enjoying spaces like those in their homes. They even want to be able to bring home those flavours that they enjoy in their visit to the retailers' cafeterias along with their shopping experience, while they see the physical store as a social point. Customers want to reproduce those cosy and pleasant experiences in their homes with their families.

5.3 Enlighten me! Expert customer service

The last role of the physical store is focused on the interaction between omnichannel and customer service. Customers wanted to be *Enlightened* by the personnel in the brick-and-mortar. When customers are buying furniture, which most of the time is an expensive acquisition, they want to have the right guidance, assistance and support along their customer journey. Customers require professional expertise delivered by the retailer employees. In order to feel safe and confident about their purchase, consumers consider that a visit to a physical store and professional advice would guarantee their acquisition and would make worth the investment of a considerable amount of money. They want to have instant service right at the moment when they need it, and they prefer face-to-face service from personnel adequately trained for this purpose. They expect that the person will do more than just answer questions; they expect them to provide expert advice and will make their shopping more valuable, feeling that they are making the right choices. Customers also expect the same level of service at the post-purchase stage. For them, it does not matter if the delivery or assembling services are done by a third party, they just want to have a seamless experience, and for them, this is always provided by the retailer. Moreover, customers expect a clear and transparent return and warranty policy. Besides they expect to have the same level of service when they are using digital or phone contact channels, perceiving this as a smooth customer service.

5.4 S-T-O-R-I-E-S

When we think about customer journeys, we like to think about those like stories that the customers are telling about their shopping experiences. Along with this project, we collected different stories through the literature review and the research methods that we applied. The findings that we got started to guide us in this new concept that we created intertwined them with the theories. When we found the role of the physical store in the omnichannel environment, we started to draw it like a tripod in our minds, this tripod then took the form of a triangle, and in the middle, we put the customer experience as the ultimate goal of the role of the physical store. We also found some other variables that play essential roles between those three major points, which enhance the connections between them and make our new concept more consistent (Figure 9).

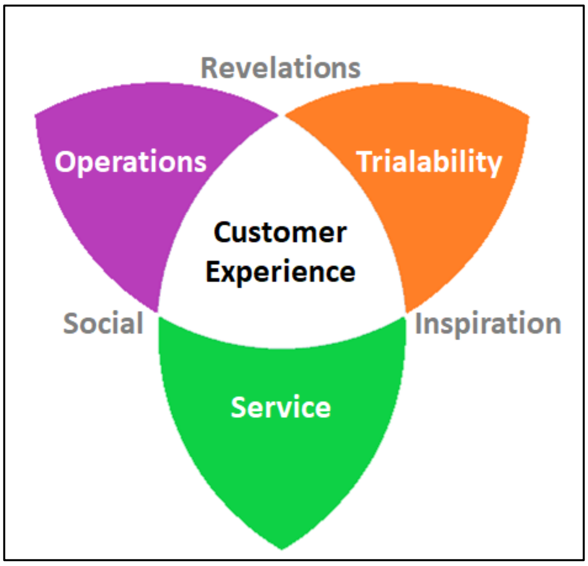

Figure 9. ***S-T-O-R-I-E-S*** *concept (own illustration)*

This is how we ended creating the **S-T-O-R-I-E-S** concept. Because we consider that the roles of the physical store are ***S****ocial*, ***T****rialability*, ***O****perations*, ***R****evelations*, ***I****nspiration*, ***E****xperience*, ***S****ervice*, these roles create multiple touchpoints (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and also are a connection between the digital and physical channels. They are leading the customers along the shopping journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) to create memorable experiences (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015), experiences that later would be told by the customers as *stories* that will create new ones and so on.

The *S-T-O-R-I-E-S concept* connects all the theories about touchpoints, omnichannel and customer service (see Figure 4) with the empirical finding of the research (see 4.4 Chapter Summary). At the same time can be considered as a tool that the retailers can use to determine the strategic importance of their touchpoints, omnichannel presence, and customer service points. The more number of S-T-O-R-I-E-S elements that a touchpoint, omnichannel or customer service point has, the more strategic it is for the retailers and will contribute to the creation of memorable customer experience (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015).

For example, a touchpoint can be the cafeteria of the physical store if the cafeteria serves as a *S-ocial* place where the families can enjoy a pleasant meal together, even though they are in a public place. Serves a point where the customers can *T-ry* the same products that the retailer sells, like food, furniture, decoration, among others. It is an *O-peration* place in terms that the customers' complete transactions were buying products. It is a place where the customers have *R-evelations* about products that they did not know about, but they have the opportunity to discover and *I-nspired* them to include those products in their lives. The cafeteria *E-xperience* is highly satisfactory and is a destination point for the retailer. Finally, the cafeteria customer *S-ervice* is highly evaluated by the customers, the personnel is friendly, and the service is fast. When all these elements are present and are positive, the more strategic is that touchpoint for the retailer and the customers.

The collection of S-T-O-R-I-E-S elements creates memorable customer experiences that will enhance the engagement of the customers with the retailer. This engagement is translated in repurchase and loyalty (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015; Homburg, Jozić & Kuehnl, 2017b; Ou & Verhoef, 2017); and the goal is to keep the customer in this loop of experiences as is explained by (Edelman Marc, 2015; Shankar et al., 2011).

Below we explain in greater detail each S-T-O-R-I-E-S element.

5.4.1 S-ocial

S-ocial is related to the "Enlighten me!" role of the physical store. It represents the opportunity that the retailer gives to the customers to do different activities together, with their families, friends or sometimes with other customers that they meet in the brick-and-mortar, as well as the interaction between customers and employees, as it is explained by Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger (2020) in their DAST theory. S-ocial also refers to the fact that the customers prefer to go shopping together with their families, meaning that the customer journeys are becoming collective rather than individual (Epp & Price, 2020). As it was identified in the empirical findings, families consider shopping as a family activity, where they can spend time together in a smart way, meaning that they are managing more things at the same time making shopping a whole experience involving, for example, eating and playing. For this reason, the Physical Store should have these kinds of places available for those customers that are looking for these types of experiences. This also can influence the number of transactions, due to that, shopping becomes more fun, and exciting and different family members can have various ideas about what to buy, how to design certain things.

Another significant S-ocial role of the physical store in the customers' journeys is their interaction with the employees, specifically with the store representatives, who are in charge of delivering customer service. Personnel influence in stores (Argo & Dahl, 2020) is crucial for the customers, given them advise regarding their needs, deliver expertise about specific products and also show hospitality, which makes it a strong point for the physical store or the entire business. Sales representatives have to be perceived as actors who can make a difference, by performing an outstanding service along the customers shopping journey.

5.4.2 T-rialability

T-rialability is the role of the physical store that works directly with senses. It is the opportunity that the brick-and-mortar provides to the customers to try out the products (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020), feeling, touching, smelling, seeing, tasting and hearing. This tactile experience is just available in the physical stores; live contact produces a sensorial experience that can engage the customer even with products that they did not know that exist. T-rialability is where the "Living the dream" role starts.

The T-rialability element is also related with the multiple touchpoints theories (Payne, Peltier & Barger, 2017; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016) giving significance to the importance of offering different contact points to the customers, where they can encounter personal or non-personal (Payne, Peltier & Barger, 2017) touchpoints. This variety is what customers appreciate from a customer-centric retailer, the opportunity to be surprised in many different ways. Customers are looking for the experience of trying the products live and not just seeing an exhibition or a picture which they can not interact with it, as it has been identified in our empirical findings.

5.4.3 O-perations

O-perations is the basic role of the physical store, representing the opportunity to do transactions. Is where the "Business is business" takes place, when customers are dealing with the final steps in their shopping journey such as payment and post-purchase services like delivery and assembly that usually involves a third party (Alexander & Cano, 2019).

The O-perations, similar to other factors, represents a significant part of the customers shopping journey. As it has been identified in the empirical findings, customers expect a smooth and transparent payment system, which allows them to avoid queuing and long waiting times. They also expect to have different payment options, including credits, vouchers, discounts etc. Moreover, services such as click-and-collect are also playing an essential role in the customer's journey. Shoppers are expected to have seamless shopping experience (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Morse & Johnson, 2011; Pantano & Viassone, 2015) which means that the retailer should provide an integrated omnichannel, that allows the customers to jump quickly from digital to physical channels, keeping the same quality experience.

Furthermore, for customers, it is essential to receive outstanding service from the third party involved; for example, get the delivery at the right time or having professional workers doing their assembling. For customers, it is transparent who is providing this service. For them, it is the retailer who is responsible for this too. This is another reason why retailers should fully integrate their channels in order to provide a memorable customer experience (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015).

5.4.4 R-evelations

R-evelations is part of the "Living the dream" and "Enlighten me!" roles of the physical store. R-evelations allow the customers to discover and find new products along with their visit to the physical store. When retailers include different options in their exhibitions and different places around their stores, customers can see needs that they were not aware of, before, and that match perfectly with their styles. The variety of touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) is essential in the R-evelations role because not all the touchpoints are revelations for different customers, as we discovered in our empirical findings.

5.4.5 I-nspirations

I-nspiration is part of the "Living the dream" and "Enlighten me!" roles of the physical store. I-nspiration is a very significant feature of the brick-and-mortar. It opens doors to creativity and dreams (Ballantine Paul W., Jack Richard & Parsons Andrew G., 2010). Most of the time, the reasons why customers come to shop in physical stores is the opportunity to inspire themselves and get more ideas about their further acquisitions, as it is explained in the empirical findings. Since we refer this concept to the furniture industry, the inspiration part plays a vital role, customers need to get inspired at the highest level possible, and this inspiration will have a direct impact on the budget spending at the shop because they want to be able to reproduce the experience that they have in-store at home with the furniture acquired.

5.4.6 E-xperience

E-xperience is the convergent point of the other roles of the physical store. It is the common point between "Business is Business ", "Living the dream" and "Enlighten me!". It is the ultimate goal of the brick-and-mortar and the end of a successful customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer E-xperience is the result of a strategic combination of multiple touchpoints (Payne, Peltier & Barger, 2017; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016), integrated omnichannel (Mosquera, Pascual & Ayensa, 2017) and outstanding customer service (Bäckström & Johansson, 2006; Alexander & Cano, 2019) towards the creation of a memorable (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015) and seamless (Demirkan & Spohrer, 2014; Morse & Johnson, 2011; Pantano & Viassone, 2015) customer experience, that creates a bond and leads to repurchase and loyalty

(Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015; Shankar et al., 2011), known as the loop of the experience (Edelman Marc, 2015; Shankar et al., 2011).

5.4.7 S-ervice

S-ervice is part of "Enlighten me!" role of the physical store. S-ervice is a very valuable aspect for the customers, as we found in the empirical findings. Sometimes it becomes a decisive point for the customers' intention to return or abandon the shopping ("Snakes & Ladders"). Along the customer journey, shoppers are using service under different circumstances, for example when they intend to invest a high amount of money in a product, most of the time they require service from an expert, who will give them comprehensive information about the product's features, warranty and return policies.

S-ervice can be digital or face-to-face (Carr, 2017). Self-service (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014) is a digital service that gives the customers the possibility to be independent along their shopping journey. By using digital devices (Melero, Sese & Verhoef, 2016; ed. Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2019; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015) at the store or online, customers have the freedom and the feeling that they are in control of their experience (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll, 2014). Most of the customers are using self-service points for design purposes, allowing them to get the feeling of designing and transforming their homes as they wish. Nonetheless, self-service points can be used for transaction purposes, which allows customers to scan and pay (Melero, Sese & Verhoef, 2016; ed. Piotrowicz & Cuthbertson, 2019; Verhoef, Kannan & Inman, 2015) for their acquisition in a quicker way.

However, face-to-face service (Rigby, 2011; Bäckström & Johansson, 2006, 2017; Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020) is the customers favourite, as they expressed in our research findings. Because they can get access to immediate customer service from well-trained sales associates, that will give meaningful and professional advice on their purchase (Alexander & Cano, 2019; Carr, 2017). By delivering an outstanding service, businesses can assure customer retention and loyalty (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Ou & Verhoef, 2017).

An essential tool that the retailers have to evaluate their customer service level is the customer's feedback, which most of the time is free to get and allows the retailer to improve their customer service strategies, and evaluate those touchpoints ("Snakes") that are pushing away their customers from the loop of experience (Edelman Marc, 2015; Shankar et al., 2011).

5.5 Snakes & Ladders[9]: The Customer Journey

Snakes and Ladders is a board game that, according to Eric Edelman, "is inspired in ancient Hindu teaching, that explains that life is rooted in karma or destiny" (Edelman, 2012, p.1). He also mentioned that "the Ladders symbolize Virtues (or advancement), and the Snakes stand for Vices (or failure)" (Edelman, 2012, p.1). (Figure 10)

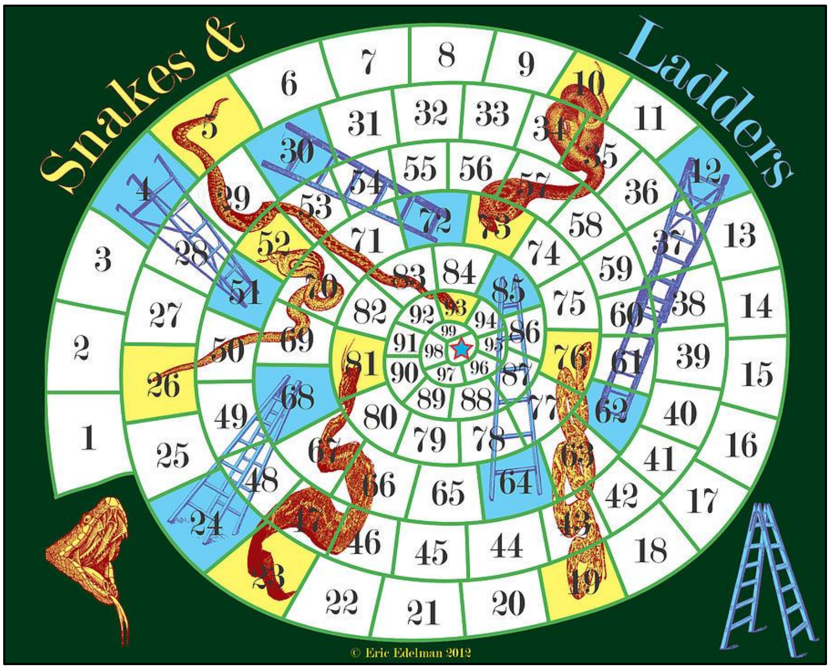

Figure 10. *Snakes and Ladders (Eric Edelman, 2012)*

We found in "Snakes & Ladders" the perfect analogy for the customer journey. The game is played on a board that has one hundred cells consecutively numbered. The board in the customer journey is illustrated by the collection of touchpoints (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), that can be in digital or physical channels along the purchase stages. The goal of the game is to complete the whole route and go to the final point that in the illustration is the cell number one hundred. In the customer journey, the goal is that the customer completes the whole journey along the purchase stages, creating a memorable customer experience (Baxendale, Macdonald & Wilson, 2015; Edelman Marc, 2015). Each cell in the game represents a step closer to the goal. In the customer journey, each cell represents a touchpoint (digital or physical) towards the creation of complete customer

[9] "Snakes and Ladders--known as Chutes and Ladders in America--is based on an ancient Hindu game called Moksha Patam. It is meant to teach that life is rooted in karma, or destiny. In the game, the progression of one's token along the numbered spaces on the board represents Life, the Ladders symbolize Virtues (or advancement), and the Snakes stand for Vices (or failure)." Eric Eldman (2012)

experience. In the game, the “ladders” are bridges that make the way to the goal shorter and are considered compensations. In the customer journey, the “ladders” are those touchpoints that enhance the customer experience, engage the customer along the purchase stages, and accelerate the conclusion of the journey with high satisfaction. In the game, “snakes” are a punishment that the player encounters forcing them to go back in cells and in some cases to the beginning of the game. In the customer journey, the “snakes” are those touchpoints that instead of enhancing the customer experience, push the customers away from the shopping stages and make them restart the journey sometimes from the beginning, creating a bad customer experience.

We considered that this is a perfect explanation of what constitutes a customer journey. Even when the retailer, manufactures, brands and third parties, create touchpoints, both physical and digital (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), thinking that those touchpoints will contribute to the customer experience, sometimes they do not. In our empirical findings we identified that each customer reacts in an individual and unique way to the touchpoints, for some customers are entirely invisible touchpoints, and for others, those touchpoints are crucial in their shopping decisions. The most important thing, in this case, is that all the customers stay inside the journey; it does not matter if it is long or short; the important is that they finished.

Another important consideration is related to the aspect that the customer journeys are not linear (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020) and they can start at any point of the purchase stages or any channel, physical or digital. Besides, the customers go back and forward several times, and this is how the “Snakes & Ladders” analogy works. According to the encounters that the customers have with different touchpoints in the digital or physical channels (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), the journey can be shorter or longer, inclusive sometimes can restart from the beginning, being too close to end. These encounters can bring the customers closer to the end of the journey or on the contrary, can push them away, here it is essential to be aware that not all the touchpoints available are activated during the customer journey, but this does not mean that those touchpoints are useless, because those that are not activated by a customer can be valuable for another (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020).

Also, one customer journey can be constituted by a collection of short ones, in this case, customers can start a customer journey with a specific purpose, but for some reason, they end buying something else but are willing to complete the original customer journey at another moment, as we mentioned in our empirical findings. It is the same with customer journeys that started without a purpose but finished with a significant acquisition because the touchpoints that the customers encounter along their journey enhances them in the loop of the experience (Edelman Marc, 2015; Shankar et al., 2011)

This is a different customer journey than the one purpose by Lemon & Verhoef (2016) (see Figure 3), which is, according to our investigation, the most complete one. Nevertheless, Lemon & Verhoef (2016) framework is too rigid and does not contemplate the jumps that the customers do consistently between the purchase stages (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020). We consider that the reason for these jumping or what we called "Snakes & Ladders" behaviour, is highly influenced by the omnichannel strategies that open countless possibilities to the customers to get in touch with products, brands and retailers 24/7.

Customer journeys can not be standardised, and each customer can choose between the different channel options, physical and digital, that the retailers offer nowadays. In the same way, they can start their journey at any stage, pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase. In the following figure, we illustrated the families with and without children customer journey in the furniture industry (Figure 11). We have designed this new customer journey framework based on the combination of all the theories from the literature review (Figure 4) and empirical findings of our research.

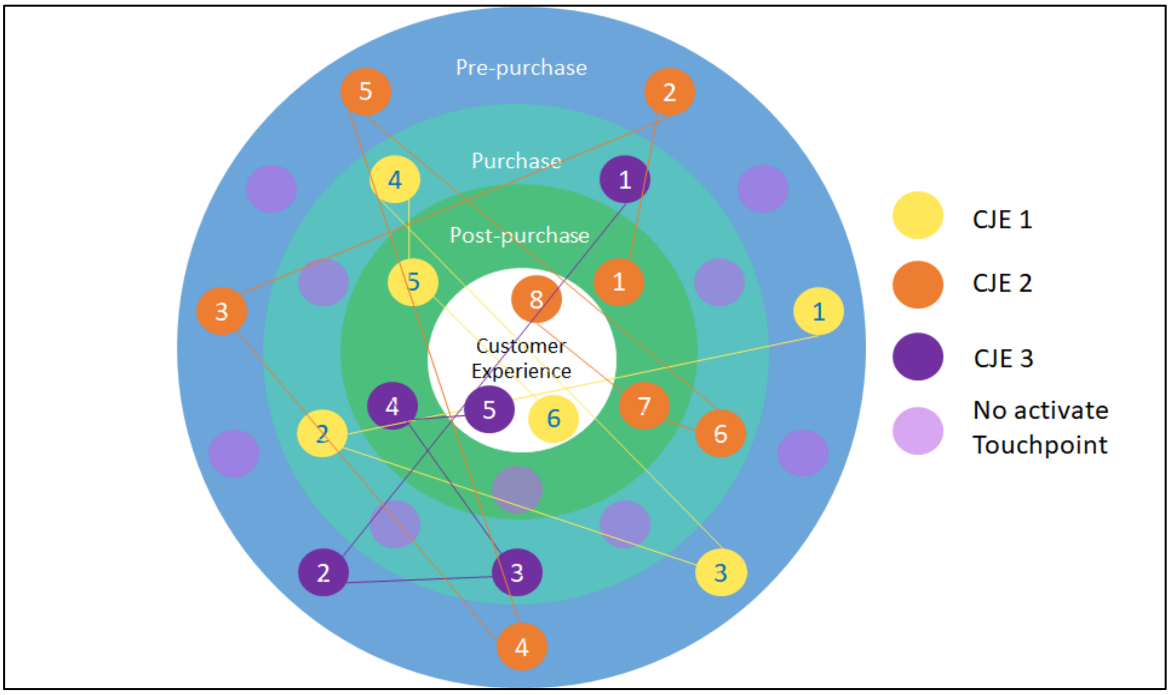

Figure 11. *"Snakes & Ladders": Families with and without children customer journey in the furniture industry (own illustration)*

5.5.1 Customer Journey Experience 1

The first customer journey (CJE 1) is identified with the yellow colour. This customer journey was performed by a family, who have one child, “Emilia & Mohamed”, they were looking to furnish their daughters' room with a beautiful armchair. The family started their journey when they received a catalogue from a store, and they began to browse and at one point got *I-nspired*. Hence, the journey started in the pre-purchase phase. In the catalogue that they got, there was a 40% discount on armchair (touchpoint 1). This got “Emilia & Mohamed” interested in the product and with high excitement, they went to the physical store (touchpoint 2), this was a “Ladder” that brought them forward to the purchase stage. In the physical store, the couple started to look for the armchair that was on sale, but they could not find it. Thus, they asked the store personnel to help them to find the armchair. The personnel lady said that they did not have any armchair on sale and that she was not aware of the discounts displayed in the catalogues. The couple got disappointed and perceived this as a poor face-to-face *S-ervice,* this was a “Snake”, that brought them back home. Two days after, “Emilia” opened her Facebook page and saw that another store placed an ad, which had a 30% on all furniture items (touchpoint 3). She got very excited and told her husband about this opportunity to buy furniture on sale. He was not that motivated to go again since the last shopping *E-xperience* “marked” him so much, but finally, he decided to give it a try and visit the store together (*S-ocial)*, this was a “Ladder” that brought them forward to the purchase stage again (touchpoint 4). They started browsing the physical outlet and finally could see a diverse range of furniture (*R-elevations*) on sale, as it was on the Facebook ad.

The couple got *I-nspired* and chose one of the armchairs that they needed and *T-ried* it out. To make sure it is of good quality, they asked for an expert *S-ervice.* The expert was very skilled and had impressive knowledge regarding the product's features such as texture, warranty, child friendly etc. The customers decided to buy it, receiving such an outstanding *S-ervice,* this was a “Ladder” that brought them forward to the post-purchase phase. After making the actual purchase and proceeding to payment *(O-perations)*, customers decided to order delivery since the armchair was quite big, and they did not have a car. The delivery arrived one day after their purchase (touchpoint 5). The couple was pleased about their purchase, and this led them to an epic shopping *E-xperience,* (touchpoint 6) this was the last “Ladder” that brought the customers to fulfilment.

5.5.2 Customer Journey Experience 2

The second customer journey (CJE 2) is identified with the orange colour. This customer journey is made by a young family, “Soley & Sasha”, that were looking to furnish their home when they have decided to start a life together. “Soley & Sasha” started their customer journey when “Sasha” got an email from a store where he previously bought an armchair. The email was a quick survey to evaluate the service that he got from the store during his previous shopping experience. Hence, this journey started in the post-purchase stage. In the mail that "Sasha" got, there was a banner (touchpoint 1) with some promotions on beds that this store offers. This banner caught the attention of "Sasha" who called "Soley" to show her the email, and they decide to click on the banner (touchpoint 2). When they clicked, this was a "Ladder" because it was a touchpoint that brought them directly to the pre-purchase stage. Here, they checked the different options that they had, but they could not find anything that triggered them to the next stage, that is why they browsed in other stores' web pages (touchpoints 3 and 4) these were "Snakes" that kept them in the same stage for an extended period. However, it was not until they visited the next store web page (touchpoint 5) until they found something that *I-nspired* them, "ladder" that moved them to the purchase stage.

Nevertheless, they decided to visit the physical store together (*S-ocial*) to complete the purchase (touchpoint 6), also, because they wanted to *T-ry* out the different options. Once in the brick-and-mortar, they were more *I-nspire* by the exhibitions, which they could interact with, *T-rying* out all the products, touching and feeling. Even more, they got a *R-evelation* about linen that they had not thought about before. Once they chose the bed that they wanted, they consulted an employee for an expert customer *S-ervice*, this customer service was another *"ladder"*. After they made their mind, they went to the cashier and paid (*O-peration*) at the self-*S-ervice* point. Because the couple did not have a car, they went to the delivery service desk and booked a home delivery service (touchpoint 7). They left the store and two days after they received their new bed at home, completing a successful customer E-xperience (touchpoint 8).

5.5.3 Customer Journey Experience 3

The third customer journey (CJE 3) is identified with a purple colour. This customer journey was made by a young family, "Erika and Fredrik", who are looking to buy a new comfortable sofa that Erika could use to breastfeed their newborn baby. The couple (*S-ocial*) did not have much time to buy, so they decided to go directly to the physical store to start their shopping journey, they started in the purchase stage (touchpoint 1). Once in the store, they *T-ry* out the different options and got *I-nspired*, by the different models. They also got a *R-evelation* about the materials, because, with a newborn baby, the sofa should be hypoallergenic and also easy to clean. Thus they approach the *S-ervice* desk to get help, and unfortunately, the store did not have the sofa that they wanted in the colour and material that they chose. This was a "Snake" that made them went back to the pre-purchase stage, leaving the store without a sofa. Once at home "Erika" looked on the internet for different options, and she found exactly what they needed (touchpoint 2) this was a "ladder" that moved them to the purchase stage again. So they decided to go to the store, *T-ried* the sofa out, and they bought it (*O-perations*), "ladder" that moved them to the post-purchase stage (touchpoint

3). They arranged home delivery, and when they got the sofa the next day (Touchpoint 4) they were delighted with the delivery *S-ervice*, the workers offered to help them to put the sofa in the right place without extra charge because they could see that they were struggling a little bit with the baby. This made their journey ended with a very satisfied customer *E-xperience* (touchpoint 5).

In these customers journeys, based on our empirical research, we confirmed the findings regarding theories and the novel ones. These findings lead us to the creation of the S-T-O-R-I-E-S model and also illustrate our "Snakes & ladders" analogy which contributed to the design of a new customer journey framework, in which is evident that the customer journeys are non-linear. It provides customers with the freedom to jump from one purchase stage to another and from one channel to another. Moreover, this also illustrates that customers journey can start from any purchase stage, depending on the touchpoints that the customers encounter, and if these touchpoints trigger them to start a shopping experience.

6 Conclusions and Recommendations

In this final chapter, we summarized the conclusion of the performed study regarding the physical store in an omnichannel environment in the furniture industry. We have discussed the theoretical and managerial contributions, as well as recommendations for future research.

6.1 The Role of the Physical Store

After finishing our research by combining the analysis of the data collected with the theoretical framework (Figure 4), we achieved the aim of our study by exploring the *role of the physical store* in terms of (1) why customers are still going to physical stores when they can buy from the comfort and convenience of their digital devices? Moreover, (2) what are the main triggers that influence customers to visit the physical store? By answering these questions based on our findings, we finally could answer our research question: *Which role does the physical store play in the omnichannel customer journey in the furniture industry?*

We found that the Physical Store performs three major roles in the furniture industry. First, *"Business is Business"* this role refers to the function that the brick-and-mortar has as a place to make transactions. This means a place where the retailers offer products and services that can be bought by the customers.

Second, *"Living the dream"* this role refers to the possibility that the physical outlet offers to the customers for materializing their dreams, by trying out the products, feeling the texture, touch and smelling them. This represents a space of getting a live experience of the products.

Third, and last *"Enlighten me!"* This role refers to the functions that the physical store plays, offering the customers the opportunity to access expert face-to-face Customer Service. Besides, the stores also offer self-service points that are starting to be explored by the customers, especially when they want to use design tools. The physical store must assure that the customers have the same quality service along the whole shopping stages, including that service delivered by third parties.

Furthermore, when we combined these three major roles with the previous theories about touchpoints, omnichannel and customer service, we created a new concept that completes the roles of physical stores for the furniture industry. We called this new concept ***S-T-O-R-I-E-S* (*S*ocial, *T*rialability, *O*perations, *R*evelations, *I*nspiration, *E*xperience, *S*ervice).**

S-ocial in terms of collective journeys and interaction between customers and employees. *T-rialability* in terms of using the senses to try out the products. *O-perations* in terms of transactions. *R-evelations* in terms of discovering needs. *I-nspiration* in terms of getting ideas from the store. *E-xperience* as the ultimate goal of the physical stores' roles, creating memorable customer experiences. *S-ervice* in terms of expert customer service along the customer journey.

Finally, we aim to recreate an entirely new customer journey based on the importance of creating epic customer experiences, both in-store and online channels by integrating an omnichannel strategy. In which service plays a crucial role in the creation of those experiences and connections between customers and retailers. First, we found that the role of the physical is to guarantee the integration of the digital and physical channels, along the purchase stages ensuring seamless customer experience. Since, for the customers who are buying furniture, it is necessary to visit the brick-and-mortar, at least once during their journey, to get a sensorial experience, trying out the products live.

Second, we have recreated a new customer journey for families with and without children in the furniture industry. This is a different customer journey (Figure 11) than the one purpose by Lemon & Verhoef (2016) (Figure 3) since we consider that journeys nowadays are more flexible and allows the customers to move freely around the shopping stages, going back and forward (Roggeveen, Grewal & Schweiger, 2020). We called “Snakes & Ladders” the jumping behaviour between purchase stages, which is highly influenced by the omnichannel strategies that provide countless touchpoints to the customers. We also conclude that customer journeys can not be standardised and vary according to the encounters of customers with different touchpoints.

The contributions of our research study are the creation of a new concept to exemplify the role of the physical store, the S-T-O-R-I-E-S concept. Furthermore, the creation of a new customer journey framework based on “Snakes & Ladders”. Both of our contributions are the result of intertwining the previous theories with the novel findings of our study.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

Our theoretical contributions are two, based on the analysis of our findings concerning the theories from our literature review (Figure 4).

The first theoretical contribution is related to the role of the physical store in the high involvement products, specifically to the furniture industry. As a result of our research, we found the basic roles of the physical stores, that we consider it can be applied to the high involvements products in general and these are the result of combining the touchpoints, omnichannel and customer services theories. Hence, we concede that the role of the physical store in the omnichannel environment is then shaped under three functions (Figure 8), (1) *Businesses are businesses*, physical stores are and always be transactional places now enhanced by technological devices. Stores are the places where the retailers offer products and services, and the customers purchase those. (2) *Living the dream*, in this function we capture the essential role of the physical store to provide a sensorial experience to the customers, where they can touch, smell, taste, see, and hear while getting inspiration for their projects or simply get involved in a shopping atmosphere that drives them into a buying experience. (3) *Enlightening me*! This is the role of the physical store that compresses customer service. The physical store is a space where customers can interact face-to-face with expertise store employees that enlighten their shopping experience, and where they can also socialise in the physical world with other customers that are also influencing their shopping behaviour.

In addition to the basic roles of the physical stores, once we did an integrated analysis of our findings related to the theories, we create the S-T-O-R-I-E-S concept which somehow, collect all the theories and present them in an integrated framework with the novel findings. The ***S-T-O-R-I-E-S (S****ocial,* ***T****rialability,* ***O****perations,* ***R****evelations,* ***I****nspiration,* ***E****xperience,* ***S****ervice) concept* is a theoretical contribution to the existing physical stores' theories (Figure 9).

The second theoretical contributions of this research are related to the introduction of a novel Customer Journey Framework, which we called “Snakes & Ladders” (Figure 11). This new framework contains the basics concepts from the Lemon & Verhoef (2016) customer journey framework and the non-linear theories proposed by Grewal & Roggeveen (2020). In this framework, we design an entirely new way to illustrate the customer journey. First, we changed the shape utterly, and we include a circular view of the purchase stages, which makes easier to the reader to understand the fact that the customers can jump back and forward between the purchase stages. Moreover, with the circular shape, we refer to the infinitive loop of the customer experience, which is the ultimate goal of the customer journey and also means that it can start at any point in the circular framework. Finally, we exemplified multiple touchpoints that can be activated or not by the costumers along their shopping journey.

6.3 Managerial Contributions

Our managerial contributions are focused on the analysis and discussion of our research. We concede that the managerial contributions are valuable for those practitioners that are struggling to find the role that their actual physical stores have for their business and how they can continue with these brick-and-mortar formats in an era where the digital channels are getting more attention from the retailers.

First, the company strategy needs to evolve into an integrated omnichannel. Multichannel strategies where companies use to have different strategies for each channel are against what the customers are looking for. Customers want to have seamless and holistic experiences from their retailers. Customers are looking forward to jumping from one channel to another without setbacks and getting the same coherent and expert information regarding products and stock availability. They want this information available in all the digital devices and channels provided by the retailers, but also in-store by the personnel.

Second, customer service is a crucial aspect for shoppers. In the same way that they are looking for integrated channels, they are looking for integrated customer service. They want to have the best face-to-face experience, but also if they used self-service points, they are looking for the same quality information. Moreover, they expect a high level of expert customer service. Customers feel more confident and are willing to purchase even more if the service that they are getting shows a high knowledge level from the personnel. Here there is something that is also very important for customers, and it is relating to third parties involved in the shopping journey. For the customers, it is indifferent who is in charge of what, for them, the provider is always the retailer, and they are looking to have the support and seal of quality and warranties from them, especially when it is about high involvement products.

Third, the physical store, design and ambience play a significant role for the customers; they feel more please visiting brick-and-mortar, that have pleasant ambients, with clearly-signed layouts. Customers highly value the possibility to interact with the retailer exhibitions, they do not want, “Do not touch” exhibitions; they want to try out the products and get inspired by the sensorial experience. For the customers, it is also essential the other services provided by the retailers like the cafeterias and playgrounds. They considered that these type of services gives them the possibility to enjoy family time or social time, while they are doing their shopping, in this way they perceived shopping as a fun activity.

Fourth, customers are willing to create a bond with the retailers. They are expecting to have some kind of loyalty or rewards programs. In return, they are willing to share their information with the retailers, in order to get access to discounts, offers or special promotions. Customers expect that services like delivery, assembling, warranties, are complementary services, regarding the amount of money that they are expending.

Our last managerial contribution is the recommendation to the practitioners to use our “S-T-O-R-I-E-S” (Figure 9) and “Snakes & Ladders: Customer Journey model” (Figure 11) frameworks, as tools to create their physical store strategies and customer journey mappings.

6.4 Future Research

More research in the high involvement products is recommended, before applying the present results to another industry not related to furniture. This could validate the applicability of the present findings to these types of products accurately.

Moreover, further studies are required to find the role of the physical store in the low involvement products in order to find if there is a true replacement of the traditional brick-and-mortar for the digital channels. Also, to compare the customers' journeys, and to determine which are the touchpoints that triggered the customers to visit the physical outlets, and how the omnichannel integration and customer service can impact the customer behaviour.

Quantitative studies are recommended to prove the generalisability of the frameworks that we are proposing in this research. The “S-T-O-R-I-E-S” (Figure 9) and “Snakes & Ladders: Customer Journey model” (Figure 11) frameworks are models that can be applied for different industries and type of products. Nonetheless, we recommend further studies to confirm if the concepts apply to non-high involvement products.

Finally, further research is recommended regarding the new customer journey model; this is a fascinating topic that is continuously changing and is valuable to continue the investigation on this non-linear customer journey behaviours and the importance of multiple touchpoints.

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Appendix 1 - In-depth Interview Script

A. Profile questions
   1. Name
   2. Age
   3. What do you do for a living
   4. Where do you live
   5. What do you do in your spare time
   6. Life Style and preferences

B. Family question
   7. Marital status
   8. Do you have children? If so, how old are they?
   9. Who is in charge of the household shopping?

C. Customer Journey
   10. Do you prefer to shop alone or with someone from your family, friends?
   11. How do you make decisions on big shopping's or acquisitions?
   12. Is it a need or a preference? How do you decide upon that, alone or with your partner?

D. Omnichannel
   13. When you think about furniture, what is the first store that pops up in your mind?
       a. If it is not IKEA the answer, why do you like this store?
       b. If it is not IKEA the answer, do you shop in IKEA?
   14. What is your favourite thing about IKEA?
   15. Do you prefer to buy online or in a physical store?
   16. Which do you think are the main differences between buying online and in-store?
   17. Where do you find inspiration for your shopping? (Magazines, tv, social media)

E. Customer Service
   18. Do you like to have customer service at the shop?
   19. Do you think that the person at the shop is an expert in the products or service?
   20. Do you use the self-services points? (like computers, tablets, etc.)
   21. Do you prefer face-to-face service or self-digital-service?
   22. Are you satisfied with the IKEAs customer service?

F. Physical Store
   23. Do you find it important to feel, touch, smell the products?
   24. Which is your favourite thing to do at the shop?
   25. Which is the part of the shop that you enjoy the most?
   26. Are the store's signs, design and lights important for you

G. Storytelling

   Ask the participants to recall an IKEA shopping experience. One in which they bought something like big furniture. Ask the participant to tell you the story based on the following aspects. If the participants do not mention them, please ask about it.

a. How they decided to do the shopping,
b. How they plan shopping,
c. How did they research the item,
d. How they compare the options,
e. How many times do they visit the store,
f. How do they decide about the budget,
g. How do they decide about the characteristics of the product?
h. Where did they buy the product on-line/in-store?
i. Did they require customer service?
j. Which other types of services did they use? Transport? Assembly? Did the product fulfil their requirements?
k. Do they order home delivery? Or prefer to pick up the products by themselves?

H. Customer Experience

27. Describe what you like the most about shopping in an IKEA store?
28. Do you think that shopping in IKEA is a satisfactory experience?
29. How do you describe your shopping experience at IKEA in 3 words
30. What is the most challenging thing about Ikea in their opinion?
31. Would they recommend IKEA to friends, colleagues, etc?
32. Would you write feedback or reviews about IKEA, is that something that you do?

Appendix 2 - Customer Diaries

General Information:

We are students at the Master's in International Marketing and Brand Management at Lund University.

For our master thesis, we need to collect some information about IKEAs customers. We are focusing on families with and without children; it is important that you fill out this formulary together with your partner.

The collected information is going to be used exclusively with academic purposes and is going to be filed in the university archives. The data collected is entirely anonymous and does not have commercial purposes. We are not including contact details on the files.

Thanks so much for your collaboration.

Mihaela Pavalache & Sara Christensen

Instructions:

Below you will find the instructions to fill out IKEA's diaries.

1. Please fill out the general information about you and your partner, which is going to be used to get to know you both better regarding your lifestyles and preferences.
2. Each diary entry must start with the date.
3. Each entry should have a goal. For example, look for a new sofa, buying new lamps, changing home décor, etc.
4. Please include the budget.
5. Please write the entry description in detail, describing how you do the shopping or how you are planning to do the shopping as a couple. For example, I have recently moved to a new flat and I decided to change the furniture and home décor, for this reason, I was checking online for different styles, I had read some magazines, watched tv programs or visited different stores to get some inspiration about styles and models that I want to buy. Please include the name of the webpages, magazines, tv programs, stores or any other source that you used or are planning to use.
6. Please include in your descriptions all your feelings and sensations getting from this entire process. Every detail is essential to us.
7. Finally, please describe the experience with IKEA, how do you go there? Did you prepare a shopping list? Do you do online shopping? If so, do you use your phone, tablet or computer? Do you use home delivery or assembling services? Do you visit the restaurant?

Do you visit the entire store or just the area where you know you can find the products that you need?

8. To conclude, please describe your feelings towards IKEA experience.
9. Please add as many entries as you need.
10. If you have it, please share with us your search history or print screens about the last IKEA acquisition.

Thanks so much for your help!

Diary Template			
Couple General Information			
Person 1		**Person 2**	
Name:		Name:	
Age:		Age:	
Gender:		Gender:	
Occupation:		Occupation:	
Housing situation (owned/rented, house/ flat, location, rooms number:		Housing situation (owned/rented, house/ flat, location, rooms number:	
Values:		Values:	
Personal style (shapes, colours, music, food):		Personal style (shapes, colours, music, food):	
Hobbies and interest:		Hobbies and interest:	
Children: Age			
Diary Entry:			
Date:			

Goal:	
Sources (stores, online web pages, magazines, tv programs, social media):	
Budget:	
Description:	