The Consumer Education Journey

Exploring how consumers educate themselves about sports supplements, and what effect gender has

by

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Abstract

Title	The Consumer Education Journey
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Authors	Rebin Naderi & William O'Riordan
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Keywords	Customer Experience Journey, Consumer Education, Consumer Education Journey, Sports Supplements, Gender
Thesis purpose	The purpose of our thesis is to explore how and why consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves about sports supplements and what effect gender has.
Methodology	Our research derives from a pragmatic orientation. We conducted a multi-method qualitative study, combining observations and interviews in order to explore and understand the online customer journeys of consumers with low prior knowledge.
Theoretical perspective	Our study is based upon a number of theories. The main theory is customer journeys and touch points, and we also draw upon theories on cognitive decision-making, social learning, brands and gender to support our analysis.
Empirical data	Our empirical data consists of screen and voice-recordings of consumers conducting a purchase scenario, gathering their online customer journeys and thought process. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted based on the screen and voice-recordings.
Findings/ conclusions	Our study has two main findings. First, we found that consumers go on one of three types of education journeys, these are the brand-owned education journey, the social education journey and the hybrid education journey. Second, in regards to gender and the education process, females and males tend to educate themselves to alleviate different types of perceived risk. Our results indicate that females tend to perceive more functional and physical risks, whereas males tend to perceive more monetary and time risks with the purchase of protein powder.
Practical implications	Our study contributes with a number of managerial insights on how to improve consumer education journeys. Our paper suggests managers should focus on elements such as brand familiarity, packaging and price. In addition, they should integrate more social touch points on their brand platforms to increase transparency and encourage consumer engagement.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Imagine that you are looking to buy a product online that will help improve your muscle recovery after exercise, and you are confronted for the first time with product names such as "Hydrolysed Whey" and "Micellar Casein". It would be understandable if you felt out of your depth, overwhelmed and confused. This could lead to a long and tedious process of trying to educate yourself about these products in order to be able to choose the right product that will satisfy your needs. Or you might even postpone or abandon your purchase attempt altogether. Even if you find the right product in the end, it would not be surprising if this process had a significant influence on your overall purchase experience.

The above scenario demonstrates the need for you, as a first-time buyer, to have 'prior knowledge' or somehow gain knowledge in order to make an informed purchase decision. Prior knowledge can be viewed as the knowledge consumers have acquired over time through usage and familiarity with a particular industry or product (Brucks, 1985). Such knowledge is particularly necessary for complex situations that require consumers to evaluate numerous product attributes or alternatives, in order to avoid stress and frustration (Heitmann, Lehmann & Herrmann, 2007). An example of a complex industry that requires consumers to have knowledge in order to make effective and informed purchase decisions is the sports nutrition industry, which is the setting of the introduction. Sports supplements, as part of the sports nutrition market, can be considered to be complex because it consists of many different product categories and is sometimes convoluted with false advertising, complicated nutritional information and other insider industry jargon (de Vries, Pajor, Curfs, Eggers & Oenema, 2019; Sharp, Moorman & Claussen, 2014).

The complexity of an industry requires consumers to educate themselves and acquire knowledge to be able to make an informed decision. The way a consumer acquires knowledge of a marketplace is through consumer education. Consumer education has been defined as:

> The process by which people learn the workings of the-marketplace [sic] so that they can improve their ability to act as purchasers or consumers of those products and services they deem most likely to enhance their well being (Bloom, 1976, p.208).

Consumer education can occur through various interactions that an individual has during a purchase situation (Suh, Greene, Israilov, & Rho, 2015). The process in which consumers educate themselves before a purchase can have a significant impact on the overall purchase experience (Heitmann, Lehmann & Herrmann, 2007; Puccinelli, Goodstein, Grewal, Price,

Raghubir & Stewart, 2009), therefore, consumer education influences the overall customer experience. The significance of customer experience has been emphasised to be "as important as the products themselves in providing a competitive advantage" (Edelman and Singer, 2015, p.90). In recent years, improving customer experience has become one of the most prominent marketing research fields as it has been shown that superior customer experience can be linked to improved customer loyalty and word of mouth (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). It is therefore easy to understand why researchers and practitioners are focusing on mapping customer journeys to manage their customers' experiences (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros & Schlesinger, 2009).

Despite the growing interest in ways of understanding customer journeys in order to improve customer experiences, there remains relatively scarce research that focuses on the consumer education process within these customer journeys. We argue that understanding the consumer education process is interesting, particularly in cases when consumers with low prior knowledge are trying to educate themselves in complex industries. In these cases, one could assume that many of these customer journeys include individuals trying to educate themselves in an unfamiliar industry, which would ultimately play a central role in their customer experience. Therefore, in this thesis, we explore what we call 'the consumer education journey' which helps increase the understanding of the consumers' education process within complex customer journeys.

1.2. Problematization

A complex purchase situation requires consumers to have an understanding of relevant information in order to evaluate purchase alternatives, however for consumers with low prior knowledge, their cognitive limitations can lead to difficulties in arriving at a purchase decision and can result in negative emotions (Karimi, Holland & Papamichail, 2018). An example of a complex purchase situation which can present first-time buyers with purchase decision difficulties is sports supplements as illustrated in the introduction. There are a multitude of different sports supplement products, and they have traditionally only been used and understood by professional athletes and bodybuilders (Arenas-Jal, Suñé-Negre, Pérez-Lozano, & García-Montoya, 2019). The complexity surrounding sports supplements is evident from, amongst other things, the scientific uncertainty about the health implications and effectiveness of sports supplement products (see e.g. Pasiakos, Lieberman & McLellan, 2014; Kårlund, Gómez-Gallego, Turpeinen, Palo-oja, El-Nezami & Kolehmainen, 2019). Furthermore, the use of sports supplements has traditionally been perceived to be male dominant (Keogh, Li & Gao, 2019). This has resulted in female consumers being overlooked by many retailers with only 2.5 percent of sports supplement products being targeted towards women (Lumina Intelligence, 2018). However, over the last decade, sports supplements have become more mainstream and are today increasingly used by recreational users (Arenas-Jal et

al., 2019). Furthermore, the traditional perception of the use of sports supplements as being male-dominant is shifting as more than 80 percent of female protein supplement users started within the last two years, "indicating a strong growth trend for females in recent years" (Keogh, Li & Gao, 2019, p.7). With the continued growth of the sports supplement usage in mainstream society, retailers must understand and improve the customer experience. If these trends continue, sports supplement retailers will face many first-time buyers with low prior knowledge, who will be looking to educate themselves and purchase products. Furthermore, it is relevant for retailers to understand how the complexity and the traditionally male orientation of sports supplements may influence the reasons why males and females educate themselves.

In recent years much research has focused on ways firms can manage customer journeys and improve customer experience. However, most research seems to neglect the role of consumer education during customer journeys even though, as we outlined, the education process can lead to frustrating and negative experiences. Therefore, when focusing on improving the customer experience for first-time consumers in a complex industry, we propose that the consumer education journey requires attention. To our knowledge, current literature offers limited insights as no studies have explored customer journeys with a distinct focus on consumer education.

1.3. Purpose

The purpose of our thesis is to explore how and why consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves about sports supplements and what effect gender has. Sports supplements have been selected for our study due to their complexity, requiring consumers to have knowledge in order to navigate through the sometimes false advertising claims and scientific nutritional jargon (de Vries et al., 2019; Sharp, Moorman & Claussen, 2014). Sports supplements are thereby particularly interesting as consumers will have to educate themselves, in some way, to gain knowledge in order to make an informed purchase decision. We will focus on the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey, as this is the main stage in which consumers research information about products and evaluate different purchase alternatives (Ekstrom, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Achieving this purpose will provide new insights on consumer behaviour and how online retailers can improve the consumer education journey.

1.4. Research Question

The research questions that will guide us towards achieving the purpose of this study are:

1. *How do consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves during the customer journey?*

2. *Why do consumers educate themselves, and what effect does gender have?*

2. Literature Review

Our thesis aims to explore how consumers educate themselves when they have low prior knowledge and what effect gender has. Previous research has shown that numerous factors influence consumer behaviour and decision-making during purchase situations. For our study, we have focused on five relevant streams of literature. These are (1) consumer behaviour and customer journeys, (2) prior knowledge (3) customer-to-customer interactions (4), brand communication and (5) gender differences in decision-making.

2.1. The Influence of Consumer Behaviour on Customer Journeys

Consumers behave differently depending on their attitudes, opinions and values (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg, 2006). Research has found that there are two central values consumers adhere to when shopping, hedonic and utilitarian values. Hedonic values relate to emotive and sensory aspects of a shopping experience (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Research has shown that hedonistic values of shopping consist of subjective experiential aspects and usually involve feelings (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Utilitarian consumer motives, on the other hand, focus on the objective and tangibles of a shopping task (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg, 2006). In other words, utilitarian motives could be a consumer's sense of accomplishment from obtaining the desired functionality of a product (Olsen & Skallerud, 2011). Research suggests that consumers with utilitarian values are more deliberate and efficient when purchasing a product (Babin, Darden & Griffin, 1994). An example of consumers adopting utilitarian shopping values can be seen in research by Warde (1999), who found that consumers often look for ways to make more efficient decisions when selecting products to purchase. Furthermore, studies show that depending on consumers hedonic and utilitarian values, they will look for different types of information (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Chen, Chang & Chen, 2017), and therefore go on different consumer journeys.

Customer journeys are all the interactions a customer has with a brand, product, service, or other external elements throughout the purchase cycle (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Since customer journeys give a comprehensive overview of consumers' path from their identification of needs and their search of information to the actual purchase, they also show the process of how consumers educate themselves. Many studies on customer journeys have focused on the customers' selection of channels (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Hall, Towers & Shaw, 2017; Ewerhard, Sisovsky & Johansson, 2019). These studies have found that consumers interact with many different online and offline channels during their journeys

and that these channels play different roles in the decision-making of consumers (Ewerhard, Sisovsky & Johansson, 2019). Furthermore, the advancement of technology in recent decades has led to an increasing number of touch points that consumers can interact with which has resulted in the number of possible journeys to become endless (Rawson, Duncan & Jones, 2013; Edelman & Singer, 2015; Hall, Towers & Shaw, 2017). Research by Hall, Towers and Shaw (2017) reveals how millennials are willing to take complex journeys that go beyond the retailer in their search for information, and how these interactions with external platforms and other stimuli outside of the retailers' control can influence an individuals purchase decision. The complex and unseen customer journeys that consumers take has resulted in numerous research that has studied ways of segmenting customers based on their demographics and their channel choices (Konus, Verhoef & Neslin, 2008; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich & Rudolph, 2019). The findings of these studies increase understanding the consumers' selection of channels and how firms can optimise their channel offerings based on customer segments such as demographics. However, when presenting future research ideas within customer journeys, Lemon and Verhoef (2016, p.88) suggest that "another topic is the question of whether specific customer segments prefer specific forms of touch points". Thus, it would be interesting to explore whether a customer segment, such as first-time buyers with low prior knowledge, prefer "specific forms of touch points" during their customer journeys.

2.2. The Role of Prior Knowledge on Purchase Decisions

In the context of purchase decision-making, prior knowledge can be defined as an individual's "amount of purchasing or usage experience with the product" (Brucks, 1985, p.1). Consumer education is especially important for consumers with low prior knowledge as research has found that consumers evaluate products differently and are less efficient in their search for information when their prior knowledge is low (Brucks, 1985; Hong & Sternthal, 2010). Furthermore, studies have found that an individual's prior knowledge influences decision-making. Karimi, Papamichail and Holland (2015) demonstrated how individuals with varying levels of product knowledge have varying decision-making processes in terms of duration, number of cycles, evaluation of alternatives and selection criteria. More recently, Karimi, Holland and Papamichail (2018) found that prior knowledge influences the complexity of consumers decision-making and that low prior knowledge results in less satisfaction with the decision-making process. Considering the influence of prior knowledge on consumers' search for information and purchase decision-making, it is relevant to understand how the low prior knowledge of consumers influences their education process. For instance, what role do social interactions, brands and gender have in these consumers' education processes?

2.3. The Role of Social Interactions on Purchase Decisions

Research has found that a common way consumers inform themselves before making a purchase decision is through information shared by other customers (Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1996; Ekstrom, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) is the term used for all communication between customers where information is transferred in a way that can influence a consumer's decision-making (Libai, Bolton, Bügel, de Ruyter, Götz, Risselada & Stephen, 2010). One of the most influential and oldest ways that information is communicated between consumers is through word-of-mouth (WOM) (Huete-Alcocer, 2017). WOM can be defined as the person to person exchange of information regarding products and services (Katz and Lazarself, 1966).

Studies suggest that WOM is the most influential source of information, being more reliable than the more traditional sources of information such as television and radio (Cheung & Thadani, 2012) and is often trusted by consumers over the communication coming directly from the brands themselves (Nieto, Hernández-Maestro & Muñoz-Gallego, 2014). With the rise of technological advancements, traditional WOM communication has spread onto online platforms and is referred to as electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) (Yang, 2017). EWOM has been described by Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan, (2008) as informal communications on the internet by consumers relating to the characteristics of products and services. Previously consumers would listen to trusted families and friends regarding the nature and performance of a product or service, whereas now they resort to EWOM as their primary information source (Nieto, Hernández-Maestro & Muñoz-Gallego, 2014).

To reduce the uncertainty and ambiguity during the search for information of a purchase decision, consumers often look for the social guidance and approval of others (Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1996; Ekstrom, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). A reference group is a collective of people that an individual wants to belong to, the reference group can, therefore, be influential in forming the attitudes and behaviours of other individuals (Ekstrom, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). A reference group that can influence the opinions of a large number of people are "celebrities" who may include politicians, sports stars and artists (Ekstrom, Ottosson & Parment, 2017), these people are also referred to as influencers (Carter, 2016). Influencers can use their expertise to influence the opinions of other individuals through feedback and endorsement and are often referred to as opinion leaders (Carter, 2016, Iyengar, Van den Bulte, Valente, 2011). In addition, blog writers who give their knowledgeable opinions and have a large following are often also regarded as opinion leaders (Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 2011). Research indicates consumers tend to place a significant amount of reliance on influencers and opinion leaders (Carter, 2016), which could be attributed to their credibility and the extent to which consumers believe they are a trustworthy and unbiased source (Brown, Broderick & Lee, 2007). Although it is widely accepted that certain

individuals can influence social opinion more than others, some researchers suggest the degree of influence is minimal (Watts & Dodds, 2007).

2.4. The Role of Brand Communication on Purchase Decisions

Studies indicate the role and influence of a brand begin with a familiarity with the brand. *Brand familiarity* has been defined by Alba and Hutchinson (1987) as the extent to which an individual has had direct or indirect experience with a brand. Research has also found that brand familiarity increases the confidence consumers have towards a brand which ultimately can increase purchase intentions (Laroche, Kim & Zhou, 1996). The findings of such studies suggest that when consumers are exposed to brands, through marketing communication and direct experience, they become more familiar and more likely to purchase from that brand (Laroche, Kim & Zhou, 1996). Therefore, as brands become more salient in the minds of consumers, they develop a competitive advantage as consumers are able to differentiate them from competitors (Lee, Conroy, & Motion, 2012).

Research has found that several aspects of brand communication influence consumers when they make purchase decisions, such as the packaging (Brakus, Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2009) and price of products (Blattberg and Wisniewski 1989). One of the most influential aspects of a product is its *packaging* as it is often the first encounter a consumer has with the product (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Although the packaging of a product has several functions, such as protecting the product and facilitating efficient storage, for consumers, the packaging is mainly a source of information at a purchase point (Prendergast & Pitt, 1996). Packaging has been shown to influence attitudes and behaviours of consumers and is, therefore, an attractive way for brands to communicate specific product attributes (Silayoi & Speece, 2007). To achieve communication through product packaging, brands use colours and design to convey a message about the brand or product (Nancarrow, Wright & Brace, 1998). The colour of the packaging has been shown to influence the customers' perceptions of a product with studies demonstrating that between 62 to 90 percent of individuals evaluate a product based on the colour of packaging alone (Singh, 2006). Furthermore, different colors have different meanings, for instance, the color green is often associated with being environmentally-friendly (Underwood, 2003). However, all consumers do not associate colors with the same meaning and might have different responses as a result. For example, studies have found that consumers from different cultures perceive colors to have different meanings (Madden, Hewett & Roth, 2000). Finally, packaging has been found to have the ability to either encourage or discourage consumers from selecting a product during purchase decisions (Ahmad, Billoo Lakhan, 2012).

Moreover, the importance of *price* as an attribute influencing customer perceptions about the value of a product have been found to be significant with customers often ranking products in a category based on their price, with the higher price equating to higher value and quality (Blattberg and Wisniewski 1989). For instance, if the price is lower than the individual's reference price for what they expect the product to cost, they could perceive the product as low quality (Blattberg and Wisniewski 1989). In addition, Hunt and Keaveney (1994) suggest that consumers tend to make quality-price inferences when they are presented with limited sources of product information. This especially applies to situations where consumers have low prior knowledge and are not able to fully process product attributes as they tend to rely on extrinsic cues such as packaging and price to measure quality (Underwood, Klein & Burke, 2001).

2.5. Gender Differences in Decision-Making

A common strategy used by marketers in order to better understand the needs and wants of consumers is through segmenting them based on gender, allowing them to tailor their offerings (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Gender has been a common way to segment consumers as research has found that males and females tend to exhibit different attitudes and behaviours in certain scenarios (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Studies have also investigated attitudes among males and females to see if there are differences between the genders. For instance, it has been found that there are differences between how males and females behave in regards to risk (Weber, Blais & Betz, 2002). These differences are, however, less related to the attitudes towards perceived risk but rather related to differences in how the genders perceive benefits and risk associated with certain activities (Weber, Blais & Betz, 2002). For instance, males associate more significant benefits from risky activities and decisions than females, and that females are less likely to engage in risky behavior compared with males (Weber, Blais & Betz, 2002). This is reflected in research on food consumption where females tended to be more concerned with health matters and thus chose to avoid particular products based on the nutritional contents (Ree, Riediger and Moghadasian, 2008; Arganini, Saba, Comitato, Virgili & Turrini, 2012).

Modern sociologists have found, across cultures, that males are raised from childhood to be more independent, whereas females are encouraged to be more socially connected and oriented (Gilligan, 1982). This is supported by more recent research investigating differences between males and females during information search which found that females preferred to look for interpersonal sources of information such as recommendations from friends and family with a preference to build relationships and understanding through empathy with a broader audience (Ellwood & Shekar, 2008; Barber, Dodd & Kolyesnikova, 2009). On the other hand, males preferred impersonal sources of information such as published material (Barber, Dodd & Kolyesnikova, 2009). Furthermore, females were more open to other

people's opinions and more likely to accept their guidance than males (Ellwood & Shekar, 2008; Barber, Dodd & Kolyesnikova, 2009). This is also supported by researchers Awad and Ragowsky (2008), who found that males prefer to achieve solutions to problems through task-oriented and report-like communication such as the ins and outs of the product information.

3. Theoretical Framework

In order to understand how and why consumers educate themselves during the customer journey, we explore several theories which will form the basis for our analysis and help us answer our research questions. In this section, we present theories of customer experience journeys, consumer behaviour, brands and gender. First, we outline the customer experience journey model and theory on touch points. Second, we cover theories on consumer behaviour that cover cognitive and social aspects of decision-making, specifically rational choice theory, prospect theory and social learning theory. Third, we present theories of brands and their role in regards to consumer behaviour. Finally, we highlight gender theory covering the reasons behind differences in perceptions towards decision-making and risk taking between genders.

3.1. Customer Experience Journeys & Touch Points

3.1.1. The Customer Experience Journey

As research has explored the complexities of consumer behaviour, it has become increasingly important and of interest for companies to learn how they can manage customer journeys and experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Customer experience has been defined as the actual response, positive or negative, to interactions along the customers' journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Typically, customer journeys are considered to be made up of three stages; the pre-purchase stage, the purchase stage and the post-purchase stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In the pre-purchase stage, the customer identifies a need that they want to satisfy, which is followed by a search of information to either eliminate or satisfy that need (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The purchase stage is the moment where the customer has completed their pre-purchase search for information, and then selects a product to checkout and buy (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The post-purchase stage consists of all the following interactions between a company and a consumer after a purchase has been made (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

3.1.1. Types of Touch Points & Touch Point Mapping

Touch points that occur throughout the customer journey are central to the customer experience and constitute all the interactions that can leave a customer with either a positive or negative impression of the brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Touch points along the customer journey which have a more significant influence on customer experience are called *critical touch points*, and due to their importance are often referred to as *moments of truth* (Lemon & Verhoef).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) outline four types of touch points that occur throughout customer journeys: (1) *brand-owned* touch points are interaction during the customer journey that the brand has full influence and control over, for example, the content on their website (2) *partner-owned* touch points are elements of shared control between the brand and a partner such as the delivery process through a partner company (3) *customer-owned* touch points are elements which are within a customer and outside of brand or partner influence for example the thoughts and feelings of a customer (4) *social/external* touch points are elements which are uninfluenced by the brand or their partners and can include blog posts or forums controlled by independent actors.

Touch points are a common way of understanding customer journeys and how customer experience can be improved (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). This can be achieved by mapping the touch points that occur throughout a customer journey (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). Customer journeys are "typically visualized as processes spanning a number of steps, stages, touch points, or activities; as a horizontal line or row … " (Følstad & Kvale, 2018, p. 204). Therefore, mapping touch points can provide otherwise unseen insights by allowing an observer to view the customer journey through the consumer's perspective (Følstad & Kvale, 2018).

3.2. Cognitive Decision-Making

Over the past decades, consumer research has been one of the most prominent research fields within marketing, with numerous studies investigating the decision-making and buying behaviour of consumers (e.g. Howard and Seth, 1967; Engel, Kollat and Blackwell, 1968; Bettman, Luce and Payne, 1998). Early research within this field has mainly focused on the cognitive aspects of decision-making and buying behaviour (Simonson, Carmon, Dhar, Drolet & Nowlis, 2001). The main aim has been to increase the understanding of how individuals make choices, what information they take into consideration and how certain factors and circumstances affect their decision-making (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). The traditional theory on how individuals make decisions is based on the economic model that assumes humans are rational individuals and dates back to the work of Smith (1776).

3.2.1. Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory is a theory that unites consumer behaviour models on decision-making that is based on several underlying assumptions. One assumption is that individuals are rational, which means they make decisions depending on which choice offers them the highest amount of utility (Becker, 1976). In other words, it is assumed that individuals can actively seek and consider all available information surrounding a decision in order to calculate the outcome of different possible choices, ultimately allowing them to maximize the

utility of a choice (Becker, 1976). Furthermore, the theory assumes that individuals have well-defined preferences and adhere to their self-interest and values when making decisions (Smith, 1776).

However, this image of individuals as rational, selfish and maximising individuals has been criticised as an oversimplified and inaccurate image of humans that provide weak predictions of how consumers behave (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg, 2006). Over the last decades, numerous researchers have proposed alternative models that view individuals as less rational and consider the many aspects that impact decision-making, such as the task environment, information, knowledge, risk and uncertainty (Simon, 1955; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

3.2.2. Prospect Theory

The rational choice theory assumes that decision-making takes place in situations where individuals have all available information on the outcome of choices and that they have well-defined preferences among these choices (Becker, 1976). However, in many situations, individuals have limited information or knowledge, and in such cases, there is a certain degree of risk involved in the decision-making. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) argue, through a model they called *prospect theory*, that decision-making often is less rational in situations in which risk and uncertainty are involved. According to the theory, individuals do not value gains and losses equally. In situations where a risky choice might lead to gains, people are generally *risk-averse,* meaning they prefer choices with lower utility (value) but with a higher certainty (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). For instance, an individual will rather buy a product that is sure to be decent than a product that might be excellent but has a certain risk of being useless. Furthermore, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) found that in uncertain circumstances, individuals often use heuristics, that is rule-of-thumb, in order to simplify their decision-making. While these 'decision rules' might result in errors in judgement, they are useful in complex and uncertain situations where an individual perceives risks (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

3.2.3. Six Types of Perceived Risks

Consumers perceive several risks when making decisions (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). These perceived risks are important for consumers as they consider them when they are looking for information relating to a particular purchase (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Consumers are more likely to perceive the degree of risks as higher when they are uncertain (Kotler & Keller, 2016). This uncertainty is more prominent in purchase situations that are complex, for instance, when certain aspects of a product are unknown to the consumer (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Traditionally, it is believed that consumers

perceive six types of risks, these are (1) functional risk, (2) physical risk, (3) monetary risk, (4) social risk, (5) psychological risk and (6) time risk (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Consumers perceive *functional risk* when they feel uncertain about the relationship between the performance and function of a product and the expectations they have (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Consumers perceive *physical risk* when they are uncertain about the damage a product could cause their health or well-being (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Consumers perceive *monetary risk* when they are uncertain about the price of a product and what it is worth (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Consumers perceive *social risk* when they are concerned and insecure about how other people might perceive them as a result of a purchase (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Consumers perceive *psychological risk* when they are uncertain about how a product might affect their mental well-being (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Consumers perceive *time risk* when they are concerned with spending additional time performing information search and acquiring a product, in the event that the product fails to meet their performance expectations (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Consumers deal with perceived risks in numerous different ways, one way is through observing and imitating the actions of other people.

3.3. Social Learning Theory

Early research on consumer behaviour mainly focused on the cognitive aspect of consumer behaviour, however, recent studies have been more interested in the social aspect of consumer behaviour (Simonson, et al., 2001). Such research examines how social settings and an individual's environment influence their decision-making. Social learning theory focuses on how individuals learn through the observations of other people and by imitating their actions. The theory stems from the psychologist Bandura (1977) concerning mental health and criminology. The basis of the theory was demonstrated in the 'Doll Experiment' where children were exposed to someone beating up a doll but were given no instruction or encouragement to do the same. Nonetheless, the children proceeded to imitate the actions of the individual they observed through beating up their own doll. Thus, this study contributed to social and behavioural science and added the social element to learning which uses observation and modelling as significant explanations for human behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Modelling and imitations of behaviour can, therefore, be applied to the dissemination of social attitudes and behaviours displayed by particular models in particular social contexts (Bandura, 1977). Critiques of this theory suggest that the common variables that are implemented to measure against reward and punishment for imitating the behaviour and that differentials regarding the reinforcement of the behaviour are overlooked, also the choice of peer selection is a major factor that is overlooked in the theory which may determine the type of imitable behaviour an individual is exposed to (Akers & Sellers, 2004).

3.4. Theory on Brands

3.4.1. Brands

Today, brands play an increasingly important role in the behaviours of consumers. In a time where there is an abundance of information that consumers need to consider, brands often simplify decision-making (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Brands are important for consumers as they can minimize the perceived risks associated with purchases (Kotler & Keller, 2016). A brand can be defined as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors" (Kotler 1991, p. 442) and "a set of mental associations, held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service" (Keller, 1998).

During each purchase consumers make, there is a certain amount of information and risk that they need to consider in their decision-making. However, the large amount of information and number of decisions consumers are exposed to leads them to look for ways to simplify their decision-making. Therefore, brands are valuable assets for firms as they can clarify and simplify consumers decision-making and influence purchase behaviour (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

3.4.2. The Dimensions of Brand Knowledge

Brand knowledge has been defined as "the personal meaning about a brand stored in consumer memory, that is, all descriptive and evaluative brand-related information" (Keller, 2003, p.596). In other words, brand knowledge is all the knowledge about a brand which a consumer has. It consists of two parts, brand awareness and brand image (Keller, 1993). *Brand awareness* is "consumers' ability to identify the brand under different conditions" (Keller, 1993, p.3). Brand awareness can be divided into two components, brand recognition and brand recall (Keller, 1993). Brand recognition has to do with consumers' ability to remember specific knowledge they have of a brand when they are exposed to that brand (Keller, 1993). For instance, brand recognition takes place in situations when consumers recognise the name of a brand from a commercial or a time when a friend has mentioned the brand. Brand recall, on the other hand, refers to a consumer's ability to think of a brand in a situation, for instance, when they are faced with a product category (Keller, 1993). An example would be if a consumer is looking to buy a particular type of product and spontaneously thinks of a brand within that category. The first brand that a consumer thinks of when given a certain product category is called *top of mind* (Keller, 1993). The second component of brand knowledge is *brand image* and is defined as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (Keller, 1993, p.3). That is,

what consumers think of and associate with a brand. These brand associations can either be positive or negative, strong or weak and unique or common, and ultimately, they determine how consumers view a brand (Keller, 1993, p.3).

3.4.3. Customer-Based Brand Equity

According to Keller (1993, p.8) customer-based brand equity "is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand". In other words, the difference in the response of consumers between a branded product compared to the same unbranded product. If the response is favorable to the brand versus the unbranded, the brand has positive customer-based brand equity, however, if the response is unfavorable, the brand has negative customer-based brand equity (Keller, 1993). The response of consumers towards a brand is vital as it leads to less price-sensitive and more loyal and satisfied customers (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

3.5. Gender Role Theory

Gender role theory focuses on the societal expectations of peoples' behaviours and attitudes according to ones' sex or percieved sex (Eagly & Wood, 1991). Although there are variations between cultures, typically gender roles expect that men should be masculine, whereas females should be feminine (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Typically the gender-role perspective is explained as a result of biological differences or social constructions between males and females (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

The theory assumes that "an individual's personal history of enacting social roles is an indirect cause of sex differences because these experiences help define the person's repertoire of skills and attitudes" (Eagly & Wood, 1991, p.309). According to gender role theory, the differences between how males and females behave is partly a result of people trying to live up to expectations that they believe their gender is expected to enact (Eagly & Wood, 1991). For instance, according to gender theory mens' biological disposition to have a bigger body mass and ability to generate power meant that they were historically assigned roles involving pursuits such as warfare to protect or expand the tribe, leading to masculine stereotypes such as assertiveness along with greater admiration and status in society than women (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Whereas women's biological dispositions towards childbearing and breastfeeding typically led them to be more homebound where they were attributed more feminine stereotypes such as friendliness that would help with relationship building within the tribe and the nurturing of their children (Eagly & Wood, 1999). However, gender roles have been changing in recent years, particularly for women, as they have experienced more

acceptability with regard to adopting more 'traditionally' perceived masculine traits such as assertiveness (Wood & Eagly, 2012).

4. Method

4.1. Research Approach

The philosophical basis of our thesis is of pragmatism. Pragmatism is a philosophy with a more flexible approach to how knowledge is acquired and focuses on the "methodological approach that works best for the particular research problem that is being investigated" (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019, p.2). The focus is less on the methods used by researchers and instead on the result of research and hence the knowledge that can be acquired (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Our study aims to understand how and why consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves, and we deemed that the best way to uncover insights to answer our research question through the implementation of a multi-method approach that gathered first-hand reports of customer journeys.

Our methodological approach for this thesis is qualitative as we required empirical data on how consumers educate themselves, that is, their thoughts, feelings and reasonings before a purchase. Due to the lack of previous research focusing on online consumer education during customer journeys, our study is of exploratory nature (Kvale, 1994) and aimed to gather new insights in order to answer our research questions. Our thesis has an abductive approach as we use our previous knowledge of customer experience and journeys as a theoretical starting point but aim to contribute with new insights from consumers' perspective through our research and analysis of the empirical data. To gather such empirical data, we used a multi-method approach where we combined multiple qualitative data collection methods. The two data collection methods we used were (1) observations and (2) interviews. These data collection methods allowed us to gather direct first-hand reports of consumer perspectives of the customer education process.

4.2. Sampling of Respondents

To explore how and why consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves about sports supplements, a specific set of criteria was required for the respondents in our study. We used purposive sampling to ensure that the respondents of this study had low prior knowledge of sports supplements and that the purchase scenario was relevant for them (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson and Jasperson, 2018). The three eligibility criteria were that the respondents (1) were first-time buyers of sports supplements, (2) had a background in sports and (3) were interested in purchasing sports supplements in the future. The criterion that the respondents were first-time buyers of sports supplement was chosen as we believe it increased the likelihood that they had low knowledge of the industry and product category. Furthermore,

we believe that criteria (2) and (3) ensured that the respondents were interested and are potential consumers of sports supplements in the future, which is important as it increased how realistic the purchase scenario was for the respondents. Furthermore, our study focuses on the online consumer education journey, therefore millennials were selected, as they are more likely to use online channels when purchasing products (Hall, Towers & Shaw, 2017; Ewerhard, Sisovsky & Johansson, 2019).

Finding eligible respondents for our study was demanding, considering the specific criteria. To mitigate this difficulty we used a snowball sampling method (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, we contacted people within our networks who were participating in sporting activities, and asked them if they had suggestions of potential candidates that meet our eligibility criteria. Through the members of our networks, we contacted and invited potential candidates to participate in our study by explaining the purpose of our thesis. In total, 13 individuals participated in our study from a diverse sporting background. The table below presents the demographic information of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents who participated in the study

No.	Gender	Age	Sports Background
1	Male	23	Martial Artist
2	Female	30	Dancer
3	Male	24	Weight-lifter
4	Male	22	Rock-climber
5	Female	27	Runner
6	Female	24	Runner
7	Female	24	Hockey-player
8	Female	23	Swimmer
9	Female	25	Weight-lifter
10	Female	24	Runner
11	Male	23	Rower
12	Male	23	Weight-lifter
13	Male	23	Footballer

4.3. Data Collection

4.3.1. Purchase Scenario

To facilitate the data collection of our study, respondents were supplied with a fictitious purchase scenario involving a friend at the gym who recommends that the respondent should buy a sports supplement product, specifically protein powder, to complement their workouts. The protein powder category was selected for the purchase scenario to make the task as relevant as possible for our respondents. Protein powder is the most purchased product category among sports supplements (Statista, 2017), therefore it is more likely that a first-time buyer of sports supplements would purchase protein powder over other product categories. This increases the likelihood of the fictitious purchase scenario reflecting a relevant and real-life purchase situation.

4.3.2. Observations

Our study aims to explore how consumers educate themselves in a complex purchase scenario, specifically the purchase of protein powder. To understand this education journey we gathered first-hand experiences. We achieved this through the collection of both visual and verbal data.

The gathering of visual data was done through screen recordings that allowed us to observe consumers in a purchase setting where they were in the process of shopping for a sports supplement product. The visual data obtained through the screen recordings allowed us to follow respondents during their online customer journeys and identify interactions they encountered during the process. As Elliot and Jenkel-Elliot (2003) suggest, the visual data gave us the ability to observe and understand the respondents' behaviours. During the observations, we aimed to have the role of 'complete observers' where we tried to have minimal impact on the actions of the respondents during the observation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). In order to do so, we encouraged the respondents to be independent during the purchase scenario by giving them a pre-task. The details of the pre-task is elaborated on further below and in Appendix 2.

The gathering of verbal data was collected through voice-recordings which were carried out by respondents, simultaneously to their screen recordings. The voice-recordings allowed us to observe the respondents cognitive state, that is, their thoughts and reasoning during the customer journey (Verhoef et al., 2009). The verbal data gave us a better understanding of why respondents took a certain journey or how different types of interactions influenced their thinking. In order to gather this type of verbal data and access the internal dialogue of the

respondents, they were asked to voice their thoughts and reasoning out loud. This method is also referred to as the 'think aloud' method and can "provide rich verbal data about reasoning during a problem solving task" (Fonteyn, Kuipers & Grobe, 2016, p. 430). The voice-recordings gave contextual support to the screen recordings and allowed us better to understand the respondents' perspective during their education journey.

The pre-task, as mentioned above, was conducted to help make the respondents familiar with the method of screen and voice-recordings. We provided them with a pre-task, to go online and search for the cheapest flight to Spain. This task was designed to be straightforward and understandable so that the respondents could focus on practicing how to set up a screen-recording and perform the *think aloud* method. The purpose of the pre-task was twofold, (1) to ensure that the quality from the data collection of the main task was conducted in an ideal manner and (2) to facilitate the respondents' ability to perform the main purchase scenario remotely, at any place and time at their convenience, without us needing to be present. For the purchase scenario, the respondents were not given a time limit to complete the activity. We believe these decisions allowed the respondents the freedom to conduct the scenario at their leisure, creating a more realistic scenario and a closer representation of a real-life purchase situation.

4.3.3. Interviews

After conducting the observations, we decided to supplement our observations with interviews with the respondents. The interviews allowed us to not only ask respondents general questions about their customer journey but also add clarity to questions that arose during the screen and voice-recordings. The interview guide for the general questions are presented in Appendix 3. Furthermore, the interviews allowed respondents to elaborate on offline touch points, such as word-of-mouth, during their journeys, which were not possible for us to observe during the screen-recordings. The reason we found interviews to be appropriate is because it is a proven data collection method when trying to further understand consumer behaviours that occur during observations (Kvale, 1994; Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003; Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). The interviews were semi-structured so that we could perform laddering techniques, which allowed us to both understand underlying motivations behind the actions of respondents, as well as eliciting examples that supported these motivations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). This interview structure helped us understand why respondents made certain decisions during their customer journeys.

4.4. Analyzing the Data

The analysis of our data was based on grounded analysis as this focuses on "building theory from categories that are 'grounded' in the data" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018, p.242). Our first

step was familiarising ourselves with the collected data. The familiarisation stage was achieved through gathering, observing, transcribing and discussing the data. After familiarizing ourselves with the data, and following Rennstam and Wästerfors's (2018) sorting method, we performed an initial coding of our data. During the initial coding of our data, we focused on being as open as possible to allow for different perspectives and interpretations of the raw empirical data to be considered. The initial coding consisted of us summarizing parts of the data by giving them descriptive words, such as 'packaging' or 'perceived risk' in relation to the context. This helped us organize the data and get a better understanding of its contents. After coding the data, we categorized the descriptive words into broader umbrella themes, for instance, codes such as 'familiarity', 'packaging' and 'pricing' are all types of brand elements, and were therefore put in a 'brand elements' theme.

We also mapped touch points for each respondents' purchase scenario by observing their screen-recordings (see Appendix 1 for each respondents' customer journey). The mapping of the respondents' customer journeys were made following the conventional way of presenting touch points in a chronological and horizontal line from start to finish (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). Furthermore, to present an overall picture of each of the consumer education journeys identified, we created an aggregated journey for each type of consumer education journey (see figure 2, 3 and 4). The aggregated journeys were created by analysing each respondents' individual journey and interview answers. After comparing the respondents' journey maps, we found similar patterns based on mainly the type of touch points they interacted with during their education process, which resulted in three types of aggregated consumer education journeys.
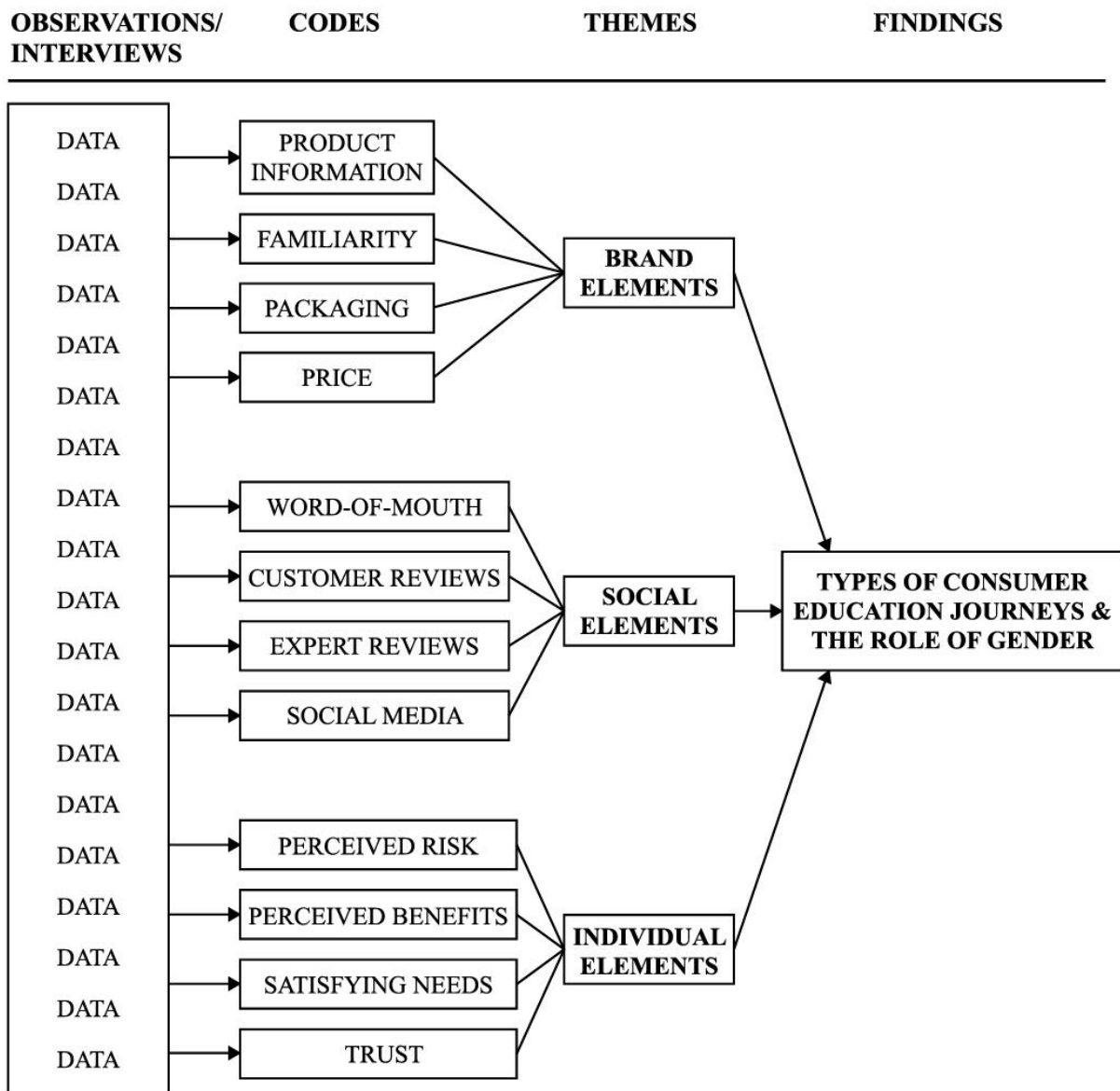
Figure 1. The Process of Data Analysis

4.5. Quality of the Study

The quality of our study can be evaluated based on three common research attributes; validity, reliability and generalizability (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). To ensure the validity of our study, that is, that our data gives an accurate depiction of how consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves, we used strict eligibility criteria to ensure the level of prior knowledge was low amongst the respondents. Furthermore, we set criteria that aimed to make the purchase scenario as relevant as possible for the respondents in order to create a realistic situation that could potentially occur in real-life. We decided to use real-time screen and audio recordings as we believe this gives a more accurate and first-hand representation of the respondents' perspective, behaviour and experiences compared with information that

respondents are asked to recall after a specific event. In addition, we made sure to prepare respondents regarding the data collection methods so that they could freely conduct the study whenever they wanted, as opposed to restricting them to conduct the task during a specific time and place decided by us as observers. We believe this created more freedom for the respondents and resulted in a more realistic purchase scenario setting, to increase the validity of our study. To ensure our test was reliable, in other words, that other observers would reach similar observations, we did our best to minimize our impact as observers on the respondents. For example, the choice of screen-recordings as the method for data collection allowed us as observers to be absent when our respondents were conducting the experiment. The ability for us to be absent during observations reduced the potential effects of us as observers on the respondents (Easterby-Smith et al., 2018). Finally, as our study aims to be exploratory, the goal is not to achieve generalisability in the sense of generalized findings that can be applied to multiple situations or demographics. Instead the goal of this study is to include a sufficiently diverse sample size that allows us to gain a broad inference of millennial perspectives on the ways consumers educate themselves in a complex purchase scenario, and to support and encourage future research on the topic area.

5. Results & Analysis

Our result and analysis chapter presents findings from our empirical data in two sections. The first section focuses on the mapping of the respondents' customer journeys which give interesting insights on how respondents with low prior knowledge acquire information before a purchase decision. The second section presents interesting findings on why respondents educated themselves and what effect gender had.

5.1. Mapping the Consumer Education Journey

The mapping of each respondents' education journeys gives insights on the touch points that consumers interact with when educating themselves in a complex purchase scenario. Although each of the respondents' customer journeys observed in our study is to some extent unique, we can observe similarities in the types of touch points used by the respondents. An aggregated analysis of each respondents' customer journey helped us identify three types of consumer education journeys that consumers with low prior knowledge seem to take when they are educating themselves about protein powder. The three types of journeys identified are *the brand-owned education journey*, *the social education journey* and *the hybrid education journey.* These journeys are presented in aggregated consumer education journey maps, which illustrates the most common and influential touch points that occur in each of the consumer journey types (see Figure 2, 3 and 4).

5.1.1. The Brand-Owned Education Journey

The brand-owned education journey is characterised by consumers who look to educate themselves through mainly elements controlled by brands. These brand elements most commonly are brand knowledge and familiarity, product packaging and the price of products. The consumers that go on this journey tend to trust the brand communication and rely on the familiarity of brands when educating themselves. They are therefore less likely to look for social communication such as customer reviews, influencers and social media. The respondents in our study that took a customer journey characterised as a brand-owned education journey are respondents 3, 6, 7, 10 and 13.

Overall *brand knowledge* (Keller, 1993) and *familiarity* (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987) were important elements during the respondents' education journey. The respondents going on a brand-owned consumer education journey tended to be more likely to favour brands that they, in some way, were aware of and recognised when deciding what retailer to educate themselves on, and buy from. For instance, after respondent 13 made a search on Google and

was faced with several brands, he deliberated and came to the conclusion based on *brand recognition*:

> I do recognise Hollands and Barretts so I will check on there. They are quite a trustworthy shop so will take a look at what they've got.
> - *Respondent 13, Male.*

Respondent 13, highlights the significant role brand recognition and favourable *brand associations* can have on consumers choices. It is clear that respondent 13 associates 'Hollands and Barretts' with being "a trustworthy shop". The trustworthiness in this context could be linked with the alleviation of perceived functional risk, for example, that he believes it is more likely that he will receive a genuine protein powder product when it comes from a reputable source he has positive association towards. In addition, we found that *brand awareness* and positive brand associations influence consumers when they are selecting a retailer or source of information. This notion can be seen when respondent 10 who, when summarizing her journey, stated:

> I recognized Renée Voltaire, which is a brand which is highly used by influencers and hardcore marketed. They have so many adverts and marketing collaborations with influencers so I guess I am a bit brainwashed, that I know that if you have the Renée Voltaire in your kitchen you are considered to be a healthy person. So I guess I fell for that.
> - *Respondent 10, Female.*

In respondent 10's case, she acknowledges that the communication of the brand Renée Voltaire influenced her choice of product. The "many adverts and marketing collaborations with influencers" has informed her on the "healthy person" that would typically purchase Renée Voltaire products. This positive *brand image* of Renee Voltaire, as described by respondent 10 is built through marketing efforts and informs her of the type of individual that would purchase products from this brand, and thus might minimize a social risk perceived by respondent 10 when purchasing protein powder. These responses demonstrate how brand awareness and brand recognition were elements used by respondents to minimize the number of alternatives evaluated. Thereby, respondents could eliminate brands from their information search by instead selecting brands that they were aware of, recognised and had favourable associations towards. Furthermore, the respondent's previous experiences, encounters and interactions with brands on various channels seemed to determine the perception they had of a brand. This is illustrated by respondent 6 in the following example:

> I would probably also go to the pharmacy and check what they have because I trust Apoteket [Swedish pharmacy] and assume that the supplements that they would offer

contain substances that you can trust.
- *Respondent 6, Female.*

Respondent 6 emphasises the importance of trust built from her previous encounters with a brand, which leads them to be *top of mind* (Keller, 1993) and for her to assume that their online outlet is also trustworthy. This demonstrates how consumers could streamline their education process by mainly exploring the offerings of brands they recognised, had positive associations towards or had previously experienced pleasant customer service from. The importance of brands during the education process did, however, seem to differ between respondents as a result of the degree of risk perceived. While the recognition and favourable associations to brands seemed to be crucial for respondent 6, respondent 3 did not seem to be influenced by a specific brand despite the fact that he recognized a brand that he had positive associations to. Instead of sticking to the brand Gymgrossisten [A Swedish retailer], he opted to buy protein powder from a completely unknown brand to him. The explanation seems to be that respondent 3 considers all protein powders to be "basically the same thing" and therefore he perceived a low degree of risk associated with the purchase and was more concerned with buying the cheapest option available.

The importance mentioned above of brand knowledge is in line with *customer-based brand equity* (Keller, 1993) which proposes that consumers with favourable associations towards a brand are more likely to purchase from that brand, over an unknown brand. In this case, we found respondents who had previous experiences or who have developed brand awareness and positive brand associations through other means, are more likely to select a familiar brand to educate themselves about the sports supplements further. However, it also seems like brands are less important in instances when the degree of perceived risk is low, and the perception of differences between products is small.

In the context of consumer behaviour, product *packaging* is a visual stimulant and that also includes product information which consumers can read, and use to educate themselves. However in an online setting this information, though still on the packaging, is provided to consumers through a clearer text format on product pages. Therefore, we found that packaging tended to have more of a visual role, providing the respondents with an image of what the product might look like. Nevertheless, packaging seemed to be an important source of information for respondents on a brand-owned customer journey despite it mostly functioning as a visual stimulus for the respondents. The respondents tended to use packaging in cases when they were looking to simplify their education process. This is illustrated by respondent 11, who explains why she looks at packaging:

> So, it simplifies my decision-making by just looking at pictures and thinking that design looks good. It's like a shortcut, so I don't have to check ... because I think the product design looks credible and good and it is in line with my preferences, so I don't

have to check the table of contents because I know it takes a little extra time. And then I get a faster decision-making.
- *Respondent 10, Female.*

Respondent 10 emphasizes the advantage of using packaging in her decision-making as a tool that helps her to avoid excessive cognitive effort. The packaging enabled her to take a "shortcut" and avoid a longer decision-making process that "takes a little extra time" which allowed her to make a faster and to some extent more informed decision about the product. However, using packaging as a way to simplify decision-making and avoid more laborious ways of education also seemed to evoke mixed feelings for respondent 10. As she was voicing her thoughts while scrolling through a product page, she stated "Okay, I am going for the pictures, I know it is not good but…", and when later interviewed and asked to elaborate on why she felt looking at pictures "is not good" she explains:

So, it was probably more the angel and the devil on the shoulders who chose between "okay I know I should not go on pictures but it looks nice in the packaging and it still looks good in the picture without reading the content".
- *Respondent 10, Female.*

Respondent 10 seems to acknowledge that her behaviour was not entirely rational, showing she is aware of the disadvantages of using packaging as the main source of information on products. However, the overwhelming task of educating herself about a complex product that she had little knowledge about led her to feel the need to take a "shortcut". According to *rational choice theory* (Becker, 1976) respondent 11's behaviour is not rational as she is not fully utilizing all information available in order to maximize the utility of her purchase. For example, by looking at packaging as a source of information instead of "reading the content" she neglects detailed information about the product. However, her actions better align with the premises of *prospect theory* (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), which assumes that individuals in an uncertain predicament tend to rely on choice heuristics or shortcuts to make decisions instead of making a more complete and rational decision that involves more cognitive effort.

Furthermore, for respondents on a brand-owned education journey, the *price* of products seemed to be another important source of information when they were looking to educate themselves about protein powder. We found that the respondents' evaluation of price influenced how they perceived the value of the products, which suggests that respondents make certain inferences based on price. For instance, when respondent 10 first discovered a product, it caught her attention, but then the price of the product made her feel uncertain as she stated:

And it is really cheap, but why is it cheap? ... I would consider this one, but it feels like it is too cheap compared to the other ones I looked at.
- *Respondent 10, Female.*

The uncertainty that respondent 11 feels because the product "is too cheap compared to the other ones" indicates that the price of the product did not match up to her reference point of what the product should cost. This suggests that when the price fell below her reference point, she felt uncertain that she would receive a product that lives up to the quality or standard she expected of a product within the category. From a rational point of view, it might seem odd that she is concerned with the product being "too cheap" as one can assume that a rational individual would want to gain as much value as possible for the smallest expense possible. However, in her case, she seemed to perceive the expected value of the product to be lower because of the low price. This is in line with *prospect theory* (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) and the assumption that individuals generally are risk-averse, where they would prefer a choice with a lower utility if they are assured with a high certainty of expected utility. In her case, she seemed not to want to risk purchasing a cheap product that she thought might not deliver the functions which she expected.

Based on the touch point mapping of the respondents that took a brand-owned consumer education journey, we have compiled an aggregated brand-owned consumer education journey map (see Appendix 1 for each respondent journey map). The Brand-Owned Consumer Education Journey map is presented in Figure 2 and shows that consumers often select a retail website based on brand recognition and further educate themselves through the product description, price, packaging and product ratings.
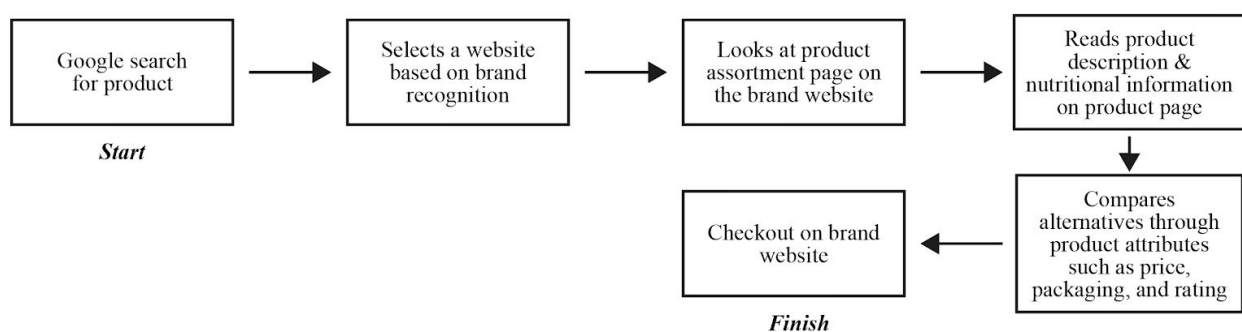
Figure 2. The Brand-Owned Consumer Education Journey Map

5.1.2. The Social Education Journey

In *the social education journey,* respondents mainly look to educate themselves through social sources of information that often are external and not controlled by brands. These

sources of information can include word-of-mouth, reviews, blogs, social media, influencers and opinion leaders. Respondents that take this journey favour social communication when educating themselves and tend to not trust communication from brands. They rely on the experience and expertise of other people, who do not directly benefit from the sales of the product. The respondents in our study that took a customer journey characterised as a social education journey are respondents 4, 5, 8, 11 and 12. A common trait among these respondents was scepticism towards brand communication and its reliability. This is exemplified by respondent 12, when asked what he feels the role of customer reviews are:

> Sometimes companies' marketing can make a product seem really good, and then when you read about it, it might not seem as good from reading reviews.
> - *Respondent 12, Male.*

Respondent 12 argues that brand communication might be exaggerated and not always accurately reflect reality. This highlights why some respondents do not rely on how companies communicate information about their products, but instead prefer to rely on other people's opinions as a source of information. We find that the reason why respondents on a social education journey prefer social touch points is because of the different degrees of trust they feel towards brand communication and non-brand communication. Respondent 4 supported this when explaining that their level of trust is based on whether or not he perceives the information provided to him is biased or not. When asked if he thinks there is a difference between how reliable certain sources of information are, he responded:

> Yes as the communication from the brands is biased, whereas the opinions of the people who buy from there are based solely on their previous purchasing experiences.
> - *Respondent 4, Male.*

The statement shows that individuals might be more critical towards brands when educating themselves if they find brand communication to be biased. When asked to elaborate on his reasoning, respondent 4 stated the reason why he perceives brands to be biased is "because they are looking to make money off the products". The idea that brands are seeking financial gain from the respondents' purchase decision was a recurring theme among the individuals taking a social education journey and made them view brand communication as less trustworthy. Their tendency to be more critical towards brand communication made them more inclined to look for social information and observe the experiences of *influencers* and *opinion leaders* (Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1996). The tendency to look on social media for the opinions of influencers during the search for information was a key characteristic of the social education journey as respondents looked to emulate the behaviour of previous users. Influencers seemed to have a higher degree of trust, as respondents found them to be

more genuine than brands. Respondent 8 expressed her thoughts on influencers and trust, stating:

> I feel that in these days many social influencers are becoming more and more transparent since there appears to be an even amount of negative and positive reviews. I feel that I can trust reviews from influencers whom I can relate to is more than a brand, since brands always appear positive and they communicate themselves as the best choice.
> *- Respondent 8, Female.*

For respondent 8, a determining factor on whether an influencer was deemed trustworthy or not, seemed to be dependent on their ability to both praise, but more importantly, criticise the product or brand in question. This also sheds light on why brands can be perceived as biased (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007) because they tend to "always appear positive" and communicate themselves as the "best choice". Furthermore, respondent 8 hints at the importance of the relationship between herself and an opinion leader in determining how influenced she is during a purchase decision. This can be seen here when she stated "I can trust reviews from influencers whom I can relate to". Respondent 5 expanded on this notion, by emphasising how trust in influencers is something that is built and increases the effect on their opinions:

> There are a couple of fitness and lifestyle influencers that I've followed for years, watch their videos and engage with lots of their platforms. I am probably quite likely to trust what they say.
> *- Respondent 5, Female.*

Respondent 5 demonstrates how the trust she has in the influencer is developed over "years" through engaging "with lots of their platforms". Furthermore, respondent 8 developed her trust towards influencers based on their ability to be transparent and unbiased. Ultimately, regardless of how the trust is built, trust seemed to increase the likelihood of respondents to consider the opinions (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007), and potentially imitate the behaviours of an influencer. Beyond influencers, the respondents on the social education journey also tended to gather information through various forms of *EWOM* (Nieto, Hernández-Maestro & Muñoz-Gallego, 2014), primarily consulting *customer reviews*, as a consequence of their low prior knowledge. In social education journeys, the respondents preferred to depend on the previous experiences of other users to gain knowledge rather than researching product information and evaluating alternatives on their own. This is illustrated by respondent 11 when he chose a website to educate himself from based on whether or not the website offered insight into other people's preferences and choices:

> To be honest this is a website that interests me as I can see what other people buy and see what other people go for as I've no idea of what I'm going for.
> *- Respondent 11, Male.*

Respondent 11 emphasises that his lack of prior knowledge leaves him with "no idea" of what he should be going for in the protein powder category and that it makes him want to " see what other people buy and see what other people go for". This shows an urge to observe the behaviours of others in a situation where such guidance can help him in his purchase decision. The notion that respondents with low prior knowledge depend on the knowledge and experiences of others is supported by respondent 7 who stated: "with limited knowledge of these products I value others' opinions before I would buy". However, the respondents seem to acknowledge the fact that this could also be a disadvantage as they rely solely on the information others provide them. This is evident when respondent 13 explained his process of educating himself on the taste of different flavours of protein powders:

> ... you almost blindly trust what many others are saying, if many say "this one is tasty" and it is an important factor for me, I will trust that it is tasty.
> *- Respondent 12, Male.*

Customer reviews offer respondent 12 some guidance when he is deciding what flavour of protein powder to purchase, nevertheless, he indicates that by "blindly" trusting what others say, he was left entirely dependent on the information provided by an unknown customer. The uncertainty towards customer reviews could suggest respondent 13 perceives a lower level of trust towards the unknown customers' information due to the lack of a developed relationship but nevertheless uses it as a source of information.

Respondents 4, 5, 8, 11 and 12 demonstrate that there is a tendency for individuals on a social education journey to look for the opinions of others when educating themselves on what product to buy. During their education process, they mainly look for ways to observe the opinions, actions and behaviours of previous buyers within the industry. This way of acquiring knowledge is in line with *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1977) which states that individuals tend to observe and imitate the behaviour of those they perceive as being models worthy of imitating. The empirical data also suggests that the more a respondent perceived themselves to be unknowledgeable, the more likely they were to look for social ways of educating themselves. This is evident through respondents 5 and 8, who developed trust with the influencers, leading to them being more susceptible to incorporating the influencers' opinions into their purchase decisions. In contrast, respondent 13 was more skeptical of the customer reviews as he had not established a relationship of trust with the unknown customer, however, due to his low prior knowledge of the products, he nevertheless followed their guidance.

The aggregated analysis of each respondent taking a social education journey (see Appendix 1 for each respondent journey map) shows that respondents go beyond retail websites to educate themselves through social touch points that allow for interactions with previous users and opinion leaders. The Social Education Journey map is presented in Figure 3 and illustrates that the most common critical touch points during the journey was social media platforms, review and blog posts and customer reviews.
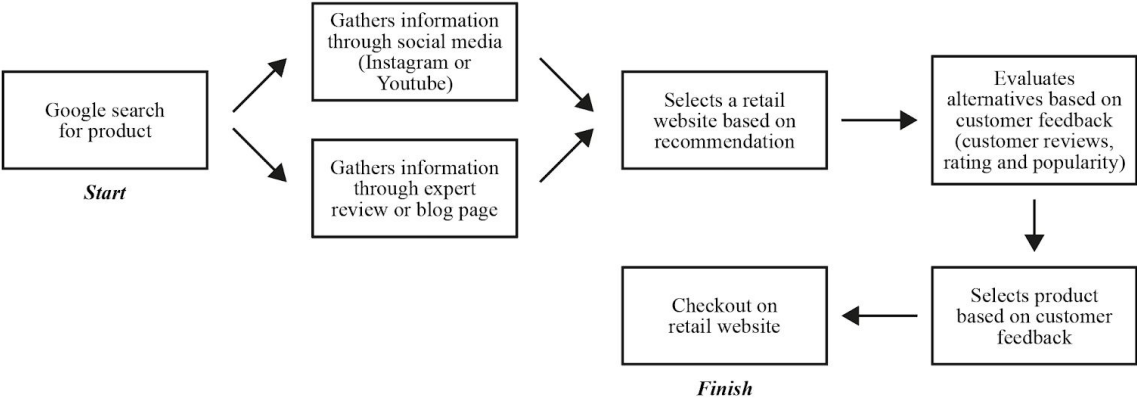
Figure 3. The Social Consumer Education Journey Map

5.1.3. The Hybrid Education Journey

In *the hybrid education journey*, the respondents' process of educating themselves were mainly characterised by individual elements. These individual elements consisted of satisfying particular needs and an impartiality to sources of information. Respondents who take this journey are motivated by their particular needs and go on complex journeys consisting of both brand-owned and social/external touch points in order to acquire further knowledge to make an informed decision. The hybrid education journey shares and combines elements of both the brand-owned and social education journeys. However, the respondents' search for information is more centered around their focus to satisfy particular needs, such as educating themselves on the risk and benefits of protein powder. The respondents in our study that took a customer journey characterised as a hybrid education journey are respondents 1, 2 and 9.

As mentioned, for respondents on a hybrid education journey, one of the main motivations to educate themselves was their desire to satisfy their specific needs which resulted in a more extensive information search. The importance of satisfying an individual's need is outlined by respondent 2, when asked "why do you educate yourself?":

> It's important to look up more information when it comes to nutrition if you have a specific fitness goal, maintaining, cutting or bulking. There are so many product

alternatives in the market so it is always better to make an informed decision.
- Respondent 2, Female.

As respondent 2 outlines there is an abundance of sports supplement products for a variety of different fitness goals, which is why she believes it is important for individuals with specific needs to "look up more information". There were several needs that the respondents had, for respondent 2, the goal with consumer education was to "make an informed decision" to satisfy her need of avoiding "products with added refined sugar" for health reasons. For respondent 1, his specific need was to find "the best protein powder for building muscle" for his particular body type and respondent 9 would instead "like to know if it adds extra calories to one's diet or not". These specific needs required more in-depth research and resulted in the respondents going on more prolonged and extensive searches for information to make a more rational decision. For instance respondent 9, with the help of an external blog post written by an expert, was able to calculate the amount of protein she was required to consume based on her current weight, diet and fitness goals. She then searched for a brand website to compare calorie information of different protein powder products to find one that best corresponded to her calculations. Her reasoning for using multiple sources was:

> As I said before, companies want to sell their products and so they make them look good, but regular information about products may be fine [from brands], however to answer "how good a product actually is...?" I do not think I would base that on the company that wants to sell it, but that's when you go to reviews and possibly there is someone who has tested different protein powders from different brands and it says that it is not advertising then I think it is good.
> *- Respondent 9, Female.*

When searching for basic information about products, such as caloric information, respondent 9 deemed brand communication as a valid and valuable source of information. However, when she was looking for more in-depth information on products, such as "how good a product actually is" she did not rely as much on brand communication. She ascribed this kind of reasoning to the fact that "companies want to sell their products and so they make them look good", and instead relied on the subjective experience and opinions of others through customer reviews, who are "not advertising" and have nothing to gain from their decision.

Thus, we can see that for respondents to acquire sufficient knowledge to make an informed decision that satisfies their specific needs, they do more in-depth research on the topic. Respondents on the hybrid education journey can be seen to mix different types of touch points. The selection of either brand or social/external elements often depended on what information they were searching for and why they were educating themselves. This process of education best aligns with the assumptions of *rational choice theory* (Becker, 1976). These respondents attempted to consider all information available, from both the brand and external

touch points, and had well-defined preferences that they wanted to adhere to with their purchase. By doing so, they could maximize the value acquired from the protein powder they decided to purchase. However, this also resulted in longer customer journeys where the respondents search for information was extensive and in some cases time-consuming.

The aggregated analysis of each respondent taking a hybrid education journey (see Appendix 1 for each respondents' consumer education journey map) shows that these consumers go back and forth between brand-owned and social touch points when trying to educate themselves. They decide what source of information to use depending on the type of information they wish to learn. The Hybrid Education Journey map is presented in Figure 4 and illustrates that the most common critical touch points during the journey were evaluation of needs, social media, review/blog websites, product description and nutritional information as well as customer feedback.
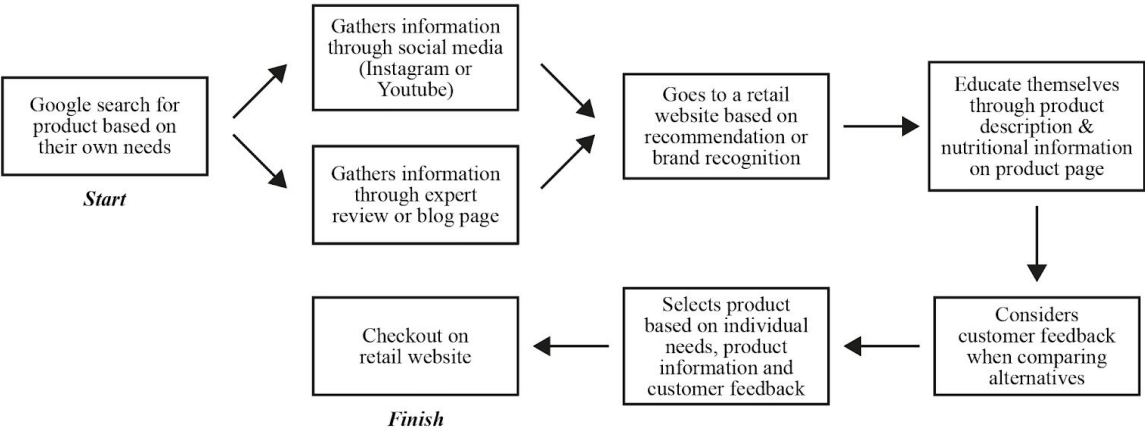
Figure 4. The Hybrid Consumer Education Journey Map

5.2. The Role of Gender in the Consumer Education Journey

While the first section of the analysis focuses on how the respondents educated themselves, this section focuses on some of the reasons why the respondent educated themselves. Our findings suggest that there are several reasons why the respondents educate themselves when purchasing protein powder, however, the main reason we identified is that the respondents educated themselves to alleviate perceived risks. In this section, we will focus on the role of gender in explaining why the respondents educate themselves, specifically the risk males and females perceived when purchasing protein powder.

In our empirical data, we can observe more instances of perceived *functional risk* (Kotler & Keller, 2016) amongst female respondents of our study. The female respondents seemed to feel uncertain about the performance and function of protein powder in cases where brand

communication reinforces preconceptions of gender stereotypes within the industry. For instance, respondent 10's uncertainty arises from the packaging of a product as she stated "Wait, okay, I don't like that, at all. It looks too much for guys. So, nope. … This looks nice, it is a bit more girl design". The uncertainty generated from the packaging led her to dismiss the product due to her perceptions of it being for "guys". In contrast she was more receptive to another product that she perceived it to be more of a "girl design". When asked why she was dismissive of packaging she believed is meant for guys she answered:

> This is the picture I get when I see protein powder that has a black background and silver text and flashes and has a design that looks very cool. Then I get this, the beefy guy in front of me that is... Ugh... No, I don't want to look like that! That's not what my goal is with protein powder. It somehow gets a little scary with the male design, that it gets like this, but god, I don't take protein powder to make me look like a man, I take protein powder because I want to improve my performance.
> - *Respondent 10, Female.*

As mentioned previously, when it comes to consumer education, the packaging is an important source of information and can generate different responses by different individuals which seems to partially be explained by gender. In the case of respondent 10, packaging with a stereotypical male design increased her level of perceived functional risk. She clarified that the uncertainty about the performance of the product is linked to the fact that she did not want to "look like a man" and that the protein powders masculine packaging would result in her having a masculine physical appearance. This links to *gender role theory* (Eagly & Wood, 1991; Eagly & Wood, 1999) which explains that people often behave according to what they believe society expects of their gender. In this case, respondent 10 reinforces the idea that males are expected to be masculine while females expected to be feminine. She explains that the importance of packaging is linked to her preconceptions, stating:

> The boyish thing became so much a confirmation of my prejudices, while the more René Voltarie's girly packaging became a little more so that I forgot my prejudices and became like this "Oh god! Of course I should have protein powder!". It kind of convinces me directly.
> - *Respondent 10, Female.*

This emphasizes the crucial role packaging can play when consumers are educating themselves, especially within an industry that has many preconceptions which could lead males and females to respond differently. In the first case, the protein powder detailed connoted masculinity based on the packaging colours and visual elements. In the second case, the packaging was more "girly" and in line with what she imagined for herself, which encouraged and convinced her to ultimately buy the product.

Similarly, instances of perceived *physical risk* (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017) were more prevalent amongst the female respondents. The perceived physical risk was linked to uncertainties regarding how the nutritional contents of protein powder would affect the health of the respondents, and revolved around potential negative side effects of using protein powder. Respondent 6 elaborated on the uncertainty she felt in regards to the physical effects of consuming protein powder by stating:

> Because when it comes to especially these kinds of products, for me anyways, who have never used or bought it before, it can be a bit like I don't really have full control of what it contains even though there is a large ingredient list on what the supplements contain, I don't really know what effect it would have on specifically my health as I have never tried it before.
> - *Respondent 6, Female.*

Respondent 6 explains that despite her having access to "a large ingredient list on what the supplements contain", there are still certain aspects which she does not feel that she can educate herself on. As the product information merely lists the chemicals and ingredients, it does not list all the different effects on the body in different dosages. This indicates that it is a tedious task for individuals to educate themselves on each property of the product's contents and how it would affect their health specifically. A similar notion about the uncertainties of the potential side effects of protein powder is expressed by respondent 8:

> Because I know from what I have heard before that using protein powder can come with negative effects such as kidney failure, or gaining a lot of weight. Those are things I would like to avoid, since my objective was to become more fit and muscle recovery, I think it is important to do some research.
> - *Respondent 8, Female.*

For respondent 8, research before the purchase of protein powder is important as she wants to minimize the physical risks she perceives with the use of the product. In her case, the purpose of education herself is to alleviate concerns she has about the potential physical harm protein powder might have on her body. In contrast, male respondents did not express, to a similar extent, concerns in regards to perceived functional and physical risks. They did, however, express uncertainty in regards to the price of products and were concerned with not wasting their money on a product that did not live up to their expectations. For instance, when asked about the importance of educating oneself during the purchase, respondent 4 answered:

> I don't want to waste my money buying an inferior product. I want to make sure I'm getting something that ultimately works when used correctly. There's no point spending on something that is low quality and doesn't make a difference to muscle

recovery and gain.
- *Respondent 4, Male.*

Respondent 4's attitude towards *monetary risk* (Ekström, Ottosson & Parment, 2017) is emphasised twice in the quote stating "I don't want to waste my money buying…" and "There's no point spending on something that is…". This attitude towards monetary risk was his main motivation for why he wanted to educate himself about the product. In addition, respondent 1 also shared similar concerns for the monetary implications of purchasing the product:

The price was influential as I wouldn't want to spend a lot of money on protein powder, because I don't think the value added by the more expensive brands is worth the extra cost that they charge.
- *Respondent 1, Male.*

Respondent 1 perceived low functional risk with the purchase of protein powder as he believed all the products function similarly. Therefore he was more concerned with the monetary risk of paying more money for a product that performs the same functions as a cheaper or standard priced one. While respondent 4's motivation for educating himself on protein powder was due to his concern that he would waste money on a product that did not meet his expectations, respondent 1 was not concerned with the product meeting his expectations, but was rather more concerned with not paying extra money for a product that would only minimally exceed his expectations. Ultimately, both respondents were concerned they would waste their money and therefore sought to gain greater knowledge about the products in order to minimize the perceived monetary risk.

Furthermore, male respondents also tended to perceive a higher degree of *time risk* (Kotler & Keller, 2016) during their purchases. In this context, they were concerned about spending more time than necessary when educating themselves on which product to buy. Although most of the male respondents perceived a higher degree of time risk, they seemed to attribute this risk to different factors. In the case of respondent 1 his reasoning behind not wanting to spend too much time educating himself about sports supplements was as follows:

I would not spend too much time educating myself on the sports supplements as they are all similar products with similar outcomes.
- *Respondent 1, Male.*

According to his reasoning, time consuming search for information would be unnecessary as he had concluded that the products "are all similar". Therefore, any further time spent on this decision would be a waste of time. However, there were also other reasons why the male

respondents were concerned with wasting their time. For instance, respondent 12 explains that while education before a purchase is important, he finds it impractical to educate himself due to his responsibilities in daily life:

> So, I think education, in whatever it is, is very important but then it depends... Where to put your focus, I mean I have a full time job, if you have to delve into everything you buy…
> - *Respondent 12, Male.*

This quote illustrates that while some males acknowledge the importance of consumer education, many do not want to allocate the time required to educate themselves due to priorities in other aspects of their lives. Much like respondent 1 who decided he did not want to waste time on educating himself based upon his judgements of the industry. Furthermore, the perception of time risk was also a result of respondents being worried that they would waste time learning about a product on their own when there is a more efficient method to educate themselves through listening to other previous users recommendations instead. Respondent 4 puts this notion forward when he discussed important aspects of his education process:

> I tend to use things based on recommendations from others because I don't want to spend my own time doing in-depth research on a product, if it's good enough for them it's probably good enough for me. They've basically tested it for me.
> - *Respondent 4, Male.*

Unlike respondent 1 whose perceptions of time risk were due to their judgements of the industry, and unlike respondent 12 whose attitude to time risk was based on their life commitments, respondent 4 emphasised that his attitude to time risk when purchasing protein powder was motivated by the desire to be as efficient as possible. During the search for information, he did not want to spend his "own time doing in-depth research" when someone else had "basically tested it for " him thus suggesting evaluating customer reviews is a more practical solution than performing his own time-consuming research on the product. Our empirical data demonstrates that the perception of time risk is higher amongst male respondents, due to perceived complexity of product characteristics, personal time or practicality. The concern of wasting one's time researching to educate oneself is something we can observe when it comes to all the male respondents. Our analysis indicates that there is a difference between the perceived risk behind why males and females educate themselves.

6. Discussion & Conclusions

In this chapter, we discuss and conclude our findings on how and why consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves about sports supplements and what effect gender has. We present our main insights from mapping the consumer education journeys and analysis of the role of gender in the consumer education journey. Finally, we offer managerial recommendations for practitioners in sports supplements, along with contributions to research, theory and suggestions for further research.

6.1. Types of Consumer Education Journeys

The first research question our thesis aims to answer is how consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves about sports supplements during the customer journey. The main finding of our study in regards to how consumers with low prior knowledge educate themselves is that consumers go on one of three types of education journeys before a purchase decision. The identification of these three education journeys is mainly based on the types of touch points the consumers interact with when they are searching for information and looking to acquire knowledge about protein powder. We refer to these three types of journeys as the *brand-owned education journey, the social education journey* and *the hybrid education journey.*

Consumers that take a brand-owned education journey mainly consider brand communication when looking to educate themselves on protein powders. These consumers tend to be more influenced by brand knowledge and have a higher degree of trust towards brands. As a consequence, individuals that take this journey are less likely to seek information through social and external touch points. The main brand elements which these consumers rely on were brand familiarity, product information, product packaging and the price of products. For consumers on a brand-owned education journey, brand familiarity had a significant influence on their choice of source of information. Brands that were recognized by consumers were more likely to be considered and selected. This aligns with findings from Lee, Conroy, & Motion, (2012) who found that brands hold a competitive advantage when they are more salient in the minds of consumers, allowing them to differentiate from the competition. Furthermore, consumers seem more likely to consider retailers that they have favorable brand associations to, which were either developed through marketing efforts or previous interactions. These results support the findings of Laroche, Kim and Zhou (1996), who found that individuals were more likely to purchase a product from a brand that they are in some way familiar with.

Once on a brand website, our results suggest that one way consumers educate themselves is through the packaging of products. The packaging seems to simplify decision-making by communicating product attributes for consumers, allowing them to avoid time-consuming decision-making that demands more cognitive effort. This supports previous research which claims that consumers look for efficient ways to reduce the duration of time allocated to selecting products Warde (1999). Our findings are also in line with research that shows product packaging is a significant component of decision-making and can influence the attitudes and behaviours of consumers (Silayoi & Speece, 2007). Moreover, consumers on a brand-owned education journey use price as a means to make certain inferences about products. We found consumers compare the prices of different protein powders to create a reference point of how much a product should cost, then infer when a price fell below the reference point, that the standard or quality of the product was lower. These results coincide with Blattberg and Wisniewski (1989) and Hunt and Keaveney (1994) who show that consumers make inferences about the quality of a product based on its price. The use of packaging and price as sources of information for consumers with low prior knowledge is in line with previous research findings suggesting that individuals who cannot fully process product attributes tend to rely on more extrinsic cues to evaluate products (Underwood, Klein & Burke, 2001).

On the other hand, consumers on a social education journey mainly consider social and external touch points as sources of information when educating themselves on protein powders. These consumers tend to be more skeptical towards brand communication and as a result, prefer to seek out the opinions, behaviours and experiences of other people who have already navigated the industry. The main social elements they use when educating themselves include social media, influencers and customer reviews. Consumers that took a social education journey were more skeptical towards brands and perceived them to be biased in their communication. The reason behind the skepticism towards the brands was consumers feeling that brands had something to gain from their choice, and were ultimately seeking to profit on their purchase decision. Our results also suggest that these consumers tend to trust influencers more because they viewed them to be less biased. Influencers were viewed as less biased as they were perceived to be more transparent by discussing both positive and negative aspects of products. Both these findings are in line with Brown, Broderick and Lee (2007) who found that individuals can be reliant on a source of information due to their earned credibility which is based on them being trustworthy and unbiased. In addition, we found that due to a lack of prior knowledge and the complexity of the industry, consumers look for the knowledge of previous users. They do this through customer feedback and reviews, where consumers can observe if previous users endorse or discourage other users from purchasing particular products. The results support findings that consumers reduce uncertainty through social guidance and the validation of others (Flynn, Goldsmith & Eastman, 1996; Ekstrom, Ottosson & Parment, 2017). Furthermore, these findings are in line with research that has highlighted how individuals look to the knowledge of opinion leaders (Iyengar, Van den

Bulte, Valente, 2011) and influencers (Carter, 2016), for guidance in forming their attitudes and behaviours.

Finally, some consumers took a hybrid education journey which is characterised less by their bias towards certain types of touch points, but rather by their desire to perform independent research to find the product that best satisfies their own particular needs. Our results show these consumers go on longer and more complicated journeys, combining both brand-owned and social/external elements in their search for information depending on what information they were looking for. One of the main characteristics of how consumers in a hybrid education journey educate themselves is their focus on the task of gathering information. This information gathering helped them understand how different protein powders correspond to their particular needs. There were various needs that consumers on this journey sought to fulfil through protein powder such as health implications, calorie intake and muscle growth. Our findings suggest that consumers on a hybrid education journey mainly hold utilitarian shopping values, as they focus on acquiring a protein powder that fulfils their desired functionality. These findings are in line with research by Babin, Darden and Griffin (1994) who suggest that consumers with a utilitarian approach value the functionality of the products they purchase. The desire to research the functionality of the product requires consumers to gather more information which leads them to be more impartial towards different sources of information. Therefore, consumers on this journey evaluated information from various sources, regardless of being brand-owned or social/external touch points in order to inform themselves about product specifics properly. This aligns with utilitarian consumer behavior where individuals have been found to seek functionality of products and thereby perform logical reasoning through evaluating sources of accessible product information (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Chen, Chang & Chen, 2017).

To conclude, the focus of this section was to examine the findings of how consumers with low product knowledge educate themselves. Although there are some outliers among the consumers' journeys in this study, overall, we found that the consumers' journeys could be segmented into three types of education journey. Our finding is that consumers educate themselves about protein powder through embarking on either a brand-owned, social or hybrid education journey, each with their distinct characteristics.

6.2. The Effect of Gender on the Consumer Education Journey

We find that gender has some effects on the consumer education journey. These effects can be seen through the differences between the reasons why males and females choose to educate themselves when purchasing protein powder. Our findings show how females were more concerned with reducing functional and physical risk, whereas the males were more concerned with reducing monetary and time risk when educating themselves. This seems to

be linked to the different preconceptions females and males have of sports supplements and protein powder. The females were more concerned with the potential health implications of the product while the males seemed to view different products of protein powder to be more similar.

The functional risk perceived by females seems to be linked to their preconceptions of protein powder as they were concerned that usage of the product would result in excessive muscle gain resulting in what they perceive as a more masculine or other undesirable appearance. Furthermore, our results suggest that the packaging of certain products could trigger concerns with functional risk. Certain colors and visual elements conveyed through packaging seem to increase the functional risk perceived by females, as these designs were often associated with traditional hyper-masculine imagery and hyperbolic muscle gain. Ultimately, such elements enforced perceived risks of the product, which tended to discourage consumers from a purchase. This finding aligns with previous research that shows that packaging can encourage or discourage consumers in the process of purchasing a product (Ahmad, Billoo Lakhan, 2012). Furthermore, our findings also support research that shows that the color of packaging influence consumers' perceptions (Singh, 2006), and that color and design can have different meanings for different people (Underwood, 2003).

In addition, we found that female consumers educate themselves on protein powder as they tend to be concerned with the physical risk of the product. The physical risk perceived by females was mainly in regards to health implications such as gain of weight or muscle and negative effects on the body. Our results indicate that the negative preconceptions of protein powder made females more likely to look up the nutritional information of products. These findings align with research that has found that females are more likely to select products based on nutritional contents and the potential implications on health (Ree, Riediger and Moghadasian, 2008; Arganini, Saba, Comitato, Virgili & Turrini, 2012). Overall, our study indicates that females perceive the purchase of protein powder to involve a higher degree of risk than males. The reason seems to be because of preconceptions they have towards sports supplements and protein powder.

Males, on the other hand, more often viewed different products of protein powders with less caution in regards to the physical and functional risks as they tend to perceive protein powder products as similar to each other. Thus, males were less concerned with which product they bought and more concerned with educating themselves in order to avoid spending too much money on a product that they perceive to offer little to no added value than a cheaper option. Although our study found that males tend to educate themselves to avoid monetary and time risks, our study also indicates that they had a more risk-taking behaviour leading them to more often purchase protein powder from a retailer that they had never heard of before and without out much concern for the products potential side effects. This aligns with the research

of Weber, Blais and Betz (2002) who found that males tend to engage in more risky behaviour when compared to females.

An additional finding of interest which contradicts previous research is that we found there to be no differences in males and females' tendency to use certain touch points. Previous studies have suggested that females are more likely to use social touch points during a shopping situation (Ellwood & Shekar, 2008; Barber, Dodd & Kolyesnikova, 2009). Whereas in our study we found females to be as likely to use, or be skeptical towards, social touch points as males. This finding could be attributed to the evolving egalitarian perspectives and trends regarding gender roles and stereotypes in contemporary society (Wood & Eagly, 2012).

6.3. Managerial Insights

For firms looking to create stronger customer experiences in a complex industry, insights on how and why consumers educate themselves is vital. Our study demonstrates the importance of the consumer education journey for millennials, both male and female. Our findings indicate the significance of the brand familiarity and being top of mind for first-time buyers and consumers with low prior knowledge. Retailers should ensure effective marketing, reaching and appealing to a wide variety of consumers, in addition retailers should ensure pleasant customer service takes place in both online and offline contexts. These recommendations could help generate brand awareness, positive brand associations and effective WOM. Moreover, our study demonstrates how consumers with low prior knowledge rely on brand elements such as the packaging and price of products when educating themselves. Therefore, to help consumers and simplify their decision-making, marketers should focus on using packaging to alleviate the risks consumers perceive with a product. Especially when marketing to females, packaging should highlight female fitness goals that move away from the masculine mass-building imagery and focus on goals more commonly in line with female consumers. Furthermore, since our findings suggest consumers make quality inferences of products based on price marketers should, therefore, consider pricing strategies when positioning products targeted towards consumers with low prior knowledge, to avoid consumers dismissing products as being of lower quality because of its price.

Our findings further indicate that sports supplement retailer websites are not well integrated with social/external touch points and might be the reason why their brand communication is considered by many as biased. Therefore, we recommend that retailers try to integrate various types of social touch points on their platforms to not lose potential consumers that go on more social/external journeys. Retailers should look to educate consumers about the health implications of a product through easy to understand and transparent product nutritional information, such as the potential side effects of particular ingredients. This can be achieved through integrating touch points such as video testimonials of influencers, expert blog posts

and customer reviews. Furthermore, retailers should seek to encourage customers to connect and engage with one another on their platforms to help create an online community around the brand, stimulate sales and facilitate a market conversation.

6.4. Contributions

The contributions of our thesis are twofold. The first contribution is theoretical. Our study adds to the emerging stream of research conducted on customer journeys in recent years and offers a unique focus on the education process within such customer journeys. Numerous studies have investigated ways of segmenting customers based on their customer journeys (Konus, Verhoef & Neslin, 2008; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014; Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich & Rudolph, 2019). However, these studies have mainly focused on segmentation based on channel-choice or demographic characteristics. Our study, on the other hand, extends customers segmentation by focusing on the specific types of touch points consumers interacted with, from a qualitative perspective. We contribute to this field of research by identifying three types of consumer education journeys. Additionally, our study contributes insights on differences between females and males motivations behind their education process based on the different perceptions of risk towards a sports supplement product.

The second contribution is managerial. In a complex industry, the process in which consumers educate themselves is vital for how they experience the overall customer journey. Our study offers insights on how managers can improve the customer experience for consumers with low prior knowledge by understanding how and why they educate themselves during their customer journey. Our findings highlight that managers should consider brand familiarity and the impact of their packaging and price on the consumer. Furthermore, they should seek to integrate more social touch points onto their online platforms to be perceived as more transparent and trustworthy. In addition, our study offers insights on why females and males educate themselves and what risks they commonly perceive when purchasing protein powder. This provides managers with relevant information to adjust offerings to alleviate perceived risks and uncertainty towards their products, for both males and females.

6.5. Study Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our thesis has several limitations. First, due to time and methodological constraints, our study is limited to exploring how consumers educate themselves in the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey. While one can argue that a significant part of consumers' education process occurs before a purchase, the post-purchase stage also offers interesting education possibilities for the consumers as they can use products and evaluate their purchase and

consumption experience. Therefore it could be interesting for future research to expand upon our study and explore specifically how consumers educate themselves post-purchase.

Furthermore, our findings are limited to the sports nutrition industry, specifically protein powder. The choice of the industry was based on its complexity as it is convoluted with false advertising, scientific nutritional jargon and many product categories (de Vries et al., 2019; Sharp, Moorman & Claussen, 2014). Future research is encouraged to validate and explore whether similar findings can be found when applying such research in other industries with various complexity. Another limitation of our thesis is that we gave the respondents a fictitious purchase scenario to conduct for our study. We considered the option of finding individuals that were about to make their first purchase of protein powder and came to the conclusion that a fictitious purchase scenario would be the best solution considering resource constraints. However, we set demanding criteria in order to ensure that our respondents were likely future consumers of protein powder and took steps to ensure the purchase scenario was as realistic as possible.

To conclude, this study has increased the understanding of how and why consumers educate themselves by exploring the consumer education journey from a consumer perspective. We found that there are three types of education journeys that consumers take and that there are interesting differences between the reason why males and females educate themselves based on the risks they perceive with the purchase of protein powder. We believe research on customer journeys is exciting and that there yet much more to explore within the field. We are looking forward to seeing how practitioners within sports supplements can adapt their offerings to first-time buyers and facilitate their consumer education in the future.

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Appendix

1. Consumer Education Journey Maps

Respondent 1, Female

Google search "what is the best protein powder for building muscle" →	Reads blog post about protein powders on Verywellfit.com website →	Goes to Amazon through blog link →	Google search "Optimum Nutrition"
Start			↓
Reads Google reviews on dolphinfitness.co.uk ←	Goes to dolphinfitness.co.uk website ←	Compares prices ←	Looks at Google shopping
↓			
Goes to Bodybuildingwarehouse website →	Reads Google reviews on Bodybuildingwarehouse →	Checkout on Bodybuildingwarehouse website	
		Finish	

Respondent 2, Female

Instagram search "sarahs_day" - Reads comments on influencers page of a promoted product →	Goes to Tropeaka website (recommend by Instagram influencer) →	Product assortment page on Tropeaka website →	Product page on Tropeaka website - Reads product & nutritional information
Start			↓
Google search for Womensbest after seeing it as promoted product on Instagram ←	Goes to Instagram and looks at krissycela influencer page ←	Product page on Tropeaka website - Reads product & nutritional information ←	Goes back to product assortment page on Tropeaka website
↓			
Product page on Womensbest website - Reads product & nutritional information →	Compares product information between Womensbest and Tropeaka →	Adds Lean protein to basket on Tropeaka website →	Checkout at Tropeaka website
			Finish

Respondent 3, Male

```
Google search          Goes to              Looks at protein        Google search
"protein powder"  -->  Gymgrossisten  -->   powder product     -->  "whey protein"
                       website              assortment on
     Start                                  Gymgrossisten
                                            website
                                                                         |
                                                                         v
Goes to                Google search        Adds Whey-80 to         Whey-80 Product Page
proteinbolaget   <--   "protein powder" <-- basket on          <--  on Gymgrossisten
website                                     Gymgrossisten            Website - Reads
                                            website                  product & nutritional
   |                                                                 information
   v
GAAM Nutrition
Whey Product Page on   Goes to MMsports     Compares price          Google search
Proteinbolaget Website --> Website     -->  between            -->  "casein protein"
- Reads product &                           Gymgrossisten,
nutritional information                     Proteinbolaget and
                                            MMsports
                                                                         |
                                                                         v
Google search          Adds GAAM Nutrition  GAAM Nutrition          Reads article on
"Proteinbolaget"  <--  Whey to basket on <-- Whey product page <--  casein protein on
                       Proteinbolaget website on Proteinbolaget       Svensktkosttillskott
   |                                        website                  website
   v
Checks                 Checkout on
Proteinbolaget   -->   Proteinbolaget
reviews on Google      website

                          Finish
```

Respondent 4, Male

```
Google search "best     Reads reviews on      Reads blog post on      Open a tab to
budget protein     -->  protein powder on --> Men's Health Blog  -->  Myprotein website
powder"                 Expertreviews.co.uk   website
    Start               website
                                                                         |
                                                                         v
Compares price,         Product Assortment    Open a tab to           Open a tab to
product description <-- Page – Customer   <-- Bulkpowders website <--  Theproteinworks
and ratings             ratings highest                               website
   |                    reviews and
   v                    comments
Checkout at
Bulkpowders website

    Finish
```

Respondent 5, Female

```
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│ Instagram search│ ───▶ │ Searches        │ ───▶ │ Remembers EWOM  │ ───▶ │ Google search   │
│ "protein powder"│      │ Myprotein       │      │ from Facebook   │      │ for MyProtien   │
│                 │      │ on Instagram    │      │                 │      │ website         │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
    *Start*                                                                          │
                                                                                     ▼
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│ Checkout on     │ ◀─── │ Adds the        │ ◀─── │ Reads and       │
│ Myprotein       │      │ smallest size   │      │ compares        │
│ website         │      │ of protein      │      │ products based  │
│                 │      │ powder          │      │ on ratings and  │
│                 │      │                 │      │ customer reviews│
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
    *Finish*
```

Respondent 6, Female

```
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│ Goes to         │ ───▶ │ Protein powders │ ───▶ │ Google search   │ ───▶ │ Apoteket Kvinna │
│ Gymgrossisten   │      │ page on         │      │ "Kosttillskott  │      │ supplement      │
│ website         │      │ Gymgrossisten   │      │ kvinna"         │      │ product page on │
│                 │      │ website         │      │                 │      │ Apoteket website│
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
    *Start*                                                                          │
                                                                                     ▼
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│ Brand           │ ◀─── │ Mittval Kvinna  │ ◀─── │ Uses filters to │ ◀─── │ Supplement      │
│ information      │      │ product page on │      │ find products   │      │ assortment page │
│ page on Apoteket│      │ Apoteket website│      │ on supplement   │      │ on Apoteket     │
│ website         │      │ - Reads product │      │ assortment page │      │ website         │
│                 │      │ & nutritional   │      │ on Apoteket     │      │                 │
│                 │      │ information     │      │ website         │      │                 │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
        │
        ▼
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│ Mittval Kvinna  │ ───▶ │ Adds Mittval    │ ───▶ │ Checkout on     │
│ product page on │      │ Kvinna          │      │ Apoteket website│
│ Apoteket website│      │ supplement to   │      │                 │
│                 │      │ basket          │      │                 │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
                                                      *Finish*
```

Respondent 7, Female

```
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│ Google search   │ ───▶ │ Goes to Holland │ ───▶ │ Filters products│ ───▶ │ Filters products│
│ "protein powder"│      │ and Barrett     │      │ based on        │      │ based on price  │
│                 │      │ website         │      │ popularity rank │      │ from low to high│
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
    *Start*                                                                          │
                                                                                     ▼
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│ Checkout on     │ ◀─── │ Compares product│
│ Holland and     │      │ ratings on      │
│ Barrett website │      │ Holland and     │
│                 │      │ Barrett website │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
    *Finish*
```

Respondent 8, Female

```
┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Google search "What │ ──▶ │ Instagram search    │ ──▶ │ Google search "What │ ──▶ │ Reads blog post on  │
│ is protein powder"  │     │ "#proteinpowder"    │     │ type of protein     │     │ Healthline website  │
│                     │     │                     │     │ powder do I need"   │     │                     │
└─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘
   Start                                                                                       │
                                                                                               ▼
┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Goes to             │ ◀── │ Goes to Youtube to  │ ◀── │ Notes down          │ ◀── │ Reads about         │
│ MyProtein website   │     │ look for protein    │     │ "Whey Protein       │     │ different types of  │
│                     │     │ powder reviews      │     │ Powder"             │     │ protein powder      │
└─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘
   │
   ▼
┌─────────────────────┐
│ Checkout on         │
│ MyProtein website   │
└─────────────────────┘
   Finish
```

Respondent 9, Female

```
┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Google search       │ ──▶ │ Reads blog post on  │ ──▶ │ Calculates          │ ──▶ │ Reads blog post &   │
│ "protein powder     │     │ Sats website        │     │ recommended daily   │     │ product review on   │
│ women"              │     │                     │     │ intake for protein  │     │ Fitnessfia website  │
│                     │     │                     │     │ powder              │     │                     │
└─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘
   Start                                                                                       │
                                                                                               ▼
┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Reads about         │ ◀── │ Google search       │ ◀── │ Reads product       │ ◀── │ Google search       │
│ different product   │     │ "protein powder     │     │ review on           │     │ "protein powder     │
│ types on            │     │ without carbs"      │     │ bäst-i-test website │     │ test"               │
│ Gymgrossisten       │     │                     │     │                     │     │                     │
│ website             │     │                     │     │                     │     │                     │
└─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘
   │
   ▼
┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Whey-100 product    │ ──▶ │ Whey-100 product    │ ──▶ │ Whey-100 product    │ ──▶ │ Google search       │
│ page on Gymgrossisten│    │ page on             │     │ page on Gymgrossisten│    │ "Whey 100"          │
│ website - Reads     │     │ Gymgrossisten       │     │ website - Reads     │     │                     │
│ product & nutritional│    │ website - Reads     │     │ product & nutritional│    │                     │
│ information         │     │ customer reviews    │     │ information         │     │                     │
└─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘
                                                                                               │
                                                                                               ▼
┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────────┐
│ Adds Whey-100       │ ◀── │ Whey-100 product    │ ◀── │ Whey 100% product   │ ◀── │ Whey 100% product   │
│ to basket on        │     │ page on             │     │ page on MMsport     │     │ page on MMsport     │
│ Gymgrossisten       │     │ Gymgrossisten       │     │ website - Reads     │     │ website - Reads     │
│ website             │     │ website             │     │ customer reviews    │     │ product & nutritional│
│                     │     │                     │     │                     │     │ information         │
└─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘     └─────────────────────┘
   │
   ▼
┌─────────────────────┐
│ Checkout on         │
│ Gymgrossisten       │
│ website             │
└─────────────────────┘
   Finish
```

Respondent 10, Female

```
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│ Google Search   │     │ Runnersworld    │     │ Runtothefinish  │     │                 │
│ "Protein powder │ ──▶ │ website - Reads │ ──▶ │ website -       │ ──▶ │ Protein.se      │
│ for running"    │     │ about different │     │ Information     │     │ Website         │
│                 │     │ types of        │     │ about protein   │     │                 │
│                 │     │ protein powder  │     │ powder          │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
  Start                                                                           │
                                                                                  ▼
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │     │ Google search   │     │ Views Google    │     │                 │
│ Life Website    │ ◀── │ "Healthshop     │ ◀── │ Shopping        │ ◀── │ Myvega website  │
│                 │     │ buy"            │     │ product         │     │                 │
│                 │     │                 │     │ alternatives    │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
  │
  ▼
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │     │ Rice protein    │     │ Hemp protein by │     │                 │
│ Search for      │     │ product page on │     │ Renée Voltaire  │     │ Adds Hemp       │
│ protein on      │ ──▶ │ Life website    │ ──▶ │ product page on │ ──▶ │ protein by      │
│ Life website    │     │ - Reads product │     │ Life website -  │     │ Renée Voltaire  │
│                 │     │ & nutritional   │     │ Reads product & │     │ to basket       │
│                 │     │ information     │     │ nutritional     │     │                 │
│                 │     │                 │     │ information     │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
                                                                                  │
                                                                                  ▼
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│ Checkout on     │     │ Adds Pea        │     │ Product page    │
│ Life website    │ ◀── │ protein to      │ ◀── │ Pea protein -   │
│                 │     │ basket as well  │     │ Reads product   │
│                 │     │                 │     │ & nutritional   │
│                 │     │                 │     │ information     │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
  Finish
```

Respondent 11, Male

```
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│ Google search   │     │                 │     │ Google search   │     │                 │
│ "protein powder │ ──▶ │ Product reviews │ ──▶ │ "maxi muscle    │ ──▶ │ Goes to Holland │
│ best value"     │     │ on              │     │ ProMax lean"    │     │ and Barrett     │
│                 │     │ Expertreviews.  │     │ after blog      │     │ website         │
│                 │     │ co.uk           │     │ recommendation  │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
  Start                                                                           │
                                                                                  ▼
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│ Frustrated over │     │ Goes to Amazon  │     │ Reads article/  │     │                 │
│ amount of       │     │ best sellers    │     │ blog post about │     │ Reads customer  │
│ alternatives -  │ ◀── │ website         │ ◀── │ "best protein   │ ◀── │ reviews on      │
│ Ends customer   │     │ "protein        │     │ powders" on     │     │ Holland and     │
│ journey         │     │ supplements"    │     │ The Telegraph   │     │ Barrett website │
│                 │     │                 │     │ website         │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
  Finish
```

Respondent 12, Male

```
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│ Google search   │     │ Goes to         │     │ Google Search   │     │ Reads blog post │
│ "protein        │ ──▶ │ Gymgrossisten   │ ──▶ │ "what protein   │ ──▶ │ on Sats website │
│ powder"         │     │ website         │     │ powder is best  │     │                 │
│                 │     │                 │     │ for building    │     │                 │
│                 │     │                 │     │ muscle"         │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
  Start                                                                           │
                                                                                  ▼
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │     │ Whey-100        │     │                 │     │ Google Search   │
│ Google search   │ ◀── │ product page on │ ◀── │ Reads blog post │ ◀── │ "protein powder │
│ "Whey-100"      │     │ Gymgrossisten   │     │ on Gymgrossisten│     │ with high       │
│                 │     │ website         │     │ website         │     │ amount of       │
│                 │     │                 │     │                 │     │ protein"        │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
  │
  ▼
┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐     ┌─────────────────┐
│ Whey-100        │     │ Whey-100        │     │ Adds Whey-100   │     │                 │
│ Product Page on │     │ Product Page on │     │ to basket on    │     │ Checkout on     │
│ Bodystore       │ ──▶ │ Bodystore       │ ──▶ │ Bodystore       │ ──▶ │ Bodystore       │
│ Website - Reads │     │ Website -       │     │ Website         │     │ website         │
│ customer        │     │ Chooses flavor  │     │                 │     │                 │
│ reviews         │     │                 │     │                 │     │                 │
└─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘     └─────────────────┘
                                                                          Finish
```
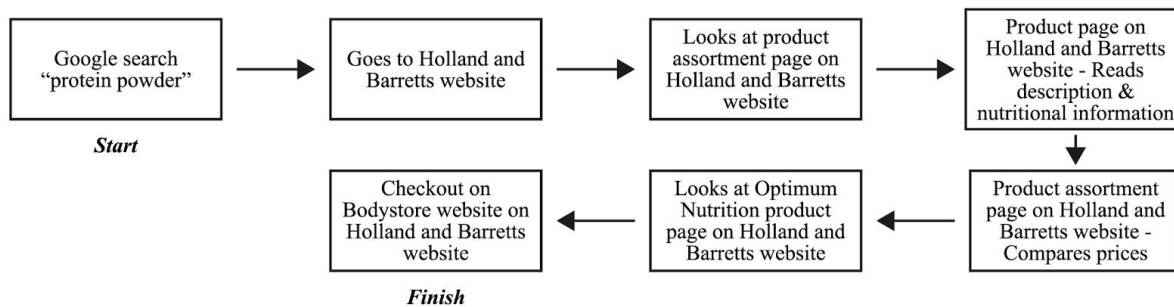
Respondent 13, Male

2. Purchase Scenarios Given to the respondents

A pre-task was given to the respondents in order to familiarise them with the method of screen and voice-recordings.

The main-task was the purchase scenario, which was the empirical data used in the analysis.

Pre-task

First, set-up and familiarise yourself with the screen and voice-recording apparatus on your device. Second, search online for the cheapest airline ticket to Spain, and practice thinking aloud. If you have any questions, you are welcome to ask us.

Main-task

In your own time and in a place you feel comfortable, please set up a screen and voice-recording on your device in the same way as during the pre-task and be ready to start after reading the scenario below.

Imagine that you are not getting enough protein in your diet to support your workout recovery. You have been suggested by a friend at the gym, to buy a 'protein powder' to see improvements. You have free time and are ready to search and purchase protein powder. GO!

3. Interview Guide

The interview was based on some general questions as well as specific questions concerning the respondents' customer journeys in regards to the purchase scenario.

General Questions

What were the most influential aspects of your shopping journey?

Why were these aspects the most influential?

What was the most critical source of information that helped you make an informed decision?

What makes a source reliable for you?

Why do you educate yourself when buying a sports supplement such as protein powder?

Do you believe there is a difference in how reliable information is when it is communicated through brands, influencers or reviews?

Do you have any additional comments about your purchase decision that you would like to add?

Specific Questions

Specific questions regarding each respondents individual purchase scenarios were also asked. These questions could, for instance, ask the respondent to elaborate on something he or she said or did during the purchase scenario.