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Consumer's choice, or is it?

*An explorative study on the constituent factors within the decision-making process towards
grocery store assortments*

Louise Bergström

Agnes Lekenhed

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Jonas Bååth

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Signed by the authors:



Louise Bergström



Agnes Lekenhed

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Swedish summary

Politisk konsumtion är en växande konsumentrörelse där individer konsumerar inte enbart för att maximera egennyttan, utan även för att skapa godartad samhälllig förändring, lokalt som globalt. Den teoretiska debatten kring detta fenomen vilar på grunder såsom neoklassisk marknadsekonomi och idén om den suveräna konsumenten. Koncept som har problematiserats och ifrågasatts i relation till denna diskurs. Vår studie har därför som mål att dissekera huruvida den svenska livsmedelsindustrin är uppbyggd på ett sätt som främjar politisk konsumtion eller ej, genom att undersöka om konsumentens beslut åhörs i försörjningskedjor genom sortimentsanpassning. För att undersöka detta intervjuas beslutsfattare för butikssortiment från samtliga ledande livsmedelskedjor i Sverige. För att uppnå syftet besvaras frågeställningen: hur bestämmer livsmedelsbutiker det sortiment de erbjuder? I det empiriska materialet identifierades fem primära värderingar, med *valuation theory* som bedömningsteori, utifrån vilka beslutsfattare vägledes i beslutsprocessen. Värderingarna var konsumenter, konkurrenter, leverantörer, trender och strategi. Dessa värderingar analyserades därefter i relation till *push* kontra *pull system*, för att utröna om värderingen medförde att försörjningskedjan styrdes av producenten eller konsumenten. Slutligen upptäcktes även att kedjornas affärsmodell avgjorde i vilken grad beslutsfattare kunde ta respektive värdering i åtanke under beslutsprocessen (*objective condition*). Denna studie bidrar med en modell som illustrerar vilken marknadsinformation beslutsfattare hanterar i sortimentsutformning. Diskussionen leder fram till ett konkluderande av förutsättningarna för politisk konsumtion. Vilka visar sig bero på vilka värderingar som premieras, samt hur kedjans affärsmodell är konstruerad.

Keywords: Food Retail Market, Food Chains, Assortment Design, Sovereign Consumer, Neoclassical Economy, Political Consumerism, Citizen-Consumer, Ethical Consumer

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1. Introduction

This section will clarify what we are asking in this study. Starting wide with a background of the problem, declaring what knowledge is missing, and concluding with a demarcation of where we will look to fill this knowledge gap, as well as the question that will guide us.

1.1 Problem background

Climate change is occurring at a rate to this date unprecedented over decades to millennia (NASA, n.d.). Glaciers are shrinking, sea levels rising, plant and animal ranges are shifting and trees are flowering prematurely (Jackson, n.d.). Actions on multiple levels are urged to be taken. One way to reduce one's personal climate impact has proved to be dietary. Amongst other researchers Swinburn (2019, p. 1) argues that the food systems of today are rapidly and irreversibly destroying our natural environments, and that they represent “the single most powerful lever we have for achieving ecological health.” Stehfest et al. (2009) argue that 18% of global greenhouse gas emissions, and 80% of anthropogenic land use, can be traced back to livestock production. Food production is something Hedenus et al. (2015) reinforces as one of the primary sources of environmental effects when it comes to food systems. Hedenus et al. also imply that it's becoming all the more reasonable to investigate the possibilities of reducing environmental effects of food through a consumer perspective. That a growing part of the food we consume today is imported and increasingly transported, making the effects of our consumption no longer solely local, but global. Which makes it harder to control environmental impact through nationally regulated production. The authors conclude that dietary changes necessary will have to be reinforced through either dramatic price regulations, through taxation, or educated consumer choice. Swinburn (2019) also calls upon increased power of civil society, through holding actors accountable and demanding policy action, as the most promising means to improve the food system. In aspects of not only ecological health, but also social equity and economic prosperity.

This leads us to an interesting phenomena; the fourth wave of consumer activism¹. A phenomena that has also been referred to as *alternative consumerism*, *ethical consumerism* or *political consumerism* (MacRae et al., 2012). In this study we will consistently use the term political consumerism when referring to the

¹ The first wave of consumer movement being the self-help co-operative movement; people coming together to help each other without the distinction of consumer versus producer (MacRae et al., 2012). The second wave was the ‘value for money’ movement, which concerned championing consumer interests amongst threats of increasing concentration and monopoly capital. The third wave also contested the power of large corporations, in this case demanding the disclosing of misinformation regarding safety and quality in consumer goods, as well as relevant state protection (MacRae et al., 2012).

fourth wave. Political consumerism went mainstream by the early 21st century, emerging already in the 1970s (Gabriel & Lang, 2005, as cited in MacRae et al., 2012). Consumers with these buying patterns can also be named *consumer-citizens*, combining their private role as a consumer with their public role as a citizen. MacRae et al. (2012, p. 2154) follow Johnston's (2007) distinctions as they explain consumerism as "maximization of individual self-interest through commodity choice" and citizenship as "the collective good," emphasizing the "responsibility to ensure the survival and wellbeing of others – human and non-human." MacRae et al. (2012, p. 2153) clarify that the purchases of these consumers are not motivated solely by individual maximization, but by "public concerns related to their identity as citizens."

There are two ways to act as a fourth wave political consumer. *Boycotting*, refraining from buying certain products or brand names, or *buycotting*, choosing particular goods or brand names over others based on claims made about the product (MacRae et al., 2012) – spending to show support. The source of influence lies in the idea that political consumerism leads to consumers actively engaging with upstream processes of the supply chain, involving themselves in decisions previously limited to the hands of global market actors (Spaargaren & Oosterveer, 2010). The actual effectiveness of this practise is a highly debated one. MacRae et al. (2012, p. 2154) argue that "arguments regarding the effectiveness and viability of political consumerism are generally based on the concept of consumer sovereignty." The authors refer to Dickinson and Carsky (2005, p. 29) when defining consumer sovereignty as "the power of consumers to determine, from among the offerings of producers of goods and services, what goods and services are and will be offered (produced) and/or created in the economic sphere of society." This concept is also known as 'voting with your dollar' (MacRae et al., 2012). Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) argue that the ethically conscious consumer could potentially bring forth an ethically improved capitalism, through 'voting' at the checkout. That the birth of the political consumer phenomena brings with it a "rearrangement of responsibilities between the state and private markets in an evermore liberalistic world economy" (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007, p. 481). This idea is built upon certain ideological tenets, in which customer sovereignty is an ideal. A concept not all researchers on the subject agree with. As the ideal of the sovereign consumer is a core concept in neoclassical economy (Holm, 2003), the political consumption discourse brings with it an inevitable discussion around "the ideal of freedom, choice and the sovereign consumer given circulation by neoliberal discourse and policies" (Trentmann, 2007, p. 148-149).

Bååth (2018) is one researcher on the subject contesting the idea of consumer sovereignty, arguing that consumer power in parts is not supported in Swedish meat industries. Bååth explains that the Swedish meat market experiences production in a state of abundance, and that abundance should not be a problem in classical economics. He refers to Smith (2007) in claiming that abundance, according to this discipline,

should be “kept at bay by the invisible, but frugal hand, of the market. ... [Ensuring] that nobody is able to get paid for producing abundance, because there are no buyers for it” (Bååth, 2018, p. 19). Contending the foundations of neoclassical economy as well, as neoclassical economy is a progress from classical economic theory². Bååth refers to Galbraith (1998, p. 18–28) when arguing that classical economic theories are no longer applicable in the post-scarcity society, where productivity far exceeds what could be fathomed at the time the theories were formulated. It is declared that industrialization decouples productivity from labour demand, reduces costs and decreases the role of consumption as the sole object of all economic activity.

1.2 Problematization

As the previous chapter reveals; it is an unresolved and highly debated matter whether the market is, or is not, structured in a way that supports political consumerism. This is debated by Micheletti, one of the main researchers on the subject. Discussing the marketplace as an arena for local to global politics, the author declares what she finds necessary to bring this conversation forward. Stating that “new scholarship should answer the question if there really is political virtue in shopping” through “investigating political consumerism’s effectiveness as a problem solving venture both in terms of its actual outcome ‘on the ground’ so to speak but also by developing theory and methodology for studying its effectiveness” (Micheletti, 2017, p. 33). In accordance with this, MacRae et al. (2012) reinforces that political consumerism is a contentious notion whose effectiveness is backed up by sparse empirical data. Indicating that there is a gap surrounding the knowledge of this phenomena and its legitimacy as a political action. This leads us to question if these consumption behaviours, with an elongated intention to affect supply chains, translate well practically. How does the market respond to boycott and buycott practises? In order to investigate the practicalities and effects of political consumption we first need to establish where to look.

Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) argue that political consumption, as a way to exercise ethical power in purchasing situations, may be illusory due to the impending mechanisms of consumption practises; “[consumers] do not have the autonomy to make unbiased choices and ethically relevant alternatives to choose from ... the necessary preconditions for most consumers to make ethically guided choices are simply not fulfilled, due to the way production, manufacturing, distribution, and marketing is organized in our societies.” Insinuating that possibilities of political consumption are restrained by the selection. The

² Neoclassicism carries with it classical traditions such as the demand driven equilibrium of markets (Hudea, 2015), as well as supporting allocation of *scarce* resources (De Vroey, 1975).

boundaries are therefore determined by middle men; facilitating the interaction between sellers (producers) and buyers (consumers). This is an important realization. Partly because consumers' notion of what quality food is does not necessarily align with producers/retailers' notion of quality food (Holm, 2003). According to Holm (2003) consumers often felt unable to find and buy products of the quality they wanted. The author claims that it is faulty to, through the argument of 'free choice', give consumers responsibility for the type of products found on the market. As there is no guarantee consumers will find what they actually want, only what they are prepared to buy. Middle men can thus act as obstacles, jeopardizing the full potential and possibilities of liberal consumer action, problematizing the notion of consumer power, as they choose what consumers can choose from. The retailers represent the consumer from the producer's point of view, and 'translates' consumer behavior³ through rearranging assortment. Therefore they represent suitable informants for further investigation in the matter of questioning the actual possibilities of political consumption.

1.3 Demarcation

Considering the traditional food system is built upon retailers acting as middlemen between producers and end consumers, and political consumption being discussed vigorously with regards to food trade specifically, this is a suitable area to investigate. The demarcation of this study will be the Swedish food industry, focusing on retail in major grocery stores. This limited focus will enable a comprehensive understanding of an entire market, as all major actors can be reached. The study will not include the entire supply chain, but focus on the interaction between product suppliers, retailers and end customers.

1.4 Purpose and aim

The aim of this work is to investigate whether the Swedish food retail industry is organized in a manner that enables political consumerism. Examining whether or not consumer practises are being received and dealt with in a fashion that aligns with the philosophic foundation upon which the idea of political consumers relies. This is interesting because, as Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) present, the view on consumer power differs between consumers, as well as, consequently, their perception of their *responsibilities*. A logical hypothesis is that there may be a link between believing your voice matters and being incentivized to utilise that voice through deliberate consumption. Providing empirical evidence that enlighten the actualities of how and where consumer voices are heard, can be powerful to prove – and

³ In this study we refer to consumer behavior as the study of how individuals select products and services.

thus perhaps encourage – this type of activism, *or* vital to pop the bubble on political consumerism being more than, as Jacobsen and Dulsrud expressed it, mere market differentiation and individual ego-trips.

To investigate the prerequisites for political consumption in the market structure, we will dive deeper into how Sweden's major food chains determine assortment selection, ergo what they offer consumers.

Establishing what role consumers play in this process, to grasp the extent of consumer impact, as well as exploring how that impact takes place. Specifically if that impact takes place through purchasing behavior. To understand to which extent, and how, consumers influence this decision-making process, our study will answer the following question: *how do food retailers determine the assortment they offer?*

2. Existing research

This chapter presents existing research pertinent to our study. Starting with an immersion into the debate of economic theories, followed by a compilation on how assortment design can proceed.

2.1 The conflict of neoclassical economy

The idea that the political consumer could catalyze an ethically improved capitalism, through ‘voting’ is, as mentioned, reliant upon the theory of consumer sovereignty and neoclassical economy as market foundation. The ideals of which are brought to discussion by the discourse of political consumption. This chapter will delve into that discussion further, starting with the issue of deficient information, followed by alternative economic theories.

2.1.1 Imperfect information

Busch (2007) declares that neoclassical economy – a foundation for political consumption in the frame of voting at the check out (Jacobsen & Dulsrud, 2007) – is built on the traditional assumption that information is perfect. The assumption of perfect information as a cornerstone in neoclassical economics is supported by Knight (1921, as cited in Aspers, 2009). Busch argues that limitations around this have become increasingly apparent over time; information is virtually never freely available. The transparency problem generally stems from sellers having more knowledge of the product than buyers, this asymmetric allocation of knowledge challenges the assumption of perfect information.

Despite being an argument against the economical theories upon which political consumerism depends, deficient transparency in the marketplace jeopardizes the purpose of the practise whichever way the market is defined. Reliable transparency is key for consumers to identify products in line with their political values and concerns (MacRae et al., 2012). If the market structure *does* support consumers making deliberately aimed choices – to translate values into actions of consumption – transparency becomes central to the discussion, since required for the practise to be successful. Transparency towards buyers is crucial for consumers to be able to make a choice that has the impact they perceive it to have. Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007) explain that many industries and corporations have responded to demands of ethicality by establishing private quality standards, regulatory schemes, and labeling programs to communicate ‘more or less justified’ claims of ethical virtues. The authors emphasize the lack of warranty surrounding corporate social responsibility, leading to confused rather than empowered consumers. Declaring that the credibility of ethical products more so heavily depends on consumer trust. MacRae et

al. (2012) emphasizes boycottings dependency on the labeling schemes established by regulating bodies. Efforts like these, aimed towards perfecting information, bode well for the prospects of political consumption. As Jacobsen and Dulsrud point out, strong actors within corporate sectors, governments and non-governmental organizations, engaging in establishing credibility for businesses operating in these domains, actively *support* the framing of the consumer role regarding political consumption.

2.1.2 The supply chain model

Market models are interconnected with and define the characteristics of today's consumer herself, as she is limited by the arrangement of the market. Neoclassical economy (NE) is a theory where purchasing power determines the qualities of the market composition, and the foundation upon which the idea of consumer sovereignty depends. Busch (2007), and other critics such as Bååth (2018) and Aspers (2009), although argue that this approach continuously fails to portray the economy as it actually exists. Compromised with monopolies, oligopolies, complex systems of taxation and subsidies, most firms do not conform to the NE model. Busch explains NE as a fundamentally normative model of what an economy *should* look like, but where there are better and worse performances in the economic sphere. Busch explains that the shift in retailer strategies away from NE, is a result of adopting a new economical approach; supply chain management (SCM). Explaining that NE and SCM, as ways to perform economy, differ in several ways. Whereas in NE the “invisible hand of [the] market ensures that supply meets demand and markets clear” whilst in SCM the “visible hand of [the] firm manages both the surface of the playing field and behind-the-scenes action. Markets do not necessarily clear” (Busch, 2007, p. 443). The clearing of markets refers to when consumer demand equals the supply produced by firms (Policonomics, n.d.). Pricing acts as a regulating force in creating equilibrium ensuring no excess supply nor excess demand.

Besides disagreeing on whether or not market clearing is a realistic phenomena, the practises differ on the viewpoint of consumer demand. According to NE “demand emerges from consumer preferences; price [is] the result of intersection between supply and (effective) demand,” whilst according to SCM “demand [is] malleable through marketing; price [is a] result of product placement, style, advertising” (Busch, 2007, p. 443). The author explains that it is an empirical fact and accepted theoretical premise within SCM-models that demand can be shaped to a significant extent. Exemplifying this with category managers:

“‘Category managers’ in supermarkets continually engage in a kind of applied epistemology, endlessly rearranging the 40,000 items on the shelves of a typical US supermarket in an effort to boost sales. ...

Category managers must physically move the objects around the store in a manner that simultaneously (1) permits consumers to find the products, (2) increases sales and (3) minimizes competition with other food retailers” (Busch, 2007, p. 456).

The SCM theory addresses the problematic area of actors ‘butting in’ and distorting ‘genuine’ demand. Hollands et al. (2019, p. 1) investigated dimensions of choice through altered selection or assortment layout as a way to affect consumer behavior, concluding that “changing the number of available food options or altering the positioning of foods could contribute to meaningful changes in behaviour.” The evidence for this was only rated low, nevertheless it catalyses a meaningful discussion on activities that jeopardize consumers possibilities of unobstructed political consumption. Busch (2007) however wants to make clear that he does not suggest that customers are malleable beyond limits. Despite massive marketing investments, only 20-33% of around 10 000 product launches are successful every year in the marketplace (Harris, 2002, as cited in Busch, 2007).

Busch (2007) explains that the way the SCM model works is not as obvious as the NE-model; due to ‘backstage actions’ warping the playing field. Busch (2007, p. 453) claims that “[it is because] backstage activities are often difficult to document, highly heterogeneous, constantly shifting and not easily measured that they are simultaneously usually visible to the various affected supply chain actors even while invisible to the general public,” and that companies can ‘draw the neoclassical curtain’ over backstage activities if they do not appeal. Busch (2007, p. 453) finishes this discussion by ironizing that “the visible hand is invisible while the invisible hand is visible.” If it is not a neoclassical economy that drives company development and market dynamics, then what is? Busch explains that there are infinite parameters, from outside the supply chain, that can be the subject of strategic action in SCM models. Unlike in NE-models where the sole subject is equilibrium. Does this mean that the potency of monetary information (in the form of revenue), to act as decision-guidance, is compromised in today’s supply chains? What prerequisites trade actually provide for the consumer to utilize potential buying power is substandardly investigated. On the market there are consumers, but there are also sellers, and it is the sellers that create the prerequisites for the consumers. The prerequisites of which can be explored through what space is given for customers to partake in the design of the seller’s assortment.

2.2 Assortment design

Due to heightened product turnover and the ongoing pace of development, category assortment is increasingly complicated to manage (Chong et al., 2001). With exponential growth of assortment variations, possibilities of creating a good assortment selection are many. Chong et al. (2001) argues that

preference uncertainty amongst consumers might be the hardest task to manage in assortment decisions. Indicating the difficulty in adapting assortment after consumer preferences. To investigate consumer preference, Bauer et al. (2012) constructed the GAP (grocery assortment perception) scale. A measuring tool intended to help understand consumers' subjective perception on whether an assortment offered in a grocery store is good or bad. Applying the GAP scale onto customer satisfaction and loyalty towards a grocery store, the authors concluded that consumers base their opinion on assortment through very basic and limited information. Consumers assess four parameters in store assortments; price, quality, variety and presentation, and use these dimensions when determining the overall attractiveness of a grocery store. The authors argue that the GAP scale could be useful in delicate decision making processes and with advantage by category managers in the process towards assortment selection.

With regards to *variety* as a dimension in consumer perception of assortment, Beneke et al. (2013) studied the effect of item reduction and perceived customer satisfaction with regards to a smaller range. Declaring that reducing assortment range and decreasing product variation most often result from risk analyses for low selling products or wanting higher yield, the authors found that a smaller selection need *not* encompass a negative perception. Arguing that if retail managers invest more in only familiar products and favored articles, whilst creating a narrower selection guided by sales frequency – what consumers buy more or less of – they could maintain positive assortment perceptions.

Another dimension of assortment is discussed by Kovač and Palić (2016); the balance between A-brands and private label products. A-brands are products from known brands that are not developed by the own firm, while private label products are developed under the company's proprietary brand. Optimizing assortment management is here approached from the viewpoint of the *seller*. Specifically, a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) producer. FMCG often consists of fresh food, strengthening relevance to this study. Kovač and Palić state that determining assortment selection and making decisions in progressive consumer goods retail is in the hands of category managers. As FMCG retail is a complex field of business, demanding adjustability and top efficiency, the authors created the OPTAS model (table 1), a tool to help managers tackle these demands, through optimizing and improving profitability parameters for private label products. The model assists in adapting assortment offers to different locations as well as store formats, with the purpose of achieving performance objectives and increasing overall sales.

Table 1: The OPTAS model

Step 1	Definition of retail outlets for the application of the Model
Step 2	Classification of retail outlets
Step 3	Analysis of the current state of assortment
Step 4	Assignment of the optimal assortment for a retail outlet
Step 5	Defining assortment display standards
Step 6	Implementation of operational sales activities
Step 7	Evaluation and control of the overall retail outlet status in accordance with contract
Step 8	Evaluation of effects of optimization on sales
Step 9	Iterative re-evaluation of the overall model

Previous research on assortment design has stated customers as a big part of building an idea around what assortment to apply in a store, based on a perception of customer demand. Although customers do not *definitively* play the most vital part in structuring the assortment, actors also use firm profitability when making decisions about design.

3. Theoretical framework

Previous chapter presents research on how assortment design should be performed. However how assortment design in actuality is performed and to what extent the customer in reality affects the design, is yet uninvestigated. To investigate this, we need theories about how assessments are made in decision making processes within markets.

3.1 Valuation theory

A suitable theory to explore “the black box labeled ‘market mechanism’ by economists,” is according to Aspens (2009, p. 127) valuation theories. Clarifying that “valuation implies the possibility of comparison and competition, which are essential components of markets” (Aspens, 2009, s. 113). The market structure consists of two roles; a buyer and a seller. Aspens (2006, as cited in Aspens, 2009) explains the market as a social structure requiring at least three actors, where the buyer evaluates two actors' offers in relation to each other, resulting in a choice. This choice is a result of a valuation process. Valuation is the process where goods acquire their value, a concept which according to Dubuisson-Quellier (2013) has been at the core of recent developments in economic sociology. The author describes how valuation activities are developed by market actors from both the supply and demand side, coordinating economic exchange. Dubuisson-Quellier (2013, p. 698) explains that “these valuation processes are based on the existence of different principles of worth incorporated into specific market devices that producers and other market actors develop and that equip consumers to make their choices.” Thus valuation is a way to manage and process information to make decisions. A process Aspens (2009) argues differs, depending on the market type. There are two ideal types of markets – standard and status (although real markets are a somewhat skewed blend), within which valuations and therefore also knowledge differs. Aspens (2009) expresses the worth of actors knowing how to value their products in every market, and argues that this is an important distinction as operating in each of them demands different kinds of knowledge from the actor.

Valuation is according to Lamont (2012) a social and cultural process as establishing value requires an intersubjective agreement on a set of criteria upon which a product is compared, and because it entails a negotiation regarding who constitutes a legitimate judge. The quality of products in the *standard market* is based upon standards constructed and accepted by producers, consumers and potentially third parties. Once these standards are constructed, there is no further need for social interaction (Aspens, 2009). All knowledge required in this market is oriented to the standards, and all actors orient themselves primarily in relation to them and how well they perform according to the established scale of valuation. In the *status*

market there is no standard or independent measurement of scale for quality; the value rather depends on the actors. The product of a status market is co-produced by all actors and the buyers evaluate the offer (Aspers, 2009). The knowledge needed to operate in a status market is thus of a different kind, and can not be oriented directly to the products. Aspers (2009) exemplifies that one cannot say a silk suit is intrinsically more valuable than a wool suit, it depends on if it is fashionable, who has worn it and the historically determined values of the material. This information has to be interpreted to produce knowledge and understanding in terms of valuation. Aspers (2009, p. 124) argues that “it is difficult for both producers and consumers to know what is going on in this market” and thus harder for an actor to know what to do well to increase their value, as it is only *after* the actor presents their offer that they truly know the value of what they have done. One way to identify valuation is through categorization – organizing valuations into different categories (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013).

In conclusion, valuation relies on different devices used by market actors to accomplish calculations and make judgements (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2013), for the purpose of *determining offers* on the market. Valuations are discovered and ascertained as factors producing value to a market offer. If valuations are analyzed correctly in accordance with one of the two market types, they can help in determining the most suitable offer (Zuckerman, 2012). The economic sociology of valuation will provide a framework within which the assortment setting procedure can be analyzed in depth. In a manner that, with advantage, also highlights underlying assumptions.

3.2 Objective conditions

Adjacent to the social construct of valuation we consider it necessary to discuss objective conditions. Social construction is limited by objective conditions, which need to be identified to understand under what terms valuations are carried out (Zuckerman, 2012). The dynamic within valuations and objective conditions indicates statistical or contextual premises; the basis for which valuations can realistically be part of the decision making process and in what way. Zuckerman (2012, p. 1) explains that “people who live in one time and place are subject to different objective conditions from those who live in different times and places,” meaning conditions are developed from a subjective perception of the environment.

For social valuations to be interpreted on the basis of objective conditions, common grounds surrounding the definition of those conditions must be established. Entailing an ontological problem, as it can be jeopardized by subjective assumptions (Zuckerman, 2012). The author highlights the importance of ensuring a mutual interpretation of the objective condition, for it to act as the basis for coordinated

cooperative actions in a decision making process. However, similar objective conditions can support wide varieties of valuation patterns, creating versatile approaches for construction of objective constraints. As long as the information characterizing a company's condition is shared within the community – acknowledging common objective conditions – it can be used to understand what valuations are interpretable (Zuckerman, 2012).

3.3 Push and pull systems

To further understand the valuations and their implication on how assortment is set we shall enrich the analysis by applying push and pull system theory. Two concepts in supply chain management that indicate if production is regulated by the producer or the consumer. Russell and Taylor (2011) describe push systems as relying on a predetermined schedule and pull systems as relying on customer requests. Applying these theories will assist in – through operationalizing the research question – fulfilling the aim of the study. As political consumption is based on the idea that consumers regulate the supply chain and the markets within it. These concepts represent an interesting addition in the interpretation of different approaches in the assortment selection process, as they enable conclusions about market dynamics. Laying the groundwork for in what terms valuations are determined.

In a market where goods and services are produced, push systems represent the traditional system to operate from (Sörqvist, 2013). The predetermined schedule of push operations is commonly shaped by forecasts from centralized management. A production scheme that is pre-planned does not respond well to deviations (Sörqvist, 2013), as customer demand is not taken into account incorrect forecasts can lead to trouble in manoeuvring ulterior abundance, pushing unwanted products into the market. Furthermore, pull systems create an opportunity for a responsive supply chain where products are 'pulled' through the supply chain. Sörqvist (2013) explains that for the pull mechanism to work, companies have to have a system governed by customer needs, producing exactly what is demanded. These theories are especially interesting to incorporate in this study as Russell and Taylor (2011) express that the idea for the pull system actually *came* from the classic American supermarket.

“Americans do not keep large stocks of food at home. Instead, they make frequent visits to nearby supermarkets to purchase items as they need them. The supermarkets, in turn, carefully control their inventory by replenishing items on their shelves only as they are removed. Customers actually ‘pull through’ the system the items they need, and supermarkets do not order more items than can be sold” (Russell & Taylor, 2011, p. 726).

Thus the authors argue that super markets are reliant upon being organized as a pull system. The perfect ideal of a pull system is a so-called *lean supply chain* where nothing is produced in anticipation of need, but rather when requested by the succeeding department in the supply chain (Russell & Taylor, 2011). Systems like these respond effectively to changes in customer demand. Russel and Taylor (2011, p. 745) express that in order for a refined pull system to work, firms need to “share information and coordinate demand forecasts, production planning, and inventory replenishment with suppliers and supplier’s suppliers throughout the supply chain.” Indicating the importance of information sharing on multiple levels, to distinguish and plan the most suitable assortment selection.

As the aim of this study is to see whether or not the Swedish food retail market is arranged in a manner that supports political consumption, this can be one way to analyze assortment setting – and through that production – as responsive, or non-responsive to consumer demand. The goal will not be to determine if the supply chains in the food retail market system is of a push or pull nature, as it is often rarely that refined. Instead these terms will act as a basis and support for discussing valuations in the analysis. A theoretically grounded way to describe in what ways the supply chain, and the markets within it, follow the behaviors of the consumers, versus in what ways the consumers have to adapt to production.

4. Methodology

This section introduces methodology and research approach to conduct the empirical study. Including how data was collected, what sample was used, how and why. Followed by a discussion on how the material has been analyzed and interpreted for the sake of the study.

4.1 Qualitative research

To investigate political consumption in the Swedish food retail industry, the idea was to explore to what extent consumers exercise political consumption and in what way it is believed to influence the assortment selection in their local grocery store. We realized that political consumption wasn't practically supported and could therefore not be used as an argumentative starting point in our study. Further understanding that our intended sample would have had an angled and subjective perception on political consumption and how it is translated and reflected successfully onto the assortment selection in grocery stores. Instead, we decided to dig deeper into the assortment selection process and investigate how assortment is chosen and where consumer behavior is taken into consideration, if it even does.

Upon deciding to study the social phenomena of political consumption from the inside (where the decision process of assortment selection takes place) and not from the outside (where political consumption is believed to be exercised) we decided that a qualitative research method seemed fitting. Qualitative research is the perfect tool for explaining social phenomenons 'from the inside' (Flick, 2018). Internal information is more likely to generate deeper analyses and thus aid us in understanding and describing experiences from professional practices. This, we believe can be achieved by discussing happenings and daily activities, something Flick (2018) argues can bring valuable insights to an investigation.

4.1.1 Inductive approach

While quantitative research aims to *test* theories and hypotheses, the general goal for qualitative research is to *generate* theories (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since qualitative research aims to generate theories, it is usually conducted with an inductive approach. An inductive approach implies how the empirical material guides us in recognizing which theories are relevant for analyzing the material in question (Bryman, 2018). In our study, we have a pure inductive approach. All theories were detected and discovered after the empirical material had been interpreted, and targeted in a suitable and beneficial way for reaching our purpose. The selected theories were then used in order to assist the formulation of a novel model.

4.1.2 Critical reflections

Qualitative research enables subjective decisions about our collected material; giving us the power to determine what information is essential or insignificant for our study. Since researchers all have independent ways of viewing input data based on experiences and personal preferences, our results would most probably differ to others who conduct the very same study. Subjective assessments like these complicate replicability (Bryman and Bell, 2011), weakening thesis legitimacy (Bryman, 2018). Doubts regarding qualitative methodological approach normally originate from quantitative researchers, criticising the possibilities of collecting generalizable data (Flick, 2018). Arguing that quantitatively, generalizability proves itself through numbers in a statistical sense, whilst qualitative researchers rarely receive samples generalizable to greater representations. Although some of these doubts are saved by qualitative research's beneficial aspects – like increased opportunity for deeper insights – some qualitative researchers remain sceptical about achieving generalizability with their approach (Flick, 2018). Our study is naturally limited by generalizability due to our sample size consisting of only nine participants (see 4.3). However, being consistent with choosing study informants based on concrete criteria, has laid the best possible foundation for us to draw general conclusions from our empirical findings.

4.2 Interviews

The reason for interviews being the most widely used method in qualitative research is because of the flexibility it holds (Bryman, 2018). As the research question our study aims to answer is of exploratory nature – and intends to create understanding in an unexplored area – it demands a flexible approach. Resulting in the choice of interviews as our method in gathering empirical data. Knowing what area we need to gain a wider perspective of, but not what information we will find or what discoveries will be made, *semi-structured interviews* were considered optimal to enable our exploratory research question. The interviews were conducted during a period of 60-90 minutes each, considered to be the most appropriate time span for collecting material of value.

A semi-structured interview is usually based on an interview guide with relatively specific subjects and/or fundamental issues that the researchers want the interviewee to touch upon (Bryman, 2018). In accordance with this we conducted an interview guide (see 11.1) containing simple and unclosed questions. Our hope was to facilitate an adequate amount of guidance so as to receive answers relevant for our study – without being too governed by preconceived notions of what the conversation should entail. In a semi-structured interview, questions or themes do not need to be asked in their original order, or even have to originate from the interview guide (Bryman, 2018), they can simply arise in connection with what

the interviewee expresses. Having our interview guide secondary, and supplementary questions linked to interviewee statements primary, proved to be a beneficial strategy; contributing to discussions rich in content as well as in-depth discoveries resulting from follow-up questions. All interviews were held in Swedish, however to enable readers' unhindered understanding, the interview guide as well as all quotes, have been translated to English.

4.2.1 Material management and complications

We recorded and subsequently transcribed all interviews, laying the groundwork for the management of our material. Bryman (2018) discusses recording and transcription as instruments to ensure a complete information base, reducing the risks of important information getting lost due to human factors. Such as *not paying attention*, or *paying too much attention* to taking notes – missing out on chances to ask important follow-up questions (Bryman, 2018). Another argument for recording and transcribing is that a lot of the analysis takes place during the transcription. As Bryman states, transcription is a time consuming activity that simultaneously fosters future analyses.

The complications we encountered while conducting interviews were mostly related to technical difficulties. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, none of our interviews could be held in person, therefore we depended on digital tools of communication such as Zoom, Teams and phone calls. The connection was at times very poor, leaving both the recordings and later on the transcripts affected. During interview D (table 2) all recording devices malfunctioned, resulting in loss of the audio file. When analyzing this interview, we could only rely on notes taken during the interview, as well as notes recreated out of memory shortly after the interview. These notes were sent back to the interviewee so he could confirm that what we had summarized was in fact true. Besides possible complications, digital communication can negatively affect the trust between interviewer and interviewee, as it can be perceived as an abnormal situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). For us, using digital tools limited the opportunity to partake in the interviewees' workplace and the tools used by them. On the other hand it allowed us to gather empirical data from all over Sweden, without being limited by travel possibilities.

4.3 Sample

To ensure that the purpose of our qualitative study was achieved, we had to be analytical and selective whilst choosing study informants. According to Halkier (2010) sampling within qualitative research cannot be haphazard, since it usually includes a smaller number of participants than in quantitative research designs. The selection sample should therefore be well thought out through arguable parameters.

To investigate the actual possibilities of political consumption and how the consumer takes place in assortment selection decisions, we wanted to sample roles responsible in choosing what consumers can choose from. Resulting in a purposive sampling technique. A purposive sampling collection indicates how researchers select research subjects based upon the belief that they will bring quality rich information in favor of answering the research question (Flick, 2018). The roles of interest were mainly identified as category managers – a “procurement professional responsible for a certain category of goods at a retailer (or wholesaler). For example, a supermarket chain may have a category manager in charge of produce” (Argentus, 2015). But also other analysts responsible for assortment decisions, such as strategic buyers. Category manager responsibilities include choosing what goods from suppliers to sell on grocery store shelves, as well as developing strategies for specific categories of goods by foresighting and analyzing current and future trends valuable for demand planning (Argentus, 2015). The Swedish food trade has been dominated by six actors with different forms of structures and ownerships (Konkurrensverket, 2018). However, recently one of these actors was acquired by a major player in the market (Aftonbladet, 2019), resulting in five dominating actors left in the trade. In order to make overall assumptions about how the decision making process for assortment design takes place, it was of great value to receive insights from all five primary actors.

The sampling strategy for our research was stratified with criteria-driven requirements. Choosing interviewees with roles that fulfilled the criteria of having an impact on assortment selection in Swedish grocery stores, as well as on a daily basis working actively with analyzing these areas and questions. We also decided to interview store managers for the purpose of, in addition to higher level decision makers, gain a store level perspective. Sampling a specific professional role belonging to a subcategory indicates that a stratified sample is being performed (Bryman, 2018). Furthermore, when a study object needs to fulfill different criterias to be considered interesting for the study, Bryman (2018) states a criteria-driven selection has been conducted. A relevant sampling technique not only assists in finding a suitable sample; it contributes with validity for the research study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Purposefully questioning employees being part of assortment decision-making – regarding what influences the selection process – we believe provides credibility in regards to this study. Being transparent in regards to the interviewees actual experience on the subject, through acknowledging interviewees area of responsibility as well as years of experience (Table 2), establishes further sample credibility.

To find our sample, we initially contacted the five actors headquarters for guidance. Although encountering mixed responses, none led us towards an interviewee. Having a pre-understanding of the right sample, we had a sudden realization of how we could adjust our approach and utilize the business

portal LinkedIn, a media primarily focused on job positions, to find them. Through LinkedIn we could search for, find and contact our stratified sample directly. This strategy turned out to be both time efficient and successful in finding appropriate candidates with people being more prone to participate when contacted personally. When an interviewee had been successfully recruited, information sharing and communication upkeep was made possible via e-mail and telephone. See final interview participant information below (Table 2).

Table 2: Interview participant information

Interview	Gender	Area of responsibility	Experience in the area (years)	Interview time cap (min)
A	Male	Strategic Buyer	2	100
B	Male	Category Manager	5	65
C	Male	Senior Category Manager	32.5	75
D	Male	Senior Category Manager	19	85
E	Female	Category Team Manager	24.5	60
F	Male	Deputy Store Manager	14.5	45
G	Female	Purchasing and Assortment Manager	10.5	75
H	Female	Shopkeeper	12	45
I	Male	Category Manager	12	65

Total interview hours: **10 hours and 25 min**

4.4 Analysis and interpretation

Seeing that this study is of an explorative nature, the analysis is with advantage, not highly systematic, but instead aimed at following interesting aspects of the separate interviews, which Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) argue allows for deeper interpretations. In accordance with how Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) describes qualitative material to best be reduced, we let recurring content form themes as well as possible analytic headlines. We were, as recommended by the authors, attentive with a gaze as free as possible from preconceived notions. The themes we formulated were *the interviewee's tasks, business model, benchmarking, assortment structure/product development, trends, key performance indicators (KIPs), direct customer communication and suppliers*. Open coding was a critical approach due to the explorative nature of our study; to see rather than to seek. In this type of open data-driven coding, themes (codes) are not quantified, but rather a qualitative analysis is composed concerning their relation to each other, the

context and the consequences of their actions (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2014). Correlating to what Rennstam and Wästerfors describe as analytic induction; a systematic examination of similarities within and between cases, with the purpose of developing concepts, ideas or theories. This is highly descriptive of our analytic process.

The analysis of the empirical material was subsequently actively guided by the established themes; a selective coding following the former open coding (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). As Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) describes suitable, these themes underwent a second scrutiny, resulting in reformulations and/or bundling of compatible themes. The form of interview analysis we chose was analysis with focus on the meaning; which the authors describe as pertaining to coding of meaning, concentration of meaning and interpretation of meaning. What is actually said and what does it mean, rather than, for example, *how* it is said. We want to establish that, as Kvale and Brinkmann express, this approach is closely related to the traditional conception that knowledge is something that already exists, which can be collected and mapped out.

4.5 Ethical considerations

Our interviews generated questions about moral and ethical considerations. Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) argue that due to the asymmetrical power relationship occurring between interviewer and interviewee, ethical considerations should be brought to light from start to finish of the interview opportunity. Initially, interviewee's consent for participation in the study must be established by enlightening them about the purpose of the study, followed by an explanation of what their participation means for the fulfillment of that purpose (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). We created an information sheet (see 11.2) explaining the aim of the study, followed by a clarification of their voluntary participation. The information sheet also emphasized their anonymity and that the material would be de-identified for integrity and confidentiality reasons. Ensuring that interviewees could approve the conditions with an informed consent. At the beginning of each interview the interviewees were also asked for consent to record. The reason for us being consistent with ethical security is to, as Kvale and Brinkmann argue, ensure the interviewee's trust. In our case ethical considerations are also of importance to not jeopardize or interfere with the image of the chains, or disclose sensitive business information. Most importantly to not affect the interviewee's relationship with their organization.

5. Analysis

This section will present the analysis of the empirical material linked to the theoretical framework. The analysis will begin with defining the market in question, the objective condition, and thereafter distinguish the categories of valuations within it as an assessment theory from the viewpoint of the seller. The valuations will then be presented one by one, and analyzed continuously with regards to the push and pull theory.

The procedure towards setting and renewing assortment selection proved to be a procedure of high intrinsic complexity. Many interviewees repeated themselves in saying that we had taken on a challenging study. When asked what is important to have in mind when setting an assortment, one category manager responded that “you can probably go through an entire career without putting your finger on it” (B). Yet here we are attempting to do just that. To understand this process we must first understand this market, and to understand the market we shall begin by defining it. What is important to remember here is that this study is oriented on grocery stores, not individual producers. Meaning that the product in this market is not a single product, but an entire assortment. The produce market can arguably be driven by standard markets, there is for example a generally accepted standard for quality of eggs. As Aspens (2009) exemplifies, these are based on internal and external characteristics of eggs, such as clean, right-sized eggs without internal blood or meat spots. However the ‘product’ of a grocery store is its entire selection – the balance of that unique assortment – as customers choose what stores to shop at rarely due to one product, or even several, but that store’s ability to fulfill as many of that customer’s needs as possible. In this market all actors (suppliers, retailers and customers) directly and indirectly cooperate in defining what a valuable selection is; a definition that fluctuates over time and space. Aspens (2009) exemplified the status market with jewelry trade, where the social construct of art raises the value of the jewelry in relation to the status of the designer. To quote the author, “it is what the actors in the market value that matters” (Aspens, 2009, s. 118). In resemblance to this we conclude that the status market is applicable on the food retail market as well. It is a social process, where other values rather than the pure materialistic value of the products play into the market. Resulting in some actors gaining more status than others.

Furthermore, we found that our interviewees – actors representing the selling side of the food retail market – repeatedly expressed the pressure to keep up with and forecast trends, as well as evaluating what trends were temporary and what trends were long-term. The process of assortment selection appeared to be highly fluent and highly dynamic, with constant revision and constant development, all in the effort to keep up with ‘trends’. Or in other words have a satisfactory selection that generates sales and a

competitive advantage. Aspers emphasizes the status market dependency on trend analysts and trend-forecasting through the fashion model market. Arguing that ‘good looks’, the standard upon which potential models are scrutinized, is highly fluent and unpredictable: “the look that is demanded is subject to fashion, which means that ‘quality,’ in essence, is a function of what the people working for the agencies think looks good for the time being” (Aspers, 2009, p. 118). The dependency on trends strengthens the conclusion of the food retail market as a status market.

Moreover, the next question in order to understand how food companies design their offer, is what is knowledge and what is value in this status market? The notion of valuation is generally discussed from the viewpoint of the buyer, as valuation guides the *buyer* in the decision making process of what to *buy*. However, as Lamont (2012) expressed, valuation is a highly social process requiring a determination of who is a suitable judge, and we find a greater value in, and a greater opportunity for, understanding the dynamics in this market by inverting this theory. By using the valuation theory to understand how valuation guides the *seller* in the decision making process of what to *sell*. This is interesting because buyers utilize valuations to choose what to buy between what is offered, but as has been expressed earlier in this study, the seller frames that choice, and the valuations of the seller may differ. The seller's process of valuation therefore encapsules important premises for the sake of understanding this market, that in the limited viewpoint of the buyer might be lost. Understanding the valuations created when the seller is the judge, will illuminate what information, of that available on the market, the seller values in deciding what to offer and what not to offer. During the interviews certain themes kept emerging in conversation regarding assortment selection. To map out the decision making procedure, these themes were understood as valuations. Resulting in the following categories of valuations as impacting the assortment process: *competitors, consumers, suppliers, trends* and *strategy*. In the following subchapters these categories will be discussed one by one, to illuminate what part the different valuations play against each other, and in the creation of the product in this status market; the assortment selection. Firstly, we shall discuss what we found to be an objective condition limiting the possibilities for sellers to adapt their product to the found valuations; the business model.

5.1 The way we do business

It was found that the way firms organize their businesses, ergo their *business model*, has a distinct impact on how assortment is decided, but even more so, the possibilities for the assortment to change. It is our interpretation that the business model acts as an objective condition, a prerequisite that constrains or in other ways affects the valuation process. Although Zuckerman (2012) discusses objective conditions in

relation to geographical and time-based conditions, we interpret that the often strongly and historically imprinted business model of a firm, acts as both a visible and invisible structure regulating the valuation process. Limiting all interviewees in their decision making, as they have to adapt to the logistical and commercial set up of the firm. As Zuckerman (2012) emphasizes, it is of high importance that there is a mutual interpretation of the objective condition, for it to act as basis in the decision making process. The role of the business model in limiting or enabling the firms to adapt to the different valuations was voiced by all interviewees – they did not use the terms valuations but rather spoke of the content within the valuations we have intercepted and categorized.

To exemplify, one chain operated as a discount chain where all supply chain operations were designed and upheld in a manner that secured lowest possible costs. For this reason assortment is standardized in all stores, with the only difference of smaller stores having a slightly reduced, still standardised, assortment. All distribution of goods is managed through centrally controlled warehouses to create economies of scale; keeping the prices down. This business model inhibits the possibilities for the chain to tailor the selection to local demand. The decision to bring goods into the assortment is also magnified as any new product has to be sold nationally. There can be no small batch trials.

“If I were to negotiate an article to, say ten stores in Sweden, that volume is so extremely small, it would require so extremely much of me to get a good price that it would also have been extremely expensive for that product. It’s almost required that you get up to the whole of Sweden, to get a volume that you can do something about to ensure that you can get the right price” (A).

All chains differed in the quota of local adaptations allowed by central regulations or recommendations. Leaving more or less space for the store to find local or external suppliers, ranging from 0-100% depending on the business model and the store manager's way of work. And although there are cost benefits, interviewee A also expresses that there is a disadvantage with regards to adapting geographically based on consumer demographics. Arguing that smaller, decentralized stores can be much more niche in their assortment range, even exemplifying adaptation to customers' political opinions. However, store manager H, who had fully decentralized assortment freedom, declared that she followed almost the entire central recommendation anyway. As it was a lot more labour intensive to find legitimate external suppliers on your own.

For several chains store sizes were a part of the business model. Having small stores that fit into city centers, requiring less work force to operate, or having big stores with enormous selections. Most chains

created selections based on the size of the store, or the structure of store shelves, rather than geographic or demographic adaptations – especially if they were centrally designed. If stores are big, assortment is more flexible as products can be trialed without having to utilize critical exposure areas. If a store is small, it has to carry through much more comprehensive analyses to weigh if the product is worth the space it will occupy. Store space also has to primarily accommodate the general needs of the general clientele, thus there is not much room for highly specific products, only highly generic products, in smaller stores.

The concept of private label products versus A-brands is also something that could be part of the business model. The advantage of private labels appeared to be the ability to offer an equivalent product for a much lower cost, due to avoiding costly A-brand advertisement. On the other hand, we discovered that chains championing A-brands found it easier to shift around the assortment faster.

“So much is happening there [the vegan trend] that it is very difficult to act right as well, because decisions that we make today, well you might see that in the store in a year, in one and a half years, in two years. That is how long it can take with negotiation, product development, design and so on. So that also means that you can end up very skewed on it as well, and end up behind these trends. ... When we launch it a year and a half later, then the trend is over and you stand there with an article that no one wants” (A).

The development of private labels can thus delay the launch of new products for up to two years, making the chain less responsive and less able to act on current trends. The choice to opt for private label and A-brand products, affects the decision making process as private labels require much more long-term analyses and potentially including more risk taking. These are the ways in which we found that the prerequisites for how the grocery stores can operate along identified valuations, are framed by the established business model.

5.2 What is everybody else doing?

A highly recurring valuation parameter in assortment planning proved to be imitation through **benchmarking**. Looking at competitors for ideas took place in two main ways: analogously or digitally. For example one chain revised their assortment through physically purchasing and comparing the assortment of all the biggest chains to theirs; category by category.

“We buy the whole market. So you go to [own company] and buy all fresh bread, then you go to [rival A] and buy all fresh bread, then you go to [rival B], buy all fresh bread, then you go to [rival C] and buy all fresh bread. Then you put it on a floor, in front of you, where the entire [own company] range is in a long

row, and in front is the corresponding item from each competitor. In order to get an extremely detailed insight into what the range looks like, if there are any white spots, if there are any articles where we need to have a better quality or whatever it may be. And based on that, you then try to have an assortment that corresponds to what the market has” (A).

This tactic – adjusting the assortment to that of competitors or the market average – is in correspondence with what Aspers (2009) hypothesized often happens in status markets. The author explains that the uncertainty inherent in status market valuations leads to actors having to “orient themselves towards each other to look for clues about what to do in their situation” (Aspers, 2009, p. 124). Perhaps therefore benchmarking appears to play a bigger role: “actors orient themselves to each other, in particular to those with high-status because they represent ‘quality’ or, in broader terms, what is valued in this market” (Aspers, 2009, p. 118). Besides analogous benchmarking all chains expressed the usage of Nielsen data, to different degrees, when analyzing their own assortment. Nielsen is an information, data and market measurement firm, and a global leader in retail measurement services (Nielsen, n.d.). They collect sales information from retail networks who through cooperation agreements share their sales data. They then sell access to that aggregated data. In this case it concerns ranking lists, including close to all products, showing which products sell the most and which sell the least on the Swedish food retail market. The ranking lists can be created for different time periods, different categories, specific chains etcetera. According to the interviewees these lists are built upon the collection of receipts.

In a way the digital benchmarking, which in reality is based on consumer purchases as the data consists of receipts, speaks for a pull system. Products are being brought into the assortment due to that product being bought by consumers. However, these consumers are not the store’s own consumers, the data is collected from grocery stores all over Sweden. So in a way it is not a pull system built upon the flow of goods within *that* specific supply chain, it is collective pull within the entire produce market. Which in turn could become a push system in specific stores. Say for example that the majority of Swedish consumers purchase this product, a small town store then follows that ‘pull’ and pushes that product out towards their consumers, only to find that it’s a flop in this geographical segment. So in the manner of benchmarking through receipt ranking lists, the market *as a whole* is intrinsically a pull system; where consumers pull produce into the entirety of the Swedish grocery system. But for customers of the individual stores, this too becomes a push system; where supply is set upon the demand of consumers from far away. As for the analogous benchmarking, it is based on what ‘the market is doing’, not data from *their* customers per se. As Dubuisson-Quellier (2013, p. 698-699) also expressed it, neo-institutionalist literature and economic sociology literature “have shown that the market is a social

form within which actors tend to imitate other actors, thus favouring the spread of models and norms.” If firms simply look at each other's selection to see what the consumer wants, it could just as well be the blind leading the blind in a push-like system.

5.3 Our customers

As concluded in the previous chapter, benchmarking in some ways leads to the following of market customers, not necessarily the firm's customers. This leads us to another valuation category: the firm's own **customers**. Discussing this valuation category plays an important part in answering this study's purpose, as it *directly* focuses on how consumers influence the decision-making process of assortment selection.

5.3.1 Following figures

Sales figures and other KPIs (determined sets of quantifiable measurements used to gauge performance) speak volumes to category managers. When asked if there is any way customer opinions are taken into account systematically in the decision making process, or if decisions are based on data analysis (of KPIs), interviewee B declared that:

“[Data analysis] is the absolute best way to get input on how an article goes. We not only have sales data, but we have... we can check how often customers buy, when they buy. For example, if it is a novelty, we can check if they only buy it once or if they bought it several times. It is a very good way to understand if a news item goes well or not. But it's not like I'm calling customers and talking to them” (B).

Analyzing the retention rate (repurchases) through receipts, can support understanding your customers. Interviewee D utilized sales figures in assortment design through categorizing in relation to demographic distinctions, to meet gender and age driven buying patterns in his range design. Many interviewees, however not all, explicitly announced that figures in this way, acted as the primary form of customer communication. When new products are released, they are essentially immediately on trial. The figures are evaluated shortly thereafter to decide if they stay or go. Figures such as these, acting as guidance for decision making bodies in what to keep and what to remove from the selection, strongly advocate for the pull system. *If* the numbers are followed, then purchasing behaviors directly regulate the selection. At least when it comes to decisions around what is already being offered.

“Basically, consumers have all the power. Because they are the ones who buy the articles. If you choose to buy something, then it will remain, if everyone stops buying something, it will not remain. Let's talk about meat, meat loses every year, sells less and less, but it still sells. If it had been the case that consumers, all consumers, would have wanted to remove all meat from the grocery trade. It's not that damn hard, it's just that everyone stops buying it. Now it is difficult of course, but in that regard you have everything in your own hands. After all, everything we do is based on what consumers do. All decisions we make are based on sales and all these numbers. But it is in some way based on buying behavior, it is based on what customers do” (A).

What's interesting as well, is that these figures were also used to guide the insertion of new products into assortment. When asked how ideas towards new products emerge, Interviewee A responded, besides other things, that if an article appeared very strong through key figures, then you might want to try launching a different taste and see if it's equally effectful. Thus KPIs can assist in where to direct innovation and product development, speaking for a pull-system as development originates from/is a response to actual consumer behavior. However, there were instances as well where these figures were used but not followed. Where the behaviour of the company was not necessarily adapting to what the number indicated, this is further discussed in chapter 5.6.

5.3.2 Managing opinions

Besides indirect communication through sales figures, there is of course also *direct communication*. How different food chains gathered and managed their own customers' opinions differed. Some put their trust in the local stores to forward the customers' opinions and requests, whilst others had specialists at their disposal who studied consumer insight by monitoring a variety of systems as well as cooperating with international professionals and research institutes. Despite what efforts customer opinions were managed, the perception of how customers opinion matters held a common ground and was *valued* equally. To cite store manager F, the core of their stores profitability was due to their 'regulars' which inevitably made customer inputs the most important thing for them to consider for the purpose of 'giving back'.

One category manager explained that they did not have any store contact, but were instead reliant on sales managers to forward if certain stores wanted something to be added in the assortment. When asked about customer influence in the store, the manager (E) expressed: “who is the recipient in the store who will take you further? Because I'm not sure that all wishes and such may come through to us.” Customers can try to exercise pull dynamics in store and they might succeed by having their opinions forwarded to the

higher management. However, it all comes down to if they have contacted the right individual on the floor and if that someone is open to take ideas in.

“I would say that the most common today, is how much they [the customers] understand me correctly when I say, ‘nag the store staff’ to try and get that product in. Because I think there, it's important to get the store staff to intercept when those questions come in. And then of course if they contact us centrally, but it’s very rare that they do that” (I).

This indicates that the attentiveness on store level to intercept local customer opinions is inadequate. Interviewee I argued that their floor staff had not been urged to be vigilant towards consumer opinions, and that an organized gathering of opinions was lacking within their stores today. This is troublesome as, besides sales figures acting as guidelines towards where to innovate, direct communication seems to be the only way for a customer to suggest *new* products that do not already exist in the assortment.

5.4 Our suppliers

Another parameter that proved to play a major role in regulating assortment selection was the **supplier**, and the cooperative relationship they had with the stores they supplied to. A majority of interviewees expressed that they work with assortment settings in close relations with their suppliers. Not because they necessarily want to, but because they *need to*. Indicating the requirement for food chains to consider both opinions and information suppliers bring to the fore.

On specific occasions each year, revision of assortments take place in order to introduce new products as well as removing old ones. During these revisions, suppliers play a driving force in what products will be discussed, based on their notification submissions. According to Callon (2007, as cited in Aspers, 2009) it is not unusual for business actors in status markets to come together and have seasonal discussions about what to choose in upcoming sample selections. When product notifications reach category managers, they are often accompanied with information regarding efforts the supplier has put into the new product in order to enable high chances of profitability; trend surveys, advanced marketing and advertising to name a few. Two interviewees expressed how some of these efforts drive demand to such an extent that they have no choice but to adapt to the supplier – “if a supplier runs a tv-commercial on these meatballs, consumer demand will be created in stores and they will be forced to take it in” (C). Interviewee I expressed something similar:

“Is it an article that suppliers are going to launch and it is on TV and you hit the big drum and so on. Then we can not stand around and be cowardly not having it everywhere. Then we have to push it out to all [stores]” (I).

The supplier *pushes* the products into the store's assortment by investing a lot in shaping demand at the consumer side. Meaning that what the suppliers invest in, the retailers must often also invest in. This speaks for push, as it indicates that production is regulated by the producer. However, at the same time the suppliers are relying on consumer requests, which speaks for pull (Russell & Taylor, 2011), since they trust the consumers to request the product in stores, so that the category managers must recruit the product to their assortment. Suppliers *creating* trends through advertisements, rather than merely responding passively to them, is according to Callon (2007 as cited in Aspers, 2009) common in status markets. This creation of a consumer demand, speaks of a new dimension of the push and pull dynamics. Where the believed pull mechanism in actuality originates from push exertion.

Assortment selection is also affected by the negotiations grocery stores enter into with suppliers and A-brands. One interviewee expressed that suppliers in certain food categories acquire *annual deals*, regarding A-brand product exposure in the grocery store's assortment selection, by paying certain amounts of money for a place on the shelf.

“You very often negotiate a certain proportion of assortment or a certain size of the assortment and then you say ‘okay, these ten articles, we will have them, we classify them as basic’ then we will have them at all our stores and then they pay some money for it” (G).

Suppliers acquiring a percentage of the shelf space inhibits stores from making frequent and subjective changes to their assortment, without taking the supplier into account. A-brand suppliers buy not only shelf space, but exposure as well – another way in which supplier investments were found to impact assortment. Interviewee H elaborated on this by explaining that her store is dependent on the centrally assembled campaign newsletter. A newsletter some suppliers pay a lot of money to be in. She explained that her store is forced to take in products offered on campaign in order to entice customers, even if it goes against what she perceives to be the local preference. An important aspect to this is the fact that, according to interviewee D, own brand products rarely ‘make the cut’ when deciding what products to expose in the weekly newsletter. Indicating the power of supplier investments when it comes to A-brands. Through this, we conclude that food chains with a business model championing a big range of A-brand products, are subject to a different objective condition than those who rely more on private label goods. As they have to take these type of supplier valuations into greater consideration.

Another dimension of the supplier valuation category is that they act as major informants regarding new products. Interviewees often stated how suppliers were their first extension to the outside market and explained how they frequently introduced both trends and benchmarked numbers in order to support sales towards the retailer. This leads us into the next valuation; trend monitoring.

5.5 Staying in the loop

An interesting area that emerged from the empirical collection was to understand where **trends** originated from. It appeared that the interpretation of trends mainly stemmed from ranking lists, supplier inputs and to some extent; exhibitions (food fairs), social media and personal research. Trends, as exemplified through fashion by Aspers (2009), is about being able to provide customers with commodities they did not know they needed until it is introduced to them. Aspers continues by stating that this is hard to achieve with little to no background knowledge about what the customers demand is. Firms thus need to obtain that knowledge in creative ways for them to use trends as a valuation tool for assortment planning.

In our opinion, the most interesting source for trend monitoring was ranking lists; observing the directions of sales, if something increases or decreases with high percentages. As these lists are made from receipts, ergo actually based on consumer purchases. Seen from a bigger perspective of the food retail market in Sweden, this would be the perfect example of when customers *pull* products into the supply chain. Consumers voice their demand through buying patterns, translating into the ranking lists and thereafter being a factor that food chains *evaluate* before deciding assortment selection. Although taking into consideration what was concluded in 5.2 as well, a nationally aggregated pull could become a local push.

However in most cases, it appeared that trends were declared for by the sellers. Many interviewees expressed great trust in their suppliers being both informed and competent enough to forward relevant trends whilst presenting new products during revisions. Arguably, however, this information could be skewed since it originates from those trying to sell something – risking hidden agendas and potentially faulty trend forecasts. Which could lead to an unsuccessful assortment.

“If they are good suppliers, you get good information from them. What trend analyses look like and so on. There are some institutes you can get some numbers from and so on. But a lot again is, try to create your own image too, so you can balance what you get in from the other bodies" (I).

With regards to ‘creating your own image’, some interviewees also expressed personal research as a part of the work with trend-monitoring. Interviewee D claimed that they have, with their own initiative, followed social media accounts for inspiration purposes; conducting personal research about trends in their specific food category. Finding out that customers are demanding healthier ingredients in bread, lead to a launching of bread with lentils. The following of trends through social media can initially be interpreted as an adaptation to consumers who display their preferences; speaking for *pull* dynamics. However, since customers are not aware of *how* the category manager collects this information, through which channels the personal research is being conducted and when, the chances to effect are small. It should also not be mistaken that the category manager makes subjective assumptions about what consumers are demanding. Which again does not suggest that pull is being pursued, but that *push* takes place here as well.

Another practise inside the Swedish food retail industry was to attend exhibitions and seminars that address news and ongoing trends. Skov (2006, as cited in Aspers, 2009) notes how attending similar types of fairs can provide useful inputs for upcoming trends. This was found in our empirical material as well.

“Our main inspiration for what is trendy comes foremost from the food fairs and A-brand/supplier visits. ... The fairs have exhibitors from all around the world, partly you want to see what trends are underway and if there is an assortment where we can develop our own brand goods as well for example. ... Other than that we want information about what is happening in the market” (E).

Food fairs presenting foreign trends, detached from consumer preferences within the local market, insinuate that products yet unasked for are pushed from the market actors onto the customers. This information stipulates predetermined offers not taking demand into consideration. In terms of push and pull factors, efforts in searching for trends were found to be mostly associated with push mechanisms.

5.6 What do we want though?

Something seen as *valuable* in the eye of the producer, is not always oriented towards what is best for the customer. This becomes clear when we analyze strategy as a valuation category. The company’s own agenda at times seemed to overweigh the numeric communication sales constituted; regarding what to keep and what to toss. **Strategies** such as a sustainability strategy, low-cost strategy, premium strategy etcetera, could sometimes challenge the information gained from sales. For example, interviewee G explained the importance of ‘the shopping cart.’ Apparently there are certain key items that bring with them substantial additional sales, and making sure that the customer buys those key items is of high

importance for general store revenue. In this case the chain had witnessed that their share of meat-sales fell short of their general share of sales on the Swedish food retail market. Their hypothesis was that their current clientele was leaning towards a more vegetable based diet. The intention onward however was not to adapt to that clientele, but rather a need to get the meat back into the customer shopping cart was expressed.

“Meat is so important because, if a person buys meat, they buy so much more. If you go into a store and buy meat you usually buy maybe six to seven more products, so you get so much else with you. Not getting this meat in the shopping basket means that you lose a lot on average-purchases. If you buy a vegetarian product, it does not drive at all as much as this does. So meat, poultry, cheese is also this type of a product, there are some that are very important to get the customer to shop so that you can get the whole average basket to increase” (G).

This discussion speaks strongly for a push system. Where assortment is not adapted to better cater the customer group they appear to have, but rather their intention is an attempt to reshape their existing customer base or entice new customers all together. Another example of strategy resulting in push-characteristics, is a chain that chose to eliminate palm oil from many of their own brands as a sustainable action.

“For our part, we think it is important that we step away from that [palm oil] to contribute to that development. But if we had only looked at sales there, we would have kept the products. And it is actually the case when we remove products with palm oil and we add a dairy product in this product instead, that then means that those who are milk allergic can no longer buy the product. But on the other hand, we have removed the palm oil. So it's a bit difficult sometimes, but precisely in that question, that's where the customer's opinion and sustainability perspective govern more than the sales perspective” (I).

This action was contradictory to the sales figures, as these products were very popular amongst customers at the time. Thus the chain chose to deviate from the figure facts and remove products that were purchased, due to them having an agenda disconnected from this. The following of trends to different degrees can be interpreted as another aspect of strategy. Something that all interviewees claimed to do, but in slightly different ways. For some chains, the firm belief in an ‘up and coming trend’ convinced them to keep products in the assortment, despite contradicting sales figures, for future competitive advantage.

“If you go in and look on a detail-level at the vegan items we have in the assortment today, you would immediately say that ‘they should be removed from the assortment, they sell the worst of all in this category.’ They sell the worst of all. But based on you still having these soft values with you in mind, and you know that this will be something that is required for us to be able to have a strong position in one, two, three, four, 20 years, then maybe you still choose to keep them. And that’s how it goes, even if it is bad numbers, you still have that type of stuff in the back of your mind” (A).

It is hard to deem if these contradicting practises, resulting from *trends*, speak for push or pull dimensions. Trends are inherently an attempt to foresee what the future consumer will demand. And as explained in 5.5, trends most often originate from extrapolating on actual consumer purchases, although not always the local consumer purchases. So in a way it is both. Push of products, based on current pull of products. With the disclaimer that the pull may be demographically uneven, whilst the push might be all inclusive. However, interviewee I mentioned that strategic directions can also originate from higher management wanting you to prioritize something they believe in, for example manager pressure to invest in trends intercepted from the US. Which definitely speaks for a push system when it comes to the consumers in the Swedish market.

Another way strategy appeared to sometimes divert from the objective interpretation of the consumer base was in chains with privately owned stores. Interviewee C explained how, based on consumer research, they found that store owners sometimes have personal preferences that differ from data-derived central recommendations.

“A few years ago they had done a study where they found eight different customer groups ... then you could put ‘you in your store have 50% financial traditionalists as a customer group, so you should go into larger packaging and more basic products.’ But that has fizzled out a little bit, because it didn’t really work. It’s like this ... the store owner wants to run the store based on his thoughts and ideas. If someone comes and tells him that you should turn this into a discount store instead, that may not be what he wants to do at all. He may want to run a grocery store with food joy. ... Well then he does not take in which customers he has, he wants to run the store from what he feels and thinks” (C).

In chains where stores were not centrally owned, there were apparently risks of store owners' personal agendas concerning what kind of store they wanted to portray, to counteract their ability to adjust to their customer base. In these cases the abundance of information that central management could gather was not utilized to its full potential.

6. Conclusion

In answering the question – *how do food retailers determine the assortment they offer* – we found that there are numerous parameters involved in every decision. Store assortment is essentially a function of actors coming together from several sides of the market. The actors, sellers in this case, value the products in the assortment based on several parameters. Mainly we distinguished five categories of valuations, all of which limited by the objective condition of the business model, in the extent of their influence on the aggregated evaluation of the assortment. All evaluations have different effects on the final assortment. The goal being to have a range as valuable as possible – within the frame of what is made possible by the business model. The valuations we found were all interconnected to some degree. To clarify these findings we created a conceptual model (figure 1), illustrating the different valuations that are part of the decision making process for assortment selection in the Swedish food retail market. The model also illustrates how the valuations are interconnected, as well as bound by the objective condition.

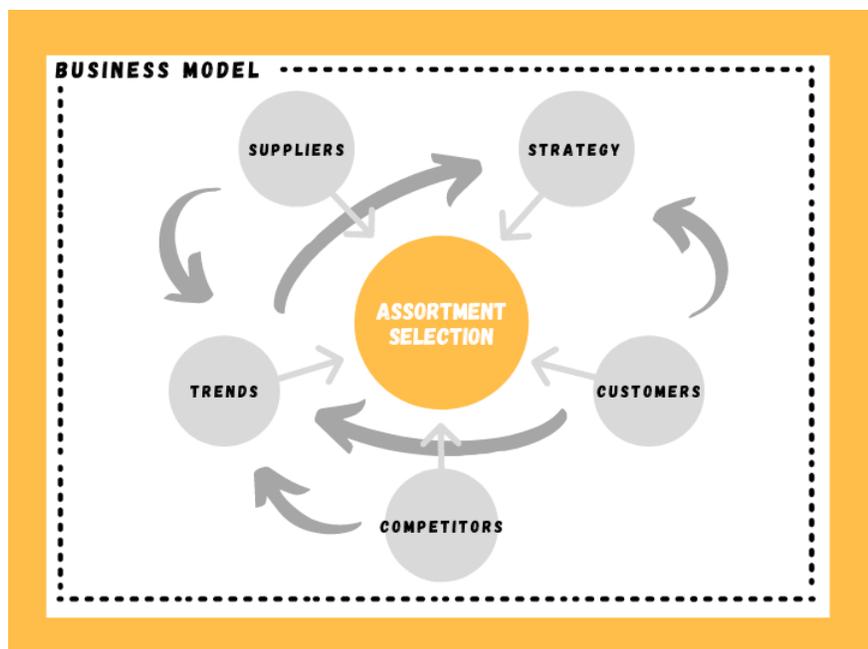


Figure 1: The valuations and the objective condition that acts as a frame for the decision making process in assortment selection.

The valuation we found first was *competitors*, evaluating your store selection based on what surrounding competitors are doing, or what's selling the best at other competitor chains. The second valuation was the chain's own customers, who were mainly 'heard' numerically through sales figures. Up next was the chain's suppliers, affecting the assortment through shelf subscriptions and aggressive marketing. The suppliers also constituted the main source for the next valuation; trend monitoring. Evaluating what seems

trendy both triggers innovation, as well as convinces chains to keep, so far, unprofitable goods for competitive advantage. Lastly strategy was defined as an important valuation, a valuation that could act in line with previous valuations, for instance following trends. However strategy could also act in complete contradiction to other valuations; such as not adapting to sales figures.

7. Discussion and contribution

The question remains. Does this speak for the sovereign consumer? A core concept within the economic theory upon which the phenomena of political consumption is dependent. An important finding to understand here, is that the store is the producer's customer. Meaning that any action by the end consumer, needs to be translated in economical signals through the store and onwards to the assortment. It all comes down to if the configuration of assortment allows these signals to be transferred upstreams. When decision makers choose what to keep in their assortment versus what to remove, sales figures proved to be the strongest indication. Sales figures are pull oriented as they follow the consumers preferences; what they buy more or less of. What does this tell us about the market prerequisites for political consumption? Valuations that are more pull-system oriented, such as following consumers through sales figures, speak for a neoclassical market theory. As when sales go down, the firm adapts the assortment by removing the declining product. When they remove that product they seize to allocate financial resources to that producer, resulting in that producer having to lower their market price. Lowering the market price means that it might no longer be beneficial to produce, and that producer could eventually go bankrupt if this continues. Pricing acts as a regulating force in creating equilibrium, as stated in neoclassical economy. Supporting the market theory upon which political consumption relies. We thus interpret that political consumption works, when it comes to *choosing from what is already available*. Although it can be inhibited by certain business models or more dominant valuations influencing the assortment selection.

With regards to political consumers being able to influence and *change what to choose from*, the discussion is more indefinite. When it comes to reconfiguring the range of choices, sales figures also have a trend-setting dimension, where the numbers can be read by decision-makers and further on lay the ground for in what direction to innovate in the future – evidently influencing the assortment selection in the long run. Consumption with a political agenda can thus entail *choosing from what there is to choose from*, as well as showing how you want the selection to evolve in terms of content. However an important distinction here is that trends mainly stem from an aggregated pull, which can result in a local push. Prompting an interesting discussion and distinction between the normative customer of the Swedish food retail market, versus the local customer. Apart from nudging through sales figures, the only direct way for

consumers to alter the assortment, with specific preferences, is through direct querying, which appeared to be received differently depending on the business model. New products were mainly introduced to the assortment with the help of the valuations with push oriented dimensions – not speaking for the neoclassical market. When consumer behavior is not translated through the store and to the producers, the store supports producers independently of, sometimes even in contradiction to, consumer behavior. This rather speaks for supply chain management, as a way to perform economy. Where the visible hand of the firm manages the market playing field and where markets are not allowed to reach equilibrium on their own. This does not support the intention of political consumption, as price-signals are not transferred from the end consumer if store-purchases occur independently. The Swedish food retail market thus consists of elements supporting both market theories.

We conclude that, as a political consumer, the chances of your actions having a ripple effect all the way to the producer, depends on the chain and their business model. Ergo, it actually depends where you shop. Based on our empirical material, centrally controlled firms with highly standardized assortments, have less capacity to respond to political consumption. Whilst decentralized chains showed greater capacity to, even local, customer adaptation. However, important to note is that capability does not necessarily equate outcome, as was seen when, for example, strategy valuations interfered. In connection with previous research, these insights act as complement to earlier discoveries about what role consumers play in the assortment selection. In this study we have ascertained how assortment design is actually conducted, in reference to previous research on how it can or should be conducted.

8. Future research

Whilst this study may have illuminated the different aspects playing into assortment selection, and therethrough illuminated the role of the consumer in this decision-making process. In some ways supporting the effectiveness of political consumption as a practise, in relation to how the Swedish food retail market is arranged. There are still other problems inhibiting the potential effectiveness of this practise. Primarily the lack of reliable transparency, misleading the consumer into believing their actions have certain effects than they in actuality have. Reducing the entire point of the practise to commercial redundancy. An important realm of research, when it comes to this subject, is therefore how to ensure transparency towards the consumers. Future research can also further investigate the flow of information between different stages, levels and departments within food market supply chains, to further investigate if the flow of information in actuality carries political consumption onward.

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10. Appendix

10.1 Interview guide

Introductory questions:

- Who are you?
 - Where do you come from, age and job position?
 - How did you end up in the role of X and why?

- Tell us about your job.
 - What food category are you responsible for/work within?
 - What tasks does your job position entail?
 - What are you responsible for?

- Describe a normal working day.

Intermediate questions:

- Is assortment decided in regards to a specific store (or generalized)? How does it work for either option?

- Where do new ideas come from?
 - When a new product enters the market, how do you find out about it?
 - When a product is to be removed from the assortment, what is that choice based on?

- What have you noticed influences product popularity or profitability?

- Do you use forecasts?
 - If yes, what are they based on?
 - How do you analyze them?

- How does the decision-making process proceed when new products are to be selected into the assortment?

- Is there a standardized procedure for analyzing if products fit an assortment or will contribute to profitability?
- Which parameters need to be analyzed?
- Does it feel like a jungle of choices? How do you manage that?
- Is the offer limited (that is, what stores can choose between to buy in) on higher levels? How big of an impact does a store have on their own offers?
- How do you view private label goods? Is the process different, any distinction between them (are either prioritized)?

Revealing questions:

- How big of an impact do you believe a customer has on their local store assortment?
- How can a customer proceed to get a new product into their local assortment?
- How are product requests handled?
 - Locally or regionally?
 - How does the process look? Timewise?
 - How does it most often end?
- How big of an impact do you believe customers in Sweden overall, have on the offer overall in Sweden?
 - How?
 - Are there any other forces acting?
- Do you see any downside with how you (or your stores) set your assortment?
- What do you think is the most important to think about when setting an assortment?

Concluding questions:

- Is there anything you want to add, that you feel we should address?

- Do you have any material we could take part of regarding these processes (analytic maps etcetera)?

10.2 Information sheet

Informationsblad om medverkan i intervjustudie

Vi heter Agnes Lekenhed och Louise Bergström och studerar Service Management Logistics vid Lunds Universitet. För att erhålla examensbevis från vår utbildning, krävs ett godkänt examensarbete med tillhörande empirisk undersökning. Det empiriska materialet agerar betydande underlag för vår studies utveckling.

Syftet med den empiriska undersökningen är att visualisera och kartlägga hur analysprocessen för beslut om produkter i assortment går till i Sveriges största livsmedelskedjor. Syftet beräknas uppnås med hjälp av bland annat *category managers* som empiriska objekt i studien.

Deltagandet i studien är helt frivillig. En intervju kommer genomföras på antingen telefon, zoom eller teams. Intervjun beräknas ta allt ifrån 60-90 min beroende på svarens detaljnivå samt vad intervjuperson har tid att avsätta. Vi värnar om din integritet och försäkrar därför anonymitet. Samtliga intervjuer kommer aidentifieras och behandlas konfidentiellt i enlighet med bestämmelser i sekretesslagen. Intervjun kommer, med ditt samtycke, att spelas in. Du bestämmer vad vi får och inte får använda.

Informerat samtycke

När du accepterar förfrågan om deltagande i studien, erkänner du dig informerad om studiens syfte och att du är införstådd i vad undersökningen går ut på.

Under intervjun kan du samtycka till din medverkan och därmed att informationen tillhandahållen av oss får samlas in, bearbetas (kodas, analyseras) samt brukas för vår studies syfte.

Tack för din medverkan!