



SCHOOL OF  
ECONOMICS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# **The Versatile Touchpoint**

*User-generated content as a new touchpoint in the customer journey*

by

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# Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to investigate how a new touchpoint has emerged due to the customers or potential customers sharing their customer journeys on social media through user-generated content.

**Methodology:** This paper takes a qualitative approach where netnography research has been conducted to collect data on the social media platform TikTok. After the collection process, the data was analyzed through the guidance of grounded theory.

**Findings:** This study identified several practices characterizing the touchpoint that users employ on social media when sharing their customer journey, specifically in the pre-purchasing and post-purchasing stages. The characteristics identified were that the touchpoint presents itself as versatile and continues. The practices found in the pre-purchase stage include new in-store reviewing in-store and customer-driven marketing. While the post-purchase stage presents the reviewing, excitement, validating, and entertainment practices. Furthermore, the findings also present that this touchpoint has two ownerships as it is customer- and social or external-owned.

**Theoretical contribution:** This study contributes to research in the marketing and retail field, more specifically the area of customer journey and social commerce research by applying the brand publics theory. It contributes with insights regarding how customers share their shopping, how the brand is used in a social media setting, and how the touchpoint takes form.

**Practical contributions:** This research contributes to practitioners in the retail and marketing areas. It contributes to the understanding that marketing is changing due to new technologies such as social media platforms. In these networks, customers can now interact not only with brands but with one another resulting in user-generated content that is as important as posts generated by brands. This type of content should be regarded as a new way of word-of-mouth that can impact the ultimate decision of a potential customer. Hence, practitioners should also direct their attention to how the brand is being used by customers on social media.

**Keywords:** Customer journey, Social commerce, Brand publics, TikTok, Customer experience, Customer engagement, Netnography.

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# 1. Introduction

*The following chapter aims to introduce the background to the thesis regarding the complexity of the customer journey due to the rise of social media. Next, we discuss the research problem and the lack of research in these two fields. Afterward, we aim to explain how we are planning to close the gap, plus state our aims and the research questions that will guide this paper. Lastly, we discuss our intended contributions and the outline of this thesis.*

## 1.1 Background

Today, people are sharing their customer journeys on social media, where they interact with other customers; hence, these journeys appear to be increasingly connected with each other. This sharing and interacting on social media has become an independent touchpoint in the contemporary customer journey. Therefore, social media has had considerable consequences on how people perceive brands and companies and their customer journey experiences. This is one touchpoint that can be significant to the complexity of the modern customer journey (Herhausen, Kleinlercher, Verhoef, Emrich, & Rudolph, 2019; Becker & Jaakkola, 2020). Consequently, investigating customer interactions on social media as a touchpoint in the customer journey can uncover interesting insights. Furthermore, the sharing of brands and shopping experiences has created a new way for firms to flourish and gain popularity. Thus, this new touchpoint in the customer journey is heavily influenced by social media communication and it is a phenomenon that must be studied.

This rise in the usage of social media when shopping is due to the increase of digital technologies which have facilitated the omnichannel retailing phenomena that are impacting companies and customers (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014; Tyrväinen & Karjaluoto, 2019). These technologies have also allowed the number of interactive paths to multiply, resulting in more complex customer journeys (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). The interactive mediums have caused customer experiences to become more social due to the different ways customers can interact with firms via new touchpoints in numerous channels (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Hamilton, Ferraro, Haws, and Mukhopadhyay (2021) agree as they state that, usually, customer decisions are taken amid a dynamic environment surrounded by social interactions and issues, which are made easier by technology and are a key element in what the authors call “the social customer journey”.

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that the increased complexity of social media makes it more difficult for companies to control how their customer journey is perceived and experienced across channels. Furthermore, one of the key touchpoints on the customer journey is word-of-mouth; this touchpoint is deemed to be one of the touchpoints that are difficult for the

firm to control (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018). Currently, with the rise of social media, word-of-mouth has also become a digital practice, and it is called electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Due to eWOM, customers have the power to influence other potential customers by using social media and posting online reviews (Court, Elzinga, Mulder, & Vetvik, 2009; Kannan & Li, 2017). Additionally, in most cases, customers read online reviews before conducting a purchase (Le, Ly, Nguyen, & Tran, 2022). These digital advancements have also led to new customer behaviors which have changed the way customers search for products (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Hence, advertisements today are not solely controlled by companies anymore, instead, customers, users, and reviewers are gaining considerable influence.

Lim and Kumar (2019) state that complex interactions between companies and customers occurring online have led to a transformation from traditional mass media where customers were just observers, in contrast to present times, where they are rather participants. Moreover, people can share their opinions online about a product or brand, voice their previous experiences, and how their encounters were awful or delightful to a wider community (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Hence, this new channel has allowed customers to share their shopping experiences online through a variety of forms which drives customers to participate in the co-creation of the brand's value and significance, and these types of practices have become a crucial source of brand knowledge (Hennig-Thurau, Malhotra, Frieger, Gensler, Lobschat, Rangaswamy, & Skiera, 2010; Klein, Zhang, Falk, Aspara, & Luo, 2020; Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström, & Freundt, 2014). Now, the entrance of social media platforms enables the widespread sharing of the individual shopping experience during the customer journey regarding a brand; however, it is not yet established what occurs concerning this customer journey. This happens as modern customers are doing more than just buying and using products, but now they also interact with people through sharing their customer journeys and experiences online whilst also watching others' reviews and shopping videos and taking an interest in others' opinions.

Furthermore, eWOM and sharing of opinions commonly occur through social media networks. As of 2023, the six most popular social media platforms are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, WeChat, and TikTok (Statista, 2023). Furthermore, the rise of short user-generated videos popularity grew strong during the COVID-19 pandemic and gave an impulse to a new type of social media to exist (Feldkamp, 2021), for instance, TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. In the last few years, TikTok has grown exponentially and has approximately 1.05 billion users as of 2023 (Statista, 2023). The incredible success and rise of this platform have led it to create new ways for customers to gather and share insights and information about brands, products, and services (TikTok For Business, 2022).

Additionally, in February 2022, TikTok For Business released a study aiming to understand the role of TikTok in the retail customer journey. Their findings indicate that TikTok is influencing users in real-life, not only, in the platform, and by this redefining the current path to purchase.



Furthermore, in their report, TikTok states that the new path to purchase is not linear but rather an infinite loop that does not have a beginning and end. With this new journey, TikTok suggests six stages: discovery, consideration, purchase, review, participation, and then purchase again (TikTok For Business, 2022). In the report, it is also stated that this infinite loop or journey is powered by the platform's users' drive to learn and explore new things. According to the study, TikTok's users state that the app has become a source for discovering, learning, and inspiration. TikTok For Business (2022) argues that in this new path, the ones that hold the power are the users as they are in control of what the platform shows and that these journeys are driven by joy and positivity. Additionally, they state that TikTok influences each stage and is more impactful than any other social media platform.

There are examples of brands becoming viral amongst users on TikTok. For instance, explosions of brands and products such as La Roche-Posay on "Skin-Tok" making their products sell out (Mamona, 2022; Knott, 2023) and the language app Duolingo becoming a viral success with almost four million views on all of their videos (Baxter, 2022). Also, the subcommunity "BookTok" helped sell over 20 million printed books in 2021 (Harris, 2022), and songs trending on the platform became viral and charted in record charts, even though some of these songs were released decades ago (Whateley, 2023). These four examples highlight the opportunities that user-generated content has for brands to gain popularity and increase reach while simultaneously holding power over their influence on the brands.

For this thesis, we have chosen to focus on retailers as it is service-oriented, resulting in retail companies having to develop captivating customer experiences; hence, this directly impacts the customer journey (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Rudkowski, Heney, Yu, Sedlezky, & Gunn, 2020). Furthermore, Forbes Magazine argued that retailers should use this platform to grow due to the number of users TikTok has, the platform's algorithm, the user-generated content shared here, which is perceived as reliable and authentic, and brands can get helpful information about their business (Wertz, 2021). On this social media network, regarding retail shopping behavior, users tend to share unboxing and haul videos (Maguire, 2022) or vlogs when they visit a brick-and-mortar store.

## **1.2 Problem discussion**

There is significant research that is establishing that the development of the Internet together with social media has democratized how information about products, services, and brands is spread (Zhang, Omran, & Cobanoglu, 2017). The activity and engagement that customers perform online with social media have an established effect on buying decisions (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019; Ngarmwongnoi, Oliveira, AbedRabbo, & Mousavi, 2020), how customers interact with each other and retailers (Pantano & Gandini, 2018) and the beneficial effects of user-generated content compared to firm-generated content (Demmers, Weltevreden & van

Dolen, 2020). Researchers have been attempting to capture the phenomenon that these user-generated social media practices have on customers' buying decisions intending to make it possible for firms to leverage them (Helme-Guizon & Magnoni, 2019; Cheung, Pires & Rosenberger, 2020). The beneficial effects of having customers engaged in creating content, and interacting with brands and customers have been settled (Demmers, Weltevreden & van Dolen, 2020; Van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner, & Verhoef, 2010) which has led to further interest in trying to understand the motives of the customers to actually engage with brands in an online setting (Hollebeek, 2011; Demmers, Weltevreden & van Dolen, 2020) how it affects future customer behaviors (Cheung, Pires & Rosenberger, 2020) and how firms can manage and encourage the customer to engage with their brands (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

The interest in the engagement practices that customers exercise online is under increasing research. The implications that user-generated content, customer engagement, and reviews and ratings have on customers have been researched in a limited scope (Hamilton et al., 2021), to understand how it impacts the decision-making process, their perceived value, and how it co-creates value (Cheung, 2020). Previous research has instead primarily focused on how firm-generated content affects customers engagement (Demmers, Weltevreden & van Dolen, 2020), employing quantifiable measures for what makes user-generated content reliable and trustworthy (Kim & Park, 2013; Hajli, Hajli, & Khani, 2013) or what drives customers to engage with brands on social media (Bazi, Filieri, & Gorton, 2020).

Additionally, there has been a limited extent of research that focuses on how customers' social media practices have affected the customer journey (Demmers, Weltevreden & van Dolen, 2020), rather it has focused on significant parts of it, such as buying behaviors (Xiang, Zheng, Lee, & Zhao, 2016). decision making in multi-channels (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014), and how brand values are created in social media (Scholz & Smith, 2019). While at the same time, there is a significant gap of research missing regarding how customers, with user-generated content, affect each other's customer journeys whilst sharing and posting their own. Demmers et al., (2020) agree as they argue with their study that additional insights can be identified concerning customer engagement on social media if the customer journey is applied as a tool for understanding.

### **1.2.1 Closing the gap**

Whilst previous researchers solely focus on customer engagement with firm-generated posts (e.g. Towers & Towers, 2021; Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger & De Oliveira, 2020; Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar & Van den Poel, 2019), researchers request additional research into how user-generated content affects the customer journey (eg. Ieva & Ziliani, 2018; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). On the other hand, there have been studies that do focus on user-generated content in social media relating to social commerce (Ko, 2018; Hajli, 2015) and, to a limited

extent, the whole customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021; Klein et al., 2020). These studies have had different objectives such as understanding what desires make customers use social media platforms when shopping and sharing (Ko, 2018), developing insights into how social commerce is constructed and how it influences customer behaviors (Hajli, 2015), and how customers interact with different touchpoints when they can navigate multiple channels (Klein et al., 2020). On the other hand and as mentioned previously, Hamilton et al. (2021) introduced a new concept to customer journey research called "the social customer journey" which indicates that customers in today's society are influenced in a dynamic way not solely by friends, family, or colleagues, but they are also influenced by social media and the hyperconnectivity that is occurring now. However, in their article, although they discuss customer-to-customer influence online, they do not deeply study this topic.

In modern society, brands have been used to show status and belonging to drive consumption (Pantano & Gandini, 2018). This social practice has previously been performed in a limited social setting with friends, family, and acquaintances. Contrary today, social media has opened up new potential for customers to share their purchases and experiences with a worldwide audience of complete strangers (Pantano & Gandini, 2018; Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). This practice of using the public sphere of social media to communicate a message whilst at the same time "showing off" a branded product and using the brand name as a #hashtag sparked interest in Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016). They investigated the phenomenon of using brands in social media for increased exposure which led them to contribute to their finding of a brand public.

This phenomenon of brand publics is defined as an organized social media space where different, heterogeneous values are communicated without having to create interaction or common values, and is drawn on as a vehicle for increased publicity and visibility (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). This highlights that the use of brands in social media is not strictly to interact with others or with the brand in question but as a tool for increasing the users' own reach, this while collecting brand stories and experiences in a collective space. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) when proposing this term; therefore, argued that people posting and sharing hashtags with brands were primarily doing it since they had their personal motives rather than attempting to interact with a brand community. While they argue that even though this practice does not revolve primarily around the brand, the authors still argue that it gives value to the brand that is publicly being drawn on.

### **1.3 Aims and Research Questions**

This research aims to provide insights into how the customer journey is influenced by people sharing their experiences on social media platforms. We attempt to conduct our study by exploring the brand of a lifestyle retailer, and the related user-generated content posted on the social media platform TikTok. Therefore, the ultimate goal of this research is to develop an

understanding of the role of a new touchpoint in the customer journey regarding user-generated content posted on social media. In order to conduct this research, we have formulated the following research questions:

*RQ1: What practices does this new touchpoint have?*

*RQ2: How are the practices organized in the touchpoint?*

## **1.4 Intended contributions**

### **1.4.1 Intended Theoretical Contributions**

With this thesis, we mainly intend to theoretically contribute to the research regarding customer journey and social media, more specifically brand publics. Furthermore, although these two areas have been widely studied in the past, we have not found any research where the customer journey and brand publics are examined together. So, as far as we know and have researched, we seem to be the first ones studying these two topics combined. Additionally, with the research design we have chosen, a netnography approach on TikTok, we also aim to bring a deeper understanding to this research practice.

Furthermore, as we are focusing on user-generated content, we also aim to bring new insights to the brand publics and the digital marketing area in understanding current customer behavior and how the modern customer influences other customers or potential buyers. On the other hand, as we are studying the customer journey, we intend to provide new perspectives regarding the customer journey stages, touchpoints, and channels that have been strongly affected by new technologies, in this case, social media. Lastly, although this paper studies a specific retailer and seeks to contribute to this unexplored research area, it also provides insights into the research field of the customer journey.

### **1.4.2 Intended Managerial Contributions**

Regarding our intended managerial contributions, we aim to contribute to the area of retailing and marketing. Even though we are focusing on lifestyle retailing and examining a specific brand, we believe this paper can provide guidance to other retail companies that have or aim to have a large social media presence. This is due to the fact that we intend to give insight into how social media, more precisely, user-generated content, shapes the perception and interactions surrounding a particular retailer brand. Hence, this will help retailers understand how their customer journey can potentially be impacted by this practice.

Therefore, our thesis aims to provide new insights and ideas that can help marketers understand a new component of social media marketing which can help create more efficient marketing

campaigns. We intend to do this by providing clarification that retailers should not only keep up to date with new social media platforms such as TikTok but also understand the importance of user-generated content and how leveraging it can lead to success. Additionally, as we are identifying a customer journey with other ways of interaction with the firm, and thus, a new touchpoint, marketers can examine their company through this new lens which can help build customer engagement and experience.

## **1.5 Thesis Outline**

This thesis consists of seven chapters. The first chapter introduced a brief background overview of the topic that will be studied, alongside the problem discussion, purpose, research questions, and potential contributions. The second chapter presents an academic literature review of the customer journey and social media. Next, the third chapter presents a theoretical framework, where the topics of the customer journey, brand publics, and co-creation are combined, and theories related to these areas are briefly discussed. The fourth chapter explains and justifies the methodology and research design choices made in the thesis. In the fifth and sixth chapters, we present the empirical findings collected whilst discussing and analyzing them. In the seventh and final chapter, the conclusion for this paper is presented, together with the contributions, a critical reflection, and research limitations and recommendations for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

*This following chapter aims to introduce the current research field in the customer journey and social media fields. First, an introduction to the customer journey literature will be made before deep diving into further discussion and concepts. Secondly, the social media field and its current research will be discussed.*

### **2.1 The Customer Journey**

#### **2.1.1 Customer Journey Definitions**

In marketing research, there has been an evolving interest in understanding how customers experience their interactions with companies and how these experiences might be affected (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Følstad & Kvale, 2018). In recent years, to fill this research gap, marketing researchers and practitioners have adopted the concept of the customer journey, this is largely attributed to the growing interest in a philosophy centered around customer experience in the marketing and service sectors (Santos & Gonçalves, 2021). Herhausen et al. (2019) agree as they state that the concept is recent and an important topic in modern marketing; however, they also argue that the research in this field started in the 1960s regarding the buying process. On the other hand, Følstad and Kvale (2018) argue that although the concept of the customer journey has been extensively used and researched, there does not appear to be a general understanding or agreement on what exactly is entailed by the concept of the customer journey. Towers and Towers (2021) agree as their literature review study of the customer journey revealed that there appears to be a lack of consensus on what exactly a customer journey entails in relation to its meaning, stages, and the taxonomy of its touchpoints.

Furthermore, based on their literature review research, Towers and Towers (2021) define the customer journey as how the customer engages with all types of touchpoints during the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages, also known for the authors as the decision-making process stages. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) describe a customer journey as the path for a customer's experience with the firm occurring during the purchasing process and involves several touchpoints, some outside the firm's control; the journey originates at pre-purchase, then goes to purchase, and finalizes in post-purchase, and it includes previous experiences, such as past purchases, in addition to external elements. The customer journey has also been defined as a sequence of firm-customer touchpoints which the customer can view as satisfying, dissatisfying, or neutral, depending on their performance (Kranzbühler, Kleijnen, and Verlegh, 2019; Towers & Towers, 2021). Other authors think of the customer journey as a metaphor that involves steps that customers perform in order to build a relationship with a brand or for a fulfilling shopping encounter (Santos & Gonçalves, 2021; Shavitt & Barnes, 2020).

Edelman and Singer (2015) argue that the term customer decision journey more precisely alludes to a set of interactions a customer has before achieving a specific objective. Rudkowski et al. (2020) state that currently customer journey is a process where customers engage with brands and retailers via numerous online and offline channels and touchpoints. The customer journey has also been defined as a process in which a company maps the customer's touchpoints across the pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase stages from the customer's viewpoint (Halvorsrud, Kvale, & Følstad, 2016; Homburg, Jozic, & Kuehnl, 2017; Rudkowski et al., 2020). Customer journeys have been described as when customers are searching and involved in the utilization of all touchpoints, offline and online, from a range of sources; these touchpoints include retailer-owned, competitor-owned, and additional ones (Herhausen et al., 2019; Towers & Towers, 2021).

### **2.1.2 Frameworks and theories**

In addition to the multiple definitions that have arisen from the term customer journey, some authors have also developed different frameworks and models based on this concept. Hamilton et al. (2021) presented the social customer journey which is meant to reflect that customers rarely take purchasing decisions by themselves but rather are influenced by others whom the authors call "traveling companions" and interact with the customer, either indirectly or directly, in the different stages of the journey. In this article, the authors also discuss that one of the most present social journeys is joint journeys which is when two or more customers participate in the journey together physically (Hamilton et al., 2021). Thomas, Epp, and Price (2020) agree with this last statement as they propose a framework called collective journeys describing journeys where customers go through a journey jointly, and in this article, the authors focus on families going through a journey together. Additionally, Hamilton et al. (2021) argue that the customer can participate with others in a social media setting and can influence one another.

Dellaert (2019) developed the consumer production journey theory which explains that, nowadays, customers have become co-producers for the value of brands and companies as they create value for other customers through reviews, peer-to-peer sales, and more. Another conceptual framework is the effective customer journey design proposed by Kuehnl, Jozic, and Homburg (2019). The authors found in their study that customers not only value the quality of brand-owned touchpoints regarding their experience, thoughts, and feelings but also care about the consistency and coherence of these touchpoints (Hamilton & Price, 2019; Kuehnl, Jozic, & Homburg, 2019). Another finding was that an effective customer journey design has a stronger influence on utilitarian behavior, while brand experience impacts hedonic behavior more (Hamilton & Price, 2019; Kuehnl, Jozic, & Homburg, 2019).

### **2.1.3 Stages and linearity of the customer journey**

In their research, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) proposed three stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. Other authors also agree that these are the stages constituting a customer journey (e.g. Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Rudkowski et al., 2020; Towers & Towers, 2021). However, other authors have proposed different stages regarding the customer journey. For example, Dellaert (2019) proposed four stages: search, purchase, experience, and reflect (Towers & Towers, 2021). Varnali (2019) stated that the customer journey consists of four significant chapters: initial contact, onboarding, interaction, and retention and advocacy. Nevertheless, in the research field, the customer journey has been more commonly divided into three stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase, and each of the stages involves different characteristics (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Følstad & Kvale, 2018).

As mentioned, the first stage is pre-purchase, and it consists of every facet of the consumer's interaction with the brand or firm prior to conducting the purchase; it starts when the customer recognizes a need or impulse to when the customer considers fulfilling this need or impulse by making a purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that the pre-purchase stage is comprised of awareness, need recognition, search, and consideration. Gao, Melero, and Sese (2020) state that this stage is essential for companies as it is their opportunity to expand their number of customers and generate revenue, as this stage comprises factors such as brand awareness, consideration, and previous experiences. In this stage, customers can also look into various channels to see which products are available at the moment (Gao, Melero, & Sese, 2020; Morales, Kahn, McAlister, & Broniarczyk, 2005). Lynch and Barnes (2020) add that due to the rise of omnichannel customer journeys, three new stages have appeared which are inspiration, research, and comparison.

Purchase is the second stage, which encompasses every encounter between the customer and the brand or firm occurring during the actual purchasing process; choosing, ordering, and payment are examples of actions taking place in this stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) also argue that usually, this stage is the most timely compressed from all stages. Nevertheless, Gao, Melero, and Sese (2020) indicate that in the purchasing stage, customers are primarily concentrated on price comparisons, assortment, and offers regarding the alternatives considered in the pre-purchase stage. Lastly, the purchasing stage might also consist of when the customer feels prepared to make the purchase (Lynch & Barnes, 2020).

The final and third stage is post-purchase which covers all interactions between the brand or the company after the purchase has occurred and all the customer's experience regarding the purchase and the brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Actions happening in this stage include consumption and use of the product or service, engagement, satisfaction, referrals, and loyalty (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rudkowski et al., 2020). Additionally, this stage is crucial for customer retention as the customer experience influences repurchasing behavior (Gao, Melero, &



Sese, 2020). Furthermore, a deeper connection between the brand or firm and the customer can occur in the post-purchase stage due to consumption and sharing of their experience with others through multiple channels (Edelman, 2010; Gao, Melero, & Sese, 2020). According to Lynch and Barnes (2020), another behavior present in the post-purchase stage is show and share, which is when customers might post their purchases on social media platforms; this behavior serves as a loop as these social media posts might influence others, and be part of the inspiration phase in their pre-purchase stage. Lastly, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that in this stage, the product in question becomes a crucial touchpoint in the journey.

The linearity and duration of the customer journey have also been a subject of debate among researchers. For example, researchers have stated that journeys have a beginning and an ending (Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Whittle & Foster, 1989). On the other hand, research has stated that the post-purchasing process is becoming a loop that impacts the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Edelman and Singer (2015) agree as they state that the journey is a loop in which there is customer retention due to the benefit that the journey brings. Hall, Towers, and Shaw (2017) add that journeys have become more diverse, long, and complex in the pre-purchase stage due to purchasing decisions influenced by others. Grewal and Roggeveen (2020) state that the three customer journey stages are not linear due to customers skipping the purchase stage and only passing through the pre-purchase and post-purchase stages. Varnali (2019) agrees as he states that journeys are not linear as customer experience is spontaneous, sensitive, and easily influenced by minor changes. Therefore, customer journeys are more complex and can vary.

### **2.1.4 Customer Experience**

Rudkowski et al. (2020) argue that customer journey and customer experience are two highly connected fields; however, customer experience has received more attention in academic research. Customer experience is defined as a multifaceted concept that emphasizes the customer's behavioral, emotional, social, sensory, and cognitive reactions concerning the offers of a company throughout the whole customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Santos & Gonçalves, 2021; Verhoef, Lemon, Parasuraman, Roggeveen, Tsiros, and Schlesinger, 2009). Other authors have a similar definition for customer experience as it is described as holistic and is related to how the customer's behaviors respond in regards to any touchpoint or contact with the brand, company, or product across the customer journey (Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, & Tse, 2014; McColl-Kennedy, Gustafsson., Jaakkola, Klaus, Radnor, Perks, & Friman, 2015; Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Hence, McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) conclude that customer experience is created by factors the firm can control and also by factors not under the firm's control, for example, the influence of other consumers. Additionally, customer experience should not be only associated with the present stage of the journey the customer is going through but also as a collection of previous experiences in other stages (Bueno, Weber, Bomfim, & Kato, 2019; Gao, Melero, & Sese, 2020; Dholakia, Kahn, Reeves, Rindfleisch, Stewart, & Taylor, 2010).

Edelman and Singer (2015) state that customer journeys have become crucial to how customers experience a brand and can play a significant role in providing a competitive edge and be even as vital as the products offered by the firm. Furthermore, researchers agree as it has been stated that offering a positive and relevant customer experience can lead to customer satisfaction (Bolton et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Verhoef et al., 2009). Bolton et al. (2014) claim that marketers prioritize performance instead of focusing on developing a customer journey that helps improve customer experience. Additionally, as today's retail industry is highly competitive and digitalized, customers are looking for entertaining, distinctive, and "insta-worthy" experiences; consequently, customer experience has become a priority for firms (Buckner, 2017; Rudkowski et al., 2020). Furthermore, customers are more in control of their experience because of the interactivity of digital media (Cover, 2006; Nyström & Mickelsson, 2019).

Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, and Alamanos (2021a) claim that throughout the different stages of their journey, customers are exposed to a variety of emotions that can be positive or negative; the ones that are positive will enhance a fulfilling experience and strengthening the relationship between the customer and the firm. In addition, Grewal and Roggeveen (2020) suggest that retail research has mainly concentrated on concepts such as word-of-mouth, loyalty, re-purchasing behavior, and satisfaction when it comes to customer experience; however, the authors state that it is also important to focus on the customer's emotional responses. These emotional reactions might include pride, relaxation, and excitement, which can have an influence on customer experience as well (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Pham & Sun, 2000).

Customer experience includes every element offered by a firm and comprises customer service, advertising, product features, packaging, reliability, and usability (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). According to Zomerdijk and Voss (2010), sensory design is another element that influences the customer experience. Sensory design refers to a company's physical environment, which mainly encompasses retail atmospherics where the five senses are key to the creation of tangible components in experience-focused firms (Kotler, 1973; Turley and Milliman, 2000; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Furthermore, retail atmospherics consist of different elements such as music, colors, lighting, and scents; however, moving around easily inside physical stores is also a key factor (Turley and Milliman, 2000; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). Nevertheless, in their study, Zomerdijk & Voss (2010) determined that the crucial element that influences customer experience in experience-centric firms is the interaction between the company and the customer.

Bolton et al. (2014) highlight the importance of value co-creation in relation to the customer's experience. The authors state that co-creation is built when customers interact with a product or a firm and actively participate in the formation of their own experiences, this can lead to customers connecting with the company as it feels as if it is allowing them to produce something distinctively valuable and thus this creates customer engagement and loyalty. Furthermore, customer engagement includes customer-to-customer interactions that then provide value to

other customers or potential buyers, such interactions might consist of brand communities where users share information (Bolton et al., 2014; Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

Multiple authors agree that the co-creation process as part of the customer journey is key to enhancing a meaningful customer experience (Micheaux & Bosio, 2019; Trischler & Zehrer, 2012; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2021a). According to Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, and Alamanos (2021a), customers being participants in the co-creation process is also influenced by them often seeking unique products that match their personal needs and preferences. McColl-Kennedy et al. (2015) add that due to this co-creation process, customer experience relies on the customer's level of participation and if the firm enables customers to actively participate. Additionally, the customer role has expanded as now customers are able to create, co-produce, and execute customer experiences (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Witell, Gustafsson, & Johnson, 2014), especially now due to social media (Dimitriu & Guesalaga, 2017).

### **2.2.5 Multi-channel and Shopping Behaviors**

The rapid development of mobile technology and social media platforms has allowed the rise of multi-channel shopping, and customers now have the control to decide which channel they want to go through (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Gao, Melero, and Sese (2020) agree as they state that in all three stages of the customer journey, customers use a variety of channels to expand their product knowledge, and this is due to the multichannel environment they are exposed to. Furthermore, customers look for channels that fulfill their interpersonal needs more effectively (van der Veen & van Ossenbruggen, 2015). Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) add that multi-channel journeys are complex to marketers and firms but not to customers, as this helps make the decision-making process simpler as they have a variety of channels to use and can choose the one that aligns with their needs more.

Studies have found that the channel the customers intend to use depends on their current stage of the journey (Frambach, Roest, & Krishnan, 2007; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). For example, Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) found in their research that regarding the purchase of cosmetics, customers used different channels depending on the stage of their buying journey. For consideration and inspiration, customers relied on friends, product reviews, videos on social networks, in-store and online product displays, and previous experiences. For searching information, customers used channels such as videos, blogs, review websites, and friends. To evaluate, customers went to the store either online or in person, and trusted friends and social media channels for confirmation. The purchase stage was conducted either online or in-store. Lastly, for post-purchase, customers went to friends or social media platforms (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014).

The multichannel environment has led to new behaviors being present in the customer journey. One of these is the zero moment of truth (ZMOT), which Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) describe as when the customer discovers a product for the first time via social media. The second behavior is showrooming which occurs when a customer sees a product in-store but decides to buy it online (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). The third and last behavior is webrooming, defined as when the research for a product is performed online, but the item is bought in-store (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Regarding behaviors due to the proliferation of multi-channel, Viejo-Fernández, Sanzo-Pérez, and Vázquez-Casielles (2019) have a similar argument; however, they only identify two main behaviors, webrooming and showrooming, and categorize them as part of research shopping. Furthermore, authors have stated that webrooming is more planned in comparison to showrooming; this is because, in webrooming, customers go through an array of online and offline touchpoints to seek information that enables them to foresee if their experience will be positive or negative based on the retailer selected (Bagozzi, Belanche, Casaló, and Flavián, 2016; Viejo-Fernández, Sanzo-Pérez, & Vázquez-Casielles, 2019). Herhausen et al. (2019) found a segment, similar to webrooming, which they call online-to-offline shopper where customers research products online before purchasing them in-store.

## **2.2.6 Channels and Touchpoints**

Channel usage has also been a research topic in multi-channel customer journey research. For example, in their research, Hall, Towers, and Shaw (2017) found that customers can use a variety of channels for product research. In their study, Li, Abbasi, Cheema, and Abraham (2020) concluded that the use of channels throughout the customer journey depends on if the purchase is hedonic or utilitarian. The authors point out that for hedonic purchases, customers look for pleasure, enjoyment, and fun, so they tend to prefer using social media and browsing on the retailer's website; meanwhile, for utilitarian purchases, customers prefer channels that are simpler and more effective to compare alternative options.

Emotions and hedonic aspects have a crucial part in the adoption of mobile channels, as the use of mobile shopping is seen as entertainment (Thakur, 2016; Tyrväinen & Karjaluoto, 2019). In addition, studies have found that mobile shopping can enhance the quality of life as it increases happiness and allows customers to escape from reality (Dennis, Alamanos, Papagiannidis, & Bourlakis, 2016; Tyrväinen & Karjaluoto, 2019). In their systematic literature review, Tyrväinen and Karjaluoto (2019) found that mobile channels are regularly used as a searching channel rather than a purchasing channel, and these mobile channels together with physical and online settings influence a customer's experience. The authors also state that the use of mobile devices makes customers feel more in control, meaning that if they use their mobile phones to search, their feeling of control increases which can influence purchase intent. Researchers state that mobile channels have generated new approaches when searching for products (Tyrväinen & Karjaluoto, 2019; Yang & Kim, 2012).

According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), customers and firms interact across a multitude of touchpoints in numerous channels and media, which has resulted in customer experience being more socially oriented. The term ‘touchpoint’ has different definitions across the customer journey research field. According to Zomerdijk and Voss (2010), touchpoints happen every time a customer comes into contact with or “touches” a firm through various channels and on different occasions. Similarly, Clatworthy (2011) describes touchpoints as the points when a firm and a customer come into contact, and as they establish a connection between these two, touchpoints are fundamental to customer experience. On the other hand, Voorhees, Fombelle, Gregoire, Bone, Gustafsson, Sousa, and Walkowiak (2017) state that touchpoints are a firm’s approach for facilitating the encounter and interactions with the customer, and these touchpoints can be online or physical. Touchpoints have also been defined as any occurrence an individual perceives or relates to a brand or company; these occurrences can be verbal, such as advertising, or non-verbal, such as product usage (Homburg, Jozić, & Kuehnl, 2017; Rudkowski et al., 2020).

The difference between channels and touchpoints is that touchpoints include all forms of one-way and two-way interactions between a customer and a company that entails any transaction or exchange of information, such as interactions between customers (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015; Herhausen et al., 2019). In addition, touchpoints can be either direct or indirect. According to Meyer and Schwager (2007), direct contacts might include physical interactions, while indirect contacts are encompassed by word-of-mouth, ads, news, and more (Varnali, 2019). Additionally, Ieva and Ziliani (2018) stated that word-of-mouth is a touchpoint that is difficult to control for a firm.

Nowadays, the customer journey can be highly complex due to the increase in touchpoints between the company and the customer (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, touchpoints have an impact on the journeys customers go through, as journeys might vary in length and complexity, and each customer has a unique experience and expectations (Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017). Additionally, customers engage in a variety of actions before conducting a purchase decision; these include searching for information from various retailers and seeking approval from others online and offline (Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017). Varnali (2019) argues that the path that customer journeys undergo is dependent on touchpoints, and this will influence the customer experience; therefore, customers are able to design their own journeys. Similarly, Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) point out that the journey the customer goes through to accomplish a specific shopping goal, such as an information search or a purchase, is made up of a set of touchpoints.

In their research, Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) found seven types of touchpoints in relation to customer experience; these are encompassed by atmospheric, communicative, technological, employee-customer interaction, customer-to-customer interaction, and product interaction. According to the authors, atmospheric elements are the physical channels customers notice; this

is comprised of the attractiveness of the store, its layout and design, display, and ambiance. Furthermore, the ambiance is not only seen in a physical environment but also in a digital one, the atmospheric elements of the website or platform's images, colors, music, and design (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). The communicative elements are the retailer's one-sided communication aimed at the customer, for example, advertisements or promotions (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). Technological components are any direct interaction that the customer has with any technology when interacting with the retailer; for instance, the customer can interact with affiliated technology, such as the retailer's apps and websites, or with unaffiliated technology, such as social media platforms. Process elements are any activities the customer must perform to achieve a specific goal with the retailer, and it includes waiting time and mobility.

Employee and customer interactions are any direct or indirect interactions a customer and an employee have during the customer's encounter with the retailer, and it can include if the employee was helpful, the personalization of the service, and customer treatment. In their study, Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) found that direct employee-customer interaction was key, particularly in the in-store setting. Customer and customer interaction consist of any direct or indirect interactions between customers during the customer's encounter with the retailer, and examples of it include customer reviews and word-of-mouth. Lastly, product interactions are any direct or indirect interactions between the customer and the retailer's product; it includes quality of the product, assortment, direct interactions (product usage), and indirect interactions (looking at displays). For example, an informant in the study conducted by Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) argued that an indirect product interaction on the social media platform Instagram, a digital channel, persuaded her to purchase the product.

Touchpoint ownership and control have also been of huge debate in the customer journey research area. In their study, Towers and Towers (2021) categorized studies based on their taxonomy of touchpoints. For instance, Anderl, Schumann, and Kunz (2016) acknowledged customer-initiated and firm-initiated touchpoints; Baxendale, Macdonald, and Wilson (2015) identified retailer touchpoints, brand-owner touchpoints, and third-party touchpoints; Lemon and Verhoef (2016) have four categories: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external touchpoints; Herhausen et al. (2019) pointed out retailer-owned, competitor-owned, and additional touchpoints. Overall, Towers and Towers (2021) concluded that there was some consensus on differentiating the various types of touchpoints, which include touchpoints owned by the firm or brand-owner, touchpoints controlled by a partner, and touchpoints not controlled by a firm or partner. On the other hand, in their literature review, Becker and Jaakkola (2020) found that most researchers have focused on firm-controlled touchpoints; however, the authors state that this is a problem as customer journeys are multichannel and have a variety of touchpoints and some of these are outside the control of the company as said by Bolton, McColl-Kennedy, Cheung, Gallan, Orsingher, Witell, and Zaki (2018) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016).

In their research, Rudkowski et al. (2020) investigated touchpoint ownership issues, meaning who is the owner of the touchpoint, meaning who is in control of the touchpoint in marketplace-based pop-ups (MBPUs). Rudkowski et al. (2020) based the touchpoint ownership in their study on the four categories that have been stated by Lemon and Verhoef (2016): brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), brand-owned touchpoints are controlled and created by the company and consist of advertising, loyalty schemes, websites, and any aspects of the marketing mix that are controlled by the firm, such as product attributes, packaging, and price. Partner-owned touchpoints are jointly controlled and created by the company and its partners; examples include marketing agencies or distribution partners (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The authors further argue that customer-owned touchpoints are any actions taken by the customer that has a role in customer experience, but the company, its partners, and externals do not exert control or influence. The authors state that in the pre-purchase stage, this touchpoint occurs when the customer is reflecting on their personal needs or wants, and in the purchase is the customer's payment method selection. Nevertheless, customer-owned touchpoints become more significant and frequent in the post-purchase stage as personal consumption and product usage take place (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Also, the role of customer-owned touchpoints has expanded due to co-creation with firms. Lastly, social/external touchpoints are others that play a part in the customer's experience and are composed of other customers, sources of information, and surroundings (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

### **2.2.7 Customer Journey and Social Media**

Demmers, Weltevreden, and van Dolen (2020) state that social media platforms have quickly grown to be an essential touchpoint in the customer journey. In addition, smartphones are now used by customers in their daily lives, which influence shopping habits and the purchasing process (Grewal, Roggeveen, & Nordfält, 2017; Jocevski, Arvidsson, Miragliotta, Ghezzi, & Mangiaracina, 2019; Pantano & Priporas, 2016). Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, and Alamanos (2021a) argue that digital technology has become a very influential factor for customers as it mediates their experience. Technology is now employed by customers to remember their journey and use social media to look for approval in the pre-purchase and post-purchase stages (Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2021a). Hence, social media can have an influence on the customer's ultimate purchasing decision (Hildebrand & Schlager, 2019; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2021a).

According to the study conducted by Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011), social media is utilized by customers for a variety of purposes, such as looking for information from brand-generated and customer-generated content, brand affiliation, interacting with brands, associating with a brand community, and looking at brand-generated content for entertainment (Demmers, Weltevreden, & van Dolen, 2020). Demmers, Weltevreden, and van Dolen (2020)

add that as the customer's goals are different in the stages of the customer journey, the type of content on social media that best meets the customer's needs during one stage of the journey might not satisfy their needs in the following stage.

Furthermore, the way customers and brands interact has been drastically transformed by digital media as customers are now able to participate in the co-creation of brand meaning via social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Klein et al., 2020; Leeflang et al., 2014). Nowadays, peer-to-peer media such as customer reviews, social media usage, and word-of-mouth are crucial forms to get brand information like firm-controlled advertising (Klein et al., 2020; Jahn and Kunz, 2012). Hall, Towers, and Shaw (2017) add that customers utilize technology devices to recall product information; for instance, customers can bookmark websites, save pictures, send emails to themselves, and use social media to perform this activity.

## **2.2 Social media and its practices**

### **2.2.1 Social commerce**

Social media has made it possible for people all over the world to connect (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and has given rise to new habits, practices, and research. There is today a significant amount of research investigating how customers develop trust between each other in e-commerce and social media environments (Wang, Wang, Lin, & Abdullat, 2021; Colicev, Kumar & O'Connor, 2021; Hajli, Sims, Zadeh, & Richard, 2017; Hajli, 2014), which further has intertwined and developed into a new research field titled "social commerce" or "s-commerce" (Attar, Almusharraf, Alfawaz, & Hajli, 2022). Social commerce is defined by Attar et al., (2022) as a platform that combines both e-commerce and social interactions and contributions between users, which now is evident in multiple social media platforms since the introduction of various features that promotes both interactivity and commerce (Üçok Hughes, Bandoni, & Pehlivan, 2016), such as Instagram Shopping (Instagram.com) that combines social interaction with the ease of shopping. Social commerce is a rather novel but growing field of research that emphasizes how social media interactions are affecting the way customers practice shopping whilst at the same time being engaged with friends, other customers, or the firm's content (Amblee & Bui, 2011; Hajli et al., 2017).

The increase in social commerce has led to customers developing new shopping practices that have emerged with social commerce (Hajli, 2014) that we have mentioned previously, such as webrooming (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014; Viejo-Fernández, Sanzo-Pérez, & Vázquez-Casielles, 2019; Herhausen et al., 2019), showrooming (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014; Viejo-Fernández, Sanzo-Pérez, & Vázquez-Casielles, 2019), rating and reviewing products (Hajli, 2014; Klein et al., 2020; Hajli, 2015; Kim & Johnson, 2016), and participating in brand communities (Rosenthal & Brito, 2017) whilst additionally looking at behaviors in this new



social context such as customer-decision-making (Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016; Chen & Shen, 2015), information seeking (Hajli et al., 2017) and purchase decisions (Cheung, Xiao, & Liu, 2014). These new shopping practices are increasingly supported by social collaboration and participation that are supported by the interactive environments created by social media (Hajli, 2014).

These practices have changed how customers interact with multiple touchpoints when buying products. The research in practices such as showrooming and webrooming has been considered as a behavior for information gathering (Hajli, 2014) or to gain social support (Liang, Ho, Li & Turban, 2011; Hajli, 2014) where customers have the ambition to make the best choices in multiple aspects. User-generated content within the sphere of social commerce has been investigated as electronic word-of-mouth, reviews, and ratings (Hajli, 2014; Klein et al., 2020; Hajli, 2015; Kim & Johnson, 2016; Amblee & Bui, 2011; Kim & Johnson, 2016; Zhang, Lu, Gupta, & Zhao, 2014 ). These have been considered to be of increasing importance when customers exercise their shopping and search for what to buy next. These practices in social commerce are considered collaborative from the customers' side since they provide companies with information although at the same time promoting commercial activities toward other potential customers (Attar et al., 2022).

Additional insights into how customers use social media in a more secretive manner have been done by Audy Martínek, Caliandro, & Denegri-Knott (2022), where they explore the practice they call lurking. They consider this concept to include the practices that take place in social media without the need for producing new content. This includes the reasoning behind why and how they save posts, searches for content, and users and how they like posts (Audy Martínek, Caliandro, & Denegri-Knott, 2022). The authors uncover behaviors that are motivated by things such as being private, gathering information, discussing with friends, and considering purchases. Therefore, the user-generated content and comments visible on social media are not the only interactions taking place; instead, there is more going on behind the scenes and in people's private spheres.

There has been a considerable amount of research that explores what makes customers on social media trust brand-generated content and user-generated content (Kim & Johanson, 2016; Colicev, Kumar & O'Connor, 2019), likewise comparing how customers interact and perceive them (Brubaker & Wilson, 2018). Researchers such as Kim and Johnson (2016), Zhang and Benyoucef (2016), and Chen and Shen (2015) have discovered that user-generated content, such as word-of-mouth, ratings, and reviews, constitutes impactful trust in other customers and generates new possibilities for companies to connect with their customers in the post-purchase stage. Trust has been a well recognized area of research in the social commerce field (eg. Chen & Shen, 2015; Hajli, 2014; Hajli et al., 2017). This is because trust is considered to facilitate

purchase decisions (Hajli, 2014; Hajli et al., 2017), whilst reviews are considered to be the most trustworthy influence for other customers (Amblee & Bui, 2011).

Therefore, the trust aspect is vital in social commerce since it is easier for customers to communicate with a larger number of people while also connecting directly with the brand in question. This has led to widespread interest in attempting to understand how these practices work. Electronic word-of-mouth is when customers participate in producing some type of content in an online setting that spreads the word of a brand, product, or service, for example, which might impact brand reputation and future customer behaviors (Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017). When trying to understand what motivates customers to participate with brands and produce content online, the term customer engagement has been proposed (Van Doorn et al., 2010).

### **2.2.2 User-generated content and customer engagement**

Social media have made new interactions between both firms and their customers but also customers to other customers. Engagement had previously been used in advertisement to understand how successful the company was at connecting both emotionally and rationally to its customers (Bowden, 2009), which later received increasing interest. Social media together with engagement research developed a new element of customer management research which became customer engagement (Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010). The novelty of social media back in 2010 when Verhoef, Reinartz, and Krafft (2010) wrote their article, they still argue for the predicted importance of social media and connected networking, which would escalate the relevance of customer engagement research.

There has been a significant amount of research that applies customer engagement in an attempt to understand how the customer engages in the social media environment (Kim & Park, 2013; Wahid, Karjaluo, Taiminen & Asiati, 2023; Wang & Kim, 2017; Quach, Shao, Ross & Thaichon, 2020; Sashi, 2012), what motivates the engagement (Kim & Park, 2013; De Vries & Carlson, 2014; Hamzah, Abdul Wahab & Waqas, 2021) and how it can be leveraged by firms (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Previous research has predominantly focused on quantitative measurements where they attempt to measure customer engagement by comparing likes, shares, and comments (Wahid et al., 2023) and therefore fall short of uncovering the deeper qualities of customer engagement in social media. Research often has preferred a firm focus (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014), which then has led to a lack of research regarding the social interactions among customers whilst these interactions are increasing (Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017; Bilgihan, Kandampully, & Zhang, 2016) and have considerable influence on decisions (Heller Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

In contemporary society, the interconnectedness of users is ever so relevant to consider. Van Doorn et al., (2010) argued for the definition of customer engagement as an engagement that

goes beyond the monetary transaction of value. Among some researchers, this definition is agreed upon (eg. Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010), whilst other authors build on this definition and additionally argue that a transaction must take place for customer engagement to exist (Kumar, Aksoy, Donkers, Venkatesan, Wiesel, & Tillmanns, 2010) and attempt to uncover the motivations behind the engagement. Groeger, Moroko, and Hollebeek (2016) identified that non-customers can exercise customer engagement in a social media setting regardless of intent to purchase. Therefore, they argue that customer engagement and co-production of value are not limited to the actual monetary transaction. More recently, there has been an increasing interest in attempting to understand how customer engagement works in a social media setting (Harrigan, Evers, Miles, & Daly, 2018; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Hollebeek, Kulikovskaja, Hubert, & Grunert, 2023). This since it has been argued that customer engagement with brands is a more interactive aspect rather than relationships and involvement, which is considered to be suitable to understand what is going on in a social media setting (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Hollebeek et al., 2023).

Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014) explain that the customer engagement standpoint builds upon the three disciplines; firstly the service dominant logic, which emphasizes the co-creation of value between customers and the firm (eg. Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Grönroos, 2006), consumer culture theory that focuses on customers (eg. Arnould & Thompson, 2005) and relationship marketing that emphasize a relationship focus (Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2012). Hollebeek, Glynn, and Brodie (2014) identify a correlation between the activation of affective customer brand engagement, which then might lead to increased customer loyalty. The authors argue the creation of positive customer brand engagement might originate from the affection component, which then leads to positive consequences for the brand. Therefore, they conclude that it is more effective to invest in influencing customers' affective aspect, which then increases the chances of customer engagement with the brand and their loyalty (Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014).

Hollebeek (2011) investigates customer brand engagement, which is a sub-concept of customer engagement that she defines as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement which customers have toward interactions with a brand. For customer brand engagement, the author found immersion, passion, and activation as important themes (Hollebeek, 2011). The first theme, immersion, according to the author, is the level of concentration the customer feels when engaged with a brand. This implies that the more focused they are when involved with a brand, the more they engage with it. The second theme, passion, is described as a loving state where customers feel strongly about the brand. Therefore, the passion findings signify a connection between the brand and the customer, where the customer feels positive effects from the brand (Hollebeek, 2011). The third theme the author identified in research was activation which is described as the level of energy, how much time they spent with the brand, and how much effort they put into the interactions. This signifies that customers engaged with a brand are often more

likely to put effort into co-produce content. Furthermore, Hollebeek (2011) contributed to research by providing insights into how customers engage with brands.

When studying luxury brands and customer engagement in social media, Quach and Thaichon (2017) found four resources that customers experience: love, status, information, and services. The first three, love, status, and information were expressed by the customer, whilst the last one, services, was given by the brand in the form of interactions. Love appeared when customers showed affection towards the brand on social media. Status expressed social statuses, such as exclusiveness and prestige, while information was regarded as advice, knowledge, and instructions. Services were the activities offered to the customers online by the official brand. All of these different resources can, according to Quach and Thaichon (2017), can both be used in a co-creating or co-destructing manner; for example, if the exclusiveness of a brand is diluted in social media or if the expected return of the customer is not fulfilled.

Van Doorn et al., (2010) defined customer engagement behaviors as practices that reached beyond the purchase and factors such as customers' attitudes, goals, affective stage, and resources. These are seen by the authors as customer factors that can affect how customer engagement behaviors develop. Dolan, Conduit, Fahy and Goodman (2016) continued on this definition of customer engagement behaviors and attempted to include social media in their reasoning. They found that social media customers' engagement behaviors (SMEB) might be categorized into seven different ways in a social media environment, namely co-creation, positive contribution, consumption, dormancy, detachment, negative contributions, and co-destruction (Dolan et al., 2016).

According to Dolan et al. (2016), The first engagement behavior, co-creation, is described as when customers initiate content creation on social media. The second practice, positive contribution, is described as more passive positive engagement, such as liking and indicating positivity towards the brand. The third engagement behavior, consumption, is low-level engagement, where the customer solely fulfills the purchase without interacting. The fourth category, dormancy, is inactive engagement, where a customer does not participate in any type of engagement. The fifth category, detachment, is described as quiet and inactive negative engagement. This could, for example, be unliking a page without making any remark about it. The sixth category is negative contributions, where customers engage with existing posts to make negative remarks which are aimed to work as negative word-of-mouth or towards the company. The seventh and last customer engagement behavior identified by Dolan et al., (2016) is co-destruction which is when customers actively engage in creating negative content and collaboratively might destroy the value of the brand. They argue that this framework can be utilized to increase understanding of what type of customer engagement is taking place in a social media setting.

Customer engagement and its reach have increased since the introduction of social media. Customer behaviors have dramatically changed over the period since social media became a widely accepted social practice. Now user-generated content in the form of posting online, reviewing brands, and electronic word-of-mouth is impacting and influencing customer decisions making (Pantano & Gandini, 2018). Pantano and Gandini (2018) argue that user-generated content on social media might function as a social support that assists customers when collecting information. Üçok Hughes et al., (2016) argue that social media has facilitated that customers now can control the narratives over brands. This they call, opposite to storytelling, storygiving instead through the use of hashtags on social media allows customers to co-create stories and values surrounding the brand. Interestingly, Ngarmwongnoi et al., (2020) focus on how electronic word-of-mouth influences the customer journey. In their research, they encountered that the influence of word-of-mouth had different effects on the customer during their journey; in the pre-purchase stage, the customers considered it to be valuable information and knowledge from other customers, whilst they perceived it with more skepticism later in their journey. Ngarmwongnoi et al., (2020) also argued that customers in the post-purchase stage participate in electronic word-of-mouth to validate the decision they made. They, therefore, consider this practice as both an input and output of the decision-making process.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

*In the following chapter, we introduce the theoretical framework this study relies upon. The theoretical framework we have chosen consists of brand publics, the social customer journey, and the consumer production journey. Aside from these theories, we considered other marketing theories such as the consumer decision-making process or the AIDA model. We also considered other topics to understand social media, for instance, media planning or influencer marketing. However, we finally decided to choose these three theories as they are significant and interesting together since we aim to understand how the customer journey is influenced by customers or potential customers sharing their experiences on social media platforms. Brand publics is a term that emerges due to social media and the aim to understand customer online behavior, the continuous focus of brands in these types of platforms, and the ephemeral communication in social networks. This theory allows us to analyze user-generated content as this is one of the focuses of the theory, alongside the comments posted regarding this type of content. On the other hand, the social customer journey theory is a framework that can help us understand how a person's customer journey is influenced by others who interact either directly or indirectly. Moreover, the consumer production journey is a theory that can assist us to understand how social media, in this case, brand publics, is enabling customers to create value for other customers. Lastly, brand publics and the customer journey are two areas that do not appear to have been researched together before. Therefore, as this seems to be the first research exploring these two fields, we believed that combining these two areas could bring a deeper understanding and contribution.*

#### **3.1 Brand Publics**

When researching how brands were used in social media by customers, Arvidsson and Caliendo (2016) coined the term brand publics which implies that brands are used by customers with other intentions than previous researchers had identified. The background of their research was based on the brand community research originally pioneered by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001). After concluding the starting point of the research field, they go further into explaining how the internet has enabled brand communities to evolve different social brand practices and therefore developed research (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Further, they build upon other concepts relating to brands and values, such as identities (Cova, Kozinet and Shankar, 2007), linking values (Cova, 1997), and co-creation of value (e.g. Lusch & Vargo, 2004; Grönroos, 2006) before going into social media.

When looking at the social media aspects of brand communities, they argue for virtual communities (eg. Rheingold, 1993; Kozinets, 2002) whilst at the same time disputing that people's sole purpose in these communities would be to interact with others (eg. McQuarrie, Miller & Phillips, 2013). Instead, by adding research surrounding the public research, which

instead focuses on meditation (eg. Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Bastos, Raimundo & Travitzki, 2013; Arvidsson, 2013) contrary to the focus on interactions in brand communities. Their use of publics to understand their research gives insights into a more individualistic, pluralistic, and publicity-seeking tool which customers can join and use with different motivations. Therefore, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) were able to spot more individualistic customer behavior where the conversation was not around the brand in specific; instead, the customers that posted pictures and hashtags of the brand had another purpose behind it.

As aforementioned, brand publics were introduced since a new customer behavior related to the use of brands on social media was identified. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) describe a brand public as a structured media environment that is maintained and held together by continuous mediation practices through devices like a hashtag. With the term brand publics, the authors attempted to show how customers used both social media and brands for their own publicity. This since the content that customers published with the hashtags, and the brands did not need to encourage interactions or community surrounding the brand. Instead, they saw that the customer used the brand as a means of publicity and to communicate their own message (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016).

Hence, the publishing in itself was not aimed towards the brand or attempted to start a conversation with others; instead, the customers wanted publicity and to have recognition of being with the brand. This together with the hashtags that the customers used in the posts that collected all the brand posts together. Therefore, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) noticed that the brands were applied more as a public for recognition and that the hashtags worked to collect the independent brand stories together. They describe it as social forms that are based on interest and mediation, but not on interaction nor are structured, and due to customer culture are aimed towards publicity rather than identity. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) further argue that although there is not a constant interaction in regards to the brand, the mediation practice is continuous which allows the brand publics to remain together. Furthermore, imitation is a key element in brand publics as the people involved emulate one another's actions by voicing their thoughts on the topic being discussed using the same mediation device but do not interact directly with one another (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). This term made the individualistic and publicity practices that occur in social media visible and possible to explore further than the brand communities would have allowed.

After the introduction of the brand public term back in 2016 there has been an increase in social media use and changes in practices. Today, social media has allowed algorithms based on likes, hashtags, shares, or views to determine which kind of content that should be available for you in your personalized entertainment in apps such as TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook (Smith, 2021). Directly after Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) introduced the term it was largely applied in the recognized field of brand communities in attempts to understand specific phenomena (Časas,

Palaima & Mironidze, 2016), understand the selfie phenomenon (Lim, 2016) and how consumers create meaning on social media (Cavusoglu & Demirbag-Kaplan, 2017) just to mention a few. More recently researchers have shifted focus and started to apply brand publics to understand how more individualistic practices on social media contribute to discursive interactions (Lima & Pessôa, 2023), arguing for integrative brand system theory (Padela, Wooliscroft & Ganglmair-Wooliscroft, 2022) and how they influence political activism (Kim & Rim, 2023). The most popular articles that have built on Arvidsson & Caliandros' (2016) research since 2016 are mainly focused on social media and value creation (Eckhardt, Houston, Jiang, Lamberton, Rindfleisch, & Zervas, 2019), establishing the phenomenon related to consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017) and how the practices in these new peer-to-peer markets develop (Perren & Kozinets, 2018). This shows the influence of their findings on how customers use social media to practice themselves individually and how brands can manifest as a mediation to publicly display a message.

### **3.2 The Social Customer Journey**

The social customer journey is a framework proposed by Hamilton et al. (2021). With this framework, the authors aim to present the concept of "traveling companions", also called social others, who are present in the customer journey by interacting, indirectly or directly, with the customer during one or more stages in their journey. Furthermore, both the customer's and the traveling companions' journeys can be influenced due to how interactive customer journeys can be. Hamilton et al. (2021) add that everyone can be influenced in these journeys, including individuals, groups, or the entire society. The argument for the social customer journey is based on the notion that customers, when going through the decision-making process, are influenced by their social circle, emerging technologies, and social changes; hence, these can influence purchase behavior. In addition, the rise of social media platforms has shaped the idea of social proximity, as even those who are not socially close to customers can have an impact on their choices. Also, after conducting a purchase, customers usually share details about the product they purchased on web platforms or social networks, which can influence the decision others take (Hamilton et al., 2021).

In their theoretical model, Hamilton et al. (2021) present a linear journey consisting of six steps: motivation, information search, evaluation, decision, satisfaction, and post-decision sharing. In the model, there are bidirectional arrows aimed to represent how customers and travel companions influence each other. There is also a gray figure that represents another customer in case that a joint journey is happening. Additionally, the framework has circular arrow loops that aim to emphasize the continuing relationships customers built with retailers or brands based on repeat purchasing behavior (Court et al., 2009; Hamilton et al., 2021; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Nevertheless, the authors argue that the linear portrayal proposed does not accurately reflect the



nature of the decision-making process as customers might repeatedly perform a stage or abandon the journey at any stage and then restart it.

Another important element discussed by Hamilton et al. (2021) in the social customer journey framework is the traveling companion's social distance. The authors argue that there are two types of social distance: proximal and distal. Proximal social others are often an individual that offers clear and distinct inputs to the customer's journey and frequently have a strong relationship with the customer, and is present and belongs to the customer's in-group (Hamilton et al., 2021). For example, a proximal social other can be a close in-person friend. On the other hand, distal social others can refer to broader groups or the entire society, where members might not be recognizable, present, or proximal, and in some instances, they can be unknown to the customer (Hamilton et al., 2021). If a distal social other is an individual, this person tends to be not personally known by the customer; for example, an anonymous reviewer or a YouTuber.

The customer journey starts in the first stage, motivation, and is when the customer's motivation to begin a journey is influenced by social others through interactions or observations; for example, by seeing a friend's review or a social media post by a celebrity (Hamilton et al., 2021). The authors indicate that the second stage is information search which entails looking for product information through memory and external sources. Nowadays, for some purchases, the preferred source for information is other customers, and technological advances have allowed encountering word-of-mouth communication even from people who are not close (Hamilton et al., 2021). Although information search can still be obtained from proximal others, nowadays it is common for customers to look for information from distal others through product reviews or social media influencers (Chen, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2021). Furthermore, Hamilton et al. (2021) state that recent studies have shown the significance of reviews in the customer journey; nevertheless, customers also find information even when it is not specifically provided; for example, when other users show their interest on social media networks like Pinterest. Overall, the advancements in technology have led to this stage being larger and open-ended as customers' journeys are impacted by others, who would have never contributed to these journeys before (Hamilton et al., 2021).

The third stage is evaluation, and the actual input of the traveling companions is the most significant element in this stage (Hamilton et al., 2021). However, the way the information will be interpreted will depend on who is the information source. Also, due to the rise of new social information sources, such as social media influencers, it is critical to review established concepts of what constitutes a persuasive source (Hamilton et al., 2021). According to the authors, when evaluating a persuasive source, it can be seen as credible, trustworthy, likable, or attractive. Furthermore, on the Internet and social media platforms, credibility is built with factors such as the number of followers, likes, or reviews. Although social media influencers and bloggers can be considered distal, as customers can regularly interact with them, their relationship can gain

closeness and become proximal, which can increase credibility (Hamilton et al., 2021). Nevertheless, credibility can also change if a company is involved in the use of sponsored posts (Hamilton et al., 2021).

The fourth stage in the social customer journey is decision, and it is the end result of the three pre-decision stages, motivation, information search, and evaluation; this means that this stage represents every social influence experienced up to this point (Hamilton et al., 2021). Furthermore, the authors divide this stage into two states, the decide state, and the purchase state. The decide state is when the customer makes the decision to conduct the purchase, while the purchase state is the actual purchase. Similarly, to the past stages, technology has also shifted how others influence. For instance, in the retail environment, nowadays, customers can connect on social media with others through online video calls or other media to receive real-time feedback from people who are not physically close (Hamilton et al., 2021; Roggeveen, Grewal, & Schweiger, 2020).

Satisfaction is the fifth stage of the social customer journey, and social others can have an important role in determining how the customer's experience regarding the usage and evaluation of the product, as the travel companion's evaluations might have an impact on the customer's personal evaluation and result in a post-purchase regret (Hamilton et al., 2021). Travel companions can also help customers to have a complete experience regarding the purchased product. In addition to this, technological devices have resulted in a broader group of social others whom a customer might rely on regarding product consumption and product evaluation (Hamilton et al., 2021).

The sixth and final stage of the social customer journey is post-decision sharing (Hamilton et al., 2021). Usually, this can be done through word-of-mouth as this is a common sharing experience. The authors add that this process consists of customers telling their inner social circle about their purchasing decisions; nonetheless, due to social media and other platforms, people can now voice their opinions to a big audience of people the customer might not know. According to Hamilton et al. (2021), customers tend to share experiences as a way of communicating their identity. In today's digital age, people share their identities through their social media posts, which consist of books, music, brands, and influencers they follow (Hamilton et al., 2021). Post-decision sharing is performed as customers might do in order to affiliate with people, and it is done through a variety of forms. One of these is brand communities, and members bond with each other as they have a brand affiliation (Hamilton et al., 2021; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001).

Hamilton et al.'s (2021) article 'Traveling with Companions: The Social Customer Journey' has been referenced in a variety of studies in the marketing and management fields (Elsevier, 2023). For example, it has been used in articles regarding studies of psychological ownership frameworks (Morewedge, Monga, Palmatier, Shu & Small, 2021), customer experience journeys

and their loyalty loops (Siebert, Gopaldas, Lindridge, & Simões, 2020), to understand the decision-making process of hotel and homestay visitors in the sharing economy (Tajeddini, Rasoolimanesh, Gamage, & Martin, 2021), in a biometric analysis of influencer marketing (Abhishek & Srivastava, 2021), in systematic literature reviews of customer journeys and brand communities (Roy Bhattacharjee, Pradhan & Swani, 2022; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis & Alamanos, 2021a), and more.

### **3.3 The Consumer Production Journey**

The consumer production journey is a theoretical model presented by Dellaert (2019). This model is based on the notion that the emergence of digital technologies has served to better meet a customer's consumption needs while also allowing customers to generate more value for others (Dellaert, 2019). According to the author, the new consumer's co-production role is part of the sharing economy, and now firms have to reconsider their marketing strategies regarding the value creation model. These new co-production activities and structures are called consumer co-production networks. Dellaert (2019) defines the consumer production journey as the co-production process of the consumer where they do not have a traditional process, and the model directly takes into consideration that customers can bring value to others. Hence, this theoretical framework links co-production to the value chain through peer-to-peer selling or customer reviews (Dellaert, 2019). To build their proposed model, Dellaert (2019) ties the consumer co-production framework to the customer's decision-making journey. The author states that the four steps taken into consideration for the decision-making journey are: search, purchase, experience, and reflect.

As mentioned, the first step of the consumer's production journey is search. In the traditional customer journey, this is when a customer searches for a product to fulfill a consumption need, and this can be done by searching for information and thinking of the product's utility (Dellaert, 2019). Nevertheless, in the co-production journey, customers have a role in the traditional production process by performing several activities such as brand promotion (Kumar et al., 2010), giving recommendations, and co-designing products (Dellaert, 2019; Franke & Piller, 2004; von Hippel, 1986). The second stage of the framework is purchase, and in the traditional journey is when customers purchase an item or service that will meet their consumption needs and is done by comparing product alternatives (Dellaert, 2019). In the consumer production journey, consumers are now sellers and distributors and participate in social commerce on sites like Etsy or eBay (Dellaert, 2019; Stephen & Toubia, 2010).

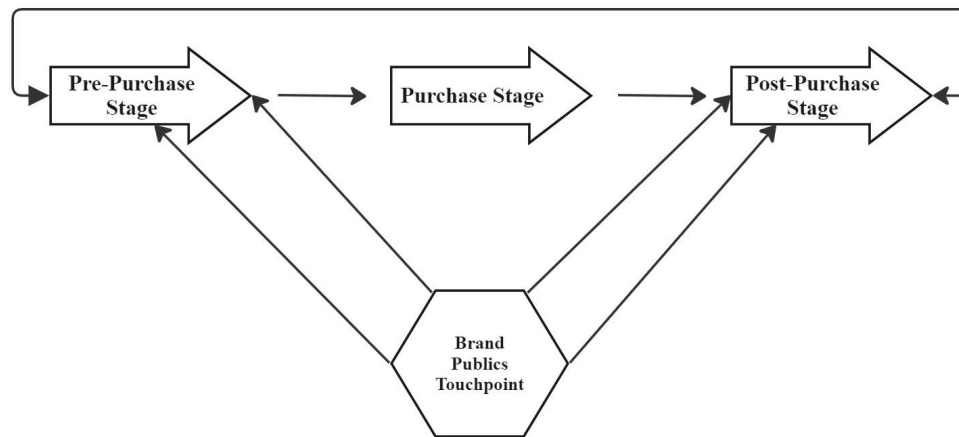
The third stage of the journey is experience, and the traditional journey is when the consumer goes through the product consumption experience (Dellaert, 2019). The author explains that usually, in this stage, consumers utilize the product purchased, and it generates a consumption utility experience. However, in the co-production journey, consumers can co-produce an

experience alongside another consumer (Dellaert, 2019). An example of this is when a consumer shares an asset with another person; for instance, with platforms like Uber or Airbnb (Dellaert, 2019; Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2017). The fourth and last step is reflection, and in the traditional customer journey, it is when the customer reflects on their consumption experience through quality, and the consumer might try to enhance their experience (Dellaert, 2019). The author adds that when the consumer is a co-producer, they can do some of these activities for others; for example, by writing online reviews that can help other customers. Lastly, Dellaert (2019) points out that the steps of the consumer production journey might be repetitive because the activities performed might be connected.

Dellaert's (2019) article 'The consumer production journey: marketing to consumers as co-producers in the sharing economy' has also been cited in multiple research, especially in the marketing field (Elsevier, 2023). For instance, the article has been referenced in studies regarding the sharing economy's implication in the marketing field (Eckhardt et al., 2019), value co-creation and co-destruction (Buhalis, Andreu, and Gnoth, 2020), customer value co-creation in online platforms (Meilhan, 2019), customer satisfaction in the omnichannel retail journey (Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2021b), systematic literature reviews about electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) and the customer journey (Babić Rosario, De Valck, and Sotgiu, 2020; Hamilton & Price, 2019; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis & Alamanos, 2021a), and more.

### **3.5 Summary of Theoretical Framework**

To bring these three theories together: brand publics, the social customer journey, and the consumer production journey, we propose our theoretical framework here (Figure 1). The objective of this theoretical framework is to serve as a guideline for our research. Although neither of the theories discusses the influence of customer experience and customer engagement in the journey, we consider them essential elements of this touchpoint and in the customer journey. Researchers have discussed that customer experience is a key and influential element in the customer journey, which makes them interconnected (e.g. Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Rudkowski et al., 2020; Edelman & Singer, 2015). Furthermore, studies have also stated that due to digital media and its interactiveness, customers can control their customer experience more (e.g. Cover, 2006; Nyström & Mickelsson, 2019). For our framework, we tie this with brand publics as this is a result of the interactivity of digital media and how customers can now shape their experiences by sharing online. On the other hand, customer engagement is a crucial aspect of social media and hence, brand publics. For example, previous research has indicated that engagement is an important element in social media and brands, and is heavily important due to the interconnectivity online (e.g. Van Doorn et al., 2010; Verhoef, Reinartz, & Krafft, 2010). Moreover, researchers also state that customer engagement is significant when it comes to value co-creation (Grönroos, 2006; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).



**Figure 1. Brand Publics as a touchpoint in the customer journey.** This figure illustrates the theoretical framework used to analyze the empirical material. The arrows from the brand public touchpoint towards the customer journey indicate how the touchpoint interacts with the customer journey.

Although it is clear that brand publics have been used in an attempt to understand how customers behave online and how they can influence each other, there have not been significant studies investigating the relationship between brand publics and the customer journey. Firstly, we base our model on Hamilton et al.'s (2021) social customer journey, and we connect this theory to brand publics as we believe they are a type of traveling companions in the customer journey. Furthermore, for our research, we consider brand publics as 'distal others' as they tend to not be physically close to customers and be unknown to them. Nevertheless, we consider them a touchpoint, which is an aspect Hamilton et al. (2021) do not mention or take into consideration.

Additionally, we believe that brand publics as a touchpoint is present in the three stages of the journey: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. This is due to the fact that brand publics are based on continuous mediation, making the touchpoint fluid and continuous. Hence, the touchpoint can be present at every stage. Furthermore, regarding the social customer journey, we consider this touchpoint is prevalent in the six steps of the journey: motivation, information search, evaluation, decision, satisfaction, and post-decision sharing. However, we believe it can be more present or noticeable in certain steps. Furthermore, depending on stages, brand publics perform different needs. Nevertheless, we consider the six steps of the social customer journey sub-stages of the standard three-stage customer journey.

The consumer production journey proposed by Dellaert (2019) helps us understand how brand publics are creating value for other customers and the brand. We also believe that it is present in the four steps considered by Dellaert (2019); however, as in the social customer journey, this

touchpoint can be more prevalent in certain stages. We think these steps are the search, the experience, and the reflect steps. Similarly, we also consider these sub-steps of the usual customer journey model. Motivation, information search, evaluation, and search are sub-stages of the pre-purchase stage. While the decision step is part of the purchasing stage. Lastly, satisfaction, post-decision sharing, experience, and reflect are sub-steps of the post-purchase stage.

Conclusively, our theoretical framework suggests that brand publics can work as a new touchpoint in the customer journey. In this research, we aim to apply our theoretical framework to gather an understanding of how social media platforms can be and are used as a touchpoint for customers to communicate, interact, and display their messages. With this, we aim to collect insights into how sharing of the customer journey on social media platforms might act as a touchpoint in the customer journey and how this touchpoint co-creates value. We will then further attempt to explore the touchpoint and develop a glimpse of knowledge of how it can take shape.

## **4. Methodology Chapter**

*In this chapter, we will introduce and map out the methodological choices made to execute this research. We discuss our thesis research philosophy and research strategy. Then, we explain our research method which is netnography. After, the sampling and selection of the retailer and social media platform were chosen to collect the data. Then, we illustrate our data collection and analytical processes. Afterward, we state our methodological reflections including our position as researchers, the quality of the study, and ethical considerations. Lastly, we state our research limitations.*

### **4.1 Research philosophy**

#### **4.1.1 Ontology**

According to Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe, and Valizade (2021), ontology is the philosophical study regarding “the nature of reality and existence” (p.72), and the majority of philosophical discussions will begin with ontology. The authors further argue that ontology can be divided into four categories: realism, internal realism, relativism, and nominalism. For this study, we follow a relativist position. This position argues that there can be several truths; however, the reality or fact will depend on the person that is observing the situation (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Hence, a fact is not found by itself but rather created by individuals (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, given the nature of our study, the findings are reliant on our personal perspectives and observations. Additionally, these findings are crafted and gathered by us through data collection and data analysis following several theories. Therefore, the findings were not found out but built.

#### **4.1.2 Epistemology**

After considering and deciding on which ontology we found most suitable for the purpose of this study, we discussed which epistemology paradigm was most relevant for us. For epistemology, in this research, we are leaning towards a more social constructivist paradigm. This paradigm argues that reality is not simply objective; instead, it is constructed and given meaning by people (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Hence, this paradigm focuses on how people understand the world and how they use language to mediate this sense. Since our research aims to provide insights into how the customer journey is influenced by people sharing their experiences on social media platforms, this is suitable for us. Combining our aim with the social constructivism paradigm allows us to ask relevant questions to our material and interpret it freely whilst at the same time being aware that our positions as researchers influence the findings in the material.

The influence of the researcher within the social constructivist paradigm is on one hand often considered one of its weaknesses (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), while on the other hand, it can be

considered a strength. Since this study does not aim to provide measurements and facts, which is more against the positivistic paradigm, but instead insights into social behavior the dependency on us as researchers is fundamental. This can make research more in-depth into a context and provide social findings. Therefore, since we as researchers are a part of it, we have to make sure to clearly state that our preconceptions and personal backgrounds will have an impact on the research. Hence, the research is not independent of us and our personal interpretations of incidents. Instead, we will attempt to clearly state our course of action when conducting our research, such as methods for gathering material and data analysis, so that other researchers can for themselves see how we came to our conclusions and if they trust our findings. In addition, we do this to endorse researchers to replicate our study to confirm, deny or further effortlessly develop our findings if interest would emerge in the future.

## **4.2 Research strategy - Qualitative**

When investigating this study's research aim and answering the chosen research questions, we came to the conclusion that it would be useful to apply a qualitative research method. This since qualitative research methods give a deeper understanding of underlying meanings and behaviors contrary to quantitative research, which aims to quantify measures (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To successfully conduct this qualitative research, we chose to design the research according to a constructivist research design suggested by Easterby-Smith and co-authors (2021). This design established our position and beliefs as researchers that are involved in the research process while additionally being more flexible and allowing the empirical material to be more in charge. Therefore, in this research, we aimed to deeply investigate and analyze the chosen phenomenon, customers sharing their customer journey online. This implies that this should not be considered as simply the truth outside of this specific context; instead, it should be treated as a focused study.

As we proceeded with this study, we decided to attempt to do an inductive approach which allowed us to let the crafted material lead the analysis and findings. After considering this, we concluded that it might be challenging to simply dive into the material without any previous theoretical knowledge, so therefore we decided to gather some previous research before starting. This whilst still being open to where the empirical material might lead us and allowing it to demand us to add or change our previous theoretical framework. This is in accordance with the abductive approach which gave us flexibility as researchers to move back and forth depending on where the findings took us (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This endorsed us to be reflexive, change when we needed to, and then thoroughly explore the chosen phenomenon.

When investigating previous studies into how researchers had approached the phenomenon of customer journeys on social media, we saw that they often applied a qualitative method, reviewing existing literature (e.g. Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Towers &



Towers, 2021) or combining different qualitative methods (eg. Rudkowski et al., 2020; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Additionally, when social media and social commerce were investigated the majority of researchers applied a quantitative approach which allowed them to count and make measurements, for example how trust is generated, and its effect on customers (e.g. Amblee & Bui, 2011; Hajli, 2014). These studies have on one hand, given great insight into some aspects of social media while, on the other hand, sometimes lacking a deeper understanding of the social context. Therefore, we thought that our research approach can contribute to the area when developing a deeper understanding of what is happening. In addition, the qualitative approach we have is in-line with how Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) conducted their research into brand publics and social media. Therefore, since our research aimed to apply the concept of brand publics, our chosen research approach, together with netnography as the method for gathering data would be sufficient to develop knowledge of the phenomenon.

## **4.3 Research Method**

### **4.3.1 Netnography**

In order to gather insights into the chosen phenomenon of where social media constructs a touchpoint in the customer journey, we needed a method that allowed us to see what was going on in a social media platform. Therefore, after looking at research that had a similar phenomenon where they investigated social media and user-generated content (e.g. Abidin, 2021; Schellewald, 2023; Su, Baker, Doyle, & Yan, 2020), we came to the conclusion that content analysis would be suitable for our research aim. Furthermore, as we were researching social media, we believed netnography to be the most suitable research method for this study.

Kozinets (1998) introduced the concept of netnography where he argued that netnography could be an interesting method to understand customer cultures and communities. Since then there have been significant advances, and netnography is being used to understand other customer behaviors. Heinonen and Medberg (2018) argues that netnography offers great opportunities for researchers to investigate customers and gain valuable insights and has been rapidly growing within marketing research. When reviewing marketing research that applies netnography as their method, she noticed that this field has developed into different streams of research and is used in other ways than first envisioned. Additionally, the author argues that there are potentially significant interesting findings to be discovered when doing netnography since more and more customer activities taking place in an online environment whilst customers now are extensively used to using the Internet (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). Moreover, a netnographic approach was employed by Arvidsson & Caliandro (2016) for their research on brand publics.

Heinonen and Medberg (2018) argue that the rise in the popularity of social media has led to social media platforms being extremely appealing for studies regarding a netnography research

approach. The authors add that the study of social media has also become important as mobile internet usage has expanded quickly throughout the world. In addition, research has indicated that the growth of the netnographic research approach in the marketing field might be a reflection of the increase in customers' online activities (Dumitricia & Gaden, 2009; Heinonen and Medberg, 2018). Along with this, netnography is a helpful approach for researchers who are aiming to follow and understand customers online as nowadays their lives are moving into the Internet through their constant usage (Kozinets, 2006; Heinonen and Medberg, 2018; Rokka, 2010). Tavakoli and Mura (2018) argue that the popularity of netnography research has been raising in the business research field as now plenty of studies had been using this method aiming at understanding customers' behavior (Gholamhosseinzadeh, Chapuis, & Lehu, 2021). As mentioned previously, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) used netnography to gather data on the social media site Twitter that discussed anything in relation to the luxury brand Louis Vuitton. The authors then analyzed the information, which led them to coin the term brand publics. Therefore, we considered the use of netnography to gain further insights into how customers interact on social media and further understand the practices of brand publics as a touchpoint in the customer journey.

## **4.4 Selection**

### **4.4.1 Selection of retailer – Miniso**

To select a retailer, we decided to conduct purposive sampling. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling method. The authors argue that in this form of sampling, entities are evaluated to decide if they fulfill the criteria, and if they do, they will be included in the sample. These criteria need to be determined by the researchers. We choose three elements that constitute the criteria to find the retailer that will be explored. First, since we wanted insight into the lifestyle retail segment the sample had to be a lifestyle retailer. Their product offerings can include clothing, houseware, stationery, electronic products, makeup, and more. Second, the lifestyle retailer must have a large social media presence, which we considered to be above a hundred thousand followers. Finally, there had to be a vast amount of user-generated content posted on social media platforms through hashtags and other search tools, which meant above 100 million views. Based on this, we found four possible retailers that could be examined. The four retailers found were Flying Tiger, Miniso, and Muji.

Nevertheless, based on the suitability for the research question, and as they have the largest presence in user-generated content posted on social media, the chosen brand for this study was Miniso. Miniso is a Chinese lifestyle retailer that has entered 105 markets over the world and is attracting over one billion customers (Miniso.com, n.d.). Furthermore, Miniso is a low-cost retailer founded in 2013, and as of 2023, the company has more than 5,400 stores (Miniso, 2023). Furthermore, Miniso sells a wide range of products, including electronics, cosmetics, stationary, and homeware. The stores' aesthetics, formats, and products offered are inspired by

Japanese design (Miniso, 2023), making it a unique shopping experience. Miniso has been described by Forbes to be building a global empire (Grant, 2019). Additionally, FundingFuel calls Miniso a “mega-success” where Miniso, as a brick-and-mortar retailer, is able to compete with e-commerce (CKGSB Knowledge, 2017).

Meanwhile, Miniso is also active on the social media platform TikTok (Arangarajan, 2022). Currently, as of today (April 2023), the official TikTok page of Miniso (@minisoofficial\_) has over 1.8 million followers, and they have in total of 19 million likes on all their posts (TikTok, 2023a). These numbers are restricted to brand-generated posts, where Miniso shares short videos. However, occasionally, they also repost user-generated posts on their official pages. In addition to this, the firm has a digital marketing strategy that consists of opening TikTok accounts for some of the markets they have entered. For example, some of their accounts with the most followers include Miniso México (@minisomx), with over 4.6 million followers (TikTok, 2023b); Miniso Colombia (@minisocolombia), with approximately 2.6 million followers (TikTok, 2023c); and Miniso Cambodia (@minisocambodia), with over 800 thousand followers (TikTok, 2023d). When searching for hashtags on TikTok, the #miniso hashtag has 2 billion views (TikTok, 2023e) indicating that there is a significant number of people interested in watching videos related to the Miniso brand. Miniso’s popularity on social media platforms makes this a relevant phenomenon for this research to investigate.

#### **4.4.2 Selection of platform - TikTok**

Similarly to the selection of the retailer, we conducted purposive sampling when choosing a social media platform to collect data. To constitute the criteria, we based the selection of the platform that will be explored on Kozinets (2002) and Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016). Kozinets (2002) argues that to find an online community that is in line with the netnography study that will be conducted, there are five preferable elements the community should have. First, it should have a topic or group pertinent to the research questions. Second and third, it needs a significant number of postings and a high amount of people participating in the community. Fourth, it needs to provide rich data with depth and descriptions. Lastly, there need to be community member interactions that will answer the research question. In addition to this, we also based our selection on the research conducted by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016). For their study on brand publics, they choose the social media platform Twitter, and they argue this was primarily due to their research focusing on social formations with very little interaction and where there is a more ephemeral nature. Hence, Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) mention they replaced netnography’s common focus on forums’ discussions and interactions with examining posts shared using hashtags and other mediating tools.

Although Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) use Twitter, we have decided to select the social media platform TikTok as the chosen platform for our study as the main element for brand public

studies can also be found here, in addition to having all the aspects mentioned by Kozinets (2002) for selecting a particular online community. In addition, the platform was also selected on the basis of the popularity seen on this app regarding Miniso, the retailer chosen for this research. TikTok is a social media application that was released in 2018, and it is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese technology company (Tidy & Smith, 2020). According to Forbes, in 2021, TikTok reported that it had reached one billion active users per month, which was accomplished in a shorter amount of time in contrast to its competitors, Facebook and Instagram (Dellatto, 2021).

Furthermore, TikTok is an application that primarily encourages users to interact with content that is tailored to their interests and wants, and this approach endorses user-generated content to reach a larger audience than traditional social media platforms, which have been built around followers and suggests content based on what the user has previously interacted with (Herrman, 2019). The British newspaper, *The Guardian*, stated that TikTok's popularity increased because of the pandemic, and it has become a place where people talk about TV shows, the government, and current world news (Stokel-Walker, 2022). However, TikTok has not only changed the way people get informed about news and popular culture, but it has also become a primary source for finding new product information (TikTok for Business, 2022).

Additionally, and as mentioned previously, TikTok published a study where they state the platform has modified the path to purchase as now it is an infinite loop. Although TikTok released this study more than a year ago, we did not find any research conducted that combines the customer journey field with this app. Nevertheless, there have been plenty of articles that have chosen to do netnographic research on this platform. Petrovic (2023) conducted a study on TikTok regarding the use of this app in Japan and how it has become a substitute for in-person karaoke. Herrick, Hallward, and Duncan (2021) employed netnographic research on TikTok to conduct a thematic analysis on content creation about eating disorder recovery. While Su et al. (2020) used netnography to find how athletes engaged in relationship marketing with their fans through TikTok during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, as per our search for articles, we appear to be the first to study brand publics and the customer journey with TikTok videos. We have chosen TikTok over other social media platforms due to the nature of the user-generated content which this research focused on; plus, the report published by TikTok for Business (2022) indicates that it is a platform that needs to be studied in conjunction with the customer journey. In addition, the results of our research could offer interesting insights as Heinonen and Medberg (2018) state that newer social media platforms provide visual information such as videos which can strongly complement traditional data.

## 4.5 Data Collection

### 4.5.1 Data collection

The data collection process began on the 6th of April 2023 when a new TikTok account was created with the purpose of gathering data for this research. A new account was created since the content recommendations made on this app are a result of an algorithm that relies on previous interactions the user makes with the platform's content; therefore, every user has a different 'For You Page' (Newberry, 2023). Furthermore, we did not have to get familiarized with the platform as we have been avid users for years. The data collection period lasted 20 days as the TikToks started being collected on the same date the account was created, the 6th of April 2023, and it finished on the 26th of April 2023. Additionally, during the data collection period, we immersed ourselves in the platform for at least thirty minutes daily.

To gather the data, we used TikTok's 'Discover' page and typed on the search bar 'Miniso' to look for content posted related to the brand. We then started searching on the 'Discover' page, which shows the most popular TikToks, and adding the links of relevant videos for our research to a spreadsheet. Nevertheless, when we could not find any more relevant videos on the 'Discover' page, we moved forward to using the filtering option to filter by dates, including videos posted in the last 24 hours, this week, this month, the last three months, and the last six months. Finally, we collected 817 TikToks, which were posted between July 2022 and April 2023. We decided to collect the data posted during a period of approximately nine months as we wanted to provide a more complete overview of the user-generated posts related to the brand. Since we did not want old material since it could be outdated which could impact our findings, as the products offered and practices found might differ from what is occurring nowadays.

After having more than 800 videos added to the spreadsheet, we started to deeply analyze each one of them and delete the ones we did not consider relevant. There were several determinants to consider which videos to analyze. Every video had to be user-generated; hence we deleted videos posted by any of Miniso's official accounts or posted by Miniso's employees. The videos posted had to be in English or Spanish to be analyzed; videos in Russian, Thai, Arabic, Vietnamese, and other languages were deleted. The videos also had to have the download function activated to be considered, as this means the user activated this function to allow viewers to download their videos. Any sponsored videos or videos posted by re-sellers were deleted as well, as we do not consider these types of videos user-generated content. Lastly, videos in which the products could not be determined to be from Miniso or that talked about other brands apart from Miniso were deleted. After analyzing 200 videos, then we started disregarding videos that had become saturated based on the products or stores shown and did not provide new insights or value to the analysis. Finally, we analyzed 412 videos and their comments. The comments were read and the

most substantial ones were placed into a word-document. The requirement to make a substantial comment was to provide value to the brand publics or customer journey field.

It is important to mention that as we only collected data posted on these specific dates, some relevant data posted before July 2022 might have been helpful for our study. In addition, other hashtags or searches were not conducted, such as Miniso Haul, Miniso Makeup, and Miniso Lifestyle; this could have provided us with other videos and practices. Furthermore, the algorithm might have also affected the study. Although a new account was created, there are other factors that impact the platform's algorithm apart from interactions; for instance, video information (hashtags and sounds) and account settings (language, device, and country) (Newberry, 2023). Hence, the videos displayed for us might have been affected by the algorithm and might be different from other users to some extent.

Furthermore, we must clarify that only one of us is a native Spanish speaker, which might have influenced our data analysis process since the Spanish videos and comments had to be translated into English. Alongside this, the non-native Spanish speaker used the auto-translating function available on TikTok to gain an overall understanding of the videos and comments collected. In addition to this, since Spanish is one of the most common languages spoken in the world, the language has many varieties across native speakers which has led to colloquial words and phrases that are not commonly understood by other native Spanish speakers. To overcome this hindrance, the Spanish native speaker watched the videos more carefully to fully grasp the context and the user's accent. On the other hand, both authors are fluent in English, which enabled the authors to understand English videos easier without the need of translating.

#### **4.5.2 Data analysis**

When performing the analysis of the collected material, we attempted to roughly apply a grounded theory similar to the one Charmaz (2006) describes in her book. For the study, this meant that we proceeded to move back and forth between the different sections of the paper whilst letting the empirical material guide us. After collecting an extensive amount of videos and comments the material started to become saturated, implying that it did not add anything new. We then sat down to look through the material once again, this time sorting everything into codes that intuitively emerge for us, based on our previous knowledge. We did this by staying close to the material, remaining open, and labeling it with shortcodes (Charmaz, 2006). This lets us follow the first step that Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) suggest for qualitative researchers which is to sort through all the material. These different codes then became our initial guidelines for which kind of patterns could be identified from the material. Thereafter, with the initial codes and patterns set, we went back to the material and looked for some additional videos that could provide additional insights to investigate if we would be able to find more material that demonstrated, contradicted, or illustrated our previous findings. That researchers move back and

forth between the different steps is a part of performing a grounded theory and assists the process since new intriguing things can emerge (Charmaz, 2006).

After going through our material several times, we identified and illustrated interesting patterns which contributed to the different codes we went on to attempt to reduce all the material. Since qualitative research and grounded theory often offer multiple interesting analytical directions researchers must reduce the material (Charmaz, 2006; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). We proceeded with this by going through our research questions and doing more focused coding of the material. This implies that the researcher identifies the most significant material (Charmaz, 2006). This led us to discard codes, combine some, and put extra focus on others. This favored the process further since we had a more manageable material to work with moving forward. After doing this we once again sat down with the material and started to write notes about how we believed our empirical chapter should be built in the best possible way to illustrate and argue for our findings. Here we sorted through, picked illustrations, and tried to, by connecting the empirical data with pre-existing theories, to argue for their relevance. In this step, we identified that some quotes needed some additional illustrations which led us to move back to the material to find these. We performed what Charmaz (2006) calls memo-writing, which entailed that we wrote down our thoughts during this process and tried to get our ideas down to paper. This allowed us to untie ourselves from the codes and start thinking more freely.

After deciding which material and which theories were going to be featured in the final text, we then began with starting to argue for it in writing. Since we wanted to have significant data which would provide us with a steady and reliable foundation, we began to go back and forth to collect more empirical data that focused on the identified categories. Charmaz (2006) acknowledges this process of going back and looking for empirical evidence as theoretical sampling, which enriches the data and the findings. This, therefore, allowed us to identify more insight relating to and focusing on our analysis. When conducting theoretical sampling, the data in the categories should become saturated (Charmaz, 2006). This for us emerged when we continued to see the same patterns in the videos and they did not offer any additional insights. After this, drawing on the saturated categories, illustrating examples and the memos we had written continuously during the process we started attempting to convert it into the final text. In this step, we tried to demonstrate the analytical findings coherently and clearly, which would argue them to the reader understandably and logically. To provide the arguments for the empirical findings with substance and relevance previous research was applied to discuss the findings relating to the field (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). Thus, allowing us to position this study's insights in a relevant manner to what previous researchers have debated.

## **4.6 Methodological reflections**

### **4.6.1 Reflections about our position as researchers**

During qualitative research, there are two other important things to consider, positionality and reflexivity. Positionality is the consideration of the position that the researcher has on the material and the final study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Hence, it is important to show awareness of the fact that you as a researcher are influenced by previous experiences and are probable to impact the results to a degree. During the process of writing this study, we were aware of and attempted to show that we build it upon our interpretations. Additionally, since this research is built upon our interests, our participation, and then our interpretations we have taken a reflexive approach. This approach signifies that social knowledge is dependent on different variables, contexts, and knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In this study, we have attempted to be as reflexive as possible by being aware of our influence and interpretations of the material whilst trying to keep a clear procedure for the collection of previous knowledge and empirical material while making sure that we established our research together with previous knowledge in the field.

### **4.6.2 Reflections on study quality**

This research is based on a qualitative approach where different aspects are important compared to a quantitative approach. We have, instead of focusing on finding the absolute truth, attempted to discover things happening in this specific context. The first consideration was validity, which traditionally refers to the chosen method being suitable for what it is said to measure (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Since we on the other hand have more of a constructivist approach we choose to follow Easterby-Smith et al., (2021) proposed view. They argue that the results should be believable and that the methods used throughout the process are transparent. Throughout this research, we have attempted to coherently do this. Firstly, we attempted to make our literature review and theoretical framework extensive to show the reader the relevance of this research whilst also displaying that our research belongs in a conversation with other researchers. Additionally, our findings are stated in relation to the previous research to provide insights into how our research position itself and motivate why the reader should believe them. Secondly, we have attempted to be as transparent as we possibly can in writing by demonstrating our arguments for chosen empirical material, methods, and other choices. This is in relation to both previous research in the field and method books. This is to provide clarity into how the research process has proceeded which can both show transparency and can make the findings believable.

The reliability of a study is another important factor to consider while conducting a study. From a constructivist perspective reliability has to do with if other researchers will be able to perform similar observations (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This meant that we made sure to clearly state why we had chosen our study objects and how we established criteria that other researchers later



can follow. Along with this the transparency used throughout the literature review, method, and the logic of the analytical chapter attempt to clearly argue for and display our way of thinking. The generalizability of a constructivist study regards the generalizability of the sample to different contexts (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Since we purposely chose a sample that we believe is a good example of the chosen phenomenon and the substantial amount of empirical material collected, the findings in the conclusion could be used to attempt to understand similar contexts. On the other hand, some skepticism is recommended before applying the findings to other cases or contexts since it is a qualitative study that focuses on a specific phenomenon and therefore does not provide the total truth.

### **4.6.3 Reflections about ethical considerations**

In our research, since we conducted the study on TikTok videos available to the wider public, there are some considerations to take into account. Before starting with collecting and gathering our empirical data we began by looking into similar research that had employed studies on social media (e.g. Herrick, Hallward, & Duncan, 2021; Petrovic, 2023; Su et al., 2020). This was to gain a better understanding of what is considered ethical conduct when researching social media. Additionally, we naturally also questioned books that had specialized in the method field to gain support for our research (eg. Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). Further, we followed the Social Media Ethics Framework suggested by Townsend and Wallace (2017) to make sure our research withstood and adhered to ethical standards. The first ethical consideration that is suggested in the framework is that the researchers need to read the terms and conditions of the chosen social media platform (Townsend & Wallace, 2017). Before beginning our research and then once again before beginning our data collection, we read through the terms and conditions of TikTok. As TikTok states that the content uploaded in a public setting is available to the public and it does not prohibit researchers from collecting data (TikTok, 2022). Thus, we were able to continue with TikTok as our platform for collecting data.

The second ethical consideration for collecting data on social media was the question of the public or private nature of the content (Townsend & Wallace, 2017). There have been some questions if the content posted on social media is public or if the user intended to only communicate with their followers even though the openness of their social media (Buck & Ralston, 2021). The TikTok videos we collected were aimed towards a larger audience since they were uploaded with a setting allowing the public to view them and further having actively used the specific hashtags. Since the creators had actively used hashtags and mentions to gain a wider audience and spread their video it therefore implied that the users wanted their videos to reach an audience outside of their follower group. Therefore, we consider the content posted openly on TikTok, with hashtags as public and we regard that they have understood that their videos and comments are publicly posted and can be seen by anyone.

The third ethical consideration that became apparent to us when researching how to conduct this research was the anonymization of participants (Townsend & Wallace, 2017). Therefore, since the creators of the videos and the people commenting could not be argued to have given their full consent, we saw that other researchers had anonymized the users' identities (Petrovic, 2023; Herrick, Hallward, & Duncan, 2021; Gholamhosseinzadeh et al., 2021). This since this was a non-participant study where it was not possible for all the users to give their consent and since this study does not consider their identities relevant to the final result. Therefore, we have chosen to blur all the recognizable characteristics, hide the usernames and rephrase quotes from the chosen comments to highlight the findings, this is to make the data useful whilst still having privacy for the content creators. Hence, we have gone to lengths to make sure that the features of the users are unrecognizable to protect their integrity.

Furthermore, we decided to not include or analyze any TikToks that did not have the download function activated, aligning with Herrick, Hallward and Duncan (2021) and how they made sure their research on TikTok was ethical. This function should be activated by the user as it is set as not downloadable as default and is activated when the user is allowing others to download it. In addition, users also decide if their profile and videos are public, and every video analyzed in this research has been posted as public, to follow similar studies ethical approach (eg. Herrick, Hallward & Duncan, 2021; Al-Megren, Majrashi & Allwihan, 2021; Townsend & Wallace, 2017). Also, users of TikTok are considered aware that their comments are public. Hence, users know that everyone can watch their videos and read their comments, as TikTok is a public site where people can access content and read comments as a guest without having to create an account. Additionally, we only observed the videos posted and comments; we never interacted in any sort of way with users, their videos, or their comments. In regards to the TikTok account, as mentioned previously, it was created with the sole purpose of this study and after concluding it, the account will be deleted. Lastly, the spreadsheet where the data was collected is private, and it could only be accessed through our university email accounts.

To conclude, there are definitely some ethical issues to take into consideration before beginning to study user-generated content on social media. We have considered the publicity of social media posts and the integrity of the users during this whole process. The argument is that the users have first chosen to post their content in a public manner instead of private and even though they can not give their outspoken consent, the anonymization of pictures and names protects the users' integrity. These two considerations are supported by other researchers who have done similar conclusions whilst also being backed by previous research that guides this method and ethical considerations (e.g. Herrick, Hallward, & Duncan, 2021; Petrovic, 2023). Lastly, we are studying phenomenology in regards to brand publics and customer journey, which means that the people are not the relevant subject for this study but rather their customer behavior on social media. Hence, we are not analyzing the person posting the videos or

comments, but their behaviors and actions that will help us understand this phenomenon. This is in line with what Bertilsson (2023) stated during his presentation on netnography research.

## **4.7 Methodological limitation**

### **4.7.1 Limitations of qualitative research**

As aforementioned, qualitative research with a constructivist approach has some weaknesses. The often-mentioned critique against this approach is that it is reliant on the knowledge of the researchers (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This could be a possible way to criticize our research, although, since we do not claim that our research is independent from us it should be clear that this is our standpoint. Another limitation the qualitative method offers is that its applicability is limited and can not easily be subverted into numerical truths (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). On the other hand, the strength of qualitative research is that it instead focuses on a specific phenomenon and then deeply investigates it. This offers deep insights into a phenomenon that a quantitative approach can not explain. Lastly, the qualitative approach to research limits the applicability of the findings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This implies that since we have focused on understanding the qualities of the specific context it can not simply be applied to a different context without careful consideration and further investigation. Therefore, since social context can differ a lot and caution is of importance, we in this study are only drawing conclusions for this specific phenomenon, not others.

### **4.7.2 Limitations of collection method**

A methodological limitation of this research is that we have only had one method for collecting empirical data. Triangulation, when different collection methods are used, can be implemented with qualitative methods to gain accuracy and reliability from the results (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In this study, it was decided to exclusively use netnography as a collection method to investigate the phenomenon of intersecting brand publics and the customer journey. The choice was therefore based upon the original study that suggested the concept of brand publics which also conducted a netnography on the social media platform Twitter (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016). Therefore, our approach to collect data in a sense replicates this study but on the social media platform TikTok which instead of the text focuses on videos. This together with the additional theoretical insights given by customer journey research we hoped would provide us with the tools necessary to investigate and add insights to the field. Additionally, one method to collect data was considered suitable since this is preliminary research examining the suitability of theories whilst leaving suggestions for how further research can combine it with additional methods. Although this is not to say that the study could not have appreciated additional insights from interviews or observations, we greatly encourage future researchers to continue to build on the insights provided in this study with other methods. This is to complement, contradict, or acknowledge findings.

Further, since we as researchers have not personally been in contact with the people that are creating the Tiktok videos or leaving the comments there is no way for us to know who they actually are. The Internet offers users to have anonymous or multiple accounts which can be misleading for us as researchers. For us, this was not of relevance since we were not interested in the person behind the content but instead in the messages, they were communicating relating to the brand. Therefore, for us, it did not matter who the creator of a video was. That was irrelevant for us and we gained as much insight from all, regardless of who the person behind it was. Furthermore, additional research that aims to dive deeper into the field can have the advantage of interviewing people of different genders and age groups to gather specific insights into the field. Although, we believe that they then should apply other methods, or at least combine them with methods such as interviews or observations to be able to conduct ethical research and provide reliable results.

## **5. Empirical Findings: Experiences with the pre-purchase stage in a social media setting**

*As we treated and analyzed the empirical material consisting of the TikTok videos and their comments, two apparent themes came forward. The first theme relates strongly to how the customers created experiences with the physical store in the pre-purchase stage and the second one is how they engaged with the actual products after concluding the purchase in the post-purchase stage. In this first chapter, we will focus on the findings relating to the pre-purchase stage and then in the subsequent chapter, present our findings regarding the post-purchase stage. In an attempt to clearly explain and argue for the findings, the chapter has been divided into different sections depending on the practices performed. In each section, in an attempt to bring the reader into the topic, examples from the empirical data are highlighted and explained together with previous theories and knowledge. The contribution of the social media platform and the accessibility to a phone camera has given the opportunity for new practices to emerge in the pre-purchase stage. Nowadays, customers seem to be able to fully skip the rest of the customer journey to perform practices that are traditionally considered to belong to the post-purchase stage, such as performing reviews, sharing opinions, and telling which products are new immediately in the physical store to a camera.*

### **5.1 Pre-purchase sharing**

The videos analyzed for this study demonstrated at first glance a variety of content related to the Miniso brand. The first videos that caught our attention were the videos appearing in-store, recording the atmosphere, and exclusively focusing on specific products. The videos focusing on the store atmosphere were primarily a practice that had the intent to forge a connection between the platform users as customers and creators and the Miniso brand. The customers often recorded themselves entering the store, where they clearly showed the brand logo in the beginning and then their experience within the store, such as products they put in their basket, what products they had passed by, and their overall shopping experience. This can be connected to Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) with the brand public concept since the customers displayed their intent to primarily show their affinity to the brand by clearly displaying the branded store in the videos, writing the brand name in the video or description and with the use of branded hashtags. This is to gain publicity, aligning with brand public theory (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), during the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey. In these videos, the creators did not express a desire in wanting to interact with the viewers of their content, instead, they rather seemed to aim their branded content to get recognition from the viewers.

Additionally, the manner in which viral songs were used in these videos did also offer an extra possibility for them to increase their own publicity and reach a wider audience. The song repeatedly used by customers when uploading the videos was a popular song which therefore

stimulated their videos and publicity. Since these videos primarily focused on attempting to, for the most part, show themselves shopping in a store with the branded products whilst not offering additional space for interacting with the viewers other than in the comments. This shows us that the interaction between users is not the intention and primary focus of the person uploading the videos. The practice of uploading these videos where they imitated others while acting and producing their independent brand story in the form of their shopping experience aligns with the theory of brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) in their research emphasized that creators on social media want to display their own stories together with the brand. In the customer journey literature, the customers usually interact and assist other customers by engaging in electronic word-of-mouth (Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis & Alamanos, 2021a). Instead, as the brand public theory argues, we identify this as an individualistic practice that focuses on communicating the creator's message and then relating them specifically to the brand rather than interacting or providing information in a community per se.

On the other hand, we did identify that the creators of the videos did practice some more interactive characters after uploading this type of content. When receiving questions in the comments asking for the location of the store and what the prices were, we were able to identify a willingness to answer these comments in a somewhat helping manner. This significantly exposes that there exists a more engaging character of these videos after being posted on the platform and that the creators had a willingness to contribute, help and co-produce values for the brand, even though this was not the main reason when uploading the video. This shows an interesting contrast to the brand public's concept since they offer a more interacting character even though this might not have been their primary intention. This instead shows how the social aspects of the customer journey come into play and that the customers do assist and support each other in both the information-seeking and the decision-making process (Hamilton et al., 2021; Dellaert, 2019). Nevertheless, the primary focus of the videos by themselves seemed to be to gain publicity for themselves as content creators and to connect themselves with the brand in question and not to interact with people or create belonging to a community. Even though some elements did allow interactions between the users. This is demonstrated in Figures 2, 3, and 4 below.



**Figures 2, 3, 4: Pre-purchase sharing.** Pictures illustrating the first seconds of their TikTok videos show how the users record themselves entering a Miniso store and starting their shopping experience. Figures 2 and 3 are in Spanish. Figure 2 translates to “Window shopping at Miniso”; Figure 3 translates to “We are going to Miniso”.

As illustrated in the pictures above the videos clearly states that the creator is about to enter the branded store or is recording inside the store. This since the creators have made sure that they record the sign clarifying which store it is and then additionally added Miniso in the text, which they then display at least the first seconds of the videos. This makes it evident for the viewer that the creator of the video has actually been in the store whilst they are recording the video, which will encourage them to make a connection between them and the brand. Connecting to the theory of brand publics this practice can be understood as a way for the creator to establish a relationship between themselves and the brand (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Hence, the first glance at the videos emphasizes the brand and the user attempts to show affiliation with it. Secondly, when clearly stating that the creator is visiting the actual store together with the hashtags does organize the videos and provides the opportunity for the creators to get their videos views. This, therefore, illustrates that the creators, even though they are not necessarily actual customers, have the desire to receive recognition of belonging to the brand public and capitalize on its audiences. This was done with the assistance of the content creators by tagging the location, giving reviews, and sharing some information about the brand and its products. This can be connected to both the social customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021) and the brand publics theory (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Here, when the creators are attempting to tune in



to the advantages of the brand public, they additionally are able to participate in a social customer journey where they provide others with different insights about the brand.

### 5.1.1 New in-store

The first practice identified in the pre-purchase stage was that customers performed the act where they presented to the viewers which new products they were able to find in their local Miniso. In these videos, the products were in focus showing close-ups of products, rather than the whole store. The creators, in these instances, were able to connect to the brand public by clearly stating which brand they were interacting with and showing belonging to it since they were able to display new products that were stocked. Additionally, with the customer journey literature (Hamilton et al., 2021), the creators do exhibit that they have previously been customers of the brand, giving an understanding that they are currently in the post-purchase stage as well, which awards them with the ability to provide trustworthy insights into the brand. This can contribute to them being considered social support for the distal social others, the viewers, and motivate them to initiate their customer journey.



*Figures 5, 6, 7: New in-store. Pictures of content created in the Miniso store where the creator records the new things that their local Miniso store has added to their assortment. Figure 5 is in Spanish and translates to “New products in Miniso Peru”.*

As illustrated in the screenshots (Figure 5, 6, 7) above the creators performed an activity that is not normally considered in the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey. The information sharing of the products and stating which products are recommended is commonly considered to



be part of the post-purchase stage of the customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021; Dellaert, 2019). Nevertheless, in this practice, the products recommended do not necessarily need to be purchased as presented in-store. The customers, instead of simply buying the products and then giving information about them during the post-purchase stage they instead started to share with others via these videos without actually fulfilling the purchase. This then provided them with a situation where they were able to influence others' customer journeys before they had fulfilled their own with simple information sharing of which products were new. Hence, the users were skipping the customer journey stages and not going through the journey in a linear manner as they seemed to skip the purchase stage, so from pre-purchase they went straight to practicing activities that are deemed to be part of the post-purchase stage. This goes in line with what has been stated by Grewal and Roggeveen (2020) that customer journeys are not linear as customers might skip the purchase stage. It therefore seems like when customers attempt to affiliate themselves to the brand public they are changing the traditional understanding of the customer journey.

On the other hand, since the customers creating the video had not necessarily purchased the products they were recording, this practice when sharing, might simultaneously influence their own potential future customer journey. This since the distal social others, the viewers when commenting or interacting with the content performed as a form of electronic-word-of-mouth. The comments could leave reviews or ratings of the products that the creators were displaying in their content. These could then in extension display the opinions of the viewers, which could encourage both the creator of the video and others to increase their willingness to purchase the products. The comments can be illustrated as “I have the products you showed in the beginning”, “OH, I love it, they are so cute!” and “I have the second shade, it is super pretty!”. In these comments, the distal social others, who have fulfilled their customer journey, are leaving information on the videos that can create value for others becoming co-producers of value as stated by Dellaert (2019). It firstly creates social support for the creator since their choices of products are considered good by others, and secondly, since it gives them insights they can capitalize on further in their customer journey (Liang et al., 2011; Hajli, 2014; Pantano & Gandini, 2018).

When connecting this to the brand publics theory it becomes evident that this type of social support in the comments awards the creator with a legitimizing effect since they are able to connect with the brand public and are recognized by others. Since Arvidsson and Caliendo (2016) argue with the brand publics that the practices ongoing on social media relate to the brand publics imitating each other. Therefore, these comments become evidence for the creator and their viewers that they are a part of the brand public. This also confirms the social customer journey theory since the users in the social media platform where the customers are influencing and assisting each other in all stages of the journey (Hamilton et al., 2021). Thus, this further might facilitate both the creators and other viewers' information seeking while offering a

trustworthy source, assisting in co-creating values with the creator, and recognizing the connection between the creator of the video with the brand publics. This illustrates how the act of contributing to the brand public to gain recognition and publicity might, in addition, influence the creator in extension to the viewers.

Additionally, in the comment section of these videos, viewers asked for additional information with questions such as “Where is this store?”, “How much for the Sanrio pillow?” or “When did you visit the store?”. These questions emphasize that the viewer's motivations for buying the products from the store had emerged when watching the content provided by the creator which encouraged them to want to visit the store themselves to possibly purchase the displayed products. These comments also indicate that the creator's video did not offer enough information for the distal social others, lacking in providing information regarding the prices, qualities, and location of the branded store. This confirms the motivation behind these practices that brand public theory emphasizes (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). This since the theory argues that the creators attempt to tune into the brand public in an individualistic character rather than to provide their opinions of the experience or the brand.

Therefore, this practice can be considered a more individualistic practice of electronic word-of-mouth which traditionally in the customer journey and social commerce literature is considered a social-oriented practice (Hamilton et al., 2021; Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020; Attar et al., 2022). This since the creators of the videos do not seem to have the intention of providing their viewers with the necessary information they would need, which becomes evident in the comments asking for this simple information. Instead, they attempt to tune into the brand public and share their personal customer experiences, which can provide them with recognition and publicity from the viewers and other customers. The videos per se can therefore be interpreted as the motivation stage in the social customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021) since it displays the brand and its products for the distal social others, but does not assist them in their information-seeking stage.

### **5.1.2 Reviewing in-store**

The second practice that was identified when the creators recorded their experiences in the stores was that they offered their personal opinions when showing the products. It was common that they tried on the makeup products in the stores or squeezed the stuffed animals, and after doing this they provided the camera with their opinions from these experiences. This illustrates that the customers practiced word-of-mouth where they reviewed and rated the products in the physical store before actually fulfilling their purchase and consuming the product. In these videos, the creators in the store tried to tune into the brand public to reach a further audience that could view their content and interact with it. This attempt of the creator to gain the advantages of the brand public without actually buying the product contributes to the social customer journey since the practice demonstrates that the social aspect of reviewing the products does provide the distal

social others with the knowledge they can benefit from in their own customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021). Therefore, when customers want to gain the advantages provided by a brand public, even though it was not the main intention, it provides the viewers with insights and opinions that can assist their journey.

Therefore, this kind of practice aligns with the way that the customer journey research has considered the elements of word-of-mouth practices, it offers additional insights into where the journey takes place and at the same time questions what is required of the customers to leave a review. In these videos, the customer solely showed the product and mentioned its qualities, price, and if and why they liked the product or not, before proceeding to restart the process with the next product. The actual purchase did not become evident in the videos and did not seem to be of importance for either the creator or the viewers; instead, the purpose of the videos was to inform the viewers of which products the creator gained an interest in. The creator therefore aligned their values with the ones of the brand and its products making them similar to each other, and the branded products functioned as a means for the creator to gain publicity while at the same time providing information to the viewers. The creator who had been in the store and had an actual relationship with the brand would also be considered a trustworthy source of information since they had been in-store and physically interacted with the products (Hamilton et al., 2021).



**Figures 8, 9, 10: Reviewing in-store.** illustrate how the creator records themselves in the store reviewing different products they encounter. They leave a comment in the video or speak their opinion out loud in the video. Figure 9 in Spanish translates to “These tissues of my melody and

*pompompurin, I love them*". Figure 10 in Spanish translates to "Recommendations of Miniso skincare, approved from a formulator".

As the screenshots (Figures 8, 9, 10) above illustrate how the customers in the stores attempt to align themselves with the brand to gain publicity which co-creates values for both the brand, creator, and the viewers of the videos. Their aim to produce their story with the brand with their own opinions in this manner creates recognition of both themselves as creators and for the company in the form of brand awareness. The viewers on the other hand receive value in the form as the videos facilitate their customer journey since the videos can both motivate them and provide them with information about the products' characteristics and prices whilst also informing them where they can purchase the product. The videos that the creator has uploaded with the brand can therefore be considered to take the role of a distal social other (Hamilton et al., 2021) which provides the customers with social support and reassurance throughout their journey.

Additionally, since the distal social others, the creator presumably leaves an impact on the viewer their customer journey and experience of it may be in some sense influenced by the videos. This became clear in the comment section of these videos which can be illustrated as: "How strange, I have that lipstick and it does not look like that", "I love your videos, I do not buy any products before watching your videos to see if you recommend them" and "@friendsusername, will you join me?". In these three comments, it becomes clear that the viewers that watched the videos and decided to leave comments were affected by the video, positively or negatively. The first of the three comments have already been to the store and purchased the product that the creator is reviewing but does not agree with how the product is featured in the video. Therefore, to possibly create further engagement with the other viewers this person believes that her opinion will provide additional information and insights, and therefore leaves her own personal review, increasing the richness of information shared in this video context. In the second comment, the viewer praises the creator and expresses trust towards her as a distal social other that she believes and allows to influence her customer journeys. The viewers' customer experience can also be considered to be impacted by how the creator chooses to review the products and the brand where they are allowed to, through being a trustworthy source of information, influence how the viewer will experience the products if they already have purchased it or will pursue to do so in the future. The last comment where the viewer leaves a comment where she asks her friend to join and go to the store together we can see that the video initiated her motivation to visit the store and begin her customer journey. Additionally, the tagging of the friend displays a mix between the proximal and distal social other, where the distal other in the video enables the viewer to visit and then the proximal other, the friend, assists the customer during the actual customer experience facilitating the customer journey.

### **5.1.3 Customer driven marketing**

Social media is offering customers the opportunity to interact with each other collaboratively whilst also promoting commercial activities (Attar et al., 2022). This became evident when looking at the TikTok videos that were featured with the Miniso hashtags. The practice where we identified where the customers in-store reviewed, showed the new products, and interacted with the store atmosphere can be understood as a form of co-creation (Dallaert, 2019). When customers engage with brands in a social media context they have the potential to perform value co-creation (Grönroos, 2004; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). That the customers actively decide to engage in the social media platform indicates that the activity provides them with value. The value that the customer receives when engaging in this open manner is interpreted to be from the social distal of others that are active on the platform. This is a form of social support that distal others can give by approving the content (Hamilton et al., 2021).

The way that the customers and creators of the videos are engaging with the brand in the physical stores is multiple. They inform, explain and engage with the distal social others about subjects such as if and why they like the store and the products it provides. This practice was repeatedly ongoing in the brand public where the hashtags and videos were of similar characteristics which employ the imitation and organizing practices of the brand publics theory (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) and as a way for the customers to engage with the brand (Hollebeek, 2016). In this brand engagement that the customers participated in, they displayed which customers belonged together and created values for the customers that performed it in the right manner. The similar videos that the creators uploaded often had the same song, featured the same or similar products, and used the same hashtags. The imitation in these videos was that the customer engaged with the brand-created values by encouraging the viewers to make the connection with the brand and providing them with the publicity of the brand public. Hence, being recognized as a part of the same brand public and showing belonging to the Miniso brand.

When the creators uploaded the video featuring their shopping experience in the Miniso store, it was an attempt to show belonging to the brand public where they also created different types of stories. Instead of the storytelling that a marketer is performing for a brand, the customers seemed to provide their own experiences as a story, aligning with the emerging social media theory of storygiving (Üçok Hughes, Bandoni, & Pehlivan, 2016) and the independent brand stories in the brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). They communicate these stories that are related to the brand public which provides them with a public to broadcast it. The stories surrounding their shopping experiences, information sharing, and reviews are similar but still different since the creators themselves have the possibility to edit the video to their personal experiences. This shows that the brand public can be imitated to create values whilst the creator themselves add a personal touch to it, for example showing their local store, which products they would like, or what products have been restocked. The brand public in these instances provides

the creator with an audience to recognize them and a tool to organize their stories, giving and awarding the brand with the storygiving practice, which in extension can raise brand awareness and create values (Üçok Hughes, Bendoni, & Pehlivan, 2016).

When the customers shared their customer experiences and engaged with the brand by uploading a TikTok video with the description of the content can be illustrated as “I want everything” and “RUN don’t walk to Miniso”. The first quote indicates that the creator has provided the brand public with their independent brand story from the pre-stage of the customer journey. Here, they might not have been able to buy the products, but the brand and its products still provide them with the possibility to receive recognition and connect with the brand public. This demonstrates that the recognition that the brand public can provide in a social media setting (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) can be exploited by customer engagement exercised without having to fulfill the customer journey. Instead, the customer in their pre-purchase stage in the physical store can create their brand stories and share them in a manner of providing value for the brand in the form of storygiving. In the second quote, we see that the creator is attempting to encourage their viewers to start their customer journey. Here, the store is recorded with products that have been restocked, which the creator thinks the distal social others might be interested in. The customers in these instances seem to use their customer experience, which they have appreciated and recorded, to create interest and curiosity in the distal others. The brand publics that are capitalized on to spread awareness in these videos are enabling the customers to co-create values together with each other. This since their stories are posted in the brand public makes it possible for them to provide the distal other with information whilst at the same time giving themselves the recognition of performing their customer experience with the brand.

The storygiving of when customers walked into and through the store is a strong and recurring elements of the brand-related TikTok hashtags. This storygiving practice relates to the brand public's elements similar to the ones of traditional reviews and word-of-mouth (Attar et al., 2022; Hajli, 2014; Klein et al., 2020), which contributed to the post-purchase stage of the customer journey (Hamilton et al., 2021) Although, instead of a linear review, after fulfilling the purchase, these videos provide a brand-related story of how the independent customers experience their interaction with the physical branded store. These videos allow the viewers of the videos to experience the distal social other's customer journey and how they experienced the brand, without themselves going to the store. Then the engagement that the creator expresses when giving their personal story during the experience makes the viewers more involved and perceptive to their personal opinions and stories. The brand public in this sense provides the storygiving practice with a context that enables the customers to gain recognition for their own stories whilst organizing it in the context that provides them with values.



## 5.2 Ownership of the touchpoint at the pre-purchase stage

When connecting this touchpoint to the customer journey literature it becomes clear that it is owned by the customers that interact with the brand. This since the customers display that their aim is to be connected to the brand but not in the sense of communicating with a brand-owned channel. This customer-owned touchpoint is in the literature considered to be any action taken by the customers and is commonly seen in the post-purchase stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) and between customers where interactions occur independently from the brand (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). The customer-owned touchpoints are additionally seen as a way for customers to co-create value with each other and with the brand (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The videos that were uploaded during the pre-purchase stage in the physical store show that it is a customer-owned touchpoint since it is initiated by the customer themselves in a channel independent from the brand while at the same time not being directed towards interacting with the brand.

Furthermore, the practice in this customer-owned touchpoint appears to be more individualistic where the creators attempt to create an attachment between themselves and the brand. During the customer-owned touchpoints, it is considered that the customer interacts with the brand in a way that co-creates value (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Traditionally, the customer has created this value when making use of the products or interacting with other people during consumption. Since this type of content is identified to be in the pre-purchase stage while co-creating value, rather than the post-stage it seems that the intentions of the customers are divergent from what previous research has identified (e.g. Pantano & Gandini, 2018; Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020). It does seem like the customers during this stage apply the social media platform together with the brand to gain recognition and create value even though they are not purchasing. In this way, co-creating value for the brand in a manner where their independent brand stories direct attention towards the brand while the brand public in return sustains them with the medium to do so and provides them with recognition.

The customers that uploaded the videos and the viewers that commented on the videos displayed minimal effort for interaction with the brand-owned touchpoint. Instead, the customers that uploaded the videos had the intention of producing their own, customer-owned, material without the need to necessarily invite the officially brand-owned touchpoint to interact. The tagging of the brand did on the other hand occur, in instances in the description of the video such as “I love @miniso” or “New things in @minisomexico”. These mentions and the tagging of the official brand illustrate that the creator does not necessarily wish to interact with the brand. Instead, it becomes a way for them to connect with the brand public and organize their personal story with others relating to the brand. This makes the tag of the brand more or less insignificant for interaction and rather focuses on them gaining recognition from the viewers showing that the creator has been to the store. This follows the brand public theory where the brand hashtag is

used to make the content public and show viewers that the creator has an affiliation with the brand (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Therefore, the practice in this customer-owned touchpoint does provide the creators with the possibility to capitalize on the brand for their convenience in creating content and to receive popularity. The tagging and applying the use of hashtags of the brand in the description can therefore, instead of attempting to interact with the brand or other customers, be an additional way for the creator to connect with the brand public and organize their personal brand story and to further be able to gain recognition from the distal social others.

### **5.3 Conclusion of the chapter**

To summarize the practices of this part of the touchpoint, it expresses that customers can perform practices that in previous research often have been considered to be a part of the post-purchase stage (e.g. Pantano & Gandini, 2018; Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2021a). There are elements displaying that when customers are sharing their experiences in-store they do not have to display proof of being an actual customer; instead, it is enough to be in the physical store to be considered a legitimate and trustworthy source of information. These actions, even though providing the viewers with information still largely revolve around the creators attempting to attribute themselves to the brand. Since the brand often is in focus, the store entrance is recorded, and the products are often displayed in a personal manner to the creator. Therefore, these practices can be interpreted to aim towards attributing themselves to the brand and sharing their personal brand stories by showing their personal experiences. Since these videos can work as a means for the viewers to gather information that can facilitate their future customer journeys this does not seem to be the priority of the creators. Instead, when publicly sharing their shopping experiences it can be interpreted as them attempting to gain recognition by using the brand while at the same time providing the viewers with the motivation to launch a new customer journey. Conclusively, the creators of the in-store content, during their pre-purchase stage, do seem to be a reliable and trustworthy source that receives brand recognition and can induce others to start their journey.

These actions even though often providing viewers with information still revolve largely around the brand and the customer attributing themselves to the brand. Information regarding the product prices and store location was often sparsely provided by the creator whilst at the same time clearly stating and making sure that the viewers would associate them with the brand. When the creator of the videos was not able to provide sufficient information, the comments would often be filled with questions regarding those things the viewers needed to begin their own customer journey. If the creator of the videos did not succeed to answer quickly enough, there were often other viewers that took action to selflessly provide the necessary information to them. Therefore, since the creators of these in-store videos did not seem to consider providing the viewers with information as their main responsibility, as they often skipped giving it in the first



place, we can understand this practice of recording these in-store videos as a personal way for them to communicate their story and display their interactions with the brand.

## **6. Empirical Findings - Engagement with the brand in social media in the post-purchasing stage**

*As mentioned in the previous chapter, after treating and analyzing the empirical material consisting of videos and comments, there were two themes found. The first theme was presented in the last chapter. The second theme focuses on how customers engaged with the actual products after concluding the purchase, in the post-purchase stage. In this chapter, we will explain our findings regarding the post-purchase stage and the practices associated with it. In an attempt to clearly explain and argue for the findings, the chapter has been divided into different sections depending on the practices performed. Furthermore, in this section, we focus on the four sections we found in regard to post-purchase sharing and the ownership of brand publics as a touchpoint in this particular stage of the customer journey.*

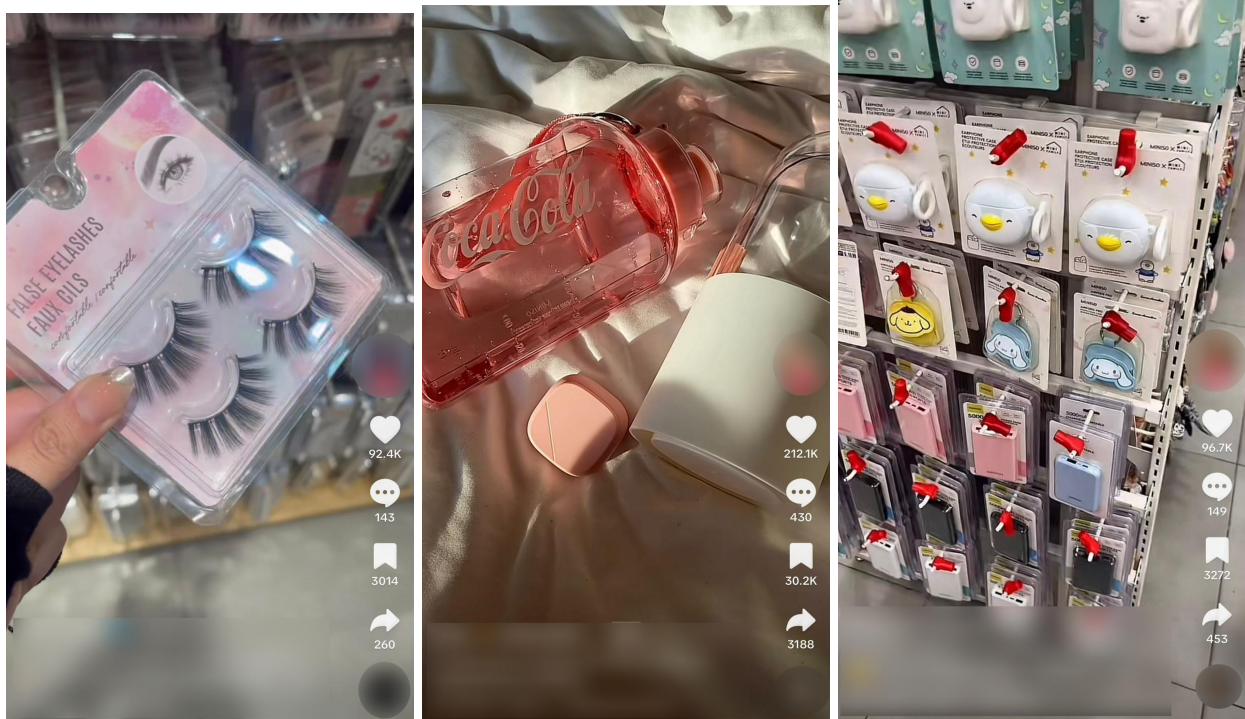
### **6.1 Post-Purchase Sharing**

A part of the videos analyzed pointed to post-purchase sharing. In this type of videos, users shared and showed the products they had bought. Nevertheless, not all the videos seemed to have the same purpose. This is when we can see Arvidsson and Caliandro's (2016) concept of brand public. Corresponding to what the authors argue in their research when the users mentioned Miniso and used the same hashtag, it serves as a mediation that sustains the brand publics. However, as mentioned, the videos seem to fall into different categories that lead them to be individualistic where users have different motivations when posting a TikTok, and in some instances, the users seemed to be seeking publicity, rather than affiliation to the brand. Furthermore, these post-purchase sharing videos are found in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. When analyzing the Tiktok videos we were able to identify four different practices which the customers did when doing their post-purchase sharing. These videos seemed to have different motivations behind being published on the platform. These include reviewing the product, creating excitement and feelings, validating their purchase, and entertainment.

#### **6.1.1 Reviewing practice**

The first practice identified, reviewing, consisted of videos where users reviewed the products after buying them. This practice appeared to have an informative purpose as it could help viewers get informed about the product. Moreover, in the reviewing practice, the videos posted could consist of different forms of reviewing. The two most prominent ones were makeup tutorials and product hauls, where users inform about product details, including quality, price, and functions (Figure 11, 12, 13). Nonetheless, the interactions between users and viewers, and between viewers themselves were minimal, as the brand publics theory points out (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). Furthermore, this type of videos appears to be part of the post-decision-sharing stage of the social customer journey proposed by Hamilton et al. (2021). However, instead of

posting videos to affiliates or sharing their identity, it seems that the point is to inform, which appears to be a form of electronic word-of-mouth.



*Figure 11, 12, 13: Reviewing practices. In the figures the creator displays products they have previously purchased and gives their opinion of the products.*

Electronic word-of-mouth has been deemed to be a form of customer engagement by researchers (e.g. Pantano & Gandini, 2018; Ngarmwongnoi et al., 2020). As Ngarmwongnoi et al. (2020) pointed out, user-generated content can influence and impact if a potential customer decides to purchase a product. This is seen in some of the videos that were analyzed. For example, one user posted a video stating the products they would not buy which included a set of fake eyelashes. In the comments, another user remarked: “Thankfully this video appeared to me just before I was about to buy those fake eyelashes, thank you for the advice!”. On the other hand, another user posted a video regarding things that people need to buy from Miniso because of their great functionality and quality. In the TikTok video, the user recommended a brush holder, a water bottle, and a pair of headphones. In the comments, one viewer stated “That water bottle is so helpful... Now I drink at least two liters per day”; while another user said, “Thank you, I need every product”. These comments show that the videos worked as social support from the distal other and facilitated the viewers’ customer journey in accordance with Pantano and Gandini (2018) and Hamilton et al. (2021).

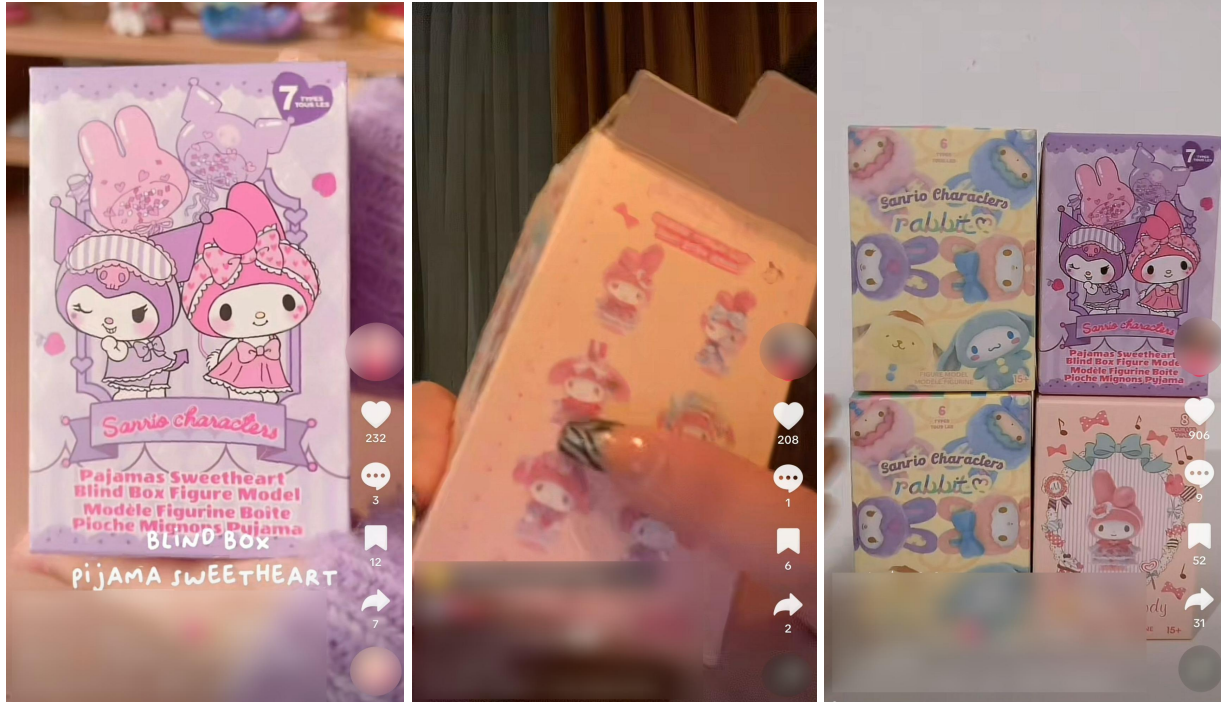
In addition to this, the reviewing practice is an example of Dellaert’s (2019) consumer production journey. The practice is found in the last sub-step, reflection, as users seem to experience the quality of the product and in this way as Dallaert (2019) indicates enhance their

personal experience. Furthermore, as users are co-creating alongside Miniso, they are producing value for other potential customers, and this is done through these reviews which can later help other potential buyers to get informed about the product or even decide to purchase it or not. This can be indicated through comments such as “I want it [the product], what is the price?”. Additionally, the viewers commenting on the video can also co-create value for the users posting or other viewers seeing the video. For example, a viewer pointed out a video consisting of a makeup tutorial “You have to try [the lipstick’s] tone 04, it is beautiful...”.

On the other hand, although the review practice can generate value for other customers or potential customers, it can also bring negative contributions or co-destruction, as described by Dolan et al., (2016). As the authors state, a negative contribution happens when a customer engages in another post to exert negative word-of-mouth. Moreover, in positive TikTok reviews, we found comments expressing negative opinions or views regarding certain products. For instance, “[these headphones] last at only two months at the most”, “the perfumes sold by Miniso don’t last at all” or “the headphones are very expensive”. Although we did not find any indications of co-destruction, there were some instances when users posted TikToks where they negatively reviewed a product. For example, a user uploaded a TikTok stating that no one should buy Miniso’s AirPods Pro protection case. Another user posted a video where they complained the product they bought was broken and were not sure if it could be returned. Nevertheless, although a user is reviewing the product negatively on a TikTok video or posting a negative comment, this is still a form of customer engagement.

### **6.1.2 Practices creating excitement and feelings**

The second practice which was evident in the empirical material was that some creators expressed a desire to display their own excitement. This was evident when creators opened blind boxes or when being very pleased with a product. In the videos where the Miniso blind boxes were in focus, the creator of the video repeatedly opened them in front of the camera while recording. Often the customer who had already performed the purchase stage of the customer journey would record their newly bought blind box and show the camera which product alternatives they could receive before moving on to show which one they wished for. This practice can be interpreted as the creator of the video trying to engage the viewer and invite them to participate in their current feelings, since they wished for a specific product, whilst at the same time creating tension and excitement for which product they might receive. In this way, the socially distal others, the viewers, were invited to become invested in the feelings of the actual customer, the creator. Screenshots of this type of practice are shown in Figures 14, 15 and 16.



**Figures 14, 15, 16: Practices creating excitement and feelings.** The figures illustrate how the creator records when they are opening the blind boxes in their home. During the videos they involve the viewers by showing them which product they wish to receive as seen in Figure 15.

The action of sharing when opening and getting excited can also be interpreted as a way for the creators to display and share their post-purchase stage where they consume the products they have bought. The publishing of these unboxing videos can be considered as an invitation for the social distal social others to become involved and feel engaged in their, otherwise private, consumption experience. This can be seen in the description of the videos where the creators write similarly to “Unbox Miniso blind boxes with me” or “Look which one I got”. In these examples, it becomes evident that the creator of the videos expresses a willingness to engage their audience in their content. This does not, per se, imply that they want to engage together with their viewers since they do not ask questions or leave room for others' opinions. Instead, they seem to rather have the intention to tune into the popularity that the brand public offer (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) to be able to engage viewers and in that way gain recognition of belonging with the brand. Hence, this type of content can be a way for the creators to actually attempt to connect with the brand and gain recognition while in extension inducing emotions in their viewers. These emotions can then work as the motivation for other people viewing the content to pursue their customer journeys (Hamilton et al., 2021).

In the comments to these videos, it was common that viewers were praising the video, showing jealousy, or contributing with which products they themselves had gotten. The praise could be

illustrated by “I love your videos” which compliments the creators' creativity and the Miniso brand in extension. The brand in these instances is then seen as a vehicle to get their brand story public to receive likes and interactions from viewers who also appreciate the brand. As the comment does give the creator credit for the video it does therefore contribute to the social support of the distal other which acknowledges the creator. The brand and the products which are recorded in these videos can therefore, be attributed and used by the customers to gain an audience whilst at the same time building tension due to the unknown content of the box.

Therefore, the feelings of the creator and the viewers can be connected to the customer brand engagement literature by Hollebeek (2011), who suggests that customers that feel more strongly towards a brand have a stronger probability of engaging with the brand and creating content. In the illustrating comment, it becomes evident that the TikTok video with the brand can induce strong feelings in the viewers. These viewers that have these strong emotions then seem to be the ones that are leaving comments on the videos since they primarily are positive rather than negative. Other comments which also stood out on the videos of the unboxing were that viewers expressed excitement for the creator since they got the product they wanted or that they themselves wished to receive from a blind box. These comments illustrate that the users that viewed the videos expressed positive feelings and excitement towards both the brand and the creator. They in this way engaged with the brand and the creators of the videos by giving positive contributions to them. This then could provide recognition and assist the original creator of the video to feel recognized, encouraging and providing social support for the creator's independent brand story.

### **6.1.3 Validating practice**

The third practice we found is what we call the validating practice. In this practice, users post TikToks to present their purchases without any other reason aside from simply showing what they have bought. Although the communication is surrounding Miniso brand, the validating practice seemed to be used for the users' own publicity and pointed out to also be appearing to be used for their own customer satisfaction. As Hamilton et al. (2021) argue, in the satisfaction sub-stage, the customer uses and evaluates the product; these activities might be shared on social media, and customers might rely on distal others when evaluating a product which can lead to satisfaction or post-purchase regret. Aside from the satisfaction stage, the validating practice can also be found in the post-decision sharing sub-step of the post-purchase stage through word-of-mouth. This is further expanded by Ngarmwongnoi et al. (2020) who state that electronic word-of-mouth might be employed to validate the purchase decision.

Furthermore, as researchers have stated, in the post-purchase stage, customers might look for approval by sharing their purchases on social media platforms (e.g. Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, & Alamanos, 2021a). The majority of the TikToks analyzed that fall into the validating practice was a type of haul videos in which users showed what products they



had purchased from Miniso. However, this did not go as in-depth as reviewing the product or providing any additional information more than just presenting the product to other platform users.. Hence, this practice appeared to indicate that the users were doing it for the sake of merely presenting their purchases, communicating their identity, affiliating with the Miniso brand, or bringing publicity. This is why we found that the validating practice can have four purposes: publicity, identity sharing, showing, or affiliation. As Hamilton et al. (2021) point out, customers might share their experiences, in this case sharing their post-purchase experience, as a form of sharing their identities.

On the other hand, our findings regarding identity sharing appear to contradict what has been stated by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016), who say that brand publics are aimed towards publicity rather than identity. Nevertheless, we think that in the validating practice, both characteristics, publicity, and identity, can be found, contrary to what the brand publics theory states. Nonetheless, another of our findings is congruent with what Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) have found in their research. The users posting the TikToks analyzed did not seem to be uploaded with the purpose of engaging in conversation with other users. In plenty of the comments analyzed, the user posting the video did not answer all of the comments, and if the comments were answered it gave additional information that was not stated on the video. For example, a viewer asked, “Hello, to which Miniso did you go?”; to which the user generating the content replied, “To the only one in my city... In *XX* shopping mall”.

As mentioned previously, the validating practice has different purposes, composed of publicity, identity sharing, showing, or affiliation. We consider that publicity is shown in this practice when users hashtag or mention Miniso, make use of viral TikTok songs, or even decide to post a video on the platform. Furthermore, identity sharing is demonstrated when users decide to upload a video that is a vlog in which they share their personality or present a story in relation to the brand, and as Üçok Hughes et al. (2016) state that this is called storygiving. Users posting on TikTok about the Miniso brand are then able to co-create the retailer’s stories and values, and it is due to TikTok and how it allows the customers to have control.

Regarding customer engagement, the validating practice is an example of the activation theme presented by Hollebeek (2011). This falls into the activation theme, as users do not only spend time engaging with the brand but also put effort into interactions and deciding to post on TikTok and by co-producing content. As with the other practices, this is part of the consumer production journey’s reflection sub-stage as customers reflect on their purchase by presenting the products bought, and in a way enhancing their experience (Dellaert, 2019). In addition, this practice can also be found in the experience sub-stage as customers appear to go through the consumption experience alongside other customers (Dellaert, 2019), in this case, the viewers of the TikTok videos.

Furthermore, comments presented on the TikTok videos are an essential aspect of the validating practice. The comments then point out what seems to be social collaboration which can be supported by the interactivity of TikTok as has been stated by researchers (e.g. Hajli, 2014). Plenty of comments found in this practice tend to be positive and seem to be validating the other user's purchase. Examples of comments found in this practice include: "Omg, this is so cute", "I need this product", or "I really want this product". Thus, the validating practice, helps both the user posting the video and the users posting on the comments to gain social support as other researchers have stated (Liang et al., 2011; Hajli, 2014). In addition, this practice can also be part of the motivation sub-stage of the social customer journey as it might act as the motivation that begins the journey and starts when a viewer interacts or observes a product in a TikTok post in regards to Miniso.

#### **6.1.4 Entertainment practice**

The final practice which was evident in the post-purchase stage was the videos that addressed entertaining matters. In these videos, the creator took control over the insta-worthy material and made it into entertainment for the audience. In these instances, the brand was used as an artifact that the creator used to create entertaining content. There was a practice where the creator used the brand to accentuate themselves as influencers and others where the brand was made to create relatable memes. Below both of these practices will be illustrated and put into context.

The first practice we saw was that there were creators that attempted to create influencer-like content, such as vlogs or hauls. In these videos, the creator was the main focus, while the brand and its products came secondary. These videos revolved around the creator themselves as an individual and let them involve a more personal connection than in the previous examples. Here stories revolved around what the creator had done during the day, how they were feeling, and lastly what their future plans were. This whilst concurrently unboxing Miniso products, telling the camera about their shopping experience, and trying on the different products they had bought during the day. In this way, the Miniso brand was not the main focus of the videos, even though the hashtags were frequently used, instead the brand was used to gain recognition and give meaning to the video. This aligns with the brand publics theory (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) since the brand is used as a means to receive attention but then broadcasting themselves as influencers. Here, the reviewing and rating of products are in a more individualistic manner where the person recording tries on the product on their skin and gives their personal opinion.

Further, products are displayed for the camera whilst the person is physically still in the picture and looking into the camera. Here, the creator often starts by talking by themselves and giving a short introduction to the video before then moving on to bringing forth the branded Miniso bag that they then unpack. This practice where the creators themselves are in focus shows how the brand simply becomes an artifact that they employ, similar to the brand publics theory (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). There is some basic information regarding the products given in



these videos concerning the store and products, but this seems as a secondary objective while the creators' ambition is to gain an audience for their video. Therefore, in this practice where uploading videos provides the viewer with entertaining insights where the creator is in focus and exploits the popularity of the brand to receive viewers and engagement.

The second practice which was considered to be aimed at entertaining the viewers was the creation of memes. These videos were often created with the intention of being relatable. The brand in these instances was used to make fun of a distinct behavior that the viewers could relate to. This could be illustrated as jokingly uploading a well-known meme with the banner “Me when I go to Miniso” or recording the Miniso store with an audio saying that “you should not buy, control your money”. In these videos, the focus was not on the creators but on the brand. Here, the fun and relatable side of the brand public was employed to make a meme that could be engaging for the viewers. In the comment section, it was clear that there were people that did recognize themselves in the videos, often tagging friends saying “@friendsusername THIS IS US”, “@friendsusername us every time we go to Miniso” or “ @friendsusername that is soo you!”. These comments all signify that the viewers of this type of content are positively engaging with the brand when agreeing that it is relatable. They are also interacting extensively with the post since they are keeping a conversation together with their friends, providing the creator of the video with a type of publicity, and providing the brand with further awareness.

In these videos, the creator is often not apparent, and when they are often to a very limited extent, instead the focus is the brand and creating content that others do agree with. In this way, the brand is employed in a different manner than it had been by the influencers, here the brand is used rather make their fans or community members feel connected. The public forum that the brand assists the creator with then seems to be engaged to gather people who can relate to it. In this sense, this practice seems to be more aligned with the behaviors found in brand communities rather than brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016), but since the creators are still using the Miniso hashtags to collect their independent brand story to reach their audience while at the same time showing little interest in interacting. Hence, since they do not attempt to engage with the comment section although at the same time, the viewers commenting did not display any interest in communicating with the person creating the video. Instead, they seemed more interested in sharing the post with their friends and interacting with them in the comments.

This practice of uploading videos that entertains the viewers in a meme format seems to be highly dependent on both being a part of the brand community and the brand public since this is what provides the content with a context. But contrary to the brand publics theory (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) the goal here seems to be to actually make content that can be related to, which demands some type of inside knowledge of the brand. Therefore, the creator of the memes does not display the brand in the same characteristics as other creators do; instead, they lean against their own experience and trust that they will be able to create relatable content which other

customers can relate to. Accordingly, the creator shows that they are an existing customer of the brand, and this type of content performs as evidence of that. The people that believe that the video meme is relatable also show that they have been customers of Miniso when expressing that they are entertained by liking or tagging their friends.

This type of content, rather than the ones where the brand is clearly stated, can require some previous experience and knowledge that the specific target audience has. Therefore, relating to customer journey research, this type of content can be interpreted as a post-purchase action since it requires the customers to have brand awareness and a previous experience with the brand to be able to understand and engage with it, hence the users watching the video might start their customer journey with awareness of the brand. This practice can be seen as a way for customers to validate their purchase behavior since they are able to see that other people also like the brand and to get social support from both the distal others in the comment section and their friends. It does, on the other side, rarely provide potential customers with additional information that could be used to ease a shopping experience. This content could on the other hand induce potential customers to begin their customer journey with the brand as a means to induce the motivation step of the pre-purchase stage. This since the brand name is stated, and the interactions that are going on in the comment section together with the meme might awaken some type of interest in new people watching it.

## **6.2 Ownership of the touchpoint at the post-purchase stage**

As we mentioned in the previous chapter, our analysis indicated that brand publics as a touchpoint appears to be a customer-owned touchpoint as the posting of TikTok videos is an action taken by the customer in the pre-purchase stage. Nevertheless, we also consider that brand publics can be a social or external touchpoint, especially if occurring in the post-purchase stage. As Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue, this type of touchpoint is when other people become part of the customer's own experience, and social or external touchpoints can include other customers, the environment, or sources of information.

We believe that brand publics can be a social or external touchpoint as it can be deemed as a customer influencing the purchasing decision of another customer or might act as an information source when the customer decides to post on social media. Our research indicated that when customers decide to post a TikTok showing a product, other potential customers might start being motivated to purchase the same product. This appears to be indicating as we found a variety of comments in which viewers state they wanted or needed a particular product. Examples of these comments include: "I need this product [a keychain]", "Give me that product [a bag] now", "I want everything", or "I have to go [to Miniso]". Furthermore, due to insights from the brand publics theory (Arvidsson & Caliendo, 2016), it is possible the goal of user-generated content is not to influence other people's customer journeys. This goes by what Hamilton et al. (2021) have

argued that occurs when customers find information although it is not explicitly stated especially on social media as users are not particularly looking for products but rather spending their free time.

Furthermore, brand publics as a social or external touchpoint can lead to it being very engaging. We found that although the user posting the TikTok is not directly asking for engagement, users commenting do engage with the TikTok video, and hence with the brand. One of the most common engaging practices included asking for the location in which the products were bought. For example, “To which Miniso have you been going? I have never found these things [Sanrio products]”, “In which location is this? I have money so I am searching for Sanrio products”, “Share the location please”, or “Are these products already in Mexico?”. Users also engage with content by tagging or mentioning their country’s Miniso TikTok account. Comments showing this practice are comprised of: “@MinisoMaroc I’m waiting for these [Sanrio] products”, “@MinisoTurkey bring these products please” or “@MinisoMexico we need it [blind boxes]”. The most common and last type of engaging practice presented by viewers is tagging other users in the comment section of the TikTok videos. Examples of this practice included: “@user1 look at this love, I need everything, @user2 I want to go to this Miniso”, “@user3 we have to go when they are restocking”, “@user4 you have the same product [a notebook]”, and “@user5 why was the Miniso we visited not this good?”.

We also believe that the ownership of this touchpoint has one of the characteristics mentioned by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016), which is imitation as we have stated in the previous chapter. As the authors said, customers are emulating each other as they use the same mediation device, in this case, TikTok; however, usually they do not interact with one another. For example, in the post-purchase stage, users tend to do similar unboxing videos, with the same viral songs, and sometimes even the same products while using the same hashtags and emojis. On the other hand, another characteristic found in the brand publics touchpoint that has not been mentioned by Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) is exclusivity. Based on the data analyzed, some of Miniso’s products and brick-and-mortar stores appeared to be exclusive. One of the most common comments found were users stating how difficult or even impossible it was to find certain Miniso products at their local retailer. For example, plenty of users posted comments saying: “Why does my Miniso store only have old products”. Another user stated: “I was at Miniso recently and they did not have any of these products”.

### **6.3 Conclusion of the chapter**

In conclusion, in this chapter, we discuss the engagement practices in the brand publics touchpoint in the post-purchase stage. We found that a great number of videos filmed in the post-purchase stage indicated to be a part of customer engagement. However, the videos had different motivations when published. Hence, we found four practices that are part of this post-purchase sharing comprised of the reviewing practice, excitement and feelings practice, the

validating practice, and the entertainment practice. In the reviewing practice, customers usually review products that they have bought where they share details such as price, location where the product was purchased, functionality, and if the product meets their expectations. In the second practice, excitement and feelings practice, users usually shared videos where they were excited about a certain product. In most cases, these products were blind boxes and customers did not know which product or character they would be getting, leading to feelings of surprise, happiness, disappointment, among others. In the validating practice, users shared their purchases for the mere sake of presenting their purchases as feelings were not displayed nor a clear review of the product. The last practice was the entertainment practice, these videos usually consisted of influencers or users creating relatable memes. We lastly discuss the ownership of the touchpoint as in this case, it appears to be social or external owned. This is because viewers might come across TikTok videos and be influenced by others to either purchase a product or be motivated to search more about it or about the brand.

## 7. Conclusion

In this research, we have attempted to shed light upon the practices of the new touchpoint that social media platforms have inflicted on the customer journey. By combining knowledge from previous research in the fields of social commerce (eg. Attar et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021; Hajli et al., 2017; Amblee & Bui, 2011), the customer journey (eg. Hall, Towers, & Shaw, 2017; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Varnali, 2019) together with the theory of brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016). This since the research considered brand publics as a part of how people interact with the personal customers' journey. Drawing from this the research is able to provide a new perspective on how customers use brands in a social media setting during their customer journey.

The findings of this research, that the brand public is a touchpoint in the contemporary customer journey, constitute insights into how customers in a social media setting might perform their customer journeys. To provide further understanding about how this touchpoint is performed we had two research questions which guided us to investigate it more deeply. The first question was regarding what practices of the new touchpoint, when answering this question it became apparent that practices that traditionally are considered to be a part of the customer journey were still exercised in this touchpoint. On the other hand, there were new practices exercised that became apparent in this research: customers in this touchpoint exposed a willingness to display to others which products were new in the store, creating and sharing feelings and creating entertainment related to the brand.

The second question regarded how the practices in this touchpoint were organized both confirming and contradicting what the customer journey literature previously had regarded. The brand public touchpoint is organized in both the pre-purchase and post-purchase stages of the customer journey. In the pre-purchase stage, the customers practiced different types of electronic word-of-mouth and presented which new products the store had stocked before actually purchasing the products whilst also being able to display their personal stories with the brand. These practices opened up a two-way interaction between the creator and the viewers which could influence the customer journey for both of them. This part of the touchpoint, the pre-purchase stage, was considered to be a customer-owned touchpoint since they were in control of what was happening and they did not display any effort to interact with the official brand or the viewers. Furthermore, due to the nature of brand publics as a touchpoint, there were some practices such as the reviewing in-store that allowed the conventional funnel of the customer journey to be modified. This is because the purchase stage was skipped and users would jump from the pre-purchase stage to the post-purchase stage.

On the other hand, the touchpoint was also apparent in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey. In this stage of the journey, the customers exercised more traditional considered

practices of leaving reviews and aiming to be validated by others. Additionally, here two new practices were uncovered, the customers here in the touchpoint engaged with the brand public by sharing their excitement on the social media platform and by creating entertaining content relating to the brand public. This part of the touchpoint was identified to be social- and external owned since viewers could be influenced by other customers posting the videos and hence impacting their customer journeys.

## **7.1 Theoretical contributions**

In this research, we have attempted to shed light upon the practices of the new touchpoint that user-generated social media content has advanced in the customer journey. By combining knowledge from previous research in the fields of social commerce, customer journey, and brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2016) the research has provided new insights into how customers tune into specific brand publics during their customer journey. Furthermore, by seeing how customers are sharing their experiences with a brand on social media we have identified comprehensive practices, taking place in the pre-purchase stage and in the post-purchase stage. In both stages, we identified similarities and differences in the practices of what the users practiced. There are different contributions that can be made from our research, we will discuss them in this order, four different theoretical findings, our methodological contributions to the different research fields, and managerial implications.

Our first theoretical contribution revolves around both the pre-and post-stage of the customer journey. In both stages, the practice of the creators perform acts of sharing reviews and ratings. This, as a theoretical finding, acknowledges and contributes to the customer journey and social commerce fields since it confirms that the customer does perform these practices in an online setting, while at the same time adds to it since it sheds light upon that the customers can share their opinions before or even regardless of actually fulfilling the purchase. Hence, dissolving the barriers for who is a customer and can function as a trustworthy source of information. Here, anyone that has the possibility to gain access to the store can tune into the brand public and gain the advantages of publicity and recognition. This contributes with insights to research on how and when the brand public can be utilized and by who. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) in their research took the assumption that to be able to perform in the brand public the person had to be an actual customer. Contrarily, this research has instead demonstrated that the boundaries of the brand public are more dynamic and flexible than previously have been considered. Therefore, this finding does contribute to the customer journey research since it illuminates that customers can practice reviews and rating of products in the physical store before becoming actual customers.

Furthermore, the customers that chose to upload content showing viewers on social media seemed to have another aim with their content than simply providing others with informative

reviews and ratings. In the customer journey literature, the reviews and ratings are often considered to be designed with the goal to help others (Hamilton et al., 2021) whilst here, by implementing the brand public theory, the findings of this research indicate that there are different ambitions underlying these practices. This study identified that the videos that were reviewing and rating the brand and its products performed this practice to gain recognition and publicity from the audience interested in the brand rather than to give valuable insights to the viewers. The videos of the reviews repeatedly had the creators' own brand story in consideration, by showing what they liked or disliked and by providing personal opinions. This shed light upon the fact that their brand stories were associated with the brand instead of actually providing viewers with more factual information such as the store location or the price of the product. This is a finding where the strengths of applying the brand publics framework to the customer journey to understand these practices become apparent.

In addition to this, the practice of the content whilst joining the brand public added further value for the creator. It was identified that the creator gained value from the publicity that the affiliation with the brand awarded them in the form of an audience. The creators, in these videos, did also create value for their viewers in the form of entertaining them with humor or by inviting them to their lives. This adds to the literature of brand publics where Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016) mainly put emphasis on the values that the creator gained from the brand and not how the creator further can employ it to create values. This study demonstrated that creators can co-create values with the assistance of a brand public throughout their customer journey in their personal manner whilst additionally providing entertaining values for their viewers. These types of co-creating and entertaining practices in the post-purchase stage were identified as manners the creators applied to validate their purchase. Here, and throughout this touchpoint, there were recurrences of the social support element that validated the creators and the brand when reaching the brand public but the strongest indications of this appeared in the post-purchase stage.

The last finding this study provides is how the ownership of this touchpoint occurs to be distributed. When the touchpoint transpired in the pre-purchase stage of the customer journey it was considered to be customer-owned whilst in the post-purchase stage it is considered to be owned by the social and external. This contributes to the research by Lemon and Verhoef (2016) since it sheds light on the dynamic ownership characteristic of this touchpoint and how it can transition depending on the stage of the customer journey. In the pre-purchase stage, it was identified that the customers that were in the physical store owned the touchpoint and chose what they wanted to display for others. In the post-purchase stage, the touchpoint was socially and externally owned since it was more directed toward engaging. The ownership over the touchpoint, since it was transitioning together with the customer journey, can therefore be considered as being of versatile character.

## 7.2 Managerial Contributions

Aside from the theoretical contributions this paper provides, it also intends to offer several practical implications. As mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, our contribution is aimed to help the retailing and marketing areas. As this study can bring valuable insight to practitioners and industries in these particular fields. Specifically, our thesis can guide lifestyle retailers as we are focusing on Miniso. Nevertheless, we think it can also help other types of retailers such as fashion and specialty retailers. Overall, this paper can help practitioners in this industry to understand how marketing is changing and how to create more competent marketing campaigns by understanding social media, more specifically brand publics, as a touchpoint in the customer journey.

First, it is important that practitioners understand that marketing has changed and it keeps changing. Part of this change is due to social media platforms which have transformed the marketing environment. Nowadays, practitioners must understand that communication between brands and customers is not one-sided as it was in the past, but now customers can also communicate with brands and other customers. Hence, previous research (e.g. Towers & Towers, 2021; Cheung, Pires, Rosenberger & De Oliveira, 2020; Meire, Hewett, Ballings, Kumar & Van den Poel, 2019) has focused on brand-generated content in social media and how brands can engage with customers more through social media. However, we consider that although brand-generated content is important, practitioners should also focus on user-generated content. As in this type of social media content, customers can make posts regarding brands that can potentially be seen by other potential buyers.

In our thesis, we focus more precisely on the social media platform, TikTok, which has released a business report explaining how its app has changed the path to purchase which was linear in the past but now is an infinite loop (TikTok Business, 2022). Although we agree on some aspects mentioned in the report; for instance, we agree that it can influence all of the stages of the journey and that its influence is prevalent even in the post-purchase stage. Nonetheless, we think that this journey is not only driven by joy but also by satisfaction and desire for publicity and validation, and to inform others. We also think it should focus on how the platform helps users find their products or brands, and how they are using these products, as it appears some users do not even purchase it, and how this influences others.

We also think that user-generated content should be considered a new form of word-of-mouth that can positively or negatively impact the purchasing decision of other potential customers that come across the post. In addition to this, user-generated content could also be considered an example of brand publics as it is aimed more towards publicity, and in some cases, like on TikTok, there is no structure or in-depth interaction between customers. Practitioners should think of this touchpoint as a versatile touchpoint that is continuous and can be present in the pre-purchase and post-purchase stages of the customer journey and even skip stages. An example



of skipping stages is the pre-purchase sharing practice found in this study. This touchpoint also has two ownerships as we have pointed out previously. Hence, practitioners should understand that it is a customer-owned touchpoint, independent of brands, and where customers use brands for their purpose. On the other hand, it is a social or external touchpoint, as potential customers might be influenced by the brand publics to purchase or not purchase a product.

### **7.3 Limitations and further research**

Although our paper brings both practical and theoretical contributions to the retail and marketing fields, it also presents certain limitations that could be developed in further research. The first limitation is regarding the methodology presented in this research. Firstly, other research could employ a quantitative methodology approach. With this, in further research, the data collected, in this case, the video material, could be analyzed in a more generalizable way and could measure aspects such as the number of likes, saves, and comments, while connecting the relevance of these measurements to customer behavior presented by users in the comments such as purchasing intent, trust, and loyalty. On the other hand, a quantitative study might use survey research as a method where a finding can help explain the practices in the touchpoint.

Regarding the qualitative study, we consider that the video material analyzed just presents a portion of brand publics and it does not indicate the sole truth. Hence, we believe that other qualitative approaches such as interviews or ethnography could help to further close the research gap between brand publics and the customer journey. For example, further studies using an interview research approach can encounter findings that could help understand in-depth the customer's motivations to post or comment on social media, and how this is influencing their own customer journey. On the other hand, research employing ethnography, more specifically participant observations, could aim to understand if the behavior of customers in a physical store is in line with our findings in this study. Overall, other methodology approaches could provide interesting insights.

Further research could also focus on conducting netnography on other social media platforms or examining other companies or industries that have a large social media presence. In regards to Miniso, we could have chosen other social media networks instead of TikTok. For example, further studies could focus on examining Facebook, where there are plenty of groups and communities in relation to this retailer, or Twitter where people also use the Miniso hashtag or mention the brand on a tweet. Additionally, further research can also focus on other brands or retailers besides Miniso or lifestyle retailers. Plenty of retailers, especially in the fashion industry, have a big presence in social media, where researchers can find user-generated content that can be analyzed, in regards to the particular retailer.

Another of our limitations that might be expanded or clarified in future research is in relation to the data collected that did not meet our set determinants. Researchers could analyze

brand-generated content, and understand how this differs from user-generated content in the customer journey or how brand-generated posts influence brand publics. Furthermore, we limited ourselves to analyzing videos in English and Spanish as these are the languages that we speak. Nevertheless, further research could expand the language selected and analyze if there are any different patterns or cultural differences that might have been found in other countries besides the Western ones. Lastly, further research could focus on re-seller content and how this is influencing the customer journey and modifying the brand publics discourse.

Our last limitation is that we do not deeply explore the purchasing stage which could certainly be expanded in further research. We decided to focus on the pre-purchasing and post-purchasing stages as the purchasing stage is, as researchers have pointed out, the timeliest compressed stage in the journey (e.g. Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Hence, in the majority of the videos analyzed the purchasing stage was not explicitly noticeable. However, further research could study this stage more in-depth by analyzing videos that demonstrate this stage or by choosing or complementing the study with other methodologies such as interviews and participant observations where the purchasing stage might be more clearly shown or identifiable.

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