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# **Customer Journey in the Concept Store**

## **An Analysis of Touchpoints and Journey Integration**

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**Master Thesis**

M.Sc. in Service Management, Retail

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# Abstract

**Date:** May 15, 2023

**Keywords:** customer experience, customer journey, customer touchpoints, concept store, journey integration dimensions

**Project Purpose:** The following study aims to enhance understanding of how customers experience different touchpoints within the concept store throughout each stage of the customer journey, as well as, explore existing and new dimensions of the customer journey integration.

**Theoretical Framework:** The following study adopts the theory of customer journey since it helps to understand what touchpoints customers interact with throughout each stage of their journey that helps to shape their experiences.

**Methodology:** The philosophical approach for the following study is interpretivism ontology and social constructionism epistemology. The following study also adopts a qualitative research method and abductive approach. As a part of the qualitative research, the authors conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews and have chosen three types of non-probability sampling methods, namely purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling. The sample size includes 1 location (IKEA Hammersmith store in the UK) and 19 people, between the ages 19 and 57.

**Empirical data:** This thesis presents empirical data divided into three stages of the customer journey: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. The analysis focuses on customers' experiences with different touchpoints and journey integrations within the concept store throughout each stage.

**Conclusions:** The findings have shown both contradicting and supporting results in relation to the previous studies on customer experiences throughout the customer journey. The results of the study have both theoretical and practical implications, which help us better comprehend the consumer journey. By emphasizing the most significant and relevant touchpoints and touchpoint integrations that customers experience, the newly adapted version of the customer journey in relation to the concept store contributes to the theory of the customer journey. Additionally, retailers can improve customer experiences and satisfaction in concept stores by putting a priority on convenience, streamlined advertising techniques, providing various product assortments, leveraging technology, ensuring customer satisfaction, and taking touchpoint integration dimensions into account.

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# 1. Introduction

*The following section introduces the background of the study and includes previous studies on concepts relevant to our study: customer experiences, online and offline touchpoints, customer journey, dimensions of journey integration, and the new retail format, concept stores. The problematization part involves a research gap that exists for understanding customer experiences throughout the customer journey. Finally, the section presents the research questions based on the main purpose of the study and the research contributions to existing literature.*

## 1.1 Background

Traditional shopping retail formats have been under threat from diversified shopping channels (Terblanche & Kidd, 2021), however, this does not mean that physical stores are dead, but its role in the customer journey is changing (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021). To remain competitive, retailers should offer their customer journey with in-store experiences that are difficult for competitors to imitate. Therefore, both retailers and academics are increasingly focusing on customer journeys (Terblanche & Kidd, 2021). Customers' ideas, feelings, social interactions, physical sensations, and cognitive reactions to their contacts with a retailer are all included in the multifaceted concept of the customer experience. This concept includes all of the several ways that the retailer engages the customer during their shopping journey, both directly and indirectly (Homburg et al, 2017). The procedure involving a customer through all phases and touchpoints that affect customer experience is known as the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Every time a customer engages with a product, service, brand, or organization across a variety of channels at various times, customers have an unique experience (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). According to Zomerdijk and Voss (2010), these exchanges between the client and any department inside the organization are referred to as "touchpoints". A customer's journey involves several touchpoints as they accomplish an activity related to buying, such as researching an item or completing a purchase (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016).

Store format depicts the essential point of contact with customers, and for physical stores to distinguish themselves from their competitors, new formats of retail attract both existing and new target markets (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021). As e-commerce is increasing, consumers are becoming

smarter, thus, physical retailers can not merely focus on low prices and a varied range of products to attract customers (Zogaj et al., 2019). Therefore, these days brands are focusing on building a special shopping environment through multisensory and emotional components to offer consumers a hedonic shopping experience (Zogaj et al., 2019). This study will explore concept stores that are closely related to flagship stores and pop-up stores, which are experience-based retail formats and where direct sales are often not the immediate goal (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021). Concept stores provide a different role in the customer journey as customers are attracted by exceptional experiences different from other experience-based stores (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021).

Customer experience is based on various touchpoints (brand-owned, customer-owned, partner-owned, social/external), starting from the initial product search to post-purchase (Terblanche & Kidd, 2021). Therefore, customer journey mapping helps to look at the holistic view of the total experience of customers (Fichter & Wisniewski, 2015). By clearly understanding customer touchpoints, companies can employ strategies that support service innovation. The goal of these tactics is to improve the customer experience associated with each touchpoint to improve customer service provider interactions (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Even though identifying critical touchpoints is complicated, it is essential since these critical touchpoints during the customer journey have the most vital effects on the major customer outcomes (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Furthermore, as Rosenbaum et al. (2017) emphasized, customer journey mapping can be a strategic innovation tool. Designing all-inclusive customer journey maps that include all possible touchpoints can turn out to be a highly complicated customer journey map that customers may or may not follow. Therefore, gathering customer information and identifying both important and less critical touchpoints would be useful to build a more effective customer journey map.

In recent years there has been a great increase in online shopping, which has resulted in the emergence of new retail channels and touchpoints that influence customers' behavior (Hickman et al., 2020). Through numerous touchpoints, customers seek information, compare offers, purchase and pay for the offerings, and ask for post-purchase assistance (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Verhoef et al., 2007). Therefore, omnichannel became a new method to enhance

customers' shopping experiences through the simultaneous use of multiple touchpoints (Hickman et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2015). By implementing an omnichannel approach, a retailer can integrate the customer experience both online and offline through every touchpoint they have with their customers. Mele et al. (2021) asserted that the integration of digital technologies, social presence and physical elements made customer journeys more complicated. Therefore, the relationship between digital and physical shopping requires a deeper understanding of how it impacts customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

## **1.2. Problematization**

First of all, further research is needed to have a better understanding of how customers experience brand-owned, customer-owned, and social/external touchpoints throughout all stages of the customer journey. Because of digitalization, retailers face the challenge to revitalize their retail formats to remain competitive (Alexander & Cano, 2020; Terblanche & Kidd, 2021). In this regard, research done by Vannucci and Pantano (2020) stresses the importance of digital touchpoints, mainly mobile phones and self-checkout. Meanwhile, other researchers (Terblanche & Kidd, 2021) have stressed the importance of in-store touchpoints; interaction with staff, communication with other customers, in-shop layout, and merchandise variety which positively impact the customer experiences and lead to an increase of customers' intentions to repatronage. In addition, Bäckström and Johansson (2017) highlighted that customers emphasize the traditional components of a retail environment more (personnel and the store layout) while merchants place a greater emphasis on integrating technological advancements (self-service and digital screens) into their physical stores for creating better customer experiences (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017). Thus, an ample amount of research has been dedicated to studying mainly in-store customer experiences and how customers interact with online and offline touchpoints within the physical store (Terblanche & Kidd, 2021; Vannucci & Pantano, 2020; Bäckström & Johansson, 2017). However, due to digitalization and the emergence of omnichannel retailing, there is a need to explore how customers experience various touchpoints (e.g. interactions with staff or other customers, mobile phone, kiosks, advertisements, word-of-mouth, to name a few) not only inside but also outside of the store since interaction with several touchpoints in one stage can impact customer experiences with other touchpoints in the next or previous stage of the



customer journey. Thus, the following study can contribute to the research gap by providing a further understanding of how customers experience the above-mentioned online and offline touchpoints before, during, and after visiting the concept store.

Additional research on exploring customer experiences is essential in the new retail format (concept store), which has not been studied extensively. Customer experience throughout the customer journey is multidimensional (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Waqas et al., 2021). According to the study (Terblanche & Kidd, 2021), four key in-store touchpoints (interaction with staff, communication with other customers, in-shop layout, and the variety of merchandise on display) positively impact customer experiences throughout their journey, thus, increasing customers' intention to visit the store again. However, the study has focused on in-store customer experiences in one type of retail sector, an outdoor apparel retailer. Thus, studying customer experiences in a different retail type is needed since it might provide contradicting insights in regards to how customers experience touchpoints throughout the customer journey in regards to concept stores. In addition, since the nature of the study is quantitative, the current literature lacks more qualitative on customer journey experiences, especially in concept stores, which have been described as "store format that aims to be an accessible touchpoint that reduces friction on a diversified customer journey with its value to the retail portfolio being that it attracts new and latent customers, mitigates existing inhibiting factors and drives them to other touchpoints" (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021, p. 1). In addition, since concept store is a new phenomenon and there is a shortage of existing literature regarding customer's experiences before, during, and after visiting the concept stores, studying how customers experience various touchpoints in this new format can enhance our understanding of the multidimensional and dynamic concept of customer experiences, that is, how customers experiences can adapt or change when they are introduced to a new retail format. Even though a recent study by Egan-Wyer et al. (2021) revealed that customer experience convenience, accessibility, and reassurance when visiting concept stores (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021), given the multidimensionality of the customer experience concept, further research is needed to identify touchpoints that are essential to customers within each stage of their journey. Moreover, consumers are in different states of mind throughout the decision journey which, makes specific touchpoints more essential than others (Santos & Gonçalves, 2022). Thus, the common customer journey mapping assumption that all touchpoints

have equal importance is fundamentally wrong (Rosenbaum et al., 2022). Therefore, there is a need to conduct a qualitative study to understand the relevant touchpoints that customers interact with before, during, and after visiting the concept store, which will help in designing an adapted version of a customer journey that is better tailored to customer experiences concerning the concept store.

Moreover, the ongoing debate on touchpoint integrations requires further exploration of how integrating various touchpoints can impact customer experiences throughout the customer journey in relation to concept stores (Gasparin et al., 2022; Hickman et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Due to the emergence of new touchpoints and retail formats, retailers are increasingly adopting omnichannel retailing (Verhoef et al., 2015), which aims to provide seamless and consistent customer experiences across all the touchpoints (Verhoef et al., 2015; Hickman et al., 2020). In this regard, several researchers (Herhausen et al., 2015; Emrich et al., 2015) claim that touchpoint integration dimensions (e.g. the consistency of product assortments in online and offline stores) can positively impact customer choices in online channels and decrease the risk of cannibalization in offline stores. However, other researchers (Emrich & Verhoef, 2015; Gasparin et al., 2022) have argued that integrating the design on online and offline touchpoints is useful only for store-oriented customers, and inconsistency of price and product assortments can positively impact customer experiences throughout the customer journey. Despite extensive research on touchpoint integrations, no research has been done to explore how customers of concept stores experience touchpoint integrations when moving from one stage to another. Since the integration of touchpoints is an essential part of a customer journey, further research is also needed to understand how customers experience the integration of various touchpoints. Also, previous research (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Gasparin et al., 2022, Keller & Lehman, 2006; Homburg et al., 2017; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Epp & Price, 2011) has focused on studying the importance of four dimensions (thematic cohesion, consistency, connectivity, and context sensitivity of touchpoints) of customer journey integration; thus, the following qualitative study also aims to explore other potential dimensions within the customer journey. For instance, another possible dimension can be touchpoint complementation: when transitioning from a mobile app to a physical store, customers might expect to gain additional information. Thus, further qualitative research is needed to investigate not only how customers experience the

existing dimensions of touchpoints integrations within the customer journey in regard to the concept stores but also identify possible dimensions that have not been discussed in previous research.

### **1.3. Research aim and contributions**

Since previous studies have focused mainly on in-store customer experiences of the customer journey, and the concept store is a new phenomenon, which has not been thoroughly studied, the following study aims to contribute to the literature by adding more insights on customer experiences at each stage of the customer journey through the examination of essential touchpoints customers interact with before, during, and after visiting a concept store. This way, the researchers will provide a thorough analysis of the touchpoints that customers encounter when visiting a concept store and how they fit into the larger context of the customer journey. In addition, given the debate on cross-channel integrations (Gasparin et al., 2022; Kuehnl et al., 2019; Hickman et al., 2020), the study also aims to shed new light on the topic by examining how customers experience the existing dimensions of journey integration when transitioning across touchpoints, as well as further exploring possible new dimensions.

By examining how customers experience touchpoints in the concept stores, the authors aim not only to provide theoretical but also practical insights that can be applied by retailers to optimize customer experiences. Since designing all-inclusive customer journey maps that contain all possible touchpoints can result in a highly complex customer journey map that customers may or may not follow, managers need to gather customer information and identify both critical and less important touchpoints that customers experience when making their journey through a service organization (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Hence, the following study aims to explore the aspects of the customer journey in IKEA from customer experiences and provide practical contributions to concept store retailers and recommendations on how to build a more useful customer journey map and effectively use touchpoints that will provide better customer experiences.

Based on the aim of the study, the authors have come up with the following research question and a sub-question:

RQ: How do customers of concept stores experience different touchpoints throughout the customer journey?

- How do customers of concept stores experience the touchpoint integrations as they move from one touchpoint to another throughout the customer journey?

## **2. Literature Review**

*In the following section, the authors introduce previous academic studies on concepts relevant to the following study. First, they provide a literature review on customer experience, focusing on the definitions of online and offline customer experience and the key factors affecting customer experiences. Later, the authors introduce the theory of the customer journey and two similar studies describing the three stages of the customer journey. The following section also covers the importance of mapping and designing a customer journey. Last but not least, the section also provides insights into various types of customer touchpoints throughout the customer journey.*

### **2.1 Customer experience**

Consumers now have more power than ever before, and they can express it in different ways. Customers now have access to more products, services, competitors, and pricing information than merchants do due to the growth of social media, online review platforms, and mobile internet access (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). Consumers are increasingly looking for outstanding and memorable experiences to go along with their purchases rather than simply obtaining and consuming goods and services (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). According to experts like Meyer and Schwager (2007), Verhoef et al. (2009), and Zomerdijk and Voss (2010), the term "customer experience" relates to how customers perceive and feel about their contacts with a company. Customers' responses are internal and subjective, and they are based on their interactions with a company.

The concept of customer experience has been studied in the literature for a long time. The term "customer experience" is dynamic; it evolves and transforms within each stage of the customer journey at different touchpoints (Kuehnl, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2015); thus, several conceptualizations of customer experience exist in current literature. According to Schmitt (1999, p. 57), who was one of the earliest authors who highlighted the importance of customer experience, experiences "...provide sensory, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and relational values" are "a result of encountering, undergoing or living through things". According to Meyer and Schwager (2007) and Verhoef et al. (2009), customer experience is influenced not only by the factors that companies can control, such as service interface, store displays, and advertising but also by external factors beyond the company's control, such as customer interactions and the purpose of shopping. This means that experiences cannot be completely controlled by the company. Later Schmitt along with other authors (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello, 2009, p. 53) conceptualized customer experience as "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments". Customer experience has also been conceptualized as "the customer's cognitive and affective assessment of all direct and indirect encounters with the firm relating to their purchasing behavior" (Klaus & Maklan, 2013, p. 228). Similarly, Lemon & Verhoef (2016, p. 71) claim that "customer experience is a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey". The authors of this research acknowledge that customer experience extends beyond the transactional aspect and incorporates numerous thoughts, emotions, actions, and sensory perceptions, in line with the perspectives of Klaus and Maklan (2013) and Lemon and Verhoef (2016).

In addition, customer experience is multidimensional, which means that it has been studied from both retailers' and customers' perspectives (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Bäckström & Johansson, 2017). In regard to customer perspectives, several authors have claimed that physical, social, and atmospheric factors have an essential impact on positive customer experiences (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017; Hickman et al., 2020; Paz & Delgado, 2020). In regards to retailers' perspectives, Bäckström and Johansson (2017) claimed that traditional factors (staff, design, and

atmospheric aspects) influence customer experiences the most. The main difference between retailers' and customers' perspectives lies in the use of digital technologies, in other words, in contrast with customers, retailers focus more on the use of technologies to create positive customer experiences (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017). Verhoef et al. (2009) specifically state that the customer experience construct is holistic in nature and involves the customer's cognitive, affective, emotional, social, and physical responses to the retailer. They (Verhoef et al., 2009) also define customer experience in a retailing context as a multi-dimensional construct. Moreover, the growing emphasis on customer experience is driven by the fact that customers now interact with companies through a wide range of touchpoints across multiple channels and media, leading to increasingly complex customer journeys (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Moreover, since new channels and touchpoints have emerged due to the advent of new technologies (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), several researchers have realized the importance of studying online customer experiences and the factors impacting positive experiences online (Hickman et al., 2020; Paz & Delgado, 2020). In the academic literature, the concept of "virtual experiences" has been defined as "vivid, involving, active, effective psychological states occurring in an individual interacting with 3-D computer simulations" (Li, Daugherty, and Biocca, 2001, p. 13). According to Hickman et al. (2020), and Paz and Delgado (2020), to enhance virtual customer experiences, companies should use online chatbots, app/website customization, and interactive photos, videos, and colors. The emergence of these virtual touchpoints has given rise to the adoption of, initially, multichannel retailing and then omnichannel retailing (Alexander & Cano, 2020). As opposed to multichannel retailing, where online and offline touchpoints are managed separately, in omnichannel retailing, offline and online touchpoints are integrated to provide consistent and seamless customer experiences throughout a customer journey (Paz & Delgado, 2020; Hickman et al., 2020; Verhoef et al., 2015; Hardgrave, 2012).

## **2.2. Customer journey**

Significant research has been conducted on the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Hamilton & Price, 2019), as an examination of the customer journey is needed to understand the

factors that impact the overall customer experience. As mentioned by Følstad and Kvale (2018), customer journeys are not limited to the physical or observable steps or touchpoints a customer goes through during service delivery. They also include the customer's emotional and cognitive reactions to the service experience. Therefore, the adoption of the customer journey perspective aims to facilitate the management and design of services that enhance the overall customer experience (Følstad & Kvale, 2018).

Zomerdijk and Voss (2010) state that the term customer journey was frequently used to describe a sequence of touchpoints. Therefore, as Fichter and Wisniewski (2015) mentioned, when a customer interacts with a business, whether it is through a product, service, website, or physical store, a customer journey map provides a visual depiction of each touchpoint. It is feasible to find problems and areas for development by outlining the entire process from the viewpoint of the consumer. This enables companies to give their customers a more seamless and satisfying experience (Fichter & Wisniewski, 2015). Moreover, in the service industry, the customer experience is regarded as a major competitive advantage. Meyer and Schwager (2007) contended that while every communication or interaction between a company and its customers has the potential to impact the customer experience, decisions made by the company regarding specific aspects of a service are frequently made without taking into account the impact on the overall customer experience. Therefore, a greater awareness of the necessity to manage and design for customer experience across touchpoints and service offerings may be to blame for the increasing uptake of the customer journey approach (Zomerdijk and Voss, 2010).

As the name suggests, a customer journey focuses on the consumer and the steps they take to make a certain purchase with a particular business. Therefore, it is crucial that the customer journey is focused on the needs of the customer and specifies the actual touchpoints and methods of service delivery as they are encountered by the consumer (Halvorsrud et al., 2016). Moreover, as Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) mentioned, companies should work to comprehend the customer's perspective to manage customer experience efficiently. This entails considering the specified touchpoint components to develop a more thorough picture of the consumer experience throughout their journey (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). In accordance with Zomerdijk and Voss (2010, 2011), top experiential service providers frequently adopt customer journey

methodologies in the management and design of their services. Therefore, the perspective of the customer journey is frequently portrayed as a tool for comprehending customer experience (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). With a deeper understanding of the customer experience, managers can identify areas where customers may encounter difficulties, "pain points", or areas where customers can run into problems, and optimize other portions of the trip to enhance the entire customer experience (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016).

In addition, as opposed to the general perception that the customer journey is a linear and one-time process, several researchers (McKinsey, 2013; Terblanche and Kidd, 2021) have argued that customers are actively involved in several processes in a given time, which can include direct customer interactions with retailers and other customers. Also, the customer journey does not always imply that customers engage in consumption experiences, that is, choosing and consuming a product, instead, customers might engage in a journey where the end goal is not to make a purchase (Hamilton & Price, 2019). Moreover, digitalization has made the understanding of the customer journey process even more complicated due to the emergence of new channels and touchpoints, such as websites, mobile apps, and blogs, to name a few (McKinsey, 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). On customer journey maps, touchpoints are often shown horizontally in accordance with a timeline of the process (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). After that, the time frame is divided into three stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2017; Vannucci & Pantano, 2020, Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016)

This research aligns with the general definition provided by Lemon & Verhoef (2016) which identifies the customer journey as consisting of three main phases - pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase. These three phases are considered to effectively capture the complexity of the customer journey while still acknowledging that it is an ongoing process that may lead to discoveries.

*Pre-purchase:* The first stage of the customer journey involves all the experiences before the customer makes a purchase, that is when the customer is searching for information about a product or when they make their first interaction with the brand (Voorhees, Fombelle, Gregoire, Bone & Gustafsson, 2017). The following stage involves behaviors such as need recognition,

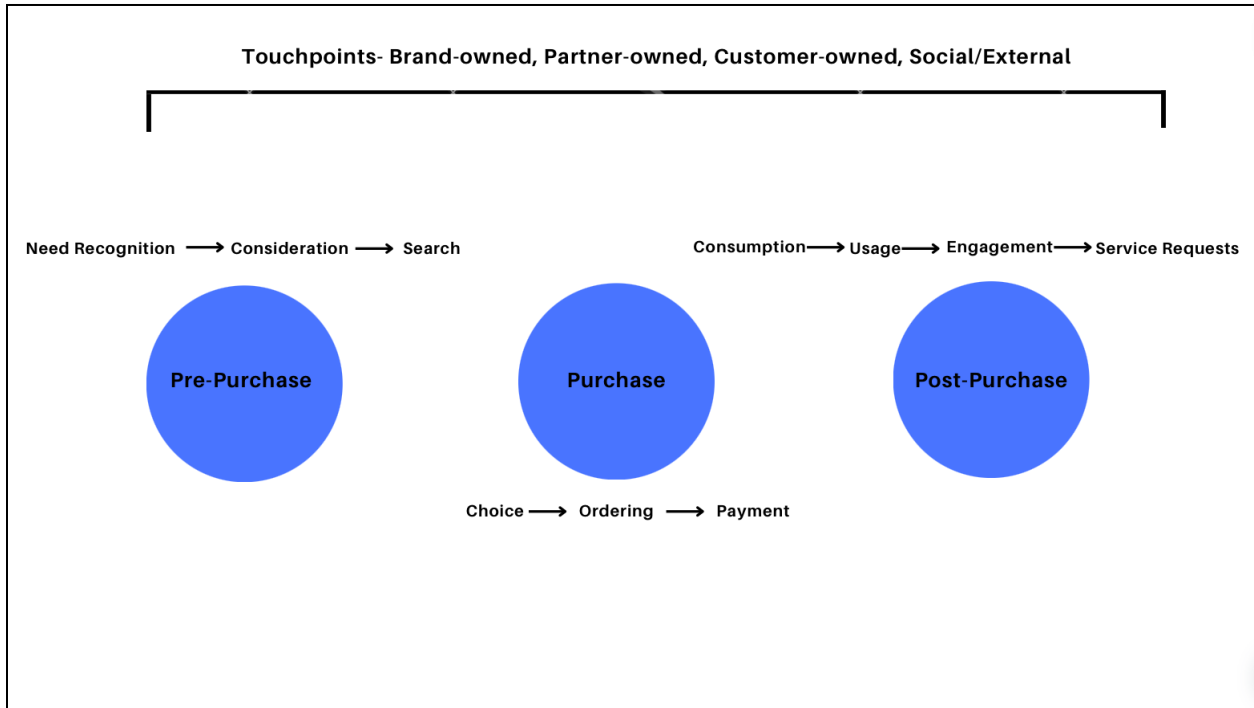


search, consideration, seeking information from online reviews, asking questions to frontline staff, and onboarding processes (Voorhees et al., 2017, Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). As Bertelsen and Jeppesen (2021) mentioned, what is extremely intriguing is that all customer journeys begin with a specific need that the consumer has, such as moving to a new place. Hence, rather than as a result of a company pushing an external product, the need arises as a result of an internal change in the customers' life. Following this identification of needs, customers enter the research and inspiration phases. It appears that customers are less open to inspiration and research before recognizing their needs (Bertelsen & Jeppesen, 2021). Pre-purchase customer experience may include touchpoints such as exposure to mall advertisements, radio advertisements, email solicitations, or any other type of marketing or communication (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). The pre-purchase phase ends when the customer has made a final decision on which product to purchase. This stage involves conducting research, evaluating products, and ultimately making a decision (Bertelsen & Jeppesen, 2021).

*Purchase*: The second and most-researched stage of the customer journey involves customers' interactions with the brand and its environment when they make the purchase, as well as behaviors, such as choice, ordering, and payment (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this period, the customer is in "the factory", where the main interactions with the staff, other customers, and technologies occur (Voorhees et al., 2017). The entire customer experience that occurs during a real service engagement with a company is referred to as the service period. This might entail actions like pulling into the parking lot, chatting with staff members, going into stores, and using kiosks (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

*Post-Purchase*: The third and last stage of the customer journey is where the customer behaves based on their experiences throughout the previous periods (Voorhees et al., 2017). This stage includes customers' interactions with the brand and its environment after making the purchase, proactive activities such as usage and consumption, post-purchase engagement, service requests, customer reviews/surveys, service recommendations, and complaints, actions taken by the firm, which aim to retain their relationship with the customer and improve further experiences over time (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017). Several researchers have identified key behaviors relevant to the post-purchase stage, which include but are not limited to returning

products, sharing a photo of a purchased item, making another purchase, and word of mouth (Wood 2001; Bolton 1998; Van Doorn et al. 2010 cited in Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Rosenbaum et al., 2017). This phase also includes any potential repeat purchases from the company related to the initial purchase (Bertelsen & Jeppesen, 2021).



*Figure 1: Process Model for Customer Journey and Experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016)*

### 2.2.1 Customer journey mapping/design

Several researchers have realized the importance of an effective customer journey design/mapping as an essential step in providing customer value in today's complex and digitized consumer sectors (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Fichter & Wisniewski, 2015; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). According to Fichter and Wisniewski (2015, p. 74), a customer journey map is "a very simple idea: a diagram that illustrates the steps your customer(s) go through in engaging with your company, whether it be a product, an online experience, retail experience, or a service, or any combination... The more touchpoints you have, the more complicated—but necessary—such a map becomes." Also, effective customer journey mapping should be data-driven and visual, which will allow the viewing of customer experience

holistically (Fichter & Wisniewski, 2015). In addition, Kuehnl et al. (2019) also claim that an effective Customer Journey Design (CJD) has a positive impact on customer loyalty through utilitarian brand attitudes (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Thus, an effective CJD allows a more explicit description of the customer journey along with the multiple touchpoints that customers interact with throughout each stage of the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

### **2.3. Touchpoints**

In academic literature, the term "touchpoints" has been conceptualized by several researchers. Baxendale et al. (2015, p. 236) have defined touchpoints "as an episode of direct or indirect contact with the brand". Also, Neslin et al. (2006, p. 96) defined touchpoints as "a customer contact point, or a medium through which the firm and the customer interact". According to Barwitz & Maas (2018), touchpoints are points of contact where a company and a client can interact and communicate. Moreover, Vannucci and Pantano (2020) asserted that touchpoints are all of the encounters that take place during a customer's journey with a company's in-store technology or sales staff. These contacts, which may occur at different points along the customer's journey, can greatly affect how the client feels about the company as a whole (Vannucci & Pantano, 2020).

The experience of customers is shaped by all the touchpoints and interactions that they have during the process of receiving a service. These touchpoints can happen before and after the purchase (Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Zomerdiijk & Voss, 2010), including the search, evaluation, purchase, and after-sale phases of the customer experience, and they can take place across various retail channels (Verhoef et al., 2009). According to Lemon & Verhoef (2016, p. 82), throughout the customer journey, "customers use and are exposed to multiple touchpoints that each have direct and more indirect effects on purchase and other customer behaviors". Touchpoints indicate what occurs from the viewpoint of the customer (Zomerdiijk and Voss, 2010). Thus, it is important to identify the key touchpoints, also known as "moments of truth" during the customer journey that have the most positive impact on customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Touchpoints in the customer journey are often categorized based on their ownership, which can be classified into touchpoints controlled by the company, touchpoints controlled by the customers themselves, and touchpoints controlled externally or by third parties (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Baxendale et al. (2015) argue that these three touchpoint groups are vital for brand consideration. However, companies should not only identify the individual touchpoints and their specifics but also connect them to obtain a comprehensive view of the entire customer journey and how it is experienced by customers (Bertelsen & Jeppesen, 2021). Therefore, this study supports the overall definition presented by Lemon & Verhoef (2016), identifying the main categories of touchpoints as brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external. Within each stage of the customer journey, customers can interact with each category of touchpoints depending on the product or service (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

### **2.3.1. Brand-owned touchpoints**

These touchpoints are consumer contacts that take place throughout the journey and are planned, handled, and controlled by the company. They comprise all forms of brand-owned media, such as online and offline advertisements (search engine marketing, display marketing, email, blogging, or social media), websites, and loyalty programs, as well as other aspects of the marketing mix that are managed by the brand, such as attributes of product, packaging, service, price, convenience, and staff (Hanssens et al., 2014; De Vries, Gensler & Leeflang, 2012; Risselada, Verhoef & Bijmolt, 2014; Onishi & Puneet, 2012). Moreover, several researchers (Berry, Seiders & Grewal, 2002; Bitner, 1990; Baker et al., 2002; Lin & Liang, 2011) claimed that the physical environment, music, accessibility of the store, interactions with staff, self-service, and delivery options have a direct impact on customer experiences and their intentions to visit the store again.

### **2.3.2. Partner-owned touchpoints**

These touchpoints are the moments when the company and one or more of its partners collaboratively plan, manage, or regulate consumer interactions that take place during the experience. Instances of partners can involve marketing firms, retailers, multichannel distributors, multi-vendor loyalty program participants, and communication channel participants (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Baxendale et al., 2015). In addition, several researchers (Ataman,

Mela & Heerde, 2008; Lemon & Wangenheim, 2009) claim that the distribution of new brands through various channels contributes greatly to the brand's growth and loyalty programs partnership affect customer experiences positively and strengthens customers' relationships with the brand.

### **2.3.3. Customer-owned touchpoints**

These contact points are consumer behaviors that are a part of the entire customer experience but are not influenced or controlled by the company, its partners, or third parties. Examples of customer-owned touchpoints can be customers considering their own needs or wants before making a purchase, choosing the payment method, or posting a product video on social media. Customer-owned touchpoints play the most important role in the post-purchase stage when the customers consume or use the product (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). An example of customer-owned touchpoints can be the IKEA Hackers website, where the customers share creative ways of reusing IKEA's old products (IKEAHackers, 2022).

### **2.3.4. Social/external touchpoints**

Throughout the customer journey, customers come into contact with external touchpoints, such as other in-store communication, peer observation, offline and online word of mouth, third-party information sources (reviews on social media), customer community pages, which play an important role in their experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Baxendale et al., 2015; Manchanda, Packard & Pattabhiramaiah, 2015; Pauwels, Aksehirli & Lackman, 2016; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). However, the degree of the impact of those external touchpoints depends on which stage the customer is in. For instance, while peers can have the most influence on customers throughout all the stages of the customer journey, other customers will mostly influence the customer during the purchase stage and sometimes in the post-purchase stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

### **2.3.5. Dimensions of journey integration**

Many researchers (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) have claimed it is ideal to integrate touchpoints across channels to promote consistent and seamless experiences. Therefore, integrating touchpoints to achieve a seamless experience can lead to a more strong and satisfying

customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). However, a recent study by Gasparin et al. (2022) has argued that having inconsistent touchpoints can lead to better customer experiences. Several authors have identified four key aspects of journey integration: the perceived consistency of retail mix elements (such as price, assortment, and information), the perceived connectivity of touchpoints (i.e. smooth transitions between touchpoints), thematic cohesion, and context-sensitivity (Gasparin et al., 2022, Kuehnl et al., 2019; Keller & Lehman, 2006; Berman & Thelen, 2018; Homburg et al, 2017; Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Epp & Price, 2011).

### **Consistency**

The term consistency refers to the degree to which the customers find uniformity in regard to the brand's elements: logo, symbol, semantics and language, packaging, product price, product assortments, message communicated through advertisements, transaction, delivery options, and return policies (Keller & Lehman, 2006; Zhang, Ren, Wang & He, 2018; Hur' e, Picot-Coupey & Ackermann, 2017; Cao & Li, 2015; Berman & Thelen, 2018; Simões, Dibb & Fisk, 2005). Examples of consistency are "when the customer finds the same product and price in the retailer's online and physical stores; reads coherent information in social media and on a website..." (Gasparin et al., 2022, p. 2). Consistency facilitates the transition from one touchpoint to another without finding any inconsistency throughout their customer journey (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Jaakkola & Terho, 2021). However, Gasparin et al. (2022) challenge the general assumption by claiming that inconsistent touchpoints can advance the overall customer experience.

### **Connectivity**

The term connectivity refers to the degree to which customers can transition easily and smoothly across online and offline touchpoints throughout their customer journey (Homburg et al, 2017). In the literature, the dimensions of consistency and connectivity are usually correlated (Kuehnl et al., 2019). However, the study (Gasparin et al., 2022) suggested that consistency and connectivity are separate dimensions. Examples of connectivity are "when the customer buys a product through the app and gets a suggestion for a nearby collection point; initiates a repair service through the brand's chat and concludes it on a partner's website without having to repeat procedures..." (Gasparin et al., 2022, p. 2).

### **Thematic Cohesion**

According to Kuehnl et al. (2019), "thematic cohesiveness of touchpoints" relates to the degree to which consumers perceive various touchpoints as sharing a similar brand theme that makes it easier for consumers to associate the brand with their particular way of life, activity, or desire. Similarly, Pine and Gilmore (1998) claim that a successful brand should have a simple but also consistent theme, which should direct the experience into a consistent narrative that engages all customers. In addition, whenever a brand introduces a new product, customers pay attention to the feature similarity of the new product to the existing products, thus, customer experiences should exhibit strong thematic cohesiveness to current touchpoints to sustain efficiency throughout the customer journey (Park, Milberg & Lawson, 1991; Kuehnl et al., 2019).

### **Context-sensitivity**

Context-sensitivity relates to the degree to which the brand meets customers' expectations and the degree to which the touchpoints are receptive to customers' goals and preferences in various contexts (Epp & Price, 2011). An example of context-sensitivity is when a customer has various options they can choose from when returning a product depending on what their preferences are in a particular context (Kuehnl et al., 2019). Moreover, throughout the customer journey, context sensitivity enhances consumers' perceptions of service convenience in terms of time and effort related to making a purchasing decision, choosing service delivery, and making a transaction (Seiders, Voss, Godfrey & Grewal, 2007).

## **2.4. New retail format, concept store**

According to Morrison et al. (2011), as the retail markets are getting more and more competitive, retailers try to differentiate their offerings to attract and retain customers. One way to do this is by providing an enjoyable and exciting shopping environment (Morrison et al., 2011). Consumers mostly go to showrooms to experience and assess the product rather than to find a better deal (Gensler et al., 2017). In this respect, brands are focusing on building a special shopping environment through multisensory and emotional components to offer consumers a hedonic shopping experience (Zogaj et al., 2019).

Two notable new formats that brands are launching are pop-up stores and flagship stores. Pop-up stores are temporary retail spaces represented through sensory and aesthetic features to encourage consumers to enjoy the shopping experience. Therefore, the goal of pop-up stores is to offer consumers a unique experience. (Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017) A flagship store is the main store of a brand that aims to attract wealthy customers (González et al. 2022). It serves a purpose beyond making profits by building strong relationships between the brand, its partners, the fashion media, and consumers (Plazibat & Brajevic, 2011, cited in González et al. 2022). Flagship stores prioritize customer experience over sales, actively engaging customers in the shopping process and making them feel special (Martínez, 2016, cited in González et al. 2022)

Among these new formats, concept stores have gained popularity as novel marketing tool for providing customers with an experiential and immersive shopping experience (Triki & Hakimi, 2017). While there is no widely accepted academic definition, concept stores typically feature creative design, in-store technology, and a limited selection of private-label products (Triki & Hakimi, 2017). Moreover, the authors (Triki & Hakimi, 2017) explained the concept store as a type of retail store that combines a physical space (the store) with a specific concept or theme to create a unique and memorable consumer experience. In essence, a concept store provides customers with a complete and immersive shopping experience. Triki and Hakimi (2017) argued that the purpose of a concept store is to offer customers an experience rather than just a place to purchase products. However, Egan-Wyer et al. (2021) asserted that the concept store does not necessarily aim to attract customers through drama or thrill, unlike other store formats that focus on providing exciting and exclusive experiences. Rather, it focuses on providing customers with convenience, accessibility, and assurance. This approach does not imply a weaker experience compared to other stores but represents a distinct and different type of experience (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021).

Concept stores need to prove their value over the long term and earn their place in the retail portfolio (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021). Moreover, the researchers (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021) found that in addition to being in a desirable location, concept stores are also seen as a source of inspiration by both current and potential customers. Customers of concept stores are unlikely to make immediate purchases in-store with cash and instead may choose to order items for delivery



through either retail personnel or independently, in-store or online (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021). However, they may also simply leave the store with greater awareness and appreciation of the brand, as well as positive or negative associations that could affect their future purchasing decisions (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021).

The research of Egan-Wyer et al. (2021) focused on IKEA planning studios placed in city centers in London and Stockholm. The researchers (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021) found that customers highly valued the unique touchpoint provided by the concept store, and they appreciated the peaceful and open atmosphere compared to traditional crowded stores, considering the concept store a superior version of IKEA (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021).

### **3. Methodology**

*The following section includes the methodology for the study. The section starts with the ontological (constructionism) and epistemological (interpretivism) approaches to the study. The following section also outlines the research method authors have chosen for the study and the criteria for determining the type and the number of participants for the interview. Later, the section describes the process of executing the interviews taking into account the code of ethics and the method chosen for the data analysis. Finally, the authors evaluate the quality of the study based on several criteria: reliability and validity.*

#### **3.1. Research philosophy**

The philosophical approach for the following study has been interpretivism (ontological) and social constructionism (epistemological). These two philosophical perspectives shape the researcher's understanding of the nature of social entities and the acceptable ways of studying the social world.

##### **3.1.1. Interpretivism**

According to Bryman (2016, p. 28), ontology is "concerned with the nature of social entities... (and) whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built

up from the perceptions and actions of social actors". Besides, epistemology has two positions: positivism and interpretivism, where interpretivism is emphasized on understanding how people perceive their social world as opposed to positivism, which adopts the natural scientific model (Bryman, 2016).

In line with interpretivism ontology, the context of the study assumes that the social entities and phenomena being studied, such as customer experiences in concept stores, are socially constructed and subjective. This acknowledges that different individuals can have varying perceptions and experiences of the same phenomenon. This approach is taken to align with the study's aim of exploring the important touchpoints of concept stores in the customer journey and providing practical insights for retailers to optimize customer experiences. The interpretivist approach is well-suited to achieve this aim since it focuses on understanding the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals.

Rather than aiming to identify a single objective truth, the interpretivist approach aims to uncover the common perspectives and experiences shared by the respondents, based on which a detailed customer journey map can be constructed. Hence, the objective of the research is not to identify a single objective truth, instead, to find common perspectives that the respondents share regarding their experiences in concept stores and based on that, build a detailed customer journey map.

### **3.1.2. Constructionism**

According to Bryman (2016, p. 24), epistemology is concerned with what is considered acceptable knowledge and "whether the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures, and ethos as the natural sciences". The following study adopts the symbolic interactionism epistemological approach, which is "the subjective meaning that individuals attribute to their activities and their environments" (Flick, 2014, p. 122). In addition, social constructionism as an extension of symbolic interactionism claims that "the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive" (Bryman, 2016, p. 33). Consistent with this philosophical approach, throughout the interviews and the analysis, the authors continuously tried to uncover the meanings behind the respondents' experiences with the concept store. Hence, instead of seeking a universal truth, the

following study aims to understand the subjective experiences of different customers in various situations, specifically, how they perceive and interact with various touchpoints throughout each stage of their customer journey in regard to concept stores.

Consistent with this ontological approach, the following study acknowledges that people's experiences in the concept store are socially constructed and subjective. The study acknowledges that depending on their context, such as whether they made purchases or interacted with specific touchpoints along their customer journey, people interpret and build their experiences in different ways. The study also notes that individuals' cultural backgrounds and social settings may have an impact on their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, a constructionist methodology was used to elucidate the multiple interpretations and meanings behind the participants' experiences in the concept store. By taking this approach, the study acknowledges that there are many possible interpretations of social phenomena rather than a single universal truth or objective fact.

### **3.2. Research strategy and approach**

When analyzing the correlation between theory and research, it is crucial to select the appropriate theoretical approach that aligns with the researchers' objectives. To understand the relationship between theory and research, it can be beneficial to consider the two strategies of deductive and inductive approaches. The difference centers on whether research is guided by theory, which is referred to as a deductive approach, or whether theory emerges from research, which is known as an inductive approach (Bryman, 2016).

This study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how customers experience touchpoints throughout the customer journey in regard to concept stores, and how these touchpoints contribute to shaping their overall experience. To achieve this, a qualitative research approach is particularly suitable as it allows for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perspectives. The qualitative research approach "involves collecting, evaluating, and interpreting data by witnessing what individuals do or say" (Burns & Bush, 2014, p. 118). The term "qualitative data" refers to information gathered in a non-numerical format, generally through notes on the actions or words of research participants (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015;

Bryman, 2016). By employing this approach, the authors can capture the complexities and nuances of customer experiences, including the dimensions of journey integration and how these dimensions shape the customer experience. This research question requires an approach that can delve deeply into customers' experiences, which is not feasible with quantitative research methods.

Qualitative research is well-suited for exploring complex phenomena in a naturalistic setting as it enables researchers to collect rich and detailed data on participants' behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). This approach can be particularly valuable when studying customer experiences, as it allows researchers to explore the various stages of the customer journey in a holistic manner. By gathering data through techniques such as interviews, observations, and focus groups, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the touchpoints that shape customers' experiences of concept stores.

Moreover, as Bryman (2016) mentioned, qualitative research follows an inductive approach to the correlation between theory and research, giving importance to the creation of theories. However, this study does not aim to develop a comprehensive theory, it seeks to enhance the understanding of how the new retail format influences customer experiences at different stages of their journey. Hence, the authors adopted an abductive approach, which refers to a type of reasoning that heavily relies on induction and is used in social sciences to explain social phenomena based on the perspectives and interpretations of individuals who inhabit those social contexts (Bryman, 2016). This approach enables the researchers to explore the perspectives and experiences of customers, which can provide new insights and ideas for future research. By using an abductive approach, the authors are not limited by pre-existing theories or hypotheses and can instead rely on their observations and participants' perspectives to inform their analysis.

### **3.3. Choice of research method**

To better understand how customers experience touchpoints and touchpoint integrations, this study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method.

In-depth interviews include asking questions to understand what a person thinks or why they behave in a certain way (Burns & Bush, 2014). The purpose of conducting in-depth interviews is to understand how people interpret and give meaning to their experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). Therefore, to better understand how customers interpret and provide meaning to their experiences, the in-depth interview technique was adopted by the researchers. According to Flick (2014), the technique of in-depth qualitative interviewing is defined by three key aspects. Firstly, interviewers aim to gather detailed and nuanced information rather than a simple yes or no answer. Questions are open-ended, meaning that respondents have the freedom to elaborate and provide their own perspectives. Secondly, interviewers have some flexibility in how they structure their questions and the order in which they ask them, allowing for a more organic and conversational exchange. Finally, this approach requires interviewers to skillfully balance the original set of questions with the natural flow of the conversation, which can be a challenging task (Flick, 2014). As Flick (2014) mentioned, the researchers were able to acquire in-depth information about the customers' experiences by using open-ended questions and allowing respondents to elaborate on their answers. This strategy allowed the researchers to piece together the interviewee's subjective perspective, which was particularly helpful in comprehending the interactions between customers and the concept store.

In addition, the authors utilized semi-structured interviews, involving a set of questions that offer some flexibility in how they are asked and answered. Unlike structured interviews that follow a rigid format, semi-structured interviews allow a more open-ended approach to gathering insight into customer experiences. (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015) In the process of interviewing, the researchers aim to reconstruct the subjective theory of the interviewee, which is the interviewee's unique perspective on their experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences. The interview guide covers various topics, with each introduced by an open question and concluded with a confrontational question (Flick, 2014). This allowed for a comparison of collected data (Flick, 2014) while enabling an comprehension of what the interviewees viewed as crucial in explaining and understanding events, patterns, and forms of behavior (Bryman, 2016). The interviews yielded spontaneous and personal depictions of the customers' experiences and provided rich, semi-structured material for subsequent analysis.

In the current study, remote interviews were chosen to accommodate the participants' busy schedules. This allowed for greater flexibility and convenience for both the participants and researchers. As mentioned by Easterby-Smith et al. (2015), in some cases, researchers may choose to conduct remote interviews, such as those conducted over the phone, email, or chat, rather than traditional face-to-face interviews. Remote interviews offer more flexibility and can make the researchers feel less obligated since they don't have to host the participant (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015).

It is important to note that utilizing self-reported data from interviews may have limitations due to the possibility of inherent biases or the influence of social desirability effects. Therefore, it is crucial for interviewers to be mindful not to impose their own viewpoints on the interviewees, which could lead to distorted findings (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). To overcome these potential issues, researchers typically employed open-ended questions and refrain from providing a specific reference framework. Questions such as "Can you describe your experience visiting the traditional IKEA store?" and "Would you visit the store again in the future? Why or why not?" (See Appendix B) were asked to prompt participants to provide more detailed and specific responses. Additionally, the authors used probes to encourage further elaboration, while avoiding leading the conversation in a particular direction, as recommended by Easterby-Smith et al. (2015).

In addition, it is crucial to note that remote interviews do not always provide the same level of depth, context, and non-verbal communication as face-to-face interviews, which may affect the quality of the data collected (Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). However, synchronous-mediated interviews, including phone calls and online chats, are similar to face-to-face interviews in that the interviewer and responder converse simultaneously (O'Connor et al., 2008, cited in Easterby-Smith et al., 2015). They might, for instance, show to be particularly useful in the context of process and real-time-based research. In this study, researchers are interested in gaining a precise chronology of events as well as a detailed comprehension of a given circumstance. Therefore, it was completely normal for the researcher to conduct online video call discussions focused on current activities and decisions rather than retrospective events to create chronologies.

### **3.4. Questionnaire**

Numerous initial and follow-up questions on the study's questionnaire (see Appendix B) were designed to assess consumers' experiences throughout the customer journey in relation to IKEA Hammersmith concept store. Customers' opinions of various IKEA retail formats, such as traditional stores, planning studios, the web, and the app, as well as their preferences for various store layouts, were sought out by these questions. Additionally, the study aimed to determine whether customers' opinions of IKEA as a whole were in line with their experiences. A focus was placed on identifying journey integration dimensions and touchpoints that could improve the customer journey map and ensure alignment between the brand's perception and customer experience. Participants were also asked about the qualities of the products and customer support.

The goal of the follow-up questions was to find out how visitors to the IKEA Hammersmith concept store felt and viewed it before making a purchase. These questions addressed a variety of subjects, such as how they found out about the new concept store, whether they had seen any offline or online advertisement, and whether or not the same image was presented on several platforms. Before visiting the concept store, customers were also questioned about any online research they had done on the store or its products and about any inconsistencies between what they had read and what they had observed.

The questionnaire also asked about how visitors engaged with store staff and how they used technology to stay in touch with family and friends while they were shopping at the concept store. The questionnaire also sought to determine the factors influencing customers' purchasing decisions, such as contacts with staff, the atmosphere of the store, affordable pricing, location, and store size. Follow-up questions were also posed to customers who decided not to make a purchase in-person, including whether they would be open to purchasing IKEA goods online, from the regular store, or by visiting the Hammersmith location again, as well as what may persuade them to do so.

### **3.5. Sampling**

Since it is difficult to collect data from every member of the population, researchers instead collect data from a sample, allowing them to make generalizations about a wider population based on the sample they have selected (Easterby et al., 2015; Wagner, 2019; Flick, 2014). In qualitative research, it is a common strategy to have several sampling techniques, where the researcher initially selects a case/cases and chooses sample units within the case/cases (Bryman, 2016). Consistent with this, the following study has two levels of sampling, where the case is the location and the sample units are the people visiting the concept store. In addition, in the following study, population refers to all the new concept stores in regard to the case, while regarding the sample units, population refers to the people who have visited a concept store at least once.

#### **3.5.1. Selected case**

The IKEA Hammersmith concept store in London, UK, was selected as the case study for this research, which aimed to investigate customer experiences with touchpoints throughout the customer journey in relation to concept stores.

IKEA Hammersmith offers a convenient shopping experience for customers, who can visit at any time without having to set aside a full day. It features a self-scan checkout system that eliminates the need for checkout lines and is cashless, making payments faster, easier, and safer. Customers can also take advantage of in-store express returns (IKEA, 2023). The store's kitchen and bedroom planning service is a standout feature, with IKEA specialists available to help customers design their perfect storage solutions. During a consultation, specialists discuss customer needs, priorities, and requirements and explore various styles, materials, and finishes to create an ideal solution (IKEA, 2023). The store also offers a selection of classic Swedish foods, both hot and cold, with the convenience of dine-in or takeaway options. Customers can even grab breakfast on the go, as the deli opens early each morning (IKEA, 2023). Overall, the IKEA Hammersmith concept store provides a well-rounded shopping experience that emphasizes convenience, efficiency, and customer satisfaction.



### **3.5.2. Sample design**

In the following study, the authors have chosen a non-probability sample design. In non-probability sampling "the probability of members of the intended (target) population being selected into the sample is not known" (Wagner, 2019, pp. 31-36). Generally, the use of probability sampling is preferred since it ensures sample representativeness, in other words, the finding can be generalized to the whole population (Wagner, 2019; Easterby et al., 2015). However, if a probability sampling method was used for the study, it would have been essential to initially identify all the people who have visited a concept store, which would be hard or even impossible considering this hard-to-reach population. Thus, the authors have decided to approach individuals leaving IKEA's Hammersmith store to make sure that the chosen sample includes people who have visited the concept store at least once.

### **3.5.3. Sample method**

In the following study, the authors have used purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling methods as a part of the non-probability sampling design.

First of all, the authors used a purposive sampling method, in which "the researcher has a clear idea of what sample units are needed according to the purposes of the study" (Easterby et al., 2015, p. 82). Since the following study was aimed to understand people's experiences throughout the journey in regard to the concept store, the authors have recruited individuals leaving the IKEA Hammersmith concept store; this way, the authors made sure to include people who were aware of the new store format and who have visited the store at least once.

The authors also used a convenience sampling method, also known as availability sampling or haphazard sampling, which "involves selecting sample units on the basis of how easily accessible they are" (Wagner, 2019; Easterby et al., 2015, p. 82). Similarly, the participants of the interview were chosen based on geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or willingness to participate in the research (Flick, 2014). Hence, the researchers approached individuals and gave them an online survey link (See Appendix C) where they would get familiar with the research aim and fill in information about their demographics and the suitable time for participating in the interview. In addition, since the concept store is a new phenomenon that has

not been extensively studied, the authors have used a sample of people who visited the concept store in general. The convenience sample was not based on other criteria, such as gender, age. Thus, the authors interviewed only people who agreed to provide their personal data and information about their experiences.

In addition, the authors used a snowball sampling method, also known as chain sampling or chain referral, where "the researcher initially samples a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research" (Wagner, 2019; Bryman, 2016, p. 415). Thus, the authors asked the participants if they knew anyone else who had experience with the IKEA Hammersmith concept store and could provide their contacts.

Finally, since a non-probability sampling method was used, the sample size of the participants was not essential; instead, the authors took into account the value of the information that could be gained from the sample (Burns & Bush, 2014). Thus, 19 interviews were conducted as data saturation was reached, that is, when no new information was gathered from the interviews. In addition, since the following study includes a sample of the location, the sample size for the location was 1; the IKEA's concept store in Hammersmith.

The table below provides the demographic information for participants. All of the participants are given nicknames so their real names are kept confidential.

<b>Nickname</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Profession</b>
Victoria	Female	28	Shop Assistant
Anne	Female	49	Investment Manager
Stella	Female	57	Accountant
Henry	Male	46	Self-employed
Daniel	Male	26	Retail Marketing

			Specialist
Violet	Female	28	Documentation Specialist
Maria	Female	27	Editor
Caroline	Female	29	Recruitment consultant
Andrew	Male	28	Knowledge executive
Olivia	Female	42	Personal Assistant
Michael	Male	27	Consultant
Hannah	Female	42	Project Manager
Leo	Male	46	Doctor
Aurora	Female	30	Marketing Specialist
Alice	Female	42	Event and Project Director
Bella	Female	28	Doctoral researcher
Stella	Female	20	Student
Liam	Male	19	Student
Robert	Male	31	Marketing Specialist

*Figure 2: Demographics of the participants*

### **3.6. Execution of interviews**

Since the respondents' resided in the UK and the researchers were located in Sweden, the interviews had to be performed via Zoom. The average interview duration was 38 minutes, and while video interviews allowed for flexibility in terms of time and place (Bryman, 2016), unstable internet connections sometimes caused delays.

Interviewees were given as much time as they desired to talk about their experiences before, during, and after visiting the IKEA Hammersmith store during the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in a conversational style. While creating the guiding questions (see Appendix B), the researchers made an effort to avoid leading the participants in a particular direction. The researchers also asked questions about interesting topics that came up in the interviews, such as store accessibility. Also, elaborations were welcomed, and the order of the questions was changed depending on the flow of the conversation. Consistent with the assertion of Flick (2014), open-ended questions were mostly used in the interview as they reveal detailed information.

Early on in the semi-structured interviews, the researchers built rapport with the interview subjects by speaking in a conversational style and discussing their own experiences. This tactic was effective in forging connections with respondents and encouraging them to freely express their thoughts and experiences. The researchers were able to bypass some of the previously answered pre-planned questions since the respondents typically provided more depth in their answers. With the help of descriptive questions like "What is the biggest difference between the IKEA concept store and the traditional format store you have visited recently?", the participants were encouraged to reflect on earlier interactions and contribute to the discussion. To clarify their understanding and promote further discussion, the researchers also asked interpretive questions like "Do you mean that even though there were no specific advertisements about the opening of the IKEA concept store, the location itself had an advertisement effect?" These methods were especially helpful at the analysis stage since they allowed the researchers to confirm their comprehension of the responses. Finally, the interviewees were given time for thinking and were encouraged to elaborate on their responses through the researchers' use of pauses (Bryman, 2016).

### **3.7. Data analysis**

In general, qualitative data produces a vast amount of information since it heavily relies on forms such as field notes, interview transcripts, and other documents (Bryman, 2016). Thus, before conducting the data analysis, the authors transcribed the Zoom recordings of the interviewees, and each of the authors listened to each recording of their interviews at least 3 times. For analyzing the gathered data, the authors adopted one of the most common methods for analyzing qualitative data, that is, thematic analysis, which is defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail... However, it also often goes further than this and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

In the following study, the authors followed the steps identified by Bryman (2016) and Flick (2014). Initially, the authors read through the transcript of the interviews several times to get acquainted with the available data. Since themes are generally generated based on codes identified in the transcript (Bryman, 2016), the authors also came up with semantic and latent codes, in other words, verbally communicated meaning, as well as hidden meanings (Flick, 2014). Thus, going through the transcripts all over again, the authors identified explicitly and implicitly expressed ideas/concepts by the interviewees. The third and most important step of the analysis process was the identification and categorization of themes that were not only based on common topics discussed by the participants but also based on metaphors and topics that have been discussed in a contradicting way among the interviewees. The themes were also identified based on key aspects of the customer journey: the four touchpoints in each stage, and the customer journey dimensions. In addition, the themes were identified as a result of key points that either supported or contradicted the findings of a previous study conducted by Egan-Wyer et al. (2021). After reviewing the themes, the authors have given names to each theme in accordance with the objective of the following study: convenience and accessibility, product assortment and store layout, traditional store as a source of inspiration in relation to the concept store, word-of-mouth, advertisement of the concept store, starting point of the customer journey: recognizing customers' needs, use of technologies throughout the journey, traditional store as a social place in relation to concept store, immediate purchases in the concept store, consistency in the aspects of IKEA brand, thematic cohesion, connectivity in the product assortment, and

expectation to physically see and feel the product in the concept store. Finally, while developing the themes, the authors also referenced some quotes mentioned by different participants to better describe each theme.

### **3.8. Ethical considerations**

In many fields, the code of ethics is becoming an essential part of research studies; thus, many researchers have dedicated their studies to identifying key aspects of ethical practices (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Easterby-Smith et al., 2015; Flick, 2014; Bryman, 2016; Diener & Crandall, 1978; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). Given the importance of the code of ethics, the authors have conducted the study in accordance with the eleven categories of ethical principles identified by Bell and Bryman (2007), which include harm to participants, dignity, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, deception, affiliation, honesty and transparency, reciprocity, and misrepresentation. Consistent with the first principle, the authors avoided causing harm to the participants, which includes physical harm and psychological harm, such as loss of self-esteem, and stress (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Diener & Crandall, 1978; Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). In addition, the authors respected the dignity of the participants and avoided the invasion of privacy by avoiding asking personal questions that could possibly cause any discomfort. Also, according to the principle of informed consent, the authors prioritized obtaining informed consent from all interviewees, ensuring they understood the nature and purpose of the study before conducting the interviews.

Besides, the study was conducted in accordance with ensuring confidentiality and anonymity; the authors ensured that the personal information about the participants was used in ways that prevented others from being able to identify the participants, as well as protected their identities by giving nicknames. With regards to the deception and misrepresentation principles, the authors avoided providing any misleading information throughout the study, for instance, an actual estimated time for the conduction of the interviews was communicated with the interviewees and all the data findings are fairly represented in the report. Consistent with the principle of honesty and transparency of the research, the authors have obtained permission to record and transcribe their interviews. Moreover, the authors took into account the affiliation principle, according to

which the participants were informed about where funding for the research was coming from. Also, with regards to the reciprocity principle, the author promised to send digital vouchers to people who would participate in the interviews, which provided benefits to both the researcher and participants. Finally, the authors carefully approached the interviewees with open-ended questions that allowed them to control the amount of information they shared, balancing the need for important empirical data with respect for the interviewees' privacy (Bryman, 2016).

### **3.9. Research quality**

Several researchers have realized the importance of research quality, which is concerned with the legitimacy of the research (Flick, 2014; Bryman, 2016; Easterby et al., 2015). In the current literature, there are several strategies and criteria for assessing the research quality. The quality of the following study is assessed in accordance with criteria introduced by Flick (2014), Bryman (2016), and Easterby et al. (2015).

Reliability: According to Bryman (2016), internal reliability refers to a research study, where there are several observers, and each member agrees on the things they see and hear (Bryman, 2016). Consistent with the idea of internal reliability, the authors studied the transcripts of interviews separately, and then discussed and agreed on the common themes. In addition, external reliability is concerned with whether the study can be replicated (Flick, 2014; Easterby et al., 2015; Bryman, 2016). The following study can be replicated given the thorough description of the methods for conducting the interviews, the sampling methods used, and the detailed explanation of the research findings and data analysis.

Validity: According to Bryman (2016), internal validity refers to the correlation between research findings and the theories that are developed. The following study has internal validity since the design and the analysis of the study address the research questions without any bias. Also, external validity is concerned with the generalizability of the study (Flick, 2014; Easterby et al., 2015). Since, the authors have used non-probability sampling, the finding of the study can not be generalized to a wider population. However, the findings of the following study are transferable

which refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to different contexts or situations (Bryman, 2016). In this regard, the findings of the study can be applied to a different brand that has the same store format but might not be applicable to people from other countries considering their cultural differences from British people.

## **4. Findings**

*In this chapter, the authors examine several touchpoints that customers interacted with regarding the IKEA Hammersmith concept store. This analysis also provides new insights into how customers experience different touchpoints within the customer journey and introduces practical insights that can be applied by retailers to optimize customer experiences. Additionally, since the study also aims to shed new light on how customers experience journey integration dimensions as they move across touchpoints and journey stages, the following section also explores the four key dimensions of customer journey integration, while also exploring whether any new dimensions emerged from the research.*

### **4.1. Store convenience and accessibility**

One of the key touchpoints that customers interact with when visiting a concept store is accessibility. Several interviewees noted that their visit to the IKEA concept store was motivated by its convenient location within the mall. As noted by Hamilton and Price (2019), who argued that the customer journey encompasses more than just the act of selecting and consuming a product, customers may embark on a journey with different goals in mind, some of which may not involve making a purchase. Therefore, it is important for retailers to provide customers with convenient and accessible experiences that meet their diverse needs and preferences. According to Egan-Wyer et al. (2021), in contrast to other store formats such as pop-up stores and flagship stores that emphasize offering thrilling and exclusive experiences, the IKEA concept store tries to give customers ease, accessibility, and assurance, rather than luring them in with drama or excitement.



*"Um, I like the Hammersmith store because it's very close to, um, you know, where we live. It's more accessible... I'll always go there because it's very close to my house and whenever I need something, uh, for personal use or for commercial use, um, it's always there for the little things..." (Aurora, 30, Female)*

*"I really like the Hammersmith store. I mean, it's so handy for me to be honest cuz it's only 20 minutes walk from where I live, so it's perfect and I can get the little bits I need often, you know, like the kitchenware that I like run out of or break or whatever and it's easy to grab that. Um, and so it's really nice that it's convenient." (Olivia, 42, Female)*

These quotes highlight how convenience and accessibility play an important role in shaping the customer experience. This is in line with previous research of Baxendale et al. (2015) and Neslin et al. (2006), who claim that touchpoints refer to episodes of direct or indirect contact with the brand, and they can be a customer contact point or a medium through which the firm and customer interact.

The IKEA concept store provides customers with a convenient and secure experience by being conveniently located and easily accessible. This aligns with the discussion of Halvorsrud et al. (2016) that it is crucial that the customer journey is actually focused on the needs of the customer and specifies the actual touchpoints and methods of service delivery as they are encountered by the consumer. The convenience in the IKEA concept store was highlighted by interviewees who owned cars, as parking space was available nearby. Meanwhile, interviewees who did not own cars mentioned easy access to the Hammersmith store via tubes in contrast to traditional bigger IKEA stores, which are usually located on the outskirts of the city. These findings connect with the overall aim of the study, which is to provide practical insights that can be applied by retailers to optimize customer experiences at each level of the customer journey, including the touchpoints where customers interact with the store.

*"I actually park on the street with street parking and there's plenty of street parking. Um, so I find it very easy to, to park the car, jump in, get back in the car and go..." (Anne, 49, Female)*

*"... it was quite close to the tube station, whereas with other IKEA in London you have to get off the tube and then because it's so big and it's kind of, yeah, like the building needs that space, you would have to walk for a bit longer. Whereas with this, you could just kind of jump off the tube and get to it quite quickly, um, and you could kind of walk into it and like immediately start shopping..." (Andrew, 28, Male)*

## **4.2. Product assortment and store layout**

All of the respondents agreed that IKEA's traditional store, website, planning studio, and concept store all shared the same brand image, but the product selection and store design were what made them unique. In the case of the IKEA Hammersmith concept store, the product selection focused on smaller, everyday home-furnishing items rather than larger items that are usually purchased at traditional IKEA stores. This approach was consistent with the store's goal of becoming a long-term component of the broad retail collection rather than a transient or experimental tactic (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021).

### **4.2.1. Product assortment**

The IKEA Hammersmith concept store's product selection and layout are the result of a strategic decision to set it apart from other IKEA retail formats and offer a unique shopping experience. This approach aligns with the research aim, which seeks to understand how concept stores can optimize customer experiences at each level of the customer journey. By focusing on smaller, everyday home-furnishing items and creating a more streamlined and less overwhelming store layout, the IKEA Hammersmith concept store provides clients with a convenient and pleasurable shopping experience that caters to their varied requirements and preferences. This aligns with research by Epp & Price (2011), mentioning that the brand lives up to consumers' expectations and the degree to which the touchpoints are accommodating to consumers' objectives and preferences in diverse settings. As Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) mentioned, companies should work to comprehend the customer's perspective to manage customer experience efficiently. This entails considering the specified touchpoint components to develop a more thorough picture of the consumer experience throughout their journey (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016).

*"I think from a range perspective, excellent, very smart use of the space and a good showcase of the range. And I think for the products that you would buy at that moment on the high street versus going to a destination retail site makes perfect sense. So I think on all those fronts, it's a very sensible decision." (Daniel, 26, Male)*

*"I was surprised by how much they had because I thought it being a store they'd be a much more limited selection. But it ended up having, like, I didn't see the whole store, but it felt like almost everything a regular IKEA had except maybe like the really big things that normal IKEA's might have." (Andrew, 28, Male)*

*"...Hammersmith one that was kind of just like a quick visit and I'd just be picking up, you know a few small items." (Violet, 28, Female)*

*"It was brilliant for, um, all the sort of little bits and pieces, um, that you can just rush in and pick up or I need this or I need that..." (Stella, 57, Female)*

#### **4.2.2. Store layout**

Several interviewees claimed that the layout of the store was distinct from traditional IKEA stores, with a more streamlined and less overwhelming product display. The smaller size of the store made it easier to navigate and find specific items. A distinctive shopping experience was greatly influenced by the store's design, which is in line with Bäckström and Johansson's (2017) assertion that consumers' in-store experiences are formed by various aspects, including physical touchpoint such as the store's layout.

*"...very smart use of the space and a good showcase of the range." (Daniel, 26, Male)*

The interviewees also pointed out that product selection and store design made the concept of a store unique; they also highlighted the store's layout as a crucial factor in their shopping experience. According to Triki and Hakimi (2017), concept stores typically have distinctive store

elements such as imaginative design and in-store technology, as well as a constrained range of private-label goods. Compared to IKEA traditional stores, participants mentioned that the concept store did not resemble a warehouse format, but a shopping mall retail format. They appreciated the convenience of not having to walk long distances to get to the section they needed.

*"...it feels more like a marketplace version of Ikea than <laugh> than the whole store where it's all separated up in sections..." (Olivia, 42, Female)*

*"The products are closer to each other and easier to buy... It's quite good and it's organized. And, uh, one good thing about it is because it's smaller than, you don't have to walk, walk a long way looking for things basically." (Henry, 46, Male)*

Even though some customers found the store layout convenient, others considered the store's layout confusing. Some interviewees pointed out that the store layout is confusing because products of various categories are stacked together, thus making it difficult to find specific items. To improve this touchpoint, clearer indicators and a more precise product categorization may help, as recommended by interviewees. For instance, one of the participants mentioned spending an extra 15 minutes searching for an item that they believed would be with kitchenware but turned out to be with the dining items. Implementing these recommendations could improve the store layout and enhance the shopping experience for customers.

*"...having the kitchen products on the basement, but the dining ware on the first floor or the ground floor, whatever you call it... so I spent 15 minutes the other day looking for something and once again I thought it would be with the kitchenware stuff, but it was actually with the dining stuff..." (Daniel, 26, Male)*

### 4.3. Concept Stores vs. Traditional Stores: Inspiring vs. Convenience-focused Shopping Experiences

Another aspect of the store design highlighted by the interviewees has been the prevalence of showrooms in the traditional IKEA store formats as opposed to the concept store. In this regard, it is important to note that a previous study by Egan-Wyer et al. (2021) has found that concept stores are seen as a source of inspiration by both current and potential customers. However, in contrast with this notion, the following study has identified that the majority of the customers are seeking inspiration from the showrooms when browsing IKEA traditional stores. Meanwhile, the concept store had fewer interior displays than the big store layouts; therefore, the concept store does not allow customers to imagine how products can be combined and used in different contexts. This phenomenon can also be attributed to the fact that most of the interviewees claimed that they spend less time in the concept store than in the traditional store.

However, according to the study's findings, shoppers who go to concept stores typically don't look for inspiration the same way they do when they go to IKEA traditional stores. Instead, people frequently search for particular products they need for their homes on a daily basis. While the concept store's layout is intended to make this procedure as convenient as possible, it may not provide the same level of inspiration as traditional stores for those looking to create more elaborate design schemes. The results relating to showroom prevalence bring up a specific touchpoint in the customer journey of traditional IKEA stores. This finding suggests that the experience of this particular touchpoint may vary between concept stores and traditional stores.

*"... when the children were younger, it'd be like, you know, it would be like a half day out with them at the IKEA traditional store and then, you know, we'd be able to get something to eat and they'd see like all the mockups of the children's bedrooms and it's good for inspiration, but obviously at Hammersmith, I think you don't get the full experience there. It's good for just popping in and picking something up..." (Stella, 57, Female)*

*"... I realize is that the bigger IKEA, you get to see showrooms, right?... You can, take your time and just, you know, see maybe your future home, how you want it to look like... smaller stores (refers to Hammersmith store) are more, you go in and you browse it as if it's a regular, home*

*furniture, like a shop, right? ... there's no inspiration, but it's more like, oh, I wanna pick up something." (Caroline, 29, Female)*

*"...when you go to a big ikea, you're probably browsing, you're looking for inspiration. So it makes sense to take you through the curated range, get you there nice and easy, and give you lots of inspiration along the way. Whereas the Hammersmith destination, I think, is far more transactional..." (Daniel, 26, Male)*

It is significant to note that the inspiration role played by traditional stores and concept stores underline the need of comprehending the varied needs and preferences of IKEA's client base. Traditional retailers continue to be essential in motivating customers to design distinctive and personalized living spaces, while the concept store may be more appealing to those looking for a more streamlined shopping experience.

#### **4.4. Word-of-mouth**

It is worth noting that our study found that word-of-mouth was not a significant touchpoint for customers in their journey at the IKEA Hammersmith store. This finding contrasts with previous research suggesting that external touchpoints, such as word-of-mouth, third-party information sources, and customer community pages, play a significant role in influencing customers' experiences throughout the customer journey, resulting possible intention to repatronage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Baxendale et al., 2015; Manchanda, Packard & Pattabhiramaiah, 2015; Pauwels, Aksehirli & Lackman, 2016; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). In our study, although some interviewees recommended the store to their acquaintances in person or via phone, no participants posted online reviews about their purchases. In addition, while the after-purchase phase is crucial, repeat purchases related to the initial purchase were the main driver of returning customers (Bertelsen & Jeppesen, 2021), rather than the initial experience or word-of-mouth recommendations. Also, even though most of the respondents have not engaged in word-of-mouth, that is, they have not posted any reviews on social media, they were still willing to visit the Hammersmith store again in the future. These findings provide valuable insights for firms seeking to optimize their customers' experiences and drive repeat purchases.

*"...but I did go last week to buy oat milk that I always buy and I bought some, uh, what was that? Some clips to go on food bags. So I'm often there just picking up lots of little things." (Daniel, 26, Male)*

*"Not really... oh but I had a friend who moved close to it so I pointed it out to them."  
(Maria, 27, Female)*

*"Um, I don't think I have, to be honest... and I haven't left a review." (Violet, 28, Female)*

*"I think I've never recommended to anybody" (Henry, 46, Male)*

#### **4.5. Advertisement of IKEA**

Before visiting a store, customers may be exposed to various brand-owned touchpoints, such as mall advertisements, radio advertisements, email solicitations, or any other type of marketing or communication (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Customers were exposed to brand-owned media, such as online and offline advertisements, and websites (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Baxendale et al., 2015). According to the interviewees, IKEA seems to have struck a balance in its promotional efforts. Customers reported being exposed to a variety of touchpoints, including social media platforms, while others discovered it through a tube advertisement, which they praised as an excellent marketing tactic. Also, one of the respondents has received a flier promoting the opening of the new store format during a festival.

*"...I think what was really clever marketing wise was the collaboration with the tube, with the TFL (Transport for London) network and getting the IKEA symbol on the map. That was a really clever idea, I've not seen anyone do that before." (Daniel, 26, Male)*

*"I think I probably saw adverts on social media or like articles about it. Um, and then I did see adverts on the tube. In the underground." (Maria, 27, Female)*

*"Mm, yeah. I think it's within the website somewhere. Mm-hmm it's just a tiny section about where they talk about what they have something new. Yeah." (Victoria, 28, Female)*

Even though several respondents have interacted with both online and offline advertisements before their visit to the concept store, some of the respondents reported that they first noticed the store's construction while walking in the area and became aware of its presence through the store's construction; thus, the concept store acted as an advertisement itself.

*"I haven't seen any advertisements, but I do go to that shop in the center occasionally, so I've just walked past it a few times. I don't remember seeing adverts for it, but I think I've just, um, I've just, I, I knew it had arrived and wanted to check it out, so yeah." (Leo, 46, Male)*

Interviewees mentioned that they did not feel overwhelmed or bombarded by promotional material. This suggests that IKEA has successfully tailored their marketing efforts to reach its target audience without overwhelming them with too much advertising.

#### **4.6. Starting point of the customer journey: recognizing customers' needs**

The findings of the study have shown that a recent move by most of the interviewees was the main reason for visiting the IKEA Hammersmith concept store and purchasing household items. According to Meyer and Schwager (2007) and Verhoef et al. (2009), customer experience is influenced not only by the factors that companies can control, such as service interface, store displays, and advertising but also by external factors such as the purpose of shopping. As stated by Bertelsen and Jeppesen (2021), all customer journeys begin with a specific need. Moreover, as Bertelsen and Jeppesen (2021) argued, following the identification of needs, customers enter the research and inspiration phases. It appears that customers tend to be less receptive to inspiration and research before recognizing their needs. Therefore, when moving into a new place, many respondents began their web investigation by looking up what products were offered at the IKEA Hammersmith concept store.



*"...I wanted some little kitchenware and I love the IKEA glass ones with the cork top. So I knew exactly what I wanted so I literally went in and put 'em in my backpack and left straight away. So that's the convenience of the Hammersmith store." (Olivia, 42, Female)*

*"Yeah, we wanted to buy artificial plants and quite a lot." (Hannah, 42, Female)*

Thus, the fact that customers often begin their search for household items at IKEA Hammersmith highlights the importance of the store's online presence and the demand for a user-friendly website that clearly displays product offers and prices.

#### **4.7. Use of technologies throughout customer journey**

Since the following study aims to explore how customers experience touchpoints, including digital touchpoints, the following research revealed that technologies play various roles in each stage of the customer journey. As mentioned in the literature review, technologies are becoming an essential aspect of customer experiences throughout their journey (Vannucci & Pantano, 2020; Bäckström & Johansson, 2017). Due to the emergence of omnichannel retailing, several researchers have highlighted the impact of online brand-owned touchpoints (e.g. social media, website) on customer experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Paz & Delgado, 2020; Baxendale et al., 2015). Consistent with previous research, online touchpoints (mobile app, website) played an important part during the pre-purchase stage of the respondent's customer journey since most of them were already aware of the store, so they browsed on IKEA's website or mobile application before visiting the concept store. Thus, the respondents who were already aware of the Hammersmith store had engaged in prior research online to gain more information on product options or to check the availability of a specific item in a specific store. However, the respondents who just happened to discover the Hammersmith store for the first time have not searched for information online before visiting the store.

*"... I checked it out online just to check what size frames they sell so that I would know if I could get what I wanted there." (Maria, 27, Female)*

*"... we really just did stumble upon it. We didn't know it was there. So, you know, there was no research beforehand." (Stella, 57, Female)*

The following study has also revealed that most of the respondents have used self-checkout in the concept store as they preferred not to interact with the staff. In addition, in the current literature, there is an ongoing debate on the importance of technologies in the purchase stage of the customer journey (Bäckström & Johansson, 2017; Vannucci & Pantano, 2020; Terblanche & Kidd, 2021). While Vannucci and Pantano (2020) claimed that the use of mobile phones or self-checkout are vital in providing better in-store customer experiences, other researchers (Terblanche & Kidd, 2021; Vannucci & Pantano, 2020) have stressed the positive impact of interaction with staff on customer in-store experiences. The following study has found that most of the customers did not use kiosks or their mobile phones when searching for specific products or asking for advice from their friends or family members. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that the respondents mainly bought small items and spent less time in the Hammersmith store than they would in the traditional IKEA store.

*"... didn't talk to staff because there was a self checkout." (Bella, 28, Female)*

*"... I quite like the self-checkouts, they worked well... it was fairly straightforward."  
(Alice, 42, Female)*

*"We kind of just walked around and yeah, we didn't use any of the kiosks." (Violet, 28, Female)*

*"... probably wouldn't look online unless there was something very specific. I'll just go into the store and wander around until I find what I'm looking for." (Michael, 27, Male)*

Another essential digital touchpoint during the post-purchase stage that has been highlighted by some of the respondents was the availability of digital receipts, which facilitates the process of returning the products, especially if customers lose the paper receipts.

*"I think because it's e-receipt, so it's easier for you to just go like back to your email and get the receipt and return the items ... So it's much more convenient than your regular receipt."*

*(Caroline, 29, Female)*

*"I know the whole idea of like emailing your receipt is really nice and I know that I'll be able to return things easily if need be." (Anne, 49, Female)*

To conclude, the following study has revealed that customers interact with various digital touchpoints mainly throughout the pre-purchase and post-purchase stages of their customer journey in relation to the concept store. Thus, while most of the customers have not interacted with digital touchpoints in the concept store, the use of digital receipts and mobile applications of the store were considered as important since they facilitate their experiences.

#### **4.8. Traditional store in relation to concept store: traditional store as a social place**

Since exploring how customers experience social touchpoints (interactions with other customers, family members, or friends, on customer experiences, especially during the purchase stage of the customer journey), was an essential aspect of the study aim, understanding how people interacted with these touchpoints in traditional IKEA store in contrast with the concept store can help retailers better design and optimize these touchpoints in a concept store format (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Baxendale et al., 2015; Manchanda, Packard & Pattabhiramaiah, 2015). The following study has revealed that most of the respondents preferred visiting IKEA's traditional store with their family or friends since they consider it a social activity where they spend most of their day. Meanwhile, during their visit to the concept store, most of the interviewees have not interacted with anyone since most of them usually visit the Hammersmith store by themselves. Thus, even though previous research considered interactions with other customers to be essential during the purchase stage (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), the following study has revealed that this social touchpoint is not relevant during the purchase stage in the concept store.

*"I've always go by myself. I run in, get some stuff and then run out" (Anne, 49, Female)*

*"I would usually be at IKEA with friends or family because, I dunno, it would be more of a like, a unique occasion and so therefore we would go with each other. Whereas with this, I was already shopping alone, so I entered the store alone as well." (Andrew, 28, Male)*

In addition, to understand how customers interact with the social touchpoint in the concept store, it is essential to explore how the respondents perceive the traditional store in contrast with the concept store. In this regard, the findings have shown that the respondents perceived the food court as an essential part of their trip to IKEA's traditional store and sometimes the main reason for visiting the store since it was a great opportunity for them to spend time interacting with their family members and friends. However, during their visit to the concept store, most respondents rarely spent time in the food court and some did not even recognize that the food court existed in the concept store. This phenomenon can be related again to the fact that the customers usually go to the Hammersmith store alone and spend less time in the concept store. Thus, as opposed to the traditional store, the concept store does not act as a social place where people could spend time browsing in the store or eating in the food court while interacting with family or friends.

*"But, you know, when the kids were younger as well, we'd go to IKEA and the food court was there and they'd have hot dogs and drinks and whatever they needed. So, yeah, we've always supported the food court." (Stella, 57, Female)*

*"I tried the food in Hammersmith as well, it's almost the same. So, instead of eating there, I just pick it up and take it home." (Caroline, 29, Female)*

Thus, to understand how customers experience concept stores, it is also essential to study how they perceive the traditional store format in relation to the concept store. People regard the traditional store as a social place where they interact with their friends and family while browsing through the long aisles and enjoying time together in the food court. Meanwhile, the concept store is seen as a retail store, where people can quickly pick up small, daily items that do not require the need to ask for a recommendation from others. Also, a concept store is a place

that people mainly visit alone, and where picking up food from the food court instead of eating there is considered a common behavior since people regard the food court as an essential place for interaction only when visiting a store with friends or family.

#### **4.9. Immediate purchases in the concept store**

As a part of the study aim to explore how customers experience various touchpoints and the dimensions of integrating these touchpoints, it is also essential to investigate how the respondents experienced the delivery option (brand-owned touchpoint) and how the delivery options were receptive to their needs in different situations (context-sensitivity dimension). The findings of the following study revealed that most of the respondents made immediate purchases as they surveyed the merchandise in the concept store instead of using the delivery service irrespective of the situation and even though they were aware of the delivery options. This finding is inconsistent with previous studies (Egan-Wyer et al., 2021; Bitner, 1990; Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal & Voss, 2002; Lin & Liang, 2011) that claim that customers of concept stores choose to order items for delivery instead of making immediate purchases in the concept store and that delivery options are an essential aspect of customer experience that directly impacts the customers' decision to visit the store. The main reasons behind the findings of the study were that for the delivery the customer had to pay the extra money and had to wait for the delivery, however, since most of the items purchased in the concept store were small items, they preferred to pick the items immediately instead of having them delivered to their home.

*"So I chose to pick it up in store, mainly just because like, I don't have to wait for the delivery. Yeah. And it's very convenient in terms of like, me just getting there and picking things up, especially like the smaller items." (Caroline, 29, Female)*

*"... only the really big things I would have delivered because delivery is quite expensive." (Maria, 27, Female)*

*"This is what always happens cuz you just see the prices, oh it's so cheap, I'm gonna buy this, I'm gonna buy that. Since everything is so cheap you end up spending a fortune at the end. I mean, not a fortune, but you spend a lot. Your intention was not to spend that much, you know..."*

*(Hannah, 42, Female)*

#### **4.10. Consistency in the aspects of IKEA Brand**

The following study has revealed inconsistent findings in regard to how customers experience the consistency dimension. In the current literature, research on omnichannel retailing (Kuehnl et al., 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016) assume that it is ideal to integrate touchpoints across channels to promote consistent and seamless experiences. Most of these studies have highlighted the importance of consistency regarding the brand's theme, logo, packaging, product price, product assortments, delivery options, and return policies (Keller & Lehman, 2006; Zhang, Ren, Wang & He, 2018; Hur´e, Picot-Coupey & Ackermann, 2017; Cao & Li, 2015). However, Gasparin et al. (2022) claimed that inconsistent touchpoints positively impact customer experiences. When the respondents were directly asked whether they found inconsistencies in the product price, delivery options, and return policies, the respondents claimed that they have not paid attention to differences in those elements and were unable to report any differences since they expected them to be the same in any of IKEA's stores.

*"I didn't even check it cuz I just assumed that it's the same as the bigger IKEA... I didn't think that there would be any difference in the level of service, customer service between the two."*

*(Anne, 49, Female)*

In addition, regarding the product assortments, the respondents found inconsistency in the Hammersmith store, meaning that they found limited product options in the concept store than in the traditional store. However, this phenomenon did not negatively impact their experiences in the concept store considering the small size of the store and the fact that the concept store complements rather than replaces the other retail formats. Despite the fact that there are few product options available in the concept store, the customers are still willing to visit the concept

store again taking into account the convenience of purchasing small items in a store that is located nearby instead of having to travel long distances or having to wait for the product to be delivered when purchasing the items online.

*"... the concept store has far fewer products than online... I mean that doesn't bother me so much. I haven't been looking for them. I guess it would be annoying to some people, but I almost go into that IKEA knowing I won't get those things so it doesn't bother me too much."*

*(Daniel, 26, Male)*

*"... it's just a smaller version... if I want to buy something and they have it in Hammersmith, cause it's closer to me, I will go to Hammersmith. But other than that, they're both the same quality, the same customer service." (Henry, 46, Male)*

Hence, most of the respondents were unable to report any inconsistencies regarding the product price, delivery options or return policies since they had already expected them to be the same in each of the IKEA stores. Despite the discrepancy found regarding the product assortment, the inconsistency did not negatively impact their decision to visit the concept store again. So, the consistency dimension is not an essential part of their customer journey.

#### **4.11. Thematic cohesion**

As mentioned earlier, since customers pay attention to the feature similarity of the new product to the existing products, the brand should have strong thematic cohesiveness (Park, Milberg & Lawson, 1991; Kuehnl et al., 2019). In the study, the respondents claimed that the IKEA brand, in general, has a consistent theme both in the traditional store and the concept store in regards to the image of the brand (family-oriented, friendly, modern), the product features (DIY, value for the money, affordable, simplicity) and the customer service (staff's availability and eagerness to help). Hence, as opposed to differences in product price, customer service, delivery options, and return policies, the respondents did pay attention to the aspects of the brand theme since they were able to clearly report similarities found both in the concept store and the traditional store.

*"I've been to one store in Australia... and the other one in Taiwan. And basically it's the same"*  
(Victoria, 28, Female)

*"So I think the smaller one, I still have the same image..."* (Caroline, 29, Female)

#### **4.12. Connectivity in the product assortment**

Since the authors also explored how the customers experienced the connectivity dimension, the study findings have shown that only one respondent found connectivity in the product assortment when transitioning from the website to the physical concept store. As the connectivity dimension generally determines the easy transition from one touchpoint to another (Homburg et al, 2017), the findings have shown that only one respondent initially found a product online and the website suggested the nearby store (the concept store), where they could easily find the product.

*"I had a look at the plants, I had to look at the prices and I just kind of, if they have it and you know, you can see that they've got it in the Hammersmith store. So I was like okay, we are going to the HammerSmith store."* (Hannah, 42, Female)

#### **4.13. Expectation to physically see and feel the product in the concept store**

Since one of the aims of the study was to identify new possible dimensions for touchpoint integration, the following study also revealed that another possible dimension could be touchpoint complementation: when customers expect to gain more communication or additional information while transitioning from one touchpoint to another. The findings of the research have shown that even though the customer did not expect to interact with the staff to get more information about the product since they preferred to do as much research as possible online before going to the store, they still expected to find out how the product looks and feels in real life. Thus, when transitioning from the website to the store, the customers want to have a better idea of how the product looks and feels physically.



*"I do as much as I can online. And I think the website was very good in terms of description and dimensions. And so when I went in the store, it was really just for myself just to go and touch it... Just to have a feel and see what things feel like." (Stella, 57, Female)*

## **5. Discussion**

*The following chapter thoroughly discusses the significant touchpoints identified in the previous findings, examining their relevance within each stage of the customer journey. Through an abductive qualitative research approach, the authors have built an in-depth and holistic understanding of how customers experience touchpoints across the customer journey in relation to concept stores. This section also highlights the key touchpoints throughout each stage of the customer journey and investigates how customers experience touchpoint integration dimensions.*

### **5.1. Pre-purchase stage**

In the following stage, customers search for information about a product or have their first interaction with the store/brand (Voorhees et al., 2017). Customers may have different goals in mind (Hamilton & Price, 2019) when visiting a concept store, and convenience and accessibility play a significant role in shaping their experience. The IKEA Hammersmith concept store provides customers with a convenient and secure experience by being conveniently located and easily accessible. This is consistent with the previous study by Egan-Wyer et al. (2021), who claimed that unlike other store formats (pop-up, flagship stores) that focus on providing unique and exciting experiences, the IKEA concept store prioritizes convenience, accessibility, and reassurance over dramatic or thrilling elements.

The study also highlights the significance of IKEA's advertising efforts, due to which, most of the respondents became aware of the new store. Before visiting a store, customers may be exposed to various brand-owned touchpoints (Rosenbaum et al., 2017), and in this study, customers learnt about IKEA's new concept store through social media platforms, tube advertisements, and fliers. Finding the right balance in promotional efforts is crucial for any

brand. Too much advertising can result in customers feeling bombarded or annoyed, while too little advertising may result in low brand awareness and fewer customers. IKEA's approach, as reported by the interviewees, seems to have struck the right balance and helped to create a positive perception of the brand.

After increasing awareness of the new store, understanding customer needs and behaviors is important in optimizing the customer experience. Many interviewees cited a recent move as the reason for visiting the store and purchasing household items. As Bertelsen and Jeppesen (2021) stated, following the identification of needs, customers enter the research and inspiration phases. Consistent with this, as soon as the customers recognized their needs, they started to search for the products online before visiting the concept store.

## **5.2. Purchase stage**

The purchase stage is the phase in which customers interact with the brand and its environment when they make the purchase, as well as behaviors, such as choice, ordering, and payment (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In this period, the customer is in "the factory", where the main interactions with the staff, other customers, and technologies occur (Voorhees et al., 2017). In the study, two important brand-owned touchpoints were identified in this stage: product assortment and the use of technology.

The product assortment is an important touchpoint that significantly impacts the customer experience, as observed in the case of the IKEA Hammersmith concept store. By offering a diverse range of smaller, practical home-furnishing items, the store provides a convenient and pleasurable shopping experience for customers, which aligns with previous research (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Moreover, this product assortment also contributes to the store's long-term appeal and marketability by catering to their daily needs - a strategy that aligns with the idea of establishing a permanent presence in the retail market, as highlighted by Egan-Wyer et al. (2021).

The use of technology was also found to play a role in the purchase stage of the customer journey. While online touchpoints were crucial in helping customers research and gather information before visiting the Hammersmith store, the study indicated that customers did not primarily rely on technology inside the store. Most customers preferred not to interact with staff and instead used self-checkout for their purchases. This aligns with previous research that highlights the importance of self-service technologies in enhancing in-store customer experiences (Vannucci & Pantano, 2020).

### **5.3. Post-purchase stage**

The post-purchase stage is a critical phase in the customer journey that encompasses various customer interactions with the brand and its environment after the purchase. During this phase, businesses take a variety of steps to maintain their relationship with customers and enhance their experiences over time (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Voorhees et al., 2017).

External touchpoints, such as word-of-mouth, third-party information sources, and customer community pages, play a significant role in influencing customers' experiences throughout the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Baxendale et al., 2015; Manchanda, Packard & Pattabhiramaiah, 2015; Pauwels, Aksehirli & Lackman, 2016; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). In our study, we found that while some interviewees recommended the store to others in person or via phone, none of the participants posted online reviews about their purchases. However, repeat purchases related to the initial purchase were the main driver of returning customers, as mentioned by Bertelsen and Jeppesen (2021), indicating that they were satisfied with the items they had bought. Despite the lack of word-of-mouth recommendations, most respondents expressed a willingness to revisit the Hammersmith store in the future. This indicates that businesses can still drive customer loyalty and repeat purchases by providing high-quality products and services, even in the absence of extensive online reviews or recommendations.

Additionally, some respondents mentioned the accessibility of digital touchpoints as a crucial component. E-receipts are one example of a digital touchpoint that makes it easier for customers to return items, especially if they have lost their paper receipts. This emphasizes how crucial it is

to provide convenient and accessible digital touchpoints to enhance the customer experience in the post-purchase stage of the customer journey.

#### **5.4. Touchpoint integration dimensions**

The following study also explores how the customers of concept stores experience touchpoint integrations through their customer journey. The findings of the study have shown that, in the concept stores, the only inconsistency they found compared to other IKEA retail formats was related to the product assortment and the design: the concept store mostly has smaller everyday items and does not look like a warehouse. In addition, in relation to other IKEA retail formats, the customers reported consistency regarding the brand theme, that is, the family-friendliness of the brand, the affordability and simplicity of the products offered, and the availability of the staff in the store. However, despite the inconsistencies found, the customers were still willing to visit the store again. Thus, for the customers, convenience was the most important aspect of the store which made the inconsistency or consistency irrelevant and not essential for them.

The study also revealed how the customers experienced context sensitivity, which was concerned with the degree to which the brand meets customers' expectations depending on the context (Epp & Price, 2011). According to the respondents, the brand was adaptive to their needs by offering e-receipts, thus, in situations where the customers lose the paper receipts they still have the digital version which they can use when returning the item in the post-purchase stage.

Moreover, only one customer regarded the website and the concept store to be connected since when the same product they found on the website was available in the concept store. Despite this, the connectivity dimension was not an essential aspect that was expressed either explicitly or implicitly by the respondents. Also, during the study, a new possible dimension was identified which is concerned with the degree to which the concept store provides the opportunity to physically see and feel the products. The customer claimed that they find out how the product actually feels and looks when visiting the concept store after doing as much online research as possible before visiting the physical store.

## **6. Conclusion**

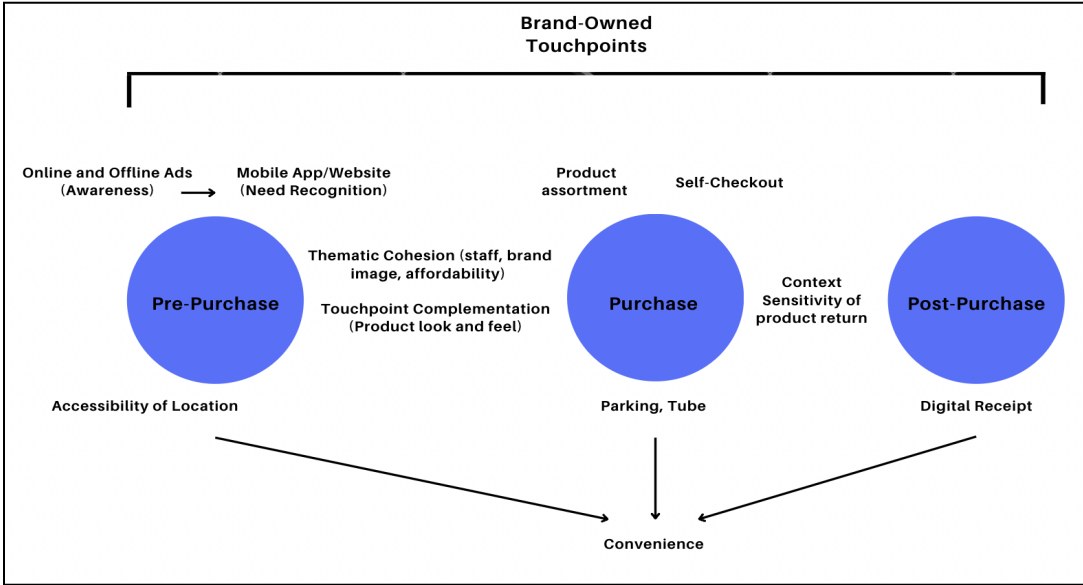
This study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of customer experiences while interacting with different touchpoints throughout the customer journey in regard to the concept stores. The research question also focused on how the dimensions of journey integration shape the customer experiences throughout their journey.

The study identified key touchpoints in each stage of the customer journey, starting with the pre-purchase stage, customers' experiences in concept stores were found to be greatly influenced by convenience and accessibility. Advertising efforts were also found to play a significant role in shaping customers' perceptions of the brand since IKEA's strategic approach to advertising has contributed to creating a positive brand perception among customers. In the purchase stage, product assortment and the use of technology were identified as important touchpoints. The diverse range of practical home-furnishing items offered by the IKEA concept store made shopping easy and enjoyable. Customers also favored self-checkout and preferred having less staff interaction, highlighting the importance of self-service technologies in enhancing in-store experiences. Regarding the post-purchase stage, our study emphasizes the importance of repeat purchases and customer satisfaction in shaping post-purchase behavior. Despite the absence of uploading online reviews, customers in our study were driven to revisit the store due to their satisfaction with the initial purchase. Additionally, the accessibility of digital touchpoints, such as e-receipts, played a role in enhancing the overall customer experience. Regarding the touchpoint integration dimensions, the study found the consistency of customer service, product affordability, and brand image as essential for customers. Moreover, as long as the brand has clearly established expectations regarding the product assortment before the customers visit the concept store, the inconsistent nature of the product assortment did not negatively affect the customer experience as they go from the pre-purchase stage to the purchase stage. Regarding the context sensitivity aspect, consumers anticipate that the retailer will make digital receipts available for usage in the post-purchase phase depending on the circumstance, such as in case the paper receipt is lost. Last but not least, a new dimension was found, consumers expect to see the product's appearance and feel the material in real life, particularly when transitioning from the brand's website to the physical store.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights into enhancing customer experiences in concept stores. The newly adopted version of the customer journey in regards to the concept store contributes to the theory of the customer journey by highlighting the most important and relevant touchpoints and touchpoint integrations that customers experience. Also, by prioritizing convenience, optimizing advertising strategies, offering diverse product assortments, leveraging technology, ensuring customer satisfaction, and considering touchpoint integration dimensions, retailers can enhance customer experiences and satisfaction in concept stores. These findings contribute to a better understanding of the customer journey and provide both theoretical and practical implications.

**6.1. Theoretical Implications**

*Based on the findings and analysis, the authors have built an adapted version of the customer journey map in relation to the concept store (See Figure 3).*



*Figure 3: Adapted version of Customer Journey in relation to the concept store*

The study's findings contribute to the theory of the customer journey by contrasting and extending results from the previous theory of the customer journey and relevant concepts (touchpoints, dimensions of touchpoint integration). The adapted version of the customer journey

suggests that the customer journey is not a one-size-fits-all approach and that touchpoints may have varying degrees of importance depending on the store format.

Firstly, as opposed to the customer journey map introduced by Lemon and Verhoef (2016), in the adapted version of the theory, the pre-purchase stage emphasizes the significance of awareness as the starting point of their journey where people become aware of the concept store through interaction with brand-owned touchpoints, that is, offline and online ads. Only after the customers become aware of the new retail format, customers start to recognize their needs and based on that engage in online research to become aware of product assortment before visiting the concept store.

Similar to the initial customer journey theory (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), the adapted version of the customer journey for concept stores also highlights that in the purchase stage, customer experiences are not only about customers making the transaction but also about their perceptions of the store aspects and interactions with online and offline in-store touchpoints. In regards to the offline touchpoints, the concept store stands out by offering a diverse range of compact and practical home furnishing items; thus, contributing to an enjoyable shopping experience for customers.

The following study has also revealed that in the purchase stage, most of the respondents have used self-checkout in the concept store. This is consistent with the previous study (Vannucci & Pantano, 2020) highlighting the importance of the use of self-checkout for providing better in-store customer experiences. Moreover, even though many studies (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Baxendale et al., 2015; Manchanda, Packard & Pattabhiramaiah, 2015; Pauwels, Aksehirli & Lackman, 2016; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006) mentioned that throughout the customer journey, social touchpoints like interactions with others play an important role in their experiences, this was not the case of concept store as customers preferred self-checkout to avoid interactions with staff members.

In addition, the convenience in regards to brand touchpoints (accessibility of the location, the availability of parking slots and nearby the tube, and digital receipts) was an essential aspect

prevalent in all three stages of the customer journey. Thus, comfort and accessibility are valued more highly by concept store customers than by dramatic or intriguing characteristics. This is in line with Egan-Wyer et al. (2021) assertion that, unlike other store formats that concentrate on offering thrilling and exclusive experiences, the concept store does not necessarily strive to draw people through drama or thrill. Instead, it concentrates on offering customers comfort, accessibility, and assurance.

Finally, the following study contributes to the theory by revealing that the thematic cohesion of customer service, product affordability, and brand image is essential for customers. The inconsistency of the product assortment did not negatively impact customer experience when moving from the pre-purchase stage to the purchase stage if the expectations regarding the product assortment are clearly set by the brand before the customers visit the concept store. In regards to the context sensitivity dimension, the customers expect the store to enable the use of digital receipts in the post-purchase stage depending on the situation, such as in the case of losing the paper receipt. Finally, the study also contributes to the theory by introducing a new dimension, which relates to the customer's expectation to be able to physically see the appearance and feel the material of the products when transitioning from the brand's website to the physical store.

The key theoretical implication is that customer experiences throughout the customer journey are constantly changing, especially when new retail formats are being introduced, thus it is essential to frequently analyze how customers experience various touchpoints. The adapted version of the customer journey in relation to the concept store reveals that the customers mainly interact with brand-owned touchpoints. However, the importance of the touchpoints throughout the journey might change as customers become more familiar with the concept store. Overall, this study contributes to the theory of the customer journey by introducing a comprehensive mapping of customer experiences along with the most relevant touchpoints and touchpoint integration dimensions throughout the customer journey in regard to concept stores.



## **6.2. Practical Implications**

The findings of the following study can provide valuable managerial implications for retail companies that have or are planning to open concept stores. The findings can help companies design the aspects of their concept store in a way that can provide better customer experiences and at the same time draw a clear distinction between the concept store and other retail formats.

As mentioned in the findings section, despite the inconsistency in the product assortment, the respondents were still willing to visit the store since it is located in a city center mall that they have easy access to via both public and private transportation. Thus, when opening a new concept store, retailers should take into account the location of the store to make sure people can travel easily to the store by their own cars or public transportation, such as the tube.

The findings of the study have also revealed that customers tend to make impulsive purchasing decisions in the concept store considering the fact that there are usually smaller, everyday items available in the store. Since this inconsistency does not negatively impact customers' experiences in the concept store, retailers should focus on offering small items in the concept stores as opposed to the traditional stores to highlight the distinctive aspect of the concept store. This way, the new retail format does not become a rival to the traditional retail format, instead, complements the traditional store.

Moreover, the findings have shown that after visiting the concept store only a few respondents shared their purchase with friends or family members and none of them posted anything about the store or their purchases. However, such post-purchase touchpoints are essential for increasing store awareness and strengthening relationships with customers. Thus, concept store retailers can create visually appealing spaces in the store to improve customer experiences within the store and also encourage the customers to post their photos on social media.

The study also highlights the need of putting in the right amount of promotional effort to build a positive perception of the brand. According to the interviewees, IKEA's advertising strategy appears to have struck the proper balance and contributed to the development of a favorable perception of the company. Previous studies have concentrated on how brand-owned touchpoints

influence customer experiences, but our study also emphasizes the need for companies to carefully balance their promotional efforts to prevent customers from feeling overwhelmed or annoyed.

### **6.3. Research Limitations and Future Research**

The following study aimed to provide new insights into customer experiences throughout their customer journey regarding the concept stores, thus, the study provides a great contribution to the current literature on the new retail format. However, the following study has a few limitations, which can help future researchers have a better research design when conducting similar studies.

First of all, the interviews were conducted online using the Zoom software. Since one author recruited people from the store and the interviews were conducted remotely a week later, one of the disadvantages of the remote interviews was that the authors were unable to reach out to most of the people who provided their personal information. Some reasons behind this could be that some people might have made typos when writing their emails initially on the survey, or the reminder emails might have appeared in their spam. Thus, to avoid this limitation, future researchers can conduct face-to-face interviews immediately after recruiting people.

Another possible limitation of the following study is the conduction of the interviews with respondents of various age groups, where the youngest respondent's age was 19 and the oldest respondent's age was 57. This phenomenon could have resulted in differences in how the various age groups experienced the new retail format. For instance, the younger generation might prefer the use of digital technologies more than the older generation, which could refrain the authors from generalizing the findings to all age groups. However, since the aim of the study was to gain an understanding of customer experiences regarding the new retail format, an under-researched area, the authors have not included a screening question regarding their age when approaching the potential interviewees. Hence, future researchers can conduct separate studies for different age groups and compare findings to reveal differences in customer experiences of various age groups in the new retail format.

Finally, another limitation is related to the transferability of the findings. In this regard, the authors have sampled only one location (Hammersmith store in the UK) and interviewed only people living in the UK. However, the study could have revealed different findings in regard to customer experiences if the sample included concept stores located in different countries. For instance, Swedish people might have considered sustainable aspects of the store as an essential part of their experiences in the concept store. Thus, future researchers can include various concept stores and people from different countries in their samples to reveal and compare how the customer experiences might differ depending on the store they have visited.

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## **Appendix**

### **Appendix A. Interview Guide**

Hello. First of all, I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. Let me introduce you to the project that we are doing. We (Tatev & Sarah) are currently writing our master's thesis project at Lund University in Sweden, focusing on customers' perception of the new retail format (new IKEA store format) and their customer journey. We are part of a bigger project that aims to provide the evaluation and development of existing ways (KPI) of assessing physical stores as well as how the new formats contribute to the success of the business.

The interview will last approximately 40-50 minutes. All the answers will stay confidential and anonymous (using nicknames instead of real names) and will only be used for research purposes according to Lund University guidelines. The interviews will be recorded either through Zoom or by phone, whichever option you prefer. After the interview, the recording will be transcribed and will be stored in the shared google drive, which will be accessible to the thesis writers. The data, including the survey of your personal information, interview recordings and transcripts will be deleted after being used. Please, let me know if you have any further questions before we start the interview.

## Appendix B. Interview Questionnaire

[Initial questions]

- Have you visited other IKEA store formats? Why? Why not?
- Have you visited the IKEA webpage/mobile app before? Why? Why not?
- Do you prefer to visit IKEA website vs traditional store vs concept store? Why?
- What is the general image of IKEA to you? (we can say for example, people associate Apple with simplicity, so how do you perceive the image of IKEA) (The purpose is to see what IKEA means to the customer, trying to understand the theme) Is the same image portrayed in the concept store?
- How do you perceive the product features/customer service of IKEA? (DIY, simplicity, low price, Scandinavian minimalist design etc.) Are they portrayed the same way in the concept store?
- What do you think about the IKEA Hammersmith concept store compared to IKEA traditional stores? (store design, customer service, product assortment etc.)
  - What makes it different from the traditional store formats you have visited? What are some pros and cons regarding the features in the store (can be anything related to design, interactions with others, product)
- What was the main purpose of visiting the store the other day? Did you make a purchase?
  - Were you satisfied with the overall store experience?
  - Was there anything you liked/disliked particularly?

- Please describe your overall experience/journey the last time you visited IKEA's concept store vs traditional store. Any differences observed?
  1. Where have you heard about this new concept store from?
    - Have you seen advertisements about the concept store (online / offline)? Is the same image portrayed in different platforms? - all the ads deliver consistent content/message? Has this impacted your decision to visit the concept store? How does this impact your experiences?
    - Heard from Family/friends?
    - Did the concept store meet your expectations? (The reason is to find if there is any inconsistency)
  2. Have you engaged in product/store research online before going to the concept store? /Did you seek any information regarding the product/store before actually visiting the concept store?
    - If yes- Have you found any differences between the provided information (the product assortment, price, any other information)?
    - If no- how do you seek information inside the store (browsing through the mobile app, using the technologies in the store)?
  3. Based on the answer how you generally perceive IKEA's product features and customer service, think about how you perceived the product assortment/service on the website or the traditional IKEA store - how does that correspond with your experience in the concept store  
(ex. Traditional IKEA store: going through every product following the way IKEA provided)
  4. While in the concept store, have you used any technologies to interact with your friends/family while searching for products in the concept store? Why? Why not?



5. How was the engagement with the staff in the store?

Did you find the interaction helpful during the visit (to make a return, surf around the store, make a purchase again, to surf around the store? Or to find a particular product?)

6. If they made the purchase in the concept store

- Why did you make the purchase in the store? What aspects impacted your decision (interaction with staff, in-store environment, affordable price, location, size of the store)
- What influence have your friends/other customers/ staff have when you decide to make the purchase?

● <If they did not make the purchase in the store>

After the visit to the IKEA Hammersmith store, are you willing to purchase IKEA products online / the traditional store / go back to the Hammersmith store?

- If they purchased from another store or brand- Why did you choose that option for the purchase?
- What could possibly change your mind to go back to the store and make the purchase in this store? (product availability, product assortment, discounts offered in the store)

7. (If the customer did online pre-research)

Have you found any inconsistencies between the online website/app and offline store? (price, arrangement, etc.)

8. (If the customer did online pre-research)

Did you find the transition (by transition we mean, changing your interaction with the brand from one area/place to another- e.g. from website to going to physical store) from online to offline store easy? (did you find the product you wanted easily that you saw online?)

→ the purpose is to understand the connectivity of the journey integration

9. When you make the purchase in the concept store, what is your preferred way of getting the product (delivery, picking up yourself from a traditional store/concept store) Why?
  
10. Are you planning to visit the store again in the near future? Why / Why not?
  - If yes, what factors affect your decision to come back?
  - If not, what would make you come back in the future? (e.g., discounts for the next purchase, loyalty programs offered in the store, promo code, emails) (the purpose is to understand what touchpoints are more important in this stage)
  
11. Have you talked to friends or family about your previous purchases in the concept store? How did you talk to them? (online, offline, what exactly you talked about)
  
12. Have you recommended the store to anyone?
  - If yes, whom did you recommend and how (to understand the touchpoints)?
  - If not, would you recommend the store to them? Why and why not?
  - Have you ever posted a review on this store? Where?

[Last questions]

- Would you say that the services offered by IKEA meet your needs/goals when you shop there? (return process, delivery options, employee support service etc.)
  
- What are these services? Are they responsive/adaptive when you conduct shopping in the concept store or when transitioning through different touchpoints?

- What is service convenience for you? In different platforms (online & offline) that you encounter this brand, do the platforms provide this convenience? How does that impact your experience?
  
- Do you expect to have more communication or get additional information or other aspects while transitioning through different touchpoints (refer to the touchpoints)? (this might give us idea of another dimension, which can be complementation, like what extra info or aspects they need)
  
- Do you have anything to add?

*\* Since the interviews were semi-structured, not all the questions were asked in the same order. The authors have also asked other questions and omitted some of the questions depending on the interviewee's response to the previous questions.*

## Appendix C. Survey Form

# IKEA new retail format interview

Thank you for your cooperation!

We are students (Tatev & Sarah) currently writing our master's thesis project at Lund University in Sweden, focusing on customers' perception of the new retail format (new IKEA store format) and their customer journey. We are part of a project that aims to provide the evaluation and development of existing ways (KPI) of assessing physical stores as well as how the new formats contribute to the success of the business. The research is conducted in accordance with the principles of GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation).

The interview will be held online via Zoom and will last approximately 40-50 minutes. All the answers will stay confidential and anonymous (using nicknames instead of real names) and will only be used for research purposes according to Lund University guidelines. The interviews will be recorded either through Zoom or by phone (if the interviewee feels uncomfortable with their face being recorded). The recordings will be transcribed later using online transcription tools and will be stored in the shared google drive, which will be accessible to the thesis writers and researchers involved in the project. The data, including the survey of your personal information, interview recordings and transcripts will be deleted after being used.

*\*All the interviewees have the right to refuse to answer the questions they find uncomfortable, and also if they no longer wish to continue, they are free to leave. In case of the refusal, all the previously collected data will not be used for the research analysis.*

The thesis will be published in Lund University's student thesis database ("LUP Student Papers"), which is accessible to the public.

For further reference, you can visit Lund university's link, where you can find more information on the rules and guidelines for collecting and storing data.

<https://www.staff.lu.se/organisation-and-governance/rules-and-decisions/rules-and-regulations/research>

**\*\*Your email address is needed to send you the fixed date and time for the online interview and to send you the IKEA voucher when the interview is completed\*\***

**Email \***

Your email

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**Name \***

Your answer

---

**Profession \***

Your answer

---

**Age \***

Your answer

---

**Gender \***

Female

Male

Other

**1) Please choose the date you want to be interviewed \***

- Feb 28th (Tuesday)
- March 1st (Wednesday)
- March 2nd (Thursday)
- March 3rd (Friday)
- March 4th (Saturday)
- March 5th (Sunday)

**Time Arrange**

March 1st (Wed)

**2) Please choose the time you want to be interviewed \***

- 8:00-9.00
- 12:00-13:00
- 13:30-14:30
- 15:00-16:00
- 16:30-17:30
- 19.00-20.00