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The Future of Marketing:
Online Transformation of Brand Experience Design

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Preface.

This thesis is our final examination on the Bachelor of Sciences in Business Administration at the School of Business, Economics, and Law at the University of Gothenburg.

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Abstract.

In this study, the marketing model of brand experience design is further examined to adapt it to the circumstances that the emerging e-commerce business entails. In this spirit, we formulated the following research question: *How can a start-up create a brand experience when only acting on the internet?* To further explore brand experience in a digital setting, a case study was conducted on an online start-up brand. In the initial stages of the study, earlier articles have laid the foundation for developing a new variant of the brand experience design model that better fits the online market. The dimensions established for the online brand experience model were brand visual identity, functionality, emotional, self-fulfillment, and cognitive. After compiling earlier studies on the subject and developing an online brand experience design model, we studied both consumers and other online brands further. We conducted an empirical study consisting of semi-structured interviews to understand what consumers value when shopping online. Other online brands were studied through netnographic research to find out how brands satisfy their consumers' preferences.

The result of our study is that brands on the digital market need to meet the consumers' expectations and provide a smooth shopping experience to weigh up for the absence of the physical aspects of traditional brick-and-mortar stores. By providing accurate descriptions and pictures of the products, the consumers are more likely to have expectations equivalent to the actual quality, which helps create satisfied and loyal customers. Since the consumers cannot examine the products before purchasing, the process of receiving and, if necessary, returning the products bought online should be unproblematic. By satisfying all five dimensions of the online brand experience design, the consumers are more likely to achieve flow during the shopping experience, which will help strengthen the relationship between brand and consumer despite never interacting physically.

Key words: E-commerce, Brand Experience, Online Marketing, Online Shopping, Consumer Value, Home Decor, Interior Design, Start-Up, Digital Market, Online Brand

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1. Introduction.

1.1 Background.

Few have missed the remarkable emergence of e-commerce businesses over the last few years. The retail industry has undergone a significant shift as digitization and internet access have swept over the world. Most firms in the industry have now directed parts of, or all, of their sales to the digital marketplace. A remarkable number of over 2 billion people purchased either goods or services online in the year 2020, and worldwide sales in the e-commerce business surpassed 4.2 trillion U.S. dollars (Statista, 2021)

The uppermost reason for this steady growth in the e-retail business in the past years is the increasing access and usage of the internet and mobile devices. The adoption of these mobile devices is especially notable in regions that lack other digital infrastructure, and the phenomenon of mobile shopping now goes under the term m-commerce. However, the unexpected spread of the Covid-19 virus is one major player in the shift in demand from brick-and-mortar retail to e-commerce during 2020 and 2021. As restrictions and lockdowns have been issued worldwide over the past year, digital marketplaces have been especially valuable to satisfy consumer demand and keep businesses going. This ongoing pandemic has led to record-breaking numbers in demand for everyday products such as clothing, groceries, and tech items (Statista, 2021).

Many companies today are adapting to this increasing demand for online stores. In trying times due to the pandemic, selling products to customers online has been crucial for the survival of many companies. Even big companies like H&M have been struggling during these trying times. The company recently announced that they plan to permanently close 250 stores globally and focus more on their online sales (BBC, 2020). The Swedish department store NK is also an example of a company forced to open its online store sooner than planned due to the effects of the Covid-19 crisis (SvD, 2020).

There seems to be a definite pattern, pandemic or not, where the emergence of digitization and declining transportation costs in conjunction with increasing numbers of people with internet access contributes to the exploding success of e-commerce businesses. Nevertheless,

there are some limitations to online retail for both companies and consumers. As the consumers no longer can touch and inspect the items closer on a digital marketplace, companies also struggle to create a brand experience, which is an important aspect when building strong customer relationships. According to Brakus, et. al. (2009), brand experience is part of a brand's design where sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoke the consumer.

There are several dimensions to a brand experience that need examining to understand how a brand experience is created and what complications there might be for a company to create said experience while only acting on the digital market. This shift to an online brand experience is a challenge many companies are faced with today. It is essential to adapt the brand experience to the digital-based business model as it is a powerful tool in creating loyal and satisfied customers (Brakus et. al. 2009). To examine how a brand operating solely on digital platforms can create a brand experience most optimally, we have decided to perform a case study in collaboration with the start-up company Pale Deco, which is an online interior design brand.

1.2 Purpose.

Our report will examine how digital companies can create a customer value proposition through the online brand experience. We will also explore how creating a brand experience can become a valuable tool that enhances the relationships between the start-up company, Pale Deco, and its consumers. Our goal is to identify the issues and possibilities of operating on the digital market and determine how to create a brand experience online.

1.3 Problem.

A growing number of companies are expanding their business to the e-commerce market, and the trend of increased online shopping is more prominent now than ever. This trend entails both advantages and disadvantages for consumers as well as companies. Consumers might benefit from being able to choose between a wide range of online stores. Still, they might lose the social aspect and chance to see the products before purchasing, which is possible in physical stores. On the other hand, companies might benefit from being available to a bigger audience through the internet but risk losing personal contact with their customers since they no longer meet them physically in the stores. For existing brands, with a heritage and origin

story imbued with brand values and experience, a change to the digital sphere of retail could prove to be a difficult or simple task, depending on the transformation design of the brand. However, how does a start-up, with no brand, with physical products, born in the new age of digital retail emerge successfully?

This study will examine how a start-up should adapt and emerge on a digital market. The Pale Deco brand has a name and logo but has not yet built brand loyalty or brand awareness. How does the traditional "physical" brand experience model transfer to the digital marketplace and create value for a brand? Moreover, how does a company like Pale Deco, whose ambition is to sell its products on its website exclusively, create a brand experience online? One problem arising along these lines is how adaptable the traditional school of brand experience design is to the modern age on the internet.

1.4 Limitations.

This study will be limited to finding how a company born-digital can design a brand experience when only acting online. In the sense of research, we have limited the study to the targeted consumer segment provided by Pale Deco's business plan and consumers who primarily do not belong to this intended segment.

Pale Deco's business plan reveals that the products sold will not be limited to the Swedish borders, and they will not aim its marketization to a particular gender or age. However, the products will be in the upper price classes due to their high quality and carefully selected production methods, limiting the consumer segment to middle- to high-income earners with an eye for quality, sustainability, and design. In the initial stages of the webshop, the products will only be available for purchase in a selection of 5 EU countries due to higher customs duties and other tax and administration costs for shipping outside of the EU.

A secondary sample group will also juxtapose this to analyze if there is "leakage" in the intended consumer segment. The consumers we interview will be over 18 and will be given other names according to ethics and privacy reasons. Furthermore, this study will limit the comparison of companies to the thought of future competitors in the sense of brand heritage and brand experience.

The research will be limited to theories related to brand experience design and experiential marketing. Thus, other business and economics-based theories will be refrained from to keep the integrity of this research study intact.

1.5 Research Questions.

This thesis aims to answer the central question of:

How can a start-up create a brand experience when only acting on the internet?

In an attempt to answer these questions, two sub-questions have been formulated:

1. *What values are the most important for a consumer when experiencing an e-commerce brand?*

2. *How are consumer values perceived in the companies' brand experience online?*

The former question aims to understand the topic from a consumer perspective further, while the latter question will guide the thesis from a brand perspective.

2. Theory.

2.1 Literature Review.

2.1.1 Brand Experience Design.

Brand Experience design is a concept that is the evolutionary next step of experiential marketing, a concept presented by Schmitt (1999). In his article, he explains the differences between traditional marketing. Consumers are rational decision-makers who emphasize functionality, and Schmitt's experiential marketing is on the other side of the spectrum. Experiential consumers are emotional yet rational, who prioritize the experience of consuming, and the functionality of the product takes the passenger seat.

Schmitt (1999) identified five strategic experiences that will create value for the consumer: sensory experiences, affective experiences, creative cognitive experiences, physical experiences, behaviors and lifestyles, and social identity experiences.
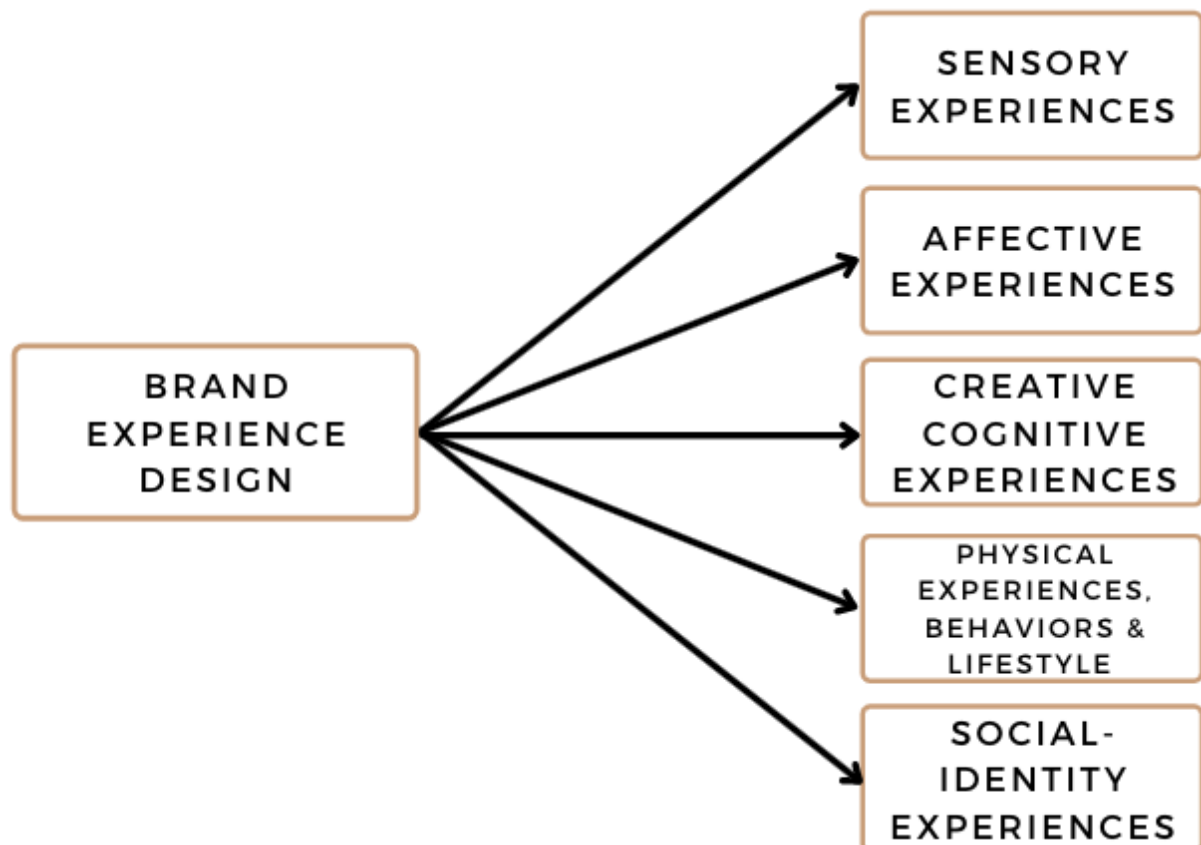

Figure 1: Illustration of Schmitt's 5 dimensions

Brakus et al. (2009) conceptualized this further and broke it into two areas. First, the brand-related stimuli include the brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environment. The second part responds to the created stimuli, including sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavior. Product experience occurs when interacting with the brand's product while, 'Shopping and Service Experience' occurs when consumers interact with the brands' physical environment (in our case would be the website), and Consumption Experience occurs when the consumer is consuming the product of the brand in question. However, the evolution of the concept did not end there. That brings us to the theory that this thesis will revolve around. Hartmann (2021) explained that there had been further development within this sphere of marketing and provided a new, modern conceptualization of the concept and its dimension. Brand experience and its design are null and void if they do not invoke value for the consumer. Value is subjective, and as the saying "one man's trash is another man's treasure," the values imbued within the dimensions provided further are thus personal. They could have a different meaning depending on the consumer.

2.1.2 Online Domain.

There are several studies on the subject of brand experience design in a digital setting. Some significant findings point to the differences in the traditional model and its adaptation to online shopping, which will be explained further. Since online brands lack the physical aspects of a traditional store, it is crucial to create an appealing online environment for the consumers. This online environment is vital in creating competitive advantages in comparison to other online brands on the market. Novak et al. (2000) argue that you need to create a so-called 'flow' for consumers online to achieve a successful consumer experience. As explained in their article, one achieves flow through the consumers' level of digital skill and control, their perceived level of challenge and arousal from the experience, their focused attention, and their interactivity and telepresence on the website. Their findings are also that several unique characteristics differentiate the internet from traditional marketing media. Consumers can, for instance, interact with firms and other consumers and the devices they access the internet through and are thereby inclined to provide content themselves.

Mollen and Wilson (2010) further validated the findings made by Novak et al. (2000) and identifies the environmental and website stimuli as a dynamic of interactivity, telepresence, and engagement. According to their article, engagement in the digital experience reinforces

cognitive and affective commitment to the relationship between consumer and brand on a website.

Trust is a significant aspect when experiencing a brand online. However, as Ha and Perks (2005) explains in their study, trust and positive experiences is a very dynamic and complex concept. Like the double helix within our DNA, constantly intertwining and working together, it is difficult to grasp where one starts and the other ends. The study focuses on brand trust, familiarity, and satisfaction as a result of brand experience. However, sometimes the aspects mentioned above are the foundation of a positive brand experience as well. Trust and familiarity are created by bilateral interactivity between consumer and brand. This concept of interactivity is further explained by Schmitt (2000). According to his study, the most significant difference is that the marketer and brand manager drive consumer and brand relationships. With a relevant stream and flow of updated information over time, the brand must signal what the consumer should experience. This is done by the brands' visual communication, which should remain constant and concise throughout the purchasing process online.

Emotional connection to a brand concerning the new technology is also discussed in an article written by Thomas and Veloutso (2013). They found that trust creates a positive aspect of brand experience, and therefore, brand reputation plays an important role. Positive brand experience leads to behavioral intentions and, in turn, emotional ties with a brand. According to this research, search engines are significant as online environments are, by nature, information-based service environments that are linked with technology.

Further studies also emphasize the importance of brand experience in the digital world, which is portrayed in an article written by Hamzah et al. (2014). Brand experience is expressed as a powerful tool, and further findings in how this could be achieved online are presented. Understanding corporate brand experience is important since a company's image or brand loyalty depends on the customers' satisfaction with the products and the company. Hamzah, et. al. (2014), identifies five main themes of corporate brand experience: (1) Corporate visual identity; (2) functionality; (3) Emotion; (4) lifestyle; and (5) corporate/self-identity. These differ from the standard dimensions of the brand experience design model significantly.

The main aspects surrounding the studies used as a theory for this thesis can be boiled down to a few key topics. Experiences are something a person consumes internally, by way of stimuli from a brand, in this case. There are two main components for the online experience for the consumer. According to Rose et al. (2012), the internal consumption of an experience can be broken down into two main components, namely affective and cognitive. Affection, or emotions in general, are very subjective and situationally based in nature and are connected to the concept of 'flow.' Flow mainly focuses on the cognitive component of the experience consumption. Meyer and Schwager (2017) explains this concept as a cognitive state the mind takes the consumer when experiencing a brand or website online. This, in turn, acts as the bridge between the two components conceptualized by Rose et al. (2012), as this cognitive state leads to enjoyment, satisfaction, and trust to mention a few aspects.

2.2 Theoretical Framework.

We decided upon developing our version of the classic brand experience design model, based on the literature reviewed above in conjunction with the initial data gathered to this point in time. This model consists of five dimensions, which to a more considerable extent suits the e-commerce market. The dimensions of the online brand experience design model are explained further below and illustrated in the following figure:
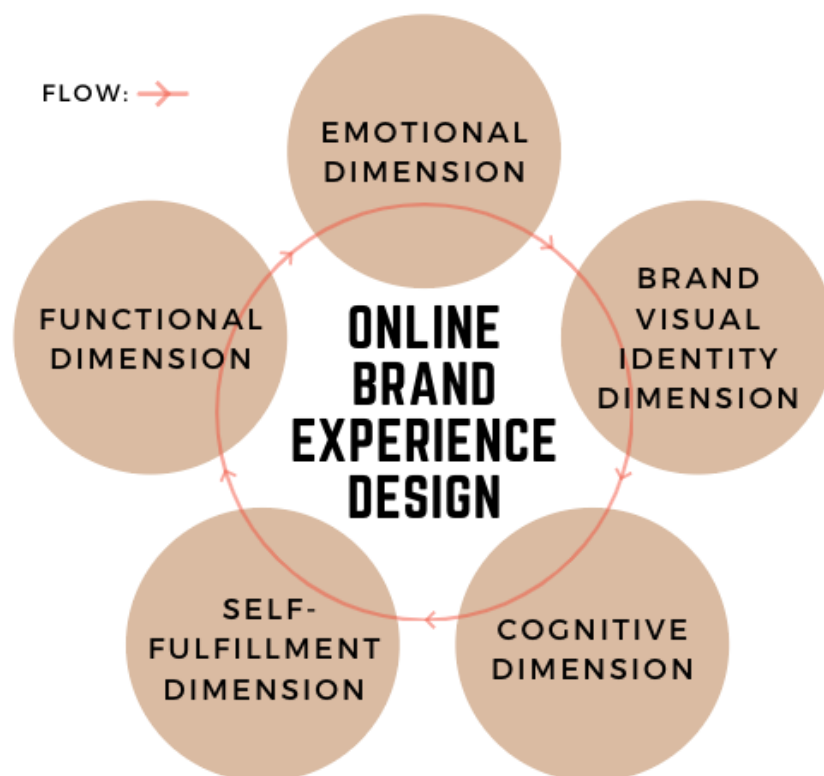

Figure 2: Blomkvist-Creutz Online Brand Experience Design Model

The results from our research are that online brand experience design consists of five different dimensions that are all connected. The dimensions are; functional, emotional, cognitive, brand visual identity, and self-fulfillment dimension. Initially, we identified these findings through research of earlier studies and articles on brand experience design and its application to the e-commerce industry, which we explain further below. Through our interviews and netnographic studies, we found additional support in our claim that these five dimensions are the most important aspects when building a brand experience online.

The interviews conducted in the next chapter have their base in Schmitt's five dimensions, and as we coded and analyzed the responses, it showed that they were not relevant for online brands. As some of the dimensions have their foundation in traditional shopping and the early stages of experiential marketing, many parts do not apply to an online setting. Therefore, changes and modifications of Schmitt's dimension, with the influence of the other studies explained in the previous part of this paper, sparked our conceptual model. Below, we explain the new dimensions identified.

2.2.1 Brand Visual Identity.

A meaningful dimension identified in creating a brand experience online is the functionality of the website and the customer service. Many people who turn to online stores instead of physical stores do so for simplicity and efficiency reasons.

The original article about brand experience written by Schmitt (1999) identifies sensory experiences as a critical dimension of a brand experience. Sensory experience covers the five human senses touch, taste, sight, sound, and taste, which all play an essential part in how a person perceives a brand. Naturally, as a brand that only exists on the internet, some of these senses might be harder to stimulate than a brand existing in a brick-and-mortar store. Studies show that the sensory experience at a corporate brand level includes corporate name, logo, design, color, and slogan, all of which are identified as visual identity. A brand only acting on the internet can benefit from stimulating the visual senses among its customers (Hamzah et al. 2014).

Additionally, a company that sells products on the internet needs to sway its customers in more ways than only the brand's visuals. It is vital that the website is aesthetically pleasing and provides an accurate presentation of the brand, which could be achieved by portraying the products sold in appealing pictures that are true to the brand.

2.2.2 Functional Dimension.

There are several advantages of online shopping, as consumers can search for the products they seek with only a couple of clicks on the right website. There is no need to browse several different physical stores and ask store personnel for guidance to the correct sections as one can find the sought after products by entering the right search words on a website instead. It is also important that other aspects of online shopping, such as payment, shipping, and customer service, are functional and straightforward to understand (Novak et al., 2000).

Therefore, visitors of a website must navigate the menu effortlessly and browse through the products with accurate search engines. The online store should be clear and logical in its construction in a way that helps the customers to find the right sections and departments for them. Customers should also be able to search for the products they are interested in by using keywords or filtrating their search results by categories, color, size, and price.

Another aspect of the functionality dimension that enhances the online shopping experience and reinforces brand experience is the simplicity of the payment. Many customers imply that they value having multiple payment methods to choose from when completing the order. Whether one prefers paying instantly or when the order arrives at their home, all different options should be available, and the payment should be able to complete in quick, easy, and safe manners.

Further, customers receive their products differently when online shopping compared to customers of a physical store. The shipping process should be quick and accessible for everybody, and the products should arrive undamaged. Any returns should also be able to transact smoothly, and if a product does arrive damaged, customer service should be easy to get in touch with to help correct the issue.

2.2.3 Emotional Dimension.

Merriam-Webster defined *emotion* as "a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as a strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body" (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

With this in mind, what do emotions have to do with brand experience online? Frustration, happiness, and relief are common emotions when browsing the internet and e-shops. Ha and Perks (2005) argues that consumer satisfaction comprises two main components, cognitive and emotional. The emotions that should be attached to the brand are happy feelings and pleasant surprises. They further explain that a positively charged emotion related to the brand experience will improve and increase brand familiarity. This emotional aspect relates to Schmitt (1999), who argues that if a brand provides consistently good feelings for the consumer, it will help relationship building between consumer and brand, which is beneficial for both parties.

Based on the data collected, a pattern of emotions could be found. Consumers who shop online seem to enjoy shopping in general, which is often connected to chemicals in the brain. When shopping, dopamine is released. *Dopamine* is a neurotransmitter that sends a message to the body's nervous system regulating one's mood. When shopping, the brain sends dopamine to the body, which entails pleasure (WebMD, 2021). Thus, a positive experience while shopping will emulate a pleasurable experience for the consumer on a chemical level. On the other side of the spectrum, if the consumer experiences the brand negatively, it will create an unpleasant mood filled with frustration and anger. These emotions seemed to be mainly triggered by the website's service options, informational flow, and other administrative areas.

According to Hamzah et al. (2014), consumers express happiness and relief when completing a purchase (transaction) without disruption. These emotions further brand trust, satisfaction, and thus brand familiarity (Ha & Perks 2005).

2.2.4 Self-Fulfillment Dimension.

Thanks to researchers such as Arnould and Thompson (2005), we know that consumers consume to realize their goal lifestyle or self-identity. Online shopping has, for many, made their current lifestyle more accessible in the sense of shopping. Consumers can now visit how many stores they wish simultaneously instead of physically transporting themselves to a store that might not have the item or size demanded. Consumers might not have the same time over as they did before. Online shopping will simplify the purchasing process by eliminating the transportation time to only a button click.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, consumers relocate themselves from offices and other workplaces to their homes at a higher rate. People are spending more time at home in front of their electronic devices for work and shopping. Both necessities and luxury goods that consumers mostly bought in brick-and-mortar stores are now commonly bought online. Even before the outbreak, there were many benefits of online shopping, as office hours often interfered with the opening hours of stores and shops. Online stores, however, are open around the clock, which simplifies the life of many.

With more time spent at home, a new interest in interior design has arisen. By combining the two new outlooks of shopping and home offices, interior design online will increase in popularity. New lifestyles and identities are created and changed, which is an essential factor as these two aspects are significant factors in consumption behaviors and patterns.

This dimension carries aspirational value, which entails searching for an improved lifestyle and thus a new personal image. Consumers consume to self-realize the ideal persona, which might be a mirage at the moment of purchasing. The consumer links itself with the values attached to the product or service to move one step closer to the "ideal" self through consumption.

2.2.5 Cognitive Dimension.

"Cognitive experience refers to how a brand creates an experience that is intriguing, piques curiosity and creative thinking and results in a re-evaluation of the attribute information of the company, product or services" - Schmitt, 1999.

Schmitt (1999) introduced the concept of cognitive experience as a part of how brand experience is created. It entails the search for knowledge and experience when in the process of purchasing. This dimension is underlying for all the dimensions mentioned above as it acts as the conscious factor in decision making. When a pre-purchase intention arises, the consumer makes an active choice to find the best way of satisfying his or her needs. This takes the consumer to the purchasing intention and the information-gathering stages of consumption. Consumption, in this case, refers to not only the product itself but the entire process of finding the right fit, the right "vendor," the right website, and the brand as a whole.

Thus, the consumption process starts in the consumer's mind and ends in the pre-consumption evaluation stage of the process. It is a cognitive, conscious decision made over time, meaning that it affects the entire experience. Opinions and values are based on knowledge and understanding, which are all cognitive aspects of the brain and the brand.

The initial findings within this thesis found that it is essential for an online brand to have a good product description, with matching photos to aid the consumer into the purchasing stage of the process. The pre-purchase intention starts with the consumer gathering information by visiting and interacting with the brand's website. As Schmitt (2000) explains, marketers must adapt the informational flow to the moving tide of consumerism and technology, all to guide the cognitive part of the consumer to the next stage of the purchasing process. Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003) further explain that making online purchases (transactions) grants consumers a sense of control and freedom.

2.2.6 Flow State.

While examining the earlier studies of brand experience in an online setting, a phenomenon called 'flow' was recoccured in several articles. Novak et al. (2000) first raised awareness of the importance of the consumers achieving flow while shopping online. In this article, flow is essential to create a felicitous brand experience, and Rose et al. (2012) further discuss this concept in their articles. Although Rose et al. (2012) argue that flow is a cognitive concept, other aspects of the brand experience design are also influenced by achieving flow. The general definition of flow is a state of mind when someone is in the zone and engages the mind through focus, involvement, and enjoyment (Buchanan & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). A functional and logical website where customers can gather as much information about the

products as possible is essential for them to enter the flow state in the first place. Attractive and appealing aesthetics that speak to the customer's image and identity are also prerequisites for flow. If all the five dimensions of the online brand experience are well-functioning, the customers will be more likely to enter the flow-state, which will leave them satisfied and positive towards the brand. Flow is an abstract concept that is hard to grasp, but it occurs in and affects the brand experience that the customers will have online immensely.

2.3 Information Needs.

This thesis requires first hand data from the intended consumer segment, as well as, first hand data from the non-intended consumer segment. First hand data in this instance will be in the form of interviews, with a consumer segment provided by Pale Deco, and interviews with a consumer segment that was not provided by Pale Deco.

3. Method.

3.1 Scientific basis.

Since we aim to understand what brand experience is in the consumer's eyes, we will conduct qualitative research through semi-structured interviews. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), a qualitative method helps interpret how individuals perceive reality. A qualitative approach is also favorable when aiming to understand the respondents' social reality. For the other perspective, a netnography of other brands' websites will be conducted. This online observation will be explained more thoroughly below.

However, as the qualitative data collected through interviews needs to be interpreted, there is a risk. This risk is because other researchers trying to replicate this study will be difficult as we, the authors, might interpret the data in another light from other researchers. The results may vary as interpretations are subjective, although based on the underlying knowledge and research of the subject itself. Furthermore, as the data subjects, both in terms of the consumers interviewed and the online brands observed, are anonymous, the results may vary, and the take-aways will differ.

Although we are working with a company, the research will be held objectively and fairly. However, as this thesis is based on how a brand can create an experience online, with Pale Deco as a case study, it may vary in outcomes depending on what industry, products, or services different brands may offer. As mentioned, we are using Pale Deco as a case study; the data collected will be focusing on interior design, specifically within the category "Bath and Bathroom," since this is the main category for Pale Deco.

3.2 Research approach.

Our study aims to understand how an online brand experience could be created by re-constructing the classical model of brand experience to fit the e-commerce business. We use earlier studies of brand experience and its adaptation to online shopping in our research and gathering empirical information on the matter. We applied an abductive approach throughout our study since we will merely reach a probable conclusion from the findings in our research. We are interested in understanding what earlier studies have shown and identifying eventual patterns in achieving a brand experience in an online setting. Patel and Davidson (2011)

explain that an abductive approach is established by having both a deductive and inductive approach during research.

In practice, an abductive approach is executed by initially proposing a theoretical framework that will later be tested by collecting empirical data. The former approach is inductive, and the latter the deductive approach. We could construct a new and updated framework with the initial theoretical framework and the empirical data collected.

Our study has created a theoretical framework to suggest an updated version of the classical brand experience design model that applies to online brands. Through interviews with consumers and netnographical research of other online brands, we tested this initial framework to understand the essential aspects of the online shopping experience. The advantage of using an abductive approach is that this information can not be used to update and redefine our framework. However, some criticize this approach since the researchers involved in the studies are not neutral and might exclude information to the updated theoretical framework that they might view as inessential. In contrast, another researcher might view this information very differently (Patel & Davidson, 2011).

3.3 Case Study.

With a burning passion for visual and interior design, the founder planned to leave her life as a corporate lawyer with an international resumé. Pale Deco's vision came about when the founder looked for a carpet that did not cost a fortune and decided to take matters into her own hands.

A couple of years later, designs were being made, and by 2016 the idea of Pale Deco expanded. The founder purchased the first order of self-designed shower curtains and towels. A core value of the company, besides its designs, is sustainability. The products are produced within the EU, namely Portugal, to minimize transportation routes and emissions. However, Pale Deco was put on hold, as the founder had to prioritize her professional and family life for a couple of years.

Pale Deco plans to sell their products exclusively on their website, with no initial intentions of working with a distributor, because of financial- and brand-sustainable reasons. The

founder does not want to lose touch with her pride and joy, which is why she chooses not to work with a distributor.

The founder of Pale Deco and the authors of this thesis came together and started discussing the brand. An agreement was made about how the authors would use the brand as the case study of this thesis, focusing on brand experience design online. This agreement would prove beneficial for both parties, as we would gain the experience of working with a start-up company within the field of branding and marketing. The company would gain a catalyzer for branding and marketing strategy development.

3.4 Qualitative research.

For the authors of this thesis to fully grasp the current climate surrounding brand experience (design) online, it is vital to analyze the data collected from both sides of the spectrum, namely the consumer and company sides. By collecting data through interviews and netnography, the research will be taking an interpretative approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This thesis focuses on brand experiences, which the authors deemed would be skewed to determine quantitatively. Thus, a qualitative method is favorable since this method focuses on "soft" values, such as feelings, opinions, and values. These soft values are preferable in this situation, as it is difficult for respondents to put a figure on emotion, for example, which is an underlying factor of brand experience..

3.5 Semi-Structured Interviews.

We chose to use the data collection method of semi-structured interviews. This type of interview creates an open, yet focused, discussion on what consumers find the most valuable and essential when experiencing a brand online. Further, semi-structured interviews are not as time-consuming as other forms of data collecting where studies are constructed of behavior over an extended period, as in ethnographic research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This way, we expect to obtain a deeper understanding of what consumers value when shopping online and how a brand experience can be created based on those findings.

These interviews are appealing methods to many researchers since they provide flexibility and an effective way to study consumer behavior in a shorter period (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Semi-structured interviews, in particular, are beneficial since the interviewer has a clear guide

with questions to cover during the interview. However, the respondent is still free to respond freely around the subject depending on what they think is relevant (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A semi-structured interview is constructed so that the interviewer is prepared with a list of questions or themes to cover during the interview to make sure that all vital areas of the subject will be discussed. However, the respondent can freely discuss the issue and give the interviewer an in-depth elaboration on their thoughts and feelings on the topic. This way, the interview can go in different directions depending on the answers provided by the respondent, and the interviewer might discover new aspects on the matter that they had not found otherwise (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most interviews have been held over video calls to avoid unnecessary physical contact with others. Still, some respondents were located in other cities, and interviews have therefore been held through video calls due to geographical reasons. The interviews started with an introduction to our study and the general intentions of the interview. We then asked the respondents about their shopping habits, both while online shopping and visiting ordinary brick-and-mortar stores. We asked in-depth questions about their experiences while shopping online and their view on what makes a shopping experience online good or bad. We also asked for examples of online stores that they frequently visit or that they appreciate in particular and asked them what makes these companies stand out in their opinion. We included questions of if and how their shopping habits had been affected by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic to understand if external events affect their practices on online shopping in any way. Finally, we asked our respondents about home décor and interior design to understand their interest in having a lovely home and if they are willing to pay extra money for design and sustainable products. This way, we could analyze the consumers' shopping experiences online in both a general matter and home styling and design, which will help us understand how Pale Deco can create an online brand experience.

3.6 Netnography.

This essay is structured around three research questions, one main and two sub-questions, each focusing on the consumer- respective company perspective. We decided to perform netnographic research to understand the brand experience from a company perspective. We conducted the netnography by creating an observation guide and following it on the competing companies' websites. We decided to limit the search to exclude their social media

and other channels. The primary search was done on the "Bath & Bedroom" sections of the websites to further the search limitation, even more, to align it with Pale Deco's primary products.

Kozinets (2012) defines netnography as "a specialized form of ethnographic research adapted to the unique contingencies of various types of computer-mediated social interaction." The four most significant differences between an "offline" ethnographic method and netnography are; the nature of the social and cultural interaction is altered, the interaction is "anonymous," the sheer accessibility of forums, and lastly, the long-lasting "storage" of conversations held.

Since this thesis focuses on creating a brand experience *online*, we deemed an altered ethnographic method to be the best fit for the thesis. As the interactions online are very different from the interactions people make face-to-face, it will aid in finding honest reviews and thoughts on the matter. The anonymity granted to the user provides, in theory, a forum for complete transparency when expressing opinions, values, and thoughts. This anonymity is an interesting issue since the data collected from the anonymous interactions, one of the pillars for this netnography, will be anonymous.

The main aim of conducting a netnography is to evaluate how competing companies of Pale Deco are working with/developing their brand experience on their websites. With the basis in the data collected through interviews, observations will be conducted on the competing brands' websites and analyze how they are working with their brand experience design. Additionally, we will conduct further research in line with the patterns identified by the consumers during the interviews. By doing so, we will find out if the companies are achieving the consumers' perceived brand values. In conjunction with one another, these two foundations will cast a wider net of understanding regarding the matter at hand. We will further interpret them in the analysis part of this thesis.

To understand how other companies in the home interior industry manage to operate successful websites for online shopping, we have also examined the websites of a few companies that Pale Deco has claimed to be their main competitors. The companies provided by Pale Deco are five companies that offer products that could be competing with those of Pale Deco. These companies all provide designed shower curtains and other interior design products that could be competing with Pale Deco's products, and they are hence interesting to

investigate further. We have performed netnographic research on these companies' websites to find patterns and similarities in creating a brand experience design on their digital outlets. The identity of these companies has been kept anonymous according to the guidelines of the netnography. We will refer to them through their given code names that we present in the following table:

COMPANY	COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	PRICE RANGE
Alpha	Sweden	$
Beta	Sweden	$$$
Delta	Denmark	$$
Gamma	USA / Sweden	$$$
Omega	Finland	$$

Table 1: Competing companies of Pale Deco

3.7 Sample group.

As our study investigates how companies can achieve a brand experience online, the natural choice of method to understand consumers' idea of a good shopping experience was to hold interviews. These interviews have been held with consumers in Pale Deco's intended consumer segment or with consumers that do not typically fit this exact frame. As mentioned earlier, Pale Deco has revealed through its business plan that the products will not be marketed to a specific gender or age but will, however, have a higher price tag. Therefore, the consumer segment is limited to middle- to high-income earners interested in quality, sustainability, and design. Since Pale Deco will initially only ship to a few countries in the EU, we limited the geographical location of our respondents henceforth.

According to a survey made by Eurostat (2021), 78% of all internet users in the age group 16-54 bought products or services online in 2020 across the EU. We decided to hold interviews with consumers aged over 18 due to ethical reasons and held a few interviews with consumers over the age of 54 to understand what they think is the most significant setback when shopping online. Within these age groups, the exact selection of the respondents has been relatively randomized; however, some of the participants have been selected based on

fitting the consumer segment provided by Pale Deco. Nevertheless, we held some interviews with consumers that did not fit this exact frame of the given consumer segment to determine if these groups could become Pale Deco customers despite not being expected to. The identity of all respondents has been kept anonymous, which the respondents have been informed of before the interviews. We will refer to the interviewees through the code names presented in the table below:

Name	Age	Intended consumer segment
Mercury	63	Yes
Venus	63	No
Tellus	25	No
Mars	26	Yes
Jupiter	30	Yes
Saturn	32	Yes
Uranus	23	No
Neptune	33	Yes
Pluto	60	Yes

Table 2: Respondents of the semi-structured interviews

As shown in the table above, the interviews were performed on nine consumers of different ages and consumer segments. The interviews were held in 25-40 minutes each, depending on the amount of discussion around the subjects with each respondent. The tone of the discussions was primarily light-hearted and relaxed in order for the respondents to feel comfortable talking freely about the topic.

3.8 Data analysis.

There are a few ways to go about data analysis, and we decided to transcribe the interviews after conducting them. We started coding the answers given to us during the interviews, and then we decided to use the 'Grounded Theory,' provided by Bryman and Bell (2011). The

approach taken to analyze the data collected was to code the respondents' answers, as this is a critical process in data analysis. By *open coding*, we aim to conduct a thematic analysis by finding patterns and key points that become a theme, which furthered the creation of our theoretical model in an inductive manner (Bryman & Bell, 2011), explained in previous sections.

After conducting this, we decided to create our model of dimensions, or 'categories,' as Bryman and Bell (2011) refer to it. The dimensions identified by the initial coding revealed the basis of the model for which we created. This iterative approach furthered the legitimacy of the model and the outcome of the analysis in the next chapter.

For the netnography, we created an online observation guide, with basis on the initial answers from the interviews. This medium would guide us towards finding out how and if companies and brands are working with the dimensions we identified or not. By doing this, we would indicate how brands work with their experience online, and it should aid us in interpreting the dimensions-utility of competing companies. This method could be called an adapted coding process, as we identify key patterns and themes made clear by the netnography guide.

3.9 Ethics.

Throughout the writing of this thesis, we have felt that it is of utmost importance to follow ethical guidelines. Basing this on the chapter on 'Ethics in business research,´ provided by Bryman and Bell (2011), we have been working along with the four main areas:

- There is no harm to the participants.
- There has been informed consent.
- There has not been an invasion of privacy.
- No deception was involved.

Each interview started with us introducing ourselves, and we presented the subject of the thesis to the respondents. By verbally agreeing on the information that will be processed, this was followed by a question regarding anonymity. We explained that the thesis would be written on brand experience, and the respondents will be anonymous during the thesis as a whole. Setting up a scheduled time for the interview over video chat was done to eliminate any sense of invasion of privacy. On this note, the respondents had the option of not

answering any of the questions posed if they felt it to be too personal or uncomfortable for any reason.

The guidelines provided by Bryman and Bell (2011) were also complemented by the Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) code of ethics within research. There are further four points that were followed to the best of our extent (Vetenskapsrådet, 2021):

1. Reliability for the quality of the research to remain intact
2. Honesty in terms of developing, conducting, and reviewing the research openly and honestly
3. Respect for colleagues, writing partners, and others involved within the thesis
4. Responsibility for the research, from idea to publishing

By working with transparency, respect for privacy, and integrity throughout the writing process, we aim to write this thesis in the most ethically and honestly fashion possible.

4. Result & Analysis.

Introduction.

In this section, we will present the results of our empirical research. The analysis of these findings will be presented for each dimension individually of our online brand experience design model to facilitate the analysis process.

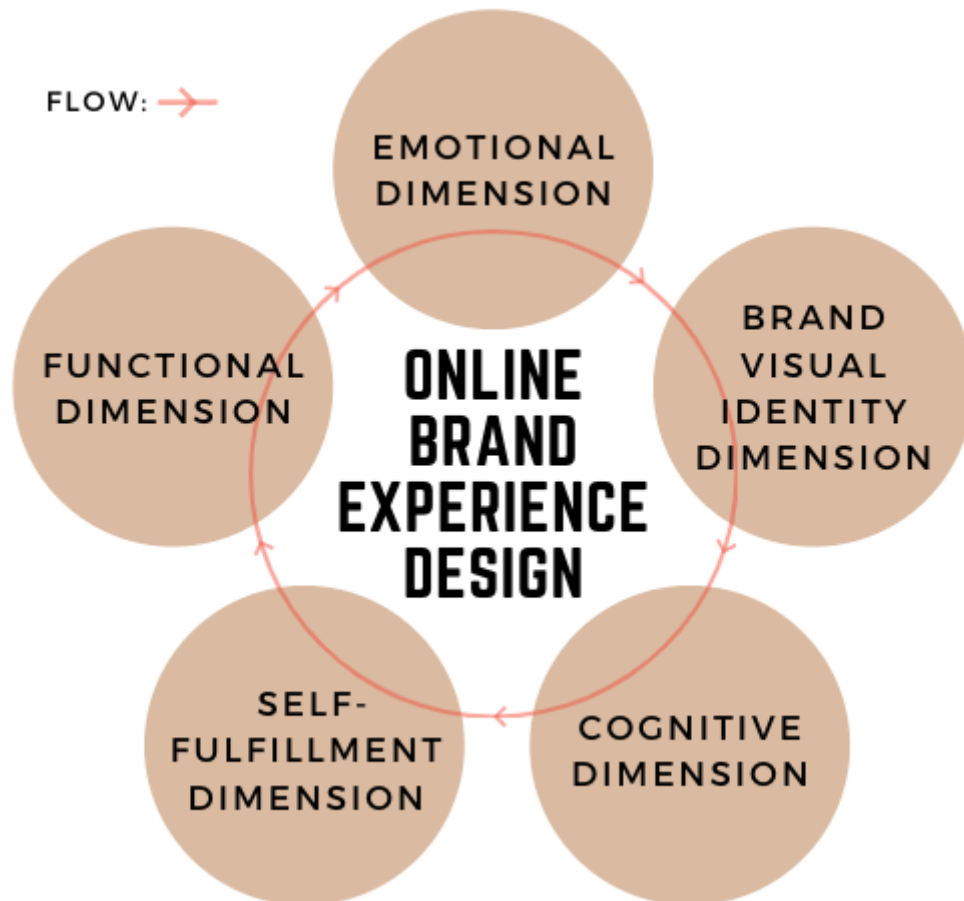*Figure 2: Blomkvist-Creutz Online Brand Experience Design Model*

4.1 Brand Visual Identity.

Since Brand Visual Identity is an intangible dimension consumed through the consumer's eyes, it proved difficult for the respondents to grasp the concept throughout the interviews. By altering the interpretation of what this dimension entails, it became clear what was meant by the idea of brand visual identity.

It was important for the consumers that the website had a clean and simple design to avoid unnecessary clutter. Since this dimension mainly focuses on aesthetics, we asked the respondents further questions to understand the depth of this dimension. We included questions regarding the website's aesthetics, how the brands portray and communicate their values, ideals, and heritage, and how the brand works around the "peripheral" aesthetic values. There turned out to be vast differences in the opinions of the respondents. When asked if the packaging had any importance for the consumer, there were mixed results.

"I don't care about the packaging; as long as the products arrive in one piece and in the expected condition, I'm good" – Jupiter

This respondent did not care too much about the "peripheral" attempt of adding value for the consumer. However, mixed signals were surrounding this topic of packaging. The main consensus surrounding the matter dealt with the price point of the product of interest.

"Depends on the product I buy. Some things I buy will be consumed instantly, and sometimes it seems unnecessary. I do appreciate nice packaging, and it increases the value of the product in general. I almost expect nice packaging when I buy something more expensive, however." - Saturnus

This quote thematically explains the subject of packaging to a degree, as the respondent only cares about the packaging depending on the product itself. If purchasing some form of pharmaceutical, this respondent would not appreciate the packaging as they would, assumedly, consume it within the near future. Furthermore, the spectrum of opinions does not end there.

"Depends on the price you pay. Luxurious products should be packed better than a basic t-shirt" – Uranus

In this case, the respondent expects the packaging to be up to part of the price paid, no matter if it is a product deemed to be consumed instantly, near future, or at a later stage. The aesthetics should reflect the product itself, based on the majority of the respondents' answers.

As previously mentioned, the central theme of this dimension is aesthetics and how the brand represents itself visually. Based on the interviewees' answers, a netnographical research commenced. However, some of the brands observed were not exclusively acting within the interior design but also had sales of other fashion and clothing. The brands Alpha, Beta, and Gamma all were established companies, with most of their sales within clothing in this instance, which affected the search results. These brands worked consistently throughout their operated segments, so the aesthetics did not change much between the market for a sweater or a rug.

The central theme throughout the netnography was the usage of colors on the websites. The majority of the brands observed utilized a spectrum of monotone colors, except Omega. Omega worked with vibrance in contrast to its more natural coloring, which gave the website's overall clean look a pop that stands out for the observer.

Only a minority of the websites observed worked mainly with inspirational pictures of its products. The majority of the companies used photos with a white background, without scenery or interior aesthetics. The minority, Delta, a Danish brand, worked with setting up the products in a setting, which communicated their classical Scandinavian origin and inspiration of the brand, with earth-toned visuals and color scheme.

4.2 Functional Dimension.

In our model, this dimension turned out to differ significantly from the original functional dimension presented by Schmitt (1999). This new take on the dimension focuses on the functionality of the brands' website and how they are managed, thus not about the functionality of the products itself, as it did when the theory of brand experience design was first presented.

The central theme identified during the interviews was the importance of the website itself. Although an intangible object, it was important for the consumers to have it feeling smooth and clean. When asked what the most crucial aspect when shopping online is, there was a consensus among the majority of the respondents.

"A good website, search function and how they present their things. If it is difficult to find things on the website, then I'll leave. It needs to be user-friendly! Important!..." – Mercury

This quote from Mercury thematically sums up the importance surrounding this dimension. The website must be easy to use, and most importantly, it needs to be user-friendly. What "user-friendly" entails also turned out to be a consensus throughout the respondents' opinions of the subject.

"Easy to sort out its products and filters which are user friendly. Good search engine, with a simple design" – Tellus

Tellus summarized the major themes of what makes a website a good one with a user-friendly UX with this answer. It should be easy to sort the products, and it needs to be simple to find the specific product that the consumer is searching after. The simple design is somewhat overlapping with the dimension of brand visual identity, which will be discussed later on in this paper. Thus, so far, a thematic pattern has emerged. The importance of a user-friendly website should not be shrugged off, as this seems to be a make-or-break for e-businesses and "e-tailers".

The secondary theme found through the consumer data collection phase was the issues surrounding shipping and returns. The inconvenience of not receiving the purchased products immediately and waiting for the order to be delivered was not stressed to any significance among the respondents. Most responses in our research indicated that consumers have grown used to delivery times of 2-5 business days and are prepared to wait for this time. Shopping online has become a common practice now, and the resentment toward shipping and delivery aspects has been reduced. This phenomenon was thematically expressed by;

"I prefer online shopping [...] Shipping and delivery from trusted and well-known Swedish companies are great nowadays!" - Venus

Thus, as expressed above, delivery or shipping fees are deemed common practice in today's consumption society. However, as we will analyze, the real issue lies not with delivery or shipping but within returns expressed below.

"I feel that returns are important because it is always a hassle dealing with sending back products. Delivery fees are not something I care about unless they are unreasonably high in price." – Saturn

When asked what the biggest issue with online versus brick-and-mortar shopping, this concept was furthered by:

"Return policies are annoying, and I would like it to be easier." - Saturn

It seems that the consumers, no matter the consumer segment, express somewhat restrictions when dealing with returns and brands' return policies. The majority with issues surrounding returns expressed that they would consider shopping more online if this issue would be remedied. Most of our respondents expressed that they were reserved about the idea of paying for returns after their purchase, as expressed by the quote below.

"...it gives you some kind of relief that you won't have to pay extra if your clothes don't fit and it needs to be sent back" – Uranus

The third theme identified throughout the interviews was security. Most notably, this aspect dealt with payment methods that brands offer on their respective websites. Some respondents expressed that choosing among different payment methods is essential for both safety reasons and the luxury of choosing between multiple options.

" Most of the companies are offering different ways of paying, various delivery options, and most things are available to order" – Venus

Thus, more payment options seem to be essential for the modern online consumer. As there are increasing payment solutions available online these days, consumers have grown accustomed to or even created preferences regarding payments. Although most of the companies offer various methods, there still seems to be more demand for a greater variety. Within the non-intended consumer segment, payment simplicity is still demanded, as Tellus expressed:

"It is important to be able to pay with Swish"

Swish offers a method where the transaction is completed by a few clicks on the consumers' phones. This might speak about the usage of devices, be that a smartphone or laptop, for instance, between the segments analyzed or the fact that Swish payments are becoming more and more common even in brick-and-mortar stores in Sweden.

The netnographic research found that most of the brands analyzed are working extensively with the website's functionality by incorporating filtering systems, categorizations, and search bars. Most brands in our research had websites with advanced search engines and detailed filtration systems, where the consumers can filter their search results by category, color, size, price, quality, and even type of room. All brands offer a search bar where customers can find specific products by entering keywords or product names. According to the findings in our interviews, they are appreciated and utilized by the consumers. The company Beta even went to the extent of incorporating a chat function, which furthers user-friendliness.

The companies are working extensively for a seamless purchasing line, from click to delivery for the consumer. Shipping and delivery is becoming easier for the consumer, as the delivery time-span is shortening and the methods of collecting one's item are widening. All companies in our research offered a wide selection of delivery methods through different shipping companies in order to have options that fit all of their customers. Customers can choose between having the items delivered directly to their door, to a delivery point, "pick-up box" or the company's physical store if there is one in the consumer's proximity. Alpha even offered its customers to have the items shipped at express delivery for an additional fee for those in need of receiving their products urgently. With the exception of Omega, all of the companies offered free returns, an aspect expressed by the respondents in the interviews as important when shopping online.

When it comes to payment, every company in the netnography offers a wide selection of methods. Options like Klarna, Paypal, and card payments were the consensus found during the netnography, which adds to the aspects of simplicity and safety expressed as essential by the consumers in our interviews.

4.3 Emotional Dimension.

"The hopeless feeling of quick excitement… Everyone likes the dopamine kick, you know?" - Saturn

In the emotional dimension, we raise awareness of the importance of engaging positive or strong emotions connected to the brand. As expressed in the quote by "Saturn" above, shopping usually results in feelings of excitement right after purchasing a product. Another respondent referred to this as activating the reward system, and almost everyone in our research stated that shopping online leads to positive and happy emotions. Shopping acts as a catalyst of hormonal release, which creates a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment.

Emotions might arise already while purchasing the products on the website or waiting for the order to be delivered. Still, many times it comes down to what feelings arise when receiving and using the product itself. Most brands strive to create a positive, happy feeling among their customers and eliminate any negative association, leading to unhappy, dissatisfied, and upset customers. We asked our respondents to give examples of good and bad experiences they have had while shopping online. The responses we received gave us quite clear patterns of what aspects that create positive or negative experiences. Almost all of our respondents expressed feelings of disappointment when the products they ordered online did not meet their expectations in quality, as it gave them the impression that the companies had fooled them. Some respondents also expressed the feeling of guilt when buying something expensive or unnecessary.

"Although I mostly get happy by buying something online, I sometimes feel guilty if I bought something expensive or if I bought too many things I don't need…" - Mercury

Negative feelings might arise among consumers while shopping, despite not necessarily being connected to the brand itself, but instead the action of spending money. Although the company or brand itself might not directly be at fault for this kind of negative feeling, there might be ways to mitigate the guilt among consumers. Another respondent had the following feelings connected to spending money when shopping online:

"I love the feeling of making a good deal when shopping online. You have access to so many different products and prices, and sometimes you might even get a discount code or coupon to use at checkout. That's why I also turn to second hand markets like Blocket or Facebook Marketplace, since I know you might be able to bargain down the prices" - Neptune

Our observation was that positive feelings are not necessarily only connected to buying something that fulfills a specific need or craving. It can also come in the form of making a good bargain in one way or another. If the consumers feel that they have got a good price deal or discount, the negative emotions of spending money might also become subdued. Rewarding members could establish this with additional benefits in the shape of coupons, discount codes, or early access to sales. Giving the consumers the feeling or impression that they get much value for the products bought will make them consider it not expensive. Many respondents answered that they would pay extra for exclusive design, quality, and sustainable products. However, something few of our respondents expressed willingness to pay was the shipping cost. One of our respondents had this to say about shipping costs:

"If I need to pay for shipping, I might reconsider my intentions of buying from that website. If you need to place an order above a certain amount of money in order to get free shipping, I'd rather add more products to my order instead of paying for shipping, even if the total price will be higher because of it." - Neptune

This quote shows how consumers want to get value for their products to be satisfied and happy with their purchases. Coupons, discount codes, sales, and free shipping, and returns have all shown to generate positive feelings among our respondents. They might even be crucial in how satisfied they are with their shopping experience.

Through our netnographic research, we found that Gamma was the only company that offers free delivery on all orders. All other companies in our research required the total price for a placed order to be above a certain amount for the shipping to be free. Given the responses from our interview, this might be the cause of disappointment among some customers. However, the prices on these websites are relatively high, and the requirements for free delivery might be fulfilled by the average customer nevertheless.

Regarding sales and discounts, Alpha was the only company to provide their customers with a section dedicated to products on sale. However, Omega offered new members a discount of 10% on their order, and Delta attracted their customers by giving out a free tea towel for all orders exceeding 100€. With Alpha as an exception, there are not many options for the customers to bargain on these websites. Therefore, the companies must ensure the customers that they will get value for their money by meeting the customers' expectations in terms of service and quality. Alpha and Gamma were the only companies to enable customer reviews on their websites, which indicates how pleased their customers are with the products. It is difficult to determine if the other brands manage to meet the customers' expectations and if they had a positive experience with the brand while examining the other brands.

4.4 Self-Fulfillment Dimension.

We wanted to understand how vital image portrayal and self-fulfillment are for consumers when shopping online in this dimension. We started by asking if they feel like their shopping preferences are affected by trends or by people around them and on social media shops.

"I think I am very affected by the influencers I follow on social media, since I turn to them for inspiration. If someone else has done it before me, I know what to expect and am more inclined to do the same…" - Mercury

Almost all of our respondents admitted to being affected in one way or another by trends and people around them, even if many take pride in trying not to act too much on the opinions and likings of others. We proceeded by asking if it is important for them that the products they buy represent a certain image. Many respondents claimed that they do not strive to portray a particular image to impress others. One respondent, however, had this to say about image:

"I think the products I buy represent quite well who I am, so in a way they represent my own image. However, I don't strive to present a certain image in order to impress anyone else, and for me the most important thing is that I like it, despite other people's opinions" - Pluto

Evidently, trends and image are significant aspects of many consumers' shopping habits, although some try not to let social factors affect them into buying things they do not like. All

of our respondents expressed interest in interior design and that products that you buy for your home need to be aesthetically pleasing to some degree and not just fill a functional purpose. Many also answered that they are willing to pay extra money for home decor with a unique design, which indicates that there is value for the consumer if the products bought can express their image and sense of style somehow or form.

Another important aspect of this dimension is that online shopping suits another kind of lifestyle of the consumers that the classic brick and mortar stores do. While the social aspect of going shopping in a mall with friends is eliminated, consumers are able to shop whatever they need, whenever they need it, and wherever they are in a geographical sense through the digital marketplace. When asking our respondents if they prefer online shopping over traditional stores, we got this answer:

"I like online shopping way more! It's comfortable, better prices and you can easily compare prices to get the best possible deal. The shipping these days are very quick and reliable as well." - Venus

While other respondents expressed dissatisfaction with not being able to visit physical stores as much during the pandemic, it becomes clear that interest in online shopping and whether you prefer it over physical stores or not is very much a question about preferences and lifestyle. A person who wants to find the products they need effectively might be more interested in turning to an online store to fulfill their needs than others. Whether you prefer online shopping or traditional shopping might also come down to how skilled the consumer is digitally. As all respondents in our research stated that they regularly shop online, they all have a digital lifestyle to some degree.

In the spirit of today's trend of sustainability, we also examined if our respondents are willing to pay extra for a product that is ethically or environmentally sustainable. Making sustainable decisions in everyday life as a consumer is something many take pride in, and a sustainable lifestyle is, to many, a desirable image. Although most responses indicated that sustainability is an important aspect when shopping online, it was far from everybody willing to put out more money. While sustainability is a desirable concept for some, we found that others are not as sold on the concept and would not pay extra for a product that holds this feature. On the other hand, through our netnographic research, we found that all five companies had a

special section on their websites dedicated to information about their sustainability efforts and goals. They all claim that they work towards obtaining or maintaining a sustainable production of their products to some degree in the environmental and ethical aspects. This might satisfy the customer that wishes to keep a sustainable lifestyle while also satisfying the less sustainability-oriented customer who probably will not open the sustainability section on the website in the first place.

We also found through our netnography that many of the companies try to portray a minimalist lifestyle through the pictures and videos on their web sites. As all brands in our research are nordic brands, they seem to play into the so-called Scandinavian lifestyle of sleek and stylish design using earthy tones such as grey and beige. Through the pictures, the products are often presented in a luxurious home setting, which enhances the image of a modern and exclusive lifestyle.

For example, the Beta brand portrays a nautical, seaside lifestyle, and you get a feeling of summer and vacation when looking at the pictures. The products are high in quality, and the brand design with blue and red themes and stars is recognizable to many in Sweden. The products have become very common as decoration in Swedish summer houses and even boats as it matches the image of the marine lifestyle.

Alpha is another example of a big company, but with lower prices, making it possible for almost everybody to shop at their website. Although you need to be a digitally skilled customer in order to place an online order, the website is close to as simple to navigate and make a purchase through as it gets. Since the prices are lower in comparison, Alpha is not particularly associated with a luxurious lifestyle. Still, the company is keeping up with the trends and is occasionally collaborating with prominent fashion designers. This way, Alpha manages to provide their customers with fashionable and trendy home decor, and customers can enhance their fashionable image. For example, Alpha offers stylish furniture and decorations made in the trendy material rattan, but for a much lower price than the more high-end brands with similar products.

4.5 Cognitive Dimension.

One could argue that the cognitive dimension is the accumulation of all the dimensions expressed previously. The brain absorbs all the dimensions, from the visual and self-fulfilling aspects to the emotional aspects and the stimulating responses of shopping on a well-functioning website. All these aspects are part of the purchasing process created by one's mind. Does the consumer want this product, is it functional, or is it just pleasing for the eye? These are questions asked at times, but often not when dealing with shopping. The "I like it, I buy it" mentality is often the catalyst of a newly purchased item. However, as seen throughout the thesis, some respondents within both the consumer segments managed to conceptualize their online shopping behaviors.

A good description of the product fulfills the consumers' intellectual, reasonable part of their brain, as the photos satisfy their aesthetic needs. Thus, it is interesting to analyze how the brands in this study work with these conceptualized matters. A majority does not consider the visual satisfaction of the consumer on their websites, as a bigger group works with the description of the products. Ergo, the brands are often pleading to the intellectual and reasonable parts of the consumer's brain. This, according to Schmitt (1999), is the definition of the traditional marketer. Not pleading to the experiential part of consumption, but for the purchase functionality at a later stage. As mentioned by Jupiter, who said: "*The fact that I cannot get the thing I bought in my hand directly*.", when asked what the missing parts of online shopping are, is a sacrifice for now, as the joy of the product is postponed for a later stage. Thus, the companies not pleading to the experiential often shoot themselves in the foot by guaranteeing two aspects of the purchase. By acting on the experiential field, it will allow the consumer to feel the joy once experiencing the brand online, and then at a later stage when the product arrives, which by nature is beneficial for the brand itself.

This introduction could be seen as extensive and somewhat "out there", but this is what the cognitive dimension boils down to. It is complex and comprehensive, but it can be conceptualized through major themes identified.

The first theme identified that was extracted throughout the interviews deals with information needs for the consumers. It seems that to bridge the gap that the senses left behind in the world of traditional shopping is the extent to which the online brands offer information. The

majority of the respondents, no matter the consumer segment, expressed the urgency surrounding the description of the products and attached materials. This would act as the substitute for examining the actual product in question.

The second theme identified was the importance of good and accurate pictures of the item that the consumer would potentially be interested in.

"I like to feel the material on the product, especially for clothes, when I buy it, that's kind of hard to do over the internet. But, when you can see good pictures and "close up" pictures of the material at least you can get a sense of what it feels like" – Uranus

By at least satisfying the visual sense of the product, it will sway the consumer towards a positive mindset despite not touching the piece of clothing, in this case. Thus, this quote expresses the urgency for a substitute for one of the amiss senses when shopping online. However, the results show that, although there are pictures of the product in some sense, Uranus explained that a "close up" would satisfy his need for the sense of touch, it seems to be some difference in this case opinion. According to a few respondents of the interviews, there needs to be some kind of real-life application of the item, acting as an 'intermediary' of trying it out in the store.

"It is important that the pictures are clear and accurate to what they look like in real life…"
– Mars

The third theme we found in the usage of customer reviews on the websites. Two respondents spoke out on the importance and urgency of reviews, as this would prove to be a helping hand when deciding upon purchasing a product online.

"...I also like customer reviews, because customers are honest after all" – Saturnus
"…I also like to read others reviews" – Mercury

An interesting point to be made in this instance is that these two quotes are made by respondents who fall within the same consumer segment. Previously, thematic patterns found that there was a widespread consensus between the two consumer segments studied. In this case, only the 'intended consumer segment' spoke out about the perceived importance of

customer review. This acts, as mentioned within the functionality dimension, as another aspect of security. As stated by Mercury: "customers are honest after all," which speaks upon the uncertainty of the online world. However, it should be noted that all reviews are not always to be trusted or to believe upon first glancing at it, but it is a pattern found over the analysis of the data collected.

The results of the netnographic research show that the majority of the brands observed are actively trying to achieve a good description with the necessary information for the customers. The companies provided descriptions with information about the material, size, options of color, and even customer reviews and washing advice. All brands made sure to include extensive information about their shipping and payment options as well, and Beta even provides a guide on "how to shop" for their customers. This guide could be helpful for new consumers or for those who are not very digitally skilled.

The aspect of descriptive and detailed photos is something only some brands applied on their websites. Even though the concept of 'trying something out' is problematic for interior design brands and stores in general, many brands have implemented some scenery that would help the consumer visualize how it would look in their own home. Delta has applied this concept to all of its products on its website. Creating a scenery, or a setting, on all products helps the consumer visualize the product at hand in a real (bath)room. The small attention to detail is, according to the consumers, an important aspect.

Only one of the brands observed, Alpha, had reviews enabled. The reviews are beneficial to understand the quality and if the products live up to the customers' expectations. Since the prices of the products of Alpha are considerably lower than the other brands in this research, the quality is also of a more diverse range. The reviews are, in this case, especially helpful for customers of the Alpha brand since the products might not meet their expectations in terms of quality. This might speak upon the intended consumers of the other brands more than the actual consumers of Alpha. Even so, it seems to create a trust for the brand and website, despite providing products of somewhat mixed quality. As Ha and Perks (2005) expressed in their study, increased brand trust increases the brand experience. This clarifies that brands should work with building trust among their customer base towards the brand itself. A positive brand experience will benefit the companies with a working trust system, and vice-versa, a negative brand trust shapes a negative brand experience.

4.6 Flow State.

Flow is a difficult concept to grasp as it occurs in consumers' minds while shopping online. To understand if flow has been achieved during a shopping experience among our interviewees, we asked them to give examples of good and bad shopping experiences. Since flow is more likely to occur when all five dimensions of the online brand experience design are satisfied, we supposed that flow happened when consumers were significantly satisfied with their shopping experience. One of the respondents had this experience to share:

"My favorite online store is Zalando. Their prices are good, and there has never been any fuss with shipping and returns. I can trust on their service and quality and they have a lot of products that I like and that suits me" - Tellus

The quote above expresses satisfaction over nearly every dimension in the online brand experience model. The respondent thinks this particular company is outstanding since they meet their expectations in terms of quality and style, and they have managed to deliver the products effortlessly at all times. It can be assumed that they have experienced flow while shopping on this website, which has contributed to overall satisfaction and trust connected to the brand.

When it comes to netnographic research, many brands proved to be very good at satisfying the dimensions of the online brand experience, which would increase the possibility for their customers to enter the flow state. Alpha managed to create a user-friendly website with many different payment solutions and shipping methods. They also provided their customers with informative descriptions and honest customer reviews. Judging by the reviews written, the consumers also seem to be overall satisfied with their purchases. The image portrayed by Alpha is minimalistic and clean, which is popular in Sweden and applies to the Scandinavian lifestyle. The aspects mentioned above contribute to the probability of Alpha's customers entering the state of flow, which might be one reason why Alpha is such a successful brand.

5. Discussion.

5.1 Brand Visual Identity Dimension.

The analysis shows that brand visual identity seemed to be a dimension that was hard to grasp and fully understand through the consumer's perspective. As consumers are browsing websites, it is often easy to spot a messy and cluttered website. However, it is on the flip side of the spectrum and easy to ignore the consumption of a clean and simple website. The importance of simplicity seems to be the case for consumers when browsing for things to purchase online. One of the respondents said the website must be "clean and simple" in its design, and the rest did not acknowledge the website's aesthetic. As the theory states, brand visual identity is curated through logos, design, and coloring of the websites, for which done well is often ignored. However, when this topic broadened more, and the general aesthetic of the brands' visual communication was taken into consideration, the respondents had diverging opinions on the matter. Packaging, the visual identity of a brand, done well, is often deemed valuable for the consumer when purchasing something more expensive. However, this has nothing to do with the brand's online presence, rather its transformation from the online realm to real life. On one side of the spectrum, it is expected to receive the purchased item in an excellent package when expensive, while one respondent did not care that much, as long as the product arrived in one piece. Thus, where does the consensus lay? Is it imperative that the brand creates a visual dialogue through its packaging, or is it more important that it visually communicates with its subtle website design? The answer to these questions lies in the hand of the individual consumer, who bases its own subjective opinions on their view of aesthetics and measurement of value.

5.2 Functionality Dimension.

The functionality dimension was, almost expected, the one dimension that the consumers deemed most important. A well-functioning and nice website is something that everyone will benefit from, as it simplifies the purchasing process. It proved that the competing brands of Pale Deco were working extensively, although with all different approaches, to create and manage a well-functioning online store. This does not surprise, as, within the world of traditional brick-and-mortar shopping, brands and companies often have systematically created the layout and design of their stores to maximize efficiency. According to the

consumers, this translates to 1:1 online, as the website's functionality was the most crucial factor when shopping online. Working systematically to maximize efficiency, from entering the website to finalizing a purchase, is beneficial for an online store. The most significant issues surrounding online shopping functionality are, as mentioned, within the previous part of this paper, surrounding user-friendliness, returns, and payment. These aspects have been so standardized throughout the lifespan of traditional shopping that the issues that previously were easy to fix are now a bigger problem. When consumers went into a physical store, they would have the option of regretting their purchase and returning the item in-store easily.

5.3 Emotional Dimension.

As previous research has shown, creating positive emotions connected to a brand is an effective way of building long-term relationships between the brand and its customers. Our studies further confirmed these claims of the effects emotions have on the brand experience since most people in our interviews declared satisfaction with brands they have positive feelings connected to. We found that positive feelings arise when purchasing a product online since this activates the reward system and dopamine release in the consumers' bodies. However, when shopping online, there are several stages through the shopping experience that can influence a consumer's feelings and satisfaction with the brand. Besides the immediate release of dopamine when placing the order, the consumers will only evaluate their experience entirely after receiving their products. Suppose the products are delivered fast and whole, and most importantly, live up to the consumers' expectations. In that case, the overall association that the consumer will have to that specific brand will be positive.

Nevertheless, the consumers need to feel that the products are worth the money they paid to be completely happy since there is otherwise a risk of them feeling guilty for spending too much money. This guiltiness can be redeemed if a brand successfully provides its customers with good quality products that are ethically and ecologically produced or give the customers a great price deal. Even offers of free shipping or persuading the customers into shopping over a specific price limit to receive free shipping might create this feeling of "getting value for the money" among the customers.

5.4 Self-Fulfillment Dimension.

Although some consumers might still prefer visiting the traditional brick-and-mortar store, digitally skilled consumers can simplify some aspects of their life through online shopping. Our studies showed that many consumers appreciate the simplicity of shopping from the couch in their homes and not having to visit countless stores in a big shopping mall to find the products they need. While some consumers in our interviews expressed a lack of the social aspects of going shopping with friends, many still turned to online shopping when looking for a specific product to buy. Going shopping in physical stores seems to fill the need for these social aspects mainly, and in some cases, the need to see and touch a product before buying it. However, today many are used to the privilege of free returns, which is the norm for most online stores, and the need to examine a product before buying it has been reduced. Many seem to have grown used to the simplicity that online shopping provides that waiting a couple of business days for a product to be delivered is no longer a significant issue. This way, online shopping allows the consumers to fulfill a simple yet effective lifestyle.

As we know from earlier studies, consumers will consume to fulfill a particular lifestyle or identity. Online shopping has done this search for identity remarkably more accessible for the consumers. They can now find the products they are looking for and that they like through the endless possibilities of the internet. Many respondents in our interviews confirmed that they are affected by trends and that they like the products that they buy to represent their style or image in some way.

5.5 Cognitive Dimension.

The cognitive dimension is, as mentioned, a very open and complex dimension. Since it deals with purchase intention and decision making, all the other dimensions converge in this final stage. However, the main point of interest within this dimension lies in information. The majority of the respondents we interviewed said that descriptive information is a necessity. This information outflow would act as a metaphoric sledgehammer of the touch barrier, as the senses are deprived when shopping online.

Our findings throughout the research and analysis of its results are that there is great importance on giving the consumers accurate information about products sold online. Since the consumers cannot examine and assess the products in real life before, the information

given on the website should be as genuine and honest as possible. While having informative descriptions of the products, their material, and size is essential, seeing the products portrayed in different settings, lights, and angles is just as important. 3D views or a video clip with a presentation of the products are a couple of examples of how products can come to life and appear more real through our sometimes deceiving digital screens. Enabling customer reviews is yet another example of giving the consumers accurate and honest information about the products sold and its quality. Suppose a consumer can get a good understanding of what the product will look and feel like in real life without actually seeing it in real life. In that case, they are more likely to have accurate expectations of its quality. Meeting the consumers' expectations was one aspect that proved throughout our studies to be highly important in creating sustainable and long-term relationships between customers and the brands.

5.6 Flow State.

A concept that we raised awareness about when compiling our theoretical framework is flow; a state achieved when the consumers can navigate, purchase and receive a product from an online store smoothly and painlessly. We realized that flow is a phenomenon that permeates all five dimensions of the online brand experience design model through our research. A brand that successfully creates an online brand experience through the five dimensions in the model sets the conditions suitable for the consumers to achieve the flow state. The interviewees in our empirical research confessed to being most satisfied with brands that made the shopping experience as smooth and straightforward as possible, and that could deliver a product that matched their expectations. However, suppose a delivered product would arrive broken or not matching the customer's expectations. In that case, the process of coming in contact with customer support or returning a product should also be painless. A satisfied consumer experience flow throughout the whole purchasing line. This includes browsing and purchasing the products on the website, having them delivered to their homes, and returning them, if necessary.

5.7 Recommendations for businesses and marketers.

The central theme of the results was the dimension of which the consumers had the most opinions and thoughts about functionality. The consumers' most considerable demand and request from an e-commerce platform is that it is user-friendly, with good methods of finding suitable items of interest. This is one of the key points that businesses need to focus on when deciding to either conduct a digital transformation or start something up from scratch. By fulfilling the need for a search engine, filter system, and a way to categorize the products on the website, the consumers' appreciation will show. As there are a plethora of online stores and marketplaces, consumers are spoiled with the options of retailers. Therefore, it is essential to meet the underlying demand for a user-friendly website before evolving it. It takes the consumer virtually no time to find another website with similar products or brands. Thus, businesses must focus on building the foundation of a well-functioning website before conveying who and what the brand is. When this is done, the marketers need to figure out how the brand should be visually identifiable to stand out in the sea of online stores. By carefully designing the brand's visual identity, it should include clear logos and a color scheme that represents the brand itself.

Furthermore, the products themselves need to have great descriptions and visual representation that is true to reality. This was shown throughout the analysis of our data to be imperative for the consumers. Therefore, marketers should focus their efforts on highlighting the ways they bridge the gap of uncertainty through good pictures and proper communication between potential consumers and the business itself. As mentioned throughout, some of the senses have been taken away during the decision-making phase of purchasing due to the virtual nature of the store. Having good information about the quality and material of the products will trigger the brain to visualize how and what the product feels like.

Businesses and marketers alike have a consumer segment in mind when releasing a new product or launching a campaign. Shown by the analysis, the intended and the non-intended consumer segment of Pale Deco did not have too many differences of opinions regarding the dimension. Thus, it could be argued that by working online, the consumer segments might mesh together to a larger extent, than perhaps offline. The anonymity of the browsing consumer is something that marketers and businesses should focus on, as there are no judging looks when entering a store not explicitly intended for a specific person. Having a more

inclusive mindset when setting up or managing an e-commerce business could prove beneficial as more consumers feel comfortable browsing the aisles of the internet rather than in a brick-and-mortar store.

5.8 Research contribution.

The brand experience design model is a powerful tool for marketers to build strong relationships between brands and consumers. The digitalization of the shopping experience demands adaptation of the classic brand design model to fit the new circumstances that online shopping entails. In today's society, with an increasing number of companies that are "born-digital" and the Covid-19 pandemic that forces companies to find digital solutions, it is crucial to understand how companies can create loyal and long-term customers in a saturated market. Our research helps adjust this marketing area to the digital shopping experience. It can act as a guideline for other e-commerce-based companies to create a brand experience via the internet. Developing a model that digital brands can successfully use will contribute to creating value for both brands and consumers.

5.9 Suggestions for future research.

To further the nature of this study, we propose a few suggestions to be made. Firstly, this study had its limitations in terms of time, resources and scope. We suggest that a similar study be held, although spread out over a more extended period. This would allow the researchers and the research to follow the current trends, gather more respondents for interviews, gather more observations in a broader group of companies, and have more time to analyze the data collected throughout.

Furthermore, the research could further its legitimacy by applying the model we created to analyze a wider variety of e-commerce brands and companies. Thus, by not restricting itself to interior design brands, applying it to more industries and more consumers would prove to be a valid stress test. As this study was held with limited resources and with time restraints, it could prove to be flawed and somewhat skewed because we are working with a company when writing the thesis. Applying the theories and the model on its own, without the interest of providing a result for the case study, could prove to have a different outcome in general.

It would also be interesting to test if the model created could be used outside the field of brand experience design. It could be used and applied when analyzing other fields of marketing, such as consumer behavior, in researching brand loyalty and possibly even brand communities. Since the model is multifaceted, dealing with both the cognition and the emotional aspects of experience consumption, it could affect how consumers view their relationship to different brands, online and offline. Expanding the theory and model created to other fields and with different perspectives could immensely benefit the research of online commerce.

6. Conclusion.

The purpose of our thesis is to find out how digital brands can create a consumer value proposition through an online brand experience. To do this, the main research question, "*How can a start-up create a brand experience when only acting on the internet?*" was formulated.

To answer the research question and thus fulfill the purpose, we conducted a study by interviewing consumers and observing brands. The results showed that consumers value the simplicity and user-friendliness of the website they are visiting when purchasing an item. The website should appeal to the senses otherwise removed while shopping online by providing information and candid photos. This way, the brands create a positive emotion within the consumers, triggering the experiential consumption of the brand and website. Through having clear visual communication, with all the necessary functions of a well-functioning website, the chances of consumer satisfaction increases.

The model created by us is a conceptualization of the online brand experience where the consumer is a key player. It helps brands and businesses online to understand what is valuable for the consumer.

Ergo, a start-up should focus on building a well-functioning and user-friendly website. This has proven to be a key point for all consumers interviewed and should be the top priority. Secondly, the website must include truthful descriptions of the products in terms of quality, use of material, and size. Accurate photos of the products were essential for most respondents, as it ensures what the product looks like in real life. Depending on the average price point of the products sold, the packaging should be proportional to the price.

However, as values and experiences are subjective, it is difficult to answer the research question to perfection fully. As the analysis showed, there is some dissonance between the brands acting online and the consumers purchasing online regarding the perception of value. Nevertheless, the start-up should focus on the critical points of interest explained throughout this paper. By appealing and creating brand trust through genuine and accurate descriptions of the products, it creates satisfaction when done correctly. When the consumer is satisfied, the overall experience will be remembered as positive, as the brain will trigger its hormonal release of dopamine and overall contempt.

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8. Appendices.

8.1 Interview guide.

Introduction:

- ❖ Introduce ourselves, mention that we are writing our thesis in marketing at Hadels.
- ❖ What is your name and how old are you?
- ❖ What do you do for a living? (or do you study etc.)

What is your experience with online shopping?
- How often do you buy things online?
    - → If they answer "never":
        - Why?
        - In what way do you feel that online stores do not satisfy your needs?
        - What would be necessary to change your stance on online shopping?
        - What do you, generally, feel is lacking when shopping online opposed to a brick-and-mortar store?
            - If this was remedied, would you be prone to shop more, the same, or less than before?

- Have your shopping habits been affected in any way due to Covid-19?
- Do you prefer online shopping over traditional shopping?
    - → Why? Price? Convenience? Safety?
- What kind of goods/services do you buy?
- Is it important for you that an online store offers fast/free delivery and free returns?
- In your opinion, in what way is online shopping superior to physical stores? In what way is it inferior in comparison?
- How important is the packaging?

What is your experience with shopping in physical stores? (⟷)
- Do you visit shopping malls and other physical stores/warehouses often?
- Do you prefer big warehouses with plenty of goods but with less focus on customer service or a smaller store with less goods but instead helpful staff and good service?
- Is there some kind of good that you prefer buying in a physical store over an online store?
- Do you visit physical stores more/less now due to the pandemic?

What is your experience with shopping interior design/homeware? (⟷)
- Do you enjoy buying things for your home?
- Do you redo the furnishings at home often?
- Are you willing to spend a bit more money on unique and exclusive designs?
- Are you willing to spend a bit more money on sustainable home decor?

- Has the pandemic influenced the way you perceive home decor and is having a nice home more important now than before the pandemic?

Dimensions of Brand Experience Design: (⬌)
- How important is it for you to be able to touch, smell etc. the product before purchasing it? (Sensory)
- What feelings arise when you shop (online/physical)? (Affective)
- Do trends and/or the people around you affect your own shopping habits? (social)
- Do you shop interior design for the functionality, or the aesthetics of it? (functionality)
- Is it important to you that the products you buy represent a certain image? (myth)

Online shopping "Deep-Dive"
- What is the most important aspect for you when shopping online, based on the previous answered questions?
    - How could this aspect improve in your eyes?
- What do you, generally, feel is lacking when shopping online opposed to a brick-and-mortar store?
    - If this was remedied, would you be prone to shop more, the same, or less than before?
- What was the best experience for you when shopping online?
    - What made this a good experience?
- What was the worst experience when shopping online?
    - Why was this a bad experience?
    - What should they have done better?
- Is there a website you shop more from than others?
    - Why do you shop more at that specific website?
        - If they answer products:
            - What value does that product give you?
        - If they answer convenience:
            - What functionality makes it that convenient that you would return?
        - If they answer safety:
            - How important is it when thinking about the purchasing process? More important than price, aesthetic of the website, or convenience?
    - Just keep asking *why, why and why*.

Conclusion:

- Do you have any questions for us?
- Any comments you would like to add before we end?
- Thank you for participating!

8.2 Netnography guide.

Step 1, identify websites for observation.
After consulting with Pale Deco, we were given competing brands to observe. These are named Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma and Omega for the purpose of privacy.

Step 2, observations.
We followed the five dimensions and identified points of interest, based on the responses from the interviews:

Brand Visual Identity:
- Logos, visual cues specific for the website/brand, what aesthetics are we identifying in general

Functional:
- Clean and effective search "bar", payment solutions, filtering of products, shipping and returns (easy and accessible)

Emotional:
- Might be difficult to gather from the website, although, might find something if the website have reviews enabled → Check out trustpilot and google reviews etc for additional information and thoughts of the brand

Self-Fulfillment:
- What lifestyle is the brand trying to convey, are the products catered for a specific segment (that we can see at least)

Cognitive:
- Sufficient information (could be of the brand, how shipping and payment work etc), are there good pictures of the products, how are the product information, are reviews enabled [Is it easy to go from point A to B in the purchasing process]