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# **How much has the shopping experience changed?**

A study on how the Covid-19  
pandemic influenced the  
shopping experience and  
customers' value creation

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**Title**

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**Abstract**

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started in 2020, it has created fear and disorder in the society. Because of restrictions, fear and economic situation, physical fashion stores have suffered huge losses. Since the pandemic started, fashion stores could not offer the same shopping experience to their customers. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to explore how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced customers' shopping experience in fashion stores with the focus on factors that created consumer value. To collect empirical data, three focus groups were used. The findings showed that customer-employee relationship has changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since many customers wanted to avoid interaction with employees, it was difficult to create value through customer-employee relationship. However, the influence of store atmosphere and store environment on consumer value seemed to remain the same as before the pandemic, even if there have occurred new elements that influenced customer shopping experience. This dissertation provides insights into customers' perspective on how the shopping experience has changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This thesis contributes to physical fashion stores as they can understand the different types of customers and their view on the shopping experience and its value creation. Moreover, this thesis contributes to store managers' knowledge about how to handle similar situations in the future.

**Keywords**

Shopping experience, Consumer value, Physical fashion stores, Covid-19 pandemic, Fashion

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# 1. Introduction

This chapter will begin with background information about the coronavirus and its effects on customers' shopping experience as well as its effects on companies within the fashion industry. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss the relevance for research on customers' shopping experience in physical fashion stores during the societal crisis. The purpose of the study and the research question will also be presented. Finally, the structure of the study will be introduced.

## 1.1 Background

The Covid-19 virus is an infectious disease that is transmitted from person to person. The virus was first found in China at the end of 2019 but has spread rapidly to other countries. In January 2020, the first infected person was confirmed in Sweden. However, the public health authority thought that the risk of spreading the virus was low (Krisinformation, 2020a). During the same month, the World Health Organization decided that the outbreak of the virus should be seen as an international threat against human health (Krisinformation, 2020b). In March 2020, the virus was classified as a pandemic, and the spread of the virus is still ongoing (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020). Since the Covid-19 pandemic started, it has created a social crisis with major consequences for both companies and customers (Olsson & Johansson, 2020). Because of several reasons, such as implementation of restrictions and fear of the virus, customers' shopping experience seem to have changed. However, some retailers, such as grocery stores, have increased their sales (Svensk Dagligvaruhandel, 2020) while others, such as fashion stores, suffered from reduced sales (Göteborgs Universitet, 2020).

The Covid-19 virus has created fear and anxiety among customers which has resulted in a change in their buying behavior. For example, many customers did not visit physical stores because of the fear of the virus and the willingness to follow the restriction to keep social distance (Handelshögskolan Stockholm, 2020).

According to the Stockholm School of Economics (2020), it is common that customers' fear and worries during crises make them reduce their purchases of goods that are not vital, and the Covid-19 crisis is not an exception.

As the number of people infected by the virus increased, countries decided to implement various strategies to slow down the spread of the virus. Many countries decided to use lockdowns (Kaplan et al., 2020) in order to create distance between people and reduce the risk of the spread of infection. However, Sweden decided not to use this strategy and introduced several restrictions that both companies and customers needed to follow instead. One of the first restrictions that was introduced in March 2020, was that it was forbidden to organize gatherings with more than 500 people. You were also forced to sit down while you were eating and drinking in restaurants and bars.

In November 2020, the restrictions became stricter, which meant that only eight people were allowed to meet (Krisinformation, 2020c). In addition, the alcohol restrictions also got stricter, which meant that the restaurants and bars were not allowed to serve alcohol after eight o'clock in the evening (Krisinformation, 2020d). It was also decided that businesses in trade should ensure that, for example, each person has ten square meters of space. Furthermore, the maximum number of visitors in stores and shopping centers was not allowed to exceed 500 people. Companies were also given the responsibility to develop solutions for cash queues and so on, and clearly show customers that they need to keep a distance (Krisinformation, 2021a).

Along with these restrictions, there are also general guidelines for companies to follow: mark distances where queues are formed, refurbishing of the premises so that congestion is prevented, avoid several people gathering at the same time and adjust the opening hours (Krisinformation, 2021a). Customers were also recommended to keep a distance and avoid crowds, stay at home at the slightest symptom, socialize with a limited number of people and work at home as much as



possible. (Krisinformation, 2021b). All these factors and restrictions, many of which are still in place, have affected both how physical fashion stores need to run their business and how customers perceive the shopping experience.

The pandemic has also created a global financial crisis since many countries, due to their decision to use different strategies, stopped developing financially (Matteo & Pianta, 2020). Because of the financial crisis, many people's income has been reduced and, in some cases, even stopped completely due to the loss of their jobs. The crisis is expected to have a long-term effect on unemployment as many companies are having a difficult time financially (Svenskt näringsliv, 2020). Although the economy has been supported by extensive economic policy measures, the demand for labor appears to remain low while the unemployment rates remain high.

According to the Swedish National Bank (2021), the unemployment figures should probably be even higher if it were not for the government's financial support for short-term redundancies. In March 2021, the unemployment rate in Sweden was 9,7 % (Ekonomifakta, 2021). This rate is not far from the crisis in the 1990s, which had an unemployment rate of about 11 %, that left Sweden with large and long-lasting negative effects on the labor market (Sveriges Riksbank, 2021). As mentioned before, these financial circumstances have left people in a difficult economic situation. With lesser incomes, or perhaps no income at all, customers have been forced to start analyzing their purchases and prioritizing different types of products (Andrée, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, some retailers have increased their sales while others have suffered from big losses. Even though Sweden used a different approach in fighting the coronavirus, compared to other countries, the pandemic has still had enormous consequences on fashion retailers in Sweden (Göteborgs Universitet, 2020). Physical stores were affected by restrictions such as the limited number of people in the same store (Regeringskansliet, 2020). Another consequence for fashion

retailers was that they considered themselves forced to sell clothes for cheaper prices in order to increase their sales (Forskning, 2020). Therefore, fashion retailers risked to sell at a loss because of smaller margins (Forskning, 2020). Since people mostly worked from home during the pandemic (Regeringskansliet, 2020), they did not have a need to buy new clothes. This was a factor that influenced fashion retailers' decline in sales (Lindqvist, 2020). Since the government recommended citizens to stay at home, the stores remained empty (Lindqvist, 2020).

Because of Sweden's restrictions and recommendations, online shopping has increased drastically. However, it was not enough to cover all the losses in revenue that physical stores suffered (Göteborgs Universitet, 2020). People started to buy more products online and stopped visiting physical stores to buy new clothes. However, people bought other products, such as food, more than clothes (Keldsen, 2020), so even though e-commerce was expanding, it was not enough. Swedish trade (2020) argued that it is important to find a way to keep physical stores since they have an important role in creating lively cities and jobs for citizens.

In sum, many factors seem to have an influence on customers' shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the Covid-19 crisis is relatively new and its impact on customers' shopping experience has not been investigated yet, we take the opportunity to try to fill this gap. Furthermore, factors in a shopping experience that create value for customers also seemed to have changed during the pandemic. Since these factors may remain the same even after the pandemic, they are relevant to explore. Besides that, it is possible that similar global pandemics occur again in the future, which is why it is relevant to study how social crises influence various stakeholders such as customers and physical fashion stores.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected all different kinds of industries. As mentioned before, some industries such as the fashion and retail industries have been

influenced dramatically (McKinsey, 2020). Besides the pandemic's impact on businesses, one of the consequences of the outbreak of the coronavirus is the rise of panic and fear among people which has led to change in consumer behavior (Naeem, 2020). Customers have become more cautious regarding what they buy, where they purchase their products and how they buy (McKinsey, 2020). Loxton et al. (2020) pointed out that customers became more rational in their consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic (Loxton et al., 2020), which is associated with a product-oriented shopping experience (Roozen & Katidis, 2019). Furthermore, Loxton et al. (2020) have found that the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a decline in retail consumption and changed consumer behavior.

Previous studies that have explored the effects of the Covid-19 on customers and businesses, have focused mostly on changed consumer behavior in grocery stores. Anastasiadou et al. (2020) identified that the price of the products and the country of origin are of great importance when it comes to making purchasing decisions in grocery stores during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the fear of being infected by the virus in stores is also identified as a factor that has affected and changed consumers' buying behavior (Anastasiadou et al., 2020). Previous research, based mostly on grocery stores further found that impulse-buying behavior and panic buying are important concepts that have affected consumer behavior during the pandemic (Anastasiadou et al., 2020). Since earlier research has mostly focused on the influence of the Covid-19 on grocery stores, there is a need to explore how other industries have been affected by the pandemic.

There are several reasons why we chose to focus on fashion stores. Firstly, there seems to be a lack of research on how other industries apart from the grocery industries have been influenced by the changes in customers' shopping experience as well as the changes in consumer value creation. Secondly, the fashion industry was negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Thirdly, shopping in fashion stores involves going to the store, touching and trying out clothes, which was

limited to a huge extent by the restrictions. Finally, online stores are the biggest competitors to physical fashion stores and since customers have been shopping more online since the pandemic's outbreak, physical fashion stores were even more negatively affected by its competitors. Because of those reasons, there is a need to explore how fashion retailers, and concepts related to shopping experience, have been influenced by the pandemic.

Kim (2002) has argued that customers' expectations on a shopping experience in general have increased. Previous literature emphasized the importance of product's price and quality as the factors that affect the shopping experience (Davis, 2013). In addition, customers are also concerned with various factors that can contribute to an enjoyable shopping experience. Atmospheric, store environment, interaction with sales personnel and other customers, as well as opening and closing times of the stores are some of the factors that have a significant part in creating a valuable shopping experience (Davis, 2013). However, all those elements have been affected by Covid-19 regulations.

Furthermore, customers' experience and their attitude towards shopping has changed. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, customers perceived it positively when there were many visitors in fashion stores since it was seen as a sign for a popular fashion store. However, since customers are scared of the Covid-19 virus, many visitors in physical fashion stores are perceived negatively because of the pandemic. The restrictions associated with the pandemic have not only affected the fashion retailers but also customers and their attitudes, expectations and experiences. Since former research has mainly focused on exploring how consumer behavior has been impacted during the crisis, there is a need to investigate how other factors such as shopping experience and consumer value have been affected. Therefore, in this dissertation we not only explored how the shopping experience has changed, but also how factors such as atmospheric, store environment and sales personnel affected the creation of consumer value.

According to Davis (2013), customers go shopping because they want to fulfill their needs, improve their well-being and interact with others. Previous research has found that customers can perceive four different types of values depending on what products they purchase. Those values are: emotional, social, functional or financial value (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Earlier studies on consumer value have been conducted under normal circumstances without taking into account the effects of societal crisis, such as a global pandemic. Therefore, there is a need to explore which factors create consumer value during abnormal societal conditions and how customers perceive shopping during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic started in 2020, there has been a lack of research on how the pandemic has affected the shopping experience in fashion stores. Fashion retailers could benefit from this research, as it can help them understand how customers' shopping experience has changed and how the changes have influenced customers' perceived value. Since the experience and creation of consumer value may remain the same after the pandemic, there is a need to explore the subject from the customers' point of view. The findings of this study could be of great relevance for the fashion retailers as these findings will provide fashion retailers with information about how customers perceive shopping in stores during the pandemic, which can help them to get another perspective on how to create a good shopping experience. In addition, this study could also help fashion retailers to manage similar situations in the future. Furthermore, fashion retailers could gain significant insights and find out if some preferences and experiences will remain after the pandemic.

### **1.3 Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced customers' shopping experience in fashion stores. The focus was on factors that create consumer value such as atmospherics, store environment and customer-

employee relationship. Furthermore, the study aimed to explore the relationship between shopping experience and consumer value.

## **1.4 Research question**

How has the Covid-19 pandemic influenced shopping experience and customers' value creation in fashion stores?

## **1.5 Outline**

This thesis has a structure of six chapters. In the first chapter, the background to our research was presented along with the problem statement. Furthermore, in the introduction part, our research question was introduced. In the second chapter, earlier studies on shopping experience and consumer value were discussed. In the third chapter, the choice of the method for this thesis was presented along with our research approach. The fourth chapter explained how our research was conducted and also what the empirical findings of this study were. The fifth chapter involves an analysis part where our empirical findings are compared to the previous studies presented in chapter two. The purpose of the fifth chapter was to provide the reader with a connection of theoretical framework with the thesis's empirical findings. Lastly, in the sixth chapter, the results of this study are discussed, and conclusions are presented.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The second chapter of this study aims to present relevant concepts for this thesis. In this section, shopping experience, atmospherics, store environment, customer-employee relationship as well as consumer value, hedonic, utilitarian and emotional value will be discussed. Lastly, a conceptual model will be presented which explains how the concepts are interrelated.

### 2.1 Shopping experience

Shopping experience can be defined as a multisensory experience (Roizen & Katidis, 2019), as it consists of different elements that should contribute to entertaining shopping experiences, and create additional value for customers (Davis, 2013). A shopping experience is influenced by various factors. Terblanche and Boshoff (2004) stated that the shopping experience involves elements such as personal interaction, merchandise value, internal store environment, merchandise variety, and assortment and complaint handling. Hart et al. (2007) agreed with some of these factors and suggested that the shopping experience is also influenced by atmosphere and accessibility, which includes logistics elements such as store location, travel, parking and pedestrian areas. Davis (2013) acknowledged those factors as well, and added customer services as an element of shopping experience. According to Davis (2013), customer service is not only associated with store personnel, but involves other factors that are related to service systems such as opening and closing time of the store, accepting credit cards in stores and so on. Retailers seek to create an enjoyable shopping experience for their customers (Foster & McLelland, 2015), which is why they are trying to improve all these different elements that have an impact on customers' shopping experience (Davis, 2013).

Customers go shopping not only to buy products and services, but also to satisfy their needs and engage in an entertaining shopping experience (Davis, 2013). Roizen and Katidis (2019) stated that customers have various reasons that motivates

them to go shopping. The authors distinguish personal store motives from social store motives (Roizen and Katidis, 2019). Customers that visit stores because of their personal motives, enjoy sensory stimulation, which fashion stores can provide. While some customers see shopping as an escape from their everyday routine, others see shopping as a way to follow new trends. When it comes to social store motives, customers seek for social experience which involves interaction with other customers or employees. Customers see shopping experience as an opportunity to communicate with others which gives them satisfaction and fulfillment (Roizen & Katidis, 2019). Furthermore, Davis (2013) differed between products-oriented and experience-oriented shopping experience. Customers who see shopping as a way to buy what they need and are rational when acquiring products and services, are engaged in a product-oriented shopping experience. On the other hand, customers who seek entertainment, sensory experience and socialization with others are engaged in an experience-oriented shopping experience.

Since a positive shopping experience is associated with higher sales turnover (Hart et al., 2007), creating a positive shopping experience for customers is one of the main objectives for retailers (Roozen and Katidis, 2019). Shopping is defined as an enjoyable experience which evokes positive emotions with customers. The feeling of enjoyment is one of the main reasons why customers visit stores instead of buying on the Internet (Hart et al., 2007). Customers who have positive shopping experience will be interested in spending more time in the store, visiting it again and purchasing goods from the same store (Hart et al., 2007). Gender is also a factor that seems to have an impact on customers in shopping contexts (Roozen & Katidis, 2019). According to Roozen and Katidis (2019), female customers seemed to spend more time on shopping tasks and do more often unplanned shopping than male customers. In addition, females appear to get more emotionally involved in shopping experiences, have a greater positive attitude towards service and carefully go through all information provided, compared to males that are more confident in their task-orientated decision making (Roozen & Katidis, 2019).



### **2.1.1 Atmospheric**

As mentioned above, atmospheric is one of the factors that influence customers' shopping experience. Atmospheric can be defined as a set of different aspects such as colours, music, temperature, air quality, noise, scents and store space (Davis, 2013). These elements can contribute to a positive shopping experience since they have an impact on consumers' five senses (Davis, 2013; Kim, 2002). Roozen and Katidis (2019) agreed on the importance of these factors and pointed out that they also influence consumer behavior towards retailers. Hart et al. (2007) also argued that customers are affected by physical attributes of the store since music, lightning and colors of the store stimulate customers' reactions. Customers are interested in having pleasurable and entertainable experiences which can be encouraged by senses of sight, sound, touch, smell and taste (Kim, 2002). Customers can respond to these stimuli of the store in two different ways (Hart et al., 2007). First, they can react to the physical attributes of the store in a positive way which is defined as an approach behavior. Approach behavior is characterized as a willingness to stay in the place that is perceived as enjoyable and fun. Customers' satisfaction and customers' retention are the result of the positive attitude customers have towards a store atmosphere (Hart et al., 2007). The opposite of approach behavior is identified as avoid behavior, which appears when customers develop a negative attitude and emotion towards a place (Huang, 2003).

The atmosphere in stores consists of both non-verbal and verbal stimuli that can influence how customers perceive an atmosphere in a shopping store (Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017). Previous research confirmed that different types of stimuli lead to an emotional response of customers. Therefore, multi-sensory cues of the store atmosphere will evoke consumers' attention and emotions which will then influence consumers' purchase behavior (Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017). Helmefalk and Hultén (2017) pointed out that retailers should focus on designing a store atmosphere that will affect consumers' five senses and shopping experience since it will provide retailers with several benefits. Previous research showed that

atmospherics is also one of the factors that can give retailers competitive advantage as it is difficult to copy those elements of which the atmosphere of the store consists (Hart et al., 2007).

### **2.1.2 Store Environment**

Store environment is also one of the key factors that affect consumers' shopping experience and consumers' value. According to Terblanche and Boshoff (2004), the store environment involves factors that create an enjoyable experience in the store such as cleanliness, shop layout, product displays and store decor. Hart et al. (2007) agreed and mentioned that the environment also includes elements like security and opening hours. Roozen and Katidis (2019) also emphasized the importance of physical attributes of the store. Environmental psychology literature suggested that the physical environment of the store can impact consumers' behavior which confirms the importance of a store environment as a factor that influences shopping experience (Terblanche & Boshoff, 2004).

Retailers cannot influence all those factors that are a part of the store environment. For example, opening hours of the store are usually regulated by local authorities instead of individual stores. The convenience of a shopping experience depends to a huge extent on opening hours of the store (Terblanche & Boshoff, 2004). Extended store opening hours give an opportunity for many customers to visit the store as customers are faced with longer working hours nowadays. Consumers' perception of the store environment is influenced by cleanliness of the public space areas and streets as well. It is also important that consumers feel safe in the area where they shop which is why security plays a significant role in the shopping experience (Hart et al., 2007). According to Terblanche and Boshoff (2004), these three factors of a store environment affect customers' perception of the shopping experience which is why they should be examined further.

### **2.1.3 Customer-Employee relationship**

Previous studies have identified a social and interactive aspect of the shopping experiences (Jaakkola et al., 2015). Saxena et al. (2015) found that relationships between employees and customers have an important role in customers' shopping experience since the relationship mediates customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and customer retention. Roozen and Katidis (2019) agreed with these findings and said that customers' complaint handling influences consumers' perception of the retailer as well. Relationship with employees is identified to be an important part of the value perceived by customers (Saxena et al., 2015; Godson, 2009). According to Smith and Colgate (2014), the employee-customer interactions create values such as functional value (e.g. service timeliness) and hedonic value (e.g. relational bonds).

Employee-customer interactions seem to be important since they affect if customers perceive their shopping experiences as positive or negative. Fahy and Jobber (2015) stated that customers will be dissatisfied if they have a negative experience with store personnel. More than two-thirds of customers stop shopping at stores after a negative experience with the store's employees (Fahy and Jobber, 2015). Customers' positive or negative shopping experience do in turn affect the chance of being recommended to other customers. Therefore, employee service carries an important role when it comes to improving organizational performance through customer satisfaction and loyalty (Saxena et al., 2015).

Age is a factor that seems to have an impact on shopping experiences since customers' age has an influence on how much service they use. Younger customers are less experienced and therefore also seem to make some of their purchase decisions based on service provided by employees (Roozen & Katidis, 2019). Older consumers want to avoid uncertainty and do therefore rely on previous experiences of the retailer's service. If previous experiences are positive, older customers seem to show a higher loyalty to the company and its services (Roozen & Katidis, 2019).

Even if there are some differences in how younger and older customers use service, all generations think that retail variables such as service are important to some extent (Littrell et al., 2005).

In Table 1 below, the components of atmospherics, store environment and customer-employee relationship are summarized.

**Table 1**

*Summary of elements that influence shopping experience*

<b>Elements of shopping experience</b>	<b>Subcategory</b>	<b>Author</b>
<b>Atmospherics</b>	Colors	A1
	Music	A1
	Temperature	A1
	Air quality	A1
	Noise	A1
	Scents	A1
	Store space	A1
	Lightning	A2
<b>Store Environment</b>	Cleanliness	A3
	Shop layout	A3
	Product display	A3
	Store decor	A3
	Security	A2
	Opening hours	A2
<b>Customer-Employee relationship</b>	Customers' complaint handling	A4
	Service	A5

Author groups:

A1 - Davis (2013), Hart et al. (2007), Kim (2002), Roozen & Katidis (2019)

A2 - Hart et al. (2007)

A3 - Terblanche & Boshoff (2004), Hart et al. (2007)

A4 - Roozen & Katidis (2019)

A5 - Jaakkola et al. (2015), Saxena et al. (2015), Roozen & Katidis (2019), Smith & Colgate (2014)

## 2.2 Consumer value

Value is an important concept within marketing (Picot-Coupey et al., 2020) since it creates competitive advantages (Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2009). Shopping value

is identified as a prime outcome of a shopping experience and has an influential role on environmental elements in customers' shopping experience (Picot-Coupey et al., 2020). Previously, value was focused on product value and did therefore mostly involve quality and price. However, value does also include a return on the investment of time, effort and money (Kim, 2002). According to Kim (2002) and Kovács et al. (2014), value also involves a trade-off between what customers perceive (quality, benefits) and what customers sacrifice (price, time). The “give-get tradeoff” includes that customers evaluate value through perceived benefits and compare it with mental, physical and financial costs. The benefits and costs have then a positive or negative effect on consumer value (Yeh et al., 2016).

The value concepts' development over time shows that customers not only care about the pragmatic considerations but also about emotional aspects during the shopping experience (Kim et al., 2014). Sweeney and Soutar (2001) have identified four common customer values within a retail context, which are: emotional, social, functional and financial. Kim et al. (2011) then divided three of the values into smaller categories and suggested that there were six variations of consumer value. Firstly, emotional value was divided into aesthetics and playfulness. Secondly, social value was divided into social self-image expression and social relationship support. Lastly, functional value was divided into price utility and functional quality (Kim et al., 2011). Picot-Coupey et al. (2020) mentioned hedonic value and utilitarian value as two types of values within shopping value, which will be further discussed below. In this thesis we will focus on hedonic, utilitarian and emotional value since it seems that these values have been affected the most by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **2.2.1 Hedonic and Utilitarian values**

According to Davis and Hodges (2012), shopping value is an important part of a shopping experience since value is a prime result of consumption. There are two different values customers can perceive during a shopping experience, which are:

hedonic value and utilitarian value. Hedonic value is experience-based and affects customers' emotional worth, playfulness and sensory stimuli (Davis & Hodges, 2012; Kim et al., 2014; Huré et al., 2017). According to Cottet et al. (2006) and Picot-Coupey et al. (2020), hedonic value refers to shopping as the main aim of a shopping trip. In contrast, utilitarian value was defined as task-orientated (Kim et al., 2014; Huré et al., 2017) and non-emotional (Ainsworth & Foster, 2017; Picot-Coupey et al., 2020). The utilitarian value of a shopping experience is rather to reach a certain aim and complete a mission (Cottet et al., 2006; Picot-Coupey et al., 2020). Since utilitarian value is task-orientated, Davis and Hodges (2012) meant that utilitarian value also involves customers' work mentality. Cottet et al. (2006) argued that the higher hedonic value, the more customers perceive the store to be pleasurable. In addition, they also argued that utilitarian value increases customers' satisfaction (Cottet et al., 2006).

To add value in customers' shopping experience, previous research found that retailers could use utilitarian as well as hedonic means (Foster & McLelland, 2015). Elements of store atmospherics, such as noise and scents, are examples of hedonic means that create hedonic value (Foster & McLelland, 2015). Cottet et al. (2006) agreed that the stores' atmosphere affected hedonic value but also stressed that factors such as employee-customer interactions, availability of peripheral services and settings in as well as around the store had an effect. In addition, Cottet et al. (2006) also found that factors such as crowding and queues had a negative impact on hedonic value. Since hedonic value can also be seen to represent customers' positive emotional value perceived during a shopping experience, a shopping trip can represent psychological therapy (Ainsworth & Foster, 2017). Foster and McLelland (2015) agreed and meant that a comfortable and differentiated store environment leads to a higher hedonic value which influences customers' positive emotions and encourages them to interact with the environment, which is important as it creates value during a shopping experience.

To increase utilitarian value, it is favourable to satisfy customers functional, physical or economic needs (Ainsworth & Foster, 2017). According to Jeremy and Ainsworth (2016), retailers could use factors such as design cues, service quality and physical cues to help customers to fulfill those needs and to complete a shopping task, which in turn would increase utilitarian value (Ainsworth & Foster, 2017). Other factors that increase utilitarian value are product availability, access to product information and purchase efficiency (Cottet et al., 2006).

Previous research has found that hedonic value and utilitarian value do not need to be viewed as each other's opposites (Cottet et al., 2006; Jones et al., 2006). Cottet et al. (2006) argued that activities customers do during a shopping experience, such as completing a specific shopping task, which is normally viewed to generate utilitarian value, can also create hedonic value. In the same way, activities that are normally viewed to generate hedonic value can generate utilitarian value. Therefore, customers can perceive both hedonic value and utilitarian value during the same shopping experience (Cottet et al., 2006). Jones et al. (2006) agreed with this argument and stressed that both needs at a functional level and psychological level could be satisfied at the same time.

However, Jones et al. (2006) also pointed out that hedonic value was more related to satisfaction in the shopping context than the utilitarian value was. The reason for this was that satisfaction is connected to emotional responses perceived during consumption, which is related to hedonic value (Jones et al., 2006). Ainsworth and Foster (2017) agreed and meant that even if both values were important, hedonic value was more relevant in retailing nowadays as retailers were more focused on offering experience-based shopping to their customers (Ainsworth & Foster, 2017).

### **2.2.2 Emotional value**

Previous research found that a shopping experience stimulated consumers' emotional reactions (Machleit & Eroglu, 2000). The role of emotions is significant since emotional experience that an individual has will to a large extent affect an

individual's actions (Romani et al., 2012). It is important for businesses to understand what activates customers' emotions as well as what the consequences of these emotions are. It is also easier for companies to control customers' emotions (e.g. through retail environment, merchandising etc.) than to control the consequences of customers' emotions when they have already experienced them (Pham & Sun, 2019). Bagozzi et al. (1999) identified that elements of a physical store environment such as music, packages, brand names and so on. influence customers' emotional responses. Machleit and Eroglu (2000) also stated that store atmospherics and shopping environments influence consumers' emotions. Romani et al. (2012) agreed and argued how consumers' emotions depended not only on products and brands themselves, but also on the interaction between customers and personnel in the store. Consumers could develop both positive and negative emotions during their shopping experience (Romani et al., 2012).

As mentioned before, sensory stimuli affect consumers' five senses and evoke pleasant emotions like excitement and pleasure. Consumers can feel multi-sensory experience in the physical stores which in turn can evoke positive emotions (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Besides positive emotions, consumers can feel negative emotions such as anger and frustration during their shopping experience (Machleit & Eroglu, 2000). Some of the factors that can cause negative emotions are crowds and noise in the store (Machleit & Eroglu, 2000).

Furthermore, Kim and Sullivan (2019) argued that consumers expect more from a shopping experience than buying high-quality and low-price products. Previous research also showed that many consumers went shopping to satisfy their emotional needs (Kumar et al., 2008), since they are interested in getting emotional value (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Sweeney and Soutar (2001) defined emotional value as the benefit customers get by the feelings or affective states (e.g. enjoyment, pleasure) a product creates. Asshidin et al. (2015) added to the definition that the benefit customers get by experiencing something new or different also creates emotional



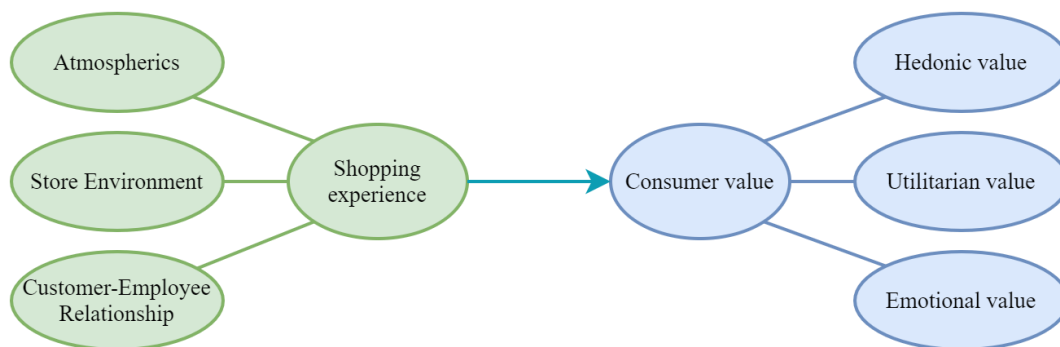
value. Later, Kim and Sullivan (2019) found that customers can get emotional value from a shopping experience through factors such as customer service, store atmospherics and entertaining experiences. In this thesis, customers' emotions, facilitated by the shopping experience, will be treated as emotional value since it is the value creation process we are interested in to explore.

## 2.3 Conceptual model

The theoretical framework was used as a base for the conceptual model. The purpose of the conceptual model was to show how all different concepts of the theoretical review are connected. The conceptual model involves the following concepts: shopping experience, atmospherics, store environment, customer-employee relationship, consumers value, hedonic value, utilitarian value and emotional value (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*The model of shopping experience's influence on consumer value*



*Note:* In this dissertation the conceptual model was analyzed in the Covid-19 pandemic context

Firstly, to the left, the conceptual model shows the three main factors that influence customers' shopping experience which are: atmospherics, store environment and customer-employee relationship. It is important to consider atmospherics as a significant factor that delivers shopping experience as it can affect customers'

senses in a positive or negative way (Davis, 2013). According to Terblanche and Boshoff (2004), the store environment helps retailers to create an enjoyable experience in the store since they facilitate customers' search for items and stimulate their shopping interest. Therefore, the store environment is an important influential factor on shopping experience. Furthermore, customers' perception of the shopping is influenced by interaction with store's employees. Interactions with employees will lead to whether customers will perceive the shopping experience as positive or negative.

Secondly, previous research has found that various factors in the shopping experience such as atmospherics, store environment and customer-employee relationship have, to some extent, an influence on the consumer value. Therefore, the relationship between shopping experience and consumer value as well as the shopping experience's direct effect on consumer value, is illustrated in the model. Thirdly, consumer value is divided into hedonic, utilitarian and emotional value, illustrated by the spheres to the right in the model. Hedonic value refers to customers' pleasure of the sensory stimuli and playfulness, created by the shopping experience itself (Davis & Hodges, 2012; Kim et al., 2014; Huré et al., 2017). Utilitarian value arises when the shopping experience facilitates a specific task or goal (Kim et al., 2014; Huré et al., 2017). Emotional value occurs when customers benefit from feelings or affective states, created by the product as well as the shopping experience (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). In addition, customers can perceive emotional value through customer service, store atmospherics and new experiences (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Since these values are connected to the retail context as well as the shopping experience and are likely to be influenced by the pandemic, it is important to consider these values in the model.

### 3. Methodology

The third chapter of this thesis aims to present the research methodology. At the beginning of this chapter, the theoretical method will be introduced by explaining the research philosophy and research approach. After that, the empirical method, which involves research design and research strategy, will be described. Furthermore, data collection as well as analysis of the collected data will be explained. Lastly, this study's trustworthiness and limitations will be discussed.

#### 3.1 Research philosophy

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), there are three main research philosophies within social science, which are: *positivism*, *realism* and *interpretivism*. Firstly, *positivism* is a philosophical direction that focuses on making generalizations through facts provided by observations. Secondly, *realism* focuses on how humans perceive the world and at the same time how they compare reality to an actual truth. Lastly, the focal point of *interpretivism* is to explain actions and relationships between people, as well as, the complex nature of the world (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, *interpretivism* is often used in qualitative studies that aims to explain and understand topics connected to social behavior (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The aim of this study is to explore and understand how customers' shopping experience has changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and how these changes have influenced consumers' value creation. It is important for our research to explore customers' perspective on the situation rather than discuss our own perspective. Therefore, the research philosophy called interpretivism was suitable for this thesis.

#### 3.2 Research approach

The research approach explains how the theory is related to the research. Bryman and Bell (2011) distinguished the *deductive* approach from *inductive* approach. The *deductive* approach is one of the research approaches where researchers use existing knowledge as a base for theories and hypotheses development. Researchers develop

theories by reviewing previous literature and thereafter focus on collecting data to test the theory. The *inductive* approach is the opposite of the *deductive* research approach. In the *inductive* approach, researchers use their findings as a base for theory development (Bryman & Bell, 2011). According to Lind (2014), there is one more research approach which is a combination of *deductive* and *inductive* approach, and it is the *abductive* approach. An *abductive* research approach consists of a clear theoretical ground, which is related to *deductive* approach. However, the theory is incorporated in the empirical material of the study and it can be modified during empirical observations, which is associated with *inductive* approach (Lind, 2014).

Since the purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between shopping experience and consumer value in time of the global pandemic, the *deductive* research approach seemed to be the most appropriate to use. In this research, the theories were built on the concepts and theories that were already explored in the previous research and literature (Bryman & Bell, 2011). At the beginning of the research process, the previous research about shopping experience and consumer value have been analyzed. The theoretical framework was a base for data collection since the theoretical framework was used to formulate questions for data gathering (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The data for this thesis was collected through focus groups.

### **3.3 Research design & strategy**

Bryman and Bell (2011) defined research strategy as an orientation for conducting business research. Research strategy can be qualitative or quantitative. According to Denscombe (2018), a quantitative research strategy uses numbers as an analyzing tool and it is associated with statistical results that can be generalized. In contrast, a qualitative research strategy uses words or images as an analyzing tool and the research involves only a limited number of respondents. A qualitative research strategy is used when the purpose of the study is to give a detailed explanation of a phenomenon (Denscombe, 2018). Since this research aims to explore how Covid-

19 pandemic has influenced customers' shopping experience in fashion stores and which factors facilitate customers' value creation, a qualitative research strategy was used. It is appropriate to use a qualitative research strategy as the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the customers' perception of Covid-19 pandemic influence on shopping experience and how this in turn influences consumers' value.

### **3.4 Data collection**

As mentioned before, a qualitative research approach was used. This approach allowed us to get a deeper understanding and a wider perspective on the studied subject (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The qualitative method includes primary data which consists of new data (Saunders et al., 2009). In this thesis the primary data was collected through focus group interviews. The method for data collection will be presented below.

#### **3.4.1 Focus group interviews**

Focus group interview is one of many methods that can be used to collect qualitative data. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), a focus group is a form of interviews that involves several participants. The focus group method enables the researcher to investigate why participants feel in a certain way. Participants are having in-depth discussions about a certain topic which enables the researcher to get an insight into the logic behind participants thoughts (Denscombe, 2018). Besides the fact that the participants have an opportunity to share their own opinions, the focus group method also creates an opportunity for participants to react to other people's opinions. In focus group interviews, researchers have a role of moderators which means that they guide the discussion instead of having an active part in it (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Denscombe (2018) argued that discussions in focus groups can lead to people agreeing with each other and in this way sharing common aspects. In contrast, Denscombe (2018) also claimed that the discussions can show differences in

participants' opinions. In other words, focus groups help the researcher to explore various kinds of opinions within a specific topic (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

As mentioned before, focus group interviews are a popular method for collecting data in qualitative research. However, there are some limitations that need to be addressed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Firstly, researchers have less control in focus group interviews compared to individual interviews since the focus group interviews enable participants to discuss different topics freely. Bryman and Bell (2011) pointed out that this disadvantage can be interpreted as an advantage as well. Researchers that do not control discussion and influence what participants say are more objective when collecting and analyzing data. Secondly, since an extensive amount of data can be collected during focus group interviews, it can be difficult to analyze it. It is also harder to transcribe data and distinguish which participant is saying what. To manage this issue, the focus group interviews were recorded. Furthermore, the empirical data was coded which facilitated the analysis process.

Thirdly, it is not easy to organize focus group interviews and ensure that all invited participants will show up on the scheduled time. In our research, all participants that were engaged in focus group interviews did show up on time. However, two participants informed us on the scheduled day that they could not participate in the discussion. Since it was difficult to find new participants at such short notice, we contacted some students because it was easier to reach them.

Fourthly, Bryman and Bell (2011) addressed group effects as another limitation of focus group interviews. Some participants may speak more during the discussion while other participants could be more reluctant to talk. However, researchers could encourage participants who do not speak to present their point of view. As moderators, we asked additional questions when we noticed that some participants did not present their point of view. Finally, participants may feel uncomfortable during focus group interviews because of the presence of other participants

(Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, we started the focus group discussion with warm up questions where every participant introduced themselves.

There are a variety of questions that need to be considered when using the focus group method. Firstly, the researcher needs to decide how many focus groups to use. Time and cost are two factors that are often limited in the research process. Therefore, they need to be considered when deciding the number of focus groups (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since this research was a part of our bachelor's thesis, we had no budget or opportunity to finance it. Therefore, one could argue that the cost aspect was that we needed to manage the focus groups on our own. Furthermore, the time aspect needed to be handled as we had a schedule and strict deadlines that needed to be followed. With the cost and time limitations in mind, we decided to use three focus groups. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the number of focus groups is enough when the participants' thoughts and opinions, in each group, start to be repeated. Since no new insights occurred during the last focus group, we decided that three focus groups were enough.

Secondly, the researcher needs to determine the number of participants that is going to be involved in each focus group. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), researchers should not involve too many participants since the material will be too extensive. Denscombe (2018) argued that the ideal number of participants is between six to ten individuals. To collect sufficient data, we decided that the three focus groups should include four to seven participants in each group. Since it is more difficult for participants to discuss with each other online, we decided to organize smaller focus groups. The chosen number of participants created an opportunity for the participants to discuss and share opinions during the focus group meeting. However, the number of participants and the provided material was not too big for us to manage.

Thirdly, the researcher needs to decide where, as well as, when the focus groups meeting should take place. There are two ways to manage focus groups: in person

or online (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since it would be less challenging for the participants to interact during a focus group meeting in person, this method would be preferable. However, because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the focus groups meetings had to be online through the digital platform Zoom. Since the participants let all express their opinion, and since no participant had any practical difficulties using Zoom, the meetings could be managed well through the digital platform.

Since the focus group interviews for our study were managed online, it was important to address advantages as well as disadvantages of online focus groups. Bryman and Bell (2011) mentioned that online focus groups are cheaper to conduct than face-to-face interviews. An important advantage of online focus groups is that this method is usually more time-consuming. Furthermore, participants who are introverts are more comfortable to discuss with other participants online rather than discussing in person. The main reason why online focus groups were used for this study is the ongoing pandemic and not the advantages of online focus groups that Bryman and Bell (2011) presented.

One disadvantage of online focus groups is that it is more difficult for the interviewer to connect with participants online (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To overcome this, we introduced ourselves first and then asked participants to do the same. Besides that, we asked some introductory questions (see Appendix A) in order to create a more comfortable atmosphere. Sometimes participants need to download a specific software on their computer in order to participate in online focus groups, which is also a disadvantage of this method. However, in our study participants were not required to download any software and they only needed the internet access. It is also more difficult to organize group exercises and discussion online (Bryman & Bell, 2011).



### 3.4.2 Participant selection

The aim of this research was to explore how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced customers' shopping experience in fashion stores and how factors such as atmospherics, store environment and customer-employee relationship affected consumer value. In order to participate in the focus groups, all participants needed to meet both criteria listed in Table 2. Both criteria were developed in order to ensure that the customers participating in the data collection would be able to participate in a reflexive discussion on the subject. If participants had not visited a fashion store during the last two months or made a purchase in the last six months, they would not have been able to discuss the shopping experience fashion stores delivered and the consumer value the customers perceived during the pandemic. Three focus groups, with participants fulfilling the criteria, were conducted.

**Table 2**

*Participant criteria for all focus groups*

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Criteria 1 - Visited a physical fashion store at least once in the last two months

Criteria 2 - Made a purchase in a physical fashion store in the last six months

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When it comes to participant selection, the participants were found through convenience selection. A convenience selection is defined as: “A convenience sample is one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility.” Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 190). At first, we tried to find participants by contacting stores that have a close relationship to its customers. Our thought was that we could collaborate with stores by exchanging practical research findings with them through customers that were willing to participate. However, we did not manage to get in touch with any store that wanted to cooperate. As an alternative, we decided to find participants by using our networks, such as school and work. Firstly, invitations were sent out through our school mail to students. Secondly, invitations were sent out via our personal mail to colleagues who work in a fashion store and a public

sector. In the invitations, both criteria for participation were clearly stated. In this way, we could ensure that the participants were suitable to discuss questions about the subject.

The use of a convenience sample in a study has several benefits. Firstly, the researchers find participants nearby who have knowledge and experience in the research topics. Therefore, it is cheap and time efficient to use the convenience sample method to find participants (Denscombe, 2018). Secondly, the researchers who use a convenience sample get the opportunity to choose the most favorable selection of participants. However, the method also has some disadvantages. Firstly, the method can lead to the consequence called sampling bias since participants are not randomly chosen. Secondly, there is a risk that the findings of the research do not represent the studied population since the researchers may have chosen participants that they know will support their conclusion. However, Denscombe (2018) argued that it is not necessary to have a representative sample in a qualitative study since the researchers get an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of a smaller sample, as well as, to investigate unexplored research areas (Denscombe, 2018).

All three groups included customers with different ages and different occupations. The participant selection also consisted of mixed genders, although it was not possible to distribute equally between the groups. In Table 3 below, each focus group participant's age, gender and occupation are presented. The focus groups varied in sizes. One of the groups included four participants while the two other groups included seven participants. In total, seventeen people participated.

**Table 3***Focus group participants*

<b>Focus groups</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
<b>Group 1</b> 2021-05-03 (54 minutes)	A	27	Female	Student
	B	23	Female	Student
	C	24	Female	Student
	D	29	Female	Student
	E	22	Female	Student
	F	56	Female	Employee
<b>Group 2</b> 2021-05-04 (1 hour and 3 minutes)	G	25	Female	Employee
	H	28	Female	Employee
	I	24	Female	Employee
	J	21	Male	Student
	K	43	Female	Employee
	L	22	Male	Student
<b>Group 3</b> 2021-05-04 (53 minutes)	M	21	Female	Employee
	N	24	Male	Student
	O	24	Male	Student
	P	24	Male	Student
	Q	24	Male	Employee

**3.4.3 Focus groups guide**

When the focus group interviews started, participants were given practical information regarding the recording of the discussion. The participants were informed by email as well as during the focus groups that their answers would be anonymized in our study, and their identities protected. After that, the purpose of the study and focus group interviews were presented. The participants were asked to give their consent for the recording of the discussion. Furthermore, we explained our role as moderators to the participants. The focus group discussions involved two phases (see Appendix A). At the beginning of phase one, the participants were asked to present their name, age and occupation. They were also asked to tell us about their favourite fashion store and purchase in the past six months. The moderators answered these questions first in order to create a more comfortable atmosphere for the participants.

As mentioned before, the participants involved in focus group discussions often feel uncomfortable. Therefore, we used an introductory phase to minimize discomfort. After these introductory questions, the main part of phase one, which consisted of three different exercises, started. The aim of these exercises was to encourage participants to discuss presented topics with each other. The purpose of case one was to see if participants could come up with a mutual proposal about factors that contribute to their shopping experience. In the second exercise, the participants were asked if they purchased more in physical or online fashion stores, and asked to discuss their reasons for their chosen alternative with the other participants. The third exercise aimed to explore how participants react emotionally to the different pictures. Firstly, we asked participants to consider the pandemic and to discuss their feelings. Secondly, they were asked to reflect upon the feelings the pictures would evoke before the pandemic and compare it to the feelings the pictures would evoke during the pandemic. In that way, the comparison between pre-pandemic and pandemic effects on consumer value could be explored.

The second phase consisted of three reflectional questions. The questions were more explicitly linked to our conceptual model and were asked in order to explore how the Covid-19 pandemic had influenced customers' shopping experience in fashion stores. The participants were also asked to motivate and discuss their answers with each other. The first question aimed to explore why customers go to physical fashion stores. They were also asked to compare if these reasons were different in the pandemic and pre-pandemic period. The purpose of the second question was to compare customers' shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic with their shopping experience before the pandemic outbreak. The last question in phase two aimed to investigate customers' perspective on the demand for shopping experience in the future and after the Covid-19 pandemic. After that, we thanked participants for their commitment and contribution to our study. The participants were also informed that they could contact us if they had any questions or additional comments. Furthermore, the participants that were interested in the

result of our study were asked to send us their email. The purpose of each exercise and question is explained in Appendix B.

### **3.5 Data analysis**

The data analysis process is complex in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The first problem is that qualitative research involves a huge amount of data which makes it problematic to analyze. The second problem is that it is not clearly defined how the data in qualitative studies should be analyzed. The use of a thematic analysis is characteristic for qualitative studies (Bryman & Bell, 2011). When researchers use a thematic analysis approach, they focus on identifying different themes in the data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In this dissertation, the thematic analysis approach was used.

The first step of the data analysis process involved listening to the focus groups records and reading the transcriptions. The process of transcription took around 10 hours and consisted of 68 pages. The second step involved abductive coding of the data since it consisted of both deductive and inductive coding. The first step of the coding was based on our conceptual model (see Figure 1) to facilitate classifying of the factors that influence shopping experience and consumer value. Therefore, the data was coded into two categories which were shopping experience and consumer value. The second round of the coding consisted of identifying themes in the coded data. The data was categorized into six codes: atmospherics, store environment, customer-employee relationship, utilitarian value, hedonic value and emotional value. Important material was connected to some elements from the conceptual model. However, some key sentences that could not be linked to any element presented in the conceptual model were categorized in an added category.

### **3.6 Trustworthiness**

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the trustworthiness of a qualitative study can be examined with the help of four distinct criteria which are: credibility,

transferability, dependability and confirmability. The authors defined credibility as an aspect that evaluates how believable the research's findings are. It can be argued that the findings of this study are credible. The focus group interviews consisted of three exercises and several open-ended questions, which allowed participants to express their own point of view and present their attitudes. Furthermore, as moderators, we did not influence the participants' opinions since we only had a role to guide discussion and ensure that every participant was engaged in the discussion. Transferability examines whether the findings of the study can be applicable to other contexts. This criterion has not been met. Since we conducted a qualitative study that involved seventeen participants, it is difficult to generalize the research's results.

Dependability is also associated with the applicability of the study, but dependability evaluates whether the findings of the study can be applied at other times. This criterion is met if the researchers "adopt an 'auditing' approach." Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 398). This study fulfills criterion dependability as complete data, involving participants selection, focus groups transcription and data analysis, was saved online. Finally, confirmability is associated with objectivity of the study. Confirmability is a criterion that measures if researchers included their personal values in their study or not (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The data was examined objectively without involvement of our personal values and opinions, which is why this criterion is met.

### **3.7 Limitations**

Two limitations that could affect the transferability and credibility of this study were found. Firstly, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic affected the ability to organize gathering of qualitative data since the pandemic made it difficult to get in contact with individuals that wanted to participate. Because of the difficulties to get in contact with participants, all three focus groups had an uneven distribution of gender, which can affect the transferability. However, all three groups did together

have a variety of gender and age, which increased the transferability. Secondly, the use of a convenience sample risk to exclude participants with experiences, opinions and key insights about the subject. Therefore, the convenience sample method challenges the credibility in this study. However, there is no way to guarantee precision of data in qualitative research. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), researchers can increase the study's credibility by using triangulation, which means that researchers avoid intrinsic biases by using various sources of data and several theoretical aspects. In this research, numerous theoretical aspects were used to explore and understand the shopping experience and the consumer values. In addition, several focus groups were conducted in order to increase the sources of data and to be able to compare the results.

## 4. Findings and Analysis

In the fourth chapter, the findings of the focus group interviews will be presented. Since the purpose of this thesis is to explore customers' perspective on the shopping experience and customers' value during the Covid-19 pandemic, the findings are the base for further discussion. In this section, customers' perspective on each element of the conceptual model, which was presented in chapter two, will be discussed. Firstly, customers' opinions on the shopping experience and factors that influence shopping experience will be introduced. Secondly, customers' thoughts about how shopping in physical stores facilitates value creation will be presented.

### 4.1 Shopping experience

Participants had discussed the importance of atmospherics, store environment and customer-employee relationship as well as how these elements had been influenced by the pandemic. When participants were asked to compare shopping experience before the pandemic and during the pandemic, the majority of participants argued how they did not notice considerable changes in the fashion stores. However, some participants discussed that the store environment has changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic. One participant explained:

What I come up with spontaneously at once are the queues. Before, you stood very tight when standing in the line. But now, it is really marked out in all stores and people keep their distance. And that is good. So, I think that's a huge difference. - Participant D

Furthermore, the limited number of customers in fashion stores was also discussed as a factor that has changed and that has an effect on the shopping experience which will be further discussed below. Another change that affects customers' experience in the fashion store is their relationship with the sales personnel. The majority of participants agreed that employees did not try to sell clothes, give recommendations and ask as many questions as they did before the pandemic.

The participants' thoughts about how important the shopping experience will be in the future also differed. Some of the participants thought that the experience in



physical fashion stores will be very important in the future. Participant D said “*It is the interaction you want. You can buy things online, but you experience shopping better in physical stores, I think [...]*”. Participant D continued “[...]But we talked before about inspiration and stuff. I think maybe they, as physical stores, will have a role to inspire and to offer an inspiring environment.”. Participant A explained that she used to book a personal shopper before the Covid-19 pandemic started. Since the use of a personal shopper created a timesaving shopping experience of high quality with good service, she believed that this type of shopping experience will be a way to attract customers to physical stores in the future. Participant C stressed the importance of creating a really special shopping experience in the future that is different from the one you experience online. She mentioned atmospheric factors such as smell and music as important parts in the creation of a differentiated shopping experience.

Furthermore, the participants discussed that more of the shopping will be done online. However, they still believed that the shopping experience will remain important but that there will be some changes. Participant I believed that the shopping experience in fashion stores will change to become more or less a showroom where the stores have an assortment that they show and that you can try, but which you then order to your home instead. Participant H agreed and explained that she thought this change would occur regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic, because of the digitalization. Some participants in this focus group also thought that factors such as plexiglass, hand sanitizers and so on, would become new factors in the shopping experience’s environment. However, some of the participants also discussed that physical stores, and thus the shopping experience in physical fashion stores today, would disappear in the future, not just because of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also because of the digitalization.

Moreover, the participants were asked to decide which factors contributed to an enjoyable shopping experience in the fashion stores during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Several participants agreed that the following factors are important in fashion stores: organization, limited number of customers, and cleanliness. Furthermore, some participants explained that they valued good customer service and helpful sales personnel. In contrast, few participants discussed that they had been avoiding contact with employees in fashion stores since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings as well as the participants' discussions about three factors: atmospherics, store environment and customer-employee relationship will be presented below.

#### **4.1.1 Atmospherics**

When the participants were asked to explain which factors in the fashion store affected their shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of the participants did not mention music, scents, lightning and colors as important factors. However, participant C explained that music and scent contributed to a positive shopping experience. Some participants agreed on the importance of music in the fashion stores. Even though atmospherics has not been discussed as a key factor in a pleasurable shopping experience, several participants pointed out that the main reason why they visit fashion stores was to touch clothes. The participants believed that it is important to evaluate the quality of the clothes. Furthermore, they wanted to feel what type of material was used to create the product. Since the pandemic started, the possibility to touch and feel products was, for many participants, the reason to visit fashion stores. Participant Q stated *“When I buy clothes, I often want to shop in physical stores because I want to feel the material and try it on”*.

As mentioned above, researchers found that atmospherics involve several factors such as store space, lightning (Hart et al., 2007), colors, music, temperature, air quality, noise and scents, that are important since they create a good shopping experience (Davis, 2013; Hart et al., 2017; Kim, 2002; Roozen & Katidis, 2019).

However, the participants in this research only discussed three of them, which is illustrated together with participant statements in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Atmospherics - Focus group interviews*

Theme	Subcategory	Illustrative example
Atmospherics	Music Scent	“And also that they need to start thinking more about just the type of smell and music because it is something that affects experience a lot.”
	Store space	“I also think it is almost connected to the store space that I wrote about. When you go into a store, you want to have enough space so that you can move, it must not be too tight.”

#### 4.1.2 Store environment

According to Terblanche and Boshoff (2004), the store environment is an important factor that can contribute to a pleasurable shopping experience. All participants agreed on the importance of the store environment when shopping in fashion stores during the Covid-19 pandemic. Several participants discussed that shop layout, product display and organization of the store were the key factors that contribute to an enjoyable shopping experience. One participant explained:

I wrote that I prefer that it is clearly marked out where the clothes are, that it is organized, so that you can see directly where you should go in the store if you are looking for something specific. - Participant J

Participant C mentioned that it is more important that the store was organized than that the employees were helpful since she would not visit an unorganized store. When it comes to product display, several participants discussed that too many clothes on the shelves in the store evoked negative emotions and led to a negative perception of the store environment. Participant A explained that there must be harmony between the exposed clothes in fashion stores. Many participants agreed

that organized stores facilitated their shopping process since they needed less time to find products.

Several participants mentioned that the space in fashion stores should be large. Many participants agreed that they did not prefer when the store space was limited as well as when there were too many customers in fashion stores. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, participants thought that these criteria were more important than the other ones. Participant A argued: *“I think you want to be able to keep your distance from people. And you do not want to be in the store with a lot of people either[...].”* Furthermore, participant D agreed with participant A and stated:

When you go into a store, you want to be able to move. It must not be too crowded. So that there is order and that there is plenty of space so that you can move even if there are other people who go and look at the same clothes, so I want to somehow be able to stay and look at mine and not have to be careful. Especially now in Covid, pandemic time. - Participant D

The majority of participants acknowledged the cleanliness of stores as an important factor during the Covid-19 pandemic. Several participants mentioned that they would not at all visit physical fashion stores if they were not clean. Therefore, they believed that cleanliness of the store could affect their perception of the store environment to a huge extent. Participants were shown a picture of the unorganized and unclean fashion store where there were many clothes on the shelves and on the floor. Furthermore, they discussed that a store environment like that one in the shown picture would contribute to a negative shopping experience, both in the pre-pandemic and pandemic period.

The participants also discussed that the use of plexiglass at cash registers, the availability of hand sanitizers in the fashion stores were the factors that had changed due to the pandemic. Most participants thought that these changes influenced their shopping experience positively. They believed that the use of plexiglass and hand sanitizers minimized the spread of coronavirus and made their shopping experience in fashion stores safe. Some participants mentioned that they would prefer if fashion

stores continued having them after the pandemic as well. Although the use of hand sanitizers and plexiglass at cash registers in fashion stores have had a positive effect on customers' shopping experience, there are some participants that experienced these changes negatively. In contrast to participant's M opinion participant D noticed:

Then I think of plexiglass protection that they have at the checkouts as well. I think it feels much more, kind of formal, like being at a bank or the hospital. It is like a lot, it is getting a little more boring. Although I understand the purpose, that it protects more from the spread of infection, I think it is more boring than it was before. It feels more like you could have contact easier before the plexiglass protection than now. - Participant D

Previous research has found that important factors of the store environment were identified as: security, opening hours (Hart et al., 2007), cleanliness, shop layout, product display and store decor (Terblanche & Boshoff, 2004; Hart et al., 2007). However, only four factors of the store environment were discussed by the participants in this study. In Table 5 below, examples of statements connected to these four factors of the store environment are illustrated.

**Table 5**

*Store environment - Focus group interviews*

Theme	Subcategory	Illustrative example
<b>Store environment</b>	Organization of the store	"I prefer that it is clearly marked out how the clothes are organized, so that you can see directly where to go."
	Shop layout	"So I want it to be so nice, otherwise I do not go in."
	Product display	"I think it is much easier in a physical store to get an understanding for what type of clothes there is and to be inspired by the mannequins and how they kind of put it up."
	Cleanliness	"I wrote that eh, few customers in the store provide a good shopping experience for me and that it is clean and tidy as many participants said."

### 4.1.3 Customer-employee relationship

According to Saxena et al. (2015), the customer-employee relationship is important in the shopping experience since it facilitates customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and customer retention. Many participants argued that customer-employee relationship was not the key factor that influenced their experience in fashion stores during the Covid-19 pandemic. Answering the question about how important customer-employee relationship is, one participant said:

It was probably more important to me before the pandemic than it is now. Because now if I go into a store, I usually know what I want even before I go in. I do not want to be in the store for too long as I did before, but when I go to a physical store today, I already know what I want and what I'm after. Of course, they should be nice when you come to the checkout, but I do not need as much help either. I want to avoid as much contact as possible. - Participant B

Many participants agreed with participant B regarding the role of employees in fashion stores nowadays. Participant B pointed out that customers did not have the same interaction with employees anymore as they had had before. According to participant C, it is also more difficult to communicate with employees in the fashion stores due to the use of plexiglass at cash registers. Participants discussed that the customer-employee relationships became more impersonal. Furthermore, some participants explained how they appreciated helpful employees who could make the shopping process easier. They emphasized the importance of employees who treated customers in a good way and were willing to help them quickly find what they needed, in the time of the global pandemic. Participant N explained that before the pandemic some employees had tried to sell products regardless of customers' willingness to purchase it, and that this phenomenon had changed which actually made participant's shopping experience more enjoyable.

According to Saxena et al. (2015), the customer service provided by the employees of stores is important when creating customer satisfaction and a good shopping experience, which was confirmed by the findings. Roozen and Katidis (2019) argued also that complaint handling is important since it affects consumers' perception of the retailer. However, complaint handling was not discussed by the

participants. A new subcategory of customer-employee relationship was found, and it was named informed sales personnel. The participants meant that the employees should not try to sell clothes too aggressively during the pandemic. In Table 6 below, illustrative examples of statements related to customer-employee relationship are presented.

**Table 6**

*Customer-employee relationship - Focus group interviews*

Theme	Subcategory	Illustrative example
<b>Customer-employee relationship</b>	Service	“Good service, I wrote that, something like that, eh meet staff who treats you well so that you can get help quickly instead of getting stuck in areas.”
	Informed sales personnel	“And then that with good service has a bit to do with knowledgeable and honest staff and that the staff should not be too aggressive.”

## 4.2 Consumer value

All participants in the focus groups have in some way touched upon and indirectly talked about hedonic, utilitarian and emotional value. Since consumer value is a difficult topic to discuss for participants who are not familiar with the topic and its meaning, we have tried to approach the topic in another way. The participants were asked questions about the shopping experience and they have unconsciously discussed the three different values in different situations and contexts. Many participants seemed to have experienced all three values during shopping experiences. However, there were differences between the participants in which situations the values were perceived. Furthermore, some participants explained that they, before the pandemic, used to perceive hedonic value while shopping in physical fashion stores. However, the participants also explained that they perceived utilitarian value more often during a shopping experience since the

pandemic started. The discussions about the different values will be presented more in detail below.

#### **4.2.1 Hedonic/Utilitarian value**

According to Davis and Hodges (2012), hedonic and utilitarian value are important part of the shopping experience since consumer value it is the primary result of customers' consumption. As mentioned above, the participants have talked about those values indirectly. When we asked the participants in all three focus groups about the reasons why they visited fashion stores during the pandemic, some participants explained it was because they needed to buy something fast or if they needed to buy a specific product. Participant B explained *"It is if you really need something."* Several participants agreed to the explanation or stated something similar. Participant F said *"I agree. And what I also am not doing anymore is probably the implus thing when you just go into the store or something. You are more determined."* Another participant, I, added a more specific reason to visit fashion stores *"Another reason is, when I think about it, is to buy a gift. Eh, that is something I would like to see before I buy a gift for someone else. Ehm and just feel and see what is there [in the store]"*. Since these statements are connected to task-orientation, which according to Kim et al (2014) and Huré et al (2017) is a part of utilitarian value, it could be argued that the statement are connected to utilitarian value.

The ability to touch, feel and try products was also discussed by the participants as an important reason to visit physical fashion stores during the pandemic. Participant D said *"Either you need something quickly or if I need to be able to feel something or try something and know if I want it."* The majority of participants stated something similar to participant D. Participant M also stressed the importance of just seeing the products *"[...]so, I do not know, it just feels like you get a better idea of seeing a garment in real life than when you see it online, as well."* Since several researchers found that the experience itself is a part of hedonic value (Davis &



Hodges, 2012; Kim et al., 2014; Huré et al., 2017), it can be argued that those statements are related to hedonic value.

When the participants were asked to compare their reasons for going shopping in physical fashion stores before the pandemic and during the pandemic, it turned out that the participants had different reasons. As mentioned above, some of the participants have been visiting physical fashion stores during the pandemic to buy a specific product, which is connected to utilitarian value. When those participants compared their reasons, they argued that they were visiting stores for the same reasons before and during the pandemic.

Participant Q added that if he wanted to look around, he would be able to do it online as well. However, some of the participants explained that their reasons to visit physical fashion stores were different before the pandemic. Participant O said *“You are probably more focused on what to shop compared to before when you did it [shopping] just for fun.”*. One participant added a new reason to visit physical fashion stores before the pandemic, she explained:

Mmm. For me, I would also say that it is to get, or before the pandemic, it was also to get inspiration. I think, in a way, that it is much easier in a physical store to get a feeling for the type of clothes and be inspired by the mannequins and how they kind of set it up [...]  
- Participant D

These statements indicate that some of the participants visited physical fashion stores for the experience, which is connected to hedonic value.

While comparing reasons to visit physical fashion stores before and during the pandemic, a third reason was discussed by the participants, which was socialization.

One participant stated:

Before, I could have had a whim and just ‘I should go to town to shop a bit. Or if you are going to meet a friend or just sometimes it is fun to go and feel and squeeze and to see what it looks like in reality. Now it has been forgotten. - Participant A

Participant B added *“I agree. Before, it was more like you said, participant A, it was like a social activity. And you no longer do that.”*. Participant H, said that she nowadays rarely went to a physical fashion store by herself. She explained that she was often an accompaniment to a colleague who was going to buy something, and then she bought something for herself.

When we asked the participants if they had been shopping more online or in physical fashion stores since the pandemic began, the majority of participants said that they had been shopping more online. However, the participants wanted to make clear that they did not shop more online, but rather that they shopped less in physical fashion stores, because of the pandemic. Related to this question, participant C stressed the importance of the hedonic value physical stores facilitated in customers’ value creation *“I personally do not think it is as fun to order online. Entering a store, I think is a pleasure in itself [...]”*. Participant P was the one saying he was shopping more in physical stores. However, he explained *“I would say it’s 50 - 50 for me. I can still appreciate going out and walking a bit, either in town or at the mall.”*. Participant A did once again stress the social meaning of a shopping experience:

Before the pandemic, even though I shopped a lot online, it was a way to be social. You went shopping with friends. It became an activity and an opportunity to hang out and not just for the shopping itself. Now you do not hang out with so many. So, there are few times that I have been to the store to shop alone. Then I sit at home myself and shop. The social interaction in going to physical stores is lost and that is why I shop online. - Participant A

Participant D mentioned that a visit to a physical store before the Covid-19’s outbreak was seen to be something fun and experience-based, which is connected to hedonic value. She also said that shopping nowadays was done online and when she needed something special, which is related to utilitarian value.

In Table 7, statements connected to utilitarian and hedonic values are summarized.

**Table 7***Hedonic and Utilitarian value - Focus group interviews*

Theme	Description of theme	Illustrative example
Utilitarian value	Task-orientation	“It is if you really need something.”
Hedonic value	Sensory experience	“...So, I do not know, it just feels like you get a better idea of seeing a garment in real life than when you see it online, as well.”
	Experience	“...Entering a store, I think is a pleasure in itself...”

#### 4.2.2 Emotional value

When the participants were shown a picture of a very messy store, they had strong emotional reactions. Words such as stress, irritation, anxiety, chaos and disgust, were used by all three focus groups. When we asked the participants why they got these feelings, the majority answered that it was because the store was messy. Participant C said “*Because it is messy. I had never walked into a store that looked like this.*”. The participants also explained that another factor that created these feelings was because it was crowded and that it was impossible to keep distance between each other. Most participants argued that they would have the same feelings even if the picture was before the pandemic. However, some participants argued that their feelings connected to the crowding would be different. Participant H said “*I probably had not cared that it was crowded or something like that before the pandemic. Eh, but when it comes to space, I would probably not have cared.*”.

The second picture we showed to the participants represented a customer who had her purchased clothes handed over by the shop assistant by hand. Both the employee and the customer were smiling in the picture. This picture created a variety of emotions for the participants. Emotions such as good service, nice, and happiness, were used by the participants. However, some participants also used words such as crowdy, irresponsible and no distance. One participant said:

Yes, I wrote that it looks nice. And I think, because I'm not afraid of getting infected and because I go to a physical store when I'm not sick or have any symptoms, I think it feels nice. I miss it. I miss being able to go and shop in that way. I kind of miss contact with people and that she kind of looks happy. It feels wonderful, I miss it. - Participant D

Another participant, F, explained that she had difficulties in getting used to the thinking of keeping distance, so she only wrote positive words. But when participant F saw the words about keeping distance, she felt it did matter. In contrast, participant B said “*During the pandemic, it is a bit irresponsible perhaps or ignorant of those who work there to stand so close to customers [...]*”. Participant E said something similar to participant B and added that she felt stressed when they were standing so close to each other, with the pandemic in mind.

The third picture represented a store with many visitors. This picture created mostly negative emotions among the participants. Emotions such as anxiety, stress, irresponsible, crowded, irritation, insecure, were used by the participants. Some participants explained that they would have the same feelings whether it was the Covid-19 pandemic or not. However, the emotions they felt were even stronger because of the pandemic. Some participants explained that before the pandemic, they would have entered the store to buy something fast, but that it was not an option during the pandemic. Participant J said “*It is perhaps a Swedish move, that you would have preferred to not enter the store before the pandemic as well. Eh but considering the circumstances, it is more uncomfortable to go in there now anyway [...]*”. Participant J continued to explain that he would feel stressed with many visitors in stores nowadays, which would not be the case before the pandemic. Participant Q said that he felt angry and annoyed when he saw many people in a store during the pandemic. He continued to explain that it was provocative when others did not care, while others did so much to prevent the virus from spreading. All participants said something similar to participant J and Q. However, three participants disagreed that the feelings were the same before and during the pandemic. The three participants meant that words that would have been used

before the pandemic would be, for example, popular store and regular shopping trip.

Sweeney and Soutar (2001) explained that the benefit customers get from feelings or affective states created by the experience, is emotional value. Asshindin et al. (2015) added to the explanation by arguing that new experiences also create emotional value. The participants in this thesis both discussed emotions connected to experiences and new experiences, which is illustrated in Table 8.

**Table 8**

Emotional Value - Focus group interviews

Theme	Subcategory	Illustrative example
<b>Emotional value</b>	Positive emotions	“Yes, I wrote that it looks nice. And I think, because I’m not afraid of getting infected and because I go to a physical store when I’m not sick or have any symptoms, I think it feels nice. I miss it...”
	Negative emotions	“Because it is messy. I had never walked into a store that looked like this.”
	New experiences	“And also that they are starting to think more about just the type of smell and music because it is something that does a lot with experience that they may not think so much about today. I feel that, if you go into Rituals, it smells good. I do not feel the same smell in H&M.”

## 5. Analysis and discussion

In this chapter, the three different types of customers, based on this thesis's findings, will be presented. Since similarities and differences between interviewed customers were found in the findings, three different types of customers depending on how they perceived shopping experience in fashion stores during the Covid-19 pandemic were recognized: *Determinant*, *Sensory-oriented* and *Adaptable*. In this chapter, the presented topology also will be linked to the theories that were used in this thesis.

### 5.1 Typology of customers

Related to our research question, the findings revealed that customers thought that the shopping experience had been changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Because of the ability to recognize some indistinguishable as well as distinguishable characteristics between customers and how they have perceived the shopping experience, a typology of three different customers could be created. These three types are: *determinant* customers, *sensory-oriented* customers and *adaptable* customers. The typology will be used in order to facilitate the discussion and answer the research question about how different customers perceived different factors of the shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each type of consumer will be discussed in detail below.

### 5.2 Determinant customers

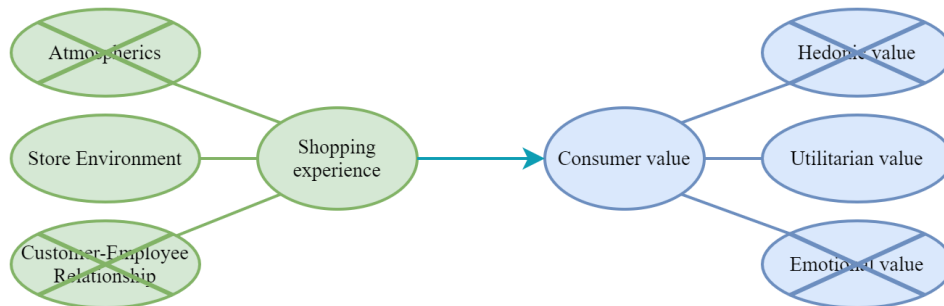
The *Determinant* customers are those who are afraid of the Covid-19 pandemic and visit fashion stores only when they need to buy something specific. Furthermore, when *determinant* customers went to fashion stores during the Covid-19 pandemic, they wanted to stay as little as possible. According to Terblanche and Boshoff (2004), store cleanliness, shop layout and product displays contribute to a positive shopping experience in fashion stores. This is in line with this thesis's findings as *determinant* customers explained that it was important for their shopping experience that the store environment was organized and clean so that they could

easily find what they wanted. Since *determinant* customers see shopping as a way to buy what they need, their shopping experience leads to creation of utilitarian value. Therefore, it can be argued that customers perceive utilitarian value also during the pandemic. Cottet et al. (2006) and Picot-Coupey et al. (2020) argued that perceiving shopping activity as a mission that needs to be completed leads to utilitarian value. This statement matches the findings of this thesis since *determinant* customers indirectly confirmed that shopping was seen as a task that they needed to complete.

[...] the reason I go into fashion stores is because I know what's in the store and I know exactly what I need and I know what size I wear. So, you know, quickly in and quickly out. And for me it was very much the same before as well [...] - Participant N

According to Cottet et al. (2006) the quality of customer service and the relationship between customer and employee seemed to have an important role in the shopping experience. However, the findings showed that customer-employee relationship does not seem to be as important during the pandemic since the participants categorized as *determinant* customers explained that they were afraid of getting infected and wanted to keep distance from others. Participants also mentioned that the relationship with employees was more important in the past before the pandemic's outbreak. Furthermore, they discussed that they did not need as much help from employees as they did before, and that they were determined to avoid contact with employees of fashion stores. Thus, it can be argued that customer-employee relationship, as a factor affecting hedonic value, is not as important during societal crises such as a pandemic, which is not in line with Cottet et al.'s (2006) findings.

*Determinant* customers were characterized as practical since they wanted to be done with the shopping of clothes quickly. Figure 2 illustrates *determinant* customers' perspective on factors that contributed to positive shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as which type of value they perceived when they visited fashion stores.

**Figure 2***Determinant customers*

### 5.3 Sensory-oriented customers

The *sensory-oriented* customers are customers who are not afraid of the Covid-19 pandemic and see the shopping experience as a pleasure itself. Since they are not afraid of getting infected by the Covid-19 virus, they still visit physical fashion stores sometimes when they are bored. However, they tried to make visits as rarely as possible since they wanted to have respect for others and decrease the chances of spreading the virus.

The findings showed that the *sensory-oriented* customers value store atmospherics. According to Davis (2013), atmospherics such as music and scents, are important to create an enjoyable shopping experience. This is supported by the thesis's findings, since the *sensory-oriented* customers mentioned that the music and smell were important in order to create a good shopping experience. Moreover, the ability to see, touch and feel products before buying them was also important for the *sensory-oriented* customers. Helmeffalk and Hultén (2017) argued that sensory-stimuli cues evoked customer's emotions and in that way influenced their purchase behavior. One participant confirmed this statement by explaining that the stimuli of the senses, for example smell, was something that stores needed to develop further. The participant explained that stores that were focused on influencing customers' senses, such as smell, created a new perspective on the shopping experience. According to Kim and Sullivan (2019), customers could get emotional value



through new experiences. Connected to the findings above, it can therefore be argued that customers get emotional value in physical fashion stores that provide sensory-stimuli experience. Even though the pandemic did not affect fashion stores' ability to offer sensory-stimulated experience to customers, it did influence customers willingness to visit fashion stores as often as they did before. Therefore, sensory-oriented customers could not perceive emotional value to the same extent as before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the findings also showed that the *sensory-oriented* customers highly valued the store environment. As mentioned earlier, Terblanche and Boshoff (2004) identified store cleanliness, shop layout and product displays as important factors in the store environment to create a good shopping experience. This identification is supported by the findings since the *sensory-oriented* customers argued that a clean store, space and organized clothes are very important for their shopping experience. One participant stated:

I think it (the organisation in the store) is almost more important than the staff being nice because if it is not organized, I will not even enter the store. Then it does not matter how the staff is. - Participant C

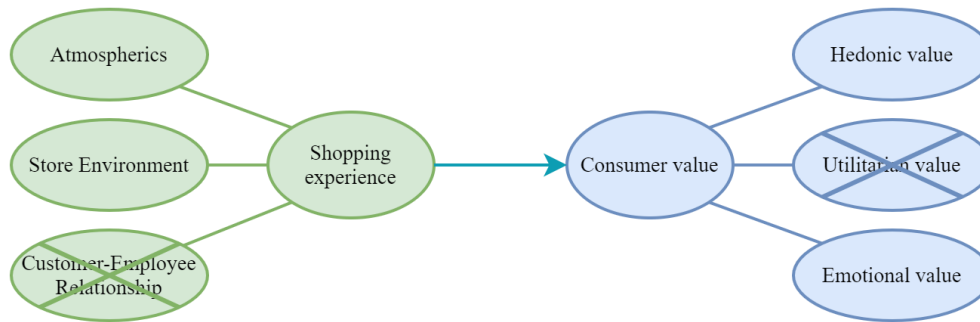
Connected to the statement above, the *sensory-oriented* customers did not consider the customer-employee relationship particularly important during the pandemic. The findings showed that the *sensory-oriented* customers valued the shopping experience itself higher than the interaction with customers. This is a contrast to Cottet et al.'s (2006) findings that stressed the importance of the interaction between customers and employees. However, the findings also showed that the *sensory-oriented* customers also believed that new factors in the store environment, such as the plexiglass, prevented communication with employees. Even if they did not value the interaction with customers highly, they still wanted to have the ability to communicate with the personnel if they needed it. Since the customer-employee relationship facilitates both hedonic value and emotional value, it can be argued that

the *sensory-oriented* customers do not seek those values through the interaction with employees.

However, it can be argued that the *sensory-oriented* customers still went shopping during the pandemic because they wanted to perceive hedonic value. Hedonic value is experience-based (Davis & Hodges, 2012; Kim et al., 2014; Huré et al., 2017) and is referred to as the main aim of a shopping trip (Cottet et al., 2006; Picot-Coupey et al., 2020). This is in line with the *sensory-oriented* customers' characteristics. For instance, participant C stated “[...] *Entering a store, I think is a pleasure in itself [...]*”.

Previous research has already found that store atmospherics contribute to hedonic value (Foster & McLelland, 2015). However, the store environment also seems to contribute to hedonic value, even if it is not differentiated, as Foster and McLelland (2015) stated. Furthermore, it is already known that the customer-employee relationship contributes to hedonic, utilitarian and emotional value. However, the findings showed that the interaction with employees in order to perceive value was not important during the pandemic.

*Sensory-oriented* customers prioritized the ability to touch, see and feel products. Figure 3 presents *sensory-oriented* customers' perspective on factors that contributed to positive shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as which type of value they perceived when they visited fashion stores.

**Figure 3***Sensory-oriented customers*

## 5.4 Adaptable customers

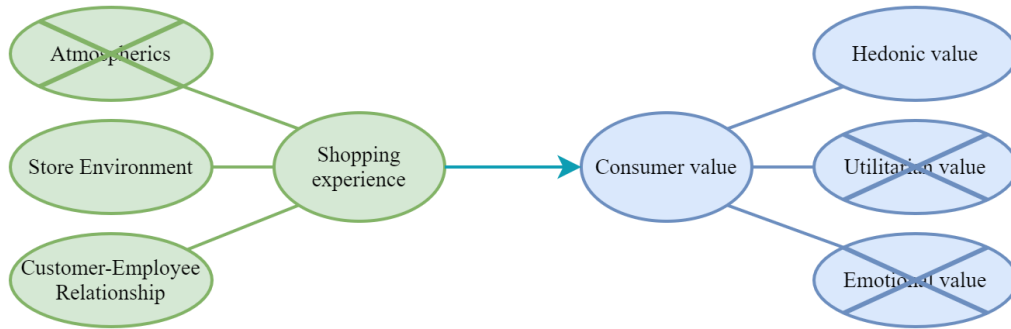
The *adaptable* customers were not particularly afraid of the Covid-19 pandemic but wanted to protect themselves as much as possible. Since they were not scared of getting infected by the Covid-19 virus, they still visited physical fashion stores sometimes. According to Terblanche and Boshoff (2004), the store environment is important to consider when stores want to create an enjoyable shopping experience for customers. This statement is supported by the findings in this research since the *adaptable* customers stress the importance of an organized and safe store environment. According to Hart et al. (2007), an important factor of the store environment is that the customers feel safe, which the *adaptable* customers valued while shopping. The findings showed that the *adaptable* customers valued the use of plexiglass at cash registers, the availability of hand sanitizers and that security personnel counted how many visitors there were in the store. Therefore, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, there seem to emerge new ways for physical fashion stores to keep customers safe while shopping. For instance, one participant said:

[...] but what I hope the fashion stores will continue having after the pandemic is like hand sanitizers and these plexiglass. You can see for yourself how dirty the plexiglass are where the customers stand, and I really hope that they will never remove them [...]-  
Participant M

The *adaptable* customers also seemed to appreciate good service provided by the store's employees. Saxena et al. (2015) stated that the interaction between employees and customers mediates customer satisfaction, customer loyalty and customer retention. The findings showed that the communication between customers and employees at least can increase the customers' satisfaction with the shopping experience. The *adaptable* customers appreciated helpful employees who could ease the shopping process, in the time of the global pandemic, by giving them good and quick customer service.

Smith and Colgate (2014) stated that the employee-customer interactions created value for the customer and pointed out two examples: functional value (e.g. service timeliness) and hedonic value (e.g. relational bonds). Smith and Colgate's statement is supported by this research's findings since it shows that customers' positive experience of an interaction with employees have a positive effect on customers' shopping experience. Therefore, it can also be argued that the customer-employee relationship facilitates hedonic value even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, these findings also support Fahy and Jobber's (2015) statement that the customer-employee relationship influences whether customers perceive their shopping experience as positive or negative.

*Adaptable* customers were characterized as customers who value prompt help from employees as well as new store environment which includes hand sanitizers and plexiglass. Figure 4 illustrates *adaptable* customers' perspective on factors that influenced shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as which type of value they perceived when they visited fashion stores.

**Figure 4***Adaptable customers*

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter begins with a summary of this thesis followed by a conclusion about customers' shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, theoretical and practical implications are presented. Lastly, the chapter is concluded with a critical review and suggestions for future research.

### 6.1 Summary and conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced customers' shopping experience in fashion stores. The conceptual model presented in this dissertation was based on earlier research. In the conceptual model, the focus was on factors that create consumer value which are atmospherics, store environment and customer-employee relationship. Furthermore, the model illustrated the relationship between shopping experience and customer value, which was also explored in this dissertation. In order to answer the research question, focus groups discussions with participants that visited fashion stores during the pandemic were constructed. The participants were asked to discuss different aspects of their shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thereafter, a thematic analysis was used to identify different themes and to analyze the collected data.

To conclude, three different types of customers were identified in this dissertation as they valued different elements of the shopping experience and were influenced differently by the Covid-19 pandemic. Firstly, store atmosphere was not the main reason why customers visited fashion stores during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, *sensory-oriented* customers appreciated music, scent and the ability to see, touch and feel material of clothes also during the pandemic, which agrees with Kim's (2002) explanation on the importance of atmospherics' elements. Foster & McLelland (2015) and Cottet et al. (2006) presented a positive influence of the atmospherics on hedonic value which is in line with this dissertation's findings. Atmospherics influence consumers' senses and evokes pleasant emotions which lead to creation of emotional value (Kim & Sullivan, 2019; Bagozzi et al., 1999;

Machleit and Eroglu, 2000). This study's findings agree with those statements as the store atmospherics had an influence on emotional value since stores' ability to offer different sensory-stimuli created a new shopping experience for customers and therefore influenced emotional value positively. However, the store atmospherics' influence on hedonic and emotional value was not different compared to the period before the pandemic. Therefore, it can be concluded that atmospherics as an important factor of shopping experience was not significantly influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Secondly, the store environment was valued by all three types of customers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Terblanche and Boshoff (2004) presented different elements of the store environment such as cleanliness, shop layout, product displays and store decor that influence shopping experience. This dissertation's findings showed that *determinant* customers valued product displays as they facilitated their shopping in fashion stores which was important for them due to their fear of the pandemic. Therefore, it can be concluded that the store environment is related to utilitarian value. On the other hand, *adaptable* customers appreciated the new factors in the store environment, and they contributed to the creation of hedonic value. Relationship between store environment and hedonic value was confirmed by sensory-oriented customers also.

Lastly, Cottet et al. (2006) explained that customer-employee relationship has a significant influence on customers' shopping experience which is why it was expected that the findings of this thesis would confirm that. However, customer-employee relationship was recognized as an important factor during the Covid-19 pandemic only by *adaptable* customers. In contrast to *determinant* customers, *adaptable* customers wanted to perceive hedonic value when shopping in fashion stores during the Covid-19 pandemic, which could be fulfilled by customer-employee relationship. The findings showed that the new factors in the store environment, plexiglass and hand sanitizers, both contributed and prevented the

creation of hedonic value since customers' opinions differed whether the new factors had positive or negative influence on their shopping experience. While *adaptable* customers perceived new elements of the store environment positively, *sensory-oriented* customers explained that the use of plexiglass prevented a relationship with employees which is why the customer-employee relationship did not have an effect on their shopping experience during the pandemic.

It can be concluded that all identified types of customers acknowledged the Covid-19's pandemic influence on their shopping experience in fashion stores. To some extent, the pandemic has changed customers' motives to visit fashion stores as well as factors that they prioritize during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period. The Covid-19 pandemic influenced customers differently, which is why it can be concluded that the pandemic had both positive and negative effects on shopping experience customers' value creation in fashion stores.

## **6.2 Theoretical implications**

To the best of our knowledge, previous research has not explored how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced customers' shopping experience in fashion stores. Therefore, this thesis provided insights into new factors that influence customers' shopping experience in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Previous research emphasized the importance of customer-employee relationship, store environment and atmospherics as elements that influence customers' shopping experience. Saxena et al. (2015) pointed out that social and interactive aspects of shopping experience led to customer satisfaction. Furthermore, Hart et al. (2007) argued that elements of the store atmosphere such as music, lightning and color affected customers' senses and led to customers' satisfaction. However, the findings of this dissertation showed that customers prioritized the store environment of fashion stores over customer-employee relationship and atmospherics during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this thesis showed what facilitated value creation for customers when they shopped in fashion stores during the Covid-19 pandemic.



Ainsworth and Foster (2017) presented that hedonic value was more relevant in retailing as customers sought for the experience when shopping in fashion stores. In contrast, this dissertation showed that utilitarian value was more important since customers shopped in fashion stores when they needed something fast in the time of the global pandemic. This dissertation contributes with insights into how customers perceived shopping experience in fashion stores differently during the Covid-19 pandemic and how distinguishable factors of shopping experience create value for different types of customers.

### **6.3 Practical implications**

This research contributes to insights about customers' perspective on how the shopping experience has changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings showed that some of the factors in the shopping experience have been perceived differently by the customers because of the pandemic. In addition, there have also been some changes in the three factors of shopping experience ability to create consumer value. For instance, the relationship between customers and employees did not seem to be able to create the same hedonic value during the pandemic, since many customers were afraid of getting infected. If physical fashion stores get an understanding of the different types of customers, who still visit physical stores, and their view on the shopping experience and its value creation during the pandemic, it could be easier for the fashion stores to steer their business in a direction that creates value for the customers and make them satisfied. Moreover, since this research provided insights about customers' opinions on how stores should create pleasurable, safe and value giving shopping experiences, this thesis contributes to store managers' knowledge about how to handle similar situations in the future.

### **6.4 Critical review and future research**

This thesis explored how three components of the shopping experience and three types of consumer values were influenced by the societal crisis, the Covid-19

pandemic. However, there are many more components of the shopping experience and types of consumer values that would be interesting to explore but were not included in this thesis. Therefore, a suggestion for future research would be to explore other components of the shopping experience as well as other types of consumer values in the same context, physical fashion stores, as this thesis. Moreover, it would be interesting if future research would repeat this research by using a quantitative method in order to be able to generalize the findings.

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## Appendix A - Focus Group Guide

### **Introduction:**

Hello and welcome to the group discussion!

First of all, we want to thank you for being here today and want to participate in the data collection for our thesis.

### **Practical information:**

As we wrote in the email earlier, we will record the group discussion because we need to be able to analyze the answers later. In order to analyze the collected data, we will transcribe your answers. However, we will protect your privacy by anonymizing your names in the essay and deleting the group discussion recordings after the analysis of the material is complete. The purpose of organizing group discussions is that we want to gather your thoughts on the shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our role as moderators is not to participate actively, but to guide your discussion.

### **Phase 1**

#### *Introduction:*

Everyone can start by introducing your name, age, and occupation. And answer the questions:

- What is your favorite fashion store?
- What is the purchase that you are happiest with in the last six months?

We will start by presenting three exercises where we want you to discuss your thoughts and opinions:

*Exercise 1:*

It is the Covid-19 pandemic and it is time to buy new clothes in physical fashion stores. What do you think contributes to a good shopping experience? By shopping experience, we mean the whole experience from the time you enter a store until you leave. Analyze for yourself for about two minutes and write down three to five answers in Mentimeter. Then we will show the results of how you answered and you will then together discuss your answers and select top three factors.

- If the participants do not discuss the various factors that influence their shopping experience, we will ask the question: How important is it with the relationship with employees and their service during the shopping experience? Discuss with each other.
- Based on the topic that is discussed between participants, follow-up questions will be introduced. Research says that the atmosphere in stores, such as music, smell, store space and more are usually important. What do you say about that?
- How important is the store environment, such as cleanliness, opening hours, product layout (how the product is presented) to create a good shopping experience? Discuss with each other.

*Exercise 2:*

Have you shopped more in physical fashionstores or online since the pandemic began? Open Mentimeter again and select one of the answer options: 1. Shopped more in physical stores, 2. Shopped more online. The ones who answered that you shopped more in physical fashion stores, what is the reason? And the ones who answered that you shopped more online, what is the reason?

*Exercise 3:*

On the screen you see three pictures from different fashion stores during the pandemic. First, we want you to discuss one to three emotions the images create. Motivate, why do you get these feelings? Last but not least, we want you to discuss whether the feelings you feel would have been different if the pictures were from before the outbreak of the pandemic.

**Phase 2**

Now we will ask some general reflection questions that you will have to discuss.

*Question 1:* For what reasons do you visit fashion stores today? Discuss with each other if these reasons are different compared to before the pandemic?

- If the participants do not discuss the different values, we will ask the question: Do you ever go to a fashion store just to quickly buy a certain item? Apart from the item you shop, what else do you gain when you shop in a physical fashion store? Discuss with each other.
- Based on what is discussed between participants, the follow-up question will be asked: Research says that people usually shop in physical fashion stores to get an experience instead of just buying one item. What do you say about that?

*Question 2:* Compare the shopping experience physical fashion stores offer today compared to before the outbreak of the Covid-19. Do you think it has changed? If so, how?

*Question 3:* What are your thoughts about the shopping experience in physical fashion stores in the future? Will it be as important, or do you think the requirements for it will be different in the in the future?

## **Closure**

Then we are done for today! We want to thank you for your participation and hope that you feel that it has been rewarding.

If there is anyone who has a question or comes up with something you want to add, contact us via email. If you are interested in the results of the research, please write your email in Zoom's chat and we will send it out when it is finished.

Thank you for today!

## Appendix B – Purpose of focus group questions

Questions	Purpose
What do you think contributes to a good shopping experience?	<b><i>Shopping experience</i></b> The question aims to explore if customers perceived atmospherics, store environment and customer-employee relationship as important factors that create an enjoyable shopping experience during the Covid-19 pandemic.
Have you shopped more in physical fashion stores or online since the pandemic began? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Why did you shop more online or in physical fashion stores?</li> </ul>	<b><i>Customer value</i></b> Firstly, we wanted to find out if the Covid-19 pandemic was the main reason why customers shopped less in fashion stores. Secondly, the purpose was to explore if shopping in physical fashion stores facilitate customers' value creation such as hedonic, utilitarian and emotional value.
On the screen you see three pictures from different fashion stores during the pandemic. Firstly, we want you to discuss 1-3 feelings the pictures create. Motivate why do you get these feelings? Last but not least, we want you to discuss whether the feelings you feel would have been different if the pictures were from before the outbreak of the pandemic.	<b><i>Customer value</i></b> This question was asked in order to see if the store environment and customer-employee relationship create emotional value. We also wanted to explore if there was a difference in customers' emotional value before and during the pandemic.
For what reasons do you visit fashion stores today? Discuss with each other if these reasons are different compared to before the pandemic.	<b><i>Customer value</i></b> This question's aim was to help us understand if customers visit stores in time of the global pandemic to buy a product fast (utilitarian value) and/or to get an enjoyable shopping experience (hedonic value).
Compare the shopping experience physical fashion stores offer today compared to before the outbreak of the Covid-19. Do you think it has changed? How?	<b><i>Shopping experience</i></b> The question aimed to understand whether customers thought that the factors that influence their shopping experience have changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the purpose was to explore if fashion stores offer some other type of experience in the time of global pandemic.
What are your thoughts on the shopping experience in physical fashion stores in the future? Will it be as important, or do you think the requirements for it will be different in the future?	<b><i>Shopping experience</i></b> The purpose was to explore the importance of shopping experience in the future and customers' perception of how it will change after the Covid-19 pandemic.