



# **Creating meaningful interactions**

The switch of focus between brands and consumers

Case: Amer Sports Oy

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<p><b>Abstract:</b></p> <p>This thesis aims to find far-reaching and tangible solutions in the fast evolving consumer sphere in the world of sports apparel and gear retail. The technological achievements have put pressure for the companies to stay ahead of the market and provide services and products that meet with consumer expectations, let alone exceed them. In the same time the consumers are becoming more and more individual and knowledgeable, which reflects highly to the traditional compartmentalizing of target groups.</p> <p>A big, rapid switch in the field of retail has been seen for the last decade, especially in a marketing and sales perspective. Competing with prices and products is becoming less relevant and digital abilities have become mandatory. Consumers are seeking experiences and value with their purchases, which creates demand for a new way of thinking on an organizational level. If companies pursue market leadership role, they need to put the consumer in the heart of all doing and seek to manage the interactions between brands and their potential shoppers.</p> <p>Main point of the study was to research future generations and other potential markets for premium sports brand company Amer Sports Oy with an omni-channel mindset. The company goal for the thesis was to find functional answers to better manage the changes in the fast changing world of sports retail. The omni-channel point of view gave this thesis a naturally digital tone, which was found as an advantage in the data collection and analyzing part of the study. Researching human shopping behavior and trying to predict behavioral patterns needed an extensive background study in e.g. consumer psychology, changes in retail and even differences between genders when thinking about decision making processes. Ethnographical observation of digital communities proved to be the most beneficial way to gather data regarding to the research problem.</p> <p>With this study it is possible to further investigate more deeply the topics that have been brought out in this writing. This study also assists towards possible future processes for the company to obtain their goals and gain some additional knowledge of the subjects of this research.</p>	
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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Four years ago I graduated as the Bachelor of Fashion and Clothing, in Brands and Marketing, and have noticed, that ever since the year 2013, the concept of Marketing has shifted enormously. The overall point of this research is to define data of the retail marketing these days and come up with a method how to predict the future transformations of the evolving industry. From early on the focus was in the consumer side and the study formed around that angle.

The smart mobile devices have changed how we communicate, shop and use our time. Wearable technology is not an exception, as many of us wear fitness trackers instead of regular watches to monitor daily steps. The overall connectivity advancements have made the entire world a smaller place and we are able to communicate real time with people around the world. This means that the market segments are also more fragmented than ever, and uniqueness as well as individuality is highly respected, unlike before.

My background of working in different tasks of customer service and consumer interface in the apparel industry, both in the B2B and B2C fields, have led me witnessing firsthand the rapid changes that are happening in the retail and communication sector. The rough financial times have not made the natural shift in consumer attitudes any easier and plainly put, many companies are struggling to make it. Many retail stores where I have been once a shopper myself, have closed their doors during this last decade. What I have learned is that all this affects the consumers, the shoppers, too. There is no such thing as only a brand experience and the goal of this thesis is to show ways to manage this.

It is often overlooked by companies that the success does lie in the outside of the organization and consumer centricity is used mainly as a buzzword, similarly to sustainability and other trendy enterprise values. Change to consumer focus can be seen either costly inefficient or there simply isn't organizational knowledge of how to do specific changes, nor where to start.

Brands need to start the world from the consumer's side, if they want to successfully embrace and gain the leadership in the consumer experience management. The modern consumers are deeply resourceful and the familiar segments are scattering more than ever, making the direct focusing on a certain group a definite challenge for the brands. The companies might spend tons of money to service design models when they could have easily just easily asked or surveyed their shoppers' opinions to better the delivery of the experience. Seems like the answer to the problem is far more simple, and maybe that is why it is easily overlooked. However, the implementation and management of these solutions might seem daunting to companies. (Godin, 2006; Ideo.com, 2017; Hybris, 2014; Pellitteri, 2016; Schmitt, 2003; Turner, 2007)

This study concentrates to find those answers with consumer in the center of observation. As I was given an opportunity of a lifetime, at least from my personal professional perspective, to do my thesis for the premiere athletic apparel and gear brands company, Amer Sports, it fast became a goal to provide tools for Amer Sports brands to carry out the execution of a seamless consumer experience, from the company side as well.

After declaring and clarifying the object of this study and finishing my background research for the overall support of this work, I noticed this could easily be a study of relationships. Diving into psychology, I have been studying how relationships work, what to do to exceed the human expectations so that the other part doesn't leave you when something better is offering itself and how does one in this strongly digital world that we live in today can make sure that the relationship is nurtured and interested?

Also this could be a journey to review the centuries old mystery: What do women want? The rising potential in Female consumers has been in organizational awareness since the 1980's, but still many companies struggle with truly delivering and connecting in a holistic matter with this gender of consumers.

There are many professional terms and acronyms used in this thesis which might not be familiar to all readers. For this reason a glossary of important terms was created to help the readers and also provide more information of some of the modern terms, e.g. related to digital or inbound marketing, that are more or less being implemented in the technical terminology these days. This glossary can be found in the end of this study, in chapter 7.

For you, the reader, to understand this study better, it is preferable to turn the normal marketer's favorite funnel upside down, like the consumer marketing expert Seth Godin suggests; and use it as a megaphone and then give it to the consumers. As the Walker Insights study shows, in the near future the consumer experiences are going to be the main differentiator between brands, far more important than the traditional price and product. This study aims to focus on the problem how the state of quality brand advocacy is really reached and how to exceed the modern consumer expectations to enable the brands' to gain the recognition of a market leader place in seamless consumer delighting. (Schmitt, 2003; Hybris, 2014; NRF, 2017; Walker, 2017)

## 1.1 Case: Amer Sports OY

Amer Sports' portfolio includes 11 active and athletic lifestyle brands. These globally known brands ensure that there is always "*something for everybody*" no matter what sport or what season it is. The brand products are known of their high quality and usage of sport professionals. The company of Amer Sports provides a nourishing and prosperous environment for its employees, as well as is notable in high-class sales efforts. With these being a very good background for success, why isn't the brands of Amer Sports automatically striving highly on the same level as their direct competitors? Employee experience being number one step in creating wholesome consumer experience, where is the gap with these high quality brands becoming market leaders? (Amer Sports, 2017; Godin, 2006; Schmitt, 2003)



Figure 1. Amer Sports Company logo. (Amer Sports, 2017)

Objectives of this research are important as they give the company, Amer Sports, such knowledge, which usually is not possible to gain without extensive study processes with different stakeholders and massive investments. Also optimistically the research is going to provide Amer Sports a so called ‘tool kit’ that will work on the brands’ advantage considering the market leadership in consumer experience and how to manage the changes of the retail market outlook.

### **1.1.1 About the company**

Amer Sports operates in three primary segments, which are *outdoors*, *ball sports* and *fitness*. These segments are divided to different owned brands and business areas. Amer Sports owns international brands like *Salomon*, *Atomic*, *Arc’teryx*, *Wilson*, *Mavic*, *ENVE Composites*, *Precor*, *DeMarini* and *Louisville Slugger*. The Finnish brand *Suunto* and *Sports Tracker Technologies* are also under Amer Sports ownership. In the spring 2017 the group bought the ownership to 2002 founded American ski brand *Armada Skis*. (Amer Sports, 2017)

To ensure important business strategies realization and to gain leadership with the go to market, Amer Sports Company is using Key Performance Indicators with all core operations and improvements are made to products and services accordingly. Amer Sports is known to be a fair and supportive employer, that strives for operational excellence, professional development and employee empowerment, which, e.g., is easily noticed whilst visiting the Helsinki Headquarters or meeting the brand employees. The employee well-being is taken seriously as the employees have an access to a well-equipped company gym and even have a personal trainer possibility, as well as lots of employee sporting opportunities that encourage the staff for a healthy lifestyle. (Amer Sports, 2017)

Amer Sports aims to be truly consumer centric in all their functions: services and products alike. To succeed in this, they have implemented a highly omni-channel mindset to their functions, since there are high demands within the sports retail industry in the digital advancement and seamless experience sectors. This all is precisely monitored and managed through different consumer focused touchpoints, which most of them are in digital environments. (Amer Sports, 2017)

## 1.2 Research Question & Thesis Statement

Forming research questions was largely a cooperative task. Amer Sports company representatives had a very similar idea and needs for data, that I had already gotten myself interested in. Many great ideas had to be cut and narrowed down, to keep this thesis in an acceptable length. The starting point in the construction of the final research questions was Amer Sports' will "to understand how to delight the consumers on every touchpoint, seamlessly. (Amer Sports, 2017) "

From the start it was evident that the study is going to be ethnographically based, which also showed in the fact that the research questions lived with the whole process. The thesis was strongly inspired by the Human Centered Design, a design concept by innovation business called IDEO, but overall work parted from the concept quite early. Nonetheless the Human Centered Design- inspiration strengthened the need of putting the consumer in the center of all doing. This also meant that the study was going to be mostly in online environments, as it seems to be the place where people can be found these days. (We Are Social.com, 2017)

Amer Sports wanted to find concrete ways how to connect with these modern consumers with such appreciation that they become brand advocates and how this all is manageable. The notion that there is a need for the "how", not "what" shaped this study and it was important for this research to study deeply in many areas to come up real solutions, rather than inspiring words and results of changes in the retail market-spheres.

The objective of the study is to gather such data that it can be turned into common sense execution from the brand side and optimistically gain such knowledge that it can be used in the betterment of services and atmosphere of every department that is working behind the brand core. With the study, it should be possible to present different possibilities to interact and connect with consumers on all critical touchpoints, and separate the brands of their market competitors with a new, insightful way.

The research aims to find answer for the following question:

- How can Amer Sports brands engage with the modern consumers seamlessly on all critical touchpoints to ensure delightful omni-channel experiences?

With the literature review and overall research methodologies chosen, it has the potential to give solutions to these additional research questions as well:

- In which ways the digital marketing innovations can help connecting with the Gen Z shoppers to ensure profitable growth for the brands?
- In what ways can Amer Sports better empower and interact with the sporty female consumers in omni-channel environments to help them become brand advocates?

The thesis statement would form out to be:

“In the near future the Consumer Experience is going to become a more important differentiator than price or product, since the consumers are becoming more knowledgeable and demanding due to the connection and digital advancements.”

### **1.3 Conceptual framework and chosen method**

The modern consumer is not only demanding, but they are growing smarter and resourceful. They care deeply in what they spend their money on and they expect the brands to care as well. They want to form a trusting relationship with the brand and want to be heard. (Schmitt, 2003; Hybris, 2014; NRF, 2017)

The study involves both qualitative and quantitative data gathering from different online Medias, direct observing of consumers on the critical touchpoints and analyzing the knowledge. This is all was combined to ensure a comprehensive perspective of how to delight the new era shoppers and manage the commercial functions so that these shoppers turn into loyal brand advocates.

The importance of the study lies in the fact that the consumer experience has been a much used buzz word since early 2000s, but still many companies fall short to really generate these relationships and hear the consumer’s voice. The time is running out as the digital

innovations are making the world even more connected and fast phased, and the oversupply of tremendous products are making the competition of market shares exhausting processes for the brands. There are many studies made of the changing environments or some researches about what should be invested from the company side to make sure they still float in 2020. However, these studies do not provide answers the primary issues. The implement plan is missing and the studies are very far of the real object of the study; the consumer. (Schmitt, 2003; Pellitteri, 2016; NRF, 2017)

To bring brand closer to the audiences, the marketing researchers need to study realistic motivations in naturalistic situations. They should try to find a way that reflects real situations that consumers face every day while interacting with the brand. In the mostly digital world of today, people spend their time on their devices. Interaction with their peers and even with brands often happens on these digital channels. This means the research should go where the people are and that meant choosing an online environment channel for the observation. The studied channel being online helped to keep this research more overall and global, as in the digital environments the borders of nations and states are more blurred than ever. The somewhat recently found methodology, Netnography was an intriguing choice for this thesis as it, briefly put, studies phenomena in online community. To be honest this method was something that I was hoping to utilize in my Master's thesis. (Schmitt, 2003; Kozinets, 2002)

#### **1.4 Literature review and term definition**

The research was strongly based on a substantial amount of professional literature affiliating to the topic of the study. The first part of the thesis process itself was spent on reviewing Consumer Experience literature, as well as variable Behavioral and Psychological publications. Psychological angle was chosen mainly so that it would be possible to review the overall study from many perspectives and to gain knowledge of how people behave, so that the study itself didn't have to focus on that. Obviously Digital Marketing themed publications and articles were reviewed extensively to have a good background knowledge of the field and better spot trends.

A lot of great articles and infographics were found to further give insight of the subject, when a lot of traditional publications failed to capture the subject so that it would benefit this study. However, 'Customer Experience Management' by Bernd H. Schmitt was a great platform to build the knowledge onto. Even though the book was published in 2003, its' message seemed fresh and not yet very implemented, which also speaks volumes of the matter that consumers are often overlooked.

Amer Sports Company requested the research to focus more on the "how" than "why", which made the behavioral and psychological aspects important. Consumer psychology is a point to consider in any marketing procedures, as it describes of the object, who often is not personally known. Both online articles and books were browsed through to gain understanding in human behavioral patterns, decision making reasons and causes of actions possibly based on gender.

Digital Marketing publications were often a little behind even if they were not old in timely manner. This could be understood as the digital world is constantly evolving and new advancements are made. Still it was possible to find such literature that wasn't bound to the time period, and could be applied to more modern functions. It was easy to find sort of patterns for trends that went hand in hand with technological advancements and this could give an outline for how digital marketing trends are born.

Best on-time literature sources were articles found from online resources and from professional websites. Business of Fashion.com and Harvard Business Review.com as well as Forbes.com rose up to be invaluable source of knowledge. From these online sources, current articles were found to give excellent insights for both the theoretical and the research parts of this thesis.

The reviewed literature not only shaped the next part, the theory behind the study, but also helped in the research data analysis. It was greatly useful to see certain patterns form themselves, and then connect these to the theory, in a way of validation of interpreted assumptions.

## **2 CHANGES IN RETAIL AND DIGITAL MARKETING**

Consulting agency ‘Accenture’ showed in a study that consumers’ value tailored and seamless experiences. The same study presents that 45 percent of consumers would be more engaged if offered more mobile options and 23 % would be more likely to purchase from a business that interacts with the consumers on Social Media. The digital development certainly impacts the consumer interface greatly. The multi-device lifestyle of the consumers has made the consumer purchase model rather nonstop with multiple touch-points. This gives companies more influencing opportunities. The apparel and active wear retailers are challenged constantly to adapt to evolving scenes, be more aware of surfacing trends and use innovative materials in their products. (Accenture, 2017; Weinswig, 2017)

By stepping into consumers’ shoes, companies and brands can build more personalized omni-channel engagement to help the strategizing in the changing consumer behavior environment. A research by Experian Marketing Services in 2012 has shown that 84 % of people are more likely to leave a company that doesn’t listen to them and 45 % would find it extremely annoying if the company would contact them in a way that is against their wishes. The same study showed that the consumers appreciated understanding companies thoroughly, and this understanding would likely lead to positive word of mouth - promotion and also additional purchases. (Experian.com, 2012)

Especially in the fashion and apparel sectors, the consumer behaviors are rapidly shifting towards a mobile mentality. The social media channels provide ‘buy now’ options, but as the retail sector is very fragmented these days, it is important to find a fresh way to interact and engage with the potential shoppers. The fashion is leading the way to study their consumers, striving to influence behavior that then increases brand awareness and leads to successful sales and loyal relationships. (Hemsley, 2016)

In the future the importance of the phone is going to diminish and the top three ways to interact with the consumers is said to be through online communities, social media channels and corporate websites. Without investing in higher levels of digital or mobile services, the companies might risk the strong relationship building with their potential shoppers. (Hoang, 2016; Walker, 2017)

The price is challenging brands, as constant discounting has changed the way consumers view prices and the consumption altogether. Lower prices are now expected, and as the active wear market grows – usually the lower price point provider can always be found. The new luxury item for the modern shoppers is time, so naturally the brands are anticipated to use the digital technology to provide more efficient, innovative, time and money saving solutions for the consumers. This means that a brand should actively examine digital advancements and trends to provide fresh ideas, and actively replace inefficient services. (Hoang, 2016; Walker, 2017)

## **2.1 The changes of retail centers in a nutshell**

The shopping malls, that once were a thriving places for shopping experiences, are been tested with the competition of digital stores and time as a new human luxury. The retail malls were once one-stop conveniences, but the difficult retail climate has changed how the offline commerce is seen. The teenagers that once were shopping as a hobby, are not bringing such foot traffic to the malls as expected. (Berger, 2011; Phelan, 2017)

These days the consumers are often choosing shopping from home, to save their precious time and are expecting more than a Movie Theater or a food store, to gravitate towards shopping at the malls. Only immediacy or experience seeking might make consumers choose shopping mall over a time saving digital option. The time spent is directly impacting the conversion rate, so for the retail center and malls to prosper, the consumers need to spend as much time as possible in the place. However the modern connectivity and multi-device lifestyle has made people get bored more easily and the retail offerings are not seen tempting, especially if they are the same in every shopping mall. (Phelan, 2017)

However, people do still need a place to gather outside their home and work places, the so called third space. The shopping malls could be thought as community centers in future, an informal space for mingling, providing experiences with showrooms and fun venues. To get people to enjoy their time in the retail spaces, it is important to think about the entertainment available and the finest details in experiences. Even fresh flowers can make a difference to the environment, as consumers, especially the younger generations

are often thinking about their Social Media profiles, and if they can “Instagram” certain situation. (Phelan, 2017)

Unique experiences and special events are going to generate foot traffic, especially if they are planned to be family-centric. Planning the future retail spaces children friendly is crucial, as consumers want to bring their families with them, especially if they have limited amount of time to spend with their flock. The key is to think about what would bring the consumers back, and for example gym centers and big grocery stores are already seen very effective. The concept of shopping experience should be seen much broader and assorted. This could mean that healthcare is provided in experimental settings, such as spa environments, rather than the stereotypical doctor’s office. Brands that are able to change their brick and mortar store concepts more for an experiential and sharable entirety, will be likely to connect more authentically with the next generation of consumers. (Heneghan, 2015; Pike, 2016; Phelan, 2016)

In recent years the edges of work and everyday life have blurred. This can be seen in the growth of remote work, stronger entrepreneurial mindsets of employees and the hazier ‘traditional - 9-to-5 office’ –concept. Environmental consciousness will be changing the driving culture and that is going to have an effect on the suburban centers. This gives the shopping malls a possibility to provide the consumers nearby options by attaching residences and office spaces to the retail spaces. (Phelan, 2017)

### **2.1.1 The next generation of shoppers**

In a decade a lot has changed with popular teen retailers, as fundamental consumer values and behaviors have shifted. It is nearly impossible to compete with fast fashion giants, such as Zara and H&M, when products are out-priced and out-designed for the market they are trying to attract. The days of “The Breakfast Club”, with easily identified, stereotypical characters or certain exclusivities, such as “You can’t sit with us” ideals that were highly popular in the early 2000’s teenage culture, are not going to transfer well to the younger consumers of today. (Pike, 2016)

The consumer culture used to be highly based on “get as much as you can”-attitude, and social success could be defined by those who owned the most, especially with the younger consumers. The product consumption was more lustful than conscious. This could be seen in advertising industry as well. There used to be a trend in lower economy countries where young, impressionable ladies would demean themselves to an unworthy situation, to be able to purchase certain brands and gadgets to gain certain social status. (Berger, 2011)

Surprising brands have found themselves gaining popularity without really using a lot of marketing measures to connect with the Millennials and Gen Z’s. The retailer Costco has attracted a lot of new market with its ability to provide more organic and so called “better-for-you” products, as well as digital coupons. These things have been a lot more effective than spending a lot on marketing campaigns directed to these generations. (Heneghan, 2015)

Especially the Generation Z’s are extremely cautious consumers. They tend to invest their limited funds carefully, as well as comfortably. Fashion and clothing purchases have also yielded, as technology, such as electronics and gadgets, are becoming more popular among the teens. It is quite often that a smartphone or wearable technology is requested for a present over clothing pieces. (Pike, 2016)

To remain relevant for the next generations, brands need to use every possibility and tool to deliver experiences for shoppers and create an environment where they can’t live without the specific product. Purchasing experiences is making consumers happier than collecting more clutter. Especially experiences that help feeling better and help consumers achieve their personal goals. People are living in a stressful, always connected digital age, so anything that helps them manage these stressors are going to stand out favorably. (Hoang, 2016; Heneghan, 2015; Pike, 2016)

### **2.1.2 Experiential purchases**

For Gen Z the experiences are more essential than the product itself. It can be said that this generation will prioritize purchases if they can be sharable on their Social Media

channels. Sharing experiences is a key element for this generation, as without the possibility, it feels almost like it didn't happen. (Pike, 2016)

The modern teenagers are not looking to buy goods. They want to invest in experiences and gain the product as a bonus on the side. Gen Z's are more likely to spend their income to Instagram friendly places, such as popular coffee shops. A study by Eventbrite & Harris showed that 72 % of Millennials would rather spend on experiences than on products. Experiences are a currency in social media, so wearing the right thing won't do the trick anymore, like it did for the Millennials before platforms such as Facebook and Snapchat. (Pike, 2016)

With the ever evolving world of e-commerce, the retailers are facing challenges to get the shoppers to the brick n mortar stores. The growth of digital options, sharing economy and sales possibilities through social media platforms are making it even more difficult. Even with the basic psychology of the supply and demand-principle, the companies should be actively staging experiences for the consumer to live their best possible life. (Hoang, 2016; Rampton Baseley, 2016)

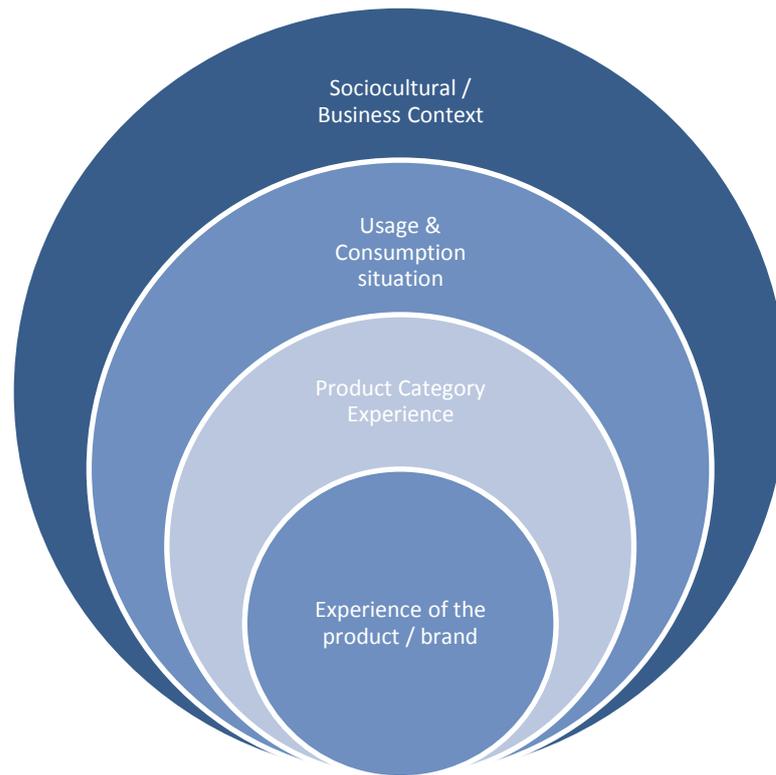


Figure 2. The Four layers of the Experiential World. Adaption. (Schmitt, 2003)

The way to implement into consumers' life is up to the brand and the companies. They should actively build ways to become essential in reaching consumers' personal goals, especially in the active wear and fitness apparel industries. Relating to lifestyle and business trends should be active, as it helps to better understand solutions that might be affecting the consumer experiences. The experiences can be connected to products or vary from brand events and festivals to more personalized items, which become memorable and engaging for the consumer. The communities that are building around the brands, have been somewhat successful in interacting on a deeper level, as they automatically provide more value to the shoppers over just selling goods. (Hoang, 2016; Sherman, 2017; Schmitt, 2003)

### 2.1.3 Omni-channel

The more capabilities the technological developments bring; the more consumers' expectations grow. This is a continuous challenge for the brands and companies, as they are trying to interact on multiple, ever increasing platforms. Consumers spend more and more

time in front of connected devices, switching between them on the go. This has made the multi-channel thinking outdated for the companies. The omni-channel mindset puts all the channels to work together providing the consumers with the same feelings on each channels, seamlessly and at each touchpoint where there is human interaction. (Guess 2016, Levine 2013)



*Figure 3. Future of Shopping. Picture from article. (Sogeti Labs, 2013)*

The key to successfully harness this experience is to pick the best working channels for the company and use them as guidance and innovation facing the other channels. The consistency is very important, as many of these channels differ from each other quite a lot. Consumers do not think that they are using different channels, as they are perceiving it all as an interaction with the company or the brand. So the channels should be thought more of portals to the experience and managed as such, rather than ways to copy already working functions. This means that communicating with the consumers can be channel-specific and not all messages work on every channel. (Guess, 2016; Levine, 2013)

Consumers expect that their shopping journey is seamless and continuous. Adapting the omni-channel is a solution for this need. The experience, however simple and non-significant to the company, needs to be thought as happening seamlessly, simultaneously. The average consumer constantly changes between different devices, such as laptops, tablets

and smartphones, or even with traditional media, such as TV and print. For example, if they give out personal information for a company via desktop, they are going to expect the information to be already there if they switch to another device. This means that there needs to be consistency and understanding of how different shoppers want to interact with brands and products. Unfortunately, many companies are still seeing this as a benefit, not as a strategized essential in the non-stop interaction with the consumers. (Guess, 2016; Levine, 2013)

#### **2.1.4 Seamless solutions across all channels**

Inbound marketing has been found to be a cost efficient and great option in the more digital and mobile world, as people value more personalized messages instead of interruptive and irrelevant ones. The digital platforms are giving more opportunities to connect with the consumers and provide meaningful content. Inbound marketing can deepen those already existing relationships and build trust. (Burdett, 2014)

All content should be used with the real value in mind, not as an advertisement. Consumers receive a lot of messages throughout their daily lives on the many channels they use, so it is easy for the information to get lost. Brands and companies should remember that consumers care about themselves, not the products or services brands provide, so this means that the marketing cannot be all about those things either. The consumer is the one who is served, so they should be the ones who are listened. There should be a real need filled and the messages should be novel, rather than mimicking others. (Hendricks, 2017; King, 2017)

The technological advancements require companies to figure out how mobile ties into their business objectives. Best plan of action with web design and mobile site requirements is to invest in on-going development and user-testing of such sites. (Rowles, 2013)

To optimize the mobile user experience, it is important to understand what social media platforms are being used by the target audience. The company needs to make sure that there is added value to the content they are providing on those channels. The mobile site optimization is very important in sharing content, especially images, while some images

might look great on desktop, they won't work with mobile devices. Content should also be interesting and engaging enough to be sharable and so called non-corporate. Audiences should be seen as individuals not a mass. (Rowles, 2013)

### **2.1.5 Differences between touchpoints and channels**

It is important to understand that the term touchpoint is not the same thing as a channel. The channel itself, as a medium of interaction, defines the consumer interaction opportunity around the touchpoint. Touchpoint, from experience view, is a point of interaction, which happens in a specific place and time and involves a certain human need. Channels enable touchpoints, but do not define them. (Risdon & Quattlebaum, 2012)

Efficient touchpoints are relevant and meaningful, and in the modern world, connected. The channel context should be understood in a way that the same consumer need or desire is met by differing channels seamlessly. This can be called 'multi-channel', or when happening simultaneously; omni-channel. Compared to single channel-mindset, that is more about exclusivity as it can only happen in one channel at a time. (Risdon & Quattlebaum, 2012)

## **2.2 Brand interaction**

The digital advancements have further fragmented brand messaging and the multiple simultaneous consumer touchpoint are implemented by many brands quite poorly. What should be remembered with all doing is that the consumer has a single view and they want a continuous journey, so the marketing shouldn't be about finding new ways to talk and attract consumers, as it is a little left behind and not cost efficient. (McPherson, 2017)

### **2.2.1 Connecting with storytelling**

Storytelling can be seen as fundamental, according to film executive Peter Guber. Bringing brand personality to come alive with stories is a fresh way to connect with the consumers. It is also a way to rise above the competition with authentic messages that are not about selling, but rather believable experiences and journeys. (Olenski, 2015; Rampton Baseley, 2016)

Imagination has not been used a lot in the communication. Possible brand storytelling often comes from an outsourced marketing consulting firm, not from the brand itself. This doesn't bring any value or help connecting with their consumers. Stories in general create the possibility for escaping, thus they activate the parts of brain that are connected to the senses. Positive experiences with different senses affect the emotional regions of the human brain, which may beneficially impact the purchase decisions. That means that the need of perceptual experiences is actually deep-seated inside the brain and messaging the brand story keeps consumers coming back for more. (Olenski, 2015; Rampton Baseley, 2016; Schmitt, 2003)



Figure 4. The Content Sweet Spot. Adaption. (Brown, 2016)

As consumers crave for more personal connections, engaging with storytelling makes a lot of sense. Consumers are also generally much more responsive to stories than facts. Numbers and statistics tend to bore humans, but being a little creative with them, might make all the difference. (Gillett, 2015; Olenski, 2015)

### 2.2.2 Community thinking

Something that can be learned from smaller, emerging brands is their way to connect with their consumers – not by using standard procedures of sales and service, but by building fandoms around their brands. Community-driven brands are shown to have success in

retention rates and getting shoppers to return, especially in e-commerce environments. (Sherman, 2017)

With these communities' brand loyalty comes naturally and the fans are automatically engaged. It is important from the brand side to nourish the relationships, host events and meet these fans to interact with them. The fandom has also formed new friendships inside the community with like-minded people, and that makes the whole brand experience much more than owning a piece of clothing. (Sherman, 2017)

The feedback and conversations with devoted consumers from the community are also an efficient way to push the brand successfully forward and improve products and services to suit these individuals even better. These members usually become great brand ambassadors and share the brand stories organically, actively and happily themselves. (Sherman, 2017)

### **2.2.3 Trending: Athleisure and the active lifestyle**

A phenomenon called 'Athleisure' has been booming for years, and even made its way to the Merriam Webster dictionary in 2016. Athleisure has become the fastest-growing apparel categories globally especially on the latter part of the 2010's. In short, athleisure is the style of clothes than can be worn to work out, but also on the go. The trend has been unstoppable, as it is very adoptable with a broad range of consumers, despite of age, gender, general style or personal activity level. (Weinswig, 2017)

More flexible dress codes, even at office environments and an overall adaption of healthier, more active lifestyle, has inspired consumers and brands alike to gravitate towards this trend. It is not surprising that performance sportswear market is likely to lead with rapid growth this decade. Not just athletic wear brands make use of this trend, but also brands such as Gant have been developing moisture wicking button-up shirts, that are perfect for those business men who e.g. bike to work. The luxury brands, such as Louis Vuitton are now designing their own collections of sneakers to answer the demand coming from the rise of the sneaker culture. These technical and comfortable textiles are seen as bringing more value to the consumers as they fit into the active lifestyles of the today's

busy, active and wellness oriented consumers. (Weinswig, 2017; One Like Athleisure, 2017; Mora, 2010; Muhlenberg, 2016)

However the strength of the athleisure trend is not all about comfortable style or making everyday life smoother. The overall growth of health and wellness awareness is a big building block to supporting it. There is a shift in lifestyle preferences and the feeling good is considered often to be more important than looking good. It is the new normal to go to the gym and have very specific diets. So it can be understandable that not just apparel sections are benefitting of this shift, there is also growth in the beauty and health departments as well. Consumers are looking for more tangible solutions in their clothing pieces so that they can feel better, even transformed. There is no need for collecting more goods. (Weinswig, 2017; Hoang, 2016; Muhlenberg, 2016)

Brands have answered to this fast growing trend by re-launching old school sneakers, e.g. Adidas with Stan Smith-sneakers or Superstars, or lifting an influent IT-girl for their brand face, e.g. Gigi Hadid or Kendall Jenner, to connect with even younger consumers. Luxury groups are buying sports brands, like cycling companies, as they see the investment opportunities in wellness. And data by Euromonitor supports this mindset, as there is expected to be growth for 17 percent in the global health and wellness sector over the next five years. (Bloomberg & Weiss, 2017; One Like Athleisure, 2017; Hoang, 2016; Euromonitor International, 2017)

### **3 FOCUS ON THE CONSUMERS**

The importance and the economic value of the consumers is being recognized on most organizational levels. Consumer centricity is the platform in the process to delight the consumers. Putting the consumer in the center of all productivity can significantly and positively affect upselling, increasing referrals, brand reputation and lower the churn rates. (Signal Mind, 2013; TechnologyAdvice, 2017)

Loyalty is seen profitable, and focus is switching to retaining consumers rather than acquiring new ones, which according to studies is 6 to 7 times more expensive method. The

process itself is not very complicated, rather it needs to be coordinated process between different departments and focusing on the consumer priorities. (Signal Mind, 2013; TechnologyAdvice, 2017)

In the past brands could differentiate themselves by creating the best possible product with competitive price point and bring their A-game while selling it. But the connectivity, the world getting smaller and the information everywhere, constantly, has developed consumers to question their true identities and values, and rethink their personal priorities. (Hoang, 2016)

This change can be seen as sustainability, transparency and authenticity are no longer ways for brands to stand out, but rather highly expected as norms from consumer side. This so-called new consumerism is pressing change in the survival on retail sectors. The shopping habits have notably changed in just a decade and the consumption has become conscious. (Hoang, 2016)

The consumers expect transparency in all business practices from the brands and retailers. The environmental and working conditions need to be shared for these highly knowledgeable shoppers. By revealing parts of the business practices is a way to engage with the consumers and help to create an honest brand experience, as these messages are traditionally kept secret. Unauthentic, insincere messages are not going through for the new generations, and the honesty needs to be implemented even in the products, especially when talking about traditional apparel industry practices. (Hoang, 2016)

Authentic brand values open a dialogue with the consumers better than jargon based glorifications, which many organizations use quite shamelessly. The products should be aligned with these values and reflect company history and culture. As consumers might be more aware of their spending, it is important for them to feel that they are paying for authenticity, because authenticity can be predicted to become primary criteria when consumers are buying. (Hoang, 2016)

The overall sustainability and consumers' growing interests in their own roots and heritage, are going to play a big role with the rise of experience economy. People gravitate

towards paid-for experiences, and how things affect, or rather enhance their life. The brands and their products are supposed to help the shopper to achieve their personal goals and are expected to provide the consumer with what they need or want, preferably before they start seeking for it. Brands should actively provide something that shoppers want to use regularly. The modern consumers want to express their individuality, so the brands are expected to recognize this desire and provide more personalized services and products. (Hoang, 2016; King, 2017; Walker, 2017)

If shoppers want to interact with a specific brand, it is important for that company to invest in their retail technology and adapt to the latest ways to help build a relationship with their consumers. Consumers can even be quite passionate about seeking the information and learn about company supply chains and operations, to strengthen their notions of the brand. They can also search information what is behind the product price point, so breaking down of the manufacturing and costs for the consumers' knowledge, can definitely be seen as a positive effort. (Hoang, 2016)

### **3.1 Consumer experience**

Walker study has predicted that in 2020 the consumer experience is going to be the main differentiator in the comparison of price and product. The more informed and intelligent consumers expect more from the companies they choose to do business with. The advancements in technology and connectivity are giving everyone more options and resources thus making the world smaller. (Walker, 2017)

Forerunners are also going to be separated from followers in the years to come, by the knowledge that the real time is not fast enough. This pressures proactive, reactionary actions and constant prediction of consumer desires. (Walker, 2017)

The seamless delivery of the consumer experience is crucial. Consumers don't see any touchpoints, and they view experiences as combined sets, instead of point-by-point divided actions. Fancy terms are often used in marketing communication and strategizing, without any concept of how they can really be implemented. The focus is thus often operational and relevance is completely missing: how are these actions to be delivered?

With this type of focus many brands face challenges as interactions are going to happen mainly on consumers' terms in the future. (Schmitt, 2003; Walker, 2017)

### **3.1.1 CEM – how to manage the experience**

To start the process of successful consumer experience management, it is necessary to have knowledge of the experiential world of the consumers. This means that the target consumer needs to be identified, the experience tracked through the touchpoints and the competitive landscape researched. Brands need to use unique and authentic research methods to gain honest insight. (Schmitt, 2003)

Positioning, or how the company wants consumers to see the company or the brand is an important part of any marketing strategy. Most of the times these strategies are internally build and don't communicate with the market or target consumers. These strategies fall short on guiding how to accomplish tasks and are often forgotten in time, due to their vague nature. (Schmitt, 2003)

Many organizations seem to stop on the event of shopping when dealing with consumers. But in the near future, if not already, this is not a way to compete on the market sector with the leaders. The process does not end at the point when the consumer has become a shopper and the Customer Relationship Management, or CRM in short, is updated with their information. There is still a point that seems almost always overlooked, as it means more work. However this step might be the crucial one bringing in those loyal consumers that shop with the brand not just once, but many times. Since these delighted consumers become those advocates that are the secret of the success in the market, and also it is a less expensive way compared to enlisting new ones. (Burdett, 2014)

The concept of 'experiential marketing' focuses on the consumption and usage situations that are brought together at all touchpoints. The desirable experience is brought to life with the help of marketers, who restore their job from protector of the brand to producer of the brand. These producers are in charge of breathing life to the brand at all touchpoints, creating valuable experiences for the consumers. (Schmitt, 2003)

### 3.1.2 Educating the consumers for a lasting, active relationship

Trust is important in any relationship building, and the interactions between brands and consumers aren't any different. Consumers expect feeling confident about their purchase decisions. They expect the brands to connect by providing experiences and a sort of education. Educating the consumers and shoppers is often overlooked due to the dreaded cost of these actions, but it is actually studied that there is measurable Return of Invest, or ROI in short. (Hendricks, 2017)

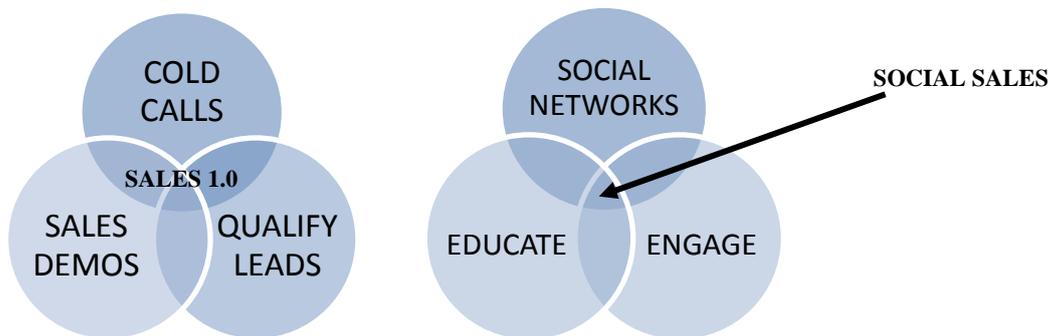


Figure 5. Social Sales: Old vs. New Sales Model. Adaption. (Smith, 2013)

Educational content that is used in marketing communications and actions, can be seen as a way to develop the interactions on touchpoints with the consumers. Also it can get individual brand messages out through the ocean of advertisement that the consumers are endlessly encountered in their daily lives. Educating will also improve the industrial transparency and help the accountability of the brand in the eyes of the consumer. An excellent way to become a trusted online brand is to become an informative, social and educational leader. The provided content doesn't have to be complex, for example it can be a video blog about a shopping trip or revealing manufacturing information in the product description section. Taking the consumers behind the scenes involves them in the brand and product story. If brands take on listening to the consumers, they will never run out of things to do or valuable content to provide. (Hendricks, 2017; King, 2017)

## 3.2 Start from the inside – organizational mindset

To really become consumer centric, the change needs to start from the inside of the organization. Companies can make sure that their service is always exceptional by empowering their own employees and making sure that the employees get their ideas heard. This is where the different departments can work together, rather than stay divided as they have traditionally been. (McPherson, 2017; Richards, 2013)

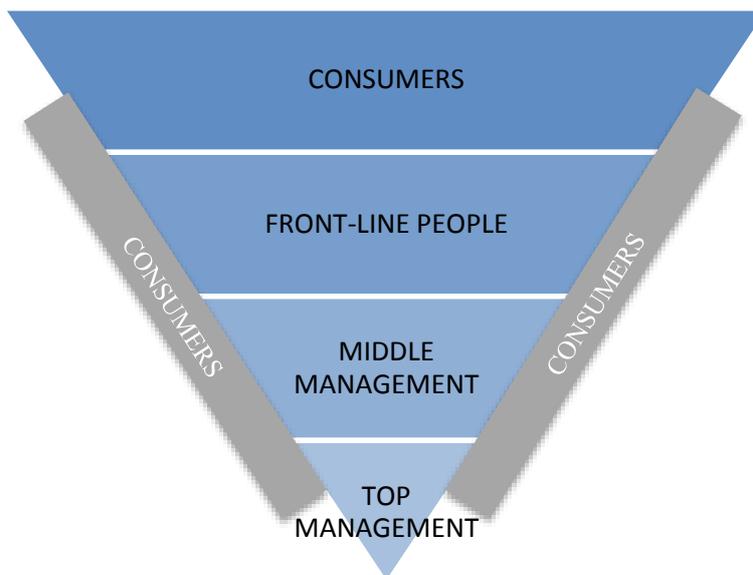


Figure 6. Modern Consumer Oriented Organization. Adaption. (Kotler & Kotler, 2012)

Human Resources, or HR in short, as a department has been traditionally overseeing the employee alignment with the company missions, values and visions. When the whole organization is shifted towards consumer centered functions, the HR has to guide employee behavior to deliver delighting experiences to the consumers. This means changing how certain human resource processes are viewed and implemented, such as recruiting, training and measuring behavior. The human resource department can play a big part in organizing for the consumer experience focused organization. (Schmitt, 2003)

### 3.2.1 Employee empowerment

Companies are more and more taking in consideration their employee talents, and thus the concept of ‘employee empowerment’ has formed itself. It has been recognized that

employees who can participate with their ideas and knowledge to benefit the employer are generally more loyal and can significantly improve the service to consumers. Indra Nooyi, PepsiCo executive, has suggested that companies should use their female employees to find innovative solutions to connect with their female consumers. (Clifford, 2016; Richards, 2013)

Employees are a great source for the company to ideate how costs can be reduced and overall efficiency improved. Empowered employees are able to make flexible, quick decisions without supervision, challenge existing conditions and feel that their input is valued. This reflects in great internal and external service, as well as makes the employees great individual brand ambassadors with their pride in their profession and work place. Fresh ideas are very important in the fast changing industries in order to keep up with competitors. (Richards, 2013)

### **3.2.2 Team work across all organizational departments**

Traditional marketing is not consumer focused. The main, quite narrow focus is on the benefits of products, and this type of marketing sees consumers only as decision makers. Commonly the consumer is not thought to be emotional or influence-driven purchaser. To really put the consumer in the heart of all doing, and be truly consumer oriented, the entire field of marketing needs to be thought over. (Schmitt, 2003)

The siloes or deeply separated departments inside companies are actually working against the organizational progress and possibly even slowing down the otherwise smart marketing measures. The aim for all should be towards all inclusive, consumer centric goals. Consumer should be in the center for everyone and in every project, whilst the organizational structure becomes more collaborative. (Guess, 2016; McPherson, 2017)

### **3.2.3 eNPS – how loyal are the employees?**

The Net Promoter Score can also be implemented in organizational development, as the way employees feel about the company is the base layer of all consumer centric actions. Employee satisfaction and empowerment is straight behind how the consumers feel about

the brand or company. The environment should encourage to empowering employees, especially the front-line staff, so that they can easily recognize the motivation behind serving the consumers. (McPherson, 2017)

As each employee has unique skill sets and talents, they should be implemented in the daily work towards the best possible results. The organizational support should be such that the employees see the benefits of recognizing each other and working as a team. This advances the organizational wellness eliminating problems and unnecessary competitiveness. Measuring the eNPS can further help the companies and the brand improve their services and overall consumer experience. (McPherson, 2017)

### **3.2.4 Benchmarking**

For apparel brands to successfully make an impact on this over competitive market, and produce engaging, attractive digital content, benchmarking has proven to be a great improvement method. In the fast phased industry, it is not possible to keep growing while staying still, and reducing costs. As simply beating competition or providing good services won't result in remaining successful, benchmarking is giving the systematic and continuous way to identify how the brand can improve and also help predicting future trends. (Knipe, 2002; Boland, 2016)

To successfully conduct benchmarking, it should be done beyond straight competitors and all sized brands should be considered to be reviewed. The awareness of constantly improving helps setting holistic goals, without confusing consumers with mimicking actions and exceeding their expectations, by gaining understanding in the competitors' performance and using those as inspiration to create genuine engagement. (Knipe, 2002; Boland, 2016)

## **4 UNDERSTANDING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

A further explanation why people do pay more for highly branded, almost cult-like items, can be found from brain activity as well. People seek moments that are fresh and unique. The midbrain region regulates the motivation levels, while the dopamine release happens

in the frontal regions activating the reward prediction, and the experience of novelty. The basic principle of supply and demand clarifies why people naturally gravitate towards the idea of limited editions. (Rampton Baseley, 2016)

In today's world, it is quite often overlooked that basic human behavior includes returning the favors. This can be seen as an asset on marketing purposes, as the giving out freebies or surprising consumers with an unexpected sample, can often lead to positive feedback in return. The simple gratitude towards the consumer shouldn't be overlooked, as that can help in building lasting relationships, if the actions are felt sincere enough from the consumer side. The best way for the companies to adapt to changes, is by learning of the consumer on a human being and psychological level. (Merriman, 2015; Rampton Baseley, 2016)

Brain activation with advertisement exposure has been studied with brain scans to gain knowledge beyond focus groups or surveys. The hidden meaning behind why humans do things and why they are affected by certain images, and how sounds stimulate specific regions of brains, is far more fruitful for marketers than basic questionnaire. (Berger, 2011)

#### **4.1 Psychology behind behavior and decision making**

Understanding consumer behavior is a key factor in successful marketing communications. Campaigns focused on delighting the consumer require more insightful knowledge of individual behavior. The science itself is constantly expanding, but to deliver outstanding, consumer centered marketing, the basics of behavioral psychology and patterns of consumptions should be studied for a better awareness of the consumers. (Bernstein, 2016)

Abraham Maslow has defined how the human behavior is driven by a pursuit to accomplish certain needs. Some of these needs are more material, and can be satisfied with purchases. The lower-order needs, the need of material things, are only a part of fulfillment, as the self-actualization, realizing one's own potential, is by far more delighting for human than physical needs like material goods and security. (Berger, 2011)

Human behavior itself is rather irrational and unconscious, and some cognitive biases affect the decision making. Surveying feelings and attitudes from consumers might not be reliable, as not everyone can self-report honestly. Humans tend to rely on latest information over “older” information, which might not always result in good decisions from the consumers’ part, but influencing might have counter effects. (Johnson, 2013; Lebowitz & Lee, 2015)

Humans have specific core needs that have been represented by many theories, including the concept of Maslow’s hierarchy. The businesses are these days looking into understand behaviorism as a part of their journey to the success. After all, humans do share some specific needs that, when correctly understood, can be considerate in planning strategical sales and marketing plans. (Rampton Baseley, 2016)

#### **4.1.1 Needs and wants should not be mixed**

It is quite often that needs and wants are labeled in the same box, inaccurately, especially when thinking about consumers. While talking about satisfying the needs and wants, the marketing is already going to fail if trying to achieve success. Satisfying is providing things to the expected level of a person’s interest, while really successful actions need to aim higher, beyond the consumer desires. That of course needs more work and dedication, and also understanding consumer wants on a new level. Wants and needs can be separated quite simply by explaining that needs are about survival and wants are that same needs fulfilled more than what is absolutely necessary. (Business.com, 2017; Ducatte, 2009)

According to business guru Tony Robbins human needs are generally similar, no matter what the driver or the purpose is. When understanding these needs and where they stem from, it is easier to create delighting new actions. The six presented needs include:

- Assurance and avoidance of pain, comfort and stability
- Thrive for variety and change, motivation to learn the unknown
- Significance, individuality, unique specialty and personal necessity to someone or something

- Connecting and being loved, cared for, feeling closeness, forming union
- Growth, eagerness to understand and expand their capabilities
- Contribution, a sense of serving and supporting others

There are four different parts, which human needs fall under. These are called **utilitarian**, which are *experienced as normal or practical*, **hedonic**, which are *bringing pleasure*, **biogenic**, which are *physiological needs* and last, **psychogenic needs**, which are about *acceptance and social dynamics*. (Ducatte, 2009; Rampton Baseley, 2016)

According to Philip and Kevin Kotler, the needs that consumers are not fully conscious of should be stated as well. Responding to only an evident needs, such as inexpensivity of products, is not enough. There should be an active recognition of unstated needs and those needs that delight the consumer, e.g. how the consumer would enjoy a little premium giveaway, upgrade or a freebie with their purchase. For companies to differentiate, it is important to help consumers learn what they truly desire, even on a hidden need level, such as how consumer want to appear in their social circles. (Kotler & Kotler, 2012)

#### **4.1.2 Influences on purchase decisions**

There is a five-stage process on typical consumer purchase routine, which includes e.g. the recognition of need, such as replacing a broken product, gathering information and even post purchase evaluations. Brands are trying to influence consumers positively on these steps with marketing and sales techniques, but there are also many outside impacts that should be considered. Studying the consumer behavior and psychology behind the decisions and motivations will help companies with strategizing the process. (Desai, 2013)

Consumers might be influenced, even not knowingly, by their childhood experiences or their peers' lifestyle choices that have formed their personality. Even the society or culture can be an influencer for the consumer, as it often is helping to shape overall beliefs and feelings. (Desai, 2013)

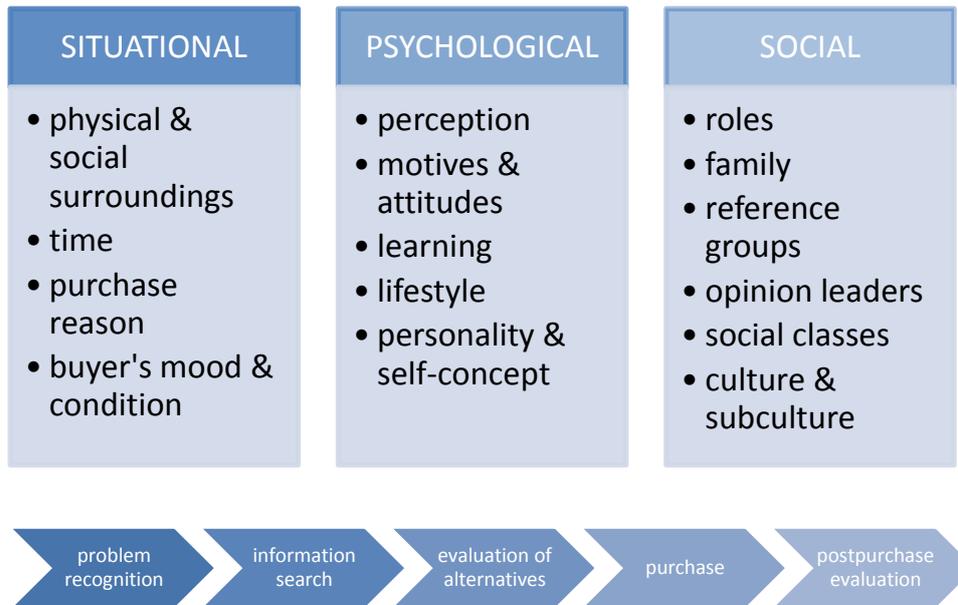


Figure 7. Possible Influences on Consumer Buying Decision Process. Adaption. (cheqala5626, 2012)

There can be economical models influencing the consumer, like price or personal income effects, but sociological and psychological influences can be quite persuasive, as they stem from consumers personal, deep seated motives. Consumers also have certain values of how they approach the world around them, so it is quite preferable for the brand to gain knowledge of the environments that their target consumers live and learn in. (Desai, 2013)

## 4.2 Gender and its relations to consumer behavior

Talking about gender in the 2010's is more of a personal rather than societal definition. The unique gender identity is more meaningful for people in comparison to biological gender, especially for the younger generations. Since there is a growing adoption and usage of the term 'genderqueer' and 'gender fluidity', this research uses the gender 'female' as representing anyone who personally identifies themselves as woman. (Gender Diversity, 2017)

Women are occupying more high level professional positions than before, and that has changed the typical concept of household spending and earnings and overall roles, making women an important, growing and very potential consumer segment. The knowledge of this has been around for quite some time. A quick google search shows multiple studies

of the subject, a first one from 1986, by V. Prakash. But still many organizations are failing connecting and interacting with female consumers on a genuine level and thus miss the loyal relationships of this potentially prolific market. According to a study by Marketing Zeus in United States 2012, 91 % of women felt that marketers did not understand them. (Benko & Pelster, 2013; King, 2017)

#### **4.2.1 Differences between female and male shoppers**

University of California, Irvine has conducted a study that compares the brains of both male and female and searches reasons for the basic behavioral characteristics of these genders, especially in the decision processes. Women have ten times more white matter, which facilitates the connections among information process centers, than men, which explains that men are great at pure processing, while women are more skilled collating and integrating differing pieces of information. Female brain lobes are connected by a 10% thicker cord which widens their peripheral vision in comparison to male. These brain differences do not affect intellectuality, but they do influence the decision making processes. (Benko & Pelster, 2013)

As shoppers, females are more discovery oriented and keep an open mind, while men have more of a mission and are task-oriented in the similar settings. Women shoppers are more likely to have satisfying results on their shopping trips. They see meetings as possibilities for familiarize, while men go directly towards the purpose of the task in hand. Women gravitate more towards social dynamics and personalities, and aim for holistic outcomes by maximizing solutions. (Benko & Pelster, 2013)

It is not surprising that females deal with things more empathetically and reinforce diversity, as they are able to recognize broader contexts and are comfortable with their emotional intelligence. Men on the other hand attack problems by isolating components. (Benko & Pelster, 2013)

Men shoppers need more detailed descriptions and do a lot of research before purchasing a product, but are more likely to end the process after they find the product that satisfies their wishes. For women, the opinions of others influence purchase decisions. The social

media accounts of peers have become very important sources for millennial women in United States to discover new products, so much that 40 % of studied female responses between ages of 18 to 35 answered social media to be the second biggest influence after in-store browsing. The importance of word of mouth can be seen in the results of 35 % of the same women answered that they are influenced by consumer reviews on the company web site. (Zorzini, 2017; Marketing Sherpa, 2016)

A study conducted by the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, DCA in short, was comparing differences of products marketed to male and female consumers. This study showed that there were significant differences in gender pricing and women pay more 42 % of the time, when men pay more only 18 % of the time. Nearly 800 products were surveyed and as the individual consumer can not affect the pricing of the marketed products, the responsibility lies with manufacturers and the retail sectors. Women are paying thousands of dollars more over the course of their life than men, e.g. 8 percent more in clothing and 13 % more for personal care products, which usually are very similar to male versions. (de Blasio & Menin, 2015)

#### **4.2.2 Sporty female consumers**

According to a study conducted by a MBA program in Kenan-Flagler Business School, the marketing campaigns have started to recognize the women who are interested in sports. For example, the 2015 NFL Championship game was watched by 100 million viewers, from which 46 % were women. NFL games in general are watched by 35 % female viewers, comparing to 32 % who watch the NHL game events. (Dosh, 2016; Nielsen Sports, 2016)

Women are seen as hard workers, and the sports advertising is waking up to this fact. As 60 % of sports related apparel purchases are made by the female consumers, the potential is there. Even though there are gender specific needs that require different methods, the same inspiring messages in marketing can appeal to both genders: the messages about healthy living and reaching to one's personal potential. Many brands have already tweaked their testosterone leading images to suit the female consumers, even in sports that are traditionally considered to be "all male". (Dosh, 2016; Nielsen Sports, 2016)

Female athletes can be considered great ambassadors. They are authentic and have respectfully earned their spot in the peak of their sport, in global sector. However, many mainstream brands use models and celebrities for advertising lines and collections for female consumers. Athletic apparel and gear ads can be considered a very important way for bringing knowledge of the athletes, which is, in comparison, very well done with the male athletes, but women's sports lacks an audience. Not casting real female athletes can be a great reason behind why women decide not to buy from specific brand. Aspiring athletes are looking for success stories and someone to look up to. Showing just model bodies and unrealistic goals, can be seen as not a good approach. (Dosh, 2016; Krupnick, 2017; Nielsen Sports, 2016)

With correctly focused and wisely targeted ads, there would be a great chance to capitalize the female market in the strongest segment of the global apparel industry that is sportswear. Considering the uphill battle which female athletes are already facing when earning respect similar to their male counterparts, it is possibly up to leading sportswear companies to use someone as a model who actually uses the gear for an athletic purpose. This could very well be a way to win over women's spending. (Dosh, 2016; Krupnick, 2017; Nielsen Sports, 2016)

### **4.3 Connecting with Gen Z**

Technological savvy is beyond the Gen Z's abilities; they have been born digital. They don't know what the technological revolution is, as they are born around the change of the millennium. They are not able to differentiate the channels they use while making purchase decisions which automatically affects how and where they shop. It has been researched that 92 % of Gen Z spend time online daily, and 24 % are online constantly. These numbers are likely to increase as the generation ages. (Pike, 2016)

Dressing up used to be more about fitting in, but the new generation looks for ways to represent their individuality and are more likely to carefully study the brands to find the ones that connect with their personal beliefs and priorities. They are in general more en-

trepreneurial and humanitarian than the prior generations, which makes them very conscious shoppers. The constant economic turbulence they have been born in to, has made them more self-aware and self-reliant. Gen Z's are definitely more cautious of their spending habits and have adapted more slow growth economy, compared to even Millennials, the earlier generation. (Pike, 2016)

It has been seen that Gen Z's are attracted to authenticity and personality in brands. Genuine communication has resonated better with the younger consumers, than typical sales oriented campaigning. For example, brand *American Eagle* was able to engage with the younger shoppers with their 'Aerie Real' campaign which featured so called real teenagers as models and the campaign images were not retouched. This stood out greatly as similar brands have been struggling with connecting with this generation and even faced closing stores. This presents that the Gen Z's are not going to be an easy advertising target, as they are adapted to quickly filter through information, research things actively and do not form loyalty with brands easily. The somewhat successful loyalty programs have been studied not to work with this generation. The Gen Z's want to be in charge of their lives and appreciate individuality. Fresh, authentic ways are needed to grab these consumers' attention, and this is done by understanding some key points of Gen Z's profound traits. (Merriman, 2015; Pike, 2016)

Building trust is not an easy process, and it is going to take a lot of work from the company side. The openness of these consumers is going to be a valid point in communicating with them, as they see genders as more fluid than other generations before, and failing at that might risk becoming overlooked, as it is crucial to show respect, before it is asked by the consumers. The trust is build more with engaging the Gen Z's into creating and giving them opportunities to solve things on the brand's behalf. This needs to be smartly planned operation, preferably in cooperation with the Gen Z's, as these highly educated consumers are always looking for better, faster and more delightful implementations. (Merriman, 2015)

On the other hand, the impatience and high expectations of this generation, are setting the bar very high for the brands and the interaction. The companies need to actively seek ways to make solutions hassle and attachment free, to attract these consumers. Becoming

irrelevant is a real risk and that is why companies that are going to harness the trust of these generational representatives, are going to lead the markets of the future. The realism and need of authenticity are going to play a huge part in how Gen Z's receive information. Gen Z's are fans of real people and ordinary, yet initiative personalities. They reject traditional views of perfection and would prefer seeing a "real person" instead of a celebrity in advertising campaigns. (Merriman, 2015)

## **5 RESEARCH & ANALYSIS**

### **5.1 Qualitative research**

To understand on a deeper level 'how' consumers experience something, the interpretive qualitative research methodology is a good choice. When choosing the most beneficial method for this thesis, qualitative study was a natural option as the objective of this study was to gain in-depth data of consumer opinions and mindsets. The qualitative research studies the phenomenon in their natural settings and the views and meanings of the study objects, and this fits the choosing of an online community. Qualitative research and its analysis is based on principles that humans are different and they experience reality differently, which in this study are seen as beneficial factors considering the objectives of the thesis. (Carson, et al., 2001; Nigatu, 2009)

To be consumer centric in this research as well, the qualitative study enables to understand how human experience the topic in question. This means that the overall context is kept in mind, and it is understood how outside influences may affect the topic or the subjects of the study. (Nigatu, 2009)

#### **5.1.1 Observation**

Observation is based on looking at behavior, patterns and occurrences in interaction. In non-participant observation there is no communication with the observer and the target group. It can be used wherever proper data is available and the actions are happening which the researcher is studying. This gives the opportunity to study the online commu-

nity environments for the thesis in a way that is thought to be most valuable for the research. Commonly consumers' responses or buyer behavior in specific situations is researched face to face, but this research is going to apply the same methods in the online environments. (Carson, et al., 2001)

As I had the opportunity to have a longer period for the study, it was terrific to use observation as a method, as it generally should be carried over a longer time. This is because the researcher needs to take in consideration the changeable routines, habits and behavioral patterns, which might happen in person's life. The online community observation was somewhat daunting task, as it never really closes, and there is lot of data observed. The ethical parts needed to be taken in consideration properly. However online community with nicknames, or handles, provides some anonymity and keeps the participants identities anonymous. This is why observation in online community as a method can be considerate appropriate and more ethical. (Carson, et al., 2001)

## **5.2 Netnography**

Netnography as a methodology is founded by Dr. Robert Kozinets who is specialized in consumer culture and tribal marketing. Netnography studies uses naturalistic techniques to study online communities. This virtual methodology adapts traditional, offline practices to the research. (Caliandro, 2014)

Netnography as a term comes from the words *internet* and *ethnography*, which are the main factors that the methodology combines. This qualitative approach analyzes the consumer interaction in online communities to gain valuable insights. (Kozinets, 2002)

The focus of Netnographical studies is anonymous, natural communication in online communities and social media spaces. The activity of the researcher can vary from passive to active participation. The methodology can be easily combined with others including offline member interactions for further the research. (Costello, et al., 2017)

### **5.2.1 Observing Social Media - Reddit**

Especially when thinking about the next generations and the future, it is important to study where these people are. Choosing a social media platform for observation was a natural decision in this study, as online behavior is becoming a great subject of study and the channels themselves have advanced so that e.g. keyword search is becoming more effortless and that way more reliable. Considering the mobile device and connection advancements, such as smartphones and applications people are using these days, the social media study can be seen to be highly real time, which is almost impossible to achieve by using other methods. (Phillips, 2011)

As Amer Sports doesn't have their own online communities where pragmatic data would be available, it was required to gravitate towards more universal channels. The need to get a broad range of anonymous answers led me to choose between the social media picture sharing application Instagram and the largest global discussion forum Reddit.com. Both are also familiar in my personal usage, so there was no need to get to know the specific channels and how they work. Instagram would be an excellent choice as the application is used by 88 % of the Gen Z's according to a study by The Drum. But since there is a need to gain overall knowledge of consumer delight, the Reddit.com was believed to provide more all-inclusive data from both genders and all ages, from all over the globe. (Patel, 2017)

Site	Daily Time on Site	Daily Pageviews per Visitor	% of Traffic From Search	Total Sites Linking In
1 <a href="http://www.reddit.com">http://www.reddit.com</a> User-generated news links, voted, promote stories to the front page.	16:12	10.56	74.80%	471,119
2 <a href="http://cnn.com">cnn.com</a> News, Weather, sports, and services including e-mail news alerts and downloadable audio/video. <a href="#">More</a>	4:20	2.29	73.50%	252,497
3 <a href="http://nytimes.com">nytimes.com</a> Online edition of the newspaper's news and commentary.	4:11	2.19	25.80%	322,034
4 <a href="http://theguardian.com">theguardian.com</a> Home of the Guardian, Observer and Guardian Weekly newspapers plus special interest web sites. <a href="#">More</a>	3:41	2.44	31.10%	154,536
5 <a href="http://www.google.com">http://www.google.com</a> Aggregated headlines and a search engine of many of the world's news sources.	7:53	9.10	1.50%	3,434,789
6 <a href="http://www.foxnews.com">www.foxnews.com</a> Daily. Offers news, opinion, sports, arts and living and entertainment. Includes archives news. <a href="#">More</a>	3:47	2.11	73.20%	196,524
7 <a href="http://bbc.com/news">bbc.com/news</a> United Kingdom and international news headlines. Contains video and audio webcasts, forums, and <a href="#">More</a>	4:29	3.07	18.30%	286,932

Figure 8. Reddit.com at first place in Alexa.com statistics Aug 9th 2017. Screen capture. (Alexa.com, 2017)

What also strengthened the choice in observing interactions in Reddit.com was that the analytics product site Alexa.com, has listed Reddit as #8 on global website listings, and it is listed as #5 in United States only. Reddit.com is also listed as most used and longest used news site globally, above more traditional media like Cnn.com and Nytimes.com. This brings more credibility as it can be seen trusted by the users. (Alexa.com, 2017)

Observing the behavior in social media is a great choice for modern day consumer research, all things considered. The social media is an active, non-stop world that is constantly evolving. The consumers are also free to provide their honest feedbacks as they have a certain anonymity. The anonymity can be seen also a problem. The results might not be credible if the person would act as someone else, i.e. *catfishing*. However, a study by Psychological Science conducted in 2008, in the early days of Facebook, showed that more people were actually presenting their personalities authentically in these digital environments. (Phillips, 2011)

Social media research can give a great variety of participants to the study, such that wasn't possible to reach even just a decade ago. The connectivity across the globe is also extending the territorial possibilities in data collection, which can give the study more authenticity compared to a study that is conducted in a single region. Also in social media it is

possible to connect with variable generations, if taken in consideration which channel is reviewed. For example, the teenagers today have become less engaged with platforms such as Facebook, but their parents can be found to be quite active at that specific channel. (Phillips, 2011)

### **5.2.2 Ethics**

Privacy and confidentiality are always an important issue whilst conducting a study. In social media, if used specific handles or usernames, the anonymity of the user should be always secured, which means that if there is a possibility to learn some personal information of that person through their handle, it should be kept secret. (Phillips, 2011)

Observation as a study method is ethical and appropriate if the subjects are not exploited in anyway. In this research the aim is to gain knowledge in observed behavior, not people's personal and internal values, which means that no private information or even individual respondent's handles are needed in the publication of this research. (Carson, et al., 2001)

## **5.3 Collecting data and analysis**

Data that is collected in social media differs from traditional survey data and a lot of technical knowledge is needed in the process. The constantly evolving sites are making even a data gathered a year ago irrelevant and possibly derail the whole research. So it is essential to plan and conduct the data collection in such way that the data isn't going to immediately expire. (Phillips, 2011)

The data itself was collected during a few days in July 2017 with pre-chosen key words from Reddit.com and is then scaled first down with choosing only topic related forums, or subreddits as they are called in Reddit-sphere. Monitoring was chosen to do at athletic, consumer, retail or healthy living- oriented subreddits. Here too the principle that social phenomenon is better understood from the inside is beneficial. From the chosen subreddits all the data I gathered and cleaned up, meaning all the provocative or racist or overly sexual answers were censored, as they are not bringing any added value to the research.

This is something that needs to be taken in consideration, and this specific knowledge comes from own usage of the systems. After data collection, it is labeled and comb it once more for the overall analysis. (Nigatu, 2009)

### **5.3.1 Using Word Cloud to present qualitative data**

To present pages of research data can be both overwhelming and challenging for the readers, so it is good to think about ways to clarify and communicate easier to others. The Word Cloud is something that technological advancements has made possible to visually and effectively give instant accessibility to the reader and let them understand the otherwise ineffective text data. (McKee, 2014)

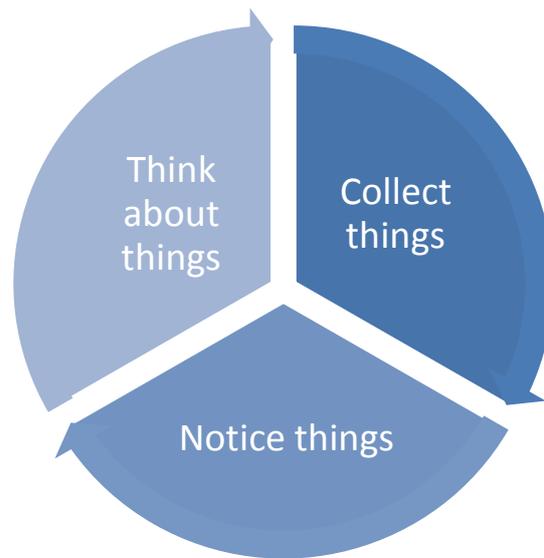
With Word Cloud the word frequency can be easily detected and from there patterns can be revealed to help guide the analysis process. The benefits also include that it can highlight some surprising words, and grab attention to something that might be overlooked as “every-day” information is text form. (McKee, 2014)

It is important to remember that Word Cloud won't do the whole analysis, and things need to be organized before inserting data to the Word Cloud. Although word clouds are effective in marketing purposes, e.g. presenting consumer needs and pain points, it might be misleading in other researches, as it doesn't represent the impact of the words, just the frequency. Word Cloud shouldn't be used with complex topics, such as budgets and crisis communications, as it is best in exploratory qualitative analysis. (McKee, 2014)

## **5.4 Data analysis**

Compared to quantitative data, qualitative data is in-depth and illustrative, and the aim is to find patterns from it. Qualitative data is not easily trimmed to numbers. The data can be described in a more philosophical manner. The knowledge gathered is supposed to provide more explanation and understanding of investigations, which is enhanced in the analysis with the observational field notes and research journaling. (Nigatu, 2009)

The point of focus in this analysis is somewhere between the primary message of the content and the ideas of individuals and groups. This focus is kept intentionally loose as everyday innovations can stem from odd places. In the data analysis the process is more ongoing, circular such as the 'Noticing, Collecting & Thinking model' below, for the possibility to gather possible new insights throughout the process. This was possible due to availability of extra time and personal resources. (Nigatu, 2009)



*Figure 9. Noticing, Collecting & Thinking- model. Qualitative data analysis. Adaption. (Nigatu, 2009)*

With the descriptive analysis, the issues of credibility, applicability neutrality and objectivity are taken in consideration. Using the literature review part of this study and my own journaling, it was easier to stay as a non-participatory observant that maps and interprets the data for in-depth patterns and rising associations. (Nigatu, 2009)

## **5.5 Findings**

The Word Cloud data labeling proved to be an excellent choice to point out most important topics of all the different subreddits and hundreds of comments. Immediately the bolder words would point out the most frequently used words, and even though not all the subreddits or comments were useful for the study itself, analyzing Word Cloud made the process easier and left more time for the analysis of the insights that could help answer the research questions more thoroughly.

All of these findings in their word cloud form can be found in the end of this study, in the appendices section. Providing this information does not compromise the anonymity or raise other ethical issues as the word cloud forms themselves do not include information of the subreddit or discussion in hand, nor do they have information of the users.

Keeping a non-participatory and purely observing point of view with this data analysis was easier when the key words were pre-decided before the start of the data gathering and observation itself. This brings more reliability for the study, as the opinions are not influenced by the researchers own.

For the data gathering after months of observing the possible subreddits and testing key word searches that might yield for the most rewarding insights, four key words were chosen:

*'athletic wear brands'*, *'best shopping experience'*, *'marketing to women'* and *'outdoors clothing'*. The data gathering was done between four days and the labeling was done after that over a longer period of time, which included choosing the right Word Cloud provider website and some set-backs due to the firstly used Word Cloud website.

To not limit the search too much, the risk of not searching key words specifically focused on Gen Z was taken. Gen Z is more of a marketing term and to really gain reliable and applicable data, much more extensive observation would have been required, which might have compromised anonymity and other ethical factors and was not also possible with the results available.

### **5.5.1 Insights of Athletic Wear Brands**

In this key word search, there were 10 subreddits of discussions, and over 350 comments to comb through. This key word was supposed to enlighten the overall opinions people have about this market. To highlight this, it was put inside"" - symbols for focused results.

Noting the themes from the insights, required that all the Word Clouds were put on the same page. This made some words stand out even more, which gave some interesting



Something else that can be seen was that consumers appreciate discount brand stores and outlets, as they are not looking for the latest trendy looks in athletic wear, rather good deals and buying more at once.

### **5.5.2 Best shopping experience**

This key word search can seem obvious, when thinking about the research question itself. But it was no means an easy search. The 1316 comments were spread across 10 subreddits and the topics included wedding dress shopping and even logistics provider experiences. That meant that the observing and analyzing needed to be done a bit more in a wider view. This analysis did not give out the most obvious answers.

Like in the previous Word Clouds, some bigger, leading brands, that are widely known for their exceptional consumer experience providence could be easily detected. These brands should be obviously taken in consideration for interesting benchmarking opportunity.

Online shopping experiences stood out and main things people discussed were the ordering and shipping experiences. The market leaders were brought up here and seems there is a big gap to the other provides, considering the service, payment and shipping issues. It could be a great opportunity for every brand with e-commerce presence to take this in consideration. It is not a surprise, as anyone can tell, that the shipment times are wished to be tolerable. In this connected world, e-commerce providers should make a huge effort to provide well parcel tracking, shorter, reliable shipping times, even from one country to another, especially if there are extra costs for the shipping.

The subject of returning items was discussed by the consumers, and this has also been noticed in the articles that were reviewed. Returning purchased items could always be a better, easier experience, especially in the e-commerce environments.

People were also excited when something so called extra was offered during their service. Those extra things that stood out were actually pretty small things and this strengthens the point that expectations might quite easily be exceeded from the brand side, as not

many are providing this kind of special treatment for their shoppers. This kind of bonus situations were e.g. when skaters were offered stickers with their purchases or when women who were bra shopping got personal measurement help.

Something that can be interpreted from the bridal store, which of course are not straightly connected to the Amer Sports athletic brands, is that consumers appreciate this kind of VIP service, appointments for shopping and having a visionary, passionate professional giving them help and insights. The similar professionalism was a theme that was brought up in many discussions: people do appreciate having a sort of personal shopping experience, where they can connect with the sales associate, and not only buy goods.

### **5.5.3 Marketing to women**

Seeing that there is an active discussion on female dominated subreddits, it was apparent that there needed to be a focused key word search, not only because of the need to gain insight for the additional research question, but also because there was an evident pool of strong needs and desires available. Since the attempts to gain survey-like, more in-depth data on these subreddits were failed due to the over active moderator rules, it was important to gain some fresh knowledge from how females see the way they are interacted with.

One thing that stood strongly out for a professional point of view, was that consumers do not understand the difference between e.g. a brand and a logo or a leading product, and have a hard time seeing beyond brand communication and social media channels are used only as selling opportunity by brands and companies. These are the situations where the responsibility of the brand side is to cleverly educate the consumer and provide value to their life, with said Instagram profiles, not only try to sell something.

A word 'pink' was actually bold in many Word Clouds, and it was something that seemed to be frequently used. This needed deeper additional viewing and immersing into the discussions and topics, as it was important not to assume that it was either positive or negative. What was quickly recognized was that the color pink was used a lot in marketing or as a product color focusing on women. This gave the discussers a feeling that they were

not understood by the marketers, which is something that also stood up from the theoretical and literature review that was done earlier. Women were targeted, exclusively, by products such as light beers, makeup and female hygienic products, and the feedback from those measures was quite distressing. The use of the word 'sexism' was often bold in these discussion Word Clouds, and female discussers were thinking that the interaction was planned by male marketers, as there was so little knowledge of things important for women. A great example were cars, as women were targeted by SUV's or mini-vans, and seen as a "soccer-mom"- type of character, when even studies lately have shown, that more ambitious working women are on the rise. Also the 'body positivity' by some brands had gone too far according to one heated discussion. Turning a shower gel bottle to represent 'real' female shapes, was seen degrading, and this could be easily compared to similar type of products for male which made the runway model-man who uses the product automatically irresistible 'ladies' men', while women are told it is okay to be chubby or even fat.

Of course there is often another side to these, while many struggle with body positivity issues and are demanding this type of advertising. However, an easy solution could be, to keep the marketing communication either simply real or then use the excitable storytelling measures, like in many male targeted marketing.



Figure 11. Example 2 of the Word Clouds of gathered data of one subreddit answers. Screen Capture from website. (Davies, 2017)

Like pointed out earlier, the consumers were talking a lot of product development as well. A lot of wishes regarding to fit and specific product details were brought up frequently. Female consumers are quite passionately requesting functional pockets or pocket options

for their active apparel. This has become more of an issue when the choice of workout pants tends to be exclusively a fitting pair of leggings and women need to carry a smart phone and other personal objects with them during exercise sessions. Another thing that was very bold in many Word Clouds, was 'sports bra'. There is a huge demand of understanding the functionality, the fitting, the material and the different situations where this bra is used.

#### **5.5.4 Outdoors clothing**

This key word was an obvious one to add more depth to the first key word search 'athletic wear brands'. Also the preliminary runs of this specific key word search had shown some interesting insights that when presented to Amer Sports representatives, were found fascinating regarding to the topic in hand. This was also the last key word search, and it meant it was already easier to decide, what to comb through. This helped out to overlook minor details and concentrate more on the patterns that could be seen. With this search, it was easier to review the other searches as well to gain more insights that might have been otherwise overlooked. There were 525 comments on 10 different subreddits, most of which were not even used due to their not linking to the subject itself and not bringing more value to the research.

It wasn't as easy to detect the genders discussing at these channels as it was with the previous key word searches. This gives this research a new edge and makes it easier to observe it from an anonym consumer place. Considering the research questions, this can definitely be seen as an advantage.

Something that stands out from all the discussions is that the frequently used words are not standing out as distinctly that it was with the other three searches. The scattering was not so deep and there was more themed discussion than with the other searches. Again some specific brands were brought up, and the Amer Sports' brand *Arc'teryx* was in discussions as well, in a quite positive light. The comments about the *Arc'teryx*- brand products were mainly seen positively and the product functionality was viewed tremendous compared to peer brands. Quite a lot negative feedback was given about the price points.

This could mean that the brand has failed to communicate the additional benefits and values the consumer gains choosing their pricier product compared to others.

Word Clouds showed interestingly that the consumers are extremely resourceful these days. They search for information, they have knowledge of different materials, they care about where the products come and what fits with different active hobbies they enjoy practicing. There were active discussions of textiles and materials that were focused on specific hobbies. People were actively offering user knowledge and helping each other out with problems. The community feel was there and you could tell that these people would make excellent brand ambassadors themselves.

Product development discussions were the most active with this key word search. There were lots of functionality wishes, especially when talking about varying weather conditions. People seem to highly appreciate natural fibers in comparison to synthetics, but this too can be easily changed with some clever educating from the brand side.

With this search, people are not so keen about how they look when wearing their favorite gear. According to one discussion, even logos could be hidden as consumers don't see the worth of them to display some brand when they are doing their own exercising.

The mobility and social media were talked a lot at the discussions. Unfortunately, the attempts to gain more gadget-product knowledge fell short, and this could be researched more thoroughly with additional studies focused on the wearable technology and sports gadgets themselves. But these insights strengthen the fact that consumers are in the mobile environments and they are comfortable there. Thus means that a brand that wanting to connect with consumers, should step their strategies up and be at the same channels as well. There were some 'ask me anything's, or AMA's as they are called in the Reddit-sphere, conducted by brand representatives which gave the consumers a real time opportunity to have a discussion with their favorite brand, and even though there were obviously some recruiting questions and some tasteless, as it is an anonym online community, the concepts for the most part worked wonderfully. This type of opportunity should be used by all brands that are trying to be the leaders in consumer experience.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

Focus was to produce a professional thesis and to prove to master this subject, in the start of this thesis process. As the subject was highly consumer focused, it was important to see the company with an outsider viewpoint while researching, to gain as authentic view as possible. But to still manage communicating experienced side as well, so that constructive insights for both the organizational and consumer side can be given. This means that the researcher needed to become a silent-observer and a sophisticated consumer experience consultant for the time of this research. The process itself took enormous time and effort, and required almost constant observing of the market and type of benchmarking of the businesses around.

The main point of this thesis was of course to answer the research questions. With the amount of information available and quite successful insights gathered from the data analysis process, it can be certainly said that the research questions can be answered with this study alone, and to gain even more deep insights, this research can be seen as a good base level to e.g. focus on the consumers of the future or study women consumers with different cultural backgrounds and the potential they bring to the market.

What would have brought more depth to the study, would have been the knowledge of the Amer Sports' personas and how this data matches them. Unfortunately, a further studying of these points wasn't possible due to time limitations. Still there is some knowledge of the target personas, and it is possible to go the results more in depth with Amer Sports' personnel after the thesis has been published.

### 6.1 Questions answered

It is good to recall the focus back to the research questions and to answer them with the knowledge gained from this study.

So to tackle the first question:

- *How can Amer Sports brands engage with the modern consumers seamlessly on all critical touchpoints to ensure delightful omni-channel experiences?*

Some aspects have to be taken in consideration when answering the main question. The first thing is to fully understand the concept of consumer experience and how it is fulfilled. Fulfilling isn't enough, there needs to be a consistent action and management to provide the best possible service, to learn more from the consumers and trends, and actively listen to the feedback the consumers give at each channel and at each point of their journey. This can be ensured with consumer experience management from the organizational side.

As Amer Sports has already very engaged and empowered employees, there is a great opportunity to further harness these talents to be even more outspoken brand ambassadors and to use their individual talents for the benefit of the whole company. The dynamic nurturing of this ongoing organizational advantage should be kept in mind and the development of the talents valued highly in organizational strategy.

The modern consumer is very connected and highly resourceful. This needs to be taken in consideration while building processes around the seamless consumer experience. The needed digital technologies that the target consumers use, need to be used and familiar by the company side as well. Consumers prefer to be contacted by their chosen methods, so the brands need to adapt to this and actively seek more agile ways to bring the consumers the best possible service and interaction. This also connects the Amer Sports touchpoints to the process. There needs to be an active review of what the preferred channels are and how to make the experiences through these channels even better. Also to make the journey more seamless for the consumer, the technological aspects, such as mobile and e-commerce websites should be upgraded to their highest possible forms.

Amer Sports brands would highly benefit of the community or fandom –thinking. By involving the consumers and not going by department or sport first, Amer Sports would speak to the consumers in a new way. With an active community, Amer Sports brands would have a continuous contact with the consumer interface, which would be very beneficial in consumer experience management but also in product development aspects. This type of community could also easily form around e-commerce environments.

Delighting consumers might seem like a daunting task, but it can be actually succeeded with quite small measures. Sometimes authentic demonstration of gratitude towards the shopper is enough, but surprising them with some freebies with their purchase is always a good idea. Building a community around the Amer Sports brands gives new opportunities for more experiential events. There have already been some successful sports events, and this kind of interacting with the consumers is a great way to connect and delight the active shoppers of Amer Sports brands, and even attract potential new ones with exciting opportunities that differ from the usual brick and mortar sales processes.

To give deep insight to the following questions, there could have been even more studying done or additional research methodologies to incorporate. It is possible to find multiple answers for the extra questions from the theoretical part of the thesis, but the Reddit observation gave depth, especially with the female consumer question.

- *In which ways the digital marketing innovations can help connecting with the Gen Z shoppers to ensure profitable growth for the brands?*
- *In what ways can Amer Sports better empower and interact with the sporty female consumers in omni-channel environments to help them become brand advocates?*

The same answers given to the main question can be applied to both of these additional research questions. Active listening and putting the consumer in the center of all doing is of course the ultimate start to all processes and functions. Understanding the human behavioral psychology will help knowing better and predicting the desires of the forthcoming generations of consumers. The knowledge and further studying of female consumer psychology will also benefit planning the communication for this consumer group. Empowering this group is not going to be a linear and easy process, and it needs an active understanding of what women do want and what are their desires. To put it very bluntly, the female consumers need understanding and connection with the brands.

Inbound marketing efforts are a clear way to adapt to a higher connection with the new generation. As these technologically fluent consumers are going to be online most of the time and their attention span is shorter from the same reasons, traditional marketing is not going to work with this target group. Also the right social media platforms should be used

to engage and ask Gen Z's to co-create content, since they are not going to be found from Facebook, where their parents are active users. Images and video messaging is popular with this generation, as well as real people celebrity influencers, so these channels and measures should be cleverly used to interact and attract this generation of consumers. Gen Z's appreciate individuality, so doing mass promotions might not be the way to get their attention, but a clever pop-up shop or authentic video blog, also known as vlog by someone who they can relate to, might just do the trick.

To appeal to the female consumers, the main thing is to stop treating them as a different gender, and start listening to what they want. Trying to produce female products or worse, girl products, seems to be the first wrong step. Not all women want to wear feminine clothing pieces and especially with athletic wear there is no need for that. Providing great quality and functionality, with a good price, will work. The trend like athleisure allows women to outfit themselves according to their personal style, and when studying which athletic brands are female favorites, the main thing in those styles is not that they look to be made for women. Something to be considered, is that women do enjoy sports too and there are great female athletes that could be lifted to bring together communities of women who could support each other's fitness goals.

Storytelling provides a great way to connect with this more intuitional and emotional consumer group. Painting mindscapes with a product marketing and showing women how their life will be enhanced with the use of this specific product. The main thing is not functionality or other features, but rather the places the person goes in these shoes and the feelings the experience evokes inside them.

To sum up the research: have consumers in the center of all actions, notice them to be feeling individuals, provide them wonderful experiences with products and services, connect them at the right time and channel, and also pursue actively to know what those times and channels are. Learning should never be stopped, and listening to consumers and exceeding their expectations with small or bigger details such as freebies or even a VIP sports event is important. Understanding basic human needs and wants will help anyone who works at consumer interface, and authenticity and transparency win trust and loyalty, in all communication towards the consumers. The change itself starts from within the

organization and employees are the best brand ambassadors. Combining departmental knowledge and talent, will work for the benefit of the whole company.

## **6.2 Practical ideas for the brands**

### **6.2.1 HCD - model**

For further ideas, it is good to shortly introduce the Human Centered Design- model. This model was founded in 2009 by an innovation and design company called IDEO. From their web site it is possible to find an enormous amount of interesting content of this problem solving method which is based on creativity, team work and human centricity. It can be used on all industries, departments and all sizes of themes. The secret to its success lies e.g. in the gathering of ideas and prototyping the solutions. (Ideo.org, 2017)

Human Centered Design, in short HCD, can be seen as a tool kit, which can be adapted to use in small and big change situations. It also brings different departments and professionals working together, which is a fresh way to structure possible new, innovative solutions for better consumer experience. The letters ‘HCD’ also point out the three key parts of the process:

- **H = Hear**
- **C = Create**
- **D = Deliver**

The ‘Hear’ is about preparing for research, identifying the challenges, recognizing what knowledge exists and mind setting development. This formation can be highly seen as in this whole thesis process as well, as it was loosely used as an inspiration. (Ideo.com, 2017)

The second step, ‘Create’, is about presenting the gathered knowledge, which was also done in the thesis project, chapter 5. The step includes choosing approaches, gathering stories and identifying patterns, which fairly resembles the qualitative research process.

The last step, ‘Deliver’, is something that this thesis does not provide. It is for the company or brand to do, by planning and implementing those solutions, testing so-called mini-pilots and evaluating the process. This model is of course non-linear as well, as the prototyping itself might loop at least few times. (Ideo.com, 2017)

### **6.2.2 Design Thinking Process**

Close to the HCD is the human centered innovation approach of ‘Design Thinking Process’. It is as well a more creative way to solve problems and discover new opportunities. The goal of it is to provide such solutions that delight people, and in this case, consumers. (Dam & Siang, 2017; PNM, 2015; Ravenscraft, 2016; Miziolek, 2012)

The methodology itself stems from the curiosity of the children and the way children come up with imaginative possibilities, before they are taught “what is possible”. It cleverly combines creative and business practices and ideas, by incorporating variable levels and areas of industry professionals. The success is based on the goal orientation, visualization and the permission to fail, as the process is highly iterative. (PNM, 2015; Ravenscraft, 2016)

### **6.2.3 Empathy mapping**

With the framework ‘Empathy Map’ it is possible to research why consumers are willing to interact with the brand. With the Empathy Map-method it’s possible to dive deeper into the consciousness of a consumer, and provide those more personalized and individualized interactions at the critical touchpoints. Empathy mapping works very similarly than a user persona creation and it was originally created by Dave Gray. It represents a consumer segments and other group of users, and supports overall agility of processes. (Bland, 2016; Cook, 2015)

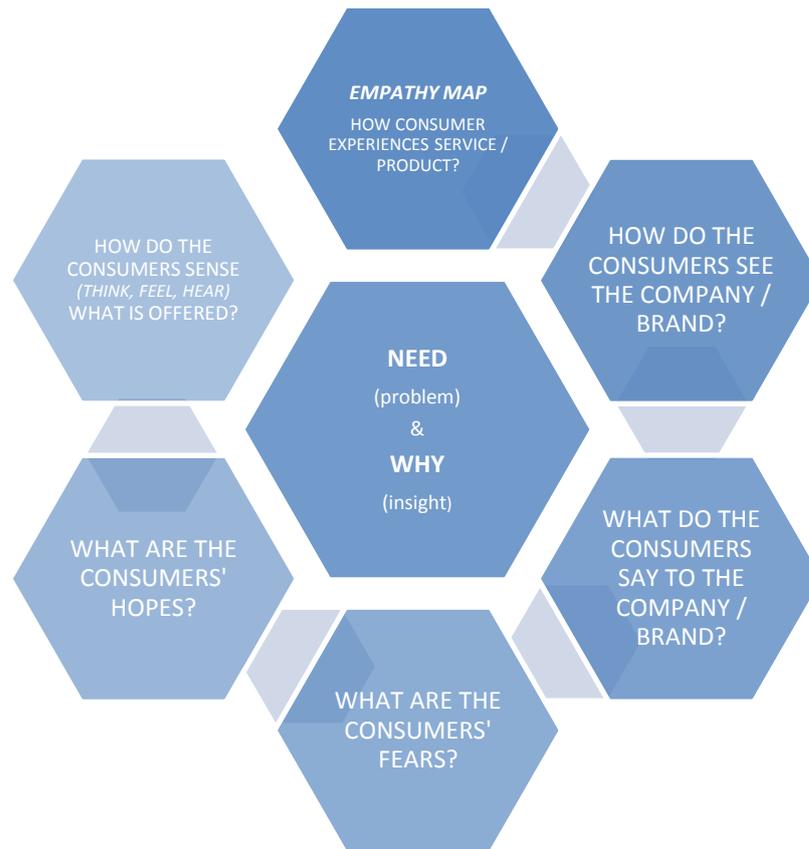


Figure 12. Empathy map. Adaption. (Skills Society Edmonton, 2017)

In terms of effective storytelling and capturing consumer behaviorism, empathy mapping can be used as a tool to submerge into the consumer environment. Empathy mapping works best in an interactive manner, in a team work setting. This technique answers questions such as what the consumers see the brand providing them and how they act around the brand or how they communicate. Mapping this way, it is possible to ponder around what kind of messages the consumers receive from the brand and its competitors, and how it makes them feel and think. As in creating a buyer persona, it is effective to come up with their hopes and fears, as it helps to create subjective value and personal significance in the experience design. (Bland, 2016; Cook, 2015; Skills Society Edmonton, 2017)

### 6.3 Further study and research

This research could have been taken to so many directions and focuses, and even different research methods could have been used. Mixed-method study could be beneficial and

additional valuable data could be gained. However, additional mixed-method research didn't seem necessary to this thesis, since the Social Media-study itself provided more than enough data and material.

Field observations at retail stores could also be potential further study methods. They were also for a long time an option for this research, as they would be an interesting ethnographical way to immerse oneself to the brick and mortar environments. Especially thinking about the future of retail, it would be useful to gather insights to what could or should be done to drive the advancement forward with specific company or brand. The best way to conduct this study would be observing in natural settings, completely anonymously, gathering field notes and for the researcher to be non-participant in the observation itself. This type of research could also prove to be a greatly beneficial benchmarking opportunity, and the company could set the focus on the target and consumers' behavior, or even study their dream consumers' behaviors and purchase journeys.

Obviously consumer psychology should be constantly studied more, as new evolvments in the industry happen quite often. This could be immersed into the CRM system development or built as own HCD –toolkit. Developing the systems could also provide some great prototyping options. The CRM – development could also be useful to adapt to regional sectors to gain more individual insights and that way to delight better with suitable service, solutions and products.

Some concepts that could be further studied and analyzed include the 'Experience economy' and 'Trendspotting'. These two concepts can be already seen valuable for the near future and could become helpful in the overall organizational agility when trying to keep up with the constant changes of the industry.

## 7 GLOSSARY

**Athleisure:** a fastest growing apparel style, comes from words ‘athletics’ and ‘leisure’. Clothing that can be worn for a workout but is suitable as casual wear as well.

(Dictionary.com, 2017)

**B2B:** An acronym meaning ‘Business to business’, and it describes the transaction between businesses, companies, e.g. a manufacturer and a wholesaler. (Investopedia.com, 2017)

**B2C:** An acronym meaning ‘Business to consumer’, meaning the business that sells directly to consumers. (The Balance.com, 2017)

**Benchmarking:** Analyzing how peer businesses achieve their high performance levels and comparing the measurements to organizations different aspects.

(Businessdictionary.com, 2017)

**Brand Advocate:** Consumer or a person who talks positively about a certain brand or a product to other people. (Webopedia.com, 2017)

**Brand Experience:** The feelings and cognitions evoked by the brand design, identity, communications and environments. (The Balance.com, 2017)

**Catfish:** A person who pretends to be someone they are not on social media, especially to pursue online romances. (Urbandictionary.com, 2017)

**CEM:** An acronym of ‘consumer experience management’, or ‘customer experience management’. A strategic way for the company to manage and improve their consumers’ experiences through e.g. feedback. (Businessdictionary.com, 2017)

**Churn Rate:** In a certain period of time, where consumer ends their relationship with a company or a brand. (Financial Dictionary, 2017)

**Consumer Experience:** ‘Or customer experience’. The interactions consumer has with the company, brand and products. How consumers feel about the company and what it is offering to them. (Businessdictionary.com, 2017)

**Consumer journey:** A journey amongst the touchpoints, where the consumer moves from awareness to purchase. In today’s world the focus is to provide a seamless experience where each touchpoint is relevant and devotes to the process. (Forrester Research, 2017)

**CRM:** ‘Consumer’ or ‘customer relationship management’ is an organizational guideline and principles of interacting with the consumers. This includes sales processes, but also analysis of trends and behaviors. (Investopedia.com, 2017)

**CX:** An acronym for consumer experience. See above. (Businessdictionary.com, 2017)

**Design thinking:** A problem-solving methodology, combining business thinking and creativity to build innovative solutions. Meant to be done in groups of different talents, to ensure best results. (Miziolek, 2012)

**Empathy mapping:** A joint tool to gain deeper insights into their consumers. Very similar to popular consumer personas. (Solutionsiq.com, 2017)

**eNPS:** An acronym for ‘Employee Net Promoter Score’, a way for organizations to measure their employee loyalty. (Solutionsiq.com, 2017)

**Experience economy:** A long-term fundamental economic change where consumers are shifting their purchase behavior towards the quality of experience rather than the quality of goods. (SM2 Strategic, 2017)

**Gen Z:** Generation of people born since late 1990’s and are seen to be born after the technological revolution, which makes them digital natives and fluent with the technology. (Collins Dictionary.com, 2017)

**Gender fluidity:** A flexible way of expressing one’s gender. A person who is gender fluid might change between which gender they feel they are or neither of ‘female’ or ‘male’ describes their identity. (Gender Diversity, 2017)

**Genderqueer:** A person who doesn't limit their gender identity and sexual orientation, or the gender lines is more blurred, or they don't identify of neither of the genders.

(Gender Diversity, 2017)

**HCD:** An acronym for Human-centered design. A creative problem solving that starts by putting the object in the heart of the project. Built on deep empathy, creating many ideas and prototypes to create innovative, fresh solutions. (Ideo.org, 2017)

**Inbound marketing:** A marketing actions that attract consumers through helpful and relevant content, via e.g. social media and search engines. Inbound marketing does not interrupt the consumers and does not fight for consumer attention. It builds trust and is designed to focus to the problems and needs of ideal shopper. (Hubspot.com, 2017)

**Influencer:** In social media marketing, an influence is a user who has a significant social media presence and can persuade their followers. (Pixlee.com, 2017)

**Intrinsic motivation:** A behavior that is driven by internal rewards and the motivation comes from personal satisfaction. (Verywell.com, 2017)

**Millennials:** People born between early 1980's to early 2000's. Also known as Generation Y. (Livescience.com, 2017)

**Netnography:** The term founded by Dr. Robert Kozinets. A methodology that analyses the naturalistic behaviors of online communities. (Karr, 2015)

**NPS:** An acronym for 'Net Promoter Score'. It is a way to measure consumer loyalty towards company's brand, products and services, can be part of company's CRM. Answers the questions: "How likely would you recommend us to others?" (Rouse, 2014)

**Omni-channel:** An approach to that focuses in seamless shopping experience for the consumer, no matter what channel the consumer is using. (Rouse, 2014)

**SEO:** Search Engine Optimization. Increasing traffic to website through organic keyword search results in search engines such as Google or Bing. (Moz.com, 2017)

**Showrooming:** Browsing an item at brick n mortar store and purchasing it online. (Businessdictionary.com, 2017)

**Storytelling:** A part of content marketing approach. Capturing and sharing stories that captures the brand or product identity to give consumers more value. (i-scoop.eu, 2017)

**Subreddit:** A Reddit forum. Focused on certain topic. Can include lots of discussion entries of that topic. (Oxford Dictionaries.com, 2017)

**Touchpoint:** A point of contact between business and consumer that reflects or reinforces the brand strategy. (Oxford Dictionaries.com, 2017)

**Trendspotting:** The way new trends are identified. A ‘trendspotter’ is a person who predicts trends in e.g. fashion or culture. (YourDictionary.com, 2017)

**UX:** An acronym for user experience. The experience using an application or website. (Oxford Dictionaries.com, 2017)

**Value proposition:** Summarizes why consumer should buy a product and how it adds value to their life or solves a problem for them. (Investopedia.com, 2017)

**WOM:** An acronym for Word of mouth marketing. Can be either oral or written recommendation by a delighted consumer for the prospect consumers. The most effective form of promotion as it is authentic and personal. (Businessdictionary.com, 2017)

**Word Cloud:** An image of words, where the frequency of the word use can be seen in a size of the word in the image. (Oxford Dictionaries.com, 2017)

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# APPENDICES

Word Cloud data collection from Reddit.com. (Davies, 2017)









Gathered: July 11<sup>th</sup> 2017.



gymgoers adventure with fitness near never a term  
foad design casual fitting look really already  
start business seem want better  
costs go clothes lot ive bit fashion  
line like market fit Just cant  
big pay clothing think gym  
people going good find target since  
need stuff find target since  
line something cost pretty place  
last fitness probably fairly check place

interested companies really sponsored  
reviews know look take back Alphalete  
running know look take back  
pictures like bought leggings fit  
fitness like - Im  
give nice stuff ordered clothing  
womens get ordered new  
small crotch top Never call strong  
shirt dont tried buy  
flattering love dont tried buy  
Good cut didnt fristals pink leg

really one guys  
Ciele running cool like  
style Gyakusou love  
function cap well nice  
looking fast im know  
theyre look brands im good  
runners bought pretty  
Kenya tracksmith

Navy Target lot new now sweat top  
pockets gym Nike get tops  
time limit allsway sports want  
got tank allsway sports want  
Bras workout nice I in shirts  
buy stuff go Old in dont  
bra heard athletic like good  
Id mulemon wal  
clothes wear shorts live ones  
feel really safe love phone spend  
cute going much love phone

made everything brands back worn A boots waterproof  
tried runners Patagonia quality never months  
hooded time rain theyre trail year  
backpack jackets great Ultra catch  
though use last thats ticket  
shirts like Im good ive stuff mittens  
doesnt size boxy Hiking credit  
Didnt look even well ENF disappointment  
year look just well ENF disappointment  
thermoball pants running stacks holes  
since Aradyx generally light still lightweight series

similar black fashion pretty 90s something  
comfortable brand feet Buckshot  
jeans really Id never theyre pairs  
grey casual good just Im think  
need buy shoes like well far athletic  
owned people dont still though balance  
little want ugly get fine that way even away  
looking much great around sneakers vans  
quality know great around sneakers vans  
polo linked classic mind recommend price better bit youre

Icebreaker brands really  
Athletic Ive high  
Hansen Isaura wear  
great like undercover  
Helly

Cool Theyre going looking shorts function decent views  
different play great make jim white  
support obviously pair well know barrieades  
prevent mood look dont youre  
mind price ankle good Think Just tennis  
woulde impange tops comfortable playing

end think ever woman yoga great sure  
try eventim new stuff quality  
Sul theyre good bras fit Lulu  
look ones wear Im really pants slot  
check leggings pair just vs  
find years also like sports cute  
use bra Ive love Dont  
buy gym price super well though fun feel  
Victorias definitely use work  
sale going size sold crazy 8sd Plus way got

short something cold little  
way much average  
restrictive wear like dead o enough  
think store fit bit small cases  
fits find really go good  
going brand room route try  
gift Store Just space sleeves torso  
montbell arms size jackets  
shape become medium jacket else  
compare clothing Look Venues shoulder muscle  
wouldnt



Gathered: July 7<sup>th</sup> 2017



going doesnt something need paved current  
outdoor audience much already able  
Well promote Section Instagram  
target just in social brand  
website site post media buying get  
product customers bar new  
now think like products  
right make see gonna free know  
followers in may feedback items  
really appeal ads work youre clothing  
learning and through promote customer without message screen

like one lot etc  
dont also Im  
kind clothing  
functional gear  
sub

together well close action movement without honest  
technology explanation know tighter feel  
technology claims insulation  
Uniqlo heattech sweat  
dont marketing way fabric wet  
garments warm Im air wool  
synthetic may function heat moisture  
intended much like Bodysocks  
supposed Looking pretty water  
worst that evaporate light weight

Earth  
deals outdoor Whole Ski Coats  
Company quality sale brand  
decent discount best like REI stuff house  
selection price People  
skiing good high jacket  
find store jackets sells  
brands prices might Austin  
used

something though all years like gear  
small prices time want large orders  
buy free like gear  
Local REI gear found  
hiking just dont lve gear  
shop store ME Outlet  
much bought clothes stuff  
return well braided line get  
Day camping shipping worth  
made everything generally problem performance  
pack confidence points price hobby might things

downtown actually  
carry might pants size Im  
dont people gear active  
stuff hind clothing larger found  
jackets plus anyone items  
athletic since clothes lot  
anything stores selection  
Sucks rain Also specialty

getting adventure already  
selection Cabelas now shop  
dont gear know looking  
think wholesale good  
stuff Im hiking etc Broadway  
local Ebs small sports specialty  
even little outdoor store  
hiking padding though Escape

may just 3 also garage often less best layer  
stuff well merino wear  
never looking advice Ive  
socks brand wool  
expensive sale ice breaker cheaper  
cheap Though awesome save option  
base blend good antecher  
layers

Sports  
bra

want Clothing gear  
intentionally tends  
camouflage hiking gear  
Typically arent look  
get stuff people Hunters  
lot less often

usually just know better Durable  
lve buy good merino dries  
stuff quickly materials  
skin cotton weather makes  
though wool shirt  
hemp Like dry well  
wondering hot Folks clothes  
synthetic youre

interesting much sloppy chinos Orvis  
boots Filson hiking Outliers  
jacket pants wear  
also outdoors dont Im asking  
look think like slim take fabric  
cargo work clothing  
avoid jackets tech already lives  
stuff layers outdoor though



Gathered: July 12th 2017