It Came Across My Feed!
- A Study on Social Media’s Impact on Social Influence, Self-Expression and Decision-Making of Home Furnishing Consumers

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Abstract

Social media is changing consumer behavior to an extent we yet not know the full consequences of. This thesis looks at three aspects of consumer behavior: social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process which are all impacted by the ever increasing presence of social media. In Sweden, the internet-usage is high and consumers spend much of their time on image-based platforms such as Instagram where trends are followed and created, especially in the category of home furnishings. By looking at social media’s impact on social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process, this thesis aims at exploring the increasing home furnishings consumption in Sweden. An inductive, qualitative research approach was taken where 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Swedish home furnishings consumers, ranging in age from 20-28 years old. The findings indicate that social media, especially Instagram, could be one of the main reasons behind the increasing consumption of home furnishings in Sweden. Consumers are highly influenced by each other and the images they are exposed to, which impacts their self-expression on social media as well as their decision-making process. The findings further showcased that consumers desire a complete picture before they make a purchase - both in the sense that they seek inspirational images, upload within a context and ask for advice from many close to them.

Keywords: consumer behavior, social media, social influence, self-expression, the decision-making process, home furnishings
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1. Introduction

”...God it was probably something I saw - I always get a lot of inspiration and such from, well if you think Pinterest or Instagram so it was probably that something like that came across my feed and I picked it up - thought this would be nice to have and I found something that worked for me. So it will have to be...yeah, I’ll have to say social media.”

- Ann, 25

Peer interactions, posts and selfies uploaded, reviews given and recommendations received - social media is changing the way we interact, consume and how we portray ourselves on the platforms that have come to integrate themselves into our everyday lives. In 2015, the usage of social media increased from 53 % to 77 % in Sweden (Findahl & Davidsson 2015). In fact, 40 % of Internet users in Sweden use Instagram and 70 % use Facebook, with almost half using it daily. Social media is changing consumer behavior as we know it (Wang, Yu & Wei 2012), impacting industries such as fashion, food (Singh 2016) and not least home furnishings (Fuentes 2016). The sales of home furnishings have seen a dramatic increase in Sweden during the last ten years and it seems as if it will only continue to grow as Swedish consumers spend on average 500 SEK on home furnishings a month (Roos 2016). Home furnishings is defined by Kinley and Brandon (2015) as furniture, floor coverings, home textiles and decorative accessories. It is a wide definition which this thesis will continue with from now on.

Although television shows about home furnishings have contributed to the spread of trends and stories of the home, social media has taken on a more important role as traditional media forms have stagnated in recent years (Fuentes 2016). Platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest allow users to produce and share their own pictures and content with an audience, thus people can now consume home furnishings on these channels anywhere and at any time they wish (Fuentes 2016). During the last years, researchers have to a large extent examined why social media has become popular, what motivates its users and how it affects them (Buechel & Berger 2016; Hajli; 2014; Wang et al. 2012; Wilson, Gosling & Graham 2012). Buechel and Berger (2016) suggest, based on previous research, that there are three primary reasons why people engage in social media: “1) Affiliation (i.e., staying in touch with friends), 2) self-expression and 3) Information dissemination (i.e., the sharing and gathering of personal and public information)”.
Affiliation, staying in touch with friends, in social media today means far more than simply keeping a list of friends online. Consumers today encounter a myriad of friends and influencers on social media platforms which create a greater social influence than ever before. This has shed a new light on peer influence in consumer research (Wang et al. 2012). Concepts such as influencers (Kapitan & Silvera 2016) and user-generated content (Fader & Winer 2012) have due to social media become hot topics, revolving around the notion that people in these networks are influenced by each other, which impacts what kind of products and brands they purchase (Powers, Advincula, Austin, Graiko & Snyder 2012). Thus, social media brings plenty of social influence on consumers today which trickles down to the decision-making process as people share and gather plenty of information online (i.e., information dissemination), for instance about home furnishings. The decision-making process is no longer a linear and fixed approach as described by the traditional Engel, Kollatt and Blackwell-model (Ashman, Solomon & Wolny 2015). It is rather a process where the 5 steps; problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluation have all been influenced by social media. Before social media, social influence included the influence of a small group of friends, of magazines and walking past a shop-window. Today, with social media, social influence has become greater than ever due to increased networks of friends and influencers that contribute to a changing decision-making process filled with multiple touchpoints (Powers et al. 2012). Consumers today will turn to social media before, during and after a purchase where social influence can ultimately either shorten their decision-making process (i.e., going from problem recognition to instant purchase) or prolong it (i.e., by uploading images or posting reviews post-purchase) (Ashman et al. 2015).

Social influence can be found most clearly in the first three stages of the decision-making process: as consumers’ exposure to trends and "must-haves” on social media affects their problem recognition stage (Ashman et al. 2015), as they turn to social media for information before a purchase (Bughin 2015), and the evaluation of alternatives stage where the role of influencers becomes great as these can influence what a consumer chooses to purchase (Powers et al. 2012). Meanwhile, the post-purchase evaluation stage touches upon a further aspect: self-expression. Social media allows for self-expression as users create an online version of themselves by sharing personal information, images, interests and thoughts with other users (Buechel & Berger 2016). These online versions of the self, or profiles, are
according to Wilson et al. (2012) not created in a vacuum, but rather through the interaction with other users. Self-expression is an important driver to social media usage and, although some censoring might occur as people wish to portray a more desirable image of themselves, most of the time the self-expression on social media is representative of the true self (Buechel & Berger 2016). Ashman et al. (2015) argue that consumers today use themselves as content as they post images of themselves on social media highlighting, for instance, specific events. Thus self-expression becomes present in the post-purchase evaluation stage where consumers might even upload images of the possession they have bought (Belk 2013) after being exposed to the social influence on social media. Possessions can extend the self (Belk 1988) and reinforce a person’s identity (Levy 1959). Home furnishings are regularly bought to enhance a home and signal personal experiences and achievements (McCracken 1989). Possessions thus reflect an individual’s identity, lifestyle and personal values to relevant social networks (Hassan, Muhammad & Bakar 2010). A home and the things it holds is therefore a place where people’s life stories are rooted (Fuentes 2016). The home changes as its inhabitants change (Belk 1988; Fuentes 2016) through e.g., experiences or life-situations, we therefore buy or exchange possessions to match our current identity (Fuentes 2016). Like fashion trends, home furnishings also go through processes of some ideas and styles becoming more dominant than others creating trends that further add to the meaning we put into our homes (Fuentes 2016). This is part of the commercialization of the home where people will consume home furnishings based on continuous change to keep up with trends portrayed on, for instance, social media.

According to Google (2012) the true challenge for companies today is the fact that consumers actively seek out information on products and take many paths before a purchase, a process named the Zero Moment of Truth (Leciniski 2014). Bughin (2015) found that social media influenced consumers’ purchase decisions at early stages in the decision-journey e.g., when gaining initial awareness of a product and according to Bronner and de Hoog (2014) consumers are more likely to use social media in high-involvement purchase decisions than low-involvement. Social media is arguably becoming increasingly important for consumers when making decisions (Bronner & de Hoog 2014). 70 % of consumers say that they would rather learn of a new product through an influencers’ post than a traditional ad (Rockwood 2017), further fueling social influence. Identifying the right influencers might be difficult for companies, but when done right, it can yield an eleven times greater ROI than traditional
advertising as consumers will not ignore posts, blogs or mentions of people they have willingly chosen to follow on social media (Ghidotti 2017)

With the increasing usage of social media, consumers today have become greatly exposed to a social influence that impacts their decision-making process. As consumers can, in the post-purchase stage, upload images of their possessions online, they create a platform where self-expression can occur as research has argued that possessions extend the self (Belk 1988). Not the least within the category of home furnishings. Therefore, by looking at social media’s impact on social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process - this thesis aims at exploring the whole picture of social media’s effect on home furnishing consumers today and its role in the increased consumption of home furnishings in Sweden. A category that benefits greatly out of social media and specifically, image-based platforms to reach an audience (Singh 2016).

1.1 Problem Formulation

Social media is the force that is transforming consumer behavior (Bronner & de Hoog 2014; Wang et al. 2012). Today, stimuli that affects the decision-making process comes from consumers interacting and influencing each other (Fader & Winer 2012) with self-expressive content online (Ashman et al. 2015), rather than consumers acting as passive receivers of information from marketers. This impacts the decision-making process to a greater extent than previously estimated (Bughin 2015) and in ways we are yet to see the full consequences of. We identify a gap in research on social media’s influence on consumer behavior regarding the three interrelated aspects of social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process. As social media increases in power, researchers and managers alike need to understand how social media impacts social influence, self-expression and the decision-making processes today.

1.2 Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore social media’s influence on three aspects; social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process. Three aspects that interrelate with each other as well as with why people choose to engage with social media, which in this
thesis are applied to the consumption of home furnishings. This is done in order to explore reasons behind the increasing consumption of home furnishings in Sweden. Thus the research question posed is;

How does social media affect social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process of home furnishing consumers in Sweden?

1.3 Contribution
Theoretically, this thesis aims to contribute with further knowledge on the role social media has on consumer behavior to existing literature. Specifically on the three interrelated aspects of social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process. Practically, companies can gain an understanding of what influences lay behind consumers’ decision-making process today and how they can incorporate these aspects into their marketing strategies. Although it centers on the home furnishings industry, the findings from this thesis can be beneficial for other industries as well as they point to a larger phenomena at bay.
2. Theoretical Framework

Below follows a presentation of the theory that sets the framework for this thesis. First, we give a deeper look into social media and its various platforms that have lead to a changing consumer behavior, before moving onto social media and social influence which explains how influencers affect consumer behavior. An aspect that is further explained by looking at social media and self-expression where possessions come into play, before rounding it up by looking at social media and the decision-making process, which today entails many different routes.

2.1 Social Media - A Deeper Look

Social media has drastically changed the way people communicate with each other and with brands (Fader & Winer 2012; Wang et al. 2012). It continues to challenge traditional sources of advertising such as television, radio and magazines as more and more consumers turn to social media (Mangold & Faulds 2009). Everything from awareness and information gathering to purchase behavior and post-purchase communication - social media has become a force of nature, integrating itself into consumers’ everyday lives. 48% of Facebook users between the ages of 18-34 confess that checking their account is the first thing they do when they wake up (Kee & Yazdanifard 2015). Thus, Parent, Plunger and Bal (2011) argue that companies who ignore social media as a marketing tool do as at their own peril, as social media has come to change consumer behavior (Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt & Füller 2013; Powers et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2012).

People constantly look to social media for up-to-date, relevant and valuable content. While content can take many forms such as text, pictures and videos (Kee & Yazdanifard 2015) so can the forums in which it is communicated. Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012) distinguish between social media, social networks and social network sites. While social networks can exist in the offline sphere as well, social network sites and social media are online platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Parent et al. 2011; Valentini & Kruckeberg 2012; Weng, Ding, Puspitasari, Prasetya, Gunadi 2012) that, at times, can be used synonymously (Valentini & Kruckeberg 2012). Both refer to platforms where people interact, communicate and engage with others as well as organizations and brands (Parent et al. 2011; Valentini & Kruckeberg 2012).

Although social media and social network sites might represent similar platforms of interaction and communication they define different boundaries in research (Valentini &
Kruckeberg 2012). Social network sites focus on the network and how the network connects users (e.g., Boyd & Ellison 2007) while social media centers on how users interact, hence its’ more concerned with user behavior than the network itself (Valentini & Kruckeberg 2012). Valentini and Kruckeberg (2012) argue that social media’s existence hinges on the users and the activities, practices and behaviors among them when they gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions. Based on this definition, we will move forward with social media as the definition used for this thesis.

2.1.1 Different forms of social media

Social media allows users to interact through platforms such as Instagram (Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas 2016), Facebook, Youtube, Twitter and blogs (Parent et al. 2011). Research (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Mangold & Faulds 2009; Parent et al. 2011; Valentini & Kruckeberg 2012) has divided social media into different categories; Facebook is seen as an egocentric site because it allows consumers to construct profiles that facilitate identity construction and connections (Parent et al. 2011) while also allowing people to develop relationships and stay in touch with friends and family (Buechel & Berger 2016; Valentini & Kruckeberg 2012). Users can send messages to one another and their profiles can include photos, videos and text (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Instagram is another platform that, like Facebook, allows its users to share images and videos (Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas 2016). Instagram is the main social media platform today for consumers to connect with brands as 53 % of Instagram users follow their favorite brands and where more than 90 % of users are under the age of 35 (ibid.). Hence, it is a key platform for companies that wish to target younger, and especially female, consumers who besides following their favorite brands also log in daily, which makes Instagram an attractive platform for brand engagement. Pinterest is another platform, however it centers on content where users can share pictures of their favorite products by “pinning” them on personalized boards they can share with friends and family (Shankar, Kleijnen, Ramanathan, Rizley, Holland & Morrisey 2016).

Kee and Yazdanifard (2015) argue that good content can be a source of motivation for consumers to buy goods or services. This can lead to higher brand loyalty but also a higher likelihood of the consumer spreading the message to others. Visual content, in particular, has become key for brands in social media because it can manage to pierce through the digital noise (Walter & Gioglio 2014) and enable higher levels of engagement with consumers (Roncha & Radclyffe-Thomas 2016). The human brain can process images much faster than
text-based content and they are also more easily remembered (Walter & Gioglio 2014). Allagui and Breslow (2016) stated that especially younger generations are more engaged in visuals than purely text-based content and in order to engage this group of consumers, using visuals in brand communication is essential. This was also a key finding in Smith’s (2011) study that emphasized that quality graphics is what grabs their attention.

“Images act like shortcuts to the brain: we are visual creatures, and we are programmed to react to visuals more than to words”. Walter & Gioglio (2014, p. 16)

2.2 Social Media and Social Influence

Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) argue that what was previously a passive behavior where consumers used the Internet to read, watch and then buy products or services, has today evolved into more of an interactive one. Today, consumers use social media to create, modify, share and discuss content. They interact with each other and companies, influencing each other in multiple ways (Fader & Winer 2012). These interactions take the form of user-generated content (UGC) which includes product reviews, blogs, descriptions of product usage and other consumer-initiated contributions.

UGC and visual content on sites such as Pinterest, has become key for brands in social media channels and it is in the foreground of what Wolny and Mueller (2013) called network effects where trends are co-created by consumers who cause and adopt them along the way. Trends that have been adopted by many will become more visual and will impact the perceived value of the product for another user. Influencers have the ability to affect the behavior of others (Liu, Jiang, Lin, Ding, Duan & Xu 2015). In the social media landscape that we have today, influencers can come in a variety of ways; they can be bloggers (Kapitan & Silvera 2016; Uzunoğlu & Kip 2014) and celebrity endorsers (Kapitan & Silvera 2016), they can be friends (Bradley 2016; Yaacoub & Najjar 2016) and unexpected opinion leaders who people find to deliver an authentic and entertaining message (Bradley 2016).

These digital influencers have, because of social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram and blogs, a wider reach than traditional face-to-face opinion leaders and are more trusted than corporate messages (Uzunoğlu & Kip 2014). Trust in particular is important for consumers today as they receive more information than they can or are willing to absorb
(Powers et al. 2012). Therefore they look to sources they have come to trust over time or sources that are deemed to be transparent.

### 2.2.1 Going deeper - Three processes of social influence

Social influence has been a central topic ever since the beginning of social psychology and can arise from small-group interaction as well as persuasive communication (Kelman 1961). People tend to conform to similar others due to a need to belong, avoid punishment or express identity (Park & Lessig 1977). Kelman (1961) outlined three processes by which people respond to social influence. These are *compliance*, *identification* and *internalization*.

**Compliance** is the most normative form of social influence and occurs when an individual, regardless of private beliefs, chooses to accept the influence of another individual or group in order to receive a beneficial reaction. Similarly, Park and Lessig (1977) used the term utilitarian reference group influence for this process, to describe how an individual’s decision to purchase a certain brand is influenced by the preferences of the people he or she has social interactions with. Kapitan and Silvera (2016) built on Kelman’s (1961) social influence framework in their research of endorser persuasion in a contemporary setting. However, the researchers excluded compliance from their framework since it occurs in a publicly observable setting and consumers are unlikely to seek personal gratification from their behavior by celebrity endorsers.

The second aspect in Kelman’s (1961) social influence framework is **identification**. This refers to when an individual, in relation to another person or group, adopts a behavior in accordance to his or her self-image, in order to establish or maintain these relationships. The relationship can take the form of classical identification, that is, a relationship where the individual imitates either some parts or every part of the influencing individual’s life – he or she wants to be like the influencing individual. Kapitan and Silvera (2016) illustrate this with an example of someone who spots a shampoo advertisement featuring a celebrity endorser and later purchases that specific shampoo. This person is not necessarily interested in learning more about the product, instead he or she might want to achieve the same attractive look of the endorser, hence the person will purchase the shampoo.

The last one of Kelman’s (1961) social influence processes is **internalization**. This occurs when an individual allows influence from someone because it is congruent with his or her value system. This is a more intrinsically rewarding process, in contrast to compliance and identification, which are tied to external sources and dependent on social support. Park and
Lessig (1977) use the term informational reference group influence for a similar concept, that puts even more emphasis on an individual’s search processes about various products and brands from professionals or independent groups of experts. In both of these concepts, the credibility of the influencing individual is important.

All three types of influence reflect different processing styles (Watt, Maio, Haddock & Johnson 2008). Compliance is a superficial processing style, where the individual conforms to social demands, while internalization is more of a thoughtful and deep processing style. Superficial examination of messages can be triggered by lack of information, low involvement with or interest in the product category, as well as a low need to learn more about the product (Kapitan & Silvera 2016). Identification processes involve more thoughts about the influencing individual and less about the product or brand thus containing a mix of both superficial and deep processing style. It is therefore stated by Kapitan and Silvera (2016) that identification results in less enduring and less strong attitude change than internalization processes. Internalization processes are deeper and more persistent in the sense that consumers must be cognitively engaged in the product category and the message and the endorser must be credible.

2.3 Social Media and Self-Expression

Upon internalizing messages, consumers can turn to social media for self-expression. These digital spaces function as windows where people can define themselves by publicly displaying their possessions through visually appealing posts (Berger 2016). Social media and more specifically the increasing popularity of photo- and video sharing sites of an egocentric nature, such as Instagram, are therefore changing the traditional view of the self in relation to the things that we own.

2.3.1 Conveying who we are through consumption

In the postmodernity, the self is not conceptualized as a given product of a social system, nor is it a fixed entity which the individual can easily adopt (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). The self is more fluid, something a person creates through consumption objects. To understand how people define themselves through consumption objects has become one of the cornerstones within consumer behavior (Belk 1988; Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). Back in 1959, Levy came to the conclusion that people do not purchase products for what they do, but
for what they mean - products and brands work as symbols to define individuals’ self-concepts.

According to McCracken (1986) products get their meaning through the culturally constituted world with advertisements, which then moves into goods through fashion systems that consist of reference groups and endorsers. In the last step, the meaning moves from products to consumers, who choose brands whose image appeals to their own self-image. The meaning is transferred through symbolic actions, such as discussing, comparing or photographing the possessions – a behavior more evident than ever in today’s society with photo- and video sharing sites such as Instagram and Pinterest (Walter & Gioglio 2014). In this way, products can help express a person’s self-identity (McCracken 1986). Consumption objects can, as identified long ago by Veblen (1899), for instance be a way to symbolically communicate status and prestige to others. Consumers also purchase products based on fantasies and aspiration, motivated by what they want to become or avoid becoming (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). Markus and Narius (1986) called this concept “possible selves”, which in psychology refers to the cognitive components of hopes, goals, fears and threats that direct our behavior. The self is therefore a complex concept, and the individual can have several actual and possible selves in different situations in life, derived from socio-cultural and historical context and from other influential forces such as the media.

2.3.2 The extended self

A more extensive research on the role of consumption objects in our lives was made in 1988 when Belk published his work on “the extended self”. In his research, Belk (1988) argued that possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities. We impose our identities on possessions and possessions impose their identities on us. By claiming a possession as ours, the ”mine” becomes the ”me” as we come to believe that the object is part of us.

Belk (1988) argued that multiple consumption objects rather than a single product or brand better represents the diverse and at times, contradictory aspects of the self that people have. Together, the possessions play a vital role in our sense of self, to the extent that when we lose our possessions because of for instance burglary, natural disasters or economic circumstances, we feel a sorrow that is similar to losing a loved one who has been a part of our life (ibid.). This non-voluntary loss of possessions diminishes the sense of self where we
feel that we have ultimately, lost a part of who we are. On the other hand, we will gladly throw away possessions which we feel are non-consistent with our self-image (Belk 1988) as symbols only become appropriate when they join, add or reinforce consumers perceptions of themselves (Levy 1959). According to Levy (1959), this echoes a plain fact of human nature where we all aim at enhancing our sense of self in ways that are consistent with our self-image or the image we strive for.

Our past is essential to who we are and possessions tend to contain memories and feelings from our past, such as a souvenir that makes an otherwise intangible travel experience tangible by its existence and an heirloom that recalls a family’s heritage (Belk 1988). Much like the self can be extended through owning certain objects, as can possessions that we receive as gifts or antiques be viewed as ways to retain a part of the extended self of valued others e.g., loved ones who gave us gifts that we forever associate with them or the work of an artist we look up to. Wherever they come from, possessions extend the self by creation, enhancement and preservation of a sense of identity and helps us to know who we are - at all ages.

2.3.3 The extended self goes digital

In the modern digital world, technologies are changing consumer behavior, which also has impacts on the extended self (Belk 2013). Sheth and Solomon (2014) expanded Belk’s (1988) theory of the extended self to a modern digital setting and pointed at three domains where the traditional boundaries between self and not self blur. These so called “fusions” are 1) between the producer and consumer, as more content today is user-generated and therefore the power has increasingly shifted to the consumer, 2) between “being offline” and “being online”, as these concepts merge together with mobile devices and social media, and 3) between the body and technology, as we have moved from “you are what you wear” to “you are what you post”, which allows for self-expression to occur.

Today, private behavior can become public with just a click, exposing possessions to the world that tell something about an individual. Belk (2013) discusses re-embodiment as part of this new shift. With popular photo- and video sharing sites, visuals have led the way to greater self-reflection when we post pieces of our self into the digital sphere. Moving from the physical world to the digital world we become disembodied, only to later become re-embodied in these photos or videos that we choose to publish. Research shows that people
find it easier to show their true self better online than in face-to-face contexts (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons 2002). When we are presenting ourselves in real life, we are usually not doing that by talking about our possessions (Belk 2013). However, doing this online has become a normal behavior according to Belk (2013), giving us a sense of self-consciousness while at the same time showing the world who we are. This sharing culture we are a part of today also makes our self-concepts more co-constructed. The instant feedback, a like or a comment on social media, from others can either affirm or modify our sense of self.

### 2.3.4 Self-expression through differentiation and convergence

The products we consume can symbolize both individuality and belonging (Hammerl, Dorner, Foscht & Brandstätter 2016). People with a high need for uniqueness are claimed to also have a higher need for unique products (Berger & Heath 2007). These people also tend to choose more distinctive brands (Escalas & Bettman 2003). The need for unique products is also more prominent in categories where the individual has a high interest (Berger & Heath 2007). For instance, a car enthusiast would be more concerned with having a unique car than a coin collector would.

Berger and Heath (2007) have further researched consumer differentiation and how different product choices can signal particular identities to the broader social world. Individuals do not choose to differentiate themselves in every product domain. For instance, the choice of bike light or toothpaste brand is not considered as related to identity as the music genre one listens to or the hairstyle one has. This shows that not only is identity signaling a question of publicly versus privately consumed goods, where publicly consumed goods are better at conveying symbolic meaning (Bearden & Etzel 1982), but it is also a question of relevant product domain. Furthermore, this means that people also tend to establish their difference in categories where they think people will look for identity signals, for instance when product choices are based less on function they are more identity signaling e.g., style or color (Berger & Heath 2007).

Although individuals often search for uniqueness to establish their identities, they do not want to be the only one with a particular taste (Berger & Heath 2007). To signal the identity clearly, processes of both convergence with the in-group and differentiation with the out-group must be involved. With publicly consumed goods, the sizes of these groups are of high relevance. When options are favored by only a minority, a person might avoid these products as he or she is afraid of being seen as weird. Majority options might on the other hand reflect
badly upon a person, as he or she might be seen as a “conformist”. In Ulver-Sneistrup’s (2011) cross-cultural study on taste in home aesthetics, this was a prominent finding. Being unique and different from the mass by avoiding products purchased by “common” people who “epidemically conform” to trends was considered a favorable trait.

2.4 Social media and The Decision-Making Process

Whether conforming or striving for uniqueness, consumers will think of what they choose to purchase. Consequently, the changing consumer behavior prompted by social media and the social influence that occurs, has found its way into consumers’ decision-making process (Wang et al. 2012).

2.4.1 The decision-making process today

The Engel, Kollatt and Blackwell (EKB) model of consumer decision-making, proposes a linear and fixed process of decision-making where consumers go through five stages: problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-purchase evaluation (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard 1995 in Ashman et al. 2015). Although the EKB model is still relevant today to explain consumers’ decision-making process (Ashman et al. 2015), the fixed approach of the model does not take into consideration today’s multiple touchpoints that consumers encounter and enter through on their purchase path such as social media, researching the product or brand, or by engaging with the brand (Powers et al. 2012). What might before have been a straightforward approach from need to post-purchase takes many different paths today where both the sequence and the length of each stage has been affected by online socialization (Ashman et al. 2015). Ashman et al. (2015) argue that e.g., the problem recognition stage today versus decades ago, differs in the sense that while consumers before would rely on a small number of real friends, consumers today will experience multiple and ongoing incidents of problem recognition throughout the day. This is due to the social influence that happens through their daily online interactions where exposure to new products or ’must-haves’ are initiated by the social network. Furthermore, the evaluation of alternatives stage has become more efficient and quicker as consumers today can narrow down options with the help of e.g., peer recommendations while the post-purchase evaluations stage has become prolonged due to consumers, for instance, uploading images of their purchases online, expressing themselves through their content, or by posting reviews.
2.4.2 Searching and evaluating

The Zero Moment of Truth describes the new way in which consumers search for information online which they then base their decisions on (Lecinski 2014). It centers on the idea that consumers today, upon hearing of your brand, search to see how you can meet their needs. It incorporates an on-going process of back and forth searches in a multi-channel marketplace where consumers look to reviews, blogs, videos, social media and even coupons and local stores before making a purchase decision (Google 2012). Thus, consumers no longer make decisions by following a straight line as suggested by the EKB model, but rather by being ubiquitous shoppers who use multiple overlapping sources for decision-making, both offline and online, on their path to purchase (Powers et al. 2012).

Social media is a rich source from which consumers can gather input for their decision-making process (Powers et al. 2012). Bughin (2015) found that consumers who use search engines to gain an initial knowledge of a product are more likely to turn to social media before a purchase. Information which will guide consumers to a better purchase decision will not only come from family and friends but also, as mentioned above, from blogs, forums and influencers that aid consumers in their decision-making process, to introduce them to new products and even change their mind about a brand (Powers et al. 2012) i.e., social influence. Recommendations (Hajli 2014), opinions and experiences from other consumers is increasingly having a greater influence on consumer choice than information given by brands (Bronner & de Hoog 2014). Hence, social media has expanded the realm of people consumers trust when gathering inputs for their decision-making process. These social and external touch points can influence consumers in their decision-making process by the same or even greater effect than advertising can (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). This rings especially true for consumers engaged in purchasing decisions concerning high-involvement products such as cars (Bronner & de Hoog 2014). Consumers are then more likely to search for information on social media compared to when they are involved in low-involvement purchases like buying butter. High-involvement products have been deemed to be rarely bought, carry a higher risk and are linked to personal identity (Wolny & Mueller 2013) and therefore, arguably, consumers will conduct more extensive information search (Geva, Oestreicher-Singer, Efron & Shimshoni 2017) and have a longer purchase journey (Powers et al. 2012).
Consumers are always on today which means that they can constantly consider potential purchases either actively or passively (Powers et al. 2012). Consumers can be passive shoppers, which means that the information they need to make a purchase comes to them when they are not looking for it through e.g., a comment from a friend on social media or they can be active shoppers which means that they actively seek out information through, for instance, a search engine or through conversations with a friend so they feel confident in their purchase decision (ibid.). It is in the transition from passive to active shopper that the Zero Moment of Truth occurs.

2.4.3 Post-purchase behavior

After purchase, consumers also turn to social media to share their shopping experiences with others through sites such as Pinterest (Shankar et al. 2016). According to Powers et al. (2012), consumers feel triumphant when sharing their recent purchase experiences on social media, as they feel a sense of pride over the accomplishment of finding a product that meets their needs. Ashman et al. (2015) argue that the post-purchase stage also plays an important role in reinforcing social identity. Before social media, that might have manifested itself through sending pictures by mail to loved ones of special occasions such as prom to showcase the "prom-look" one wore. Today, due to social media, that behavior of self-expression manifests itself through a myriad of real-time sharing and interactions across one’s networks where one uses oneself as content when, for instance, posting a picture of oneself in a prom dress. Hence the satisfaction with the purchase will hinge not only on the consumer’s satisfaction but also on the virtual satisfaction of others that take the form of likes, comments and shares. As put by Ashman et al. (2015, p.139): ‘Consumers seem to think “how can I know if I’m satisfied until I hear what other people say?”’. 

2.5 Summary of Theoretical Framework

The influence of social media on consumer behavior can no longer be ignored. Consumers increasingly look to UGC content such as reviews or blog-posts while interacting and by extension, influencing each other (Fader & Winer 2012). Social influence is a strong force on consumer behavior and in the social media landscape which has become especially prominent with the many new influencers that take the form of bloggers (Kapitan & Silvera 2016; Uzunoğlu & Kip 2014), celebrity endorsers (Kapitan & Silvera 2016), friends (Bradley 2016; Yaacoub & Najjar 2016) and unexpected opinion leaders (Bradley 2016). Kelman (1961)
made a distinction between three processes by which people respond to social influence: compliance, identification and internalization. While the first two processes are more superficially processed, the last one is more deeply processed and more intrinsically rewarded as the individual allows influence that is more congruent to his or her value system.

By consuming certain products and brands, we can display our belonging to specific groups as well as our individuality (Berger & Heath 2007; Escalas & Bettman 2005; Hammerl et al. 2016). The creation of an individual’s self-identity was a topic that Belk (1988) further investigated, claiming that our possessions become extensions of ourselves. Publicly consumed goods are better at conveying symbolic meaning (Bearden & Etzel 1982) and in today’s social media era, individuals can expose possessions to their social networks, making previously private things public. On platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest, visual content can flourish and inspire its users, causing new trends and consumer patterns to arise (Wolny & Mueller 2013) while engaging in self-expression.

Social media has allowed consumers to have a wider network of influencers that they trust (Powers et al. 2012) which means that consumers now have more sources than ever before that influence their decision-making process (Ashman et al. 2015). The EKB model still lingers relevant for consumer decision-making today but with some moderations having to be taken to incorporate all the different touchpoints consumers come across today that either prolong or shorten the decision-making process. Consumers now navigate everything from search engines to social media interactions (Google 2012) before, during and after purchase, either passively or actively (Powers et al. 2012).
3. Method

Below follows a description of the research approach and design chosen for this thesis, as well as the data collection process and the data analysis conducted. The research design and method chosen derive from this thesis’s purpose and research question.

3.1 Research Approach and Design

The purpose of this thesis is to explore social media’s impact on three aspects; social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process within a home furnishings context. Therefore, in order to answer the following research question: *How does social media affect social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process of home furnishing consumers in Sweden?* a framework for the collection and analysis of data was chosen that built on an exploratory study design. Because there is a lack of research on how social media impacts its users, especially on image-based platforms, concerning these aforementioned aspects, an exploratory study design was chosen because it aims at further exploring a phenomena, to explore what is happening and seeking new insights (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). The flexibility of an exploratory study allows for an initially broad focus that is later narrowed down, which was considered suitable for this study. A qualitative approach has been chosen due to the purpose of this thesis. Sensitive information or underlying feelings can at times be difficult to extract from people because they wish to protect themselves or if they are not aware of the underlying mechanisms at play in their subconscious (Malhotra & Birks 2006), which further impacted the choice of research approach for this thesis.

In order to answer the research question, we needed to collect data that was concerned with consumers’ underlying thoughts and feelings that guide their consumption behavior and which is influenced by social media. We took an inductive approach in this thesis as theory and data were collected simultaneously. However, some theory was collected beforehand which affected the data collection process. Thus, it was not a completely inductive approach (Bryman & Bell 2011).
3.2 Data Collection and Process

The data was collected through 13 semi-structured interviews. The qualitative interviews provided us with rich and detailed answers (Bryman & Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2009) as well as a flexibility to take the interview into directions that were cued by the participant (Bryman & Bell 2011; Yeung 1995). The interviews ranged in time from 20 - 40 minutes. For validation reasons questions were clarified during the interviews, in order to ensure that the participants comprehended the questions fully and that the topics were covered from a variety of angles (Saunders et al. 2009). Interviews were also audio-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were audio-recorded because we were also interested in not only what our participants said but also of how they said it (Bryman & Bell 2011). A complete account of the interview was therefore needed in order to be available for analysis. Notes were taken as well during the interview, as a back-up to the audio-recordings. Furthermore, as Saunders et al. (2009) argue for, immediately after every interview we composed a full record of the interview including contextual data such as background information about the participant, the setting of the interview as well as date and time so as to not lose data that could become valuable during the analysis.

The interviews took place in different settings and during different times depending on when our participants could meet. We tried to conduct interviews in quiet settings so the audio-recording could register everything but also in which our participants would feel at ease. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face while two took place over Skype because we could not get to the participants and two took place over regular telephone calls for the same reason. It impacted the findings in the sense that we could not see our participants, we could not judge their body language but were rather constricted to analyze their tone of voice instead. All questions from the interview guide (see Appendix 2) were posed during the interviews, apart from when the participants themselves answered some questions in connection to other questions in which they were given time to further think and explain. Follow-up and probing questions tended to vary due to the direction taken by the participants (Yeung 1995), e.g., more follow-up questions were asked if we felt that a participant had more to say or if he or she seemed to have a greater knowledge of or interest in the subject.

Although reliability is hard to attain when using non-standardized interviews due to the lack of standardization of the findings and the replicability of the study, semi-structured
interviews were chosen because the research question deals with a complex and dynamic phenomena (Saunders et al. 2009). A phenomena that currently reflects reality but which might change in a couple of years. Therefore, reliability is overcome by bearing in mind that, due to the nature of the research question, non-standardized interviews are the best approach when exploring this specific topic because of their strong flexibility. However, to increase reliability we provide detailed descriptions of the data collection process in this section, while below we explain our thoughts concerning the development of interview questions and the interview guide as well as the implementation of the interviews. We will also describe how the data was analyzed.

From an ethical standpoint, we informed our participants of this thesis’ subject and gave a general explanation of what the questions were about. We also asked the participants for permission to audio-record their interviews, allowing them to decline if they felt uncomfortable with both the subject as well as the audio-recording. It was, however, a conscious choice not to give further details on the subject and questions at hand for the interview as we wanted the participants to give more spontaneous and genuine answers compared to answers they thought we might seek. Furthermore, all participants have been given fictitious names in regards to protecting their privacy. It was also important to us to actively listen to what the participants answered or did not answer so that we would be ready to abort the interview or restrain from asking some questions if we felt that a participant was not willing to provide any more answers.

3.2.1 Sample
Due to the nature of the research question, the sample had to be selected based on high interest and relation to home furnishings. Therefore, we used purposive sampling which is suitable when the sample size is small and when the cases are particularly informative for the study (Saunders et al. 2009). By using purposive sampling, the results can not be generalized to a population since it is a non-probability approach (Bryman & Bell 2011). However, as our results are supposed to gain deep insight into a specific group about a phenomena through their point of view, generalizability was not our intentional purpose.

To find relevant participants to the study, we used snowball sampling (Bryman & Bell 2011). We began by reaching out to people in our closest surroundings whom we knew were committed consumers of home furnishings. These people further recommended us to
approach others they knew had a particular interest in the topic. In total, 13 interviews were conducted, which we consider to be an appropriate amount for this study due to its inductive nature (Saunders et al. 2009). Saturation was reached at 11 interviews, but we decided to conduct two more to receive a completely satisfactory result where no more new significant findings emerged (Saunders et al. 2009).

The participants varied in age, ranging from 21 - 28 years old and from different backgrounds. Many are students, some with a part-time job as well, meanwhile others have full-time jobs in different working fields. Some live with their parents, some live alone and others live with a partner, in either a rented apartment or a condominium, whilst one participant lives in a house. The geographical location of the participants also varied from big cities such as Stockholm, Gothenburg and Uppsala to smaller cities and towns spread out across Sweden. Furthermore, the participants also varied in gender. However, the majority were female with 2 out of the 13 being male. This was due to the sample being purposive and by using snowball sampling as well. Besides gender, the different characteristics of the participants gives a broader perspective of the phenomena and how it is perceived (Bryman & Bell 2011).
Table 1. Profile of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Interview form</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Living situation</th>
<th>Family status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emilia</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>Childhood house with parents</td>
<td>Boyfriend (not living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Studio apt. rental</td>
<td>Boyfriend (not living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrik</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Student and part time consultant</td>
<td>1 bedroom condominium</td>
<td>Girlfriend (living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Full time store associate</td>
<td>2 bedroom condominium</td>
<td>Fiancé (living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1 bedroom apt. rental</td>
<td>Boyfriend (living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student corridor</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>Part time communications assistant</td>
<td>1 bedroom condominium</td>
<td>Boyfriend (living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>Student and part time marketer</td>
<td>1 bedroom condominium</td>
<td>Boyfriend (not living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Student and part time customer service worker</td>
<td>1 bedroom condominium</td>
<td>Girlfriend (living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Full time quality technician</td>
<td>2 bedroom apt. rental with parent</td>
<td>Boyfriend (not living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Student and part time design technician</td>
<td>Studio apt. rental</td>
<td>Boyfriend (not living together)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saga</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Childhood house with parents, soon moving to studio apt. rental</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frida</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1 bedroom condominium</td>
<td>Boyfriend (living together)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the sample for this study can differ from an average Swedish consumer in many ways e.g., no one had children, many were students which affected their economic and housing situation with one participant living in a student corridor, although some lived with a partner - others lived by themselves or with their parents which also affected the way in which they consumed and/or thought of home furnishings. Lastly, all participants are part of
generation Y, which was due to a purposive and snowball sampling. Generation Y is a tech-savvy generation (Thau 2013) with high social media usage (Kennedy & Gúzman 2016) which can arguably affect their responses to social media’s impact to a larger extent than older generations. Because the participants are all part of the same generation, generalizing the results to other generations is not feasible. We were aware of these different factors but due to the research design and sample chosen which do not aim at generalizability - we were satisfied with our participants and their answers for the data collection and analysis in discovering key themes.

3.2.2 Interview guide

The interview guide (see Appendix 2), a technique appropriate for semi-structured interviews, provided us with guidance and direction (Bryman & Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2009) while at the same time providing the participants with enough flexibility to provide rich answers (Bryman & Bell 2011). The interview guide centered around specific themes that were derived from the theoretical framework as well as our previous, personal experiences with the topic (Saunders et al. 2009). The intention with the interview guide was to have a clear focus for the data collection which is what Saunders et al. (2009) recommend, to ensure that the study is progressing.

A variety of questions were used, e.g., open questions that were later followed up by probing questions to help explore the topic even further (Saunders et. al 2009). Saunders et al. (2009) do not encourage posing leading questions as they might indicate bias on the interviewer's part which could affect the responses. We, therefore, strongly tried to avoid posing leading questions. There were at times a need to pose direct questions due to the complex nature of the subject (Bryman & Bell 2011). Some participants would circle around the subject, we therefore posed some direct questions to make sure we understood our participants’ responses and kept them on the subjects we were keen to find out more about.

There were at times a need to vary the order of the questions posed due to participants “going off the subject” at times and slipping into other questions, which is a normal endeavor in semi-structured interviews (Saunders et al. 2009). While writing the interview questions we regularly thought of the language we used to make sure it was easily comprehensible, as well as the order of the questions posed to make sure they followed a logical order (Bryman & Bell 2011; Saunders et al. 2009). The first interview guide (see Appendix 1) was then tested
on one participant to ensure these factors. After the pilot guide was tested we reviewed the
questions and revised two questions; Q2: What items for your home do you spend the most
money on? was extended by adding two follow-up questions: Where do you usually buy? and
How often do you purchase home furnishings? as we realized that we lacked this important
aspect as well. Q5: If you could imagine anything, what in home furnishings would you want
to buy for yourself? was clarified by adding a probing question; Anything else that you’ve
thought of or dreamed of? because the pilot interview indicated that Q5 needed more
probing. After these changes, a second interview guide (see Appendix 2) was created and the
interviews proceeded accordingly.

3.2.3 Operationalization of theoretical framework
A variety of research questions were written which are rooted in the theoretical framework
and the themes that arose. The theoretical framework was thus operationalized into eight
variables (see Table 2) which guided the creation of the interview guides (see Appendix 1 &
2). We designed the interview guide so that we would be prepared to ask follow-up questions,
which sometimes led us across different themes. However, all of the main questions were
covered in all interviews. Below follows a description of these variables with a selection of
questions asked for each, where only one question (Q1) from the interview guide is not
mentioned. This was due to Q1 acting as an overall introductory question which was posed in
order to get the participants to start thinking of their homes and relation to their home
furnishings.

Social Media and Social Influence (Variables: Influencers, Social Influence)

The first theme dealt with concepts related to social media and social influence, with the
variables influencers and social influence. The first question directly connected to this
theme was Q4: “Where would you say that your interest in these products first arose?”, an
open question that made it possible for us to follow up with questions related to social media
and social influence, as well as Q6: “If you were to rank these in order - which affects you the
most? (Friends, Social media, Stores, E-commerce & Interior magazines each had its own
post-it for participants to rank)” which was a question that gave the participants an
opportunity to elaborate on the different alternatives to determine which had the greatest
influence. With this question we wanted to see how the participants discussed the different
sources of influence in connection to the theory on influencers and social influence, what
affects them the most and what does not have a significant impact on their decisions. When the participants discussed social media, we specifically asked follow-up questions about influencers, such as “Do you follow a specific person on social media that you would say inspire you the most?” or “Can you think of a time when you have purchased a product based on inspiration from someone you have seen on social media?” if the participants had not already mentioned it.

Consumers’ decision-making process in today’s digital landscape is suggested to be highly influenced by social factors (Powers et al. 2012). In Q10: “Before you make a purchase (or wish for something) for your home, do you seek advice from people close to you or do you search for the product online?”, the intention was therefore to discover whether the participants were dependent on others when making a decision to purchase a product.

**Social media and Self-expression** (Variables: Possible Selves, The Extended Self, The Digital Extended Self, Uniqueness)

Questions related to self-expression and how our possessions define and extend our sense of self, as well as how we communicate this to others on social media, were integrated as follow-up questions in several questions where the participants discussed their possessions. By asking “why?” and “what made you desire this?” we received answers related to self-expression. As behavior can be directed by consumers’ dreams and aspirations, a concept Markus and Narius (1986) called possible selves, Q3: Are there any items you prefer over others? and Q5: If you could imagine anything, what in home furnishings would you want to buy for yourself? were posed. Both questions explored the concept of possible selves by asking the participants these questions that relate to their dreams and preferences. Furthermore, Q2: What items for your home do you spend the most money on? was asked in connection to the variable of the extended self to explore the participants’ relations to their actual purchases, and how possessions were part of their extended self. Moreover, through the questions Q7: “What does your home say about you?” and Q8: “How would you feel if someone took all of your home furnishings away” we specifically aimed, based on Belk’s research (1988), at reaching the participants’ feelings toward their possessions and the role they play in the participants’ lives. Q9: “How would you feel if a friend decided to purchase the same things as you?” was asked to explore the participants’ feelings towards uniqueness. Lastly, Q11: “After you’ve made a purchase, do you send an image to your friends or do you
“Put it up on Instagram/Facebook?” was a question to investigate the participants’ post-purchase behavior and with the follow-up question “why?/why not?” we aimed at finding out if their self-expression became further extended when displaying possessions for others on social media, thus looking at their digital extended self.

**Social media and The Decision-Making Process** (Variables: multiple touch-points, search and evaluation, post-purchase behavior)

The best way to find out how the participants’ reason before making a purchase we considered to be through Q6: *If you were to rank these in order - which affects you the most? (Friends, Social media, Stores, E-commerce & Interior magazines each had its own post-it for participants to rank)* which was based on the theories of Ashman et al. (2015), Kapitan and Silvera (2016), Kelman (1961) and Powers et al. (2012), where the participants elaborated on these sources. On each of the different sources, we had prepared follow-up questions, for instance if physical stores would be ranked high: “*Do you make a purchase immediately when you see the product or do you need some time to think? What do you do then – ask people for advice, search for the product online etc.?*” to further investigate the routes the participants’ decision-making process took. This was further explored through Q10: *Before you make a purchase (or wish for something) for your home, do you seek advice from people close to you or do you search for the product online?*. Besides social influence, the question explores where the participants encountered multiple touch-points in their decision-making process and if they further conducted search and evaluation before making a purchase. In order to investigate the participants’ post-purchase behavior, we asked Q11: “*After you’ve made a purchase, do you send an image to your friends or do you put it up on Instagram/Facebook?*” that besides post-purchase behavior, also explores the participants’ self-expression on social media.
Table 2. Variables derived from the theoretical framework on social media and social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process.

3.3 Data Analysis and Presentation

The data was analyzed throughout the data collection process as interviews were transcribed and discussed soon after contemplation. By making the data analysis an ongoing process, it enabled us to become more aware of emerging themes in the interviews that could later be asked about in a more direct way in other interviews (Bryman & Bell 2011). Once all interviews were transcribed we went through each interview to find common themes as well as differences in the data. Unitizing the data meant that everything from sentences to whole paragraphs were added under the respective questions we had posed during the interviews and irrelevant data was excluded after careful consideration (Saunders et al. 2009). Once this summary of the main findings was done, it was printed and thus began a color-coding process. Variables derived from theory were attached to relevant and large “chunks” of data (Saunders et al. 2009) that were color-coded in three different colors, each one assigned one of the three theoretical themes of this thesis. We thus highlighted answers, in color, deemed suitable for the three categories of social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process. The answers for each question were compared to find commonalities and
differences. The most prominent findings from the summary have thus been collected and written down in the following chapter. The data analysis also included translating the data from Swedish to English. The following chapter, findings and analysis, consists of the main findings from the data collection process, which are interwoven with an analysis connected to the theoretical framework. This structure was chosen because it was deemed to be the best way to present the findings of this thesis by avoiding overlapping chapters where findings were presented separately.
4. Findings and Analysis

Below follows a presentation of the empirical findings that have emerged during the data collection and which are analyzed together with theory. The results follow the order of the theoretical framework and the three aspects behind this thesis’ purpose. The most important results from all 13 interviews have been collected, similarities and differences, in a manner that was respectful to all participants’ opinions. The results have then been matched to theory and the variables that were the foundation for the interview questions.

4.1 Social Media and Social Influence

4.1.1 Influencers

One of the main findings from the collected data was that the inspiration to buy home furnishings mainly comes from social media with 10 out of the 13 participants claiming that social media is the main source that influences what they purchase. The dominating channels were Instagram, Pinterest and blogs which the participants visit daily. For the most part, the participants expressed that they mainly follow lifestyle accounts rather than accounts which solely focus on home furnishings, even if some participants mentioned these types of accounts as well. Lifestyle accounts often incorporate a variety of aspects e.g., home furnishings, fashion and travel. When it comes to home furnishings, the participants expressed that these non-corporate (private individuals), lifestyle accounts provided more inspirational images because they were set in an “inspiring environment” which also enables them to see the full picture of products they are interested in and ideas on how to combine different items. The same was true of blogs. These findings suggest that influencers come in the form of celebrity endorsers (Kapitan & Silvera 2016) as some participants named a few famous bloggers and influencers that can be deemed as celebrities in Sweden. Furthermore, “ordinary” bloggers (Uzunoğlu & Kip 2014; Kapitan & Silvera 2016) were also found to be influencers as well as friends (Bradley 2016; Yaacoub & Najjar 2016). One participant placed friends as the main source that influenced her, saying that her current obsession with scented candles was down to her seeing it at a friend’s house. Our participants struggled to recall the names of the lifestyle accounts they follow however, besides the more famous ones such as Kenza. This would suggest that, when looking for inspiration for home furnishings, content rather than the source is more influential as long as the images are inspirational and preferably within a home environment context. These images were prevailing in the findings over product shots which the participants found to be uninspirational and unrelatable which might be a reason as to why they mostly follow non-corporate accounts. This was also true as to why a majority of participants rarely looked to e-commerce websites for inspiration.
Furthermore, Uzunoğlu and Kip (2014) argued that digital influencers such as the aforementioned, are more trusted than corporate messages. We would speculate that this could also be a reason as to why more non-corporate accounts than corporate accounts (e.g., specific stores or product brands) are followed. However, we argue that lifestyle accounts can be corporate as well, in the sense that some influencers are brands themselves with at times, sponsored content (e.g., Kenza). Although, this was not a distinction that our participants made when talking about corporate and non-corporate accounts, as they discussed corporate accounts as specific stores or product brands and non-corporate accounts as private individuals.

Non-corporate accounts center on UGC and with sites such as Instagram and Pinterest where visual content is key, Wolny and Mueller (2013) argued that network effects could emerge where trends essentially are co-created by consumers who cause and adopt them, which makes trends more visual on these platforms. It was evident from the findings that the participants turn to social media for inspiration on current trends. As social media was found to be the main source of influence, it would suggest that trends on home furnishings are highly visible on platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest and blogs and therefore influence what consumers of home furnishings purchase as the network effects impact the perceived value of the products consumers see (Wolny & Mueller 2013). Thus, image-based social media platforms are the dominating channel for finding inspiration to guide purchase decisions of home furnishings. Furthermore, images were found to be the main source of inspiration, some participants explicitly expressed that these were highly important even though some can be recognized as staged. This corresponds to Kee and Yazdanifard (2015) as well as Walter and Gioglio’s (2014) theories that visual content can pierce through the digital noise and be a source of motivation to buy goods.

### 4.1.2 Social influence

Looking at how social influence impacts consumer behavior, Kelman’s (1961) three processes of social influence were emphasized in the previous chapter – compliance, identification and internalization. The most normative form of conformity, compliance (i.e., to regardless of private beliefs accept influence of another individual or group in order to receive a beneficial reaction) was not clearly found in the participants answers, this might be due to the participants reluctance to willingly admit if they have ever purchased something to receive a beneficial response from others. Compliance means a superficial processing style of
messages (Kapitan & Silvera 2016), which the participants did not display in the interviews. This could be because of the participants’ high interest in home furnishings and where purchasing products against private beliefs is not a common behavior. Signs of conforming can, however, more clearly be traced down to Kelman’s (1961) identification process (i.e., the individual imitates either some parts or every part of the influencing individual’s life, in accordance to his or her self-image). One participant emphasized that seeing how a home can look like today on Instagram is not always a positive thing since it somehow sets the frame for what is accepted and what is not.

Well, if I had seen them [candle holders] while out shopping before visiting this blog then I probably wouldn’t have thought of them. But there on that blog they looked so good that I...well I just felt that I needed to buy them (...) they were maybe not really my style but they looked so good that I also wanted them.

- Louise, 26

The participants admit that they are often inclined to follow home furnishing trends they spot on social media, hence their frequent purchases of decorative details. One participant had bought a vase, after she saw it on Instagram, as a gift for a relative and another participant, Louise, described a time where she had bought candle holders that not necessarily matched her style but that looked good on a blog which influenced her purchase decision. One participant said that whenever her student budget allows for it, she will go out and buy items she has seen on social media. We would also argue that due to lifestyle accounts on Instagram being followed more frequently than pure home furnishing accounts, the participants might in some cases strive to imitate specific people. By purchasing the same products as the influencing individual, their homes can achieve the same attractive look (Kapitan & Silvera 2016). This is, however, as several participants expressed only some parts of the influencing individual’s home, not every single part of it. It shall also be noted that every participant in our study is in their 20’s, hence they have a greater knowledge of who they are and what they like, which we can speculate would result in less likeliness to normatively comply to others. Instead they are more concerned with consuming products in accordance to their self-image, as in the identification process. The most prominent process in our findings is however internalization (i.e., when an individual allows influence from someone because it is congruent with his or her value system) as the participants often expressed how they see things on social media but then go inside themselves to figure out
how the products would fit in their home and then buy the things they genuinely like and that
would look good in their homes. Since the processing style of messages is deeper when the
interest is high (Kapitan & Silvera 2016) this prominent finding may not come as a surprise.

*Because there you see like...[on Instagram] somewhere you get inspiration of how a home
should actually look like. And that’s what I did... then I get my own ideas, some things one
might have copied straight of, where I make something my own with my own touch to it, sort
of.*

- David, 21

4.2 Social Media and Self-Expression

4.2.1 Possible selves

When the participants were asked what item they would buy for themselves if they had no
financial constraints, many answered that they wished for larger items, such as a dining room
table or something luxurious such as velvet chairs or an expensive bed. Items with a unique
value were also mentioned, for example a painting by a renowned artist. These answers give
away a longing for products that are part of the participants’ fantasies, hopes and goals
(Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998; Markus & Narius 1986). Here, the participants’ possible
selves shine through (Markus & Narius 1986), which also became evident when they were
asked to tell about a home furnishings product they already owned and which they liked a lot.
Some participants mentioned larger furniture because they held a social function, in the sense
that it would make it possible for big gatherings, something the participants could see
themselves having plenty of in the future. One participant expressed that he would like to
have an old-fashioned home-office which he had seen in movies depicting men working in
finance. His aspiration to reach this possible self was reflected in his choice of education as
well as the products he mentioned in the interview. Another participant mentioned looking in
interior magazines where she felt a desire to imitate the ideal portrayed in them.

*I want the feeling of me in my home because I want the feeling you get when you open an
interior magazine, it’s that feeling that I want. (...) I guess it’s that it feels luxurious, it
reflects me. When you open a magazine you often think “wow their house is so nice, it’s
pretty”. I want to feel like that as well.*

- Sophia, 25
Thus, it becomes evident that our participants mention products that reflect a lifestyle they admire, a possible self they wish to strive for, derived from a socio-cultural and historical context as well as media such as magazines, movies and social media.

4.2.2 The extended self
Belk (1988) argued that possessions extend the self and contribute to, as well as reflect, our identities where we believe that an object is part of us. The findings from the interviews supported Belk’s (1988) theory.

"I like that my house is perfect and that it looks like me so that people will immediately understand who I am."
- Melissa, 25

It became evident that our participants regard possessions as extensions of self. For many it was very important that their home reflected them or at least parts of them. One participant expressed that it was highly important for her that her home not only reflected who she was but that it also told her story of places she had traveled before and that her home was not a place where just anyone could live. Some participants argued that their home did not have to be 100% them, but one explained however that there could not be conflicting styles within her home.

Those who lived with a partner expressed that it could be difficult to unite two, at times, different styles as well. One participant had difficulties relating to the question because she lives at home with her parents and a few expressed that whether a home is clean or messy will tell something of the person living there. Many participants did struggle to answer the question of what their home tells of them. Arguably, this could be because it might be difficult to be aware of the different and perhaps contradictory aspects of the self that one has (Belk 1988). Furthermore, as many participants mentioned that social media influenced what home furnishings they bought, we would argue that some purchases might stem from a desire to keep up with trends rather than focusing on whether the item truly reflects one’s identity as previously mentioned.

9 out of 13 participants frequently mentioned decorative details when asked what they spend the most money on and what in home furnishings they prefer e.g., tealight holders, scented
candles, cushions and vases, usually with arguments such as “when getting tired of them they are easy to exchange”. Several participants expressed that the details complete their homes and are a way to display personality. Thus it can be argued that it is the wide array of decorative details that represent the diverse and contradictory aspects of the self that one has, rather than a single product (Belk 1988). Simultaneously, because many participants expressed that they gladly exchange these decorative details to keep up with trends and seasons - we would further argue that they discard items that are no longer consistent with their self-concept or the self they strive for. This is in accordance to Levy’s (1959) argument that symbols only become appropriate when they join, add or reinforce the perceptions we have of ourselves. As our perceptions can change as we change, decorative details become the means to express our current extended self.

Belk (1988) stated that losing possessions is equivalent to losing a loved one who has been a part of an individual’s life. Many participants expressed that they would feel empty if someone took away all their home furnishings although not to the extreme extent as suggested by Belk (1988). However, one participant expressed that she would feel naked without them because they told of who she was while another participant said it would mean ”losing her babies”. This further indicates how possessions can extend the self and how we impose our identity onto them which is why it may feel empty without them or why we express such strong emotions when they are taken away versus when we choose to discard them. Some participants expressed that the loss would be greater if the items held high sentimental value e.g., items they had received from family members, older items that were no longer available for purchase or items that were more unique - sentiments further supported by Belk’s (1988) theory.

4.2.3 The digital extended self

In accordance to Sheth and Solomon’s (2014) expanded theory on Belk’s (1988) work, we can in our findings see that the three fusions are present. Firstly, it is evident that the power has shifted from the producer to the consumer since the participants mainly follow lifestyle accounts centered on user-generated content rather than corporate accounts. Secondly, due to our participants expressing that social media is the main source of influence on their behavior because they use it multiple times a day, there is no longer a clear distinction between being offline and being online as social media is an integrated part of their everyday lives. Lastly, the shift from “you are what you wear” to “you are what you post” is in our findings most
evident in what the participants state they do not post. The participants seem to be highly 
aware that what they upload signals who they are and are therefore more selective, they do 
not want to be seen as bragging and showing-off but will rather upload a post of their 
possessions in a context such as hosting a brunch. This makes their self-expression through 
their possessions more implicit rather than explicit. Hence, it somewhat contradicts Belk’s 
(2013) theory as it was not normal behavior among our participants to upload images of 
possessions without a context.

For instance, if you think of the plates that I have, well if I know that I’m going to have a 
waﬄe-brunch and I’m going to take a picture, well then yes then I’ll use the nice plates but it 
can take months, years even after I’ve purchased them.
- Saga, 23

It is of high importance for those participants that upload pictures that the styling is right, that 
they create a feeling in the picture, yet it has to feel natural. However, none of the participants 
are active in uploading posts on social media, but those who do it sporadically do it due to a 
need for conﬁrmation or because they want to inspire others in their network. Thus the 
feedback on social media afﬁrms their sense of self (Belk 2013).

4.2.4 Uniqueness
Berger and Heath (2007) found that people tend to establish their differences in categories 
where they think others will look for identity signals. Based on our ﬁndings, home 
furnishings seems to be a category which people use to express their identity to others and is 
thus a strong category of identity signals. The participants expressed strong feelings towards 
the question how they would feel if a friend bought the same home furnishings as they had. 
Although they were ﬁne with it to some degree, for instance a few items were acceptable or 
items in a different style or color (Berger & Heath 2007), the participants expressed that if the 
majority of the home was copied then that would cause strong negative feelings. As 
previously mentioned, this suggests that the home reﬂects one’s identity and when copied it 
creates a sense of another also copying one’s identity. Furthermore, ﬁnding the right items for 
one’s home was seen as an accomplishment but also something that takes time and eﬀort. 
Thus, if someone would imitate their “work of art” they would feel somewhat robbed of time 
and identity.
Majority options could according to Berger and Heath (2007) reflect badly upon a person because they could be seen as a conformist rather than unique. This was evident in our findings when the participants were asked where they most frequently do their purchases. Several participants mentioned IKEA, but did so only after mentioning other stores such as Åhlens, H&M Home, Zara Home, Mio and Lagerhaus. When they mentioned IKEA, they often did it with additional, almost excusing, comments that products purchased here can look good, but that they are not that unique. However, one participant claimed that IKEA is a good store to purchase from when you want to make your furniture more unique since they are easy to transform in Do-it-yourself-projects. In general, to create a unique impression, for instance through the choice of color scheme in the home, was mentioned as important. This is also in accordance to Ulver-Sneistrup’s (2011) findings regarding home aesthetics where it was more favorable to be unique. Hence, although our participants are inspired by social media and at times buy the exact items they see, they will much rather get inspired by different social media accounts only to convert it into something unique and personal. Whether it be the styling or painting a different coat of paint on a dresser - the participants wish to feel unique hence the strong negative feelings if their home was copied. This further explains why friends were considered less influential on the participants’ behavior than social media. Often the participants would express that they simply did not have the same taste in home furnishings as their friends although they valued their opinion.

*It depends to what extent... I’ve had some issues with other friends about this. It doesn’t bother me that much as long as it’s not everything... (...) to use the same color scheme or stuff like that is okay but buying the exact same things would be... boring.*

- Maria, 25

However, an additional finding emerged where some participants expressed that it could be a compliment if a friend bought the same items. They saw it as a compliment that they had nice things and perhaps uniqueness was not as important to them as for the others.

*But then I think it’s more like you get flattered, that if someone copies me well then I’ve inspired someone else and I don’t see that as something negative. More like, okay then I’ll be glad because it was useful for someone else as well.*

- Nora, 28
4.3 Social Media and The Decision-Making Process

4.3.1 Multiple touchpoints, search and evaluation

Powers et al. (2012) argued that consumers today take many paths before a purchase in which they encounter multiple touch-points that affect their purchase behavior from e.g., social media, research or by engaging with the brand. The findings in this thesis support this argument as many participants expressed that social media, searches on Google, peer and family recommendations as well as physical stores all play a part before they actually make a purchase decision. The majority of the participants express that, when they see something they like on social media, they continue clicking to other places to find out which brand or store the product is from. After the initial inspiration from mainly Instagram, the participants will continue to click on links that take them to an e-commerce website, a blog or other outlets that allow them to see the product in an inspiring environment, preferably an environment that helps them decide how the item fits into their home. One participant even claimed that she only visited blogs if Instagram had led her to it. As social media was for most participants the starting point in their decision-making process, it affirms that the daily online interactions on these channels expose the participants to new products or ‘must-haves’ (Ashman et al. 2015). Not only was social media the prevailing channel for inspiration, but some participants also recalled purchasing items that had been directly inspired by social media.

“You saw these feather-lamps everywhere and thought, yeah that could create a nice lighting. You become impacted by... the things you encounter all the time and when you see it enough times, you also want it. It’s a created need in that sense...”

- Ann, 25

According to Ashman et al. (2015), the decision-making process today has become prolonged due to social media, where consumers go back and forth between online and offline sources on their path to purchase (Google 2012; Powers et al. 2012). Many of our participants search for a product before making a purchase, either on Instagram by using hashtags and filters, or on Google. A few also expressed that they conducted research in order to make sure that they made the right purchase decision which is in line with Powers et al.’s (2012) definition of an active shopper. However, reviews were only mentioned by a few as a tool in the purchase
process which might have to do with the nature of the category of home furnishings not being a category in which reviews matter too much.

Not only do the participants take many routes before a purchase, but there are also many others involved in the decision-making process. A rule of thumb was that the more expensive or bigger the purchase was - the more our participants were inclined to seek advice from others, for instance friends and family, to ensure that they made the right decision. Although the initial awareness of a product came from social media, the information needed to go further in the decision-making process came from family and peer recommendations (Powers et al. 2012). Simultaneously, many still choose to buy items without counseling with others or choose to disregard opinions if they receive a negative feedback where the purchase intention and desire is high. We could speculate that this new finding could be due to some home furnishings being regarded as mere trend items where social influence has played a part and where the participants are already confident about the product being socially acceptable. As only two participants mentioned being influenced by advertising in their decision-making process it can be argued that the participants are either unaware of the advertising they are exposed to or that social media has a greater effect on the decision-making process than traditional advertising (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). The participants stated that if they decide to purchase a product, then they want to adapt it to their own style and home. Social media is considered to offer a wide and more normal selection of home furnishings than interior magazines which by some participants are considered to only offer expensive and unreachable products. Thus, social media becomes a channel where inspiration can be gathered and then turned into something that allows for self-expression.

Physical stores were also deemed to influence the participants in their decision-making process. Many expressed that they prefer to take their time to ponder over a purchase and seeing a product in its physical form and to touch it will help them reach a purchase decision. However, stores were also found to be time-consuming by some participants and thus e-commerce websites would be more preferable. This would indicate that the participants appreciate speed but that they also need extensive information to be confident in their purchase. Physical stores could also be a source of inspiration much like social media, while e-commerce websites were seen as uninspirational although they had attractive prices. Some participants argued that they only went to e-commerce websites if they had been inspired to do so by social media. Lastly, interior magazines were the weakest or second weakest source
of influence on the decision-making process according to 11 out of 13 of our participants. The general opinion was that they did not come across physical magazines nor did they buy them which further supports that information that leads to a purchase comes from the online world in the form of social media - an ever-present tool (Ashman et al. 2015; Powers et al. 2012).

4.3.2. Post-purchase behavior

When consumers have made a purchase they sometimes turn to social media to share their shopping experiences with others, for instance by uploading a picture (Shankar et al. 2016). As previously mentioned, the participants in this study were not overly active in uploading pictures on social media, hence this behavior was not particularly prominent. However, when they upload a picture of their purchase, it can be months later from the actual purchase occasion and almost always involves the product in a context (such as displaying one’s new plates at a waffle brunch). As stated by Ashman et al. (2015) the post-purchase stage has been prolonged due to this new behavior and we would argue that it might be even longer in the category of home furnishings since it sometimes takes time before a person uses the product or finds the proper place for it in their home. As Ashman et al. (2015) state, the satisfaction with the purchase today is virtual as well, due to likes, comments and shares, hence the satisfaction can come later if the response on social media is positive.

Although few participants said that they upload pictures of their purchases on social media, many admit to sending pictures privately, through Snapchat or chat functions on Facebook and Instagram, to their friends and family. Many participants claim that this is because they want to show their appreciation for these people taking time and effort to help them with advice and seeking out products. As many of our participants admit to asking others for support, more people also become involved in the process. Sending a picture therefore becomes a way of saying “thank you” or “now you can stop searching, I’ve found it”. Other participants send pictures because they are proud of their purchase, while those who upload on social media do it because they want to inspire others.
5. Discussion

Based on the findings and analysis chapter, the following chapter will discuss the main findings in depth, together with the methodological aspects of this thesis. The structure of this chapter differs from the previous ones as the emphasis on the connection between social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process is brought forward. This will then lead into a concluding chapter.

The purpose of this thesis was to explore social media’s influence on three aspects; social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process. This was done in order to investigate reasons behind the increasing consumption of home furnishings in Sweden. In this thesis, 13 qualitative semi-structured interviews have been conducted in order to meet the purpose and thus to collect data that concerned consumers’ underlying thoughts and feelings which guide their consumption behavior and which is influenced by social media. From the interviews, rich and detailed answers emerged that helped shed a light on the reasons behind the increasing consumption of home furnishings in Sweden.

The main findings indicate that overall, the theory related to social influence (Kapitan & Silvera 2016; Kelman 1961; Uzunoğlu & Kip 2014; Wolny & Mueller 2013; Yaacoub & Najjar 2016), self-expression (Belk 1988; Belk 2013; Berger & Heath 2007; Markus & Narius 1986; Sheth & Solomon 2014) and the decision-making process (Ashman et al. 2015; Powers et al. 2012; Shankar et al. 2016) were to a large extent supported. For instance, social media and its various influencers have a great impact on consumer behavior as the findings indicate that home furnishing consumers are both actively and passively influenced by what they see on social media which impacts their self-expression and their decision-making process. Thus we have learned that the starting point for the decision-making process for the most part is social media where consumers will turn for inspiration on current trends and visual content set in an inspiring environment. Consumers are thus more inclined to follow lifestyle accounts rather than corporate accounts and are demanding inspiring images that allow them to see a product in a context. They are selective however in what they choose to follow and although influencers have a big impact on consumers, we have learned that the content itself seems to be more important than who the actual influencer is, at least in the particular category of home furnishings and on platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest. Whether this finding rings true for all social media platforms or if it would be different in a different category such as fashion is debatable. We can speculate, however, that because consumers follow lifestyle accounts centered on user-generated content on sites such as Instagram, they are interested in receiving a “package-deal” of many aspects such as fashion,
home furnishings, food, travel and exercise within the same lifestyle account. All these aspects probably influence the consumer beyond a single category as they seek out for inspiration. Arguably, these lifestyle accounts will thus nourish each other - e.g., Kenza is a fashion account but from our findings we can see that this account also inspires purchases of home furnishings. We can therefore speculate that lifestyle accounts can create trends that transcend industries and inspire consumers in who they choose to follow on social media. Hence, consumers both follow and do as the influencers they see on social media. It is easy for them to unfollow those they deem to be boring or uninspiring and finding new ones. Hence, they are in control of the social influence they are exposed to and this makes it easier to talk about, as our findings suggest. This leads us to Kelman’s (1961) theory of social influence where internalization was the most evident process among our participants. This might be due to the nature of home furnishings where possessions extend the self and act as identity signals, but also the control social media offers. We would speculate that by choosing who or what to follow and unfollow, consumers might embrace the content as personal and unique to them, which might explain why the deep process of internalization occurs among the findings. Although the more superficial process of identification was present in the findings as well, the high interest among the participants for home furnishings can also, as previously mentioned, explain why identification was less common than internalization.

It became clear that possessions sometimes are an indicator of identity, yet it was not always seen as important by the participants. Here we feel a need to discuss the participants’ ages and life-situations as they play a part in the findings. The participants have in recent years moved into their own homes, bought their first apartment or moved in with a partner. Thus, they have inevitably spent more money on home furnishings and their interest in the category has increased. Especially for those that have bought an apartment or that rented one opposed to those living with their family or in student-housing. Those who lived with a partner, or family, furthermore argued that it was difficult to fully express themselves when it came to home furnishings because they have to consider someone else as well. Another consideration for the majority of the participants is that because of their current occupation as students many expressed that the financial restraints inhibit them from purchasing everything they desire. We would speculate that this affects their self-expression in the sense that they might settle with home furnishings that are cheaper or only meant for a short while, which affects how they perceive their sense of self in relation to their home furnishings. In contrast, the feeling of emptiness the participants expressed if someone would take away their home
furnishings shows that Belk’s (1988) theory of the extended self is still relevant. This indicates that even though the participants not always consider their home furnishings to reflect who they are, they would yet not feel complete without them. However, unlike Belk (2013), we have shown that displaying possessions online is a rare rather than normal behavior and that for the most part, discussions concerning home furnishings happen offline. These discussions aid the consumers in their decision-making process as they seek out advice from their family and friends. The findings show that, besides the initial spark from social media, consumers will look to offline sources such as physical stores in order to make a well-informed decision. After purchase, it is interesting to note that the participants only upload images of their possessions occasionally and in a context, or they will send an image privately. We may speculate that this is due to the participants’ reluctance to explicitly “show-off” their possessions which might be a cultural dimension as it might be frowned upon in Sweden. It might also be that if one is not fully satisfied with one’s home and how it represents him or her then one might not be inclined to share it on social media. Those that were more willing to upload images however did it to inspire others. We would argue that, somewhere in this desire to inspire others, is an understanding the participants have of the power of social media and the social influence that occurs. There is an awareness of the social influence social media has and consumers do not mind being exposed to it. Social media allows for influence but also judgment, which might be why some upload and others do not. There is an awareness that social media reflects personal identity and by uploading pictures to inspire others, one might just become as the influencers one looks up to.

Furthermore, like Berger and Heath’s (2007) research suggests consumers with a high interest in a category are more inclined to seek uniqueness which the findings support. As home furnishings reflect personal identity, consumers do not want to have the exact same things as everyone else, which causes them to seek out uniqueness in ways such as choosing a different color than the initial one seen on social media. This is mostly done by purchasing decorative details that can enhance consumers’ uniqueness while also allowing them to keep up with trends. In order to seek out these unique products or to confirm their choices, consumers will search and evaluate home furnishings both offline and online. The process often starts on social media, then takes a few detours with stops along the way among peers, family and different websites. It is interesting to note that the decision-making process begins in social media which was not prominent in the theoretical framework. We speculate that this might be due to the generation that the sample of this thesis adheres to. Furthermore, the
decision-making process might facilitate the strive for uniqueness as it allows consumers to find products that give the illusion of being unique if for instance, the color is different (Berger & Heath 2007) while at the same time being under the spell of social influence.
6. Conclusion

Based on the previous chapters we have come to some conclusions in regards to the research question for this thesis. These conclusions are presented below. Lastly, theoretical and managerial implications of this thesis are discussed as well as limitations and suggestions for further research.

This thesis posed the question of How does social media affect social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process of home furnishing consumers in Sweden? We can, from the findings, conclude that social media affects many parts of Swedish home furnishing consumers’ lives. It influences them, sets the standard, touches upon self-expression and steers their decision-making process, which further suggests that the five steps of the EKB-model are highly influenced by social media. Thus consumer behavior is in fact changing. Social influence triggered by social media is highly present and consumers allow for it. Consumers are further aware that self-expression occurs on social media which influences both what they choose to share or not to share. Last but not least, the information gathering needed for the decision-making process is never ending. Social media is the starting point before any other step is taken, whether it be talking to friends or going to a store. Thus one thing becomes evident among all three aspects: consumers desire a complete picture. Whether it is by following lifestyle accounts, uploading images that have context or searching online for products set in inspirational environments - consumers seek many points of references. It therefore becomes more evident than before that the three aspects of social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process are evolving due to consumers’ changing needs. They all belong together, rooted in one core - social media.

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

Overall, this thesis contributes with an extended perspective on social media’s impact on consumer behavior and adds to existing consumer behavior research on social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process. Thus, this thesis adds to Buechel and Berger’s (2016) research on why people engage in social media by further exploring how they are affected by it. The findings contribute to Wang et al.’s (2012) research on peer influence on consumers online, and Powers et al.’s (2012) theory of how that influence impacts what consumers purchase. This consequently gives us an increasing insight into the role of visual content and how it affects consumers today and how they respond to messages. Another
contribution from this thesis is that young consumers seek to inspire other members in their network, which is an interesting finding that contributes to social influence theory. The findings suggest that internalization is the prevailing process of social influence which adds to Kelman’s (1961) theory as well. Furthermore, our findings make a contribution to research on the digital extended self by Belk (2013). While Belk (2013) focused on giving an overview of the online world and how the use of avatars and virtual possessions in a virtual world affects the extended self, this study further adds to Belk’s suggestion that the extended self is in constant change due to evolving technology. The findings from this study help shed a light on self representation on social media, where we have shown that there is a high awareness of the self-expressing function social media has, hence the at times apprehension to upload images. This thesis also contribute to research on the decision-making process by Ashman et al. (2015), Powers et al. (2012) and Bronner and de Hoog (2014), where our findings further manifest social media’s role in the decision-making process and which clearly show that increasingly, consumers will turn to social media first.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Findings from this study have managerial implications for companies that wish to further understand the changing consumer behavior happening right now. First of all, it is important to take into consideration one of the main findings from this thesis: social media reigns supreme over any other channel of influence. Before consumers even enter a physical or online store, they turn to social media. Consumer today will rather turn to an influencer with a lifestyle account that inspires them in multiple ways with visually pleasing content than follow company-owned accounts. For managers, this requires an awareness and knowledge of where consumers actually search for products and brands. If they, as the findings suggest, start on social media then it might be beneficial for managers to identify the right channels as well as the right influencers that their target audience follows as these influence the decision-making process more than any other factor. Thus, managers can collaborate with these influencers in order to reach their customers. Inevitably, consumers are affected by what they see and, although it might be difficult to control it, companies should also be aware of what sort of content their own brand is mentioned in and how that affects the brand. Moreover, managers can, from this thesis’ findings, gain further understanding of how consumers reason before, during and after a purchase and how these factors can be incorporated into their
marketing strategies. Although this thesis centers on the home furnishings industry, the findings can be beneficial for managers in other industries as well, such as industries revolving around high-involvement products or product categories such as fashion, where the identity signaling is high and which require visual presentation before purchase.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

This thesis is not without its limitations however, the chosen research method of semi-structured interviews with 13 participants make it difficult to generalize the findings to a large population. Since a purposive sampling technique was chosen for this study, it led us to young consumers in their 20’s that are part of generation Y which has been described as a tech-savvy (Thau 2013) and an always-on generation (Kennedy & Guzman 2016). This has to be taken into consideration, as well as perhaps that a sample with other generations such as generation X or Baby Boomers might have given different results. Furthermore, the chosen industry of home furnishings also limit the findings to a specific industry that is highly visible on social media which perhaps might not be the case for other industries. Lastly, as 11 out of 13 participants were women this thesis lacks a gender diversity that might have given the findings another perspective. While the findings between the women and men in this thesis were fairly alike, the small sample of only two men makes it further difficult to generalize the findings.

For further research it would be interesting to take a generation-perspective such as generation X or Baby Boomers, to see whether the results differ from this thesis’ sample and whether social media has the same social influence. It might also be interesting to explore if there are any gender differences as well, as this thesis had a majority of female participants we argue that it could be interesting to conduct a study with a higher gender diversity. Furthermore, further research could also benefit from a study into different industries. As this thesis focused on the home furnishings industry it would be intriguing to see if other industries, for instance fashion, would reach the same conclusions concerning social media’s affect on social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process. Future research might also explore if these aspects differ between high - and low-involvement products. Lastly, further research might also consider exploring social media’s effect on each aspect (social influence, self-expression and the decision-making process) in more depth as we
suggest that there is more to explore in these aspects, more knowledge to gain beyond this thesis.
References


Appendix 1

Interview guide

Living situation: Age; Occupation; Time; Place; Gender:

1. Would you like to tell me about a home furnishing product you have either bought or wished for, that you really like? (Kan du berätta om någon inredningsprodukt du köpt eller fått som du tycker väldigt mycket om?)

   - What inspired you to buy or wish for this product? (Vad inspirerade dig till att köpa/önska denna?)

2. What items for your home do you spend the most money on? (Vilka produkter till ditt hem lägger du mest pengar på?)

   - Why? (Varför?)

Variables: The extended self

3. Are there any items you prefer over others? (Finns det några inredningsprodukter du tycker extra mycket om?)

   - Which brands? (Vilka varumärken?)
   - Why? (Varför?)

Variables: Possible selves, The extended self

4. Where would you say that your interest in these products first arose? (Var väcktes ditt intresse för dessa produkter?)

   - Where do you get your interest from today? (Var får du ditt intresse idag?)
   - If magazines: do you follow any of them on social media? (Vid tidningar - följer du också någon av dessa på sociala medier?)
   - If social media: which platforms do your use? (Vid sociala medier - Vilka plattformar använder du?)
   - Has the interest in home furnishings also increased among your acquaintances? (Har intresset ökat även i din bekantskapsskrets?)

Variables: Influencers, Social Influence.
5. If you could imagine anything, what in home furnishings would you want to buy for yourself? (Om du fick drömma fritt, vad inom inredning skulle du vilja köpa till dig själv?)

- If they do not mention a brand: any specific brand you come to think of? (Om de inte säger varumärke - Något speciellt varumärke du tänker på?)

Variables: Possible selves, The extended self.

6. If you were to rank these in order - which affects you the most? (Om du skulle rangordna dessa - Vad påverkas du mest av?)

- Social media: Which social media platforms do you use? What attracts you to them? (Vid sociala medier; Vilka sociala medieplattformar använder du? Vad är det som lockar dig?)
- Friends: Do you talk about it a lot? Face-to-face or on social media? Do you send links to each other? (Vänner: Brukar ni prata mycket om det? Fysisk form eller via sociala medier? Länkar till varandra?)
- Physical Stores: Do you immediately buy something that you see or do you take your time to think about it? If you choose to think about it, what does that entail? (Butik: Köper du direkt när du ser någonting eller brukar du fundera lite på det? Om du väljer att fundera lite, vad brukar du göra då?)
- E-commerce: How did you get there? Is it initially there that you find the products? (E-handel: Hur hittade du dit? Är det där du initialt oftast hittar produkterna?)
- Physical Interior magazines: Why? (Inredningsmagasin: Varför?)

- When something is low - why? (Vid lågt: Varför var detta lågt?)

- If they mention influencer: What do you think of this person? (Om nämnande av influencer - Vad tycker du om denne?)
- Do you get a lot of inspiration from him/her? (Får du mycket inspiration från just denna personen?)
- In what way? How much of your home is inspired by this person? (På vilket sätt? Hur mycket i ditt hem är inspirerat från denna personen?)

- If they do not mention influencer: Can you think of a time when someone influenced you to purchase home furnishings? (Om ej nämnande av influencer: Kan du tänka på ett tillfälle då någon influerat dig att köpa en inredningsprodukt?)
When you’ve bought items that X has influenced you to purchase, how do you later feel when you put it up? (När du köpt produkter som du X inspirerat dig till att köpa, hur känner du sedan när du ställer fram/hänger upp mm den i ditt hem?)

Variables: Influencers, Social Influence, Multiple touchpoints, search and evaluation

7. What does your home say about you? (Vad säger ditt hem om dig?)

Variables: The extended self, Uniqueness

8. How would you feel if someone took all of your home furnishings away? (Hur skulle du känna dig om någon tog ifrån dig alla dina inredningsprodukter?)

Variables: The extended self

9. How would you feel if a friend decided to purchase the same things as you? (Hur skulle du känna om en vän bestämde sig för att köpa samma produkter som du har?)

- Why/Why not?

Variables: Uniqueness

10. Before you make a purchase (or wish for something) for your home, do you seek advice from people close to you or do you search for the product online? (Innan du gör ett köp (eller önskar dig något) till ditt hem, brukar du rådfråga med personer i din omgivning eller söka information om den produkten på nätet?)

- Why/Why not?

Variables: Social influence, Multiple touchpoints, search & evaluation

11. After you’ve made a purchase, do you send an image to your friends or do you put it up on Instagram/Facebook? (Efter att du köpt den, brukar du skicka en bild på den till dina vänner eller lägga upp en Instagrambild/Facebook inlägg?)
- Why/Why not?

Variables: The digital extended self, post-purchase behavior
Appendix 2

Revised Interview guide

Living situation: Age; Occupation; Time; Place; Gender:

1. **Would you like to tell me about a home furnishing product you have either bought or wished for, that you really like?** (Kan du berätta om någon inredningsprodukt du köpt eller fått som du tycker väldigt mycket om?)

   - What inspired you to buy or wish for this product? (Vad inspirerade dig till att köpa/önska denna?)

2. **What items for your home do you spend the most money on?** (Vilka produkter till ditt hem lägger du mest pengar på?)

   - Why? (Varför?)
   - Where do you usually buy? (Var brukar du handla?)
   - How often do you purchase home furnishings? (Hur ofta köper du inredning?)

*Variables: The extended self*

3. **Are there any items you prefer over others?** (Finns det några inredningsprodukter du tycker extra mycket om?)

   - Which brands? (Vilka varumärken?)
   - Why? (Varför?)

*Variables: Possible selves, The extended self*

4. **Where would you say that your interest in these products first arose?** (Var väcktes ditt intresse för dessa produkter?)

   - Where do you get your interest from today? (Var får du ditt intresse idag?)
   - If magazines: do you follow any of them on social media? (Vid tidningar - följer du också någon av dessa på sociala medier?)
   - If social media: which platforms do your use? (Vid sociala medier - Vilka plattformar använder du?)
   - Has the interest in home furnishings also increased among your acquaintances? (Har intresset ökat även i din bekantskapskrets?)
5. If you could imagine anything, what in home furnishings would you want to buy for yourself? (Om du fick drömma fritt, vad inom inredning skulle du vilja köpa till dig själv?)

- If they do not mention a brand: any specific brand you come to think of? (Om de inte säger varumärke - Något speciellt varumärke du tänker på?)
- Anything else that you’ve thought of or dreamed of? (Något mer du tänker på, som du drömt om?)

Variables: Possible selves, The extended self.

6. If you were to rank these in order - which affects you the most? (Om du skulle rangordna dessa - Vad påverkas du mest av?)

Social Media - Friends - Physical Stores - Ecommerce - Physical interior magazines. (Shown by the usage of post-its: interviews over phone - have them write down the different sources) (Sociala medier - Vänner - Fysisk Butik - E-handel - Fysiska inredningsmagasin) (Visas fysiskt) Över telefon: Ber dem skriva ner dessa innan frågan ställs.

- **Social media**: Which social media platforms do you use? What attracts you to them? (Vid sociala medier; Vilka sociala medie platförmar använder du? Vad är det som lockar dig?)
- **Friends**: Do you talk about it a lot? Face-to-face or on social media? Do you send links to each other? (Vänner: Brukar ni prata mycket om det? Fysisk form eller via sociala medier? Länkar till varandra?)
- **Physical Stores**: Do you immediately buy something that you see or do you take your time to think about it? If you choose to think about it, what does that entail? (Butik: Köper du direkt när du ser någonting eller brukar du fundera lite på det? Om du väljer att fundera lite, vad brukar du göra då?)
- **E-commerce**: How did you get there? Is it initially there that you find the products? (E-handel: Hur hittade du dit? Är det där du initialt oftast hittar produkterna?)
- **Physical Interior magazines**: Why? (Inredningsmagasin: Varför?)

- When something is low - why? (Vid lågt: Varför var detta lågt?)

- If they mention influencer: What do you think of this person? (Vid nämnanande av influencer - Vad tycker du om denne?)
- Do you get a lot of inspiration from him/her? (Får du mycket inspiration från just denna personen?)
- In what way? How much of your home is inspired by this person? (På vilket sätt? Hur mycket i ditt hem är inspirerat från denna personen?)

- If they do not mention influencer: Can you think of a time when someone influenced you to purchase home furnishings? (Om ej nämnan av influencer: Kan du tänka på ett tillfälle då någon influerat dig att köpa en inredningsprodukt?)

- When you’ve bought items that X has influenced you to purchase, how do you later feel when you put it up? (När du köpt produkter som du X inspirerat dig till att köpa, hur känner du sedan när du ställer fram/hänger upp mm den i ditt hem?)

*Variables: Influencers, Social Influence, Multiple touchpoints, search and evaluation*

7. What does your home say about you? (Vad säger ditt hem om dig?)

*Variables: The extended self, Uniqueness*

8. How would you feel if someone took all of your home furnishings away? (Hur skulle du känna dig om någon tog ifrån dig alla dina inredningsprodukter?)

*Variables: The extended self*

9. How would you feel if a friend decided to purchase the same things as you? (Hur skulle du känna om en vän bestämde sig för att köpa samma produkter som du har?)

- Why/Why not?

*Variables: Uniqueness*

10. Before you make a purchase (or wish for something) for your home, do you seek advice from people close to you or do you search for the product online? (Innan du gör ett köp (eller önskar dig något) till ditt hem, brukar du rådfråga med personer i din omgivning eller söka information om den produkten på nätet?)

- Why/Why not?
Variables: Social influence, Multiple touchpoints, search & evaluation

11. After you’ve made a purchase, do you send an image to your friends or do you put it up on Instagram/Facebook? (Efter att du köpt den, brukar du skicka en bild på den till dina vänner eller lägga upp en Instagrambild/Facebook inlägg?)

- Why/Why not?

Variables: The digital extended self, post-purchase behavior