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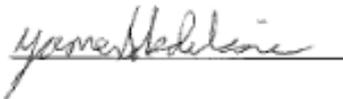
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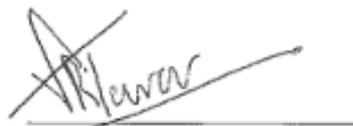
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# **Bachelor Thesis in Business Administration**

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## **Abstract**

Electronic commerce is the selected field to investigate for this thesis, particularly pure player apparel brands. This has been of interest as consumers struggle when shopping online for apparel since they cannot test the product before purchasing with pure players, therefore, there is information asymmetry. Moreover, when consumers lack trust, they may be more hesitant to purchase online due to the perceived risk, therefore, companies should attempt to relieve their doubts. It has been recognized in previous research that electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) could provide guidance and develop confidence during the purchasing process. The aim of this study was to develop an understanding on how consumers perceive online reviews to assure that they will be satisfied with the order. Moreover, there were several factors identified in previous research that could influence the use of online reviews, therefore, those factors were recognized and analyzed in the context of pure players for this study. In addition, the study revealed two factors that influenced the use of online reviews. A qualitative method was utilized, to gain a deeper understanding on consumers' opinions on the topic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide the opportunity for individuals to further develop their responses. The results suggested that pure player apparel brands should include online reviews. They could improve the mechanism by considering the factors that were identified in this study.

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# 1. Introduction

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*In this section, the background of electronic commerce and pure player brands is presented, followed by a problem discussion. The purpose of the thesis is also included, along with two research questions. Lastly, the delimitations of the study are discussed.*

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## 1.1 Background

The chosen field to base the thesis on is electronic commerce as the authors had an interest in the recent growth of online shopping after moving to Jönköping and noticing the lack of stores available. Electronic commerce is the concept of conducting business online by making electronic transactions between companies and their consumers using computer networks (Liu & Arnett, 2000). It has proven to be beneficial for companies and has gained popularity in various fields (Salo & Karjaluo, 2007).

Furthermore, based on observations from the internet, it was noticed that there are brands available only online that have recently been established such as Boohoo.com, etc. These are referred to as pure players, meaning that they do not sell their products in any physical stores on the high street but only have them available online (Grewal, Iyer & Levy, 2004). Moreover, the apparel industry in an online context was chosen for the investigation, as individuals have different preferences when it comes to clothing because of their body type, quality standards, etc., which therefore means that it might be more beneficial to rely on one's own judgment. Grewal et al. (2004) discuss that consumers find it challenging to shop for clothing online as they face the inability to have a sensory evaluation of the product. In addition to that, apparel was found to be an important category to study, as there have been pure player fashion retailers that have gained popularity over the years (Ashman & Vasquez, 2012). However, despite the growth of electronic commerce, there is still a lack of trust which is a significant deterrent for consumers (Palvia, 2009). The study by Gefen (2000) established trust as one of the most important aspects of electronic commerce. In addition to that, the author's findings also displayed that trust in an electronic commerce vendor increases a consumer's propensity to inquire about their products and finalize a purchase. Therefore, due to the inability of trying on clothing items, trust is a concept that will be examined as well, to determine

how it is developed to lead to a purchase. Furthermore, it is vital to define trust, as the definition varies across multiple disciplines (McKnight & Chervany, 2001). Trust is defined as the expectation that the other party will stay committed to what they promised by acting honest and not taking advantage of the other party if an opportunity is present (Corbitt, Thanasankit & Yi, 2003).

Furthermore, the rapid expansion of the Internet has led to the opportunity for individuals to share and express their opinions for others to view and consider (Dellarocas, 2003). Due to this, electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) has been established as a term which includes online reviews that are either negative or positive posted anonymously by consumers. The statement can be viewed publicly by individuals who have access to the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004). Since there is intangibility with online businesses, it was found from previous literature, that consumers collect information about a product online to achieve confidence, therefore, utilizing e-WOM as a mechanism (Prasad, Ishwar & Totala, 2017). The online review is usually available next to where the product description is displayed on the website (Korfiatis, García-Bariocanal & Sánchez-Alonso, 2012). Online reviews have been helpful in increasing sales and has been proven to prolong the time a customer spends on the website. They have also led to greater traffic and a sense of community amongst the purchasers (Ku, Wei & Hsiao, 2012). Hence, it was intriguing to study e-WOM in depth and gain a better understanding since it has provided several benefits.

## **1.2 Problem**

There has been some agreement that e-WOM can develop trust, and therefore decrease uncertainty in the process (Prasad et al., 2017). However, based on observations online, there are still electronic commerce websites that do not include online reviews. Therefore, it leads to questioning whether online reviews do hold value or if it is possible for companies to function with other mechanisms to increase sales. While past literature has highlighted the benefits of online reviews, it might not be as valuable as claimed, based on the observations that some companies do not include them. It could be possible that consumers may be gaining information through other resources, or relying on their own experiences. Thus, online reviews will be investigated to acquire an understanding based on consumers' experiences and opinions. Some researchers have found that online

reviews may be losing credibility due to the unethical actions made by companies and there has been little research done about how consumers respond to that (Lee & Jin Ma, 2014). Therefore, the reputation of online reviews may have changed recently due to past actions made by companies. Furthermore, Cui, Lui and Guo (2012) suggested that for future studies, the structure of online reviews should be examined to determine its usefulness, thus, for this paper that will be considered. It can be argued that the option of returning the product could be one way to test quality, therefore eliminating the need for online reviews. However, consumers may be reluctant to purchase if it is likely that the product will be returned as Grewal et al. (2004) have discussed that the return process could be considered a hassle. The aim could be to keep the product, therefore, attitudes towards the use of online reviews as a mechanism to assure that the product is going to be satisfactory, will be studied.

It is significant to understand how consumers build trust as the lack of it is one of the main reasons for consumers to not proceed with a purchase online (Cheung & Lee, 2000). It was discussed by Salo & Karjaluoto (2007) that more research should be developed about online trust as there are still many areas to explore. With online trust, Swan & Rosenbaum (2004) have noticed that the main discussion is about the security of the website. Therefore, since that has been dominant, trust in relation to products has been of interest, specifically pure players. It will be studied how consumers gain assurance that they will be satisfied with the order since it is not available offline to examine. If products have a physical presence as well, there is a possibility that the quality of the product has been tested at the store. Previous research has recognized that there is uncertainty with brands that only have an online-presence. This has also been recognized as a gap in electronic commerce as Ashman & Vasquez (2012) have claimed that they are under-explored, therefore, that will be the focus as there is limited research. Durkan, Durkin & Gillen, (2003) discussed that trust can be built online with the use of physical brands that are known as trustworthy. However, the aim of the thesis is to understand the significance of e-WOM in establishing trust for brands without a physical presence.

Even though the relation between pure players and online reviews has been analyzed by Lee & Jin Ma, (2012), they have claimed that there is still limited research on online reviews, and that their use may differ based on specific product categories. Manes &

Tchetchik (2018) would agree as they acknowledged that e-WOM is not 'monolithic', which means that the impact differs based on certain aspects such as product characteristics, and therefore the type of product should be considered. In conclusion, there is still a need for research in this field and therefore, a specific product category will be selected which will be apparel, as discussed before. The influence of online reviews for apparel products will be investigated to determine their effect on the purchasing decision.

### **1.3 Research Purpose**

The aim is to study consumers' experiences with e-WOM, to understand its usefulness in gaining trust, and thereby reducing risk for pure player brands. In addition, the factors that affect consumers in deciding whether to consider or ignore an online review will be analyzed. Therefore, this study will have a twofold focus.

Furthermore, Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009) have stated that there are three types of purposes that a research can have such as; exploratory, descriptive or explanatory. Exploratory studies are aimed at figuring out and deepening the understanding of the exact nature of a particular problem which might be unclear to the researcher. Descriptive studies put emphasis on depicting a correct representation of an event, situation or person. There are also cases where these two approaches can be combined and that is called descripto-explanatory purpose. The last kind of research purpose is explanatory, which is most applicable to this thesis. The explanatory approach has a focus on investigating a problem or situation to understand the relationship between two or more variables. Having an explanatory purpose also offers the researcher the choice of conducting either a quantitative or qualitative study. In addition, an explanatory purpose is suitable for studies that examine the relationship between two variables. This applies to this thesis as the relationship between the use of online reviews and the development of trust to decrease risk will be investigated. The findings would benefit researchers that are interested in acquiring more insight about online reviews on pure player websites. Moreover, this study would provide useful information to pure player businesses on how they could manage online reviews for the products offered.

### **1.4 Research Question**

After identifying the problem, the following research questions have been proposed:

- *RQ1: What are consumers' attitudes towards online reviews for pure player apparel brands?*
- *RQ2: What factors affect the use of online reviews to develop trust in order to decrease risk for pure player apparel brands?*

The first research question will capture the participants' views and opinions about online reviews for pure player apparel products. The second question will aim to understand which factors impact the use of online reviews in building trust, and thereby reducing risk. Since consumers face the possibility of receiving a product that does not meet their expectations as they cannot test the product themselves, the use of e-WOM will be analyzed to determine its value in reducing that risk. With these questions, an overall comprehension of the use of e-WOM in the pure player context could be developed.

### **1.5 Delimitations**

To complete the purpose of this thesis there are some aspects that deliberately will be avoided. The authors decided to only focus on one e-WOM source, online reviews, and no other sources such as YouTube or blogs, for example, since each source has an abundance of literature on them. The thesis would not have a narrow focus if all the fields were covered. Moreover, not all the product categories will be investigated in this study as the focus will only be on apparel sold by pure player brands. This is because the results would differ based on the product categories and would lead to other variables affecting the outcome.

## 2. Frame of Reference

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*In this section, online trust and the risk that consumers encounter due to information asymmetry have been thoroughly studied to comprehend the nature of electronic commerce. Also, research regarding the use of online reviews and consumers' opinions have been included, not focusing on pure players in particular. Moreover, factors that influence the use of online reviews have been identified and discussed. Lastly, a model summarizing the findings from previous research has been formulated and discussed.*

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### 2.1 Trust in Electronic Commerce

#### 2.1.1 Significance of Trust in Electronic Commerce

Trust is essential in electronic commerce as it is key to a successful relationship online. Corbitt, et al. (2003) considered how there are three characteristics of trust; dependence, vulnerability and uncertainty, that can be applied in an online setting because of the reason that it is difficult to physically examine the products. Therefore, these can also be related to fashion pure player products in particular, as the consumers have to depend on the information provided by the business since they are unable to verify the quality of the goods. Moreover, McKnight & Chervany (2001) highlighted that trust is when consumers put themselves in a vulnerable state even when they are aware that a situation involves risk and uncertainty. Therefore, trust is critical as it is the belief that the sellers will take their wishes into consideration despite the dependence and vulnerability that they face (Gefen, Karahanna & Straub, 2003).

Furthermore, Corbitt et al. (2003) studied social exchange theory in the online context and concluded that trust is a fundamental factor. With the theory in general, it is believed that consumers avoid relationships where there are more losses than rewards. They connected that to the online environment and discussed how risk is present due to the physical distance that consumers experience and thus, trust is crucial for a relationship. It is argued that online vendors succeed when they build trust in consumers and reduce their risk perceptions. McKnight & Chervany (2001) came to a similar conclusion as they discussed that the inability to test the products available online makes it important for

consumers to believe that the electronic commerce websites are trustworthy and not misleading. This is especially significant since there is not a guarantee that the online vendor will not behave in a destructive and devious manner, such as using unfair pricing, providing incorrect information and violating customer privacy (Gefen et al., 2003). In addition, the development of trust is heavily dependent on the security measures on the website (Swan & Rosenbaum, 2004). Furthermore, Corbitt et al. (2003) also claimed that consumers' willingness to trust the concept of online shopping is also based on their general perception of electronic commerce, their internet experience and the reputation and quality of a particular website. For an electronic commerce website to be successful, it is vital that these aspects are considered and managed to increase the levels of trust for the website.

### 2.1.2 Perceived Risk in Relation to Trust

Perceived risk is a concept by Raymond Bauer that was introduced in literature by 1960. He explained that when consumers purchase, there is risk involved (Taylor, 1974). It was also noticed by Bauer that consumers have a disadvantage due to their limited information, unlike sellers that are aware of all the characteristics of the product or service (Mitchell, 1999). Moreover, Selnus (1998) referred to Bauer's theory in that perceived risk is heightened when there is uncertainty about the possible outcomes. It was discussed by Bauer that perceived risk has a linkage to uncertainty. In this case, it can be assumed that when consumers purchase, they may face uncertainty leading to decisions that are regarded with some risk.

Furthermore, Kim, Xu & Gupta (2012) have found that when risk and uncertainty are present online, lack of trust tends to occur and is therefore an issue. A model was developed by Mayer, Davis & Schoorman (1995) for the organizational context to describe the relation between perceived risk and trust. It has been revised from its original format and has been used in various fields, highlighting its validity. Mayer et al. (1995) argued that trust exists only when there is the possibility of risk. Multiple researchers have applied the model developed by Mayer et al. (1995) and have discussed trust in relation to risk in the electronic commerce field. Harridge-March (2006) found that although Mayer et al. (1995) claimed that trust exists only when risk is involved, it is difficult to find an activity that does not have some potential risk, therefore, trust is always

needed. In addition, he states that if there is no trust present in the relationship and there is high risk, then a purchase may not possibly occur. This is also discussed by Selnus (1998) that perceived risk is reduced when there is trust. He believed that trust is a significant mechanism as it may be more effective than other mechanisms. Moreover, Mayer et al. (1995) also discussed that trust would lead to risk taking. For example, if there is a high level of trust, then the individual is more likely to take a risk. Therefore, based on past literature, there is a consensus that trust is essential as there is risk present in the electronic commerce field and that may counterbalance the effect.

## **2.2 Main Issue Faced Online**

### **2.2.1 Information Asymmetry**

When consumers shop online, there is a lack of trust due to the separation between the products and buyers. Since there is incomplete information on the quality of the product, there is risk with online businesses. This is information asymmetry, an economic term developed by Akerlof in 1970, where one party has more information than the other (Shen, Chiou & Kuo, 2011). A market consisting of asymmetrical information may result in consumers not buying a product, even if it is of perfect condition. This is due to their risk-averse mindset as the risks are greater than the benefits (Christozov, Chukova & Mateev, 2006). Information asymmetry occurs more in electronic commerce than in brick and mortar stores and it is a disadvantage that should be resolved (Shen et al., 2011). Researchers that have studied pure players discuss the inability to observe the product, which can be linked to Akerlof's concept of information asymmetry developed in 1970. With offline businesses, consumers can acquire information about the quality through feeling the product, however, that is not possible online (Mukherjee & Nath, 2007). With fashion pure players, consumers struggle as they are unable to examine the product beforehand (Ashman & Vasquez, 2012). Grewal et al. (2004) came to a similar conclusion as they discussed that consumers struggle online and that risk is more apparent since the characteristics of the product are difficult to grasp such as the fit, quality, and color even when descriptions are present.

## **2.3 Ways to Resolve Information Asymmetry**

### **2.3.1 Signals of Quality**

Shen et al. (2011) believed that for sellers to solve the information asymmetry issue, they need to signal that they provide quality products, especially online due to the risk involved. Consumers rely on signals when they are not aware of the quality of a product (Akerlof, 1970). Li, Fang, Wang, Lim & Liang (2015) have added support to the signaling theory as they state that it is imperative to understand the effectiveness of signals. Biswas, Dutta & Biswas (2009) would support the argument that signals of quality are necessary especially in an online context. Brick and mortar stores do not need to put efforts in developing signals of quality as the quality is evident with the investments made to the physical store such as the layout, location and staff, for example. On the contrary, in an online environment, consumers have limited information on the types of investments done. Moreover, Li et al. (2015) mentioned that e-WOM could act as one of these signals. Therefore, e-WOM will be analyzed as a type of signal of quality, to determine if it is beneficial for consumers in the pure player context.

## **2.4 Attitudes Regarding Online Reviews**

### **2.4.1 Usefulness of Online Reviews**

Online reviews are considered weak-ties, in contrast to traditional word of mouth (WOM), as they are written by strangers. It is not similar to WOM which involves strong-ties since information is shared between known individuals (Chatterjee, 2001). WOM may be utilized more as it is within a social circle, rather than strangers which could be less credible (Park, Lee & Han, 2007). However, e-WOM can also be viewed as a mean to alleviate risk as consumers look for information from others to reduce that (Corbitt et al., 2003).

To eliminate risk, online stores must signal trustworthiness to attract consumers (Riegelsberger, Sasse & McCarthy, 2005). Comegys, Hannula & Väisänen (2009) discovered a positive relationship between trust in a firm and purchase intentions. Consumers may prefer online reviews when they are online shopping. Jamil & Hasnu (2014) discussed (2013) that they found in a 2012 survey that 70% of the consumers viewed online reviews as trustworthy. They acknowledged that online reviews are used

by consumers to gain more information about a product. In addition, Utz, Kerkhof & van den Bos (2012) also found that online reviews have a strong effect on the perceived trustworthiness of the online store overall. Their study further concluded that online reviews from other consumers were a more powerful construct in developing trust than the reputation of the store. In the context of online stores, timely delivery and an effective and responsive complaint handling system might be considered as factors contributing to store reputation. Therefore, their findings put emphasis on the importance of online reviews being a significant aspect in influencing trust. However, Lee & Jin Ma (2014) concluded in their studies that consumers do not take them into account when they perceive the company as dishonest. Harridge-March (2006) also recognized that websites may have an unethical reputation, and because of this, even though there is potential for the feedback system to reduce risk and develop trust, that perception is still a possibility. Thus, there are various standpoints towards the influence of online reviews when purchasing a product.

#### 2.4.2 Experience and Search Goods

Experience goods are non-standardized products, thus there is more uncertainty leading to dependence on social cues (Jamil & Hasnu, 2013). It has been discussed how experience goods may benefit more than search goods for the use of e-WOM (Park & Lee, 2009). Other researchers such as Hu, Liu & Zhang (2008) would agree as they found that with search goods, information about the return policy and product warranty may be sufficient to reduce uncertainty as they are already aware of the value. For search goods, the characteristics of the product could be evaluated before the purchase with the information provided such as with electronics, for example (Xia & Bechwati, 2008). However, apparel would be considered as an experience good as discussed by Ashman & Vasquez (2012), since consumers can only form opinions about their purchase after they have received it in the mail. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that apparel has been classified as an experience good in this study.

#### 2.4.3 Positive and Negative Online Reviews

Lee & Youn (2009) found that negative e-WOM had a greater effect on consumer purchase decisions, which can be explained in terms of the information being more descriptive. Cui et al. (2012),

also found that a greater proportion of negative online reviews have a stronger effect than positive online reviews. These findings are in congruence to the notion of the negativity bias, which means that even in the presence of positive or neutral information, the negative information is psychologically considered to be more enlightening (Herr, Kardes & Kim, 1991).

Furthermore, the study conducted by Sen & Lerman (2007), discovered that a negativity bias is only prevalent for utilitarian products and not for hedonic products. From their study, they concluded that for hedonic products, consumers tend to have a positive expectation, and thus, are not heavily influenced by negative online reviews. Furthermore, with utilitarian products, such as dishwashers, cell phones, etc., their purchase is usually made to maximize consumer utility and consumption is based on consumer needs. Hedonic products are purchased for their aesthetic appeal, fun nature, and enjoyment (O'Curry & Strahilevitz, 2001). In terms of fashion in general, researchers have moved away from the idea that shopping is utilitarian in nature and only a function of cognition and have established that shopping can be associated with hedonic values, such as consuming for pleasure, fun and recreation (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Therefore, when purchasing for apparel, people will either be purchasing for utilitarian or hedonic purposes, which will influence the way they perceive negative information. Moreover, Hao, Ye, Li & Cheng (2010) recognized that negative online reviews have greater impact on experience products, than for search products, whereas the effect of positive information in online reviews is greater for search products. Park & Lee (2009) established a similar conclusion and found that consumers purchasing experience goods consider negative online reviews to a greater extent due to the uncertainty that they sense with these types of products. In addition, Chatterjee (2001) found that individuals are more likely to take negative comments into account when they are not familiar with a website.

## **2.5 Factors That Could Affect the Usage of Online Reviews**

### **2.5.1 Content and Writing Style of Review**

Online reviews need to be considered helpful to establish trust in the online vendor. When online reviews are viewed as helpful, they have been discovered to have a greater impact on customer purchase intentions (Chen, Dhanasobhon & Smith, 2008). To assess online

review helpfulness, and in turn its trustworthiness, Filieri (2016) discussed that individuals pay particular attention to the content and writing style of the online review. Long and detailed online reviews are utilized more as they are viewed as trustworthy and informative. In addition, the viewpoints in an online review, the source of communication, and review extremity (very positive or very negative) were all important considerations in determining how trustworthy an online review is. Consumers with high experience of online shopping are suspicious of online reviews when they are written in a market-oriented style, considered short and lack evidence that a purchase was made. Therefore, it is critical for companies to be aware that consumers may not use online reviews due to mistrust.

The study also established that if a purchase has higher involvement, consumers will spend more time on scrutinizing the information in the online reviews. Korfiatis et al. (2012), also studied review helpfulness, and concluded that online reviews that contain more readable text, meaning that they provide well justified and useful information are considered more helpful. This provides greater evidence that the stylistic elements exert influence in review helpfulness. However, their study contrasts from that of Filieri (2016), as their findings suggested that the extensiveness of an online review may not necessarily contribute to its helpfulness, as it should include relevant and detailed content.

#### 2.5.2 Source Characteristics

The source credibility theory developed by Hovland & Weiss (1951), suggests that persuasiveness of a piece of communication is dependent on the perceived credibility of the source. In 1975, McCroskey and Jensen established five dimensions of source credibility, which are competence, character, experience, sociability and reputation. The works of Banerjee, Bhattacharyya & Bose (2017) confirmed that all these factors are significant in building reviewer trustworthiness. Moreover, it was found by Lee & Youn (2009) that consumers are reluctant about online reviews since they could be anonymous. They discussed that it may be valuable to incorporate features that provide more information about the reviewers, in order to garner greater trust for the online review in question.

### 2.5.3 Reviewer Agreement

Reviewer agreement is defined as the degree of perceived agreement among different reviewers in their assessment of a product. This agreement can be judged based on the number of likes on an online review (Benedicktus, Brady, Darke & Voorhees, 2010). Jiménez & Mendoza (2013) found that the level of detail in an online review affects the credibility of online reviews for search products, whereas, reviewer agreement affects review credibility and purchase intentions for experience products. This was due to the nature of experience goods, where the evaluation of the various characteristics of the product can only be assessed during and after the purchase. Individuals in their study realized that their experiences with the product can be subjective, therefore, one detailed online review may not be sufficient to base a purchase decision on. This is the reason why consumers may focus more on reviewer agreement for experience goods, rather than only the content of an individual online review, to assure that others have had similar experiences with the reviewer. However, with search goods, as defined by Franke, Huhmann & Mothersbaugh (2004), it is simple to assess various attributes of the product prior to the purchase. Thus, for search goods, there is not a reliance on how many have agreed with an online review, as the level of detail in an online review is sufficient. However, since apparel is considered an experience good as discussed before, there may be a dependence on reviewer agreement.

### 2.5.4 Information Overload

In past research, it was argued that online reviews are not always useful as a huge amount may lead to an overload of information. When there are a lot of online reviews, consumers may become confused due to the difficulty of processing the various perspectives. It can be challenging to determine which opinion to consider. However, there is another argument that when there are more online reviews, it can lead to higher popularity for the product. A study by Park, Lee & Han (2006) tested these conclusions and found that information overload was an occurring phenomenon, and suggested that there should be more organization in the review section by online sellers.

However, a study made by Kwon, Kim, Duket, Catalán & Yi, (2015) referenced to a study by Park et al. (2006) and came with a contrasting outcome. They concluded that consumers did not experience information overload even with many online reviews. A

possible reason suggested could be that individuals decide to only focus on a certain number of reviews in order to not be overwhelmed when making a purchasing decision. It was acknowledged that their varying results could be because they had a different experimental design from Park et al. (2006). They discussed that each online review consisted of a product rating, and therefore, a summary of the reviews was available which was not included in the study by Park et al. (2006). It was suggested that the summary statistics could have made it easier for consumers to understand the general attitude towards the product. They recommended that for information overload to not be a factor that discourages individuals, online reviews should be organized with summary statistics.

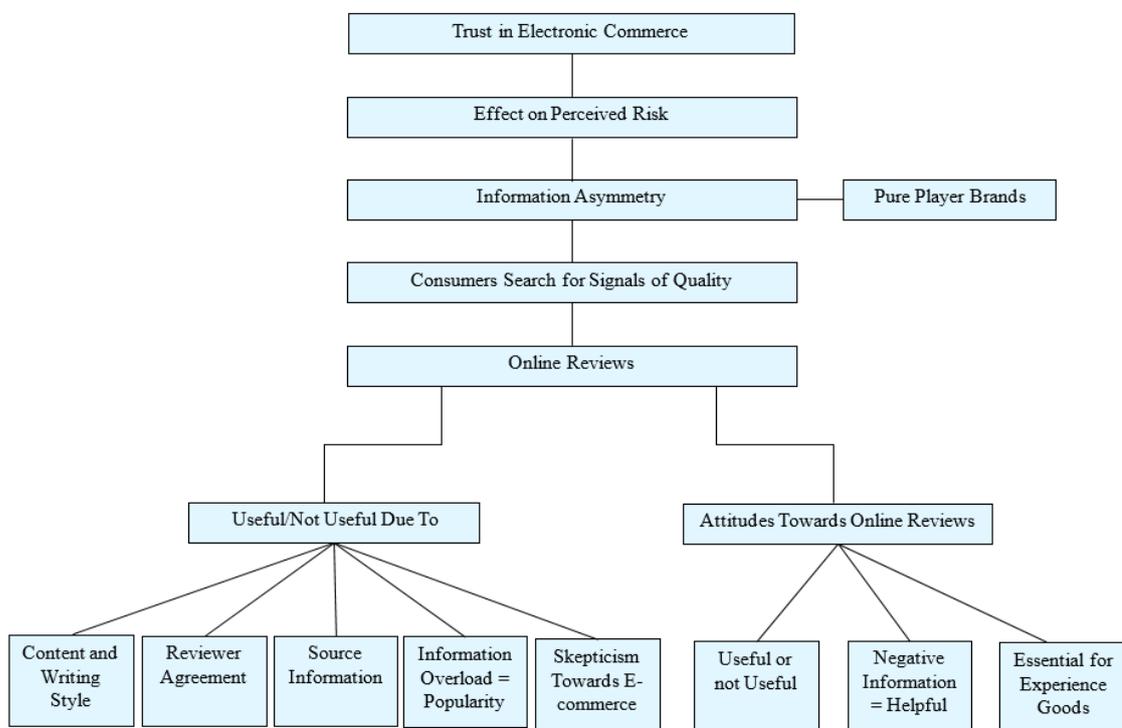
#### 2.5.5 Skepticism with Electronic Commerce

Situational normality could be a factor that affects the trust for an online vendor. This is where online shopping is perceived as normal, therefore, consumers are not hesitant to proceed with a purchase since they are familiar with the activity. If there is a high situational normality, they will be more likely to trust the online vendor. It is argued that when consumers have trust in the website, then they will consider the information provided by online reviews (Harrison McKnight, Choudhury & Kacmar, 2002).

This is similar to an argument made by Lee, Park & Han (2011) that online reviews only positively affect consumers when the website is considered trustworthy. Solely including online reviews on the website is not sufficient as the website needs to be considered trustworthy from the beginning. Furthermore, it has been recognized by Swan & Rosenbaum (2004) that the first priority for individuals to develop trust in an online business is security. There is a hierarchy of needs, and this would be the primary need that should be met. When consumers shop online, the main concern is that confidential information such as their personal and credit card details may potentially be stolen (Oosthuizen, 1998). So & Sculli (2002) also recognized that trust for the protection of personal information holds more power than the quality of the product. Therefore, it can be argued that if security is not present, e-WOM will not be considered during the purchasing decision.

Moreover, while it has been discussed that a greater amount of online reviews could be connected to popularity for the product, this view is dependent on individual consumers. Skepticism can be a factor that hinders the adoption of online reviews. Highly skeptical individuals are unlikely to consider the information in online reviews nor the amount available on the website (Sher & Lee, 2009). Furthermore, if consumers have familiarity with an online vendor, they may have trust for the website and therefore, be less skeptical to proceed with a purchase (Gefen, 2000). Therefore, skepticism for the website may possibly affect the use of online reviews in a pure player context.

## 2.6 Summary of Frame of Reference



*Figure 1 Summary Model of the Frame Reference*

This model was developed to provide a summary and to act as a reference when comparing findings recognized in previous research to the results collected in this study. The model depicts that trust in electronic commerce is a vital ingredient in online shopping. Multiple researchers have studied the concept of perceived risk formulated by Bauer (1960) and found that consumers face this issue online and that it may be reduced with trust. Moreover, the model illustrates a connection between pure players and information asymmetry, an economic term formed by Akerlof in 1970, as it is not possible

to examine the product, therefore consumers lack information. It has been discussed by Shen et al. (2011) that consumers search for signals of quality in an attempt to mitigate these risks associated with online shopping. Online reviews will act as a signal in this study, to determine whether it provides guidance to consumers. Considering this, the model was extended by highlighting the various factors found in prior literature that could influence the use of online reviews. Furthermore, attitudes towards online reviews were also acknowledged, to establish what previous research has discovered.

### **3. Methodology**

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*This section consists of a research philosophy, approach and strategy relevant to the study. Moreover, the sample is discussed, with a table representing the participants. The interview process has also been described, to explain how it was conducted. Lastly, the ethics of interviews and the data analysis were included in this section.*

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#### **3.1 Research Philosophy**

A research philosophy is the development of new knowledge and it is the type of viewpoint that is taken to view the world. To study the several types of perspectives, there are paradigms which are philosophical frameworks to organize the research conducted. The two main paradigms in research are positivism and interpretivism (Collis & Hussey, 2013). Saunders et al. (2009) also introduced another philosophy called pragmatism, which is a combination of both positivism and interpretivism. They suggest that there is no correct way to conduct research and that the philosophy adopted just depends on the formulation of the research question.

In regards to the paradigms, Collis & Hussey (2013) argue that to determine which one to select, it is critical to understand how the assumptions are viewed such as ontology, epistemology and axiology. Ontology is the nature of reality, epistemology is the validity of knowledge, and axiology is the study of the value of knowledge. For all the assumptions, interpretivists take a subjective approach for reality as opposed to the objective stance of positivists. Subjectivism means that the realities are formulated by the individual's perceptions, resulting in multiple realities (Saunders et al., 2009). Therefore, since the study is subjective, interpretivists utilize qualitative methods to study those interpretations of individuals. For positivism, knowledge can be verified scientifically, therefore, quantitative methods are utilized. However, the axiological assumption highlights limitations with the subjective approach, as there may be biases in the study due to the researcher's heavy involvement in the research process. Since they cannot be independent, they can potentially influence the results (Collis & Hussey, 2013). Therefore, it would be important to acknowledge this limitation while conducting this study.

Since the interpretivist philosophy places focus on finding the subjective meanings to the actions that motivate social players in an environment, such a philosophical stance fits this study. Online reviews could be viewed differently because of an individual's own view of the world. Their beliefs could result in differing attitudes towards electronic commerce, even if they belong to the same environment. Also, Collis and Hussey (2013) have criticized positivism as they claim that individuals cannot be understood without studying their perceptions. It would be challenging for this study to develop a deeper insight on consumers' attitudes about online reviews if their interpretations and experiences with online shopping are not analyzed. Therefore, an interpretivist paradigm will be taken to explore the various opinions on the topic of e-WOM in relation to pure player products.

Furthermore, in previous literature, it was noticed by Andrews & Boyle (2008) that majority have utilized quantitative methods to acquire research. As a result, they argue that there is a lack of research on consumers' experiences with risk online. They claim that to test perceived risk with online websites, qualitative research would be more beneficial. This is due to the argument that risk is more subjective, in that it relies more on perceptions. They believed that if quantitative research is conducted, it would limit the consumers and not capture their subjective views of what they think about risk. This is relevant to this study, as perceived risk in relation to trust is a factor that will be part of the investigation. It will be examined how consumers associate risk with pure player brands and the role of e-WOM in acquiring trust to limit risk. There is a potential risk that the product will not meet quality standards, therefore, the development of trust to reduce risk is an important element of the study. In addition, Andrews & Boyle (2008) discussed that for future research, qualitative research should focus on communication sources, how that is utilized to gain information about purchasing online. For this research, the type of communication source would be recommendations by other individuals written as reviews for products. Moreover, Filieri (2016) agrees that there is a lack of studies that use qualitative methods to study how consumers process information included in e-WOM. Therefore, it was deemed appropriate to take an interpretivist paradigm to gain further insights on the use of e-WOM as a tool to alleviate risk in a pure player environment.

### **3.2 Research Approach**

Research can either be conducted by using a deductive, abductive or an inductive approach (Kovács & Spens, 2005). Li, Easterby-Smith & Bartunek (2009) explained why it is important to think about the research approach before beginning the process of collecting data. They discussed that once a decision has been made about the research approach, it becomes easier to make an informed resolution about which methods to use for data collection and how to analyze to answer the research question(s).

For the purpose of the study, an abduction approach is going to be adopted. The aim of abduction is to view current literature in a new context (Kovács & Spens, 2005). Since it was challenging to find information about consumers' experiences and thoughts on e-WOM in building trust for pure player brands in previous research, it was believed appropriate to study e-WOM in that context. The empirical results will likely contribute new information to literature regarding online reviews and pure player brands. Induction will not be applied as conclusions are made based on past literature, further developing existing theories rather than creating a new one (Kovács & Spens, 2005). In a deductive approach, the theories in question are either confirmed, or are subject to modification (Robson, 2009). The intention of this study is to comprehend how online reviews influence the perceptions of pure player products, and hence, the aim is not to perform rigorous tests on previous theories and their relationships. For that reason, the deductive approach to research is not implemented. In addition to that, it is likely that alternative explanations to the research question that are not in tune with the theory might be gathered, and deduction would not have allowed that. Therefore, as an abductive approach is being taken, there is an opportunity to develop new insights about online reviews.

### **3.3 Research Strategy**

As the study aims to learn about consumers' view on e-WOM to reduce risk and develop trust for pure player brands and the factors that impact the use, interviews were chosen as the method to collect data. Saunders et al. (2009) discussed several benefits of interviews as a data collection method. One of the benefits explained is that this method can help gain insight on individuals' opinions regarding the topic in question as it gives them the opportunity to further explain their reasoning. While it was possible to conduct focus

groups for this research study, as it can also collect various opinions on a topic, there was a possibility that a dominant participant could affect the other participants.

Moreover, with interviews, the type chosen was semi-structured where the interview is governed by a certain set of questions, however, all the questions might not be utilized in the interviews. Semi-structured interviews are beneficial as there is the opportunity to gain novel viewpoints, since the discussion is not restrained to a structured set of questions. They provide the possibility to 'probe' which is the practice of asking additional questions in response to the participant's answers. This can lead participants to further explain their responses and therefore, a better understanding of the interviewees perspectives could be acquired (Saunders et al., 2009). Structured and unstructured interviews were not appropriate for this study for several reasons. Structured interviews are for quantitative purposes, not qualitative, as they are questionnaires that include standardized questions for all individuals. Moreover, unstructured interviews are informal, as the purpose is to collect all the individual's thoughts without a predetermined list of questions. This may lead to valuable yet an overwhelming amount of information that would take a prolonged time to analyze. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were the selected method for this study. However, one of the limitations of interviews that are less structured is the possibility of interviewer bias where the interviewer influences the responses based on how the questions are formulated (Kvale, 2007). Due to this, it was decided before the interviews were conducted that the interviewers should be mindful of how the questions are asked and keep them open-ended.

### **3.4 Data Collection**

#### **3.4.1 Sample**

Before conducting face-to-face semi structured interviews, it was decided that nine individuals that reside in the Jönköping region would be interviewed. Moreover, the authors also decided that individuals between the ages of 16-24 would be contacted as it was found that in the European Union, this age group is the most active in purchasing clothes online ("E-commerce statistics for individuals - Statistics Explained", 2018). Furthermore, the authors of this study came to an agreement to have a convenience sample which is a non-probability (not random) sampling technique that selects individuals that are the easiest to reach (Saunders et al., 2012). This was due to the limited amount of

resources and the time constraints to travel to various areas in Sweden. Therefore, the authors contacted their personal connections on social media for the interviews. This approach was practical because the interviews could be organized with relative ease as all the participants resided in Jönköping. The only requirement for the selection of interviewees was that they were within the age group agreed on, therefore the authors made certain of that before including them in the study.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>
Participant 1	20
Participant 2	23
Participant 3	21
Participant 4	21
Participant 5	23
Participant 6	24
Participant 7	24
Participant 8	21
Participant 9	21

*Table 1 shows the number of participants that took part in the interviews, and their ages*

### 3.4.2 Interviews

The interview sessions took roughly 20-30 minutes per session and they were divided between the authors to utilize the time effectively. There was an average of two interviews per day and a room was booked for each, to avoid the possibility of disturbance. There were always two authors present in each session, where one's role was centered around note-taking allowing the interviewer to only focus on asking questions. This arrangement was decided upon, as it would be challenging for the interviewer to take notes and listen simultaneously. Moreover, it was discussed by Collis & Hussey (2013) that while it is

possible for one author to be there for the interview, there could be additional support to ensure that the interviews are conducted well. It was a valuable decision as during the interview sessions, there were moments when the interviewer missed key questions or had difficulties with keeping the conversation flowing, thus the contributions from the other author helped in acquiring all the necessary information. For the interviews, the authors alternated roles, as it was not possible for two authors to be present for every session. Therefore, the interview sessions were divided among the group. To assure that the authors would not forget about a session, a schedule was organized with the dates and rooms. The interviewees were also contacted a day before as a reminder, to make certain that all participants were present. This led to effective time management, as it avoided the possibility of rescheduling, therefore, the group was able to collect data promptly to focus on the analysis of the data.

For the preparation for the interviews, a set of questions were formatted as guidance, although not all were utilized during the interview session since it was semi-structured. When organizing the questions, the literature review was read as well, to assure that all the themes were included. Moreover, generic questions were formed to gain insight on their online shopping habits and then transition to deeper questions related to online reviews. To further prepare for the interview sessions, a practice interview was made among the authors to test the relevance of the questions written and to have an estimate of the time frame to inform interviewees beforehand.

During the interviews, before the questions were asked, a short introduction about pure player brands was provided, to assure that the interviewees are aware of the concept. This introduction was useful as interviewees were able to understand the background. Furthermore, concepts were defined for the interviewees to make certain that they understood the questions asked. Moreover, while the interviews did provide informative responses on their experiences, there were instances when they were not related to the topic. Kvale (2007) has found that this is a common issue with interviews, as responses could be ambiguous. This occurred several times, therefore, specific questions were asked to guide the interview back to the central topic. Furthermore, Kvale (2007) discussed that the interviews could be a learning process for the interviewees. This held true as the interviewees noticed characteristics of online businesses that they were not aware about

before. For example, some individuals did not know that a few online vendors did not have the possibility of providing online reviews, even though they have been on the website before. This was interesting to take into consideration for the analysis.

### **3.5 Ethics**

Before each interview, the participant was asked if they could be recorded for the transcriptions. They were informed that the authors would be the only individuals with access to the recording. They were also told that their identity would be confidential, to allow them to openly discuss their experiences. This was essential as Kvale (2007) discusses that interviewers should provide consent beforehand. Also, the purpose of the study was discussed with the subjects, so that they were aware of the reason for conducting the interview.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

Saunders et al. (2009) described the analysis process as solving a jigsaw puzzle, where the different pieces of the puzzle need to be categorized beforehand, and then a relationship should be developed between the pieces to complete the puzzle. Before the analysis took place, the interview data was prepared, and this entailed the transcription of the audio recordings. A transcription is a written (word-processed) account of what the interviewee said, using their actual words – verbatim. The interviews were transcribed within one week of the interviews, to avoid a pile up of work, and have the context of the interview fresh in mind. Since there were nine to divide, each author was responsible for three. Furthermore, the interviews were recorded on the mobile phone of the author responsible for the transcription to avoid the stressful task of sending large audio files over the Internet. The recordings meant that the transcribers did not only have to rely on their memory and the notes. The transcriptions were saved on the computer and all the authors had access to have the results available for the analysis.

Furthermore, Kvale (2007) distinguished between two forms of interview analysis – analysis that focuses on meaning, and analysis that focuses on language. For the data collected via interviews, the focus was put on analyzing for meaning. After the process of transcription, the interviews were viewed again, to identify various themes. After the organization of the themes, summaries of the transcripts were written independently according to each category as Saunders et al. (2009) suggested, to have guidance for the

analysis. This was done to better understand the relationships between the data, and make the process of sifting through information manageable. An overlap between the different categories was observed at times, and that was taken care of in the analysis. Since an abductive approach was taken for this study, the conceptual framework was viewed to analyze if the factors identified previously also applied to the pure player context and if additional factors were discovered, as the aim of this approach was to recognize novel information.

## **4. Empirical Findings and Analysis**

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*In this section, the empirical findings are presented and analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework. The analysis follows the research questions formulated for this study, splitting the findings into two sections. Firstly, consumers' attitudes regarding online reviews for pure player brands are presented and analyzed. Secondly, an analysis of the identified factors that impact the use of online reviews for pure players is included.*

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### **4.1 Introduction**

To reduce the issue of information asymmetry, it was proposed by Shen et al. (2011) that companies should invest in signals of quality. It was highlighted that it is essential for online vendors to aid consumers in making a decision. For this study, e-WOM was considered as a mechanism to signal quality, and its use was analyzed. There have been disagreements in research about whether online reviews are considered during the purchasing process. In prior research, there were several factors that could influence the adoption of online reviews. For this study, consumers' thoughts on the use of online reviews were examined, as well as their reasons for deciding on whether to consider them or not.

### **4.2 Generic**

Participants were asked generic questions in the beginning of the interviews, to collect information about their background and online habits. It was found that all the participants purchased from pure players before, therefore, they were familiar with the concept. However, they differed with their perception of electronic commerce. They were questioned about their frequency of shopping as previous literature has recognized that their familiarity with electronic commerce could have a linkage with the level of trust. Their level of trust with online shopping was questioned, to later make connections with other factors in the analysis. Moreover, the participants were asked about whether they shop for hedonic or utilitarian purposes, as it was found in prior research that it could be an aspect that affects the use of online reviews. These questions were formulated as there were aspects found by researchers that could explain the decisions made by consumers

when shopping online. Their shopping behavior could influence their views on online reviews and how they regard the influence.

*Table 2: Summary of the respondents to the generic questions asked to the respondents*

	<b>Purchased from Pure Players</b>	<b>Frequency of Shopping</b>	<b>Utilitarian or Hedonic</b>	<b>Level of Trust</b>
<b>Participant 1</b>	Yes	Rarely, prefers physical stores	Utilitarian	<u>Low</u> , they do not shop online due to fear of dissatisfaction with the product.
<b>Participant 2</b>	Yes	Two or three times a year	Utilitarian	<u>Low</u> , they have a worry of unmet expectations.
<b>Participant 3</b>	Yes	Four times a year	Utilitarian	<u>Moderate</u> , there is fear when free product returns are not available but trust is present with online reviews.
<b>Participant 4</b>	Yes	Every two or three months	Mainly utilitarian, hedonic when sales are present	<u>High</u> , has trust depending on the type of website. In general though, their expectations are met.

<b>Participant 5</b>	Yes	Hasn't purchased recently, but usually every two months	Hedonic	<u>High</u> , they would not shop online if they did not have trust.
<b>Participant 6</b>	Yes	Hasn't purchased recently, but it could be once a month or after half a year.	Both	<u>High</u> , if they have familiarity with the website.
<b>Participant 7</b>	Yes	Rarely, prefers physical stores	Both	<u>High</u> , if recommendations are on the website and they have familiarity with the website.
<b>Participant 8</b>	Yes	Hasn't purchased recently, but usually once or twice a month.	Both	<u>High</u> , if they have a positive experience and there are recommendations on the website.
<b>Participant 9</b>	Yes	Once a week	Hedonic	"Always a gamble", but tends to have <u>high</u> trust if they have familiarity with a website.

### 4.3 Attitudes towards Online Reviews

#### 4.3.1 Risk and Information Asymmetry

It was found in a study conducted by Kim et al. (2012) that consumers face perceived risk online and that could lead to a lack of trust, hindering the possibility of a purchase. This study verified those findings as majority of the interviewees would only continue with a purchase if they have trust. It was only Participant 5 that still continued with a purchase, even when they lacked trust, as they took precautions. They stated that:

*“If they take a huge amount of money from my account, first there is not a lot of money on it, and I have a limit on it to protect me.”*

Participant 5 had a separate credit card and while this suggests that they sometimes do view online shopping as risky, they do not need to have trust for the website. Although Participant 5 discussed that they generally have trust, this demonstrates that even when they lack trust, it does not hinder them from continuing to purchase online. This is one contradiction against the research found on the necessity of online trust for a purchase to occur. However, majority were consistent with the arguments made by Mayer et al. (1995) and other researchers that have reviewed the model that trust is necessary to continue with an activity that involves risk. Furthermore, their levels of trust were discussed, as Gefen (2000) found that when consumers have more familiarity, they are likely to continue with a purchase online. This was confirmed, as the participants that had low trust, rarely purchased online. The participants that had high trust generally referred it to their past experience.

Moreover, when participants discussed their trust in relation to pure player products, they all related it to the inability to examine the product. This was present in the study made by Ashman & Vasquez (2012) since the characteristics of apparel are difficult to sense, there is more risk involved with the purchase. This links back to Bauer's (1960) theory that there is perceived risk due to the disadvantage of having less information than the vendors. Moreover, Grewal et al. (2004) has also agreed to this notion, that a lack of information when purchasing online hinders consumers from purchasing a product. Thus,

it can be established that consumers do tend to face information asymmetry when shopping online and need trust to continue with the risk of purchasing products online.

#### 4.3.2 Value of Online Reviews

To further comprehend the concept of information asymmetry and the use of online reviews as a signal of quality in the online context, participants were questioned about how they regard online reviews to acquire information. Participants 1 and 5 were not supportive of online reviews due to subjectivism. They argued that individuals differ with their preferences, therefore, an individual's opinion could not be applied to everyone. Moreover, Participant 1 did also not value online reviews since they did not consider them useful. They brought up this argument:

*“It would be more trustworthy if you read fashion bloggers and act on their recommendations than random people on the website”.*

This demonstrates that online reviews did not hold value in comparison to other sources such as fashion bloggers. The participant did not believe that the individuals writing the online reviews on the website were qualified to provide knowledge, as they were not experts. While most of the participants, aside from Participant 1 and 5, did consider online reviews for apparel, the significance of online reviews could be questioned as other sources were used as well. For example, with Participant 3, it was recognized that they put more worth to the advice given by their friends as they said:

*“I see them as a real person that say the truth, while for reviews, it might be people that benefit from selling the product”.*

Participant 8 also had similar thoughts, as they went to their friends even though they also utilized online reviews frequently. This confirms the argument by Park et al. (2007) that WOM may be utilized more than online reviews due to the credibility of the source. However, it should be noted that Participant 8 still highly regarded online reviews, as there were moments where they could not proceed with the purchase without reading them. Therefore, there is still support for researchers that argue for the use of online reviews.

Furthermore, to comprehend the value of online reviews, participants were questioned about the possibility of not having online reviews available on the website and their attitude towards that. For Participants 1, 5, 6 and 9 it was recognized that they did not notice when online reviews are not on the website as they could sometimes not recall if a certain brand had reviews or not. It was discussed by Participants 6 and 9 that information provided by the company tends to be sufficient. This implies that they do not depend solely on online reviews. However, for Participants 1 and 5, they explained that even when they lack information, they would not consider online reviews as they discussed before that the comments are subjective when it comes to apparel. That differed slightly for Participants 6 and 9, as they explained that their need for online reviews depends on the type of product. For certain products, the sizing differences are immense, therefore, it is challenging to select the appropriate product. For example, Participant 9 stated:

*“I wouldn’t do it (the purchase), for instance like for a dress that must be really fitted, I wouldn’t buy it without the reviews. It’s okay for more basic stuff like t-shirts, hoodies, I will just go without the reviews.”*

This demonstrates that online reviews are necessary when the sizing of the product is difficult to grasp by the information provided in the descriptions. Therefore, the findings from Participants 1, 5, 6 and 9, do not fully support the literature by Biswas et al. (2009) on the need for a signal of quality for online vendors. It was argued in that paper that for bricks and mortars, it is not critical, as the investments can be represented with other characteristics such as the layout and location, however, that is difficult with online vendors. These findings may suggest that it is not essential for companies to invest in signals of quality, such as online reviews.

However, there were some participants that supported Biswas et al. (2009)’s argument as Participant 2 believed that for unknown websites, online reviews are essential, as it mediates the unfamiliarity with the business. Furthermore, for Participant 3, they “question why they are not there”, therefore, when online reviews are not present, it increases their suspicions for the business, as it signals that they are hiding something. For Participants 7 and 8, they demonstrated the greatest dependence, as it is unlikely they

would continue if online reviews are not present. Therefore, there were various perspectives on the necessity of online reviews on the website. Based on the findings, to assure that all types of consumers are satisfied, online reviews should be available. While a few participants did not value online reviews, the majority communicated some dependence, just differing on the extent of use, therefore, they should be implemented.

#### 4.3.3 Experience and Search Goods

When the interviews were conducted, it was explained that apparel was related to experience goods, as that connection was made in the study by Ashman & Vasquez (2012). In most of the interviews, the respondents were asked if they faced different levels of uncertainty with experience goods in comparison to search goods. The distinction between search and experience goods was made, because in previous research by Hao et al. (2010), Park & Lee (2009) and Hu et al. (2008), they found that online reviews may affect consumers differently depending on the type of product. Hao et al. (2010) discussed that with experience goods, there is not enough information, therefore, there could be a need for online reviews. All the participants believed that there was more uncertainty with apparel, however, they differed with their use of online reviews. Majority of the participants considered online reviews when searching for more information. For example, Participant 8 explained that there is usually not enough information with experience goods and therefore, they have to look at online reviews to collect all the necessary details.

*“If it’s not on the reviews, then I won’t buy. Sometimes, the company does not say the size of the model, so then it makes it challenging to move on from that, I don’t want to buy the wrong size”.*

They further explained that there is less reliance on online reviews when purchasing electronics because they tend to function the same, regardless of the ownership, which can be considered as search products as stated by Xia & Bechwati (2008). This is consistent with the findings of Park & Lee (2009) that suggested that experience goods would have more dependence on e-WOM than search goods. However, as discussed before, Participants 1 and 5 differed as they believed that online reviews are subjective, therefore, irrelevant in terms of apparel. For example, they both explained that they would

read online reviews for search goods, rather than for experience goods, Participant 1 stated that:

*“For clothing, for quality and color, it is very subjective. While for electronics, it is one dimensional and if it’s good for 10 people, then it’s most probably good for the majority”.*

This therefore contradicts the argument made by Hao et al. (2010), Hu et al. (2008) and Park & Lee (2009) that online reviews are more beneficial for experience goods. Based on the findings, it could be established that the general opinion is that experience products such as apparel tend to have more uncertainty, therefore, there is more of a reliance on online reviews. The few participants that argued against that believed that online reviews are not helpful as opinions about taste are subjective, while for search goods, the comments would be related to the function, which is unlikely to differ between users.

#### 4.3.4 Positive & Negative

The type of perspective in the online review, meaning whether the comment is negative or positive, was discussed as it was found in previous research that it could impact the helpfulness of the mechanism. Based on the findings, it was recognized that both perspectives should be present in the review section. There were participants that did consider different perspectives to conclude on whether they should continue with the purchase or not. There were also some participants that only focused on negative comments, however, that depended on the content and background. For example, Participant 2 explained that:

*“I usually tend to not trust individuals that are super negative, that want to explain everything that went wrong”*

This demonstrates that although an individual could be persuaded when there are negative online reviews, the content could also hinder their adoption. Moreover, a statement was made by Participant 7 highlighting that they mainly focused on negative online reviews:

*“If there are 10 positive reviews and one negative online review, I will think maybe it (the product) is not good as everyone says, so the negative (reviews) are definitely affecting me more than the positive comments”*

Based on this statement, it could be argued that they search for any negative comment that confirms their fears due to lack of experience when shopping online. As Chatterjee (2001) discussed, this could be because the individual does not have familiarity with a website, and therefore they will strive to read the negative online reviews. In essence, since they do not shop frequently online, they could be more hesitant when it comes to shopping for pure player brands and therefore place greater importance to a negative experience to avoid that situation for themselves. This is in comparison to Participant 9, as although they are generally influenced when there are many negative online reviews, they focus on their own judgement when they truly desire the product. Their confidence when shopping online could be linked to their familiarity with it. Participant 9 discussed that:

*“I’m not that scared of shopping online because I have been doing it for so long”*

This means that they are more likely capable of predicting whether they would enjoy the product due to their past experience of shopping online. Therefore, in reference to Participant 7, it can be concluded that when consumers are hesitant about shopping online in general, they may perceive positive online reviews as less useful than other types of online reviews. Furthermore, there was an argument made by Sen & Lerman (2007) that the purpose for shopping online could affect the influence of discouraging reviews. They discussed that consumers that shop for hedonic purposes may have a prior positive expectation, and thus, are not influenced by discouraging reviews. This could be observed with Participant 9 as they discussed that when they have high favor for a product, they have already concluded before purchasing that they will enjoy it. This may have occurred as they mainly shopped for hedonic purposes, while for Participant 7, since they sometimes shopped for utilitarian purposes, they may not have had that bias towards the product. Thus, this could be another reason to explain why consumers put more focus on negative experiences.

While negative online reviews would reduce risk, it can hinder the possibility of a sale for the company. However, when there is a presence of mainly positive online reviews that could also lead to less purchases. For example, Participant 5 stated that when there were many positive comments, they felt that “*something is sketchy*”, therefore, making them question the trustworthiness of a pure player website. To put their fears at rest, they would prefer evidence such as pictures along with the review showing that the consumers had either enjoyed the product or not. Companies could consider the recommendations provided to increase trust in the review section. Moreover, this establishes that marketers should not aim to censor online reviews as it could be counterproductive either way. Furthermore, Participant 5 explained that when there is a mixture of positive and negative online reviews, it is a depiction of reality as everyone can not have the same sentiments about something.

Therefore, despite the presence of negative online reviews, while it can hinder a few sales, it can lead to long-term success, as there is an overall increase in the trustworthiness of the online vendor. Based on the interviews, it could be established that there should be a balance of perspectives to provide guidance for consumers. It may be difficult to prevent consumers from focusing on negative online reviews, as that depends on their own personal background and the situation at hand. If only positive reviews are included, it may increase fears that the website is ‘sketchy’, and therefore, negative online reviews should not be censored. However, if the review section only has positive online reviews even though they are not monitored, companies could add more credibility to the positive online reviews by adding features as discussed by Participant 5, therefore leading to future sales.

#### **4.4 Factors Effecting the Use of Online Reviews**

##### **4.4.1 Content and Writing Style of Review**

Filieri (2016) discussed that the content of an online review, which means the level of detail and what is written could impact the use. When Participant 1 was asked about how they perceived detailed online reviews, their reply made it clear that they did not really look at them to build trust for the product and henceforth did not care for the content of an online review. These views are not seen in line with previous researchers that argued for the use of online reviews as a significant mechanism to build trust online.

On the other hand, Participant 8 and 9 explained that when an online review was detailed, they were more inclined to read it. The detailed online reviews in their mind held comprehensive information about the fabric, the sizing of the clothing article, and painted an overall picture of the product. This is aligned with the argument by Filieri (2016) that consumers prefer detailed online reviews. While Participant 8 and 9 preferred long and detailed online reviews, there were participants that opted for shorter online reviews. Participant 2 revealed that they were “*too lazy*” to read all that information, and therefore, vouched that an ideal review length would be a maximum of 4 sentences. Moreover, Participant 4 was suspicious of oddly short (“*one or two words long*”) online reviews for a pure player product, and therefore, they tended to ignore them. Furthermore, it is not only the level of detail in an online review that is important, but also what is included. Participant 7 mentioned that they pay attention to what the comments discuss and then judge its usefulness to them. For instance, they discussed an example of an online review that stated:

*“The dress was damaged because it started to rain”*

They ignored the review since they had planned to wear the clothing item inside and the chances of rain affecting them in these circumstances were minimal. These findings go hand in hand with the argument by Filieri (2016), who proposed that individuals pay great attention to the information included in an online review. In this case the information was not relevant to the participant’s situation, thereby leading them to ignore the online review. This phenomenon was also confirmed by Korfiatis et al. (2012), where they concluded that online reviews with more readable text (well justified and useful information) were considered more helpful. Furthermore, Filieri (2016) discussed that consumers who have greater experience with shopping online, are more suspicious of short reviews. Participant 4 demonstrated a relatively high level of experience with online shopping, as they bought online every two to three months. Therefore, it can be implied that because Participant 4’s experience with purchasing pure player products is high, they are more suspicious of short online reviews as suggested by Filieri’s (2016) study. Finding short online reviews to be suspicious can be a plausible reason for ignoring them.

Furthermore, when it came to the writing style of the online review, Participant 8 explained that they did not trust online reviews because of certain reasons which they described as:

*“I would ignore reviews that are messy, not written properly, have grammatical errors and unclear”*

Participant 7 also shared the same sentiments on the written material in an online review, explaining that they ignored online reviews that had poor use of language and grammar as they deemed them to be untrustworthy. Participant 6 also preferred online reviews that were short and ideally a maximum of 4 sentences like Participant 2, however, they did not value the writing style and grammar in building credibility for the online review. Participants 4 and 5 had a similar attitude as they were not really concerned about the writing style or any grammar related issue in the online review. For them a review fostered trust when it had good content to deliver regardless of how it was written. The influence of writing style (grammar and language) was highlighted by Filieri (2016) as an important factor in the usability of an online review, however, the empirical results suggest otherwise.

In summary, except for Participant 2, all the respondents agreed on content and detail being an important factor in an online review’s usability and trustworthiness. However, many did not find the writing style to exert much influence on the way they read an online review.

#### 4.4.2 Source Characteristics

The works of Banerjee et al. (2017), confirmed that the five dimensions of source credibility, a model formulated by McCroskey and Jenson in 1975, indeed lead to greater trust for an online review. The five dimensions were competence, character, experience, sociability and reputation. According to the empirical results, this theory does not seem to hold true. The participants had relatively mixed views about source characteristics and their influence in making an online review on a pure player website more useful and credible. Majority of the Participants were not affected when they lacked source information. Participant 6 explained that they did not mind if the review was anonymous

or not. For them, an online review did not provide any added value or increase in trust if they knew information such as the name, gender, age, etc., regarding the reviewer. A similar stance was shared by Participant 2 when they stated that knowing information about the reviewer was “*not important*”. Participant 1 did not perceive online reviews as a useful mechanism in building trust for pure player products due to the subjectivism factor. Therefore, they felt that even after being exposed to personal details about the person writing the review, it would add no extra value for them in perceiving the review as trustworthy or useable due to their subjective nature. Participant 9 discussed that even after knowing personal details about the person they would “*still not know them*”, and that was their reason for not finding much use in features that exemplified such information. What this might mean is that Participant 9 tries to look for information coming from personal sources, such as their family and friends. This deduction validates the study of Park et al. (2007), who argued that WOM is utilized more than e-WOM as it is coming from the person’s own social circle, and not a stranger that makes it less credible. Moreover, Participant 3 also did not view source information as useful. The interviewee thought that they would trust the opinion of friends and family more because for them it seems to be coming from a “*real*” person and having a social media link to the reviewer’s profile would not have the same effect. In this statement, Participant 3 is explicitly demonstrating support towards the opinion of friends and family, and the statement also provides a clear link to the work of Park et al. (2007). However, despite them displaying minimal support towards source credibility dimensions, they mentioned that they had once found a picture posted by a reviewer wearing a swimsuit which they considered as helpful. The photo guided them in making an informed purchasing decision, as it gave them a better overview of the sizing of the swimsuit. Therefore, this implies that if information about the source is connected to the product specifically, then it may be valuable. Lastly, Participant 7 also had the same opinion as the rest of the respondents and deemed source characteristics as not useful.

Participants 4, 5, and 8 had slightly contrasting views regarding the use of source characteristics in online reviews. Participant 8 was not particularly concerned about different source characteristics but concluded that the age and the height of the reviewer might be useful constructs in an online review. Age was important to the interviewee as they thought that differences of opinion might exist and that they would find information

coming from a person similar to their age would be more useful. This piece of information was quite unique as the respondent described why they thought age was useful in an online review. Participant 4 argued that at times it was hard for them to tell whether the online review had been written by an actual person or not. For this reason, they preferred some sort of information related to the reviewer, such as their name and picture. According to them, this made the online review more credible since it was coming from a 'real' source. This is consistent with the findings of Lee & Youn (2009), that consumers may find it difficult to consider an online review due to it being anonymous, and therefore demonstrated support for some reviewer characteristics in forming credibility. Along with Participant 4, Participant 5 was fully on board with the concept of source characteristics providing greater use to an online review for a pure player product. They explained that they would be interested in seeing extra information about the source, particularly the age and size of the person, particularly for more expensive clothing items. However, Participant 5 did acknowledge that people may be hesitant in sharing private information such as their size, therefore, hindering the feasibility of knowing different source characteristics. In addition to that, the interviewee thought that a verification system of sorts that verified reviewers based on their shopping history with the website would provide more credibility to the person reviewing the clothing article. They discussed that:

*'I would like to see something that shows that they (reviewers) are verified from the company, like they shop over there a lot'.*

The source credibility characteristic of 'experience', seems to be relevant to Participant 5. Therefore, this piece of data has a connection to the work of Banerjee et al. (2017), who confirmed the role of experience as an influential source characteristic that builds trust.

All in all, the views regarding source characteristics as a mechanism of reducing risk and increasing an online review's usability for pure player brands did not receive a great amount of support from the participants. The source credibility characteristics of competence and reputation from the McCroskey and Jenson (1975) model are seen to be completely absent from the empirical findings. The evidence to back up aspects of character, experience, and sociability is also scarce. The dimensions that seem to have

some weight in terms of source credibility are age, pictures and sizing, as found from the empirical results. Therefore, it is possible to imply that for pure player products, consumers do not develop trust regarding the source and hence the online review based on the source credibility dimensions as introduced by McCroskey and Jenson (1975). If they were to look at private information related to the reviewer, such as their age and some information about their sizing that might be considered somewhat useful.

#### 4.4.3 Reviewer Agreement

It should also be noted that since the interviews were semi-structured, all the participants were not asked the same questions. Reviewer agreement was therefore discussed with a total of 6 people, out of which 5 thought that it was useful in relieving overall risk towards a pure player product. The results indicated that a greater part of the participants demonstrated favor for reviewer agreement. Participant 8 discussed how they were able to trust an online review more for a pure player product when it had been agreed by other people. Even in the case of many negative online reviews and only a few positive ones, where the positive ones had been “*liked*” by other customers, the respondent trusted the positive information more. The information in the review was also considered more trustworthy to Participant 9, when other customers had indicated support to that comment. In a given scenario where two reviews were negative and had many “*hits*”, while the rest were all positive, Participant 9 thought that the agreement with the review counted for another negative review. The only difference was that those individuals did not take out the time to write a negative online review, and instead decided to agree with the online reviews made by someone voicing their complaints. When Participant 4 was asked about their views on reviewer agreement and its usefulness, they mentioned that in some websites, they not only saw the feature of liking a review, but also comments of agreement or disagreement underneath them. According to them, those comments would increase trust. Participant 6 also claimed that seeing “*many hits*”, i.e. a high level of reviewer agreement, on a review made them think that the information was more credible as more people had agreed with the information provided by the online review. The information has a strong connection to the work of Jiménez & Mendoza (2013), who claimed that reviewer agreement affected review credibility and purchase intentions for experience goods. Since apparel is considered as experience goods, the argument by the authors is valid. Moreover, Participant 5 also believed that reviewer agreement would make them

think the information was more credible as other people had agreed with it, however, they did not view online reviews as useful in purchasing pure player products. This support towards reviewer agreement could mean that they might consider using online reviews if reviewer agreement was present.

The empirical results mostly validate the work by Jiménez & Mendoza (2013). Despite the support for reviewer agreement, Participant 3 was the only individual who did not view this feature as significant. Although, Participant 3 does not value reviewer agreement, it can be seen as contradictory since they have shown favor when there are similar opinions shared in the online reviews. They discussed that:

*“I prefer to buy things that have a lot of reviews. Because then I can trust that okay if these people have tried it and felt it and didn’t like the product then I probably also won’t like it.”*

This is congruent to the claim by Jiménez & Mendoza (2013) that if more people have a similar opinion, people will find it more helpful. This is therefore seen as puzzling because Participant 3 does not consider reviewer agreement, which also display support for a particular comment. Despite that ambiguous result, the majority have demonstrated favor for reviewer agreement. Therefore, if it is implemented, online reviews could be perceived as more helpful to decide whether a pure player product should be purchased or not.

#### 4.4.4 Information Overload

Regarding information overload, majority of the participants did not experience that. The results are more consistent with the argument by Kwon et al. (2015) who had a different conclusion from the study Park et al. (2006), as they found that consumers did not struggle with information overload. This could be due to the possibility discussed by Kwon et al. (2015) that individuals do not experience uncertainty as they avoid that by selecting a certain amount of online reviews to consider. For example, Participant 8 stated:

*“I just look at the first page, the second maybe. It depends on what I saw on the first page”*

This statement proposes that they may be selective in order to not be exposed to many disagreements, and therefore, their uncertainty is not increased. Looking at the first few pages of the review section could be the reason for not facing confusion when there are many viewpoints. Participant 9 was the only one consistent with the argument by Park et al. (2006) that products that had an abundance of online reviews could lead to more uncertainty for consumers as they do not know which perspective to consider. However, Kwon et al. (2015) discussed that individuals could have experienced information overload in the study by Park et al. (2006) since there were no summary statistics available. The findings of Participant 9 support that reasoning, as they explained that:

*“The perfect thing would be that they sum it up (the reviews), like with a rating system”*

They expressed that it would be helpful if companies could summarize the online reviews with a rating system for different categories such as ‘true to size’ and ‘quality’ etc. This implementation would simplify the process of going through all the online reviews and help to get an overall idea of what the general attitudes regarding the product are. This further adds to the argument by Kwon et al. (2015) that companies should consider providing a summary to decrease the possibility of consumers facing information overload. It can be established that when there is a disorganization, that could impact the use of online reviews.

#### 4.4.5 Skepticism towards Pure Player Websites

Risk about security on the website as the main concern while shopping online was put forward by Swan & Rosenbaum (2004), So & Sculli (2002) and Oosthuizen (1998). It was argued by So & Sculli (2002) that if security is not present it will not lead to a purchase even if the product is of high quality. This held true for majority of the participants, as they discussed that they do not shop from certain websites due to a low level of trust and hesitancy towards the reliability of the business. Participants 1 and 4 discussed that when the layout of the pure player website was not professional, they were reluctant to purchase even if the product was desired, as they questioned the safety of the business. Participants 3 and 6 referred specifically to the origin of an unknown website, that if it is not Swedish, they would be more hesitant to proceed with the purchase because

they would have the perception that it is not secure. Based on most of the participants, it could be concluded that there needs to be trust for the pure player website, before they can evaluate the trustworthiness of the product.

Furthermore, Participants 1 and 6 mentioned that extremely cheap products make them believe that it is not a realistic business. Price could affect the perception of the website, leading consumers to ignore a website and online reviews. In addition, Participant 1 brought up a new perspective that was not mentioned before by stating that:

*“It can be suspicious if a site has third party ads that might not even be related to clothes”*

This suggests that the use of ads that are not from the same industry can reduce the trust for the website, as it makes them believe that the online vendor is just attempting to make a profit, therefore avoiding the business. Based on these discussions, it demonstrates that those pure players would be avoided, not because of the products that they offer, but due to the overall perception of the website. The layout, prices, and ads could all be aspects that prevent an individual from proceeding further with the purchase. It can be concluded that if these factors are not handled first, then the online reviews written about the products are not significant. This supports the claim by Corbitt et al. (2003) that an online vendor can only be successful when the quality of the website is managed. This is also in agreement with Park et al. (2011) that online reviews will only be viewed if the overall website is positively perceived by the consumer.

Moreover, if consumers are skeptical about the online vendor, they may have the perception that the online reviews are manipulated. Participant 2 brought up a fear related to start-ups:

*“The company is moderating reviews and comments on the website”*

Furthermore, Participant 3 also stated that for unknown websites, they feel that the reviews are also not trustworthy, and therefore, searched for information provided by third parties such as social media influencers, for example. This was also discovered by

Lee & Ma (2014) that consumers do not consider them when a company is not trusted. Harrison McKnight et al. (2002) would also agree with that claim, as they studied situational normality, and discovered that when consumers are not familiar with a website, they are less likely to adopt an online review. In addition, Sher & Lee (2009) would support this, as their argument was that it is highly probable that consumers that have high skepticism will not adopt an online review. Based on these findings, it could be implied that majority of the participants that have hesitance towards a website will be less likely to purchase, even if there are online reviews. Therefore, this exhibits that skepticism is also a factor that can affect consumers on pure player websites from adopting online reviews.

#### 4.4.6 Returns

This study analyzed the return policy as it was considered as an additional factor that could influence the use of online reviews. It was discussed by Hu et al. (2008) that experience products require more information such as consumer reviews while for search goods it is enough to be aware of the return policy. This was present with Participant 4 and Participant 7 as although they did value the option of free returns, they also utilized online reviews for purchasing clothes (experience goods). Participant 4 proposed that for them to trust the offerings of the website, they disclosed that they heavily relied on online reviews saying that they “*always read them*”, before making a purchase decision. Participant 7 also had similar views on the return policies for pure player websites. They conveyed that:

*“I do read them quite a lot, for instance if I’m not sure how to use a product”.*

Therefore, it is in congruence with the findings of Hu et al. (2008) that experience products should have more information than only the return policy. However, the results of Participants 3, 5 and 6 were not consistent with those findings. For all three participants, it was enough to have return policies, as they did not even consider online reviews. For Participant 5, they did not have high value for online reviews, as they viewed it as subjective, stating that:

*“If the clothes don’t fit you, it might be because you have a different body shape”*

They also stated: *“if I don’t like it, I just return it”*, which means that they place more value on other mechanisms for avoiding risk, such as returning the product than the use of online reviews. This was similar for Participants 3 and 6 as they also do not take online reviews into account, however, that is only when the return policy is free. For Participant 3 they explained that:

*“If there was no free return then I would want reviews. But if the returns were free then it is okay that there are no reviews.”*

Participant 6 also stated a similar opinion as they discussed that in the scenario of costly return policies:

*“Then I would be more careful, the reviews would matter more.”*

This demonstrates that when return policies are free, it affects the use of online reviews as they are not utilized. Therefore, it could be implied that for these participants, when pure players include free return policies, there is not a necessity for online reviews. However, that does not apply for all participants, as it was discovered that for Participants 1, 2, and 8 they perceived the return policy as bothersome. This is connected to the findings by Grewal et al. (2004) where they discovered that consumers believe that returning a product is a hassle. However, the literature did not include online reviews as a mechanism to prevent that possibility. A novel perspective was found in this study where Participants 2 and 8 placed more reliance on online reviews to attempt to avoid returning the product. Participant 8 explained that:

*“My goal is to not return a product”*

It was recognized that Participant 8 aims to collect as much information about the product such as with online reviews to avoid the possibility of returning the product. This was also noticeable with Participants 2 as they do not desire returns, and therefore, they read online reviews to assure that the sizing is correct. Therefore, it could be concluded that since the return policy is not considered a main risk reliever, Participants 2 and 8 look for

online reviews to reduce their uncertainty. For Participant 1, it is important to note that while they also had issues with returning products, they differed as they did not utilize online reviews to avoid that possibility.

Therefore, based on these results, there have been contrasting views on the return policy as a factor affecting the use of online reviews. While Participants 4 and 7 did not only depend on the return policy, Participants 3, 5 and 6 could rely solely on the return policy. Yet, for Participants 3 and 6, if there were costs related to the return policy, they might utilize online reviews in that case to reduce risk. However, for Participants 2 and 8 they placed the highest value on online reviews as they viewed the process of returning the product inconvenient, and therefore, attempted to prevent that from occurring. It was only Participant 1 and 5 that did not even consider online reviews, as they linked it to subjectivism.

#### 4.4.7 Customer Service

There were participants in the study that brought up customer service as a novel factor that could affect the use of online reviews. Participant 4 and 8 sometimes avoided a website, regardless of the online reviews, due to their own personal experience with customer service. Participant 4 brought up an example on how it was difficult to contact a company when they had an issue with the delivery costs. Therefore, they claimed that:

*“It was the first and last time I bought from there”.*

Participant 8 was also influenced by a previous poor experience and therefore, also stated:

*“I never ordered from there [again]”.*

This contradicts Utz et al. (2010)’s argument that recommendations by others are more valued than the reputation regarding customer service. Moreover, Participant 8 further explained that even though the layout of the website was favorable, the customer service affected the possibility of purchasing from there in the future. This demonstrates that it may not be adequate to only manage the website and its features but there should be efforts to provide satisfactory customer service as well. Therefore, this leads to criticism

of the study by Corbitt et al. (2003) as it mainly focused on the quality of the website as a mechanism to success, however, the empirical results suggest that customer service should also be acknowledged. The layout of the website might not only affect the consideration of online reviews, but customer service as well, therefore, there needs to be adequate management in that aspect as well. This demonstrates that when there is a lack of satisfactory customer service, consumers will not even consider the products offered, therefore, the online reviews will not be read. It can be implied that regardless of how many individuals recommend a product that will not influence their decision as they regard their personal experience with higher value.

## 5. Conclusion

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*With the aim to answer the two research questions, this section summarizes the key findings in terms of consumers' attitudes towards online reviews on pure player brands. It also highlights the factors that affect the use of online reviews in building trust and reducing risk.*

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One of the focuses of this study was to understand consumers' opinions about online reviews on pure player brands as a method of reducing the risk of receiving a product that does not meet expectations. The study revealed that consumers face information asymmetry in regards to the inability to test pure player products before a purchase, however, they differed with their views on the helpfulness of online reviews. Most of the participants considered online reviews, except for two individuals who argued that the opinions provided by others are subjective for apparel. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that for some of the participants that did consider online reviews, their usage depended on the type of product or the website. For instance, if the website had an esteemed position in the market, online reviews would not be required to foster trust since consumers have already established familiarity with the website. With the type of product, online reviews would be more useful for consumers that require a certain clothing item to fit a certain way. Furthermore, consumers' attitudes towards positive and negative online reviews were studied and mixed responses were received. Although there were participants that only read negative online reviews in certain situations that was not always the case as some discussed that online reviews should have a balance of both. Therefore, it could be concluded that there were various attitudes on when online reviews are regarded as helpful in the pure player context.

Regarding the second research question, in the theoretical framework, several factors were identified that could impact the use of online reviews as a mechanism to build trust so that risk is reduced. However, it was found that not all applied to this study in the pure player context. Participants discussed that when they had skepticism about the website, they did not take online reviews about products into consideration. When it came to the content and writing style of the review, majority of the participants agreed that an online

review's content and its length had an impact on the use of an online review to build trust. Simultaneously, limited support was shown towards the writing style. Hence, the discussion revealed that content was the only part of the factor that impacted the use of an online review to build trust. Moreover, the factor of source characteristics in terms of the model developed by McCroskey and Jensen in 1975, did not gather much support from the participants. The thesis revealed a few new source credibility dimensions, in the context of pure player products, which were age and sizing. In summary, source characteristics did not really affect the usability of online reviews for pure player products in affecting trust and reducing risks. Furthermore, the factor of reviewer agreement received a great amount of support from participants in that it could add to a review's assistance to reduce a risk for a pure player product. Lastly, information overload was not considered a factor that made it more challenging for consumers to consider online reviews.

Two additional factors, alongside the ones previously identified in research, were found to affect the usability of online reviews in pure player brands. One of these new factors was customer service. A few participants explained that experiencing bad customer service would make them not interested in the products on that website, and therefore, they would not consider online reviews to build their trust. The second factor found was the option of returning the purchased products. This factor could both persuade people to use online reviews as well as avoid them. For instance, a few participants considered the process of returning products a hassle and would therefore try to avoid the risk of returning products by reading online reviews. In addition, some individuals explained that if the return policy was costly they would consider the online reviews more as they would not want to pay for returns, and if the returns were free, they would not read online reviews to develop trust. Thus, there were factors recognized from the interviews that may impact whether consumers consider online reviews or not for pure player apparel brands.

## 6. Discussion

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*In this section of the thesis, managerial implications will be included, with recommendations on how pure player brands could improve their strategies to reduce risk based on the empirical findings. The section further highlights the limitations of the method of the study. Lastly, the chapter is concluded with suggestions for further research.*

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### 6.1 Managerial Implications

These results could provide guidance for pure player brands that are considering to include online reviews for their products and how to improve their usefulness. Since there are pure players that do not include online reviews, they could take this study into consideration to determine if the feature should be added to bring more value to the business. This study could be beneficial as overall, it was recognized that the majority of participants take online reviews into account when purchasing for pure player products. Although it may not impact companies heavily if online reviews are not included as some do not notice when they are absent, it could increase favor for the company. Consumers struggle with information asymmetry, especially with pure player products as they are not possible to examine at a physical store. Online reviews could provide guidance and relieve the risk of dissatisfaction with the product. Moreover, companies should not fear negativity related to the product. While there were a few participants that mainly read negative online reviews, there were others that acknowledged that there should be a mixture of reviews available. If only positive online reviews are included, it can raise suspicions about the credibility of the online vendor. Therefore, companies should not aim to censor negative online reviews as that could be counterproductive and decrease sales in the future. This could be applied with reviewer agreement, as while it could be argued that if consumers ‘like’ a negative comment that would decrease sales, it can be advantageous for a company since they would be perceived as transparent. Also, in the case that companies are not censoring comments but there are only positive online reviews available, the business should signal to consumers that they are not manipulating the review section. It was suggested by Harridge-March (2006) that there should be additional features on the website that establish that the business is trustworthy. It would

be recommended that the managers pay attention to the overall perception of the website such as the layout.

As discussed earlier, if consumers have skepticism about a pure player website, they do not take online reviews into consideration for building trust for the product. Therefore, this means that pure player brands should invest thoroughly in creating a website that looks professional and safe, as the inability to do so would hinder consumers considering their products for purchase, and the use of online reviews to build trust for them. However, the layout of the website should not be the only factor to consider for improvements, as customer service could also impact the use of online reviews. It was found in this research that a few participants did not proceed with a purchase due to poor communication with the company about certain issues. It is therefore suggested that pure player websites should consider this factor as unsatisfactory customer service could make customers develop a negative perception of the website leading them not to purchase their products. They should assure that the company is constantly available to answer issues. Furthermore, it was also revealed that extremely low prices had a negative effect on believing whether the website was trustworthy or not. Pure players should be careful of selling apparel that is remarkably inexpensive, as it could give the impression to consumers that the website is unreliable.

Furthermore, since it was discovered that consumers found online reviews with good content useful, pure player websites could encourage their consumers to write online reviews that are comprehensive and useful to other customers. They could do this by leaving a polite message on the review tab that reminds consumers to give a well-rounded review and touch on certain aspects such as quality, size and color, for example. Moreover, the support for source credibility characteristics was minimal, meaning that consumers would not use personal information about the reviewers in building greater trust for the review they write and hence the product. As the anonymity in reviews is not bothersome to the consumers, pure player websites should not invest in systems that would provide personal information about the reviewers.

Although some participants expressed that they heavily rely on the return factor when shopping online, it was also found that other participants required online reviews since

experience goods come with uncertainty. Additionally, there were some who disliked the return process completely. It is advisable for pure player companies to not only rely on the return policy, as a factor that would reduce consumer risk, and invest their energies in creating review sections for their products. Therefore, these recommendations could improve a company's overall reputation as it may help consumers with their online shopping experience.

## **6.2 Limitations of Method**

While interviews did provide a greater insight on individual's views on online reviews, there were some issues that may have affected the data collected. Before conducting the interviews, while there was awareness that there could be interviewer bias, it was difficult to avoid. Interviewer bias is when the questions are phrased in a way to receive a certain response (Saunders et al., 2012). Although it was agreed before that the questions would be general, there were instances where the questions were closed-ended to gain a further understanding of the responses and that may have influenced the interviewees. Kvale (2007) has discussed that interviewer's questions related to the responses could affect the outcome. Also, small comments were passed by the interviewers during the interviews, and therefore, that could have made the interviewee consider their opinion based on what the interviewers had stated. These challenges that the authors faced could be due to the lack of experience with conducting interviews. While a practice interview was conducted among the members, it was still challenging to avoid mistakes. After each interview, a reflection was made on how to improve for the future but unfortunately, the mistakes affected the previous responses, affecting the reliability of the data.

Furthermore, in terms of reliability, since the method was non-standardized, it may be difficult to achieve the same results in the future as it depended on the circumstances. The online environment may change in the future and the nature of the interview may be different. Saunders et al. (2012) believe that this should be recognized and stated about qualitative data, as that is generally the case. It is important to include the research design, for future studies to understand how the data was collected and the analysis made. Furthermore, since the roles of interviewing were alternated among the authors, that could have also led to different knowledge produced. Although there was an attempt to cover all themes, there were instances when a theme was neglected due to the nature of the

interview. Kvale (2007) has discussed that the interviewer's interactions with the subject could influence the responses. Thus, if the interviews were conducted with the same interviewer, that may have resulted in covering all the themes for the participants.

Furthermore, there were a few interviews out of the sample that were shorter than others due to their lack of experience with online shopping. It was difficult for them to recall their experiences as they were not regular shoppers as opposed to individuals that frequently shopped online and were therefore, able to provide more information. Furthermore, since it was a convenience sample, it lacked generalizability since individuals from the same region were chosen. Consumers from different regions may differ with their online experiences, therefore, it is not a complete representation of the online community. Thus, these are the limitations related to this study.

### **6.3 Future Research**

The study could contribute to literature as there were novel factors discovered that impacted the usability of online reviews in the pure player context. Also, the factors discussed in previous research were applied in this study to pure players, which had limited research on the topic. However, the authors have recognized that certain aspects were not investigated, therefore, future researchers could take that opportunity and apply it to their research designs. It could be valuable to study the different genders' view on online reviews for pure player brands, as clothing is categorized according to gender. Moreover, since several factors were studied in this paper, it was not possible to deeply understand each factor. Future research could select a single factor to focus on to gain more insight on how online reviews are affected. Furthermore, to have a well-rounded research that covers a multitude of perspectives, a larger sample could be chosen for a qualitative study, to reduce the generalizability from the findings. This was challenging to do in this study as there were time constraints, therefore, it would be advisable for the future. Although this study could contribute to literature, these are the recommendations to further develop research regarding this topic.

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