Source consultation by consumers: differences between males and females

A study of the sequence of sources consumers consult and their gender differences in the pre-purchase phase of the purchasing decision process

(Dreamstime, 2017)

Erik Veneboer - 851813848

Open University of the Netherlands

- Faculty: Management, Science and Technology
- Education: Master of Science in Management
- Specialization: Relationship Marketing
- Course: Master thesis in Management MM
- First supervisor: Dr. J. M.C. Schijns MBA
- Second supervisor: Dr. J. Mampaey

July 20, 2017
Acknowledgements

Regarding the execution of this study and the writing of this thesis, I want to thank all people from the Open University who were involved for their support or contributions. In particular I would like to thank my first supervisor Jos Schijns. Due to my many activities as an entrepreneur, teacher and student my schedule is always overbooked. Jos Schijns has always been understanding and motivated me with his peace and calm, and feedback. This was a great motivator to me, and kept me on the right track.

I also want to thank all other people who have provided me with information through interviews or in any other way to gain insights or obtain input which gave me motivation and support during difficult times. In relation to this motivation and support I want to thank my wife Renate Veneboer-Wasch. And last but not least, I want to thank Melody, Dillion and Camilo who saw their dad less than they wanted.

This document is the result of my exploratory study for my master study of Management, Science and Technology at the Open University of the Netherlands.

Erik Veneboer
Summary
The current study shows:

- insights into the sequence in which consumers tend to use online or offline external sources;
- that the interviewed participants only used external commercial and external personal sources;
- that the internet has become an influential channel for information search;
- that the online and offline search has been reversed (made a switch) to the most (online) and second most (offline) influential information source.

Background and problem statement
There is little knowledge on the choices consumers make when consulting information sources within the pre-purchase phase. This phase is one of the five phases of the five-stage purchasing process model, and the other four phases are problem recognition, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and evaluation after purchase (Ancarani, Costabile, Keller, & Kotler, 2014) (Verhage, 2015). Nowadays, it is likely that the search for information will start at home through the use of a mobile device, because of the changed information seeking and purchasing process in recent years. The development of the Internet has significantly impacted the information search behaviour of consumers. Many consumers regularly consult Internet sources for information on product categories, brands, manufacturers, and retailers, particularly when making a purchase decision about major durable goods or high involvement products. Online sales have increased by the advent of e-commerce through the Internet. Within the commercial industry, the marketers are using this new channel to be able to reach potential customers, and it has become a powerful force to increase the online purchases by consumers. Commercial sources normally perform like an information function, whereas personal sources perform like a legitimising or evaluation function. By gathering information, the consumer learns about the competing brands and their features. Consumers might experience an overload of information within the external search in the pre-purchase phase. Therefore, the aim of this study is primarily to investigate which external sources a consumer consults, and whether these sources were used online or offline within the information seeking (pre-purchase) phase of the consumer purchasing decision process. This was answered using 13 research questions.

Literature
The theoretical background of this research will be presented in the literature review, which discusses the concept of online and offline sources, consumers’ information search (pre-purchase search), purchasing decisions, the frequency of usage of the various sources and male versus female segmentation. Information Search is the second phase of the five-stage purchasing process model (Ancarani, Costabile, Keller, & Kotler, 2014) (Verhage, 2015). In this phase, after recognising the need for a product, the consumer searches for alternatives that may fulfil his needs and desires (Sachdeva, 2015). When a consumer starts to search for information he or she will consider what is already known about the product or service. In case this search does not provide enough information to make a purchasing decision an external search is desired. Within the external search there are four sources, which can be identified as (1) personal sources: these include family, friends, colleagues or people whom the consumer trusts. (2) Public sources: these include the objective information provided by the government, articles in magazines, or product experiments. (3) Commercial sources: these are advertisements, labels, sales representatives, and websites. (4) sources based on experience: this is the viewing, touching and using an article, but also includes reviews on the internet (Verhage, 2014).
Methodology
This research is exploratory and was conducted through a case study. A total of 16 participants were gradually selected concurrent to the data analysis, resulting in a diverse sample in terms of age and educational level, including both student and employees. A semi-structured questionnaire has been used by the same interviewer, therefore validation has been obtained within this research. The findings of this study help to gain insight into the consumer’s information seeking process to develop hypotheses which can be used by other researchers. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Subsequently, the essence of the interview was transferred into a data matrix to encode the different answers.

Results
The interviews were examined to answer the research questions as described in the ‘Background and problem statement’. The interviewees were asked about the various phases of an information search about a product within the range of specialty goods. It was stated clearly, by almost all interviewees that they used commercial sources. These were consulted online and offline. Looking at the male and female respondents, male respondents more often than females used a personal source. Looking at the respondents’ preferences, the online search on the Internet (commercial online) is highly preferred. When searching online for information through an online commercial source, all interviewees indicated that they start their online search in Google. Within their information search, respondents used diverse ways to achieve their goals. The respondents indicated that an online search and a visit to online stores do not give them any obligation to make a purchase, unlike the physical stores where a visit and a conversation with a sales representative would make them feel obligated. The objectivity of offline stores was often questioned while the Internet was considered to be an objective source by the interviewees.

Regarding a vacation as a service within the range of specialty goods, the respondents use the Internet as a first source of information. When respondents search for information online, they will search for reviews to gain information about the location, hotel, service and online (travel) shops.

Conclusions
The aim of this research was to investigate which external sources consumers consult in the information seeking (pre-purchase) phase of the purchasing decision process and to explore differences between males and females. Our study investigates these insights in relation to the information search males and females tend to follow when purchasing specialty goods. In addition, this study investigated whether these sources were used online or offline. To summarise these research goals, a problem definition was compiled. When searching for information prior to the purchase, there seem to be minor differences in the steps that are followed between males and females. There are also minor differences observed between males and females in consulting the various external sources.

Remarkable is the diversity of possibilities for consulting online or offline external sources. The theory that consumers can experience the amount of information available as an overload because there is an overproduction of information is confirmed by interviewees, but not experienced as a problem or a burden. The online commercial source, which has been consulted by the interviewees, seems to be the most important source and has a high level of influence on the interviewees because of the number of times it is used and how it affects consumers. The consumer keeps on visiting psychical shops and stores, but start the information search in almost all cases using online commercial sources (the Internet). Consumers will take time to search for information to inform themselves prior to making a purchase decision. The interviewees indicated that the possibilities
offered by the Internet provide a comprehensive overview of all specialty products and the variations within the product range that they were looking for.

The current study corroborates with the research of Sachdeva (2015) in terms of consumers who receive most information about a product from commercial-marketer-dominated sources where several functions influence the buying decision. Previous studies primarily investigated the external search in general. These studies did not consider the several types of information sources.

Another result of this study is the interviewees’ perception of the Internet, which was found to be viewed as an objective source. According to the interviewees, shops and stores are subjective, because they want to sell the products they have in stock. The current research shows that the internet has become the most important channel for information search. The interviewees reported an element of significant importance regarding commercial sources, the reviews. The interviewed males and females stated that they read these reviews frequently. Reviews are not objective, so it is questionable whether the objectivity of reviews as a source, according to the respondents, can be guaranteed.

We can assume that the commercial online source has been experienced as the most influential objective source when consumers search for information in the pre-purchase phase. It appears that the online and offline search has been reversed (made a switch) to the most (online) and second most (offline) influential information source. Nowadays, consumers search for information online and inform themselves about products in this manner.

The answers to the various research questions compiled four hypotheses for further research:

1. The online and offline search has been reversed (made a switch). The commercial online source (the Internet) has been experienced as the preferred (and most influential) objective source when consumers search for information in the pre-purchase phase. Nowadays, consumers search for information online and have their selves informed online.

2. When seeking for information in the pre-purchase phase of specialty products, there are differences regarding this phase between male and female consumers. Female consumers will start their search primarily commercial online, in contrast to the male consumers who will start their search by primarily consulting a personal source.

3. Today, consumers have various possibilities to consult an information source (online or offline) prior to a purchase. The amount of online information is not considered to be an overload because the consumer is able to ‘filter’ this information. Therefore, consumers will only review the information that they think is necessary.

4. Today, consumers will educate themselves about a product in the pre-purchase phase, through searching and reading on the Internet. Here, the consumers can find an overview of the products, product types, and product reviews, in contrast to offline shops and stores. The advisory function which shops and stores have had for many decades, will eventually disappear because it is considered subjective. Commercial sites are perceived to be objective compared to the sales staff of shops and stores.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 2
Summary ........................................................................................................................................ 3
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................................. 6
Table 1 Glossary of notification terms ............................................................................................. 7

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 8
   1.1 Trends .................................................................................................................................. 8
   1.2 Problem statement .............................................................................................................. 8
   1.3 Studies referring to the problem statement ......................................................................... 9
   1.4 Problem definition and research questions ........................................................................ 10
   1.5 Theoretical importance ...................................................................................................... 11
   1.6 Practical importance .......................................................................................................... 11
   1.7 Goal of research ................................................................................................................ 12
   1.8 Reading guide ................................................................................................................... 12

2. Theoretical framework ................................................................................................................. 13
   2.1 Literature review ................................................................................................................. 13
      2.1.1 Consumers’ information search (pre-purchase phase) .............................................. 13
      2.1.2 Online and offline sources ...................................................................................... 15
      2.1.3 Purchasing decision process .................................................................................... 17
      2.1.4 Frequency of usage and sequence of use .............................................................. 18
      2.1.5 Male versus female segmentation .......................................................................... 19
      2.1.6 Conceptual model ................................................................................................... 19

3. Methodology ............................................................................................................................... 21
   3.1 Research design .................................................................................................................. 21
   3.2 Data collection .................................................................................................................... 21
   3.3 Operationalization .............................................................................................................. 21
   3.4 Data-analyse ...................................................................................................................... 21

4. Results ......................................................................................................................................... 23
   4.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 23
   4.2 General results of the various interviews ........................................................................ 23
   4.3 Answering of the research questions ................................................................................ 25

5. Conclusions, discussion and recommendations ......................................................................... 32
   5.1 Conclusions ........................................................................................................................ 32
   5.2 Discussion .......................................................................................................................... 32
   5.3 Recommendations for further study ............................................................................... 37
   5.4 Limitations ......................................................................................................................... 37

References ....................................................................................................................................... 39
Appendix ......................................................................................................................................... 42
**Tabel 1 Glossary of notification terms**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commercial offline</td>
<td>Physical shops and stores, warehouses, department stores.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial online</td>
<td>Online stores or commercial websites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial sources</td>
<td>Advertisements, labels, advice from sales advisers and corporate websites (Verhage, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult</td>
<td>To ask the advise or opinion of someone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer</td>
<td>A person who acquires goods and services for his or her own personal needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer purchasing process</td>
<td>The process that consumers usually go through when a latent need becomes manifest (Ancarani, Costabile, Keller, &amp; Kotler, 2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced sources</td>
<td>The experience gained by the consumer when viewing, testing or using the product (test drive; Verhage, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External search</td>
<td>The process or activity of attempting to obtain information contexts by consumers in their external search in order to evaluate the various alternatives within one of the four sources: personal, public and commercial sources and sources based on experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five-stage purchasing process model</td>
<td>A model in which the purchasing process has been divided into stages (Ancarani, Costabile, Keller, &amp; Kotler, 2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information overproduction or information overload</td>
<td>More information than is necessary to make a decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information seeking</td>
<td>The process or activity of attempting to obtain information in both human and technological contexts by consumers in order to evaluate the various alternatives within the four sources of the external search.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information seeking (pre-purchase) phase</td>
<td>A stage within the five-stage purchasing process model prior to the evaluation of alternatives purchase phase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal search</td>
<td>The amount of information or knowledge a consumer already has about a product or a service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees or participants</td>
<td>The interviewed persons (respondents) of this study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major durable goods or high involvement products</td>
<td>High value good that is purchased only after long and careful consideration and characterized by extended periods between successive purchases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile device</td>
<td>A mobile device is a handheld tablet or other device that is made for portability and is therefore both compact and lightweight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-channelling</td>
<td>The way consumers use the different information and purchasing channels and how the customer completes these transactions through the various channels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offline</td>
<td>A connection or consultation in a physical way without the use of an internet connection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Computer or device connected to a network (such as the Internet) and ready to use (or be used by) other computers or devices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shops and stores</td>
<td>Commercial offline, physical outlet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialty goods</td>
<td>Items that consumers infrequently buy (once every 2-15 years) and which can be extraordinary, unique, or seldom bought; enough to motivate people to make an (unusual) effort to get it. This includes items such as a laptop, laminate floor, jewellery, electric bicycle, PlayStation 4, mobile phone, and a smart TV.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal resource</td>
<td>The personal resources are: family members, friends and colleagues - people who trust the consumer, including social media (Verhage, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-purchase phase</td>
<td>Information seeking phase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public resource</td>
<td>Objective government information, articles in classified magazines and product tests from, for example a consumer federation (Verhage, 2015).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Respondents                                     | The people who were interviewed within this case study.                                                                blrhale
1. Introduction
There is little knowledge regarding choices of information sources even though the concepts of decision-making and information search are mentioned in other studies, which is remarkable considering the increasing amount of data which is available to consumers in online and offline environments (Basso, Broilo, & Espartel, 2016). “Consumer Behavior in Interaction with Information Channels plays a critical role in terms of transmitting information to and from different entities. Therefore, this role is important in the highly knowledge-intensive environment that characterizes modern retailing” (Dholakia, et al., 2010).

1.1 Trends
The advent of the Internet has given consumers more (and different) opportunities to search for information within the various stages of the five-stage purchasing process model. Kottler (2014) used the purchasing process model which identifies five stages from the moment a consumer feels the urge to buy a product or a service until the moment of the actual purchase. This purchase decision process consists of the following stages (Figure 2): problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and evaluation after purchase (Verhage, 2014). In the past, a consumer went to a store to obtain information about, for example, an electric toothbrush. It is likely that the search for information today will start at home. The actual information seeking and purchasing process in recent years.
Kannan, Kulkarni and Ratchford (2012) established that the Internet has significantly impacted on the information search behaviour of consumers. Many consumers regularly consult Internet sources for information on product categories, brands, manufacturers, and retailers, particularly when making a purchase decision about major durable goods.
The Internet also provides retailers the opportunity to use the strategy of multi-channelling. Multi-channel retailing is a marketing strategy that offers consumers a choice of ways to buy a product. A true multi-channel strategy covers purchases from a store, website, mail orders, interactive television, catalogue ordering and comparison shopping websites. The aim of a multi-channel retailing strategy is to maximise revenue and loyalty by offering customers choices and convenience. Multi-channel retailing is receiving increased attention within industry and academia as synergies between channels are realised by retailers and consumers (Collins & McGoldrick, 2007). The Hoofd Bedrijfschap Detailhandel (HBD) observed the change of the buying and shopping process because of the popularity of the Internet, and the emergence of mobile technology and social media. The consumer increasingly uses multiple channels (omnichannel) during the buying process, in addition to the use of a physical store. These insights provide opportunities for retailers to respond to the way consumers collect their information within information seeking (Detailhandel, sd).

1.2 Problem statement
The adoption and penetration of the Internet by consumers has led to businesses where consumers can interact with each other. This has turned the online marketplace into a very important communication and distribution channel. Online sales have increased by the advent of e-commerce through the Internet (Datta, Dutta, & Van der Meer, 2012). Social networking is another development that is growing rapidly. Within the commercial industry, the marketers are using this relatively new channel to be able to reach potential customers (Goodrich & de Mooij, 2014). These purchases and possibilities also influence the behaviour of consumers (Mason & McGaughey, 1998). The research and purchase activities of consumers have been changed by different phenomena such as accessibility, substantial amounts of information, very low search costs and access to all competitors on the internet (Karimi, 2013).
Nowadays, it is easier for consumers to collect and evaluate various competing offers of retailers and providers by using the Internet. It provides access to various locations at any time for every consumer. At the same time it is furthermore possible to visit different retailers which can be totally unfamiliar, at the same time. It is possible to compare the products or services of these retailers at the same moment (Koufaris, 2003). Koufaris (2003) and Karimi (2013) conclude that the Internet purchase behaviour does not follow the traditional path. Today, consumers use the Internet for the search and research of products, to make a purchase or to use e-services. However, within the purchasing process, the various stages might take place in online or offline shops. Therefore, the Internet allows consumers to make use of cross-channel search and purchases. The Internet affects (influences) consumers in the choices they make.

1.3 Studies referring to the problem statement
Basso, Broilo and Espartel (2016) performed exploratory research on how consumers choose their sources of information during pre-purchase external search for products and services. Their findings present relevant academic and managerial contributions. Their primary contribution was to propose a framework (Figure 1) which is able to provide a greater understanding of consumer behaviour regarding the choice of information sources in pre-purchase external searches, within the multimedia and the multichannel environment.

Information (overload)
Due to the increasing flow of information within the physical (offline) and online environment, the consumer should not only make a decision about what to buy but also which sources he or she will consult when searching for information to be able to make a decision. Basso et al. (2016) indicate that there might be an overload of information and indicates to understand how consumers choose their sources of information within the external search in the pre-purchase phase. Keller (2010) indicates that a part of the various communication activities of producers, entrepreneurs, and service providers, who are used to reach the target group of this investment, has been wasted. Keller (2010) studied the challenge for marketers in choosing between several options to devise coordinated communication and channel strategies that maximize “push” and “pull” in today's complex multichannel, multimedia retail environment. This study did not investigate which choices consumers make when searching for information in the pre-purchase phase.

Males versus Female
Friedmann and Lowengart (2013) examined the similarities and differences between men and women in forming purchase intentions. In the purchasing context, men are described as more instrumental than women, and women are described as more focused on the shopping experience. Various elements may affect purchase decisions, but two issues still remains unresolved: Are both sexes similar in how they form their purchase intentions? Do men and women experience the information search process differently? Basso and colleagues did not investigate the sequence or choices consumers make when they start searching for information in the pre-purchase phase. Furthermore, they also did not investigate whether women and men follow the same sequence within their information search.

Consumer behaviour
Dholakia et al. (2010) have taken an in-depth look at emerging consumer behavior issues relating to multimedia and multichannel developments in the marketplace. They argue that the long-standing distinction between the information channel and the purchase channel has become increasingly blurred as a result of these developments. As these channels begin to commingle, consumers and retailers face many new opportunities and challenges to shape their interactions. Therefore, it is
important to gain insight into the consumer behaviour towards the start of their information search. Bronner, Neijens, Smit and Voorveld (2016), explored how online and offline buyers of a specific product differ in their cross-channel use throughout the purchase process and how this differs across types of products. Their study examined purchase channels and information channels in combination in order to provide insight into how consumers use (or claim to use) several types of channels and media to guide their online and offline purchases. Various stages of the Five-stage purchasing process model (Ancarani, Costabile, Keller, & Kotler, 2014) were focused on, in contrast to the current study where the second phase, which is the information search phase, was investigated.

1.4 Problem definition and research questions
The aim of this research is primarily to investigate which external sources a consumer consults and whether these sources were used online or offline within the information seeking (pre-purchase) phase of the consumer purchasing decision process. Additionally it is examined whether there are distinct differences in these processes between males and females. Furthermore, this study aims to understand which sources of information are most used by males and females in the process of purchasing a product or service. It provides insight into the sequence in which these sources are consulted and it will show the differences (e.g. in the frequency of use and/or sequence) between males and females regarding the use of these sources. Furthermore, this study aims to understand how consumers choose their sources of information in pre-purchase external searches, given the assumed information overproduction scenario. Due to the increasing volume of information in physical and online environments, a consumer intending to purchase a product or service must not only choose not only what to buy but also which sources to consult when searching for information that may aid decision-making.

The problem definition of the current study is as follows:

**Which online and offline sources does the consumer use within the information seeking (pre-purchase) phase of the consumer purchasing decision process and are there differences between male and female consumers?**

To be able to answer this problem definition, a number of research questions have been formulated, which will be discussed in separate sections of the literature study in chapter two. The research questions are as follows:

1. Which sources of the external phase (personal, public, commercial and experienced) does a consumer consult when searching for information about products (such as a smartphone, laptop bike, automobile, and washing machine) and services?
2. Do consumers experience an overload of information within any of the various online or offline sources of the external phase?
3. Which of the four external sources influences consumers most in the pre-purchase phase?
4. In what sequence do consumers consult the external sources of information online and offline, respectively?
5. Which sources can be identified within the external sources?
6. Do consumers consult these external sources online and/or offline?
7. When seeking for information online, what device do consumers use?
8. Why do consumers search for information on the Internet in the pre-purchase phase?
9. In relation to the various sources, which one is most influential within the information search phase regarding the decision to make a purchase?
10. Are there differences in pre-purchase search in relation to the type of goods?
11. When searching for information, what strategy do consumers use when consulting various sources?

12. Based on what criteria do consumers decide to use a certain information source?

13. What are the differences between men and women in choices made when seeking for information in the pre-purchase phase?

1.5 Theoretical importance

The share of online purchases within the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) has increased in recent years (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2016). Jepsen (2007) has indicated that the Internet creates new opportunities for conducting pre-purchase information searches. Lower search costs have been found to affect use of the Internet for this purpose. Benefits in terms of the large amounts of information available and freedom from physical contact with sales staff have also been found to affect the use of the Internet for information search positively. It is possible that the future of online shopping will outshine traditional shopping, because the Internet provides these new opportunities. Bronner et al. (2016) confirmed the opportunities of having a lot of information available at low costs. They stated that consumers use more online channels when making an online purchase instead of making an offline purchase. Therefore, Inman, Kannan and Verhoef (2015) and Fang et al. (2014) indicate that it is important to gain insight into how consumers use the various sources within the information search phase.

Most studies investigated the behaviour of consumers within the purchasing phase, and the phase prior to this phase, the evaluation of the alternatives (Bronner, Neijens, Smit, & Voorveld, 2016) (Böhm, Gensler, & Verhoef, 2012). These studies did not investigate the information search phase, which is the subject of the current study. It is important to know which steps a consumer takes within the information searching process before he or she purchases a product. Gensler, Neslin, and Verhoef, (2017) examined the factors that influence competitive showrooming, whereby consumers visit an offline retail store to gather information but make their purchase online at a competing retailer. It remains unclear what consumers tend to do in the first phase of the information seeking process.

The proposed framework (Figure 1) will provide the basis for further studies to develop a more detailed framework which allows this study to broaden academic knowledge on the matter. The identified sources will be added to the framework (Verhage, 2014).

1.6 Practical importance

Managementadvies (2016) stated that Consumer Insights are the basis for customer-oriented business and a "critical success factor" for all consumer-oriented organizations. Sachdeva (2015) stated: “In today’s consumer-oriented society the utmost concern of the marketers is to know the consumers’ decision-making process. Consumer decision making is a process describing how a consumer makes choices.” (p. 7). Therefore, it is important for marketers to analyse and observe the consumer decision-making process in order to optimize their activities and achieve maximum results in terms of reaching their message (Janković, Kramo-Ćaluk, & Vlašić, 2011) (Sachdeva, 2015). In paragraph 1.3 it was stated that Keller (2010) indicated that a part of the investment can be wasted when marketers do not know the different options to devise coordinated communication and channel strategies that maximise “push” and “pull” in today's complex multichannel, multimedia retail environment. The outcomes of the current study can be used in the supply of information within a changing ‘purchasing climate’, an increase in omnichannel retailing by increasing online transactions, customer-focused business, and more effective communications with a target group.
1.7 Goal of research
Most studies investigated the behaviour of consumers within the purchasing phase and prior to this phase, the evaluation of the alternatives (Bronner, Neijens, Smit, & Voorveld, 2016) (Böhm, Gensler, & Verhoef, 2012). These studies did not investigate the information search phase, which is the subject of this study. The current research is exploratory and was conducted through the use of a case study. Research questions were defined based on literature research and a formulated problem definition. This research may find new concepts, explanations and theories. Through interviews, data has been collected and analysed to identify connections between variables (variables conducted from the current research). The several interviews that were held have been transcribed and analysed. For analysis of the qualitative data, coding and categorisation have been used.

1.8 Reading guide
The next chapter contains the theoretical framework and starts with a literature review. This chapter describes the literature regarding consumers’ information search, online and offline sources, the purchasing decision process, frequency of usage of sources, and differences between males and females in their information search. The chapter concludes with the proposed conceptual model. Chapter 3 contains the methodology of the study and describes how the data was collected. Chapter 4 describes the results of the current study in three paragraphs. The last paragraph (4.3) contains the answers to the research questions. The final chapter covers the conclusions and the discussion of the research, as well as recommendations for further research. A glossary of the various terms that were used in this thesis is presented in Table 1.
2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Literature review

In this section, a theoretical background of the current research will be presented. The following concepts will be examined in more depth: online and offline sources, consumers’ information search (pre-purchase search), purchasing decisions, the frequency of usage of sources and male versus female segmentation.

2.1.1 Consumers’ information search (pre-purchase phase)

A consumer is a person who acquires goods and services for his or her own personal needs (Dictionary.com, 2016). Information seeking behaviour refers to those activities a person engages in when identifying his or her own need for information, searching for such information in any way, and using or transferring that information. Information behaviour is the totality of human behaviour in relation to the sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use. Thus, it includes face to face and online communication with others as well as the passive reception of information (Wilson, 2000).

Information search is the second phase of the five-stage purchasing process model (Ancarani, Costabile, Keller, & Kotler, 2014) (Verhage, 2015). In this phase, the consumer, after recognising the need for a product, searches for alternatives that may fulfil his needs and desires (Sachdeva, 2015). According to Karunakaran (2009), Ancarani et al. (2014) and Meenakshi and Kumar (2009), an aroused consumer searches for information about the product. Consumer information sources are personal sources, commercial sources, public sources and experimental sources. The relative amount and influence of these sources vary with the product category and the buyers’ characteristics.

Generally speaking, the consumer receives most information about a product from commercial-marketer-dominated sources. According to the authors, each information source performs a different function in influencing the buying decision. Commercial sources perform like an information function, whereas personal sources perform like a legitimizing or evaluation function. By gathering information, the consumer learns about competing brands and their features (Sachdeva, 2015).

When a consumer starts to search for information he or she will consider what is internally already known about the product or service. In case this search does not provide enough information to make a purchasing decision, an external search is desired. Within the external search, there are four sources, which can be identified as (1) personal sources: these include family, friends, colleagues or people whom the consumer trusts. (2) public sources: these conclude the objective information provided by the government, articles in magazines or product experiments. (3) commercial sources: these are advertisements, labels, sales representatives and websites. (4) Sources based on experience: this is the viewing, touching and use of an article, but also reviews on the internet (Verhage, 2014, p. 117). These sources provide a lot of information for the consumers. Basso et al. (2016) studied the increasing volume of information spread in physical (offline) and online environments when a consumer starts to search for information when intending to purchase a product or service. Nowadays, the consumer must not only choose what to buy but also which sources to consult when searching for information that will eventually lead to decision-making. The findings of the study of Basso and colleagues showed that consumers tend to consider a few sources of information, based on a previously built perception of which sources are appropriate for consultation. The collected data indicated that few external offline and/or online sources are consulted in the search for pre-purchase information regarding products and services. Preferred selected sources tend to be those that consumers perceive as more effective which is based on the decision problem, the consumer’s individual characteristics (including previous experiences) and
their social circle. Selected sources are also chosen according to pre-established evaluation criteria, which may involve the use of socialised images as heuristics. Mourali, Laroche and Pons (2005) clearly demonstrated the importance of the pre-purchase information search within the buying process. The pre-purchase information search is a critical step in the buying process of consumers, especially in the case of products and services. Among the various information sources, interpersonal sources seem to play a key role in consumers’ choice decisions. Laroche, Mourali and Pons (2005) found that people differ in their relative preference for interpersonal sources and that this relative preference is influenced by some of their personality traits as well as their familiarity with the product category. The authors identified several sources used by consumers to obtain information relevant to their purchase situation. Among the various information sources, interpersonal non-commercial sources seem to play a key role in consumers’ choice decisions. They examined potential antecedents of consumers’ relative preference for interpersonal information search. Existing literature on information search suggests that consumers only use a limited number of the sources available to them to keep the search costs low. The results of Castaldi, Dijst and Rijnsoever (2012) lend support to the claim that more involved consumers search more, and search across more information sources. They also identified clusters of consumers based on their search strategies, as defined by the sequence of information sources used. They state that since consumers can consult multiple sources of information, one might ask about the typical sequence in which different information sources are consulted during pre-purchase search (Castaldi et al. 2012).

The framework that Basso et al. (2016) identified (Figure 1) shows that preferences have some effect over the choice of information sources. A previous study by Zins et al. (1977) has shown that consumers tend to build preferences throughout their experiences. Basso et al. (2016) aimed to understand how consumers choose their sources of information during pre-purchase external searches for products and services. The study also identified the possible occurrence of consumer confusion associated with information sources, extending the theoretical understanding of such a concept. The Internet has transformed consumer behaviour in relation to the overproduction of information, particularly the way consumers search for information prior to making a purchase according to Ferraro, Luxton and Sands (2009). However, we know relatively little about the relationship between consumer information search strategies prior to visiting a physical retail store and the amount of money spent on product purchases. Research has shown that consumers use the Internet to search for product information prior to making a purchase through an alternative channel, such as a retail store (Neslin, Verhoef and Vroomen 2007). Neslin et al. (2007) add to previous research in their study by investigating the impact of online information search on consumer in-store product purchase behaviour. Specifically, they investigated how purchases differ between consumers who do or do not use the Internet to search for information prior to making a purchase in-store. Ferraro et al. (2009) set out to investigate the Internet’s impact on consumers’ physical store purchase behaviour. They found key insights into the way in which the retail sector has been transformed by the Internet as an additional information and purchasing channel. Their study confirms that online search plays a significant role in driving offline, in-store behaviour. This is particularly important given that consumers’ use of online search channels is expected to increase over time, as consumers increasingly turn to the Internet as a credible information source (Balasubramanian, Bronnenberg, & Peterson, 1997). Ferraro et al. (2009) have shown that the Internet can have a significant impact on consumers’ in-store behaviour. The alternative interpretation of their results is that consumers who are planning to buy more expensive products may make the time and effort to pre-search on the Internet before making a purchase. By collecting information on the type of items purchased and the various product categories, future research could investigate this potential effect in more detail.
In summary of the consumers’ information search as described, the following research questions have been drawn:

1. Which sources of the external phase (personal, public, commercial and experienced) does a consumer consult when searching for information about products (such as a smartphone, laptop bike, automobile, and washing machine) and services?
2. Do consumers experience an overload of information within any of the various online or offline sources of the external phase?
3. Which of the four external sources influences consumers most in the pre-purchase phase?
4. In what sequence do consumers consult the external sources of information online and offline, respectively?

2.1.2 Online and offline sources

Studies on pre-purchase external searches reveal that there are several types of sources of information available to consumers (Guo, 2001). However, they do not explain how the sources that are selected for use are chosen. The postulated theory by Bettman, Johnson and Payne (1993) and Byeong-Joon (2004) suggests that the decision of consumers to use online channels rather than offline channels when searching for information and buying products tends to vary depending on the decision-making problem, the individual characteristics and the context. According to Ferraro (2009), the Internet is a powerful tool for consumers to search for information and, as such, it is important to understand the relationship between consumers’ use of the Internet as an information search tool and their subsequent purchase channel. The Internet has significantly impacted the information search behaviour of consumers. Many consumers regularly consult Internet sources for information about product categories, brands, manufacturers, and retailers, particularly when making a purchase decision about major durable goods (Kannan, Kulkarni, & Ratchford, 2012). Kannan et al. (2012) focussed on trying to understand the link between online versus offline search channels and specific choosing behaviour. Consumer information search has been an enduring area of interest in consumer behaviour, economics, and marketing literature over the past three decades, and understanding the information search process is a key element in understanding consumer decision-making behaviour. Although focusing on online channels, Byeong-Joon, (2004) states that consumers may search online and buy offline, and vice versa, in addition to possibly using the same channel to do both. In the current literature, there is no comprehensive classification for the multiple types of offline and online sources available for consultation by consumers in search of pre-purchase information, according to Basso et al. (2016). Further, the study of Basso et al. (2016) identified the types of online and offline sources considered for external information search based on types of media available for use by advertisers (retailers, manufacturers and service providers) and the set of data collected through the interviews their study provided. Tabel 2 provides an overview of the identified online and offline sources. Within the study of Basso et al. (2016), all participants reported having a smartphone and using it for internet access, in addition to sometimes selecting multiple online sources for searching information through different devices (desktop computer, notebook, tablet and/or smartphone) and from various locations (from home, work, on the road or while travelling). How this new interactive environment is changing the way consumers make decisions was investigated by Aubl et al. (2005). For consumers there is an increased amount of information available, and they can interact with information sources beyond the basic desktop and laptop computers (e.g., personal digital assistants, mobile phones, tablet computers). Consumers have more choices than ever about how, when, and how much to interact with companies and each other. Aubl et al. (2005) examined whether consumers want interactive environments and what effects these interactive environments have on consumer behaviour. Byeong-Joon (2004) has determined variables:
the characteristics of the decision problem, the individual consumer characteristics and the social context when choosing the internet as a channel for information search and the purchase of products and services. This was also observed in the behaviour of choosing online and/or offline sources to search for information about products and services. Despite the existence of such variables, Basso et al. (2016) observed that certain sources seem to gain strength in relation to others in the perception of different consumers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OFFLINE SOURCES</th>
<th>ONLINE SOURCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family and Friends</td>
<td>Search engines or apps (such as maps, images, and videos)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News articles</td>
<td>Websites from manufacturers or from service providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisements</td>
<td>Specialized virtual stores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External media</td>
<td>Virtual stores of articles in general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expositions and events</td>
<td>Content portals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catalogues</td>
<td>Online News Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer service (phone)</td>
<td>Blogs, microblogs and social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical chain stores</td>
<td>Salesperson (e-mail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical independent stores</td>
<td>Online customer service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salesperson (store visit)</td>
<td>Consumer reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point of purchase materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Packaging or service informative folders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Identified offline and online sources (Basso, Broilo, & Espartel, 2016).**

Searching for information on the Internet is relatively cheap and there is no doubt that there is a large amount of information available on the Internet according to Jepsen (2007). The main result of her study is that the amount of Internet use affects use of the Internet for pre-purchase information search more than perceived low search costs and perceived availability of information. The study also identified that low search costs and availability of product information affect the use of the Internet for information searching. The most important driver for the use of the Internet for the pre-purchase information search is the general change in behaviour that is related to extended use of the Internet. Other results of Jepsen (2007) showed that people for whom the use of the Internet is compatible with their shopping mode, use the Internet more for the pre-purchase information search. The amount of Internet use affects the perceived availability of information. Some customers buy a higher amount of, and more expensive products, suggesting that the online information search and offline purchases are complements according to Huizingh, Leeflang, Pauwels and Teerling (2011). Offline retailers should use specific online activities to target specific product categories and customer segments. The revenue impact of an informational website is larger when the benefits of the search are higher and when the prior search costs are higher. The research of Huizingh et al. (2011) draws on the information search literature to specify and test hypotheses regarding the offline revenue impact of adding an informational website. What kind of purchase is made, differs across four retail product categories between consumers who do and do not use the Internet to search for information prior to making a purchase in-store. By using a selection of different channels, consumers are able to deal with a single organisation to search for information, engage in communication, purchase products and return purchases according to Ferraro et al. (2009). Cheema and Papatla (2008) examined the relative importance of online versus offline information for Internet purchases by investigating the role of these online and offline sources. They showed that the relative importance of online sources for purchases on the Internet decreases along with increases in consumers’ experience with the use of the Internet.

In summary of the online and offline source as described, the following research questions have been drawn:
5. Which sources can be identified within the external sources?
6. Do consumers consult these external sources online and/or offline?
7. When seeking for information online, what device do consumers use?
8. Why do consumers search for information on the Internet in the pre-purchase phase?

2.1.3 Purchasing decision process

"Consumers do not always know which products will provide their wishes and needs, or even if those products do exist" (Verhage, 2014). Searching for information begins with the ‘internal’ search, the use of already existing knowledge about a product or a service. When this internal search does not provide a sufficient basis for a purchase decision, an external search is desired. The four major classifications of an external search are: personal sources, public sources, commercial sources, and experienced sources (Verhage, 2014). The pre-purchase phase is also called the ‘information search’ phase (Ancarani, Costabile, Keller, & Kotler, 2014).

To be able to study the various stages within the purchasing decision process, Kottler (2014) used the purchasing process model which identifies five stages from the moment a consumer feels the urge to buy a product or a service until the moment of the actual purchase. This purchase decision process consists of the following stages (Figure 2): problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and evaluation after purchase (Verhage, 2014).

Once a consumer becomes aware of a problem, need or desire, the decision-making process starts. The less experienced the consumer is, the greater the risk of a falsely purchased product. Consumers will generally gather information before making a decision (Verhage, 2015). According to Solomon (2009), the major steps in the decision-making process are problem recognition (which includes recognition of needs and opportunity), information search (by which consumers survey the environment for appropriate data to make a reasonable decision), and evaluation of alternatives. Karunakaran (2009) and Arun and Meenakshi (2009) state that consumers pass through five stages during their decision process: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase decision. Sachdeva (2015) constructed a scale for consumers’ decision-making process, which is a five-stage model where the purchase decision stage is explained as the purchase of the product once the consumers have searched and scanned the various alternatives. The results of the study by Basso et al. (2016) suggests that the choice for a specific source can vary depending on the type of product or service, perceived risk, and time availability. Aspects related to access and structure of the physical or the online environment can also influence choice. Aside from task and context variables, the individual characteristics of consumers, such as the perceived ability to seek information and prior knowledge, as well as personal preferences related to the individual’s personality profile, may also influence the choice of sources to be consulted (Basso, Broilo, & Espartel, 2016). By analysing online consumers’ decision-making styles Chatwin and Meng Sam (2015) conducted research to understand online consumer behaviour better. To deal with the emergence of e-commerce activities, They found that it is necessary to consider online consumers' decision-making styles that influence the willingness of online consumers to purchase products.
2.1.3.1. Types of purchasing behaviour
It depends on the type of product whether the consumer follows all stages of the purchase decision process. Three types of orientation and purchasing behaviours can be identified: routine purchase behaviour, limited decision-making, and comprehensive decision-making (Verhage, 2015). The gathering of information in addition to routine purchasing behaviour is minimal. These routine purchasing products are products with a high purchasing frequency and low involvement, such as food and drinks where consumers purchase products out of a habit because they already know what they want. Most times, the consumer has a clear brand preference (Verhage, 2015). Products with limited decision-making behaviour involve products with a 'normal' purchase frequency, such as household appliances, clothing, and furniture, as well as eating in a restaurant. There is a certain amount of information gathering involved, but not as much as during the purchase of extensive decision-making products with low purchase frequency (Verhage, 2015).

Evoked set
The information search phase is followed by the evaluation of alternatives phase. There is an overlap between these phases, because consumers start to evaluate the information at the same time they start looking for it. The evaluation of the alternatives phase starts with the evoked set, which represents the number of (limited) brands a consumer takes into consideration when making a purchasing decision (Verhage, 2015). The evoked set is, therefore, the end of the information search phase.

In summary of the purchasing decision process and various types of purchasing behaviour as described, the following research questions have been drawn:

Research questions:
9. In relation to the various sources, which one is most influential within the information search phase regarding the decision to make a purchase?
10. Are there differences in pre-purchase search in relation to the type of goods?

2.1.4 Frequency of usage and sequence of use
Previous studies primarily investigate involvement and external search in general. These studies do not consider the diverse types of information sources, and minimal research has been conducted on the sequence of use of these sources, based on the sequence variables (Castaldi, Dijst, & Rijnsoever, 2012). Castaldi et al. (2012) identified four clusters of consumers with different search strategies. This clustering can form the basis of a segmented marketing approach. Since the sequence of consulting information sources was not only related to the use of information sources, but also to the influence on the final decision according to Hauser, Urban, and Weinberg (1993), it is important to recognise consumers’ search strategies. Though the first source consulted was shown to have the largest influence in the final purchase decision, the sources consulted later on were also of relevance. Given that consumers can consult multiple sources of information, one might ask what the typical sequence is in which different information sources are consulted during the pre-purchase search. It remains unknown whether accounting for a more complex ranking of sources in terms of sequence might shed new light on the use of multiple information sources (Castaldi, Dijst, & Rijnsoever, 2012).

In summary of the Frequency of usage and sequence of use as described, the following research questions have been drawn:

11. When searching for information, what strategy do consumers use when consulting various sources?
12. Based on what criteria do consumers decide to use a certain information source?
2.1.5 Male versus female segmentation

Females are the principal buying agents for most households according to Bakewell and Mitchell (2006). Research shows that men see shopping as being unpleasant and undesirable (Dholakia R., 1999). Dholakia (1999) studied the proposition that: male consumer decision-making traits will be different from female traits. Evidence exists that males make decisions differently and are likely to have different decision-making styles compared to women (Bakewell & Mitchell, 2006). Friedmann and Lowengart (2013) examined similarities and differences among men and women in forming purchase intentions. In the purchasing context, men are described as more instrumental than women, and women are described as more focused on the shopping experience. In general, emotional utility (such as identity consumption which is defined as the tendency to attach value to products that are perceived as compatible with the self of the person) seems to be more important for women and functional utility more important for men. Identity consumption affects both men and women, depending on the type of utility examined. As expected, when forming purchase intentions, identity consumption has a differential effect on men and women (Friedmann & Lowengart, 2013). Theoretically, when exploring purchase intentions, identity consumption is an important determinant in purchase formation on its own, but the mechanism of how it interacts with other purchasing variables remains unclear (Friedmann & Lowengart, 2013). Additional research on the information seeking and purchasing process of specialty goods has not been conducted. Basso et al. (2016) stated that within the proposed classification of types of information sources, there is room to investigate what types of online and offline sources are prioritised by different consumer segments like males and females. Therefore, the current exploratory research will gain insight into the information seeking process of males and females. Future research can also examine different product categories (such as specialty goods) with diverse levels of involvement for males and females. As Browne and Kaldenberg (1997) found, there are differences between males and females regarding the level of involvement in different product categories. According to Mourali, Laroche and Pons (2005), gender is an important variable where primary results indicated that females have a significantly higher relative preference for interpersonal sources than males.

In summary of the male versus female segmentation as described, the following research question have been drawn:

13. What are the differences between men and women in choices made when seeking for information in the pre-purchase phase?

2.1.6 Conceptual model

Figure 3 shows the conceptual model of this study, describing which choices of external information sources, and the choices regarding online or offline sources consumers make.

The conceptual model (Figure 3) of this explorative study shows that:

- Consumers are segmented into male (1) versus female (2);
- Consumers can use four external sources when starting the phase of information seeking: personal (3), public (4), commercial (5) or experience sources (6);
- The sequence in which these external sources will be consulted can differ;
- After consumers choose an external source (3-6) they can use various offline sources (7,9,11,13), online sources (8,10,12,14), or both (7-14);
- There may be variations in consulting the various online and offline sources (7-14) depending on the components of the problem decision, individual characteristics (including prior knowledge accessed by internal search), and the social context (referring to the social circle...
Figure 3: Conceptual model based on theory, formed prior to the current case study.
3. Methodology
This section describes the research design that was used for this study. It provides information about the research strategy, design, procedure and the measurements.

3.1 Research design
The format of a case study has been chosen because of the depth of the subject, opposed to a survey where options regarding the answers are usually limited. In this way, the subject will be discussed in a detailed way regarding the various possibilities and answers. The opportunity to question respondents during the interview whenever necessary ensure the validation.

Prior to questions like ‘why’ and ‘how’, it is important to know what people consult in a particular phase of the purchasing process. Some research on this topic has been conducted, but it has not been studied in detail what people tend to do after a latent need for a specialty good has become manifest. This case study clarifies the question of what people are going to do in the process of the information search, in addition to answer the questions why and how consult consumers a particular phase of the purchasing process.

A semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix A) has been used by the same interviewer, therefore, validation has been obtained within this research. The questionnaire has been changed in the basis of three ‘pilot’ interviews. When testing the questionnaire, it was revealed that questions were asked in a way that was not a positive addition to this research.

This research is exploratory. The findings of this study provide insight into the consumers’ information seeking process, in order to develop hypotheses which can be used by other researchers.

3.2 Data collection
Data on all the listed dimensions and research questions will be collected through individual semi-structured interviews, which will be conducted face to face with the participants, based on a semi-structured interview script (Appendix A). A total of 16 participants (8 males and 8 females) were gradually selected concurrent to the data analysis, resulting in a diverse sample in terms of age and educational level.

The interviewees were either employed by a company (5 interviewed males and females) or were students (3 interviewed males and females). The interviewees are citizens of the Netherlands. The ages ranges of the female participants was between 18 and 48 years old, with an average of 32 years. The age range of the male participants was between the ages of 18 and 55, with an average of 42 years. Each interview was conducted at a time and place of convenience indicated by the participants.

3.3 Operationalization
All interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Subsequently, the essence of the interview was transferred into a data matrix in order to encode the different answers. The various interview questions were related to the research questions in a model (see Appendix B). This model facilitates the answering of the individual research questions.

3.4 Data-analyse
In this study, we connect on the article in the Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing: "Pre-purchase information search: too many sources to choose" (Basso, Broilo, & Espartel, 2016). Open questions were asked during the interviews to gain more knowledge about the respondents’ information search. The content of each of the interviewees was categorised in a table (spreadsheet) which made it easier to compare and to have a clear overview of the key elements. The collected data was sorted through coding. The research questions were also listed in this spreadsheet in order
to relate these (coded) answers to the research questions. The data of this exploratory case study will initially answer the different research questions and thereby the problem definition. In addition, these answers can be used as hypotheses for further research.
4. Results
To be able to answer the research questions, the interviews were examined. The interviewed were asked about the various phases of information search concerning a product within the range of specialty goods. They took a variety of goods into account, including a laptop (4x), a laminate floor, jewellery, swing chair, fireplace, armchair, garden-parasol, electric bicycle, gas fireplace (gas-hearth), PlayStation 4, mobile phone, smart TV and a garden house (shed).

The interviewed stated that there was no time pressure for their search for information.

4.1 Introduction
In section 4.2, the general results of the various interviews were discussed by the various themes from the questionnaire (appendix a). In paragraph 4.3, the results of the case study were discussed based on the problem statement of this research. The problem statement will be answered by answering the 13 different research questions in paragraph 4.3.1 till 4.3.13.

4.2 General results of the various interviews

External sources
The interviewees were asked several questions regarding the external sources. The conceptual model of Basso et al. (2016) in Figure 1 shows a clear overview of the different external sources and the online and offline use of these sources (see also Table 2) that was observed in their study. Figure 4 shows the conceptual model that is compiled in response to this research design. Given the different possibilities, the expectation was that all different offline and online sources would be used by the respondents within the information search phase. Regarding the external sources in this case study, we interviewed the respondents about their information search phase of specialty goods. The research had a focus on information search regarding the purchase of a specialty good. None of the respondents indicated that they used public and experience sources. It has been stated clearly that almost all interviewees used commercial sources, which were consulted both online and offline. In addition, some of the respondents gathered information by consulting personal sources. These personal sources were relatives or friends. The respondents consulted these personal sources offline by visiting these sources to obtain the first information about the product. In a particular case, the personal source was consulted online by placing a message on Facebook. Comparing answers from the male and female respondents, male respondents used a personal source more often. In some cases, the personal source was the first source consulted, and in other cases the personal source was consulted after an information search on the Internet.

Preferred external search
Examining the different interviewees’ preferences, the online search on the internet (commercial online) is highly preferred. Only a few respondents would like to be informed by a sales representative in a physical store. After respondents have completed the internal information search phase, they move on to the next step consulting external source. It became clear that this next step of the information search should not cost too much effort. Therefore, some of the respondents indicated they would ask family or friends for information. Most of the interviewees would use a mobile device to gain information in the following phase. When questioning the interviewees about all the sources used, the commercial online source is the most preferred source. Several reasons for this preference are: it is easy, it is fast, it is clear, it provides a total overview of the various choices, and it is anonymous.

Recent buying experience
All the interviewees bought a specialty product as described at the beginning of this Chapter. As previously described, interviewees consulted the commercial source online frequently, often
followed by consultation of an offline commercial source. The obtained information has led to the conceptual model shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Conceptual model of external information search after interviews.

Other issues emerged from the interviews

When searching for information through a online commercial source, all interviewees said they started their online search in Google. Perhaps this is a standard starting point for searching information online. As for the keywords used in Google, the majority of the interviewees searched for a product name, and some searched for a company name. One of the interviewees added the word ‘shopping’ to obtain results from different offline stores on the Internet. Another respondent indicated that, after entering in the product first, they continued looking for reviews about this product. After the product has been entered in into the computer, the respondents choose how to proceed. One of the respondents indicated that he selected various websites to examine in a more extensive way, and to see if there are stores located close by in order to have a look at the product. What is clearly visible is that respondents use diverse ways to achieve their goals in their information search.

What was broadly stated is that the search starts on a ‘product name’ in Google. The interviewees open different websites to obtain information about a product and product, types which can be divided into brands. The next step is to search for more information by searching by brands or type of product, in order to eventually decide on one type or brand (or a small selection). The search will be continued by searching by type or brand. Finally, the online and offline purchasing options become clear. The respondents indicated that an online search and a visit to online stores do not give them any feeling of obligation, unlike physical stores where a visit and a conversation with a sales representative could make them feel obligated. In fact, a physical visit to a store is not anonymous. When visiting a store, it might make you feel the need to apologise if you do not purchase anything after receiving information. Also, the objectivity of offline stores was often questioned, while the Internet was considered to be an objective source by the interviewees.
According to the conceptual model (Figure 4), the expectation was that the interviewees also used other sources such as leaflets, but they did not. When questioning the interviewees, they were asked several times whether they consulted other sources within the conceptual model (Figure 1). They stated that they did not use other sources than those mentioned before within the information search. Two interviewees indicated that they used comparison websites where the ‘comparison work’ has already been done. The interviewees consider these sites to be objective. Regarding the purchase, the majority of the interviewees indicated that the information search phase ends with an overview of different prices and providers (both online and offline). Important criteria within the information search are: the service and warranty, physical store location, reviews about online stores, but also the delivery time of the product. The respondents want to receive the product quickly after they ordered a product. On average, the turnaround is four days. If it takes longer, respondents tend to buy the product at another store, even if they must pay (a little) more. The range of this price difference depends on the product and the total price. Also mentioned were the reviews that the respondents frequently consulted when searching online commercial sources. For example, a respondent indicated that by reading the reviews she received a “feeling” for the product she was in search of. Another respondent indicated that reviews are important for unknown products and, in addition, reviews can be used to verify if the supplier is "trustworthy".

Service
The interviewees were also asked about the information search in relation to a service. They all used a vacation as a service as an example within the range of specialty goods (service). All interviewees use the Internet as a first source of information. When interviewees searched for information online, they searched for reviews in order to gain information about the location, hotel, service, and online (travel) shops. After completing the information search, the interviewees also indicated that they would purchase this service online.

4.3 Answering of the research questions
4.3.1 Which sources of the external phase (personal, public, commercial and experienced) does a consumer consult when searching for information about products (such as a smartphone, laptop bike, automobile, and washing machine) and services?
According to the answers of the interviewees, only two of the four external sources which were identified were used and mentioned in the interviews. These are the personal source and the commercial source. With regard to the commercial source, the interviewees made a distinction between a physical store (offline commercial source), an online commercial store (webshop) or an Internet searching (online commercial source). The personal source was used offline when the interviewees had a conversation with family or friends about the information gathering. The online use of a personal source was the use of Facebook. One of the interviewees questioned his Facebook acquaintances in order to gain information about a certain product.

Females
Two out of eight interviewed females consulted a personal source. This could be a father, mother, brother or a friend. These were all personal offline sources. Six used a commercial source in the first stage (as a first step) of information seeking.

Males
Four out of eight interviewed males also consulted a personal source as a first action within the information seeking process. Three interviewees used this personal source offline, and one
interviewee used the personal source online. All interviewed males consulted commercial sources as a first or second source of information.

- CH: “I start off with an online information search because I want to have an overview of the various products. The internet provides me with this overview. Now I can have an excellent idea about the total range of products that an offline source cannot provide”.

- LH: “My information search always starts online, but most of the time I purchase a product offline because I want to see, feel and touch the product”.

4.3.2 Do consumers experience an overload of information within any of the various online or offline sources of the external phase?
The interviewees described the amount of information they received in different words. The description ranged from very little information to an overwhelming amount of information. Of importance is the type of (external) source that the interviewees used to search for this information.

Of the interviewees, almost everyone indicated that the search for information through a online commercial information source provided an amount of information that could be considered an overload of information. However the interviewees indicated that they could filter through this information, so it was not experienced as an overload.

- NT: “Of the total amount of information the Internet provides (Google) I will only look at the shops and stores I am familiar with”.

- MW: “The amount of information that can be found when searching on the Internet is overwhelming, but because I know where to search, it does not feel this way”.

4.3.3 Which of the four external sources influences consumers most in the pre-purchase phase?
The interviewees indicated that they are influenced by family or friends. In some cases, this was because family and friends had already bought the article that they were searching for. They can question these personal sources about their experiences with the product. Personal sources were also consulted whenever the interviewees had the feeling their family or friends knew a lot more about the product they were looking for, in order to make a well-informed choice. The offline commercial sources (shops and stores) are visited by the interviewees in order to see, touch or test the various articles. Besides that, the shops and stores are visited for further information, and confirmation of the information the interviewees already collected. The sales representative is tested is some way on their knowledge. The online commercial source (the Internet) has a large influence on the interviewees.

- SL: “The internet provided a lot of information about the different parasols. In this way, I can teach myself to search in more detail”.

- PG: “As far as the information search is concerned, I was able to search and compare the various products through the possibilities of the Internet”.

- FS: “I want to educate myself first with the help of the Internet before I visit a store because I do not want to be dependent on the one salesperson I find in the store. I do not know what the level of knowledge of this seller is and what their intentions are in relation to the sale”.

Another element of significant importance regarding commercial sources are reviews. The interviewees mentioned that they frequently consulted reviews. The review varies from information
about the Internet company, information about the best ‘type’ of product and information that can
give insights into various key features.

- **SS**: “*I think that reviews are important. I read these to get some kind of ‘feeling’ towards the
  product.*”

- **KH**: “*I like reading reviews about the different models especially when I have not made any
  choice regarding an article yet.*”

4.3.4 In what sequence do consumers consult the external sources of information online and offline,
respectively?
Research question 1 mentioned the external sources that were identified. The male and female
participants consulted these sources as follows:

**Females**
Two out of eight interviewed females consulted a personal source at first. This might be a father,
mother, brother or friend. Six females consulted a commercial source when they started their
information search (Figure 6). The next source for three females was to search online commercial
source (the Internet) and four females continued their search using offline commercial sources (shop
or store). One female proceeded with consulting a personal source.

**Males**
Four of the interviewed males consulted a personal source as the first step within their information
search. The second step of these interviewees was the online commercial source (the Internet)
consultation. The other four interviewed males consulted the online commercial source (the
Internet) as a first step. The next source for these males was to consult an offline commercial source
(shop or store). None one of the interviewed males used an offline source (shop or store) as a first
step when seeking for information about a specialty good. The third source to be consulted is the
commercial source for half of the interviewed males. Three males continued their information
seeking at an offline source and one male had already made a purchase after consulting two sources.

Figure 5 shows the sequence of searching for information by men and women. Not every respondent
consulted the same number of sources within their information search. The first mentioned source in
Figure 5 is also the source which was consulted first. For example, the commercial online source was
used as a first source by five females and four males.
4.3.5 Which sources can be identified within the external sources?
The conceptual model (figure 4) shows four external sources which can be consulted. These sources can be used offline (shop or store) or online (for example a web shop). This study showed that only the external sources (personal and commercial sources), were used when searching for information about specialty goods. The commercial sources were consulted both offline and online.

4.3.6 Do consumers consult these external sources online and/or offline?
The answers to the research questions clearly indicated that the personal sources are used. According to the interviewees these sources were used both offline and online. The offline search for information is mostly transferred by conversation. Regarding the online information transfer, the interviewees referred to email and Facebook. One of the interviewees sometimes ‘posts’ a question regarding a specialty product on Facebook, to ask if someone has any experience with or suggestions about the type of the product. For example, they would ask whether anyone has any suggestions for a brand and type of telephone. The commercial sources are being used offline as well as online. The consumer keeps on visiting the physical shops and stores, but they almost always start their information search using online commercial sources online (Internet).

4.3.7 When seeking for information online, what device do consumers use?
All interviewees indicated that they are in possession of a mobile phone which has been used for information searches. The most important device the interviewees used was a laptop. In particular
because a laptop has a slightly larger screen and a substantial number of internet pages can be opened at the same time. It was suggested that this is a faster and easier way to search for information. In addition, some of the interviewees also mentioned the iPad. The iPad has a larger screen compared to a mobile phone. In some cases, a desktop computer was used.

4.3.8 Why do consumers search for information on the Internet in the pre-purchase phase?
All interviewees indicated that they consult the online commercial source; the Internet. Almost 40% of the interviewees start searching for information online. Another 25% starts online after having first consulted a personal source (see research question 4, Figure 5). The interviewees mentioned the following reasons for searching online:

- The Internet provides a complete overview of everything that is for sale what I am looking for;
- The Internet is objective, so I can make choices based on specifications;
- The Internet makes it easy for me to gain and check information so I do not have to go outdoors in the first place;
- On the Internet, I find reviews that provide different insights into the product, its use and the different versions of this product;
- On the Internet, I can check whether the local stores have the product in stock to save time and effort in case they do not sell this product;
- Online searching is a fast way to search, it is easy to do and it saves time.

- **NT:** “Most of the time when I visit a store, I have the idea that the salesperson wants to force me into buying the products he has in stock”.

- **MA:** “With the information, I had obtained from visiting the stores I was able to judge the information I had gathered from the Internet. The information I received from the stores was not always unambiguous because of the seller’s knowledge”.

- **NT:** “Finding online information is easy, and I can also find a total overview of products. The range of products is much wider in the online stores compared to the offline stores”.

- **SL:** “The reason I am looking for products on the Internet and not going to a physical store has to do with visiting ten stores in five minutes on the Internet. The Internet provides a total range of products. For me, that is important. In the physical shops, I only find a small range of products”.

4.3.9 In relation to the various sources, which one is most influential within the information search phase regarding the decision to make a purchase?
The online commercial source, which was consulted by the interviewees, seems to be the most influential source. Consumers do not buy the same specialty goods every year. Therefore, consumers will take the time to search for information and to ‘educate’ themselves in order to make a purchase decision. The opinion of the interviewees is that these online commercial sources are the best alternative for doing so. For this reason, these sources are the most decisive within the information search, although a lot of actual purchases still are done at the offline commercial sources (shops and
stores). The interviewees stated that, before they go to a shop or store, they want to have some level of knowledge about the article of interest and therefore they already collected information about this article.

- **EB**: “I want to purchase the product in a physical store because costs of this kind of products is relatively large. If this is the case then I am less likely to buy it on the Internet”.

- **MA**: “Subsequently, I went to the store because I had the intention to purchase the product at a physical store. I think it is important because if there should be something wrong with the product, I can go to the store”.

4.3.10 Are there differences in pre-purchase search in relation to the type of goods?
Regarding the type of goods such as convenience, shopping and specialty goods, the way consumers search for information is different. The interviewees indicated that specialty goods are on average more expensive compared to convenience and shopping goods. In addition, specialty goods concern articles which are seldom bought, about once every 2 to 15 years. As a result, the interviewees take more time to inform themselves about these products. Regarding the convenience goods, there is no need for extended information searching. These purchases are usually made at the, for the interviewees, regular shops and stores.

4.3.11 When searching for information, what strategy do consumers use when consulting various sources?
The searching strategies of the various respondents show many similarities. Figure 5 shows that the beginning of the information search either starts online or an online search is consulted second, after consulting family or friends (personal sources). The strategy that clearly emerges is that all the interviewees want to read about this product in the first place. This is the main reason why most of the interviewees based their strategy on online information search. The interviewees indicated that the information offered by the Internet provides them with a comprehensive overview of all specialty products and the variations within the product type that they were looking for. Next, they indicated that the following phase might be the purchase of the product. However, the majority of the interviewees indicated that the next step was to visit an offline commercial source for gathering additional information, or to purchase the product.

4.3.12 Based on what criteria do consumers decide to use a certain information source?
The interviewees used personal and commercial sources for their information search. The main reason for the interviewees to consult these personal sources was because they had the opinion that family, friends or acquaintances have more knowledge of the products or were more experienced with these products. In two of these cases, this personal source influenced the interviewees because it did suggestions in consulting the next source; the commercial source.

The criteria that the interviewees mentioned for using the online commercial sources are:

- Easy to use;
- Fast to use;
- It gives a much better overview of the total range of products;
- The total amount of information becomes comprehensible;
- Questions are answered.
The offline commercial sources (shops and stores) were hardly used for obtaining information. One of the interviewees began his information search using an offline commercial source (store) because he happened to be in the neighbourhood. Figure 5 shows the searching process which ends at offline commercial sources (shops and stores) in 69% of the cases. The conclusion can be drawn that the purchases were made within this phase. In all cases, there was an information exchange before the purchase. The question is whether this information exchange has contributed to the total amount of information the interviewees used to make a well-informed purchase.

- **NT**: “The most important part of a source is to be able to filter the information quickly, based on specifications, for example”.

4.3.13 What are the differences between men and women in choices made when seeking for information in the pre-purchase phase?

When searching for information prior to a purchase, there seem to be slight differences in the steps that are followed between males and females. Within this study the interviewees were asked about their information search about a specialty good. It had to be a product which they had bought in the past year.

There is a noticeable difference within the first phase of the searching process concerning the male respondents (Figure 6). Half of the interviewed males used a personal source for several reasons (see research question 12). Almost all female respondents predominantly consulted a commercial source (see Figure 5 and 6).

![First sources consulted](image)

**Figure 6: First type of source consulted, split between males and females**
5. Conclusions, discussion and recommendations

This chapter starts with the conclusions of the current research, followed by the discussion where the various hypotheses will be presented. Suggestions for further investigation will be described in the recommendations and are provided by the four hypotheses.

5.1 Conclusions

The aim of this research was to investigate which external sources consumers consult in the information seeking (pre-purchase) phase of the purchasing decision process. Furthermore, this study aimed to understand whether there are differences between male and female consumers within this phase.

To summarise, from these research goals the following problem definition was formulated:

“Which online and offline sources does the consumer use within the information seeking (pre-purchase) phase of the consumer purchasing decision process, and are there differences between male and female consumers?”

In addition, this study investigated whether external sources were used online or offline. It further provides insight into the sequence in which the several sources are consulted, and it answers whether there are differences between males and females regarding the use and sequence of these sources. In contradiction to the study of Basso et al. (2016), the current study shows that not all online and offline sources from their conceptual model (Figure 1) were used within our research. Basso et al. (2016) did not categorise external sources as commercial, personal, public and experience sources. In the present study, the public and experience sources were not used by the interviewees. Additionally, the diversity of possibilities for consulting these external sources online or offline is remarkable (Table 2). The conceptual model (Figure 4) shows that the variety of used online and offline sources in this study is quite different from the conceptual model of Basso et al. (2016) shown in Figure 1. Their synthesised framework does not provide insight into which different external sources were used. Basso and colleagues used different criteria to evaluate the external information search. In fact, their framework (Figure 1) does not show the four different external sources that were identified by Verhage (2014) and Sachdeva (2015). As a result of the current study the online commercial source, which was consulted by the interviewees, seems to have a large influence of the information seeking process of the interviewees. The consumer continues visiting physical shops and stores, but the information search is started using online commercial sources (Internet) in almost all cases. The interviewees mentioned several reasons why they use this online commercial source. Consumers do not buy the same specialty goods every year. Therefore, consumers will take their time to search for information, and to inform themselves before making a purchase decision. The opinion of the interviewees is that these online commercial sources are the best methods for doing so. The interviewees indicated that the possibilities offered by the Internet, provide them with a comprehensive overview of all specialty products, and the variations within the product of interest.

5.2 Discussion

In Chapter 2 the following concepts were discussed in more detail: online and offline sources, consumers’ information search (pre-purchase search), purchasing decisions, frequency of usage and male versus female segmentation. The present research sheds light on the information seeking process of consumers in the pre-purchase phase of specialty goods, and the differences between males and females within this process. Additionally, this study revealed more interesting discoveries and thoughts. This study corroborates with the research of Sachdeva (2015) in terms of consumers which receive most information about a product from -marketer-dominated sources where several
functions influence the buying decision. Personal sources play the role of a legitimising or evaluation function, and by gathering information, the consumer learns about competing brands and their features. Commercial sources normally play an informational role. Previous studies primarily investigated involvement and external search behaviour in general. These studies did not consider the several types of information sources. Our research gains insight into the sequence in which consumers tend to use external sources, and whether consumers use these sources online or offline. The interviews that were held as part of this case study brought forth the conceptual model presented in Figure 4. Compared to the conceptual model of Basso et al. (2016) in Figure 1, the current study identified differences in the use of external sources within the information search of the interviewees. The present research showed that the interviewees only used the external commercial and external personal sources.

5.2.1 Online or offline use of sources

Ferraro (2009) stated that the Internet is a powerful tool for consumers to search for information. There is a great interest in understanding the relationship between consumers’ use of the Internet (as an information search tool) and their subsequent choice of purchase channel. The study of Kannan et al. (2012) focused on trying to understand the link between online versus offline search channels and specific choice behaviour. From the present study it can be concluded that the Internet has significantly impacted the information search behaviour of consumers. Furthermore, the current study showed an extensive use of online sources. A study by Bronner et al. (2016) provide insight into how consumers use (or claim to use) different types of channels and media to guide their online and offline purchases. In contrast to their study, the present study investigated the sequence in which consumers consult external sources within the information seeking process in a detailed manner, and it provides answers to the question ‘why’ and ‘what’ consumers use regarding the external sources. Based on this research it can be assumed that the online commercial source (Internet) has been experienced as the most influential objective source when consumers search for information in the pre-purchase phase. Sachdeva (2015) stated that generally speaking, the consumer receives most information about a product from commercial-marketer-dominated sources. They did not specify these commercial sources as was done in the present study. It seems like the online and offline search has been reversed (made a switch). Nowadays, consumers search for information online and inform themselves about products in this manner. The offline information sources are only used to physically examine or purchase a product. In addition, these shops and stores are subjective because they focus the information they present on selling the products that they have in stock, while the internet has been experienced as objective, since no one will try to talk a consumer into purchasing a certain kind of product.

In summary of the discussion of online or offline use of sources as described, the following hypothesis was compiled for further research:

**Hypothesis 1**

*The online and offline search has been reversed (made a switch) to the most (online) and second most influential (offline) information source. Nowadays, the commercial online source (the Internet) has been experienced as the preferred (and most influential) objective source when consumers search for information in the pre-purchase phase. Consumers search for information online and have their selves informed online in contrast to the past when consumers have their selves informed offline (stores and shops).*
The study of Bronner et al. (2016) stated that it is important to study media or information channels because consumers might not only rely on online and offline purchase channels, but may also use a larger variety of information channels to inform themselves before making a purchase. The outcomes of their research does not corroborate with the present findings. They concluded that:

- “Consumers used more online channels when making online purchases than when making offline purchases and
- Consumers used offline channels to the same extent when buying online or offline.

Our findings did not substantiate the conclusions mentioned above. Sachdeva (2015) studied the personal, commercial, public, and experience sources but did not differentiate these sources into online and offline use as was done in the current study.

5.2.2 Differences between male and female

Friedmann and Lowengart (2013) examined similarities and differences between males and females in forming purchase intentions. Males are described as more instrumental than women, and women are described as more focused on the shopping experience, see paragraph 2.1.5. The current study does not corroborate this insight in relation to the information search males and females tend to follow when purchasing specialty goods. When searching for information prior to the purchase, there seem to be minor differences in the steps that are followed between males and females. The interviewees mainly used external commercial sources. Half of the male respondents used a personal source as their first source to consult. The other half started their search by using an online commercial source. Six of the female respondents started by using an online commercial source and two females consulted a personal source first. The second most common consulted source used by the male interviewees (75%) was the online commercial source, and the third most used source (25%) by males was the offline commercial source. Regarding the female interviewees, the second most used source is also a commercial source, but used offline instead of online. In addition, the other half consulted personal and offline sources at the same frequency (Figure 5). The differences observed between males and females in consulting the various external sources depends on the type of product they are looking for; the personal and commercial sources could either be consulted as a first, second or third option.

In summary of the discussion of differences between male and female as described, the following hypothesis was compiled for further research:

**Hypothesis 2**

*When seeking for information in the pre-purchase phase of specialty products, there are differences regarding this phase between male and female consumers. Female consumers will start their search primarily commercial online, in contrast to the male consumers who will start their search by primarily consulting a personal source.*

There are few studies that have examined the combined product-consumer effect, especially with regard to gender differences. Friedmann and Lowengart (2013) stated that identity consumption (paragraph 2.1.5) enhances females’ intentions of purchasing a product. Males are targeted shoppers focusing on the purchase of practical items. Overall, their theoretical findings about a differential, gender based, interactive effect indicate the importance of accounting for consumers’ heterogeneity in exploring the process through which purchase intentions are formed. In their study they stated: “Therefore, exploring the potential effects of heterogeneity is an area worthy of further research. Future research can also examine other product categories with different levels of involvement for
men and women.” The present findings were based on the information seeking process of specialty goods and do not corroborate the findings of Friedmann and Lowengart (2013).

5.2.3 Overproduction of information?
Ferraro et al. (2009) studied the overproduction of information. Basso et al. (2016) assumed that consumers experience an information overproduction when choosing their sources. The fact that consumers can experience the amount of information as an overload because there is an overproduction of information is acknowledged, but not experienced as a problem or burden. The interviewees stated that they can ‘filter’ through this amount of information. Our research showed that all respondents use the Internet as a first or second source. The answer to the second research question (paragraph 4.3.2) showed that the respondents did not experience the quantity of information from the Internet as an overload. Jepsen (2007) concluded that searching for information on the Internet is relatively cheap and that there is a large amount of information available on the Internet. The most important driver for the use of the Internet for pre-purchase information search, is the general change in behaviour that is related to extended use of the Internet. The present research shows that the Internet has transformed consumer behaviour, particularly the way consumers search for information prior to a purchase.

In summary of the discussion of overproduction of information as described, the following hypothesis was compiled for further research:

**Hypothesis 3**

*Today, consumers have various possibilities to consult an information source (online or offline) prior to a purchase. The amount of online information is not considered to be an overload because the consumer is able to ‘filter’ this information. Therefore, consumers will only review the information that they think is necessary.*

In addition to information overload, previous studies provided mixed results about whether consumers experience information overload from a vast volume of reviews. Catalán, Duket, Kim, Kwon, and Yi, (2015) studied this (review) information overload and found no clear evidence to suggest that information overload increases as the number of reviews increases. Instead, the participants relied on a very limited number of reviews in making purchase decisions. The current research has shown similarities in relation to the interviewees, and how they used different information sources on the Internet. Consumers are able to filter the amount of information or reviews they examine.

5.2.4 Objectivity of commercial sources
Another result of this study is the perception of the interviewees towards the Internet, where it was found that they experienced the internet as an objective source. Therefore, the credibility of sales staff in shops and stores (offline) experience a certain pressure. According to the interviewees, shops and stores are subjective, because they are motivated to sell the products they have in stock. The interviewees do not realise that a salesperson might also be part of an online shop. According to the interviewees, the range of products in a physical store is not very wide, you can only find a few product types. On the other hand, the Internet provides a complete overview of the total range of products and different product models. Although interviewees indicated that they obtained objective advice by consulting online commercial sources, the question remains whether this is the case, since most of the sources that are consulted online, are commercial. It is therefore questionable to what extent these sources are objective or not. These sources might not be objective at all, but the interviewees experienced them as objective. Kannan, Kulkarni and Ratchford (2012) focused on
trying to understand the link between online versus offline search channels and specific choice
behaviour. The way in which the retail sector has been transformed by the Internet as an additional
channel has been described by Ferraro, Luxton and Sands (2009). Their study confirms that online
search plays a significant role in driving offline (in-store) behaviour. The current research shows that
the Internet has become the most important channel for information search. Because customers
inform themselves by using the Internet, they already have a certain level of knowledge when they
visit shops and stores. Sachdeva (2015) confirms this behaviour in their study. They stated: “By
gathering information, the consumer learns about the competing brands and their features.” This
changes the ‘classic’ sales conversation. In addition, the way of searching for information and the
manner in what way the product has been purchased, changed. Nowadays, it is more difficult for
offline sources (shops and stores) to satisfy the customer. One of the respondents stated that shops
often want to ‘palm something off’ on a customer. Because of the Internet, it becomes clear that
shops and stores only have a limited range of products, in contrast to the Internet which has an
enormous range of products and choices. The interviewees mentioned another element of
importance regarding commercial sources, the customer reviews. The interviewed males and
females stated that they used these reviews frequently. The reviews vary from information about the
online company, information about the best ‘type’ of product, and information that can give insight
into different key features. The interviewees stated that they read and take into account several
reviews before making a purchase decision. Reviews are not objective, so it is questionable whether
the objectivity experienced by the respondents can be guaranteed.

In summary of the discussion of objectivity of commercial sources as described, the following
hypothesis was compiled for further research:

**Hypothesis 4**

*Today, consumers will educate themselves about a product in the pre-purchase phase, through
searching and reading on the Internet. Here, the consumers can find an overview of the products,
product types, and product reviews, in contrast to offline shops and stores. The advisory function
which shops and stores have had for many decades, will eventually disappear because it is considered
subjective. Commercial sites are perceived to be objective compared to the sales staff of shops and
stores.*

Gensler et al. (2017) examined the factors that influence competitive showrooming, whereby
consumers visit an offline retail store to gather information, but make their purchase online at a
competing retailer. The present research has shown similar consumer behaviour and showed that
the interviewees mainly used the online commercial sources and the personal sources as a first
source of consultation (Figure 6) in contrast to the competitive showrooming of Gensler et al. (2017).
The assumption of consumers who inform themselves about a product was also stated by Sachdeva
(2015) and the study of Dholakia, et al. (2010): “Information channels are useful not only for
providing persuasive communications and product-related information to channel intermediaries and
end-customers via websites, product manuals, and customer hot-lines, but also for delivering
customer education (especially valuable for complex products and services), technical support, and
increasingly, for connecting one customer to one another.” Bronner et al. (2016) concluded that
“Consumers more often relied on offline channels when buying a product for the first time.” The
results from the current research showed almost the opposite conclusion in terms of the objectivity
of offline commercial sources.
5.3 Recommendations for further study

Further study can be undertaken by testing the various hypotheses proposed in section 5.2.

In addition to hypothesis 1, this study provides insight to the use of commercial online sources. To what extent these online sources were investigated might provide more detail. Research showed a frequent consultation of the Internet. Further research could be undertaken by investigating the commercial online and offline sources. Therefore, a more detailed study regarding these online sources is advised.

In addition to hypothesis 2, this study was aimed at investigating the information seeking phase of specialty products. Laroche et al. (2005) stated that the pre-purchase information search is a critical step in the buying process of consumers, especially in the case of highly involving products and services. Our research did not investigate the information search strategy of purchasing convenience and shopping goods. Therefore, this might be an interesting point for further research.

In addition to hypothesis 3, this study showed that the respondents did not experience the amount of information as an overload when searching for information on the Internet. Further studies might investigate how consumers make choices in which type of websites to choose and use for their information search.

In addition to hypothesis 4, the present research showed that consumers inform themselves about products, especially by consulting online commercial sources. The consumers experience these sources as being objective in contrast to the offline sources, which they experience as subjective. Further research can be undertaken to gain more insight into this observation.

The current study also showed that personal sources are consulted very frequently, and according to Sachdeva (2015) perform the role of a legitimising or evaluation function. The present research also showed that consumers use reviews as an important source for information seeking (especially when searching for vacations). It is possible that consumers experience reviews as a personal online source rather than an online commercial source. According to Mourali et al. (2005) this might be of great importance because “one of the main distinctions between interpersonal sources of information and commercial sources of information concerns the perceived motives of the communicator. In interpersonal exchanges, unlike commercial advertising, the communicator is perceived to be independent of the seller and his recommendations are not considered biased or exaggerated. In addition, interpersonal sources provide an opportunity for clarification and immediate feedback. These particularities make them a favoured source in consumers’ acquisition of product-related information.” Further research might shed light on this observation.

This study had a focus on specialty products. Since the interviewees were questioned about various specialty products, it might be logical that they did not show the same sequence of behaviour. For example, a consumer who wants to buy a laptop will be interested in specifications of this product, in contrast to a respondent who wants to buy jewellery. One might, for example, wonder whether the information seeking process is more applicable to rational decisions than to more emotionally driven purchase decisions. To gather more detailed information, further research could examine the information search behaviour relating to specific types of products.

5.4 Limitations

The respondents were asked about the information search prior to a purchase. It might be possible that some respondents picked a personal source for consultation first, even if they reported the use of another source as their first source of information. When respondents consulted their family, friends or partners, it might not be viewed a personal consultation but a discussion or opinion.
Further research might clarify whether respondents interpret a discussion or opinion as a consultation.

This study examined the process of information search after the moment a consumer feels the urge to buy a product or service until the moment of the actual purchase. This research does not examine the problem recognition phase or the purchase decision phase. Therefore, it might be difficult for respondents to answer the several questions only in reaction to the particular information seeking phase.

This study further provides insights into sources that consumers claimed to have influenced their choices in the information seeking process, not into sources that could have influenced consumers without their conscious awareness. It might be that sources are ‘forgotten’ and are not mentioned because interviewees were not aware of these sources. Thus, consumers might not be fully aware of the external sources that guide their information seeking process and eventually the purchase decisions they make. Therefore, this study might have led interviewees to report an information seeking approach by describing the process they felt would appear to have been appropriate for the pre-purchase, rather than the process they actually used. Explicitly laying out the various external sources and purchase stages for interviewees must be explained in further study.

Finally, the relatively small number of interviewees is a limitation of this exploratory study. However, it proved to be sufficient to reveal a pattern in information seeking within the pre-purchase phase. Future research might try to use quantitative research based on the various hypotheses which this exploratory study has identified.
References


Appendix

Appendix A. interview script

Part 1 - Male / Female

1 The person to be interviewed is male or female. Describe:
   a. Approximately (or precise) his/her age.
   b. Is he/she a student or employer or both.

Part 2 - External sources

The first questions are about the external search where there are four variables to identify: 1. personal sources; 2. public sources; 3. commercial sources and 4. Sources based on experience.

2. Think of any (highly involving) product or service which you have recently purchased (or what you are going to in the future), in a situation where you have searched for information aiming to make your buying decision. Please describe:
   1. What did you buy?
   2. Previously to initiating your search, what kind of information were you looking for?
   3. Was there any kind of difficulty regarding the purchase to be made (e.g.: time pressure, risk, etc.)?
   4. Can you explain which sources 1. personal sources; 2. public sources; 3. commercial sources and 4. Sources based on experience. help you in searching for information about the product?
   5. In consulting the multiple sources (personal, public, commercial and experimental) in what sequence do you consult the sources of information?

Focus: high involving product are products like ‘specialty goods’. Products a consumer not very often purchases (ones per 2 - 10 years) like a smartphone, laptop, washing machine, Bike, automobile...

Part 3 - Preferred external source

3. Looking at the answers of part 2, we focus on the external source which might have had a lot of influence.
   a. Which of the four external sources affects (influence) you the most in the pre-purchase phase? And why?
   b. When you are searching for information and you consulted one or more external sources, what can you say about the amount of information that been given to you?

Part 4 - Recent buying experience (offline or online sources)

4. About the information sources you used, which were them, how, where:
   a. Where did you look for information?
   b. How did you consult the most important external source, online or offline and please explain why?
   c. [In case he/she mentions the internet] Could you describe how did you do your browsing (accessing a search engine, a specific website...)? And where/how was your access (from home/work/other, using desktop/notebook/tablet/smartphone)?
   d. [In case he/she mentions people: salesperson/family/friends/other] Could you describe how did you consult with them (in the store, by email, phone, Facebook...)?
   e. What is the main reason to search information online?
   f. When you are seeking information online, what device(s) are being used?
Focus: to identify types of sources used, online and/or offline.

5. About the motives for you to use these sources, please report:
   a. Why did you use these sources?
   b. Could you have used other sources? If yes, which? Why didn’t you use them?
   c. What do you find important when you choose an information source aiming to decide a purchase?
   d. Which were the best sources among the ones you used? Why?
   e. Which were the worst information sources? Why?

Focus: to identify evaluation criteria of sources and possible heuristics.

6. About the quality of the information sources you used, please report:
   a. During your information search, have you found any source which presented too much, too similar and/or ambiguous information? If yes, which source(s)?
   b. Were you satisfied with the sources you used, to make your purchase decision?
   c. Are there any you wouldn’t use in the future? If yes, which source(s) and why?

Focus: to identify possible experience of confusion (by overload, similarity and/or ambiguous information).

Part 5 - Additional buying experiences

5. If in the first part the respondent has referenced a product (or service): Could you describe a recent experience of information search regarding a service (or product)?

Focus: same as questions 1 to 6.

Part 6 - Other circumstances and in general

6. Based on any other purchasing experience you can remember, aiming for a different type of (highly involving) product or service, was the information search any different?

Focus: to complement question 2.

7. Is it any different when you have more or less time to make a buying decision?

Focus: to complement question 2.

8. In general, how and where do you search for information regarding a (highly involving) product or service (using desktop/notebook/tablet/smartphone; from home/work/other)?

Focus: to complement question 3.

9. Do you use specific sources once you are using one or the other (for example, desktop or smartphone) or according to where you are (for example, at home or at work)? Which sources and why?

Focus: to complement question 3.

10. Do you recall any source you have used which has not been helpful in your search for information? Could you describe?
Focus: to complement question 2-6.

11. In general, are you used to consulting the same information sources for different (highly involving) products and/or services? If yes, which are those sources, and why?

Focus: to complement questions 1 to 6.

Closure
Appendix B. interview in relation to research questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1 - Male / Female</th>
<th>RQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The person to be interviewed is male or female. Describe:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Approximately (or precise) his/her age.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Is he/she a student or employer or both.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 2 - External sources</th>
<th>RQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The first questions are about the external search where there are four variables to identify: 1. personal sources; 2. public sources; 3. commercial sources and 4. Sources based on experience.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Think of any (highly involving) product or service which you have recently purchased (or what you are going to in the future), in a situation where you have searched for information aiming to make your buying decision. Please describe:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What did you buy?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Previously to initiating your search, what kind of information were you looking for?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Was there any kind of difficulty regarding the purchase to be made (e.g.: time pressure, risk, etc.)?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Can you explain which sources 1. personal sources; 2. public sources; 3. commercial sources and 4. Sources based on experience. help you in searching for information about the product?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In consulting the multiple sources (personal, public, commercial and experimental) in what sequence do you consult the sources of information?</td>
<td>4, 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 3 - Preferred external source</th>
<th>RQ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Looking at the answers of part 2, we focus on the external source which might have had a lot of influence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Which of the four external sources affects (influence) you the most in the pre-purchase phase? And why?</td>
<td>1, 5, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. When you are searching for information and you consulted one or more external sources, what can you say about the amount of information that been given to you?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a. Where did you look for information?  

b. How did you consult the most important external source, online or offline and please explain why?  

c. [In case he/she mentions the internet] **Could you describe how did you do your browsing** (accessing a search engine, a specific website...)? And where/how was your access (from home/work/other, using desktop/notebook/tablet/smartphone)?  

d. [In case he/she mentions people: salesperson/family/friends/other] **Could you describe how did you consult with them** (in the store, by email, phone, Facebook...)?  

e. What is the main reason to search information online?  

f. When you are seeking information online, what device(s) are being used?  

5. **About the motives for you to use these sources, please report:**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Why did you use these sources?</td>
<td>11, 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Could you have used other sources? If yes, which? Why didn’t you use them?</td>
<td>11, 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. What do you find important when you choose an information source aiming to decide a purchase?</td>
<td>9, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Which were the best sources among the ones you used? Why?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Which were the worst information sources? Why?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **About the quality of the information sources you used, please report:**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. During your information search, have you found any source which presented too much, too similar and/or ambiguous information? If yes, which source(s)?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Were you satisfied with the sources you used, to make your purchase decision?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Are there any you wouldn’t use in the future? If yes, which source(s) and why?</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 5 - Additional buying experiences**  

5. If in the first part the respondent has referenced a product (or service): **Could you describe a recent experience of information search regarding a service (or product)?**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Where did you look for information?</td>
<td>1, 4, 5, 8, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. How did you consult the most important external source, online or offline and please explain why?</td>
<td>1, 5, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Could you describe how did you do your browsing (accessing a search engine, a specific website...)? And where/how was your access (from home/work/other, using desktop/notebook/tablet/smartphone)?</td>
<td>5, 6, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Could you describe how did you consult with them (in the store, by email, phone, Facebook...)?</td>
<td>5, 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. What is the main reason to search information online?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. When you are seeking information online, what device(s) are being used?</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part 6 - Other circumstances and in general**  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. Based on any other purchasing experience you can remember, aiming for a different type of (highly involving) product or service, was the information search any different?</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Is it any different when you have more or less time to make a buying decision?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. In general, how and where do you search for information regarding a (highly involving) product or service (using desktop/notebook/tablet/smartphone; from home/work/other)?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do you use specific sources once you are using one or the other (for example, desktop or smartphone) or according to where you are (for example, at home or at work)? Which sources and why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you recall any source you have used which has not been helpful in your search for information? Could you describe?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. In general, are you used to consulting the same information sources for different (highly involving) products and/or services? If yes, which are those sources, and why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. In general, are you used to consulting the same information sources for different products and/or services? If yes, which are those sources, and why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>