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**Has CSR started to sell?
Based on the Covid-19 pandemic
An insight from consumers' perspective**

Orhan Begovic and Isabelle Wålinder

Author

Orhan Begovic

Isabelle Wålinder

Title

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Supervisor

Karin Alm

Examiner

Lisa Källström

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore if consumers evaluate CSR more into their purchase criterion compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic. CSR activities, consumer buying behavior, and CSR as a purchase criterion were combined in a conceptual framework. The consumer decision-making model was used as a framework in consumer buying behavior. In CSR as a purchase criterion, three factors were used to conclude if consumers started to evaluate CSR more as a purchase criterion. The empirical data was collected through two semi-structured focus groups. Group A was ensembled through a convenience sampling method but evolved to a snowball effect. Group B was ensembled through a purposive sampling method. The findings indicated that consumers did not start to evaluate CSR more as a purchase criterion. The main reason was the financial situation. However, consumers have started to buy more sustainable food, especially locally produced during the pandemic which indicated an increased awareness towards CSR as a purchase criterion. The findings also showed that the Covid-19 pandemic influenced consumers' awareness of CSR but the implemented safety precautions in grocery stores had a limited effect on consumers. The research field of consumer buying behavior in the context of CSR can be complemented with the findings in this study. This study contributed to a deeper understanding of consumer buying behavior and if they value CSR in their purchases during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords

Consumer buying behavior, Consumer behavior, CSR, sustainable food, Organic food, Safety precautions, Safety, Covid-19 pandemic, Grocery store, Shopping, Safety,

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1. Introduction

During the past decades, businesses focus not only on profit-making but rather on societal and environmental aspects. Stakeholders, such as consumers, can influence companies to act more socially responsible. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) or socially responsible companies is no longer considered a passing trend (Pradhan, 2018). The relationship between consumer behavior and social responsibility is stronger than ever. It influences companies to engage in social and environmental issues (Boccia et al., 2018). *Svensk Dagligvaruhandel* (2020a) stated that companies within retailing strive to establish relationships with consumers. Food retailing is part of the retail industry. There is also an increasing trend for food retailers, who now offer a wide range of sustainable food, that allow consumers to make conscious decisions (*Svensk Dagligvaruhandel*, 2020a).

Feldmann and Hamm (2015) claimed that interest in sustainable food such as locally produced food grew substantially during the twenty-first century. Consumers started to request transparency from companies that evolved to new consumer demand (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). A study made by the food marketing institute (2008) concluded that US consumers chose local food due to the product's origin and its freshness (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). Parsa et al. (2015) stated that consumers are not likely to pay a surplus for sustainable food, and that price and quality still are two primary criteria in the buying decision. *Svensk Dagligvaruhandel* (2020a) stated that consumers' purchasing preferences for organic products have increased. Citizens consider the product's origin and the content of products as more important (*Svensk Dagligvaruhandel*, 2020a). However, it is demanding for grocery stores to respond to consumer demands, as they faced uncertainties due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Pantanoa et al., 2020).

In late 2019, a virus was discovered in the city of Wuhan in China. The World Health Organization (WHO) was informed that people were suffering from mysterious lung diseases. WHO named the disease Covid-19, which developed into a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). This has resulted in businesses being urged to implement correct safety precautions for consumers' trust (Foodlogistics, 2020). Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the disease has negatively affected the economy, businesses, as it led to government-imposed restrictions all over the world. The restrictions were implemented to reduce the spread of the disease (Manuel & Herron, 2020). *Svensk handel* (2020) stated that grocery stores must follow *Folkhälsomyndigheten's* recommendations. According to *Folkhälsomyndigheten*

(2020), retail stores have to provide social distance signs for consumers to distance themselves from others and keep the store clean in general. According to *Svensk Handel* (2020), the retail industry is a hub in society because it provides the human population with food. To reduce the spread of the virus it is essential to implement and maintain the safety precautions so that the food retailers can continue to function and remain open. Common restrictions for safety precautions have been developed to reduce the spread and to create a safe environment for consumers (*Svensk Dagligvaruhandel*, 2020b). ICA (2020) implemented safety precautions in their grocery stores such as strict cleaning routines, providing hand sanitizers, disinfectants of the pay terminals, and other surfaces. Businesses found these changes challenging due to no previous experiences in similar situations (Pantanoa et al., 2020). *Handels* (2020) made a survey to measure if safety precautions conducted by the food retailers were considered acceptable by the consumers. The survey included 800 people and 60 percent of them were not satisfied. The consumers mentioned that there were too many people in the store, there was also a lack of social distancing signs (*Handels*, 2020). Therefore, it is important for food retailers to act in a socially responsible manner with safety precautions when trying to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

According to Visit Sweden (2020), sustainability has taken on a new meaning and has become more important for consumers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Dynata surveyed global consumer trends and concluded that after the Covid-19 pandemic consumers will purchase more locally produced food (Marketsight, 2019). The ICA Group (2020) has acknowledged that the demand for organic products has increased. The pandemic has increased sales for organic food in Sweden compared to before the crisis. Society has joined forces during the crises and demanded organic food. Consumers who created bonds with farmers and started buying organic food are likely to continue to purchase, even after the Covid-19 pandemic (*Ekolantbruk*, 2020). According to Cranfield (2020), there was a rising demand for locally produced food before the Covid-19 pandemic. Nie and Zepeda (2011) found that in the early twenty-first century, local food consumption was one of the fastest-growing trends. According to Feldmann and Hamm (2015), some consumers prefer locally produced food because of the health aspect, and disregard imported goods due to environmental aspects, such as pollution. The demand for locally produced food has also increased substantially in Sweden. Swedish consumers emphasize local production and daily goods originated within the borders (*Orkla*, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic was an eye-opener for consumers regarding imported goods

and made consumers look for sustainable food within the borders. The eye-opener indicated an increased consumer awareness of sustainable food choices (Via TT, 2020).

1.1 Problematization

Despite the increasing emphasis on CSR in grocery stores, there is insufficient research about how CSR activities affect consumer behavior (Cao et al., 2018). According to Cao et al. (2018), past research indicated that CSR had a minor effect on actual purchases, even though CSR activities enhance consumers' purchase intentions. Pradhan (2018) also stated that only a minor part of consumers considers CSR in their purchase criterion. However, Lee and Shin (2009) found that there is a positive correlation between buying behavior and consumers' awareness. According to Pradhan (2018), there are challenges with consumers' awareness of CSR in their buying decision. Further research by Öberseder et al. (2013) and Lee and Shin (2009) has identified that consumers' awareness of a company's CSR activities is not enough to affect the buying behavior. However, Dsouza and Sharma (2021) argued that consumers' awareness regarding CSR has increased since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. The above-mentioned studies implied that CSR activities combined with consumers' buying behavior are complex and more research within this field is needed.

Öberseder et al. (2011) explored the unresolved paradox between CSR and consumer behavior. The paradox demonstrated a large gap among consumers in their interest in CSR. Consumers demand information regarding companies' CSR activities. However, there is a gap between interest in CSR and the evaluation of CSR in the buying decision (Öberseder et al., 2011). Janssen and Vanhamme (2015) researched the same paradox, and explicated the paradox as followed:

“If CSR should lead to a “better world”, and most consumers say they are likely to purchase socially responsible products, why doesn't CSR sell well?” (p.776).

Furthermore, Schlaile et al. (2016) also addressed the paradox and described it as a gap between consumers' purchase intentions and attitudes. This indicated that these researchers addressed the CSR-consumer paradox in other novel ways and encouraged future researchers to further

investigate the paradox (Janssen and Vanhamme, 2015; Schlaile et al., 2016; Öberseder et al., 2011).

Beckmann (2007) found that CSR activities can impact consumers differently based on their interests in CSR, given that it is of good cause. It is argued that consumers only respond to some CSR activities, which portrays a limited picture of CSR and consumers (Beckmann, 2007). According to Fatma and Rahmen (2015), most companies are engaged in CSR activities nowadays. However, the argument by Fatma and Rahmen follows Beckmann (2007) that a deep comprehension of CSR activities is needed to influence consumer responses. Additionally, Fatma and Rahmen (2015) found limited research on CSR activities related to consumers' responses, which, in turn, indicated a narrow view of this field. Huang et al. (2019) also conducted that there are limited studies between CSR and consumers, particularly their awareness and reaction to CSR activities. This supports that there is limited research in CSR related to consumer behavior (Beckmann, 2007; Fatma and Rahmen, 2015; Huang et al., 2019)

Manuel and Herron (2020) stated that consumers have started to prioritize safety more than ever before due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic induced uncertainty and fear in individuals' lives. For that reason, operating with CSR activities has led to an increased demand from consumers to make them feel secure (Manuel & Herron, 2020). Roggeveen and Sethuraman (2020) examined how consumers' shopping habits have changed during the Covid-19 pandemic and concluded that there has been a drastic change. Shopping was something consumers found enjoyable and fun. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has indulged in fear of getting infected (Roggeveen & Sethuraman, 2020). Similarly, Sehgal et al. (2021) studied the safety precautions in stores that provide essential goods in India and their impact on consumer buying behavior. During a pandemic such as the Covid-19, the risks with shopping are the human-to-human virus transmission. It was concluded that the close interaction between consumers, employees, and items such as baskets, shelves, and trolleys increase the risk of getting infected. Further, it was also concluded that consumers became more health-conscious in their choice of food. (Sehgal et al., 2021). A study made by Hassen et al. (2021) also concluded that consumers in Qatar have become more health-conscious due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the implemented safety precautions, one of the findings showed that consumers started buying more locally produced food. Consumers want to know where the food comes from because it could pose a safety risk (Hassen et al., 2021). The argument by Hassen et al. (2021) corresponds with Sehgal et al. (2021) that consumers have been impacted by the

Covid-19 pandemic and have in general become more aware of their safety which impacted their choice of product. Further research by McKinsey (2020) acknowledged that consumers tend to change buying behavior in life-changing experiences. Consumers' new experiences with the Covid-19 pandemic have led to a change in their beliefs, which have impacted their everyday activities, such as grocery shopping. Life-changing experiences can affect consumers' beliefs and long-term buying behavior, post the Covid-19 pandemic (McKinsey, 2020). Jribi et al. (2020) correspond to the argument by McKinsey (2020) that life-changing experiences such as the Covid-19 pandemic can change consumers' food buying behavior. Even earlier research by Crofton et al. (2013) discovered that pandemic increases consumers' awareness which can make them choose sustainable and nutritious food alternatives (Crofton et al., 2013). The literature above has provided old and new perspectives of how a pandemic can affect consumer buying behavior. It is proven that as humans face crises their way of shopping changes and the long-term effects are unknown. Safety precautions has not been a priority before the Covid-19 pandemic but has become more essential in times of the Covid-19 virus. However, none of the above-mentioned studies investigated if the Covid-19 pandemic together with the implemented safety precautions in physical grocery stores could have impacted consumers to evaluate CSR more as a purchase criterion compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic, which in turn led them to buy more sustainable food. Therefore, our research purpose together with previous research could contribute to important findings that involve a pre and post Covid-19 perspective.

Previous research needs to be complemented with new expertise because the Covid-19 pandemic is a new empirical field, and there is insufficient research. Cranfield (2020) investigated consumer demand for grocery stores and how it was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Cranfield (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic is an unforeseen event and cannot be equivalent to other crises within a reasonable time frame. Cranfield (2020) identified a gap in understanding buying behavior related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, Cranfield (2020) concluded a casual observation of consumer demand, which implied that the research field is new and in need of analysis. Öberseder et al. (2011) found a gap between consumers' evident interest in CSR activities and their buying behavior's limited role towards CSR. Öberseder et al. (2011), examined CSR as a purchase criterion and concluded that it had a limited influence on consumers' purchase intention. Therefore, it would be interesting to apply Öberseder et al.'s (2011) research from the perspective of the Covid-19 pandemic. A global crisis combined with consumers' knowledge about a company's CSR activities could increase the consideration of evaluating CSR as a purchase criterion.

1.2 Purpose and research question

The purpose of this thesis is to explore if consumers evaluate CSR more into their purchase criterion compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic.

RQ 1: How has consumers' awareness of CSR as a purchase criterion changed during the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ 2: How has the Covid-19 pandemic and safety precautions influenced consumers buying decisions towards sustainable food?

These two research questions were used to understand the Covid-19 pandemic impacts on consumers' buying behavior. Grocery stores had to take their social responsibility through managing safety precautions, and in turn, influencing consumers' buying decisions. This influence can increase consumers' awareness to become more socially responsible and buy more sustainable food. If consumers' awareness has increased, CSR could be evaluated more as a purchase criterion.

1.3 Demarcation

The Covid-19 pandemic is the empirical context in this study. CSR is ordinarily from a business perspective, but in this thesis, CSR was used as a theoretical framework. CSR was then applied and analyzed from a consumer perspective. CSR activities is a broad definition, previous research indicated that grocery stores have had an important responsibility towards society. Grocery stores have had a social responsibility to implement safety precautions during the Covid-19 pandemic to keep the consumers safe. Therefore, CSR activities are demarcated to safety precautions. There has been an increasing trend of sustainable food. The Covid-19 pandemic and grocery stores safety precautions influence consumers' buying behavior. Sustainable food is a broad definition and is therefore demarcated to food purchases that are locally produced and organic.

1.4 Outline

The **first chapter** presents an introduction to the topic of this thesis, an argumentation for the identified problem, and the research questions. The purpose and demarcations of this thesis are also presented.

The **second chapter** presents the theoretical framework and conceptual framework. The conceptual framework is based on two theories and was used to analyze the findings.

The **third chapter** presents the methodology, research design, and how the data was collected and analyzed. Lastly, the chapter presents the collected data's trustworthiness and critical reflections of the methodology.

The **fourth chapter** presents the empirical findings and analysis. Literature combined with the empirical data was used in the analysis.

The **fifth chapter** presents the conclusion, the theoretical and practical contributions. Ending the chapter with a critical review and at last, future research is declared.

2. Theoretical framework

This second chapter presents a theoretical framework of consumer behavior in the context of CSR activities. The key aspect discussed is consumer buying behavior for CSR, and elaborated through the decision-making process, awareness, the impact of CSR activities, and value. The chapter concluded with a presentation of a conceptual framework.

2.1 Corporate social responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has various definitions, of which some of them are included in this thesis. Carroll (1991) defined it as society's expectations of companies from different dimensions; economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary. More than two decades later, Carroll (2016) reviewed his research and claimed that CSR has evolved substantially during history. It was anticipated to grow even further in impact and importance globally (Carroll, 2016). Bhattacharaya and Sen (2010) defined CSR as *“a commitment to improve [societal] well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources”* (p.8). Kanji and Chopra (2010) stated that companies' social responsibility activities, policies, and processes were increasing substantially. It was argued that CSR not only improves a company's social respect but also provides a safer and healthier workplace and society (Kanji & Chopra, 2010). Dahlsrud (2008) gathered 37 definitions of CSR in an extended literature review and argued that the umbrella term evolved since there is no consistency in the CSR concept. Frynas and Stephens (2015) complemented Dahlsrud's (2008) research by claiming that CSR is an umbrella term that contains various practices and concepts. Socially responsible behavior can have different meanings depending on the individual and situation (Frynas & Stephens, 2015). According to Frynas and Stephens (2015), CSR is defined as companies' responsibility and its effect on the environment and society. The research above concluded that CSR is not easily defined. In this thesis, CSR was decomposed into CSR activities in the form of safety precautions. Therefore, Frynas and Stephens's (2015) definition was suited in this thesis because of the importance of companies' responsibility and their impact on society.

2.2 Consumer behavior

Consumer behavior is related to consumer's buying decisions that influence the choice of specific products. Consumer behavior is defined as the change in the awareness of consumption. Within consumer behavior, one part is buying behavior (Oszust & Stecko, 2020). Buying behavior is affected by consumers' attitudes (Yeow et al., 2014). Price and quality are two criteria that further affect buying decisions. Duquenne and Vlontzos (2014) also mentioned that price and quality influence buying behavior. Yeow et al. (2014) claimed that buying behavior is influenced by attitudes and beliefs, as well as companies' activities. According to Feldmann and Hamm (2015), consumers' attitudes influence buying behavior directly and indirectly. Oszust and Stecko (2020) stated that buying behavior is connected to the buyer's attitudes and shaped by their own experiences. Oszust and Stecko (2020) found that the consumer behavior field is constantly developing and that it is a complex phenomenon in need of more research from different scientific disciplines. In this thesis, the study was focused on how the Covid-19 pandemic can shape consumers' awareness and buying behavior. Oszust and Stecko's (2020) definition of consumer behavior was related to consumers' awareness of the buying behavior. Therefore, consumer buying behavior was suited for this thesis.

2.2.1 Consumers decision-making process

Beckmann (2007) conducted a study that addressed CSR in relationship with consumers' behaviors, awareness, and attitudes. Beckmann (2007) outlined the two past decades of studies on CSR, marketing, and consumers. Beckmann (2007) used the classic consumer decision-making process in the context of CSR as a framework. The process refers to when consumers' needs are identified and become more aware of their buying decisions. The consumer decision-making process is based on five different stages when conducting purchases. The five stages are *need recognition*, *information search*, *evaluation of product alternatives*, *purchase*, and *post-purchase experience* (Beckmann, 2007). The five stages can be described as follows.

The first stage, *need recognition*, refers to consumers' awareness, and interest in companies' CSR activities, as an additional state to the primary product criteria, price, and quality. This may involve environmental and political values and beliefs (Beckmann, 2007). Beckmann (2007) stated that most consumers reveal an interest in CSR concerns, although there is a heterogeneous connection between consumers' knowledge and awareness. Wagner et al. (2008) established the heterogeneous connection by explaining that retailers' positive CSR activities

are not recognized, meanwhile, consumers highlight negative activities that indicate social irresponsibility. Bray et al. (2011) claimed that CSR activities could influence consumers' intention to their actual buying behavior. However, CSR had a limited effect on the actual buying behavior.

The second stage, *information search*, and the third stage, *evaluation of alternatives*, are influenced by the consumers' attitudes and beliefs regarding a company, product, and brand. The beliefs and attitudes are in turn influenced by information sources, such as commercial, non-commercial, and personal (Beckmann, 2007). The fourth stage *purchase* of product and service from CSR engaged companies is usually measured as purchase intentions (Beckmann, 2007). In the context of CSR being an attribute, consumers are not willing to make compromises in the decision-making process (Beckmann, 2007). In the fifth stage, *post-purchase experience*, consumers will become loyal depending on the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the purchase. As declared above consumers, in general, are unwilling to compromise on the primary criteria. Therefore, a bad experience with for instance the product quality will fail regardless of implemented CSR activities (Beckmann, 2007).

Since the purpose of this thesis was to explore if consumers evaluate CSR more into their purchase criterion compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic, the five stages in the decision-making process were used. It was used to identify if it made consumers more aware of their buying decisions. This framework was suitable to understand buying behavior towards social responsibility.

2.2.2 Consumers' awareness of CSR

Consumers' awareness is consumers' comprehension of companies' CSR activities. It refers to consumers' ability to evaluate if companies are performing CSR activities (Öberseder et al., 2011). Companies tend to publish their CSR activities in sustainability reports, annual reports, and websites (Bhattacharya et al., 2009). Bhattacharya et al. (2009) argued that the dialogue between companies and their consumers is constantly developing. Consumers' awareness is an important prerequisite to induce positive attitudes towards CSR activities (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) argued that CSR activities had more impact on awareness and attitudes compared to the actual buying behavior.

Lee and Shin (2010) examined consumer awareness towards CSR activities and if it could have an impact on buying decisions. CSR activities could impact buying decisions, and consumers' awareness can be positively linked with companies' engagement (Lee and Shin, 2010). However, Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009) demonstrated that previous research of awareness is presumed or in laboratory settings. For this reason, it remains ambiguous if consumers in practice are aware of CSR activities in buying decisions (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). Elg and Hultman (2016) claimed that knowledge about awareness emerged to be limited. Evidence indicated that individuals did generally not endeavor to consider CSR, for example, when buying disposal products. CSR is a multifaceted and complex research field therefore it is difficult for consumers to understand (Elg & Hultman, 2016).

Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009) implied that consumers have low awareness. Du et al. (2010) also agreed that there is low awareness among consumers. Du et al. (2010) further discussed the challenge between CSR communication and consumer skepticism. Consumers claim they want companies to act with good intentions. However, in general, consumers are suspicious of CSR activities (Du et al., 2010). Boyd et al. (2016) researched consumers' awareness regarding companies' performance of CSR activities over an information source, social media. Boyd et al. (2016) concluded that when consumers were informed about companies' implementation of CSR, it impacted attitudes positively. Pradhan (2018) stated that consumers tend to consider companies' engagement in CSR activities which can have an impact on the buying decisions (Pradhan, 2018).

2.2.3 The impact of CSR activities on consumers' buying behavior

Past research by Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) found a positive link between CSR activities and the actual buying behavior, given that all the following conditions are satisfied. Firstly, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) argued that consumers need to share similar ethical values with the company. Secondly, socially responsible products must be of high quality. Lastly, the price has to be reasonable and not too expensive compared to regular goods (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). Beckmann (2007) argued that the product's price and quality outweigh CSR as a purchase criterion. Janssen and Vanhamme (2015) found that CSR had a minor influence on consumers' buying decisions. Thus, there is an unresolved paradox between CSR, related to consumer behavior. Öberseder et al. (2011) explored the paradox and demonstrated a large gap among consumers in their interest in CSR. The value of CSR in buying decisions was also explored (Öberseder et al., 2011). Three factors that explained the likelihood between consumers' purchases to CSR were identified, *core*, *central*, and *peripheral* factors. The factors were described in detail and how they were connected to consumers' evaluation of CSR. The factors contributed to a greater understanding of consumers' decision of CSR as a purchase criterion (Öberseder et al., 2011), therefore, it is a relevant study for this thesis. The following sections present each factor.

The *core factors* determine if consumers have considered CSR when buying a service or product (Öberseder et al., 2011). Öberseder et al. (2011) divided the core factors into two parts, namely information and personal concern. Informational concern refers to consumers' knowledge about companies' CSR activities and whether they are perceived as positive or negative. The personal concern is subjective and cannot be influenced by companies. It is consumers' individual beliefs on CSR-related issues. Both factors are considered prerequisites when considering CSR in the buying process. Consumers with limited information about companies' CSR will most likely not consider them when evaluating a purchase. Well-informed consumers are the ones that would primarily consider the company (Öberseder et al., 2011). Past research by Bray et al. (2011) and Elg and Hultman (2016) discovered that the transparency of companies' CSR activities affects consumers' buying decisions. Öberseder et al. (2011) stated that if a well-informed consumer spots a Fairtrade label, they will most likely know that it is associated with social responsibility, which can influence their buying behavior. Contrarily, labels that are associated with bad working conditions and child labor will affect consumers' buying behavior negatively (Öberseder et al., 2011).

The *central factor* concerns consumers' financial situation that affects their buying behavior (Öberseder et al., 2011). The central factor is one of the prerequisites that influence consumers to evaluate CSR purchase criterion. The financial situation determined price perception, and the degree of willingness to buy products from CSR engaged companies (Öberseder et al., 2011). Bray et al. (2011) also stated that the financial situation takes precedence over the ethical values in buying decisions. Consumers have to possess some sort of ethical values before incorporating them into their buying behavior (Bray et al., 2011). Öberseder et al. (2011) stated that price is a primary criterion in the decision-making process. Thus, consumers are more likely to buy sustainable food, if the price is the same as unsustainable food, assuming that the quality is equivalent. For instance, consumers often perceive Fairtrade products as more expensive (Öberseder et al., 2011). One reason for higher prices on sustainable food could be regulations that cause higher production costs. If consumers are aware of the fundamental causes behind sustainable food there might be an extended comprehension towards the price (Öberseder et al., 2011). The findings by Öberseder et al. (2011) presented that consumer often infer that their financial situation is not aligned with the price.

The *peripheral factors* consist of three factors that consumers value as important in companies' CSR activities, and which in turn influence the buying decision (Öberseder et al., 2011). The three factors are the credibility of CSR activities, the influence of peer groups, and the image of the company. It is important to acknowledge the interconnection between the peripheral factors. Image is often influenced by both peer groups and the credibility of CSR activities. These factors measure consumers' skepticism towards CSR (Öberseder et al., 2011). The credibility of CSR activities is defined as consumers' views on companies' activities and if they are aligned with their core business. A company's image is constantly developed by interactions with peer groups (Öberseder et al., 2011). According to Öberseder et al. (2011), family and friends influence consumers directly. Peer groups can either dissuade or encourage a purchase or a visit to a store, which leads to supporting or boycotting a company. These three additional factors are not enough to trigger consumers to consider CSR to their purchase criterion. However, consumers agreed that *peripheral factors* are important when evaluating CSR as a purchase criterion (Öberseder et al., 2011).

The *core, central, and peripheral factors* are interconnected with the actual buying decision. *Core factors* include personal and informational concerns. *Central factors* concern consumers' financial situation. *Peripheral factors* refer to three additional factors that are credibility, peer

group influence, and image of a company. When all core factors are fulfilled and the central factor is perceived acceptable, consumers can then value the peripheral factors, before incorporating CSR into their buying decisions (Öberseder et al., 2011).

Since the purpose of this thesis was to explore if consumers evaluate CSR more into their purchase criterion compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic, the three factors, core-, central- and peripheral were used. The factors were suitable to understand CSR in the decision-making process and if they started evaluating CSR as a purchase criterion more than before.

2.2.4 The value of CSR activities

Porter and Kramer (2011) defined value as the shared value on more levels. Lee and Shin (2010) found that CSR activities contributed to social issues and had more value for consumers' purchase intention than environmental. Öberseder et al. (2013) confirmed the difference in purchase intentions by distinguishing consumers' engagement for CSR activities. For instance, different CSR engagement towards employees, consumers, local community, and society (Öberseder et al., 2013). Elg and Hultman (2016) stated that consumers feel that they indirectly contribute to society when buying from CSR engaged companies. Furthermore, consumers tend to buy from companies that are identified with their values and beliefs (Elg & Hultman, 2016). Flammer (2018) demonstrated that CSR can function as a differentiation strategy against competitors. CSR can also function as an indicator of trust and is of great importance when acquiring trust from consumers' (Flammer, 2018). Pradhan (2018) stated that if companies create value for consumers, it can influence them positively, and enhance trustworthiness. Additionally, it could improve consumers' satisfaction (Pradhan, 2018).

Consumers demand transparency in companies' CSR activities (Elg & Hultman, 2016). Beckmann (2007) claimed that consumers are sensitive to negative information, which increases the risk of a boycott. On the other hand, Braunsberger and Buckler (2011) stated that consumers participate in boycotts to state dissatisfaction with a company's actions. In other words, socially responsible consumers tend to boycott companies that are acting with irresponsible behavior (Beckmann, 2007; Braunsberger & Buckler, 2011). Frostenson et al. (2012) found that the general retail consumer does not take CSR activities into account with the rest of the decision-making process. Pradhan (2018) also examined consumers' decision-making process while buying from CSR engaged companies. CSR activities are a structured

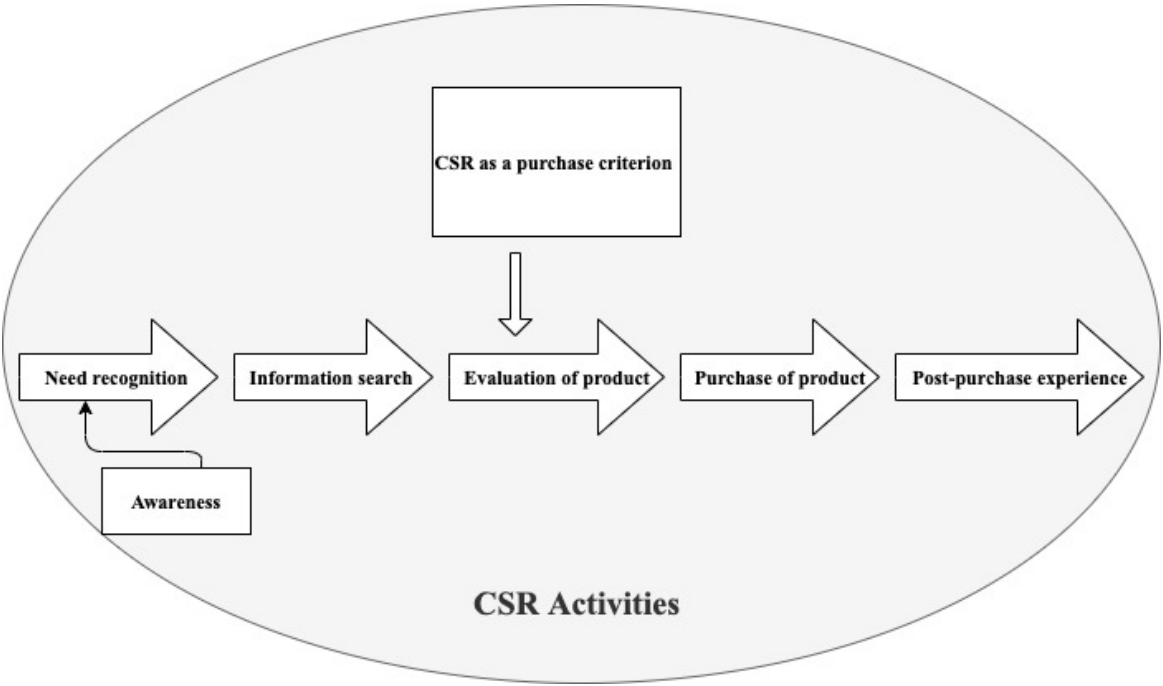
and logical process where consumers consider factors that they value. Therefore, companies must respond to consumers' demands regarding CSR (Pradhan, 2018).

Beckmann (2007) claimed that consumers showed more loyalty to CSR engaged companies and are resilient towards negative CSR engagement. Consumers' loyalty generates CSR engagement to function as an "insurance policy" (Beckmann, 2007). Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) established that a company's CSR is significant to build a strong consumer base. Conclusively, if companies do answer and value consumers' responses to CSR activities the outcome could result in loyal consumers.

2.3 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is founded on the presented theories to explain how the theoretical framework is linked and conceptualized. The different components describe consumers' awareness and how it impacts their buying decisions during a crisis. The conceptual framework's foundation was based on Beckmann's (2007) study of consumers' decision-making process in the context of CSR and Öberseder et al. 's (2011) study of CSR as a purchase criterion. The setting for these two theories is the Covid-19 pandemic. To understand the conceptual framework an illustration was created to investigate the relation between the theories and understand them further (Figure 1). The conceptual framework aimed to explore if consumers evaluate CSR more into their purchase criterion compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1
Conceptual model



Constructed conceptual framework

As illustrated in Figure one there are different components that influence each other. The conceptual framework presents the forced additional pressure on grocery stores' CSR activities because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The big grey circle represents CSR activities which are grocery stores' social responsibility towards consumers and society by managing safety precautions. CSR activities were used to understand how grocery stores' safety precautions influence consumers' buying behavior. If consumers' buying decisions have become influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and the safety precautions the consumers' may have started to evaluate CSR more as a purchase criterion. The large arrows illustrate the process of consumer decision-making and its five stages. The framework also presents awareness that influences the decision-making process. The following paragraphs below will describe the different components of the figure: *awareness*, *the decision-making process*, and *CSR as a purchase criterion*, and how they are applied.

Awareness is connected with the decision-making process and is illustrated in a box with a thin arrow pointing towards need recognition. The Covid-19 pandemic may have impacted consumers' awareness of CSR in their buying behavior. The phenomenon of the Covid-19 virus may have led to consumers feeling vulnerable and can therefore evolve to different concerns. For example, when food shelves are becoming empty, consumers can start reasoning that food resources are limited. Further concerns, how the food is manufactured, where food originates from, if the Covid-19 pandemic will develop into a need of self-sufficiency, and therefore reflect if the native country can support itself. These insights of vulnerability can lead to increased consumers' awareness which can influence their buying decisions. Further, this influences consumers' buying behavior, which can then lead to consumers supporting local businesses by purchasing sustainable food, such as locally produced and organic. The Covid-19 pandemic together with the implemented safety precautions could have affected consumers' ethical standpoint and made them consider sustainable food.

The first step in the decision-making process, *need recognition*, present if consumers' awareness has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic combined with safety precautions and if it has made them recognize a need to buy sustainable food. The second step, *information search* describes how the consumer perceives information regarding grocery stores' social responsibility, and if the perceived information can have changed their attitudes and beliefs. In our case, if the Covid-19 pandemic and safety precautions have affected consumers' interest in searching for sustainable food.

The third step, *evaluation of alternatives* describes the process of evaluating different alternatives. Evaluation of alternatives is connected to CSR as a purchase criterion. In this step, the third step in Beckmann's (2007) decision-making process, evaluation of alternatives will be based on the three factors, core-, central, and peripheral by Öberseder et al. (2011), before considering CSR in their buying decision. *CSR as a purchase criterion* is a part of the evaluation process considering that in this step consumers evaluate different criteria such as price, quality, and ethical aspects. The fourth step, *purchase of product* refers to consumers' willingness to compromise in their purchase intentions. Past research indicates that consumers tend not to prioritize the ethical aspects of their purchase intentions. However, during the Covid-19 pandemic, local businesses have suffered. It could be a factor that may have changed consumers' buying behavior and made them willing to compromise. The fifth step, *post-purchase experience* refers to if consumers after their purchase have become loyal to grocery stores because of their safety precautions.

3. Methodology

This third chapter presents the methodology used in this thesis. This chapter describes the research method used to collect the empirical data. Additionally, the selection of participants, focus group guide, and the practice of the focus group sessions are also presented. The chapter ends with a description of how the empirical data has been analyzed, how credible the collected data is, and what limitations have been encountered. Finally, an analysis of the empirical data, credibility, and limitations is presented to display strengths and weaknesses with the thesis.

3.1 Research design

This chapter introduces the methodology applied in this thesis. Opening with the aim of the research, research philosophy that describes the collection of data, how to apply it, and the analysis process. Further on the approach of the research is presented to understand the research design.

3.1.1 Research purpose

According to Bell et al. (2019), an exploratory stance is preferable when a new phenomenon is studied. It is often used in studies with a smaller scale of participants. Exploratory stance can search comprehension of a phenomenon by asking questions to obtain different perspectives. An exploratory stance can formulate and clarify problems when the result of the research is unclear from the start (Bell et al., 2019). An exploratory stance can also set the foundation of research, which in turn can evolve to further studies (Denscombe, 2016). An exploratory stance was used in this thesis because the goal was to investigate consumers' buying behavior and if they started to evaluate CSR as a purchase criterion more. In this thesis consumers' awareness and buying behavior were explored from a consumers' perspective. Therefore, considering that the research was unclear from the start this thesis may change direction after the collection of data.

3.1.2 Research philosophy

According to Bell et al. (2019) epistemology refers to a theory of knowledge. There are three different research philosophies which are *positivism*, *realism* and *interpretivism*. *Positivism* refers to researchers' comprehension of the social world and how they apply their study objectively. *Realism* compares individuals' experiences in relation to the reality of their beliefs. *Interpretivism* refers to abstract descriptions of subjective meanings of social actions by human experience. It perceives human behavior and actions as complex and needs social scientists to collect an extended and subjective explanation of social actions (Bell et al., 2019). Considering that this thesis is founded on consumers' individual experiences and the goal was to obtain deeper understanding of consumers' buying behavior, interpretivism is suitable as a research philosophy.

3.1.3 Research approach

The relationship between theory and research can be investigated through an inductive, *deductive*, or *abductive* approach. *The inductive* approach refers to the relationship between research and theory. This approach creates theories grounded on findings from empirical data. *The deductive* approach refers to developing hypotheses on existing theories and then conducting a research strategy to test the theory (Bell et al., 2019). Inductive and deductive can be combined and utilized as an *abductive* approach. This approach refers to progressive research that alternates between empirical data and theory to investigate a phenomenon (Bell et al., 2019).

In this thesis, different theories were used and therefore, an *abductive* approach was applied to identify patterns regarding the investigated phenomenon. Considering that this study focused on understanding consumers' buying behavior, an abductive approach made it possible for flexibility when alternating between data and theory. Successively, an abductive approach allowed us to be open to new data, rather than use old data to confirm the existing theory (Bell et al., 2019). However, the studies are limited within this research field and therefore, it requires further investigation through qualitative research with participants.

A qualitative research approach refers to a method that focuses on gathering data with conversational and open-ended communication. Its importance is not only in “what” people think but instead “why” something is as it is. The approach can understand complex situations in-depth and provide valuable insights (Bell et al., 2019). A Qualitative approach is related to small-scale research and was therefore suited for this study. To gain deep insights this thesis involved eleven participants and the aim was to understand if consumers evaluate CSR more into their purchase criterion compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.2 Data collection

This chapter introduces the different steps of how the empirical data was collected. Opening with the research method and how the selection of participants has been conducted. Further how the focus group guide was created and how the focus groups were conducted.

3.2.1 Research method

Focus groups were used as the research method to gather data. Focus groups are effective to use when analyzing individuals’ actions and feelings (Bell et al., 2019). A focus group consists of several participants who discuss a particular topic. One of the reasons for choosing focus groups is the dynamics created within a group. Dynamic discussions can create a comfortable situation for the participants. These dialogues can generate in-depth discussions, by sharing opinions regardless of agreeing or disagreeing. The discussions can go in a direction that the moderators did not intend (Denscombe, 2016).

According to Denscombe (2016, there are multiple participants in a focus group which can make the participants more comfortable. It allows the participants to express their actual thoughts and feelings compared to a personal interview. Focus groups tend to involve multiple participants compared to a personal interview, where the interviewer and the candidate are alone. Focus groups were chosen instead of personal interviews because we wanted to observe discussions that provided different perspectives. The different perspectives could affect the participants during the focus group sessions which could lead to unexpected responses. The participant can be affected by the interview effect when conducting a personal interview. The interview effect refers to the participants' answers that could be affected by the interviewer's characteristics and identity. In turn, the answers can result in becoming less objective (Denscombe, 2016).

Considering the strict restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has informed society to avoid social gatherings and take social responsibility (*Folkhälsomyndigheten*, 2020). Therefore, it is important to limit the number of physical meetings, and that is why virtual focus groups were conducted. The benefit of a virtual focus group is the flexibility, considering that participants do not have to be at the same location. Another benefit of a virtual focus group is that participants who are normally quiet and shy can find it easier to express their thoughts and feelings. Shy individuals tend to feel more comfortable in a virtual setting (Denscombe, 2016). Therefore, virtual focus groups were used as a research method to gather data.

3.2.2 Selection of participants

The selection of the participants was selected through three different methods. The first method used was snowball sampling. Snowball sampling refers to the researcher's initial contact with one individual or a small group that further establishes contacts with others. The snowball sampling makes it easy to find subjects that are from reliable sources. However, there are weaknesses and one of them is the time needed for planning. The second method was convenience sampling that refers to choosing participants that are available for the researchers. One advantage when conducting convenience sampling is that the data can be collected in a short amount of time and that it is cost-efficient. However, one of the weaknesses is that the sample is not representative of the whole population and that the result is not generalizable (Bell et al., 2019). The third method was purposive sampling refers to a strategic way of choosing participants with certain research goals and attributes in mind. Purposive sampling makes it easier to generalize, compared to a random sample where not all participants have the same characteristics. However, there are weaknesses, and one of them is that random sampling is open to selection bias (Bell et al., 2019).

The selection was based on participants' characteristics in this thesis such as gender, sex, age profession, and civil status. It was also based on the level of awareness of CSR. According to Kotler (2014), awareness can be defined as having knowledge and understanding a topic based on experience or information. In this thesis, one group was named CSR less-aware due to them not being familiar with the term CSR. The other group was named CSR aware due to their former knowledge about CSR and due to their part-time activity besides the primary work. Higher awareness of CSR is defined as having knowledge of CSR and being actively involved in

The idea behind a less aware group and one aware group of CSR was to be able to compare different levels of awareness and how it may have been influenced due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This comparison provided meaningful insights that enrich this study. The ages are selected between the range 24-52 years, this selection was chosen based on Delina and Rum (2019) argument that consumers' attitudes towards responsibility and sustainability in consumption depends on their age. Therefore, we chose participants of various ages to provide more nuanced reflections.

One group was named group A and aimed to gather participants that possessed higher awareness of CSR. The other group was named group B and aimed to gather participants that possessed a lower awareness of CSR. Age, profession, civil status, and country are genuine but to ensure the participants' anonymity, fictitious names were created. In group A, participants were given names that started with the letter A, and the participants in group B were given names after the letter B. The fictive names were used in the transcription to create a better understanding for the reader in the analysis. A presentation of the participants is presented below (Table 1).

Table 1
Presentation of the participants

Focus group	Names/Gender	Age	Work	Civil status	Country
A (CSR aware group)	Adam ♂	40	Strategy coordinator	Married	Ecuador
	Alexandra ♀	32	Student in Human Rights	Relationship	Italy
	Annika ♀	45	European Commission	Relationship	Sweden
	Anthony ♂	27	Earth Advocacy Youth	Relationship	Sweden
	Alice ♀	24	Earth Advocacy Youth	Single	Belgium
	Anna ♀	26	Lawyer	Single	Belgium
B (CSR less aware group)	Beata ♀	30	Business student	Single	Sweden
	Boris ♂	42	Construction engineer	Relationship	Sweden
	Benny ♂	29	Engineering student	Single	Sweden
	Brandon ♀	49	Design engineer	Married	Sweden
	Barbara ♀	52	Accountant	Relationship	Sweden

Group A included participants that were aware of the topic of social responsibility (Table 1). In the process of gathering empirical data, the Covid-19 pandemic limited the choice of available participants. The fundamental idea behind the selection began with one of the moderators' family members that lived in Ecuador but are originally from Sweden. The family member worked in a global action network that was aligned with environmental and societal aspects. In the global action network, there were people that had similar opinions and valued social responsibility. The participants that possessed a high awareness of CSR were based on several key points. Firstly, the participants are involved in a global action network that works pro bono due to their genuine interest. For example, Anna works as a lawyer but has a passion for human rights and social responsibility. Besides her regular job, she works actively within the network. Secondly, all the participants in group A had at least studied one course within CSR and were familiar with the term. Thirdly, the family member works within this network and ensured that the participants were actively involved in social responsibility. Therefore, we resonated that they could provide valuable data by answering questions on the topic.

The selection process in group A was planned as a convenience sampling but evolved to a snowball effect. Considering that it was an international network, it resulted in a selection of participants with cultural differences and perspectives. However, it was not intended to have participants from other countries. The international participants were the outcome considering the pandemic and the convenience sampling that evolved to a snowball effect. However, the strengths of this selection were the discussions among the participants. The participants compared their experiences which resulted in more in-depth discussions than expected.

The cultural mix in group A evolved during the sampling of participants. At the beginning of the thesis, the goal was not to have participants from all over the world. We presupposed that the people participating from the global action network were people that lived in Sweden, because of miscommunication from our side four participants lived in other countries. We are aware that the selection of participants is a weak selection that can be criticized. The restrictions and safety precautions can vary depending on country and culture. Some countries have entirely closed the society and some have not. In turn, individuals' buying behavior has been affected in physical grocery stores differently and this created different experiences of grocery stores' safety precautions. During the focus group session with group A, we encountered safety precautions that were not common in Sweden, such as measuring the temperature of people when entering a grocery store. However, all the participants also shared safety precautions that

were used in Sweden as well, such as hand sanitizers, masks, and social distancing. We chose to not include the safety precautions that were not common in Sweden and instead focus on common factors like hand sanitizers, masks, and social distancing. During the transcribing process, we reflected on our selection of participants and realized that group A's selection was weak. We decided to not include the cultural aspect in this study considering that it was not the intended research purpose. Therefore, the cultural differences were not a part of this study.

Group B involved only Swedish participants; this selection contributed with only Swedish insights compared to Group A. Group B included participants that were less aware of the topic (Table 2). The selection of participants was acquired through the purposive sampling method. This method aimed to identify various backgrounds and characteristics that could contribute to different perspectives on social responsibility. One of the researchers contacted their boyfriend's colleagues' family and they were purposely selected due to their less awareness of the topic. The participants that possessed a low awareness of CSR were based on that the boyfriend's colleagues' family were asked before the focus group session if they knew what the term CSR was. All of them were unknown about the term and never heard about it before. Therefore, we resonated that these participants were less aware of CSR.

3.2.3 Focus group guide

The focus group guide was based on a semi-structured interview technique. This technique enabled the discussions among the participants to evolve. To structure the focus group sessions a guide was created, based on the theoretical framework. The guide contributed with guidance and asked reflective questions during the sessions. Every question was related to the conceptual model (Figure 1). We conducted two focus group sessions consisting of three warm-up questions followed by eleven main questions (Appendix 1). The warm-up questions were used to provide a holistic view of the participants' former knowledge of CSR. Before the sessions, the participants were asked if they had former knowledge about CSR. In the first focus group session, one of the researchers had the role of a moderator and the other one was an observer. In the second session, the roles switched.

3.2.4 The practice of focus groups

Bell et al. (2019) implied that one focus group is not enough to provide sufficient data. Smaller focus groups are preferable when conducting minor research. A group of six to ten participants is enough to encourage conversations (Denscombe, 2016). Therefore, this research was divided into two focus groups, five and six, with a total of eleven participants, instead of conducting one big group. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual focus groups were preferred and conducted through a video application named Zoom. The virtual focus groups consisted of participants from all over the world, Sweden, Ecuador, Italy, and Belgium. Several nationalities gave a broader perspective, which can enrich this research.

The two focus groups sessions were practiced in English. The agenda was presented, general information, purpose, and why the topic was interesting to investigate. The participants were informed that the approximate time for the sessions was scheduled for 1,5-2 hours, and a ten-minute break was scheduled. The participants gave their permission for recording and transcription of the focus groups. Further, the purpose was presented and how a focus group is conducted. The participants were informed that the moderator's and observers' role was not to contribute to the discussions, the participants' role was to discuss among each other freely and give their perspectives. The participants were informed that their names will be replaced with fictitious names.

One virtual focus group with a total of eleven participants would have limited the interaction between the participants. Additionally, it would have been challenging to not interrupt each other. Conducting two focus groups facilitated us to identify and compare similarities as well as differences. Therefore, in group A there were six participants and in group B there were five participants. Group A needed less guidance in the session due to their awareness and expertise of the topic. Their awareness and expertise led to in-depth discussions. Group B in contrast to group A needed guidance to keep the sessions going. A challenge with group A was guiding and intervening with the participants to stay on topic. Another challenge as a moderator was not to intervene in the discussions. According to Bell et al. (2019), personal values could affect the participants' opinions. A challenge with group B was to include all the participants in the discussion. Two of the participants in group B had guarded personality traits and were not as confident to speak and share their opinion, which challenged the moderator. The moderator had

to ask these participants more directly if they wanted to share their opinion on some of the questions.

The sessions created valuable dialogues and generated sufficient data for the analysis. In the analysis, the empirical data were analyzed on an individual level, and the participants' opinions were compared. To increase the credibility of the findings a comparison between the groups is suited to contradict and confirm findings (Bell et al., 2019). At the end of chapter four, empirical findings and analysis, a comparison of the groups is presented to increase the credibility of the findings.

3.3 Data analysis

Denscombe (2016) states that after collecting the empirical data the researchers should transcribe it, which will further make it easier when analyzing the data. It also creates a clear overview for the researcher to compare findings with each other. A disadvantage with transcribing is that it takes a lot of time. The transcribing process made us more familiar with the empirical data. The next step is the interpretation process that involves coding the data, categorizing the codes, identifying patterns, as well as developing general conclusions based on the identified patterns. Researchers can face several issues when transcribing empirical data. One issue that researchers can encounter is the inability to hear clear sentences during the audio recordings, especially in the setting of a focus group. Another issue is participants that may not finish their sentences, leaving some question marks in the transcription (Denscombe, 2016). In the transcription process, we have encountered both issues. Some of the participants did not talk loud enough and sometimes interrupted each other which made it challenging to hear what they said. We also encountered that some participants did not even finish their sentences and completely switched from one topic to another. In these cases, we had to lead the participants back on the topic by going over to the next question or give the word to another participant.

The transcription took approximately 15 hours and resulted in 70 pages of empirical data. Denscombe (2016) claimed that categories and subcategories can be used to further narrow down the empirical data when patterns and similarities are identified. There were 24 subcategories identified but were further limited to 8 when finishing the data analysis. When pursuing the coding a deductive coding was used. Deductive coding refers to researchers' use

of theory to obtain different categories (Bell et al., 2019). The sub-categories are based on the theoretical framework of the two studies by Beckmann (2007) and Öberseder et al. (2011).

To become familiar with the empirical data the material was studied several times. To facilitate the analysis process, we decided to highlight important statements in different colors depending on category and subcategory. To be as objective as possible we individually highlighted the empirical data. For instance, pink represented safety precautions, while yellow represented awareness. The colors were used to easily separate similarities and differences and to be able to find the most relevant statements for our thesis. To generate an understanding of the categories and sub-categories, an example of coding is presented below (Table 2). The first quotation by Anna is linked to the category financial situation because the topic of the question concerned consumers' financial situation. The identified pattern in the analysis is the price which was then linked to the sub-category price perception. Price perception is based on Öberseder et al. (2011) which was applied as one of the theoretical frameworks. A further overview is presented in chapter four with each table (Table 3 to 10).

Table 2
Example of coding

Quote	Category	Subcategory
ANNIKA: “I just think that like supermarkets and the consumers should put in more effort in taking the safety precautions more seriously for everyone's safety”	Social responsibility	Safety precautions
ANNA: “I would have to agree that the price point is important”. I think it's between the price and the CSR	Financial situation	Price perception

3.4 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to a set of criteria to declare if the quality of qualitative research is trustworthy. To facilitate credibility Bell et al. (2019) present four main criteria to take into consideration the quality of the research. The following criteria are *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. *Credibility* is used to ensure that the study is of good practice and that the researchers understood the social world. To establish credibility the empirical data have been thoroughly analyzed to enhance the credibility of the research. *Transferability* refers to what extent the findings can be generalized and applied in alternative contexts (Bell et al., 2019). In qualitative research, compared to quantitative research transferability can be challenging because the findings are harder to generalize. Transferability within qualitative research is more challenging, compared to quantitative, because the findings are harder to generalize. This thesis is qualitative research and to enhance the transferability we have attempted to do a thorough job of describing the methodology, research approach, and findings. *Dependability* refers to the reliability and consistency which allows researchers to be more integrated (Bell et al., 2019). In both focus groups the participants were informed that it was recorded, and they gave their full permission. The collected empirical data throughout the thesis is accessible if requested to strengthen the dependability in this thesis. *Confirmability* refers to the researcher's objectivity and ability to reduce any personal values and act impartial (Bell et al., 2019). To establish confirmability in this research we assured to not affect the participants' answers with their own personal opinions. For instance, we ensure objectivity in our roles under the focus groups, and we make it clear for the participants that there are no wrong or right answers.

3.5 Critical reflections

To create balanced discussions, our goal was to make it possible for all participants to contribute. As mentioned before, a few participants switched over to buying food online. To include them in the discussions follow-up questions were asked to gather as much data as possible. However, all participants had purchased from a grocery store at least once during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, participants were encouraged to reflect on their perception of a grocery store. They were encouraged to think of hypothetical scenarios which made them reflect on how they would perceive and act in a grocery store.

Throughout the sessions, it was noticed that the participants within group A had expertise about social responsibility and group B had general opinions. Group A had nuanced reflections from both companies and consumer perspectives, meanwhile, group B reflected from a consumer's perspective. However, both groups shared similar opinions of socially responsible consumer behavior. This resulted in similar responses within the groups. If the participants had more diverse opinions, it could have resulted in additional insightful dialogues. One thing that could have been executed differently is a mix of group A and group B. It would have created another dynamic and involved the participants to answer the questions from other perspectives. Three of the participants did not take part in the discussions to the same extent as others when discussing grocery stores. These participants only purchased food online. If they purchased food in physical stores, their opinions would have been even more valuable.

4. Empirical findings and analysis

This fourth chapter presents an analysis of the findings based on the conceptual model (Figure 1). The conceptual model was created to help examine if consumers evaluate CSR as a purchase criterion and if they started to buy more sustainable food since the Covid-19 pandemic. At the end of this chapter, literature was used to analyze the empirical data, the participants were compared with one another, and differences were identified between the groups. The following sections below are presented with tables to demonstrate the categories and subcategories. The subcategories are based on the theoretical framework and then linked to the empirical data. The categories and subcategories simplify it for the reader to understand the analysis (Table 3 to 10). To create a better understanding of the analysis, group A's participants, possessing a higher awareness of CSR, were given names that start with the letter A. In contrast, the participants in group B, possessing a lower awareness of CSR, were given names that start with the letter B. Finally, the chapter ends with a comparison between the groups.

4.1 CSR activities

This section aimed to understand consumers' perspectives on retailers' social responsibility. According to Öberseder et al. (2011), consumers that respond positively to CSR activities can affect consumers' buying decisions. The empirical findings indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected our participants' (Group A and B, as presented in Table 2) awareness concerning social responsibility.

4.1.2 Social responsibility in grocery stores

When social responsibility was discussed, every participant considered safety precautions as important. The participants agreed that grocery stores have a social responsibility towards consumers, to make consumers feel safe. Therefore, safety precautions were identified in the discussions and used as a subcategory (Table 3).

Table 3
Subcategories of Social responsibility

Category	Subcategory
Social responsibility	Safety precautions

According to McKinsey (2020), consumers' buying behavior tends to change in life-changing experiences. The Covid-19 pandemic has forced consumers to adapt to everyday activities such as grocery shopping (McKinsey, 2020).

“During Covid-19[...] I have felt that food retailers have an overall responsibility to make sure that one feels protected and safe” - (Adam, 40)

“A store that does not make an effort with their safety precautions is not a place that I want to visit[...], in other words, then I don't feel safe” - (Boris, 42)

“I prefer stores that follow the safety precautions[...]and make us consumers feel safe when we shop groceries” - (Brandon, 49)

The first statement by Adam indicated that his awareness concerning safety has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. The second statement by Boris pointed out that his buying behavior has changed during the Covid-19 pandemic. He is now more aware of his safety. The third statement by Brandon implied that his buying behavior had changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, emphasizing the feeling of safety when evaluating the choice of store. These statements indicated that consumers find safety important when visiting grocery stores during

the Covid-19 pandemic. This implied a change in buying behavior and is in line with McKinsey (2020) who argued that consumers' buying behavior tends to change in life-changing experiences. Hence, the following three statements made by the participants supported the argument made by McKinsey (2020).

According to Öberseder et al. (2011), buying behavior is affected differently depending on how consumers perceive CSR activities. Szymkowiak et al. (2020) argued that since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, consumers feel afraid of becoming infected. Nevertheless, groceries are essential and there are often many people circulating in the stores, which increases the risk of getting infected and ill (Szymkowiak et al., 2020).

“Before the pandemic, me and my boyfriend used to do bigger shoppings [...] Lately, I have been going to the small grocery store alone, mostly in the evenings to meet as few people as possible. I never planned my shopping trips before but now I do.” - (Beata, 30)

“I am afraid of big groups of people [...] Before, I always went to the small supermarket, but I started going to the bigger store down the street due to their safety precautions such as hand sanitizers and markings [...] I go there in the evenings when there are not that many people” - (Alexandra, 32)

The first statement by Beata indicated a changed buying behavior due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Beata had to change her usual behavior and began to plan her shopping. She also started to visit the stores in the evenings to avoid big crowds of people. Therefore, Beata's preferences of the store had changed to a smaller one. The second statement by Alexandra pointed out a change in her buying behavior, her preferences changed, and she started visiting the bigger grocery store. Both Beata and Alexandra preferred evenings which supported the argument by Szymkowiak et al. (2020) that there is a fear of getting infected in grocery stores. Therefore, the participants had to adapt their shopping. Alexandra and Beata's statements follow the argument by Öberseder et al. (2011), that buying behavior impacts differently depending on how consumers perceive CSR activities. These statements shared something fundamental in common, which was an indication of a change in consumers' buying behavior due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the implemented safety precautions. This implied an impact on consumers' buying behavior and forced them to adapt after the circumstances.

4.2 Consumer buying decisions

This section aimed to understand what influences consumers' buying decisions. According to Oszust and Stecko (2020), consumer buying behavior is related to buying decisions that influence the choice of specific products. Beckmann (2007) claimed that consumers' needs have to be identified to gain more knowledge and understanding about their buying decisions.

4.2.1 Need recognition

When CSR was discussed the participants', awareness varied¹. In the study by Beckmann (2007) awareness is the subcategory for need recognition. Therefore, we used it as a subcategory (Table 4).

Table 4
Subcategories of Need recognition

Category	Subcategory
Need recognition	Awareness

Beckmann (2007) claimed that consumers have an interest in CSR but their level of knowledge and awareness differs. According to Robinot et al. (2017) consumers with a negative attitude regarding sustainability will not make any attempts to reduce their irresponsible consumption. However, according to Buerke et al. (2017), CSR is an increasing trend and overcomes the antagonism of responsibility versus profit. Hoa-Chang and Ho (2020) deepened this argument, arguing that many consumers feel that companies should address strong responsibility in environmental and social challenges. Companies' duties are to be profitable. Rather, they are expected to implement CSR activities that favor society (Hoa-Chang & Ho, 2020).

"I do not think about social responsibility.... I just buy the product" - (Benny, 29)

"I think responsibility means taking initiative and how they [companies] give back to society in different kinds of ways". - (Alice, 24)

"It feels like I am getting more conscious in my choices and where I buy things[...]therefore companies have to adapt to follow the pattern of the people [...]" - (Beata, 30)

¹ This will be further developed in 4.4 Difference between groups.

The first statement by Benny implied no efforts of prioritizing social responsibility. This can be related to the fact that Benny lives in Sweden where social responsibility such as labor policies and human rights are not violated as much. Therefore, many people do not experience it in their everyday lives. In contrast to Hoa-Chang and Ho (2020), Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009) as well as Elg and Hultman (2016) argued that consumers are often unconcerned and lack an understanding of social issues and how companies may influence or be related to those issues. Benny's statement concerning social responsibility indicated a low level of awareness and that he might not be well-informed of these issues, which makes it difficult for him to act socially responsible and understand the linkages between social issues and companies' actions. This follows the argument by Johnson and Chatterman (2019), that consumers' lack of awareness of some social issues can be the result of vast geographical distance from the origin of the issue in question.

The second statement by Alice emphasized that social responsibility is something that companies should implement to favor society, which clearly is in line with Hoa-Chang and Ho's (2020) arguments stated above. The third statement by Beata indicated that she has indeed become more aware of her buying behavior and understood the importance of adapting to challenging circumstances like the Covid-19 pandemic. An important indicator in these empirical findings is that some consumers' awareness has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, which could have impacted their buying decisions. However, Alice's and Beata's statement is in line with the argument made by Buerke et al. (2017), who claimed that there is an increasing trend of CSR and that responsibility versus profit was still an ongoing debate in companies. In contrast to Benny's statement, Alice, and Beata indicated a high level of awareness when it comes to social responsibility and placed great emphasis on companies' important role in social responsibility. These empirical findings are therefore tied to Buerke et al.'s (2017) argument above which states that, to act socially responsible during the Covid-19 pandemic, consumers must be aware of the issues that societies are facing. Benny's negative attitude towards social responsibility is an important finding in this thesis as it shows the correlation described by Robinot et al. (2017), that consumers with a negative attitude are most likely not going to act in favor of social responsibility.

4.2.2 Information search

When attitudes and beliefs were discussed with the participants, the empirical findings were different. In the study by Beckmann (2007) attitudes and beliefs is the subcategory for information search. Therefore, we used it as a subcategory (Table 5).

Table 5
Subcategories of Information search

Category	Subcategory
Information search	Information sources

Loose and Remaud (2013) claimed that, in the last decades, consumers' research interest has increased regarding organic food. However, it remains unclear to what degree purchase information regarding social responsibility impacts consumers' food choices (Loose and Remaud, 2013). The findings concluded by Feldmann and Hamm (2015), also presented an increased interest in sustainable food in the last decade. Furthermore, Cranfield (2020) highlighted the increased demand for locally produced food before the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“So, I think I agree with everyone that my attitude hasn't changed in general [...] But I buy more locally produced, because I want to support local grocery stores” - (Annika, 45)

“My attitude is the same [...] I buy more locally produced now [...]” - (Boris, 42)

“Considering that I travel a lot with my work, during the pandemic I had to stay home, which led to having more time to learn new things and explore different local and organic alternatives” - (Alexandra, 32)

The first statement by Annika indicated that her attitude towards sustainable food is the same as before the Covid-19 pandemic. The statement by Annika supported Feldmann and Hamm (2015), who claimed that there has been an increased interest for sustainable food even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though Annika has an unchanged attitude towards sustainable food, she did express that, since the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, Annika has been buying more locally produced food. This insight from Annika can be seen as a contradiction to Cranfield's (2020) statement of increased demand for locally produced food before the Covid-19 pandemic. The second statement made by Boris also indicated that his attitude remains the same but that purchases of sustainable food have increased. This is yet another statement and finding that is considered contradictory to the argument made by Cranfield (2020). The third

statement by Alexandra indicated that she has, during the Covid-19 pandemic, spent more time researching sustainable food and exploring different alternatives. The argument by Alexandra was in line with Cranfield's (2020) argument that the Covid-19 pandemic has an impact on her interest in research of sustainable food. These findings stated above were in line with the arguments by Cranfield (2020), Feldmann and Hamm (2015), as well as Loose and Remaud (2013) who pointed out an increased demand for sustainable food in the last decades. This indicated that there was an increased demand even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Annika implied that her attitude has not changed but Alexandra's was, however, the opposite. Nevertheless, both informed that they have started buying more sustainable food in the past year. Despite the differences in awareness between the groups, these findings, could be an indication that interest in sustainable food has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.2.3 Evaluation of CSR as a purchase criterion

This section, the third step in Beckmann's (2007) decision-making process, evaluation of alternatives will be based on Öberseder et al.'s (2011) three factors core- central and peripheral. These three factors will be used to understand if consumers have started to evaluate CSR as a purchase criterion in the decision-making process. Beckmann (2007) concluded that CSR is not consumers' priority when buying a product. Öberseder et al. (2011) claimed that CSR activities are not enough to consider a purchase decision in many cases. However, the Covid-19 pandemic and safety precautions added to the equation could influence consumers to evaluate CSR as a purchase criterion. The following three subheadings present literature and the participants' perspectives based on the three different factors.

4.2.3.1 Core factors

Earlier in this thesis under information search, participants' attitudes and beliefs were investigated when searching for information regarding sustainable food. This step will emphasize consumers' awareness of grocery stores' information concerning safety precautions. When information and personal concern regarding a purchase was discussed, the participants mentioned transparency. The participants discussed that they wanted more information to examine and evaluate companies to facilitate social responsibility consumption. In the study by Öberseder et al. (2011) informational and personal concern is the subcategory for the core factors. Therefore, we used it as a subcategory (Table 6).

Table 6
Subcategories of Core factors

Category	Subcategory
Core factors	Informational & Personal concern

For consumers to consider socially responsible consumption they need to be well-informed (Öberseder et al., 2011). Furthermore, Kang and Hustvedt (2014) argued that transparency is a topic that has grown because of ethical considerations and the proliferation of information. Informational consideration could be related to transparency and research pointed out that companies' transparency policies thus do not always succeed (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014).

“Social responsibility like transparency and companies being clear about what happens in your supply chain, and how you do things is fundamental.” - (Alexandra, 32)

“I think grocery stores information about safety precautions could have been more visible, I did not see that much out in the store.” - (Adam, 40)

“They [Grocery stores] has handled the information okey under the pandemic” - (Benny, 29)

The first statement by Alexandra indicated that transparency is fundamental, which follows the argument by Öberseder et al. (2011) who emphasized the importance of information. Alexandra implied that two-way communication is important when considering social responsibility. The second statement by Adam is one example of a consumer that expected more visible information from grocery stores. Adam indicated that grocery stores have not provided enough information to meet his needs. Adam’s statement is in line with Kang & Hustvedt (2014), that companies' transparency policy does not always succeed. It also follows the argument by Öberseder et al. (2011) who claimed that consumers demand more CSR information. The third statement by Benny represents a consumer that believed grocery stores displayed enough information. However, based on previous citations by Benny he indicated a low level of awareness of social responsibility and that it is not a priority for him. Therefore, his response regarding displayed information can be questioned thus he is not as aware of social responsibility. These statements follow the argument by Öberseder et al. (2011) that consumers that do not care or have limited knowledge about CSR activities will most likely not consider CSR as a purchase criterion. The statements above indicated that limited information concerning grocery stores’ safety precautions ends with less chance that consumers consider CSR as a purchase criterion.

4.2.3.2 Central factor

When the financial situation was discussed, it was considered a determining factor for the participants when considering CSR as a purchase criterion in their evaluation. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the participants' price perception and degree of willingness to buy sustainable food. This created discussions that resulted in different opinions. In the study by Öberseder et al. (2011) the financial situation is the subcategory for the central factor. Therefore, we used it as a subcategory (Table 7).

Table 7
Subcategories of Central factor

Category	Subcategory
Central factor	Financial situation

According to Öberseder et al. (2011), consumers' buying behavior depends on their financial situation. The central factor is a prerequisite that has to be fulfilled for the consumer to evaluate CSR into their purchase criterion (Öberseder et al., 2011). Aschemann-Witzel and Zielke (2015) confirmed that one of the biggest barriers to ethical purchases is the price. For instance, consumers perceive organic products to be more expensive (Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2015). According to Lin and Huang (2012), there could be a degree of willingness to pay higher prices under specific conditions. The price does not have a connection to consumers' decision of sustainable food, they consider the ethical values more (Lin & Huang, 2012)

"My economic situation is difficult right now, I cannot say that I'm buying organic and locally produced food." - (Benny, 29)

"I think it is between the price and the CSR" - (Anna, 26)

"I definitely feel that it is worth paying that extra amount for the product [sustainable food] that I am getting, especially now during the pandemic." - (Adam, 40)

The first statement by Benny indicated that the financial situation does not allow him to purchase sustainable food. This follows the argument by Öberseder et al. (2011) who claimed that consumers' financial situation is a prerequisite before evaluating CSR as a purchase criterion. However, during a global crisis, our findings indicated that the financial situation determines. The second statement by Anna implied that there is a difficult balancing act between being socially responsible and the price of a specific product. Anna's statement is in line with Aschemann-Witzel and Zielke's (2015) argument that price is one of the biggest barriers to sustainable food. Anna is an example of a consumer that considers CSR in her

evaluation process. The third statement by Adam indicated that there is a willingness to pay a higher price. Adam indicated that he valued the ethical aspects during the Covid-19 pandemic. This statement follows the argument by Lin and Huang (2012), that under specific conditions consumers are willing to pay a higher price. In Adam's case, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted his buying behavior which in turn made him willing to choose the ethical aspects instead of the price. The empirical findings indicated that the financial situation differs among the participants. It indicated that some consumers are willing to pay a higher price. However, the empirical findings implied that consumers still evaluate their financial situation before evaluating CSR as a purchase criterion during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.2.3.3 Peripheral factors

Earlier in this thesis under core factor consumers' view of companies' transparency have been discussed. Consumer skepticism arises with transparency when questioning a company's activities. Therefore, there will be some similar reasoning presented that goes in line with the core factor. When credibility, peer groups, and the image of the company were discussed, the participants agreed that the credibility and influences of peer groups interact with their image of a specific company. These factors measure consumers' skepticism towards CSR. In the study by Öberseder et al. (2011) consumer skepticism is the subcategory for the peripheral factors. Therefore, we used it as a subcategory (Table 8).

Table 8
Subcategories of Peripheral factor

Category	Subcategory
Peripheral factor	Consumer skepticism

According to Öberseder et al. (2011), consumers' skepticism towards companies' CSR activities is measured through credibility, the influence of peer groups, and the image of the company. On the other hand, if a company fails it can affect the consumer's evaluation process of CSR as a purchase criterion (Öberseder et al., 2011). According to Chang-Hyun and Jung-Yong (2019), CSR is an effective strategy, which can contribute to a polished picture of a company's image in the public's mind. CSR activities can have a negative effect when consumers consider a company's motivations for pursuing an activity as not pure (Chang-Hyun & Jung-Yong, 2019).

"I believe it is difficult for companies to take responsibility because they have to grow." - (Anna, 26)

"I think it is difficult for me to think about responsibility and corporations because I feel in general that they do not take their responsibility." - (Alice, 24)

The first and second statements by Anna and Alice indicated the problematization of consumers' low value of CSR activities and skepticism towards companies. These statements are in line with Öberseder et al. 's (2011) argument that there is consumer' skepticism towards companies that do not conduct "right" CSR activities. Both Anna and Alice are two examples of consumers that believe companies are pursuing social responsibility as a strategy to grow revenue, and do not have pure intentions for their social responsibility. These statements supported Chang-Hyun and Jung-Yong's (2019) argument that if CSR is conducted in the right way it could be an

effective strategy. However, the participants had a broader knowledge, which can explain their strong opinions of questioning companies' intentions. This can be a reason for skepticism. This indicated that consumers that feel distrust will therefore not value companies' social responsibility. Therefore, companies should respond to consumers' demands to affect them to evaluate CSR as a purchase criterion.

4.2.4 Purchase of product

This fourth step in the decision-making process is similar to the third step. The difference is that the emphasis will be on consumers' purchase intentions instead of deciding if CSR has become a purchase criterion. When purchase intentions were discussed with the participants consumers had different opinions whether they were willing to make compromises when facing the Covid-19 pandemic. Some participants argued that the Covid-19 pandemic has led to a change in their purchase intentions and depends on several factors. In the study by Beckmann (2007) purchase intention is the subcategory for purchase of product. Therefore, we used it as a subcategory (Table 9).

Table 9
Subcategories of Purchase of product

Category	Subcategory
Purchase of product	Purchase intention

Beckmann (2007) claimed that consumers are not willing to make compromises in the decision-making process when it comes to ethical aspects. According to Marquina and Morales (2012), consumers' sustainable purchase intentions are not always evident and direct. However, according to Kim (2017) when a company conducts proactive social responsibilities, consumers may support the positive intentions and ambitions of the company. Beckmann (2007) follows this argument with her study concluding that impact on health consciousness can affect the purchase intention of buying organic food.

"I prefer to go to the nearest store, which is the most convenient for me [...]" - (Benny, 29)

"[...] because of the impacts of Covid[...] If I give money to these supermarkets but they're already making money, I will walk 10-20 minutes to a local place to make sure the money contributes to something good." - (Anna, 26)

The first statement by Benny indicated no purchase intention. The statement by Benny supported the argument by Beckmann (2007) that consumers are not willing to make compromises in ethical aspects. In contrast to Benny, the second statement by Anna implied that she was willing to compromise on convenience to contribute to society which contradicts the argument made by Beckmann (2007) who claimed that consumers were unwilling to compromise in ethical aspects. This indicated that Anna has changed her willingness to compromise because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The argument by Anna indicated support towards local grocery stores, and this follows the argument by Kim (2017) that consumers may instead contribute to a good cause. These empirical findings indicated diversity in opinions

between the participants, where some participants were willing to compromise on CSR while others were not.

Manuel and Herron (2020) argued that consumers may have increased their preference to purchase locally produced food to create more jobs during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Su and Shen (2021), nationalism thrives in times of global crises. Furthermore, O’Sullivan (2019) implied increased nationalism by demonstrating consumers’ purchasing preferences for locally produced food.

“There’s no point of buying goods that are imported from across the world [...] I believe it is important to contribute to society in tough times like this [Covid-19].” - (Anna, 26)

“I buy more locally produced, because I want to support businesses in Sweden because now it is like every country on its own. I feel like you must support our own country. So, I think I buy more locally produced compared to before [...]” - (Boris, 42)

The two examples by Anna and Boris indicated consumers who are aware of the social issues. Both participants’ behaviors were in line with the argument made by Manuel and Herron (2020), that consumers have increased their purchase intention towards society during the Covid-19 pandemic. Anna and Boris’ arguments indicated that consumers actively try to support local grocery stores in times of global crises. These statements support the arguments made by Su and Shen (2021) that nationalism thrives during crises and those consumers’ purchasing preferences for locally produced food can increase when facing a crisis (O’Sullivan, 2019). These statements indicated no difference between the groups. Both implied the importance of supporting society. Furthermore, the indicated importance contradicts the argument by Beckmann (2007) that consumers are not willing to make compromises in CSR as an attribute.

4.2.5 Post-purchase experience

This step is similar to the section about CSR activities, the difference is that the emphasis will be on if consumers become loyal to grocery stores because of the conducted safety precautions. A scenario was presented for the participants to examine how their response would be towards a grocery store's way of implementing safety precautions (Appendix 1). When loyalty and satisfaction were discussed, participants' experiences with grocery stores' safety precautions were expressed. In the study by Beckmann (2007) loyalty and satisfaction is the subcategory for the post-purchase experience. Therefore, we used it as a subcategory (Table 10).

Table 10
Subcategories of Post-purchase experience

Category	Subcategory
Post-purchase experience	Loyalty & Satisfaction

According to Syafarudin (2021), loyalty and satisfaction go hand in hand. Beckmann (2007) argued that loyalty depends on the consumer's level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Dsouza and Sharma (2021) argued that consumers value safety in their experience of grocery shopping. Therefore, companies have to create a pleasant experience for the consumers during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dsouza & Sharma, 2021).

"I have three supermarkets near me and I don't think the loyalty has much to do with how they handle the pandemic [...] At the end of the day, if you need a tomato, your grocery store is right there." - (Benny, 29)

"I don't think I will be loyal to the store after the pandemic [...] After the way grocery stores acted with their safety precautions, I do not see any point of being loyal." - (Anthony, 27)

"To create a sort of loyalty to a grocery store, they have to satisfy my needs." - (Adam, 40)

The statements above by Benny and Anthony indicated participants who do not associate loyalty with grocery stores. The first statement by Benny implied that it is the grocery store's duty to handle the Covid-19 pandemic. Benny's statement contradicted Dsouza and Sharma's (2021) argument that consumers value safety. The second statement by Anthony followed the argument by Beckmann (2007), who claimed that consumers who are dissatisfied will not be loyal to a store. The third statement by Adam followed the argument by Syafarudin (2021) who claimed that satisfaction and loyalty go hand in hand. Adam clearly stated that in the creation process of loyalty, satisfaction leads to loyalty. Adam and Anthony are two examples of

consumers who are loyal depending on how satisfied they are with the safety precautions. These statements indicated no difference between the groups. The participants indicated that loyalty is not associated with how the store handled the pandemic.

Beckmann (2007) claimed that consumers are sensitive to negative CSR activities. If CSR activities are perceived negatively Braunsberger and Buckler (2011) stated that consumers participate in boycotts to state dissatisfaction with a company's actions.

"I would still go there, as I said before, if you need a tomato the supermarket is right around the corner [..]" - (Benny, 29)

"I would not go there. I would take my friend or family members' word for it. I would also encourage other persons to not go there too." - (Barbara, 52)

"I prefer grocery stores that follow the safety precautions and if they do not, I choose another store." - (Beata, 30)

"I just go to another one [grocery store] and I would personally avoid a store that does not take the pandemic seriously." - (Alice, 24)

"I would agree with that statement and feel discouraged about visiting that store." - (Adam, 40)

"I heard from a family member that the staff do not use gloves when they touch the fruits. [..] I don't trust the supermarkets and refuse to buy fruits there." - (Annika, 45)

Here, the above-mentioned statements indicated that negative associations could have a detrimental outcome for companies. The participants refrained from the presented scenario and a boycott of the store was the obvious choice. These statements supported the argument by Beckmann (2007), that consumers are sensitive towards negative CSR activities and if a company does not pursue its CSR activities in the right way they will be dissatisfied. The above-mentioned participants are five examples of consumers who vary in their knowledge of CSR but share the same opinions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, Annika presented a real-life scenario, where a family member influenced her to boycott a store due to their safety precautions. Annika's example was in line with Braunsberger and Buckler's (2011) argument, that consumers show their dissatisfaction through boycott. Her dissatisfaction also indicated that the company's image is not valued as socially responsible. The empirical findings shared that dissatisfaction with safety precautions could affect grocery stores negatively.

4.3 Comparison of the groups

Group A (the CSR-aware group) and group B (the less CSR-aware group) had different levels of awareness concerning CSR, which aided us in identifying similarities and differences between the groups. Demographic differences did not create strong contrasts in the opinions and experiences of the participants concerning social responsibility and safety precautions in grocery stores. The Covid-19 pandemic is a global crisis and cannot be a factor in the similarities due to increased social responsibility among consumers. Both groups had similar tendencies regarding safety precautions. The participants expressed an overall tendency of valuing grocery stores that prioritize safety precautions, confirming Öberseder et al.'s (2011) theory. The participants' responses in groups A and B were in line with the notion of the importance for grocery stores to manage their safety precautions. Hence, the empirical findings indicate that safety precautions are of great importance for all participants. However, safety precautions did not contribute to a higher level of customer loyalty. All the participants expressed that if they were dissatisfied with the safety precautions it could result in boycotts.

The knowledge of social responsibility differed between the two groups. Participants in group A discussed companies' and consumers' perspectives, which indicated expertise and interest in the topic. They also expressed social concerns, consequences, environmental issues and shared their opinions on what companies and consumers can do to contribute to a better society. Some participants in group A expressed strong opinions of companies' social responsibility, mainly from a critical and skeptical perspective. This might have influenced the overall opinions within the group, as dominant voices tend to shape a dialogue. In contrast, participants in group B shared more reflections from a consumer perspective, which indicated that they might not have the same level of expertise and interest in the topic. The consumer perspective involved tendencies based on individual experiences and beliefs rather than opinions based on technical terms and operational processes. Nevertheless, both groups emphasized in diverse ways that social responsibility is a duty for companies to act in the best interest of society.

Differences in opinions concerning the dynamics of social responsibility in companies were identified in the groups. The purchase intentions towards locally produced food differed between the groups: Six participants from group A said that they started to buy more locally produced food during the Covid-19 pandemic. In contrast, only two participants from group B shared this same tendency. This difference in purchase intentions supports the argument made

by Beckmann (2007), that a consumer's level of knowledge and awareness concerning social responsibility impacts the actual buying decisions. These empirical findings support those differences in purchase intention that can be explained by consumers' individual attitudes, beliefs, and fields of expertise. Another difference identified between the groups was the willingness to compromise and pay a surplus for sustainable food that generates more positive impacts in society. Since six participants in group A demonstrated an increased consumption of locally produced foods during the Covid-19 pandemic, more so compared to group B, it can be concluded that the tendency of compromising price in favor of social responsibility was stronger in group A compared to group B. Therefore, this thesis argues that the evaluation of CSR as a purchase criterion depends on the level of awareness and expertise in the topic, which supports Öberseder et al.'s (2011) theory which argued that consumers' varying assessment of CSR determines their buying behavior. However, the analysis presented different findings on whether CSR is considered as a purchase criterion or not.

5. Thesis Conclusion

This fifth chapter presents the conclusion of this thesis. The two research questions and the purpose will be answered thoroughly. The chapter ends with theoretical and practical contributions, followed by a critical review and future research.

5.1 Conclusion of thesis

This thesis explored relatively new research and the purpose was to see if consumers evaluate CSR more into their purchase criterion compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, how has the Covid-19 pandemic and safety precautions influenced consumers buying decisions towards sustainable food. Previous research has not investigated this field and therefore the research is limited. This research provides new insights into how the Covid-19 pandemic influenced consumers' buying behavior. The study revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic together with the safety precautions induced fear in consumers of being infected which affected their buying behavior. This in turn has influenced consumers to act socially responsible. The three main findings are presented below and summarized in the last paragraph. Firstly, this study demonstrated that the prerequisites in the evaluation of CSR as a purchase criterion must be fulfilled before consumers consider a change in their purchase intentions even though under a pandemic. It was shown in this study that consumers evaluated the factors differently. Consumers demand transparency from grocery stores. However, they do not feel that the grocery stores responded. It indicated that consumers with expertise in CSR were more critical towards displayed information regarding safety precautions. It was shown that consumers were skeptical regarding companies' information. Consumers felt distrust in companies and had challenges valuing their CSR. Öberseder et al. (2011) argued that consumers' buying behavior depends on their financial situation. This study indicated that the financial situation was of great importance. This study also indicated that consumers' willingness to buy sustainable food is influenced by their financial situation. However, it was demonstrated that the financial situation and the willingness to pay a surplus differed between the consumers.

Secondly, this study demonstrated that safety precautions make consumers feel safe, however, it is considered grocery stores' responsibility. Safety has become a determining priority for consumers when visiting grocery stores during the Covid-19 pandemic. Consumers started planning their grocery shopping to avoid big crowds of people in stores. In accordance with big

crowds, consumers changed grocery stores, in turn, to be safe. It has impacted consumers' buying behavior and forced them to adapt after the circumstances. This study also indicated that consumers expect grocery stores to take care of their safety precautions. Even though consumers are satisfied with the safety precautions it does not equal loyal consumers. However, dissatisfaction can result in boycotts. This study implied that even though grocery stores take their responsibility consumers do not value their effort because it is perceived as companies' duties during the Covid-19 pandemic. We believe that this still follows Beckmann's (2007) argument that grocery stores' positive CSR activities are not recognized. Our study indicated that CSR still had a limited impact on consumers' buying behavior.

Thirdly, this study demonstrated that the Covid-19 pandemic and safety precautions have impacted consumers' buying decisions. Consumers were willing to change their buying decisions towards sustainable food. Safety precautions have affected consumers' choice of stores. Consumers started buying from local grocery stores to avoid big crowds. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an increased demand for locally produced food (Cranfield, 2020). However, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the demand even further and consumers have started to buy more locally produced. Our study indicated that there has been increased consumption of sustainable food, especially locally produced. This study implied that consumers' that possess an interest and expertise in CSR were more likely to change their buying decisions towards sustainable food during a crisis. Our study also indicated that consumers who were less aware of CSR were not willing to change their buying decisions. This is in line with Beckmann's (2007) argument, that the impact on consumers buying decisions differs based on their interest in CSR.

The findings demonstrated that even though consumers have started to buy more locally produced during a global crisis, CSR was never a primary criterion. Price was considered as the primary criterion, and consumers experienced the price of sustainable food as too expensive for the consumer's financial situation. Therefore, CSR as a purchase criterion was not evaluated more by the consumers. However, consumers started buying more locally produced food which indicated that their awareness towards CSR as a purchase criterion changed positively. This study concluded that the Covid-19 pandemic influenced consumers' awareness of CSR, but the value of safety precautions had limited influence on consumers.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

The main theoretical contribution to this research was the empirical context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is important since it is a new field that has insufficient research. The research contributed to further understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic and the grocery stores' implemented safety precautions. Further, how it may have influenced consumers to evaluate CSR more as a purchase criterion and how the consumption of sustainable food has changed. There is no previous research, to the best of our knowledge, that has linked the decision-making process in relation together with the three factors when evaluating CSR as a purchase criterion. Beckmann (2007) used the decision-making process in the context of CSR and in our study, we applied it with knowledge of consumers' buying behavior towards sustainable food. This was used to see if the consumers became more aware during the Covid-19 pandemic and started buying more sustainable food. The further theoretical contribution was to apply Öberseder et al's (2011) study to investigate if CSR has become more evaluated as a purchase criterion in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The study by Öberseder et al. (2011) was conducted a decade ago and we wanted to investigate if the theory could be applied in the context of a pandemic. The complexity of considering CSR in consumers' buying decisions is still current according to our study. This study indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic did not have a particular effect on consumers' evaluation of CSR as a purchase criterion.

5.3 Practical contributions

The practical contribution of this research generated a new understanding of how consumers' buying behavior can change during the Covid-19 pandemic. This practical contribution can be used by grocery stores to understand consumers' perspectives of grocery stores' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. This thesis provided knowledge of consumer experiences of grocery shopping during the Covid-19 pandemic. Grocery stores could use this knowledge by improving safety precautions in the future. Furthermore, since the consumption of sustainable food has increased, a further demand has thrived during the Covid-19 pandemic and evolved opportunities for locally produced businesses. Locally produced businesses could use these insights in their development of their business and marketing for new consumers.

5.4 Critical review

In our thesis, there are several critical reflections to consider. CSR activities were conceptualized as safety precautions in grocery stores. No previous research has conceptualized safety precautions as CSR activities. We are aware that this conceptualization is not clear enough for the reader and can raise question marks. Further, this thesis angles safety precautions as the potential factor that have influenced consumers to buy more sustainable food. From a critical standpoint, this is not a logical parallel. It was the Covid-19 pandemic in general and the fear of getting sick. This is also something that can raise question marks for the reader. Another critical reflection is the theoretical framework. In the writing process of the analysis, we realized the theories were too similar. The intention with two similar theories was that it would make the analysis process easier, but instead, it became the opposite. Therefore, the analysis chapter has some similar reasoning. A revision process has been done to restructure the analysis chapter to reduce similarities.

Further critical reflection is the semi-structured focus groups. The participants might have been affected by the environment of a focus group session. We did not ask the participants if it was their first time attending such a meeting, but it could be such a case. In that case people tend to be shy and not be able to express their honest opinion, especially when they are not familiar with the environment. Some of the participants could have been affected by us, and by the other participants as well, and therefore answered in a specific way that might not be their honest answer. It was also our first time in the roles of moderator and observer. The focus groups took place over a virtual setting, which limited the interactions between the participants. The chosen questions for the focus group sessions could have been better formulated and more specified, which would have given more nuanced answers instead of general opinions. Furthermore, the selection of participants can be criticized because some of them are not from Sweden which affects the generalization of the findings applicable in Sweden. Considering that countries such as Italy have experienced lockdown which affects consumers in a different way compared to consumers from Sweden, who have not experienced lockdown. We are aware that there are cultural differences, but they have not been taken into consideration in this thesis. The cultural differences would have led this thesis into a broader international perspective which was not intended. If given the opportunity for new research, we would have chosen only Swedish participants to keep a narrower perspective.

5.5 Future research

The aim was to examine if consumers evaluate CSR as a purchase criterion in their buying behavior. It was further examined if consumers started buying more sustainable food in grocery stores. Our findings indicated that locally produced food will be an increasing trend after the Covid-19 pandemic and suggest future research to investigate that. Further research could investigate the empirical finding that consumers started to actively support local grocery stores which indicated an increased nationalism and if it will still thrive after the Covid-19 pandemic.

6. List of References

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Appendix A - Focus group guide

<p>Introduction</p> <p>The focus group session started with an introduction of the interviewers, and the structure for the session was presented. No topics or questions were revealed in advance, to keep the participants unbiased as well as discuss the topic founded on their own opinions and values. The session took approximately 1,5–2 hours and a break were offered in the middle for the participants. Permission to use audio recording was inquired. Before starting this session, a clarification of sustainable food, as which are locally produced, organic, and Fairtrade was presented.</p>	
<p>Questions</p>	<p>Purpose (based on table 1)</p>
<p>1. Today, there are a lot of discussions about companies taking responsibility in the society. What does responsibility mean to you? Suggest and elaborate with each other.</p>	<p><i>Social responsibility</i></p> <p>The purpose of this warm-up question was to open a discussion concerning companies taking responsibility, and to get a view of the respondents' prior knowledge of the subject. As well as, to understand the respondents' different attitudes towards the subject.</p>
<p>2. What have you heard about corporate social responsibility? And what does it mean for you in your consumption?</p> <p>Explanation: The idea that companies should take responsibility for how they affect society, from an economic, environmental, and social perspective.</p>	<p><i>Social responsibility</i></p> <p>The purpose of this question was to investigate if the respondents were familiar with the business term CSR and what it means.</p>
<p>3. Which responsibilities do you believe that grocery stores have during a pandemic like Covid-19?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why are they important? • Why are they not important? 	<p><i>Social responsibility</i></p> <p>The purpose of this question was to let the respondents elaborate on which responsibilities they believe grocery stores have to implement during the Covid-19 pandemic.</p>

<p>4. What are your thoughts on purchasing food from a grocery store during the Covid-19 pandemic?</p>	<p>Consumer behavior</p> <hr/> <p>Considering that consumers are impacted differently by the Covid-19 pandemic this question was used to understand if the participants have changed their consumption.</p>
<p>5. How have your consumption patterns looked in grocery stores during the Covid-19 pandemic?</p> <p>→ In which ways has it changed? → Have you purchased different products compared to before the pandemic?</p>	<p>Consumer behavior</p> <hr/> <p>A warm-up question to comprehend the participants prior awareness of the topic. Additionally, to comprehend the participants' attitudes towards the topic. Need recognition is connected to awareness and therefore suited to this question.</p>
<p>6. What is your perspective on sustainable food, for example fairtrade, locally produced and organic?</p>	<p>Consumer behavior</p> <hr/> <p>This question was used to understand how consumers' attitudes and beliefs have changed towards sustainable food.</p>
<p>7. How has your perspective changed about buying sustainable food compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you buy sustainable food, to what extent? <p>→ What is the difference compared to before the Covid-19 pandemic? → What could be the reason for this change?</p>	<p>Consumer behavior</p> <hr/> <p>This question was to understand if consumers are willing to make compromises in their purchase intention when facing Covid-19. We wanted to investigate if the respondents were willing to make compromises in their decision-making process.</p>
<p>8. Price and quality are considered to be two primary criterions when purchasing a product.</p> <p>Sustainable products are often considered more expensive. But given the current Covid-19 pandemic and the impact it has on our lives it can change your attitude. What is your opinion about this?</p>	<p>The influence on consumer buying behavior</p> <hr/> <p>This question was used to understand how consumers' financial situation affects their price perception and willingness to purchase sustainable food.</p>
<p>9. Grocery stores have implemented safety precautions, how has this impacted you?</p>	<p>Social responsibility</p> <hr/> <p>This question was used to understand if consumers' awareness has shaped their attitudes, beliefs and then impacted their buying behavior.</p>

<p>10. What effect does safety in the store environment have on your choice of store during the Covid-19 pandemic?</p>	<p>The influence on consumer buying behavior</p> <hr/> <p>This question was used to understand if consumers' felt safe by the grocery stores safety precautions and if they chose a particular store to shop in.</p>
<p>11. How are the grocery store's safety precautions impacting your choice of store after the Covid-19 pandemic?</p>	<p>The influence on consumer buying behavior and CSR engagement</p> <hr/> <p>This question was used to understand if consumers' personal consideration of grocery stores' safety precautions provided them value and something they would take in their choice of store when the Covid-19 pandemic is over.</p>
<p>12. Scenario → you hear from your family / friends that a grocery store does not perform after the biosafety precautions issued by the government, e.g. narrow passages, no hand disinfection, no masks, etc. This has resulted in them not feeling safe.</p> <p>After hearing this, what are your thoughts?</p>	<p>The influence on consumer buying behavior</p> <hr/> <p>This question was used to understand how influential consumers are of their family and friends and to what extent it impacts the choice of grocery store.</p>
<p>13. How would your loyalty towards a grocery store be affected depending on their performance of biosafety precautions?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there something the grocery stores could have performed better? If so, what? 	<p>Consumer behavior</p> <hr/> <p>This question was to understand if consumers are satisfied with grocery stores safety precautions and will therefore be loyal to the store. We wanted to elaborate how important safety precautions are in connection with their value of CSR.</p> <p>This question was used to understand if safety precautions in grocery stores created value for consumers. Also, we wanted to know what grocery stores could have done better.</p>
<p>14. How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted your health awareness?</p>	<p>The influence on consumer buying behavior</p> <hr/> <p>This question was used to understand if consumers' have become more aware of their health because of Covid-19 pandemic. We wanted to examine if the increased health awareness has changed their way of consuming food.</p>