Moving towards multisensory embodied experiences in retail brandscapes - An (n)ethnographic case study

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ABSTRACT

To compete effectively in the dynamic retail markets, companies increasingly focus on creating a unique customer experience perceived across the customers' senses. Although multisensory experiences gain increasing traction in academia and practice, there seems to be a lack of literature on the role of the body in shaping a multisensory experience and the application in the retail environment. The purpose of this study is to clarify this omission by studying the interplay between the customers' multisensory experience and on- and offline touchpoints. Following the premise of intelligent embodiment, we employ qualitative (auto)ethnographic and netnographic techniques in studying the customers' embodied experiences in a retail brandscape, Gymshark. The research provides an integrative and dynamic framework that describes the emergence of a multisensory customer experience in relation to online and offline touchpoints. Overall, the study contributes to the literature on embodied approaches in marketing and consumer research focused on retail brand landscapes by demonstrating the value of a multisensory approach, describing how multisensory embodied experiences occur at different touchpoints on- and offline, and providing granularity in terms of intensity, scope, and landscapes (online vs. offline).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Given the continuous homogenization of products in the retail industry, differentiating from competitors is critical when building a brand (Floor, 2006). To be outstanding, the focus is on consumer experience and engagement, for example by engaging the senses of the customer while shopping (Sheth, 2021; Fiore & Kelly, 2007).

So far, several studies have been conducted on sensory marketing in service environments, both in offline contexts with (flagship)stores (Schmitt, 1999; Mattila & Wirtz, 2001; Spence et al., 2014; Kozinets et al., 2002) and in online e-tailing (e.g., Kahn, 2017; Petit et al., 2019). However, these studies are often limited to unisensory experience where individual effects are linked to individual senses (Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017; Spence et al. 2014). Multisensory experience, instead, is the simultaneous activation and interplay of more than one sense shaping customer experiences (Fulkerson, 2014; Stead et al., 2022). The aim of multisensory experience is to distinguish, differentiate and position a brand as an image in the human mind (Hultén, 2011). Especially in retailing, service providers increasingly promote on- and offline multisensory experience for consumers through their own specialized offerings (Wichmann et al., 2021; Heller et al., 2019; Petit et al., 2019). One of the first researchers in this field states: "Instead of focusing on the individual senses in unrealistic isolation ... the individual senses are deeply intertwined, and ... our perceptual experience is inherently multisensory" (Fulkerson, 2014). In the last few years, many companies have gained their competitive advantage by creating a multisensory customer experience (Spence et al., 2014; Pine et al., 1999; Puccinelli et al., 2009).

However, recent research has shown through basic digital interfaces (e.g., screen, mouse, and headphones) similar sensory-rich experiences can be created in an online environment, which was prior lacking, leading to competitive advantages in physical stores (Heller et al., 2019; Petit et al., 2019). Although much research has been done on multisensory experience, the existing literature lacks studies on the activation and interaction of multiple senses simultaneously (Scott & Uncles, 2018; Spence et al. 2014) and what role the senses play in different landscapes (e.g., online vs. offline) (Mahr et al., 2019; Kuuru, 2022). Therefore, this research focuses more specifically on the interplay between multisensory customer experience and on- and offline interactions.

The purpose of this research is to create a deeper knowledge of the interplay between multisensory experience and on- and offline interaction by using an embodied approach. In this vein, two research questions are defined.

RQ1   What is the interplay between multisensory experience and on- and offline touchpoints between customers and providers?

RQ2   How can retailers facilitate the multisensory experience to improve the customer experience?

To explore these questions, this study deploys a qualitative research design. This is underpinned by literature review, that touches on the topics of (multisensory) customer experience and the customer journey. Empirically, ethnographic and netnographic techniques are used to tap into social life practices, cultures and values through observation and reflection (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003; O'Reilly, 2012). Both techniques seek to generate deep human understanding. However, where ethnography focuses on people's interpretations based on interactions (Jonsson, 2015, Rix & Lièvre, 2008), netnography focuses on online communities (Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, 2015).

This study scrutinizes retail brandscapes since they operate in dynamic markets that require moving from a product to a customer experience (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Mariani & Fosso Wamba, 2020). In addition, the research will focus on individuals from Generation Y and Generation Z since despite this generation having grown up with the digital world, they also indicate a continued need for offline shopping experiences in an enjoyable atmosphere (Sullivan and Heitmeyer, 2008; Vojvodić, 2018; Ladhari et al., 2019).

This study contributes to the already existing literature by two contributions. First, we create a better understanding of the interplay between multisensory experience and on- and offline interaction (Stead et al., 2022) by filling the gap on the role of multisensory embodied experiences in shopping (Yakhlef, 2015; Stevens et al., 2019). This is done by demonstrating the value of a multisensory approach, describing how these experiences occur at different touchpoints on-

and offline, and providing granularity in terms of intensity, scope, and landscapes (online vs. offline). Second, even though multisensory experience has been researched several times, this mainly involved literature review (Spence et al., 2014; Fulkerson, 2014; Stead et al., 2022). This research offers a deepening of techniques for understanding multisensory experience by applying ethnographic and netnographic techniques. In addition, netnographic research is also rarely conducted in the retail sector, but particularly in the hotel and banking sectors.

Practically, this study gives service providers a better understanding about facilitating multisensory rich experience across both online and offline channels. Firms are continuously trying to get a better understanding of their customers and end users to fulfill their needs. Multisensory experience is one such way for companies to satisfy customers. However, many brand managers lack the knowledge regarding 'multisensory experience' and how it can be used for their own brand. By providing them with a better understanding of the phenomenon, they can better set up their retail environment according to customer needs.

The previous chapters have framed the research problem, defined the objectives, and indicated the relevance. In the next section, the theoretical background will be discussed. Next, the methodology section contains the research design, including data collection and analysis. Finally, the findings of the study are discussed in the results section, followed by the discussion, conclusion, and recommendations for future research.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter further elaborates on the different theories used in this research. Emphasis will be placed on what the literature says about such experiences in the retail brandscape.

2.1 CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Success in retail is increasingly less about what the retailer must sell but more about how he sells it, or in other words, creating customer experience (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Sachdeva & Goel, 2015).

Customer experience stems from the theory that consumption contains experiential aspects that must be considered (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982).

Basically, an experience is the subjective interaction that exists between a provider and a consumer (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982), which is shaped by both the customer's characteristics and those of the provider and simultaneously influenced by the environment of the interaction (Same & Larimo, 2012). It includes every "cognitive, affective, emotional, social and physical" point of contact with a business, product, or service (Grewal et al., 2009; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In other words, the perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and intensity of emotions that customers have when they are confronted with a product or brand along with the memory of those experiences (Schmitt, 2010; Sachdeva & Goel, 2015). For example, Sachdeva and Goel (2015) found that the need brings consumers inside the store, but the emotions ultimately cause them to stay. Customer experience is a broad concept that looks beyond the focus on controllable touchpoints to a broader understanding including also 'noncontrollable' touchpoints that influence the customer's experience and encompasses social and physical components in addition to cognitive evaluations and affective responses (Hirsch & Levin, 1999). In recent years, the subjectivity of the customer experience (Helkkula, 2011; Jaakkola et al., 2015) and the central role of the customer's environment for the experience (Tynan et al., 2014; Heinonen & Strandvik, 2015) have received increasing attention.

Much existing literature focuses on the various factors that influence the customer's experience, while only a few pays attention to the role of the body in shaping such an experience. Therefore, this study took an embodied approach to customer experience to expand our understanding on a more emotional level.

2.1.1. Embodied experience

From the embodiment perspective, customer experience is an embodied, spatial experience in which a bodily activity is created by and in a space (Yakhlef, 2015). Our body allows us to feel the environment, and at the same time, thanks to the environment, we can feel and experience our bodies. Individuals experience their physical and social environment in a pre-reflective, non-conscious way

through various forms of embodiment, such as seeing, touching, and smelling (Claycomb and Mulberry, 2007).

Embodiment traces back to the famous French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who claimed that the body grants us access to the world as we live in it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The theory sees embodiment as our "perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Embodied knowledge is defined as personal, experiential knowledge rooted in the human body and senses and accumulates over time (Kuuru, 2022). Embodied knowledge is always tied to an individual's unique 'lived' body (Strati, 2007). This lived body is the experienced body; human beings have a lived body in addition to the body while experiencing the world in tactile, visual, olfactory, and auditory ways (Gherardi et al. 2013). In this regard, bodily movements give structure to the shopping environments experienced by the body (Yakhlef, 2015).

'Intelligible embodiment' centers on how the body shapes the mind, and how we use embodied metaphors to interpret our experiences (Gärtner, 2013). The premise of an 'intelligible' body provides a useful means to gain a finer grained understanding of how customers experience across their senses. This phenomenon is called 'viscerality', referring to the "invisible and perceived biological obligations" in the body you are born with (Meadows, 2005). In this way, an experience, without the customer being aware of it or having control over it, can stimulate multiple senses simultaneously, in other words create a multisensory experience.

2.2 MULTISENSORY EXPERIENCE

A brand can influence the embodied experience of the customer by creating a multisensory experience. For example, Stevens et al. (2019) investigated the embodied approach of Hollister Co. One of the results showed that the first sensory encounter, the Hollister fragrance, attracted customers inside. As one customer described, "it was a fantastically sweet, thought-provoking scent that evoked summer and sunshine".

Creating such an experience for consumers is more important than ever (Rauen, 2006). What consumers want is a memorable event that engages them (Sachdeva & Goel, 2015). Consequently, stores are encouraging shopping visits by making shopping more fun and enjoyable (Poulsson & Kale, 2004). The longer a customer spends in a retail environment, the more he is likely to spend (Wakefield & Baker, 1998).

Built environments are defined as 'servicescapes', i.e., physical environments that influence the behavior of both consumers and employees in service organizations (Bitner, 1992). These servicescapes can be divided into three environmental dimensions, namely environmental conditions (e.g., temperature, music, smell), space/function (e.g., layout, equipment, furniture) and signs, symbols, and artifacts (e.g., signage, personal artifacts, style of décor) (Bitner, 1992). The servicescape is thoughtfully designed with different atmospheric cues so that it elicits an emotional sensory response that promotes consumer behavior in the form of, for example, time spending (Krishna, 2012; Spence et al., 2014; Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017) and consumers' affective response towards the store (Doucé & Janssens, 2013). For example, Mattila and Wirtz (2001) investigated the congruency of scent and music as a driver of in-store evaluations and behaviors. For this purpose, they created a 3 (no scent/low arousal scent/high arousal scent) x 3 (no music/low arousal music/high arousal music) fractional, factorial design in a field setting. The result of their study showed that when smell and music match in terms of their arousal potential, the shopping environment is rated more positively, more impulsive buying behavior is exhibited, and more satisfaction is expressed.

Sensory marketing is an element of experiential marketing (Doucé & Janssens, 2013). Experiential marketers find consumers rational and emotional and respond to consumers' need of having pleasurable experiences (Schmitt, 1999). In the retail brandscape, this translates into a shift from product focus to creating customer experiences in the store (Soars, 2009). Sensory marketing is the use of triggers to stimulate customers' senses and influence their perceptions, judgment, behavior, emotion, and cognition (Krishna, 2012). Primarily, sensory stimulation can increase customers' engagement with products or services and establish powerful associations in customers' minds (Petit et al., 2019).

The simultaneous activation and interaction of multiple sensory stimuli (visual, auditory, haptic, olfactory and taste) that trigger processing in different modalities is called 'multisensory' (Stead et al., 2022; Mishra et al., 2021). In a multisensory experience, the

emotional senses are effectively stimulated (Spence, 2022). A certain level of congruence between different atmospheric cues is important for a positive interaction effect (Doucé & Janssens, 2013). For example, Helmefalk and Hultén (2017) have shown a positive effect of multisensory congruent cues on customers' emotions. Moreover, customers indicated that they find multisensory cues, such as auditory and olfactory, more effective than visual cues alone.

These are positive aspects of multisensory experience, but at the same time, strong scents (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001), loud or fast music (Holbrook & Gardner, 1993; Morrison et al., 2011) and warm and saturated colors (Kaltcheva & Weitz, 2006) in a retail environment, can lead to sensory overload, negatively affecting the consumer experience (Spence et al., 2014). However, the literature lacks information on the ideal level of sensory stimulation and what causes overstimulation (Stead et al., 2022). In addition, it is still unknown for service providers how to facilitate a consistent multisensory rich experience across channels (e.g., online vs. offline) (Stead et al., 2022). To figure out the ideal level of sensory stimulation at which embodied feelings can be elicited, the in-store customer journey will be examined.

2.3 CUSTOMER JOURNEY

Creating a multisensory experience occurs during the customer journey through the activation and integration of multisensory stimuli (Stead et al., 2022). Traditionally, the customer journey has been viewed as a 'funnel' or linear process that ends in one purchased offer from a series of potential brands (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). The customer journey was also seen as the process, path, or sequence a customer goes through to use or access an offer from a company (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). It involved every touchpoint and channel customers engage with during their shopping journey (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). The customer-focused philosophy in the marketing field has led to an increasing interest in the customer journey (Crosier & Handford, 2012). The customer journey can take place through two different journey models, a smooth or a sticky model (Siebert et al., 2020). While smooth journeys are more appropriate for instrumental service categories, sticky journeys are premised on the excitement of unpredictable experiences. Central to the sticky journey is the engagement spiral - a "roller coaster ride

of exciting and challenging experiences that motivates increasing experiential engagement over time" (Siebert et al., 2020). Multisensory experiences are therefore found in these sticky journeys where companies invest in endless variation mechanisms and experiences to create this 'roller coaster ride' and keep the adventure exciting to retain customers.

The stages during the customer journey can be separated into: prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). At each stage, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses may be experienced by the consumer, with the consequences of each stage influencing the others (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). This study focuses on the prepurchase phase, as it is during this phase that retailers seek to persuade customers to buy something through a sensory experience.

Nowadays, with the contribution of digital technologies, the customer journey is rather seen as a non-linear process that is interrupted by dynamics such as feedback loops, channel switching and outages (Kranzbühler et al., 2018). In fact, the funnel concept is no longer valid to capture all touchpoints (Grewal et al., 2020). This non-linear structure means that the process is iterative and dynamic where past experiences can influence expectations regarding current and future experiences (Lee et. al, 2018; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014).

The customer's goal (e.g., entertainment, recreation, social interaction, or intellectual stimulation) influences how the customer moves through the stages of the customer journey decision process (Arnold & Reynolds, 2003). Therefore, goals and the resulting customer experiences help create product/shopper goal-oriented categories or structures (Barsalou, 1991). The customer journey together with the retail atmosphere, created in-store or out-of-store through retailer-controlled touchpoints, results in the formation of a customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Roggeveen et al., 2020). In addition, the customer journey illustrates what sensory information is important to customers and how it correlates with their perceptions during their customer journey (Stead et al., 2022).

Currently, the literature lacks information on the extent to which customers process multisensory stimuli during the customer journey (Stead et al., 2022). In other words, are customers aware that they are affected by multisensory stimuli during different

online and offline touchpoints of the customer journey?

2.4 ON- AND OFFLINE TOUCHPOINTS

During the customer journey, customers interact with businesses through a multifaceted set of touchpoints across multiple channels and media (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The customer experience is built through a collection of touchpoints at different stages of a customer's decision process or purchase journey (Pucinelli et al. 2009; Verhoef et al. 2009). Touchpoints are individual contacts between the firm and the customer at distinct points in the experience (Homburg et al. 2015; Schmitt 2003). Or in other words, "an episode of direct or indirect contact with a brand or firm (including retailers)" (Verhoef et al., 2015). Four categories of touchpoints can be identified during the customer journey: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Brand-owned touchpoints are designed, managed, and controlled by the company, while partner-owned touchpoints also involve one or more of its partners (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). An example of a brand-specific touchpoint is an e-channel touchpoint that takes place in the online environment, where a retailer offers consumers an online shopping opportunity through a specific digital form of shopping (e.g., an app) (Wagner et al., 2020). Customer-owned touchpoints, on the other hand, cannot be influenced or controlled by the company, partners, or others (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Social/external touchpoints relate to others or external factors that may influence the customer experience (e.g., other customers, peer influences, independent sources of information, environments) (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

When brands create sensory stimuli for consumers through offline touchpoints in the customer journey, their brains capture perceptual, motor, and introspective states related to the various senses and integrate them into multisensory representations that are stored in memory (Petit et al., 2019). Despite traditionally not being able to touch, smell or taste objects over the Internet (Gallace & Spence, 2014), this does not mean that the senses do not influence cognition during online touchpoints. Exposure to online images of products customers have previously encountered can trigger spontaneous perceptual re-experiences (i.e., embodied mental simulations) of multisensory representations stored through in-store experience (Chen et al., 2016; Petit et al. 2016). These perceptual re-experiences involve some of the same brain regions recruited during previous in-store experiences, which can elicit similar sensations (Simmons et al., 2005).

Since the literature lacks clear information on how retailers can facilitate the multisensory experience created through online and offline touchpoints during the pre-purchase phase to improve the customer experience, this study changes that.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study combines the insights from the previous chapter on customer experience, multisensory experience, customer journey, and touchpoints with ethnographic and netnographic techniques. This chapter explains and describes in further detail the research methods, consisting of the research design, the case selection, and the data collection and analysis.

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research aims to deepen knowledge of differentiation for brands through offline and online multisensory experience to optimize customer-brand interaction. To answer the research questions, the study uses a qualitative research method. The qualitative research method collects, analyzes, and interprets non-numerical data (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). Qualitative research offers the opportunity to identify issues from the perspective of the research participants so that meanings and interpretations they give to behaviors, events or objects can be understood (Hennink et al., 2019). Since the study is exploratory in nature, ethnographic and netnographic techniques are fitting.

The research questions will be studied in the context of retail brandscapes since they operate in dynamic markets that require moving from a product to a customer experience (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Mariani & Fosso Wamba, 2020). To compete effectively in retailing, low prices and innovative manufacturing alone are not enough; companies must focus on the customer's shopping experience (Grewal et al., 2009).

3.1.1. Gen Y and Gen Z

The study focuses on individuals of Generation Y and Generation Z. Since the generations differ in ages, they have different needs and will also have different experiences (Dimock, 2022). Gen Y - or 'millennials' - are grown up in a media-saturated, brand-conscious world (Sullivan and Heitmeyer, 2008; Bilgihan, 2016). The marketing literature varies in delineating this generation as those born between 1977 and 1994 (Butcher et al., 2017) but also as those born from 1981 to 1996 (Dimock, 2022) or from 1982 to 2000 (Moore, 2012). In this study, individuals born between 1981 and 1996 are considered millennials. Most millennials are technologically savvy and use the internet for product research, purchasing, and experiencing (Nash, 2019). Millennials are considered online shoppers (Bilgihan, 2016) with technology making them a globally homogeneous group (Moore, 2012). In an offline environment, millennials need hedonic shopping experiences in an enjoyable atmosphere (Ladhariet al., 2019). This generation is most value- and emotion-driven (Chuah et al., 2017).

Gen Z - or 'post-millennials'- are individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2022). Nearly a third of Generation Z was born with Internet technology and grew up with the need to be virtually always connected to others (Turner, 2015). Having interaction on social media is an important part of Gen Z's socialization behavior, where they build strong virtual bonds (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017). Gen Z is "the first generation born into a world where every physical aspect (people and place) has a digital equivalent" (Stillman & Stillman, 2017). Although the generation is digital native, they desire unique and pleasant shopping experiences in a brick-and-mortar store (Pantano & Naccarato, 2010). Gen Z needs a shopping experience that consists of socialization, novelty, entertainment, instant gratification, interaction, and fun (Vojvodić, 2018).

Since these digital native generations need an in-store experience and therefore will always believe what they see, smell, feel, hear and taste (Cossío Aparicio, 2021), millennials and Gen Z were chosen as the target groups for this study.

3.1.2. Ethnography

Ethnography stems from anthropology and sociology and requires a researcher to comprehensively study social life practices, cultures, and values (Elliott and Jankel-Elliott, 2003), through participant observation and researcher reflection (O'Reilly, 2012). Ethnography posits that the best and most authentic way to understand an unknown cultural environment is to immerse oneself in it (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Nowadays, ethnography in social sciences (Brewer, 2000) is commonly conducted in everyday settings with the goal of understanding people's actions, perceptions, and behaviors (O'Reilly, 2012). Ethnographic research provides a detailed understanding of complex social phenomena and the personal experiences associated with them (Adler & Adler, 2007). In fact, ethnography is considered the best way to capture embodied experiences in this regard (Sparkes, 2009; Valtonen et al., 2010; Yakhlef, 2015) by using a range of qualitative methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and case studies (Barker, 2004). Merleau-Ponty, the founder of embodied theory, applied ethnography himself in his book by basing his perception on his own experience in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

The full participation of the researcher is also reflected in the name 'autoethnography' which includes self (auto), ethnos (culture) and graphy (process) (Reed-Danahay, 1997). With an autoethnographic approach, personal experiences are used to understand larger cultural phenomena (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography is a method of describing how oneself interacts with others in the social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997). This validates freedom of movement and expression on the part of the researcher (Adams et al., 2015). In this study, autoethnography allows the researcher to expand the understanding of how embodiment shapes experiences (Ellis et al., 2010) by placing the ethnographer and her lived body at the center of real-world experience.

An ethnographic technique was chosen to examine the multisensory, embodied experience in the selected retail store, the Gymshark store in London. First, we participated in the research environment to gain researcher reflection. This included walking around the store while taking pictures of various aspects of the store. Furthermore, we observed the behavior, emotions, and interactions of the participants with the aim of finding out how the customer responds to the multisensory touchpoints created by the retail brand. To create a 'thick description', we took field notes of these observations. A thick description reflects the complexity of the

situation, including tacit conventions and overlooked assumptions obtained through detailed observations (Geertz, 1973). According to ethnographers, without these detailed observations, it is more difficult to make a meaningful interpretation of human actions. Next to participation and observations, interactions in the field are considered critical during ethnographic investigation (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Short face-to-face interviews were conducted to gain further explanation of customer's behavior. An interview guide was created to make sure that all the important subjects were covered, and to facilitate homogeneity between the different interviews (Appendix A). As seen in the interview guide, these interviews were divided into categories to obtain information effectively. The categories mentioned in the short face-to-face interviews were: 1) overall experience, 2) smell, 3) sight, 4) taste, 5) hearing, 6) touch and 7) feeling. Of course, these categories only served to guide the interviews with the customers and did not play a dominant role in the responses.

3.1.3. Netnography

Today, customers are constantly connected to the Internet through their cell phones where young people also share their opinions, experiences, and daily activities online (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). In 1997, netnography was developed in response to the upcoming use of the Internet by customers, using an ethnographic research approach to examine consumption-related aspects of customers' lives online (Kozinets, 1997; Kozinets, 2006). There are several definitions of netnography that have evolved over time since the evolution of netnographic research is closely linked to the evolution of the internet and information technologies (Heinonen & Medberg, 2018). The early definition of netnography refers to the online communities created from computer-mediated or Internet-based communication (Kozinets, 1998). This definition emphasizes fieldwork, communities and online culture, and cultural anthropology. Later, the focus was simplified to online fieldwork, defining netnography as participatory-observational research based on online fieldwork (Kozinets, 2002). In doing so, online marketing research techniques provide consumer insights (Kozinets, 2002). However, the most recent definition of netnography shifted the emphasis to data and the procedural elements of the method, considering the earlier connections to

ethnography and anthropology as inessential (Kozinets, 2020).

Virtual groups, created via online channels, have 'real' existence for their participants which means they have implications for many aspects of behavior, including consumer behavior (Kozinets, 1998). Brand-customer interactions on these online channels are based on information technologies (Sousa & Voss, 2006). Indeed, netnography uses this publicly available information in online forums to identify and understand the needs and factors driving the decisions of relevant online consumer groups (Kozinets, 2002). Netnography is often seen as a synonym of digital ethnography, online ethnography, virtual ethnography, and cyber-ethnography (Grincheva, 2014). However, netnography is a distinct research method with its own set of methodological guidelines (Caliandro, 2016).

For the purpose of this study, we decided to use a netnographic technique to focus on the online touchpoints and generate deep human understanding about the decision drivers in the retail landscape of Gen Y and Gen Z. The primary reasons to use a netnographic technique were: (1) netnography has emerged as a comprehensive, pragmatic method; (2) netnography has been widely adopted in the field of consumer research (e.g., De Lassus & Freire, 2014; Khan & Fatma, 2022) which attests to its potency and effectiveness. In this study, netnography is conducted through blog analysis, social media analysis, Google Review analysis, and the examination of behavior in online forums. These platforms provided insights into customers' online opinions about the retailer.

3.2 CASE SELECTION

Consumers increasingly require multisensory experiences in retail environments (Kpossa & Lick, 2020). However, retail studies often fail to address embodied theory (Yakhlef, 2015). To fill this gap in the existing literature on retailing, our specific focus is on consumers' multisensory embodied experiences in relation to retail companies. In this study, the retail company Gymshark was chosen as an empirical case study. While other companies have moved from offline to online in recent years, Gymshark has made the choice to open a physical store in addition to their online store. This remarkable choice made them an interesting case study for research. This section further

describes the context of the study by explaining the company and their addition to the study in more detail.

Gymshark

As mentioned above, Gymshark is bringing the online to offline. The online sports and fitness brand since 2012 has changed to an omnichannel retailer with the opening of its first physical store on Regent Street in London in October 2022. As founder Ben Francis mentioned before the opening: "It's going to be experiential, and we want to bring as much of that Gymshark vibe and community into this place" (Faithfull, 2021). The store is designed with a focus on the community, which aligns with the shopping experience and the desire to make exercise accessible, whether a beginner or an experienced athlete (Faithfull, 2022). Its marketing strategy using influencer marketing on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok is one of the reasons why 'the Nike of Gen Z' is now worth over a billion euros. Since Gymshark demonstrates a strong use of both the online and offline environment, Gymshark is chosen as the case company. Furthermore, the addition of an offline store in an all-digital era is remarkable. It will be interesting to see how this offline store adds to their already great success.

3.3 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This study aims to generate a deeper understanding of the interplay between multisensory experience and on- and offline interaction, requiring access to individual experiences to explore the often-hidden dimensions of experience. Ethnographic approaches offer a holistic description of retail experience through understanding, description, and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). We decided to turn to autoethnography, which allows us to expand the understanding of how embodiment shapes experiences (Ellis et al., 2010) by placing the ethnographer and her lived body at the center of real experience (i.e., the multisensory experience in the store). True to ethnographic tradition, the researcher traveled to London to fully immerse herself in the Gymshark shopping experience.

Both first-order data and second order concepts are used. First-order data is collected during field activity with observations of behaviors and verbal records of interviews (Arnould & Wallendorf,

1994). To generate the first-order data, observing, communicating (listening, questioning), and recording skills are required (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013).

One source of data is spectator-type observation that refers to "what can be seen directly through the eyes of the ethnographer" (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013) while the researcher remains at a distance and superficially orients activities related to the subject of interest (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). In this study, behavior and emotions are observed with the aim of finding out how the customers respond to the multisensory touchpoints created by the retail brand. In addition, the observations help orient the researcher while learning about where people congregate, what other places of gathering or activity are located in the store, what barriers the customer experiences during the visit, and the customer's time commitment. These unobtrusive measures describe customers' behavior, emotions, and experience. By categorizing this information, the customers' emotional reactions and behaviors could be identified. The observations are described by taking field notes. Van Maanen (2011) argues that field notes are an ongoing 'stream-of- consciousness' commentary about what is happening in the research. In addition, short face-to-face interviews are used as a source of intrusive data collection to ascertain customers' embodied experience. Intrusive data illustrates the experience of customers through their own eyes. The interviews enable consumers to describe their feelings, sensations, behaviors, and experiences in a personal, reflective manner. This provides access to informants' perceptions, values, beliefs, and internal states (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). By following the interview guide (Appendix A), several questions are asked to the participants to ascertain their sensory and embodied experience in the store. To complement the observations, the observed customers are asked behavior-specific questions to emotionally explain their behavior in the store, find out what their embodied experience is during the process in the store and why they make certain choices. Since the researcher would like to include quotes from these participants in the study, the interview will be recorded to support the field notes.

The researcher's actual interpretations of the first order data, are called second order data (Visconti, 2010). During the generation of the second-order data, both unobtrusive and obtrusive data collection

techniques are used (Visconti, 2010). In this study, an unobtrusive technique is applied for the observations and obtrusive technique is applied for the interviews. The data were interpreted through an iterative process, a theory-building approach that involved going back and forth from the ethnographer's field notes, observations and interview transcripts to the literature. Useful patterns and similarities can be seen when looking at the field notes, observations, and the interviews.

The empirical data of this study consists not only of written notes and the interview transcriptions, but also of an autoethnographic description. Autoethnographic descriptions are personal and subjective, but at the same time they are related to reality and the surrounding culture making them generalizable (Ellis et al., 2010).

Table 1. Key figures in data collection

Type	Number of sessions	Amount of data and specifications
Observations	30	2
Short interviews	8	34

4. FINDINGS

This chapter will explain the findings from the ethnographic and netnographic research techniques. In addition to describing the findings, emerging themes connect the findings to the research question after which a framework will be presented.

4.1 CHARACTERIZATION OF MULTISENSORY EXPERIENCES

This section describes the findings in which the multisensory experiences are characterized into five sensory dimensions. These dimensions are summarized in Table 2, including the overall experience and emotional state whose significance is explained later in this section. For clarity, exemplary quotes are included which were documented during on- and offline data collection. The findings are supplemented by an autoethnographic description of the ethnographer's experience in the store, including interpretations, which are included in Table 3.

4.1.1 Overall experience

In this study, overall experience is seen as an encompassing dimension related to the other dimensions. A conscious decision was made to start with this overarching dimension so that it was possible to see if customers were aware of the different multisensory stimuli. It turned out that customers began to talk mostly about the unique services the store offered (Exhibit 1) and the way they were treated by employees, in other words, the service interactions. With these free training sessions, the brand responds to the needs of their gym-going customers for help from professionals or just the customers who do not know how to start exercising. This customer need for help is also evident in one of the YouTube comments:

Really like the idea of the free gym classes to show you how to use the gear, I definitely have that issue that I don't know what I'm doing in the gym" - (Will, 2022).

The fact that customers mainly appointed the services, and the way employees treated them shows that customers primarily look at the human perspective in a store when describing their overall experience. This human interaction is something offline can offer while online cannot. For that reason, as the 'IRL-director' (In Real Life) describes below, Gymshark focuses offline on the creation of such a personal experience through human interaction.

Offline is all about creating a personal experience. We want to engage with our customers in real-life experience - (IRL director Gymshark)

People crave this human-to-human interaction after the need for it was accelerated by Covid (Hu, 2022).

This human interaction is also something that is described in the autoethnographic description. The simple and small conversation that began after being approached by a staff member evoked a comfortable and welcoming feeling.

Exhibit 1. Service interactions

4.1.2 Sight

The first sensory dimension refers to the visual sense, the sight. Exhibit 2 presents the spatial design of the industrial look reflected in the store.
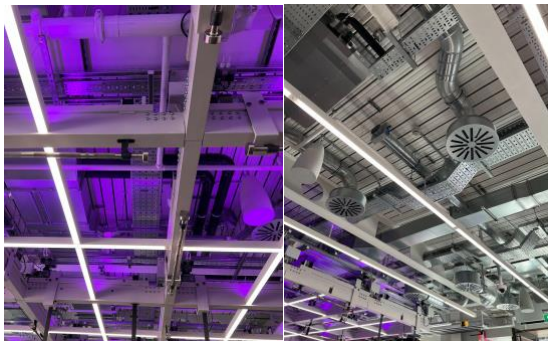

Exhibit 2. Spatial design

The cool and bright colors can evoke an emotional state of excitement, visual clarity, and approach intent (Park & Farr, 2007). This is also reflected in respondents' feelings where they indicated that the lighting made them feel more welcome (approach intent) and since the lighting shines throughout the store and is not too bright, the products are clearly visible (visual clarity). At the same time, they report that the industrial look of the ceiling and lighting evokes the same emotional state of excitement in them that they experience in the gym.

Exhibit 3. Moving images on visual screens

Besides the industrial look, large visual screens are placed in the store shown in Exhibit 3. The results show that these images influence the customer's mindset. Seeing other people working out and being healthy encouraged the customers to live a healthy lifestyle themselves. They associate this healthy lifestyle with healthy eating and working out regularly.

Additionally, the mannequins in Exhibit 4 can be seen as triggers to evoke embodied feelings in the customer's lived body. By casting, scanning and 3D printing real people from the community or ambassador roster, Gymshark has ensured that everyone can identify themselves in the store (Francis, 2022). This is translated in the store by mannequins with different body types and different origins. In addition to the diversity in appearance of the mannequins, they are placed in training positions to present a clear understanding of how the clothing forms during exercise.

Exhibit 4. Representative mannequins

Table 2. Key figures in data collection

Dimension	Meaning	Manifestation in practice	Exemplary quotes (on- & offline)
Overall experience *What does the brand do to create an overall experience and how does the customer feel about it?*	The customer is central, with their needs, wants and desires integrated into experiences and interactions.	Engagement of humanity: employees connecting with customers and offering of free sessions (group classes by Gymshark Athletes, personal training, personal shopping)	*I felt a little insecure and anxious when I walked in. However, this feeling did not last long and was dispelled when I entered the store. The staff said 'hello' to me and asked if they could help me with anything. This gave me an excited tickle in my stomach. I felt special and comfortable. - Respondent 4 @Gymshark* *I always go online shopping, but this Gymshark store creates a really nice overall experience that makes me want to make the effort to go to the store. I don't even necessarily go for the clothes, but the fact that they organize events, and you can join free workouts given by fitness influencers gives me a sense of connection with a motivated group of people. - Respondent 1 @Gymshark*
(1) Sight *How do customers feel about what they see in the store?*	The ambiance, presentation of products and creation of a comfortable shopping experience is influenced by the visual presentation.	Website, social media, and digital influencers create an interaction between visual experience and online touchpoints. Images and videos of toned people offering workout inspiration, tips and sharing other fitness-related content. Bright lights to create a welcoming feeling, large moving images to inspire and 3D printed mannequins based on real people working out to ensure inclusiveness.	*I'm here just to thank you, watching your videos inspire me to work harder, whenever I loose motivation, I think of you. - @TikTok* *The overall interior fits the brand and is a good reflection on much of the gym and fitness industry - minimal but highly functional. - @Google Reviews* *The lights are bright and shining all over the entire store.[...] The first thought that came to mind was that I felt like being in the gym instead of being in a retail store on Regent Street. When I got close, I even saw that the clothes were hanging from the bars that I normally use for my exercises. I was surprised and I think that is pretty cool. - Respondent 8 @Gymshark* *The lights in the shop were not too bright and the large amount of windows also brought in natural light which made me feel nice and welcome. - Respondent 4 @Gymshark* *When I entered, I entered a bright space that made me feel welcoming. I immediately became happy as I saw many colorful clothes nicely hung on hangers and many colorful images on large digital screens. It felt like there was life in the store, like there was movement. - Respondent 3 @Gymshark*

			When entering the store and seeing the mannequins, I saw that they have very inclusive sizes which makes me feel very well and comfortable in my own body. - Respondent 7 @Gymshark
			I feel embodied in the store by the fact that they have clothes for everyone, no matter if you wear a S or a XL. The mannequins perfectly show that every body is beautiful. [...] They give me more confidence and a comfortable feeling to walk around here. Not everyone has a perfect and tight body, right? - Respondent 5 @Gymshark
(2) Sound *How do customers feel about what they hear in the store?*	Music sets the mood and tone of the store. Music can be quickly associated to a particular place and thereby create a certain atmosphere.	Music consisting of a mix of EDM, House and HipHop to create a motivating, inspiring and informal atmosphere.	*This type of music makes me happy and motivated. It reminds me of the music in the gym. It's up tempo which makes you get hyped up. - Respondent 7 @Gymshark* *When I hear this music, I feel my body moving inside and need to control myself not to move my body and start to dance. This music makes me energetic. - Respondent 1 @Gymshark*
(3) Taste *What does adding taste do to the customer?*	Adding taste to the shopping experience elicits an embodied response from the customer. It awakens memories and it makes customers feel more at ease and special.	An in-store juice bar and coffee shop to offer customers healthy refreshments while waiting, during shopping or after their purchase where they receive a 10% discount when showing their purchase receipt.	*This is the full experience. You walk around the Gymshark store with your Joe and the Juice power shake. - Ben Francis @YouTube* *Holding a healthy juice while shopping in the store adds something to my experience, since I feel healthy while drinking. Now that I have finished the juice, I feel comfortable in my body. It's the same feeling I experience after I finish a workout. I feel fulfilled. - Respondent 1 @Gymshark* *Holding a coffee while shopping makes it cozy and I feel a bit safer having something in my hand. - Respondent 4 @Gymshark* *When walking around with a juice I would feel fresh and hydrated. - Respondent 8 @Gymshark*
(4) Smell *What do people smell and how does this make*	The scents evoke strong associations with memories in customers. This contributes strongly to the imagination of a	Floor covered with rubber mats creating a gym-relative smell, the scent of healthy smoothies and coffee for a fresh, healthy smell and scented	*When entering the store, my nose filled with a fresh scent. This gave me energy and a boost inside. - Respondent 2 @Gymshark* *The smell really gave me the feeling of being in the gym since it smelled like the rubbish matts that are also in the gym. [...] This gave me a calm feeling*

them feel?	specific place.	candles at the fitting rooms to avoid foul odors.	*where my heart rate calmed down again after the many impressions awakened outside.* - Respondent 6 @Gymshark
(5) Touch *What does the ability to touch do to the customer?*	Touching and trying products offers customers a tactile experience that visual perception alone cannot provide. It provides the opportunity to judge the quality of the material and construction, by allowing the product to feel on the skin.	Online written descriptions of the haptic properties of the product to inform the customer about the quality of the product through words. The store provides a place to touch and test the products to feel and experience the quality.	*I was really attached to the store to feel the fabrics in real life* - Respondent 2 @Gymshark
Emotional state *In what ways does the brand bring the customer into a different emotional state?*	Understanding the emotional state of customers and creating positive emotional experiences can increase customer satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word of mouth.	The industrial look, bright lights, rubber floor, fresh scent and gym equipment combined with a juice bar for refueling creates a gym-oriented experience.	*The smell reminds me of my gym, like rubber. This makes me feel good and motivated like I already had done a workout. This is a nice feeling because it makes me feel fulfilled and proud since I work on being the best version of myself.* - Respondent 5 @Gymshark *The music connects me to working out. It reminds me of my small fitness place at home. When I do or have done a workout, I listen to chill music. The music gives me a warm feeling inside, the feeling of coming home.* - Respondent 3 @Gymshark *It kind of smells like the gym because of the rubbish floor. Since I always feel excited, strong, and energetic in the gym, I also get that feeling here. [...]I feel my heart beating faster with my body giving the signal of wanting to move.* - Respondent 8 @Gymshark *It didn't feel like I was walking into a store, but more a gym. [...] This gave me the experience like I was shopping in a gym. I could totally picture myself training in that blue set. So, yes, I also bought the set. I couldn't get him out of my mind.* - Respondent 6 @Gymshark

Exhibit 5 presents the adjustable lighting in the fitting rooms which also came up frequently during the observations: [customer switches between the lights in the fitting room and looks surprised]. When the customer was asked why he was constantly changing lights and whether this added value for him, he replied: "*I was impressed by the different modes but would still end up using the standard lightnin*g". This means that for this customer, the adjustable lights are seen as unique, but he is not affected by them.

However, this is not the case with every customer. In fact, there was another observation regarding the lighting in the fitting rooms: [customer presses the brightest lights and starts taking selfies in her new clothes]. Asking why this customer was going to take selfies with this light, she replied "*This is the perfect Instagram light*". This comment presents that for her, too, the customizable lighting makes the experience even more unique, but she was also influenced by it in actually using it when taking an Instagram photo. With the adjustable lighting, customers can choose their own lighting and thereby their desired ambiance. Where warm and muted colors generate coziness and relaxing, bright lighting creates an energetic and lively vibe. This means customers can literally create their own desired atmosphere. The findings show that the right ambiance makes customers feel comfortable and welcome, positively influencing the overall shopping experience.

Exhibit 5. Adjustable lightning

4.1.3 Sound

The third sensory dimension, sound, relates to the auditory senses. Customers indicated that the music in the Gymshark store added to their sensory stimulation and reinforced their desire to move their body. In addition, field notes clearly indicated that the mood of customers in the store was largely determined by the music. The music caused some of them to sing and swing along. It created an energetic feeling, as I also

experienced myself: "*The music enhanced my excited feeling and made me feel like moving and exercising*". Compared to some other stores, customers reported that the volume was not too high. This made conversations easy and verbal interactions between staff and customers frequent. The literature shows that the right volume prevents sensory overload, where customers receive too many stimuli at once, negatively impacting the consumer experience. As the customers themselves described, the music functioned only to create ambience and as background noise to make the customer feel comfortable without over-stimulating them.

4.1.4 Taste

Exhibit 6. In-house juice bar and coffee shop

The fourth sense dimension, taste, is covered by the gustatory sense. Taste was introduced into the store through an in-house juice and coffee bar, which is shown in Exhibit 6. Whereas at luxury stores like Tiffany's or Cartier the customer is offered a champagne to match this ultimate feeling of luxury, Gymshark offers light refreshments such as coffee, tea, juices, sandwiches, and healthy snacks matching that need for refreshments after working out. Customers indicate that these refreshments and Joe and the Juice in general are strongly associated in their minds with a healthy lifestyle. In doing so, the brand responds to the desired healthy lifestyle provoked by the moving screens described in 4.1.2.

In addition, the field notes indicated that customers had the urge to share the vibe in-store with the outside world: [customer picks up his Power Shake and takes a picture of the logo with the store on the background and adds it to his Instagram story]. When this customer was asked why he took a picture, he replied: "*I am very excited about it. It is so aesthetic that I had to take a picture. These are my two favorite*

brands". He described this excited feeling as: "*I felt a smile come across my face when I picked up my order. I felt energetic and my heart started beating faster".* The connection between customers and brands is so strong that it even leads to embodied responses (e.g., "*my heart started beating faster*"). This feeling of excitement and a faster heartbeat indicate that the customer's emotional state is changing as opposed to before this moment. At the same time, this contributes to providing entertainment and instant gratification in-store, which is desired by Gen Z (Vojvodić, 2018).

4.1.5 Smell

The fifth sensory dimension, scent, was created in the store by different elements. Exhibit 7 shows the main contributor to the smell, a floor completely covered with rubbish mats. These mats are not only to visualize a workout area but also to create a specific atmosphere in the store. The interviews showed that when smelling the rubbish scent, personal feelings emerged where some of the customers felt energized and motivated while others found calmness. This shows that smell can quickly evoke a personal association with a particular place.

In addition, refreshments from the in-house juice and coffee house (described in 4.1.4) contributed to the fresh and energetic smell that customers described. The products like fruits and vegetables blended into smoothies created a natural and fresh smell.

Finally, fragrance was maintained in an environment where unpleasant odors can be prevalent such as fitting rooms by using scented candles. Through these elements, customers experience a fresh and pleasant fragrance throughout their journey.
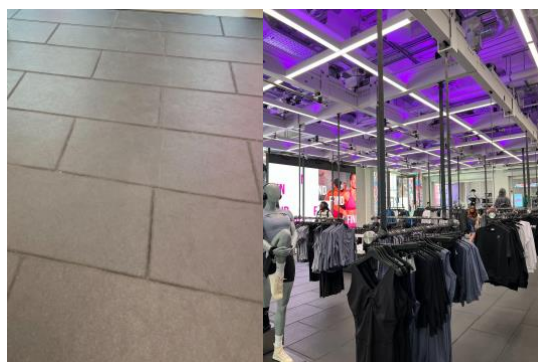

Exhibit 7. Rubbish floor

4.1.6 Touch

Truly setting a new level of shopping, love the fact you can try and test your new clothing out in the gym and potentially with a Gymshark athlete - YouTube (LewisL91, 2022)

Haptic elements of sensuous experience are not neglected in the Gymshark store, with Gymshark claiming that its fabrics are breathable, quick-drying, and stretchy. Through written descriptions of the haptic properties of the products, Gymshark helps their customers online assess the texture, dimensions, and materials of the product. However, it is not possible to feel the fabrics through your screen. In-store, the desire to feel the fabrics was a strong one for several of the respondents, as also the following field note shows: [customer touches the shorts, rubs the fabric, and takes a closer look]. In addition, I also experienced this myself: "*Feeling the fabrics gave me confirmation or additional information that I don't get online. In addition, I saw everyone touching the clothes, so it was also a kind of copycat behavior"*.

As Lewis describes, Gymshark truly sets a new level of shopping by offering not only the possibility of touching the fabrics, but also testing them out in a specially designed 'Pro Bench' area. In doing so, they differentiate themselves from the market, providing a unique experience. During the tactile experience, the consumer's behavior is driven by instinctive, non-cognitive and pre-conscious desires, rather than cognitive, conscious processes, to make contact with the clothing. As a result, the customer is quickly tempted to test the clothing in such an area without feeling shame. This results in a deeply embodied, sensory response that is vividly conveyed.

4.1.7 Emotional state

Cool new store with a really unique aesthetic. I think Gymshark are in a league of their own in the athletic world, and this store is an attestation to that - Google Review (Defaux, 2023)

Emerging from the autoethnographic description, the in-store feelings are elicited by typical gym equipment installed in the store, for example weight plates, bars and lifting straps as represented by Exhibit 8. "*Seeing real sports equipment in the store puts me back in the setting of walking through a real gym*". Through this imagination of a particular place, it puts customers in

a certain emotional state that corresponds to how they feel in that location. This experience is also described in the autoethnographic description: "*As a girl who goes to the gym regularly, the gym atmosphere in the store made me feel welcome and warm because for me, the gym is a place where I can clear my head and feel comfortable and non-judgmental*". The aesthetic of this gym to which respondents and the ethnographer refer is, as Defaux describes, a unique one. It confirms that Gymshark is "*a class apart in the athletics world*", meaning there is no sports brand like Gymshark that creates such an experience where your emotional state is affected. This again reflects that the way Gymshark presents itself in the market enables the brand to create a unique position.

Exhibit 8. Workout equipment in-store

Table 3. Autoethnographic description

1.1	**Overall experience**	**Connection to and interpretation of multisensory experience**
	When I walked into Regent Street and saw the logo of Gymshark, I immediately got that feeling where you get *jitters in your stomach*. Since Gymshark is such a big sportswear brand on social media, I had *high expectations* from the store. As the customers before me did, I took a picture with the logo in front of the store so I could show it to my friends. This instantly recalled the old days where I used to take a picture in front of the Abercrombie & Fitch store. At the time, this was the most famous and loved brand of my generation, so it was cool if you had been there. It gave a *sense of belonging*. This same feeling came up now. When I walked into the store, I was surprised and noticed that *I started slowing down my stride*. The only thing I thought was how could this be a store on the most retail-focused street in London? The previous Regent Street stores I visited focused on presenting their clothes in the best possible way with spotlights on the most expensive items. Here, this was certainly not the case. I smelled a familiar scent. I couldn't place it right away but when I looked down, I saw the rubber mats placed on the floor. These are *the same mats that are also located throughout the gym I go to*. At the same time, I heard chill music at a volume that was just right to understand each other and the clothes racks (which were sports bars) were attached to the ceiling by the kind of straps I normally use for my deadlifts. The music enhanced my excited feeling and *made me feel like moving and exercising*. As a girl who goes to the gym regularly, *the gym atmosphere in the store made me feel welcome and warm because for me, the gym is a place where I can clear my head and feel comfortable and non-judgmenta*l. The lights were bright and neutral throughout the store with some purple accents. When I looked up, I saw an	Feeling of excitement Temporality in experience: Past experiences at play and shaping behavior Desire: Affiliation Underlying emotion: Impressed Association to specific place Energetic feeling Temporality in experience: Recognizable feelings shaping present feelings

industrial look consisting mostly of pipes. *This is the same view I have when lying on a yoga mat in the gym*. Turning to the left, I saw a guard standing and when I looked further, I saw more standing throughout the store. These guards always gave me a feeling of luxury and exclusivity. When I sat down on the big table in the center of the store, I saw many employees walking by in all-black outfits consisting of sweatpants or leggings combined with a tight shirt with 'team' on the back *showing off their toned bodies*. They enthusiastically showed customers around the store, and I saw the togetherness within the team. Everyone was happy to see each other and greeted each other exuberantly. This recalled the *community at the gym* with whom you share a common passion and who you see for a few hours a week. As I sat, I heard the blenders of Joe and the Juice. When I hear a blender, it automatically reminds me of the healthy smoothies I often make at home. Looking down, I noticed the attachment of wheels under literally every element in the store. It became clear to me how flexible this store was and that everything could be pushed aside. I immediately linked this to the straps on the clothing racks, because of course they could also be raised that way. An employee approached me. "Hi, are you looking for something specific or are you just browsing?". I replied that I was just resting for a minute. "If you do need me, I am here to help". This small conversation made me feel welcome and comfortable. It made me feel like I *mattered in the store* because they gave me the attention I unconsciously desire. As I continued my tour through the store, I became aware that I was touching all the clothes. *I wanted to feel the fabrics*. Feeling the fabrics gave me confirmation or additional information that I don't get online. In addition, I saw everyone touching the clothes, so it was also a *kind of copycat behavior*. When I looked up from the clothes, I saw a dark room in the corner which was named the 'sweat room'. The room was filled with large mirrors, weights, and dark lights. A workout room in a store that sells workout clothes is so professional that the only thing I can think of is that *the quality of the clothes must be good* if they operate so professionally. As I walked up the stairs to see the second floor, I came across the text "this is your sign to workout out" circled with bumper plates hanging from the ceiling. *Seeing these sports equipment in the store reminds me of walking through a real gym*. When I arrived at the fitting room, I was distracted by a button with 4 different settings. With the lights coming from both the front and the top, for the first time in my life I did not feel uncomfortable in a fitting room. Instead, *I felt confident*. In every other retail store, the light only comes from above, so I always come out of the fitting room more uncertain than when I went in. From the fitting rooms, I could walk through to the 'Pro Bench', a small gym area where customers could test the products. I hesitated for a moment but

Association to specific place

Physical impressiveness

Association to specific place

Feeling of inclusiveness

Desire: Physical contact

Desire: Affiliation

Assumption based on past experience

Temporality in experience: Recall a place that leads to imagination

Feelings evoked by the atmosphere

then decided to do a quick squat anyway to make sure the leggings weren't showing through. Now I had better take advantage of this opportunity because online it's always just guessing if it won't show through. When I returned to the fitting room, I had a moment of realization. I could only glow with joy and excitement because *this whole experience felt so unreal.* Before I left the store, I bought myself a juice called the 'Hydration Station' which made me leave the store with a special and healthy feeling. Indeed, my body felt fresh and hydrated while drinking. Looking back on my journey through the store, I felt *like a kid in a candy store* again.	Meaning: Extraordinary experience Result: Fulfilled in needs

1.2   Personal training experience

To get the whole experience in the store, I decided to book a 121-personal training session. After I booked this online, I already became a little bit nervous. Nervous because I will be trained by *a real* 'Gymshark pro'. When I think of Gymshark*, I think of toned and strong people*. So, I felt a little bit intimidated already. When I walked towards the changing rooms before my session started, *my heart was beating fast*. When I arrived at the dressing room, it was so professional that I got an *exclusive feeling*. There were Dysons föhns, several douche cabinets and lockers. To get from the locker room to the Pro Bench area, I had to go through the store from the ground floor to the second floor. This walk felt eternal to me, and I got an *awkward feeling* while walking through the store in my leggings. When entering the workout area, I felt safer, and the Gymshark Pro was already waiting for me with his iPad in his hand. He looked professional and *my nervousness turned into excitement and gratitude*. The man started with a little chat about me, where I was from and where he could help me with. He showed me exercises and gave me personal nutrition tips. At first it felt strange that I was working out in a store, but after a while *I didn't realize this at all*. The trainer was nice, interested, and helped me so much that I felt very special. Normally I am always shop online, but this kind of experience gave me so much connection to the brand. *Having now been introduced to the people behind the brand* and the professionalism of the brand, *I can't wait to go back to the store* someday.	Online brand image Meaning: Nervousness Privileged Uncomfortable feeling due to otherness Meaning: Emotions adapt to environment Meaning: Absorbed in the moment Personal connection Brand loyalty

4.2 EMERGING OVERARCHING THEMES

This section presents the five overarching themes that emerged from the results and connect the results to the research question.

4.2.1 The usability of online and offline settings

The first emerging theme relates to the way online and offline settings are used by service providers to communicate with customers.

While lots of businesses have launched e-commerce after having a physical shop, Gymshark went the other way around. Online, the brand uses a website, social media, and digital influencers to create an interplay between the visual experience and online touchpoints. Customers see these channels as

inspiration and motivation. This way, Gymshark creates a community around the brand of people who enjoy working out and where the brand is seen as the 'trainer' or the 'professional'. This 'trainer' and thereby the digital influencers who represent Gymshark on social media, are seen as sources of valuable and credible information for people who follow them. Kapitan and Silvera (2016) state that these human sources are a favorable condition for increasing the spread and impact of the messages. To customers, this affects the brand loyalty, while the brand gains greater reach from this. Touchpoints are limited online as the customer is in charge. The customer chooses when to respond to the stimuli and engage further with the brand. For example, when they see a TikTok from Gymshark pass by, the decision lies with them to choose to act on it or scroll through.

In the store, the brand is in continuous contact with the customer. The customer consented to this by responding to their need (Sachdeva & Goel, 2015) and stepping over the threshold of the store. This contact, through touchpoints, occurs not only through an interaction between the brand (via employees, instructors, influencers) and the customer, but also through the constant stimulation of multiple senses. Inside the store, there is music, a strong smell, food and drinks, bright lights, customers can touch the items, and moving visuals with colorful images are placed everywhere. In short, customers are stimulated throughout their entire journey through the store. Simultaneously, interaction with other bodies is an important part of embodied experience because we do not experience the world in isolation from others, but together with others. The body is relational by nature, and other bodies affect our bodies in various ways, both tangible and intangible (Stevens et al., 2019). Physical relationality emerges in our findings primarily in relation to our respondents' physical reactions to the store's employees. The confrontation with the 'toned' bodies of sympathetic employees elicited positive embodied feelings from respondents.

As described above, whereas online captures the customer's attention and creates the basis of a community, offline takes this further. Online it is hard to picture how big a community is, but offline you can meet them in real life. The community are, for example, the 11,680 members on Strava who are joining the Gymshark Run clubs around the world. This coming together of people with the same interests and passion creates a sense of togetherness that not only makes people feel good inside, but also indirectly creates more loyalty for the brand because they are the central pillar of the community. In addition, offline can be used to build an image around the brand. Online it is just a brand, but offline the brand also gets a smell, a taste, and a sound. In other words, it almost becomes a fellow human being: your gym buddy.

4.2.2 Fusion of on- and offline spatiality
This section presents the emerging theme in which online and offline spatiality fuse by creating thoughtfully designed touchpoints.

Gymshark is originally an all-digital brand. This online base of the brand is strongly reflected in the store. By putting the customer in a certain emotional state, it creates a fusion of online and offline spatiality. One example is the use of digital influencers as trainers at limited group classes or speakers at events. In this way, the influencer's digital following merges with the offline environment.

Another example are the fitting rooms. The adjustable lighting offers several so-called 'selfie modes', in other words the perfect lightning for mirror selfies. And what are selfies shared on? Social media. By creating a whole experience in the store, Gymshark entices people to take selfies. With a look at Instagram, it was found that 56 selfies have been posted on Instagram since October 2022 using the Gymshark store in London as the location. These are photos in the fitting rooms, in the mirrors and with juices or shakes. In short, the Gymshark store is seen as the perfect place to take selfies. For example, the unique addition of the in-house juice bar is something that brings the customers in an emotional state of excitement which they want to share with their followers. We cannot say that Gymshark has not thought carefully about this. After all, when these images are shared online, Gymshark's reach increases and so does its brand awareness.

4.2.3 Embodied (self)identification
This section describes the emerging theme of embodied (self-)imagination in which the customer is triggered in her lived body that contributes to full emergence in the store.

The store's mannequins, each of which is based on a real member of the Gymshark community, are as realistic as possible and truly represent what the

body looks like in reality. As a result, customers identify with the mannequins. This unique experience not only impresses them but also creates a comfortable feeling that makes them feel welcome. It lets them know that they matter: everyone is a customer of Gymshark and therefore can be part of the community. Especially in this era where nearly a quarter of young people are insecure about their bodies and suffer from Body Dysmorphic Disorder, Gymshark makes a powerful statement here. They create an atmosphere focused on inclusivity where each body can be a sports body. Especially with Gen Y and Gen Z, focusing on representation in retail is everything and a powerful tool to not only make customers feel at ease but with that, connect with the customers and indirectly drive sales. After all, the customer feels supported, which encourages them to buy clothes in which they feel comfortable without being afraid to show their bodies.

Unlike Gymshark, other sports stores have nothing but slim mannequins that give the customer the illusion that only people with such a body are 'allowed' to exercise. This creates a feeling of discomfort that the customer wants to escape from and decides to leave the store. As Gymshark is seen as a role model and therefore can have a lot of influence on the target audience, the unique mannequins are even more powerful in convincing the younger target audience to appreciate their bodies than when people in their close circle tell them. They can identify themselves in the store, showing that their bodies are no less beautiful than others. As a result, Gymshark manages to get customers to leave the store feeling different than when they entered by influencing their embodied feelings.

4.2.4 Reminiscing memories and experience
This emerging theme illustrates that the gym-inspired store design not only creates a unique experience, but also puts the customer in a certain state of emotion where memories and experiences are evoked.

There is no doubt that Gymshark is conducting a full-scale sensory stimulation on consumers. This happens both somatically (physically) and viscerally (internal organs and nervous system). The respondents are sensory stimulated, from the bright lights, the minimal but highly functional interior, the rubber floor and thus the fresh and over-scented smell of rubber to the in-house juice bar and coffee shop and the sports equipment that

is everywhere. The retail space offers a functional as well as a sensory and experiential oasis which contributes to the creation of a gym-oriented experience. The gym is a space designed to settle down, work on the best version of yourself, and evoke a powerful physical response. The in-house juice bar and coffee shop is in the center of the store where sofas and a large table with chairs invite customers to stop moving, sit down and relax their bodies. When the body is at rest, our minds become more active as we look around and think about where we are. This is also called 'emplacement' which is seen as an important component of co-creation of consumer experiences (Sherry, 1998; Sherry et al., 2007). Emplacement took place in the Gymshark store when our respondents paused to look around the store or settled down at the juice bar and coffee shop. There is plenty to see in the store, not least the large screens with videos of people working out that bring them closer to an ambitious world of exercise and taking good care of their body. This sensory stimulation brings about a meditative state that takes customers to other environments in its visualization. This triggers the customer to reminisce. Customers are taken to an imagined place, which also brings out associated memories, experiences, and emotions. The guidance of the actions by the materiality of built space occurs in unconscious and embodied rather than cognitive ways (Stevens et al., 2019). In the case of Gymshark, the findings show how first impressions of the interior (rubber mats, industrial lamps, bars as clothes racks, etc.) evoke strong embodied responses that make them wonder and intrigue.

The Gymshark store and the gym share one common goal: working on your well-being. Referring to Maslow's pyramid, which ranks the basic human needs, this goal relates to the need at the top of the pyramid, namely self-actualization. In this need person are focused on the development of themselves as human beings (e.g., "*I work on being the best version of myself*" - Respondent 5). In other words, Gymshark customers have already met Maslow's other needs, where the next step is to develop further. This requires motivation.

The strong emotions that are retrieved lead to the generation of strong embodied responses. In their lived bodies the customers get feelings like motivation, fulfillment, pride, excitement, strength, and energy. As a result, they get warm and

comfortable feelings in-side in which their heart starts beating faster. This shows the power of the imaginative projection of the body, where consumers imagine themselves elsewhere, described as an 'embodied imagination' (Joy & Sherry, 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

4.2.5 Offline channels strengthening multisensory experience

The latter section argues and explains, based on the results, that offline channels enhance the multisensory experience through the interaction between different sensory stimuli.

> This isn't purely a shop [...] for Gymshark this is all about the experience. You are able to see the product and emerge yourself in the Gymshark brand – (Ben Francis, 2022)

The CEO's use of the word "*emerge*" shows that Gymshark purposefully focuses on generating an embodied customer experience. In doing so, they not only respond to the target audience's need for a hedonic (Ladhariet al., 2019), interactive and enjoyable (Vojvodić, 2018) shopping experience, but also keep the consumer in the store longer. As mentioned earlier, the more time a consumer spends in a store, the more he is likely to spend (Wakefield & Baker, 1998). While online only uses visual branding to stimulate the senses, an offline environment offers the opportunity to create more sensory touchpoints to differentiate in the marketplace. Since auditory and olfactory cues are more effective than visual cues alone (Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017), offline channels are able to strengthen the multisensory experience. The interplay of the offline sensory touchpoints contributes to the creation of the embodied imagination where consumers imagine themselves elsewhere, the embodied imagination. Only an industrial, minimal interior may remind the customer of the gym but can also evoke associations to other places. The same goes for smell, music, and taste. However, the interplay of different sensory touch points causes them to come together and create a strong association with one specific place. In this case, the gym.

The creation of an interplay of sensory touchpoints is not the only feature of an offline channel, it also provides the opportunity to interact with the customer. In-store events that bring the customer and the brand closer together provide an opportunity to further strengthen the embodied imagination. Taking a group class in a store, for example, literally merges the associated place (the gym) and the store. This is also reflected in the flexibility of the Gymshark store where each object is equipped with wheels. This way, the store can literally be transformed into a workout area. At the same time, it allows the store to be changed repeatedly, leading to an ever-changing consumer experience with different sensory stimuli at different points in the customer journey. This is necessary because the facilitation of a multisensory embodied experience is dynamic rather than static. A human being must be kept stimulated. In this way, offline channels elicit strong emotions from the customer, which reduces the distance between the customer and the brand and strengthens brand loyalty.

4.3 MULTISENSORY EMBODIED FRAMEWORK

This section presents the empirically grounded framework (Figure 1). The framework represents the emergence of multisensory embodied experience in on- and offline touchpoints. At the top of the framework is the interaction between online and offline touchpoints that result from sensory stimuli that are dynamic in nature. These dynamics have to do with the intensity of touchpoints, which depends, for example, on the type of product and the type of customer. At the same time, past experiences can influence expectations about current or future experiences (Lee et al., 2018; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014), which will affect the intensity for the customer. Not all touchpoints are equally embodied. This difference is represented in the thickness of the line where a thick line indicates a strong embodied element.

Originating from three sensory stimuli: sound, sight and visual touch, the perceived online touchpoints are social media, the e-commerce website and emotional branding. Whereas social media (TikTok and Instagram) and the e-commerce website speak for themselves in terms of meaning, emotional branding encompasses the relatable online content with which the brand engages customers (e.g., videos with recognizable scenes at the gym).

Offline, all five senses are collectively employed leading to four extensive touchpoints:

service interactions, spatial design, ambient cues, and emotional branding. Services such as free group classes, one-on-one shopping sessions, personal training sessions and events facilitate a moment of interaction between the brand and the customer. The spatial design that focuses on creating an industrial look and feel, creates an environment suitable for embodied imagination. Ambient cues refer to the environmental signals presented in the store that may influence customers' behavior, perceptions, and decision-making. These signals include the type of lighting (bright or warm), music (type and volume) and smell. Emotional branding can be seen as the connector between online and offline. Where you build a community online, you portray it offline. If you create an offline environment that reflects online elements, the customer's emotional connection with the brand will make them use it (e.g., sharing a selfie on Instagram). If customers do not feel connected to the brand and store, they will not share it with others. In addition, group classes taught by digital influencers will not be followed if the customer does not feel connected to both the influencers and the brand.

All these experiences bring about consequences for the customer: (1) an interaction takes place between online and offline spatiality, (2) through the signals, embodied self-identifications are evoked that make the customer feel comfortable and completely emerged in the store, (3) based on embodied imagination, memories and experiences are generated that are connected to the associated environment.

Ultimately, these consequences create outcomes that drive retailers' creation of multisensory embodied experiences. First, these consequences lead to the creation of a strong community because people feel connected to the brand, online and offline. Second, personal experiences are developed because each individual experiences the shopping environment differently based on their own past experiences, memories, and emotions. Finally, it leads to brand loyalty where the customer will choose your brand based on the pleasurable memories associated with the brand.

Conversely, outcomes inform consequences because only when there is high brand loyalty, for example, memories and experiences can be triggered. Subsequently, consequences lead to adaptation in the experience phase. When consequences occur, the consumer will engage in different behaviors in which he adapts to the environment. For example, when memories are retrieved from the gym, the consumer experiences more of the urge to work out. So, this means that throughout the emergence, influence on customer behavior, perception and decision making occurs.

Figure 1. The emergence of multisensory embodied experience in on- and offline touchpoints
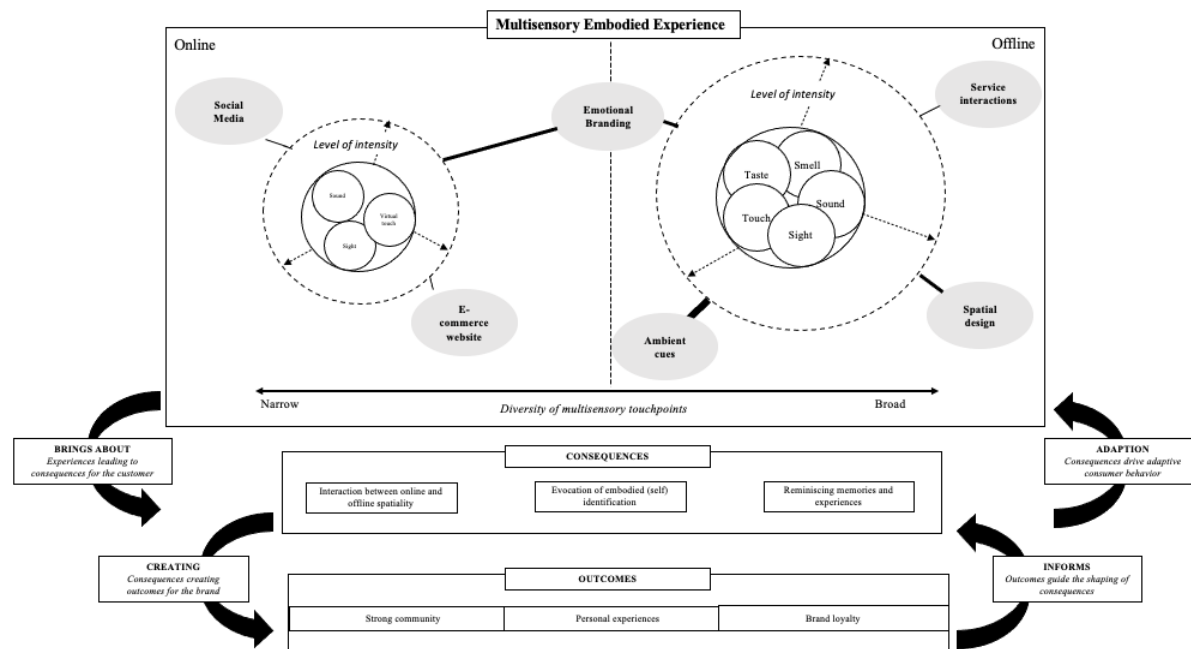
5. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study presents how an embodied approach to consumer experiences in retail brandscapes enables a more holistic understanding of the multisensory processes involved. When a retail environment is created with a proper alignment of sensory stimuli, a brand can respond to consumers' embodied feelings, resulting in a deeper personal connection between the brand and the customer. In doing so, an environment can contribute to the generation of embodied imagination where the consumer's mind is taken to an associated environment making the feelings take place even more strongly. In this chapter, the contributions of the research to both theory and practice, the limitations and the conclusion are discussed in more detail.

5.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

Although many researchers have studied the phenomenon of multisensory experience (Fulkerson, 2014; Hultén, 2011), there is little research on consumers' embodied, multisensory experiences in retail environments (Yakhlef, 2015; Stevens et al., 2019). This study contributes to the literature on embodied approaches in marketing and consumer research related to retail brandscapes (Kozinets et al., 2002, 2004; Sherry, 1998; Yakhlef, 2015; Stevens et al., 2019) with the following two contributions.

First, we create a better understanding of the interplay between multisensory experience and on- and offline interaction (Stead et al., 2022) by (1) demonstrating the value of a multisensory approach to understanding consumers' embodied experiences with retail brandscapes, (2) describing how such experiences occur at various touchpoints on- and offline, and (3) providing granularity in terms of intensity, scope (narrow-wide) and landscapes (online vs. offline). The required data was examined by immersing the researcher in the brand's store in London to observe customers behaviors and interactions up close and identify the various offline touchpoints. The findings present how the target group, Generation Y and Generation Z, experienced the Gymshark store through their bodies, and from their embodied experiences, reflection arises, supporting Merleau-Ponty's assertion that the body is at the root of all thinking (Joy & Sherry, 2003). The way our respondents react to the Gymshark brandscape reveals powerful bodily responses. Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes that the body is in a state of 'constant operation' as it deals with new environments. This is clearly reflected in the results where discomfort and comfort were in rapid succession as respondents negotiated the multisensory in-store environment and its unique inter-bodily impressions. Due to the lack of research and high demand from service providers, the embodied, experiential aspects of branding uncovered in this study are highly relevant.

Second, even though multisensory experience has been researched several times, this mainly involved literature review (Spence et al., 2014; Fulkerson, 2014; Stead et al., 2022). By doing so, the embodied experience described by the customers themselves was missing. This study presents how, by following the premise on intelligible embodiment, useful tools can be obtained to gain a finer understanding of how customers experience their senses. Through ethnographic and netnographic techniques it was not only possible to identify the online and offline touchpoints used by retailers, but also the embodied experience of customers on these touchpoints. The autoethnography (focused on the ethnographer's view) along with short interviews (focused on the respondent's view) offered insights into the embodied experiences of consumers, which are lacking when using research methods such as literature reviews.

5.2 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Besides the study's contribution to theory, the findings also make several contributions to practice. The managerial implications are aimed at retailers. A multisensory embodied experience enables retailers to satisfy their customers by meeting their needs and eliciting feelings in their lived bodies. However, many retailers lack the knowledge regarding multisensory embodied experience and how to facilitate such an experience. There are two managerial implications defined.

First, the study provides more information to retailers about the little researched general understanding of the multisensory embodied experience in retail brandscapes. Retail is defined as a dynamic market that requires moving from a product to a customer experience (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Mariani & Fosso Wamba, 2020). By positioning this

research in the sector, and by exploring customers' behaviors and embodied responses, the research contributes to understanding customers' needs to focus on the customer's shopping experience instead of low prices and innovative manufacturing.

Second, by identifying touchpoints and experiences, it provides retailers with insights and tools to facilitate multisensory, embodied experiences that result in strong community, personalized experiences, and brand loyalty. When customers develop a multisensory embodied experience with a retail brand, the customer experience will improve as customers will feel more connected to the brand by having a positive association. It is important for retailers to recognize their role as facilitators, and that it is the customer who creates multisensory embodied experience in a personal way. The results show several enabling online and offline touchpoints that retailers can use to facilitate the embodied multisensory experience, namely: (1) social media, (2) e-commerce website, (3) emotional branding, (4) service interactions, (5) spatial design and (6) ambient cues. These touchpoints are in line with previous research, which presented how individual consumers interact with retail environments in physical, instinctive, and sensory ways (Stevens et al., 2019).

The results indicate that retailers can facilitate the multisensory experience and thereby improve the customer experience by responding to the emotional responses of their customers' lived bodies. Here, creating a recognizable environment and atmosphere especially has a strong effect on evoking memories, experiences, and associated emotions in customers. Responding to customers' embodied emotions not only creates an enjoyable shopping experience but also strengthens the emotional connection to the brand, making the customer feel more strongly attracted to it. For example, Gymshark focuses on a gym-oriented experience that evokes different memories related to working out for customers. Related emotions that surface with these memories vary from comfort and calming to energetic and fulfilled. As a result, it enhanced the customer's sense of brand loyalty. Such an atmosphere can be created through ambient cues (e.g., strong smell, bright lighting, up-beat music), emotional branding (e.g., inclusivity, communities), spatial design (e.g., gym equipment), and service interaction (focus on human-to-human contact). The actual implementation

of the touch points depends on the kind of environment you want to create as a retailer. The key here is to create an environment that customers can logically associate with the brand. If not, it will not lead to the desired results. For example, in a coffee shop, do not choose a tropical ambiance, but rather a homey atmosphere since home and coffee are both associated with a sense of coziness, chatting and relaxing. That way, the customer will feel at home and come back to experience this pleasant feeling again. In other words, the customer becomes loyal to the brand.

5.3 LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any research, this study has several limitations that indicate future research directions. This research does not contain so many limitations regarding the method, as ethnography is considered the best means of capturing embodied experience (Sparkes, 2009; Valtonen et al., 2010; Yakhlef, 2015). However, the freedom of movement and expression of research in an autoethnographic approach creates a perspective of the situation based on the ethnographer's personal experiences and reflections. The researcher's dual role as both an observer and a participant can influence the interpretation and analysis of the data. Therefore, we acknowledge that the data are to some extent subjective and abstract. However, they are related to reality and the surrounding culture making them generalizable (Ellis et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the study serves as a starting point for future research, in the sense that the topic of multisensory embodied experience in the shopping environment needs to be explored further.

The findings show that the way our respondents react to the Gymshark brandscape reveals powerful bodily responses. It would be interesting for other researchers to elaborate further on these findings. Future researchers can focus on the underlying mechanism between multisensory integration and strong embodied customer responses (e.g., emotional state and embodied imagination). These results can then be applied by service providers to work toward optimal and memorable customer experiences tailored to the functioning of the lived body.

Moreover, the framework illustrates that while in the offline environment all sensory stimuli emerge and interact, in the online environment only visual touch, sight and sound are present. This offers

several further research opportunities. First, it would be interesting to see how sensory stimuli can be configured to overcome the absence of other senses (e.g., smell and taste in the online environment). This data can contribute to the still little explored topic of online multisensory experience. Second, the offline presence of all the senses carries the risk of sensory overload. To prevent customer over-stimulation leading to a negative experience, future research could focus on the desired level of sensory stimulation. These results will then provide valuable information to service providers that they can take into consideration in shaping their servicescape in a way that will create to multisensory embodied experiences.

Finally, this study focuses on a single case company located in the United Kingdom. This provides little basis for generalizing results to the broader population since the findings may not be representative of broader global or cross-cultural contexts. Cultural, social, economic, and political factors specific to the customers and the UK can significantly influence the research outcomes. Therefore, caution should be exercised when applying the findings to other countries or types of customers. However, it would be interesting for other researchers to focus specifically on these cultural differences. Future researchers can focus on the effect of cultural differences on the experience of multisensory stimuli in retail brandscapes. To complement this, they can look at how a brand can facilitate its multisensory stimuli to respond to the behavior of consumers from as many cultural backgrounds as possible.

5.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article contributes to literature on embodied approaches in marketing and consumer research in retail brandscapes by studying the interplay between the on- and offline touchpoints and the multisensory embodied experience. The study's results can be applied in practice by retailers, to facilitate a multisensory embodied experience to improve the customer experience.

In conclusion, the findings suggest that if retailers want to facilitate a multisensory embodied experience, they should create an environment in which the various sensory stimuli merge, evoking an embodied imagination that includes emotions, memories, and past experiences. The interplay between the sensory

stimuli must be dynamically controlled as it depends on the personal level of intensity to the customer. In addition, retailers should not operate online and offline service contexts in isolation but allow an interaction between these spatialities. The way touchpoints are designed depends on the environment you want to create as a retailer where a connection between the environment and the brand is essential. By doing so, retailers can create an ideal situation for the facilitation of a multisensory embodied experience in which customers can develop their own personal experiences based on the embodied responses. The emotional connection resulting from a strong multisensory embodied experience will lead to brand loyalty and the formation of a community in which online and offline merge. This personal attention, community and loyalty that result from the facilitation of a multisensory embodied experience in retail are more precious than ever in a world of near-perfect information and ever more choices.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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8. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for participating and making time for this short interview. First, I would like to ask you if I have the permission to record the interview?

Overall experience

Based on the setting (e.g., time of questioning in customer journey, intelligence level of respondent), three of the questions below are chosen.

- What brought you here?
- How would you describe your experience of the store?
  o What did you feel? Which emotion did you feel the strongest?
- What struck you the most?
- To what extent did you feel embodied in the store?
- What is the link between you and Gymshark?
- To what extent did you feel emerged?

Smell

- Can you describe the smell in the store?
- Did the smell remind you of anything?

Sight:

- How was the lighting in the store?
  o How did you feel about this?
  o How did this contribute to your experience?
- Did you mention the screens?
  o What did you see on them?
  o How did that make you feel?

Taste:

- Did you buy Joe & the juice?
- What feelings did the juice bring to you?
- Did it change your experience in the store?

Hearing:

- Can you describe the music in the store?
- What did this remind you of?
- How did this make you feel?

Touch:

- Did you touch the clothes? Why?
- What does this add to your experience?
  o Is this different from similar stores?

Feeling:

We have now come to the end of this short interview. After answering these questions, I would like to ask again:

- What did you feel in the store?
- What did the visit do to you?

These were all the questions. Thank you for the participation. It was nice to meet you.