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Interior Architectural Branding –
The implementation of the brand identity at the point of sale by means of interior design

Abstract

Today it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate brands from competitors. A strong brand identity is a prerequisite for achieving this differentiation.

Existing research concerning the Point of Sale has focused primarily on the influence of store design on sales and consumer buying decisions, but not on its influence on brand perception. To fill this gap, we developed an explorative study design focusing on one exemplary brand.

We first examined how the brand personality is expressed in stores, second, we analysed the influence of the store design on the consumer perception of the brand with a representative online survey.

Our study shows that interior design elements are well suited to express the brand personality.

Summary Statement of Contribution

Existing research concerning the Point of Sale has focused on the influence of store design on sales and consumer buying decisions. The importance of the PoS for brand management and its influence on brand perception has not been examined so far. The study presented in this article fills this gap examining what influence the interior design has on brand perception. This research shows a strong influence on consumer's perception of brand values and attributes.

Keywords: Brand identity, brand image, brand management, architectural branding, interior store design

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1 Introduction

In an increasingly intense competitive environment, it is more and more difficult for companies to differentiate their brands from their competitors. A well thought-out brand concept and efficient brand management are the prerequisites for achieving this differentiation and for long-term success. (Burmann et al. 2018)

The concept of identity-oriented brand management (Meffert et al. 2005) is the guiding principle of brand management for many German brands and retailers: Brands need a strong identity and personality to be successful. The development of such a clear brand identity, which is based on the brand's self-concept and vision, is the fundamental task of brand management. The competencies, services and values as well as the brand appearance are derived from this self-concept. Already here, companies often face an obstacle, because often there is a lack of know-how and competence in this area.

But even when this task has been mastered, it is particularly important for brands to make this newly defined identity known to the target groups, especially when it comes to mass markets.

As a result, the second fundamental task of modern brand management is to communicate this identity with the help of all instruments of the marketing mix. The central goal is that the brand perception, i.e. the brand image, is as congruent as possible with the defined identity. Moreover, the brand must have a clear positioning that differentiates it from the competition. (Burmann et al. 2018)

The point of sale (PoS), i.e. the shop in the offline world, plays an outstanding role as a central point of contact with consumers. In addition to the behaviour of the sales staff, the ambience in these stores is decisive for the consumer perception (Müller 2012; Steiner 2011).

It is determined by the illumination, the scents used and by the music played – and also by the interior design, i.e. the way in which the walls, the ceiling and the floor are designed, and which decorative elements are used. However, the influence of these aspects on the perception of the brand identity, its values and attributes have not been in the centre of empirical research so far. This paper fills this gap introducing the results of an online survey representative for the German population between 18 and 64. In this survey, the impact of the interior design on the perception of one brand (the Dutch cosmetical company Rituals) has been examined using an experimental survey design. Furthermore, the empirical results concerning Rituals will be discussed with regard to this category of companies working out the central aspects with relevance for company practice.

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2 Theoretical Basis

2.1 Identity-based Brand Management

Most theoretical considerations on brand management assume that brands need a strong identity with a clear and focused personality that distinguishes them from other brands (Aaker 1996; Burmann et al. 2018). The underlying basic consideration is that brands are perceived by consumers in a similar way that other people are. This is based on the idea of animism: people tend to attribute human characteristics to things, i.e. to humanise them. This also applies to brands. Jennifer Aaker first developed a complete theoretical approach in the 1990s (Aaker 1997). Starting with personality research in psychology, she derived five basic types of character traits for brands: These can therefore be characterised by sincerity, sophistication, robustness, competence or excitement, whereby brand personalities can also consist of combinations of these basic types (Aaker 1997).

At the same time, the concept of identity-based brand management was developed in German-speaking countries, which has some parallels to Aaker's core concept (Burmann et al. 2018; Esch 2018). The essential starting point here is the brand identity. It is understood as a determining factor, that makes the brand authentic and sustainably differentiates it from competitors (Burmann et al. 2018). Out of the various brand identity models (Aaker 1996; Kapferer 1997; Esch 2018; Burmann et al. 2018), the identity-based branding approach of Burmann et al. (2018) is most widespread in the German-speaking world and is also frequently applied (explicitly or at least immanently) in practice. Therefore, it forms the main theoretical basis for this paper.

In this context a brand is defined as a bundle of functional and non-functional benefits whose design differentiates itself sustainably from competing offers (brands) in the perception of the target groups of the brand (Burmann et al. 2017). The identity of the brand is determined by the vision, history, competencies, values and personality of a brand. Whereas the vision addresses the core idea of a brand and its future perspectives, the brand history describes where a brand comes from and what it has achieved in the past. Both, future and tradition, have influence on the competencies describing the core qualifications of a brand and on its values and personality. The values describe what a brand believes in, whereas the personality characterises the appearance of the brand.

In this context, it is particularly important to point out the importance of brand values and brand personality, as they not only represent a guideline for brand behaviour, but also decisively determine the perception of the philosophy of a brand (Burmann et al. 2018). They are therefore a crucial part of the conception of brand identity, and the external perception of the personality and of how the brand values are realised is a crucial factor for the evaluation of brand's credibility and its image. Therefore, the successful communication of the brand personality and the fulfilment of brand value promises is a basic prerequisite for the authenticity of a brand and its success (Burmann et al. 2018).

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The major task of brand management is conceptualising, designing and managing the brand identity, whereby the brand's origin represents the foundation of the construct. This identity is then communicated to external target groups through brand touch points (Burmann et al. 2015). The aim is to harmonise the perception of the target group, i.e. the image, with the identity. The brand image can therefore be understood as a downstream reaction of the external target groups to brand management activities: Identity and image are thus self-image and external image of the brand (Burmann et al. 2015).

The basic prerequisite for the formation of an image is brand awareness consisting of brand recognition and brand perception. Since the formation of a brand image and the linking of associations are not possible without brand awareness, it is not defined as one of the actual components of the brand image, but as a necessary precondition for its development (Burmann et al. 2015).

The brand image itself can in turn be subdivided into the perceived brand attributes and benefits of the brand by the consumers. The (subjectively perceived) brand attributes describe the characteristics of a brand from the point of view of the target group. Here, on the one hand, knowledge about a brand is formed, e.g. about its history and the offered products. On the other hand, attributes are attached to the brand, which reflect the competencies (e.g. high quality) but also the appearance of a brand (e.g. sporty, young).

The extent to which the needs of consumers are satisfied by the brand depends primarily on the perceived brand benefits. These can be divided into a functional and a non-functional dimension (Burmann et al. 2015). The functional brand benefit describes the ability of the brand to solve concrete problems or to fulfil physical needs of the target groups, e.g. whether clothing of a certain brand is perceived as durable, pleasant to wear and warming. The non-functional use of a brand, on the other hand, is characterised on a psycho-social level: consumers express their (idealised) self-identity by buying or using brands. Thus, brands play a role in self-realisation. In addition, belonging to a certain group or social class can be expressed with brands in the sense of a status symbol. These factors are primarily shaped by the components values and visions on the part of the brand identity (Burmann et al. 2015).

Brand management therefore should identify consumer needs and address them by means of the benefits promised by the brand. Furthermore, it has to ensure that these promises are fulfilled by brand behaviour leading to a consumer experience which is in accordance with the promises and expectations (Burmann et al. 2015). Brand behaviour comprises both the brand's products and services as well as its communicative (and spatial) appearance – i.e. all aspects that shape the interaction between customer and brand at the various touch points.

The point of sale (PoS), i.e. the shop in the offline world, plays an outstanding role as a brand touchpoint for consumers. While the importance of the point of sale for purchasing decisions is evident from a business point of view and has been researched in many different ways, the role of the PoS for identity-based brand management is one of the aspects that has not yet been discussed and researched

thoroughly. In the following, a brief look at the basic aspects of the point of sale will be shed before its role in the context of identity-based brand management will be discussed in detail.

2.2 Role of the point of sale

Within the customer journey, the point of sale is the touch point where the purchase actually takes place (see Figure 1). For retailers, however, the relevance of the point of sale is not only determined by the fact that the purchase is made here; studies show that 70% of consumers just make their buying decision here. In addition, consumers tend to make impulse purchases – about 30% of purchase decisions are spontaneous and unplanned (GfK Gruppe 2009; Schröder 2015; Schröder et al. 2007; Gröppel-Klein/Bartmann 2007).

Figure 1:   Customer journey (own illustration)

Due to this, the store layout is of crucial importance for the success of stores. Shop layout means the division and arrangement of the salesroom as well as its structuring into individual functional zones (merchandise area, customer area). With the store layout retailers decide which areas are reserved for the presentation of goods and what are the walking paths and, if applicable, the areas reserved for customers (e.g. special recreation zones in book stores etc.).

Quantitative space allocation deals with the size allocation of sales areas to product groups, while the arrangement of the individual product groups on the sales area is referred to as qualitative space allocation. The promotion of impulse buying plays a central role in this arrangement. These aspects are particularly important for the food, consumer electronics, cosmetics and fashion retail sectors, i.e. for products that belong to the categories of convenience or shopping goods.

However, with the exception of food, these are also those sectors in which the point of sale is partly shifting due to the development and expansion of e-commerce. Factors such as high transparency, time savings and convenience are increasingly influencing consumers' purchasing behaviour and ultimately lead to digital purchases or at least digital channels playing an important role in offline purchases in the sense of the 'omnichannel' concept (Westermann et al. 2018; Mehn/Wirtz 2018).

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For stationary retailers, this means that targeted instruments must be used to keep the brick and mortar stores attractive. This includes the possibility of experiencing products live, personal service and advice from sales staff and social interaction with other consumers – but also the spatial experience of the product range and the brand in the sense of experiential marketing.

These experiences can be seen as a central factor for the formation of the brand image in the tradition of Experiential Marketing (Schmitt 1999). In contrast to rational decision theory with a focus on purely functional aspects, this approach assumes that decision makers always behave at the same time rationally *and* emotionally and strive for pleasant experiences. Schmitt distinguishes between five different types or levels of experiences, so-called strategic 'experience modules' (Schmitt 1999: 56ff; see Figure 2.

First, sensual experiences ('sense') focus on sensory perception and appeal to the human senses. Second, the module 'feel' generates emotions and feelings. Third, creative cognitive experiences are covered by the intellectual level and encourage consumers, for example, to 'think' about the brand. Alternatively, brand knowledge can also be conveyed in this way. Fourth, the level 'relate' expresses the social and cultural context of a brand – a space is created for encounters with the brand community. The last level ('act') includes behaviour and lifestyle. Consumers can, for example, experience products live through product tests or get in contact with other people (Schmitt 2010).
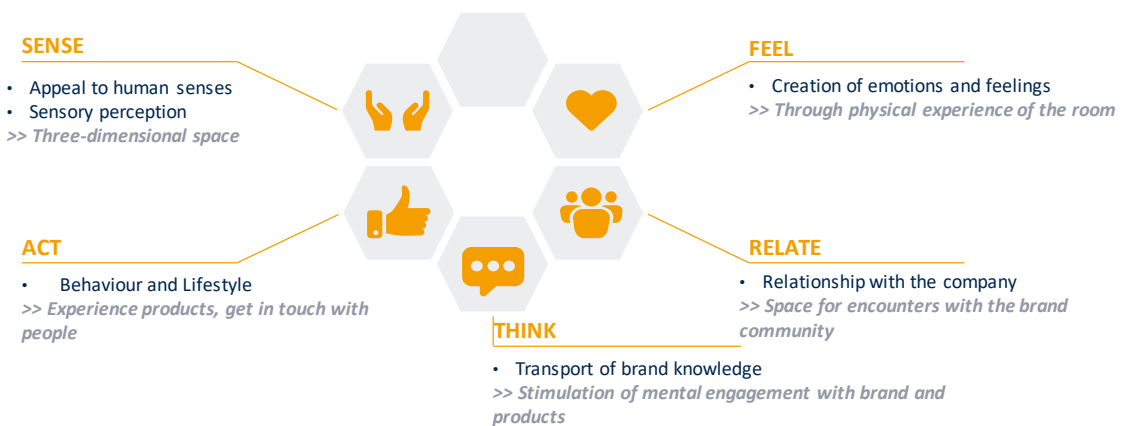

SENSE
- Appeal to human senses
- Sensory perception
>> *Three-dimensional space*

FEEL
- Creation of emotions and feelings
>> *Through physical experience of the room*

ACT
- Behaviour and Lifestyle
>> *Experience products, get in touch with people*

RELATE
- Relationship with the company
>> *Space for encounters with the brand community*

THINK
- Transport of brand knowledge
>> *Stimulation of mental engagement with brand and products*

Figure 2:   *Experience modules (adapted from Ghorbani/Westermann 2023 based on Schmitt 1999)*

These experiences are created by so-called experience providers such as communication and as well by the (interior) design of the point of sale (Schmitt 1999).

The aim is to create holistic experiences or to integrate personal experiences into a holistic framework, so that the places are not only decisive for the duration of the respective experience, but also serve as an anchor of memory for individually significant experiences. In this way, brand associations are positively influenced and – in the most positive case – an unforgettable and emotional connection between brand and customer is created (Raffelt/Meyer 2012).

Emotions associated with a brand, brand knowledge and values associated with the brand are also a crucial aspect in the context of identity-based brand management. Therefore, marketing, communication and sales measures should be implemented in such a way that positive and specific emotions are evoked in the consumer which are in line with the defined brand identity (Esch et al. 2012) – and the interior design of the point of sale plays a central role here.

In addition to the behaviour, the service and advice of the sales staff, the ambience in the stores is decisive for the consumer perception (Müller 2012; Steiner 2011). This can be influenced by the targeted, strategic use of a number of elements including music, scents and interior design. If brands are understood as constructs with a personality comparable to those of actual people, then shops in fact become 'living rooms' of these brand personalities and the way of living and furnishing is a central part to express one's personality.

Whereas authors have dealt with the influence of scents and music in the context of brand management, the role of interior design has been neglected by far. Thus, in the following, this paper focuses on interior design, discussing the different aspects in which it can be used from a theoretical point of view and what it can achieve. In this context, the authors refer to the broader term Architectural Branding after Raffelt (2012) and Raffelt/Meyer (2012). It comprises also brand related exterior design in addition to interior design.

2.2 Strengthening brand awareness, identity and experience through Architectural Branding

Architectural Branding is part of the broader concept of Corporate Architecture which is defined as 'a means of communicating content and information about the respective company' (Messedat 2005). Architecture is thus understood as a form of communication and offers companies the opportunity to present their values to internal and external target groups in a sustainable and continuous manner in the form of buildings. (Raffelt/Meyer 2012) In the corporate context, architecture includes all building concepts (e.g. production, administration or sales buildings) and (interior) space concepts (e.g. shops) but also temporary presentation concepts such as exhibition stands.

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An essential goal of (Interior) Architectural Branding, as that part of Corporate Architecture which focuses on architectural elements of brand touch points, is to create these touch points in a way in which they strengthen brand perception positively and sustainably through a brand-compliant (interior) architectural appearance (Raffelt/Meyer 2012). Both brand awareness and identity can thus be supported by architectural elements. While distinctiveness and consistency contribute to the recognition of the brand and thus to awareness, the values and the personality can also be experienced visibly and sensually with the specific design. Thereby the wall, ceiling and floor design as well as the interior design are of central importance. In this way, a unique encounter with the brand and a high degree of authenticity can be achieved (Raffelt/Meyer 2012).

2.3 Dimensions of store design and their connection to brand identity

But how can brand values and brand personality be expressed by means of interior design elements from a theoretical point of view? To answer this question, it is necessary to consider the different relevant dimensions. The interior design comprises colours and forms used for the walls, the ceiling and the floor as well as decorative elements. All these elements are closely connected to the presentation of goods and will be considered more in detail.

In a broader sense also visual, acoustic and olfactory shop environment factors belong to it. Exterior design also comprises architectural (design) elements equivalent to the interior design, which can only be perceived from the outside (e.g. shop front design). If the store is not rented but newly constructed, the whole building obviously belongs to the exterior design (like e.g. in the case of Café del Sol where all cafes are newly build helping to express the brand identity).

By combining various coordinated design elements, a certain store atmosphere can be created which results from the sum of sensory impressions of the consumer (Theis 1999). The influence of this perception on the brand image depends on the extent to which the retailer manages to communicate the defined brand values through corresponding elements. In order to assess the potential impact of store design and atmosphere on consumer's brand perception, it is crucial to consider both the relevance of individual design aspects and consumer's overall impression. For this reason, this study focuses on (interior) architecture and visually perceptible shop environment factors. Interior and partially exterior design are therefore of particular interest. The individual design parameters of interior and exterior design can now be further differentiated according to five similar categories (see Figure 3).

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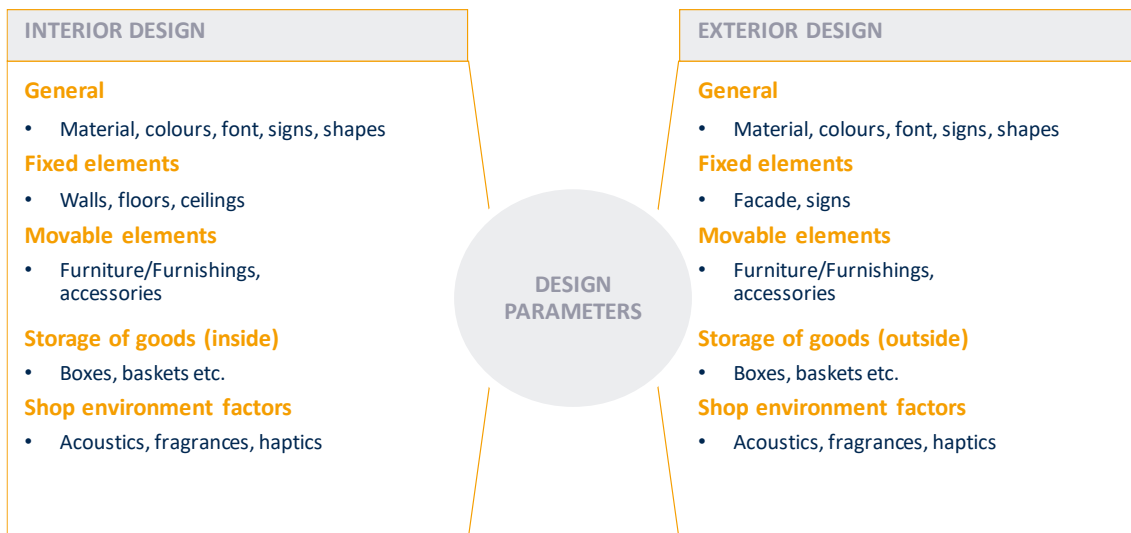
INTERIOR DESIGN		EXTERIOR DESIGN
General		**General**
• Material, colours, font, signs, shapes		• Material, colours, font, signs, shapes
Fixed elements		**Fixed elements**
• Walls, floors, ceilings		• Facade, signs
Movable elements	DESIGN PARAMETERS	**Movable elements**
• Furniture/Furnishings, accessories		• Furniture/Furnishings, accessories
Storage of goods (inside)		**Storage of goods (outside)**
• Boxes, baskets etc.		• Boxes, baskets etc.
Shop environment factors		**Shop environment factors**
• Acoustics, fragrances, haptics		• Acoustics, fragrances, haptics

Figure 3:   Design parameters (own illustration based on different authors)

First of all, the materials, the colours, signs, fonts and shapes used play a crucial role and should be taken into consideration. With regard to the five basic types of Aaker (1997) mentioned at the beginning, brands which have chosen an exciting character would – so the assumption – choose arousing colours like red, while brands with a cultivated character would tend to use more decent colours. But also, forms can be used to express character traits: Cultivated brands are presumably round in shape, while 'robust' trademarks would be more likely to use square forms with edges.

In addition, the fixed elements of interior design should also be considered, i.e. walls, floors and ceilings. Brands that stand for diversity can use different, alternating design features, whereas brands that stand for clarity and stringency are more likely to tend towards uniform, recurring design variants. Also, movable elements, i.e. furnishings such as furniture, accessories and decorations, must also be considered from similar points of view. The same applies to the form and method of storing goods. Furthermore, additional shop environment factors like scents, sounds and the haptic of the materials used in the store also contribute to the brand perception and can be realised in accordance with the brand identity, e.g. rough brands would use rough materials, masculine scents and arousing music, whereas cultivated brands should stick to smooth haptic impressions, neutral to feminine scents and calming sounds.

In order to investigate the extent to which retailers succeed in conveying their brand identity within the framework of shop design and actually turn the shop into the living room of the brand, all design categories must be considered. It is important to consider which individual design parameters are used in interior and exterior design and to what extent they are related to the brand identity – as has been explained by the examples mentioned. Although it is crucial to address consumers via more than one sensory channel within the framework of holistic brand communication, visual perception dominates

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(Müller 2012). Accordingly, the following explanations concentrate on the interior design of retail stores and thus the visual dimension.

In order to systematically consider how the personality and values of the brand are expressed through the interior design of the stores, all design parameters must be analysed with regard to their connection to personality and values. This connection can be established by an analysis grid in matrix form. The grid consists of the components of the brand identity as rows and the categories of the design parameters as columns (Westermann/Zimmermann 2019a). This results in the following system:
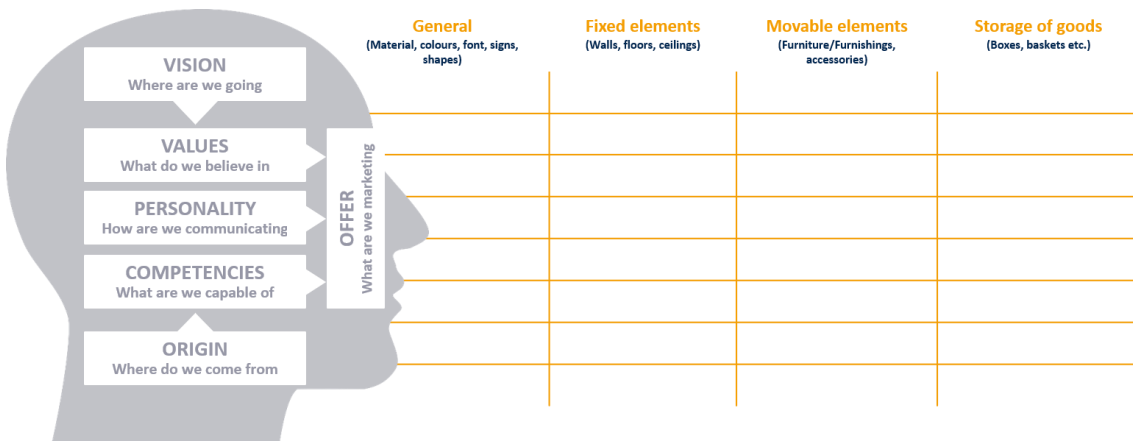
Figure 4:   Analysis grid (own illustration)

2.4 Specialities in the creative industry

Especially for companies in the creative industry, there are many opportunities to express their brand identity at the PoS and anchor it in the minds of their stakeholders. For example, cooperation with artists and the integration of art at the point of sale is a win-win situation for both sides: for artists, exhibitions in stores and brand spaces or commissioned works for concrete spatial situations provide an opportunity to promote their own work. For companies, investing in art that matches the brand identity is much more than just a decorative addition to the working environment or the store: it ensures that the identity becomes vividly tangible and is also a sign of cultural commitment that can lead to a creative dialogue both among the company's own employees and externally among customers (Conzen/Salié 2012). Hybrid architectural concepts offer new perspectives for the encounter between customer and brand.

Such shared spaces correspond to the principle of Design Thinking, whose basic idea is to bring together as many different experiences, opinions and perspectives as possible. In contrast to other innovation methods, Design Thinking is described as an approach based on the three basic elements team, space and process. The principle of sharing creative spaces and processes opens new perspectives for

the development of brands and the expression of their personality. In addition to static spaces, dynamic spatial situations such as pop-up stores can be used for exciting encounters between brands and art. A selected work can be integrated here or even the store itself becomes a temporary work of art (Conzen/Salié 2012). In this way, the brand identity becomes alive and tangible.

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Research gap and research aim

As discussed in the literature review, Corporate Architecture plays a central role in communicating brand identity, as it creates a brand environment and an interactive space for consumers and employees. In addition to illustrating corporate design or strengthening brand recognition, Architectural Branding aims to enhance brand-congruent consumer experiences. However, existing research concerning the point of sale focused on different sales aspects. Existing studies deal for example with the importance of walking routes, the placement of goods and the use of displays (Schröder et al. 2007; Gröppel-Klein/Bartmann 2007; Berekoven 1990; Theis 1999). In addition, there are a number of studies dealing with multisensory factors such as scent or sound marketing (e.g. Müller 2012). A pure consideration of the interior design dimensions as a form of expressing brand identity, has hardly been the subject of previous research or considerations of its significance for identity-based brand management. Although some theoretical considerations with regard to Architectural Branding and Corporate Architecture have been made in recent years, most studies have focused on exterior architecture (Messedat 2005; Raffelt 2012; Raffelt et al. 2013; Vonseelen 2012; Brauer 2011; Schröder 2015). By contrast,interior architecture and related design choices remained a research gap to a large extent (Leydecker 2014; Dagli 2016; Shon/Song 2021).

The authors aim is to provide an initial approach to fill this gap, which leads to the following key research questions:

1. How do brands and retailers use interior design to transport the brand identity and which concepts can be observed?

2. What influence do these concepts have on the perception of consumers?

In order to answer these research questions, an explorative study design consisting of two parts was developed, which comprises a qualitative and a quantitative methodology with the aim of evaluating the interior design of the store and its impact on consumers. Due to the explorative character of the study, the authors decided to focus on one suitable case. Thus, in a first step a suitable brand had to be identified. In the second step, the stores of this brand were analysed in a qualitative way on the basis of the theoretical findings by categorising and interpreting store design parameters with the help

of the theory-based analysis grid developed in the theoretical chapter. This study part delivered answers for the first research question. Afterwards the authors elaborated a survey design for testing the impact of the store design on consumer perception of the brand taking the experiences into regard which had been made in an online survey among students (Westermann/Zimmermann 2019b). Based on the results and methodological experiences made during this study the methodology and the questionnaire have been developed further. Finally, an online survey representative for the German population between 18 and 64 was carried out to answer the second research question and to test the main hypothesis that values can be transported via means of interior design. The results of this survey will be the further focus of this paper.

3.2 Brand selection and qualitative case study

After a comprehensive pre-search for suitable brands, the brand Rituals was selected as the research object for the case study and the subsequent consumer survey. At the beginning of the case study process, several shops in different European countries were visited and the following two aspects were identified as prerequisites for further research. First, the stores are designed identically, independent of the country and the city where the store is located. Second, most stores have approximately the same size, thus they are structured in the same way. It may be concluded that Rituals employs a strategic, cross-national approach of communicating a consistent brand identity at the point of sale.

Rituals has been on the market for 23 years and may therefore serve as an example and blueprint of how a brand can be successfully established on a B2C mass market in the 21st century. Today the brand has over 600 brand stores and numerous other sales outlets in 27 countries (Rituals 2018).

Rituals defines itself as a luxury lifestyle brand and as the first brand to combine luxurious home and body care products with the aim of transforming everyday routines into meaningful rituals. The philosophy of the brand is that happiness lies in the detail and the small and simple things that need to be enjoyed with care and attention. Ritual's understands its brand and products as inspired by Far Eastern traditions, being of high quality and meant to enrich body and soul. At the same time, they should remain affordable due to a fair price-performance ratio. This already leads to the identification of brand values and characteristics, which is important as they can serve as quantifiable items for the consumer survey. Therefore, the company's website and printed material were analysed, and additionally an interview was conducted with the brand's marketing manager. This led to the identification of the following five key brand attributes: 'luxurious', 'unique', 'far eastern inspired', 'affordable' and 'natural'.

3.3 Qualitative store check

The Rituals stores usually have an area of only 60-100 square meters. The overall design of the stores is evocative of luxurious wellness spas. The basic aim here is obviously to provide consumers with a pleasant and relaxed shopping experience. Various design elements can be identified in the individual categories of the analysis grid mentioned in the theoretical part to express the defined brand values.

By using relatively dark colours (e.g. black lacquer) and dark materials, above all (solid) wood, as well as dimmed light, a pampering, relaxing and luxurious atmosphere is created throughout the entire store immediately upon entering. In addition, the various wooden elements are meant to create a feeling of sustainability, authenticity and high quality. The same counts for the floor and wall design: The dark parquet floor has a high-quality effect. Parquet elements can also be found partly on the walls in addition to stucco realised with a special wiping technique. This mixture underlines the brand characteristics of variety and, again, of quality and luxury.

The relaxing and pampering spa ambience is further enhanced by various accessories. These include, for example, beach mats, curtains, relaxing pictures and photo motifs, various grasses but also daylight mirrors.

Far Eastern flair is created by a Buddha statue and white jasmine. The dark (mainly black) colour also shows Far Eastern inspiration.

Products are mainly presented in black lacquered shelves with glass fronts and in bast baskets. Also, clothes racks are used and occasionally the products are also presented simply on tables. The shelves look high-quality and luxurious. Baskets and coat racks convey sustainability, authenticity and relaxation as well as Far Eastern inspiration.

Due to the brand values of Rituals, it is noticeable that a limited choice of colours as well as clear forms and structures are used in the shop design. The relatively clear focus of the brand values and their matching obviously facilitates a stringent design of the PoS.

3.4 Specification of the second research question and the according hypotheses

Following this preliminary qualitative investigation, the second central research question was specified: How does the (interior) architectural design of Rituals influence consumer's perception of the single brand values and attributes? Our major hypothesis (H1) is, that being confronted with the interior design at the point of sale leads consumers to attach the desired values and attributes to the brand. In a representative survey presumably not all respondents know the brand before being confronted with it during taking part in the survey. Nevertheless, the effect of transporting the intended brand values and attributes should work for both groups (H2a), but the attribution effect among the group of people who have known the brand before should be stronger than in the other group (H2b) as they have had brand knowledge before which is just actualised during the survey. In accordance

with this, there should also be an influence of the point in time when consumers knowing the brand have visited a Rituals store for the last time: If the last visit is not long ago the brand values and attributes should be more present even without being exposed to the store design, whereas a longer period between the last visit and taking part in the survey leads to a weakening of attached brand attributes (H3a). This effect should be partially levelled after being exposed to the store design (H3b).

Finally, research shows that the different senses are of different importance for people. It can be assumed that people who are of the opinion that visual impressions are of importance to them are more likely to be influenced by a primarily visual store concept than people who stress the importance of other senses (H4).

3.5 Quantitative survey design and sample

A quantitative, self-completion online survey was designed to measure the perception and strength of brand values an. In order to assess the relevance of interior design at the point of sale and to measure possible changes in brand perception, a simulation of a store visit was conceptualized taking the central research question and the different hypotheses into regard. Thus, photo-based questions were used in the questionnaire to give the respondents an impression as realistic as possible of the interior store design, which is a common practice in interior design studies (Petermans et al., 2014).

For the realisation of this study an online panel (omnibus) from a market research institute was used, in which 1,000 consumers from Germany were surveyed. The selection of respondents was representative for the online population between 18 and 65. The sample was representative with respect to gender and age[1] (see Figure 5).

Initially, the authors asked people if they know the brand Rituals. If they agreed they were asked when they visited a store for the last time. Furthermore, the respondents were asked if they usually recognise visual aspects, music and scents when entering as store.

The study participants knowing the brand were asked to evaluate how strongly they attach brand attributes on a 5-point Likert scale both before and after viewing photos from a Rituals store. Respondents not knowing the brand were directly exposed to the store photos and then asked how they perceive the brand.

It is important to note that the items of this scale encompassed both the intended, but also two not intended brand attributes. On the one hand, the authors thus examined whether the five intended brand attributes were conveyed by design of the stores. On the other hand, they tested whether the

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[1] A deeper analysis of further details and the impact of sociodemographic aspects would have been interesting, however due to financial restrictions and a limited budget this was not possible. Instead, the focus of the study was comparing participants based on their previous brand knowledge.

three non-intended, inappropriate brand values may also be perceived to cross check the reliability of the survey results.
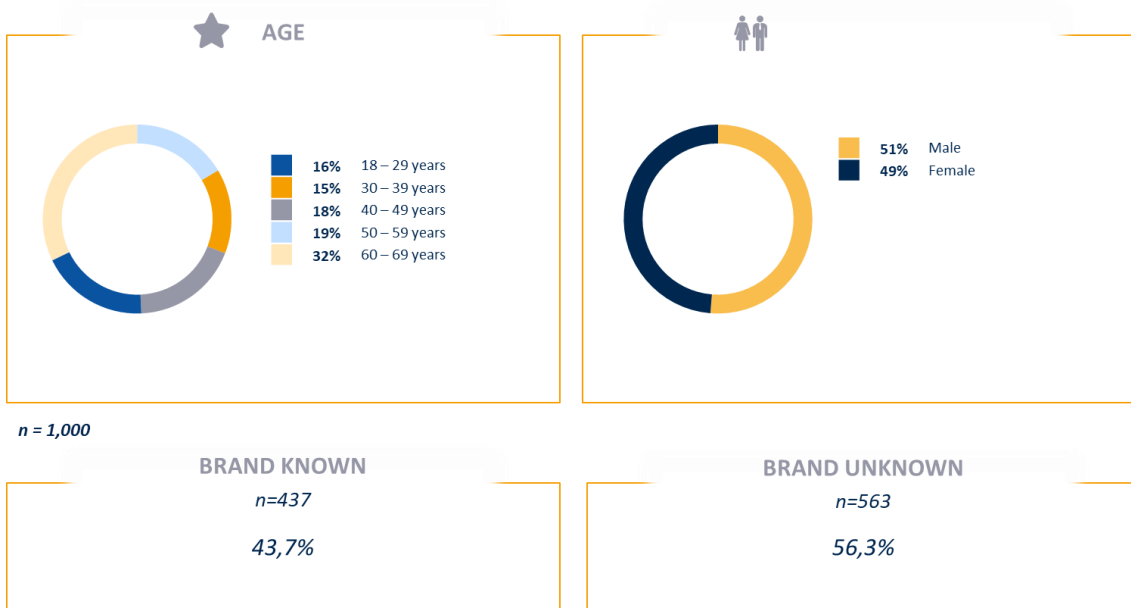

n = 1,000

Figure 5:   Sample overview

4 Results

4.1 Relevance of interior design elements and importance of visual aspects

Before elaborating on the ratings of brand values and attributes, the authors asked the participants to rate their conscious perception of interior design parameters with 4- or 3-point rating scales. This served the purpose of determining to what extent the respondents perceive interior design and atmosphere when entering a shop. In general, the majority of those surveyed stated to consciously perceive the fixed and movable elements of interior design as well as atmospheric elements. Most survey respondents stated that they perceive the furnishings (79%) and decoration (76%) directly. Walls (63%) as well as floors and ceilings (59%) seem less conspicuous in comparison. In addition, this enquiry showed that the ambience is perceived very strongly through the aspects of scents (84%), music (80%) and light (78%). A notion of caution is due here, since this survey only indirectly measures the effect of the interior design based on the participants' self-disclosure. Therefore, unconscious influences and their impact remain uncertain.

Based on these observations on the relevance of interior design elements, the entire sample was divided into two types to find out if there are customers that are more influenced by visual aspects. To this end, it was determined which customers expressed a high level of approval for all four visual aspects. The comparison of these visual types with non-visual types did not yield significant results in

terms of brand evaluation. There were slight differences with regard to the fact that visual types overall perceived brand values more strongly. However, the impression of the photos and the resulting differences in image ratings did not show clear differences between the types. Thus, it can be concluded that hypothesis H4 must be rejected, according to which visual types are more influenced by the visual store experience in their brand evaluation.

4.2 Brand awareness, last store visit and brand perception

43.7% of the participants stated to know the brand. Also, 29% of the total sample visited the store in the last six months prior to the survey. In contrast, 56.3% said they did not know the brand. In the following, the statistical analysis distinguishes between the brand perceptions of these two groups to determine possible differences in the perception of interior design and the assessments of brand values.

The participants who stated that they knew the brand (n = 437) were first asked to assess how strongly they agreed with the eight attributes with regard to the brand before viewing images of the interior design of the Rituals stores. It is important to note that about half of the interviewees agreed with the five intended brand value items. For instance, 47% of this partial sample (rather) agreed that Rituals is 'luxurious' and 49% evaluated the brand as 'far eastern inspired'. Moreover, the brand value item 'natural' was most strongly perceived, as it received the approval of 58% of the sample. However, 53% of those surveyed perceived the brand to be 'exciting' and 'summerlike', which are considered as not intended brand values. The lowest agreement received the not intended attribute 'daring' with 29%.

The subjects were then shown two photos from the interior of a Rituals store and were asked to evaluate the atmosphere conveyed using the various brand attributes. The first photo elicited strong agreement with the atmospheric values of 'luxurious', 'unique' and 'far eastern inspired'. The perception of 'luxurious' as a dominant attribute was highlighted even more clearly, with 68% of the respondents agreeing. It is crucial to highlight that each of these photo attributions exceeded the previous scores for the overall brand attributes with an increase of at least 10%.

The same procedure was carried out for the second photo, which depicted the viewing angle from the entrance to the store. Similar to the first assessment, this photo was rated 'luxurious', 'unique' and 'far eastern inspired'. Each of these attributes also received at least 10% more approval than the overall brand rating before. However, the attribute 'unique' (67%) was rated most highly in this case. In addition, viewing this photo strengthened the attribute 'daring', what may have led to an unintentional brand impression.

Finally, participants were asked to re-evaluate the brand after viewing the photos. This question did not directly follow the exposure to the two photos, but followed later in the omnibus survey, i.e. questions concerning other topics were prior to the re-evaluation. In this re-evaluation, the three attributes

'unique' (66%), 'luxurious' (62%) and 'far eastern inspired' (62%) were considered as the most dominant brand values. Their individual increase of at least 10% shows that the impression of the photos has thus been transferred to overall brand evaluation. Also, the not intended feature 'daring' received an increase of over 10% with a final score of 39%. Interestingly, the previously most highly rated aspect 'natural' was no longer included in the top attributes. Another interesting aspect is that all items regardless of the brand's intention have increased after viewing the photos (see Figure 6).
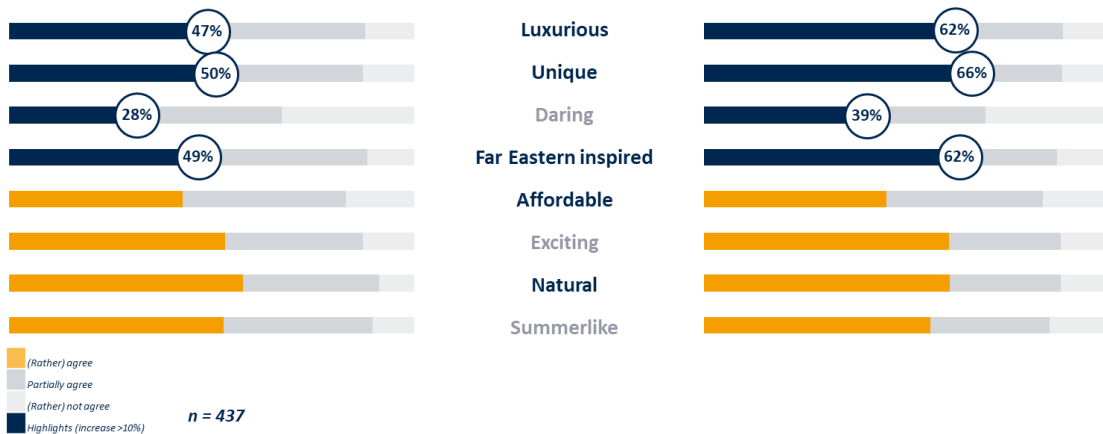

		Luxurious		62%
47%		Unique		66%
50%		Daring	39%	
28%		Far Eastern inspired		62%
49%		Affordable		
		Exciting		
		Natural		
		Summerlike		

(Rather) agree
Partially agree
(Rather) not agree
Highlights (increase >10%)   n = 437

Figure 6:   *Image attribute comparison (before vs. after)*

In contrast, the partial sample of participants without prior brand knowledge (n = 563) was – as already outlined – not asked to evaluate the brand at the beginning as this would have made no sense. They started with viewing the photos immediately. With reference to their evaluation of brand attributes as conveyed by the first photo, it becomes evident that they generally rated the attributes lower than respondents who knew the brand. This is illustrated by a comparison of the three top attributes. Although the strongest attributes here are identical to the top attributes of the first sample, the individual scores for the items 'unique' (44%) and 'far eastern inspired' (35%) are significantly lower. The impression 'luxurious' is the only exception with a value of 61% of agreement. Likewise, the rating of the second photo revealed the same three top attributes, albeit again with lower scores than in the first sub-sample. Again, the rating of the attribute 'luxurious' stands out with a score of 58%.

These findings are also reflected in the final brand evaluation after viewing the photos, with the attribute 'luxurious' being the only item that more than half of the test participants agreed to (55%). This is followed by 'unique' (41%) and 'far eastern inspired' (39%). The intended brand attribute 'affordable', on the other hand, only reached a value of 14% and is rated significantly worse than all unintended brand attributes. In summary, it has been again shown that the attributes of the photos were transferred to the overall brand rating. The findings provide evidence for the main hypothesis H1 as they confirm the connection between interior design impression and brand value attributions. Nonetheless,

the lower overall scores indicate that the effect is lower with regard to participants without previous brand knowledge as had been claimed in hypotheses H2a and H2b. (see Figure 7)
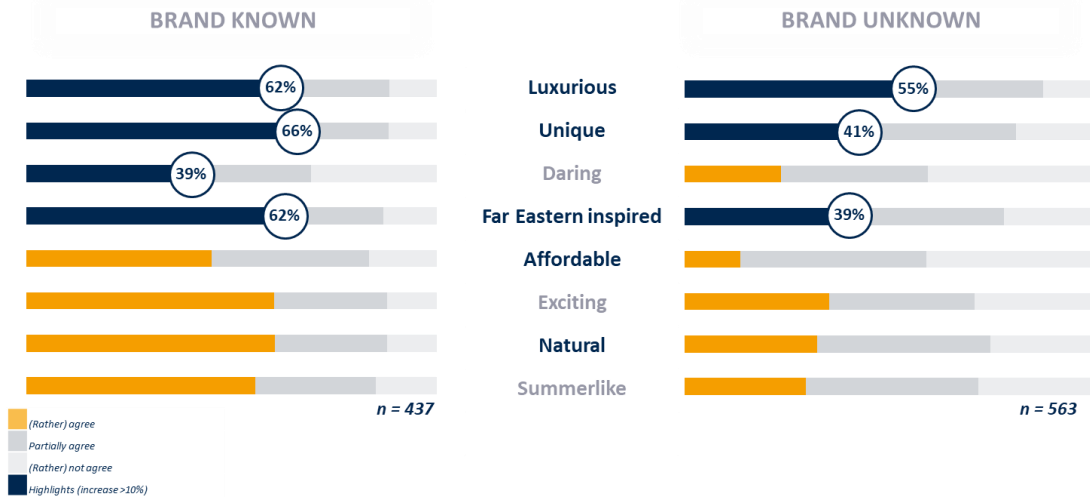

Figure 7:   Consumer sample comparison (brand known vs. brand unknown)

What is more, the partial sample of consumers who knew the brand was further subdivided into visitors who have visited a store recently, that is within the last sixth months (n = 284), and those, whose visit was more than six months ago (n = 153). A comparison of these conditions showed that there are differences in the brand evaluation both before and after viewing the photos. First, the initial brand rating of the recent visitors was higher in all aspects than that of those who had visited Rituals longer ago. Moreover, the chi-square independence test confirmed the statistically significant correlation for all image items between the two groups. These results are significant at the $p = 0.05$ level. With respect to the intended brand values, the biggest differences were found for the attributes 'far eastern inspired' (56% vs. 37%), 'affordable' (50% vs. 29%) and 'natural' (64% vs. 46%). However, these correlations also apply to the not intended brand values. Therefore, these correlations should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, they show that the overall brand impression appears to be stronger.

It can be inferred therefrom that consumers who visited the store recently are more likely to perceive the brand as desired. This can be attributed to the brand experience in the store, which is strongly influenced by the implementation of the brand identity at the PoS. If the visit has taken place some time ago, consumers are more reluctant to agree with the brand values, what may be traced back to a weaker recollection of the brand experience due to the time passed in the meantime.

Similarly, the brand evaluation after viewing the photos was investigated. This also showed that the agreement of those who were recently in a store is higher in all points, but the differences are not as pronounced as before. The statistical independence test also only partially shows correlations between

the visitor groups, namely for the attributes 'luxurious', 'unique', 'affordable', 'exciting', 'natural' and 'summerlike'. Basically, the approval rates for both groups have increased after viewing the photos, which indicates that the existing brand knowledge is actualised by viewing the photos. In both cases, the attribution of the desired brand values is increased. For those who have not been in the store for a long time, there is a greater update effect and accordingly the gap to visitors with more recent experiences is reduced.

Taken together, the two hypotheses H3a and H3b were confirmed, since the point at time at which consumers last visited the store significantly influenced their brand knowledge and the potential strength of brand value impressions. Possible differences, however, were partially relativized by the impression of photos. The results of this quasi-experimental comparison based on visual stimuli can also be seen as evidence for the assumption that the visual impression is a central criterion for the brand-congruent interior design.

5   Conclusion

The theoretical discussion and the additional qualitative store check have shown that there is a large range of possibilities to express the brand identity with its values and its personality at the PoS. The brand Rituals chosen for this case study shows that many of these possibilities are used in brand management practice in this case.

The quantitative study set out to investigate whether and how interior design influences the perception of brand values and attributes taking the same case as example. Using photo-based questions that simulated the visit to a Rituals store, the online survey measured the brand perception of consumers. This study has shown that interior design and atmosphere have a high impact on the perception of brand values and attributes. On the one hand, the quasi-experimental study showed that interior design can actualise and strengthen intended brand values in relation to the perception of consumers who know the brand. On the other hand, it pointed out that among those who do not know the brand, the newly created images tend to follow the intended direction in terms of brand values. The intended value 'affordable' is the only brand value which seems not to be transported by the interior design of Rituals. This is not surprising, as this result is in accordance with the store check which revealed that the brand places its focus at the PoS on the also intended value 'luxurious'. Both attributes stand in contrast to each other as far as visual appearance is concerned and form a general challenge for the management of this brand.

With reference to the model of identity-based branding as the starting point for Corporate Architecture and Architectural Branding, this research supported the idea that not only exterior architecture, but also interior architecture contributes significantly to brand recognition and evaluation. The findings reported here shed new light on the communication and action potential of interior design, as the store seemed to be considered as the living room of the brand expressing its personality.

The results underline the importance of brand identity implementation at the point of sale by showing that consumers consciously perceive interior design and atmospheric elements. Moreover, the findings suggest that these impressions are related to the formation of brand images, as they may enhance or even change the strength of brand value attributions. The insights gained from this study may be of assistance to retail companies that aim to enhance brand-congruent consumer experiences. Finally, this research suggests that brand identity perception by consumers with and without previous brand knowledge can be achieved through interior design if the design elements underline the intended brand values.

5.1 Practical Implications

The results suggest that store design should consequently be in line with the brand identity, its values and personality. To achieve this, the implementation of the brand identity should be a part of the conceptual work with regard to store concepts in addition to classic aspects like designing the layout and consumer walking paths. It is crucial that this conceptual work is done from a holistic perspective taking all dimensions into account, beginning with the materials and forms used, through the design and integration of floor, ceiling and walls into the concept, to decorative elements and signs. The analytical grid developed at the end of the theoretical part may help to consider all relevant dimensions. Finally, market research pre-tests of newly conceptualised stores should also consider the influence of the store design on the brand perception and should not be limited to sales aspects.

The design of the PoS (and of company buildings in general) offers great opportunities to introduce their brand identity to consumers and other stakeholders: Welcoming them in the brand's living room may leave a lasting first impression establishing a brand image which is in line with the brand identity. Moreover, companies from the creative sector can express their creativity right here choosing new and unusual ways of conceptualising their 'living rooms'.

5.2 Limitations and future research

The methodological approach used in this study simulates a store visit by showing two pictures of Ritual stores from different angles. Naturally, the two pictures do not give a holistic impression of the store, as not every detail and every possible perspective can be seen, and furthermore the pictures are limited to two dimensions thus not really giving a completely realistic impression of a 3D room. Moreover, music and sounds as well as scents and the haptic of the materials used cannot be transmitted. Respondents have to evaluate on the basis of an incomplete slice of reality. The authors accepted these limitations in order to obtain representative data.

Although a general influence of interior design at the PoS on the brand perception can be claimed, results may not be generalised in detail with regard to the statistical data, since the study presented

in this article is limited to the case of one company. Furthermore, as far as the qualitative part is concerned, the analytical grid is primarily a blueprint for a criteria-based analysis. Future research of the ways the brand identity is implemented at the PoS could use more elaborated, psychology-based analytical tools.

Future research should also be devoted to test the effects identified here with a much broader basis of brands from different industry sectors and their respective stores, both to check if the effect is the same in other sectors like food, electronics, clothing etc. or if it is dependent on the type of goods and the resulting predisposition of customers. Such a broader basis of brands could help to generate detailed data which can be generalised thus delivering reliable data to quantify the effect.

Furthermore, in addition to approaches using simulations, research should also be devoted to field studies in which subjects are interviewed directly after visiting stores. This could either be realised with a qualitative approach with in-depths interviews or as a quantitative approach. For such a quantitative approach the cooperation with a brand would be ideal, as it would allow either interviews directly in or in front of the store or even the use of customer data collected in loyalty programs.

Finally, the effect identified here could be analysed in more detail as far as different types of customers are concerned. The study did for example not focus on the influence of age or gender with regard to the research question. And though the hypothesis H4 could not be approved, it still remains open if the effect is different in dependence from the predisposition and type of the consumer, as the limited number of questions which can be asked in an omnibus survey did not allow to integrate questions which may have led to a sophisticated differentiation with regard to these aspects.

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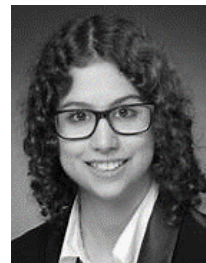
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