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Making Sense of Retail Brands in Omnichannel Environments: A Narrative Exploration

PhD dissertation

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“I may not have gone where
I intended to go, but I think I
have ended up where I
needed to be.”

Douglas Adams,
The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul

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Alina Both

Aarhus, April 2024

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "A. Both".

Executive Summary (EN)

The ways in which retailers and customers interact with each other are transforming radically and perhaps irreversibly. Today's retailers appear on the stage of the market environment as brands, striving to connect to their consumers on as many channels and touchpoints as possible and becoming ever more intertwined with people's everyday lives both on- and offline. Simultaneously, the channels and touchpoints carrying brand meanings emerge and evolve rapidly, leading to a greater dispersion of the retailer brand within such an omnichannel context. Ultimately, the retailer therefore presents as a multi-associative network for consumers to navigate and make sense of.

As a result, traditional linear and firm-centric models within retailing are increasingly struggling to account for consumers' real-life practices, leading to a need for new approaches to understanding the ways consumers and retailers interact. The purpose of this dissertation, therefore, is to improve the understanding of how meaning and value emerge between retailer brands and their consumers, given the increasing dispersion within an omnichannel context. To do so, each of the studies contained herein addresses consumer-brand experiences within omnichannel retail contexts from different angles. The first article examines how such experiences have been researched within retail literature. Based on a thematic grouping of the research streams, it establishes an agenda for further research, emphasizing the potential worth of consumer-centric approaches. The second research essay engages with retailer-brand experience from a theoretical consumer-based standpoint by presenting a discussion of the touchpoints encountered along omnichannel consumer journeys. Using a narratological angle, this article suggests how the meanings associated with a retailer brand could be conceptualized as a co-creative process of narrative sense-making that takes place upon each touchpoint encounter.

The empirical papers within this dissertation, the third and fourth research articles, respectively, are built on ethnographic and interview data, as well as a qualitative diary study. The third research article investigates consumers' experiences with a specific retailer brand, focusing on the retailer's narrative as communicated on its lead channel. The findings of this article suggest that retailer brand meaning and value are co-created through disclosures of a number of story elements, which are rooted in the retailer's core value propositions. Finally, the fourth research article takes an entirely consumer-centric perspective, investigating the experiential qualities of memorable encounters with retailer brand touchpoints.

It identifies these qualities as a means of attaching meaning and value to touchpoint encounters while emphasizing the limited influence retailers may have over the consumers' co-creation of such meaning and value.

Taken together, the four articles within this project contribute to existing retail marketing and branding knowledge by generating a consumer-based understanding of meaning co-creation based on narrative theory. They contribute insights into brand storytelling practices and the value of fragmented narration in omnichannel retail contexts to a research field which has thus far placed its emphasis on cohesion and seamless integration in order to enhance customer experiences.

Dansk Resumé

Den måde, hvorpå detailhandlere og kunder interagerer med hinanden, ændrer sig radikalt og måske irreversibelt. Nutidens forhandlere optræder i markedsmiljøet som brands, der stræber efter at skabe forbindelse til deres forbrugere gennem så mange kanaler og kontaktpunkter som muligt, og de bliver stadig mere sammenflettet med folks hverdag både on- og offline. Samtidig opstår og udvikler de kanaler og kontaktpunkter, der bærer brand-betydninger, sig hurtigt, hvilket fører til en større spredning af forhandlerbrands inden for en sådan omnichannel-kontekst. I sidste ende præsenterer forhandleren sig derfor som et multiassociativt netværk, som forbrugerne kan navigere i og finde mening i.

Som følge heraf kæmper traditionelle lineære og virksomhedscentrerede modeller inden for detailhandel i stigende grad med at tage højde for forbrugernes praksis i det virkelige liv, hvilket fører til et behov for nye tilgange til at forstå, hvordan forbrugere og detailhandlere interagerer. Formålet med denne afhandling er derfor at forbedre forståelsen af, hvordan mening og værdi opstår mellem forhandlerbrands og deres forbrugere, givet den stigende spredning inden for en omnichannel kontekst. For at gøre det, adresserer hver af undersøgelseerne heri forbruger-brandoplevelser inden for omnichannel detailhandelskontekster fra forskellige vinkler. Den første artikel undersøger, hvordan der er blevet forsket i sådanne erfaringer inden for detailhandelslitteratur. Baseret på en tematisk gruppering af forskningsstrømmene etablerer den en dagsorden for yderligere forskning, der understreger den potentielle værdi af forbrugercentrerede tilgange. Det andet forskningsessay beskæftiger sig med detailhandler-brand-erfaring fra et forbrugerbaseret synspunkt på et teoretisk niveau ved at præsentere en diskussion af de berøringspunkter, man støder på iløbet af omnichannel-forbrugerrejser. Ved hjælp af en narratologisk vinkel foreslår denne artikel, hvordan betydningerne forbundet med et forhandlerbrand kan begrebsliggøres som en samskabende proces med narrativ sansning, der finder sted ved hvert kontaktpunktsmøde.

De empiriske artikler i denne afhandling, henholdsvis tredje og fjerde forskningsartikel, er bygget på etnografiske data og interviewdata samt en kvalitativ dagbogsundersøgelse. Den tredje forskningsartikel undersøger forbrugernes erfaringer med et specifikt forhandlerbrand, med fokus på forhandlerens fortælling som den formidles på dens lead-kanal. Resultaterne af denne artikel tyder på, at forhandlerbrandets betydning og værdi er samskabt gennem afsløringer af en række historieelementer, som er forankret i detailhandlerens kerneværdiforslag.

Endelig tager den fjerde forskningsartikel et fuldstændigt forbrugercentreret perspektiv, der undersøger de oplevelsesmæssige kvaliteter ved mindeværdige møder med kontaktpunkter for detailhandlere. Den identificerer disse kvaliteter som et middel til at tillægge kontaktpunktmøder mening og værdi, samtidig med at den understreger den begrænsede indflydelse, detailhandlere kan have over forbrugernes samskabelse af en sådan betydning og værdi.

Tilsammen bidrager de fire artikler i dette projekt til eksisterende viden om detailmarkedsføring og branding ved at generere en forbrugerbaseret forståelse af meningssamskabelse baseret på narrativ teori. De bidrager med indsigt i brand-storytelling praksis og værdien af fragmenteret fortælling i omnichannel-detailhandelkontekster til et forskningsfelt, som hidtil har lagt vægt på sammenhæng og sømløs integration for at forbedre kundeoplevelserne.

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Part I – Introduction and Project Description

Introduction

Retailers are closely interwoven with our everyday culture. Consciously or unconsciously, we constantly encounter them on different channels and platforms over the course of our daily lives. Through this ongoing dialogue between lived realities and strategically planned retailer brand communications, the meanings and values that emerge reach further than a mere exchange of products for money (Cassinger, 2010). Therefore, today's retailers enter the market stage as brands, striving to connect to their consumers not only on a utilitarian- but also on an emotional level to enhance and elevate customer experience (Chen et al., 2023; Marhamat, 2024). Doing so entails new challenges, however, as an increasing number of channels and touchpoints available to consumers also means a stronger fragmentation of the retailer brand and the meanings it is attempting to convey (Moin, 2020; Sadler, 2021; Swaminathan et al., 2020).

In fact, a rising demand for elevated and personalized retail experiences that span multiple channels is being consistently listed as one of the largest trends within the European market, along with the intertwining of off- and online shopping and retail media approaches to brand communication (Delberghe et al., 2024; *European Omnichannel Commerce Trends 2023: Shoppers Embrace Social Media Purchases, Marking a Shift in Online Shopping Habits*, 2024). Even companies in relatively mundane sectors such as grocery retailing are increasingly banking on building brand identity and enhancing the shopping experience across channels – as evidenced by REWE, one of the largest grocery retailers in Germany, citing this undertaking as taking on an essential role in their future corporate strategy (*Digitale Verantwortung*, 2024). Accordingly, the grocery chain already offers consumers a retailer brand network spanning physical stores, an online store, its own app, and a media presence including native blogs on recipes and nutrition, as well as YouTube- and social media channels (*Willkommen bei REWE*, 2024). At the same time, e-commerce giants like Amazon are using technological progress to integrate features resembling in-person shopping scenarios into their retail experience: the brand only recently launched their beta version of an A.I.-powered personal shopping assistant (Loeb, 2024). Yet, whilst these approaches to retailing and branding clearly seem to be an expanding industry trend, it is equally clear that they also involve extensive amounts of research and investments from companies looking to implement them (*Euroshop 2023: Trends in the European Retail Market*, 2024). What is more, it is becoming apparent that on the consumers' side, there are different expectations towards the value propositions of different channels (Briedis et al., 2021; Delberghe et al., 2024).

It has been argued that within this changing retail environment, the growing hyperconnectivity and concomitant fragmentation require a re-thinking of brand value creation, shifting the perspective from a unilateral design of retailer brand experience and communications to the co-creation of brand meaning and experience (Swaminathan et al., 2020). For retailer brands, hyperconnectivity has led to the adoption of so-called omnichannel strategies, which recognize the consumers' ability to switch flexibly between different channels and touchpoints (Berman & Thelen, 2018; Verhoef et al., 2015). In this context, understanding the changes to customer experiences and journeys has been established as a vital success factor for retailer brands, with potentially beneficial effects on spending, consumer loyalty, and overall retailer brand image (Balis, 2021; Berman & Thelen, 2018; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Steinmann et al., 2016; Weeks, 2020).

Thus far, omnichannel retail research has been chiefly concerned with crafting seamless, cohesive experiences across a multitude of channels and touchpoints (Y. P. Chang & J. Li, 2022a; Gasparin et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Torrice et al., 2020), highlighting the benefits of a consistent retail mix across different touchpoints and smooth transitions between channels with regard to engagement, customer satisfaction, and sales (Y. P. Chang & J. Li, 2022b; Frasset-Deltoro et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Torrice et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). While measuring consumer experience on these terms has certainly driven considerable progress within retail branding practice and theory, an argument can nevertheless be made regarding what this largely instrumentalist, company-centric perspective overlooks. As retailer brands become more intertwined with people's lives both on- and offline, academia has recognized the need for overarching approaches which look beyond single consumer-brand encounters, spanning the entire system of channels and touchpoints at marketers' disposal (Hayes & Kelliher, 2022; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016; Van de Sand et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2020). Current retail literature, in contrast, primarily focuses on singular phenomena and purchase decisions. New retail marketing channels and touchpoints emerge and evolve rapidly, and consumption involves emotional, cognitive, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses in both physical and digital contexts (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Mele et al., 2021). As a result, traditional theoretical and conceptual models barely enable researchers and marketers to investigate and understand the real-life practices of consumers, leading to a need for different approaches to understanding the ways consumers and retailers interact in this context (Balis, 2021; Dickson, 2020; Mele et al., 2021).

In practice, the above-mentioned ways in which retailer brands and customers interact with each other are radically transforming (Da Costa, 2019; Marhamat, 2024). Consequently, there is a clear need for

practitioners to find the means of creating more intimate, personalized ways of establishing their retailer brand while meeting elevated customer expectations, a need that places the customer at the core of the customer journey and assigns marketing a central role in promoting digital transformation and brand storytelling (Balis, 2021; Batra & Keller, 2016; Moin, 2020). This change in consumer-brand interactions stands in contrast to a dispersed research body that remains uncertain when it comes to understanding consumer sense-making and the co-creation of retailer brand meaning in omnichannel retail contexts (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Harris, 2017; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Van de Sand et al., 2020). Additionally, a multitude of approaches continue to rely on linear customer journey conceptualizations, which is already being challenged as too rigid and simplistic to capture what, in reality, tends to take shape as a rather unstructured, individualized process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

Furthermore, while the turn towards the idea of a co-creation of meaning and value, which firmly stresses the central role of the customer, seems to have been thoroughly embraced by the field of service marketing (Arnould & Price, 1993; Arnould et al., 1998; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2016), retail marketers seem to grapple with the notion of the meanings attached to brand messaging increasingly drifting out of their control. Some sources even argue that the meaning attached to retail brands cannot be clearly communicated at all, but rather only emerges in the retellings of its customers, who influence each other almost as much as brand strategies do (Batra & Keller, 2016; Cassinger, 2010). With both theory and practice acknowledging the growing centrality of – and need for understanding retailer brands in omnichannel environments from a consumer-focused viewpoint, there is still relatively little research within retail marketing actually adopting a customer-centric view (Hayes & Kelliher, 2022; Kamleitner et al., 2019; Tueanrat et al., 2021). Thus, current research approaches and perspectives on retail branding predominantly neglect the co-creative aspect, which is said to be one of the most significant changes in how brand meaning and value are shaped within digitalized omnichannel contexts (Swaminathan et al., 2020). This, in turn, risks limiting the view of how retailer brand experience may be enhanced in omnichannel settings, neglecting individuals' lived realities and the dialogical nature of retailer brand meaning.

Overall, a practical need for understanding and meeting the customer at an individual level on all channels and throughout the entire customer journey in order to address a rapidly changing retail environment combines with a lack of customer-centric research actively acknowledging consumers' co-creative role in the shaping of retailer brand meaning. This thesis therefore problematizes the commonly adopted approach to retailer branding in omnichannel contexts, which focuses on

seamlessness and channel consistency to improve customer experience. In attempting to address the outlined knowledge gaps, this project *contributes to existing retail marketing and branding knowledge by generating a consumer-based understanding of brand meaning co-creation in omnichannel retail environments*. To do so, it employs a narrative perspective on retailer brands, investigating the ways in which fragments of retailer brand information attain meaning and value. Doing so additionally contributes insights into the storytelling practices of retailer brands in omnichannel contexts to a research field which has thus far placed its emphasis on cohesion and seamless integration (Ya Ping Chang & Jingwen Li, 2022; Gasparin et al., 2022). As such, the project contributes to both retail marketing literature and retail branding theory and practice alike.

Motivation and Thesis Aim: Research Gaps and Questions

The move towards omnichannel retailing is increasingly challenging researchers to reconsider the theories and concepts that have long been held as cornerstones within retail marketing (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016). In addition to an academic reassessment, there is also a clear need for practitioners to find the means of creating more personal ways of establishing their retailer brand while meeting elevated expectations. However, as outlined above, most research continues to rely on incremental approaches and remains hesitant to look beyond canonical models and theories, which entails considerable challenges when it comes to understanding consumption within this new and fast-changing context (Baxendale et al., 2015; Harris, 2017; Mishra et al., 2021).

Focal Research Problem

To address the practical issues regarding a better understanding of the consumer perspective and respond to those academic voices advocating for a consideration of new paradigms and theories in light of the shift towards omnichannel retailing and the resulting more fragmented customer journeys and experiences (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016), this project overall *aims to identify new theoretical lenses and starting points for understanding modern consumption and retailer branding in omnichannel contexts*. The previous section has chiefly highlighted the need for a theoretical re-thinking of how consumers and retailer brands interact in omnichannel contexts, the disregard of consumers' lived realities, and consequently the neglect of the co-creative facet of consumer-brand interactions despite its relevance for shaping retailers' meaning and value as prominent research gaps. In attempting to address these gaps, this thesis focuses on the way consumers and brands make sense

and co-create meaning throughout their consumption experiences and journeys. Accordingly, the project as a whole revolves around the following overarching research question:

How do consumers and retailer brands co-create meaning and value in omnichannel contexts?

To answer this broad overall question, the papers comprising this dissertation turn towards narratology and storytelling by both brands and consumers, exploring different ways in which the growing fragmentation and openness entailed by the omnichannel context interacts with the human tendency to emplot information in narrative forms (Bruner, 1991, 2002; Czarniawska, 2004). The choice of this theoretical lens stems from the core argument that an increased fragmentation of information equally increases the importance of the human act of grasping together disparate, individual pieces into stories that make sense, which gives renewed relevance to narratology and storytelling as a means of sense-making (Gensler et al., 2013; Sadler, 2021). Drawing on post-structuralist narrative theory as well as qualitative data, this dissertation consists of four individual research articles, each contributing towards answering the overall research question. A brief summary and overview of the individual papers are provided in Table 1.

Research paper I consists of a thematic literature review examining the notion of customer experiences in omnichannel retail environments. It synthesizes established knowledge and approaches within the field thereby opening up the possibility for the post-structuralist view of the subject adopted throughout this overall dissertation. The thematic approach to reviewing allowed for the formation of a general image regarding the prevalent research trends and literature streams occupied with this phenomenon. Overall, the paper is titled “Customer Experiences in Omnichannel Retail Environments: A Thematic Literature Review” and *aims to explore the concept of customer experience in omnichannel retail contexts by examining the existent corpus of research as well as theoretical and methodological approaches to this issue, aiming to establish how – and to which degree – it has been investigated.* It identifies eight streams of literature within this corpus of research and, by proposing an agenda for further research, emphasizes that the field might benefit from more consumer-centric, interdisciplinary work taking the co-creational aspect of consumption experiences into account.

Research paper II is a conceptual essay attempting to re-frame the notion of omnichannel touchpoints based on post-structuralist narrative theory. This essay is titled “Omnichannel Customer Journeys – Fragments of a Never-Ending Story?” and *aims to identify new starting points for understanding omnichannel customer journeys through narrative theory.* Synthesizing the concept of

fragmented narratives with current knowledge on omnichannel touchpoints and brand storytelling, this paper proposes a framework and research agenda for investigating customer touchpoints as narrative fragments.

Research paper III represents an illustrative qualitative study undertaken with a Danish furniture retailer brand. Titled “Retail Brands as Fragmented Narratives: Everything Everywhere All at Once?”, it concerns itself with the brand-as-narrative, zooming outwards from the idea of the touchpoint-as-fragment. To create more insights into how retailers can adapt their storytelling practices vis a vis narrative dispersion, this work *aims to identify the different story elements converging into the retailer brand narrative via the brand’s lead channel and asks: how do both brand representatives and consumers make sense of these elements?* By identifying five overall story elements used by brand representatives and consumers to co-create meaning and value, retailer brand narratives are re-conceptualized as fragmented narratives. This re-conceptualization further challenges aspirations towards channel consistency within the field, giving prominence to viewing channel inconsistencies as opportunities to engage consumers, rather than obstacles.

Research paper IV re-focuses on the concept of retailer brand touchpoints in a longitudinal qualitative study. Using iterative interviews and diary data compiled over the course of a month, it attempts to understand consumer sense-making and the impact of touchpoints at varying degrees of brand influence. Thus, it investigates the characteristics which have the potential to transform a retail brand touchpoint into a memorable encounter for the consumer. This research takes its departure from experiential theorizations of precious moments of consumption, as well as cultural branding approaches arguing that brand image is subjectively co-created via storytelling practices across channels and touchpoints along the consumption journey. Titled “Paths of Moments: Exploring the Experiential Qualities of Retailer Brand Touchpoints”, this paper explores *which experiential qualities set touchpoint encounters apart as memorable moments along the consumption journey and how these moments interact in co-creating consumers’ lived retail brand experiences.*

Collectively, these articles therefore present a novel research approach to omnichannel experiences and journeys with the aid of the chosen theoretical lens and using the notion of narrative fragmentation. As such, they expand both practical and theoretical knowledge in the field of retail marketing and branding.

Table 1: Overview of the research articles which constitute this thesis.

	Paper I	Paper II	Paper III	Paper IV
Title	Customer Experiences in Omnichannel Retail Environments: A Thematic Literature Review	Omnichannel Customer Journeys – Fragments of a Never-Ending Story?	Retail Brands as Fragmented Narratives: Everything Everywhere All at Once?	Paths of Moments: Exploring the Experiential Qualities of Retailer Brand Touchpoints
Research Aim / Question(s)	Explores the concept of customer experience in omnichannel retail contexts by examining the existent corpus of research, including theoretical and methodological approaches to this issue. <i>How – and to which degree – has customer experience in omnichannel retail contexts been investigated?</i>	Identifies new starting points for understanding omnichannel customer journeys through narrative theory	Identifies the different story elements converging into the retailer brand narrative emanating from the lead channel. <i>How do both brand representatives and consumers make sense of these elements?</i>	Explores the experiential qualities that set touchpoint encounters apart as memorable moments along the consumption journey. <i>How do these moments interact in co-creating consumers’ lived retail brand experiences?</i>
Data	Peer-reviewed research articles	Theoretical Paper	Ethnographic- and Interview Data	Interview- and longitudinal qualitative data (journaling)
Co-author(s)	Sascha Steinmann	Sascha Steinmann, Polymeros Chrysochou	Sascha Steinmann	Sascha Steinmann, Polymeros Chrysochou
Status	Published in <i>International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research</i>	Published in <i>Advances in National Brand and Private Label Marketing - 9th International Conference, 2022</i>	Preparing to submit to <i>Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services</i>	Preparing to submit to <i>JACR – Experiential Consumption</i>

Theoretical Background

This section serves to lay out the general theoretical grounding of the dissertation. It is not meant to provide a comprehensive review of retail branding literature, but instead aims to outline the theoretical base for the four essays constituting this dissertation. Doing so will also further elaborate on the ways in which these papers are interlinked, as well as help to position them within the wider theoretical academic conversation. To cover the main areas of literature underpinning this work, this section begins with an overview of two of the key theoretical concepts concerning omnichannel retail research – i.e. the customer journey and experience. Secondly, a brief outline of brand storytelling literature will show how consumer-brand narratives are inexorably linked with such journeys and experiences. Finally, the focus will be placed on the post-structural theoretical concept of fragmented narratives, outlining how it can help researchers build theoretical approaches better suited to investigate retail narratives between consumers and brands in an omnichannel context.

Omnichannel Retailing: Key Concepts

In a retail environment where customers can switch between shopping channels as they please, adopting omnichannel approaches to marketing is swiftly becoming the new status quo for retailers (Beck & Rygl, 2015). Whilst there are different degrees of adoption, omnichannel marketing is generally characterized by its recognition of consumers' ability to hop between different channels and touchpoints, using them interchangeably, constantly, and simultaneously (Berman & Thelen, 2018; Verhoef et al., 2015). According to Berman & Thelen (2018), the benefits of implementing an effective omnichannel marketing strategy include additional consumer spending, increased loyalty, willingness to pay higher prices, and an improved image. Regarding consumer behavior, the literature especially focuses on grasping the interrelated concepts of customer experience along the customer journey.

Grewal & Roggeveen (2020) have defined the modern customer journey as nonlinear and centered around cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes – a notion that also sets omnichannel approaches to retailing and marketing apart (Berman & Thelen, 2018). Here, it is important to note that definitions of omnichannel retailing uniformly highlight an integrated, seamless experience across all available channels as the key distinguishing feature of this strategy (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014). Customer experience is generally thought of as occurring over the course of a customer's journey with a brand or company over time (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The focal point of

these journeys mostly lies on the purchase cycle and the phases that can be identified throughout – namely pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Verhoef et al., 2007). To optimize the customer’s experience along this journey, researchers suggest that successful omnichannel retailers should seek to minimize the effort consumers need to expend when switching from channel to channel and aim to keep their messaging uniform across all channels and devices (Berman & Thelen, 2018). The journey is further described as iterative and dynamic, built upon past experiences and simultaneously influencing and shaping expectations for future experiences (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Throughout each stage of this journey, consumers may encounter so-called touchpoints, which are commonly defined as “an episode of direct or indirect contact with the brand” (Baxendale et al., 2015, p. 236). Companies and marketers may have varying levels of control over different types of touchpoints, while each of them can have a considerable impact on the customer’s experience (ibid.). Studies examining touchpoints along the customer journey currently remain focused on sales and conversion effects, rather than customer experience, leading to calls for an investigation of critical touchpoints, so-called “moments of truth” along the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

In a similar vein, the omnichannel turn within retailing challenges researchers to consider the entire phenomenon of customer experience along the customer journey (Gerea et al., 2021; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). In their seminal work on the subject, Lemon & Verhoef (2016) define this type of experience as “[...] a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer’s cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm’s offerings during the customer’s entire purchase journey” (p. 71). Recent academic enquiries, however, have begun to adopt a more systemic and consumer-centric view of customer experiences and journeys, driven by a turn towards the notion of an experience economy and experience co-creation (Andreini et al., 2018; Becker, 2018; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Schau & Akaka, 2021). This stream of research proposes a broader view of the notion of experience, with researchers adopting a phenomenological characterization of customer experiences that emphasizes the importance and influence of fun, fantasies, emotion, aesthetics, and meaning, and embeds the concept within consumers’ lifeworlds (Becker, 2018; Helkkula, 2011; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Experiences, in this context, are understood as discrete kinds of purchases in their own right, along with goods and services, being conceived of as memorable events engaging the customer on a personal level, staged for them by a company (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Pine & Gilmore, 2013). Vargo & Lusch (2004) essentially coined the concept of experience co-creation, viewing an experience as the outcome of customers’

engagement with an entire ecosystem of actors (see also Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b). This theoretical stream opens up a different view of the customer experience, which is able to complement perspectives that are more company-focused or behavioral (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Collectively, therefore, the viewpoint is gradually being shifted towards conceiving of customer experience along the customer journey as a dynamic process in flux and part of a broader consumption journey instead of viewing it merely as an outcome (Bolton et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2018; Mele et al., 2021).

Overall, research investigating the concepts of customer experience and customer journey within retailing tends to take on rather company-centric, strategy-focused viewpoints (e.g. Berman & Thelen, 2018; Picot-Coupey et al., 2016) and customer behavior-based approaches (e.g. Pantano & Viassone, 2015; Riaz et al., 2022). The perspective of experience co-creation between customer and retailer therefore does not yet seem to have permeated this research field. However, in light of the growing interest in and calls for perspectives giving greater prominence to the consumer's role, this perspective provides a promising theoretical underpinning for the research within this dissertation.

Retail Brand Storytelling

Based on the human tendency to make sense of the world in narrative forms (Bruner, 1991; Gottschall, 2012; Salmon, 2010), storytelling has long since become the main language of the marketing and branding disciplines (Moin, 2020; van Laer et al., 2013). However, over the course of time and with changing circumstances, the theory of brand storytelling has moved through different paradigms – from a structural, organicist view of stories as part of brand structure and architecture (Keller, 2013) to more interpretive, cultural approaches to brand meaning (Moin, 2020; Visconti, 2010).

In his discussion of brand storytelling in a digital age, Moin (2020) identifies two distinct paradigms of brand management. On the one hand, positivistic approaches to branding assume that brands are owned by marketers who are in control of brand communications, which are being passively received by the consumer. Constructivist branding approaches, on the other hand, see brand values and meaning as emerging from an active exchange between marketers and consumers: brands, in other words, are viewed as complex, co-created entities that have the potential to form relationships with consumers that evolve over time. Within marketing literature, Stern (1994) pioneered this notion, shifting away from a passive view of the consumer and highlighting their participatory role in a complex, interactive process of communication.

With retailer brands becoming ever more fragmented and multidimensional, and their touchpoints becoming more firmly embedded in the social fabric of our lives, retailer branding equally becomes more and more inseparable from storytelling. Stories, after all, can imbue the retailer brand with meanings, which generates relatability and accessibility for consumers (Moin, 2020; Visconti, 2010). In alignment with constructivist approaches to branding and meaning co-creation by way of narration, researchers within the field of consumer culture have further developed the idea of brands as ideological carriers and storytellers (Holt, 2004; Visconti, 2010; Woodside, 2010). This stream of theory views brands themselves as cultural forms, i.e., ways of organizing and interpreting our worlds, which entail certain assumptions of how people should look, live, or even think (Cayla & Arnould, 2008). Viewing a brand in this way also entails a concept of branding as “a specific form of communication, which tells stories in the context of products and services, addresses people as consumers, and promises to fulfill unmet desires and needs” (Cayla & Arnould, 2008, pp. 86-87). Retailer branding, therefore, is storytelling since it represents a specific way of seeing the world and talking about it (ibid.). As the world becomes more and more “hyperconnected” and retailer brands increasingly omnipresent in everyday contexts, consumers themselves are also becoming key authors of brand stories (Gensler et al., 2013; Swaminathan et al., 2020). The same holds true for other branded or brand-affiliated entities and stakeholders, making the emergence of retailer brand meanings a collective process of co-creation between a number of voices, all of whom contribute their stories to the overall narrative (Gensler et al., 2013). While social media platforms naturally represent a key channel for the generation and sharing of consumer-generated brand stories, the co-createdness of retailer brand meanings can- and should be expanded to a wider context (ibid.).

At a time in which consumers additionally do not only generate – but also have unprecedented access to tools that allow them to freely determine their own paths through brand narratives (Feiereisen et al., 2021), this cultural theoretical stream within branding research provides an important cornerstone for the present investigation of modern retailer brands. Overall, therefore, this thesis is underpinned by constructivist cultural branding theory, which views the brand as both innately storied and co-created.

The Co-Creation of Meaning and Value

The notion about a co-creation of retailer brand meaning also goes hand in hand with the co-creation of value derived from retailer brand encounters. Swaminathan et al. (2020) firmly stress that one of the most significant changes to brand value delivery brought about by an increasingly digitalized

economy is the shift away from a unilateral view of designing brand experience and brand meaning. Instead, both brand meaning and brand experience in this context must needs be thought of as co-created between the retailer, its consumers, and other third parties (ibid.). In a branding context, therefore, co-creation can be thought of as a process of interaction and mutual influence between a variety of involved parties (see also Sarasuvo et al., 2022).

The concept of value co-creation has seen a considerable rise within academic marketing literature, as it generally views the consumer as actively involved in generating value, which in turn implies that value itself is interactional (Grönroos et al., 2015). A particular focus has been placed on value-in-use, which is concerned with the attainment of consumer-centric goals and their attainment through instrumental resources (Alimamy et al., 2024). Countering this utilitarian focus, the concept of value-in-being has been proposed as a means of understanding value deriving from meaningful, interconnected existence. Since retailers frequently influence the wider experiences of individuals' daily lives, they too are a part of providing the context of human existence (ibid). A co-creative approach to the generation of meaning and value through brand storytelling by both retailers and consumers therefore transcends the utilitarian perspective and recognizes the importance of purpose and meaningful existence in providing customer experiences. This notion is reflected in the formulation of the overarching research question and further complemented by narratological approaches rooted in the theories of scholars like Martin Heidegger and Roland Barthes.

Post-Structuralism & Fragmented Narration

The multi-associative network retailer brands represent today arguably requires a re-thinking of the patterns of consumer sense-making. The dispersion of the retail brand over a multitude of channels and touchpoints can be said to place a higher amount of responsibility on the recipient, who must bridge narrative gaps through their own input (Hamby et al., 2017; Sadler, 2021). Indeed, the beginnings of digital technology have been described as a reminder of the fact that human sense-making has always been fragmented – a prediction that has become more relevant than ever, with current works describing the ongoing process of mediatization, in particular, as characteristic of a world constituted by fragmentation (Kozinets, 2021; Sadler, 2021). With media and consumption bleeding into our daily lives and private spheres ever since the onset of digitalization, aspects once restrained to the offline environment can now be lived and experienced through media (Moin, 2020; Sadler, 2021). This shift towards a more mediatized life experience is accompanied by a stronger fragmentation of information for people to make sense of. When it comes to personal life-stories, for

example, people construct their narratives from a range of possible available lives and worlds, heavily informed by the canon and forms of cultural context. Jerome Bruner, who formulated this line of theory, described narrative as humans' preferred and perhaps even obligatory means of expression and sense-making (1986, 1991).

Because of this tendency, it has been argued that narratives continue to play a central role in spite of – or perhaps even precisely because of an increased fragmentation of information. Even algorithms, though able to juxtapose different fragments, remain unable to arrange them into meaningful entities: if anything, according to this line of argumentation, an increased fracturing of information entails an equally increased need for human interpretation (Markham, 2005; Sadler, 2021). Thus, the fragmentation of information actually increases the relevance of the human act of grasping disparate elements together into a story that makes sense. Part of the ongoing relevance of narratives in an age of fragmented information also lies in their function as both a means of interpretation and representation. In other words: the fact that information is not presented in the shape of a narrative does not prevent people from interpreting and emplotting it as such (Bruner, 1991; Czarniawska, 2004; Hamby et al., 2019; Sadler, 2021).

In light of omnichannel retail branding and the concomitant fluidity of the subject (i.e. the retailer brand), a post-structural theoretical approach can be helpful to understand consumer-brand sense-making regarding retailer brands. One key tenet of post-structuralism is the absence of the subject, or the notion that there is no one, single understanding of the signified, making the signifier the main focus of enquiry (Eco, 1981; Liveley & Liveley, 2019). In the case of retailer brands, this notion is gaining prominence due to the increasing fragmentation of brand meanings in omnichannel contexts. While it could be argued that the terminology of meaning co-creation falls on the constructivist spectrum, what it denotes is a multiplicity of competing potential meanings more closely related to post-structural ideas. These meanings, according to post-structuralists, are then transported through the retelling and re-enactment of stories (Bruner, 1986, 1991). When it comes to storytelling in a market context, Roland Barthes is commonly considered one of the fundamental theorists in narratology, and his theories often provide the foundation for interdisciplinary work using narrative approaches, e.g., by Stern (1994), Czarniawska (2004), or Escalas (2004). Often seen as one of the key figures of the structuralist tradition within literary studies, one could argue that the implications of his theories also make him a post-structuralist (Visconti, 2018). His idea of the author-as-scriptor essentially hails the “death of the author”, tying in with Umberto Eco's concept of the *Opera Aperta* or open work (Eco, 1989). It represents an empowerment of the reader or message-receiver and shifts

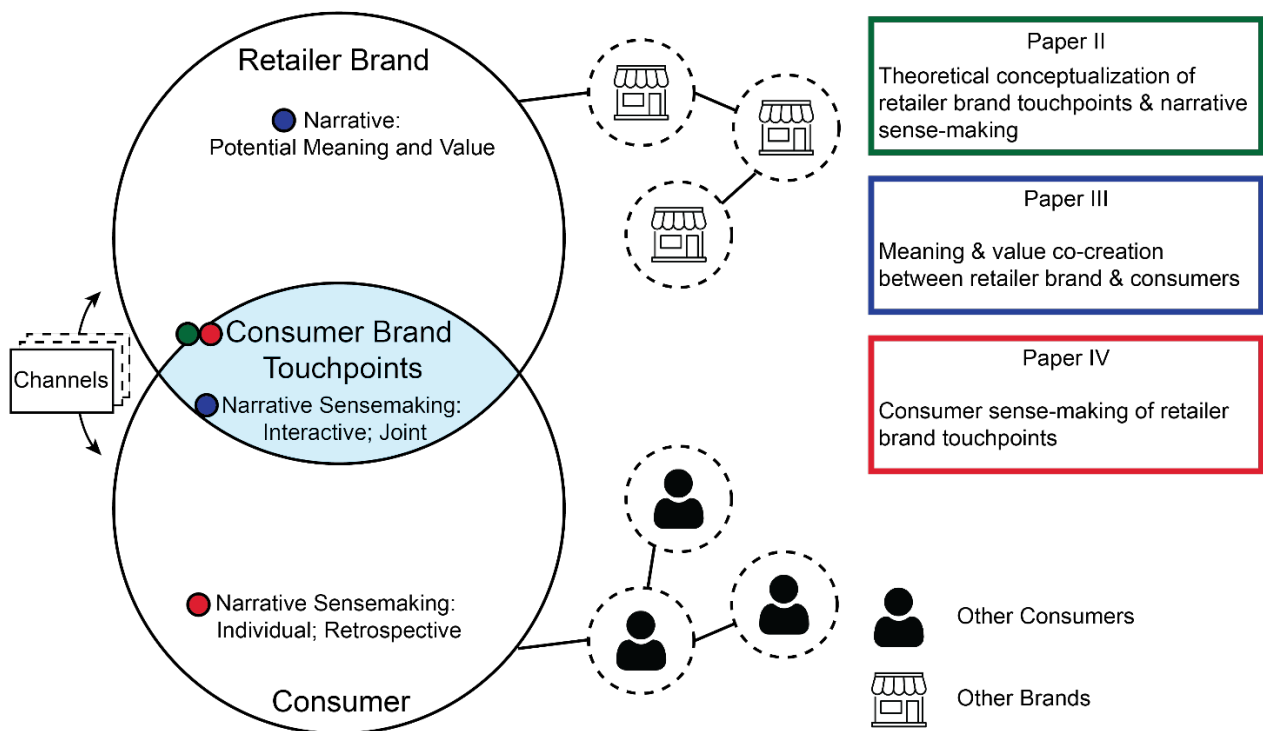
them into focus as a key creator of meaning. These ideas were already taken up by Stern (1994) in her call for a “revised communication model for advertising” and become arguably even more acute when marketing involves multiple channels where consumers can interact directly with both each other and the brand, becoming co-creators.

The specific concept of fragmented worlds and fragmented narratives shifts the attention to the wider structure of discourse (as opposed to previous micro-approaches within the field of linguistics). Here, Barthes argues that not all units of a narrative are of the same weight and importance. Modern conceptualizations of fragmented narrative rely on the theories of Martin Heidegger (2015), a key point of reference for later post-structuralists. Rejecting the notion of a stable sense of being and universal truths, he endorsed a return to original experience instead – an idea also reflected in phenomenology. Thus, fragmented narratives are seen as existing on a spectrum of greater or lesser narrativity, rather than dealing in black-and-white distinctions of narrative and non-narrative (Fludernik, 2005; Sadler, 2021; Van Laer et al., 2019). In this sense, narration itself is seen as a way of knowing and being-in-the-world (Sadler, 2021), which is one of the key theoretical assumptions this thesis is founded on as it necessitates us to think of consumers as co-creators of meaning. Sadler (2021) has used this theory to show how political narratives converge on social media platforms without, however, expanding it beyond this context. Within marketing literature, Gensler et al. (2013) called attention to consumers as authors of brand stories given the ease of accessing and sharing such stories today. Visualizing brand- and consumer-generated stories as puzzle-pieces, mutable and re-assembled as time goes by, they present a theory of brand stories based on co-creation, though without an overt referral to narrative theory. Notably, both of those approaches do not move beyond the context of social media platforms. In contrast, this thesis represents an attempt to expand these theories to encompass more facets of the entire retailer brand, such as the physical lead channel (paper III) and brand touchpoints (paper IV).

Overall, therefore, post-structuralist theory enables this thesis to address the increasing openness of brand narratives, calling into question the notion of uniformity and cohesion so prevalent in omnichannel research (Gasparin et al., 2022; Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020). The concept of narrative fragments further goes hand in hand with prior branding research stressing the importance of context and the interplay of emotional- and cognitive factors to create behavioral outcomes (Escalas, 2004; Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). Previous research also suggests that narrative openness is likely to evoke memory formation, as it requires people to move from a passive- into an actively interpreting and sense-making role (Hamby et al., 2019). Especially striking in this regard is the supposition of

narrative accrual over time which, given the context of the customer journey, may be thought of as repeating and adding on to a brand’s narrative upon each touchpoint encounter. These theories and tools, emphasizing the growing role of individual interpretation and sense-making, therefore represent a crucial foundation for this research and help us investigate retailer branding from a co-creative perspective. Figure 1 contextualizes the research articles within this dissertation vis a vis the theoretical grounding.

Figure 1: Theoretical scope of research papers. Adapted from (Gensler et al., 2013), (Grönroos & Voima, 2013)



The framework in this figure is an interpretation of Gensler et al.’s (2013) model of consumer-brand storytelling and Grönroos and Voima’s (2013) value co-creation model. The notion of narrative sense-making takes on a different angle in each of the papers within this dissertation and is therefore informed by additional concepts and theories in each case. Yet, these underlying theories of co-creation and storytelling can help in picturing the overall logic of this dissertation’s framework.

Research Design and Methodology

Departing from the theoretical background outlined above, the work presented in this dissertation is based on a multi-method research design encompassing interview- and ethnographic data.

Thesis Structure and Scope

The dissertation in general is structured around the three research articles and one theoretical research essay written throughout the project's duration. While this first part of the thesis provides an overview of that project's overall aim, theoretical grounding, design, and methodology, the second part of the thesis consists of the papers themselves. Finally, part three provides an overview of the insights and findings gained from the research within this project as well as their managerial and theoretical implications. A discussion of the thesis' overall limitations and suggestions for further research precedes the final conclusion.

With the overarching aim of this thesis being to explore the co-creation of meaning and value between retailer brands and consumers, the individual papers presented herein do so from different perspectives. Therefore, in order to focus the scope of this work, certain delimitations were made regarding the data collected and analyzed for each paper.

Firstly, to gain an overview of the research engaging with customer journeys and experiences in relation to omnichannel retailing, the literature review in the first research article was conducted as the project's point of departure. Relevant papers were arranged thematically to give an idea of the issues most frequently discussed within the field and highlight their interrelations and overlaps. Thus, even though the review does not lay claim to exhaustiveness, it does serve to illustrate pertinent research trends and the academic discourse surrounding these phenomena.

Secondly, the scope of the third article is delimited to the specific case of a major Danish furniture retailer considering their recent and ongoing re-branding and strategy shift in the German market. This focus was chosen to gain an understanding of a brand's own perception of its narrative and how it is used for value co-creation with consumers. This particular retailer and market context were chosen due to the recency of both image- and strategy shift, giving the first author access to a sense-making process that was very much ongoing on both the retailer- and consumer-side at the time of data collection. This was also the reason for including the perspectives of both retailer brand representatives and consumers in the paper. Further, the brand's lead channel was chosen as a focal point since, on the one hand, physical stores are set to become even more important sites for the co-

creation of extraordinary experiences in a retail environment that is characterized by omnichannel shopping (Alexander & Cano, 2019; Marhamat, 2024). On the other hand, the brand's clear and continued focus on its lead channel created an interesting tension when juxtaposed with its strife for channel consistency as part of the new overall strategy (Rösser, 2022).

Finally, instead of any particular channel, the fourth paper deals with the perception of retailer brand touchpoints. Taking its departure from Baxendale et al.'s (2015) comprehensive touchpoint study, this work focuses entirely on the consumer's perspective, employing a much broader scope across five different categories of retailer brands. With the goal of capturing participants' perception of touchpoint encounters, self-selection of the categories ensured that the data generated would be reflective of participants' lived experiences. This broader investigation of the consumers' perspective allowed for insights into how retailer brand touchpoints are experienced over the course of time, and which touchpoint qualities can make an encounter especially memorable.

Ontology & Epistemology

This dissertation is underpinned by an ontological and epistemological standpoint which complements the socio-cultural view of branding and experience co-creation, as well as the theory of fragmented narration expanded upon in the previous section. This standpoint takes its departure from Kantian philosophy, where any phenomenon as it is being perceived or experienced involves some kind of representation (Howell, 2016). Consequently, we are only able to interpret phenomena as they appear to us through the filter of the categories of understanding at our disposal – the world, in other words, is our representation of it (ibid.). Conceiving of our minds and what is in the world as fundamentally interlinked, I position this work within the constructivist ontological tradition, perceiving reality as being locally constructed and based on shared experience. The work within this dissertation attempts to outline and interpret such shared experience, in terms of its contribution to the formation of retailer brand meaning and value.

From an epistemological standpoint, it follows that the relationship between the investigator and the investigated phenomenon cannot be separated, and findings are created under the influence of a certain socio-historical context, only coming to light over the course of the investigation rather than being formulated as a priori hypotheses (Howell, 2016). Consumer research following such interpretive approaches has often positioned itself in alignment with hermeneutics which, although in itself not a uniform branch of philosophy, is generally centered around the interpretation of understanding (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). The approach taken herein is grounded in

the philosophical hermeneutic tradition shaped by Heidegger (2015) and Gadamer (1999), which rejects the notion that understanding is an objective recognition or revelation of an intended meaning. Thus, there can never be one definitive interpretation to be uncovered. Instead, understanding is a practical task undertaken by an interpreter who finds themselves in a continuous process of “coming-into-understanding” (Arnold & Fischer, 1994, p. 56). The tenets of this approach can also be found in Hirschman’s (1986) humanistic inquiry, which requires an “in-dwelling” (p. 238) of the researcher with the phenomenon under investigation and achieves understanding from personal experience. Such modes of inquiry are necessary to address socially constructed phenomena, making them a well-suited approach for this thesis work, in which the retailer brand is conceived of as a cultural form co-narrated by multiple stakeholders. Thus, while the general theoretical approach of this thesis takes its roots in post-structuralism, the research papers use hermeneutic and phenomenological tools to gain insights into conceptions of reality. The methods and mode of research chosen are representations and direct consequences of this underlying philosophy and I invite readers to critically process and engage with the presented findings on these terms.

Overall Methodological Approach

Departing from this ontological and epistemological foundation, the overall methodological approach of this thesis follows qualitative study designs as a means of examining meaning co-creation between consumers and retailer brands. This general methodological approach emphasizes a socially constructed reality and, therefore, provides a good fit for investigating brand narratives and consumption experiences as personal, subjective phenomena. Qualitative research in particular helps researchers view phenomena through the eyes of the people studied, making it especially apt for exploring the ways in which people attribute meaning to their environment (Bell et al., 2022; Bryman, 2012). It further emphasizes the processual nature of the phenomena under study, all of which are necessary for pursuing the overall aim of this thesis. Whereas quantitative methods and surveys remain the most prominent means of studying the customer experience in both marketing- and omnichannel retail literature (see Becker, 2018; Mishra et al., 2021), this work instead aims to capture embedded, first-hand descriptions of lived retail experiences. For such an undertaking, a methodological toolkit seeking to understand the “what” and “how” behind such experiences provides the closest fit (Silverman, 2013).

The third research paper presented herein seeks to understand sensemaking processes between consumers and a particular retailer brand via that brand’s lead channel. This undertaking required a

close engagement with the people involved and the context of that channel, leading to an ethnographic approach. Ethnography was seen as fitting the aims of this study particularly well as it provides a holistic account of retail experiences through the researcher's understanding, detailed description, and interpretation (Healy et al., 2007). This method further allows the researcher to see and experience what consumers see and experience and allows the actors involved to clearly articulate their own understanding. It is, therefore, ideal for discovering what it is that actors do in order to make sense of the retailer brand, as it enables an exploration of the emergence of meanings within an authentic context (ibid.). Secondly, semi-structured in-depth interviews with brand representatives were central to this study, as they allowed participants to re-tell their own perception of the brand, giving them the freedom to pinpoint their own highlights and emphases (Bell et al., 2022). With the examined retailer brand itself still being in the process of making sense of its narrative, these interviews provided an indispensable cornerstone for exploring the co-creation of brand meanings taking place within the lead channel.

The fourth research paper in this dissertation is based on a more phenomenological characterization of the consumption experience which emphasizes subjectivity, context-specificity, and embeddedness within consumer's life-worlds (Becker, 2018; Helkkula, 2011). Accordingly, the methods of this investigation deal with the disclosure of meaning and creation of attachment through instances of storytelling. Since the experiential qualities that make touchpoint encounters memorable are of particular interest for this investigation, a longitudinal diary study was conducted to gain insights into participants' subjective reflections over a period of time. While Baxendale et al. (2015) presented a comprehensive quantitative study of touchpoint encounters regarding frequency and positivity, participants in this study were given the opportunity to report and reflect on their individual experience of a touchpoint, including what made it memorable to them. Thus, each participant created a solicited diary, i.e. a diary produced specifically for the purpose of the investigation (Kenten, 2010). Data collection further followed an interval-contingent design with participants being asked to prepare entries at specified, regular intervals – namely once per week (Bolger et al., 2003). This allowed them to self-report events, thoughts, and observations, resulting in accounts of sequences of significant events (Becker, 2018). Framing this journaling period with in-depth interviews lends further depth to the data and gives participants the opportunity to reflect on the process once more (Bryman, 2012). This approach fits the aim of the study as it opens insights into the layers of meaning involved in even a single touchpoint and sheds light on potential temporal dynamics.

All in all, this multi-method approach across studies allows the overall project to address retailer brand experiences from a narrative angle, which puts consumers themselves front and center as co-creators while taking into account the growing dispersion and fragmentation of brand meanings within an omnichannel retail context.

Relationship between Research Papers

Each of the papers contained within this thesis attempts to make a contribution towards answering the overall research question of how meaning and value is co-created between consumers and brands within omnichannel retail contexts. While every research article approaches this subject from a slightly different angle, they are all instrumental in meeting this overarching goal.

The first paper sets out to lay the groundwork for beginning to answer the overarching research question. It does so by first examining the ways in which academia in the field of omnichannel retailing has – and has not engaged with the retail context of interest for this thesis. An investigation of this sort was deemed fundamental because the retail context and the omnichannel turn it has taken substantially contribute to the continued fragmentation of retailer brands, necessitating a re-conceptualization of key marketing concepts. The paper accordingly outlines the terms upon which one such key concept, the customer experience, is being engaged with academically, highlighting the absence of co-creative approaches. Amongst other items, the research agenda deriving from this review emphasizes the need for a stronger consumer point of view towards retailer brands, as well as dimensions and elements related to retailer brand experiences which look beyond seamless integration as a means of value creation.

Building upon the gap identified by this literature review, the second brief article begins to tentatively develop a conceptualization of how retailer brand touchpoints may be re-framed as fragments of brand narratives to better address processes of meaning co-creation. Attempting to map out key factors influencing the accumulation of retailer brand narratives via touchpoints-as-fragments, this work sought to lay down a theoretical lens for engaging with the co-creation of meaning and value between consumers and brands within a retail context that makes it more and more difficult for brand to rely on grand narratives owned and controlled by marketers.

Papers three and four then engage with this foundation in an empirical manner, exploring meaning co-creation on a brand narrative and brand touchpoint level, respectively. The third paper emphasizes a specific retailer brand coming to terms with its own updated narrative together with consumers. In

so doing, the brand's lead channel is being used as a key platform for the co-creation of meaning and value between consumers and brand representatives. Both strategically and intuitively, different elements constituting the retailer brand's narrative are being identified (with), decoded, and re-emplotted into personal stories by both parties, utilizing different potential meanings to co-narrate individualized versions of the brand. While interactions with touchpoints – i.e. fragments – from other channels clearly influence this process, further research on their contribution is still required.

The fourth paper zooms further in on the experiential qualities of individual retailer brand touchpoints, taking on an entirely consumer-centric perspective. Accordingly, it uses narration as a methodological approach to uncover the meanings and values attached to encounters with retailer brand touchpoints along the consumption journey. Thus, the consumers' reflection on these encounters is used to explore the qualities that transform them into memorable moments.

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Part II – Research Articles

Paper I:

Customer Experiences in Omnichannel Retail Environments: A Thematic Literature Review

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Abstract: The paradigm shift towards omnichannel approaches represents an ongoing fundamental change and a key metamorphic process taking place within the fields of retail marketing and management today. The intertwining of commerce and content across channels and touchpoints requires retailers to reconfigure their strategies and manifests new challenges for grasping concepts like customer experience and customer journeys. In response to these developments, we conduct a thematic review of 64 academic papers addressing customer experiences in omnichannel retail environments, integrating central concepts and approaches and thereby contributing to the body of literature exploring new and alternative approaches and theories to customer experiences along omnichannel customer journeys. We identify 8 overlapping streams of literature in this regard, highlighting that research on the subject tends to be focused on the seamlessness of channel integration and efficiency and thus might benefit from more consumer-centric, interdisciplinary work taking the co-creational aspect of these experiences into account. We contribute to retail- and omnichannel literature as well as retail branding theory and practice.

Keywords: omnichannel, customer experience, retail, customer journey, co-creation

1. Introduction

Within the fields of retail marketing and management, understanding customer experiences along the customer journey has been established as a vital success factor for retail brands and businesses (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Steinmann, Kilian, and Brylla 2014; Steinmann et al. 2016; Balis 2021; Weeks 2020). As retail brands are becoming more intertwined with consumer's lives on- and offline, researchers have recognized the need for more encompassing approaches which look beyond the service encounter itself, spanning the entire system of channels at marketers' disposal (Stein and Ramaseshan 2016; Van de Sand et al. 2020; Wagner, Schramm-Klein, and Steinmann 2020). With innovative technologies and digital retail marketing channels constantly emerging and evolving, the need for strategies adaptive to this constant transformation affording an interaction with customers according to their individual preferences and requirements has grown all the more pressing (Cornfield 2021; Wagner, Schramm-Klein, and Steinmann 2020).

Verhoef, Kannan and Inman (2015) define omnichannel management as '[...] the synergetic management of the numerous available channels and customer touchpoints, in such a way that the customer experience across channels and the performance over channels is optimized' (p.176). Hailed as a major paradigm shift within the field, the move towards omnichannel retailing challenges researchers to reconsider the theories and concepts that have long been held as cornerstones within retail marketing (Parsons and Descatoires 2016). The shift from multi- to omnichannel retailing also entails a stronger focus on the interplay between channels and brands (Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman 2015). Especially with regard to the retail context, retail brands are increasingly becoming part of our private spheres, with an even stronger intertwining of commerce and content necessitating a clear, coherent retail brand story across all channels (Van de Sand et al. 2020; Moin 2020). Recent research shows that a third of American consumers already consider omnichannel features a regular part of their shopping routines, with especially younger generations taking them as a basic requirement (Briedis et al. 2021). With strong omnichannel strategies being linked to longer customer lifetime value, higher spending and bigger shopping baskets, and overall increase in annual revenue, the message seems clear: customers value and enjoy omnichannel shopping and are willing to reward retailers who can deliver on their high expectations ("Retail 2020: Winning in a Polarized World" 2020; Spoadijeva, Dholakia, and Benjamin 2017). Although meeting these expectations and implementing successful omnichannel strategies may confront retail brands with a higher amount of complexity and risks, the potential payoff seems vast, as the creation of seamless experiences by retail

brands has been found to create added customer value and satisfaction through the seamless integration of channels and touchpoints (Larke, Kilgour, and O'Connor 2018; Rodríguez-Torrico et al. 2020). Recent research also identified the positive effects of customer experience on concepts such as loyalty and engagement (Lee et al. 2019; Tyrväinen, Karjaluoto, and Saarijärvi 2020). In addition to an academic reassessment, there is thus also a need for practitioners to find the means of creating more personal ways of establishing their brand while meeting elevated customer expectations, a need which places the customer at the very core of the customer journey and the process of attaching and co-creating brand meaning (Batra and Keller 2016; Moin 2020).

These practical developments are juxtaposed with a research body that continues to rely on incremental approaches, discussing individual channel characteristics or behaviors and rarely looking beyond canonical models and theories (Xu and Jackson 2019; Gao, Melero, and Sese 2020). While incremental approaches have afforded a thorough micro-perspective on omnichannel customer behavior, it nevertheless faces some major challenges when it comes to understanding the broader customer experiences along the customer journey in omnichannel retailing, especially considering constant technological evolution providing for a fast-changing retail branding landscape. This knowledge gap becomes even more complex with the introduction of more digital channels and touchpoints (Van de Sand et al. 2020; Harris 2017; Puccinelli et al. 2009; Grewal and Roggeveen 2020). A multitude of approaches continues to rely on linear customer journey concepts based on the traditional marketing funnel, an approach that is already being challenged as too rigid to capture what, in reality, tends to play out as a non-linear, often chaotic, and personal process (Lemon and Verhoef 2016). To address this research gap, it is necessary to take stock of current literature pertaining to the phenomenon of omnichannel retail experiences. A thematic review of academic publications on the subject can help us summarize the state-of-the art and understand the terms on which academia currently treats omnichannel retail experiences. Doing so will result in a research agenda highlighting hitherto underexplored aspects of the phenomenon and suggesting that both practice and academia may benefit from a more customer-centric approach.

This paper therefore sets out to explore the concept of customer experience in omnichannel retail contexts, assessing key contributions to the literature and answering the call for a consideration of new paradigms and theories in light of technology-driven omnichannel retailing and the resulting customer journeys (see Parsons and Descatoires 2016). We set out to examine the existent corpus of research as well as theoretical and methodological approaches to this issue, aiming to establish how – and to which degree – it has been investigated. We present a thematic and integrative analysis of 64

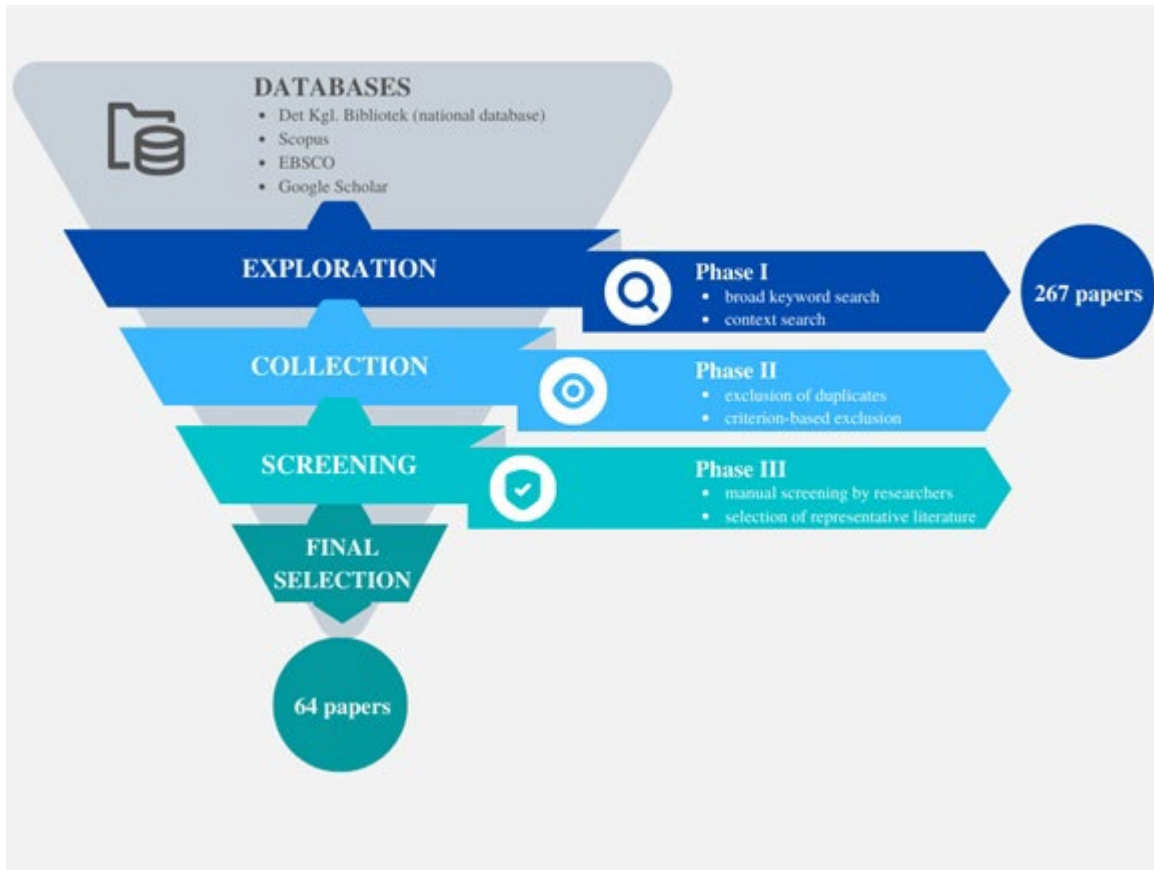
papers concerning current research on omnichannel customer experiences, with a focus on retailing and retail brands. In so doing, we contribute to the literature on customer experience in omnichannel retail environments by identifying eight research streams within omnichannel retailing and outlining the nature and common themes of these literature streams. These themes highlight that omnichannel retail experiences are chiefly being thought of and investigated with a view towards efficiency and seamless channel integration, leading to a rather fragmented view that does not capture the complex, multi-associative nature of these phenomena. We further develop an agenda for research approaches to these topics, reflecting the changing and changed role of the customer and their part in co-creating meaning throughout the customer experience. After outlining the methodological approach and research rationale, the paper presents a brief overview of omnichannel- and customer experience literature as well as a discussion of the identified key themes and approaches, closing with an outlook on pertinent knowledge gaps yet to be addressed

2. Research Design and Methodology

In order to gain an overview of the research engaging with customer experiences in omnichannel retail environments, we applied a thematic and integrative approach (Torraco 2005; Ridley 2012; Creswell and Poth 2018). Given the emergent nature of omnichannel research and the phenomenon of the omnichannel customer experience in retail environments, this strategy was deemed appropriate since it allows researchers to investigate novel issues which might benefit from a more holistic conceptualization and synthesis of the current literature (Torraco 2005). While systematic reviews compile all empirical evidence on a phenomenon, thereby minimizing potential bias, such an approach seems less suited for phenomena attracting studies across different methodological approaches, which have seen diverse conceptualizations and are represented by less mature research fields as is the case here (Snyder 2019). The objective of this qualitative way of reviewing is thus not to provide a detailed critique of any individual studies, but instead to carve out a general image of the research trends and streams of literature which have occupied themselves with the topic thus far (Creswell and Poth 2018). In doing so, new frameworks or perspectives for further research may be developed which, given the need for an academic reassessment of core concepts considering the omnichannel paradigm shift, presents an endeavor that is both necessary and conducive to further investigations.

With this rationale as a point of departure, the literature search took place over the months of April-May 2022 and proceeded across three phases of exploration, collection, and critical screening, as illustrated in figure 1.

Figure I-1: Visualization of the research process



At the first stage, a broad search yielding a pool of 267 publications was conducted through a comprehensive search of relevant databases including ScienceDirect, Business Source Complete, ABI/Inform, Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and EBSCO research databases. Initially, the keywords ‘omnichannel’, ‘retail*ing’ and ‘brand*ing’ (including variations in spelling) were paired up with inquiries for ‘customer experience’ and ‘customer journey’. The objective of the described proceeding in this literature search was to identify themes in omnichannel research pertaining to the customer experience and -journey, to summarize the state-of-the art and understand the terms on which academia currently treats omnichannel retail experiences. Thus, while a substantial stream of research concerning itself with the logistics of omnichannel retail should not go unmentioned (see Mishra 2021), these papers are largely concerned with the value chain and cost optimization for retailers, rather than dealing with the customer’s experience. For the present study, it was therefore

deemed more relevant to highlight academic studies addressing consumer- and marketing-related topics. As omnichannel retailing is a fairly recent academic phenomenon and research interest, certain challenges with regard to inconsistencies in both terminology and concepts transpired in the exploratory phase. Due to the field's emergent and fast-evolving nature, omnichannel literature has often had to grapple with different terminologies for retail marketing strategies and consumer behavior involving the use of multiple channels and touchpoints at the same time (Mirsch 2016). Thus, the terms of 'omni-', 'multi-', or 'cross-' channel all abound within academic literature. According to Beck and Rygl (2015), however, these terms can and should be classified according to both the implied level of integration and customer involvement, with only 'omni-channel' fully reflecting activities spanning all available channels at a level of full integration, which may be triggered by either the customer or the retailer (own emphasis). Thus, in line with this reasoning, keyword searches were focused on the omnichannel terminology, although intersections with multi-channel and related terms were not actively excluded if they appeared alongside- or in relation to omnichannel nomenclature. This is, for example, the case in Lee (2020), where both omni-channel and multi-channel serve as the paper's prime keywords. During the final stage of the exploratory phase, the lists generated by the initial search were transferred to the search engine Research Rabbit for a broader, citation-based mapping. This served the threefold purpose of ensuring that the search would represent both older and younger works within the literature, grasping potentially relevant peripheral themes, as well as highlighting the wider context of connected literature around the phenomena of interest.

In the second stage of the reviewing process, the collected works were further delimited by formulating criteria for in- and exclusion based on the aforementioned terminology and nature of the source. Since this review aims to provide a discussion and synthesis of representative literature on customer experiences in omnichannel retail environments (Torraco 2005), specifically to explore research develop avenues for further investigation, a clear focus was placed on peer-reviewed papers published in academic journals as illustrated by table 1. Since the purpose of this review is a summary and categorization of different research areas on customer experiences in omnichannel retail, grey literature such as, for example, magazine- or newspaper articles, business reports, or dissertations were excluded from the pool as they do not generally undergo a process of peer review ensuring the quality of the presented results, therefore running contrary to our objective of specifically representing validated academic insights (Ridley 2012; Tueanrat et al. 2021). Since electronic access represents another indicator of impact and reach when it comes to academic work, it served as another

exclusion criterion – ultimately, though, any peer-reviewed publications in a non-electronic format also failed to meet further inclusion criteria. Whilst this approach may be limited in its ability to capture the fast-evolving context of the phenomenon, it does provide more clarity on what is considered stable, accepted knowledge and theory within the field (Snyder 2019; Tueanrat et al. 2021). Additionally, the number of citations listed for each article provided a starting point for identifying key works, a process which was continued during the third phase of critical screening.

Table I-1: List of inclusion- and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written in English • Including the main keywords plus one or more of the additional keywords in their title, abstract, or author keywords • Peer-reviewed • Published in an academic journal • B2C context • Available in an electronic format 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-English language papers • Theses, pure case studies, non-academic commercial publications and articles, book chapters • Non-peer-reviewed publications • Publications unavailable in an electronic format

At this final stage, the qualitative rationale of actively seeking representative literature, i.e. literature the researchers identify as most relevant to- and depictive of the issue at hand, was foregrounded (Torraco 2005; Creswell and Poth 2018). To that end, a variety of strategies may be employed, from reading each piece in full to focusing in on the findings or methodological approaches of every article, each of which affords a different viewpoint on the subject to be investigated (Snyder 2019). Whilst the methodological state of the research field was of interest for the descriptive analysis, the overall approach best befitting the aim of this review was a two-staged screening process conducted by the researchers, with an initial emphasis on core concepts and findings addressed in the abstract as well as in the keywords of each paper. After making an initial selection based on this first stage, articles were once more screened in full to ensure they met the inclusion criteria (Ridley 2012; Snyder, 2019). This strategy of primary screening and subsequent in-depth examination was selected to more efficiently filter the pool of articles dealing with multi- or omnichannel related topics for customer experience- and retail related relevance. This approach further created a staged process of reviewing reminiscent of a hermeneutic approach to the literature (Howell 2016). From beginning to end, this

staged selection strategy resulted in a total of 64 academic articles chosen for review. The selected articles were further organized by their relationship and overlaps as emerging from topics and foci rather than chronology, leading to the thematic clustering found herein.

When conducting a semi-structured, thematic review, a measure to ensure both quality and reliability is the use of multiple researchers throughout the selection process (Snyder 2019). We thus follow a practice common in thematic qualitative coding to introduce a measure of inter-rater reliability and strengthen the stability of our thematic clustering (Armstrong et al. 1997; Mishra et al. 2021). This is why in the end, an external researcher unaffiliated with the project, but an expert in customer research in omnichannel retailing, was asked to examine and revise the identified themes to lend additional stability to our findings. Following a first revision, which already showed a high amount of consensus, the remainder of unclear classifications was further discussed and agreed upon.

During the final stage of the research process, the selected papers' content was subjected to a thematic analysis exploring patterns of meaning emerging from the literature and tracking the evolution of themes within this research stream (Alhojailan 2012; Thomas and Harden 2008). By grouping together prevalent topics and research foci emerging from our selection, a total of eight broad themes arose, with behavioral- and conceptualization themes featuring most prominently across the literature. It should be noted that naturally, some papers were found to address more than one theme, creating overlaps and highlighting relations between research fields. Thus, even though this work does not lay any claim to exhaustiveness, it conceivably serves to illustrate pertinent research tendencies and trends regarding customer experiences in omnichannel retail environments, thereby shedding light on the need for new interdisciplinary approaches and theoretical concepts.

Finally, it must be noted that the results obtained in this way should be seen in the context of their limitations. Firstly, the decision to include only academic databases and to leave out grey, non-peer-reviewed literature may be less suited to capture the fast evolution of omnichannel retailing and preclude other, potentially interesting sources of information. Secondly, the decision to undertake a two-staged process of screening as part of the literature selection, while common practice for review papers facing a broad variety of contributions and therefore in need of thinning the initial pool of literature efficiently, certainly forfeits a certain degree of in-depth analysis (Polanin et al. 2019; Snyder 2019). However, this strategy can be especially helpful when dealing with transdisciplinary subjects with a vast number of potentially relevant or related keywords (Polanin et al. 2019). Further, the issue of publication bias in the article selection must be considered. A common challenge in meta-

analyses of empirical material, the present decision to include only peer-reviewed articles may naturally also reflect a degree of such bias, relying on a system which favors the publications of statistically significant results (Drucker et al. 2016; Chalmers et al. 1990). However, since the review at hand transcends purely empirical papers including conceptual, qualitative, and mixed methods work as well, it was felt that peer-review provided the best possible means of indicating validated academic work.

3. Findings

In the following section, each of the themes emerging from the literature on omnichannel retail experiences shall be explored in detail. Identified themes include: the nature of customer experience, retail channels and touchpoints, retail strategy, retail branding, the impact of technology, customer behavior, customer segmentation, and finally incrementalism and fragmentation as an overall characteristic of omnichannel experience research. First, however, we will provide a brief descriptive analysis of the literature selection at hand.

3.1 Methods, Theories, and Publication Record within Research on Customer Experiences in Omnichannel Retailing

An overview of the publication record (see table 2) unsurprisingly reveals journals focusing on retailing, consumer services, and IT and technology as primary contributors revealing omnichannel retail experiences as a budding branch of research, with a substantial number of contributions emerging from 2015 onwards. While the concept of multi-channel shopping and customer experience management in retailing already appear in the mid- to late 2000s (e.g. Verhoef, Neslin, and Vroomen 2007; Puccinelli et al. 2009), it is not until the late 2010's that the omnichannel terminology gains traction (e.g. Larke, Kilgour, and O'Connor 2018; von Briel 2018). This development goes hand in hand with the proclamation of a paradigm shift from multi- to omnichannel retailing around the middle of the 2010s (Parsons and Descatoires 2016; Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman 2015).

Table I-2: List of methods and distribution across academic journals (N=64 papers)

Publication Record	Methodological Approaches
17% Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services	55% Quantitative
14% Journal of Retailing	20% Conceptual
8% International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management	17% Qualitative
3% Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research	8% Mixed Methods
3% Journal of Business Research	
3% European Journal of Operational Research	
3% International Journal of Research in Marketing	
3% International Journal of Production Economics	
46% Other: Marketing- and management related journals	

Overview of publication outlets and methodological approaches (in descending order)

However, comprehensive studies on the subject have only recently emerged, particularly from 2020 onwards (Hickman, Kharouf, and Sekhon 2020; Bascur and Rusu 2020). When it comes to theoretical underpinnings amongst the literature, we join other authors (Mishra, Singh, and Koles 2021; Gereá, Gonzalez-Lopez, and Herskovic 2021) in noting that such underpinnings are often limited, with a focus on general managerial concepts. As part of such approaches, an overview of relevant background literature tends to serve in lieu of theorization (Nguyen and Nguyen 2022; Riaz et al. 2022). Theories like technology adoption, innovation diffusion, and planned behavior have thus far provided cornerstones in the investigation of omnichannel experiences (Herhausen et al. 2015; Savastano et al. 2019; Shi et al. 2020; Rippé et al. 2017; Xu and Jackson 2019), generally underlining the need for seamless integration.

Finally, as illustrated by table 2, the subject of omnichannel retail experiences is largely characterized by quantitative research, while qualitative methods form a growing minority. Conceptual- and review-based papers also abound, indicating the emergent nature of omnichannel experience research (Bascur and Rusu 2020; Gereá, Gonzalez-Lopez, and Herskovic 2021; Beck and Rygl 2015; Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman 2015).

Therefore, the research field on omnichannel retail experiences might benefit from broadening both its disciplinary- and methodological scope. To further explore possible points of departure for a

diversification of this sort, the following sub-sections will present an overview of the main themes crystallizing from our analysis.

3.2 The Nature of Customer Experience in Omnichannel Retailing

Given the observations captured in the previous section, is it not surprising that conceptualization, or grasping the nature of multi- and omnichannel customer experiences is a theme that consistently emerges throughout the literature. Whether through entirely conceptual works (Bascur and Rusu 2020; Gereá, Gonzalez-Lopez, and Herskovic 2021), quantitative scale development for optimal measurement (Chang and Li 2022), survey studies (Riaz et al. 2022) or qualitative approaches (Stein and Ramaseshan 2016) – providing a concept, a better understanding, or a better way of investigating and examining the omnichannel customer experience frequently appears as one of the key aims of research (see Shi et al. 2020). The trope of a disruption of the status quo and the need for a revisitation and re-evaluation of traditional notions and accepted theoretical concepts goes hand in hand with this theme, as does an inclination towards predicting future trends within the commercial retail- or omnichannel technology environment (see Grewal and Roggeveen 2020; von Briel 2018).

Another crucial insight to be gleaned when examining conceptualization as a theme within the literature on omnichannel customer experiences is the tight theoretical association between- and intertwining of the concepts of the customer experience and the customer journey, the former usually being associated with the more efficient, utilitarian aspects of consumer decision-making processes, while the latter is taken to signify the more hedonistic, enjoyable aspects (Gerea, Gonzalez-Lopez, and Herskovic 2021; Tyrväinen, Karjaluoto, and Saarijärvi 2020). In an omnichannel brand environment, however, addressing both of those aspects across all stages of the journey is crucial, leading to calls for an investigation of the interplay between these two concepts (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).

Despite the recognition of the importance of this interplay and the clear prominence of conceptualization as a theme within the literature, there remain relatively few efforts attempting a holistic approach to capturing omnichannel retail experience. If present, these efforts remain at a purely conceptual (e.g. Grewal and Roggeveen 2020) – or highly specialized and contextualized level (Komulainen and Makkonen 2018). Thus, the theme of striving to investigate the nature of omnichannel customer experiences, though being identified as a strong overarching motif within academia, can be seen in juxtaposition to the subject matter of the final section: the fragmentation and incrementalism characterizing omnichannel experience research.

3.3 Retail Channels & Touchpoints

As the simultaneous management of all available channels and touchpoints presents one of the key characteristics of omnichannel retailing, it is not surprising that it also emerges as a strong theme within the literature. Generally, channels are thought of as the medium through which customer and retailer interact, while touchpoints describe specific, individual moments of interaction. Thus, one channel may encompass a number of different touchpoints while the moments of interaction described by the latter may be either sought or serendipitous (Stein and Ramaseshan 2016; Wagner, Schramm-Klein, and Steinmann 2020).

Overlapping with the theme of customer behavior in omnichannel retail environments, channels and touchpoints have drawn research interest in relation to omnichannel customer experiences. Despite channels having been defined as denoting the possibility of a two-way interaction or communication (Verhoef, Kannan, and Inman 2015), there remains a somewhat unclear and seemingly interchangeable use of the two terms, with channels receiving a comparatively greater amount of attention from researchers while systematic investigations of omnichannel touchpoints and their bearing on the customer experience remain few and far between (Baxendale, Macdonald, and Wilson 2015).

When it comes to retail channels, frequent subjects of inquiry include channel integration (Lee et al. 2019; Le and Nguyen-Le 2020; Gao, Fan, et al. 2021; Herhausen et al. 2015), channel congruence (Gabisch and Gewbu 2011), channel loyalty (Xu and Jackson 2019), channel convenience and transparency (Gao, Li, et al. 2021; Nguyen and Nguyen 2022), channel synergies (Fisher, Gallino, and Xu 2019), or effects across channels (Verhoef, Neslin, and Vroomen 2007). Amongst these, channel integration in particular has been drawing researchers' attention. Customers' level of perceived risk is found to play a large role in their channel selection and loyalty tendencies, with channel transparency and uniformity being identified as key measures to mitigate or lower risk perception (Xu and Jackson 2019). Moreover, integration, coherence, and seamlessness are frequently emphasized as cornerstones to the creation of satisfying omnichannel experiences (Le and Nguyen-Le 2020). Gao et al. (2021) do note, however, that some integrated efforts, e.g. surrounding price, promotion, and product, have a more pronounced effect on the cognitive- rather than the affective customer experience, leaving the latter in need of further investigation.

In all, literature within the theme of channels and touchpoints makes it plain that seamlessness in terms of technical functionality is imperative for the creation of positive omnichannel experiences.

Other affective and emotional aspects which may contribute to a cohesive and seamless experience remain somewhat neglected though, as does the potential for customer empowerment, which is only referenced by one contribution (Mishra et al. 2021). Finally, touchpoints emerge as a rather under-theorized concept with a multiplicity of meanings attached to it. While much has been written about the provision and identification of touchpoints in omnichannel experiences, the ways in which customers perceive – and make sense of them still warrants further exploration.

3.4 Omnichannel Retail Strategy

As the management of channels and touchpoints needs to be embedded in a deliberate strategic framework for omnichannel aspirations to prove advantageous, we now turn to the literature addressing omnichannel retail strategy. Articles featuring the strategy theme include omnichannel marketing- and management focused research that emphasizes the retailer itself as the main subject of interest (Pantano and Viassone 2015). Typically, the literature within this theme follows the implementation of omnichannel strategies by a retailer, highlighting the importance of leveraging existent infrastructures and carefully managing the transition (Larke, Kilgour, and O'Connor 2018); the challenges adopting omnichannel approaches may entail – often closely interwoven and of an organizational and human resource-related nature (Gerea and Herskovic 2022; Picot-Coupey, Huré, and Piveteau 2016); or the outcomes and advantages of following a strategic omnichannel approach, highlighting the potentials of channel integration synergies and identifying omnichannel marketing as superior to multichannel efforts (Berman and Thelen 2018; Herhausen et al. 2015). In the literature following transition processes of case companies, customer-centricity in particular is being highlighted as a key enabler of successful omnichannel strategies (Gerea and Herskovic 2022).

This theme overlaps with the issue of incrementalism, since it includes a multitude of case studies (e.g. Mandal, Basu, and Saha 2021) as well as foci on specific strategic practices such as showcasing (Park, Dayarian, and Montreuil 2021) or assortment integration (Emrich, Paul, and Rudolph 2015). A certain overlap with the technology theme, specifically how retailers might utilize new technologies to optimize their omnichannel approaches, also arises (Kumar and Uma 2019). Naturally, these research efforts tend to investigate variations of the question of how retailers may leverage the omnichannel phenomenon to gain- or sustain some sort of competitive advantage. With regard to this challenge, unification, congruency, and channel integration emerge as key concepts invoked by researchers (Larke, Kilgour, and O'Connor 2018; Pantano and Viassone 2015). When it comes to marketing strategies in an omnichannel context, consumer engagement and loyalty arise as concepts

of particular interest, with researchers inclined to focus on message unity and coherence across different channels (Manser Payne, Peltier, and Barger 2017). A rather conspicuous aspect to note here is the fact that these examinations tend to focus on larger companies in a Western cultural- and economic context.

Overall, the literature exhibiting this theme draws attention to the complexities omnichannel approaches entail for retailers and the considerable challenge presented by a unification of the customer experience across multiple channels and touchpoints, which involves both careful strategic implementation and effective omnichannel retail brand management (Larke, Kilgour, and O'Connor 2018).

3.5 Omnichannel Retail Branding

In relation to omnichannel strategies, the theme of omnichannel branding and brand experience warrants a mention – not because it is particularly ubiquitous, but because it seems to need further investigation, especially with regard to the retail environment. Especially at the intersection of customer journey and customer experience research with omnichannel retail brand contexts, research efforts are scant, with a mere handful of papers attempting any comprehensive or conceptual efforts (Frasquet-Deltoro, Molla-Descals, and Miquel-Romero 2021; Lynch and Barnes 2020). Moreover, such efforts often assume a retailer-based view rather than highlighting the role of consumers within the creation of omnichannel experiences (von Briel 2018; Larke, Kilgour, and O'Connor 2018). Again, omnichannel brand experiences appear in highly specific research contexts, as for example in Gabisch and Gewbu's (2011) investigation of virtual brand experiences and their relationship to real-world purchase decisions or Blom et al.'s (2017) research on the effects of omnichannel promotions on brand image. The former indicates that virtual brand experiences, depending on accuracy and usefulness, shared self-concept with other brand users, and consistency across marketing channels, can indeed affect actual purchase decisions while the latter demonstrates the benefits of using digital traces for increasing purchases and enhancing brand image for omnichannel retailers. To the best of our knowledge, Frasquet-Deltoro et al. (2021) remains the only effort which seeks to capture the omnichannel retail brand experience in a comprehensive way. By developing a comprehensive scale across eight dimensions of social, sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioral, pragmatic, relational, and lifestyle aspects, these authors highlight the positive influence of customer experience on both satisfaction and loyalty.

Thus, the theme of branding and brand experience within omnichannel retail contexts emerges as highly relevant due to its connection to achieving coherent and seamless experiences - yet in dire need of further investigation and conceptualization.

3.6 The Impact of Technology on Omnichannel Retail Experiences

As technological progress and tools form another characteristic part of omnichannel retailing for both customers and providers, its emergence as a theme adds another important facet to this overview. The representation of a technology-focused research stream within the omnichannel retail experience literature is often based upon the notion of a certain disruption- or transformation of customer experience and customer journey through the introduction or intervention of some new technology. Articles reflecting this theme frequently deal with customer-technology interaction, with the in-store context being a particular focus, be it to emphasize the beneficial effects of integrating in-store technologies to improve omnichannel customer experience, to highlight that phygital (physical-digital) functionality aids the creation of a seamless customer experience and increased loyalty, or to show that in-store staff can use adaptive selling tactics to affect purchase intentions and customer compliance under the influence of mobile devices (Alexander and Kent 2020; Pangarkar, Arora, and Shukla 2022; Savastano et al. 2019; Rippé et al. 2017). Another way of approaching the subject is by providing technology-based strategies for retailers, examining the potential of big data engineering or machine learning for creating optimized omnichannel customer experiences (Kumar and Uma 2019). No matter which perspective is taken, however, personalization, engagement, and integration are the key concepts appearing in connection with the impact of technology on omnichannel retail experiences (see Alexander and Kent 2020; Pangarkar, Arora, and Shukla 2022). While the potential of technological advances to foster more immersive, seamless customer experiences and thereby more engaged and ultimately loyal customers is widely agreed upon (Savastano et al. 2019), less attention has been given to scenarios of technological failure and technology-induced frustration within omnichannel retail experiences, though Rippé et al. (2017) stress the importance of an interplay between on-site staff and technology.

Finally, it is striking that within this particular thematic stream, the customer seems to be framed as a largely passive entity upon whom technology exudes some sort of effect, or who is ‘under the sway’ of technological devices (Rippé et al. 2017). The notion of technology’s potential to transform customers into co-creators of omnichannel retail experiences and omnichannel retail brand meanings

remains largely absent from the literature within this thematic stream (see also Gereaa, Gonzalez-Lopez, and Herskovic 2021).

3.7 Customer Behavior in Omnichannel Retail Environments

Closely related to the preceding theme surrounding technology, as well as the theme addressing channels and touchpoints, research focusing on consumer behavior, attitudes, and motivations represents one of the most conspicuous streams within omnichannel retail literature. Explorations of omnichannel customer experience naturally tend to focus on customers' decision-making and purchase behavior, which means that the customer journey represents a frequently used concept and research interest within this theme (Chang and Li 2022; Nguyen, McClelland, and Thuan 2022). Investigations tend to focus on purchase intention (Blom, Lange, and Hess 2017; Gabisch and Gewbu 2011), channel choice and selection (Zhao and Deng 2020; Xu and Jackson 2019; Nguyen and Nguyen 2022), or technology adoption (Herhausen et al. 2015). One prominent issue within this theme is the subject of customer loyalty and how to generate- or retain it within an omnichannel context, e.g. by identifying reach and positivity of touchpoints as being related to loyalty intentions, or highlighting the positive effects of customer experience, influenced by hedonic motivation and personalization, on loyalty (Ieva and Ziliani 2018; Tyrväinen, Karjaluo, and Saarijärvi 2020). In particular, it seems as though the overall brand experience a retailer is able to deliver has a positive effect on loyalty (Frasquet-Deltoro, Molla-Descals, and Miquel-Romero 2021). A concept closely connected with loyalty and almost equally prominent within literature exhibiting the customer behavior theme is risk, specifically customers' perception of it (Shi et al. 2020). In line with other thematic streams, the research on customer behavior also seems to identify coherence, seamlessness, and consistency as the main means for reducing perceived risk in omnichannel contexts (Quach et al. 2020).

Finally, it may be noted that this theme is widely investigated with the use of quantitative methods such as surveys or experimental research designs (Fisher, Gallino, and Xu 2019). Although more qualitative and mixed-methods approaches have recently emerged (Shi et al. 2020), a strong focus still seems to lie on classic behavioral studies. The notion of the customer as an active experience co-creator again remains absent from this theme.

3.8 Customer Segmentation and Omnichannel Retailing

Another means of researching retail customers is represented by literature seeking to segment them more meaningfully for an omnichannel context. Articles focusing on segmentation in relation to customer experience tend to fall into a comparatively earlier period of research output and often make use of the multichannel terminology (Steinmann et al. 2016; De Keyser, Schepers, and Konuş 2015). Thus, segmentation seems to be one of the initial ways of grappling with the emergent phenomenon of multi- and omnichannel retailing, seeking to establish common patterns within customers' shopping behavior in this context and provide a classification based on it. Commonly, such classifications include the two behavioral patterns of webrooming and showrooming – or versions of it, such as reverse showrooming (Lee and Lim 2017).

DeKeyser et al. (2015) provide a segmentation based on customers' channel usage for information search and purchase, identifying six distinct segments such as store-focused, web-focused, or research shoppers amongst others, showing that they differ significantly in their average revenues and loyalty. Mahrous and Hassan (2017) provide broader, but overall similar findings and categorizations within the context of the travel industry. Steinmann et al. (2016) meanwhile use multidimensional customer contact sequences as a means to classify and cluster retail customers, describing four groups with distinct channel strategies across different phases of the purchase process. Lee and Lim (2017), on the other hand, directly link their customer segments – which they base on omnichannel shopping behavior – to customer experience, seeing it as the crucial factor for the assessment of customer purchase patterns. However, this study merely investigates two types of omnichannel shoppers, finding a stronger significance of the customer experience for reverse showroomers than for showroomers. Finally, Barwitz & Maas (2018) introduce new ways of segmenting omnichannel customers based on the value-in-use sought in their interactions along the customer journey.

Overall, the theme of segmentation reflects research efforts to grasp the omnichannel phenomenon from a customer perspective, demonstrating the need for novel ways of clustering retail shoppers which are more meaningful and diagnostic than simple demographic and psychographic segmentation. However, investigations thus far tend to focus on consumers in Western cultural and economic contexts and have not moved towards exploring possible interrelationships between retail brands and different customer segments.

3.9 Incrementalism & Fragmentation in Omnichannel Retail Research

As a final theme found across the entire body of literature, incrementalism – i.e., small, gradual additions and change processes - can be said to characterize omnichannel retail experience research in several ways, both regarding the subject matter itself and the context of academic approaches. Regarding context, fragmentation largely manifests itself in a high amount of case studies, often following retailers' transitions towards an omnichannel concept (Picot-Coupey, Huré, and Piveteau 2016; Larke, Kilgour, and O'Connor 2018). Moreover, luxury- and fashion retail seem to be particularly prevalent contexts in which to study omnichannel experiences, typically accompanied by arguments that here, strong brands and engaged customers are to be found (Riaz et al. 2022; Pangarkar, Arora, and Shukla 2022; Lynch and Barnes 2020). In this way, omnichannel retail experiences have become strongly associated with a specific kind of retail context in academia, which in some way disregards the more mundane, everyday omnichannel experiences customers encounter on a regular basis.

Secondly, when it comes to research focus, it became apparent that studies often chose to highlight and investigate one particular omnichannel phenomenon such as a specific channel (Tyrväinen, Karjaluoto, and Saarijärvi 2020), a part of the customer experience like store atmosphere (Roggeveen, Grewal, and Schweiger 2020), a type of customer behavior like research shopping or supercharging (Verhoef, Neslin, and Vroomen 2007; Bell, Gallino, and Moreno 2020), or a specific stage of the customer journey. In the latter case, the moment of purchase continues to command the highest amount of attention and while some consideration is given to its antecedents, relatively little research has focused on its aftermath (Mandal, Basu, and Saha 2021). Therefore, it can be noted that although the need for overarching concepts of omnichannel experiences has been voiced and is evidenced by continued and growing interest (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Grewal and Roggeveen 2020; Parsons and Descatoires 2016), researchers have thus far been adopting a micro-level approach to the issue, dissecting it bit by bit. This has effectively resulted in a somewhat opaque body of literature characterized by a multitude of terminological- and conceptual ambiguities, e.g., the aforementioned issues regarding channel- and touchpoint conceptualizations or differentiations within the online channel. There are, for example, a number of studies broadly distinguishing between two channels, namely online and offline (e.g. Zhao and Deng 2020), while other researchers contest this notion, drawing attention to the need for a more differentiated view of something as diverse as the online channel (Wagner, Schramm-Klein, and Steinmann 2020). Another example of such ambiguities is the

use of the concepts channel and touchpoint as interchangeable, without providing theoretical or conceptual distinctions (Hickman, Kharouf, and Sekhon 2020).

The theme of incrementalism throughout the research on omnichannel customer experiences has therefore resulted in a rather fragmented and inconsistent body of literature with context-specific findings, stressing the general need for further theorization (see also Mishra, Singh, and Koles 2021). Thus, having started our array of themes with literature on the nature of omnichannel retail experiences, this final theme brings us full circle in highlighting that despite high research interest, we have, as of yet, only succeeded in illuminating limited parts of this phenomenon.

4. Discussion and Research Agenda

In summary, it can be said that particularly over the course of the last five years, omnichannel has advanced to somewhat of a buzzword within retail research. However, when it comes to understanding the resulting customer experiences and journeys as well as their associated marketing implications, the themes emerging from this investigation highlight that there is ample ground for further research. Especially approaches employing qualitative or mixed-methods, or different theoretical lenses would enrich the research field. The preceding section represented an attempt at outlining the different themes, methods, and theories currently underpinning the literature on omnichannel experiences in retail contexts. In the following, the insights gained will be used to delineate prominent research gaps within the field and propose avenues for further research.

As outlined in the first section of our findings, when it comes to methods in relation to the themes identified above, it must be noted that the research field is still dominated by quantitative, survey-based work employing statistical means of data analysis (e.g. Nguyen and Nguyen 2022). At the intersection of themes and methods, quantitative work on customer behavior and channels is especially abundant, with much less attention being given to qualitative- and mixed-methods. Even within qualitative approaches, the data collection methods are often confined to interviews, leaving an entire array of methodologies underexplored (Gerea and Herskovic 2022). Consequently, there is a considerable chance – and need for research to delve into customers’ actual, lived experiences within omnichannel retail contexts. In addition, the central role taken up by the customer in light of the omnichannel paradigm shift also warrants an examination of their role as experience co-creators, especially regarding the possibilities afforded by ever-advancing technologies within retailing. While

some investigations into consumer empowerment have emerged (Le & Nguyen; Mishra et al), it might be especially fruitful to investigate co-creation with regard to online contexts and socio-technological touchpoints along the omnichannel customer journey. Further, the strong quantitative methodological focus of omnichannel literature has resulted in a research body focused on analyzing what is happening, rather than why or how, with other researchers also calling out a complete absence of consumer-centric approaches like narrative analysis or netnographies (Mishra, Singh, and Koles 2021). Thus, while the functional and cognitive aspects of customer experience and seamlessness in omnichannel contexts have primarily drawn the interest of researchers (e.g. Rodríguez-Torrico et al. 2020), very little is known about the affective and emotional aspects which may be involved in creating cohesion within omnichannel retail experiences.

The theme of fragmentation and incrementalism also seems to overlap with quantitative approaches, which emphasizes the need for more overarching and holistic explorations of omnichannel customer experiences in retail contexts. Longitudinal studies in particular might provide a means of exploring the unfolding of non-linear customer journeys and experiences over time and capture an extended relationship between customers and omnichannel retail brands, rather than providing short-term evaluations of purchase intention, channel choice, or engagement. Finally, another research gap may be found in the somewhat opaque conceptualization of channels and touchpoints within omnichannel retail experiences, which has also been called out by other reviewers of omnichannel literature (Mishra, Singh, and Koles 2021; Gereá, Gonzalez-Lopez, and Herskovic 2021; Bascur and Rusu 2020) and which is reflected in the aforementioned terminological discomposure within the literature.

At the intersection of theoretical approaches and our identified themes, the omnichannel customer experience reveals itself to be, thus far, a rather under-theorized subject. In agreement with other reviews of omnichannel literature, we find that there is a distinct lack of solid theoretical groundwork underpinning the research on omnichannel retail experiences (see also Mishra, Singh, and Koles 2021). Despite the paradigm shift towards value co-creation, which firmly stresses the central role of the customer (Vargo and Lusch 2004; Vargo and Lusch 2016; Arnould and Price 1993), omnichannel retailing seems to struggle with representing the idea that meaning creation drifts more and more out of marketers' control – a development accelerated by the introduction of multiple communication channels, customer touchpoints, and a more complex customer journey. Some researchers even argue that a retail brand's image cannot be communicated, but rather only emerges in the re-telling of its customers, who influence each other as much as brand strategies do (Cassinger 2010; Batra and Keller 2016). With both theory and practice acknowledging the growing need for understanding experience

and purchase journeys from a customer viewpoint, there is still relatively little research actually adopting a holistic, customer-centric view (Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, and Alamanos 2021; Kamleitner, Thürridl, and Martin 2019). Thus, addressing the wider context of the omnichannel customer experience, especially over an extended period, would counterbalance the trends outlined within the theme of fragmentation, which intersects with behavioral and managerial theories.

Theoretical approaches from the field of marketing often address the concept of the customer journey which, as mentioned before, is interwoven with customer experiences in omnichannel contexts. Regarding the customer journey, however, there remains a strong focus on purchase phases and purchase decisions as the ultimate outcome (Anderl, Schumann, and Kunz 2016; Juaneda-Ayensa, Mosquera, and Murillo 2016; Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, and Alamanos 2021), which may be called into question in an omnichannel context. More recent research output within the customer behavior theme already indicates that for modern retail brands, topics like loyalty and engagement, which speak to a more long-term relationship customers are willing to enter, might be more relevant indicators for investigations into omnichannel customer journeys and experiences (Pantano and Viassone 2015; Tyrväinen, Karjaluoto, and Saarijärvi 2020). There is also the fact that the very phases of the customer journey which have the highest likelihood of containing ‘black boxes’ within which customers become opaque, namely before- and after the purchase, are precisely the ones in need of more research attention and have thus far mainly received attention from a managerial, strategic perspective (Tueanrat, Papagiannidis, and Alamanos 2021). In addition, the connections and potential synergies between phases remain somewhat underexplored, with analyses typically not setting out to encompass different phases – but rather focusing on one in particular.

With regard to retail channels, the digital realm which bears high potential for co-creation has thus far mainly been examined under the heading of classical, desktop-based online shopping, with research on touchscreens, apps, AR, and other emergent channels still in its early stages (Wagner, Schramm-Klein, and Steinmann 2020). The role of social media also remains relatively unexplored with most researchers treating the online medium as one overall concept without further distinction, as evidenced by recent calls for a more differentiated view of ‘the online channel’ (Steinmann, Kilian, and Brylla 2014; Hollebeek et al. 2020). In congruence with this research gap, little is known about the collective customer experience in omnichannel retail contexts and the ways in which customers influence each other’s behavior on- and offline. Thus, while behavioral theories are especially abundant in research concerned with channels, we once again seem to be lacking the bigger picture, indicated by the overlap of behavioral theories and the channel- as well as the incrementalism theme.

Another gap emerging from the thematic analysis is the lack of investigations concerning omnichannel retail brand experiences in particular. However, given the growing ubiquity of omnichannel brands, it is likely that this research field bears a vast potential for elucidating more affective aspects of omnichannel experiences, in contrast to the functional ones often highlighted by behavioral research focusing on channel-related attitudes and actions. Moreover, future research may want to expand the retail brand context beyond the realms of luxury and fashion, examining omnichannel retail experiences as the everyday practices and brand encounters they have, by now, become. Finally, given the multi-faceted nature of omnichannel experiences, we find a surprising lack of interdisciplinary approaches despite the clearly stated need to re-evaluate key assumptions in light of the paradigm shift towards omnichannel retailing. Interdisciplinary research, therefore, bears vast potential for fulfilling this need and re-conceptualizing the customer experience along the customer journey within omnichannel retail, providing some fresh theoretical underpinnings.

Regarding the identified themes of the nature of customer experience, retail channels and touchpoints, retail strategy, retail branding, the impact of technology, customer behavior, customer segmentation, and incrementalism and fragmentation, we find that each highlights different aspects of importance for grasping customer experiences within omnichannel retailing. However, the investigation presented herein also emphasizes that each theme brings to light the need for further research in a particular direction. While the literature on channels and touchpoints, for example, has closely examined and shown the benefits of providing a seamless, integrated experience, there remains a lack of investigations into the interplay of channels and touchpoints as well as an underappreciation of their potential for creating affective, emotional relationships going beyond sheer functionality and convenience. Together with the preceding discussion of theoretical and methodological approaches vis á vis our themes, therefore, further avenues for future research can be derived. Table 3 provides an overview of all identified themes, including their respective strengths, the knowledge gaps they give prominence to, and the resulting research agenda.

In summary, we conclude that a need for understanding and meeting the customer at an individual level on all channels and throughout the entire customer journey in to address a rapidly changing retail environment combines with a lack of customer-centric research using the latter's co-creative role to an advantage, an over-reliance on linear and potentially outdated concepts within largely quantitative approaches, and a neglect of newer digital channels and their potential. An attempt to address these gaps essentially begs the question of how customers make sense of the multi-associative network represented by modern omnichannel retail brands.

Table I-3: List of themes, their respective highlights and shortcomings, and avenues for further research.

Theme	Highlights	Shortcomings	Research Agenda
Nature of the Customer Experience in Omnichannel Retailing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future trends • Interdependence of customer journey & customer experience • Comprehensive overview of conceptualizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interplay of customer journey & customer experience unclear • Few holistic approaches • No conceptualizations from the customers' point of view ("outside in" instead of "inside-out") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper operationalization of customer journey & customer experience in omnichannel retailing • Establish customer perception of omnichannel retail brands
Retail Channels & Touchpoints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effectivity of seamlessness and channel integration for creating superior customer experiences • Identifies risk as one of the main influences on channel choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of overarching approaches • Focus on functionality over affective elements • Lack of differentiation regarding new touchpoints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic mapping of channel and touchpoint interaction within omnichannel retail environments • Investigation of emotional and affective customer experience elements in omnichannel retail brands
Omnichannel Retail Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear outline of key drivers, challenges, costs, and advantages when adopting omnichannel approaches • Stresses potential competitive advantage of omnichannel retail strategies • Clear best practice outliers for retailers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong case study focus (industry- and context-specific) • Focus on particular strategic practices & phenomena (showcasing / assortment integration) • Focus on Western, developed economies • Little theoretical support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore omnichannel strategies amongst small / medium-sized retail brands • Explore omnichannel strategies in a broader range of categories & sectors, as well as different cultural contexts
Omnichannel Retail Branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear connection between strong branding & achieving seamless omnichannel experiences • Retail brand experience established as critical for customer satisfaction & loyalty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still too little research on retail brands in omnichannel contexts in general • Focus on retailer-point-of-view (often highly context-bound) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper operationalization of retail branding in an omnichannel context • Establish dimensions of retail brand experience in an omnichannel context
The Impact of Technology on Omnichannel Retail Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential of new technologies (big data, machine learning) to optimize experience provision for retailers • Potential of technological advances to drive engagement & loyalty by enabling immersive and seamless customer experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on in-store technologies • Neglect of potential drawbacks (failure / frustration) • Neglect of customer agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broader operationalization of technologies as co-creative tools within omnichannel retail experiences • Critical evaluation of technology usage by omnichannel retail brands (when is it appropriate, when is it potentially detrimental)

Table I-3: (Continued)

Theme	Highlights	Shortcomings	Research Agenda
Customer Behaviour in Omnichannel Retail Environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasizes the role of overall retail brand experience as a strong influence on customer loyalty Stresses the roles of seamlessness & consistency as reducers of perceived risk in omnichannel retailing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Missing an inside-out customer point of view & insights on a deeper level than behavioral outcomes Purchase intention remains the main research focus Low ecological validity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Investigate customer behavior with a more long-term view towards the relationship between retail brands & customers → across the whole customer lifecycle Generate customer-perspectives highlighting the reasons, rituals and patterns underpinning omnichannel customer behavior
Customer Segmentation for Omnichannel Retailing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides early insights into broader patterns of behavior in omnichannel retailing Sheds light on distinct omnichannel retail phenomena (webrooming / showrooming) Shows that different customer groups employ distinct behavioral strategies in omnichannel contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong emphasis on Western, developed economies and customers Variety of different possible criteria for segmentation (usefulness highly context-dependent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probe further into the differences between omnichannel customers, especially regarding various cultural backgrounds and lived experiences Use big data capabilities to develop more useful (broader) segments Investigate interdependences between retail brands & customer segments (brand communities)
Fragmentation & Incrementalism in Omnichannel Retail Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides detailed empirical evidence for retail practitioners Gives insights into a range of particular omnichannel retail phenomena and aspects of customer experience (e.g. channel switching) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research bears ties to one specific type of retail context (luxury / fashion) Fewer considerations on mundane instances of retail brand interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grasp together the insights on omnichannel customer experience in retail environments into broader, more overarching theories Incorporate new ways of interacting with retail brands (e.g. social media) Account for the temporal dispersion & repetitive nature of omnichannel retail experiences

5. Conclusion

In all, the present work represents an attempt at taking stock of current developments and trends within the literature on omnichannel customer experiences, specifically in relation to the retail setting and the ways in which these experiences unfold along the customer journey. With retailing having to constantly reconfigure and adapt to rapid changes regarding both technological progress and consumer expectations, a better understanding of customer experiences in omnichannel retail contexts may prove beneficial for industry practitioners in several ways. While research already shows that integrated promotions and access of information can lead to higher customer satisfaction and cross-selling opportunities in omnichannel contexts (Lee 2020; Wagner, Schramm-Klein, and Steinmann 2020), the research agenda developed herein highlights that this ideology of efficiency is but one facet of creating omnichannel retail experiences. Omnichannel brands have become multi-associative and dispersed across touchpoints, which is why customer-centric, experience-based strategies bear great potential for the establishment of more long-term brand relationships based on loyalty and engagement, rather than pure efficiency and individual conversions (Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Grewal and Roggeveen 2020; Tyrväinen, Karjaluoto, and Saarijärvi 2020; Bowden and Mirzaei 2020). As this dispersion has led to signaling power and brand image becoming ever more central, to benefit from omnichannel systems, retailers need to develop and apply omnichannel strategies that involve the consumer across the whole omnichannel system as well as in individual channels creating a unique customer experience, as reflected by the shift towards the experience economy and experience co-creation (Becker 2018; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Pine and Gilmore 2013; Andreini et al. 2018). Thus far, however, retailers still seem to struggle with suboptimal tools for grasping the complex customer experience in omnichannel contexts, further complicated by siloed internal systems (Gerea and Herskovic 2022; Pantano and Viassone 2015). However, a more comprehensive mapping of channel- and touchpoint interaction within omnichannel retailing may support a more effective allocation of resources, ensuring more successful transitions. A wiser allocation of resources may also be gleaned from a better understanding of the role different technologies may play for the customer experience in different omnichannel retail settings. Moreover, exploring and understanding customers as co-creators of omnichannel retail experiences may aid managerial efforts to build lasting relationships between customer and retail brand based on loyalty, authenticity, and engagement.

A thematic overview of the pertinent literature streams and fields of research reveals that the necessary reconsideration of the processes and commonplace concepts within retail marketing necessitated by the paradigm shift to omnichannel retailing, already called for in 2016 (Parsons and Descatoires 2016), is just beginning and despite the turn towards an experience economy (Argenton 2015), omnichannel literature remains largely devoid of approaches exploring a consumer-centric, co-creative perspective towards brand experience. In particular, knowledge gaps point towards the need for a better understanding of how consumers make sense of the dissipated, multi-mediated, transient pieces of information constituting a modern omnichannel brand. As this process forms a key aspect of today's non-linear, even circular customer journeys, paving the way towards a better understanding and theorization thereof bears value for the fields of retail- and omnichannel marketing as well as retail branding theory and practice.

Thus, in the end, it may be said that the turn towards omnichannel and its resulting customer experiences represent an ongoing metamorphic process within the field of retailing and, while metamorphoses certainly bear a potential for great progress, we might also do well to remember their inherent linkage to strife and irrationality. Most importantly however, metamorphoses afford a kaleidoscopic view of the transformed, allowing us to see it in a fresh light. In this vein, the present exploration suggests that omnichannel retail transformations open a unique possibility for viewing and investigating customer experiences and -journeys from novel, interdisciplinary angles.

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Paper II: Omnichannel Customer Journeys – Fragments of a Never-Ending Story?

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Abstract: While the potential of storytelling to create emotional and memorable connections to a brand has long been realized, today's omnichannel brands face the challenge of telling their story across a multitude of touchpoints and channels, forming a multi-associative network for customers to navigate and make sense of. With an increasingly blurry boundary between content and commerce, fueled by new technologies and digital channels emerging and evolving rapidly within the current economic climate, the need for theoretical and methodological approaches that span the entirety of touchpoints at marketers' disposal has grown. By proposing a framework and research agenda of customer touchpoints as narrative fragments, we strive to generate a customer-based understanding of meaning co-creation along the customer journey. This conceptual work represents an endeavor to contribute insights into new and emergent channels. As such, the approach presented herein will contribute to retail- and omnichannel marketing literature as well as retail branding theory and practice.

Keywords: Omnichannel retailing, customer journey, branding, storytelling, brand narratives, sensemaking

1. Introduction

Within the fields of retail marketing and management, grasping the customer journey has been established as a vital success factor for brands and businesses (Steinmann et al., 2016; Wagner et al., 2020). The move towards omnichannel re-tailing has already been hailed as a major paradigm shift within the field as early as 2016, challenging researchers to reconsider the theories and concepts that have long been held as cornerstones within retail marketing (Parsons & Descatoires). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, this need has arguably become even more urgent, as customer adoption of new and digital shopping channels has evolved rapidly and perhaps irrevocably. Brands have increasingly become part of our daily lives and private spheres, leading to an even stronger intertwining of commerce and content and necessitating a clear brand story across all channels (Cornfield, 2021; Van de Sand et al., 2020). In addition to an academic reassessment, there is thus also a clear need for practitioners to find the means of creating more personal ways of establishing their brand while meeting elevated customer expectations, a need which places the individual at the very core of the customer journey and assigns marketing a much more central role as the driver of digital transformation and storytelling (Balis, 2021; Batra & Keller, 2016; Tueanrat et al., 2021).

This industry need is juxtaposed with a research body that continues to rely on incremental approaches and fails to look beyond canonical models and theories, remaining ill-equipped to understand the customer's journey within this new and fast-changing context (Baxendale et al., 2015; Harris, 2017; Mishra et al., 2021). A multitude of approaches, for example, continues to rely on linear customer journey concepts based on the traditional marketing funnel, an approach that is already being challenged as too rigid and simplistic to capture what in reality tends to play out as a looping, non-linear, often chaotic, and deeply per-sonal process (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

To address these issues and answer the call for a consideration of new paradigms and theories in light of technology-driven omnichannel retailing and the resulting customer journeys (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016), an attempt will be made to identify new starting points for understanding modern omnichannel customer journeys through narrative theory. As consumers are confronted with increasingly fragmented information on a multitude of channels, this theory can provide a means of grasping sensemaking processes along the customer journey to ultimately create better omnichannel experiences addressing customers on both emotional- and cognitive levels. The following section will be concerned with synthesizing promising conceptualizations from the realm of consumer narratives with post-structuralist theory on narrative fragments to present a novel research approach to

omnichannel customer journeys in a world where, increasingly, brands are no longer the main narrators of their story – e.g. due to digital channels like social media, review platforms, and customer-to-customer interaction (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016; B. Stern, 1994).

2. Fragmented Narratives – A New Perspective for Omnichannel Marketing

To better understand everyday processes of brand narratives, it may be helpful to consider post-structural notions of the open work, the writerly text, and the fragmentation of narratives. Roland Barthes (1975) established the idea of the death of the author, tying in with Umberto Eco's (1989) concept of the *Opera Aperta*, the open work. Essentially, these notions shift the reader or message-receiver into focus as a key creator of meaning (Visconti, 2018). Similarly, the concept of fragmented worlds and fragmented narratives further shifts the attention to the wider structure and Gestalt of a text. Essentially, all units of a narrative are seen as potentially re-organizable to provide an overarching meaning beyond superimposed, conventional restrictions: while some units function as central cores, others serve as peripheral information separating the former, thereby creating a sort of narrative nucleus around which related fragments are clustered (Visconti, 2018). Driving the concept further, Barthes' work *S/Z* (1970) distinguishes between the writerly text which actively involves the reader in the creative process on the one hand, and the readerly text, for which the reader is a passive receiver, on the other hand. However, a true open text, which would be responsive to the reader's every need, remodeling itself according to the circumstances, remains a hypothetical construct (Turner Iii, 2005).

Some of these notions have in fact already been reflected in marketing and branding literature, e.g. by Stern's (1994) revised communication model for advertising or Escalas' (2004) work on consumer-brand relationships. They become conceivably even more acute when marketing communications involve literal two-way channels where consumers can interact directly with both each other and the brand, becoming storytellers in their own right. Taking these thoughts one step further is the notion of the "produser", a user permanently engaged in a writerly process of interpretation (Sadler, 2021). Yet, while these concepts have been used in the context of social media- and communication studies, the notion of fragmented narratives remains, to the best of the authors' knowledge, entirely absent from marketing-, customer journey- and omnichannel literature, its potential for grasping people's sensemaking processes across channels and touchpoints notwithstanding.

2.1 The Relevance of Narratives in a Fragmented World

The multi-associative network omnichannel brands have become arguably re-quires a re-thinking of those patterns of customer sense-making usually taken for granted. The dispersion of brand stories over a multitude of channels can be said to place a higher amount of responsibility on the recipient who must bridge gaps in any multi-media narrative through their own creative input (Hamby et al., 2017; Sadler, 2021). Indeed, the beginnings of computer technology have been described as a reminder of the fact that human sense making always has been fragmented – a prediction that has become more relevant than ever, with current works describing the ongoing process of mediatization in particular as characteristic of a world constituted by fragmentation (Kozinets, 2021; Sadler, 2021). As the paradigm shift towards omnichannel strategies stresses, both media and consumption have increasingly bled into our daily lives and private spheres ever since the onset of digitalization and social media. Thus, aspects once restrained to the offline environment can now be lived and experienced through media (Sadler, 2021). This shift towards a more mediatized life experience is accompanied by a stronger fragmentation of brand information across off- and online touchpoints of an omnichannel system, making it more complex for consumers to make sense of.

Yet, or perhaps precisely because of this development, narratives continue to play a central role as algorithms, though able to juxtapose different fragments, remain unable to arrange them into meaningful entities: if anything, in-creased fracturing of information entails an increased need for interpretation (Markham, 2005; Sadler, 2021). Thus, while initially viewed as the downfall of narrative and metanarrative (Lyotard, 1984; Manovich, 2001), fragmented information actually increases the relevance of the human act of grasping disparate elements together into a story that makes sense. In fact, modern platforms like social media are perhaps particularly well positioned to “enable greater expression of the local, at the same time as they reaffirm reliance on metanarratives” (Sadler, 2021, p.5).

Part of the ongoing relevance of narratives in an age of fragmented information lies in their function as both a means of interpretation and representation. In other words: the fact that information is not presented in the shape of a narrative does not prevent people from interpreting and emplotting it as such (Czarniawska, 2004; Hamby et al., 2019; Sadler, 2021). This tendency towards narrativity in sensemaking processes can also be seen in consumer research demonstrating the effectiveness of simple prompts transporting people (back) into a narrative (Kamleitner et al., 2019). Psychological approaches have conceptualized this process as a sequential progression towards narrative

persuasion: for a narrative to be persuasive, a so-called deictic shift is initially needed. Namely, information has to be recognized as relevant to a given narrative before a process of reflection and an emergence of meaning can take place. This chiefly involves relating the received information back to one's own life and experiences in a matching-process which may eventually lead into persuasion outcomes (Hamby et al., 2018; Hamby et al., 2015). Another notable concept in research on narrative sensemaking is that of narrative transportation, dealing more with the affective, emotional influences of stories (Green & Brock, 2000; Green et al., 2004). Accordingly, this concept stresses the relevance of poetic aspects of a narrative as well as the role of the individual in the sensemaking process. The devil, it was realized, lies not within the text, but within the recipient and their situation (Green & Brock, 2000).

All in all, a modern omnichannel customer journey involving a multitude of touchpoint interactions across different channels represents just such a mosaic of informational fragments as described herein. Conceiving of brand stories as a fragmented narrative, therefore, can become a crucial component of successfully crafting a proactive, customer-centric omnichannel strategy.

2.2 Omnichannel Touchpoints as Narrative Fragments

In light of omnichannel branding, the theoretical approach outlined above will aid in understanding consumer sense-making along the customer journey. According to Grewal & Roggeveen (2020), the modern customer journey is nonlinear and revolves around cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes. In fact, the authors stress the importance of recognizing the “social narratives” played out across different communication- and consumer channels (p. 3). Thus, the goal of understanding and shaping experiences along the omnichannel customer journey might benefit strongly from interdisciplinary work using narrative approaches: on the one hand, the omnichannel context provides a significant extension to the re-search on narrative sensemaking by foregrounding channels which involve the customer as an active part of the story while on the other hand, narrative theory is able to bring together emotional and cognitive aspects in the process of meaning co-creation.

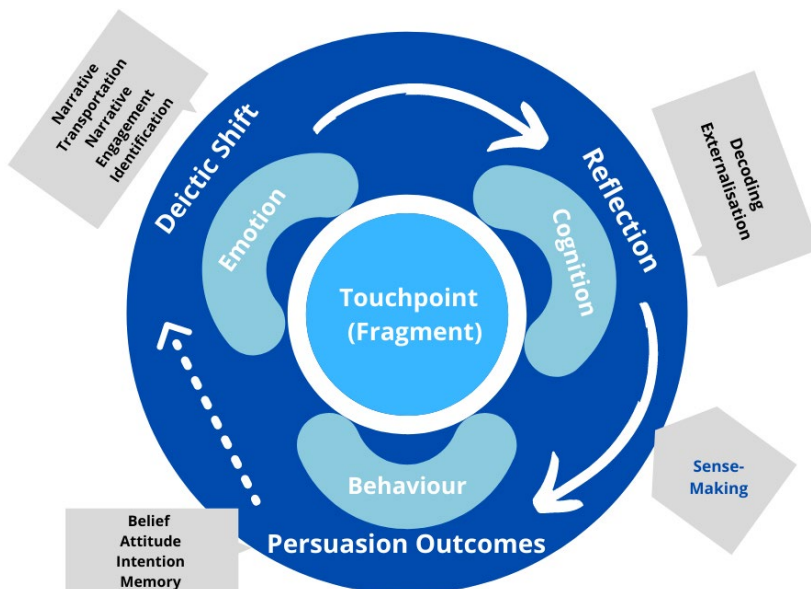
Thinking of various touchpoints as fragments of a brand's narrative would enable researchers to evaluate each touchpoint's relevance and expressiveness with regard to conveying a story over multiple channels. If such a narrative were further conceived of as having different degrees of openness, the consumer moves out of the passive reader-recipient role, paving the way for more customer-centric frameworks (e.g., Lemon & Verhoef 2016) and helping marketers and re-searchers illuminate multiple potential meanings of brand stories. This would also entail a view of meaning as

largely divorced from the creator and thus suggest constructs allowing for an openness to interpretation and multiplicity of meaning, which seems apt for investigations of everyday sensemaking. Previous research on narratives further suggests that “writerly” work is likely to be memorable, as it requires people to move from a passive- into an actively interpreting and sense-making role (Hamby et al., 2017).

The notion of narrative fragments further goes hand in hand with prior work on both the customer journey and narrative processing, which stresses the importance of context and the interplay of emotional- and cognitive factors to ultimately create behavioral outcomes (Escalas, 2004; Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). Especially striking in this regard is the supposition of narrative persuasion as a process over time which, given the context of the customer journey, may be thought of as repeating and adding on to a brand’s narrative every time a touch-point - i.e. narrative fragment - is encountered. This, however, would require the initial deictic shift into the narrative, so that the consumer begins engaging with it (Hamby et al., 2018). Fig. 1 maps out the core concepts of narratives and customer journeys against a backdrop of narrative fragmentation.

Figure II-1: Omnichannel Touchpoints as Narrative Fragments.

Adapted from Hamby et al. (2018), Grewal & Roggeveen (2020) and Escalas (2004).



As the omnichannel paradigm shift can be seen as a representation of the increasingly fragmented information characterizing modern life (see Sadler, 2021), theories emphasizing the growing role of

individual interpretation and sense-making may be crucial for future research, as will be discussed in the following.

3. Outlook: Conclusion & Future Research Agenda

Since customer journeys and their concomitant sensemaking processes increasingly involve nonlinear, fragmented information and multi-mediated conceptions of what is meaningful (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Markham, 2005), one could begin to conceptualize different omnichannel touch-points as fragments of a brand's narrative, which would enable researchers to identify core story-elements and priorities within a brand narrative that is spread out over several channels. A concept of touchpoints as narrative fragments could thus further aid in both understanding the ways customers make sense along their omnichannel journeys as well as identifying and categorizing various omnichannel touchpoints according to their storytelling potential. Ultimately, doing so can contribute to impacting key consumer-related outcomes for omnichannel brands and aid in positively influencing customer engagement to build long-term relationships that go beyond the purchasing process in an amalgamation of content and commerce.

Thus, with the aid of this theoretical lens, future research may begin to examine the narrative potential of different touchpoints, which are commonly defined as “an episode of direct or indirect contact with the brand” (Baxendale et al., 2015, p. 236). If narrativity is viewed as a continuum (see Van Laer et al., 2019), categorizing their expressiveness and narrative function across different phases of the omnichannel journey would become a useful indicator for investigations into long-term factors like consumer engagement, for example. Another particularly intriguing avenue of investigation in this regard would be a brand's ability to encompass the local and personal, while remaining true to its overarching metanarrative. In an age of fragmented information, the brand is no longer the sole narrator of its story, calling the relevance of consistency into serious question and highlighting the need for flexibility: how can we keep on telling new stories without altering our core message? Omnichannel touchpoints viewed as narrative fragments of a brand's story may provide a crucial tool for probing more closely into this dichotomy. Finally, fragmentation could present a means of tackling one of the most central puzzles within both narrative- and omnichannel research, which is the effect of stories over time, beyond the moment of encounter (see Hamby et al., 2017; Hamby et al., 2019). Which cues would be needed to fit fragments into an overarching narrative? Are there contextual elements that may increase the likelihood of information being integrated into established stories?

And how does a brand narrative transform (or stabilize) itself over time in the memory of consumers? Investigating such topics may provide novel, consumer-centric insights for retail– and omnichannel marketing as well as retail branding theory and practice.

All in all, the present work represents an attempt at taking stock of current developments and trends within omnichannel retailing, specifically in relation to the ways in which brand stories are transported over the course of the customer journey. The necessary reconsideration of the processes and commonplace concepts within retail marketing necessitated by the paradigm shift to omnichannel retailing, already called for in 2016 (see Parsons & Descatoires, 2016), is only just beginning. In particular, knowledge gaps point towards the need for a better understanding of how consumers make sense of the dissipated, multi-mediated, transient pieces of information constituting a modern omnichannel brand narrative. As this process forms a key aspect of today's non-linear, chaotic, and even circular customer journeys, paving the way towards a better understanding and theorization thereof bears value for researchers and practitioners alike. Therefore, this paper proposes a conceptualization of touchpoints along the omnichannel customer journey as narrative fragments, drawing on post-structuralist literary theory as well as consumer- and retail literature. Thus, it provides a crucial extension of the retail branding literature into an omnichannel context, as well as a base for improving customer experience along the customer journey across emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. The presented approach can further contribute to existing retail management research by generating a customer-based understanding of meaning co-creation as the basis for behavior along the customer journey. Such a notion would adequately reflect the growing role of the individual within this new realm of customer-brand interaction and allow for research to further probe into- and develop more timely, proactive (rather than descriptive) concepts of omnichannel customer journeys based on one of humanity's oldest, most universal, and therefore most effective practices: storytelling.

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Paper III:

Omnichannel Retail Brands as Fragmented Narratives: Everything Everywhere All at Once?

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Abstract: Given the rapid, ongoing transformations within the retail industry, retailers themselves have begun to arise and behave as brands in their own right, including a distinct image and brand story. With the rise of omnichannel distribution and marketing strategies, these stories have become more multi-vocal, multi-mediated and dispersed, challenging retailer brands' strife for consistency and control. To create more insights into how retailers can adapt their storytelling practices in light of this dispersion, this paper presents an illustrative qualitative investigation of Danish retailer brand JYSK and their process of making sense of the brand narrative considering a recent shift towards omnichannel retailing. By identifying five overall story elements used by brand representatives and consumers to co-create meaning and value, converging into the retailer's narrative via its lead channel, this paper proposes a re-conceptualization of retailer brand narratives as fragmented narratives. Doing so calls into question the prevalent aspiration towards channel consistency within omnichannel retail theory and practice and highlights channel inconsistencies as opportunities to engage consumers, rather than obstacles.

Keywords: retail branding, brand narratives, fragmentation, meaning co-creation

1. Introduction

The retail industry has undergone significant and fast-paced processes of transformation over the past few years – a trend that is not going to come to a halt any time soon. Due to economic-, political-, technological-, and social changes at a global scale, retailers have perhaps felt the need to align their virtual and physical touchpoints with rapidly evolving consumer habits more keenly than ever (Nealon, 2023). While technological progress allows retailer brands to continue making shopping across a system of different channels easier and more efficient for consumers, it has equally led to a rising desire for unique in-store experiences that cannot easily be delivered through other channels (Marhamat, 2024). Thus, the physical store remains the most important sales channel for many retailers who are using it more strongly to convey emotions and stage their brand. In fact, the growth of online channels more keenly emphasizes the importance of in-store experiences, leading to forecasts of record investments in this channel until 2025 (Atzberger, 2016; Hofacker, 2016; Horbert, 2016). The store therefore remains a crucial lead channel attempting to not only provide a flawless, straightforward purchasing process, but who strive to convey a retail brand narrative that engages consumers and leads to long-term relationships rather than mere repeat purchases (Escalas, 2004; Nealon, 2023).

Today's rapidly evolving, multi-mediated omnichannel retail market environment poses a new challenge for this endeavor insofar as consumers, now more than ever, enjoy an unparalleled amount of access to a broad range of media and platforms, giving them the means to control their exposure to – as well as the shape of narrative delivery (Feiereisen et al., 2021). In essence brand narratives, which have been described as co-constructed (Holt, 2004; Visconti, 2010), are becoming even more fragmented, multisited, and therefore volatile. While academic research predominantly highlights the benefits of a consistent retail mix across different touchpoints and smooth transitions between channels with regard to engagement, customer satisfaction, and sales (Chang & Li, 2022; Frasquet-Deltoro et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Torrice et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018), recent investigations already question whether more integration is necessarily always better, since consumers do not, by default, value the consistency of certain retail elements equally (Bertrandie & Zielke, 2017; Gasparin et al., 2022; Liu & Liu, 2024). At the same time, the continuing relevance of physical stores as central channels that allow for meaning co-creation and unique, social consumption experiences already suggests that when it comes to retailer brand narratives, this strife for a coherent grand narrative may not be worthwhile at all.

With more and more retailers being perceived and behaving as brands in their own right, it is undeniable that retail brands and their stories do not only go hand in hand, but also that the rapidly progressing turn towards omnichannel strategies within retailing poses new and heretofore under-examined challenges to brand managers – especially those with a purely instrumentalist view of brands (Berthon et al., 2007; Brynjolfsson et al., 2013; Burt & Davies, 2010; Davies, 1992). In this paper, we adopt a view of retail brands as sense-givers without which material markers like a name, logo, or design would be empty and devoid of meaning (Holt, 2004). Retail brands fill, connect, and emplot such markers as stories for consumers to relate and be drawn to. In so doing, they become more engaging and personal, catering to people’s emotions and fantasies and thus to the more experiential aspect of consumption (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Moin, 2020). Overall, retail brands are understood as accumulations, assemblies of ideas, experiences, and memories – all of which become emplotted within a multitude of multivocal narratives (Beverland et al., 2020; Eagar et al., 2022; Moin, 2020). The strength of a brand, however, remains dependent on how much these stories become conventionalized, even mythologized, and treated as consensual truths in an everyday context (Holt, 2004). We therefore follow cultural branding scholars in adopting the notion of brands as narrators and cultural forms, viewing branding as a specific form of communication and storytelling (Cayla & Arnould, 2008).

Based on this standpoint, the paper at hand juxtaposes the growing dispersion of retail brand stories across channels with brands’ simultaneous striving for consensus and meaning in a context which affords them less control over the narrative. By interconnecting research literature on omnichannel retail- and brand storytelling, we define retail brand narratives in omnichannel contexts as multi-vocal, multi-mediated assemblages of story elements and seek to explore retail branding from the perspective of the store as lead channel. We do so through the lens of a qualitative study of Danish furniture retailer JYSK, whose brand story relies heavily on their national and Scandinavian identity and who, despite a purported shift to omnichannel retailing, continues to place central importance on its physical stores. This investigation therefore serves as a revelatory case of a retailer brand with a clear lead channel making sense of its narrative in light of an omnichannel transition. Through a multifaceted inquiry encompassing in-depth management interviews, observational data gathered onsite in store environments, and ethnographic consumer interviews, we *aim to identify the different story elements which converge into the JYSK narrative emanating from the brand’s lead channel*. Secondly, by examining *how both brand representatives and consumers make sense of these elements*, we propose a novel understanding of brand narrative co-creation within the omnichannel paradigm,

which goes along with crucial implications for retailers aiming to imbue their brand with meaning and build lasting connections to consumers. Probing into these questions, this qualitative study contributes to both retailing- and branding theory and practice. It does so firstly by interlinking omnichannel retail- and brand storytelling literature streams, developing a definition of retail brand narratives for the omnichannel context. Secondly, based on this definition, we further develop the notion of retailer brands as fragmented narratives and outline its implications for value co-creation between brand representatives and consumers, challenging the integration imperative within retailing and identifying further avenues of research as a result. These contributions offer meaningful guidance to managers when it comes to developing their brand value propositions, highlighting individual channel characteristics and providing a pathway towards greater strategic value via narrative co-creation between retailer and consumer.

2. Conceptual Background and Literature Review

As this paper delves into the investigation of retail brand narratives and how they may be adapted to an omnichannel context, this section will briefly review the key theoretical concepts as they appear within retail marketing and branding research literature. On the basis of this review, we develop an updated definition of retailer brand narratives which provides the conceptual basis for this study.

2.1 New Frontiers for Retail Brand Narratives

Strong brands have long been one of the most crucial assets and value-creators for companies – especially in a retail context (Keller, 2013; Kotler et al., 2021). However, with the circumstances of a changing market environment our views of brands and branding have moved beyond the classic notion of retail brand elements ready to be plotted onto a certain structure in order to create and maximize retail brand experience. Equally, when it comes to telling an engaging brand story, marketers and scholars alike have traditionally assumed a certain sense of universality, seeking blueprints and recipes for success (Brown & Patterson, 2010; Publitz et al., 2016; Kotler et al., 2021).

In contrast, cultural branding scholars have since advanced the idea of brands as narrators and cultural forms, formulating a view of branding as a “specific form of communication, which tells stories in the context of products and services, addresses people as consumers, and promises to fulfill unmet desires and needs” (Cayla & Arnould, 2008 pp. 86-87). Thus, many researchers have shifted their viewpoints from conceiving of brand managers as architects building strong brands according to a

certain blueprint pattern (Keller, 2013) to understanding the work of branding as an ongoing dialogue in which meanings are co-created between brand representatives and consumers alike (Visconti, 2010). In this dialogue, control over the retail brand narrative is necessarily understood as residing at least partially with the consumer, formerly in the mere passive role of an audience. Berthon et al. (2007) speak of a negotiation of different evolutions of a brand's image, employing the metaphor of a symphony of brand meanings (see also Diamond et al., 2009). Within this symphony, new and highly individual voices are added constantly: research shows that retail sales representatives and store personnel frequently and freely employ the use of stories and metaphors in their daily work, re-framing brand stories and adding their own voices to the chorus that constitutes a brand narrative (Gilliam & Rockwell, 2018; Otnes et al., 2012). At the same time, consumers may emplot their purchases and branded items, thereby integrating retail brand stories into their own private life-worlds (Cassinger, 2010; Schau & Akaka, 2021).

What is more, the ways in which consumers encounter and experience brands are now becoming increasingly complex, multi-mediated, and context sensitive. Simultaneously, the evolving landscape of brand encounters is increasingly intricate and consumer-centric due to technology-driven changes (Swaminathan et al., 2020, Mangio, 2022). When it comes to brand narratives in this environment, consumers now wield significant control over how brand narratives are delivered, shaping their own story trajectory (Feiereisen et al., 2021). Brands therefore face a certain tension between being open to various interpretations and maintaining control over narratives to protect their image (Lury, 2005; Swaminathan, 2020). While some argue for limiting meaning co-creation to safeguard brand integrity (Arvidsson, 2005), others advocate for open narratives to foster authentic connections (Beverland, 2005; Visconti, 2010). Narrative openness encourages consumers to relate to and enrich brand stories, tapping into the human tendency to process information through storytelling (Czarniawska, 2004; Bruner, 1991; Woodside, 2010). Within Marketing and consumer research, Stern (1994; 1998) conceptualized the foundations of this perspective, advocating for a revision and expansion of the traditional model of communication and reconceptualizing brand messages as written text and thus more complex than ordinary word of mouth exchanges. However, while consumer research is quite familiar with the topic of narrative consumption, it is thus far largely conceptualized as a predominantly mental process, with narratives embedded in space, embodied by consumers, and affording different levels of agency to story co-creators remaining largely uncharted (van Laer & Orazi, 2024).

Following cultural branding scholars, we argue that the adoption of standardized blueprints does not represent an ideal way to create an effective brand story. Firstly, with regard to blueprinting and story structure, today's brands navigate a world in which, despite the risks it entails, a co-creative approach to brand meaning formation becomes necessary, since such meaning is automatically being created by a multitude of different stakeholders (Swaminathan et al., 2020). To researchers like Woodside (2010) and Escalas (2004), the indices of a story provide touchpoints to the lives of people, suggesting that uniformity and consistency across such elements may not represent the most effective approach to brand storytelling (see also Borghini et al., 2009; Diamond et al., 2009). In a similar vein, Visconti (2010) points out that consumer receptiveness to certain kinds of stories may vary dramatically since people use different cues to make sense of them. Therefore, far from presenting storytelling as a silver bullet for brands it takes "vision and constant adaptation to the context, fine-tuning with the company's audiences, and definite neglect for standardized recipes" (p. 250). These views of branding strategies go hand in hand with an understanding of the consumer based on their cultural resources (Arnould et al., 2006). This stance highlights that branding strategies, instead of presenting a consistent core value proposition, might rather enlist consumers' imaginative capacities to create multiple strands of meaning which form consumer-brand connections. As this notion regards consumers' goals, as well as their resources as touchpoints for value enrichment, it suggests that brands might benefit from providing "customized links that induce an explosion of meanings" in place of a consistent core value proposition (Arnould et al., 2006, p.108).

Given the ongoing turn towards omnichannel retailing in the mid-to late 2010s, we take our departure in this socio-cultural view of brands and consumers as narrators and therefore acknowledge the interpretivist, constructivist nature of brand storytelling and the resulting consumption experiences. Accordingly, rather than identifying a grand narrative, we set out to examine the story elements emerging from a retailer's lead channel, which may be grasped together into different narratives across channels by different actors. We further postulate that these concepts need further exploration and re-evaluation considering the omnichannel trend, as they have thus far been largely absent from omnichannel literature and research, as the following section shall outline.

2.2 Delineating Retail Brand Narratives in an Omnichannel Context

The omnichannel strategies which have been adopted by many retailers over the course of the past years have been described as a paradigm shift within retail marketing, which challenges researchers and practitioners alike to reconsider established concepts (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016). One such

concept is brand experience which, even though it has been effectively defined by Brakus (2009), has been highlighted as being in need of revision since the experiences created by today's retailer brands have become more multi-layered and complex (Frasquet-Deltoro et al., 2021). Thus, brand experience scales have been adapted to the omnichannel context (ibid.), and touchpoint studies reveal the relative impact of different retail brand touchpoints on consumers' consideration (Baxendale et al., 2015).

However, while there seems to be a growing awareness in marketing- and retailing literature about experiential aspects like hedonism, personalization, and creativity gaining relevance in an omnichannel world (Kallevig, 2021; Tyrväinen et al., 2020), the co-creation of brand stories, which is crucial for creating memorable brand experiences and forming connections to brands (see Escalas, 2004), remains thus far largely absent from omnichannel retail research – especially when it comes to retailer brands. Forays into this territory have been made with regards to fashion and luxury brands (Beverland, 2005; Kallevig, 2021; Pangarkar et al., 2022) – yet these fail to take into account the vast multitude of retailers which have adopted omnichannel elements since customer behavior and expectations have changed to a more exacting level (Cornfield, 2021; Da Costa, 2019; Olenski, 2018). Generally, omnichannel investigations tend to be characterized by a certain sense of incrementalism, elucidating smaller individual phenomena like channel switching, showrooming, last-mile delivery or the influence of a particular device or platform (Barreto et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022; Rippé et al., 2017). Reviews of the overall literature within this field point in a similar direction, with proposed future research agendas frequently featuring calls for more overarching, holistic investigations (Bascur & Rusu, 2020; Both & Steinmann, 2023; Manser Payne et al., 2017; Mishra et al., 2021). Furthermore, the prevailing consensus when it comes to providing superior omnichannel retail experiences seems to be a focus on seamless channel integration and consistency on all available channels and touchpoints (Gao et al., 2021; Larke et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2019; von Briel, 2018). All prevalent definitions of omnichannel retailing identify an integrated, seamless experience using all available channels as the key distinguishing features of this strategy (Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014). This notion has become so firmly established that – even within such a relatively young research field – some scholars have already begun to call this “integration imperative” into question, challenging the unanimous assumption that touchpoints need to be seamlessly integrated across channels to evoke positive experiences (Gasparin et al., 2022). Moreover, research in marketing communications as well as the brand storytelling literature discussed herein extensively highlights the overlap of meanings communicated on different channels and the ways in which they need to complement each other to shape brand experience (see Batra & Keller,

2016). Additionally, the actual mechanisms linking customer patronage and channel integration remain largely unclear (Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, the research field seems to both acknowledge the growing signaling power of brand image and encourage more consumer-centric approaches, while at the same time struggling to address the process of meaning co-creation and changing nature of brand stories in this context. Yet, the growing multitude of communication channels, customer touchpoints, and overall increasingly complex consumption journeys is likely to accelerate the aforementioned shift of the very brand meanings crucial for creating positive and memorable experiences from marketers and brand owners to consumers and other stakeholders (see Swaminathan et al., 2020). With researchers already having pointed out the relevance of value congruency as a possible influence of whether channel integration is being perceived as beneficial (Liu et al., 2023), an investigation of retailer brand narratives may require a reconsideration of the prevalent conceptualization of channel consistency understood in terms of price, product, service, and promotion (Gasparin et al., 2022; Huré et al., 2017).

Since brand stories as providers of emotional touchpoints to consumers' lives are likely to become increasingly relevant for brands attempting to forge connections to people in a more and more dispersed retail landscape, this paper seeks to integrate the concept of brand narratives with the context of omnichannel retailing. Doing so, we are highlighting their ongoing relevance but simultaneously proposing a re-evaluation of the concept considering the multivocality and narrative autonomy accelerated by this development. Drawing on the streams of branding and omnichannel literature discussed, we understand retail brand narratives to be *multi-vocal, multi-mediated assemblages of story elements characterized by openness, non-linearity and atemporality* – fragments, as it were, constituting a narrative whole which remains in constant flux. As such, retailer brands adapting to the omnichannel context might be conceived of as fragmented narratives contingent on a pre-thematic grasping together of different story elements. Pre-thematic in this case refers to narration as a way of knowing and being-in-the-world as per Heidegger (2015), that occurs as “constellations of happenings are grasped together, but without the nature of the grasping being readily apparent” (Sadler, 2021, p. 39). Thus far mainly applied to literary texts (see Markham, 2005; Turner, 2005), recent research has already indicated the potential of conceiving of multi-mediated, multi-vocal content in terms of fragmented narratives (Gensler et al., 2013; Sadler, 2021; Visconti, 2018). Instead of insisting on maintaining rigid authorial control and interpretive authority over a grand narrative, it allows firms to ensure their continued success by coordinating and navigating

meaning co-creation by and with consumers, providing touchpoints to their lives and creating value based on more personal connections (Cayla & Arnould, 2008; Gensler et al., 2013; Woodside, 2010).

With a distinct brand narrative representing a competitive advantage that remains amongst the hardest assets for competitors to imitate (Kotler et al., 2021; Visconti, 2010), the omnichannel context prompts retailers to carefully consider in their allocation of resources how, where, and when their story plays out and who participates in telling it. The discussion and further theoretical and managerial implications presented herein are based on a qualitative study of Danish retail brand JYSK, whose Scandinavian identity takes center stage in the brand narrative as conceived of by both the company's representatives and its customers.

3. Method and Procedure

Seeking to identify the different story elements that constitute JYSK's retail narrative emanating based on the brand's lead channel and to investigate how both brand representatives and consumers make sense of these elements, this qualitative study makes use of ethnographic observational-, and interview data collected within the German market, where the retailer's re-branding and concurrent shift towards a stronger omnichannel approach with the store as lead channel was still ongoing at the time of this enquiry. JYSK, therefore, represented a promising revelatory case of a retailer brand with a clear lead channel making sense of its narrative in light of an omnichannel shift. Following a brief company portrait, this section further outlines the approaches to data collection and analysis employed here, which are informed by a constructivist, hermeneutic research philosophy (Howell, 2016).

3.1 Framing JYSK's Narrative – The Case of a Furniture Retailer Brand

Danish furniture retailer JYSK represents the brand under consideration for this constructivist qualitative study (see Harrison et al., 2017). The company, part of the Lars Larsen Group, was founded in 1979. The first store opened in the city of Aarhus, the largest in Jutland, which remains the seat of the company's headquarters to this day. Nowadays, the company sells a wide variety of home furnishings from smaller decorative items to outdoor furniture. Their core competency, however, remains the sale of bed frames, pillows, mattresses, and other sleep-related products. This is mirrored in both the original name "Jysk Sengetøjslager" (roughly: Jutland's mattress warehouse; transl. by author), later shortened to simply JYSK, as well as its current slogan "Scandinavian

Sleeping and Living” which singles out sleeping as a special highlight. Under the leadership of its 3rd CEO Rami Jensen, the JYSK trade chain currently operates more than 3.300 stores in 48 countries all over the world, with 28 national markets under direct charge of JYSK and 20 being franchised. In 2022, the company counted 30.000 employees and turned over 4.87 billion Euro in revenue.

The identity of this brand, which still describes itself as part of a “family owned” holding group (*About Us*, 2023) is not merely rooted in being Scandinavian or Danish, but in particular in stemming from Jutland, the mainland part of Denmark. This emphasis is most obviously found in the brand name as well as choosing to keep company headquarters in Aarhus, their place of origin and Denmark’s second largest city instead of moving to the capital. Moreover, the brand frames itself as being humble and based on family values, highlighting the modest roots of founder Larsen himself and maintaining a philosophy of good deals and financial accessibility for everyone. On their website, JYSK also clearly stresses their company culture and business strategy as being “based on [their] Scandinavian roots” (*About Us*, 2023). JYSK’s core value propositions might therefore be summed up as revolving around affordability, Scandinavian design and lifestyle, closeness to the customer (both in terms of availability and relatability), as well as competence and helpfulness – particularly with regard to sleeping supplies. More recently, the brand has moved towards a stronger omnichannel approach, going hand in hand with updated store designs and a more uniform branding across markets including a consistent switch to the JYSK name. As this study deals with the German market context, where this change was still ongoing at the time of data collection, it makes sense to outline the channel system in place there. This channel system is designed to minimize silo-thinking between the online- and offline channel – i.e. it should not matter whether consumers make their purchase online or offline as in-store and website pricing is coherent and revenues flow into the same account. The distribution of products ordered online is handled by three central warehouses across Germany, with consumers additionally having the option to view product stock in nearby stores by entering their postal code online. In this way, products can be reserved online for in-store pick up. The brand’s communication channels include TV and radio commercials, as well as the product catalogue which still holds a central role for the German market, and digital- and social media accounts which are gaining overall relevance. Billboard and poster advertising plays a less significant role, being used rather sporadically and only in specific cases. This overarching strategy is also mirrored in the company’s mission statement “seamless and closer to the customer” (*Mission Statement*, 2023) which directly references two of the main omnichannel tenets: seamless integration and universal accessibility. Nevertheless, despite this dedication to omnichannel retailing, the brand is equally still committed to emphasizing

the role of their physical stores within this system, with the opening of new stores and the continuous improvement of existing stores representing major areas of investment for the brand. Especially the new 3.0 store concept, which involves more spacious interiors as well as a cleaner store structure and layout, is meant to represent the updated brand values and mission (Rösser, 2022). With ambitions to implement this concept in all physical stores by mid-to late 2024 and further widespread investments in employee-training, the brand still prioritizes this sales channel (*JYSK erzielt im Geschäftsjahr 2022/23 erneut Umsatzsteigerungen*, 2023; Rothermund, 2022). This, in turn, is reflected in an overall rise in the amount of in-store customers by 1.2 million from the year 2022 to 2023 and record turnovers of € 1,172 billion for the German market. In fact, those stores which had already shifted to the new concept are highlighted to be a major part of that success by management (ibid.). JYSK therefore represents a retailer brand with a clear lead channel, which needs to make sense of its updated narrative within the context of an omnichannel strategy shift, leading to an interesting paradox to delve further into.

These developments make JYSK a particularly interesting case for investigating retail brand narratives, as the brand was and is undergoing processes of re-framing specifically in light and as a consequence of a turn towards omnichannel retailing. Both brand representatives and customers are therefore faced with a complex and fluctuating amalgamation of brand meanings to leverage, make sense of, and emplot in their own stories. On the German market, this shift was undertaken as recently as 2021 with the updating of stores and brand re-naming even still ongoing at the time of data collection. Given this recency and the opportunity to follow the process as it was playing out in German stores at the time of this investigation, we chose to place our focus on this market context.

3.2 Data Collection – Gathering Brand Stories

The findings and further implications presented within this paper are based on an array of ethnographic and interview data collected by the first author of this work. The decision to utilize a combination of different data sources served to strengthen the single-case design of this investigation (see Kelliher, 2005). To investigate the store as lead channel, field observations and short consumer interviews were conducted throughout two major sales periods within the calendar year. Following Healy et al.'s (2007) argumentation in favor of ethnography in retail contexts, since it bears the potential to more fully capture the branded world consumers enter, in-store observations were conducted during store visits which lasted a full working day. A strategy of deep hanging out was adopted to get to know the retail space as well as all actors within it and gather authentic stories and

experiences. Furthermore, this approach allowed the researcher to establish the unspoken rules of the space; the aspects and meanings accepted as normal, routine, or obvious by actors within the retail setting (Sherry Jr, 1995; Sherry Jr & Kozinets, 2001; Walmsley, 2018). In accordance with Berg's (2009) suggestions for ethnographic field strategies, measures were taken to initially get acclimatized with each setting. The researcher took the time to get to know the physical setting and lay of each space, by obtaining store layout plans at the beginning of the day and being shown around by the respective store manager or deputy. A point was also made to meet the present members of staff, track their routines and ask some informal questions to establish their daily routines as well as the people and environments they would regularly interact with. Observations took place over the course of Spring and Winter 2022, capturing the beginning of the outdoor and garden-, as well as Christmas sales periods respectively. With the aid of- and in agreement with JYSK's management, stores were purposively sampled to highlight locations where the shift and re-design of the store environment were either especially recent or still ongoing (Bryman, 2012; Myers, 2020). Whenever possible, visits were scheduled towards the end of the week or on weekends, so as to capture a higher in-store footfall. Thus, a total of 8 days or 72 hours of observation were carried out across 8 stores in the Northern parts of Germany. Documentation took the shape of field notes and photographs, focusing on verbal exchanges, practices observed, and possible interrelations between these (see Berg, 2009; Rose, 2001). All observations took place overtly, with the researcher's presence being known to staff members and management, and written consent obtained from each store manager (Berg, 2009; Bryman, 2012). Overall, a total of 50 shopping scenarios involving 81 consumers were observed and recorded through field notes. For further context and to gain a deeper insight into the consumer perspective, short ethnographic interviews were additionally conducted with consenting customers (Roulston, 2019). As these ethnographic interviews were meant to resemble casual talk as closely as possible, they took an open form and did not follow any predetermined manual. Open questions about the purpose of the store visit, potential other channels that were (being) used, and interviewees' general impression of the retailer brand served as cues, letting the consumer guide the conversation from there on out (May, 2011). This data was anonymized simultaneously upon collection, with only gender and approximate age of each person finding entry into the field notes. In this way, a total of 40 such walk-and-talks were collected to supplement the observational data.

Within the company itself, in-depth interviews with members of management were conducted to grant researchers a view of their perception and implementation of brand story elements. As the outcomes of this study are also of interest for JYSK's brand management and could potentially be presented to

the respective representatives at a future point in time, participants were completely anonymized to protect their identity but vary in terms of their age, gender, level of seniority and length of experience and employment within the company. These interviews were recorded and transcribed in line with common qualitative research standards (see Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2013), resulting in a total of 11 managerial accounts as a further basis for our findings. The semi-structured interview guide (see appendix), though largely exploratory in nature, was designed based on the background literature discussed herein, spanning the fields of omnichannel retailing and brand storytelling. Overall, the interviews spanned three wider subject areas and were aimed at eliciting rich descriptions and stories of their first-hand experiences of everyday work-life from interviewees. The first set of questions addressed the general development of the retailer brand's image and -experience and, based on the notion of brands as cultural forms and narrators (Holt, 2004; Visconti, 2010) attempted to elicit how representatives perceive the retailer brand and how, in turn, they would want to be perceived by consumers. This line of questioning is meant to elucidate the links which induce multiple meanings and have the potential to become touchpoints to people's lives from the retailers' perspective (Arnould et al., 2006; Woodside, 2010). Accordingly, these enquiries helped to get a first overview of different layers of meaning associated with the retailer brand and helped researchers gain an initial understanding of where emotional, storied touchpoints to people's lives lay and how they were being talked about. Secondly, based on the notion of multi-mediated customer journeys and brand stories (Moin, 2020; Swaminathan et al., 2020), we probed deeper into the relevance of different channels and touchpoints for our interviewees and their work, to better understand how the retailer brand's dispersion across channels and touchpoints was being perceived by our interviewees and how it affects their daily work (both strategically and in unexpected ways). Finally, building upon this line of questioning, we enquired further into consumer's expectations of retailer brands to find out what interviewees feel was being expected of JYSK as an omnichannel retailer brand and how they would attempt to meet those expectations. These enquiries were particularly enlightening when it came to uncovering differences in meaning potentials regarding the brand's overall narrative, as well as the role of channel consistency within it. The collection of new data was discontinued once saturation was reached, meaning that researchers felt no new insights could be gleaned from the collection of more of the same data (Berg, 2009; Wengraf, 2001).

Table III-1: Overview of the data collected for this study

Type of Data	Documentation	Scope of Set
In-store Observations	Field notes, photographs	72 hours
Ethnographic Customer Interviews	Field notes	40 interviews
Managerial In-Depth Interviews	Recordings & transcripts	11 interviews

The complete dataset as summarized in table 1 was subjected to a narrative analysis (Corvellec, 2006; Hirschman, 1986; Silverman, 2020) wherein researchers aligned codes after in-depth familiarization with the overall content, which allowed themes and brand story elements to emerge. In line with Saldana (2009) and Silverman (2020) the initial way of engaging with the data was a close reading looking for striking, odd, or interesting phenomena and their repetitions. Accordingly, the first round of inductive, holistic coding did not involve any notable preliminary limitations, simply labeling similar items to summarize excerpts and form a basic set of sub-categories. These labels were based on emic categories, i.e. categories participants themselves addressed explicitly. This first phase and the descriptive codes identified throughout multiple re-reads of the transcripts formed the basis for a second phase of coding, in which first-level codes were grouped together to form patterns based on etic categories, i.e. the first authors' own ideas and patterns emerging from the close reading of the data. This process allowed for the emergence of themes that form the brand story elements found in our analysis, and which serve as the structuring of our findings. Table 2 provides an overview and summary of all identified story elements, which we will move on to discuss in the following section.

Table III-2: Overview of the story elements emerging from our data

Story Elements	Interview Example	Fieldnotes Examples	Supported By
Archetype of the Benevolent Guide	<i>“we try to convey a shopping experience to the customer that tells them they can do everything here as well [...] that we don’t send the customer away, but we take care of it “</i>	counselling and expertise displayed in consultations consumer seeking aid with other shopping channels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mood of Intimacy - Family Metaphor - The Element of Surprise
Scandinavian Romanticism	<i>“we also really want to [...] convey this Scandinavian feeling – I mean I have been to Denmark and my prime example analysis is [...] the way people drive [...] in Denmark they drive in a laid-back way and that is also what we ate trying to convey here a little bit”</i>	customer visiting specifically for Danish Christmas decorations in-store displays of rugged dune landscapes emphasis on “hygge” Danish product names	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mood of Intimacy - Family Metaphor
Mood of Intimacy	<i>“for some people you also become some sort of psychologist, sometimes they just come to the store because they want to talk to someone”</i>	new store layout with secluded, more private bedding display physical touch verbal deceleration (“just relax” / “take your time”)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Archetype of the Benevolent Guide - Family Metaphor - Scandinavian Romanticism
Family Metaphor	<i>“okay, this might get you more money or this might get you a car but here – here you’ve got family, here you’ve really got family, here you’ve got friends”</i>	customers and RSAs exchanging stories about private lives and well-being haptic interaction with product displays in-store environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Archetype of the Benevolent Guide - Mood of Intimacy
The Element of Surprise	<i>“when we tell the customer [...] things they would not have expected, they tend to be perplexed, but in a good way, and that makes them more willing to buy something or to laugh and to take that story home”</i>	RSAs being able to strike deals and grant discounts in store striking difference between old vs. new store design & product assortment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Archetype of the Benevolent Guide

Narrative enquiries allow for an examination of the stories people create in interpreting and making sense of their own lives. They can therefore provide researchers with insights into the ways in which people choose to represent and frame both themselves and their experiences to others (Kohler Riessman, 1993; Herman, 2001) making them an ideal tool for investigating the story elements emerging from brand representatives' and consumers' re-tellings of the retailer brand. The coding of our data therefore followed the question of how distinctive themes and the internal patterns of accounts construct experience, i.e. how consumers and representatives make sense of the brand through storytelling (Doyle & Kelliher, 2023; Silverman, 2020) It is important to note, however, that this treatment of data involves a double layer of interpretation, as first participants and then researchers choose to emplot events in a certain way. Coming-into-understanding, personal experience, and interpretation were therefore a constant companion throughout the data collecting process. The findings presented and discussed below are thus merely one amongst several possible readings of the data at hand and should be engaged with as such.

4. Analysis & Findings – Making Sense of the Retail Brand

The data collected and analyzed over the course of this study supports the notion that retail brand meaning is a dialogical effort of co-narration by both brand representatives and consumers (Berthon et al., 2007; Diamond et al., 2009; Visconti, 2010). However, it also becomes apparent that, in an effort to be present and close to the customer on all available channels, the JYSK brand does not strive to present a uniform retailer brand image upon each encounter and each touchpoint. Rather, a set of discernible story elements emerging from our data repeatedly are flexibly drawn upon and repeated to emerge as an overall recognizable but simultaneously fuzzy narrative whole. Since these story elements overlap and feed into each other, they may be grasped together dynamically and synergetically by different actors at brand-owned and external touchpoints to narrate an individualized yet still clearly recognizable adaptation of the brand. Thus, brand representatives and customers set different emphases, giving their stories varying focal points. However, all seem to draw from an overall arsenal of fragments to co-create brand meaning and make sense of the shopping experience. As such, JYSK's retail branding approach might be conceived of as a fragmented narrative contingent on a pre-thematic grasping together of story elements. In the following, we will present the prominent story elements emergent from the data collected on the brand's lead channel, before discussing the implications of conceptualizing retail brand stories as a fragmented narrative.

The elements presented here are not meant to be exhaustive and merely represent the interpretive themes which emerged most clearly from the data at hand.

4.1 The Benevolent Guide

The benevolent guide or mentor figure is a well-known character archetype employed in storytelling. Within literary studies and narratology, this term commonly refers to the figure or character who aids and supports the hero(ine) of a story, offering wise counsel and guidance (Moin, 2020). Although brands have been known to cast themselves in a heroic light, it has been pointed out that the ideal role for a brand within its own storytelling would be precisely that of the mentoring figure, with the customer as hero (Moin, 2020). Regarding the case at hand, invocations of this mentor figure very much take the shape of a caring, benevolent guide – at times even a healer – and are especially played out through the staff on site in stores. The archetype is visible both in the ways store managers perceive their own and their staff’s roles as well as in the ways customers approach or react to JYSK employees as observed during store visits. A store manager formulates the sentiment thus: *“we want JYSK and ourselves here to be perceived as pleasant, helpful, friendly people”* (Interviewee 2). Whilst this may be a sentiment supported by many sales representatives of many brands, this representative further points out that such helpfulness and friendliness mainly manifest in being there for the customers, which provides a counterpoint to other furniture retailers on the market: *“the way we treat our customers – open. Friendly. Always time for an extra word or two. This typical grumpy German ‘hello and goodbye’ and so on, that’s exactly what we don’t want”* (Interviewee 2).

In particular when it comes to navigating different sales channels of the brand, JYSK employees are also considered and presented as taking on the role of a guide, helping the customer orient themselves and imparting the impression that they are here to lead customers to the best possible outcome. This is apparent in the way this store manager frames the importance of educating employees on the brand’s assortment on different channels:

“[my] employees don’t have to know everything [in the online range], but they have to be well-versed enough to help the customer [...] we try to convey a shopping experience to the customer that tells them they can do everything here as well – that we can process online returns here in store, that that we don’t send the customer away but we take care of it. If a customer has an issue with an online reservation – or we can also get information on the customer service line here in store [...] that’s really important” (Interviewee 2)

From this statement, it also becomes clear how, for the brand representatives, this special amount of guidance through the brand's channel system can only be attained in store, emphasizing the importance of this channel for the realization of this story element and its concurrent brand values. Indeed, this notion seems to be reciprocated by customers, who were observed as approaching employees as guides, often entering the store with either their phone or paper catalogue in hand and directly seeking out the aid of a member of staff without even browsing on their own. Among the observed interactions were also instances of customers calling the store by phone to ask, for example, why they had not yet received the digital newsletter or to reserve some products they had seen among the online assortment. Essentially, customers who were in some way uncertain about the information provided through other sales and communication channels heavily relied on JYSK staff as their guides. For the employees, this role was adopted and enacted by taking their time, decelerating sales situations, sharing their counsel and imparting a sense of care. However, when it comes to overarching connections with the online channel, brand representatives also seem to act as diplomatic facilitators whenever channel inconsistencies occur:

“Sure, we have the advantage that [online and offline] is linked through Click and Collect – that means choose at home and order here. The online shop itself is also well-organized, especially because we have an extended range of products there. It’s just a shame that Google – I’m not sure [...] exactly why this is the case, Google does not take out the old adverts that means a lot of the customers can be confused. They see the price of a chair from the last season, but that chair is now [sold] at a different price. Well, then you’re in a bit of a conflict – what do I do now [...] do I sell it as it is because that’s an old advert or do I go the other way of being accommodating and try not to lose the customer?” (Interviewee 6)

“well, regarding the online shop. There we have unfortunately not yet found a system that really lets you see on the online shop what is actually here on site for the customers and what can actually be collected. So we still reserve our products by hand in the warehouse. The problem is, the stock that is reserved here locally is not being show to the customer online, so we have occasionally had cases where customers had come from far away. They had looked up the stock online [...] and had seen – ah, they still have 15 chairs in stock I’m sure two of those should be available. Then they drove all the way here just to see oh, the chairs are all reserved. But the customer does not see that online.” (Interviewee 1)

These two stories show how, despite the brand's omnichannel approach, there may still be inconsistencies and sources of friction between online and offline channels. In such cases, it seems as though the brand representatives step into their role of benevolent guide to smooth over the situation and provide an overall positive brand encounter for the consumer.

Especially when it came to the brand's core competency of selling mattresses, pillows, or bedframes, the role of the staff as providers of wise counsel became apparent in the interactions witnessed in store. On each observed occasion, sales staff were quick to relate their own stories to the customer, talking about back- or health issues they or their friends and family had experienced and thereby encouraging customers to do the same. In this way, stories were swapped regarding personal pains and problems, resulting in the product under discussion being framed as a sort of cure. Staff regularly asked customers to lie down and try out the products, closely observing the way the customer lay and often going to quite some length (by fetching and combining different products) to simulate a situation as close to what the customer would experience in their own home as possible. Whilst observing the customer's position on a mattress, some salespeople even slipped into a kind of medical orthopedic jargon, talking about the alignment of certain vertebrae and how they might be affected by one's sleeping position. Besides checking positions by sight, some staff members also palpated the customers' back during a consultation, feeling for the spine's position while the customer was lying down and explaining what they were doing every step of the way. Once again, brand representatives themselves also contrast their own knowledge and expertise to any information consumers might be able to find on the online channel:

"I myself have the T60 Box-spring bed; I've just turned over the mattress. And tonight I've had some back pain. But I know why, because the body now has to re-adjust – so one side is a little more firm than the other. Right, and this is stuff we have to explain to the customer, they do not know that when they order online. That the body needs 2-3 weeks to get used to the new base. That's all part of the sales service we do here" (Interviewee 2)

This framing led to customers the first author engaged with clearly deferring to staff as counselors, at times even trusting them over their own senses and impressions. One customer, for example, kept describing how their body felt lying on different mattresses, yet each time ending their description with a "...but you tell me!" – seeking the staff member's ultimate validation. Appeals like "you're my last hope" were equally not uncommon in such sales talks. Thus, brand representatives

were framed as wise mentors by demonstrating special competence and expertise on the one hand and exuding an air of care and trustworthiness on the other hand.

These latter aspects were particularly exemplified through instances in which customers were attempting to buy products the brand specializes in for someone else. In fact, on none of the observed occasions did the author witness a sales representative sell a mattress or similar product after being told it would be for the customer's child, sibling, partner, or roommate. In such cases, customers were advised to return with the person in question, often with the additional suggestion of taking some time, as a proper consultation would last a while. This happened consistently, even if the person in question would have been willing to buy the product on the spot. Through this behavior, the staff therefore gave an impression of caring for the individual's well-being over closing a sale, with brand representatives insisting that a consultation for a mattress needs to be "[...] *completely individual, because every body is different and because everyone has different sleeping habits*" (Interviewee 8). This sentiment is also apparent in a representative's story about selling a young couple a cheaper mattress: "*I told them point-blank, you don't need to have a guilty conscience. You're lying more comfortably here than on the pricier [mattress], and then the customer also notices that I am not out for their money, but that I want to do something good for them*" (Interviewee 2). Interestingly, this framing of the brand as guide and mentor, which manifests strongly in the strategy of the store management and the interactions between customers and brand representatives, seems to be largely absent from brand stories on social media. Representatives report that stories on this channel are predominantly product-focused, so it follows that an element of the brand narrative hinging upon and co-created through interpersonal interactions moves into the background.

Overall, the story element of an archetypal mentor or guiding figure, while clearly forming a strategic part of JYSK's brand narrative as evidenced through the interview statements, seems to play out chiefly at a specific set of interpersonal in-store touchpoints at which storytelling is owned by brand and customer alike. It further becomes clear that this aspect of the narrative cannot be communicated as effectively through online or social media channels – on the contrary, it is rather being actively used to smooth over any inconsistencies that may affect consumers' brand experience on these channels.

4.2 Scandinavian Romanticism

If one were to attempt to ascribe a genre to JYSK's retail narrative, it might be labelled Scandinavian Romanticism, since the brand imbues its country of origin with a sense of emotiveness, longing for

nature, and characteristic style. This story is already told through the product range which, after the re-branding, received Danish names referring to places or typical given names. Moreover, especially around Christmastime, store observations revealed that the product range includes specifically Danish items such as braided hearts or “nisse” figurines of Danish Christmas gnomes – both as decorative items and as ubiquitous prints on tablecloths, sheets, cookie jars, napkins, and the like. Danish “kalenderlys” candles counting down the days to Christmas are also featured among the assortment. Accordingly, during store visits in the Winter season, customers the first author spoke to during ethnographic interviews specifically came to shops for these small items which were tied to the brand’s country of origin, so as to give their own homes a touch of Scandinavian coziness. One male customer, describing exactly this reason for his visit, even joked that he was currently in store with his father as his girlfriend’s love for these items was “much worse” than his and could not have been contained had she joined for the trip (Store 5, Customers 3&4).

Customers also reported that this idea of Danish coziness is strongly invoked on Social Media brand stories. Translated into Danish, the term “hygge” is commonly used to refer to this feeling but may also denote the overall Danish design aesthetic and even general way of life. As one brand representative interviewee describes:

“Right, and I think that the photo style and so on, and also the way we write when we do posts, is Scandinavian. [...] And then of course sometimes we do spell it out a bit more by referring to hygge. Yeah, or referring to Nordic- uh, design or Nordic atmosphere or something.” (Interviewee 5)

This atmosphere is further transported through design elements that could be observed in the store throughout the seasons, where images of outdoor scenarios frequently feature views of the ocean, backyard saunas, or marram grass typically found among the dunes and beaches of Jutland’s West Coast. As illustrated in images 1 and 2, this maritime nature imagery also gets incorporated into the design of highlight product displays, with beaches and dune landscapes serving as backdrops for outdoor furniture arrangements. While not all customers might overtly identify these elements as specifically Danish, their frequent repetition and juxtaposition with Danish terminology both online and in store paints the picture of a Scandinavian idyll – a piece of which customers would long to purchase for themselves to take home. Special product displays such as the “Nordic mood collection” table pictured in image 3 further spell out this connection directly.

JYSK's brand representatives further confirm that this element of the narrative has moved into clearer focus: "yes, this 'Scandinavian Sleeping and Living' [thing], that has also been promoted before, but that became much more strongly emphasized after the re-branding – at least that's my impression" (Interviewee 1). Another interviewee remarks:

"we also really want to [...] convey this Scandinavian feeling – I mean I have been to Denmark. And my prime example always is [...] the way people drive in Denmark and the way they drive in Germany. In Germany they drive aggressively, they tailgate, they constantly grumble and in Denmark they drive in a laid-back way and that is also what we are trying to convey here a little bit." (Interviewee 2)

As this quote shows, the brand representatives themselves also seem to connect a certain feeling and way of life with JYSK's Danish identity – one which they aim to pass on to customers as well. Another interviewee even frames this Scandinavian feeling of coziness as a sort of retreat and escapist moment for some consumers:

"Yeah, I think coziness is a ... you know, especially in tough times it is, I think, a really important thing you could convey to the customer quite well, so ... because they need that. Because they have few alternatives – let's say they can hardly afford to go on vacation [...] it's getting more and more difficult financially here in Germany. And then that's an important thing which I think you should ... yeah, I think you should convey." (Interviewee 8)

This tranquil, perhaps somewhat idealized sense of Scandinavian lifestyle ties in closely with the mood of intimacy created by the brand and seems to be strongly driven through brand-owned touchpoints. Overall, therefore, the brand's country of origin becomes a romanticized ideal within JYSK's narrative, suggesting an emotionalized longing for the Danish nature, sense of coziness, and overall way of life.

Images III-1 & 2: Scandinavian Romanticism – nature imagery as part of in-store product displays





Image III-3: Scandinavian Romanticism – product display highlighting design elements that help create a “nordic mood” at home

4.3 A Mood of Intimacy

Another story element closely connected to the archetype of the benevolent guide, yet distinct in its manifestation, is the atmosphere of intimacy between brand and customer. This intimacy seems to be mainly co-created between brand representatives and customers in store and through practices of storytelling that pervade the entire sales process, as witnessed by the first author. This story element, therefore, emerged mainly from observational data of staff-customer interactions with each other and the store environment. Given the fact that the brand specializes in selling items for one of the most intimate and private spaces in people’s homes – namely their bedrooms – and aims to support them in improving their sleep, a state in which most living beings are at their most vulnerable and which has major implications for both physical and mental well-being, creating a sense of trust and intimacy within the brand narrative seems crucial for JYSK.

In the German cultural context, this mood-setting already begins with the way colleagues and consumers are addressed. Whilst it is normally typical to address people formally, especially in business- or sales contexts, JYSK opts out of this cultural norm, using the informal address as a default both on-and offline, unless the customer signals a desire to keep the conversation on a formal level. This approach already indicates that the brand seeks to establish a more personal relationship

with people, paving the way for an even stronger signaling of care. As one manager puts it: “*we don’t just see JYSK as a regular employer and we don’t see the customer as a disruptive element – instead we want to spend the day together with them*” (Interviewee 2).

While the mood of intimacy already shines through in the way in which the brand and its representatives are observed to approach potential customers, the updated store design encountered during store visits also clearly signals this sentiment. As illustrated in images 4 and 5, in the new store concept, the bedding- and mattress area is clearly separated from the rest of the retail environment both visually and spatially. Though open on both ends, it is presented in a much darker color scheme than the rest of the store, swapping out the bright ceiling lights for dimmed wall lamps. Curtains and bedside tables simultaneously serve as separators between beds and additional signifiers of a homely, more intimate atmosphere. Thus, consumers trying out mattresses or getting a consultation enter a space that is somewhat darker and quieter than the rest of the store, where they are also more shielded from other visitors and employees. In terms of spatial arrangement, this display of mattresses and frames is typically relegated to the very back of the store in older layout concepts. The new layout, by contrast, places this display area more towards the middle, at the heart of the store, signaling its centrality. Together with the repetition of the slogan “Scandinavian Sleeping”, as seen in images 4 and 5, the rebranding process therefore seems to imbue the brand’s narrative more thoroughly with a mood of intimacy in order to better transport one of its core competencies.

This spatial design naturally sets the perfect stage for salespeople, who amplify this mood even further. During observed consultations, customers were encouraged to take off their jackets, scarves, or hats when entering this space and phrases like “just relax” and “take your time” were frequently employed to decelerate the process and convey a sense of care and confidentiality. Once again, this care is also extended to customers who signal that they are not currently interested in making a purchase. Both physically and mentally, brand representatives also helped visitors re-create a sense of their own homes within this space by, for example, fetching different slatted frames, pillows, or mattresses to most closely replicate conditions in the person’s own bedroom. In addition, observations revealed that people are actively encouraged to share stories about their own living spaces – either through direct questions, or by salespeople leading by example and beginning to tell stories about their own homes. Although the new store design reinforces these acts, this approach of engaging the customer through stories and anecdotes is also ubiquitous in visited stores that had not yet undergone the redesigning process and extends beyond the core bedding products. As one of the store managers

says: “for some people you also become some sort of psychologist, sometimes they just come to the store because they want to talk to someone” (Interviewee 1).

Thus, the brand narrative’s mood of intimacy is being co-created between consumers and brand representatives, further amplified by the design of the retail space, and serves to firmly underline the brand’s core competency.

Images III-4 & 5: A mood of intimacy – updated layout of bedding displays highlighting “Scandinavian Sleeping”



4.4 The Family Metaphor

A common word painting that consistently re-emerged in conversation with both JYSK brand representatives and store visitors alike was the metaphor of the brand-as-family. This metaphor seems to be built up through multiple layers of meaning, which already find their beginnings in emphasizing the company’s humble beginnings as a family business and highlighting the fact that Lars Larsen group remains family-owned to this day, when the brand has grown to a global scale (see *About Us*, 2023). A familial bond, though, is not merely the basis of JYSK’s brand narrative, but also extends to the way in which staff view each other as well as the way in which the customer is perceived and treated.

Throughout interviews, multiple brand representatives brought up the familial atmosphere of the brand as well as the fact that the social aspect of their work is valued, lived, and embodied by themselves and their colleagues as a point of pride. Referencing both their experiences with colleagues as well as their own career paths, they frame JYSK, the employer, as a family people like to return to: *“I have already worked for another furniture retailer and I ended up leaving of my own accord, because they were not living these values we live here. The customer was not being respected. The customer was not being valued and colleagues were not being valued either”* (Interviewee 2). In addition to the emphasis on lived values and mutual respect highlighted by this representative, this emphasis on the feeling and values embodied by the staff are often contrasted with taking pay cuts or making other personal sacrifices just to return to the brand family, as the following anecdotes show. Talking about a colleague who is described as a “JYSK child” from the beginning, one interviewee relates:

“[they’ve] been here forever, they trained here, were store manager here, then left the company, found a new job where they’re really happy, but they said they were missing something and now they’ve come back as a marginal worker on a part-time basis [...] just to be able to work here. So they work five days at their regular job and do the sixth day with us just to be here again” (Interviewee 7)

Speaking from personal experience, interviewee 2 further explains: “even if it means I pass up on some money – but simply put, the way we work here this is how I want the customer to perceive us, having fun [...] and being approachable”. Thus, as in other story elements, financial gain and profit seem to fade into the background in favor of an emotional framing even before the customer enters the picture. Interviewee 7, who described their colleague returning on a part-time basis, goes even further in directly likening the brand to a family unit:

“[...] everyone who’s left the company – 90% return because they just notice – okay, this might get you more money or this might get you a car but here – here you’ve got family, here you’ve really got family, here you’ve got friends – look, nearly my entire circle of friends [...] consists of JYSK people, that’s just the way it is. Even after work I’m always around at least 2-3 JYSK people, my wife herself is a [company role] so yeah – yeah okay, we’re living this.”

The sentiment of living the brand, outlined in the interviewee’s anecdote above, also further translates from the relationships between brand representatives into a certain way of framing the brand towards the customer. Interviewee 2 describes this approach as follows:

“[...] if I do not live this in store, there’s a misfit – and the customer also notices that, oh this is just an image promo. Right, for example [hardware retailer], I think they’re doing great TV ads [...] but if I walk into the store and all I see is they’re constantly frustrated, well then all that advertisement is pretty much worthless.”

This stance clearly highlights an awareness of how different fragments of a brand narrative need to support each other in order to create a positive brand experience. Accordingly, in this case the family metaphor is used as a story element which is explicitly signaled to employees with the aim of spilling over to customers, thereby supporting other story elements such as the mood of intimacy and ultimately, the overall co-creation of the brand’s narrative. In-store observations seem to strengthen this impression as visitors and brand representatives often interact in a highly familiar manner, from greeting one another by their first names, to visitors specifically waiting around in store to say hello or goodbye to a particular employee, or even enquiring about a person’s holiday dates to ensure they would meet upon the next store visit. In turn, brand representatives were witnessed to enquire about consumers’ well-being, which tends to provide a frame for referring to past purchases – for example when asking about improved quality of sleep, back-, or neck issues. As mentioned in the previous section, the swapping of family stories seems to be a commonplace practice during observed sales or consumer talks: from the daughter who moved to a different city to study, the partner who always steals the blankets, to the mother who “never keeps the receipts no matter how many times I tell her” (Store 6, Customers 4&5), even to the bedroom which needs redecorating because a partner passed away and one “cannot stand it looking the way it was anymore” (Store 3, Customer 21). Beyond such intimate family stories, familiarity also seems to translate into the haptic ways in which visitors interact with the store environment, as displays of benches, sofas, or outdoor furniture frequently become places to gather, sit down and linger, and have a chat – especially for couples and families. Children in particular treat these displays with an air of being ‘at home’, interacting with them respectfully yet playfully, for example hiding behind sofas, rocking back and forth in swing hammocks, or crawling in and out of tents.

Overall, therefore, the family metaphor emerges throughout multiple layers of JYSK’s brand narrative, from employer-framing to in-store interactions, and closely ties into the story elements of intimacy and the archetype of the benevolent guide.

4.5 The Element of Surprise

Part of any good narrative, the element of surprise refers to the unexpected, and astonishing instance representing a change in one's fortunes. If they are well-made and carefully set up, such surprises can be delightful to experience and may even continue to entice people whilst relying on a narrow and even repetitive assortment of devices (Tobin, 2018). For JYSK, the element of surprise seems to have taken a more prominent place within the strategic brand narrative after the company's re-orientation towards a more uniform and updated brand image, as management representatives cite "to keep surprising people" as one of the main future goals for the brand (Interviewee 10). On the one hand, these surprises hinge upon subverting the expectations formed by past brand experience:

"[...] customers might also go through that transition where they'll be like wow, yes, I didn't know this! It's like completely different from what I remember, because many [...] consumers know it from when they were kids. And they're like I went there with my mom and dad and then I went back and they had like all sorts of great stuff and they're like completely surprised" (Interviewee 5)

In this example, the interviewee was mainly referring to past experiences consumers might have had with regard to the store design and product assortment. However, generating surprising instances by doing or saying the unexpected also seems to be a commonplace practice during interactions in store. One brand representative explains:

"in a sales talk on the floor or at checkout, we always try to create a positive kind of perplexity if you will. So when we tell the customer [...] things they would not have expected, they tend to be perplexed, but in a good way, and that makes them more willing to buy something or to laugh and to take that story home." (Interviewee 1)

While this example highlights the role of surprises within the communication strategy towards customers and as a means of generating memorable instances, surprise is also transported through the enactment of the benevolent guide and helper archetype. In the following anecdote, it is precisely the amount of care and assistance a customer received which provided the element of surprise:

"[the customer] had bought a dresser here five years ago. He came in last week and we still had a hinge for him. That he had been unable to find anywhere [...] and that was completely surprising for the customer [name of colleague] went into the warehouse for him and really searched for five minutes. Really burrowed through everything and actually still managed to find that thing and that really left the customer surprised and this is exactly what JYSK should do." (Interviewee 2)

Finally, sales representatives were observed to use strategic and dynamic pricing tools in order to keep providing surprising instances for customers with regard to deals and offers. A commonly witnessed strategy for employees in sales conversations with customers is to make a point of checking whether any special price reductions may be reached towards the end of the purchase process. When asked how such an unexpected and significant reduction is possible by an astonished customer, one salesperson jokingly replies: “because I can do magic!”. This magic seems to be the result of brand representatives being consciously provided with the means to strike special deals in store, as the following quote underlines: “we want to exceed expectations [...] that I tell [the customer] you know what, we have this product on offer for that price next week – I’m already going to give you that price today. No other company would do that” (Interviewee 2).

When asked specifically about so-called seal-the-deal offers being made by brand representatives in store, one interviewee also clearly stressed the contrast between physical- and online sales channels:

“well, that’s what the customer is here for after all. Online you’ve got – well there you see the customer cannot choose for themselves okay, this mattress I’m seeing here, I’d like to have that at half the price, or I’d like a better price for it so I’ll do it myself – no, they have to come here to us for that.

Interviewer: so this kind of negotiating – this kind of bargaining is only possible in store?

“exactly, exactly. That’s also supposed to be a bit of a difference between online and here. The customer should [...] really always get the best price, if we can offer it. You have to present it in a good way of course, not like I’ll reduce this and I’ll reduce that – right, so the customer should get the feeling this is really just for him [...] it’s something special. That mattress they saw for a discounted price last week. Oh, this week it’s back at 1500€ but I’d quite like to buy it. I’ll fix the same [discount] price, no problem at all.” (Interviewee 7)

The element of surprise, therefore, emerges as a story fragment which is carried through different layers and touchpoints within the brand narrative attaining slight differences in meaning, yet consistently following the pattern of subverting expectations with the aim of creating memorable moments. Notably, as the final quote by interviewee 7 above clearly shows, channel inconsistencies regarding pricing are actively leveraged by brand representatives to provide this positive association.

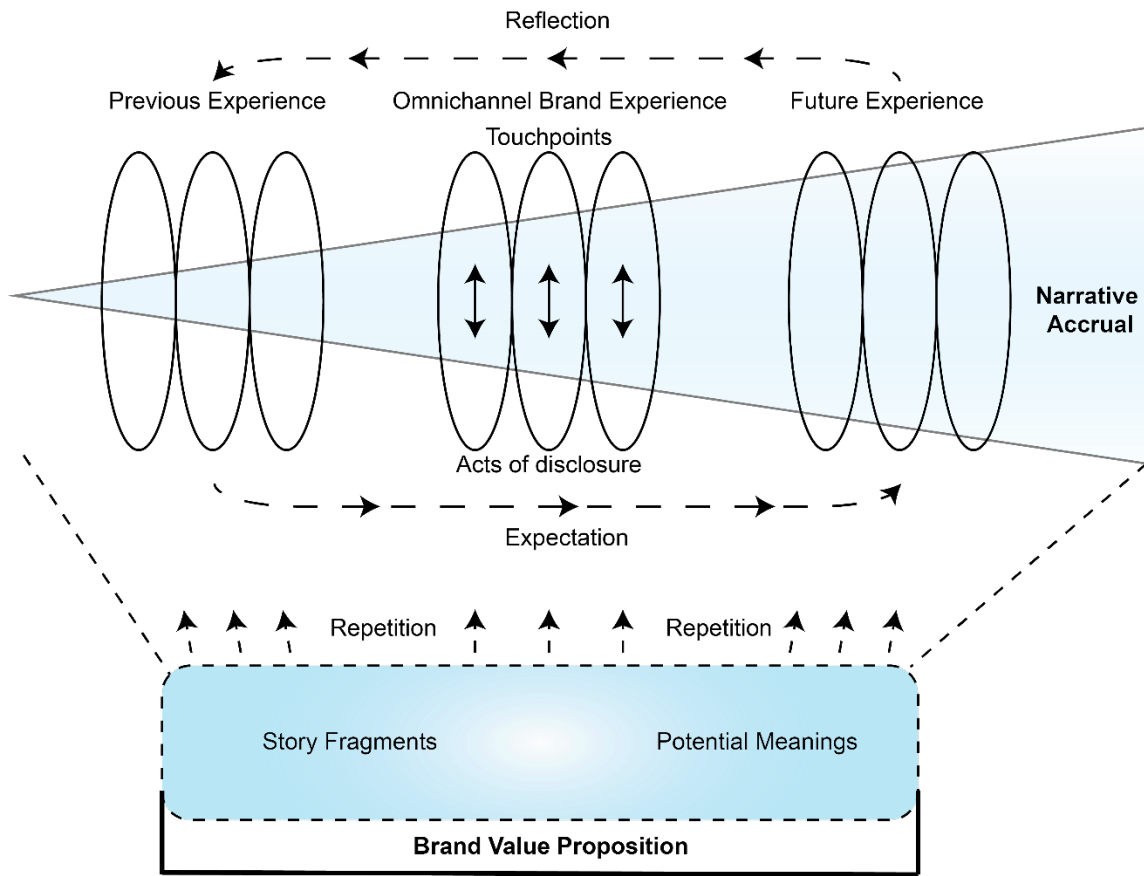
5. Discussion – The Retail Brand as Fragmented Narrative

As the data collected over the course of this study reveals, JYSK's identity as a retail brand may be conceived of as an assortment of fragmented story elements that are constantly re-adapted and re-configured by brand representatives and consumers alike to carve out their own stories within the brand's overall narrative. In this case, the story elements emerging can be summed up as the benevolent guide, Scandinavian romanticism, the family metaphor, intimacy, and the element of surprise. Thus, narration as part of the consumption process becomes a way of grasping together different events to create an understanding of the wider, more complex whole of the retail brand in instances of storytelling as a way of knowing and disclosing the world. It can further be argued that these acts of grasping together are pre-thematic rather than thematic as in an omnichannel context, there is no notion of explicit storytelling, where narrative structure and causal relationships would play a defining role (see Sadler, 2021). Rather, constellations of these fragments are being grasped together dynamically by different actors in different situations, allowing for various disclosures of the world. Going by Heidegger (2015) disclosure, referring to an unveiling of beings regarding the manner of their existence and their relationships to one another, constitutes a way of being (*dasein*), but also a way of being-with-others (*mitdasein*) (see also Bartky, 1979; Sadler, 2021). It therefore allows for a disclosure of life-worlds within the retail context which is grounded in and contextualized by a certain mutual and public understanding – for example the metanarrative of a sales encounter – but still allows for the provision of story elements as touchpoints to people's lives which is so crucial for retail branding (Escalas, 2004; Gilliam & Rockwell, 2018; Woodside, 2010). Overall, the story elements resulting from our analysis are embodied and enacted by brand representatives in store, and emplotted and co-created in the ways in which consumers interact with these representatives as well as the store environment. Thus, the store as this retailer brand's lead channel presents a unique opportunity for grasping together the fragments which constitute JYSK's brand narrative and thereby connecting them to consumers' lives. This function interacts, is supported by- and sometimes clashes with the brand's other channels but can never be fully overtaken by them without radically changing the narrative at its core. JYSK's brand narrative is dependent on fragments which unfold their impact on the lead channel, and vice versa.

The fragmented narrative thus created may perhaps best be described as ambient, in the sense that it comprises many small contributions to a larger yet largely unknown and open narrative whole. This narrative whole is rather loosely defined, so that the impact of individual fragments becomes more

unpredictable as their contextualization is quite removed from the control of their creators – in this case, brand and marketing managers (Sadler, 2021). Due to this loose structure, a strong emphasis falls on the role of repetition: ambient narratives, therefore, can consist of a repetition of the same themes and elements to build up intensity without having to rely on a particular plot order to make sense. JYSK’s ambient brand narrative thus emerges as a constellation of closely related story elements told and re-told by a multitude of marketplace actors, ultimately producing a larger, loosely defined whole. As our data indicates, ambient narratives are sites of interaction and co-creation, which means they may also become sites of conflict, dissonance, and contradiction (see also Brown & Patterson, 2010). Coherence, in this case, would therefore not be understood in terms of structural continuity, i.e. the absence of internal contradictions, but rather in terms of material coherence built through narrative accrual, i.e. the repetition of broadly similar stories over time and across touchpoints (see also Sadler, 2021; Visconti, 2018). This conception of coherence presents an important addition to the predominant concepts of cross-channel consistency regarding price, product, service, and promotion within the omnichannel literature (Cao & Li, 2018; Huré et al., 2017). Figure 1 below represents an attempt at visualizing these processes of narrative accrual through repetition over the course of consumers’ experiences with retailer brand touchpoints.

Figure III-1: Narrative accrual through fragmented storytelling in an omnichannel retail context



Our data further suggests that brand representatives, whether implicitly or explicitly, seem to leverage the fragmentation of their brand’s narrative across different channels and touchpoints to emplot and frame brand identity as well as their own self-conception within retail sales encounters. This becomes especially apparent through the archetype of the benevolent guide, which seems to be firmly understood in terms of general goodwill, but also specifically with regard to aiding consumers in their navigation and sensemaking of various channels. Ultimately, this type of guidance may even lead to a mitigation of any potential dissatisfaction caused by channel inconsistencies which, despite the brand’s omnichannel approach, still seem to occur. The story element of surprise even illustrates how such inconsistencies can represent elementary building blocks for JYSK’s brand narrative. Whilst surprise also emerged as being created by the new look of the servicescape or updated product assortment, the most frequent and impactful moments of surprise centered around price and brand representatives’ ability to leverage channel inconsistencies with the catalogue or website in order to create pleasant ‘plot twists’ for their customers (see the statements by interviewees 2 and 7 above).

While retail semiotics as well as recent work on customer experience draw attention to the importance of achieving a balance between seamlessness, coherence, and predictability versus unexpected and engaging elements (Siebert et al., 2020; Welte, 2021), failing to recognize and leverage this value of surprise is certainly a glaring flaw in any omnichannel strategy striving for a perfect routinization of the brand's narrative through seamless channel integration.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

As suggested in the previous section, viewing retail brand narratives as assemblages of fragments across different channels and touchpoints raises the question of how academics and brand managers conceive of the prominent notion of channel consistency and seamless integration within the omnichannel literature. While the benefits of a consistent retail mix across different touchpoints and smooth transitions between channels have thus far predominantly preoccupied academic discourse and theorization highlighting positive effects on engagement, customer satisfaction, and sales (Chang & Li, 2022; Frassetto-Deltoro et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018), they seem to be operating under the tacit assumption that this particular type of integration and consistency is what consumers desire unequivocally. In fact, consistent and seamless channel integration has been likened to flow experiences customers find it draw away from (Liu et al., 2023), which seems to stand in direct contrast to research suggesting that it is actually the unpredictability of engaging experiences which keeps the consumer engrossed (Siebert et al., 2020). Accordingly, several recent investigations already suggest that “more integration is not necessarily always better” (Gasparin et al., 2022, p. 4), as consumers do not hold the consistency of certain retail elements in equal regard as a matter of course, but rather focus on individual channel characteristics at a lesser scope (Bertrandie & Zielke, 2017; Liu & Liu, 2024). When it comes to transporting a brand's narrative across the omnichannel retail environment, our study supports the latter point of view. Specifically, a fragmented narrative conception of the brand, as presented herein, asks us to re-think the concept of consistency vis a vis the value propositions and brand mission under consideration of the varying narrative potential of different touchpoints. Table 3 illustrates how, in the case at hand, the retailer brand's value propositions translate into story fragments imbued with a set of potential meanings which accrue through different scenarios and encounters.

Table III-3: The JYSK brand as ambient narrative

Value Proposition	Story elements	Potentials for meaning disclosure	Narrative accrual
Competence & helpfulness (particularly regarding sleeping supplies)	Archetype of the Benevolent Guide	expertise, knowledge, helpfulness, care, attention empathy, goodwill	in-store interactions between RSA and customers, RSA's self-concept, customer perception of RSAs
Scandinavian design & lifestyle	Scandinavian Romanticism	natural beauty, maritime charme, connectedness to nature, coziness/hygge, tranquility, simplicity	RSA's self-concept, customer perception of product range, signaling trough store servicescape
Closeness to the customer	Mood of Intimacy	care, deceleration, trust, honesty, empathy, consideration, concern	signaling trough store servicescape, customer perception of RSAs, in-store interaction between RSAs and customers
	Family Metaphor	Closeness, friendliness, emotiveness, trust, happiness, loyalty, camaraderie	RSA's self-concept, RSA's perfection of consumers, signaling through store servicescape
Affordability & great offers	The Element of Surprise	Perplexity, unexpectedness, novelty, shock, trust, care attention	RSA's self-concept, customer perception of product range, in-store interactions between RSAs and customers

5.2 Managerial Implications

Our findings further suggest that JYSK, despite moving towards an omnichannel retail strategy, nevertheless seem to have a clear conception of the brand touchpoints at which certain fragments of their narrative can particularly flourish. In both the retail brand's strategy and conception of their narrative, the store still holds to role of a lead channel which most powerfully tells the story of the brand's core value proposition centered around helping customers achieve better sleep and therefore increased wellbeing. As this narrative crucially hinges upon story elements that signal and build trust and intimacy, an omnichannel approach attempting to homogenize brand communications and service attributes across touchpoints could, in this case, even prove detrimental. The view of retail brand

narratives and their convergence with the in-store consumption experience presented herein also draws further attention to the challenges and potential benefits of using the right story elements and meanings at the right time and invites us to explore the unique capabilities of each channel and its touchpoints. Instead of a uniform omnichannel experience, therefore, it may be more prudent to think of a fragmented opti-channel experience where each touchpoint is optimized with a view towards the brand narrative, helping practitioners identify and amplify their unique capabilities in relation to and in concert with customers' unique needs.

Furthermore, when it comes to storytelling, our research strongly supports the notion of stories acting as an important strategic platform for the co-creation of value (see also Doyle & Kelliher, 2023). We can further argue that consistency in a straightforward narrative is not necessarily the gold standard for retail brands as it is perfectly possible for a narrative to be entirely consistent – yet boring, ineffective, or forgettable. Thus, viewing brands as fragmented narratives may aid practitioners in aligning the concept of channel consistency with the brand's key value propositions whilst keeping consumers engaged by feeding into their “narrative urge” to tell their own stories (Brown & Patterson, 2010, p. 547). Rather than following any grand narrative, then, this view invites brand managers to consider their arsenal of story fragments as a tool for providing value-enriching touchpoints to consumers' lives, allowing for a co-created brand narrative which is multifarious, polyphonic, and open enough to place different emphases on different channels and touchpoints. Not only does this sort of co-creation bear the opportunity of making the competitive advantage of a unique brand narrative even more inimitable, but it can also be useful in the process of resource allocation for retail brands transitioning to omnichannel approaches. When it comes to retail branding, therefore, the narrative theoretical lens adopted in this paper invites both practitioners and researchers to view the fragmentation of brand meanings and increasing openness of brand narratives afforded and driven by the omnichannel context as opportunity rather than obstacle.

5.3 Limitations and Further Research

Naturally, despite the use of different types of data sets, our means of data collection and conducting research entail clear limitations. As observations were undertaken overtly, there certainly is a chance of people self-editing due to the presence of a researcher, despite efforts to keep the retail environment as natural as possible by not introducing any recording equipment. Thus, a certain level of impression management by both consumers and staff members may have played a role in their observed behavior and interactions. Moreover, stories are necessarily construed and told for the benefit of some sort of

audience – whether consciously or subconsciously. Therefore, there is also a risk of warped or one-sided narrations being presented to the researcher. We tried to mitigate this risk by collecting brand stories in multiple different shapes (see Bryman, 2012), but of course, one can never fully discount this possibility. Based on the conceptualization of brand storytelling within the omnichannel paradigm proposed in this paper, a broad variety of avenues for further research unfolds. Firstly, experimental investigations probing further into the processes of sense-making and emplotment in the context of fragmented narratives might be able to elucidate the effects of story fragmentation on the perception of character, authenticity, or truth in consumers. Further, it has already been theorized that the kind of disclosure afforded by fragmentation may inherently favor the voices of already- dominant groups of people interested in maintaining existing understandings of the world (Sadler, 2021). In the context of marketing and branding, therefore, further research could investigate issues of access and underlying power structures regarding brand narratives, asking which voices get to co-create and participate, and perhaps gatekeep certain stories and why. Secondly, the scope of the data presented herein is highly limited, as our focus lies mainly on brand representatives and customers within the context of the store servicescape, where touchpoints are arguably still brand- controlled. Thus, further research is needed to develop a clearer picture of how brand story fragments’ potential for meaning disclosure is realized at touchpoints which are less within – or entirely outside of the brand’s control. Such research might also probe further into the negative aspects of narrative fragmentation and brand story-openness, for example regarding online trolling, the appropriation of meanings, or cancel-culture. This, of course, goes hand in hand with a need for the investigation into the narrative accrual of story fragments across the entire system of channels and touchpoints at a brand’s disposal, allowing researchers to map out the system of core- versus supportive story elements at work at different touchpoints in greater detail. Moreover, when it comes to narrative accrual, its progression and evolution over time as well as in different cultural contexts presents another matter for enquiry. Also, as the present study is focused on one particular retail brand within one specific retail category, it would naturally be interesting to see the proposed concept extended and adapted to other types of brands and retailers. Finally, while ethnographic interviews and observations did form part of our dataset, the overall study nevertheless placed its focus on the retailer’s point of view. It is therefore essential to develop a more consumer-centric view of retail branding and the narrativity of different touchpoints by investigating which touchpoints inspire consumers to tell their own stories about the retail brand and provide memorable, value-enhancing instances throughout the consumption journey.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to explore retail branding via a lead channel by identifying the different story elements emerging from our investigation of Danish retail brand JYSK. To do so, we drew from both branding and omnichannel retailing literature to propose a definition of brand narratives as the theoretical basis for this endeavor. Through in-depth interviews with brand managers and representatives, as well as observations of interactions in-store across several branches in Germany supplemented by ethnographic customer interviews, we identified five complementary and intertwined story elements used by both brand representatives and consumers to make sense of the brand's dispersion through the store as its lead channel.

Overall, the story elements of the benevolent guide archetype, Scandinavian romanticism, a mood of intimacy, the metaphor of the family, and the element of surprise emerged as closely interrelated, yet fragmented entities in the sense that they were not connected by an over-arching plot or linked through a chain of causality. Instead, they provide an array of potential meanings to be drawn upon and emplotted by brand representatives and consumers, a process which gives the brand's lead channel a unique place with regard to value co-creation and the enactment of core values. Thus, in response to the second overall aim of this study which posed the question of how brand representatives and consumers make sense of such story elements together, we conceptualize the manner of their usage emergent from our data as a pre-thematic way of being and knowing. This conceptualization in turn leads us to the proposal of a novel understanding of brand story co-creation within the omnichannel paradigm, which views the retail brand as fragmented narrative. In so doing, we join the growing body of research calling the "integration imperative" predominant within the omnichannel literature into question, arguing that the theoretical lens adopted herein and the concept derived from it asks us to re-think and amend the current, prevalent notion of channel consistency with regard to the brand's mission and value propositions. We therefore contribute to the academic dialogue on omnichannel retailing, as well as retail branding, by presenting a theoretical stance that may lead on to a multitude of fruitful paths for potential future research and which encourages both researchers and retail brand managers to view the increasing fragmentation of brand narratives as opportunity rather than obstacle.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Semi-structured interview, duration approx. 1 hour

Introduction: Welcome, thank you for agreeing to this interview

Notify once again that interview will be recorded, and all information will be treated confidentially

Please be aware that you are welcome at any time to deny answering a question / make me aware that you are uncomfortable with the situation or end the interview outright if you feel the need to do so

- Set 1: General Development of Brand Story & Experience

How does JYSK generally aim to be perceived as a brand by its customers?

- ➔ Does this differ slightly, e.g. from country to country
- ➔ How does this differ on the German market from before the re-branding? What was the intended brand perception before, what is it now?
- ➔ Do local managers have any leeway to adjust to local conditions / culture within that framework?
 - If so, how / how much?

How does JYSK differ from other furniture retail brands, in your opinion?

What effects do you expect the ongoing re-branding to have on the brand image of JYSK, specifically on the German market?

What kind of stories is JYSK trying to tell, how would you describe your brand's main narrative? (allude to article, chance to fill new image with stories)

- ➔ Are there certain constant / fixed elements of your brand story? If so, which ones & why do they need to remain fixed in your opinion?
- ➔ Are there elements that are more flexible & open to change / adaptation? If so, which ones & why?

What makes a great customer experience at JYSK for you?

- ➔ Take me through it / encourage to draw from own experiences
- ➔ What kind of customer experience would be optimal from JYSK's perspective according to your overall strategy?

- Is there any difference to what it was before the re-branding?
 - ➔ Are there certain experiences / parts of the overall experience you're aiming to achieve through specific touchpoints? What unique value do your different touchpoints have for you in creating a great experience?
- Set 2: Relevance of channels and touchpoints

I have asked you to describe the components of a great customer experience. How does JYSK transport this over all the different communication- and shopping channels available?

- ➔ Which channels and touchpoints do you think are important?
 - Which ones will gain more relevance for you in the future? Why?
- ➔ Are there channels you see as more significant than others when it comes to telling your brand's story?
- ➔ Which channels would you like to integrate more strongly in the future, where do you see the most potential?

Do you see the role of your overall brand story as differing across the different phases of the purchase process? (e.g. mobile channel for searching / gathering info etc.)

- ➔ i.e. are there certain touchpoints you consider to be more / less relevant at different stages of the customer journey?
- ➔ If so, is this part of your overall strategy?

How would you describe an ideal – from your perspective – shopping experience at JYSK?

- ➔ What is the ideal you aim to achieve?

Which customer touchpoints do you perceive to be the most relevant for telling your story?

- ➔ Relating back to previous question: do you think they gain different relevance at different points during the purchase process / customer journey?
- ➔ Poss. provide definition of touchpoint (any point of contact / interaction between business & customer)

- Set 3: Customers' Expectations of an Omnichannel Retailer

How do you hope to make your customers feel about JYSK?

➔ What are you doing to instill these feelings?

- Both in terms of utility, but also in terms of making an emotional connection

➔ What kind of a relationship do you want to have & foster with your customers? How?

At what point during the shopping process would you say your customers are most likely to feel satisfied / stressed?

➔ What are you doing to address these challenges / utilize these opportunities?

What, in your opinion, can you as a retail brand do to stay relevant to your customers?

Has anything changed in the way you interacted and communicated with your customers over the course of the last years (pandemic / rebranding)?

➔ How has your customers' way of shopping changed? Have you played an active role in that change? If so, how?

➔ Which of these changes do you think are here to stay?

- Was it “only” the pandemic that triggered these changes, or did other factors play a role too? If so, which?

➔ Are you happy with the way it has changed? Do you see new opportunities for development?

Wrap-Up: how would you summarize the last hour, was there anything surprising / unexpected / enriching you're taking out of this? Do you have any feedback for me?

- Follow-up Questions

Could you explain ...?

Please elaborate / what do you mean by ...?

Let's go back to ...

Could you take me through ... again?

What did you do then?

How did ... react / make you feel?

Paper IV:

Paths of Moments: Exploring the Experiential Qualities of Retailer Brand Touchpoints

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Abstract: With retailer brand touchpoints becoming ever more dispersed in omnichannel retail contexts, researchers have called for a reconsideration of concepts like the customer brand experience and customer journey. In particular, retailer brand literature still lacks approaches exploring a consumer-centric, co-creative perspective towards brand experiences playing out across touchpoints. The present work therefore sets out to explore this experience from consumers' points of view using a diary-based approach which captures their reflections on touchpoint encounters as memorable moments along the consumption journey. Asking which experiential qualities set touchpoint encounters apart as memorable moments along the consumption journey and how these moments interact in co-creating consumers' lived retail brand experiences, this study identifies a spectrum of engaging and efficient qualities. In concert with a notion of retailer brand influence, these qualities provide a starting point for mapping out touchpoint encounters from a consumer-based standpoint. This work contributes to the existent body of omnichannel marketing- and retailer branding literature by offering a consumer-centric conceptualization of retailer brand touchpoint encounters embedded in a broader, more holistic consumption context. This perspective challenges the integration imperative prevalent in the field and highlights the multifaceted and non-linear nature of consumption journeys.

Keywords: retail branding, retailer brand touchpoints, experience co-creation, consumption journeys

1. Introduction

Today's retailers are faced with the challenges of building their brand image and telling their story across an ever-expanding multitude of channels and customer touchpoints (Danaher et al., 2020; Feiereisen et al., 2021). These touchpoint encounters are increasingly embedded in consumers' wider lifeworlds, eroding notions of a binary consumer – brand relationship (Becker, 2018; Schau & Akaka, 2021). With technological advances progressing rapidly and the timeframes for mass adoption of new experiences shrinking further and further over the course of our history (Charpentier & Terreaux, 2022), researchers have begun to call for a reassessment of long-held branding paradigms (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Specifically, the concepts of customer brand experience and customer journey seem to require such reconsideration given the multi-associative nature and dispersion of omnichannel retailer brands (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). On the one hand, academia has, in recent years, begun to shift towards a more systemic and consumer-centric view of customer experiences and journeys fueled by the turn towards the experience economy and experience co-creation (Andreini et al., 2018; Becker, 2018; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Pine & Gilmore, 2013; Schau & Akaka, 2021).

On the other hand, however, omnichannel retail research and -literature in particular thus far remains largely devoid of approaches exploring a consumer-centric, co-creative perspective towards retailer brand experiences (Gasparin et al., 2022; Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014; R. Mishra et al., 2021). This study applies a diary-based approach to investigating this experience, which captures consumers' reflections on touchpoint encounters in a broader lifeworld context, rather than focusing on a binary consumer – brand relationship (Becker, 2018). In answering the call for more consumer-centric, dynamic approaches when it comes to mapping out omnichannel experiences and journeys (see Gasparin et al., 2022; Klaus & Kuppelwieser, 2021; R. Mishra et al., 2021) and considering our aim of adopting an experiential view towards touchpoints, it makes sense to join authors who have conceptualized this journey with a stronger emphasis on the person themselves. Hamilton and Price (2019) as well as Schau and Akaka (2021) have proposed the notions of the consumer- or consumption journey respectively, to stress the individual's perspective on the journey. Juxtaposing it with the company-centric framework of the customer journey, they argue that consumption journeys offer a more long-term, culturally embedded view of value creation that allows for more customer-centric touchpoints to find entry into mapping, rather than the classic emphasis on market actions (Schau & Akaka, 2021). This broader perspective which highlights the person themselves at the center of the

journey, will therefore form the basis of our understanding of the experiential qualities of memorable touchpoints which is why the terminology used within the remainder of this paper also adopts the notion of the consumption- rather than customer journey. Given the interoperability between digital and physical realms as well as the ever-stronger interweaving of content and economic exchange, we believe that a diary-based approach provides a useful lens for understanding the impact of touchpoints at varying degrees of brand ownership and control in the face of relentlessly accelerating consumption experiences.

Therefore, this paper sets out to explore *the experiential qualities that set touchpoint encounters apart as memorable moments along the consumption journey and how these moments interact in co-creating consumers' lived retail brand experiences*. To pursue this goal, we employ a longitudinal diary study combined with in-depth interviews to capture retailer brand touchpoint encounters from a consumer perspective. By identifying a spectrum of experiential qualities highlighted by consumers when talking about memorable and noteworthy retail brand encounters, we aim to contribute to the fields of omnichannel retail marketing and retail branding by offering a consumer-centric conceptualization of retailer brand touchpoint encounters embedded in a broader, more holistic context of consumption. This adds an experiential and processual perspective to the existing theorizations of retailer brand touchpoints and sheds light on factors which are part of the experience via consumers' life-worlds, but not necessarily tied to any company (e.g. social actors). Our findings imply that retailer brands' efforts to create touchpoint consistency and seamless integration in an omnichannel context only address one side of the experiential values which may be perceived as memorable moments from a consumer standpoint.

2. Background Literature

For the research context at hand, which tries to establish the consumers' viewpoint, the notion of consumption experiences and journeys enables a broader, less static perspective on touchpoint encounters. Because it actively takes into account the lifeworld of informants, this stream of literature is of central relevance for grounding the research approach at hand. Secondly, the concept of the special moment is crucial in understanding the meanings consumers attach to touchpoint encounters (Mele et al., 2021; von Wallpach et al., 2020). While retail marketing literature tends to take a company-centric stance on such moments, investigating their experiential qualities requires a

theoretical grounding that allows us to understand meaningful consumption experiences beyond the scope of a retailer's focal offering.

2.1 Consumption Journeys and Experiences

Throughout management and marketing literature, a growing focus on experiences – rather than products – has already been noticeable from the late 20th century onwards, with Pine and Gilmore (2013, p. 25-26) formulating the idea of an experience as being a discrete type of economic offering along with goods and services and defining it as a memorable event which engages the customer on a personal level and is staged for them by a company. Drawing on the language and terminology of theatre, the authors thus rang in a certain experiential turn within academia, resulting in an increased focus on the performances which constitute the so-called “experience economy” (Argenton, 2015; Boswijk, 2013; Boswijk et al., 2007; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Sundbo & Sorensen, 2013). Equally, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) departed from a view of customer experience dealing mainly with the processing of information and instead gave rise to an experiential notion that highlights the roles of fun, fantasies, emotion, aesthetics and meaning. This entails a broader view of the concept, with authors arguing that essentially, all experiences are consumption experiences including mundane, everyday ones (Carù & Cova, 2003; Woodward & Holbrook, 2013), as well as a more phenomenological characterization of customer experiences emphasizing their subjectivity and embeddedness in consumers' life-worlds (Becker, 2018; Helkkula, 2011).

This development towards an experiential turn in consumer literature also went hand in hand with a stronger focus on the broader context of customer experiences, expressed in the notion of experience co-creation which invites us to understand an experience as the outcome of consumers' engagement with an entire ecosystem of actors (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004a, 2004b; Swaminathan et al., 2020). This approach affords a different view of the entire phenomenon of customer experience, in contrast to entirely company- focused or entirely customer-focused perspectives (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Drawing on their examination of the history of customer experience as a concept within marketing literature, Lemon & Verhoef define it as “[...] a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey” (2016, p. 71). In addition, they note that customer experience along the customer journey is a process informed by past- and oriented towards future encounters formed throughout repeated purchases. More recent research has since somewhat amended this notion, emphasizing the customer journey not as a repetitive- but instead as an iterative

process across multiple cycles, akin to a hermeneutic loop of interpretation (Siebert et al., 2020a). Thus, the focus has somewhat shifted from conceiving of customer experience as an outcome to understanding it as a dynamic process in flux and part of the wider customer journey (Bolton et al., 2014; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2018; Mele et al., 2021).

Within the context of omnichannel retailing, the multidimensionality of customer journeys arguably becomes even more pronounced as both customer experiences and -journeys are open to a variety of influences partially or even wholly outside of a retail brand's control and take place in a much more unstructured, non-linear way than the traditional marketing funnel would have us believe (Grewal & Roggeveen, 2020). A key component in this development is the increasing amount- and evolving nature of retail- and marketing channels as well as customer-brand touchpoints (Ieva & Ziliani, 2018; Larke et al., 2018; Puccinelli et al., 2009; Roggeveen et al., 2020). Channels are typically thought of as the medium through which an interaction between customer and retailer takes place, with online versus offline describing just one broad, commonly applied distinction (e.g. Hickman et al., 2020). Touchpoints denote specific points or instances of contact between retail brand and customer throughout the customer journey (Puccinelli et al., 2009; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). One channel may contain any number of touchpoints both in- and outside of the retail brands' control to varying degrees (Gasparin et al., 2022; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Recent research into millennial consumption journeys emphasizes that a touchpoint is more than a mere contact, describing it instead as "a phenomenological microworld of events, interactions, relationships and emotions" (Mele et al., 2021, p. 428).

Thus far, omnichannel research has successfully shown that touchpoint cohesion, consistency, and context sensitivity reduce the time and effort involved for consumers to fulfil their journeys (Y. P. Chang & J. Li, 2022b; Kuehnl et al., 2019). However, many investigations have widely and implicitly been working under the assumption that ease and predictability are what consumers invariably prefer and value on their journeys (Siebert et al., 2020a). Recent research has shown, however, that the excitement and surprise created by unpredictable, sometimes even frustrating journeys and channel inconsistencies can equally be perceived as desirable and valuable by consumers (Bertrandie & Zielke, 2017; Gasparin et al., 2022; Siebert et al., 2020a). To capture these aspects, Siebert et al. (2020a, 2020b) introduced the idea of sticky customer journeys meant to create unpredictable experiences to create excitement and increase consumers' involvement, as opposed to smooth journeys consisting of predictable experiences designed to make consumers' lives easier and build their loyalty. When exploring the experiential qualities that single out touchpoint encounters as

memorable moments along the consumption journey, the notion of sticky versus smooth touchpoints and the value they deliver forms an important cornerstone.

When looking at how the concepts of customer experience and customer journey have been treated within retail research, it is notable that many contributions take a company-centric, strategy- focused (e.g. Berman & Thelen, 2018; Picot-Coupey et al., 2016) or a customer behavior-based view towards omnichannel customer experiences (e.g. Pantano & Viassone, 2015; Riaz et al., 2022). Thus, the aforementioned notion of experience co-creation between customer and retail brand does not seem to have fully permeated this stream of literature yet, despite an acknowledgement of the loss of control retailers may exert over the customers' experience along the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Parsons & Descatoires, 2016). While the field of omnichannel retail research is often described as somewhat under-theorized in general (see Lazaris & Vrechopoulos, 2014; R. Mishra et al., 2021), this critique seems especially apt when it comes to retail brand touchpoints and their contribution to omnichannel customer experiences. Apart from Baxendale et al. (2015), few research efforts have attempted an overarching, systematic examination of how retail brand touchpoints contribute to the creation of omnichannel customer experiences. With regard to retail channels, researchers tend to emphasize cohesion, integration, seamlessness, and technical functionality over affective, hedonic, or emotional experiential aspects, giving the somewhat skewed impression of omnichannel retail brands as the designers, controllers, and creators of experiences which are to be passively received and reacted to by customers (e.g. Y. P. Chang & J. Li, 2022a; Wei Gao et al., 2021; W. Gao et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Torrice et al., 2020). Phenomena such as showrooming or webrooming are framed as rogue, undesirable behaviors needing to be controlled (e.g. Hu & Tracogna, 2020) with little regard for customer emancipation, sense-making, or co-creation (see also S. Mishra et al., 2021).

In sum, building upon previous research, our investigation is underpinned by an understanding of the customer journey as consumption journey centered on the consumer and embedded within their lifeworld and lived experience. We further acknowledge the multidimensionality, fuzzy and sometimes irrational, and iterative nature of customer experience along this journey. Finally, we join the emergent omnichannel research stream challenging the hitherto prominent notion of seamlessness and predictability being the main sources of value and success within retailing. Having laid out the foundational concepts and terminologies regarding omnichannel experiences and - journeys, the next section attempts to set them into the context of temporality and memorability, thus building our foundation for investigating and discussing touchpoint encounters as remarkable moments.

2.2 Memorable Moments

Recent research attempting to map out consumption journeys which take place in complex physical and digital environments found that it was best to describe such journeys as a “path of moments” affecting consumers’ experiences in an unstructured, unpredictable manner (Mele et al., 2021, p. 428). Thinking of such moments as occurring upon touchpoint encounters, therefore, can be useful in an investigation of their experiential qualities as well as their memorability.

The idea of a moment itself is a relatively volatile concept – it is commonly associated with sudden, punctual events emerging from an otherwise undifferentiated flow of time, breaking through the mundane and passing swiftly, but leaving lingering consequences (Zemka, 2011). However, the concept itself is rather fluid and the ways in which moments are experienced are more diverse still. For the present context, it is important to note that the experience of a moment can reach beyond the concept of quantifiable clock- and calendar time and the qualitative notion of disruption and opportunity. Thus, the common understanding of linear “clock time” (Zemka, 2011) is complemented by the notion of the moment as a precise and revelatory unit of time, an “opening into or distillation of meanings” (Groth, 2014, p. 65).

Within retail marketing and branding literature, special moments between a consumer and retailer brand have been conceptualized as so-called “moments of truth”. Coined by Procter & Gamble, these moments initially described three key points of contact neatly tallied with the linear three-step process of the customer journey across pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases (Laurent et al., 2018). However, with consumer journeys and experiences evolving and becoming more non-linear, the set of moments has quickly expanded to depict encounters between consumers and retailers on different channels and different points in time along the journey. For example, the so-called social moment of truth was established to take into account the influence of online communities on social media platforms (Ramadan & Farah, 2017). However, with the growth of an always-on system of interaction between consumers and retailers, some researchers found it more prudent to speak of an “ubiquitous” moment of truth, as today’s consumer journeys tend to merge the steps along the path to purchase into a single, synchronous instance as mobile technologies allow consumers to go through many or all of the stages nearly simultaneously (Laurent et al., 2018). While this practitioner-led modeling of moments is helpful in identifying important instances of retailer brand contact from the retailer’s point of view, its informativeness remains limited when it comes to exploring how consumers attach meanings to such encounters (Gillian et al., 2014; von Wallpach et al., 2020).

Furthermore, systems of brand touchpoints have been examined regarding their relative impact on change in brand consideration (Baxendale et al., 2015), yet their experiential qualities remain thus far under-addressed, leaving open the question of what, besides frequency and perceived positivity, transforms a retail brand touchpoint into a memorable moment for the consumer. In this case, experiential qualities refer to those shared characteristics of moments of encounter with a retailer brand which are perceived to be special or noteworthy by the consumer (see von Wallpach et al., 2020). Thus far, touchpoint studies and research investigating moments of truth along the customer journey tend to take a practitioner-led approach when identifying aspects which might improve retail experiences (Becker, 2018; Gillian et al., 2014; Ieva & Ziliani, 2018). To address this gap, the research presented herein takes its departure from experiential theorizations of precious moments of consumption (von Wallpach et al., 2020), as well as narratological approaches arguing that brand image is subjectively co-created via storytelling practices across channels and touchpoints along the consumption journey (Cassinger, 2010; Moin, 2020; Visconti, 2018).

For the investigation at hand, therefore, it is useful to highlight Robinson's (2015) conceptualization of moments in the sense of Kairos, which carries connotations of opportunity, decision, or action making it a concept often used by people to give voice to, formulate, and evaluate their experiences (von Wallpach et al., 2020). Thus, instead of being mere temporal descriptors, moments become something which is imbued with experiential qualities and meaning, making them memorable instances (ibid.). However, a key characteristic of such instances is also their short-lived and passing nature, as they provide a detailed snapshot of "the minutiae of everyday experience" (Gabb & Fink, 2015, p. 984). The emphasis on this attribute outlines the potential of such small, fleeting instances to interrupt people's day-to-day routines and imbue them with positive emotions and meaning, even in relatively mundane contexts. When it comes to attaching meaning and significance to a moment, von Wallpach et al. (2020) call attention to the crucial point that this singling out may happen either as the moment occurs or upon reflection. However, the impact of a moment can never be entirely anticipated before it actually takes place. Moments we thought would be very important might turn out to be perfectly inconsequential and unremarkable, while truly impactful and meaningful experiences can also spring from unexpected, serendipitous or even dreaded moments.

Whether they are big or small, anticipated or unexpected, though, the memory of a remarkable moment we experienced has the potential to affect and shape our views, values, and behavior post-hoc (Pillemer, 2001; von Wallpach et al., 2020). We therefore follow von Wallpach et al.'s (2020) notion of moments as meaningful events which are "multi-faceted and not limited to a temporal

dimension, but [accentuate] the specific qualities of these ephemeral instances and the changes they induce in people's selves and lives" (p. 493). Accordingly, we conceive of touchpoint encounters as moments along the consumption journey, which have the potential to be memorable and are encapsulated within a temporal unit that is being made sense of and ascribed meaning in retrospect. Thus, examining the experiential qualities of such moments affords a deeper understanding of omnichannel consumption journeys, as well as touchpoint relevance and memorability.

2.3 Re-tellings of Retailers

Viewing the moment of encounter with a retailer brand not only in terms of its chronological nature but also as an opening for the revelation and co-creation of meanings (Groth, 2014; Robinson, 2015), simultaneously opens up a way of understanding how retailer brand meaning is created from a narrative perspective. Through touchpoint design and retail strategy, certain narrative potentials are presented by the retailer and made sense of through consumer tactics (Cassinger, 2010; Gensler et al., 2013). This kind of meaning co-creation differs from interpretivist and structuralist approaches, which presume the existence of meaning as something pre-constructed which is there to be uncovered and passively adopted (Cassinger, 2010; Visconti, 2018). Instead, consumers can be seen as active co-shapers of meaning, using stories to make sense of retailers in the context of their own everyday life-worlds and grasp together disparate elements into a meaningful whole (Sadler, 2021). According to Czarniawska (2004), the emplotment of events is one way in which narrative meaning is created, which offers researchers a way of understanding storytelling as a practice of meaning co-creation. Consumer re-tellings are emplotted based on how the individual person makes sense of things that happened. The same array of events or moments, therefore, may be given different meanings depending on how they are made sense of and by whom (Cassinger, 2010).

The present study, in viewing retailer touchpoint encounters as moments which open up the disclosure of meanings, is rooted in the sense-making of experiences through language and re-telling. This viewpoint enables us to grasp meaningful retailer touchpoint encounters as individual paths of moments which may be captured retrospectively through storytelling. For that reason, several methodological techniques which encourage participants to narrate and reflect on such moments were employed.

3. Methodology and Research Approach

Based on a more phenomenological characterization of the customer experience which emphasizes subjectivity and context-specificity, as well as embeddedness in a consumer's lifeworld (Becker, 2018; Helkkula, 2011), this investigation deals with the disclosure of meaning and creation of attachment through instances of storytelling. Therefore, a strategy which engages with human existence and language in striving to understand the 'why' behind consumers' views and choices is needed (Caldwell, 2015; Howell, 2016). This is why constructivism, paired with a hermeneutic epistemological viewpoint, forms the proposed research philosophy for this undertaking.

Overall, the study design employed a qualitative approach to elucidate participants' individual meaning-making. To capture the experiential qualities of memorable touchpoint encounters, participants were prompted to keep a diary of such encounters over the course of a month, supplemented with two cycles of interviews before- and after the diary-period. This method, which is thus far rarely employed in research dealing with retail experiences, yielded rich insights about experiential touchpoint qualities which are not necessarily related to a focal retailer brand and its offerings, allowing a view of participants' own perceptions of meaning and value based on their reflections and re-tellings (Becker, 2018).

3.1 Research Design

One way of capturing stories of the everyday, which makes use of consumers' own personal reflections and introspection, is presented by diary-based research (Becker, 2018; Kenten, 2010). However, although often touted as a promising means for investigating consumer experience, research actually utilizing this approach is few and far between in the fields of marketing and social science (ibid.) Rynänen et al. (2016) used diary methods to investigate dimensions of meaningful consumption experiences – however, their study was focused specifically on the packaging of products. Within retailing research, Smith et al. (2003) notably employed a long-term diary to probe into consumer attitudes and experiences with loyalty programs, finding that the diary entries added an important level of depth to the differences and similarities detected between program members and non-members. On the whole, however, approaches prompting consumption stories in diary form to capture retrospective sense-making through emplotment remain absent from retail marketing and branding literature to the best of our knowledge. Taking this status quo as a point of departure, our

study design and methodological approach was shaped on the basis of the theoretical concepts discussed above: consumption journeys experienced as memorable moments re-emplotted and retold by consumers in a process of sensemaking.

Generally, quantitative methods and surveys remain the most prominent means of studying experiences in both the marketing- and omnichannel retailing literature (see Becker, 2018; R. Mishra et al., 2021; Steinmann et al., 2016). While such studies are excellent at identifying means of improving the customer experience with regard to firm-related aspects, they may be less illuminative about factors which are not necessarily related to a focal retailer brand and its offerings (Becker, 2018). Diary methods in particular are helpful in capturing embedded, contextualized first-hand descriptions of consumers' lived experiences and developing a processual view of touchpoint encounters over time (Becker, 2018). Since those aspects are of particular interest for this investigation, a longitudinal diary study was deemed the most appropriate for this investigation.

While Baxendale et al. (2015) presented a comprehensive quantitative study of touchpoint encounters, participants in this case are given the opportunity to report and reflect on their individual experience of a touchpoint, focusing on what made it memorable to them. The data takes shape as a solicited diary, i.e. produced specifically for the purpose of this investigation (Kenten, 2010), and collection follows an interval-contingent design since participants prepared entries at specified regular periods of time – namely once per week (Bolger et al., 2003). This approach allows participants to self-report and reflect on events, thoughts, and observations with regard to the experienced, the record of which constitutes a narrative in itself, since it renders an account of a sequence of significant events and moments (Becker, 2018). In this way, customer-touchpoint encounters were being tracked over the course of a month, framing this duration with in-depth interviews to brief- and debrief participants and give them a chance to reflect and comment on the process. Utilizing collage techniques and thought protocols to illustrate channel use while interviewing participants at the beginning and end of the study granted additional insights into how omnichannel retail brand touchpoints are experienced over the course of time, and what it is that makes these moments in time memorable. This approach is deemed especially apt as it allows for an exploration of multi-layered processes as well as temporal dynamics, both of which are crucial for this investigation.

3.2 Participant Profile and Recruitment

As table 1 shows, a total of 28 people participated in this study, with 24 completing the entire data collection process of first interview, diary creation period, and second interview.

Table IV-1: List of study participants; pseudonymized

Participant (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age
Leah	F	20
Nancy	F	21
Alana	F	22
Nadia	F	22
Isabel	F	23
Kevin	M	23
Dana	F	25
Nora	F	25
Sam	M	26
Cecilie	F	26
Miriam	F	27
Linus	M	27
Nolan	M	29
Silas	M	29
Alan	M	30
Yvonne	F	30
Anne	F	31
Frida	F	32
Amelia	F	32
Manuel	M	34
Carsten	M	35
Marcel	M	37
Lena	F	39
Sara	F	43

These participants were recruited through Aarhus University’s research participation system in collaboration with the institution’s Cognition and Behavior (COBE) lab and remunerated with a total of 300dkk for the full completion of the study. The data collection period was spread over the course of roughly 11 weeks in the summer of 2023, with the first round of interviews being conducted between June 12th -22nd and the second round of interviews taking place between July 12th and August 21st. With no prior exclusion criteria, participants could elect to sign up for the study themselves and,

once the study had begun, were asked to choose one of five overall categories of retail they wanted to engage with for the course of the study. Following Baxendale et al.'s (2015) approach of studying different categories of consumption, the five categories used in our case were food and drink, homeware and furniture, consumer electronics, fashion and clothing, as well as health and beauty. This selection serves the twofold purpose of covering the most common everyday purchases, as well as representing retail sectors with a strong tendency towards omnichannel structures (Delbergh et al., 2024; Marhamat, 2024; Nealon, 2023; Vranica & Robinson, 2021). Giving participants the freedom of choice had the twofold function of putting them at their ease and ensuring they felt comfortable talking about the subject, as well as ensuring that the information thus gained would be rich in detail (see also Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). The delimitation to a certain retail category was undertaken so as to make it easier for participants to focus on a sizeable set of touchpoints that would neither overwhelm them by being too broad, nor constrain them by being too narrowly limited to one retailer brand in particular.

3.3 Data Collection: Solicited Diaries

After completing one interview with the first author, participants were invited to keep a diary of memorable touchpoint encounters over the course of a month. They received access to a diary form via a QR code, as well as a URL, both of which were explained and handed over at the end of the first interview. Additionally, the code and URL were re-shared every time participants received a diary-reminder via email over the course of the study, which took place once per week. The decision to use a digital form was made to give participants a maximum of convenience and accessibility, as well as the opportunity to attach different illustrative media to their entries such as image files, screenshots, or links. In addition to general inquiries about where the touchpoint encounter took place, or which activity they were engaged in when it occurred, participants were mainly asked to answer three open-ended prompts when drawing up their entries: a description of the encounter itself, in as much detail as possible, their opinion on why this encounter was memorable, and their thoughts on the way in which this encounter might have influenced their perception of the retailer (for full set of diary prompts, see appendix). After the duration of approximately a month, participants were called back for a second round of interviews.

3.4 Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

Before the main period of data collection in the summer of 2023, a total of 8 pilot interviews were performed in an iterative process and with the aim of testing and refining the interview guide. Piloting

the research tool can be especially helpful in qualitative enquiries as it allows the researcher to test the procedure and prepare for any potentially unexpected issues (Wengraf, 2001). In this case, the pilot interviews were especially helpful in refining the open-ended questions in the interview guide and in clarifying whether the terminology and tasks were clear to participants. After this preparatory stage, the first round of 28 semi-structured interviews prompted participants to generally describe their engagement with- and impression of their chosen retail category as well as favored retailer brands within it. In the main section of the interview, participants were asked to recount a memory of a specific brand encounter they had experienced within their chosen category, telling the story of this encounter with the aid of icons on a digital whiteboard (Kartch, 2017; Mishler, 1986). This kind of elicitation is particularly suitable for illustrating the participants' point of view, specifically with regard to their feelings and intentions, as well as reasoning for their actions and visualizing the perceived progression of the journey and its ecosystem (Becker, 2018; Mele et al., 2021). Finally, an investigation into what interviewees explicitly expected of an omnichannel retail brand rounded out the first interview (for full interview guide, see appendix). Participants were then briefed on the process of filling their diary and received a QR code to the form in which they made their entries.

3.5 Data Collection: Open-ended Interviews

With 24 out of the initial 28 participants returning for the second interview, the 24 final interviews took a deep-dive into one of the encounters the participant had recorded in their diary during the study and, using a more open-ended approach (see Becker, 2018; Mishler, 1986), asked them to re-tell the experience and reflect on it whilst giving the researcher conducting the interview the chance to probe and ask follow-up questions (for full interview guide, see appendix). This type of interviewing prioritizes the subjective experience over any theoretical assumptions, meaning that they should not find entry into the interview guide or script, ensuring an open, conversational exchange (Becker, 2018). The interviews conducted during phase one and two of the study ranged in duration from approximately 30 to 50 minutes. In the end, therefore, our dataset consisted of a total of 52 interviews – 28 for part 1 and 24 for part 2 – as well as 24 completed touchpoint diaries spanning 137 individual entries. A second round of recruiting, interviewing and diary creation was not deemed necessary, since this dataset already fulfilled the saturation principle, according to which the collection of qualitative data is deemed sufficient once no new insights can be gleaned from the collection of more of the same data (Berg, 2009; Wengraf, 2001). In all, this research approach aimed to fulfil Becker's (2018) methodological requirements for studying consumer experience from a more consumer-centric standpoint, which should allow for a first-hand description of the experience, a description of the

relevant actors and institutions in the consumers' ecosystem, and finally capture the experience's processual nature.

3.6 Data Analysis

Following data collection, the interview transcripts and diary entries were subjected to a hermeneutic approach to qualitative data analysis (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Spiggle, 1994). This type of interpretive analysis is rooted in an understanding of the meanings consumers ascribe to their experiences as texts, stories, or narratives. It therefore views the meaning of consumption as a form of narrative, arguing that consumers as self-narrators selectively highlight specific facets of their experiences in order to assign meaning to events in their lives (Thompson, 1997). When stories are the result of consumption experiences that become embedded into the broader life-narrative of a person, a dialogical interplay allows personalized meanings to emerge (*ibid.*). This approach to analyzing consumer re-tellings of their experiences is therefore particularly helpful when it comes to identifying consumption related meanings especially salient to consumers' life-worlds, which makes it ideal for the present investigation. Interview data is generally considered appropriate for this approach, as are diary entries which, according to Becker (2018), represent a personal record of events that constitutes a narrative since it provides a sequence of events perceived as significant by the participant.

In accordance with this approach, the electronically recorded interviews were fully transcribed and, together with the diary entries, underwent a process of iterative interpretation, comparison, and thematic categorization (Spiggle, 1994). This iterative process involved a thorough reading of the texts in their entirety, to gain an impression of the whole. Overall, the aim was to remain open to any possibilities the texts affords, instead of imposing or projecting any predetermined system of meanings onto it (Thompson, 1997). The texts then underwent further re-readings to develop an understanding of the consumption meanings they contained. Finally, intertextual investigations sought to discern any patterns across the texts constituting the dataset. As is characteristic of hermeneutic interpretation, this process involved several iterations over time, with each reading of the text attempting to grasp a wider range of considerations and constantly interrogating participants' emplotments of their experiences to understand the personal significance of the described events (Arnold & Fischer, 1994; Thompson, 1997). To gain a consensual and shared understanding of the data, interpretations were discussed among the authors (Spiggle, 1994; Thompson, 1997). In this way, five overall types of retailer touchpoints emerged as being relevant in our participants' stories: social,

technological, product related, communicative and promotional, as well as aesthetic and atmospheric touchpoints (see also Table 2). The encounters with these touchpoints varied in the ways in which they were valued by participants, i.e. their experiential qualities, and the role of the retailer in influencing these qualities. The meaning and significance of these interpretive findings will be presented and discussed over the course of the following sections.

4. Findings

Despite relatively mundane shopping contexts and categories making up most of our data, participants' tales of memorable retailer brand encounters involved a wide variety of touchpoints. As illustrated by the storyboards participants created during their first interviews, a single re-telling of a retail experience often involved a diverse set of touchpoints of highly varying natures and functions being employed or coming into play in non-linear and surprising ways. Both the stories collected during our interviews as well as the diary entries therefore support the notion of consumption journeys as paths of moments, with each memorable moment being represented by a touchpoint encounter that was able to form a link to the consumer's life in some way. From the data at hand, five overall types of touchpoints emerged in the collected re-tellings of memorable encounters including social, aesthetic, product-related, promotional and technological varieties. However, some of these were in themselves diverse enough to warrant sub-categories, a full overview of which may be found in table 2, including examples.

Table IV-2: Different types of touchpoints highlighted by participants

Touchpoint Type	Examples	Illustrative Excerpt	
Social	friends, family & other consumers	shopping together; consulting others; being complimented; feeling at ease amongst other shoppers	<i>"I'll probably usually use my girlfriend as a reference point. If She thinks it looks cool. Because I think we tend to be, we tend to usually agree like style wise. And I think when you're shopping for yourself, it's more difficult to determine if the thing you're looking at is actually cool or not, or if it's like kind of something you're imagining." - Marcel (Fashion & Clothing)</i>
	staff	interactions; consultations; working conditions for staff	<i>"So I thought, yeah, like, when people personalize things, and like, just chat you up. Yeah. That makes it like a friendly place to go, you know, and you can tell that it's not full of disgruntled people [...]yeah, that made a really big difference for me. I remember that dude [...] you know, it would show that they treat their employees well. And I want to shop at a place where, you know, like, if people seem happy, then it must be a good working environment, or they pay them well, and they give good pennies [pensions]. Even if you don't pay a lot, like if you have this, like, friendly environment, you know, that makes a huge difference" - Lena (Food & Drink)</i>
Technological	process optimization	filters; algorithms; web/ app navigability	<i>"I think I really like when something is technologically advanced. So whether it's going to be like, it's just so intuitive and easy and you don't need to overthink anything. So it's just like, I think it's on the, if we talk about online, it's just more on the technological side. [retailer] is that - if I really like that box right there or the surface, then I can just put my camera on and search for it in [retailer's app]. So it actually can show me maybe something closest to it." -Anne (Fashion & Clothing)</i>
	add-on technologies	third-party apps; smart home devices	<i>"It's like a general [app] that you can see like all the catalogs from all the stores. [...] So it compares all of the catalogs from all of the supermarkets." - Nancy (Food & Drink)</i>

Table IV-2: (Continued)

Touchpoint Type	Examples	Illustrative Excerpt
Product related	perceived quality; pricing; product use; assortment	<i>"I actually remembered like that I had seen this [retailer's] shop [...] it had made more of an impression on me because it was like, I noticed that the style had changed a little bit from what I expected. And that had kind of like made me like think about it a bit more and it changed a bit my perception of the brand. So that specific moment was kind of like more memorable than actually all the days in which I was actually trying to buy clothes. And it was kind of, yeah, it was kind of interesting to notice that I actually had an opinion, so to speak, of this specific brand that I had seen for actually, I had experienced for less time than the others, but it had actually like made me think about it while the others had not even registered to my brain." - Alana (Fashion & Clothing)</i>
Communicative & Promotional	print advertisement; TV advertisement; SoMe advertisement; 3rd-party SoMe content (youtubers, influencers); informative content (website / SoMe)	<i>"I have seen different video ads on YouTube last week by the same firm and they are all variations of the same concept, and they all subvert your initial expectation. The video starts as an ad for usual farm/genuine products such as eggs, carrots, apples, etc., but then it turns out to be different types of cheese in unusual locations." - Entry no. 6 (Food & Drink)</i>
Aesthetic & Atmospheric	store environment; servicescape; assortment presentation; spatial layout & crowdedness	<i>"This massive, massive, massive mirrors on the first floor. We could try on stuff and like walk around while whoever is with you, they can sit in like very comfortable chairs and there's a table and everything. So comfy" - Nora (Fashion & Clothing)</i>

When choosing to talk about- and record their experiences with retailer brands, participants overall opted for categories that involved predominantly routine purchases, with food and drink being the most widely chosen option.

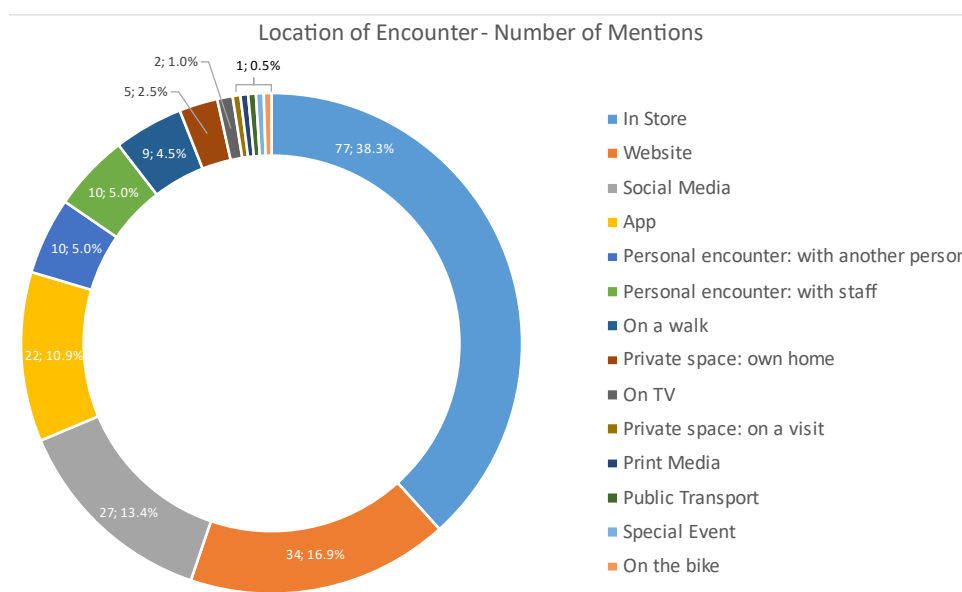
Delving deeper into the memorability of touchpoint encounters, it became apparent that moments which stand out in participants' minds were often described as unusual, unexpected, surprising, or disruptive of the regular routine. Whenever things go smoothly, it seems, touchpoints become white

noise that blends into the background and becomes difficult to remember in any detail after some time has passed. As Frida (Furniture) says: “I guess that most of the buying is fairly generic. It’s there, you put it into the basket, whatever. But [...] if something happens, those are the things that are changeable, or you can influence or somebody else can influence”. In fact, it seems that even in the most mundane contexts such as grocery shopping, participants actively sought to include or provoke surprising or unusual instances in their consumption journeys to create enjoyment for themselves. This might influence the choice of retailer brand in the first place, because as Linus (Food & Drink) says: “They don’t have always the same thing. So, like it’s nice because you find things that you didn’t really think of”. Others purposefully choose not to make a clear plan, preferring to be taken by surprise instead:

“I go on a little discovery inside the store. [...] No, it’s very... it’s not structured at all, actually. I go there for one or two things and maybe I come out with – who knows? Sometimes I also just go in there, not for any particular reason, just to do my round” - Sam (Food & Drink)

Besides unexpectedness, another predominant quality of memorable encounters seemed to be the involvement of some sort of embodied, active experiences, as described here by Nora (Fashion & Clothing): “I feel like it’s easier to remember something you’re experiencing like alive and then you use all your senses to do it.” This notion is also supported by the nature of the diary entries, as a majority of the encounters participants chose to record took place in physical settings like store environments and servicescapes, as illustrated by figure 1.

Figure IV-1: Number of mentions regarding where memorable touchpoint encounters took place among diary entries



However, the experiential qualities recounted as the reasons which made the encounter memorable vary in the types of value they add for consumers, as well as the extent to which a retailer brand may influence or control them. In general, therefore, we find that participants formulate their expectations towards retailer brands and make sense of past experiences based on a small selection of key moments that remain memorable. These moments can be characterized as touchpoint encounters spanning five overall types of touchpoints and often involve an element of surprise or unexpectedness and engage multiple senses. The following sections outline the experiential qualities associated with those memorable moments, before juxtaposing them with the role of the retailer brand when it comes to control, ownership, and agency. These two spectra are then used to map out touchpoint encounters from a consumer point of view, emphasizing the importance of an interplay between efficiency and engagement.

4.1 Experiential Dimensions of Touchpoint Memorability

When it comes to participants' descriptions of the ways in which they experienced particular touchpoint encounters and their reasoning for why these specific moments might have stayed on their minds, two major themes relating to engagement and efficiency emerged, supplemented by a third, tentative theme of care. As participants were re-telling their experiences with retailer brands, certain value-adding elements were highlighted as experiential qualities which made individual moments stand out as special, unusual, extraordinary and therefore memorable. A closer consideration of the kind of value they perceived was added by a touchpoint allowed for a classification along the aforementioned overarching themes. These themes form a spectrum, which is to say they are not mutually exclusive. However, the more pronounced one of these value creating experiential qualities is present in a given memorable moment, the less pronounced the other tends to be. The experiential qualities of the moments described by our participants thus ranged from engaging on the one extreme, to efficient on the other end of the spectrum, with a potential middle ground being formed by moments of care. Table 3 provides an overview of the dimensions based on these themes, which will be further elaborated in the following sections.

Table IV-3: Experiential dimensions of memorable touchpoint encounters – overview.

Dimension	Described Qualities	Illustrative Example
Engaging	<p>Fun, exciting, entertaining, indulgent</p> <p>→ Makes consumers’ lives and retail experiences more enjoyable</p>	<p><i>“I think it was something on sale or on great discount. It made me so happy if I could buy it. And if there was an addition thing to it, like if I already wanted to buy it before I entered the shop and it was already on sale. Oh my God, it's the best feeling.”</i></p> <p>– Lena (Food & Drink)</p>
Caring	<p>Special concern shown towards consumers, employees, or wider societal issues/ causes</p> <p>→ Makes consumers feel appreciated</p>	<p><i>“And then [the assistant] saw that my girlfriend was looking at those tops. And [...] my girlfriend has a friend of hers who has one of those tops and she had tried them before in another store, but it didn't fit quite well. And then it has something to do with the size. So, you should maybe go one size up or something like that. And the owner of the shop was just very good to explain that to her. And then she also told her that you could turn it one way or the other way and it would fit.”</i></p> <p>- Nolan (Fashion & Clothing)</p>
Efficient	<p>Extraordinary amount of convenience, ease of use, helpfulness, functional user experience</p> <p>→ Makes consumers’ lives and retail experiences easier</p>	<p><i>“I have just come to a holiday, and left our fridge. I'm going back on Thursday but I have already prepared a shopping list for myself in the [retailer's] app. It is so great that I can even write a shopping list from abroad. [It is memorable] Because it is so unique that I can write a shopping list from Hungary”</i></p> <p>– Entry no. 107 (Food & Drink)</p>

4.2 Engaging Moments

At one end of the spectrum of memorable touchpoint encounters, participants were talking about experiential qualities which made the moment of encounter in some way engaging – in other words these moments were described as fun, exciting, entertaining, or even indulgent. While encounters of this kind were being retold as occurring across the different touchpoint types outlined above, they tended to be most frequent when it came to communicative and promotional material, product features, and social touchpoints. Promotional touchpoints that struck participants as memorable due to being engaging included, for example, you tube advertisements as in the following diary entry:

“I was watching some videos on YouTube and this video ad was placed before the start of the video I wanted to see. It grabbed my attention and thus I have watched it entirely. It is memorable because it was fun to watch. It created suspense in the first few seconds and then I was invested in what the protagonist was looking at. The situation in the ad was relatable and thus made it fun to watch and remember the product.” – Entry no. 18 (Food & Drink)

Equally, however, serendipitously encountered advertisements on billboards or posters in town or at bus stops were remembered for being fun, making participants laugh, or including elements that were perceived as surprising, as the following excerpts show:

“[...] I haven't heard of that place before, but the slogan on the poster was very funny and smart. I enjoyed it because it made me laugh.” – Entry no. 111 (Food & Drink)

“I can use the example of the billboards that is in front of [retail store] like I see them all the time, but this time I was so impressed because there were like people, the actual farmers and producers advertising the vegetables that they make. And then a few days later [...] I thought about it and was like, oh, wait a minute, but they are just like local people, and it's like, this has never happened before here.” – Nancy (Food & Drink)

While the above-noted encounters characterized by engaging experiential qualities seem more passive with informants having simply happened upon the touchpoints in question by chance, product-related and social types of touchpoints marked by experiential qualities were most often embedded in more active, intentional and embodied experiences. With regard to product-related touchpoints, pricing strategies were often able to evoke feelings of excitement, discovery, or triumph which made moments engaging and memorable:

“[...] stuff that I just think looks nice. Or that kind of makes me excited. Like a box of chocolates on offer. Or the stuff that I usually don't... I'm not good at treating myself very much. So, when I see stuff like this and I can save a lot of money on buying it. That makes me excited. I'll go home and show - I have a couple of roommates. And I'll probably show them, look at all the stuff that I got for only this much. Yeah, that kind of gets me going actually. – Sam (Food & Drink)

Sam's excerpt clearly shows the level of excitement, triumph, and happiness even small, everyday touchpoints in a context like grocery retailing can evoke. When combined with product features, the excitement and engagement evoked by discovering a good deal tended to be boosted even further, as exemplified by this enthusiastic diary entry about something as profane as shopping for milk:

“I picked some milk by my usual brand that was on discount, and it turned out to be a special biodynamic version where the fat percent varies from day to day. I had no idea that this was something I could buy, so that made me kind of excited since I love milk with lots of fat, and this milk is fatter than I'm used to. Yum! [The retailer] have stuff that make me excited, so that makes me want to shop there more” – Entry no. 30 (Food & Drink)

Other participants also highlighted their use of the product as the quality which ultimately made the moment memorable – when, for example, finding a rare ingredient needed to prepare a special recipe carried by a certain retailer, or when fantasizing and envisioning themselves in an item of clothing they had happened upon in a store window display. The touchpoint type which was brought up the most as being linked to engaging experiential qualities, however, was the social one. Consider, for example, Nora's memorable encounter with a fashion retailer brand, which is almost exclusively made up of exciting social moments:

“So I went to this city with a new friend of mine [...] and I was like, okay, let's go shopping. Let's go to stores, you know. [...] And then I put on this one, like suit, like it's a very shiny suit. And I bought the top from it. I can show you. Because I felt so good. Number one. And number two, like it was so nice to try on clothes before buying it. Just to see how it would look like. I literally told my friend, like, let's try on the like the most outrageous, like most extra clothes we could find. And we really did do like the match outfit.

And I ended up buying the shirt from that outfit. And she ended up buying like the little blazer. And what was really cool is that this kind of thing - like I haven't felt in very long time. [...] And when I tried the suit on, the girl working there also was stunned. Like a lot of people were stunned by my

outfit [...] And then the girl working there, I actually started talking to her. We started talking like, oh, it's just like saying that she's going to start studying [...] And I might also as well. And then like she compared me to this one character from Euphoria [...]" - Nora (Fashion & Clothing)

Not only did Nora have a special day out with her friend getting to be creative and trying out unusual items, but the experience was made even more memorable by first the sales assistant and then even other shoppers noticing and complimenting her choices. Strikingly, she chooses to highlight the small talk she had with the assistant about studying and the series Euphoria, which shows that it actually was the social aspect of the moment rather than, for example, receiving advice or a consultation, which made it engaging and memorable to her. Thus, friends and family, either by their presence or through sharing their opinions, often played a pivotal role in making a touchpoint encounter exciting and fun, rather than forgettable. Overall, the experiential qualities which marked memorable touchpoint encounters as being on the engaging end of the spectrum of moments were surprise, discovery, fun, indulgence, excitement, creativity, triumph, fantasy, curiosity, and experimentation.

4.3 Efficient Moments

The other broad category of reasons participants cited for transforming a touchpoint encounter into a memorable moment was a remarkable or extraordinary amount of supportiveness, convenience, or ease of use. Thus, on the other end of our spectrum we locate experiential qualities which may be summed up under the overarching term of efficiency, signaling that the encounter in question remained on people's minds because it made their lives and retail experiences easier in some way. Although once again, nearly all types of touchpoints contained experiential qualities linked to efficiency or helpfulness, on this end of the spectrum, the functionality afforded by technological types of touchpoints was highlighted particularly often, as in Nadia's story about deciding not to buy a dress:

"so because I couldn't make up my mind, I used the Zara app and I scanned the barcode of the dress so that I had it actually on the app, saved. And I could also see how it should look on the model, how it should fit there actually or if it really doesn't fit me or if it should look like this. And then I saved it for future reference in case I do change my mind. And then, yeah, I didn't buy it. [...] I thought it's very user friendly, I guess, or just, yeah, buyer friendly to just save something to go back to in the future, because when there was no app to be available [...] like when I was 15 or something, what I was then often worrying about is- oh, I'm not going to find this piece anymore because it's not online yet or it's, yeah, I just won't find it. Which kind of gives me now the safety, I guess, to go back in time

and look at it one more time, think about it, sleep on it and then buy it instead of buying something impulsively and regretting it or having to return it or all that hassle.”

In this case, not only did the touchpoint add value to her shopping experience by being convenient, but it also provided a moment of relief and a feeling of security or reassurance which made the encounter stand out as memorable, even outweighing the significance of the actual purchase she made during this experience:

“I did find something else, which was just a linen shirt, which is a classic and I wanted one for quite some time. I did buy the classic. [...] I mean, [I remember] only actually the app, I think. Like that's the only thing that really was stuck in my mind. Because about the linen shirt, I actually didn't think about it at all.” – Nadia (Fashion & Clothing)

Even in more everyday contexts such as grocery shopping and retailing, technology-focused touchpoints like retailer brand apps were regarded as creating memorable moments due to a unique level of convenience they afford their users.

In addition, this convenient and efficient quality added through technological and process-related touchpoint encounters was also highlighted by participants who had chosen retail categories dealing with larger, more involved purchases:

“I considered buying a cabinet from the store but had read that the delivery costs were considerable and wanted to read more into it. I tried going through the sales flow in the app and found out that I can pick up my purchase in their warehouse free of charge instead of paying 400dkk to get delivery at my address. [...] This will both save me money and save me the potential trouble of having to be at home, when the furniture is to be delivered.” – Entry no. 82 (Homeware & Furniture)

In the excerpt above, expectations about a usually bothersome process were subverted, leaving a favorable impression about the retailer brand and transforming the encounter with their touchpoint into a moment which was memorable due to its qualities of helpfulness and efficiency. In many consumption stories, it was also the store design and atmosphere which were highlighted as transporting experiential qualities which transformed retail touchpoint encounters into memorable moments that reflect favorably on the retailer brand:

“I think also like when we talked about this browsing with my daughter and experience that actually - the size actually is a quality to me. I think that's why I prefer it because even if you go in rush hours, it doesn't feel cramped in the same way that smaller stores can do. And you feel like you have to pick

something because there's two people coming and they all, I mean, I think it just feels more stress free in a way that there's room for two people to pass each other. And I didn't think about that before really, but that probably is a thing that also affects me without thinking about it.” – Manuel (Food & Drink)

Again, Manuel’s reflection makes it clear that the particular experiential quality of this touchpoint lies in a sense of ease and relief created by taking pressure and awkwardness off the consumer. Overall, the experiential qualities that marked memorable touchpoint encounters as being on the efficient end of the spectrum of moments included helpfulness, feeling organized, planning, convenience, pride, and relief.

4.4 Moments of Care – The Middle Ground?

One additional experiential quality which stood out as being particularly memorable in our participants’ stories and diaries is a feeling of care being conveyed by the retailer brand. Interestingly, while such moments also tended to be more inclined towards either helpfulness or excitement, they usually included elements of both, forming a middle ground of sorts. Consider, for example, Nolan’s story about his encounter with a sales assistant:

“She just wanted to make you feel welcomed and have a good experience. And if you should choose to buy something, it should be the right thing to buy. But even though there was nothing for me in the shop, I was just like, oh, she's so nice. [...] she was also just very helpful and kind. And even though there was nothing for me in the shop, I just wanted to actually just buy something to support her. And it just made me realize [...] that I really value good customer service. It's really everything to me.”

- Nolan (Fashion & Clothing)

For Nolan, the memorability of the moments he recounted as part of his shopping experience was clearly tied to both the care and warmth of the assistant’s demeanor as well as the fact that she was able to provide the couple with some helpful advice. The value created through this encounter, therefore, stems from a combination of engaging and helpful moments which, in concert, convey a quality of care. Unsurprisingly, this sense of care was overwhelmingly found in stories featuring encounters with human retailer brand representatives such as sales assistants, as seen in the story above. However, the sense of care conveyed by a touchpoint encounter need not always be directed towards the consumer themselves, as Frida’s story shows:

“It's kind of funny when I was there, the person serving me, I think, yeah. He had a vision disability. And I don't know, I just thought it's nice that they hire people who have disabilities. He was obviously very visibly impaired somehow, so he had to look in a weird way on the scanner thing to see the numbers. So, he probably had some sort of blindness. But it was, I don't know. I know [other brands] also sometimes hire people who have some sort of disabilities. And it kind of makes me happy to know that people who might otherwise not get a job are offered the option to also contribute to the society.”

– Frida (Homeware & Furniture)

As this recollection illustrates, it is also the perceived care a retailer brand takes of its employees which makes an impression and stays on consumers' minds as a memorable moment. Finally, a moment could also stand out as conveying an experiential quality of care about wider societal, political, or ecological issues:

“I went grocery shopping and while in the store one of the first things is that they have a poster saying that all bread products are half price after 19 in order to combat food waste. Walking further and looking to buy some fruit and vegetables, I have also noticed that they had pre-packaged fruit at a lower price with the same "fight food waste sign". It was nice to discover that they take some action about fighting the big amounts of food waste there is in Denmark, and it was pleasant to discover that you could get perfectly good products for a lower price while avoiding food waste and thus harming less the planet. [...] It was memorable because I got the pleasant shopping experience of finding something at a lower price and feeling better about the fact that that food will not go to waste.”

Entry no. 50 (Food & Drink)

This diary entry shows that even when it comes to touchpoints related to product assortment and pricing, engaging experiential qualities like discovery and surprise are paired with experiential qualities at the efficient end of the spectrum to create a memorable moment characterized by care. This final experiential quality, therefore, may be said to mark the mid-point on the spectrum of identified experiential qualities which make up the essence of memorable moments when it comes to retailer brand touchpoint encounters.

4.5 Retailer Brand Influence and Agency

Typically, branded touchpoints have been described and classified with regard to ownership within omnichannel research literature. Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) seminal work on customer experience throughout the customer journey distinguishes between four types of brand owned, partner owned,

customer owned, and social or external touchpoints. This terminology has been widely taken up as a matter of course by other empirical brand touchpoint studies such as Baxendale et al. (2015) or Gasparin et al. (2022). Touchpoint ownership, in these cases, seems to be mainly defined in terms of the brand's control over the design and management of the touchpoint in question. In fact, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) only suggest touchpoint ownership as a possible starting point for further determining which kind- or what degree of influence a firm might have over a given touchpoint or set of touchpoints.

Yet, it is precisely this aspect of influence or control over a touchpoint which came to light as an influential factor with regard to our participants' lived experiences with retailer brands. Through their stories, it became apparent that there is a notable difference between having control over the design and management of a touchpoint and having control over its reception – the kinds of sense-making and meaning co-creation that may happen when it is encountered by a consumer. Thus, while a brand may have full ownership of media such as advertising or websites, the following statements from our interviewees show that the reception and meaning formation triggered by such media are by no means fully under the brand's control:

“Like the ad that I was surprised by somehow [...]like dairy products from Europe apparently. I've never heard about it but like I like the concept that they were using kind of surrealist type of advertising because I like the movement.” – Kevin (Food & Drink)

“And then the images that you have is- I feel that is too much information. Like when you do a slide for your presentation and then they tell you, oh my God, this is a very busy slide. I feel like that's [retailer brand], like the website is like that. You only see icons, icons, icons, and then here an offer and here another offer. And then you're just like, oh my God. Yeah. I get really stressed. I get very overwhelmed. [...] I don't like it- but maybe it's just me. When I see the colors on the website, for me, they don't look real. And yes, they have all that, that they can put it on your lips and then I just think - but this doesn't look real.” – Amelia (Health & Beauty)

Kevin's statement makes it clear that part of what he specifically liked about the advert he saw was its particular use of a surrealist artistic style, which corresponds well with his own general taste in art or sense of aesthetics. Thus, the memorability of this moment hinged at least in part on some individual meaning Kevin attached to the video. Similarly, advertisements such as the one in his example may become memorable moments to consumers because they trigger a recollection of a place, person, or other past experience. The level of influence the brand may exert over the resulting

experiential qualities of the moment, therefore, is only partial – albeit still considerable. Similarly, Amelia’s statement about a beauty retailer brand’s website shows that she is well aware of her own taste preferences influencing her perception of the website and, by extension, the brand. She knows that the features offered by the touchpoint might be helpful, engaging, or innovative for other consumers, but is at the same time clear about the fact that for her, personally, this meaning and resulting value does not come across.

Similarly, a touchpoint type that is usually described as being a brand-owned element of the marketing mix is the sales force. However, while retailer brands can certainly have full control over designing guidelines, trainings aligned with their core values and mission, and penalties for their violation which they may enforce to a greater or lesser extent, they are arguably never fully able to influence the experiential qualities emerging through meaning co-creation in an encounter between two human actors. Consider, for example, Nora’s earlier story about her encounter with a sales assistant and her delight at being compared to a character from her favorite series. Whilst the content of that conversation was likely not the result of any employee training or company service guidelines, it nevertheless created a key memorable moment for the consumer and reflected back positively on the brand itself.

It seems therefore that a classification of touchpoints when it comes to their interplay with consumers’ lived experiences, sense-making, and re-telling needs to be adapted to reflect a brand’s level of influence or agency in the moment of encounter. Thus, in correspondence to the scope of experiential qualities outlined herein, touchpoints may be thought of as spreading along a spectrum of brand influence that ranges from a high level, where the brand has a considerable amount of agency in influencing the meanings and resulting experiential qualities which may result in a memorable moment, to a low level of such agency. The significance of these dimensions will be further developed and discussed in the following section.

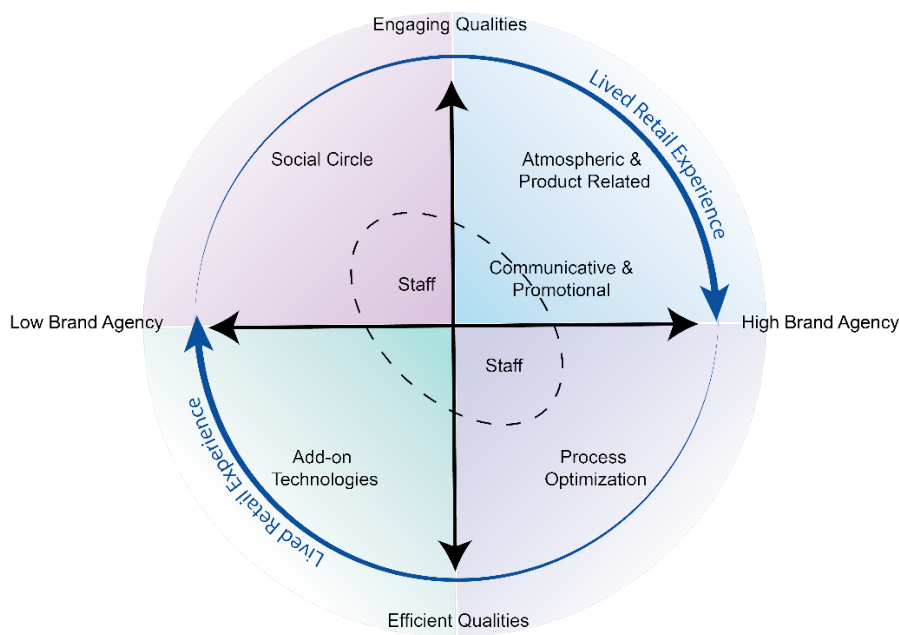
4.6 The Interplay of Memorable Moments in Lived Retail Experiences

Having identified different types of touchpoints within our participants’ stories about their lived retail experiences, we moved on to map out the experiential qualities that transformed a touchpoint encounter into a memorable moment. With these qualities being distributed along a spectrum which roughly ranges from exciting and engaging to helpful and efficient, we further found that the level of influence or agency a retailer brand has over the co-creation of memorable moments may differ. Importantly, this notion of agency is distinct from previously described levels of touchpoint

ownership in that it is focused on the brand’s influence on the co-creation of the respective experiential qualities which spark memorable moments upon a touchpoint encounter, rather than the brand’s control over its design and -management. Thus, this understanding of brand agency is a consumer-focused rather than a touchpoint-focused one.

When it comes to participants’ lived retailer brand experiences, the two spectra describing the level of brand agency and kinds of experiential qualities may be used to create a sort of map for the different types of retailer brand touchpoints, as illustrated by figure 2.

Figure IV-2: Dimensions of touchpoints as memorable moments



Here, we can see that – in rough approximation – there are certain touchpoint types which may especially lend themselves to the co-creation of certain experiential qualities. In essence, the two dimensions or spectra created by a touchpoint’s experiential qualities and the retailer’s level of agency in influencing the meanings co-created within these encounters can be used to integrate the different touchpoint types highlighted by participants with regard to their lived experiences. For example, while the social circle tended to be associated with rather fun, engaging qualities in participants’ retellings, the retailer’s influence over which kinds of brand meaning emerged from these touchpoint types can be described as peripheral at best. On the other hand, retailers tend to have tighter control over aspects of process optimization which also gives them greater influence over the types of efficiency-related meanings and values derived from these types of touchpoints. The ‘middle ground’,

as described above, could be represented by moments of care created through staff encounters, which can be both engaging and efficient at the same time. Since efficient experiential qualities are more closely associated with staff members fulfilling their function based on their job training, retailers might have more influence on the meanings and values created in this manner – for example through the provision of staff trainings. Engaging moments with staff, however, tend to be associated with brand representatives improvising, giving their own opinions or going ‘off script’, adding their own meanings to an encounter as seen in Nora’s example of being compared to a TV character. Thus, while staff may be trained according to strict brand guidelines, there is still a range of meaning- and value co-creation with a lower level of brand influence. The following example serves to clarify this kind of touchpoint mapping further with the aid of a participant’s full re-telling.

When considering the full story of one of our participants’ experiences with a fashion retailer brand, it becomes clear how their consumption journey can be mapped out as a path of moments created by touchpoint encounters:

“it's something I remember quite clearly. And it's about the shoes from [retailer]. Because I saw an ad on- I don't remember if it was Facebook or Instagram. But either this or that one. And it was a white pair of sneakers with some light green stripes. And then I went to the website through a link. [...] And then I tried to find the shoes in the picture that I saw on the app. And frankly I went through all of the items of shoes for males. Until I found out that it was for females. But then I just went back to the male shoes. And then I actually found like three or four pairs of shoes. So I actually favorited them. [...] And then I showed them to my mom. [...] And now I'm stuck between two of them. I think I will go with the one with like a dark green. [...] that's probably the one I'm going with.

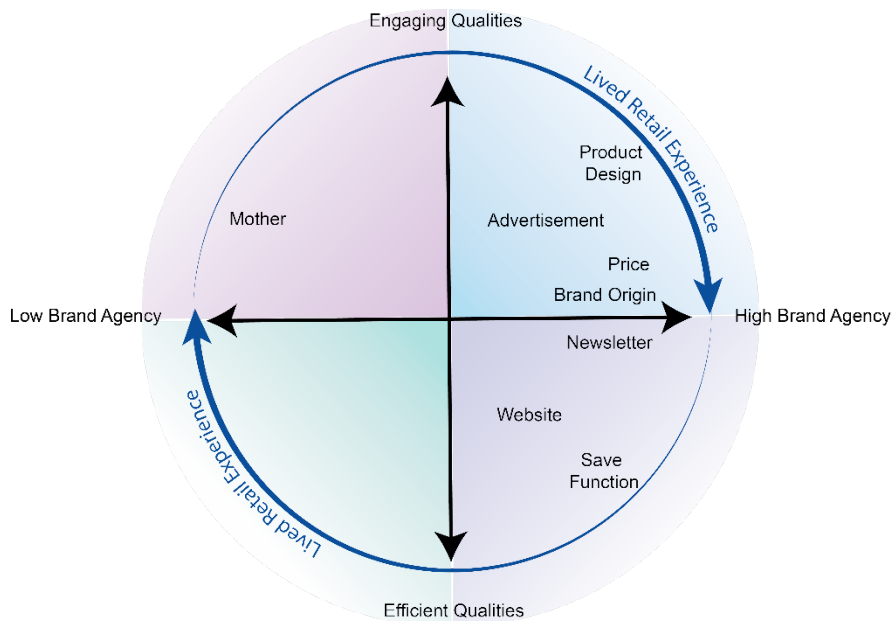
[...] It's not that usual that I'm getting caught by ads. Like at least not conscious. But in this case, actually - and it was just a normal ad with like normal photos of the shoes. But I just found them very nice. And, you know, it was like they had like a tennis... Like some kind of two like, you know, rackets. Crossed rackets. On the top of the shoe. And, you know, I have just watched like the French Open. And Wimbledon is starting in two weeks. [...] And so, I have played tennis myself. So I just thought like, oh, that just caught me. Also, when I was younger, I used to buy those, you know, white sneaks, tennis shoes you called them at that point. And for the past, I don't know, three, four, five years, I haven't actually bought like white tennis shoes.

[...] I mean, I like to think that I support, you know, a Danish manufacturer and production in Denmark. I don't know if they're produced in Denmark, but at least the brand is Danish. So that's-

And the price was also quite good. And, you know, I signed up for the newsletter and I got a 15% discount. So, there we go.” – Linus (Fashion & Clothing)

As Linus’ story shows, his experience with a particular Danish fashion retailer brand highlighted at least eight different touchpoint encounters which became memorable moments due to a range of different qualities. The original product design that caught his attention, for example, was memorable to him because of other current events that were shaping his lifeworld at that moment – i.e. the two major tennis tournaments – as well as a certain sense of nostalgia for his own days as a player, neither of which could have been fully controlled by the brand itself. He goes on to say that, even though the original design that drew his attention was that of a women’s shoe model which turned out not to be available for him, the convenience of being able to search for- and save similar styles on the web-store for further consideration was actually helpful enough to keep him on his journey with this brand instead of giving up or continuing to search for a similar shoe elsewhere. Equally, the (dis)approval of his mother, the retailer brand’s origin, and the product’s price played a part in supporting this trajectory and would have had the potential to turn the story into a different direction in their own way. However, even if we simply consider the juxtaposition of the first two touchpoints Linus encountered, it becomes clear how the interplay of engaging and efficient experiential qualities can shape consumption journeys by turning touchpoint encounters into memorable moments. Thus, it is not one of these qualities in isolation, but their interaction along each individual path of moments that makes for retailer brand experiences which are worth remembering and re-telling. Figure 3 shows how Linus’ touchpoint encounters could be mapped onto our two spectra, thereby creating a path of moments outlining the retailer brand experience from the consumer’s perspective.

Figure IV-3: Mapping the path of moments contained within Linus’ story



This consumer-centric conceptualization of touchpoints highlights the importance of engaging experiential qualities like serendipity, creativity, unexpectedness and excitement when it comes to omnichannel consumption journeys and thus the need to move beyond the dominant focus on efficient experiential qualities like convenience, cohesion, and seamlessness. This is further emphasized by the perception of many of our participants who seemed to view the value created through efficient experiential qualities as coming at the cost of free choice, sociality, and excitement:

“that experience stuck with me, really, because it was such a nice break from the usual norm, which is just buying clean and buying stuff online, which is like, you know- like it is convenience. And that's also great. But I've noticed that people who can be able to do a lot of these things are not really like enjoying life. And it's like a weird, weird thing to say. [...] you end up having everything automated. And then like, of course, you have free time to do what you like, but maybe something you like has also been automated. And I feel like that's the thing about the shopping experience. Yeah, because it's become automated. There's a lot of people that enjoy that experience. And I used to do that all the time before.

[...] shopping for me is like the experience of all these random things that that you might not experience on a daily basis if you just like - just like went to work and back - just spontaneity and like lack of the responsibility [...] because shopping is about you, that gives you the freedom to do all these other things that are fun, right, it's not a bad experience for me I like - it's fun, right? I like to do fun stuff like that” – Nora (Fashion & Clothing)

Nora’s statement is simply one among many which illustrate this perceived tension between engaging and efficient moments. It also once more illustrates the point that consumers seem to appreciate and at times actively seek out unpredictable, random, and even confusing experiences to give variety to their everyday lives and escape the perceived monotony of purely efficient brand encounters. It therefore seems as though retailer brands who understand the ways in which they may facilitate or simply leave space for the co-creation of moments at both ends of the spectrum are more successful at remaining in their consumers’ memories, providing touchpoints to their lives and being re-told in their stories. For retailer brands, being aware of the experiential qualities their touchpoints may evoke and the level of influence they may exert over the co-creation of memorable moments may provide them with a more consumer-centric way of mapping out potential consumption journeys and building long-term relationships with consumers by becoming memorable through an interplay of being engaging or efficient at the right touchpoints. The implications following from this viewpoint will be further discussed in the following section.

5. Discussion

Overall, our findings highlight that investigating the experiential qualities of retailer brand touchpoints is key for a comprehensive exploration of omnichannel consumption journeys. While efficiency and seamlessness are often emphasized in omnichannel retailing, there's a suggestion that too much focus on these aspects might come at the expense of other experiential qualities such as sociality, choice, and creativity. Thus, retailer brands adopting omnichannel approaches should be aware that if their sole emphasis lies on touchpoint consistency and seamless integration, they are neglecting a crucial part of the experiential values which may create memorable moments for their consumers. That is why the proposed conceptualization of retailer brand touchpoints adds the notion of experience- and meaning co-creation between retailers and consumers to the omnichannel discourse. This notion is necessary for retailers to keep up with their customer base on a more sustainable level, creating greater longevity in consumer-brand relationships. The theoretical and

practical implications of such a more nuanced view of retailer brand touchpoints are further expanded on in the following.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

The omnichannel terminology has evolved into somewhat of a trend within both retail theory and practice, but with regard to understanding the resulting consumption experiences and journeys there remains ample ground for more consumer-centric research. Especially investigations employing qualitative-, mixed-methods, or interdisciplinary theoretical approaches can enrich this academic field (Bascur & Rusu, 2020; Becker, 2018; R. Mishra et al., 2021). Investigating the experiential qualities of omnichannel touchpoints allows for a more overarching and holistic exploration of omnichannel consumption journeys and their contexts. This longitudinal study allows for an exploration of the unfolding of non-linear touchpoint encounters over time and through their re-telling, captures the extended relationships between customers and omnichannel retail brands rather than providing short-term evaluations of purchase intention, channel choice, or channel switching. While the prevalent approach to omnichannel retailing in both theory and practice seems highly concentrated on creating experiential qualities linked with efficiency by focusing on channel integration (Herhausen et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018) and seamless customer experiences (Ya Ping Chang & Jingwen Li, 2022), our findings suggest that such efficiency and seamlessness might come at the expense of perceived sociality, range, choice, and creativity. What is more, not only does following this ideology of efficiency narrow the perceived choices available to consumers, it may even create feelings of awkwardness and feeling observed, turning a value-creating quality into something undesirable. In the worst case, this can lead consumers to feel cornered, constricted, and claustrophobic or may spiral them off into addictive behavior (Hoang et al., 2021; Siebert et al., 2020a). Thus, theoretical models seeking to conceptualize and research omnichannel consumption must not discount the impact of embodied experiences and lived stories in favor of an ideology of efficiency.

Our findings further suggest that seamless integration is not necessarily memorable or noteworthy in and of itself, rather it is what consumers expect. Experiential qualities linked to efficiency become memorable only when they represent extraordinarily or unexpectedly helpful moments. As such, our findings support the research stream conceptualizing successful brands as presenting consumer with interlinkages of sticky, i.e. exciting, and predictable consumption journeys and thereby creating customer-brand relationships of greater longevity (Siebert et al., 2020a, 2020b). However, this

provides a contrast to omnichannel retailing research, which assumes channel integration as the main success factor which keeps consumers on their journey with a particular brand. Indeed, recent research proposed that omnichannel integration could generate flow-like experiences which are hard to draw away from and keep consumers engaged (Liu et al., 2023). However, our findings along with other recent academic work on non-linear consumption journeys in omnichannel contexts (e.g. Gasparin et al., 2022) suggests that stickiness and riveting consumption journeys are achieved by engaging and exciting touchpoint encounters, not predictable and seamless ones. As Siebert et al. point out: “consumers sometimes yearn for the excitement of unpredictable journeys, if only to temporarily escape their otherwise hyper-rational lives” (2020a, p. 56). Our findings support this notion and further demonstrate this tendency’s presence even in very mundane contexts. Moreover, while Siebert et al. (2020a) mainly address the interlinkage of stickiness (engagement) with loyalty (predictability) in the context of firms offering multiple services, our data suggests that different retailer brand touchpoints can already evoke these elements along the consumption journey.

Moreover, omnichannel customer experiences themselves are still largely considered a rather under-theorized subject (see R. Mishra et al., 2021). Despite the turn towards experience co-creation, which firmly stresses the central role of the customer (see Arnould & Price, 1993; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2016), omnichannel retailing seems reluctant to acknowledge the concept of meaning creation taking place outside of the influence sphere of marketers. Yet, this loss of control is even further driven on by the fragmentation of brand meaning over multiple communication channels and customer touchpoints, as well as over the course of a more complex customer journey (Feiereisen et al., 2021). Thus far, marketing theory tends to emphasize touchpoint integration, cohesion, and seamlessness as the ultimate determinants of satisfying omnichannel experiences (Larke et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020). However, as consumption landscapes, rationales, and realities change and involve more and more digital channels, this position becomes contested. In fact, some research already suggests that positive experiences may also be triggered by low levels of consistency in an omnichannel context (Bertrandie & Zielke, 2017; Gasparin et al., 2022). In congruence with this view, the investigation at hand understands consumption journeys with retailer brands as paths of moments (see also Mele et al., 2021) characterized by the temporal quality of Kairos rather than Chronos: consumers remember and base their image and expectations towards a brand on their recollection of just a few key moments that stand out to them. These moments become memorable due to the co-creation of certain experiential qualities that carry different types of value for the consumer. These experiential qualities, in turn, make it easier for consumers to link and integrate the touchpoint

encounter into their own everyday life-stories. Touchpoint encounters as memorable moments are therefore characterized by Kairos or the opportunities, experiential qualities and values they afford, for example becoming part of consumers' brand re-tellings even years after they have passed.

Finally, this investigation extends the common understanding of retailer brand touchpoints by adding a consumer-centric perspective which highlights experiential qualities as key dimensions for touchpoint memorability. Furthermore, each touchpoint encounter, from a consumer standpoint, can be seen as a complex microcosm of events, interactions, experiential qualities and emotions the co-creation of which may be more or less under a brand's sphere of influence (see also Mele et al., 2021). Overall therefore, the present work contributes to the academic discourse around omnichannel consumption in a threefold way by adding to the literature which challenges the integration imperative prevalent in the field and highlights the multifaceted and non-linear nature of consumption journeys (see Gasparin et al., 2022), by adopting a consumer-centric approach to omnichannel consumption journeys, and by further nuancing the conceptualization of omnichannel retailer brand touchpoints based on this view.

5.2 Practical Implications

In an era of unprecedented connectivity and information access across a multitude of channels and platforms, brand meaning is increasingly co-created, requiring brands and branded entities to cater to more than plain shareholder value maximization (Swaminathan et al., 2020). From this close interlinkage of content and commerce also follows a heightened set of consumer expectations which go far beyond convenience and functionality, giving the roles of consumption stories and meaning co-creation a renewed relevance for brands navigating the digital age (Moin, 2020; Sadler, 2021). Arguably, with the rise of viral content and the rapid-fire spread of information on digital platforms, it is more relevant than ever to attempt to understand how the experiential qualities of retailer brand touchpoints live and develop in consumers' memories – both to inspire re-tellings by consumers, but also to forestall potential damages caused by hijacking and trolling (see Fowler, 2022).

Our findings suggest that retailer brands following omnichannel approaches need to be mindful that when they focus their efforts on touchpoint consistency, seamless integration, effortlessness and predictability, they are only serving one side of the experiential values which may create memorable moments within a consumption journey: they are, in Siebert et al.'s (2020b) terms, only creating loyalty loops without considering the power of engagement spirals. Furthermore, retailer brands need to be aware that the experiential qualities evoked by some of the most engaging touchpoints are only

partially or entirely out of their sphere of influence, making it important for practitioners to map out where and how they can shape the co-creation of memorable moments. Since these moments transcend chronological clock-time, though, marketers are afforded a new way of conceptualizing their value offerings vis a vis non-linear, chaotic, and irrational consumption journeys. Thus, the notion of touchpoint encounters as paths of memorable moments developed herein provides a starting point for brands to tackle the challenges of integrating consumption experiences and -journeys in a retail market characterized by both hyperconnectivity and fragmentation. As a consumer-centric concept, it may also shed some further light on the articulation of consumers' fantasies and feelings in an increasingly cynical retail landscape (Introducing Cultural Studies, 2004).

Our findings further suggest that, even though retail brands may not be in control of the stories resulting from their actions, they are still the ones who can provide a framework for their memorability and thus, by extension, "narratability" (Cassinger, 2010, p. 231; see also Van Laer et al., 2019). Understanding the experiential qualities their touchpoints evoke can help practitioners harness such narratability in a context which sees consumers constantly confronted with a wealth of abundant and easily accessible information (Swaminathan et al., 2020). This in turn may provide practitioners with new opportunities for balancing the sticky- and predictable aspects of their omnichannel brand experiences and addressing new logics of consumption.

In sum, both theory and practice acknowledge the growing need for understanding retailer brand touchpoints and non-linear consumption journeys from the customer's viewpoint – yet there is still relatively little research actually adopting an overarching, customer-centric position (Kamleitner et al., 2019; Tueanrat et al., 2021). Thus, by addressing the wider context of omnichannel retailer brand touchpoints as paths of moments, especially over an extended period of time, this work contributes to addressing prevalent knowledge gaps within both omnichannel- and retail branding research, paving the way for further probing into the co-creation of retail experiences at the intersection of the lived and the rationally planned.

5.3 Limitations and Further Research

Although the present work adds a much-needed consumer perspective to omnichannel journey research and extends the understanding of retailer brand touchpoints from this vantage point, it comes with clear limitations. At the same time, investigating the memorability of brand touchpoint encounters also opens several avenues for further research.

Firstly, as in any qualitative investigation, our data is contingent upon our participants' honest and open reporting of their subjective impressions (Berg, 2009). By inviting participants to several interview sessions and talking about their diary entries during the second set of interviews, an attempt was made to get as comprehensive a view of their views and thoughts on touchpoint encounters as possible, their reports may still have been distorted by an intention to please or certain halo effects, e.g. when it comes to the consumption of fast fashion or ecological groceries. Moreover, it transpired over the course of the diaries that participants' understanding of the concept of a retailer brand, although discussed during the first interview, tended to fluctuate between store brands, retailer brands, and private label brands rendering some entries less useful than others. Further research on the different types of touchpoints in each of these retailer types would therefore provide a much more detailed means of touchpoint mapping. Regarding demographics, table 1 shows that participants in this study tended to fall mostly into the millennial age range. For our purposes, a millennial group of participants proved beneficial in that it represents a generation already digitally literate and native, whose consumption journeys naturally tend to play out in both physical and digital realms (Mele et al., 2021). However, this also means that further investigations of a wider spectrum of consumer groups could reveal a different range – and perception of touchpoint encounters and the experiential qualities that make them memorable. Furthermore, our participants were given the free choice between five very broad retail categories to engage with over the course of the study. These categories spanned rather different sets of brands as well as levels of involvement when making purchases – for example when talking about homeware and furniture versus food and drink shopping.

While our findings are informative of our entire dataset, further research of touchpoints tied to individual categories or even individual brands within these categories, paired with a longer period of journaling, could give deeper insights into which types of retailer brands or retailer brand categories could benefit from different levels of engaging versus efficient qualities throughout their touchpoint assortment. Further research on elements of touchpoint design which may be able to facilitate efficient or exciting qualities within encounters would equally help to paint a clearer picture of the level of agency retailer brands have in the co-creation of memorable moments. In this vein, narrative agency (see van Laer & Orazi, 2024) could provide a useful theoretical lens in determining who gets to tell brand-related stories, at which types of touchpoints whose narrative voice is more prominent, and which experiential qualities create different kinds of plots for consumption journeys. The notion of touchpoint memorability could thus be further expanded to touchpoint narratability, enquiring into the qualities which allow a certain type of touchpoint to become emplotted within

consumers' narratives. It is also important to note that this investigation focused on positively connotated experiential qualities in retailer brand touchpoints. It is clear, however, that the opposite, potentially off-putting experiential qualities are just as- if not more important, especially with regard to a brand's sphere of influence over them. Further in-depth research on these qualities is therefore strongly encouraged. There is also ample ground for delving further into the experiential qualities evoked by tech-forward touchpoints in particular, for example when it comes to algorithms evoking feelings of empowerment versus claustrophobia or oppression (Hoang et al., 2021; S. Mishra et al., 2021). Overall, the findings presented herein therefore provide but a starting point for further empirical investigations of the concepts we propose.

6. Conclusion

Given the ever-progressing change of omnichannel consumption journeys in the current retail context and the inability of traditional consumer decision-making models to account for the fuzzy, non-linear ways they play out in practice (see also Mele et al., 2021), this work set out to investigate omnichannel retailer brand touchpoints from a consumer-centric perspective. By way of a longitudinal qualitative study employing both interview- and diary data, we were able to identify the experiential qualities that set touchpoint encounters apart as memorable moments for consumers, ranging on a spectrum from engaging to efficient. Doing so allowed for a conceptualization of how such touchpoint encounters interact in the co-creation of consumers' lived retail experiences, which involves the notion of such experiences as paths of moments characterized by their quality (Kairos) rather than their temporal descriptiveness (Chronos). Moreover, when addressing the experiential qualities evoked by touchpoint encounters, the idea of brand ownership over touchpoints needs to be adapted to reflect the level of influence or agency a brand has over the respective moments' impact, which – from a consumer point of view – can be strongly influenced but never fully controlled as meanings are co-created. Thus, the study highlights the non-linearity of consumption journeys and diverse nature of consumption experiences – even ostensibly simple ones – and proposes a conceptualization of retailer brand touchpoints which reflects this development.

In so doing, this work contributes to the existent body of literature in several crucial ways. Firstly, it seeks to answer the call for stronger consumer-centric work within omnichannel research reconsidering commonly held paradigms in light of a changing and changed reality (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Parsons & Descatoires, 2016). In the same vein, it also seeks to address the lack of

theorization within omnichannel research, especially when it comes to touchpoints and touchpoint-interaction (Baxendale et al., 2015; R. Mishra et al., 2021). It further explores new methodological avenues when it comes to investigating touchpoint encounters and consumption journeys across a multitude of channels and touchpoints, thereby adding a distinct consumer-focused view to omnichannel retail branding research (Becker, 2018). Finally, by drawing attention to consumer sense-making within current retail formats which are informed by- and intertwined with the digital realm, this work problematizes the ‘integration imperative’ dominating omnichannel experience research (Gasparin et al., 2022), favoring a more nuanced view of retail touchpoint memorability and the orchestration of experiential qualities across consumption journeys.

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Appendix

Interview Guide – Round 1

Narrative interview, duration approx. 1 hour

- Introduction

Welcome, thank you for agreeing to this interview

Notify once again that interview will be recorded, and all information will be treated confidentially

Be aware that you are welcome at any time to deny answering a question / make me aware that you are uncomfortable with the situation or end the interview outright if you feel the need to do so; right to retroactively revoke participation

- Set 1: Retailer Brand Image & Experience

Tell me a little more about why you have chosen [category]

What is your favorite [category] retailer brand?

Possible Prompts

➔ Why? What do you think of / what comes to mind when you hear their name?

- What do you connect with [retailer brand]?

➔ What makes [retailer brand] different from others, in your opinion?

➔ How do you interact with [retailer brand], how do you keep yourself updated? Why?

➔ Why do you feel particularly connected to [retailer brand]?

- Set 2: Channels and touchpoints

Describe the most recent shopping experience at [retailer brand] that stuck in your mind

➔ What made it memorable to you? Why?

Tools: zoom board - **what** did you use / encounter, and **how**?

Possible Prompts

➔ Who are you shopping for /with?

➔ Which aspects of the retailer brand did this particular encounter highlight for you?

- ➔ Take me through the entire process – what happened before / after the encounter?
- ➔ At what point during the shopping process would you say you feel the most satisfied / stressed? Why?
- ➔ Where do you normally look for information, what resources do you use before, during, or after your shopping run?
- ➔ Are there any situations in which you would prefer a Web-shop to a brick-and-mortar store? If so, which situations (before/ during/ after shopping) and why?
- ➔ Refer to zoom board: Would you say you often use any of these channels simultaneously? Which ones and why?
 - What makes them work particularly well together?
 - Which ones would you say are the least relevant for you?

Set 3: Expectations towards an Omnichannel Retailer Brand

What makes a truly great retailer brand different from others, in your opinion?

What do you think of as a really great / perfect [category] experience

- ➔ Why does it stand out? What makes it special to you?

Wrap-Up: how would you summarize the last hour, was there anything surprising / unexpected / enriching you're taking out of this? Do you have any feedback for me?

- Possible follow-up Questions

Could you explain ...?

Please elaborate / what do you mean by ...?

Let's go back to ...

Could you take me through ... again?

What did you do then?

How did ... react / make you feel?

Interview Guide – Round 2

Narrative interview, duration approx. 1 hour

Thought protocol: focus on one particular experience of the interviewee during the time of the study + the corresponding diary entry

Set 1: Progression & Journey (entry-specific)

Tell me a little more about why you have chosen this particular experience to revisit

Name the retailer brand involved, and please give a brief description of the overall experience

How familiar would you say you are with that retailer brand?

What do you connect with that retailer brand?

What were you doing at the time this occurred (what were you trying to achieve / was there an overt goal?)

Please try to remember and describe any specific incidents or encounters that happened during the overall experience

Before / during / after

How did this experience make you feel?

In general

Towards the retailer brand

Which aspects that you connect with this retailer brand were highlighted during this experience?

Set 2: Channels and touchpoints

- Which channels did you find yourself using mostly over the duration of the study? → why?
- What are your reasons for preferring these channels?
- How did you use these channels?
- What do you expect from these channels / what are your requirements towards them? → were they met? If not, what could be improved?
- Which devices did you find yourself using most often over the duration of the study? → why?
- What are your reasons for preferring these devices?

Set 3: Memorability

How was it for you, to sit down and try to remember these encounters once a week?

Any particular challenges?

Were there types of encounters that came to mind more easily than others?

If so, which ones?

Were there certain aspects within an encounter that came to mind more easily than others?

Why is that so, in your opinion?

What would you describe as the things that made encounters most memorable for you?

Wrap-Up: how would you summarize the last hour, was there anything surprising / unexpected / enriching you're taking out of this? Do you have any feedback for me?

Possible follow-up Questions

Could you explain ...?

Please elaborate / what do you mean by ...?

Let's go back to ...

Could you take me through ... again?

What did you do then?

How did ... react / make you feel?

Access to Diary Form:

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/link/review?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:c5ba4cb5-3929-3c18-b13a-27d37f016a99>

Part III – General Discussion and Conclusion

This doctoral project set out to explore new theoretical lenses and starting points for understanding modern consumption and retailer branding in omnichannel contexts. In this final section, an overall summary of the key findings and insights provided by each research paper leads over into a discussion of their implications for theory and practice, respectively. After outlining the theoretical, methodological, and managerial implications of the research within this thesis, a brief reflection on the project's general limitations as well as potential avenues for further research will be presented, before closing the dissertation with some concluding thoughts.

Key Findings

Overall, each of the papers presented in the preceding part of the thesis contributes to answering a part of the overarching research question: how do consumers and retailer brands co-create meaning and value in omnichannel contexts?

To lay the foundation for investigating this question, the first paper engaged with the literature surrounding customer experiences in such omnichannel contexts. Following a thematic literature review, this paper highlights the relatively recent emergence of comprehensive studies on omnichannel experiences, as well as a tendency towards scant theoretical underpinnings. Technology adoption, innovation diffusion, and planned behavior theories have thus far provided the main theoretical foundations for examinations of omnichannel experiences (Herhausen et al. 2015; Savastano et al. 2019; Shi et al. 2020; Rippé et al. 2017; Xu and Jackson 2019), generally underlining the need for seamless channel integration as a crucial factor in experience optimization.

Within the examined body of literature, this paper discusses seven overall themes which emerge as characteristic of research engaging with omnichannel retail experiences: The nature of customer experience in omnichannel retailing, retail channels and touchpoints, omnichannel retail strategy, omnichannel retail branding, the impact of technology on omnichannel retail experiences, customer behavior in omnichannel retail environments, customer segmentation for omnichannel retailing, and incrementalism and fragmentation in the overall research field. Each of these themes highlights key insights on the ways in which retail experiences are conceived of, understood, and researched in an omnichannel context, which simultaneously opens under-explored avenues for future research. Most notably, a predominantly quantitative methodological focus of the literature has resulted in a research body focused on analyzing *what* is happening, rather than engaging with consumer-centric questions

of *why* or *how*. Consequently, the functional and cognitive aspects of customer experience and seamless channel integration have drawn considerable research interest as drivers of success in omnichannel retailing (e.g. Rodríguez-Torrico et al. 2020). On the other hand, far fewer investigations concern themselves with retailer branding in this context. While strong branding is highlighted as a success factor in achieving seamless channel integration, the changed nature of consumer-brand relationships in omnichannel retailing is scarcely explored. Moreover, most research remains company- rather than consumer-centric. The findings of this paper therefore suggest that the research field on omnichannel retail experiences might benefit from broadening both its disciplinary- and methodological scope.

The second paper consists of a theoretical exploration of how a co-creation of meaning in omnichannel contexts might be conceptualized. Viewing brand touchpoints through a narrative theoretical lens, it outlines how one could begin to understand them as fragments of a retailer's overall narrative. Doing so is deemed relevant since retailers, in a hyperconnected world, are no longer the sole owners and storytellers when it comes to their brand narrative and brand meanings are increasingly co-created (Swaminathan et al., 2020). This development in turn seriously challenges the dominant role given to consistency and seamlessness when it comes to creating meaning and value in omnichannel contexts. Ultimately, it is argued, a narrative approach to sense-making may provide a means for retailers to aid in enhancing customer engagement, building long-term relationships that reach beyond the moment of purchase.

In general, the second paper provides a theoretical extension of brand narrative literature into an omnichannel retail context, as well as a conceptual basis for exploring retailer brand touchpoint encounters along the customer journey.

The third paper is concerned with the case of a specific retailer brand which, at the time of the study, was undergoing re-branding and strategic changes leading to brand meanings being in flux and therefore representing an ideal opportunity to explore co-creation processes. Overall, the findings of this paper support the notion that retailer brand meaning is a dialogical effort of co-narration by both brand representatives and consumers (Berthon et al., 2007; Diamond et al., 2009; Visconti, 2010). In contrast to research emphasizing coherence and consistency to create a strong retailer brand narrative, however, the findings from this investigation suggest that value can also be created by leveraging the fragmentation of brand meanings as well as channel inconsistencies.

With regard to JYSK, the investigated retailer, an array of story elements emergent from the collected data are found to be flexibly drawn upon and repeated, forming a clearly recognizable but simultaneously fuzzy narrative whole. Using the chosen narratological theoretical lens, it is therefore argued that JYSK's approach to retail branding can be understood as a fragmented narrative contingent upon the pre-thematic grasping together of five distinct story elements on the retailer's lead channel: The archetype of the benevolent guide, Scandinavian romanticism, a mood of intimacy, the family metaphor, and the element of surprise. These story fragments are constantly re-adapted by both brand representatives and consumers to carve out their own stories and trajectories within the retailer brand's overall narrative. By doing so, narration as part of the consumption process becomes a way of grasping together different events to create a shared understanding of the wider, more complex whole of the retailer brand experience. Storytelling thus essentially becomes a way of knowing and disclosing the world (Sadler, 2021). In an omnichannel retail context, this shared understanding through meaning co-creation attains particular significance, since there are no instances of explicit storytelling where an overt narrative structure and causal relationships would serve to impose meaning (see Sadler, 2021). Instead, constellations of story elements are being grasped together and re-told by different actors in different situations, allowing for various disclosures of the retailer.

Overall, the story elements emerging from this study are found to be enacted by brand representatives in store, as well as emplotted and co-created through the ways in which consumers interact with both representatives and the store environment. This also stresses the role of the store as lead channel in the case at hand, as it presents a unique opportunity for performing the human act of grasping together the fragments of JYSK's brand narrative and connecting them to consumers' lives. That role clearly interacts, is supported by- and sometimes clashes with the retailer's other channels. However, it cannot be fully overtaken without radically changing the brand narrative at its core.

All in all, the third paper finds that the retailer itself may be described as a fragmented narrative, dependent on story elements that unfold their impact on the lead channel and are made sense of by consumers and brand representatives. Thus, when it comes to the research question guiding this project, this viewpoint suggests that meaning and value are co-created by brand representatives and consumers on the retailer's lead channel through the disclosure of meanings based on story fragments rooted in the retailer's key value propositions and repeated throughout consumer-brand experiences over time. Failing to recognize and leverage this means of value co-creation certainly represents a

definite oversight in retail strategies merely attempting to routinize their brand narrative through seamless channel integration.

Finally, the fourth paper explores the experiential qualities of retailer touchpoint encounters from a consumer-perspective. Generally, the findings derived from this study imply that such qualities vary regarding the kind of value they add for consumers, as well as in terms of the extent to which a retailer brand may influence them. Participants tended to form their expectations of retailers and make sense of past consumption experiences based on a few key moments that stand out as somehow memorable. In the data at hand, these moments can be characterized as retailer brand encounters spanning five overall types of social, technological, product-related, promotional, and atmospheric touchpoints.

Two major themes of efficiency and engagement emerged from participants' descriptions of their experiences of touchpoint encounters, as well as their explanations regarding why these moments might have remained on their minds in particular. The kind of added value in a touchpoint encounter perceived by participants was the basis for a classification according to these overarching themes. The themes form a spectrum and are not mutually exclusive, yet the more prominently one of the valued experiential qualities emerged in a given memorable moment, the less pronounced the other tended to be. With engaging on the one end and, efficient on the other end of the spectrum, moments of care emerged as a potential middle ground.

Further, it was found that the level of influence a retailer brand may exert over the generation of memorable moments through touchpoint encounters may differ. This understanding of influence crucially differs from previous concepts of touchpoint ownership: it is focused on the brand's ability to affect the co-creation of the experiential qualities transforming encounters into memorable moments, rather than the brand's control over a given touchpoint's design and -management. The experiential qualities associated with memorable moments could be formulated as lying on a spectrum ranging from highly engaging to highly efficient or helpful. Simultaneously, with regard to controlling and influencing the meaning and value created during such encounters, the role of the retailer brand can be formulated as falling on a spectrum between high and low amounts of influence. When it comes to the lived retailer brand experiences recounted in this study, these two spectra, outlining brand agency and experiential qualities respectively, may be used to map out retailer touchpoint encounters from a consumer point of view. Doing so draws attention to the importance of an interplay between efficiency and engagement along omnichannel consumption journeys.

In particular, the perceived tension between engaging and efficient moments served to illustrate how some consumers seem to appreciate- and even seek unpredictable, random, or confusing experiences in an effort to vary their everyday routines and escape seemingly monotonous retailer touchpoint encounters characterized by pure efficiency. In contribution to the overall research question tying the project together, the fourth paper conceptualizes retailer touchpoint encounters as memorable moments along the consumption journey.

In summary, the four papers constituting this thesis find that the consumer, whose role is thus far still underrepresented in omnichannel retail research, becomes a co-narrator and key shaper of retailer brand meanings, precisely because of the retailer's fragmentation across channels and touchpoints. Overall, therefore, the findings suggest that in such fragmented contexts, narration represents a crucial tool for sense-making and the co-creation of value between retailers and consumers. The following sections briefly summarize the implications that can be derived from these findings for managers and researchers.

Implications for Management

For retailers, which are increasingly striving to implement omnichannel strategies, the co-creation perspective when it comes to brand meaning and value adopted in this thesis bears a set of implications regarding the fragmentation afforded by channels and touchpoints – all of which suggest a departure from standardized, company-centric blueprints (see also Cayla & Arnould, 2008; Visconti, 2010).

Firstly, a better understanding of the experiential qualities that retailer touchpoints could elicit and the amount of influence the retailer themselves exerts over the co-creation of memorable moments can provide practitioners with a more consumer-centric way of mapping out their customers' potential consumption journeys. In the long run, understanding such consumption journeys and how one's retailer brand interacts with consumers' life-worlds can help retailers form long-term relationships with consumers, by co-creating memorable encounters along 'sticky' journeys through an interplay of being engaging or efficient at the right kinds of touchpoints (see also Siebert et al., 2020a). Thus, the findings presented and discussed herein urge retail practitioners to be mindful that, when optimization efforts are focused solely on touchpoint consistency, seamless integration, effortless

and predictability, they only encourage one side of the array of experiential values that could transform into memorable moments within a consumption journey.

Secondly, the findings of this dissertation suggest that despite shifting towards omnichannel approaches, retailers may nevertheless benefit from a clear conception of those brand channels and touchpoints which allow certain fragments of their narrative to flourish. The case of JYSK presented in the third paper shows how the store still holds the role of a lead channel within the brand's strategy and conception of their narrative, as it most powerfully transports the story of the brand's core value proposition. An omnichannel approach trying to homogenize brand communications and service attributes across touchpoints could, in this case, even prove detrimental as it would impede opportunities for meaning and value co-creation unique to the lead channel. In terms of both resource allocation and experience co-creation, therefore, it may be useful to adopt a fragmented opti-channel approach attempting to optimize retail encounters with a view towards the brand narrative. This perspective can aid practitioners in identifying and amplifying their retailer brand's unique capabilities in relation to- and in combination with customers' unique needs.

Thirdly, with regard to retailer brand storytelling in a hyperconnected marketplace, this dissertation argues that consistency and straightforward narratives are not necessarily the gold standard practitioners should strive for (see also Brown & Patterson, 2010; Moin, 2020; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Visconti, 2010). Instead, treating retailer brands as fragmented narratives encourages practitioners to align the idea of channel consistency with the retailer's core value propositions by providing potential meanings and frameworks for co-narration. Doing so actively engages consumers and feeds their "narrative urge" (Brown & Patterson, 2010, p. 547). Instead of attempting to design a homogenized grand narrative that assumes the consumer as a passive recipient, retail brand managers may think of story fragments as a means of proposing value-enriching touchpoints to consumers' lives, allowing for active co-creation in making sense of the retailer brand. This approach to co-creation further has the potential of boosting the inimitability of unique brand narratives, which still represents a considerable competitive advantage (Visconti, 2010).

Finally, with regard to retailer brand touchpoints and the ways in which they interact with consumers' life-worlds, retailers might benefit from the knowledge that their ability to influence some of the experiential qualities evoked by memorable touchpoint encounters is sometimes merely partial or even entirely absent. However, a consumer-centric notion of touchpoint encounters may enable

practitioners to plot where- and how they may be able to foster the co-creation of memorable moments.

In sum, when it comes to retail practice, this dissertation serves to highlight that a departure from standardized, cohesive approaches to experience optimization can be conducive to a comprehensive understanding of the value emerging from sensemaking and meaning co-creation between retailers and consumers in fragmented omnichannel contexts. Although efficiency and seamlessness are currently emphasized in omnichannel retailing, too strong a focus on these aspects might come at the cost of other, non-firm-centric experiential qualities with great potential of enhancing consumer-brand encounters and relationships. Thus, retailers should be aware of the increasing co-creative potential afforded by the fragmentation of meanings in an omnichannel market context. Understanding processes of sensemaking through co-narration and meaning co-creation is necessary for retailers to understand changing logics of consumption and engage consumers on a long-term basis, anchoring the retailer brand within their life-worlds by providing potential touchpoints to their lives. Therefore, the narrative theoretical lens adopted in this thesis invites retail practitioners to leverage the fragmentation of brand meanings rather than treating it as an obstacle to overcome.

Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

With regard to the strong tendency towards omnichannel approaches in retailing and the resulting shift in how value can be generated for and with consumers (Parsons & Descatoires, 2016; Swaminathan et al., 2020), the findings presented in this dissertation contribute to exploring novel theoretical angles useful for generating more consumer-centric approaches to retail experiences and consumer journeys. Doing so inevitably challenges and extends several notions within the research field.

Firstly, viewing retail brand narratives as assemblages of fragments across different channels and touchpoints raises the question of how channel consistency and seamless integration are understood within the omnichannel literature. The benefits of a consistent retail mix across different touchpoints and channels have dominated academic discourse and theorization (Y. P. Chang & J. Li, 2022; Frasquet-Deltoro et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Torrico et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2018). However, this position implicitly assumes that this particular type of consistency is what consumers unequivocally desire. A few recent investigations have begun to suggest that “more integration is not necessarily

always better” (Gasparin et al., 2022, p. 4) when it comes to improving the consumers’ experience – a standpoint which is supported by the findings of this thesis. Specifically, the fragmented narrative conception of the retailer adopted herein urges researchers to re-think and expand the concept of channel consistency with a focus on brand value propositions. These propositions can translate into story fragments imbued with a set of potential meanings which can be used to co-create value for and with consumers.

Secondly, this dissertation attempts to answer the call for more consumer-centric research when it comes to understanding consumption experiences and journeys (Hayes & Kelliher, 2022; Mishra et al., 2021). The literature concerning omnichannel retailing seems predominantly focused on creating efficient experiences along the customer journey by focusing on channel integration (Herhausen et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2018) and seamless transitions (Ya Ping Chang & Jingwen Li, 2022). However, the findings of this project caution that for the consumer, a focus on efficiency and seamlessness might come at the expense of perceived sociality, range, choice, and creativity. Theories attempting to capture retailer brand experiences and the value they may generate should therefore not discount the impact of lived realities and stories re-told by adopting a company-centric ideology of efficiency.

With regard to consumption journeys in particular, this dissertation adds to- and supports research that views successful branding as a mixture of sticky, i.e. exciting, and predictable consumption journeys, resulting in customer-brand relationships of greater longevity (Siebert et al., 2020a, 2020b). However, with regard to omnichannel retail research, this notion stands in contrast to the implicit assumption that channel integration remains the main success factor to keep consumers on a particular journey trajectory favored by the retailer brand (Liu et al., 2023). This dissertation joins other recent academic work on non-linear consumption journeys (e.g. Gasparin et al., 2022) in arguing that ‘stickiness’ is equally achieved by engaging and exciting retailer touchpoint encounters, in extension to predictable and seamless ones.

Finally, this project has contributed to breaking new grounds when it comes to the methodologies used to study consumer experiences. While the commonly employed methodological toolkit within retail research has proved highly successful in the identification of retailer-related factors which can serve to enhance experiences, there have been calls for methodologies allowing for insights into consumers’ life-worlds and experiential factors outside company activity (Becker, 2018). Thus, it has been proposed that investigations exploring qualitative-, mixed-methods, or novel theoretical angles have a particular potential to enrich the field (Bascur & Rusu, 2020; Becker, 2018; Hayes & Kelliher,

2022; Mishra et al., 2021). Using ethnographic- and diary-based methods to explore the co-creation of retailer brand meaning and value allows for a more overarching and consumer-focused view of omnichannel consumption. The longitudinal design of the diary study allowed us to investigate the non-linear nature of retail touchpoint encounters, capturing extended consumer-brand relationships and meanings instead of short-term evaluations of purchase intention, channel choice, or channel switching. Although the set-up and implementation of these methods proved challenging and time-consuming, they proved essential in elucidating the multi-layered nature of retailer brands from a consumer standpoint and allowed for a tremendous amount of self-reflection for participants. With diary methods especially being hardly ever used as a main technique of data collection (Becker, 2018), this thesis also adds to retail marketing literature by expanding the methodological corpus.

Overall, this doctoral work contributes to the academic discourse around retailer branding in omnichannel contexts in three crucial ways: firstly, its narratological approach strengthens the research streams that have begun to challenge the integration imperative dominating the field, arguing that there are other, equally important experiential qualities or brand story elements that may enable the co-creation of meaning and value. This secondly extends the concept of channel consistency, giving central prominence to the retailer's value proposition. Finally, it emphasizes the protean and complex nature of retail consumption journeys in omnichannel contexts and adopts a consumer-centric approach to the conceptualization of omnichannel retailer brand touchpoints both theoretically and methodologically.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the present work adds new dimensions and perspectives to research engaging with retailer brands in omnichannel contexts extends several theoretical and methodological concepts, it entails clear limitations. However, given the exploratory nature of the research efforts within this dissertation, several fruitful avenues for further research can also be derived.

Regarding the project's limitations, it should firstly be noted that, though catering to the need for rich, qualitative data, the research approach taken by nature also yields fewer insights on a more individual level (Berg, 2009). Thus, the insights gained do not lay claim to any universal applicability or explanation. Moreover, the studies within the project were limited to particular retail sectors and

brands, customer segments (e.g. mainly millennial consumers in paper IV), and cultural contexts which further limits their explanatory powers.

With regard to the research philosophy underpinning this thesis, it should also be stressed that the researcher herself must needs constitute an integral part of analyzing and “re-emplotting” the data (Corvellec, 2006; Czarniawska, 2004). Thus, although researcher reflexivity formed a key component of the approach, the results of the analyses undertaken should be seen as one possible reading of the data rather than an objective, extricated truth (Howell, 2016).

Regarding the project’s overall subject matter, the literature review conducted in the first paper of the dissertation already begins to show how research has barely been able to keep up with the speed of socio-technological development. Thus, the findings emerging from this project certainly also run the risk of being- or becoming dated as new and unprecedented channels, touchpoints, and logics of consumption may emerge or experience a shift in relevance. However, the narratological approach taken herein does represent an attempt at somewhat forestalling this effect, since it attempts to provide broader conceptual results instead of a momentary quantitative snapshot of current preferences.

In terms of the methodologies adopted, it is clear that most of the approaches taken in the studies at hand are strongly dependent on participants’ open and honest reports of their subjective impressions, feelings, and experiences (Berg, 2009; Bryman, 2012). With observations and interviews alike, there are certainly risks of self-editing or even simple misunderstandings by participants, despite efforts to provide clear definitions and keep the research contexts as natural as possible. Moreover, stories are, either consciously or subconsciously, told with some sort of audience or recipient in mind, be it a real or even an imagined one (Eco, 1979). The possibility of the researcher having been presented with distorted or one-sided narrations therefore cannot be fully discounted. An attempt at mitigating this risk was made by triangulating and collecting brand stories through multiple means (see Bryman, 2012), yet this risk remains as a clear limitation.

Generally, therefore, this thesis explored rather broad theoretical concepts in rather specific settings, leaving ample room for further research of both qualitative and quantitative nature. Quantitative investigations, for example experiments, might probe further into the processes of sense-making when it comes to fragmented narratives in general. Within branding literature, such enquiries could further clarify the effects of story fragmentation on consumers’ perception of character, authenticity, or truth. With regard to the co-creation of retailer brand meaning in particular, the need for an investigation of narrative accrual across the entire system of retailer channels and touchpoints

remains. More specific quantitative research may be able to map out the system of core- versus supportive story elements employed at different touchpoints in greater detail. Moreover, greater detail could also be achieved regarding the value co-created by various types of touchpoints along the consumption journey, for example through touchpoint design.

However, there remains an equally vast potential for phenomenological and event-based approaches in the study of consumer experience and sensemaking (see also Becker, 2018). Such studies could give researchers further insights into participants' sensemaking and consumption logics when it comes to different types of retailer brands -or categories. Further qualitative enquiries may therefore explore issues surrounding who gets to tell brand-related stories in omnichannel retail contexts, which types of touchpoints afford a stronger narrative voice of the consumer, as well as the consumer journey plots (e.g. heroic, dramatic, comedic, trickster-like). For such undertakings, the theoretical approach underpinning this dissertation could be expanded to include the notion of narrative agency (see van Laer & Orazi, 2024), shifting the focus to the narratability of retailer touchpoints. Investigations of this sort could build upon and further develop the beginnings of the consumer-centric approaches proposed in this dissertation.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that all explorations undertaken over the course of this project are focused on the positive aspects surrounding meaning and value co-creation by retailer brands and consumers. As such, they follow the direction of both popular- and academic literature on omnichannel retailing, which is thus far lacking any efforts to critically engage with this phenomenon. At the same time, however, critical theorists are heralding an age of claustropolitanism and surveillance-capitalism built upon a marketing fable which paradoxically views the manipulation of choice and decision-making as a means of empowering consumers (Darmody & Zwick, 2020; Hoang et al., 2021). Thus, one of the most relevant avenues for further research would invite scholars to critically engage with the dark side of omnichannel retailing, regarding a broad variety of topics from sustainability to value co-destruction, authenticity, privacy, and trust, as well as potential negative experiential qualities evoked by touchpoint encounters. With regard to retailer brand narratives, there is a further risk of fragmented contexts inherently favoring already dominant voices of actors or institutions striving to maintain present meanings and understandings of the world (Sadler, 2021). In this vein, research engaging with truth perception, access, and underlying power structures to retailer brand narratives might enquire which storytellers get to co-create, participate in- and perhaps gatekeep certain narratives.

Overall, therefore the findings of this dissertation merely scratch the surface of meaning and value co-creation between retailers and consumers in omnichannel contexts and merely provide starting points for further empirical investigations of the proposed theories and concepts.

Conclusion

Originally, this thesis as a whole was inspired by the rapid evolution of channels and touchpoints in omnichannel retailing having led to a greater dispersion of retailer brands and presenting consumers with complex networks of meaning to navigate. With this phenomenon and the concomitant change in the ways in which value is created, new approaches to understanding consumer-retailer interactions are called for. Therefore, this project set out to improve our understanding of how meaning and value emerges between retailer brands and their consumers in such dispersed contexts characterized by omnichannel approaches to retailing and branding. Specifically, it generally aims to identify new theoretical lenses and starting points for understanding modern consumption and retailer branding in omnichannel contexts. The four research pieces included in this thesis contribute to this aim by exploring various angles of consumer-brand experiences in omnichannel retail contexts from a theoretical perspective informed by narratology.

Firstly, they emphasize that the widely stipulated reconsideration of the established processes and concepts within retail marketing, necessary due to the ubiquitous turn towards omnichannel retailing, has barely begun to take hold. In particular, omnichannel retail literature still largely remains silent when it comes to approaches exploring consumer-centric, co-creative perspectives towards the retailer brand experience. Secondly, they expand retail branding literature into an omnichannel context on a conceptual and theoretical level, arguing that narrative theory may help researchers investigate the co-creation of meaning and sensemaking processes when probing into consumption experiences along the customer journey in contexts characterized by a fragmentation of such meanings. Thirdly, they propose a new way of understanding the co-creation of brand narratives under the omnichannel paradigm, viewing the retailer brand as fragmented narrative. This emphasizes the potential limitations of the dominant notion of channel consistency and seamlessness, advocating a re-conceptualization of the former based on the retailer's mission and value propositions. Such a re-conceptualization also invites the notion of an increasing fragmentation of brand narratives as opportunity rather than obstacle. Finally, the research in this thesis emphasizes consumer sense-

making within retail formats characterized by digitalization and meaning fragmentation across channels and touchpoints. Doing so further problematizes the predominant, company-centric approaches to omnichannel experience research and supports a more nuanced view of retailer brand touchpoints, as well as the experiential qualities resulting from their encounter across consumption journeys.

Thus, while each research effort emphasizes different aspects of the overall topic, the papers taken together highlight the need for a shift towards a consumer-centric, co-creative perspective in omnichannel retail and branding literature, challenging the prevalent notion of channel consistency and advocating for a more nuanced view of retailer brand touchpoints along non-linear consumption journeys. With this general argument, they contribute to the ongoing academic dialogue on omnichannel retailing and retail branding, joining the stream of literature that has begun to question the underlying implicit assumptions governing this dialogue.

Overall, it is my hope that the work within this thesis will provide inspiration, new theoretical angles, and starting points for investigating the interactions of retailer brands and consumers in today's highly technologized, hyper-connected and yet fragmented market environment.

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Co-Author Statements



Declaration of co-authorship*

Full name of the PhD student: Alina Diana Both

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	Customer experiences in omnichannel retail environments: a thematic literature review.
Authors:	Both, A. D., & Steinmann, S.

The article/manuscript is: Published Accepted Submitted In preparation

If published, state full reference: Both, A. D., & Steinmann, S. (2023). Customer experiences in omnichannel retail environments: a thematic literature review. *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, 33(5), 445-478.

If accepted or submitted, state journal:

Has the article/manuscript previously been used in other PhD or doctoral dissertations?

No Yes If yes, give details:

The PhD student has contributed to the elements of this article/manuscript as follows:

- A. Has essentially done all the work
- B. Major contribution
- C. Equal contribution
- D. Minor contribution
- E. Not relevant

Element	Extent (A-E)
1. Formulation/identification of the scientific problem	B
2. Planning of the experiments/methodology design and development	B
3. Involvement in the experimental work/clinical studies/data collection	A
4. Interpretation of the results	A
5. Writing of the first draft of the manuscript	A
6. Finalization of the manuscript and submission	B

Signatures of the co-authors

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Date: 01.05.2024

*As per policy the co-author statement will be published with the dissertation.



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Signature of the PhD student

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Full name of the PhD student: Alina Diana Both

This declaration concerns the following article/manuscript:

Title:	Omnichannel Customer Journeys–Fragments of a Never-Ending Story?
Authors:	Both, A. D., Steinmann, S., & Chrysochou, P.

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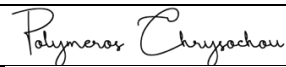

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Title:	Paths of Moments: Exploring the Experiential Qualities of Retailer Brand Touchpoints
Authors:	Both, A. D., Steinmann, S., & Chrysochou, P.

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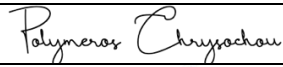

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