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Brand Experience Through an Online Direct-to-Consumer Strategy

An Investigation Based on Fashion Brands

Master Thesis

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Graz, 26 April 2023

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Lisa Steinbacher

Abstract

Brand Experience Through an Online Direct-to-Consumer Strategy

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Lisa STEINBACHER

The online direct-to-consumer (D2C) strategy, which aims to create an extensive brand experience through direct contact with consumers, has become increasingly widespread in recent years. However, this strategy presents a notable research gap in academic literature. As such, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how a brand experience is (co-)created via an online D2C strategy used by fashion brands and how it is manifested by consumers. Based on a literature review, consumer interviews are used to create a qualitative research approach, which results in the development of a model that extends previous research. This method reveals that brand experience is co-created at three levels (culture & market, collective, individual) which are influenced by different factors, with brand stimuli being particularly important in terms of an online D2C strategy. Furthermore, consumer responses are identified as sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural, and relational, with each dimension having specific components. A systematic consideration of all levels and a profound understanding of the dimensions is shown to be a necessary managerial implication.

Keywords: Direct-to-consumer, e-commerce, performance marketing, brand experience, fashion

Zusammenfassung

Markenerlebnis durch die Online-Direct-to-Consumer-Strategie

Eine Untersuchung basierend auf Modemarken

Lisa STEINBACHER

Die Online-Direct-to-Consumer (D2C)-Strategie, welche durch den direkten Kontakt mit Konsument:innen auf die Schaffung von Markenerlebnissen abzielt, gewann in den letzten Jahren zwar zunehmend an Bedeutung, wird jedoch in der wissenschaftlichen Literatur kaum behandelt. Ziel dieser Thesis ist es daher, zu untersuchen, wie Markenerlebnisse durch Online-D2C-Strategien von Modemarken (mit-)geschaffen werden und in welchen Ausprägungen diese von Konsument:innen erlebt werden. Auf Basis des theoretischen Hintergrunds, wurden in einer qualitativen Forschung Interviews durchgeführt und die Ergebnisse in einem erweiterten Modell dargestellt. Markenerlebnisse werden auf der Kultur- & Marktebene, kollektiven sowie individuellen Ebene geschaffen und von verschiedenen Aspekten beeinflusst, wobei Markenstimuli im Hinblick auf eine Online-D2C-Strategie eine besonders wichtige Rolle spielen. Die Reaktionen der Konsument:innen werden als sensorisch, affektiv, intellektuell, verhaltens- und beziehungsbezogen identifiziert, wobei jede Dimension spezifische Komponenten aufweist. Eine systematische Betrachtung aller Ebenen und ein tiefgreifendes Verständnis der Dimensionen erweist sich als notwendige Implikation für Modemarken.

Keywords: Direct-to-consumer, Onlinehandel, Performance-Marketing, Markenerlebnis, Mode

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Introduction

The introductory chapter begins with the background, followed by the research interest and relevance. On this basis, the research objectives are formulated, and at the end of the chapter the structure of the thesis is outlined.

Background

Even though the growth of electronic commerce (e-commerce) has vastly widened the scope of brands to sell their goods to consumers more directly for decades, retailers are still very important as intermediaries for brands and disintermediation has been less prevalent than initially anticipated (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 237). However, digital disruption and increased use of new technologies, as well as changing consumer behaviour in recent years initiated a demand for business strategy development (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 367). As a result, the direct-to-consumer (D2C) strategy has experienced rising importance across a wide range of industries (Donna et al., 2022, p. 1; Moser, 2019; Samsukha, 2022). Since 2015 direct online sales have increased in the United States significantly (Bower, 2017, p. 17). While in 2018, D2C e-commerce sales in the US accounted for $60.76 billion, in 2021 they were tracked at $128.33 billion, meaning they have more than doubled in three years (eMarketer, 2022). According to the forecast of eMarketer (2022), D2C e-commerce sales will continue to rise, reaching $212.91 billion in 2024. Although statistics on D2C are mainly concerned with the retail landscape in the US and rarely cover Europe, D2C strategies naturally can also be identified in Europe. A study by the University of St. Gallen in 2020 indicates that the online D2C strategy is becoming increasingly important and that the D2C trend was even boosted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Schögel & Lienhard, 2021, pp. 2–12). The trend has already arrived in the service industry and more and more manufacturing companies are moving to this

customer-centric approach as well (Biazzo & Filippini, 2021, p. 179). Revolutionary and original pure D2C brands, like Dollar Shave Club and Warby Parker, captured the market and established brands, such as Nike or Under Armour, shifted significant parts of their businesses to direct channels in order to reduce their dependency on traditional retailers (Bower, 2017, p. 17; Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 382).

The fashion industry has experienced a decline in the retail sector, which has resulted in retail bankruptcies and store closures (Kim et al., 2021, pp. 1–3). This can be attributed to the rise of e-commerce and the recession of traditional brick-and-mortar retailers as a sales channel. To put it in numbers, in 2019 the US recorded a bankruptcy increase by 35% and over 9,000 store closures (Unglesbee, 2019). Therefore, the potential for the D2C strategy in the fashion industry is high and already well established, as brands like Gymshark or Reformation show (Kim et al., 2021, p. 3).

Even though the D2C trend is omnipresent in the online environment, the vast majority of manufacturers still rely on intermediaries (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 238). Trading partners offer them wide market reach and generate high sales. Due to their significant role, manufacturers avoid the potential risk of channel conflicts that could arise through direct channels. However, selling through indirect channels results in a major loss of control (Kahn et al., 2018, p. 258). In contrast, the D2C strategy offers brands tremendous advantages in interacting directly with consumers and thereby creating resonant brand experiences (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 238). This benefit is of critical importance because, as Iglesias et al. (2019) state, *"in an ever more competitive, interconnected and transparent business environment, brands must offer memorable experiences to their customers if they want to differentiate themselves and build a solid competitive position"* (p. 344). As experiences in marketing are geared towards building consumer-brand relationships and brand equity, they

significantly affect consumer buying behaviour and are therefore crucial for business success (Beig & Nika, 2019, p. 2).

Research Interest and Relevance

The online D2C strategy is steadily gaining momentum in the contemporary retail market. Despite this, research shows a significant gap in both literature and empirical studies on the matter (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, pp. 380–382). Even concrete definitions of what D2C entails are hard to come by. Therefore, many studies only scratch the surface and focus on a conceptual overview of D2C, including its benefits and challenges (e.g., B. E. Jin & Shin, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021; Lienhard et al., 2021), or different D2C e-commerce and branding strategies (e.g., Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019; Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021). Nonetheless, it is commonly suggested that the D2C strategy offers increased control over all business activities and ensures how brands are experienced by consumers, which presents a major advantage over operating indirect channels (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 368; Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 238). The creation of brand experience especially is rather unexplored in the online D2C context.

Experiential marketing, which goes beyond traditional marketing of features and benefits to create experiences for consumers (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 53), received a lot of attention in recent years. Various modes of experience, such as customer experience or product experience, and even facets of brand experience, such as service brand experience or sensory brand experience, have been investigated in prior research (e.g., Hepola et al., 2017; Iglesias et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Additionally, the relationship between brand experience and other brand variables like brand loyalty, consumer brand-relationships or brand equity have been examined many times (e.g., Beig &

Nika, 2019; Çifci et al., 2016; Cleff et al., 2014; V. Kumar & Kaushik, 2020). However, only few studies focus on unravelling what a brand experience truly represents and how it is created or even co-created (Zha et al., 2020, p. 289). As key research into this matter is missing, researchers suggest that future research on brand experience should be conducted on a qualitative basis to gain deeper insights by reflecting subjectivity (Khan & Rahman, 2015, p. 9). Furthermore, as the online environment is a fast-paced area, online brand experience requires more research (Zha et al., 2020, p. 306).

As more and more fashion brands start to sell directly online (Kim et al., 2021, p. 2), there is a need to expand on the limited literature linking this market and type of brand to either the academic discussion of the online D2C strategy or brand experience construct.

From a managerial perspective it is especially interesting how and which memorable brand experiences are created by the use of an online D2C strategy. To derive implications for brand managers and shift the focus on efficiency, aspects that significantly influence the development of the desired brand experience are of special relevance.

Research Objectives

To close the aforementioned research gaps and shed light on the brand experience created by an online D2C strategy of fashion brands, this thesis aims to answer the following main research question: How is brand experience through an online D2C strategy of fashion brands (co-)created and how is it manifested by consumers?

Therefore, the first objective of this thesis is to explore the online D2C strategy and the concept of brand experience in the context of fashion brands in previous consumer research. The second objective is to empirically investigate these issues and identify influencing factors as well as its manifestation. Thirdly, this thesis aims for discussing the findings and developing

propositions as well as a model that covers the creation and representation of brand experience in this setting.

Thesis Structure

Chapter 1 serves as an in-depth literature review of the current state of research pertaining to the two main topics of this thesis, the online D2C strategy and the brand experience in the context of fashion brands, and lays the foundation for the theories applied. The key points are summarised in Chapter 2 and even more specific research gaps are derived in Chapter 3. In addition, sub-research questions are posed that support the answering the of main research question through the empirical research conducted. Chapter 4 presents the methodology used for the qualitative study conducted via interviews, followed by the presentation of the results of said study in Chapter 5. These findings are finally linked with the relevant theory in Chapter 6 and propositions are derived from this with regard to the sub-research questions. In Chapter 7 the main research question is addressed by consolidating the generated insights and the final model is presented. Finally, in Chapter 8, this thesis' place in the current state-of-the-art research and managerial implications are discussed, and its limitations and directions for future research are indicated.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

This chapter presents prior research and theory on the online D2C strategy as well as brand experience. Where possible, references are made to fashion brands, that is any brand that markets clothing and apparel (e.g., casual wear, sportswear, evening wear, lingerie, etc.) as well as accessories (e.g., bags, sunglasses, hats, gloves and scarves, wallets, luggage, neckties, etc.) or footwear (e.g., sneakers, sandals, slippers, etc.) for women, men, or children (Posner, 2015, pp. 10, 162). Brands that sell perfume, cosmetics or homeware are also

categorised as fashion brands in a broader sense. A more detailed definition of fashion brands is given in the section of Brands and Fashion Brands.

Online Direct-to-Consumer Strategy

In the following subchapters the strategy of D2C is defined, the motivation and goals as well as the types of organisations that apply an online D2C strategy are explained. Further, the potential online sales channels of a D2C strategy and performance marketing channels are elaborated. Finally, the determinants of a successful D2C strategy of fashion brands are given.

Definition of D2C Strategy

Organisations utilising a direct-to-consumer approach engage with customers directly through both online and offline channels, promoting and selling their products or services directly to them (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 368). This means that no other intermediary is involved in the communication nor transaction process and the company or manufacturer is in complete control of these operations (Bower, 2017, p. 17; Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, pp. 239–240). The only exceptions which can sometimes be outsourced to third-party providers are support activities such as payment or logistics.

D2C is mostly used in relation to direct sales, which are realised via vertically integrated distribution channels (Donna et al., 2022, p. 1; Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 239). However, D2C is considered as both a marketing and a sales approach that determines the channels used, which are direct, and the target customer segment, which are end users in the consumer goods market (Bruhn, 2016, p. 347; Ramershoven, 2022). In broader definitions D2C is referred to either as a strategy (Lienhard et al., 2021; Schögel & Lienhard, 2021) or as a business model (Biazzo & Filippini, 2021; Bower, 2017; Schlesinger et al., 2020)

interchangeably and without specific explanation. A business model consists of nine different blocks of which channels and customer segments represent two (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010, p. 14). Therefore, D2C determines merely a part of a business model and does not build the entire model. Lienhard et al. (2021) describe D2C as a channel selection strategy (pp. 11–12). Since channels are the core element of D2C and distribution channels distinguish D2C from the traditional business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) settings that use indirect channels, this thesis goes in line with the definition of a D2C strategy. Figure 1 shows simplified multi-level channel structures including intermediary customers of B2B and B2C compared to D2C for clarification.

Figure 1 – Channel Structures
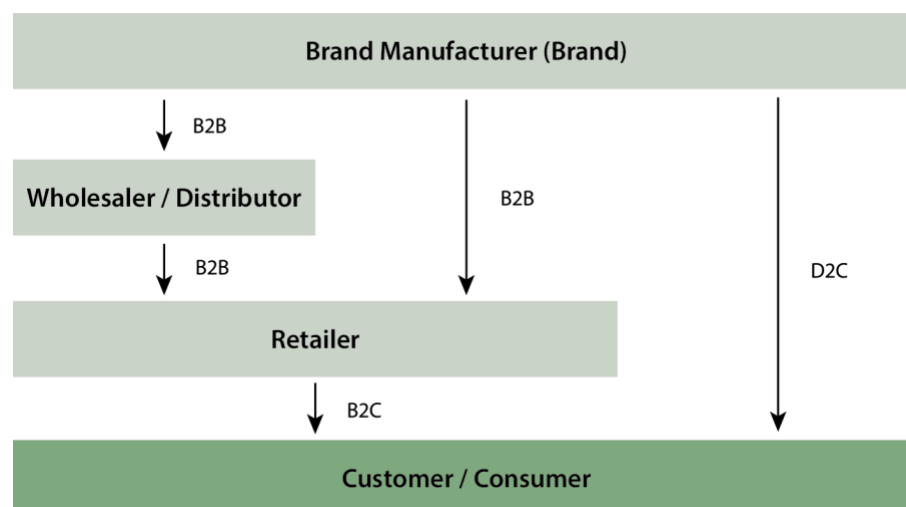
Note. Adopted from *"Direct to Consumer (D2C) E-Commerce: Goals and Strategies of Brand Manufacturers",* by Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 240.

As shown above, a D2C strategy does not involve indirect channels through which manufacturers sell their products through intermediaries like wholesalers, distributors, or retailers (Tahirov & Glock, 2022, p. 403). Instead, manufacturers with D2C strategies operate direct channels, which include online channels like webshops, social media or newsletters,

and offline channels like company-owned brick-and-mortar stores, like flagship stores (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 239; Tahirov & Glock, 2022, p. 403). Since D2C strategies benefit from the ease of operating online shops and are strongly supported by digital marketing activities (Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 14) this thesis focuses on the online environment and does not cover offline channels.

Motivation and Goals

Besides the above-mentioned boost to D2C strategies enabled by the possibility to easily implement an online store, the motivation and driving factors for brands to implement a D2C strategy are either market or customer driven (Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 14).

With regard to market driven reasons, brands want to reduce their dependency on (few) intermediaries (Lienhard et al., 2021). In a typical setting retailers take full control over bringing the products to the consumers (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 369). This includes, inter alia, pricing, assortment, product presentation, and marketing activities that are designed to increase the profits of the middlemen with little or no regard for the manufacturers' interests. Through direct channels products can be offered cheaper to consumers and with a higher profit margin for the brands (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 375). Moreover, a brand-specific market presence and an increase of market coverage, as well as expanded market reach that is not geographically restricted by intermediaries is enabled (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 238). Leimstoll and Wölfle (2021) also mention declining margins and growing assortment of retailers that no longer allow personnel-intensive services and displaying all products of a manufacturer that drive brands to go into direct channels (p. 243).

Meeting consumer expectations by providing the option to purchase directly from the brand is a customer-driven reason that some brands puruse (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, pp. 237–238). Within industries that are affected by product piracy like luxury fashion especially, consumers seek to reduce the risk of purchasing fake products through direct brand channels. According to Kim et al. (2021), brands with D2C strategies aim to *"connect every aspect of their business with consumers: from the website to their product, and every touchpoint in between"* (p. 16). Popular customer driven reasons are building customer relationships, adapting to changes in consumer behaviour, differentiating brand experience, and increasing brand awareness (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 368; Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 14). The direct access and contact to the consumers and, even more importantly, the thereby gathered first-party data, help brands in exploiting that potential and are key drivers.

To investigate the goals for D2C strategies of brand manufacturers a survey was conducted by Leimstoll and Wölfle (2021). E-commerce managers from well-established Swiss companies of different industries were interviewed as experts. The results are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Goals of D2C Strategies
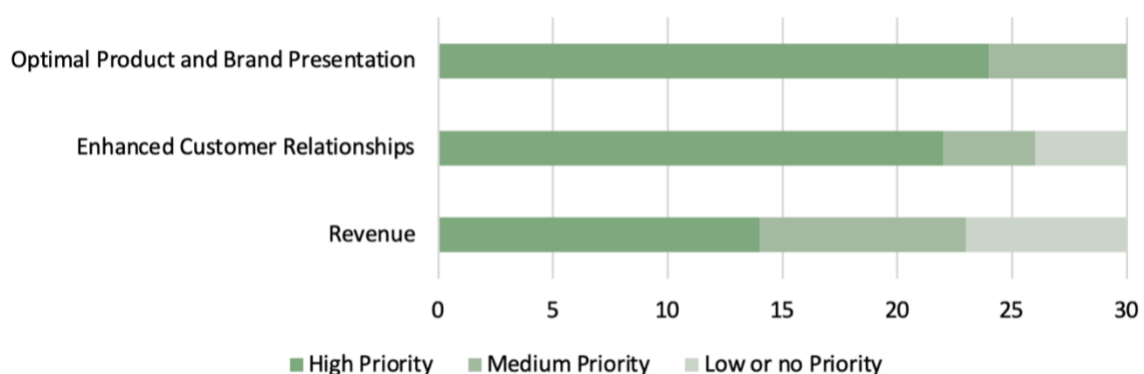
Note. This figure shows the prioritised goals of a D2C strategy resulting from a survey conducted with 30 e-commerce managers from Swiss companies. Adopted from *"Direct to*

Consumer (D2C) E-Commerce: Goals and Strategies of Brand Manufacturers", by Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 244.

In conclusion, it seems that the primary goal of D2C strategies is not increasing revenues from sales (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 248). Instead, it is market and customer driven reasons that appeal to brands and companies to implement a D2C strategy to create an optimal presentation, and thus the desired brand experience, as well as the establishment of consumer-brand relationships.

Types of Organisations with D2C strategy

According to Lienhard et al. (2021) there are four types of organisations with D2C strategy that can be distinguished:

- direct selling companies

- vertically integrated manufacturers

- established brand manufacturers

- D2C brand manufacturers (Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 12)

Traditional direct selling companies which are characterised by a face-to-face selling off-premises additionally operate their own online shops nowadays (Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 12). Vertically integrated manufacturers realise wholesale and retail, including local stores and online shops, only through their own companies (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 239). Direct selling companies such as Thermomix or Tupperware, are not very common in fashion industry, while vertically integrated manufacturers like Zara, whose owner is Inditex, or H&M have played a major role for decades and are rather considered as retailers (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 239; Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 12).

More and more established brand manufacturers are participating in the online D2C trend, selling directly to consumers through their own online and offline shops, alongside intermediaries (Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 12). However, adding direct channels to existing indirect channels often means competing with intermediaries and leads to channel conflicts (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 238; Tahirov & Glock, 2022, pp. 403–404). In addition, lack of knowledge complicates building up direct channels. Nevertheless, more and more brands are taking on this burden to gain advantage from the D2C strategy, as exemplified by established brand manufacturers like Nike, Gucci, Marc O'Polo, Prada or Adidas (Bower, 2017, p. 17). Few brands, such as the American brand Everlane, even practice disintermediation by eliminating middlemen like wholesalers and retailers (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 367; Moser, 2019). Though this move is highly risky and usually not the preferred choice by manufacturers when adopting a D2C strategy.

The least explored and newest type of organisations are D2C start-ups or so-called *original* D2C brand manufacturers that operate online shops and increasingly offline shops as well (Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 12). According to Lipsman (2022) and Loeb (2019) D2C brands are growing very fast – outlining the growth rate of total e-commerce in the US – and becoming a major competitor for the retail industry. As stated by Kim et al. (2021), *"they typically begin as a purely online business, fully leveraging digital channels for marketing and selling"* (p. 2) and differentiate by product or business model innovation. Moreover, these digitally native brands often specialise on a single product or a small range of related products. Examples of global D2C fashion brands originating in the US include Gymshark, Everlane, Reformation or Glossier (Kim et al., 2021, p. 3). D2C fashion brands have also been widely accepted in the European market among consumers. Kapten & Son, Oh April, Ayen, Aim'n sportswear or Karo Kauer Label are just a few D2C brands that originate in Europe.

Online Direct Sales Channels

Since this thesis focuses on the online environment, possible direct sales channels are discussed that are part of e-commerce, which refers to all transactions involving the sale and purchase of products or services via the internet (Turban et al., 2017, p. 6). These channels can be utilised for mobile commerce as well, which means using mobile devices for e-commerce (Turban et al., 2017, p. 169). A sales channel that is part of a digital D2C strategy can take the form of either a brand-owned webshop or a brand store on an online marketplace (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 374). Both forms are distinct and provide advantages and disadvantages for brands which are elaborated in detail below.

A brand-owned webshop is an individual company's website where its products are sold and which can also be integrated into a mobile application (Turban et al., 2017, p. 6). Brand manufacturers that operate a brand-owned webshop as an online direct sales channel are in full control of their distribution and can benefit from all advantages a D2C strategy offers (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 374). These include improved margins and expanded market reach and, even more importantly, brand-specific market presence and first-party data gathered through direct customer contact, that help to create an extensive brand experience and to build consumer-brand relationships.

With a brand-owned webshop a manufacturer is able to market its products in an online environment that conveys its corporate identity (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 374). Its values and key messages can be communicated in any form (e.g., video, animation, text, illustration, etc.) and visually supported by its corporate design that is consistent throughout the shop. The pricing is also entirely up to the brand and target countries can be individually defined up to a global target market (Bashkin et al., 2017).

Selling through a brand-owned webshop allows interaction and feedback loops that provides valuable information for product innovation and development, and in this process, turn customers into co-creators of value (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 376; Kim et al., 2021, p. 6). As an example for reflecting customer's feedback, the American apparel brand Everlane replaced the materials used for wool trousers with ones perceived to be less itchy and added details like belt loops that were requested by consumers (Kim et al., 2021, p. 4). A brand-owned webshop further allows quick testing of new products without enormous expenses for shelf-placements at retailers (Bower, 2017, p. 25).

Moreover, co-creation plays not only an important role in the development stage of new products. By means of mass-customisation, that is enabled through online product configurators integrated into brand-owned webshops, products tailored to the individual needs of consumers can be offered (Büttgen, 2017, p. 160). These customised products create higher value und build lasting experiences for consumers (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 374). As an example of this, the German brand Canvasco offers a bag configurator to customise them in terms of size, bag and strap colour as well as myriad graphics that can be placed individually on the bag (Canvasco, n.d.). Some product configurators can even preview the configured products as a three-dimensional model in real-time (Gottschalk et al., 2020, p. 84).

Direct contact, and the thereby collected first-party data, enable personalised communication, which can involve welcoming customers by their name or congratulating them on their birthday (Diorio, 2016; Samsukha, 2022). In addition, brands are enabled to personalise offers that may influence consumers' repurchase intention positively or generate incentives based on their interests that encourage cross- and upselling of products. This is enabled by cookies and retargeting campaigns, that are further explained in the section of

Performance Marketing Channels later on. Product recommendations for users are also enabled by algorithms that automatically predict users' interest by collecting the preferences of many consumers (Graef, 2015, pp. 477–478). Moreover, virtual assistants in the form of chatbots based on artificial intelligence are used to create personalised experiences, such as the so-called *Virtual Stylist* of Levi's which helps customers find the right jeans in terms of size, shape and stretch (Levi Strauss & Co., 2017).

Moreover, cutting-edge technology like augmented reality may be incorporated into the webshop and support the sales channel by a special form of marketing the products (Kim et al., 2021, p. 5). Through augmented reality the real environment is viewed with additional virtual objects (Carmigniani et al., 2011, p. 342). A pioneer of exploiting this technology is Warby Parker, a US eyewear brand (Kim et al., 2021, p. 5). Warby Parker offers a virtual try-on of eyeglasses that supports consumers in making their choice.

Currently, only a small number of shops with a large and loyal customer base manage to achieve high sales (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, pp. 374–375). Even if revenue is not the primary goal of most, due to lacking brand awareness, scale, and financial resources it is quite a challenge to drive traffic to the webshop and reach a critical mass of consumers. Therefore, according to Gielens and Steenkamp (2019), brands try to enhance webshop attractiveness by *"offering a broad and unique assortment, featuring exclusive, premium products, and personalisation, combined with special services to distinguish itself from online retailers"* (p. 374).

Contrary to brand-owned webshops, brand stores on online marketplaces provide enormous reach and easy penetration of the mass-consumer market (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 375). A brand store on an online marketplace is a branded area on a website that facilitates shopping from different sellers and is comparable to a store-within-a-store

arrangement. The brand manufacturer acts as a third party seller who sells directly to consumers, uses the infrastructure of the marketplace and has to pay a fee or certain share of the turnover to the marketplace in return (Abhishek et al., 2016, p. 2259; Yenipazarli, 2021, p. 763). In this case, the marketplace platform does neither buy nor own any products but acts as an agent (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 375; Yenipazarli, 2021, p. 763). Since a brand store on a marketplace can be implemented mostly independently and self-determined by brand manufacturers, it is considered a direct sales channels (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 239).

In the fashion industry, more and more online marketplaces have enabled the creation of brand stores as well (Pimberly, 2022). These marketplaces include industry giant Amazon (Amazon.com, Inc., n.d.-b), as well as other online marketplaces specialised in fashion like Zalando with its partner programme (Zalando SE, n.d.), the ASOS Marketplace (ASOS Marketplace Limited, n.d.) and FARFETCH (FARFETCH UK Limited, n.d.), which all offer brands the possibility of direct sales. Brands that utilise this possibility via Zalando's partner programme, for example, are DRYKORN, CLOSED, Michael Kors and BOSS (Zalando SE, n.d.).

By utilising brand stores on online marketplaces as direct online sales channels, a brand manufacturer is in control of the price, its offered products, and can partly determine the content and presentation of its brand store (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 247). In addition, customers may turn into co-creators or even free customer service employees by providing valuable feedback and answering questions of other consumers (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 375). However, the possibilities for a brand's presentation are limited and direct interaction with the consumer is hard to achieve, which is why brand experience suffers (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 247). Data can be analysed and partly used, but is owned by the marketplace and therefore personalisation and making use of cross-selling potentials are reserved for the

marketplace itself. Consumers may even get distracted by other products or brands and price competition is a present issue. The latter is even more intense when dealers of the brand manufacturer sell products on the marketplace as well (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 369).

As evidenced above, brand stores on existing marketplaces have to contend with the advantages and disadvantages of the practice, which is why brand manufacturers have to make a conscientious decision whether they offer their products on existing marketplaces. However, the appeal of consolidated marketplaces for the consumer cannot be overstated, as a survey of the Schlesinger Group showed that 70% of global consumers are of the opinion that marketplaces are the *"most convenient way to shop online"* (Mirakl, 2021). Yenipazarli (2021) even states that for many brands *"marketplace presence is not optional but mandatory"* (p. 761).

Another direct online sales channel, that is neither listed in literature nor primary in this thesis, is a brand store on social media. In the US and Asia social commerce, which means the processing of e-commerce transactions via social media (Turban et al., 2017, p. 15), has already been established and is becoming increasingly important. According to statistics, the global market volume amounted to $492 billion in 2021 and is expected to more than double by 2025 (Accenture, 2022). In Europe, social commerce is also on the rise, but social media platforms still do not cover the complete shopping process, including checkout (Sagebiel, 2023), which is why this channel of direct sales will not be discussed further in this thesis. However, it can be said that operating a brand store on social media is comparable to a brand store on an online marketplace. The social network takes over many functions and suffers from similar limitations as a marketplace with the difference that the opportunities for direct customer interaction are inherently better.

Independent of the channel, each direct sales channel can be operated as an organisation's single channel. Nevertheless, more and more original D2C online brands are adding offline direct channels, such as physical stores or showrooms, and operate a dual-channel strategy (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 375). They want to reduce return rates and give consumers the possibility to touch and try on especially high-quality or high-priced products. Warby Parker and Bonobos, a men's apparel brand from the US, opened showrooms or so-called *guideshops* that provide customers with styling services (B. E. Jin & Shin, 2020, pp. 303–304). In these shops all possible variants of the products are available to try on, but no inventory is kept. When a customer makes a purchase, staff place an online order and products are delivered home within a few days. This allows the brands to curb the usually high costs of physical stores.

Furthermore, most established brand manufacturers, such as Nike or Prada, and even some original D2C brands, such as the German fashion brands Kapten & Son or Armedangels, sell directly and indirectly simultaneously (Tahirov & Glock, 2022, p. 423). Some rather new brand manufacturers like On-Running even start their business with a combination of direct and indirect sales channels benefiting from both right away (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 246). This can range from a dual-channel strategy in the sense of a direct and an indirect sales channel (Tahirov & Glock, 2022, p. 403), to multi-channel retailing, which comprises more than two channels that are separated, or even omni-channel retailing, which consists of even more channels, including mobile, that are integrated and provide a seamless experience (Verhoef et al., 2015, pp. 175–176). These dual, multi- or omni-channel distribution strategies offer brands greater reach as well as market coverage, while consumers benefit from the ability to freely choose their desired (Dumrongsiri et al., 2008, p. 692; Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 240). However, selling through both direct and indirect channels, and adding direct

channels to an existing indirect distribution strategy especially, may lead to conflicts between channels as they compete with each other, which was already pointed out in the chapter of Types of Organisations with D2C strategy (Tahirov & Glock, 2022, p. 423). To avoid channel conflicts some options can be considered: modifying product offerings by selling them in multi-pack selections, different packaging or package size, or creating and offering distinct product lines for each channel (Bower, 2017, p. 25; Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 240).

Performance Marketing Channels

For D2C strategies, communication plays an essential role and is a major driver of success, which is also reflected in a US study showing that D2C advertising has seen an increase by 50% in recent years (Loeb, 2019). However, the goal of the advertising is not to achieve more reach or impressions via classic media like TV or print advertising (Diorio, 2016; Ramershoven, 2022), but rather it is about using first-party data collected via online direct sales channels and to target consumers directly. Specifically, it is about measurable results such as conversions or subscriptions in the way of performance marketing.

Performance marketing is a form of online marketing that aims to trigger measurable reactions of consumers (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 3). That can be, for example, the click on an ad or the completion of a transaction. Performance marketing campaigns often have a modular structure and use various channels. In contrast to classic advertising campaigns, which often only aim to increase brand awareness, performance marketing campaigns run through the entire marketing funnel. An exemplary funnel, based on the well-known AIDA (attention, interest, desire and action) model proposed by Elmo Lewis in 1898 and still relevant, is shown in Figure 3 (Hassan et al., 2015, p. 265). To capture a user's attention and

encourage a purchase, a typical four-step process involves creating awareness, generating interest, fostering desire, and finally prompting an action in the form of a purchase.

Figure 3 – Performance Marketing Funnel

Note. The funnel includes performance marketing channels that may be utilised at each stage. Adapted from *"Performance Marketing: Der Wegweiser zu einem mess- und steuerbaren Online-Marketing – Einführung in Instrumente, Methoden und Technik [Performance Marketing: The Guide to Measurable and Controllable Online Marketing – Introduction to Instruments, Methods and Technology]"*, by Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 6.

The focus of performance marketing campaigns is on consumers and data-driven advertising (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 4). Data-driven marketing is a complex process consisting of collecting data and analysing consumers' search and purchasing behaviour to target the audience through a personalised strategy (Grandhi et al., 2021, p. 384). Via tracking mechanisms such as cookies, which are small text files that record when a user visits a website and track the user's activities and preferences, users can be remembered and targeted with ads based on their interests (e.g., visiting a casual fashion blog) and intentions (e.g., price

comparison for a specific ankle boot), as determined by their browsing behaviour. This can significantly increase the relevance of the ad to the user and therefore the likelihood that they will engage with it. Further, crucial for performance marketing campaigns is setting goals for each channel and defining key performance indicators (KPIs) that show potentials for optimisations as performance marketing aims to continuously improve campaign results over time (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 7–8). Some exemplary KPIs are impressions (how often an ad is delivered), cost-per-mille (CPM, cost of 1,000 impressions), cost-per-action (CTA, cost of a predefined action) and especially cost-per-click (CPC, cost of an ad-click), click-through-rate (CTR, ratio of the number of web impressions to clicked ads), engagement rate (ratio of likes, comments, shares, etc. to impressions), conversion rate (ratio of a specific goal such as a transaction to impressions), and the return on advertising spend (ROAS) (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 60–63).

However, brands that employ a D2C strategy can use any marketing or communication channel of their choosing and are not limited to performance marketing. In most cases, social media is the primary marketing channel of a fashion brand with a D2C strategy since it enables direct interaction with consumers and gives consumers the possibility of interacting with each other (Kim et al., 2021, p. 9). According to reports, 93% of internet users are social media users as well (We Are Social, DataReportal & Hootsuite, 2022), and the most important social media platforms for businesses include Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter and TikTok (Social Media Examiner, 2022). Social media channels are also leveraged by brands that sell indirectly, while performance marketing channels, which are ultimately always aimed at a purchase, are not used as frequently. Brand manufacturers that sell indirectly mainly run brand awareness campaigns and focus on building brand image, as the final action of the consumer, the purchase, cannot be made without a retailer (Yue et al., 2013, pp. 492–493).

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Advertising that focuses on sales specifically is then done by retailers, usually in a cooperative advertising approach where costs are shared with the manufacturer. Performance marketing is therefore more prevalent amongst brands with a D2C strategy, which is why the focus of this thesis is on these channels. The subsequent section highlights the key channels utilised in performance marketing. As almost all fashion brands with a D2C strategy also participate in performance marketing, specific examples for each channel will not be provided.

Social media advertising includes all paid advertising measures on social media platforms and is particularly useful for reaching large and specific target groups (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 133–135). Each platform offers individual possibilities in terms of ad formats (text, photo, video, slideshow, etc.), targeting options, and objectives, which can range from awareness to conversion campaigns. Users can be targeted by demographic attributes (age, gender, location, education, workplace, etc.), interests (sustainable fashion, sportswear, etc.), behaviour (device or operating system used, etc.) or connection (users who already like the page, have been to an event, etc.). Moreover, custom audiences or lookalike audiences can be created for retargeting and conversion tracking purposes. Custom audiences consist of users from customer lists or those who have been identified on the brand's webshop through a cookie, the so-called *pixel* (Meta, 2023). Lookalike audiences that can be generated, comprise users who closely resemble the custom audiences but have not yet been identified. These audiences can be effectively targeted with advertising campaigns.

Influencer marketing, which has established itself with the advent of Instagram and YouTube, is another increasingly important performance marketing channel (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 149). The relevance of influencer marketing is highlighted by a global market size of $16,4 billion in 2022 (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022). Companies or brands use the reach and reputation of influencers and cooperate with them to promote their

products and to avoid consumers' growing rejection of classic advertising formats (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 149). Influencers are described as multipliers that have built up a large community on social media platforms by frequently creating content, expressing their opinions and exerting influence on their audience (Kay et al., 2020, p. 248). Except for celebrities, influencers often belong to the mainstream of society and thus appear very authentic and credible (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 149–150). Especially fashion influencers who share style tips and introduce their clothing to a sizeable following have attracted the attention of fashion brands (S. V. Jin et al., 2019, p. 567). Decisive for the success of the cooperation is the selection of the influencer, that he or she fits the brand and that his or her community matches the target group of the brand (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 152–154).

Search engine marketing comprises both search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine advertising (SEA). While SEO consists of all measures that improve the organic (unpaid) ranking and presentation of a website or webshop in search engine result pages, SEA consists of all paid advertising measures within search engines and their partner networks (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 19, 43). The most popular search engines include Google, Bing, Yahoo!, DuckDuckGo, Baidu in China, and Yandex in Russia (StatCounter, 2023). As algorithms use a myriad of factors to evaluate websites and calculate their position, optimisation considers the content and keywords of a website, technical measures directly related to the website, such as the structure or the loading time, and the relevance of the website, indicated by links that refer to it from other websites or social networks(G. Kumar & Paul, 2020, pp. 30–32). In terms of advertising, the company or brand defines keywords for which it wants to be found and specifies the click price it is willing to pay (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 43–45). Depending on the bid and the user's intention, the search engine then either displays the ad or not. Usually, the sponsored results are displayed at the top of the search engine results pages before the

organic results and most users cannot distinguish between them (Schultheiß & Lewandowski, 2021, p. 285). The most common advertising options range from text-based ads to text and image combinations, to data feeds such as product. There is a variety of targeting options available, including geographic limitations, specific characteristics of the target group (gender, interests, purchase intention, etc.), and time-based or device-based targeting.

Display advertising refers to banners that are distributed on third-party websites (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 91). These banners can be of various sizes and positions, static, animated or in the form of a video. Basically, a distinction is made between native advertising, a form of advertising in which the ads are integrated into the content of the third-party website and are hardly perceived as advertising, and programmatic advertising, which is data-based and automated trading of online advertising placements (Ciuchita et al., 2023, p. 232; Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 93). The latter puts the user in the centre and has become more and more established in recent years, as a survey by Statista (2022) confirms. A wide variety of user data is used to address the target group in the right place and at the right time with ads (Osmundson, 2022). Therefore, a wide variety of targeting options are available here as well (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 95–102). In addition, retargeting can be used to address users who have already been identified, and prospecting can be used to find exclusively new users. The ads are bought on ad exchange platforms and the price is usually determined by an auction process, the so-called *real-time bidding*.

Affiliate marketing came up in the 90's and still has its raison d'être (Jurišová, 2013, p. 106). It describes an internet-based distribution system in which a brand acts as an advertiser, also called merchant, and remunerates a distribution partner, here called publisher or affiliate, on a success-oriented basis in the form of a provision (Duffy, 2005, pp. 162–163). In this process, the advertiser makes its online advertising material (banners, product links,

videos, etc.) available via an affiliate network (Jurišová, 2013, p. 107). The affiliate who participates in the programme then places the ad on its website to promote the merchant's offer and direct users to the brand-owned webshop. To evaluate the success of an affiliate marketing campaign, tracking codes are used to record when an action or transaction has been completed. Known affiliates can be (price) comparison portals or special deal sites. However, any third-party website can act as a publisher provided it meets certain requirements (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 112–123).

Email marketing means broadcasting commercial messages via electronic mail (Bawm & Nath, 2014, p. 250). It can be used to reach a large number of prospects at reasonable cost and is particularly suitable for reactivating existing customers, but can also be used for customer acquisition (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 73). The generation of addresses can be done via existing customer data or the purchase of email addresses or registrations through webforms (Bawm & Nath, 2014, p. 251). Email marketing includes the sending of regular newsletters, trigger emails such as birthday greetings, transactional emails such as order confirmations, or emails for retargeting purposes. The latter reaches out to consumers who have not reacted to previous emails at all, have only opened them, clicked on links, or have not purchased products in their virtual shopping cart (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 77–85). The sending of vouchers is also very common, and the subject line, which usually consists of a clear call-to-action or personalisations, may be decisive for success.

Finally, it should be noted that all these channels can be utilised when operating a brand-owned webshop as well as a brand store on online marketplaces. Marketplaces such as Amazon or Zalando are also considered search engines, or at least offer a search function, which is why optimisation often makes sense for brand stores as well, and advertising is also possible on some marketplaces (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 244). Search engine marketing is

similar, but differs slightly depending on the marketplace, and is therefore not discussed further. Additionally, marketplaces like Amazon run their own affiliate programme which can be leveraged by brands to advertise (Amazon.com, Inc., n.d.-a). However, operating a brand store on an online marketplace limits retargeting possibilities as the data of the website is owned and not shared by the marketplace for data privacy reasons and cannot be used by the brand for other channels such as social media or programmatic advertising (Graef, 2015, pp. 478–479).

Determinants of a Successful D2C Strategy

According to Kim et al. (2021) there are various determinants that affect the success of a D2C strategy and decide whether a consumer remains loyal to a fashion brand or not (pp. 8, 17). The most important factor is brand uniqueness as it fulfills the consumers' inclination towards individuality, followed by social media engagement and innovativeness.

Consumers' perceived brand uniqueness includes both unique products and unique brand stories compared to competitors (Kim et al., 2021, p. 8). The uniqueness of products is based on factors like design, function, quality, or materials used. Sepiia a Spanish fashion brand, differentiates itself by offering shirts that are similar to sportswear – breathable, easy-care, stain- and wrinkle-free (Sepiia 2080 S.L., n.d.). Unique brand stories can be distinguished between the brand's origin or efforts towards sustainability. Levi Strauss & Co., which is known for its classic blue jeans, differentiates itself with its long and rich brand history rooted in the American culture, dating back to 1852 (Levi Strauss & Co, n.d.). Levi's promotes nostalgic stories from the past to show its authenticity and timeless style. Armedangels, an up-and-coming German fashion brand, puts sustainability in the centre and proclaims *"we are*

not here to make fashion. We are here to make a difference" (Social Fashion Company GmbH, n.d.).

Social media engagement refers to the consumers' behaviour that is manifested in social media beyond the purchase (Kim et al., 2021, p. 9). Social media is used as a tool for communication by brands and consumers alike, as consumers engage with brand accounts themselves and with other consumers (Ho & Wang, 2015, p. 11). Online communities that have their own practices and rituals are formed and often driven by influencers who take on the role of brand ambassadors (Kim et al., 2021, p. 9). Gymshark, a US sportswear brand, uses influencers to partake in their storytelling and share workout videos to motivate other users. Users are then encouraged to maintain these relationships and build a stronger connection to the brand.

A brand's innovativeness is also considered a factor of success that refers to innovative products, business models, or other actions (Kim et al., 2021, p. 9). Brands that provide new and useful solutions or make use of cutting-edge technology, like the virtual try-on that Warby Parker offers, enhance consumers' desire to purchase (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010, p. 66).

Three other factors that indirectly affect repurchase intention through consumer attitude are cost-effectiveness, which means a proper value-price-ratio, website attractiveness, and co-creation (Kim et al., 2021, pp. 4–6). As the (virtual) storefront of most D2C strategies, websites or webshops should attract consumers through a thoughtful design and by conveying the brand identity. Co-creation was already mentioned in the section of Online Direct Sales Channels and means creating experiences through direct interactions and co-produced or customised offerings.

Brand Experience

Brands are valuable assets and those offering an overall experience are far more popular on the consumer and investment market than those simply selling products (Zha et al., 2020, p. 287). Thus, how consumers experience brands is vital for successful marketing strategies, for positioning and differentiation, and achieving competitive advantage (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 52; Khan et al., 2016, p. 712; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013, p. 26). Furthermore, from a managerial perspective, brand experience is crucial for building consumer-brand relationships and has therefore gained substantial attention in marketing practices (Khan & Rahman, 2015, p. 1; V. Kumar & Kaushik, 2020, p. 52).

The following chapter starts with the fundamentals of fashion brands and gives a comprehensive review of the brand experience construct, which is anchored in experiential marketing. After the definition, the dimensions, and levels of brand experiences, as well as the peculiarities of the online environment are elaborated in detail. Wherever possible, despite the paucity of literature in this context, references are made to fashion brands with a D2C strategy.

Brands and Fashion Brands

Brands in general can be defined from a corporate and a consumer perspective (Wood, 2000, p. 664). They are created by company strategy for the fundamental purpose of identification and differentiation. As intangible bundles of attributes, consumers derive benefits from them and brands are therefore the added value, from a consumer perspective. Brands can be seen as a combination of associations and meanings that are ascribed to the brands and reflected in a human's mind (Posner, 2015, p. 140). This also means that consumers and other stakeholders are active shapers of brands, and that brands are not only

created by marketers (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 125; Black & Veloutsou, 2017, p. 426). In this thesis, brands are therefore considered as socially constructed phenomena that are co-created through the interactions of all its stakeholders (Black & Veloutsou, 2017, p. 426; Merz et al., 2009, p. 338).

Fashion brands can be divided into belonging to different market sectors according to the product categories of clothing and apparel, accessories, footwear, homeware, perfume and cosmetics, as well as being categorised as catering specifically towards women, men, or children as already described in the introductory text of the Literature Review (Posner, 2015, pp. 10, 13, 162). These categories cater to a variety of product types, including but not limited to lingerie and denim, as well as diverse end-uses such as sportswear and formal wear, and fashion styles such as contemporary fashion. Further, fashion brands can also be assigned to different levels of the fashion market. The superordinate levels are haute couture and couture as well as ready-to-wear. These levels are displayed in Figure 4 and explained in the following.

Figure 4 – Fashion Market Hierarchy

Note. Adopted from *"Marketing Fashion: Strategy, Branding and Promotion"*, by Posner, 2015, p. 13.

Haute couture, which means high sewing, represents the highest level of fashion and is used to describe elaborately hand-sewn dresses, with great attention to detail and often made from unusual fabrics (Armitage, 2022, pp. 2–3; Posner, 2015, pp. 12–14). It is characterised by extremely high prices, often reaching six figures, and limited sales of each garment. The term "haute couture" is legally protected and subject to strict rules set by the historic Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture in Paris. Exclusive clothing from designers that are not recognised by the Chambre Syndicale, must be marketed as couture rather than haute couture. Examples of true haute couturiers include Chanel, Valentino and Dior. However, haute couture is a small segment of the fashion industry, that is not initially sold to consumers on the internet and serves primarily as a marketing tool to enhance a brand's status and desirability.

Ready-to-wear fashion, on the other hand, includes products that are not made to measure for an individual customer but are prefabricated and usually manufactured industrially in predefined sizes. According to Posner (2015) it can be divided into four levels (pp. 14–15):

- High-end fashion includes luxury designers and premium brands, like Chloé or Prada, and is characterised by signature designs, exclusivity, and high prices (Fionda & Moore, 2009, p. 359). To make the brand accessible to a larger target group, luxury designer brands create diffusion lines like See by Chloè that are part of the middle-market.

- Middle-market fashion encompasses affordable luxury and masstige fashion, which is a short form of prestige for the masses, making luxury available to all, even those with limited budgets. Fashion brands that belong to middle-market fashion are Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein or Scotch & Soda.

- Mass-market fashion usually refers to fashion retail chains like Zara or H&M which offer fast-fashion products and the latest styles for an affordable price, but also includes D2C brands like NA-KD or LIVELY.

- Mass-market and fast-fashion are often also associated with retail chains like Primark or Takko that are considered in the hierarchy of fashion as value-market fashion. Value-market fashion offers products at a very low price point and is therefore dominated by discount retailers.

The boundaries that separate the various levels of the fashion market are becoming increasingly blurred and harder to define. Nowadays, a growing number of fashion brands are implementing tactics to broaden their appeal and expand their business to different customer segments, which can make it harder to pinpoint where they fit within the market. However,

beyond these levels, fashion brands can also be divided into different types according to Posner (2015, pp. 143–144):

- Corporate brands, such as Patagonia or Gymshark, represent an entire corporation, whereby the brand and corporate name are the same (Yu Xie & Boggs, 2006, p. 347). Furthermore, corporate groups that have a brand portfolio to maximise market coverage or target different customer segments, are considered corporate brands. An example of such a group is LVMH Moët Hennessy – Louis Vuitton SE, which owns Louis Vuitton, Givenchy, Fendi and many other brands (LVMH Moët Hennessy – Louis Vuitton SE, n.d.). As these brands are all individual subsidiaries, they are also considered to be corporate brands.

- On the other hand, when a single company owns several brands to differentiate its products, these are called product brands (Yu Xie & Boggs, 2006, p. 347). For example, Sisley is a product brand of Benetton (Benetton Group, n.d.).

- Private brands, or private labels, are owned by retailers to differentiate their offer and add value, like Collusion by ASOS (ASOS plc, n.d.), and are therefore not relevant for brands with D2C strategy.

- Endorsed brands are sub-brands to highlight specific products or collections, whereby the names of the parent and sub-brand are linked. A sub-brand, such as Polo by Ralph Lauren, benefits from the reputation and credibility of the parent brand.

- Finally, partnership brands or co-brands are created when two brands, such as Vans and Disney, collaborate to develop a new brand. These collaborations can also include personal brands like those of celebrities and influencers, resulting

in special collections such as Rianne Meijer x NA-KD (Nakdcom One World AB, n.d.).

Experiential Marketing

The concept of experience is discussed in various disciplines (e.g., philosophy, cognitive science, managerial practice etc.) and was first explored in the context of consumer research by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982). A few years later, Pine and Gilmore (1999) defined experiences as *"events that engage individuals in a personal way"* (p. 12). In contrast to the traditional approach of features and benefits marketing, Schmitt (1999a) introduced experiential marketing that creates experiences for consumers and include five types of experiences: *"sensory experiences (SENSE), affective experiences (FEEL), creative cognitive experiences (THINK), physical experiences, behaviours and lifestyles (ACT), and social-identity experiences that result from relating to a reference group or culture (RELATE)"* (p. 60).

In the meanwhile, numerous researchers contributed to experiential marketing, especially in terms of customer experience, which involves all individual contacts between a company and a customer, so-called *touchpoints* (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016, pp. 70–71). Customer experience is the broadest research area and serves as an umbrella term (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53; Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013, p. 29; Zha et al., 2020, p. 292). Rather than focusing on specific aspects, it includes all customers' or consumers' experiences and experience processes that may be related to products, brands, technology, shopping, service, retail, or consumption. Experiences occur either directly through a physical contact or indirectly via advertising and marketing communications (Beig & Nika, 2019, p. 2; Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53). Both direct and indirect experiences may exert considerable influence on consumers' attitude as well as behaviour and, are therefore of high managerial relevance.

Definition of Brand Experience

For a long time, research focused on utilitarian categories of experiences (e.g., product or consumption) and ignored the branding factor (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 52; Zha et al., 2020, p. 287). In 2009 brand experience was first coined by Brakus et al., who built on Schmitt's (1999a) experiential marketing approach and defined brand experience as *"subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognitions) and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments"* (p. 53). Accordingly, brand-related stimuli are the source of brand experience and refer to specific colours, typefaces, shapes, design elements, a slogan, name, or logo, as well as advertisements, a website, or the environment in which the brand's products are marketed or sold, such as physical stores, events or online shops (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53). Brand experience occurs in various settings and at numerous touchpoints of interactions when consumers search and shop for a brand or consume it. It therefore relates to the *"summary impressions of a brand as a whole"* (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013, p. 35). Some researchers even state that non-customers who are exposed to a brand's communication have a brand experience (V. Kumar & Kaushik, 2020, p. 42).

As a multi-dimensional construct, brand experiences vary in valence, strength and intensity (Beig & Nika, 2019, p. 3; Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53). Some experiences are more intense or last longer than others, and they are either positive or negative to varying degrees. Brakus et al. (2009) empirically showed that it is distinct to other brand-related constructs like brand attitude, brand involvement, brand attachment and brand associations, and demonstrated that it significantly affects consumer satisfaction and loyalty directly as well as indirectly through brand personality (pp. 53, 65). Brand associations include anything that is attributed to the brand, from benefits, to products, to human characteristics that represent

the brand personality, and which are influenced by experiences (Schmitt & Zarantonello, 2013, pp. 35–36). Attitudes are general evaluations of a brand, whereas brand experiences are specific sensations, feelings etc. dedicated to specific stimuli. Brand involvement and attachment are motivational in nature and include personal interest, while experiences even happen when consumers do not expect it.

Almost all subsequent research (e.g., Beig & Nika, 2019; Cleff et al., 2014; V. Kumar & Kaushik, 2020; Nysveen et al., 2013; Yoon & Youn, 2016) is based on Schmitt (1999a) or relied on the stimuli-reaction paradigm of Brakus et al. (2009), which is even more common. However, this is severely criticised by Andreini et al. (2018), who argue that changes in the context of consumers, markets and consumption, such as digitalisation, co-creative relationships, or proliferation, initiated a demand for a broader view of brand experience (p. 124). Although the managerial importance of brand experience is recognised and has revolutionary implications for the market, academia has contributed little to the further development of the brand experience construct.

In line with brand literature that goes beyond functional benefits and considers brands as socially-constructed phenomena that are not solely shaped by marketers, but instead created and co-constructed by the interaction of its stakeholders (Black & Veloutsou, 2017, p. 426; Merz et al., 2009, p. 337), Andreini et al. (2018) identified three theoretical streams (relationship theory, consumer-culture theory and service-dominant logic) implicitly dealing with brand experience (p. 124–125). They show that brand experience is co-created through interactions on an individual, collective, culture and market level. From that perspective, brand experience is understood as a subjective response to brand-related stimuli that is formed in a social and cultural context, multi-dimensionally represented in the consumer's mind (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 127; Zha et al., 2020, p. 298).

Dimensions of Brand Experience

Experiences are generally categorised into different dimensions. Schmitt (1999b) proposed five strategic experiential modules (see sub-chapter Experiential Marketing) that are further developed by different researchers (e.g., Gentile et al., 2007). Brakus et al. (2009) put them into the context of brand experience and adopted Schmitt's modules from a consumer perspective. They constructed a reliable brand experience scale with twelve items for measurement and empirically explored the dimensions using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (Brakus et al., 2009, pp. 55–63). As a result, only four dimensions passed validity tests, namely sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioural, and the four-factor model was introduced. The fifth relational dimension was disqualified since it showed strong emotional aspects. However, in other applied writings and investigations (e.g., Andreini et al., 2018; Nysveen et al., 2013; Schmitt et al., 2015) the relevance of the relational dimension is demonstrated and argued for again. Brand experience connects individuals with each other, companies, or other stakeholders and activates relationships (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 127). As mentioned before, this thesis considers brands social constructs and therefore aligns itself with Andreini et al. (2018) who state that *"brands and brand experiences are elements bound up in these social relationships"* (p. 127). Therefore, relational dimensionality plays a fundamental role that must be taken into account as an independent brand experience dimension. In the following the dimensions are explained in more detail.

The sensory dimension encompasses the five senses and is about the visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory stimuli a consumer experiences (Schmitt, 1999b, p. 99). They capture how a brand appeals to the consumers' senses (e.g., pleasure or excitement) and also covers aesthetic attributes (Beig & Nika, 2019, p. 3; Iglesias et al., 2019, p. 345). The sensory experience is triggered by sensory expressions which may involve colours, music, scents,

materials and many more (Hultén, 2011, p. 265). Schmitt (1999b) divides the expressions into primary elements, styles, and themes. Primary elements include obvious attributes like colours, shapes, loudness, texture, etc. and combined they constitute specific styles like minimalism, abstraction, or dynamic movement (Schmitt, 1999b, pp. 102–107). Themes add meaning and content to the styles and refer to narratives or stories that serve as a mental anchor. Brand names, slogans, jingles etc. may be such themes that activate the imagination or associations in consumers' minds. An example of a fashion brand that creates sensory experiences is Hermès. For decades the luxury brand has been known for its orange colour, which came to be associated with quality and contemporary craftsmanship, and which is reflected in its product boxes, shopping bags, envelopes, ads, etc. The colour is strongly linked to the brand and immediately attracts consumers' interest when spotted. A sensory expression is the first thing that catches the consumer's attention and, in many cases, brand choices or purchase decision are based on sensory aspects like visual appearance (Bloch et al., 2003, p. 551). Hepola et al. (2017) state that the more senses are stimulated, the more intense the experience is perceived as (p. 286). Therefore, it is a central dimension that is examined in many studies (e.g., Hepola et al., 2017; Hultén, 2011; Iglesias et al., 2019; Jiménez Barreto et al., 2019).

Affective experiences refer to consumers' feelings in relation to a brand, ranging from moderate moods to strong emotions, that can either be positive or negative and of varying intensity (Schmitt, 1999b, pp. 122–126). These experiences are triggered by communication, events, people, etc., but are most intense when caused by consumption or interaction. In general, basic and complex emotions are distinguished. The eight basic emotions proposed by Plutchik and Kellerman (1980) are fear, anger, joy, sadness, acceptance, disgust, expectation, and surprise (p. 26). Combining these basic emotions can then result in complex

emotions like nostalgia, pride, or shame (Schmitt, 1999b, p. 125). For example, Nike with its empowering slogan *"Just do it"* (Nike Inc., 2022) strives to generate feelings of confidence, strength, and determination. Since emotions often lead to consumer behaviour and affect decision making, they play an important role in the research on consumer response (Williams, 2014, p. viii).

According to Schmitt (1999b) intellectual or cognitive experiences refer to the stimulation of consumers' creative and analytical thinking by brands, which in turn prompts consumers to reassess them (pp. 138-148). In this context, to drive consumers' creativity both convergent and divergent thinking is required. While convergent means systematic thinking and analytical reasoning, divergent is more creative and covers different perspectives. Marketers employ associative thinking campaigns that are surprising, intriguing, and provocative to evoke this kind of thinking and experience. Intellectual experiences are most often created by technology brands (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 61), but fashion brands also run provocative campaigns that address sexuality, power, or identity, such as Yves Saint Laurent with its androgynous models (Breslin, 2017).

Behavioural experiences pertain to changes that involve the physical body in terms of movements or gestures, lifestyles, or interactions (Schmitt, 1999b, pp. 154–169). Interactions in this context are not considered socially, but with reference to the medium, since experiences differ depending on whether the interactions take place in-person or with a machine. Lifestyles that are behavioural patterns expressed in activities, attitudes, and interests play an important role in the fashion industry especially. Brands convey certain lifestyles and often use role models to influence changes in consumers' lifestyle or behaviour (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 62). As an example, BOSS launched its spring/summer campaign of 2023 under the motto *"Be your own BOSS"* (HUGO BOSS AG, 2023) featuring young talents, such

as Khaby Lame, that overcame obstacles and real struggles, and should showcase how to become one's own boss.

Relational experiences cover aspects of all experiential dimensions mentioned before and are about fulfilling the consumers' desire for self-improvement, driven by the need to appeal to others, and social identity (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 62). This is enabled by the fact that consumers perceive their possessions, or branded products in this case, as parts of their identity (Belk, 1988, p. 139). Relational experiences go beyond the individuals and relate them to the social and cultural context of a brand (Schmitt, 1999b, pp. 171, 188). This involves everything from connecting with other individuals (e.g., friends, family, or colleagues) to social groups (e.g., ethnic or lifestyle) or social entities (e.g., nation, culture, or society). Moreover, consumers' relations to brands and brand communities play essential roles. A brand community is defined as a *"specialised, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relations among admirers of a brand"* (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). The brand is at the centre and the community is characterised by *"shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility"* (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412). A brand community may lead to enhanced consumer-brand relationships, brand loyalty, and commitment and therefore brings great value to the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 427). As already mentioned in the section Determinants of a Successful D2C Strategy, the sportswear brand Gymshark has such a community (Kim et al., 2021, p. 9).

Levels of Brand Experience

Following the approaches of relationship theory, consumer-culture theory, and service-dominant logic, brand experience takes place on different levels as noted earlier (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 125). These levels range from the interactions of individuals' with brands at the

micro-level and interactions between collectives like communities and social groups at the meso-level, to cultural dimensions such as societies, institutions, or class systems at the macro-level which incorporates both the micro- and meso-level (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 127).

Figure 5 illustrates the three levels in the form of a conceptual model developed by Andreini et al. (2018).

Figure 5 – Levels of Brand Experience Co-Creation
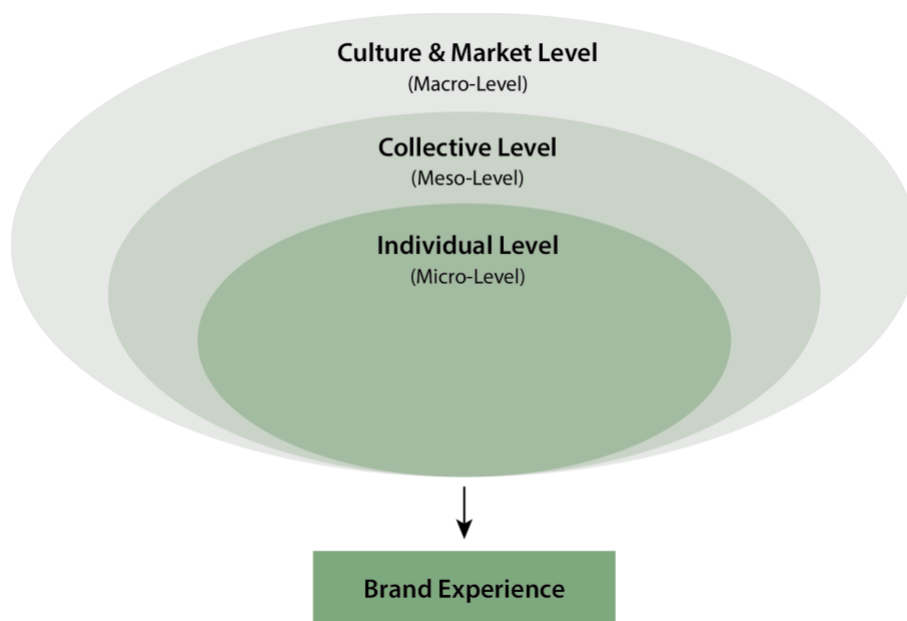
Note. Adopted from "A renaissance of brand experience: Advancing the concept through a multi-perspective analysis", by Andreini et al., 2018, Journal of Business Research, 91, p. 128 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.05.046).

The individual level is based on the relationship theory of Fournier (1998) that focuses on consumer-brand relationships. According to various studies, there is a link between experiences and relationships (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 125). On the one hand, relationships are developed by experiences (V. Kumar & Kaushik, 2020, p. 52), on the other hand, relationships themselves are *"lived experiences"* (Fournier, 1998, p. 360). The theory assumes that consumers build meaningful relationships with brands and that the interactions between

consumers and brands create individual associations towards brands (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 125; Fournier, 1998, pp. 362, 365). Further, brand meanings are derived that can be functional but also emotional and psychosocial. These meanings are incorporated into the consumers' lives and, consequently, contribute to their self-identity as well as help them realise their projects of self-improvement.

The collective level hinges upon the service-dominant logic of Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) that is adapted by Merz et al. (2009) from a brand perspective. In this context, not only the customers, but all stakeholders, are co-creators of value and brand experience is formed by their interactions (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 127; Merz et al., 2009, p. 328). In line with the consumer culture theory of Arnould and Thompson (2005) that deals with the relationships between consumers, markets, and cultures, these interactions may include practices like usage, rituals, or community activities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 875). The focus at the collective level is therefore set on *"co-creative practices and interactions"* (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 127) that include other consumers and social groups like brand communities, that were already thematised in the relational dimension of brand experiences. It comprises brand-related interactions with all other stakeholders and the company itself by enabling brand experiences through brand stimuli.

At the culture and market level, brand experiences are considered offerings that deliver economic value and contribute to developing markets (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98). On the other hand, and from the perspective of consumer culture theory, brands and brand experiences are perceived in relation to cultural elements and beliefs and serve as vehicles to form the individuals' self-identity in a social and cultural context (Andreini et al., 2018, pp. 126–127). Culture originates practices, norms, and meanings and therefore enables

experiences on an individual and collective level. Both levels are influenced in a cultural context as interactions, brand meanings, and practices are shaped.

The model in

Figure 5 shows that these three levels are intertwined. Therefore, Andreini et al. (2018) state that *"understanding the network of actors involved in the creation of desirable experiences at the three levels is strategically important"* (pp. 129–130), although empirical validation is lacking.

Peculiarities of Online Brand Experience

Depending on the environment brand experiences diverge (Hamzah et al., 2014, pp. 2300–2301). Brands perform differently online than offline, largely due to the inherent characteristics of the internet (Chernatony & Christodoulides, 2004, p. 238). A key difference is the physical and personal contact with a brand that may be very intense in the offline environment and low or non-existent online (Rose et al., 2011, p. 26). The internet's dynamic nature encourages interaction any time at any place and facilitates community as well as relationship building (Chernatony & Christodoulides, 2004, pp. 238–239). Meanwhile, the offline presentation of a brand is used to attract various senses and the information richness is limited, the presentation of a brand online is mainly audio-visual and rich in information (Rose et al., 2011, pp. 26–27). As the focus of this thesis is on the online environment, the construct of brand experience is discussed primarily through this lens.

Some researchers studying online brand experience provide a separate definition of brand experience that includes the online context specifically: Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) describe it as *"the individual's internal subjective response to the contact with an online brand"* (p. 22). According to Mollen and Wilson (2010), it is defined as a

"perceptual spectrum, ranging from perceived interactivity to telepresence … and finally, to engagement, a cognitive and affective commitment to the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities" (p. 920). Ha and Perks (2005) characterise it as *"a consumer's positive navigations … and perceptions … with a specific website"* (p. 440). However, other scholars like Yoon and Youn (2016), as well as this thesis, prefer the general definition of brand experience (see section Definition of Brand Experience), since brand-related stimuli, which are the main source of brand experience, are not mutually exclusive and include those from online environments.

Regarding the dimensions of experience in the online context, researchers like Jiménez Barreto et al. (2019) and Rose et al. (2012) only take the cognitive and affective components into account. Although the studies of Sohn (2011) and Brodie et al. (2013) confirm that sensory experiences can be evoked online too. In this context, virtual reality, in which users are immersed in a synthetic world, and augmented reality, which was already mentioned in the section on

Online Direct Sales Channels, play a significant role (Zha et al., 2020, p. 309). This is because augmented reality potentially addresses all senses and is not limited to the visual and auditory realms (Carmigniani et al., 2011, p. 342). Moreover, Hamzah et al. (2014) developed dimensions and components of brand experiences of online banking services based on Schmitt's (1999b) five strategic modules. The study shows that all dimensions may be included in online experiences. A detailed list of the dimensions and their components, which serve as a useful reference, can be found in Table 1. However, these dimensions are very specific to the industry studied and cannot be applied one-to-one to fashion brands.

Table 1 – Dimensions and Components of Brand Experience

Dimension of Hamzah et al. (2014)	Components	Related Dimension
Corporate visual identity	Name, slogan, logo, colour, design	Sensory experience
Emotional experience	Happy, confidence, relieved, worried, frustrated, disappointed	Affective experience
Functionality	Focused attention, knowledge, skill, freedom, interactivity, control	Intellectual experience
Lifestyle	Changed personal banking, simplify lifestyle, right time and place	Behavioural experience
Corporate/Self-identity	Self-image, modern impression, feel related, prestige, important in life	Relational experience

Note. The dimensions and components were researched in the context of online banking services. Adopted from "Designing corporate brand experience in an online context: A qualitative insight", by Hamzah et al., 2014, *Journal of Business Research*, *67(11)*, p. 2307 (https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.05.046).

In the online context, the main source of brand experience are brand stimuli as well. However, there are some additional factors that affect online brand experience which are often discussed as antecedents of online brand experience. Commonalities in literature can be identified, but there is no general consensus. Therefore, some relevant constructs are outlined in the following sections.

Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013) view perceived usefulness as antecedent of online brand experiences (pp. 23–26). Perceived usefulness is *"the extent to which a person believes that using the system will enhance their performance"* (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013, p. 23) in terms of benefits, and also depends on the perceived ease of use, better known as usability, and claims minimum effort to use the system. Both constructs are derived from

the technology acceptance model of Davis et al. (1989) and are determining factors for information system adoption. Additionally, Bilgihan et al. (2016) identify them both as antecedents of online shopping experiences (p. 108–109). Moreover, when analysing the online destination brand experience in terms of sensorial and cognitive dimensions, Jiménez Barreto et al. (2019) examine the perceived website quality as antecedent and identify the importance of the ease of use and quality of information as significant (p. 255).

Furthermore, according to Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013), trust in a brand positively affects brand experience and is itself influenced by brand reputation as it reduces uncertainty and perceived risk (p. 25). Additionally, trust is viewed as a precondition of perceived usability as it *"brings down the psychological barriers to adoption of technology"* (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013, p. 25). Though, it is debatable whether trust is an antecedent or consequence of online brand experience, as other studies state that trust in a brand is built through positive experiences (Ha & Perks, 2005, p. 440; Khan et al., 2020, p. 170).

Another relevant keyword in this context is interactivity as an indicator for success that enables brand experience (Van Noort et al., 2012, pp. 223–224; Yoon & Youn, 2016, p. 5). The definition of interactivity goes back to Steuer (1992), who said that it is *"the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time"* (p. 84). Customers' perceived interactivity, that is the actual engagement with interactive features, with a brand triggers stronger online experiences in multi-dimensional ways. Built on the study of Liu (2003) and the approach of Brakus et al. (2009), Yoon and Youn (2016) propose a model, that demonstrates features of interactivity affecting brand experience, namely two-way communication and active control. *"Two-way communication refers to the reciprocal or bidirectional flow of information"* (Yoon & Youn, 2016, pp. 4, 11) as

a human-human interaction through the machine and is allowed by feedback mechanisms such as chatbots, as well as information collections such as registrations or surveys. Beyond this, two-way communication is especially encouraged by social media. The study of Bilgihan et al. (2016) views social interactions with the brand and other consumers as essential for creating positive experiences (p. 110). While two-way communication encompasses the cognitive and semantic aspects of interactivity, active control covers the behavioural aspects (Sohn, 2011, pp. 1326–1329). Active control as human-machine interaction is the users' perceived ability to make their own decisions and use a website the way they want to (Yoon & Youn, 2016, pp. 5, 11). It is enabled by features such as navigation bars, hyperlinks, search functions, or language options and therefore strongly related to usability. Beyond this, Sohn (2011) points out that perceived interactivity can also be enhanced by sensory aspects, which are conveyed by animations or audio in advergames or virtual product presentations amongst others (p. 1327). In contrast, Jiménez Barreto et al. (2019) identify the importance of interactivity as antecedent rather low in their study of online destination brand experience (p. 255).

Moreover, some studies indicate a brand website's design and aesthetics (e.g., colours, graphics or layout) as affecting customers' online experiences (Jiménez Barreto et al., 2019, p. 255; Rose et al., 2012, p. 312) and determine personalisation beyond customised messages as an important factor for creating positive experiences (Bilgihan et al., 2016, p. 110). Personalisation in an online context means that content is customised to the individual users' needs and implemented through collecting data and creating profiles of users. The profiles can be used to recommend products, for example, which also contributes to usability in a broader sense.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Summary

Following the presentation of the current state of research in the literature review, the findings are summarised and merged in this chapter.

As a marketing and sales approach that uses direct channels bypassing middlemen, D2C strategies are driven by e-commerce and applied by four different types of organisations, with D2C brand manufacturers being the newest among them (Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 12; Miller & Clifford, 2013; Ramershoven, 2022). The motivation behind using a D2C approach is market-driven (full control) and/or customer-driven (direct contact), and both are united by the main goal, an optimal product and brand presentation resulting in a resonant brand experience (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 244; Lienhard et al., 2021, p. 14). For direct sales, online brand-owned webshops or brand stores on online marketplaces are operated, either as a single channel or parallel to offline direct channels and/or indirect channels in the sense of a multi-/omnichannel strategy (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, pp. 374–375; Tahirov & Glock, 2022, p. 423). As a fundamental part of a D2C strategy, communication is consumer-oriented and data-driven (Diorio, 2016; Ramershoven, 2022). With performance marketing campaigns that use various online channels, consumers are addressed directly, with social media and retargeting playing particularly important roles (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 3–4; Kim et al., 2021, p. 9). Many fashion brands are applying D2C strategies and taking full advantage of their benefits, as it is shown in several examples up to this point. Brand uniqueness, social media engagement, and innovativeness are seen as main determinants of successful D2C strategies of fashion brands (Kim et al., 2021, p. 17). Fashion brands operate in different market sectors according to categories and levels and can even be further divided into different types of brands, whereby corporate brands are most common in relation to D2C strategies (Posner, 2015, pp. 10–15, 140).

The brand experience construct can be situated in experiential marketing. Therefore, it is the consumer's subjective response to brand-related stimuli which is the source of brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53). In terms of an online D2C strategy, most brand-related stimuli are in control of the brand. These then called brand stimuli can be its direct sales channel, performance marketing campaigns, or any other direct contact point with the brand. Brand experience was long seen as a stimuli-reaction paradigm and quite a lot of research on the online environment tried to identify influencing factors like perceived ease of use, design, or personalisation (Bilgihan et al., 2016, pp. 109–110; Jiménez Barreto et al., 2019, p. 255; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013, p. 23; Rose et al., 2012, p. 315), which are facilitated and easier to control by a D2C strategy. Brand-owned webshops provide a huge range of possibilities to ensure brand-specific market presence and brand experience by means of cutting-edge technology while performance marketing activities encourage brand experience in a similar way (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019, p. 374). Brand stores on online marketplaces also offer advantages in terms of brand experience, but the possibilities are limited, as are the performance marketing activities in this context due to lacking consumer data (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 247). Some influencing factors, like two-way-communication between other consumers, indicate that it is not only about the properties of stimuli, but instead about the interactivity on different levels. From the perspective of viewing brands as socially constructed phenomena, brand experience takes place at, and is shaped by, different levels that are intertwined (Andreini et al., 2018, pp. 129–130). Therefore, the consumers' identity project (mircro-level), relevant social groups and communities (meso-level), as well as the integration into the market and culture (macro-level) need to be taken into consideration. However, empirical studies on these levels are completely lacking, with Andreini et al. (2018) only roughly outlining a conceptual model.

Moreover, brand experience is as the consumer's subjective response represented multidimensionally (sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural and relational) in the consumer's mind, but these dimensions are rather conceptual in nature and their meaning and expressions are not specifically identified (Hamzah et al., 2014, p. 2302; Zha et al., 2020, p. 298). For this issue, a study has already been conducted for online banking services (Hamzah et al., 2014), but empirical research on brand experience relating to fashion brands with an online D2C strategy are sorely missing.

Chapter 3: Research Questions

This master thesis addresses the main research question: How is brand experience through an online D2C strategy of fashion brands (co-)created and how is it manifested by consumers? After conducting a review of relevant literature and summarizing the theoretical framework, certain gaps emerge that require further investigation. According to the surveyed literature, brand experience is created and enhanced by online D2C strategies (e.g., Bower, 2017; Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021), but research offers little explanation. Furthermore, it has not been investigated empirically how brand experience is co-created on different levels and what the brand experience dimensions in the context of fashion brands are. The following two sub-research questions are posed to support answering the main research question:

1. What are the main factors of brand experience co-creation at the different levels of interaction of fashion brands with an online D2C strategy?

2. What are explicit consumers' responses in relation to the dimensions of brand experience of fashion brands with an online D2C strategy?

Chapter 4: Methods

In this chapter, the research method is thoroughly discussed and justification for the chosen approach provided. The qualitative research design is covered and the criteria for sampling are outlined in detail. Additionally, the semi-structured interview is presented as the method of data collection and qualitative content analysis with its concrete procedure is explained as the analysis method of choice. Finally, the overall quality of the study is addressed.

Research Design

As an inductive approach, qualitative research allows for the investigation of under-researched areas and aims to describe and explain psychological and sociological contexts (Corbin & Strauss, 2014, p. 27; Fantapié Altobelli, 2017, p. 357). It has a humanistic focus and reveals participants' perspectives about the phenomenon under investigation in their social reality and does not investigate concrete realities and test hypotheses as quantitative research does (Azungah, 2018, p. 384). It goes even further and explores participants' inner experiences and how these are formed, and sheds light on meanings and influences (Azungah, 2018, p. 385; Corbin & Strauss, 2014, p. 27). Therefore, to close the research gap and answer the research questions of this thesis, qualitative research was conducted.

Most common qualitative research methods include interviews and observations (Fantapié Altobelli, 2017, pp. 357–358). Interviews are conducted when the interaction of the participants and interviewer help reveal insights into underlying psychological or social processes. Since brand experience is defined as a subjective consumer's response that is not necessarily externally visible (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53), consumer interviews in a one-to-one setting provide most valuable in-depth data and were used as data source.

Sampling

In contrast to quantitative research, the central point of qualitative research is not statistical representativeness or generalisability of the sample (Fantapié Altobelli, 2017, p. 391). The sample in qualitative research is rather purposeful and typically small in size (Azungah, 2018, p. 354; Fantapié Altobelli, 2017, p. 391). A distinction is made between data-driven and theory-driven sampling procedures (Schreier, 2011, p. 246). Both aim to select investigation units in such a way that characteristics that impact the object of investigation are represented in the sample. Since these characteristics are known, theory-driven sampling was the procedure of choice and a qualitative sampling plan was made to achieve robustness and heterogeneity (Schreier, 2011, p. 249). According to Schreier (2011) the creation of a qualitative sampling plan is comprised of five steps:

1. Definition of the scope of the study

2. Identification of relevant characteristics that possibly influence the phenomenon

3. Definition of the combination of characteristics or cells of the plan

4. Determination of the number of cases per cell

5. Case selection (p. 250)

The scope of the study includes Austrian consumers that purchased a fashion brand's products directly. To narrow it down further, the focus is on the core market of fashion brands which is the apparel sector. Since the women's apparel market is around one and a half times greater than that of men's apparel (Statista Consumer Market Insights, 2023, pp. 10–11), female consumers define the scope. For improved comparability the products purchased must include tops (shirts, jumpers, blouses etc.), and the brand must be either an original D2C brand or an established brand manufacturer. The direct sales channel is limited to a brand-owned webshop because when shopping on an online marketplace consumers are often not

aware that they are buying directly from the brand and brand experience suffers (Leimstoll & Wölfle, 2021, p. 247). Relevant characteristics that exert influence on the object of investigation include the perceived brand uniqueness and the timeliness of purchase. As the most important success factor of a D2C strategy, brand uniqueness plays a crucial role and directly impacts the brand experience that consumers will have. Uniqueness, with the distinction between unique and ordinary, depends on various factors such as the brand's product offerings and brand story (Kim et al., 2021, p. 8). The extent of brand experience can be influenced by the timeliness of a purchase, which ranges from a recent purchase that occurred within the last three months to a purchase that was made four to six (several) months ago. This is because the timeliness influences the potential number of contact points with the brand and its stakeholders, as well as the consumer's ability to recall experiences with the brand, as recalled experiences tend to be biased towards the most intense and recent moments (Schmitt, 2011, p. 26). The expressions of characteristics are combined in cells and the number of cases per cell is defined, mapping the presumed relevance of the subgroups to the phenomenon under study (Fantapié Altobelli, 2017, p. 392). With a total sample size of ten consumers the level of data saturation was reached and no more new categories or themes emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2014, p. 150). The cases were chosen to meet the requirements of the respective cells and data collection was completed within three weeks. The qualitative sampling plan is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – Qualitative Sampling Plan

Timeliness of Purchase	Recent	Several Months Ago
Perceived Brand Uniqueness		
Unique	3	3
Ordinary	2	2

Note. Table created by the author.

Data Collection

The data was collected by conducting face-to-face interviews with individual consumers which creates a certain level of trust between the interviewee and the interviewer that enables in-depth questions and addressing sensitive topics (Fantapié Altobelli, 2017, pp. 359–360). The in-depth interview, which is a relatively long informal conversation and the most common form of interview, aims to uncover the unconscious and hidden motives and attitudes of the interviewee, as are the levels and dimensions of brand experience. Therefore, this type of interview is well-suited for the research topic at hand. To create as natural an environment as possible, the interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue, German. The average length of the interviews was 48 minutes.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way that enabled consistent coverage of concepts while remaining flexible in the interview process (Corbin & Strauss, 2014, p. 59). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews contain both open-ended and theory-driven questions to explore data based on the consumers' experience as well as on existing constructs guided by literature (Galletta, 2013, p. 45). Therefore, several topics to be discussed were chosen in advance and an interview guideline was elaborated. In contrast to fully structured interviews, the decisive factor is that there were no predetermined answers and that the interviewees could freely articulate their perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2014,

p. 59). Interviewees were encouraged to add anything relevant to them and the interviewer was allowed to ask additional questions and explore certain topics in more detail. The arrangement of the topics and questions was chosen in form of a funnel, so that rather general topics are addressed at the beginning of the interview, and more profound questions are explored as the interview progresses.

To cultivate an environment conducive to exploring the research topic, the interviewee was requested to bring the purchased top to the face-to-face conversation. This physical object served to enhance the interview process, enabling reflections that contributed to a deeper understanding of the research topic (Roulston & Halpin, 2022, pp. 673–674). Furthermore, to gain detailed insights about the brand-owned webshop, which plays a central role in the survey as a brand stimulus, part of the interview was conducted as a focused interview (Fantapié Altobelli, 2017, pp. 360, 377). Thereby a stimulus, which is the respective webshop, was shown and discussed during the interview. The focus was set right at the beginning of the interview by showing the interviewee the webshop and asking for his or her opinion on it. Subsequently, additional background information was obtained in the course of an in-depth interview. In the following, the different sections, based on the structure of Galletta (2013), and topics covered by the interview guideline are explained.

The interview guideline begins with an introduction thanking the interviewee for taking part and explaining the purpose of the interview. It also includes obtaining the interviewee's consent to audio recording and clarifying anonymity.

A warm-up section helps in establishing a level of comfort by asking broad questions about his or her experience with the brand, initiating a narrative of the direct purchase and creating a link to the purchased top that augments the interview.

The middle part of the interview builds on the opening part with more specified questions that are narrower in scope than the first part and gradually become more personal as the interview progresses. Therefore the middle part starts with brand stimuli that are in control of the brand and the main source of brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009, p. 53). These involve the online sales channel, performance marketing, and other contact points with the brand. Over the course of this part of the interview, the respective brand-owned webshop is shown as a focus and the peculiarities of online brand experience are addressed. The next section involves the levels of interaction where brand experience takes place, ranging from culture and market, to collective, to individual level (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 129). Last but not least, the brand experience dimensions which are sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural, and relational (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 127; Brakus et al., 2009, p. 65) are investigated in detail.

The closing section gives the interviewer space for returning to unanswered questions or contradictions, and the interviewee to add any relevant thoughts (Galletta, 2013, p. 52). Further, demographic data is asked to better assess the interviewee as well as the brand and, finally, gratitude is expressed for the valuable contribution to the research.

The full interview guideline with the main questions and potential sub-questions can be found in Appendix A. Prior to the actual data collection, the interview guideline was pre-tested to ensure that the questions were understandable and suitable for a good interview process, that it covers the relevant topics, and whether it generates the desired information overall. On this basis, ambiguities were eliminated, and questions were adapted as necessary.

The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were written verbatim with dialect colouring and pauses in speech were marked as such. For ethical reasons, the data in the transcripts were anonymised. The interviewer's utterances were

marked "IR" and the interviewees' utterances were marked "IE01-10". The fashion brands discussed were not referred to by name, but simply as "brands" in German. In addition, the interviewees signed a privacy statement regarding the use of the interviews for the study.

Data Analysis

To transform data into knowledge, qualitative content analysis was applied. In general, content analysis is a systematically and category-based analysis of communication that exists in logged form and the procedure of which follows explicit rules (Mayring, 2015, pp. 12–13).

While there are a number of variations and approaches to this, Mayring (2015), as well as Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022), emphasise the method's foundation in hermeneutics, which involves text comprehension and interpretation, and highlight the systematic nature of the approach (Schreier, 2014, pp. 2–5). They distinguish three different basic forms and share the content-structuring variant, which can be regarded as the core method of qualitative content analysis procedures. Through this technique specific topics and content areas are identified in the analysed material and then systematically described. Essential to content analysis are categories, which in this variant are created using a deductive-inductive approach (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 102–103). This hybrid approach helps focusing on themes that are known to be important in the existing literature, while retaining flexibility and openness to new issues that arise (Skjott Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019, p. 264). As this guides the answering of the research questions, the content-structuring qualitative content analysis is the method of choice.

While Mayring (2015) proceeds with inductive category building using paraphrasing and generalisation, including deletions and reduction through bundling (pp. 71–72), Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) apply open coding, whereby categories are continuously developed,

optimised, and organised (p. 97). However, the method according to Mayring (2015) is also

criticised because complex and essential connections are lost through paraphrasing and

contradictory statements end up as victims of a (hasty) generalisation (Kuckartz & Rädiker,

2022, p. 76). To avoid this, the method of Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) was applied

preferentially. The specific procedure is divided into eight phases, all of which are oriented

towards the research questions, and is illustrated in Figure 6.

Figure 6 – Procedure of the Content-Structuring Qualitative Content Analysis
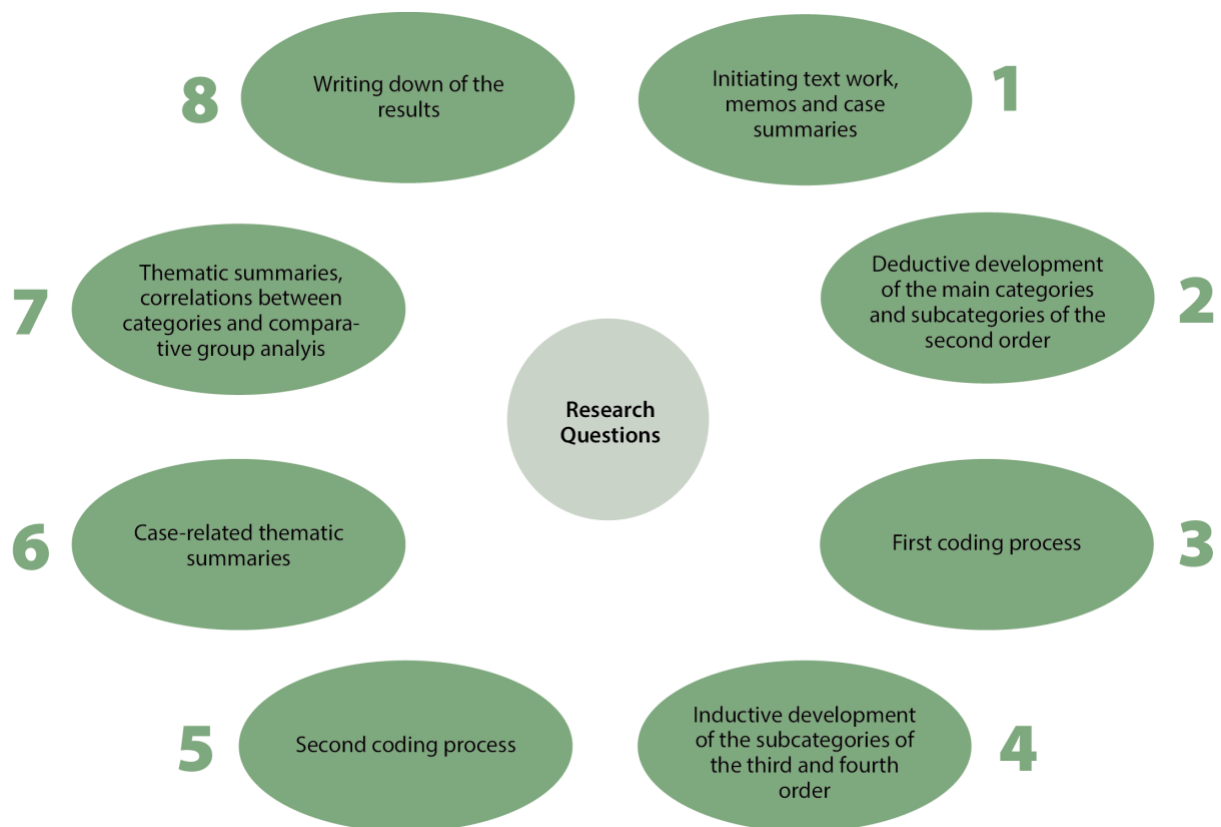
Note. The figure shows the applied procedure. Adapted from "*Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse.*

Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung [Qualitative Content Analysis. Methods, Practice,

Computer Support]", by Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2022, p. 132.

The first phase of data analysis involved initiating text work, memos, and case

summaries (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 132–133). The initiating text work is mainly about

familiarising oneself with the material and reading it carefully, which has already taken place when transcribing the interviews. Noticeable aspects were recorded in the form of memos and bullet point case summaries were written.

The content structure of the chosen method is formed by main categories of the first order and subcategories of the orders below (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 66, 72, 75, 81, 133). Together, these form the coding frame, also called category system, and can be found in Appendix B. When creating categories, it is important that the categories are exhaustive while avoiding overlap. The main categories and subcategories of the second order were developed deductively in the second phase. This so-called *a priori categorisation* is theory-driven and oriented towards the research questions. As is common in semi-structured interviews, thematic categories were derived from the interview guideline, which reflect the research interest in thematic blocks and topics. For the sake of completeness, a residual category was also created, which was later eliminated. A coding guideline was then elaborated for uniform classification, better interpretability, and documentation purposes. In the coding guideline, the subcategories of the four main categories were described as precisely as possible and application examples were given. To illustrate the application of the category, particularly typical text passages were chosen as examples in the original language of the interviews. In a trial coding run with approximately twenty percent of the text material, the applicability of the categories developed was tested and then slightly modified as needed. However, it should be noted that deductive category building does not preclude changes to the category system during the analysis. Table 3 shows an exemplary definition of the category "behavioural experience" with the translated version of the application example. The entire coding guideline is presented in Appendix C.

Table 3 – Exemplary Category Definition

Category Name	Behavioural experience
Description	Changes induced by the brand that involve the consumer's lifestyle and behaviour (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 62)
Application Example	I'm certainly more likely to buy more sustainable clothes.

Note. Table created by the author.

The first coding process initiated the third phase (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, p. 134). The transcripts were worked through line by line, and main categories were assigned to the text passages according to the coding guidelines using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software from VERBI Software GmbH. Irrelevant text passages remained uncoded and passages containing several themes were assigned several categories accordingly. In the course of qualitative content analysis, the size of the coded text segments is usually defined in terms of a unit of coding and a unit of context, which are minimum and maximum size (Mayring, 2015, p. 61). According to Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) however, it is crucial that units of meaning are coded (p. 136). This means that the size of the coded segment is chosen in a way that is comprehensible outside the context. A unit of meaning comprises at least a phrase up to several sentences or even paragraphs. If the interview question was necessary for understanding, it was also coded.

In the fourth phase, subcategories of the third and fourth order were inductively formed (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 82, 90–93, 138). The process involved a meticulous examination of the material, with text segments coded from higher-order categories being allocated to new thematic subcategories. If appropriate categories were available, the text

segments were subsequently allocated to them. The concreteness or abstractness of the subcategories remained open at the beginning and emerged in the process of the steadily growing system of categories. The categories were systematised and ordered. Similar categories were grouped together, and overly general categories were differentiated, resulting in a maximum of seven subcategories per superordinate category. After working through approximately fifty percent of the material to be analysed, saturation was reached, and no new categories arose. At this point, the subcategories of the third and fourth level were also added to the coding guidelines.

In the second coding process, the fifth phase of the procedure, the entire data were coded with the defined subcategories (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 142–143). The labour-intensive systematisation and structuring of the material was thus complete.

In the sixth phase, which Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) describe as an optional intermediate step (p. 143), case-related thematic summaries were produced in MAXQDA. They consolidate and highlight the material and are therefore particularly helpful when dealing with extensive material such as transcripts (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 143–147). The coded text passages of a case, which corresponds to the interviewee in this research, were compiled for each category in a thematic matrix. Summaries were then prepared for each category in the words of the researcher, as can exemplary be seen in

Table 4. These case-related systematic summaries are based on original statements and grounded in the empirical data. The thematic matrix is comprehensive, well documented, and serves as helpful groundwork for the following phases.

Table 4 – Thematic Matrix with (Case-Related) Thematic Summaries

	Specific Emotions	**Reduced Purchase**	**…**
Interviewee 1	The consumer feels self-confident when wearing the brand's clothes.	The consumer buys less and focuses on high-quality clothing.	..
Interviewee 2	The consumer feels proud and confident when wearing the brand's clothes.	The consumer buys more selectively and less frequently due to the high quality.	..
…	..	..	..
Thematic Summaries	Wearing the brand's clothes evokes emotions of joy, confidence, and pride in consumers.	Consumers buy less clothing if the quality and prices of the garments are high.	…

Note. Excerpt of the thematic matrix produced in MAXQDA. Table created by the author.

Phases seven and eight are often considered interrelated and were therefore run through several times in succession (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 147–154). In the seventh phase, simple and complex analyses were carried out in preparation for the presentation of the results. In the eighth and final phase, the results of the analyses were written down in regard to the research question, also using preliminary work such as memos, case summaries, and thematic summaries. The focus was on between-case and category-oriented analyses. Therefore, analysis along the categories was applied (p. 148). The case-related thematic summaries of each category were compiled and examined for similarities, differences, and anomalies. On this basis, a thematic summary was produced for each category and the thematic matrix was thereby completed, as can be seen in

Table 4. In addition, content-related correlations between categories as well as correlations between classifying characteristics within categories and across categories were examined. For comparative group analysis, cases were classified. On the one hand, this was

done according to the dimensions of the sampling plan, which are brand uniqueness and timeliness of purchase, while on the other hand, new groups were defined. Additional information on the brands and prices, provided by consumers and verified via online sources, allowed classifications by type of organisation and fashion market level. Moreover, regular purchasers who have bought the brand at least four times in the last two years were also grouped for analysis. A detailed table on the classification of cases can be found in Appendix D. The written results of the aforementioned analysis are organised according to the categories in a reasonable order in Chapter 5 and supplemented with a visualisation in the form of a mind map (p. 154).

Quality Assessment

During the research process, particular attention was paid to meeting quality standards. Traditional quality standards, which include objectivity, validity, and reliability, are intended for quantitative research but are not appropriate for qualitative research (Fantapié Altobelli, 2017, p. 387). Consequently, researchers have devised alternative methods and established quality criteria specific to qualitative research. Miles et al. (2020) introduced the following commonly used criteria for evaluating qualitative research (pp. 305–307):

- Confirmability refers to objectivity and is the degree to which the research can be confirmed by others. It is established by neutrality, minimal influence of inevitable bias, and transparency in methods and procedures.

- Dependability and auditability, which relate to reliability, refer to consistency and stability over time, across researchers and methods.

- Credibility and authenticity refer to the believability of findings and whether they make sense in terms of internal validity.

- Transferability and fittingness, in terms of external validity, refer to the greater significance of findings and their transferability to other contexts.

In the context of qualitative content analysis, Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) distinguish between internal and external study quality, whereby internal study quality is a prerequisite for external study quality (p. 236). While internal study quality refers to reliability, dependability, verifiability, rule-basedness, intersubjective comprehensibility, and credibility, external study quality refers to transferability and generalisability.

Kuckartz and Rädiker (2022) provide a checklist for the internal study quality, which covers both data collection and transcription, as well as the conduction of qualitative content analysis in the narrower sense (p. 237). All these points were taken into account, implemented according to the author's own judgement, and disclosed in Chapter 4. Once the checklist had been satisfactorily answered, the validity of the results was confirmed by so-called *member checking* (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 250–251). In this process, the research results were discussed with four research participants to obtain feedback in the sense of communicative validation.

Intercoder and intracoder reliability can also play an important role in checking the internal quality of a study (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 82, 239). This refers to the agreement between the coding of two coders or a single coder at two different points in time. In the context of the inductive categorization approach used in this analysis, there is no assertion of intersubjective reliability. Thus, this research focuses more on agreement in the application of categories. Since the process was performed by a single researcher at a single time, neither intercoder nor intracoder reliability can be calculated.

While the external study quality considers generalisability and transferability to external contexts (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2022, pp. 82, 254), it should be noted that qualitative

research does not claim to be representative. This also applies to the present thesis, not least because of the limited sample size. Additionally, the results are not valid across the sample selection and are therefore neither generalisable nor transferable to other contexts. Moreover, it is important to note that the interpretation of the results includes cautious assumptions rather than factual statements. It is therefore necessary to consider the results in the light of this aspect.

Chapter 5: Results

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative research before being discussed in relation to the research questions in Chapter 6. Preliminary information at the beginning facilitates the overall understanding of the cases and results. The findings on consumers' perceptions of brand stimuli are then drawn. This is followed by a summary of the results on the consumers' different levels of interaction, where brand experience is co-created, and their subjective responses in the different dimensions of the brand experience.

Preliminary Information

In the interviews, participants, fashion brands, and direct purchases were screened for their suitability and additional information gathered to analyse and interpret them. Basic information that is of relevance is provided in the following sub-sections.

Consumer Demographics

The interviewees are between 25 and 40 years old and their job descriptions include student, unemployed, white-collar workers, and entrepreneurs, with only blue-collar workers missing completely. Almost all enjoy a high level of education and a household net income that is above the Austrian average according to the survey of European Union statistics on

income and living conditions (Statistik Austria & EU-SILC, 2022). The sample with all demographic data can be found in Appendix E.

Fashion Brands Investigated

The fashion brands included in the study range from mass-market brands to high-end fashion brands, with the majority of brands at the middle-market level. Mass-market is only served by ordinary fashion brands, while high-end fashion is only served by brands that are perceived unique. Established brands are equally divided between unique and ordinary brands, which means that the majority of D2C brands are perceived as unique. The perceived brand uniqueness was also expressed and clarified in the interviews and is based on either a unique brand story or unique product design and functionality.

The interviewees all experienced the fashion brands in a positive way. They have known the established brands for quite a long time, whether from offline retail or from fashion magazines, and they got to know the D2C brands via Instagram, either through ads or influencers. Most of them associate its fashion style and some also the country of origin with the brand. The style of ordinary fashion brands is considered as simple and timeless, whereby a mass-market brand is rather contemporary and trendy. Moreover, few unique fashion brands serve timeless fashion, but most offer specific styles like casual, smart-casual, or street style. During the interviews, the product quality was highlighted particularly often, and sustainability aspects were mentioned. All fashion brands, except for mass-market brands, appear to offer high quality garments, which was deemed essential by the participants. For D2C brands of middle-market level, sustainability plays an important role in terms of fabrics and production. Mass-market brands seem to cover sustainability aspects simply because

they have to, and consumers of high-end fashion brands, as well as the majority of consumers of established brand manufacturers, do not thematise the brand's sustainability efforts.

Direct Purchases

The direct purchases, which include blouses, jumpers, and T-shirts, made via brand-owned webshops within the last six months were also screened. The research shows that the timeliness of purchase has no effect on the results. Consumers did not have more contact points with the brand or its stakeholders, nor were they less able to recall experiences the more months had elapsed since their last purchase. The vast majority of interviewees have already bought more than once and therefore already had many different contact points to begin with. As can be seen in Appendix D, a large part of consumers even buys regularly.

For several participants', the last purchase was triggered by Instagram or the brand's newsletter, with either a discount code being the deciding factor or an announced sale. Sometimes the purchase was also intrinsically motivated because participants simply wanted new clothes. Consumers have chosen the brands because they like the design, are satisfied with the quality, and have had good experiences so far. Only mass-market brands have been specifically chosen for their favourable pricing. Although most brands are also indirectly available through retailers, they are preferably bought directly. The main reasons for this are a wider range of the specific brand's products and better deals during sales. Trusted originality and improved brand and product presentation are also cited as reasons for direct purchases.

Brand Stimuli

Brand stimuli play a significant role in terms of a D2C strategy and differentiate it from other strategies. This section comprises the consumers' experiences with the direct sales

channel, performance marketing channels and any other relevant contact points with the brand.

Direct Sales Channel

The direct sales channels discussed during the interviews are brand-owned webshops, as predetermined by the sampling. The opportunity to buy new jumpers, blouses or T-shirts is what makes such shops perceived useful. Consumers of original D2C brands especially use and like the direct online channels since the overall product selection is limited and not overwhelming as they feel with some online retailers. Consumers of established brands perceive the product selection to be large. But they appreciate the availability of the entire product assortment that online retailers mostly do not offer. Interviewees, except for mass-market consumers, also emphasise buying products in clearance sales and consumers of unique fashion brands are particularly fond of buying the latest products from the webshop. In addition, consumers appreciate being able to try on clothes at home, rather than having to take the time to visit an offline store. The online order processes are perceived as easy, delivery as fast, and some consumers also point out the beautiful packaging of the products. Free returns and various payment options are also of great importance to the interviewees.

The use of online shops is generally perceived as easy by all consumers, indicating that usability is high. The navigation is intuitive, and the web pages are logically categorised according to the interviewees. They mostly use the online shop by navigating to specific product categories and then filtering by colours or sizes. Some interviewees mention the importance of a good search function, others appreciate wish lists to save preferred products. According to the interviewees mobile device usability and responsive design of the webshop is also crucial. Some search for products on their mobile phone and buy via their laptop, while

others shop exclusively on their mobile device. The sole downside highlighted by some interviewees pertains to the selection of countries in the online store. This process was not consistently automatic, causing certain users to access the wrong country store and realise this only when they were unable to complete their purchases.

Interactivity is mainly perceived through active control, which refers to webshop navigation and usability. Two-way communication is hardly perceived by the interviewees or is of little importance to them. Of course, they were contacted after purchase via emails with the legally required order confirmation and the shipping confirmation including a tracking code. Most were also asked to write a review, but none of them did. While some respondents are suspicious of reviews, others read and trust reviews but do not feel like writing them. Some were also asked to sign-up for a newsletter and even did so. Newsletters and social media profiles play an important role concerning two-way communication and will be further discussed within the results of performance marketing channels section. A few interviewees also mentioned notifications which they have activated and inform them about the launch of collections or about the re-availability of sizes. According to the interviewees, not all brands offer chatbots, and if they do, none of the interviewees have used them. They would only use them if they had a problem or needed support.

Furthermore, none of the respondents perceived personalisation in any way, and recommendations are only given by some webshops based on other consumers' preferences. Some respondents state that "you might also like" recommendations are not necessarily needed due to the limited and clear product assortment offered by D2C brands, but they would like to receive suggestions for product combinations.

All participants of the survey like the aesthetics of the brand-owned webshop in question and designs seem to be similar across all brands: simple, clean, unobtrusive, and

either black and white or in the corporate colours. Product presentation and information is of key importance to respondents. With the exception of consumers of mass-market fashion brands, all respondents said that product information is comprehensive. In particular, consumers of brands that focus on sustainability emphasise the importance of information about materials, production processes, etc. This is underlined by Interviewee 10 who states that *"when brands promote sustainability, they need to reveal everything in detail"*. Furthermore, garments are worn on the photos by models who are perceived to fit the brand. Respondents like natural models who are ordinary people they can identify with. They also like that some webshops display photos taken in more natural settings than studios, sometimes outdoors, and photos from different perspectives and angles. Integration of video into the webshop is rare and even more so for product presentation, which some respondents feel is not necessary. Interviewees also like to see available colours and sizes at a glance. They also appreciate information on the height of the model and the size of the product worn.

The brand-owned webshops are perceived as trustworthy by the interviewees, and this is seen as a prerequisite for purchase. If trust has already been built up through other experiences with the brand, it is transferred to the online shop. However, trust in a brand is built through owning and wearing products of the brand and is considered a prerequisite for repurchase. Those consumers who have already repurchased regularly have built up intense trust in the respective brand.

Performance Marketing Channels

With regard to performance marketing channels, it is especially important to note that ads are not always noticed by consumers and therefore these results do not reliably represent

all performance marketing activities of brands. These results simply reflect consumers' conscious experience with different channels.

A lot of research participants receive advertisements on social media, more specifically on Instagram. Notably, they are retargeted after interacting with the brand's webshop or Instagram profile. The ads are either video or image based and are perceived as engaging and native. Moreover, on Instagram most interviewees notice influencer campaigns of the brands or even got to know them via influencers in the first place. These influencers match the fashion brand's style and values, and the collaborations are therefore perceived as authentic. The respondents identify with the influencers and are inclined to buy from the promoted brands, as Interviewee 3 stated: *"She was wearing a jumper that I really liked, which I then wanted to have too"*. Consumers of mass-market fashion brands are particularly exposed to such campaigns and are influenced by discount codes provided by influencers, or collections created in collaboration with them. These collections result in so-called *partnership brands*, that seem to be very successful and, according to the interviewees, sell out in no time. However, consumers of high-end fashion brands are not sure if influencers are paid to promote the products or if they do it free of charge just because they like the products or want to be seen with the brand's products. Certainly, luxury brands do not aggressively promote their products via influencers with discount codes.

Ads in search engines are consciously perceived only by the minority of interviewees and optimisation measures cannot be traced by consumers. However, several respondents are retargeted after website interaction with display ads. These take the form of either banners based on programmatic advertising in online magazines, or industry-related blogs (e.g., cosmetics), or pre-roll and in-stream ads on YouTube that play before or during a video.

Native advertising or affiliate marketing is either not used by brands or not recognised by respondents.

The bulk of interviewees has subscribed to a newsletter and receives emails from the brands on a regular basis, ranging from almost daily to twice a month. Sales and special offers, as well as new products and collections are promoted in the newsletters, and discount codes provided. Some read the newsletters in part, others skim them or delete them immediately. Although hardly anyone reads them with full attention, respondents say that newsletters do drive purchases, which could be due to the fact that they at least get into the inbox and the brands therefore stay in the consumer's mind. Those who are not subscribed to any newsletters are annoyed by them in general. Almost no other email marketing campaigns are noticed by the interviewees, apart from the aforementioned potential collection launch or back in stock size alerts and transactional emails.

Other Contact Points

Advertising via classic media was hardly noticed by the interviewees. The only exception includes consumers of established fashion brands, who recognised some advertisements in fashion magazines.

It was striking that almost all consumers follow the respective fashion brand on Instagram, with two specially stating to not follow any other fashion brand besides it. The brands' content seems to be appealing and is seemingly not primarily aimed at selling. Instead, behind-the-scenes insights into production processes, work culture, etc. are provided and even some designers and fashion brand founders show their face in Instagram stories. In addition, brands that value sustainability are prioritising activism on their social media profiles.

Some of the consumers surveyed had direct contact with the brands' customer service employees. Whether by email or phone, responses were quick, staff were friendly, and problems were resolved in a straightforward manner, resulting in an overall positive experience. A few respondents also follow the founders on Instagram, accompany them through their lives and identify with them. Another minor part of respondents knows (former) employees of the brands personally, whereby it must be mentioned that respondents were already consumers before their acquaintances were hired. Nevertheless, this fact has strengthened their connection to the brand, as the employees are reported to speak very favourably about the brand.

Levels of Brand Experience of Fashion Brands with an Online D2C Strategy

This section summarises the results regarding the brand experience levels. Like the interview guideline, it is structured in a funnel, starting from the more general level of culture and market, through the collective level, to the in-depth individual level.

Culture & Market Level

Most of the unique fashion brands are considered as innovative by the participants, while only some of the ordinary fashion brands are. Some are recognised as pioneers in the field of sustainable fashion, while others are trailblazers in developing novel business models that leverage influencers' potential. Consumers of ordinary fashion brands typically lack knowledge about the brand's origin, whereas consumers of unique fashion brands are well-informed and often acquainted with the founder or designer, particularly through the use of Instagram. The bulk of consumers are familiar with the brand's country of origin, and some can even identify with it or have a personal connection to it.

In terms of social classes, according to the consumers, mass-market brands tend to appeal more to the lower middle class, middle-market brands attract upper middle class, and high-end fashion brands higher society or an exclusive circle of supporters. The majority of brands seems to address an age group of 20 to 50 years and most D2C brands only appeal to women, as their product assortment is limited to women's clothing only. Ordinary brands are not perceived to target specific consumer values, whereas unique fashion brands focus on sustainability in their approach or target specific consumer markets such as urban or professionally ambitious consumers.

Collective Level

The collective level encompasses all stakeholder interactions, including consumer interactions with brands. As the findings on brand stimuli have already been presented in a separate chapter, they will not be discussed further in this chapter.

The survey shows that while a significant number of interviewees talks about the respective brand with their families, only few of the family members are also consumers of the brand. However, they mainly talk about the purchase made and not about the brand itself. In contrast, all consumers interviewed exchange information about the brand with their friends and colleagues. As most of them are also consumers, they influence each other and draw attention to the respective brand. While consumers of ordinary brands simply talk about the purchases they have made, consumers of unique brands exchange experiences about the brand more intensively. They not only talk about the purchases made, but also about the brand itself and its sustainable aspects, its origin, etc.

Moreover, the respective brands are hardly perceived as status symbols and do not convey the feeling of belonging to a social group. Only brands that flaunt their logo are

considered status symbols in the case of some established brands. Additionally, it is only when they are seen as status symbols that consumers feel they belong to a social group. However, consumers of unique fashion brands state that these brands are identity-building, and they feel somewhat connected to people who also wear clothes of these brands.

Almost all consumers agree that there is a brand community on social media, even if they do not feel part of it. Online brand communities of ordinary fashion brands are not seen as intense, and members are only connected by the same style of fashion. In contrast, communities of unique fashion brands tend to also share the lifestyle, consciousness of values, and a sense of moral responsibility. Furthermore, the research shows that respondents do not talk about the brand on social media with other consumers they do not know.

Individual Level

On an individual level, the interviews show that consumers feel well connected and have a good relationship with the brand. Despite this the brand has a mainly functional meaning for them. The brand represents the primary value of the clothes they wear, as Interviewee 1 explains: *"I mean, the benefit is, of course, that it's a piece of clothing and you put it on"*. Some also emphasise the long-term benefits of quality, others the benefits of being well dressed at work, and still others the multi-functionality for both private and professional use. It seems that the emotional and psychosocial meanings are not consciously perceived by consumers, although they do have affective and relational experiences that are somewhat related to that, as discussed later.

In terms of self-identity, the respondents feel that the brand suits them and that they can therefore identify well with it. Mostly, their own values are in line with the brand's values,

e.g., emphasis on quality, sustainability, and the brand's fashion style fits the individuals particularly well, as some examples prove:

- Interviewee 1 describes herself as not shy or timid, but rather outgoing, rocking, and energetic. She buys from a brand that offers streetstyle in the form of edgy clothes that are ripped and have a loose fit.

- Interviewee 2 has a rather calm and reflective character and is consumer of a smart-casual fashion brand that offers understated and minimalistic fashion.

- Interviewee 4 generally likes to try new things and is adventurous. She shops at a mass-market brand that sells trendy and contemporary fashion.

The interviewees were also asked how the brands help them achieve their self-improvement projects. As a result, ordinary fashion brands do not help or simply help people to feel better about themselves, while unique fashion brands are rated higher and reduce the interviewees' consumption by drawing their attention to high-quality products. In addition, brands that focus on sustainability help consumers integrate more sustainability into their lives.

Relating to self-presentation, Interviewee 9 quoted the proverb *"fine feathers make fine birds"*. According to the respondents, the brands support them in presenting themselves and being perceived as well-dressed. They want to be recognised by their fellow human beings with certain characteristics such as stylish, open-minded, competent, or responsible. Figure 7 represents all characteristics they want to be attributed with.

Figure 7 – Attributes of Self-Presentation
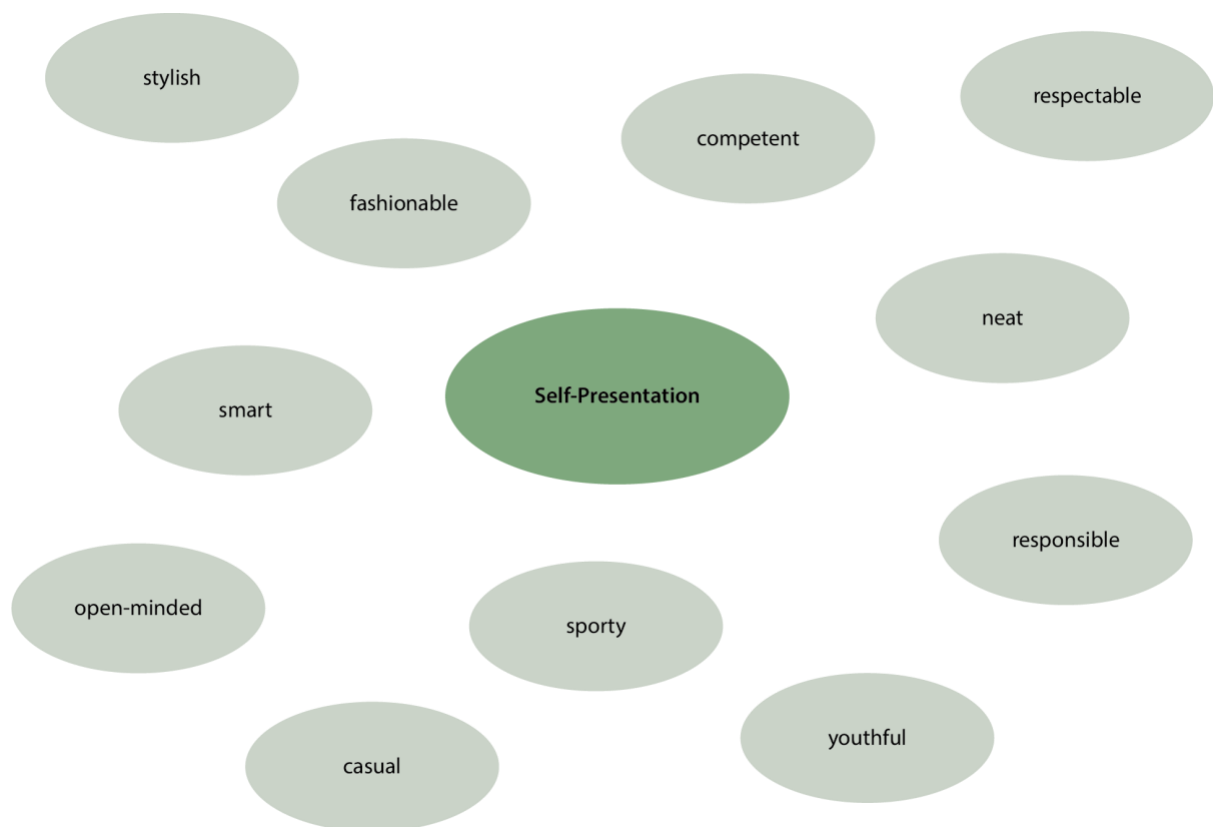
Note. Results of the study on self-presentation presented in a mind map created by the author.

Unique brands are perceived as such by consumers. They are either unique in design, functionality, or in their brand story in terms of their origin or sustainability approach. But beyond this, consumers feel unique when wearing the brands' clothes and want to distinguish themselves from others by wearing them. They stand out because the clothes of these brands are not worn as often by other people and they like that. On the other hand, ordinary brands are not considered unique by consumers. Nevertheless, they partly want to use the clothes to differentiate themselves from others, as Interviewee 7 declares: *"Not everyone has it either, so I buy it".*

Dimensions of Brand Experience of Fashion Brands with an Online D2C Strategy

This section presents the results on the participants' perception of the brand experience dimensions including sensory, affective, intellectual, behavioural, and relational.

Sensory Experiences

In terms of sensory experiences, consumers mainly receive visual stimuli and perceive the brand as visually appealing. As already mentioned, consumers like the clean design and aesthetics, and that the brand's corporate design with its colours, shapes, and typefaces is consistent amongst all stimuli. They also find the imagery of the brand to be pleasing and some mention that the brand's logo catches their attention the moment they see it. Almost none of the respondents remember an auditory stimulus, which may be partly because they say they never listen to videos with sound. As it is an online sales channel and all stimuli are received online, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory stimuli can only be received from products they purchase. Virtual or augmented reality was not addressed by consumers. According to the consumers, the jumper, blouses, and T-shirts feel soft and comfortable. Some consumers of high-end and middle-market fashion brands also highlight special fabrics such as cashmere and merino wool, which have a particularly soft texture. However, since the products are clothes, no olfactory and gustatory stimuli are received by consumers. Consumers of sustainable fashion, however, at least say that the clothes do not smell unpleasantly of chemicals.

Affective Experiences

All consumers interviewed experience a feeling of well-being associated with the brand. Consumers of unique fashion brands in particular have positive feelings towards the brand and enjoy wearing the brand's products. The brand evokes emotions of joy, confidence, and

pride in the consumer. The latter because consumers are proud that they can afford it. This is illustrated by the statement of Interviewee 2: *"If I really actively think about how I feel now, I would perhaps even say a little proud and a little self-confident"*. This implies that the brand has an emotional meaning for consumers. However, consumers of ordinary fashion brands attribute the feeling of well-being to clothing in general rather than to the brand itself and do not feel any strong emotions.

Intellectual Experiences

The research shows that intellectual experiences are mainly had by consumers of unique fashion brands. Yet, almost all brands, with the exception of mass-market brands, stimulate consumers thinking about quality. Unique brands that focus on sustainability partly engage in a kind of brand activism and encourage consumers to think about sustainable and fair clothing. In particular, they encourage consumers to think and learn about the production process and where the clothes come from. In contrast, consumers of ordinary brands say they are not encouraged to focus on sustainability, quite the opposite. Although some mass-market brands promote sustainability, consumers tend to be suspicious and critical. However, only consumers who do not regularly shop at the brand express their critical thoughts. Consumers are also critical of brands that focus on sustainability but do not do enough regarding brand activism and social projects. High-quality fashion brands are also critically scrutinised in terms of their pricing, whether this is justified at all.

Furthermore, some consumers say that their creativity is stimulated by the brand and combining clothes into outfits. Others say that the brand helps them in simplifying their daily life by not having to think about how to combine clothes because the clothing is so

understated and versatile. High-end fashion brand consumers even express that they do not need to put much thought into their outfits since the apparel and its design speaks for itself.

Behavioural Experiences

Although most consumers deny a change in their behaviour and lifestyle induced by the brand, there are some areas where the brand is having an impact. Ordinary, and mass-market brands especially, motivate consumers to buy more through low prices, discounts, and clearance sales. Conversely, unique fashion brands lead consumers to buy less, as they encourage them to focus on quality to enjoy the clothes for a longer time and prices tend to be high. Unique fashion brands that focus on sustainability not only make consumers think about sustainability, but also make them buy sustainable clothes and act more sustainably in their daily life, as illustrated by the statement of Interviewee 10: *"When I wear these clothes, I buy fewer plastic bottles in the supermarket"*. Consumers who say they wear the jumpers and blouses at work, are also motivated by the brand to be active in a professional way. As the research shows, these behavioural experiences also relate to consumers' self-improvement projects.

Relational Experiences

The research demonstrates that brands are not perceived to connect consumers with social groups or entities, but with other individuals. These can be either family members, friends, colleagues, or even strangers wearing the same unique brand of clothing. When they see the latter, they feel a direct connection and sympathise with them. This implies that the brand has a psychosocial meaning to the consumers. Ordinary fashion brands are not seen as contributing to the social identity of consumers, whereas unique brands, and brands that are recognised as status symbols, shape their social identity. This is done, on the one hand,

through the mere possession and wearing of clothes of the respective brand and, on the other, through the attributes that consumers are expected to ascribe to themselves as part of their self-presentation.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the results presented with the relevant theory. In doing so, both sub-research questions are addressed and dealt with in a separate section.

Main Factors of Brand Experience Co-Creation at Different Levels of Fashion Brands with an Online D2C Strategy

As proposed by Andreini et al. (2018) and further supported by this research, brand experience takes place at, and is shaped by, three intertwined levels. The main factors at each level are explained and a justification is given to answer the first sub-research question: What are the main factors of brand experience co-creation at the different levels of interaction of fashion brands with an online D2C strategy?

Based on the findings, at the culture and market level the perceived brand uniqueness is of particular importance since unique brands enable the creation of a much more intense brand experience at all levels and in all dimensions. Innovativeness also exerts influence and the brand's origin (founder and country), which may or may not be part of its uniqueness, allow consumer identification. The respective level of the fashion market seems to be responsible for addressing the targeted social class and also affects the dimensions of brand experience with the behavioural in particular. This is also in agreement with consumer culture theory which states that brands must align with consumers' cultural norms, values, and beliefs in order to enable experiences (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 126). Consistent with the data,

the type of organisation differs only in brand stimuli and has no relevant impact on brand experience dimensions.

Proposition 1a: At the culture and market level the uniqueness, innovativeness, origin, and fashion market level of a brand are likely to impact brand experience co-creation.

At the collective level empirical evidence suggests that brand experience is mainly co-created by brand stimuli that will be specified later on, interactions with other individuals and online brand communities. Individuals such as family members, but friends and colleagues especially, appear to have a major influence on brand experience. Even if consumers do not actively interact with certain social groups and communities, as assumed by the prevailing theory of Andreini et al. (2018), at least the existence of online brand communities seems to shape brand experience.

Proposition 1b: At the collective level brand experience is likely to be co-created by consumers' interactions with a brand through brand stimuli, interactions with other individuals such as friends, colleagues, and family members, and online brand communities.

In line with the research, the most important brand stimuli are the direct sales channel and performance marketing activities, such as influencer and email marketing, as well as retargeting through social media and display ads. Moreover, the brand's social media channel and the interaction with employees also belong to the main factors.

The most important aspects influencing online brand experience of the brand-owned webshop of a fashion brand with a D2C strategy seem to be the products themselves, their presentation, and information, which is also supported by Gielens and Steenkamp (2019). The limited choice of products, and simultaneously the overall range including clearance sales and

the availability of new products, appear to play a significant role in the perceived usefulness to consumers. In line with Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou (2013), trustworthiness is crucial for using the online shop. However, it is perceived as a prerequisite for purchase and has no further influence on brand experience. Information richness and authentic photos are essential to consumers, as are design and aesthetics of the webshop in general. Usability, that is very important according to both previous research (e.g., Bilgihan et al., 2016; Jiménez Barreto et al., 2019; Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013) and this study, and in particular mobile device usability, as well as some additional features that facilitate shopping, also affect brand experience. Contrary to statements of Yoon and Youn (2016), the interactivity of the webshop and personalisation do not seem to affect the experience.

In terms of performance marketing activities, those aforementioned seem to be the most important drivers. Native ads, affiliate, and search engine marketing are either not leveraged by brands or not recognised by consumers. The research shows that interaction with employees, as well as with the brand's social media profile, which offers added value through background insights, contributes significantly to the creation of brand experiences. Traditional media seems to play only a negligible role.

Proposition 1c: As brand stimuli, the online direct sales channel, performance marketing activities, a brand's social media channel offering background insights and the interaction with employees co-create brand experiences. The brand-owned webshop is likely to create an optimised brand experience if the product assortment is perceived as useful, the product presentation as authentic, the product information as comprehensive, the design as appealing, and the usability as high. In terms of performance marketing, influencer and email

marketing, as well as retargeting via social media and display ads, are most likely to contribute to brand experience co-creation.

In line with the theory of Fournier (1998), empirical evidence suggests that consumers build meaningful relationships with brands. Functional, but also emotional and psychosocial meanings, seem to be derived and unconsciously incorporated into the consumers' lives. The brand contributes to the consumers' identity, whereby the congruence of self- and brand-identity seem to be vital. Moreover, it seems to be of importance that the brand fulfils the consumer's demand for self-presentation. As part of this, research shows that brands help consumers in differentiating themselves from other individuals and that this process significantly shapes brand experience. Further, based on the findings, brand experience also takes place when helping consumers in realising their self-improvement projects.

Proposition 1d: At the individual level, brand meanings derived from consumer-brand relationships, the congruence of brand- and self-identity as well as a brand's contribution to self-presentation, differentiation from others and self-improvement are likely to shape brand experience.

Consumers' Responses in the Dimensions of Brand Experience of Fashion Brands with an Online D2C Strategy

In line with Andreini et al. (2018), the research shows that all five dimensions of brand experience are addressed. Every dimension is explained in detail to answer the second sub-research question: What are explicit consumers' responses in relation to the dimensions of brand experience of fashion brands with an online D2C strategy?

According to Schmitt's (1999b) sensory expressions that trigger sensory experiences, the study shows that the primary elements include colours, typefaces, shapes, imagery, and

textures. The style is likely to be simplistic and the theme, which adds meaning, is the brand logo. Therefore, the sensory experience seems to be mainly visual and refers to the presentation of the brand in terms of design and aesthetics. In the consumption stage, also tactile stimuli are provided by the garment, or rather its fabric. However, research shows that consumers do not have an auditory, olfactory, or gustatory experience.

Proposition 2a: Consumers are likely to have a visual experience triggered by sensory expressions like colours, typefaces, shapes, imagery, simplicity, and brand logos. During consumption, consumers are also likely to have a tactile experience through fabrics' texture.

In accordance with Schmitt's (1999b) theory, the affective experience is perceived most intense by consumers during consumption. Based on the findings, consumers experience a feeling of well-being when wearing the brand's clothes. Furthermore, referring to Plutchik and Kellerman's (1980) definition of emotions, joy as a basic emotion, and confidence and pride as complex emotions seem to be triggered.

Proposition 2b: Consumers are likely to experience a feeling of well-being, joy, confidence, and pride.

In terms of the intellectual experience, the study agrees with Schmitt (1999b), who says that brands make consumers think and reassess (p. 138.). In the case of fashion brands with an online D2C strategy, it appears that consumers respond primarily with analytical thinking about quality, sustainability, and sometimes also critically about the brand itself. Further, during the consumption phase, combining a brand's garments into outfits can either stimulate creative thinking or lead to less mental work if the task is simplified by the garments itself.

Proposition 2c: Consumers are likely to respond with analytical thinking about quality and sustainability, as well as critical evaluation of the brands themselves. Further, consumers are likely to think creatively about their outfits or perceive the creation of new combinations as less mental work.

The research shows, and this is also consistent with the theory of Schmitt (1999b), that consumers also have behavioural experiences, as a certain behaviour is triggered, and lifestyle is influenced. Fashion brands seem to change consumers' buying behaviour, either by making them buy more or buy less. In addition, those consumers who shop less are more likely to buy high-quality or sustainable clothing. In addition, fashion brands also seem to influence consumers' motivation and actions in other areas of life that are linked to the brand's values, such as sustainability, or the purpose of the products, such as wearing them at work.

Proposition 2d: Consumers are likely to change their buying behaviour and also other areas of life that are linked to the brands' values and products' purpose.

Regarding the relational dimension, the research shows, in line with the theory of Andreini et al. (2018), that fashion brands with an online D2C strategy shape consumers' social identity through possession and attributes that are expected to be ascribed as part of self-presentation. However, contrary to theory, consumers do not seem to feel connected to social groups, entities, or communities, but rather to other individuals.

Proposition 2e: Consumers are likely to experience a relation to other individuals and perceive the brand as part of their social identity.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Final Model

This chapter serves as a conclusion and summarises the findings by answering the main research question: How is brand experience through an online D2C strategy of fashion brands (co-)created and how is it manifested by consumers?

Using the propositions and responses to the sub-research questions presented in Chapter 6, an extended brand experience model that mainly draws upon Andreini et al.'s (2018), Brakus et al.'s (2009), and Schmitt's (1999b) work is illustrated. The model visualises three different levels of brand experience co-creation that are intertwined. The culture and market level, where brand experience is embedded in a cultural context and the formation of economic value, enables experiences at the collective and individual level. At the collective level brand experience is co-created by interactions which then happens subjectively at the individual level. Within the levels, the main factors contributing to brand experience co-creation are highlighted, with brand stimuli playing a particularly crucial role in terms of an online D2C strategy. Furthermore, the model presents the five dimensions that categorise the brand experience and show how consumers manifest brand experience by incorporating explicit components and responses from consumers.

Figure 8 – Brand Experience Model of Fashion Brands with an Online D2C Strategy

Culture & Market Level
(Macro-Level)

brand uniqueness   brand origin

brand innovativeness   fashion market level

Collective Level
(Meso-Level)

brand stimuli

online brand
community

brand-owned webshop
- perceived usefulness
- product presentation & information
- design & aesthetics
- usability

performance marketing channels
- influencer marketing
- email marketing
- social media ads
- display ads

other individuals
- friends
- colleagues
- family members

other contact points
- social media profile
- employees

Individual Level
(Micro-Level)

brand meanings   self-identity   differentiation

self-improvement   self-presentation

Brand Experience	
Sensory Experience (Visual & Tactile)	• primary elements: colour, typeface, shape, texture, imagery • style: simplicity • theme: logo
Affective Experience	• feeling of well-being • joy • confidence • pride
Intellectual Experience	• analytical thinking about quality and/or sustainability • critical evaluation of the brand • creative or reduced thinking about outfits
Behavioural Experience	• change in buying behaviour • motivational influence on other related areas of life
Relational Experience	• relation to other individuals • formation of social-identity

Note. Research results summarised in a model created by the author.

Chapter 8: Concluding Remarks

This final chapter comprises four main sections. Firstly, theoretical contributions are outlined based on the research gap identified in the introduction of the thesis. Secondly, managerial implications for brand management practice of fashion brands are drawn. Thirdly, limitations connected to the research method are discussed and, finally, topics for future research are recommended.

Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to the understanding of the under-researched online D2C strategy and clarifies its central role in the formation of brand experience. It thereby demonstrates how brand experience is co-created and provides an extension of the brand experience model by Andreini et al. (2018). Furthermore, the study explores the true essence of brand experience by delving into the subjective responses of consumers towards fashion brands and explicitly highlighting the dimensions of brand experience. Moreover, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the fashion brand market in the fast-paced online environment.

Managerial Implications

The findings of this research provide valuable insights from which brand managers of fashion brands can benefit. Primarily, to design a resonant brand experience for target consumers, managers should take every level (micro-, meso-, and macro-) and main factor into account. As they are not solely responsible for developing the brand experience, a deeper understanding of collaborative creation is required. Their strategy needs to consider how the brand integrates into the cultural context and shapes the market in its competitive landscape through uniqueness, innovativeness, origin, and the fashion market level to enable brand

experience (macro-level). For a favourable experience, fashion brands should optimise brand stimuli, encourage consumer interactions with other individuals and the formation of online brand communities (meso-level). Furthermore, managers should take the consumers' identity and the congruence with the brand into consideration, as well as the brand's contribution to their self-presentation, improvement project, and differentiation from other individuals (micro-level).

For brand stimuli that are under control the of the fashion brands themselves in terms of an online D2C strategy, several recommendations can be made to brand managers. As the direct sales channel, the brand-owned webshop should offer a relevant product assortment and be easy to use. The presentation of products should be authentic, visually appealing, and rich in information. Influencer and email marketing should be leveraged as preferred performance marketing channels, and social media and display ads should be used to retarget consumers. The brand's social media profile should provide added value to the target consumers and interactions with employees should be encouraged.

Insights into potential consumers' responses and reactions to the identified dimensions of the brand experience should be used to trigger targeted experiences. For example, thinking about quality or sustainability can be encouraged by specific associative thinking campaigns or a certain behaviour in other related areas of life can be promoted and supported by appropriate imagery.

Ultimately, managers need to adopt a systematic view of practices at all levels and profoundly understand the network of stakeholders involved to increase the efficiency of the online D2C strategy and form a desirable brand experience.

Limitations

First, this study was conducted within the context of fashion brands and cannot be transferred to other markets due to the differences in nature of other consumer goods. Second, the small sample size and specific requirements make the survey not generalisable. Only fashion brands offering apparel as a product category and brand-owned webshops as an online direct sales channels were included. In addition, the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as employees, suppliers, and investors, were not taken into account, since only consumers were included as participants in this study, with homogenous demographics. Third, the study relies primarily on recalled experiences, which are prone to bias based on the most intense and recent moments (Schmitt, 2011, p. 26). Fourth, all consumers have had positive experiences and have built a good relationship with the brand. Negative experiences were therefore not considered.

Future Research

Based on the above limitations, there is room for improvement and avenues for future research, which are listed in the following:

- Quantitative research: To enhance generalisability the proposed model should be tested through quantitative research. Thereby it should also be validated if and how differences in consumer demographics or fashion brands operating in different market sectors (e.g., accessories, footwear, or cosmetics) impact the results. Moreover, consumers who have had negative experiences should be included.

- Cross-cultural comparison: As interactions between different cultural contexts can vary, conducting a cross-cultural comparison represents a valuable avenue for future research.

- Various markets: To broaden the scope of future research, it may be valuable to explore the perspectives of consumers of brands with an online D2C strategy in other markets, such as those interested in sporting goods or food and beverages.

- Comparison of channel selection strategies: As the study is about fashion brands with an online D2C strategy, it would provide valuable insights to compare the brand experience between direct and indirect channels.

- Consequences: Although previous research (e.g., Beig & Nika, 2019; Çifci et al., 2016; Cleff et al., 2014; V. Kumar & Kaushik, 2020) has already focused on the consequences of brand experience, it would be beneficial to explore how these consequences specifically relate to an online D2C strategy.

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Back matter

List of Appendices

Appendix A – Interview Guideline

INTERVIEW GUIDELINE		

1. Introduction

Hallo und herzlich willkommen zum Interview. Vielen Dank, dass du dir die Zeit nimmst. Die Befragung wird im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit zum Thema „Brand experience through an online direct-to-consumer strategy. An investigation based on fashion brands" durchgeführt. In den nächsten 45 bis 60 Minuten werden wir uns über deine persönlichen Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen mit der ausgewählten Marke unterhalten. Dabei werde ich Impulse geben und dir Fragen stellen, auf die du bitte offen und vor allem ehrlich antwortest. Das Interview wird aufgezeichnet, im Nachgang transkribiert und anonym ausgewertet. Hast du noch Fragen zum Interview oder zum Ablauf?

2. Warm-up	Main Questions	Sub-Questions
Fashion Brand	Wenn du an die Marke denkst, was fällt dir spontan ein?	- Was verbindest du mit der Marke? - Welches Logo, Slogan, Farben, Schriften verwendet die Marke?
	Woher kennst du die Marke? Wie hast du die Marke kennengelernt?	
	Wie würdest du deine Erfahrung mit der Marke ganz allgemein beschreiben?	
Direct Purchase	Erzähle mir bitte über den letzten Kauf bei der Marke.	- Was wurde gekauft? - Wann wurde gekauft? - Wie viel wurde bezahlt? - War es der erste Kauf oder wurde bei der Marke schon mehrmals (direkt) gekauft? - Was der Auslöser für den Kauf bzw. wie ist dazu gekommen? - Warum hast du dich für diese Marke und nicht eine andere entschieden? Warum wurde direkt gekauft und nicht über einen Händler?

3. Brand Stimuli	Main Questions	Sub-Questions
Direct Sales Channel (incl. Peculiarities of Online Brand Experience)	Wo (über welchen Kanal) hast du eingekauft und wie hast du den Kauf erlebt? Ist etwas besonders positiv oder negativ aufgefallen?	- Wie war die Bedienung? War der Shop benutzerfreundlich? - Wie war der wahrgenommene Nutzen vom Online-Shop? - Was ist dir denn am Online-Shop am wichtigsten?
	Nun sehen wir uns den Online-Shop einmal gemeinsam an. Wie würdest du beim Einkauf vorgehen? Was fällt dir da auf und was findest du gut oder schlecht gelöst?	- Wie funktioniert die Navigation? Findest du dich zurecht? - Wie gefällt dir die Produktpräsentation? - Wie gefällt dir das Design vom Online-Shop? - Inwiefern wirkt der Shop vertrauensvoll? Hattest du schon Vertrauen in die Marke bevor du gekauft hast, oder ist das Vertrauen eher danach aufgrund des Kaufes entstanden?
	Wurdest du vom Unternehmen aufgefordert zu interagieren, z.B. über einen Chat-Bot, Umfrage zur Zufriedenheit, Rezension?	
	Hattest du das Gefühl, dass der Online-Shop auf dich persönlich eingeht?	- Wurdest du z.B. begrüßt mit „Hallo (Name)"? - Waren die Angebote auf dich abgestimmt bzw. wurden dir Kaufempfehlungen gegeben?
Performance Marketing Channels	Hast du schon einmal Werbung von der Marke gesehen? Wie hast du sie wahrgenommen?	- Auf welchen Kanälen? (Social Media, Influencer, Suchmaschinen, Banner auf anderen Websites) - War das vor/nach dem Kauf? - Wie hat die Werbung ausgesehen (Videos/Bilder/Texte)? - Was war die Kernaussage der Werbung?
	Wurdest du nach dem Kauf von der Marke nochmal kontaktiert?	- Hast du einen Newsletter abonniert?
Other Contact Points	Welche Kontaktpunkte hattest du noch mit der Marke?	- Warst du mit Mitarbeiter:innen der Marke in Kontakt (über Telefon/E-Mail/Chat-Bot/Social Media)? - Verfolgst du die Marke über Social Media?

4. Levels of Brand Experience	Main Questions	Sub-Questions
Culture & Market Level	Wie innovativ ist die Marke für dich? Trägt die Marke zur Schaffung neuer Märkte bei?	
	Hat die Marke eine historische Vergangenheit?	- Wie wurde die Marke gegründet?
	Spricht die Marke eine bestimmte Kultur oder Gesellschaft an?	- Wo liegen die Produkte der Marke preislich? - Sind die Produkte für jeden leistbar oder handelt es sich eher um Luxusgüter?
Collective Level (without brand stimuli)	Wie intensiv tauschst du dich mit Freunden/Verwandten/Bekannten über die Marke aus?	- Kaufen deine Freunde/Verwandten/Bekannten auch bei der Marke ein? - Wie intensiv tauschst du dich mit anderen (einzelnen) Konsumenten aus?
	Fühlst du dich durch die Marke einer bestimmten sozialen Gruppe zugehörig? Welcher?	- Ist die Marke ein Statussymbol?
	Würdest du sagen, dass es eine Brand Community gibt? Also eine soziale Gruppe an Anhängern/Bewunderern der Marke, die durch die Marke Gemeinschaft erfährt.	- Gibt es Aktivitäten/Rituale/bestimmte Gebräuche, die mit der Marke zusammenhängen, die du mit anderen Konsumenten teilst? Oder ist es der Kleidungsstil an sich, der verbindet?
Individual Level	Welche Bedeutung hat die Marke für dich im z.B. nützlichen oder emotionalen Sinne?	- In welcher Beziehung stehst du zur Marke?
	Erzähl mir von dir. Wie würdest du dich selbst beschreiben? Warum passt die Marke zu dir?	
	Inwiefern trägt die Marke zur Verbesserung deiner Selbst bei?	
	Wie möchtest du von anderen gesehen und wahrgenommen werden? Unterstützt dich die Marke dabei?	
	Unterstützt dich die Marke dabei, dich von anderen zu differenzieren und dich besonders/einzigartig zu fühlen? Oder unterstützt sie dich dabei gleich zu sein wie andere?	- Inwiefern ist die Marke für dich einzigartig?

5. Brand Experience Dimension	Main Questions	Sub-Questions
Sensory Experience	Inwiefern fühlst du dich von der Marke und deren Präsentation (direkten Kanäle) angesprochen, in Bezug auf deine Sinne?	- Findest du die Marke (und die direkten Kanäle) visuell ansprechend? - Wie war das auditive Erlebnis? Wurden Videos/Töne abgespielt? - Wie fühlen/greifen sich die Produkte an?
Affective Experience	Wie fühlst du dich, wenn du an die Marke denkst? Welche Gefühle erzeugt die Marke in dir?	
	Wie fühlt es sich an, Produkte der Marke zu besitzen?	
Intellectual Experience	Inwiefern regt dich die Marke zum Nachdenken an?	
	Stimuliert die Marke in irgendeiner Art und Weise deine Neugierde, Lösungsorientierung oder Kreativität?	
Behavioural Experience	Inwiefern fordert dich die Marke zum Handeln auf?	
	Hat sich dein Lebensstil durch die Marke verändert?	
Relational Experience	Inwiefern prägt die Marke deine soziale Identität?	
	Verbindet dich die Marke mit anderen Individuen, sozialen Gruppe, Communities, sozialen Einheiten wie Kulturen, Gesellschaften etc.?	

6. Closing	Main Questions	Sub-Questions
Additional Thoughts	Damit sind wir schon fast am Ende der Befragung angelangt. Möchtest du noch irgendetwas ergänzen oder abschließend zu deiner Markenerfahrung sagen?	
Demographic Data	Um die Marke besser einordnen zu können, möchte ich dir zu guter Letzt noch kurze Fragen zu deiner Person stellen.	
	Wie alt bist du?	
	Was machst du beruflich?	
	Was ist dein höchster Bildungsabschluss?	
	Wie viele Personen leben im Haushalt und wie hoch ist circa das monatliche Haushaltsnettoeinkommen?	
	Vielen Dank für deine Zeit und deine Unterstützung!	

Note. Table created by the author.

Appendix B – Coding Frame

Category	Frequency
Basic information	0
Fashion brands	0
Overall experience	10
Associations	0
Colours	10
Logo	9
No slogan	4
General associations	12
Brand characteristics	0
Style	21
Sustainability	14
Quality of products	18
Pricing	13
Get to know	11
Reasons for brand choice	11
Direct purchase	0
Products	15
Timeliness	10
Trigger	11
Reasons for direct purchase	14
Number of purchases	18
Consumer demographics	0
Age	10
Job	10
Highest level of education	10
Monthly household net income	10
Brand stimuli	0
Direct sales channel	0
Perceived usefulness	0
Product selection and range	15

Category	Frequency
Clearance sale	12
Latest products	8
Order and delivery	18
Usability	0
Handling	15
Navigation	22
Filter	7
Search	2
Wish-list	3
Country selection	7
Mobile	7
Perceived interactivity	0
Order and shipping confirmation	7
Newsletter subscription	3
Reviews	14
Notifications	2
Chatbot	8
Personalisation	10
Recommendations	9
Design & aesthetics	21
Product presentation and information	0
Images	17
Video	5
Colours	3
Sizes	12
Product information	11
Trust	0
Trustworthiness of the online shop	14
Trust in the brand itself	8
Performance marketing channels	0
Social media advertising	13
Influencer marketing	28

Category	Frequency
Search engine advertising	8
Display advertising	9
E-mail marketing	17
No performance marketing channels	4
Other contact points	0
Social media profile	25
Classic media	7
Employees	14
Levels of experience	0
Culture and market level	0
Innovativeness	14
Founding history	0
Foundation and founder/designer	17
Country of origin	12
Target audience	15
Collective level	0
Family	11
Friends and colleagues	20
Other individual consumers	4
Status symbol	20
Social group	14
Brand community	11
Individual level	0
Meaning	0
Meaningful relationship	10
Emotional meaning	12
Functional meaning	15
Self-identity	13
Self-improvement	10
Self-presentation	14
Differentiation	15
Dimensions of experience	0

Category	Frequency
Sensory experiences	0
Visual	13
Auditory	10
Tactile	9
Olfactory	2
Affective experiences	0
Positive feelings of well-being	11
Specific emotions	8
Intellectual experiences	0
Thinking about sustainability	8
Thinking about quality	6
Critical thinking	4
Creative thinking	7
Reduced thinking	6
Behavioural experience	0
Increased purchase	3
Reduced purchase	8
Purchase of sustainable clothes	2
Motivation for other areas of life	6
No change in lifestyle and behaviour	8
Relational experiences	0
Social identity	10
Connection to others	11
Total	985

Note. When subcategories were formed, coded text segments from higher-order categories were assigned to lower-order categories. Categories are presented in a graduated manner from the highest order (main categories) in the darkest colour to the lowest order in the lightest colour. Table created by the author.

Appendix C – Coding Guideline

Category Name	Description	Application Example
Basic information	General information about the fashion brand, direct purchase and consumer	
Fashion brands	Anything about the brand the consumer bought from directly	
Overall experience	General experience with the brand that could be either positive or negative	Habe nur gute Erfahrungen mit der Marke gemacht.
Associations	Associations that the consumer has with the brand	
Colours	Colours that the consumer associates with the brand	Farben sind eher so Erdtöne.
Logo	Logo that the consumer associates with the brand	Logo relativ schlicht und nur eine dünne Schrift
No slogan	The consumer cannot remember any slogan	Slogan kenn ich keinen einzigen. Weiß gar nicht, ob die einen haben.
General associations	Every other association that the consumer has with the brand	Das kann man eigentlich immer anziehen, über Jahre hinweg, so richtige Klassiker.
Brand characteristics	Attributes that describe the brand identity and values	
Style	Appearance or design of the fashion brand	Also ich würde einfach sagen, dass es ein Casual-Look ist, den du überall tragen kannst.
Sustainability	Sustainability as a characteristic of the brand	weil die Marke halt hochwertig, nachhaltig ist
Quality of products	Level of product excellence in terms of materials, reliability, durability, performance etc.	ich finde die Qualität voll gut, wirklich

Category Name	Description	Application Example
Pricing	General price strategy of the brand	die Teile sind standardmäßig immer um den Preis von 100 Euro
Get to know	From where the consumer knows the brand from	Ich habe sie echt nur durch die ganzen Influencer kennengelernt.
Reasons for brand choice	Arguments why the consumer selected the brand	Also ich habe mich einfach nur für das entschieden, weil es mir einfach gut gefallen hat.
Direct purchase	Anything that describes buying directly from the brand	
Products	Garments last bought directly from the brand and their price	ein beiger Pullover, der sehr teuer war. Der hat 80 Euro gekostet.
Timeliness	Recency of the latest purchase expressed in a time factor	Also ich habe das letzte Mal gekauft im November, Oktober, also vor circa vier Monaten.
Trigger	Specific cause of the purchase	Der Auslöser war eigentlich, dass ich von meiner Schwester darauf hingewiesen worden bin, dass Sale ist.
Reasons for direct purchase	Arguments why the consumer bought directly from the brand and not indirectly	weil's eine größere Auswahl auch gibt und eben auch, weil's die besseren Abverkäufe meistens sind. oder Also die Auswahl ist halt einfach größer als jetzt bei einem Händler. Der hat ja dann doch nicht die ganze also das komplette Sortiment.
Number of purchases	How often the consumer bought from the brand	Ich habe schon öfter bei der Marke bestellt.

Category Name	Description	Application Example
	(single or repurchase incl. number)	Mittlerweile jetzt dreimal.
Consumer demographics	Demographic information about the consumer	
Age	Age of the consumer in years	25 Jahre
Job	Job title or position of the consumer	Ich bin in der Unternehmenskommuni kation von einem großen Logistikunternehmen.
Highest level of education	Highest education completed by the consumer	Bachelor, also FH
Monthly household net income	Net income per consumer household per month	Ich alleine zwischen 2.500 und 3.000 Euro netto.
Brand stimuli	Experience with all stimuli that are in control of the brand, as are the direct sales channel, performance marketing channels and any other direct contact point with the brand	
Direct sales channel	Experience with and impressions of the brand-owned web shop including the peculiarities of an online brand experience	
Perceived usefulness	The extent to which the consumer is convinced that the use of the system is beneficial (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013, p. 23)	
Product selection and range	Product choice and assortment that is perceived as useful	die Auswahl ist jetzt nicht riesig, was ich sehr entspannend finde.
Clearance sale	The consumer emphasises buying in clearance sales	Ja, weil der Sale das macht dann oft schon viel aus.

Category Name	Description	Application Example
Latest products	The consumer emphasises buying newly available products	Und dann kannst du entweder gleich auf „New-in" gehen. Also das ist immer ganz cool, weil wenn du öfter im Online-Shop bist, dann siehst immer was gerade neu ist. Das ist praktisch, wenn man so wie ich bei der Marke öfter mal reinschaut.
Order and delivery	Anything in terms of order or delivery that is perceived as useful	Die Bestellung war schnell da, so hat alles gepasst. Es ist auch mit dem Rücksenden hat alles funktioniert. Ja war alles eigentlich ganz unkompliziert.
Usability	Perceived ease of use that claims minimum effort to use the web shop (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013, p. 23)	
Handling	Anything that describes the perceived operation of the web shop in general	Die Website funktioniert gut.
Navigation	Anything that is linked with the menu, links etc.	Es ist die Navigation und so, das ist sehr leicht und ja halt einfach richtig überschaubar
Filter	Options for specifying the search	Ich filter vor allem die Größe, weil in meiner Größe ist oft alles ausverkauft. Dann Farben, Beliebt, Neuheiten, diese Kategorien und so weiter. Preisspanne ist mir eigentlich nicht so wichtig.
Search	Function to search for products	Ich habe auch den Namen des Sweaters eingegeben, der ist dann

Category Name	Description	Application Example
		sofort erschienen. Also die Suchfunktion, das funktioniert alles gut.
Wish-list	Function to save products for a later time	Wenn man es für später speichert, weil man es noch nicht in den Warenkorb geben will.
Country selection	Option to select the consumer's country	Das einzige Negative, das man die deutsche und österreichische Website unterscheiden muss, weil normal ist das automatisch, wenn man die eine aufmacht. Ich weiß ned, warum das da nicht funktioniert hat.
Mobile	Anything that describes the usability of the web shop on a smartphone	oft schaue ich dann schon auch mobil weiter oder wiederholt sage ich mal. Mir ist schon wichtig, dass dort dann alles so funktioniert, dass du halt trotzdem gutes Responsive Design hast und quasi einfach mobil auf's Gleiche zugreifen kannst und gleich zurecht findest wie quasi auf einem Laptop und am Computer generell.
Perceived interactivity	Bidirectional flow of information (Yoon & Youn, 2016, pp. 4, 11) and not active control as this is covered by usability	
Order and shipping confirmation	Emails regarding the completed purchase	Und man bekommt auch immer eine Nachricht gleich, dass es versendet worden ist.
Newsletter subscription	Brands ask for newsletter sign-ups regardless of whether consumers had signed up	Newsletter-Anmeldung natürlich immer wieder Popups

Category Name	Description	Application Example
Reviews	Brands ask for a rating or a review after purchase	Eine Nach-Mail hab ich auch bekommen, aber ich hab nie eine Bewertung abgegeben.
Notifications	Notifications or email alerts that can be activated or is activated by the consumer	Ich fand es eigentlich ganz gut, weil du konntest bei den Größen, wenn sie nicht verfügbar waren, auch so einen „informiere mich" Alarm einstellen.
Chatbot	Brands give the possibility to use a chatbot with a messaging interface and automated response	Also den Chatbot hab ich noch nie benutzt. Das ist ja, es poppt ja nicht sofort auf wie bei anderen was ich sehr gut finde, weil wenn ihn hernehmen möchte, nehm ich ihn eh her. Aber ich hab ihn wie gesagt noch nie verwendet, aber ich habe generell noch nie einen Chatbot verwendet.
Personalisation	Customised messages and content that is customised to the consumer's needs and interests (Bilgihan et al., 2016, p. 110)	Also personalisiert sind's nicht. Na, sind eher so allgemeine.
Recommendations	Product recommendations based on the individual consumer's or other users' preferences enabled by algorithms (Graef, 2015, pp. 477–478)	So auf der Website ist mir jetzt nichts aufgefallen, dass mi irgendwie dahin geleitet hätten von wegen „vielleicht gefällt dir das auch" oder so.
Design & aesthetics	Graphics, layout, fonts and colours used in the web shop (Rose et al., 2012, p. 312)	Sehr ansprechend. Ich finde, dass es sehr clean ist und mit der Schrift so mit der Schreibmaschinenschrift

Category Name	Description	Application Example
		finde es eigentlich sehr cool.
Product presentation and information	The manner in which the products are displayed and the indications or specifications relating to the products	
Images	Anything that describes the product presentation in the form of images	Sie haben halbwegs normale Fotos, keine die voll gestellt sind und wo man sich dann denkt, da seh ich jetzt nur die Hälfte vom Gewand.
Video	Anything that describes the product presentation in the form of videos	Es muss jetzt kein Video sein, wenn man was trägt.
Colours	Anything that is about the experience with the colour selection	Und wie gesagt also ich finde das da super mit der Farbe, also dass man immer die Farbe oben easy sieht.
Sizes	Selection of or information about product sizes	Es steht die Passform. Welche Größe trägt das Model und so weiter. Das finde ich auch immer sehr gut eigentlich.
Product information	Indications or specifications relating to the products, such as materials, functionality etc.	welcher Stoff das ist und so schau ich auch immer. Also Produktinfos sind mir schon sehr wichtig.
Trust	Confidence in the brand or web shop that reduces uncertainty or perceived risk (Morgan-Thomas & Veloutsou, 2013, p. 25)	
Trustworthiness of the web shop	Confidence in the credibility and reliability of the web shop	der Shop ist schon wichtig, weil wenn ich schon ein unsicheres Gefühl habe, dann bestelle ja

Category Name	Description	Application Example
		wahrscheinlich auch gar nicht
Trust in the brand itself	Confidence in the brand itself	Ich hatte davor schon Vertrauen in Marke gehabt, vor allem, dass sie gut ist.
Performance marketing channels	Experience with and impressions of the performance marketing activities and ads	
Social media advertising	Paid advertising measures on social media platforms that direct consumers to the web shop (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 133)	Social Media halt, nachdem ich wieder mal was gekauft hab. Dann kommt da schon natürlich was ja, weil's getrackt wird da – Facebook und Instagram.
Influencer marketing	People with a wide reach who cooperate with the brands to promote their products on social media (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 149)	Weil sie da einfach sehr authentische Persönlichkeiten haben, die wirklich, die einfach zu dem Stil passen. Das waren hauptsächlich so skandinavische Influencerinnen.
Search engine advertising	Paid advertising measure in search engines that direct consumers to the web shop (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, pp. 43–44)	Also bei Google hab ich Mal Werbung gehabt von der Marke, aber auch nicht so viel.
Display advertising	Banners that are distributed on third-party websites (Kamps & Schetter, 2020, p. 91)	Aber auf anderen Seiten, Online-Magazinen glaub ich hab ich schon Mal Banner-Werbung bekommen.
E-mail marketing	Commercial messages via electronic mail with newsletters in particular (Bawm & Nath, 2014, p. 250)	bekomm fast jeden Tag eine E-Mail von der Marke. Dann schau ich immer durch, überhaupt wenn Sale ist.
No performance marketing channels	No experience with and impressions of	Ich weiß jetzt nicht vor wie vielen Jahren das

Category Name	Description	Application Example
	performance marketing activities and ads at all	war, dass sie es offiziell bekanntgegeben haben, dass sie das nicht mehr machen.
Other contact points	Experience with any contact point that does not include the direct sales channel or performance marketing activities	
Social media profile	Interactions with a brand's social media profile and content that is not paid	
Classic media	Experience with traditional media that is TV, magazines etc.	Und eben auch durch Modezeitschriften immer wieder
Employees	Interactions with employees	Die haben immer gleich zurückgeschrieben, also so jetzt mal 24 Stunden Response und sehr freundlich.
Levels of experience	Where brand experience takes place including culture and market, collective, and individual level (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 125)	
Culture and market level	Economic value and contribution to developing markets as well as the relation to cultural elements and beliefs (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 874; Pine & Gilmore, 1998, p. 98)	
Innovativeness	New and useful solutions offered by the brand ranging from innovative products to business models or taken activities (Kim et al., 2021, p. 9)	in dem Preissegment und in Deutschland produziert waren die eigentlich, glaube ich, Vorreiter oder einer der Vorreiter für diese

Category Name	Description	Application Example
		nachhaltigen Sachen in Deutschland
Founding history	All the knowledge the consumer has about the history of brand foundation	
Foundation and founder/designer	All the knowledge the consumer has about the foundation itself as well as the founder or designer	die Designerin von dieser Marke heißt ja genau so und dann wirst du ja früher oder später, wenn du es auf Instagram verfolgst, auf sie aufmerksam
Country of origin	The brand's country of origin and anything that relates with it	Ich glaube gerade im französischsprachigen Raum ist es schon noch mal eher verbreitet, weil sie halt dort ihren Ursprung hat. Also ich mag Paris und Frankreich allgemein sehr gerne (...) Hatte auch früher in der Schule mal Französisch.
Target audience	Perceived social class and characteristics of the target consumers	Jüngere, eher nachhaltigere, aber die natürlich eher ein höheres Einkommen haben.
Collective level	Interactions with other stakeholders (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 127), except with the brand itself, as these interactions are already covered by brand stimuli	
Family	Interactions with family members about the brand or the purchase	Ja mit meiner Schwester red ich vielleicht auch ein paar Mal drüber. Wenn ich mit ihr telefonier, nachdem ich gerade bestellt hab oder so.

Category Name	Description	Application Example
Friends and colleagues	Interactions with friends and colleagues about the brand or the purchase	Ja also mit der Vicky vom Studium, weil sich die jetzt eben auch schon öfter mal was bestellt hat oder, ich glaub, zwei Mal. Da haben wir halt einfach über diese, weil wenn du weißt, dass da auch wer was bestellt hat, fragst halt mal nach, hat das eigentlich passt, oder? Und auch über die Gründerin, weil sie der eben auch folgt.
Other individual consumers	Interactions with other individual consumers that are strangers about the brand or the purchase	Also ich spreche da jetzt generell keine fremden Personen an.
Status symbol	Anything that describes whether the brand is perceived as a status symbol	Es gibt schon auch Gewand dort, das auch ein bisschen teurer ist. Aber im Endeffekt haben die auch ganz normale, preiswertere Sachen. Also das ist jetzt nicht so ein Statussymbol, aber es steht auch jetzt nirgendwo außen oben eigentlich die Marke.
Social group	Interactions with a group of people in the offline environment	Schwierig, also einer sozialen Gruppe zugeordnet fühl i mi jetzt nicht direkt, na.
Brand community	Interactions with a group of people who are not geographically bound, typically anchored in the online environment and consisting of admirers of a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412) as well as their shared characteristics or activities	Ich finde es ist schon ein bisschen die Haltung zur Nachhaltigkeit, die halt die ganze Community an sich hat. Aber es ist auch gleichzeitig Fashion.

Category Name	Description	Application Example
Individual level	Brand meanings and contributions to the consumer's self-identarian project (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 125; Fournier, 1998, p. 361)	
Meaning	Meanings that are derived from the relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998, p. 361)	Also ich finde, dass die die Marke zum Beispiel jetzt andere also in meinem Kopf so ist sie natürlich anderen höher gestellt, weil sie lokal ist, in Deutschland produziert.
Meaningful relationship	Relationship to the brand that is purposive and ego-centred (Fournier, 1998, p. 361)	
Emotional meaning	Emotional purpose of the brand (Fournier, 1998, p. 361)	Kleidung führt allgemein dazu, dass man sich wohlfühlt und ich glaube, das ist dann mit der Marke a ein bisschen verbunden.
Functional meaning	Utiliarian purpose of the brand (Fournier, 1998, p. 361)	Ich mein der Nutzen ist natürlich, es ist ein Gewand und du ziehst es an.
Self-identity	Consumer's understanding of herself in terms of values, beliefs and personality traits that relate to the brand-identity	Ich glaube, dass ich ziemlich gern was ausprobier, mach neue Dinge, liebe Abenteuer. Und deswegen glaube ich, passt die Marke ganz gut, weil die eigentlich ziemlich mit den Trends gehen.
Self-improvement	Consumer's efforts to enhance her personal qualities and actions	Ich kauf vielleicht irgendwie ausgewählter. Und Verbesserung im Sinne von immer gut

Category Name	Description	Application Example
		angezogen im Büro, würd ich vielleicht sagen.
Self-presentation	The way the consumer wants to be perceived by others and the attributes she wants to be ascribed with	Also ich möchte schon eher als locker, cool und offen gesehen werden und nicht verschlossen, brav oder so Tussi oder so, und da unterstützt mich die Marke halt schon.
Differentiation	Consumer's desire to distinguish herself from other individuals	Es hat auch nicht jeder, darum kauf ich mir's.
Dimensions of experience	Multi-dimensional representation of the subjective consumer's response in the consumer's mind (Andreini et al., 2018, p. 127; Zha et al., 2020, p. 298)	
Sensory experiences	Appeal to the five senses triggered by sensory expressions like primary elements, styles and themes (Schmitt, 1999b, p. 99)	
Visual	Visual sense triggered by certain expressions	Eigentlich hauptsächlich visuell. Und ich finde eben dieses Triumph-Zeichen oder halt das Logo generell hat einen hohen Wiedererkennungswert.
Auditory	Auditory sense triggered by certain expressions	Auditiv kann man jetzt nicht so viel sagen, weil sie haben jetzt kaum Musik, keine Videos auf der Webseite. Bei den Reels muss ich ehrlich sagen, ich hab fast immer mein Handy auf lautlos (...) Also wenn da

Category Name	Description	Application Example
		irgendwas dabei ist, hör ich's nicht.
Tactile	Tactile sense triggered by certain expressions	feines Material, nicht so harte T-Shirts, die schnell eingehen. Beim Pullover haben sie sehr oft Kaschmir. Also schon eher höhere Qualitäte und weiche Stoffe – einfach angenehm zu tragen.
Olfactory	Olfactory sense triggered by certain expressions	es riecht halt neutral, also es riecht einfach nach nichts.
Affective experiences	Inside feelings in relation to a brand, ranging from moderate moods to strong emotions that can either be positive or negative and of varying intensity (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 61)	
Positive feelings of well-being	Consumer's state of emotional happiness, satisfaction or calmness.	Ja dann fühle ich mich gut angezogen. Dann fühle ich mich einfach wohl. Das ziehe ich einfach gerne an.
Specific emotions	Basic or complex emotions that describe the consumer's experience	Wenn ich jetzt wirklich aktiv nachdenke, wie ich mich fühle, würde vielleicht sogar sagen ein bisschen stolz und ein bisschen selbstbewusst auch.
Intellectual experiences	Analytical and creative thinking induced by the brand (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 61)	
Thinking about sustainability	Thinking about sustainability aspects	Ja und sonst hat es mich schon auch zum Nachdenken angeregt, weil ich halt nicht gewusst habe, dass man

Category Name	Description	Application Example
		auf Sri Lanka alles nachhaltig produzieren kann. Du informierst dich halt gleich mal drüber.
Thinking about quality	Thinking about quality aspects	durch die Preispositionierung irgendwie ein bewusstere Umgang mit Fashion. Einfach weil du lange länger und nachhaltiger eigentlich was davon hast im Endeffekt.
Critical thinking	Critically reassessing the brand	Ma fragt si halt, warum's dann wieder so billige Sachen gibt. Man will dann oft gar nicht wissen, warum das so billig ist, wie es produziert wird und so Sachen.
Creative thinking	Creativity is triggered	Ich finde Kreativität vielleicht in dem Sinn, dass du ja quasi ein neues Stück hast gerade in deiner Outfit-Kollektion quasi, dass du auch wieder neu kombinieren kannst.
Reduced thinking	Less mental work, as some tasks are simplified by the brand or the garments	Du musst du nicht viel Nachdenken, ziehst das T-Shirt an und weißt, dass du gut angezogen bist.
Behavioural experience	Changes induced by the brand that involve the consumer's lifestyle and behaviour (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 62)	
Increased purchase	Buying more garments	Sie regt mi nur beim Einkaufen halt, bei die typischen Rabatttage an, Black Friday oder so, da

Category Name	Description	Application Example
		pushen sie natürlich extrem und dann kauf i natürlich in die Richtung dann einmal schneller was ein
Reduced purchase	Buying less garments that are higher in quality	Wenn du dann immer mehr Sachen von der Marke hast, die dir sehr gut gefallen und die gute Qualität haben und für die du vielleicht auch a bissi mehr zahlst, dann reduziert sie im Großen und Ganzen schon dein ganzes Einkaufen.
Purchase of sustainable clothes	Buying garments that are sustainably produced	Ich kaufe dadurch sicher eher nachhaltigere Kleidung ein.
Motivation for other areas of life	Changes in other areas of life that are related with the brands' value or purpose of the products	Ich finde es trägt schon dazu bei, dass i generell nachhaltiger handle (...) Ja einfach vom Gefühl her, weil du trägst es jetzt schon und dann schaust du, dass du im Supermarkt vielleicht jetzt nicht alles in Plastikflaschen kaufst.
No change in lifestyle and behaviour	No change in lifestyle and behaviour perceived	Na eigentlich nicht, weil das hab ich eigentlich immer schon, das Sportliche mit den Sweatern und so, das hat mir eigentlich immer schon gefallen.
Relational experiences	Social identity and connection to other individuals or social groups evoked by the brand (Schmitt, 1999a, p. 62)	

Category Name	Description	Application Example
Social identity	Self-concept is influenced or not by the membership of a social group	Wenn man so angezogen ist, wird man einfach anders wahrgenommen.
Connection to others	Anything that describes the feeling of a relation to other individuals	Ich würde mir vielleicht denken, die Person ist ähnlich wie ich.

Note. Application examples are only given for categories of the lowest order since the formation of subcategories has displaced the text segments from categories of higher order. Categories are presented in a graduated manner from the highest order (main categories) in the darkest colour to the lowest order in the lightest colour. Table created by the author.

Appendix D – Classification of Interviews

Interview	Perceived Brand Uniqueness	Type of Organisation	Fashion Market Level	Timeliness of Purchase	Regular Purchase
Interview 1	unique	D2C brand manufacturer	high-end fashion	recent	yes
Interview 2	unique	D2C brand manufacturer	middle-market fashion	several months ago	yes
Interview 3	ordinary	D2C brand manufacturer	mass-market fashion	several months ago	no
Interview 4	ordinary	D2C brand manufacturer	mass-market fashion	recent	yes
Interview 5	ordinary	established brand manufacturer	middle-market fashion	recent	yes
Interview 6	unique	D2C brand manufacturer	middle-market fashion	recent	no
Interview 7	ordinary	established brand manufacturer	middle-market fashion	several months ago	yes
Interview 8	unique	established brand manufacturer	high-end fashion	recent	no
Interview 9	unique	D2C brand manufacturer	middle-market fashion	several months ago	no
Interview 10	unique	established brand manufacturer	middle-market fashion	recent	yes

Note. Table created by the author.

Appendix E – Demographic Data of Interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Highest Level of Education	Job	Monthly Household Net Income
Interviewee 1	25	University	Entrepreneur	€ 2,500-3,000 (1 adult)
Interviewee 2	30	University	White-collar worker	€ 2,500-3,000 (1 adult)
Interviewee 3	25	University	Student	€ 3,000-4,000 (2 adults)
Interviewee 4	27	University	White-collar worker	€ 2,000-2,500 (1 adult)
Interviewee 5	40	Compulsory School	Unemployed	€ 2,000-2,500 (single mother with 1 child)
Interviewee 6	28	University	White-collar worker	more than € 5,000 (2 adults)
Interviewee 7	37	University	White-collar worker	more than € 5,000 (family of 5)
Interviewee 8	29	University	White-collar worker	€ 4,000-5,000 (2 adults)
Interviewee 9	26	University	Entrepreneur	more than € 5,000 (2 adults)
Interviewee 10	32	University	White-collar worker	€ 2,000-2,500 (1 adult)

Note. Table created by the author.