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Bridging gaps: Professional positioning in mass  
retail and the effects on a brand's perceived  
quality – The Syoss case

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# **Bridging gaps: Professional positioning in mass retail and the effects on a brand's perceived quality - The Syoss case**

*Miranda Rincon, Kim Kassandra Rosengarten & Jan Ziegler*

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The specific objective of this research paper is to examine the role of a brand's professional positioning strategy in the mass retail market segment and the impact on its perceived quality among customers.

**Design/methodology/approach:** By employing a combination of literature review and a qualitative mode of enquiry, the paper attempts to illuminate the stated research purpose through the use of given theory in the explored field as well as focus group discussions. Due to this research approach, the study was explorative and interpretive in nature.

**Findings:** Professional positioning affects a brand's perceived quality in a positive way. It benefits from adapting the human traits of a profession as part of their personality. The framing effect plays a major role when using professional positioning since it can dilute this concept.

**Research implications:** High perceived quality provides a strong competitive advantage among brands within mass retail, since it is a determining factor when it comes to buying decisions. As a result, several brand and communication elements are presented as being critical for a brand's professional positioning.

**Practical implications:** For the brand's purpose of having a competitive advantage, a high perceived quality using a professional positioning and communication strategy is essential and profoundly recommended.

**Originality/value:** Recent developments concerning competition in mass retail have heightened the need for competitive advantages among rivaling brands. The present study therefore fills a gap in the literature by assessing the interdependence of a professional positioning and perceived quality.

**Keywords:** Professional positioning, brand personality, brand physique, mass retail, perceived quality, competitive advantage, reverse innovation, Syoss, L'Oreal

**Paper type:** Research paper

## **Introduction**

In times of high competition and low demand, companies need to adapt their strategies to survive in the developed environment (Tournois, 2012). In order to create a competitive advantage, businesses must differentiate their brands to raise awareness amongst customers. There is evidence in the literature that recognises disruptive innovations as a means to drive markets (Christensen, 2008). A best practice for using

those in mass retail is the Syoss case (Proeschel, 2013). Syoss is a retail brand in the hair cosmetic sector that was able to generate a significant market share using a distinctive positioning strategy: is promoted as a professional salon-product but sold in mass retail. Through alternating the existing structure that is separating professional hair care from mass retail, Syoss is bridging the gap between segments. The literature in this field shows that the concept of positioning is often used to highlight the distinctive

characteristics of a brand in a certain segment, especially amongst a defined target group. This research paper therefore faces the central question to which extent a brand's professional positioning in mass retail affects its perceived quality among (possible) customers.

## Literature review

In order to analyse the effects of professional positioning on perceived quality, a brief literature review has been conducted. A number of studies have identified three principles that can encapsulate a strong retail brand: differentiation, long-term marketing continuity and consistency (Cosmin Tănase, 2011). Accomplishing differentiation in the consumer's mind is crucial for the brand. If the product is easily distinguished from competitors, the brand can have a stronger presence in the market. When a brand offers continuity and has established consistency with the product offered, the brand can be linked to successful branding (Cosmin Tănase, 2011). A strong retail brand should hold these assets depending on the strategic position they want to establish within a desired market. The exclusivity rooted in a positioning strategy lies in the context of changing market conditions (Tournois, 2012). Research has confirmed that there are numerous factors that affect the way consumers react to a certain product's position in the market. Consumers may develop value from the advertising associated with branded products that exceeds the value they would perceive from an identical but unbranded product (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1998). When demand declines, the competitive pressure rises. Consequently, consumers may grow less sensitive to perceived quality and progressively sensitive to price (Tournois, 2012). A challenge derives by trying to find the most promising features to surmount a market and achieve a dominant position. Tournois (2012) suggests that it is crucial for organisations to concentrate on a successful market-oriented strategy which can lead to detecting undeveloped needs not yet addressed by any in the market. Thus, a product can be

projected as professional by being promoted in that sense in the minds of consumers.

While analysing prior studies conducted within the field of perceived quality, a consistent pattern emerged. The studies are mostly based on two important factors: quality and uniqueness (Van der Lans, et al. 2016). A few researchers have concluded, that high quality may be essential to be profitable in many industries, but that it is not a guarantor for profits when standalone (Selvalakshmi & Ravichandran, 2015). By contrast, the stronger focus is on having a consistent product quality at every purchase. When consumers identify a brand consistently and positively across its main qualities, they are more likely to select this brand. Van der Lans et al. (2016) conclude, that core brand benefits are more important than external brand benefits when it comes to determining brand purchase intentions. This leads us to the query of evaluating what truly has an effect on the perceived quality of a brand in mass-markets. The study followed by (Van der Lans, et al. 2016), reiterates that the average across all countries analysed, first projects quality, followed by the uniqueness of a brand, as the most important brand benefit when making a purchase. For example, if consumers perceive other brands in the same category (L'Oréal Paris) with similar perceived benefit as the focal brand (Syoss), its effect on the focal brand's purchase intention is significantly reduced (Van der Lans, et al. 2016). Therefore, the perceived quality can indeed be affected by the way a product is positioned in the market. There are almost no studies conducted that confirm the association between perceived quality and professional positioning in mass retail.

Marketing has always pursued moments, when consumers are open to influence (Court et al. 2009). The results of the position of a product signifies to what extent the consumer benefits from the brand. Positioning in retail should target segments where the brand can affect the behaviour of consumers. To be able to position themselves and clearly depict the advantages of the product (Kotler et al. 1999). A further definition given by Kotler et al.

(1999), describes how market positioning should give a product a greater image of distinction and appeal in compared to the competing product in minds of target consumers. Yip (1997, pp.153-164) suggests that “[...] some of the positioning approaches in the literature are incomplete and therefore confusing [...]”.

As discussed above, a successful brand should possess greater distinctions, uniqueness, and quality compared to its competitors. Kapferer (2012) discusses, that the brand platform is the blueprint of the brand. Thus, he is determining brand identity as the source of positioning, since both tools are elementary for managing brands (Kapferer, 2012). This distinction can be exemplified by using the brand platform for bridging the gap between the current and desired image of a brand. A further key element that influences the brand is the perceived quality. In order to link the perceived quality with the brand identity as the source of professional positioning, it is necessary to review the concepts of brand identity, positioning, and perceived quality. Aligning the brand platform with its components identity and positioning, Kapferer (2012) states the following:

#### *Brand Platform*

The brand platform combines the brand's identity and positioning. Brand identity is more complex than positioning since it comprises several facets of the brand. Positioning on the other hand focuses on the discriminator in a competitive environment and on how to create a competitive advantage. It is a vital tool for brand managers and the starting point of this analysis (Kapferer, 2012).

#### *Brand Identity*

According to Kapferer (2012), brands need to have a character, distinctive in order to inspire. Brands communicate with their target group through the messages they send. These messages are interpreted by the recipient and create a picture of the sender (brand). The Brand Identity Prism defines six facets as part of this communication (See Figure 1).

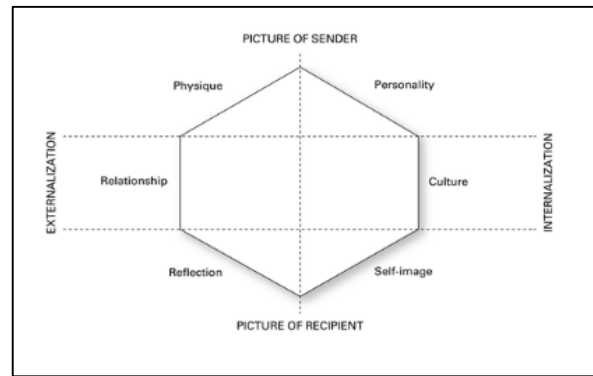


Figure 1: Brand identity prism (Source: Kapferer, 2012)

- (1) *Physique* describes the physical appearance of the brand. It merges salient or emerging features and builds a brand's foundation and tangible added value. It also includes product features and symbols.
- (2) *Personality* is the personification of a brand and shows its human traits.
- (3) A brand is a *culture*. This is the most important facet of the brand identity prism since it argues that brands need to be an ideology in order to resonate deeply with their target group.
- (4) *Relationship* explains the nature of transaction and exchange brands are involved in. The facet is especially important for service brands since they heavily rely on good service which leads to a favourable relationship with customers.
- (5) *Reflection* refers to the buyer a brand is addressing. It is the perceived reflection of people who consume the brand.
- (6) “A brand speaks to our *self-image*.” (Kapferer, 2012, p. 162) The last facet explains how the customer views himself and acts therefore as an internal mirror of the target group.

The facets (5) Reflection and (6) Self-image create the picture of the recipient when combined.

#### *Positioning*

Kapferer (2012, p.170) states, “[p]ositioning a brand means emphasizing the distinctive characteristics that make it different from its competitors and appealing to the public”. One of the most well-known tools for positioning is

perceptual or positioning mapping. It is often used to identify the positioning of a brand in a market along selected dimensions (Ghauri and Cateora, 2010). High price versus low price and high quality versus low quality are the dimensions commonly used (Kotler, 2010). The major advantage of this approach is its simplicity.

#### *The concept of professional positioning*

A profession is a “[...] paid occupation, especially one that involves prolonged training and a formal qualification” (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010). Brands that are positioned as professional, capitalise on the training and the qualification of the related profession which is assumed to implicate a high quality. Within the limitations of this paper, it was not possible to identify any theoretical framework for the concept of professional positioning.

#### *Perceived Quality*

Perceived quality “[...] can be defined as the consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority” (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). According to Aaker (2014), perceived quality is a part of brand equity and is influenced by the reason to buy a brand, its price and its distinctive characteristics. These factors are crucial for brand managers in order to position their brand (Kapferer, 2012). Since brand identity is the source of positioning it is necessary to identify the facets that are most relevant for the perceived quality. Krishna (2012) states, that perceived quality is influenced by the personality of a brand. She describes this from an economical angle and defines it as “marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgment and behaviour”, also called sensory marketing.

A broader perspective has been adopted by Grönroos (1990) who argues that the total perceived quality is a result of both expected and experienced quality. Thus far, his research refers to service brands. Yet, this approach will be used to examine the research question within the analysis in further detail.

## **Case**

### *Syoss versus L'Oréal*

Syoss is a mass retail brand within the hair cosmetic segment belonging to Henkel AG & Company. It offers hair care and hair styling products as well as coloration (Henkel, 2016). Syoss managed to create a niche of its own through its disruptive positioning as a professional product in mass retail (Proeschel, 2013) and therefore innovating the industry. There was a gap between premium and mass retail products and that was precisely when Syoss was developed. Henkel was ahead of competitors when they first introduced the product in 2009 since it targeted a hidden market, not yet explored. It focuses on women between the age of 25 and 50, who want to have salon-hair every day at the commodity of their homes (Henkel, 2016).

This new hair product was developed and tested by professional hairdressers in Japan and directed to only women in the early stage. Syoss was the first to break the thin line between what is perceived to be professional and what is pondered to be professional in the hair care industry. The product was carefully manufactured to meet professional criteria when it comes to the package, design, and formula. The industry was transformed with a product that included essential qualities to be superior, but was still accessible to all (Proeschel, 2013).

Henkel's market-driving strategy rapidly created a first-mover advantage for Syoss and gained market share, growing strongly among competitors between 2009 and 2011 (Euromonitor International, 2012). Due to the successful product launch of Syoss, one can apply a reverse innovation framework: the development of products for emerging countries targeting specific local needs. Then positioning the same product using a penetration strategy in industrialized countries, thus creating new markets (Knapp et al., 2015), made the introduction of Syoss to the German market work effectively. The hair care industry was mostly dominated L'Oréal, as second leading brand until 2009. It was during that year, that they first encountered

Syoss. L'Oréal addresses different target audiences, ranging from early teens to 50. Their products were categorised under premium, mid and mass (Euromonitor International, 2012). They had not yet explored the unknown market segment Syoss was positioned in. Henkel was able to gain over 6% market share with the launch of Syoss, something never seen before in the hair care division. Up to today, their launch mechanism has been the most effective in the last ten years (Proeschel, 2013).

By 2011, L'Oréal lost share and popularity in two of the key Western European markets, France and Germany. Customers were clearly showing more interest in buying salon affordable products. This trend originally started in the United States and made its way to Western European countries. Triggering a big impact in L'Oréal's positioning strategy, since they were behind of the game of premium products being affordable for mass-retail. They already had products strictly for the use of professionals only. Also, salon brands were available for retail, but directed to exclusive consumers, who were willing to pay a higher price for the products exclusivity. It was vital for L'Oréal to keep up with the new trend in order to avoid more loss in the market. To do this, they introduced L'Oréal Paris advanced hair care and hair expertise, an affordable luxury line. These products were positioned in the market following the same strategy behind Syoss. The only difference was that L'Oréal's products are used and advertised by professionals. The key to successful positioning lies in being first to stake a claim in the minds of the consumers (Melin, 2002).

## **Methodology**

To investigate the research problem, a multi-method qualitative approach is used. Existing literature on theories, studies and papers regarding the perceived quality in professional positioning of mass retail brands were examined. To analyse the research problem in a further detailed way and to find out relevant and authentic conclusions on Syoss' perceived quality among the potential target group, focus

group discussions were held. This type of method can be seen as an interpretive approach to the research issue. It fits the overall design of the study since focus groups provide deeper insights and a broader understanding of how the participants react to a certain topic and product presented (Nagle and Williams, n.d). Furthermore, the focus group members get in a detailed discussion, giving subjective answers about several issues coming up. Since the focus of the case is the perceived quality, a subjective insight and also the analysis of the non-verbal reactions is essential to gain results which can be interpreted best to fit the research problem.

As stated in the case description, Syoss and L'Oréal, having two different positioning strategies, were opposed to examine whether Syoss' perceived quality among possible customers fits its professional-positioning-strategy, competing against L'Oréal. The choice of focus group discussions to examine this research problem emphasised a good method to get detailed information and insights.

### *Research leading questions*

In accordance with the research problem, the authors were facing several questions leading the analysis. The literature review has shown that there is a research gap in the field of brands with a professional positioning in mass retail. As mentioned above, an own study had to be conducted to gain deeper insights into possible consumers' perceptions. In order to constitute a precise result of the focus group discussions, the most critical questions regarding the research problem were selected beforehand, questioning:

- (1) If possible customers are aware of Syoss' professional positioning strategy
- (2) Whether the awareness of the professional approach influences the possible buying decisions and perceptions
- (3) What factors or brand elements are most critical in terms of influencing the perceived quality of the products
- (4) Whether a retail brand can obtain the same perceived professional state in the minds



- of the consumers as acknowledged products only through marketing
- (5) If the expected product quality complies the experienced quality.

*Focus group structure*

To gain appropriate results, the authors chose to select focus group members which represent the possible main target group of Syoss - female participants, who are interested in hair care products and in the age group of 25 to 28 (Henkel, 2016). Two discussions were held, aiming on gaining distinguished results. Since L'Oréal hair care products are positioned in different market segments (Euromonitor, 2012) - from mass retail to professional salon haircare - several brand types within these segments were shown in comparison to Syoss' hair care products. To achieve a precise result in regards to the research problem, only L'Oréal's mass retail product as well as the L'Oréal professional hair care product were used for the comparative analysis. The research problem was formed up within a visual presentation, divided into three phases:

*Phase 1:* The packaging of several products from Syoss and L'Oréal were shown without brand elements, e.g. name and logo.

*Phase 2:* The same product packagings were displayed, but with brand elements.

*Phase 3:* Print- and video commercials from both Syoss and L'Oréal products were presented.

The participants were asked to give their verbal opinion about for example the displayed packaging, product quality and esteemed price and were encouraged to discuss. After the verbally discussed impression, the participants were asked to fill in a provided evaluation sheet. *Figure 2* shows the design, containing of three research categories - perceived position, professionalism scale and quality test. The authors chose the axis designations 'price' (x-axis) and 'quality' (y-axis) for the model of *perceived positioning*. Since the price is a critical determinant of perceived quality (Aaker, 2014), those dimensions were assumed to be the best fit when facing the research problem. Within the positioning model, the participants were asked to mark the position they perceive of the products in terms of price and quality after each of the three phases described above. At the same time, a *professionalism scale*, ranging from one to nine, was given, on which the focus group members had to mark the professionalism levels they think fit the

<p style="text-align: center;">Perceived position</p> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Quality</p> <p>Price</p> </div> <p>Please use different colors provided for every time we ask you to position the brand after what you've seen in the presentation. Mark the position you think the company positions its brand on the market. Use '1' or '2' behind the x to clarify which product you mean. Product 1 is the first you've seen in the presentation, product 2 therefore the second.</p>	<p>Professionalism scale</p> <p>Phase 1 </p> <p>Phase 2 </p> <p>Phase 3 </p> <p>Use '1' and '2' as well to clarify the different products.</p> <hr/> <p>Quality test</p> <p style="text-align: center;">"On which side of the hair do you perceive the quality of the used product as better?"</p> <p>Left <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Right <input type="checkbox"/></p>
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Figure 2: Evaluation sheet of the focus groups. (Source: own research)



products from Syoss and L'Oréal best after having the visual impressions in the phases one to three. Since the total perceived quality of consumers is compiled of expected and experienced quality (Grönroos, 1990), the participants were asked to test the quality of the products in a last step. The authors considered the product category hairspray as most feasible and appropriate for the *tangible experiment*. Beforehand, a test person provided the hair with the L'Oréal Professional hairspray on the left part, the Syoss hairspray on the right. Thereafter, the focus group members had to physically assess the product quality. The authors conducted two focus groups, examining both verbal and non-verbal results. The following chapter contains the outcome of the focus group discussion, analysis the evaluation sheets and video material. The aim is to gain interpretive results on how possible customers assess the quality of Syoss products in comparison to L'Oréal professional.

## Analysis

Turning now to the experimental evidence on the stated research frame, the first set of analyses examined the verbal opinions of the focus group participants when looking at Syoss in comparison to L'Oréal. As already stated in the Methodology, the identification of distinctions was performed within three stages. The most important statements identified are highlighted in *Table 1* and now further analysed.

### Syoss

Within Phase 1, the majority of respondents described the Syoss product packaging as clear, sleek and with an elegant structure, minority claimed it to be generic, almost clinical because of the subtle use of colours. All agreed, that the product packaging itself does not indicate professionalism straightaway. Nevertheless, the use of colours among Syoss products could be interpreted as a symbol for quality. Bringing the perception of the product packaging without brand elements in comparison to Phase 2, where the brand features were shown, a controversy among the

participants occurred. Some interviewees claimed the interrelation of colours and text within the simple design of the bottles as professional - precisely because the information on the product was perceived as benefit indicators. Others described the interplay of colour, logo and additional text as overloaded, which, in turn, lowered the perceived quality in the recipients minds. The line of reasoning included especially the comparison to actual professional products, since they would not need explanations on the packaging. As the answers further reveal, the slogan 'Professional Performance' on Syoss products yet signals professionalism. The third phase of discussion concentrated on the brand's advertisement. The result of this phase indicates a clear gap between print and moving-image advertisement of Syoss. Regarding the print publications, the colour play and use of images was especially pointed out by recipients. The black background and interplay between the testimonial and product were associated with professional appearance and quality. 'The pictures look like those in the hair salon', commented one of the interviewees on the topic. The same contradictory discussion as in Phase 2 occurred. The recipients perceived the use of text either as essential to know the benefit and therefore the quality of the product or as less professional in the sense that high quality products would not need any descriptions.

### L'Oréal

In comparison to L'Oréal's mass retail hair care product, Syoss achieves better results in terms of professionalism and quality perception. In all focus groups, the informants reported that the outward appearance of the product does not appeal in a professional way due to the choice of bright colours. A common view was therefore, that the design can be seen as typical for a retail product. 'You can recognise the product easily' or 'Screams: Buy me!', were comments stated. Yet, with regard to the mass retail category, the design of the product was seen as appropriate amongst interviewees. Furthermore, negative comments about the advertisement were mentioned.

<i>Phase 1</i> Products without brand elements	<i>Syoss</i> <i>mass retail products</i>	<i>L'Oréal</i> <i>mass retail products</i>	<i>L'Oréal</i> <i>professional products</i>
	Clear, clinical, elegant, sleek, generic	Bright colours, "flashy", "weird"	Metallic and elegant colours, shape of the bottle
	Product packaging without brand elements does not indicate professionalism straightaway	Choice of colours does not appeal as professional/high quality	"That looks like high quality!"
	Still indicated quality through use of colours	With regard to the product category, colours make sense	Use of colours and bottle shape are perceived as indicators for high quality
		"You can recognise the product easily", "Screams: Buy me!"	
<i>Phase 2</i> Products with brand elements	<i>Syoss</i> <i>mass retail products</i>	<i>L'Oréal</i> <i>mass retail products</i>	<i>L'Oréal</i> <i>professional products</i>
	Overloaded, too much text → professional products do not need explanations ↓ Simple design, colours and text are used in a professional way, product information perceived as benefit indicators	Design of a typical retail product	Fond on the bottles is not too big, not overloaded, more emphasis on the packaging instead of the use of text
	"Professional performance"-slogan signals professionalism	Mass-retail-appeal does not change with brand name on it	Remains perceived as a high quality product - not because of the brand name, but the use of colours and shape in combination with text and typo
		Use of colours together with text strengthens the image of mass retail product even more	
<i>Phase 3</i> Advertisement	<i>Syoss</i> <i>mass retail products</i>	<i>L'Oréal</i> <i>mass retail products</i>	<i>L'Oréal</i> <i>professional products</i>
<i>Print</i>	Professional appearance through images and colour play	Looks similar to Syoss in terms of the use of colours and text	Still appeals as professional, but high fashion-orientation is perceived as problematic since the product is missing within the advertisement
	Use of pictures reflect high quality perception - "look like those in the hair saloon", black background emphasises quality	Picture wise, it emphasises more professionalism than just the product itself  No connection to professionalism - focus on that is missing	"It is not about using the product at home, but more about having the nice hair style from the hair dresser."
	Less professional appearance because of the text ↓ Product needs text so the consumer understands that it has a professional approach - knowing the benefit	More "classy", focus is on the face and hair of the testimonial → looks elegant, but less professional	More fashion editorial than product advertisement
<i>TV</i>	Almost comical, voice-over and music "horrible"	"They throw arguments at you", convincing approach rather than professional way of appealing to customer	Rather storytelling than convincing approach, opposite of mass retail product advertisement
	Hair saloon is an indicator for the use of a professional setting, but it 1) is implemented in a "cheap" way, 2) does not state the quality or professionalism of the product and 3) indicates the product price, which lowers the perceived quality	Ambassador is associated with having nice hair ↓ Does not convince through ambassador, just states that brand has the money for buying famous testimonials	Linking the commercial to trustworthiness of the brand, "when you go there you will have a good result", without claiming benefits → > convince oneself by visiting the saloon
	↓ Clear gap between print and video commercial	Male voice does not appeal as professional	Visual wise perceived as high quality ↓ Storytelling wise seen as "ridiculous", too much of trying to appeal emotional

Table 1: Critical statements emerge amongst focus group participants. (Source: own research)

They throw arguments at you', expresses the opinion of the majority best. Through the use of a 'convincing approach', the moving-image advertisement appeals in a less professional way. Whereas this type of advertisement does not convince the recipients, especially through the involvement of a famous testimonial, the print advertisement's interplay between colour and text occurs to be similar to Syoss' advertisement among interviewees. Main difference: the focus is on the face and hair of the testimonial, instead of, in the case of Syoss, on the product. Although the participants on the whole assumed this to be elegant, it still appeals less professional.

### *L'Oréal Professional*

One participant commented: 'That looks like high quality!', which summarises the first impression amongst the majority of the recipients. Especially the metallic and elegant colours and the shape of the bottles were seen as critical indicators for the product being perceived as professional and highly qualitative. Adding the brand elements, the participants stated that their attitude towards the products' professionalism or quality did not change to a great extent. A determination based on the recipients input arising is that the perceived quality of L'Oréal's professional product is not due to its brand name, but rather linked to the interplay of colour, shape and fond. Considering the print advertisement of the product, the recipients clearly connected the product with professionalism. However, the advertisement is seen as rather fashion- than product oriented. 'It is not about using the product at home, but more about having the nice hair style from the hair dresser', is the strongest statement in regards to the absence of the product in the advertisement. While the communication through print content is perceived as professional, the moving-image approach achieves the opposite. Although it reveals a storytelling rather than a convincing means of communication, contrary opinions emerged. While some participants link the commercial to the trustworthiness of the brand, highlighting the message that 'when

you go there you will have a good result', others claimed the storytelling approach of advertisement as 'ridiculous'.

Having analysed these statements, four contradictions within the participant's assessments emerged:

#### *1. Information overload vs benefit*

*indicators:* Some participants perceived the packaging of Syoss products as overloaded and unprofessional, since high quality goods would not need explanations. Other recipients indicated that the additional information is a way of illustrating advantages of the product. The same pattern arose when presenting the Syoss print advertisement.

#### *2. Print advertisement vs video commercial:*

The evaluation of Syoss products further expounded that several interviewees of the group recognised a clear gap between the different types of commercials. While the print advertisement is perceived as more professional, the moving-image communication requires improvement.

#### *3. Celebrity endorsement vs credibility:*

While presenting L'Oréal's mass retail product advertisement, two conflicting courses in regards to brand ambassadors emerged. A minority of the participants perceived the choice of a famous testimonial as suitable, because they link the role a famous person takes within society, for example being leading role in a known series, to the product quality. Nevertheless, the dominant notion on the use of celebrity endorsement within mass retail product advertisement leads to a lack of confidence when talking about the brand's credibility. Most of

the participants state that brands, which use famous testimonials, are solely boasting with their available advertisement budget.

4. *Visual appeal* ↯ *narrative approach*:  
 Assessing the moving-image advertisement of the L'Oréal professional products, the recipients describe a gap within the concept of addressing the customer in a proper manner. Visual wise, the commercial was perceived as a high quality production, which in turn linked to the quality of the product. On the contrary, the attempt of appealing emotional to customers through the use of storytelling was, in this case, perceived as rather absurd than professional.

*Perceived Positioning*

Taking the research purpose into account, further analysis was performed by isolating the L'Oréal mass retail product and solely

comparing Syoss products to the L'Oréal Professional line. By bringing together the verbal opinions regarding the personality facets of the brand's products with the perceived position in terms of quality and price, a positioning model was created - resulting in a perceptual positioning map. *Figure 3* provides an overview. The color code in the graphic clarifies the areas in which Syoss and L'Oréal Professional are perceived as situated among the interviewees. Furthermore, the graphic indicates the motion of the perceived position within the three stages of the focus group discussion process.

Examining the given scope, no position overlapping of the two brands can be found. Instead, intersections within the individual arrangement of the brand's positioning can be noted. Nevertheless, Syoss largely adopts a positioning close to the perceived one of L'Oréal Professional. In addition, a surprising pattern emerged since the perceived positions cover a broad spectrum, even within the different phases of the discussion. Comparing Syoss' and L'Oréal Professionals' perceived position after showing only the product

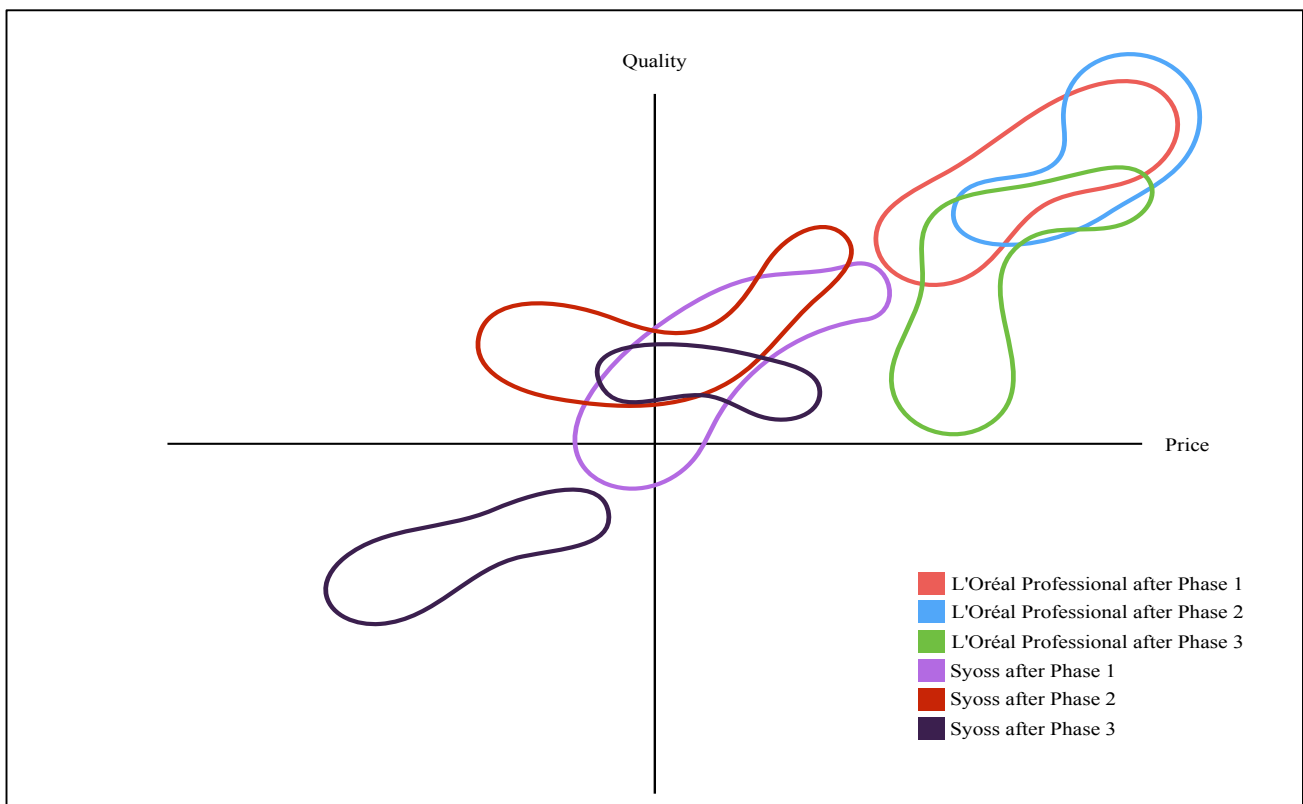


Figure 3: Total scope of participant's estimated positioning of Syoss and L'Oréal Professional within the three phases of the focus group study. (Source: own research)

packaging in Phase 1, the edges of the marked scopes are almost overlapping. While Syoss largely achieves a good average with a tendency to be seen as more qualitative and costly among the recipient's perceptions, L'Oréal Professional products are clearly seen as more expensive and of higher quality. The outer edge of L'Oréal Professional Phase-1-scope is even almost settled at a quality and price premium. Moving on to the emerged patterns within Phase 2 where brand elements were shown additionally, a wider gap between the scope edges of Syoss and L'Oréal Professional can be determined. Syoss' perceived position broadens in comparison to the slightly horizontal spectrum in Phase 1 more vertically. The scope obtains a level of higher perceived quality, while the perceived price position of Syoss is lowered, mainly located in the first quadrant. In contrast, L'Oréal Professional's is position estimated to be settled in the upper right corner of the second quadrant. By comparison with the first phase, the average of the perceived quality and price rating of L'Oréal Professional increased. The last phase investigated the assessment of the product commercials. A contradictory pattern within Syoss' advertisement becomes

visible. While the print display of the products achieves a similar scope compared to phases one and two, the moving-image communication has a significant negative impact on the perceived price and quality. The source of this contradictory impression arises from the discussion among participants stated above. Likewise, the scope of attitude towards L'Oréal Professional dropped. The brand's products are still perceived within a positive quality-price-relation, but the average degree is lowered.

Together, these results provide important insights into the interdependencies of brand elements and the resulting perceived quality and professionalism of a product. Further conclusions regarding this assessment will be drawn in conjunction with the theoretical knowledge.

#### Professionalism Scale

Next to the evaluation of the perceptual positioning map, the correlation between the perceived professionalism among Syoss and L'Oréal Professional was assessed in order to give a fact-based statement on Syoss' perceived professionalism within mass retail

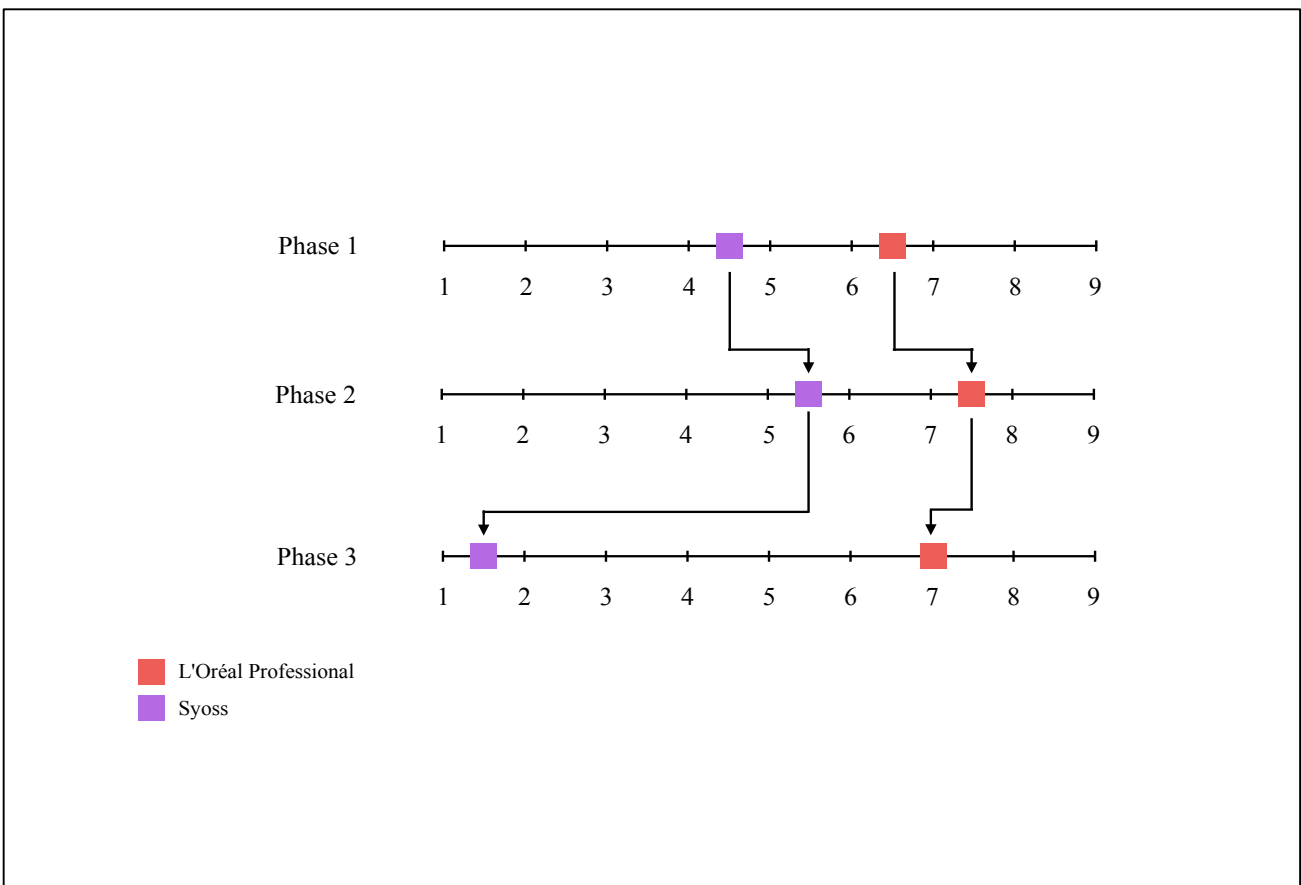


Figure 4: Total scale-overview of the perceived professionalism of Syoss and L'Oréal Professional within the three discussion stages. (Source: own research)

when compared to an actual professional product. *Figure 4* shows the total main average of the perceived professionalism rank of both brands, again divided in the three discussion phases. Beginning with the assessment of the estimated professionalism ranking within Phase 1, 75% of the interviewees indicated Syoss' professionalism level as situated between four and five, with a tendency to the lower level.

L'Oréal Professional achieved a level between six and seven among half of the participants. After the logo and packaging were presented additionally, the professionalism level of both Syoss and L'Oréal Professional increased proportional. While slightly more than half of those participating position Syoss on a level between five and six with a strong tendency to the upper level, L'Oréal Professional was being situated in the midst of six and seven. The contradiction among participants in regards to Syoss' packaging information became apparent within the professionalism analysis, since the remaining participants situated Syoss on a lower level. L'Oréal gained a better average, since all participants located the professionalism level between seven and nine, whereas the scale began at a level of five before. It can therefore be assumed that the brand name, logo, and packaging presentation play a role in the perceived professionalism of the brands' product appearance.

The evaluation of professionalism within Phase 3 shows, that Syoss experienced a rapid descent in terms of its professional level. Due to the highly negative perception of the moving-image communication, 62,5% of the interviewees situated Syoss on a level between one and two, while out of those, almost 83% gave a tendency to the lower rank. Less than one quarter positioned Syoss on a level higher than four. In contrast, L'Oréal Professional was ranked on seven among 87,5% of the participants. Nevertheless, the level of professionalism of the L'Oréal Professional products lowered. The prior narrow scale between seven and nine evolved into a broader scheme between five and eight. This raises the further implication, that product advertisement

is another crucial element for perceived professionalism and quality.

#### *Tangible experiment*

As already stated, expected and experienced quality are connected in order to form the total perceived quality (Grönroos, 1990). Therefore, a concrete measurement of the experienced quality among the focus group participants was conducted in order to give a statement on how both factors interrelate. As mentioned in the Methodology, a test person applied Syoss and L'Oréal Professional hairspray for participants to feel and smell the product on the hair. Interestingly, 75% of the participants declared Syoss to be the more professional product. It therefore seems likely that a connection between the experienced quality and expected quality of Syoss may lead to a higher perceived quality among customers in the post-buying-process. These findings may be somewhat limited by the fact that the products were applied on loose, not styled hair and therefore may not achieve their complete effect.

#### *Findings in theory and practice*

As already stated in the framework, previous research has established that the brand platform incorporates the brand's identity and positioning (Kapferer, 2012). Having this in mind, one must at first link the analysis findings to Syoss' identity aspects. Although the total brand character consists of six items (Kapferer, 2012), only the aspects 'Physique' and 'Personality' are essential with regards to the research question and therefore further examined. Since customers perceive a brand's identity in a bottom-up-process, the physical elements like logo and product packaging appeal at first (Kapferer, 2012).

As the previous analysis shows, the participants of the focus group had a contradictory perception of Syoss' product packaging. On the one hand, the simple design and use of colours appealed positively. On the other hand, elements like logo and the use of text on the packaging were either seen as benefit indicators or information overload. This observations can directly be linked to the

second important character of Syoss' identity: the personality - a type of human that the given brand represents. Since Syoss tries to position itself as a professional product, the brand has to take over the imagined role of an experienced hair dresser. L'Oréal Professional has an advantage towards Syoss, since the brand's products are supported by existing human traits in the form of professionals, representing the brand and products as ambassadors. Especially the tangible features like shape of the bottles or information on Syoss' products therefore need to substitute the role of a hair expert, since they constitute their ambassadors themselves.

Turning now to the positioning, which constitutes the second component of a brand's platform (Kapferer, 2012), distinctive statements can be made in relation to the previous experimental analysis. Van der Lans, et al. (2016) made the observation, that when a brand is signaling the same benefits as its direct competitors within one market segment, the purchase intention is reduced significantly. Therefore, Syoss took an outstanding approach when localising itself above other mass-retail products through the use of professional positioning. This indicates, that Syoss rather compares itself to L'Oréal Professional than equalising with other mass-retail products in order to achieve a competitive advantage. As Kotler (1999) mentions, a mass-retail brand needs to change the customer's behaviour through its position in order to make sure that the distinctive features are perceived as such among consumers. On this behalf, Syoss' approach to professional positioning is clearly seen as superior to competing products in the mass-retail segment. The product features represent the human traits of a hair expert, which in turn can be seen as the attempt to change the customers behaviour, since they do not have to procure a high amount of money for professional products when they can obtain a mass-retail good to an affordable price. Syoss considerably creates a greater image of its products through the professionalism approach and the thereof resulting interplay of the tangible brand elements, having an effect on

the perceived quality and shaping Syoss' physique and personality. Taking Cosmin Tănase's (2011) researched principles for successful branding into consideration, continuity and consistency can be seen as the skeleton of profitable brand building. With regards to the product's tangible elements, the interviewees mainly stated that Syoss applies a consistent interplay-pattern of shape of bottles, use of colours and further product details. Yet, through the previous examination regarding different advertising materials of the Syoss products, the consistency within the types of communication is missing. All participants of the focus groups described the moving-image advertisement as improper. Therefore, a contradiction to both the print advertisement and the attempt to be perceived as professional through the products' physique prevails. Since Tournois (2012) draws the conclusion, that products promoted professional are projected in the same way in the minds of the consumer, Syoss needs to create long-term consistency within the three most important aspects in contact with the customers - the personality, emitting human traits of being an expert, accompanied with the product packaging and advertisement. In this context, participants stated that if price would not be a factor, they would purchase the product which is advertised as professional.

#### *Further findings*

Bringing all literature based and experimental evidence together, Syoss still does not reach the level of professionalism and perceived quality that L'Oréal Professional has. However, as a brand in mass retail and in comparison with direct competitors as for example L'Oréal's mass retail products, a clear motion to higher perceived quality and professionalism can be determined. The following findings further derived: The relation between price and perceived quality within times of high mass-retail competition (Tournois, 2012) was highly supported through the participant's statements. Further referring to Tournois, consumers are then more sensitive to price than perceived quality. A majority of the participants stated that they



would choose Syoss products mainly because of the price difference when compared to L'Oréal Professional's products. Some interviewees did not perceive Syoss' approach of substituting the human traits of hair experts within the product packaging and information as professional. While those recipients claimed the packaging to be overloaded, others perceived the additional information as benefit indicators. Another fact that harms Syoss' more professional and high quality perception is the package size. In regards to that, the participants connect the volume of the products with in-salon-product packaging since professionals use plus-size-bottles within their daily business. In this respect, the participants indicated that in order to feel special, customers of hair-salons may purchase the products in smaller sizes. By reasoning in this way, the individual feeling of purchasing a high quality product is therefore lost through the oversized packaging of Syoss products. Size can thus be suggested as another element affecting the perceived quality of the brand when referring to the approach for professional positioning.

As stated in the previous analysis, experienced quality is another critical factor for obtaining the total perceived quality among customers. Grönroos (1990) made clear, that there is a connection between expected and experienced quality. Although his research is based on service brands, the stated relation can yet be brought in connection to Syoss products, since the brand tries to fulfill the service aspect reflected in its personality.

After examining the output of the analysis, the authors encountered a so called framing effect (Kahnemann & Tversky, 1979). In regards to the research question on how professional positioning affects a brand's perceived quality, one can draw a connection to the bias on how people react to different ways of presenting the products. Some participants named other mass-retail products with a price premium that followed Syoss' approach to professional positioning, but using a higher price setting. Within this bias, consumers are more likely to choose the price

premium product while comparing mass-retail price premium, Syoss and professional products, since they perceive the professional products as too expensive, whereas the Syoss products as too low-priced. An implication of this is the possibility that when increasing the price to a price premium, the perceived quality can proportional be increased as well.

## **Conclusion**

The results arising from the conclusions confirm, that professional positioning has an effect on a brand's perceived quality, especially through the interrelation of the facets physique and personality. Since the personality mirrors the human traits of professionals, Syoss needs to personify its products in order to substitute the advantage of professional products concerning the human ambassadors. To capitalise on the qualifications of professional brands, Syoss needs to consistently maintain its brands personality throughout the entire communication process. The research has shown, that occurring framing effects can also dilute the perceived quality and therefore damage the personality of the brand.

## **Managerial implications**

Syoss needs to reach consistency when communicating with the customer through advertising and tangible brand elements. The aspects influencing professional positioning need to consistently be followed throughoutly at every contact point with the customer. From a managerial perspective, the evaluation of moving-image advertisement is of crucial importance since production and airing costs of the advertisement need to be outweighed in relation to the benefit arising out of it.

Besides being consistent, the management of Syoss needs to be aware of the framing effect. The conflict of selling a professional product through a mass retail channel becomes visible when defining the price of the product. Since consumers automatically relate a high price with high quality, the management needs to adapt a price strategy allowing to be competitive in mass retail and at the same time creating a price

premium, arguing with the experiencing of a professional service.

### Limitations

Given the fact of a limited timeframe within which the study was conducted, the target group of both Syoss and L'Oréal Professional could not be covered as a whole. A further limitation occurred since some participants within the focus group discussions already used the Syoss products. Therefore, one could assume that the statements of those already been in past contact with the analysed product were partly influenced by this.

### Future research

The findings of this study suggest that there is a connection between a brand's professional positioning and its perceived quality. Yet, a framing effect was discovered while conducting the analysis, indicating that the price setting of mass retail products using this type of positioning strategy, need to higher the price in order to prevent a negative framing among customers. Additional research analysing this phenomenon is recommend.

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