



LUND UNIVERSITY
School of Economics and Management

Department of Business Administration

BUSN39

Degree Project in Global Marketing – Master Level

Spring 22

The (Mis)alignment between Offline and Online Brand Image

A Qualitative Study based on Customers' Brand Associations of the
Swedish Beauty Retailer Kicks.

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Abstract

Title	The (Mis)alignment between Offline and Online Brand Image: A Qualitative Study based on Customers' Brand Associations of the Swedish Beauty Retailer Kicks.
Date of Seminar	2nd of May
Course	BUSN39: Degree Project in Global Marketing
Authors	Emma Källström, Madeleine Erikson & Sophie Johansson
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Purpose	The purpose is to explore the alignment or misalignment of a beauty retailer's offline and online brand image based on customers' brand associations.
Theory	To explore a beauty retailer's offline and online brand image, Keller's (1993) framework of brand association is used and built upon to include Aaker's (1997) framework of brand personality. Together, brand attributes, brand benefits and brand personality create the conceptual framework and thus, the concept of retailer brand image alignment.
Methodology	This study follows a qualitative research strategy with an abductive approach grounded in a relativist and constructionist position. The empirical material consisted of 13 semi-structured interviews with Swedish customers of Kicks selected through convenience sampling, influenced by purposive sampling. The data was analysed through the process of sorting, reducing, and arguing.
Findings	The findings indicate that both alignments and misalignments can be discovered between a retailer's offline and online brand image. The empirical material shows that none of the elements were to its entirety aligned between the offline and online brand image. Symbolic benefits was the only brand image element found to be entirely misaligned.
Implications	Academically, this study has suggested a comprehensive outline to explore the alignments or misalignments within a retailers' offline and online brand image. It has contributed qualitatively to ongoing literature on brand image and through the creation of the retailer brand image alignment conceptual framework. Managerially, this new framework can work as a tool and could be valuable for brands and brand managers operating across various channels.
Keywords	Brand Image, Brand Image Alignment, Brand Associations, Retailing, Multichannel

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to those who made this thesis possible and supported us along the process.


Reema Singh

Our greatest gratitude to our supervisor, Reema Singh, for her time and guidance throughout this thesis process. The valuable feedback provided us with the support needed to continue this challenging journey.

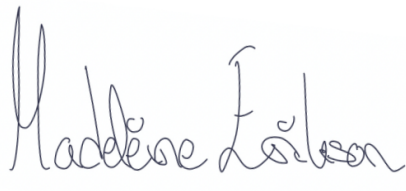
Participants

We would further like to thank the participants of this study who contributed with their time and opinions, allowing us to gather valuable empirical material.


Lund 31st of May 2022



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1. Introduction

With the rise of the Internet, a greater number of channels have become available for customers to engage with a brand through. As there has been an increase in retailer brands adopting various channels, we have seen the growing importance of having an aligned brand image across channels, especially within beauty retailing, a sector considered hedonistic in nature. This context will be the primary focus of the study.

The first chapter presents the background of this study, emphasising how digitalisation has transformed the retailing industry, and thus, how this has led to the widespread adoption of a multichannel strategy. Thereafter, this chapter stresses the necessity of maintaining an aligned brand image across the various channels as a result of the transformation. The background concludes by highlighting the relevance of this study in regard to current research. Subsequently, the background culminates in a problem discussion, which positions this study in regard to the existing body of literature, and results in the formulation of the purpose and research question. Finally, to guide the reader through this study, an outline is presented.

1.1. Background & Problematisation

Digitalisation has been the driving force behind significant transformations in organisations, creating both opportunities and challenges to existing business practices (Hagberg & Jonsson, 2022). These opportunities present themselves as ways to improve competitiveness, enhance operations, and establish new businesses, which has resulted in digitalisation being viewed as a source of value creation (Martinez, 2019). On the other hand, challenges include a change in customer behaviour, increased competition, and an absence of technical support in the adoption of new technology (Dvorak, Komarkova & Stehlik, 2021). As a result, digitalisation has had a significant impact on business performance. However, it has not only transformed individual business practices but entire industries (Jocovski, Arvidsson, Miragliotta, Ghezzi & Mangiaracina, 2018).

One of the industries facing a significant change is the retailing sector. The growth of the Internet has radically transformed the field over the last decades (Buldeo Rai, Verlinde, Macharis, Schoutteet & Vanhaverbeke, 2019) and resulted in a retail landscape that is

revolutionary in scope (Sorescu, Frambach, Singh, Rangaswamy & Bridges, 2011). Today's retailers have gone from placing a dedicated emphasis on the physical stores, to an increased focus on their online presence (Buldeo Rai et al., 2019). Similar impressions can be made of the beauty retailing industry (Grewal, 2019). Here, most customers globally prefer to purchase beauty products in-store (Statista, 2022). However, the share of customers that prefer to purchase through both channels is almost as large as the one purchasing solely online (Statista, 2022). Therefore, this industry is of interest to explore and will thus be the context of this study.

Although the shift toward an online presence has resulted in a great increase in competition, it has also provided the industry with tremendous opportunities (Grewal, 2019) and completely changed the market structure (Kwon & Lennon, 2009a). Nowadays, customers are expecting retailers to operate across various channels (Dragan, Stipe & Zoran, 2016). As a result, it has become a standard business strategy to incorporate both an offline and online presence, utilising a so-called multichannel strategy (Kwon & Lennon, 2009a).

When a retailer integrates a multichannel strategy, it operates in at least two different channels with the aim to provide customers with the opportunity to visit various channels for different purposes (Sorescu et al., 2011). The two most prominent channels dominating present retailing are the physical store and the website (Buldeo Rai et al., 2019; Dragan, Stipe & Zoran, 2016), and the same can be said for the beauty industry (Statista, 2022). By incorporating a multichannel strategy, retailers can reap benefits such as increased customer loyalty, enhanced customer satisfaction and greater profitability (Goa, Melero & Sese, 2020). However, to utilise these opportunities, retailers need to guarantee that all their channels are integrated (Grewal, 2019) which would lead to a consistent brand image (Kwon & Lennon, 2009b). This is important because brand image is considered to be one of the most valuable assets for a company (Landers, Beatty, Wang & Mothersbaugh, 2015). Consequently, an aligned brand image may facilitate customers' cognitive efforts, meaning that it simplifies the transition of attitudes and trust (Bezes, 2013). On the contrary, if failing to integrate the channels, and thus the brand image, consistently and seamlessly, customers might become frustrated (Grewal, 2019). One reason for this could be that customers would lack an understanding of the brand message, and as a result, would be less likely to be loyal toward the brand (Nandan, 2005). Similarly, if retailers are unsuccessful in aligning their brand image between the offline and online channels, they may have less control over the customer experience and customers will end up irritated too (Grewal, 2019). This portrays a reciprocal relationship between offline and

online brand images of retailers' channels, emphasising the necessity of seamless integration across channels (Kwon & Lennon, 2009b).

Brand image is created by the positive or negative associations customers connect to a brand, where a strong brand image is generated by positive associations and thus, increases the uniqueness of a brand (Roper & Fill, 2012). These associations relate to what a brand means to customers (Keller, 1993). Kwon & Lennon (2009b) state that if customers experience negative brand image associations with one of the channels, this might affect the associations with another. Therefore, to avoid friction and the negative consequences that follow, Grewal (2019) stresses the importance of keeping the channels' brand image aligned. However, this goes solely beyond visual consistency, such as a similar colour scheme and font style (Grewal, 2019). Instead, it is a complex issue, involving, for instance, the necessity of having common characteristics across the channels as well as similar structures (Bezes, 2013). Moreover, it includes an alignment between the products and services offered, because if they are perceived as inconsistent across channels, the brand image risks being weakened (Kwon & Lennon, 2009b). Additionally, the appearances of the offline and online channels need to be aligned, otherwise, this also risks weakening the brand image. This is because customers find the layout and design to be more convenient if consistent (Kwon & Lennon, 2009b). Concludingly, it is understood that the alignment of a retailer's offline and online brand image is a complex matter, involving several aspects. Nevertheless, it is clearly an essential issue to consider.

There is an overall agreement among researchers who consider brand image to be one of the most valuable assets for a company, though few studies emphasise how brands should manage and align their image across channels (Landers et al., 2015). Research into alignment as well as retailers' offline and online channels has mainly taken a quantitative approach, focusing on causality and theory testing. As such, literature has been able to measure effects and results, and validate statistically significant relationships, leading to contributions that analyse the effect of a retailers' offline and online channel on various factors, among others. For example, Verhagen and van Dolen (2009) investigated the online and offline store perceptions' influence on online purchasing intentions. Other literature has focused on the effect of retailers' offline and online brand image on how customers perceive risk and loyalty (e.g., Kwon & Lennon, 2009a). With the move from traditional brick-and-mortar stores to online stores, previous research has also quantitatively examined the impact of a transfer of attitude and trust from a

retailer's physical store to their online store (e.g., Badrinarayanan, Becerra, Kim & Madhavaram, 2010).

The quantitative focus of these studies calls for an immersive customer understanding of customers' associations with a retailer's offline and online channels. We observe a gap between the number of quantitative and qualitative studies in regard to the concepts of brand image, alignment, and a retailer's offline and online channels, thus we see an opportunity to extend the literature in line with this. Furthermore, the lack of distinction in the brand image in the existing literature points to the assumption that customers form the same brand associations irrespective of the channels they purchase from. However, whether this can be stated about the retailer's brand is questionable and the findings of this study will be imperative in putting forth if there is any brand image alignment or misalignment between retailers' offline and online channels. As a result, we see an opportunity to extend and add to previous literature by incorporating various brand image elements to create the conceptual framework as well as using a qualitative approach that explores customers' brand associations with a retailer's offline and online brand image.

1.2. Purpose & Research Question

The purpose is to explore the alignment or misalignment of a beauty retailer's offline and online brand image based on customers' brand associations. More specifically, what elements within the brand image that are aligned or misaligned. We will address our research problem using the context of the Swedish beauty retailer Kicks. This context is of interest as the beauty industry globally is estimated to grow 4.76 per cent annually between 2022 and 2026 (Statista, n.d.) and thus this will provide more illumination into our research question. The ambition is to provide a better understanding of a retailer's brand image alignment between offline and online channels based on customers' brand associations of the brand image. This has led to the question of whether there is a (mis)alignment in retailers' offline and online brand image based on customers' associations with a brand. To further our understanding of retailers' brand image (mis)alignment, we will examine the following question:

- What (mis)alignments can be found in retailers' offline and online brand image based on customers' brand associations?

As current research is lacking within the field in terms of qualitative research and in regard to brand image alignment or misalignment between the offline and online channels, we intend to contribute academically by adding to the ongoing literature through this new perspective. By exploring this area, we aim to advance managerial understanding of the phenomenon and contribute with knowledge of elements to reflect upon to create a consistent brand image across channels.

1.3. Research Outlines

1

The first chapter introduces the background of this study, which is the foundation for the problematisation. Here, the concepts of retailer industry, multichannel strategy, brand image and alignment are presented. Thereafter, the research purpose followed by the research question are introduced in line with the aim. The chapter concludes with this outline to facilitate the navigation of this study.

2

The second chapter presents the theoretical framework, leading up to the conceptual framework used in this study. The conceptual framework is a modification of the theories of brand attributes, brand benefits and brand personality. Together, they created the concept of retailer brand image alignment, used in the analysis of this study.

3

The third chapter motivates the methodology of this study. Firstly, the philosophical stance is introduced, followed by the research approach and method. Thereafter, the research design is presented, including data collection strategy, ethical considerations as well as a discussion about the research quality. The chapter ends with a presentation of the data analysis process.

4

The fourth chapter presents and analyses the empirical data in relation to the conceptual framework and divided in the following order: product-related attributes, non-product-related attributes, functional benefits, experiential benefits, symbolic benefits and brand personality. Each element begins with analysing the offline channel, then the online channel and ends with a comparison of the two.

5

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the discussion of the empirical analysis, as well as the findings and conclusion of the research. Here, the analysis is discussed in relation to theory and research questions, and thus, is being connected to the concepts of retailer brand image alignment. Lastly, the conclusion is stated.

6

The sixth and final chapter presents the contribution of this study to academia and management practices, divided into chapters of theoretical and managerial contributions. The chapter continues with a discussion of the limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research.

Figure 1. Research Outlines

2. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter presents the theoretical framework relevant for the research problem. Firstly, a clarification is made of what beauty retailer is referred to in this study. Thereafter, the concept of retailer brand image associations is presented, followed by retailer brand image alignment. The latter is divided into brand attributes, brand benefits and brand personality, where each introduces elements that make up a brand's image. The chapter concludes by presenting the conceptual framework that will function as a tool for the analysis of the empirical material.

2.1. Beauty Retailer

A retailer is described as a department- or speciality store that offers several different brands within various product categories (Badrinarayanan & Becerra, 2019). The products provided are sold in small quantities to the supply chain's final customers, resulting in an interaction between customers and the retailer (Ganapathy, 2017). Furthermore, there are different types of retailers depending on the products they sell, including food products, durable goods or consumables (Ganapathy, 2017). In this study, the focus lies with consumables, specifically beauty retailers selling beauty products. This segment is divided into four product categories: cosmetics, skincare, personal care, and fragrances (Statista, 2021). Sephora and Kicks are examples of beauty retailers that offer a wide range of products and services, including their own private labels (Grewal, 2019). A delimitation for this study has been made to beauty retailers, as such, this thesis will refer to beauty retailers as those who sell products and services in the aforementioned four categories.

2.2. Retailer Brand Image Associations

Brand image has been widely recognised and is an established concept within business and marketing (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). However, many scholars agree that the definition of it is highly widespread (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Keller, 1993). There are also those who assume that the term has been weakened due to its broad use (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Most definitions of brand image date back in time, however, they are as relevant and applicable today as before.

A frequent definition of brand image is Keller's (1993), who defines it as: "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (p. 3). Similarly,

Kapferer (2012) states that brand image is the result of prior contact customers have had with the brand, whereas Newman (1957) refers to it as “a composite image of everything people associate with it. These impressions determine how a prospective buyer feels about it and influence his selection” (p. 101). He further explains that brand image has several dimensions, which are social, psychological, functional, and economic. More in line with Keller’s (1993) definition is Dichter’s (1985), who states that: “It [brand image] describes not individual traits or qualities, but the total impression an entity makes on the minds of others” (p. 75).

Although the literature provides a plethora of definitions, the most commonly occurring characteristics of brand image seem to be that it derives from the receiver’s side (Kapferer, 2012) and that it is customers’ perceptions about a brand based on previous impressions from or contacts with it (Dichter, 1985; Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Keller, 1993; Newman, 1957). To simplify, this study will lean more in line with Keller’s (1993) definition and refer hereafter to brand image as customers’ brand associations derived from their memories.

Brand associations reflect the value and meaning of the brand for the customers (Keller, 1998). Roper and Fill (2012) mean that this connects to what words or phrases that customers think about when hearing of or seeing a particular brand. Similarly, retailers’ brand image is determined by customers’ perceptions reflected in their minds (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Hence, brand image and Keller’s (1993) idea about brand associations in the context of retailing can be discussed in a similar manner as general brands.

The concept of retailer branding has evolved from a focus on merely products, to both the store and corporate aspects, resulting in a multi-dimensional brand image (Kremer & Viot, 2012). Kremer and Viot (2012) mean that general associations to a retailer’s brand image include factors such as variety and quality of the assortment, price, social responsibility, values as well as reputation, store atmosphere and the standard of the customer service. As a consequence of the multi-sensory nature of retail brands, Ailawadi and Keller (2004) highlight that retailers can create brand image through more unique ways. To exemplify, the authors state that by attaching more unique associations to the service quality, product assortment, pricing, and merchandising, among others, the result is an enhanced customer experience. Additionally, the authors emphasise that retailers are to a great extent resellers of other manufacturers’ brands, as such, retailers are affected by these brands’ images. Due to the aforementioned and the

competitive environment retailers operate in, creating a strong brand image is thoroughly important (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004).

2.3. Retailer Brand Image Alignment

In research, the term alignment has been used synonymously with concepts such as congruence, level of fit and similarity, among others (Tam, 2016). As such, there is not a universally agreed upon definition of the term. Stephen and Coote (2007) define alignment as a position that allows for the creation of positive outcomes for the stakeholders involved. In the context of a brand, Pranjal and Sarkar (2020) view the concept as the way in which elements of a brand, such as image and identity, correspond to the perceptions of stakeholders. A similar perspective is held by Ranfagni, Faraoni, Zollo and Vannucci (2020) who state that brand alignment involves the brand's communications and customers' perception of the brand.

The assumption of a positive relationship between brand alignment and brand performance is highlighted by Tam (2016). He believes that researchers stress the alignment between internal and external stakeholders as a necessary condition for strong brand performance. This assumption is in line with Fombrun, Gardberg and Sever's (2000) view that one of the factors for brand success stems from consistency in perception by means of sound positioning. However, the lack of brand alignment can pose a threat. Mingione and Abratt (2022) describe this as a block that hinders the value creation process. Additionally, the brand can weaken as a result of a lack of brand alignment due to the customers who lose trust in the brand (Tam, 2016). As previously stated, if companies fail to maintain, for instance, a consistent brand image throughout their channels in a seamless way, customers can be left annoyed, resulting in negative consequences (Grewal, 2019).

The varying definitions of brand alignment outlined above and the lack of a definition in regard to brand image result in the need to define brand image alignment that this study will subsequently follow. However, in consideration of the purpose, brand image alignment needs to be defined in the context of retailers, here referred to as retailer brand image alignment. This concept is multi-faceted and involves various connected units such as distribution channels and own-brands (Bezes, 2013). Though, managing customer perceptions of a retailer is complicated due to the opinions that are carried over from previous experiences with the offline store and rising expectations of the online store (Kwon and Lennon 2009a, b). Additionally, retailers

control numerous channels of distribution that function under an umbrella brand, therefore, alignment between a retailer's offline and online brand image is even more crucial (Bezes, 2013). Consequently, this study will define and refer to retailer brand image alignment as the way in which customers' brand association to the retailer's offline brand image corresponds to customers' brand association to the retailer's online brand image. Hence, this study defines alignment in a similar manner to Pranjali and Sarkar (2020) and Ranfagni, Faraoni, Zollo and Vannucci (2020), and the elements of brand image are further defined by Keller's (1993) notion of brand association.

The brand associations presented by Keller (1993) appear in an abundance of forms and may reflect aspects of the product itself or independent characteristics. The various appearances of brand associations make it necessary to divide them into three major pillars when assessing the brand image: brand attributes and brand benefits and brand attitudes (Keller, 1998). However, in his literature from 1998, Keller excluded brand attitude as one of the main pillars. Since Keller's book is more up-to-date than his article published in 1993, the third pillar is no longer deemed relevant and thus excluded in this thesis.

Moreover, a final component relevant to discuss in regard to brand image is the personality or character of the brand itself (Keller, 1993), the so-called brand personality (Aaker, 1997). Consequently, we have built upon Keller's (1993) framework of brand association and included Aaker's (1997) framework of brand personality. Together, brand attributes, brand benefits and brand personality create the conceptual framework and the concept of retailer brand image alignment. As previously stated, the image of a retailer's offline channel can be examined in the same manner as a retailer's online channel (Bezes, 2013), therefore, no distinction will be made, and the framework will be applied in the same way to both the offline and online channel.

2.3.1. Brand Attributes

Due to the qualitative nature of brand associations, Keller (1993) emphasises that the main pillars can be further distinguished into subcategories. Brand attributes are dichotomised into product-related and non-product-related attributes, where the latter is further divided into four main types: price information, packaging and product appearance information, user imagery, and usage imagery (see Figure 2). Brand attributes are directly related to the descriptive features characterising a product, both the product itself (product-related attributes) and what is included

in the purchase or consumption (non-product-related attributes) (Keller, 1993). In Keller's (1998) updated study of brand attributes, the subcategory of packaging and product appearance information was deemed no longer relevant and therefore excluded from the study. As a result, packaging and product appearance information will be omitted from this study.

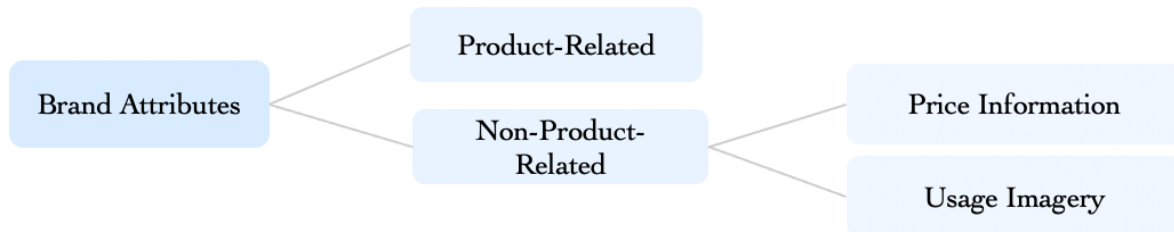


Figure 2. Adapted from Keller 1993) Brand Attributes.

2.3.1.1. Product-related Attributes

Product-related attributes are defined as “the ingredients necessary for performing the product or service function sought by consumers” (Keller, 1993, p. 4). Hence, it involves the product's physical composition (Keller, 1993) and the main function of it (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014). According to Keller (1998), the product itself has the main influence on customers' experiences of a brand. In the context of a retailer, it was deemed not appropriate for this study to base customers' experience of a brand solely on a product specific level. Instead, product-related attributes will, in this study, consider the products offered by a retailer.

2.3.1.2. Non-product-related Attributes

Non-product-related attributes are, according to Keller (1998), defined as those related to the external aspects of a product. For the same reasons as previously stated, non-product-related attributes will, in this study, refer to the external elements of the products offered by a retailer brand rather than to specific products. Keller (1993) mentions three non-product-related attributes, namely, price information, user imagery and usage imagery. He states that price information is a natural step in the purchase process, without the involvement in physical product performance. Moreover, he highlights that often, customers have strong beliefs about the value of the brand and the price they are willing to pay, thus, making price information a

necessary consideration in regard to the brand image. Wang and Tang (2011) stress that this is because customers form perceptions about the value of a brand or product based on the quality and price.

Furthermore, Keller (1998) states that both user and usage imagery may be directly formed from the customers' experiences of and contact with a brand. User imagery considers the type of individuals who use the brand, resulting in the individuals' mental representation of the true or idealised users (Keller, 1998). These representations could be based on psychographic or demographic factors such as age, income, social issues, or attitudes toward a career. In this study, as further explained in the methodology chapter, participants were selected based on predetermined criteria, leading to a specific customer group with shared characteristics. As a result, user imagery is considered to be irrelevant and will not be explored in this study.

On the other hand, usage imagery is the associations that inform about the circumstances and situations under which a brand should or can be used (Keller, 1998). This could refer to the time of day, the location, the week, or year, amongst others. Keller (1998) highlights that both user and usage imagery may focus on customer groups as a whole, which then reflects onto the perception of the brand image. He explains this by mentioning that a brand used by many customers can be viewed as a "popular" brand, attracting more customers as a result.

2.3.2. Brand Benefits

The second brand association, benefits, is the personal value that customers attach to a product (Keller, 1998). More importantly, what specific needs customers believe the product can satisfy (Keller, 1993). These benefits do not have to be purely functional in nature and are elements that can potentially distinguish one brand from its competitors (Keller, 1998). Benefits are categorised into functional-, experiential-, and symbolic benefits, see Figure 3 (Keller, 1993).

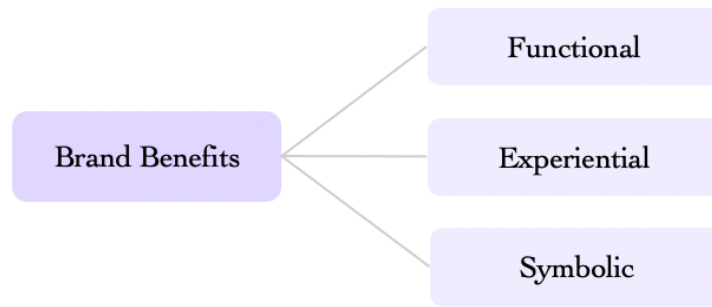


Figure 3. (Adapted from Keller 1993) Brand Benefits.

2.3.2.1. Functional Benefits

Functional benefits relate to the fairly fundamental and rational motivations of consumption and are therefore the most intrinsic advantages of the product (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014; Keller, 1993). Often, these correlate directly with the product-related attributes (Keller, 1993; Orth & De Marchi, 2007) and are the benefits most easily replicated by competitors (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014). These types of benefits are meant to satisfy an issue or problem perceived by customers (Fennel, 1978). Due to the context of this study, the focus will be on the functional benefits customers gain by purchasing from a particular retailer rather than the benefits from a specific product.

2.3.2.2. Experiential Benefits

Experiential benefits, according to Keller (1993), regard the experiential needs and correspond to how a product feels. For instance, a product can evoke emotions such as warmth, excitement, and enjoyment, among others (Keller, 1998). Additionally, this can satisfy customers' cognitive stimulation and sensory pleasure (Keller, 1993) and corresponds to product-related attributes (Orth & De Marchi, 2007). In this study, the experiential benefits will be based on emotions evoked when customers purchase from a retailer brand rather than the feelings induced by a specific product.

2.3.2.3. Symbolic Benefits

Symbolic benefits are defined as those related to customers' self-approval of consumption and correspond to the extrinsic advantages of a product (Keller, 1993). These benefits are generally

connected to non-product-related-related attributes (Orth & De Marchi, 2007). Keller (1993) states that these benefits reflect the need for self-expression or social approval and are directly linked to one's self-esteem. In a brand context, he argues that different customers value different aspects of a brand, such as prestige, exclusivity and sustainability. Additionally, brands can function as symbolic devices, meaning that customers project their self-image onto a brand (Keller, 1998). As specific brands are associated with specific types of values or traits, consuming products related to a certain brand can be a means for customers to convey the kind of individual they are (Keller, 1998). Here, symbolic benefits refer to those extrinsic advantages customers associate a retailer's brand with rather than their associations with a specific product.

2.3.3. Brand Personality

A component related to brand image is the personality or character of the brand itself (Keller, 1993), which is defined as "the set of human personality traits that are both applicable to and relevant for brands" (Japutra & Molinillo, 2019). These traits are created by customers, allowing them to identify with and project themselves onto brands, shaping a brand's personality (Kapferer, 2012). This, in turn, results in competing brands with similar characteristics and offerings being able to differentiate themselves (Roper & Fill 2012).

Some scholars suggest that customers humanise, animate, or personalise a brand in order to facilitate their connection with them (Japutra & Molinillo, 2019). The most common action is for customers to anthropomorphise a brand, either in a positive or negative way, to communicate their emotions about it (Roper & Fill, 2012). As this is an unconscious process, customers do not have problems ascribing humanised features to a brand (Japutra & Molinillo, 2019). These human features can be formed both directly and indirectly between customers and brands (Aaker, 1997). Aaker (1997) highlights that directly formed traits are built upon the brand's user imagery and internal stakeholders. Meanwhile, the author states that indirectly formed traits are created through associations with aspects such as the product category, brand name, logo, product-related attributes, and price.

2.3.4.1. Dimensions of Brand Personality

The Dimensions of Brand Personality is a framework developed by Aaker (1997), which resulted in the initial conceptualisation of the brand personality phenomenon (Carvalho, Demo & Scussel, 2021). During the creation of the framework, Aaker (1997) discovered five distinct

personality traits based on customers' perceptions. These form the five personality dimensions, which the author refers to as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness (see Figure 4). According to her, a brand that is sincere captures a sense of warmth and acceptance and is often described as either down-to-earth, honest, wholesome or cheerful. Furthermore, Aaker (1997) explains that the second dimension, excitement, connotes the notion of being sociable, energised and active, thus these brands are often described as either daring, spirited, imaginative or up-to-date. Moreover, she highlights that brands that encapsulating responsibility, security, and dependability are often reported as being reliable, intelligent, or successful, thus leaning toward the dimension of competence. Furthermore, the author states that both the dimensions of ruggedness and sophistication tap into the desire of having something one does not necessarily need. She expresses that a brand with the dimension of ruggedness wants to encapsulate masculinity and strength and glamorises American ideals of the West. These brands are often described as tough or outdoorsy. Finally, Aaker (1997) means that a brand described as upper class or charming captures the dimension of sophistication with the associations of glamorous, sexy, and upper class.

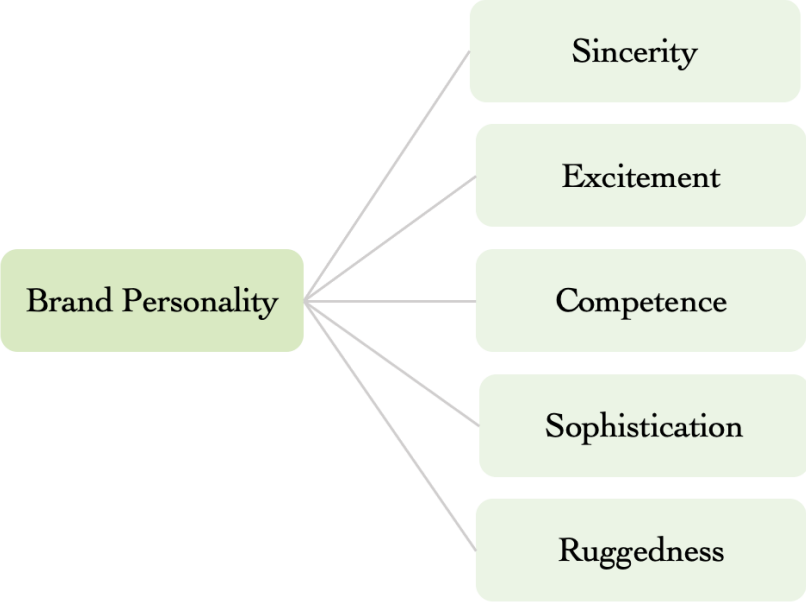


Figure 4. (Adapted from Aaker 1997) Brand Personality.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

For this study, the aforementioned elements of brand image conceptualise the notion of brand image alignment. This will be explored in the context of the Swedish beauty retailer Kicks’ offline and online channels. The conceptual framework presented below (see Figure 5) will lay the foundation and work as a tool for the empirical analysis with the aim of answering the research question. Consequently, the framework of Keller (1993) was modified to incorporate brand personality by Aaker (1997). Additionally, adjustments were made to be able to explore the research problem from a brand level instead of a product specific level. The conceptual framework will be applied in the same manner for Kicks’ offline and online brand image allowing for a comparison of both channels.

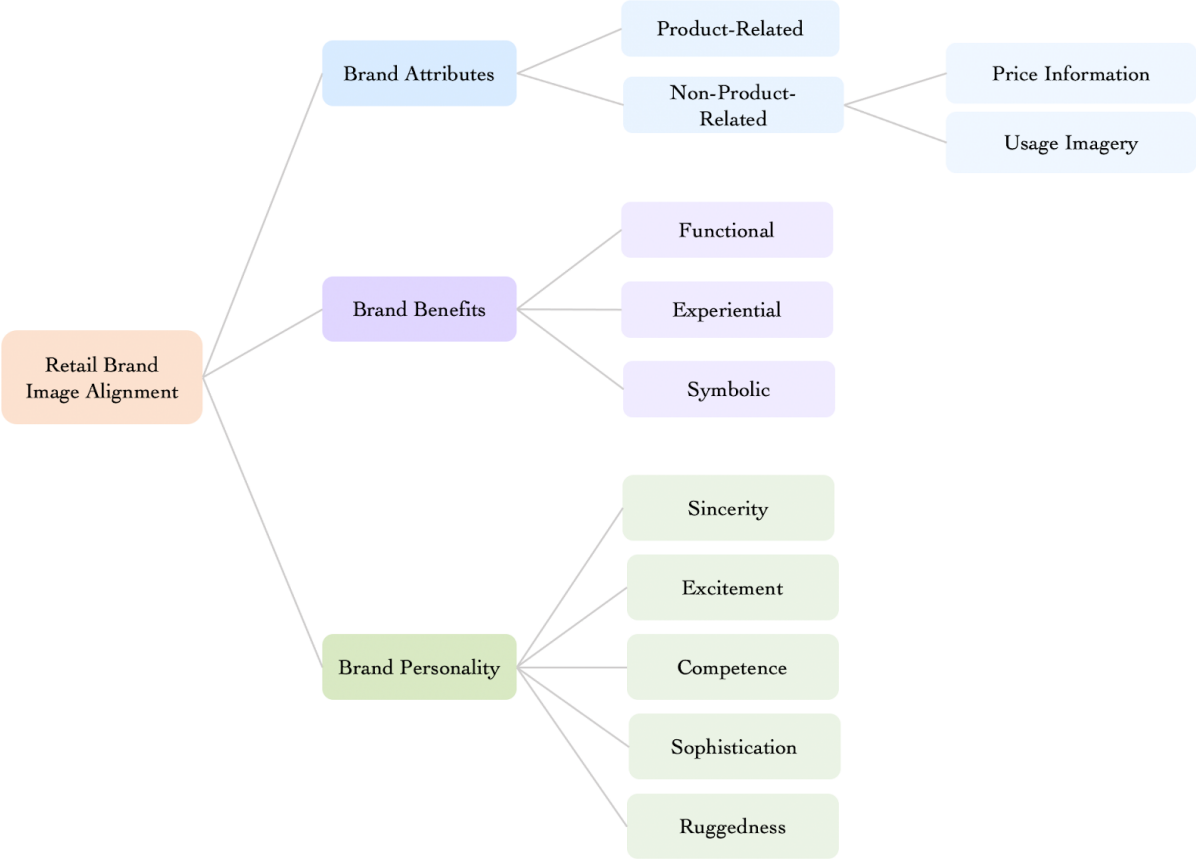


Figure 5. (Adapted from Keller 1993) Retailer Brand Image Alignment.

3. Methodology

The following chapter details the methodology of this study. In the first section, we motivate the choice of research philosophy upon which this study is built. The second section includes the research approach which explains our choice of conducting a qualitative research study with an abductive approach. Thereafter, we will discuss the choice of semi-structured interviews as the research method for this study, as well as present the choice of the beauty retailer Kicks. Finally, we will motivate the research design, which includes the data collection process, ethical considerations, and quality of the study, concluding with the method for data analysis.

3.1. Research Philosophy

Research philosophy refers to the assumptions and beliefs about the development of knowledge (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019) and provides the foundation to a research project (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). By understanding one's philosophical underpinning, the researcher enables him- or herself to have a clear sense of one's role in the research method and to identify the most appropriate research design (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Additionally, it helps the researcher to understand what evidence is to be gathered, how it should be interpreted and in what way the outcome enables a suitable answer to the research problem or question (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Research philosophy can be discussed in accordance with two philosophical standpoints: ontology and epistemology.

3.1.1. Ontological Position

Ontology concerns the very basic assumptions about reality and how the world is perceived and is defined by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) as the “philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality” (p. 71). Moreover, the chosen ontological stand determines how a researcher sees and studies the research objects (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019) and defines the basic ideas of the research in regard to aspects such as design, methods and structure of the analysis (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), the ontological approaches extend from two opposites, one with an approach that assumes that the social world exists independently of any perceptions and observations made about it. The contrasting assumption is that the social world is dependent on the viewpoint of the observer. The authors state that these extend from more quantitative methods to qualitative. Within this continuum,

there are four different ontological positions: realism, internal realism, relativism, and nominalism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The focal point of this study is to explore the alignment or misalignment of customers' brand associations of a beauty retailer's offline and online brand image. As previously stated, the two most prominent channels, namely the physical store and the website (Buldeo Rai et al., 2019; Dragan, Stipe & Zoran, 2016), will be used to limit the scope of this research. This study is dependent on customers' different perspectives and "truths" of the phenomenon, which is in accordance with the relativist ontological standpoint (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The stance of this study is that the participants possess different experiences and perceptions of reality and the studied phenomenon. Hence, their expressed dictums are subjective and true based on their assumption of reality. According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), the relativist stand enables an understanding and assessment of the empirical data that is based on the viewpoint of the individuals, their unique opinions and experience of reality and social phenomena, making it a suitable choice for our study.

3.1.2. Epistemological Position

Having established the ontological position of this research, it is equally important to reflect upon the epistemological approach. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) define epistemology as "a general set of assumptions about ways of inquiring into the nature of the world" (p.71) and explain that it involves the study of knowledge. Furthermore, it concerns what should be considered as knowledge in a discipline, and whether or not the social world should be studied in accordance with the principles and procedures similar to natural science (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Epistemology can be discussed in regard to two considerations: positivism and constructionism (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Positivism is the position that affirms the necessity to imitate natural science (Bryman & Bell, 2011) and is mostly linked to quantitative studies (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). On the opposite side of the paradigm is constructivism, which stems from the assumption that reality is socially constructed based on human interactions (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

The relativist ontology is connected to the constructionist epistemology (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), and is therefore the most suitable position for this study. The constructionist stance stems from the viewpoint that reality is given meaning by and is socially constructed through

individuals' daily interaction with each other (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Thus, the social reality is determined by individuals rather than external and objective aspects, as with positivism. Furthermore, Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) state that the importance of constructivism is to inquire into how people make sense of their experiences. This is in line with our need for an understanding of the individual experiences and opinions of customers to explore if there is a brand image alignment or misalignment. A constructionist position is the most appropriate standpoint and would allow us to delve into the research question.

3.2. Research Approach

Following the established philosophical position, the subsequent section presents our research approach. The section begins with arguments for our choice of a qualitative research strategy and ends with our motivations for an abductive approach.

3.2.1. Qualitative Research Strategy

In line with the research of customers' brand associations of beauty retailers' offline and online brand image, a qualitative research strategy was chosen. A qualitative method entails that data is derived from words and images, in a non-numerical form (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). The process by which the data is gathered is interpretative and interactive as participants' subjective meanings about the researched phenomenon needs to be understood (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019), resulting in theory generation or development.

In contrast, a quantitative research strategy involves the collection and analysis of numerical data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This method explores the relationships between the measured variables. Furthermore, the role of theory and research takes on a deductive form, emphasising the testing of theory rather than the generation of it (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As our research is concerned with customers' brand associations of a retailer's offline and online brand image, an understanding of each individual's personal experiences, thoughts, values, and opinions are needed. This entails detailed worded descriptions that would be difficult to quantify. Therefore, a quantitative research strategy would not allow us to explore subjective perceptions in-depth and was deemed unsuitable. As a result, the elements of a qualitative method were in line with the aim of this study and, thus, this method was determined appropriate.

3.2.2. Abductive Approach

The two most common types of approaches to research are inductive and deductive reasoning. Induction begins with the collection of data to research phenomena without a foundational theoretical standpoint (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Subsequently, the identified patterns and themes in the data are used to generate or build theory. On the contrary, deduction starts with theory that is used to derive hypotheses or propositions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). These propositions are then tested through the data collected that would verify or falsify the related theory (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

The constraints of the inductive and deductive approach have led to the development of a third, namely abduction (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). This approach lies between induction and deduction, drawing on influences from both. Abduction starts with an observation that current theory cannot sufficiently explain (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Data is then collected and throughout the research process, the framework or concept is altered as a result of the findings or insights gained (Dubios & Gadde, 2002). This entails a constant engagement between the related theory and the data collected. As such, our research paper follows an abductive approach. We started with an observation questioning if there was a brand image alignment or misalignment between a retailer brands' offline and online channel. The existing theory was viewed to be insufficient in qualitatively explaining this phenomenon and data was initially collected through a first test interview to evaluate the interview guide. The questions were then modified where appropriate and the conceptual framework was developed. Therefore, an abductive approach was deemed most appropriate for this study.

3.3. Research Method

In qualitative research, there are various methods to collect empirical data, where the selection depends on the purpose of the study (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). For example, researchers can conduct interviews, focus groups or ethnographies, among others (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Based on the nature of this study, interviews were deemed most suitable as they enable the obtainment of information from the participants regarding his or her behaviour, attitude, beliefs, norms, and values (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Through interviews, we eliminate the risk of participants being influenced by other individuals' opinions about a phenomenon, which would be present if focus groups were conducted.

To achieve greater flexibility with the questions posed, we decided to construct the interviews using a semi-structured approach. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) explain that this enables researchers to ask follow-up questions to further understand the participants' thoughts and reasoning, which is common within qualitative research. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews involve the notion that new ideas arising during the interviews can be asked, which would not have been the case with a more structured technique (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). By conducting semi-structured interviews, we were able to gain valuable, nuanced, and insightful understandings of customers' associations to the studied social phenomenon.

The consideration of sampling size, according to Bryman and Bell (2011), is equally important as the choice of research method. There is not a general consensus on the number of interviews that should be conducted (Bryman & Bell, 2011), however, it is possible to make an estimation based on existing literature. With this as foundation, the appropriate number can be estimated to be between 6-12 interviews (e.g., Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006; Coenen, Stamm, Stucki & Cieza, 2012; Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; Namey, Guest, McKenna & Chen, 2016). With this in mind, we aimed for a number of 12 interviews. However, one interviewee did not fully comprehend the interview questions, therefore, we conducted an additional one to supplement the empirical material.

3.4. Research Design

The purpose of the research design is to provide a general plan of how to conduct the research project and answer the research question (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). It should include information about and justification of the choices of what data is to be gathered, how it is gathered and from where (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Moreover, ethical considerations should be discussed as well as any possible constraints encountered during the research process (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Thereafter, it should also contain a plan on how the collected data is to be analysed and able to answer the research question (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To provide a clear structure of the research design, the following remaining chapters hereafter will discuss the different aspects of it.

The underlying orientation of this study is pure research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) with an exploratory approach (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). The primary objective of pure

research is a greater understanding of a phenomenon, without there having to be any direct impacts on the real-world (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), it aims at “the development, refinement and testing of general principles and theories that help us explain social phenomena” (p. 3). This orientation is deemed most appropriate since this study aims at contributing with new knowledge to current literature by focusing on the context of a beauty retailer brand through a qualitative approach.

Furthermore, Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) state that having an exploratory approach affects how the research question is defined. The authors indicate that exploratory studies are likely to include research questions starting with “how” or “what” and will lead to answers that are partly or entirely descriptive. This is in line with the research question of this study, which begins with “what”. Additionally, exploratory approaches are ubiquitous within qualitative studies and enable the empirical data to be obtained through in-depth individual interviews (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Therefore, due to the nature of this study, an exploratory approach was deemed most appropriate.

3.4.1. Selection of Kicks

In the selection of the appropriate beauty retailer, several factors were considered. Firstly, we reflected upon our own interest in the beauty industry, and specifically Kicks as a retailer. Having both previously purchased through their offline and online channels, we were familiar with their products and services as well as Kicks as a brand. Secondly, as stated in the problematisation, there are few studies with an emphasis on how brands should manage and align their image across channels. Therefore, we can infer that in this context, the beauty industry in Sweden is an understudied sector. Thirdly, beauty products can be viewed as hedonistic in nature, placing emphasis on experience and pleasure (Zhu & Lin, 2019). Participants are therefore more likely to evaluate these products in relation to subjective standards and with emotional connection (Zhu & Lin, 2019). Consequently, this would allow us to qualitatively answer the research question in greater depth. Lastly, the choice of Kicks was further motivated as they are one of Sweden’s largest beauty retailers (Grewal, 2019). Due to the fact that we are Swedish residents and familiar with the sector, it was most convenient to find Swedish customers of Kicks. Thus, based on the aforementioned factors, Kicks was deemed the appropriate beauty retailer to explore.

Kicks is one of Scandinavia's largest beauty retailers, offering products such as skincare, makeup, fragrances and hair care (Kicks, 2021). The retailer operates over 230 stores across the Nordic countries with a product portfolio of around 250 brands consisting of both well-established and smaller brands, including their own in-house lines (Kicks, 2021). Their Kicks Club is made up of 2,7 million members, making it the Nordics largest beauty customer club. In 2021, they expanded the club to incorporate Kicks Beauty Talks, an online community where members can share product reviews, tips and partake in competitions (Kicks, 2021). Apart from this, they offer various beauty services, both online and in selected stores. These services include hair and nail salons, brow bars as well as facial treatments (Kicks, 2021).

3.5. Data Collection

The following chapter details the process of collecting empirical data through customer interviews and how the participants were selected. Throughout the process, both primary and secondary material have been gathered, which will be described below. Primary data was obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with female Swedish customers of the beauty retailer Kicks. To facilitate the understanding of the primary data, secondary sources consisting of peer reviewed journal articles and other academic literature were also used.

3.5.1. Interview Design

The interviews were conducted as so-called mediated interviews, meaning through any online media (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The digital communication platform Zoom was used, enabling video calls with the participants, recording of the sessions and automatic creation of audio files. For some time, remote interviews have been widely used due to the COVID-19 pandemic and digital communication has become ubiquitous (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Hence, we anticipated that the participants were familiar with the platform and were accustomed to communicating online. Online interviews are undoubtedly convenient though also advantageous when wanting to avoid unnecessary expenses, such as travelling costs, and could include participants unable to be reached otherwise (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Thus, due to the restricted scope of this study, online interviews were deemed most suitable. However, this results in loss of the immediate contextualisation, non-verbal communication, and body language (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), which is otherwise an advantage with physical interviews (Denscombe, 2016). However, it was deemed that, in order to answer the research

question, the advantages gained from conducting interviews online were greater than the disadvantages.

Before conducting the interviews, participants were informed about their rights to end the interview at any time and not answer the questions. The participants were also briefed that they could withdraw their participation at any time during the process, though not once the study was concluded. Thereafter, they were informed that the session was going to be recorded, and asked to give their full consent. In addition, they were further notified that their identity will be anonymised and given fictitious names in order to protect their integrity with the ambition that this would help them talk more openly and freely.

An interview guide was prepared in advance to ensure that we asked thoroughly constructed and elaborated questions in line with the research question, see Appendix A. As a guidance, we used the conceptual framework in which each question was connected to one part of it. Additionally, the guide was constructed to follow the guidelines of semi-structured interviews, allowing us to ask follow-up questions when necessary to gain elaborate answers. To ensure that the answers were as thorough as possible, the interviews were held in Swedish. This decision was made as Swedish is the mother tongue of all the respondents, implying that they may feel more comfortable expressing their opinions in Swedish. This, in turn, potentially enabled them to give more elaborate and clear answers, further developing them when necessary. To ensure that the translation of the quotes used in the analysis did not affect the content of what the respondent stated, each respondent validated their quotes to confirm the accuracy.

3.5.2. Sampling Strategy

For this study, the participants were selected through a convenience sampling strategy. This sampling strategy is a type of non-probability sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), meaning that it is not possible to decide the likelihood of each entity within a population being sampled (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Convenience sampling means that the participants are randomly selected as they are easy to access for the researcher (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Due to the limited capacity of this study in terms of finances and time, this sampling strategy was deemed most suitable. Additionally, Denscombe (2016) emphasises that this is the most appropriate strategy for researchers who have limited resources, further arguing

for our choice. However, it is essential that convenience sampling strategy is not the only criterion when selecting the participants (Denscombe, 2016; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Therefore, the primary criteria for the selection of participants was age and gender, in which females aged 16 to 34 were chosen.

Our decision for the aforementioned age range and gender was based on a report conducted by Cosmetics Europe (2017), who is the European trade association for the beauty industry, more specifically within cosmetics and personal care (Cosmetics Europe, n.d.). Across Europe, the association operates as a national representative within the industry, collaborating with policymakers and has, for several decades, been an authoritative spokesperson throughout the sector (Cosmetics Europe, n.d.). Firstly, the report found that a greater share of females in comparison to males rank beauty products in their everyday life as ‘very important’ (Cosmetics Europe, 2017). Furthermore, the percentage of females who believe beauty products improve their quality of life is higher than the corresponding percentage for males. The two age groups 16 to 24 and 25 to 34 value beauty products as very important for their quality of life, to a greater extent than older age groups (Cosmetics Europe, 2017). Based on these statistics, we may infer that females in the age group of 16 to 34 could have a greater interest in the beauty industry as opposed to others. The statistics could possibly indicate that this age group has a more extensive purchasing history of beauty products, further motivating our choice of the specified age group and gender.

Furthermore, a convenience sampling strategy is often complemented with a purposive sampling strategy (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). This means that the selected participants must be eligible to meet certain criteria (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) with the aim that this will enable the researcher to answer the research question in the best possible way (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Therefore, the eligible criterion for this study is that the participants must be a customer of the retailer brand Kicks, either through Kick’s physical stores or Kicks.se. This is essential since the outcome of this study relies on the participants’ experiences of and associations to Kicks. To enable a comparison of the empirical data, and further explore if there are any alignment or misalignments between Kicks’ offline and online brand images, participants were divided into two groups. One group contained participants of Kicks’ offline channel, Kicks’ physical store (see Table 1), the other group consisted of customers of the online channel, Kicks.se (see Table 2).

Table 1. Table of the Participants - Offline Channel

Fictitious Name of the Participants	Choice of Channel
Astrid	Offline
Freja	Offline
Agnes	Offline
Olivia	Offline
Ines	Offline
Ester	Offline
Iris	Offline

Table 2. Table of the Participants - Online Channel

Fictitious Name of the Participants	Choice of Channel
Vera	Online
Alma	Online
Selma	Online
Elsa	Online
Lilly	Online
Ella	Online

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The discussion about ethical research does not have any predetermined answers but researchers always need to be aware of ethical issues that might occur (Bryman & Bell, 2011). By maintaining an ethical awareness, researchers can base their decisions on what they know the implications of each choice will be (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To ensure that ethical aspects were considered for this study, it was discussed throughout the entire research process.

Even if the ethical aspects researchers need to consider can vary, Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) explain ten key principles that can be used as a guide for ethical considerations. The first six

principles are meant to protect the participants of the study, while the remaining are about protecting the research community (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Similarly, Bryman and Bell (2011) have divided ethical considerations into four areas where each cover, to a large extent, the ten principles. The first three areas refer to the protection of participants, while the last covers the protection of the research community. For this study, it was decided to use Bryman and Bell's (2011) four areas as the basis for our ethical dialogue. These four areas cover Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) ten principles in a more concise and extensive manner, paving the way for a clearer discussion.

The first area is 'harm to participants', noting that 'harm' can appear in several different ways (Bryman & Bell, 2011). When reflecting upon this study, the interviews were the primary ethical consideration. The interview questions were structured and posed in a way that would not cause harm to the participants as the questions did not include an emotional aspect in a way that could, for example, harm their self-esteem. Furthermore, the anonymity of the participants needed to be considered. Bryman and Bell (2011) explain that participants' identities and records should be kept confidential. If a participant's identity needs to be disclosed, they must be informed about it before their participation. As stated, the participants were asked for their approval and consent to record the interview and pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. However, conducting a qualitative study means that complete anonymity can be difficult to maintain as a participant's answer can sometimes disclose their identity (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

'Lack of informed consent' concerns whether the participants choose to take part in the interviews based on an informed decision or not (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bryman and Bell (2011) explain that based on what a participant might need to make an informed decision, the amount of information about the research given varies, a factor we have taken into consideration throughout the research process. Additionally, the authors suggest that potential participants should be able to give informed consent, though the information given should not affect their answers. To ensure this, the participants were given a brief introduction to the topic as well as to Kicks' physical store and Kicks.se before deciding whether to participate or not.

The third area, 'invasion of privacy', is of great importance, however, what individuals consider an invasion of privacy can differ (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bryman and Bell (2011) state that during the collection of empirical data, it is important to show consideration for a participant's

right to privacy and respect if they want to discontinue the interview, which we have taken into consideration during the interview process. With that in mind, participants should always have the choice to choose not to answer a particular question and finish the interview whenever they want (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This was clearly stated before the interviews started, thus, ensuring participants' privacy in this study.

The fourth area is 'deception', which is said by Bryman and Bell (2011) to occur "when researchers represent their research as something other than what it is" (p. 136). As the authors explain, avoiding deception is necessary for researchers to continue to be trusted, something we have acknowledged this early on in the process and strived to limit this in our study. However, the authors stress that deception poses a dilemma as researchers do not want to reveal the entirety of their study to ensure that participants respond as naturally as possible, resulting in various degrees of deception. Thus, this is to some extent unavoidable. We are therefore unable to guarantee the presence of deception in our study, however, we have taken this into account and tried to limit the extent of it.

3.7. Research Quality

Critical to the two general criteria of reliability and validity, Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose the use of trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research as criteria to evaluate a study's quality. This is because there is no single truth of social reality, and therefore, reliability and validity are not appropriate criteria (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As our study is based on a relativist ontological position, it needs to be evaluated according to the two primary criteria of qualitative studies, where trustworthiness consists of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Credibility is evaluated based on whether the research was conducted according to good practice and respondent validation. This criterion is of particular importance in instances where there are multiple accounts of truth (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To establish credibility in our study, the participants were sent the transcribed interviews, as well as the translated quotes used in the analysis, in addition to the concluded research findings to validate that they were accurately interpreted and translated. Furthermore, the study was carried out following the ethical considerations outlined in Chapter 3.6, further strengthening its credibility.

Transferability concerns the opportunity to transfer the research patterns into another setting (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). However, this is in practice difficult in regard to qualitative studies, instead researchers should produce so-called thick descriptions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Bryman and Bell (2011) describe this as producing a rich account of the details of the studied phenomenon. This study consisted of a relatively small sample size, with the aim to create thick descriptions, rather than allowing for generalisability of the findings. Thus, the 13 interviews we conducted facilitated transferability through the thick descriptions it created.

Dependability refers to other researchers' ability to assess and understand the research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The aim is for others to be able to follow the process and how it was performed, rather than replicate it (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). Therefore, Bryman and Bell (2011) emphasise the necessity to keep detailed documentation across every phase of the research process, which we have aimed to comply with. Thus, detailed notes of the problem formulation, sampling strategy, analysis decisions among others have been kept. Additionally, we have regularly examined the research process with the ambition to optimise the procedure.

Conformability is ensuring that researchers have acted in good faith, even if maintaining complete objectivity is not possible (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To achieve impartiality, considerable efforts were taken throughout the research process to not allow our individual values and opinions to exert influence on the findings. This involved not asking leading questions or directing participants to answer in a specific way. Additionally, specific aspects concerning the purpose of the study were not revealed to ensure that participants' opinions of the phenomenon were not influenced.

The final criteria, authenticity, examines the broader impact of research and the necessity for researchers to provide a balanced depiction of the participants' view in their social environment (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For this study, we solely explored customers' associations of a retailer's brand image. However, we incorporated the views of customers who purchased through different channels and as such, considered the perspectives of both offline and online customers. The analysis of empirical material was done in a transparent manner in which the presence of conflicting expressions was not excluded to warrant fair representation and authenticity.

3.8. Data Analysis

One of the main challenges of conducting qualitative studies is to condense the large amount of data into an attainable amount (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) state that poor data management leads to significant amounts of time and energy losses and emphasise the necessity to organise the data. To arrange the data, we opted to pursue Rennstam and Wästerfors' (2018) three-stage analytical process. This process presents a systematic way of structuring and interpreting the collected data. It is distinguished into three stages: firstly, the researchers should sort the data, thereafter the data should be reduced and finally the researcher should argue for the findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). If the organisation of data is done successfully, it should be possible to present the research findings in a convincing way and "in a format that tells a story" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 260).

3.8.1. Sorting

The first step in the process is to sort the collected data (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In this study, the empirical data stems from several semi-structured interviews facilitated by an interview guide. Although the interview guide provided the interviews with a clear structure in accordance with the research problem of this study, Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) emphasise the need for sorting the data anyways, since there will nevertheless be a disorder. This is due to the fact that individuals do not strictly follow a categorisation or theme when conversing, but rather move back and forth (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

When sorting, the data should be filed systematically (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021) and in a thematic order (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Bryman & Bell, 2011). According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), qualitative material is often distinguished based on its content and is divided into those frequently occurring. Thereafter, these form different themes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Likewise, we attempted to approach our collected data in a thematic way with the conceptual framework as the foundation for the categorisation. Firstly, we transcribed the audio recordings. Thereafter, each transcription was sorted into the different categories and subcategories based on the conceptual framework. Table 3 and 4 provide an overview of how the data was sorted. Note that Table 3 and 4 are solely examples of how the data was sorted for transparency reasons and not the in-depth sorting process that was used during the analysis.

Table 3. Example of the Sorting Process - Offline Brand Image

Categories	Content from Interviews
Product-Related Attributes	“I don’t experience that they have the most exclusive brands, but not the least exclusive either, more something in between”
Non-Product-Related Attributes	“The prices are attractive but not like all other brands I think”
Functional Benefits	“When you want to buy something in-store, there are not that many retailers with the same offers in the cities I live or have lived in”
Experiential Benefits	“If you think of the logotype, it’s black and white with capital letters a bit apart. It really appeals to me”
Symbolic Benefits	“Inclusive, that’s the deciding factor if I shop [at a beauty retailer] or not”
Brand Personality	“The first thing I think of is honest, which I really believe fits them since they’re honest with their products”

Table 4. Example of the Sorting Process - Online Brand Image

Categories	Content from Interviews
Product-Related Attributes	“Many different products from many different brands and they have a wide assortment”
Non-Product-Related Attributes	“[I] think that when you search online, Kicks.[.se] usually has cheaper prices”
Functional Benefits	“I think there’s a much bigger selection online where I can buy brands that aren’t found in store”
Experiential Benefits	“Kicks has a great trustworthiness I would say at first. It feels as if they have enough products and a wide assortment of brands, which I know of, so I trust them”
Symbolic Benefits	“Clarity is important – that I can see different categories and know what I should click on”
Brand Personality	“Intelligent because everything is on the same website”

3.8.2. Reducing

When the sorting process was finalised, we found ourselves more familiar with the data and gained a better overview of it. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) highlight that it is impossible to manage and present all collected material, therefore the following step is reduction. This aims to deal with the problem of representation, meaning that researchers are unable to reproduce all collected data, and thus, must decide what to prioritise (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) describe categorical reduction as the narrowing down of categories and subcategories within the sorted data. For our study, we followed the outline of categorical reduction. As the conceptual framework was the foundation for our data sorting, the main categories and subcategories were already established. Although, certain categories were subsequently excluded from our data to form more manageable and concentrated material. The basis for the exclusion of certain categories were from our overall sense of the study, our methodological approach and previous research. Consequently, we were able to discover frequently occurring themes most relevant for the outcome in order to arrive at additional

findings from a new perspective. Table 5 provides a summary of different themes that were discovered during the reduction stage. This enables explicit comparisons between the beauty retailer's brand image alignment offline and online.

Table 5. Discovered Themes – Offline and Online Brand Image

Categories	Offline Brand Image	Online Brand Image
Product-Related Attributes	Wide and varied assortment	Wide and varied assortment
	Satisfying quality	Satisfying quality
	Make-up and perfume	Make-up and skincare
	Lacking international brands	Lacking advances skincare products
Non-Product-Related Attributes	Attractive prices but more expensive than competitors	Attractive prices and sometimes cheaper than competitors
	Daily use	Daily use
Functional Benefits	Wide and varied assortment	Wide and varied assortment
	Satisfy spontaneous needs	Convenient when no instant purchasing need
	Accessible	
Experiential Benefits	Black and white, clean, appealing	Logotype is neutral, classic, clean, black and white
	Logotype and store layout have consistent colour scheme	Website is feminine and creates warm feelings
	Organised	Organised
	Inclusivity	Easily available, trustworthy, safety, pleasantness
Symbolic Benefits	Inclusivity	Clarity
	Kind and service-minded store personnel	Transparency Sustainability
Brand Personality	Competence	Competence
	Sincerity	Excitement

3.8.3. Arguing

To complete the analysing process, it is not enough to solely sort and reduce the data, but an analyst must also argue for their findings (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Due to the abductive nature of this study, we began with observing a phenomenon that current theory cannot entirely explain. This led to the creation of the conceptual framework, which was then used as a tool to argue for, and analyse, the empirical data. This enabled for an in-depth analysis of the research problem in accordance with already established theories and thus, with existing literature. The outcome resulted in new insights of the studied phenomenon, giving us an entry to this unexplored area. As a result, we managed to supplement the existing body of knowledge. To further strengthen our arguments, excerpts and quotes from the interviews were included in the presentation and analysis of the empirical data.

4. Empirical Data & Analysis

In this chapter, the empirical data is presented and analysed. The analysis is based on the conceptual framework and is structured around the elements of brand image, namely, product-related attributes, non-product-related attributes, functional benefits, experiential benefits, symbolic benefits, and brand personality. To ensure a logical outline of the analysis, each subheading is further distinguished into separate analyses of the offline and online retailer brand, laying the foundation for a comparison of each element.

4.1. Product-Related Attributes

Product-related attributes are connected to the physical composition and main function of the product customers are seeking (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014; Keller, 1993). In the context of the beauty retailer Kicks, it was not possible nor relevant to explore the product-related attributes on a product specific level. Instead, this is analysed based on the products that are offered by the beauty retailer Kicks. During the analysis process, the following themes were discovered in regard to Kicks' offline brand image: wide and varied assortment, satisfying quality, make-up and perfume, and lacking international brands. For Kicks' online brand image, the following themes were recognised: wide and varied assortment, satisfying quality, make-up, and skincare, and lacking advanced skincare products.

4.1.1. Offline Retailer Brand

When asked how to describe the products offered by Kicks in store, every respondent instantly stated that it has a wide and varied assortment incorporating many different brands. However, what this meant was found to be slightly different. For instance, Iris said “[it’s] very wide [the product assortment], they have something for everyone. But also very basic, I would say because they have all the ordinary ones one wants to have”. Similarly, Ester said “I would say it is pretty varied, my spontaneous thought is that they have pretty cheap brands”. Both Iris and Ester associated Kicks' physical store with being a reseller of many budget brands, whereas Ines believed Kicks to be more in between budget and premium. She said “I don’t experience that they have the most exclusive brands, but not the least exclusive either, more something in between”. Most common was the opinion of Kicks as a retailer with both budget and premium brands. To exemplify, Freja stated “I kind of feel like their product range is very divided, it varies from drugstore brands like Maybelline and then it can be all the way up to Dior, so I feel

like it's very widely spread - the range of products". Although the respondents have different perceptions of what is included in the wideness and variety of Kicks' product assortment, there was a general agreement that the assortment offered a vast and diverse selection.

When asked about their experience of the general quality of the products offered by Kicks in store, a majority of the respondents expressed that they were satisfied. Olivia stated that she is always highly content with the quality, whereas Ester said that the quality is good though not better nor worse than any other beauty retailers. Freja was the only one showing slight dissatisfaction regarding the quality, saying "in general, I think it's okay [...] I always feel like the seals are kind of broken often [...] I feel like that defeats the purpose of going to the store". However, no other respondent showed any signs of being unhappy with the quality even though some found it varying depending on the products.

Most of the respondents associated Kicks' stores with makeup products, where Ester said "I buy mainly makeup, like mascara, concealer or something like a brow pencil maybe" and Olivia stated "it is actually the entire makeup routine, from primer, foundation, concealer, eyebrow [products] and mascara". Similarly, Ines expressed that "I usually buy makeup products, like mascara and foundations", but she also said that she sometimes purchases perfumes at Kicks too. Although not as distinct as the association to makeup was, perfume was also a recurring answer, where Freja said "I think the products I have bought were perfume and I like their collection of scents and fragrances". In essence, the findings indicate that customers mostly associate Kicks' product offerings with makeup and fragrances.

Although there was a united impression that Kicks' products in store are wide and varied, it was found that respondents believed it lacked a selection of international brands. Many believed that the competitor Sephora had a more satisfying assortment when it came to mostly American brands such as Fenty Beauty and Rare Beauty. To exemplify, Freja stated: "I would say I'm missing some products. I think if you are, like, Sweden's biggest beauty retailer you should offer a lot of products and I think they don't offer what Sephora does". She mentioned that Kicks lacks these brands in their portfolio and further stated "there's been new brands, like Fenty Beauty, Rare Beauty, etcetera, these celebrity brands, coming up and they are quite fun, and I think more people would like to try them out [...] I feel like they [Kicks] are a bit old fashioned".

4.1.2. Online Retailer Brand

To the question of how the respondents would describe the products offered by Kicks.se, every respondent expressed that it is both wide and varied. For example, Vera said that Kicks.se has “many different products from many different brands and they have a wide assortment”. We found that many respondents also believe that Kicks.se has a good amount of brands and products, ranging from budget to premium. Lilly stated that “I think they have a good range of cheaper brands but also more expensive and exclusive brands. This means that I click around more there [at the website] because there are products that fit every occasion depending on what you are looking for”. Furthermore, Ella, Lilly and Vera meant that Kicks.se’ products online have everything one might need in regard to beauty. For instance, Ella said “I would say they are one of those stores that has mostly everything I look for”. There was only one respondent that believed Kicks.se lacks some products online. For instance, Alma highlighted that she wants Kicks.se to offer more advanced skincare and makeup. She stressed that Kicks.se is unsuccessful in offering products that suit more sensitive skin and believed they do not have the knowledge to include these kinds of products in their assortment.

When asked about how the quality of Kicks.se’ product assortment is perceived, all respondents were united in that they experience the quality as satisfying. To exemplify, Elsa stated that “the brand they have is good and I use their own brand, Beauty Act, a lot and find it very good”. Likewise, Vera said “it is of very good quality, and I would say they have become better because in the past, it wasn’t so good”. However, although Lilly was content with the quality, she highlighted that it could vary among the different brands, but she did not find this to be an issue. Thus, no respondent expressed any dissatisfaction with the quality.

Furthermore, the empirical material shows that all of the respondents associate Kicks.se’ product offerings mostly with makeup products. For instance, Alma stated she mostly purchases “the most common product, such as mascara, all these regular brands like L’Oréal och Maybelline, so mostly makeup for me”. Similar answers were found throughout all interviews, though another commonly occurring association was skincare. For example, Elsa, Lilly, and Vera stated that they mostly purchase makeup and skincare on Kicks’ website.

4.1.3. Comparison of Product-Related Attributes

The respondents for both Kicks' offline and online channels believed that they offer a wide and varied product assortment. However, the respondents for the online channel seemed to be more pleased in general with the range of the assortment than the respondents for the offline channel. They were also more in line with what they believed Kicks.se offers in terms of varied products, whereas the respondents for the offline channel were not in consensus with their thoughts for the range of products. Both the respondents for the offline and online channel believed that the quality is to satisfaction, but it was found that many of the respondents believed that it changes depending on the product and brand. However, this did not affect any of the respondents' general perception of the quality in either of the channels. Although the findings clearly showed that all the respondents for both the offline and online channel highly associate Kicks with makeup products, the empirical data shows an evident distinction between the second-hand association. The respondents for the offline channel clearly associate the products in Kicks' store with perfume, whereas the respondents of the online channel associate the website with skincare. Moreover, it was found that the respondents for both the offline and online channel believed Kicks lack certain brands. For the physical store, respondents desired more international brands, with certain American brands being stated. Meanwhile, for the website, it was more advanced skincare.

4.2. Non-Product-Related Attributes

Non-product-related attributes are related to the external elements of a product, including price information, user imagery and usage imagery, and are formed by customers' experiences of and contact with a brand (Keller, 1998). As stated in the methodology, the participants had to meet certain criteria in terms of age and gender, and thus the user imagery is disregarded in the analysis. Furthermore, due to the context of this study, it is more appropriate to analyse non-product-related attributes based on the products offered by the beauty retailer Kicks, instead of on a product specific level. The themes found during the analysis of Kicks' offline brand were the following: attractive prices but more expensive than competitors and daily use. For Kicks' online brand, the discovered themes were: attractive prices and sometimes cheaper than competitors and daily use.

4.2.1. Offline Retailer Brand

When asked whether respondents believe Kicks' offline channel has attractive prices, they gave an overall impression that the prices are somewhat attractive though other competitors can be cheaper. To exemplify, Agnes stated that "yes, otherwise I wouldn't have shopped there so absolutely". However, she acknowledged that she is aware that Kicks' physical store is slightly more expensive than other brands, referring to the brand Lyko as an example. Similarly, Iris stated that "the prices are attractive but not like all other brands I think". She elaborated that Kicks' physical store does not often have sales or discounted prices that she often experiences that other brands have. In contrast to these opinions, Olivia believed that "if you look at like Lyko then I think Kicks is quite equal". The quotes may suggest that different respondents have a different frame of reference in regard to pricing, which might provide a motivation for the contrasting answers. Additionally, instead of making a comparison to other competitors, Ester differentiated between the offline and online pricing of beauty retailers and stated that "[I] think the prices are good if you compare to other physical stores but it's more expensive if you were to buy something online for example". However, overall, the empirical material did not show any evidence that Kicks' offline prices are believed to be cheaper than their competitors and respondents consider Kicks as either equivalent to or more expensive than its competitors.

Another non-product-related attribute is usage imagery, which refers to the situations under which the brand can or should be used (Keller, 1998). When asked about whether the products they purchase at Kicks' physical store are those used every day or for special occasions, it was evident that most respondents use these products for daily use. For example, Agnes stated that "I use them every day, it's part of my daily routine". In a similar view, Olivia stated that "Every time I get ready, I use Kicks' products". The quotes above suggest that these respondents' usage imagery have been formed from their daily interaction with Kicks' offline store as a brand. On the other hand, Astrid highlighted that her usage is varied, stating that "some things I use every day and others not, so like a tanning product I don't use every day but it's also not like something I save for a special occasion". This quote may suggest that Kicks' offline usage imagery is linked to everyday use of standard beauty products, though is not linked to a special or unique usage imagery. This was a thought restated throughout the empirical material and thus indicates a daily usage imagery of Kicks in an offline setting.

4.2.2. Online Retailer Brand

The overall collective attitude regarding the pricing for products on Kicks.se is that they are attractive, with none of the respondents mentioning that competitors' pricing is cheaper. The empirical material showed that some respondents emphasised the discounts provided by Kicks.se, further supporting their view of attractive prices. For example, Alma highlighted that "[Kicks.se] are good at marketing their discounts - I actually got a notification about a member discount over the weekend". The quote may suggest that Kicks.se's prices are attractive due to the number of targeted discounts she as a member receives. A contrasting view is that Kicks.se's pricing is in line with market prices, where both Vera and Lilly experience that there is no price advantage at Kicks.se, though they would not say it is more expensive in comparison to competitors. This belief may illustrate that in regard to price information, they view Kicks.se and its competitors as equivalent. A contrasting opinion to the collective attitude is that of Selma who stated "[I] think that when you search online, Kicks usually has cheaper prices". Therefore, from the empirical material, it can be deduced that the online prices are regarded as attractive, and in certain instances, cheaper than its competitors.

When asked if the products purchased at Kicks.se are those used every day or on occasion, respondents all stated that these products are used on a daily basis. To exemplify, Alma highlighted that she uses "both refill products like mascara that I use all the time, a hairspray or something, but it's my favourite products that I buy and use every day". Vera had a similar view, stating that "it's often those products I use every day". The above quotes exemplify a daily usage imagery of Kicks.se. The empirical material did not indicate that Kicks.se's products are used seldom or on occasion.

4.2.3. Comparison of Non-Product-Related Attributes

A comparison of the price information showed slight differences between Kicks' offline and online channels. For the offline channel, respondents overall expressed that Kicks has somewhat attractive prices, and are viewed as equal to or more expensive than other beauty retailers. In contrast, respondents questioned about Kicks' online channel saw prices as attractive, emphasising targeted member discounts and deals. In some instances, a respondent experienced Kicks.se's prices as cheaper in comparison to other online beauty retailers. Furthermore, Kicks' offline prices were compared to the market prices and some respondents

highlighted that its prices are in line with the industry standard. This view was also maintained by some respondents for Kicks' online channel, indicating a similarity in the responses between the offline and online channels. Despite this, the general consensus implied from the empirical material indicated a more favourable view of Kicks' online prices than their offline prices.

The usage imagery was found to be uniform for both Kicks' offline and online channels. All respondents for both channels used products that they had purchased for daily use, implying a daily usage imagery for both offline and online. The responses did not indicate that Kicks store or Kicks.se' products are used seldom or on occasion. This implies that both Kicks offline and online channels' usage imagery can be viewed as foundational or basic.

4.3. Functional Benefits

Functional benefits are directly linked to product-related attributes (Keller, 1993; Orth & De Marchi, 2007) and describe the rational motivations for consumption as well as the underlying benefits of the product (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014; Keller, 1993). To examine functional benefits, this study bases the analysis on customers' brand associations with purchasing from Kicks, rather than focusing on the benefits gained from a specific product. When analysing the empirical material, the following themes could be uncovered for Kicks' offline brand image: wide and varied assortment, satisfy spontaneous needs, and accessible. For Kicks' online channel, the themes wide and varied assortment, and convenient when no instant purchasing need, were found.

4.3.1. Offline Retailer Brand

The functional benefits gained through Kicks' physical store were found to differ slightly among respondents. One distinct functional benefit was found to be that Kicks' store offers a comprehensive assortment where many respondents believed they could satisfy all their beauty needs. To exemplify, Astrid stated "as I know there are so many different products, for example, when I was going to buy self-tanning products, I hadn't really decided on the brand but then I have a whole shelf with that". Moreover, due to Kicks' comprehensive offerings in store, Agnes felt that she was able to satisfy her interest in trying new makeup. Here, she experienced that Kicks' store personnel were of great guidance in instances where she wanted to try new products. Another respondent expressed that the large range satisfied the functional benefit of

finding products not possible to physically find elsewhere. As an example, Olivia mentioned that Kicks is the only retailer who offers a brand she is interested in.

Another functional benefit highlighted by some respondents is the accessibility of Kicks' store. To exemplify, both Ester and Iris explained that the main reason they visit Kicks' store is the possibility of instantly satisfying a spontaneous need. The physical store location in combination with their offerings are also what Ines mentioned as the most prominent reasons for her to visit Kicks. She highlighted that "when you want to buy something in-store, there are not that many retailers with the same offers in the cities I live or have lived in". These opinions suggest that the location and accessibility of the stores serve as functional benefits as they satisfy the customers' need of purchasing beauty products in a spontaneous manner.

4.3.2. Online Retailer Brand

The most prominent functional benefit of Kicks.se is the extensive range of products mentioned by several respondents. To exemplify, Elsa stated "I think there's a much bigger selection online where I can buy brands that aren't found in stores, and then I find it nicer to buy online because I don't need to worry if products are in stock or not". Similarly, Lilly highlighted that "there's a lot of different brands, not only their own brand but also a large enough range of products". Here, both Elsa and Lilly are able to satisfy their need for a large product range, portraying a functional benefit Kicks.se fulfils.

The other prominent functional benefit mentioned by respondents was convenience. Many respondents found it convenient to, in a calm manner, go through the Kicks.se's products without the presence of store personnel. For example, Elsa said "I think it's easier [to shop online] [...] it's nice to go through the product on my own and at my own pace instead of having someone asking questions or trying to help me". Convenience was interpreted in a different way by other respondents. For example, many highlighted convenience in terms of online deliveries, emphasising quick delivery times. Alma stated that " [I like it when] I can get the products home fast". Vera has a similar opinion and stressed that "I would like the delivery as soon as possible". Here, Kicks.se fulfils the function of being convenient, a benefit that respondents emphasise that they demand. None of the respondents seemed to have an instant purchasing need when visiting Kicks.se, therefore this suggested that the delivery time was not an issue.

4.3.3. Comparison of Functional Benefits

The functional benefits mentioned by respondents were similar between Kicks' offline and online channels, varying slightly in their interpretation of it. Respondents from both interview groups were motivated to visit Kicks' store as it could satisfy their need for a varied and wide product offering. However, they interpreted this benefit differently due to their contrasting rational motivations. For the respondents of the offline channel, Kicks store's extensive product assortment enables different demands to be met. Meanwhile, for the respondents of the online channels, Kicks.se's products can fulfil the need for a larger product range than what is available in store.

For both the interview groups, another functional benefit was found, though this was distinctly different between the channels. For Kicks' offline channel, respondents benefitted from the locations and accessibility of Kicks' store and felt that it could satisfy spontaneous beauty needs. For Kicks' online channel, convenience was found to be a benefit, where the respondents found it practical to, in a calm and uninterrupted way, complete the purchasing process on Kicks.se. Additionally, despite that the respondents encouraged fast delivery times, they seemed to have no immediate purchasing need, in contrast to the offline respondents who instantly wanted to satisfy their spontaneous needs.

4.4. Experiential Benefits

Experiential benefits can evoke emotions (Keller, 1998) and involve how a product feels and thus, regard the experiential needs customers have of a product (Keller, 1993). The context of this study makes it irrelevant to analyse the experiential benefits of a specific product. Therefore, the analysis will be based on the emotions evoked when customers are involved in a purchasing process at Kicks. In the analysis, the following themes were discovered for Kicks' offline brand image: organised, inclusivity, consistent colour scheme for logotype and store layout being associated with black, white, clean, and appealing. For Kicks' online brand image, the themes found were: safety and pleasantness, easily available and trustworthy, organised, feminine creating warm feelings, as well as the logotype being neutral, classic, clean and black and white.

4.4.1. Offline Retailer Brand

Many respondents initially associated Kicks' store with its logotype, store layout and colour scheme. They described Kicks' logotype as a black background with white capital letters, and believed the store follows the same colour codes. For instance, when asked what thoughts come to mind when thinking of Kicks' store, Olivia answered "their logotype and the interior in the physical store - black shelves with wooden floors" and elaborated by saying that the logotype is clean with a white text on a black background. Many respondents had similar thoughts, though when asked to describe how this made them feel, the empirical data showed slight dissimilarities.

Some respondents believed that the logotype and colour scheme are appealing and fresh-looking, which seemed to create a sense of satisfaction. For instance, Agnes said "if you think of the logotype, it's black and white with capital letters a bit apart. It really appeals to me [...] even inside the store, it's usually black and white and fresh in my opinion". Moreover, Olivia believed Kicks has a consistent colour scheme throughout the logotype and store layout. She also expressed that the store layout is nicely organised, making it easy to orient oneself and thus generates positive emotions. Similar opinions were expressed by other respondents. Although the logotype and colour scheme were the initial emotional association many respondents connected to Kicks' store, it was found that the experiences in the physical store creates more profound emotions.

Freja had quite negative feelings toward Kicks' physical stores. She felt unsatisfied with the product assortment as she occasionally experienced that the most popular products were out of stock. Additionally, she stated that "I always feel like in the store, it's often not very clean", which did not leave her with a positive impression. Similarly, Agnes said that it happened from time to time that the product she wanted was out of stock, which she did not expect when visiting the store. This made her leave the store with disappointing emotions.

Even though the empirical material showed instances of negative emotions, the collective attitude was positive. For example, Kicks' store generates feelings of inclusiveness which was shown through a frequent comparison to the competitor Sephora. In Sephora's stores, many respondents expressed that they do not feel welcome and consequently felt uncomfortable visiting it. On the contrary, Kicks' store was found by Iris to be "very natural and kind. Kicks

seems to be for everyone, from beginners to those that put on a lot of makeup or those who only need skincare or perfumes. There is really something for everyone”. Similarly, Erica stated “I know I can go in there [the store] and find cheap things but also more expensive things if I want to feel more luxurious. I feel like everyone is welcome.” Thereafter, she compared it to Sephora where she said she felt like “am I even allowed to be here? I’m not very good at makeup”. She further acknowledged that Kicks’ store does not cause the same negative emotions and said “I don’t feel that way at Kicks [store] because they are really for every type of person. So, inclusive and not only for those who are interested in makeup”. Not only were positive emotions expressed toward the store, but also toward the store personnel who were described as approachable and well informed. To exemplify, Ester said “it’s often nice staff working there” and Iris expressed “it feels like the people working there are very knowledgeable”.

However, the empirical material shows that not all respondents experienced positive feelings toward the store and its personnel. As stated, Freja felt that the store was unclean, but she also believed that the service provided by the employees could be improved. To put it into perspective, she compared it to Sephora where she experienced better service. Moreover, Ines also felt unsatisfied with the personnel, and said “I often feel like the store personnel are pretty rude. However, she expressed that this did not change her decision of selecting Kicks as her beauty retailer because she still feels that they offer what she needs.

4.4.2. Online Retailer Brand

Initially, many of the respondents expressed that Kicks’ website is easily available, has a wide product assortment and is trustworthy. It is also presented as a professional and serious actor. For example, Alma stated “it has a wide assortment and I would say it’s easily accessible too [...] So, affordable, accessible, clean” and Vera said “[Kicks gives] a very professional impression. A serious company and a very successful company”. Many of the respondents highlighted that they felt that they can rely heavily on Kicks.se, which seemed to create feelings of trust. Here, Lilly expressed “Kicks has a great trustworthiness I would say at first. It feels as if they have enough products and a wide assortment of brands, which I know of, so I trust them”.

When asked which visual aspects connected to the website that evoked different emotions, the logotype and the colour scheme were highlighted. Many of the respondents believed the

logotype to be neutral, classic, and clean, however, also ugly according to some. Elsa expressed it accordingly: “it’s this black block [...] [with the] ugliest font you can have”. None expressed it as negatively as Elsa, instead, many respondents seemed to have fairly neutral emotions toward the logotype. For instance, Lilly said “[the logotype] is pretty simple and clean and easy to take in”, and Alma stated “there’s nothing about it that’s in your face, instead it’s more neutral and classic”. Furthermore, more distinct emotions were found in regard to the colour scheme of the website. The empirical material showed that some respondents believe the layout to be mainly pink coloured with brown touches. They described the emotions of Kicks.se as trying to create feminine and warm feelings.

Additionally, some of the respondents expressed positive feelings toward the structure of the website and believed it to be well-organised and easily navigated, creating feelings of safety and pleasantness. To exemplify, Lilly said “I believe it’s a good website, it is easily navigated, and I feel secure [...] I know what I should click on if I want to go somewhere and I know what to expect”. Similarly, Vera stated “it’s a well-made website. It’s very interaction friendly. I think they have made it easy to navigate so you can find everything you need. It’s nice to be on” and Ella stated “it [the website] is very easily navigated, so I think it’s a good website”. None expressed any negative feelings toward the structure and organisation of the website.

4.4.3. Comparison of Experiential Benefits

The initial association the respondents of the offline channel had was to Kicks’ logotype, store layout and colour scheme. It was found that these respondents perceive those aspects to be consistent throughout, namely, black, and white, organised, and, though less frequently occurring, clean. For the online respondents, the empirical data shows that the logotype in particular is in accordance with the offline respondents’ experience. However, the respondents for the online channel had different emotions toward their perception of the logotype. Some said it to be neutral, classic, and clean, while others believed it to be ugly. In contrast to the respondents for the offline channel’s experience of the store layout, the online respondents believed the website layout to be feminine and warm with pink and brown colours. Although the layout was perceived to be different, both the physical store and the website were considered to be organised and structured from the respective interview group.

Moreover, the initial associations the respondents for the online channel made were to the availability and product assortment, as well as the appearance of Kicks.se. None expressed any negative emotions toward these aspects and believed Kicks' website to create feelings of trust. Similarly, respondents for the offline channel believed Kicks' store to create emotions of inclusiveness and intelligence, which can be seen to generate trust. However, one negative aspect raised by the respondents of the offline channel was the feeling of disappointment when products are out of stock. This seemed to happen occasionally, though was not an emotion expressed by any of the online respondents. Another factor that was raised by the respondents for the offline channel as a generator of feelings was the store personnel. Some had very positive emotions toward the service and encounter while others experienced negative feelings. This was not expressed by any of the respondents for the online channel.

4.5. Symbolic Benefits

Symbolic benefits, as previously mentioned, relate to the need for self-expression or social approval (Keller, 1993). Consuming products from a certain brand can communicate the type of individual the customer is (Keller, 1998), and is linked to one's self-esteem (Keller, 1993). In this analysis, symbolic benefits will be viewed from a brand perspective. For Kicks' offline brand image, it was possible to find the following themes: inclusivity and kind and service-minded store personnel, whereas for Kicks' online brand image, the themes found were: clarity, transparency, and sustainability.

4.5.1. Offline Retailer Brand

When respondents were asked what values are important to them when purchasing from a beauty retailer, the responses provided were mixed. Astrid and Olivia both mentioned that they value inclusivity, where Olivia stated "inclusive, that's the deciding factor if I shop [at a beauty retailer] or not". Astrid explained that she feels like Kicks' offline channel is inclusive based on what she has seen from their advertisements and hopes other customers feel included. The above could suggest that Olivia and Astrid may appreciate inclusivity as this benefit has a favourable impact on their self-esteem and reflects the kind of individual they are or want to be perceived as.

One of the most recurring values throughout the empirical material was centred around the store employees and their treatment of the respondents as customers. The values stressed were kind

and service-minded employees, which was highlighted by Agnes who stated that “I think the service is really important, I want to feel welcome and treated nicely. This is something that brings me back to the store”. Iris developed this further and stated that “you don’t want to feel judged, you want them to help you in a nice way [...] I want to feel appreciated as a customer”. As Keller (1993) states, these benefits reflect the need for self-expression or social approval and are directly linked to one’s self-esteem. The responses above could thus indicate that there may be a link between the self-esteem of customers and employees’ treatment of them. Additionally, Olivia expressed that “there shouldn’t be any pressure, I shouldn’t feel like I walk in and get pressured to buy expensive products”. This response could imply that the respondent values when a brand reflects their own identity and allows for self-expression without being pressured into purchasing products they do not align with. This implication is further exemplified by Iris who believed that “if I didn’t feel like I fit in when I walked in the store then I wouldn’t end up there”, emphasising the importance of consuming products from a brand that reflects the kind of individual they are.

4.5.2. Online Retailer Brand

The responses received from the questions regarding symbolic benefits for Kicks.se placed a large emphasis on benefits related to the online environment. Two interconnected benefits brought up by respondents were clarity and transparency. To exemplify, Alma stated that “clarity is important - that I can see different categories and know what I should click on. If I’m looking for ‘what’s new’ there should be a button for that”. She further explained that transparency is also important, highlighting that companies should be open with customer reviews and allow others to read them. Lilly valued the same benefits and expressed that “when it comes to make-up, I think it’s important to be transparent about the shades and showing the difference between them”. Some respondents valued transparency in terms of product size, where Elsa emphasised that “I think it’s important that the site is transparent about how big the product is so you don’t think that you are buying a product that contains 500ml and then turns out to contain less”. The answers to what respondents value could be explained by the difficulty in observing what colours are available online, the product size, and the inability to physically try the products.

A symbolic benefit not linked to the online environment brought up by one of the respondents was sustainability. Selma stated that: “overall I think sustainability has become more important,

so I guess I think about that a bit". As Keller (1998) states, consuming products from a certain brand can reflect the kind of individual they are and is linked to a need for social approval. Thus, the above quote may suggest that as Selma believed sustainability is growing in importance, she may feel the need to buy sustainable products for social approval.

4.5.3. Comparison of Symbolic Benefits

The symbolic benefits expressed by respondents for the offline and online channels differed entirely. The values mentioned by offline respondents were centred around store-related benefits, namely inclusivity and kind and service-minded employees. On the other hand, the online respondents generally valued benefits associated with purchasing online, specifically clarity and transparency, with sustainability being the exception to the online setting. Overall, online respondents did not mention benefits that were linked to one's self-esteem such as feeling judged or being pressured into purchasing certain products. However, based on the empirical material, it could be gathered that there may be a link between offline customers' self-esteem and employees' treatment of them. The same connection was not evident for online customers. The online space may be a contributing factor as customers may not feel judged or observed when purchasing products.

4.6. Brand Personality

Brand personality is shaped through human personality traits created by customers, allowing them to identify with and project themselves onto brands (Kapferer, 2012). To explore which personality traits Kicks' offline and online channels possess, the analysis will be based on the Dimensions of Brand Personality framework by Aaker (1997). According to Aaker (1997), there are five different personality traits based on various adjectives. During the analysis process, competence and sincerity were the themes found for Kicks' offline brand image, whereas for Kicks' online brand image, the themes were competence and excitement.

4.6.1. Offline Retailer Brand

The respondents were asked to state which of the correlated adjectives to the dimensions of brand personality, described in the framework by Aaker (1997), they would associate Kicks' physical store with. The adjectives mentioned were cheerful, reliable, charming, imaginative,

down-to-earth, up-to-date, successful, wholesome, honest, and upper class. The most prominent adjectives were successful, reliable, and honest.

Successful was found to be the adjective a majority of the respondents would describe Kicks' physical store with the most. Many of the respondents related Kicks' offline channel with success due to its extensiveness in Sweden. To exemplify, Olivia said "[I related it to] successful since it is so large. It's found all over the country and is still one of the main beauty chains here in Sweden". Similarly, Astrid stated "[I related it to] successful because I know that they are found in many places, and they feel pretty successful because of that". Although success was associated with Kicks' physical store, mostly in regard to its extensive reach, it was also considered successful due to its wide and varied assortment, which Agnes highlighted.

Furthermore, reliable was another adjective describing Kicks' physical store and also one that many would describe it with the most. For instance, Agnes expressed that Kicks's store always has what she searches for, otherwise it offers something similar and equally good. Moreover, Ines stated "it's a brand that has always been there [...] It's a well-known brand and I know that I can shop there, my mum can shop there, and my grandma can shop there". The third and last frequently mentioned adjective was honest, which was perceived slightly differently between the respondents. For instance, Freja believed that Kicks' physical store is honest because "what you expect is what you get", whereas Iris related it more to the information about the product and the actions of the store personnel. She said "the first thing I think of is honest, which I really believe fits them since they're honest with their products", which she elaborated by stating that it is easy to find information about, for instance, animal testing and vegan options. She also related it to the staff, experiencing that they provide honest opinions to how different products fit, for example, her skin tone.

It was found that out of the adjectives chosen, a majority of the respondents believed up-to-date is the one least describing Kicks' physical store. For instance, Astrid experienced that Kicks's physical store is not fully knowledgeable to what is considered new and trendy. Similarly, Olivia believed that Kicks is not always at the forefront with the latest news from different brands. Iris did instead focus on corporate visibility and believed that Kicks' offline store does not fully succeed with meeting the customers on social media and should become more active on those types of platforms.

Concludingly, based on the adjectives mostly used to describe Kicks' physical store, with consideration to which adjective the respondent found described it the most respectively the least, it was found that competence is the most prominent personality trait. Moreover, this is closely followed by sincerity. Due to its primary trait of competence, Kicks' physical store thus highly connotes the notion of being responsible, secure, and dependable. Moreover, it also captures the sense of warmth and acceptance, which Aaker (1997) describes stems from the personality trait of being sincere.

4.6.2. Online Retailer Brand

When asked for which adjectives, based on Aaker's (1997) framework, the respondents would describe Kicks' website with, intelligent, reliable, honest, successful, cheerful, up-to-date, imaginative, and down-to-earth, were used. The empirical material showed that the most prominent adjectives used were reliable, intelligent, and cheerful.

The adjective that mostly described Kicks' website was reliable, however, different respondents found different aspects reliable. For instance, Selma found the entire process of ordering on the website trouble-free and was confident that she would not experience any issues in the future. However, Lilly believed that the website is reliable as the assortment seldomly changed, therefore, she could be confident to find what she was looking for each time she visited it. In a similar manner, Alma stated "I know that my favourite products are there, so I don't have to search for a long time. I can kind of just refill". Similarly, Ella said "I think it's reliable since I know what I get when purchasing there". Thus, it was found that a majority of the respondents found reliable to be the most descriptive adjective of Kicks' online store.

Another adjective that appeared frequently in describing Kicks' website was intelligent. To exemplify, Alma believed that Kicks' website can be described as intelligent due to their focus on a wide product range. She said "it isn't just a makeup site, so to speak, but they have just about everything - everything from hair, nails, and skin [products] and so on. So, intelligent because everything is on the same website". Moreover, Vera had another impression of how she believed that Kicks' online store is intelligent, she said: "[they have a] smart and methodical way of organising their page". The final prominent adjective was cheerful. There were slight differences to why Kicks.se could be described as cheerful, though, there was an overall consensus that the website per se was not cheerful but more how it made one feel. For instance,

Alma stated that she would feel joy because she was always able to find her favourite product at a reasonable price. Additionally, Lilly said she felt cheerful visiting Kicks.se since the product assortment is appealing to her.

An adjective not equally prominent but still worth mentioning is imaginative, which was highlighted by some respondents. For instance, Elsa said “imaginative because they do many fun things. They show how you can use some of the products in a more unusual way, not the traditional standard way”. Similarly, Alma also enjoyed the way Kicks.se is promoting their products and believes it is imaginative to include many different brands in their assortment.

Furthermore, the empirical data shows that of the chosen adjectives, honest and up-to-date describe Kicks’ website the least. It was considered to be honest in terms of the respondents knowing what they receive when purchasing, however, being transparent was believed to be difficult online. To exemplify, Vera acknowledged that companies in general are trying to be more transparent, but she believed that it is very difficult to show transparency through a website, which includes Kicks.se. Similarly, even though it was found that the respondents believed Kicks’ website was up-to-date, many still believed its competitors manage to exceed them in terms of following trends. For example, Alma highlighted that although Kicks has a wide assortment online, there are still competitors with even greater assortment, who launch new products at a faster rate.

Concludingly, based on the adjectives respondents used to describe Kicks’ website, as well as with consideration to which adjectives they believed describe it the most respectively the least, competence was found to be the most prominent personality trait for Kicks.se. This captures the sense of Kicks’ website being responsible, secure, and dependable, based on Aaker’s (1997) framework. Additionally, competence was followed by the personality trait excitement, which according to Aaker (1997), encapsulates the sense of Kicks.se being sociable, energised, and active.

4.6.3. Comparison of Brand Personality

The empirical data showed both similarities and differences to which adjectives respondents described Kicks’ offline respectively online channels with. Respondents for both the offline and online channels have a uniformed perception that Kicks is most reliable but least up-to-

date. However, respondents for the offline channel would describe Kicks' physical store as successful and honest, whereas the respondents for the online channel believed honest to be the least descriptive adjective for Kicks' website. Instead, the respondents for the online channel found intelligent and cheerful to be the most descriptive adjective for Kicks' online channel. This resulted in the most prominent personality trait, competence, which both respondents for offline and online channels had the same opinion of. However, it was found that respondents for both offline and online channels believed a second personality trait is applicable for the respective channels. For Kicks' offline channel, the empirical data shows signs of sincerity, whereas for Kicks.se, indications for excitement were seen.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

In the context of a retailer, the brand image alignment is a crucial element to consider (Grewal, 2019). If failing to maintain a consistent brand image throughout various channels, customers risk ending up frustrated (Grewal, 2019) and losing trust in the brand (Tam, 2016). A retailer's brand image alignment can be explored by studying it in accordance with the conceptual framework created for this study. Here, several aspects need to be considered in regard to three brand related elements based on customers' associations of a brand: brand attributes, brand benefits and brand personality. Together, these create a brand's image. In this study, the conceptual framework was the foundation to explore Kicks' offline and online brand image separately, enabling for a comparison and exploration of alignments or misalignments between the two.

In this study, it was found that Kicks maintain a consistent brand image in several aspects. Firstly, it was shown that customers believe that Kicks offers an extensive and diverse product assortment in both its offline and online channels, showing a consistent and aligned brand image in the component of product-related attributes. Even if customers' interpretation of a wide and varied assortment differed slightly, Kicks' customers of both the channels believe this fulfils the functional benefit they desire. Namely, one of the rational motivations to purchase products at the retailer, either online or offline, is the broad and diverse range of products and brands. This is in line with Ailawadi and Keller (2004), who state that retailers are able to create their brand images through distinct ways, such as attaching unique associations to the product assortment. However, the functional benefit was interpreted slightly differently, which could imply that there is an alignment in the benefit but a misalignment in the reasons for the experienced benefit. Moreover, another distinct alignment between Kicks' offline and online brand image, in regard to the product-related attributes, is that customers of both channels initially associate the retailer with makeup products.

Furthermore, it was found that Kicks has a uniformed brand image in terms of usage imagery, which is a part of the non-product-related attributes. It is implied that Kicks' offline and online customers purchase products at the retailer for daily use, rather than seldom or for special occasions. This shows an alignment in Kicks' brand image for the circumstances in which customers either visit the physical store or website. Moreover, it was found that customers of both offline and online channels had similar emotions toward Kicks' logotype. Therefore, it

was considered consistent between the channels and the customers expressed similar emotions toward it. Although the feelings were not completely homogeneous, they still are to the extent that they should be considered similar, presenting a brand image alignment in regard to the experiential benefits. Another alignment found in the experiential benefits involves the united opinion that Kicks creates a sense of trust, further showing an aligned brand image. Even though trust was found to be generated by different factors offline and online, the main focus of experiential benefits is on the emotions created (Keller, 1993), which in this case is the same and thus is deemed aligned.

This study shows that the personality trait most descriptive to both Kicks.se and Kicks' physical store is competence. This shows an alignment in Kicks' brand image, which thus is, according to Aaker (1997), described with the adjectives reliable, successful, and intelligent and encapsules the sense of being dependable, responsible and secure. However, although the assessment was made that Kicks' offline and online brand images are both described with the trait competence, misalignments were found regarding which adjectives used by the customers. Regardless, the adjectives culminate in the personality trait competence, showing an overall similar personality characteristic.

In this study, it was found that Kicks maintains a consistent brand image in several aspects, however, when analysing the elements of the brand image in depth, certain aspects showed misalignments. The lack of brand alignment can pose a threat in the sense that it hinders the value creation process (Mingione & Abratt, 2022) and the brand can weaken as a result (Tam, 2016). Therefore, it is of importance to explore the lack of alignments found within a brand's image. In the analysis of non-product-related attributes of Kicks' offline and online channels, customers' associations of price information were found to be different. Customers associated attractive prices with Kicks' online channel, emphasising discounts and in some instances, lower-priced products than its competitors. As customers form perceptions about the value of a brand based on the price (Wang & Tang, 2011), this may signal a more favourable view of Kicks.se and thus indicate a misalignment between the two channels.

Another lack of alignment found between Kicks' offline and online brand image is the symbolic benefits expressed by customers in the respective channels. Even though non-product-related attributes correspond to symbolic benefits (Orth & De Marchi, 2007), the application of the framework in a brand context and not on a product specific level results in the inability to

discuss this connection. The brand image element symbolic benefits was the sole element found to be entirely misaligned between Kicks' offline and online channels. Interestingly, customers did not mention any of the same benefits in respective channels despite being selected according to a predetermined set of criteria resulting in shared characteristics. This could be motivated by Keller's (1993) argument that different customers value different aspects of a brand. Through this, the symbolic benefits conveyed can express the type of individual they are (Keller, 1998). Furthermore, the mentioned symbolic benefits were closely associated with the environment the customer interacted with the brand through.

The empirical data furthermore showed a brand image misalignment in product-related attributes in terms of the products that customers associate Kicks' different channels with. Although makeup was the first-hand product association across both Kicks' offline and online channels, the brand image misalignment lies within the second-hand association. Here, customers associated Kicks' offline channel with perfume, while skincare was rather associated with Kicks' online channel. These attributes are closely connected to functional benefits and as previously mentioned, the empirical material showed a brand image misalignment in the underlying rational motivations for the functional benefits mentioned by customers. These benefits are the most easily replicated by competitors (Ghauri & Cateora, 2014) and are meant to satisfy an issue perceived by customers (Fennel, 1978). In this sense, the functional benefits mentioned by customers were related to the respective online or offline channel they purchased products at.

A brand image misalignment was also shown to be present in regard to experiential benefits. Although it was found that customers of Kicks' offline and online channels had similar emotions toward the logotype, there was a distinct misalignment in how the customer groups felt about the layout in store and on Kicks.se. The online customers described the website layout to be warm and feminine, associating it with colours like pink and brown. Contrastingly, the offline customers associate Kicks' store layout to be black, white, and organised. The words and phrases customers think about when hearing of or seeing a particular brand is connected to the value and meaning of the brand through their associations (Roper & Fill, 2012). This could imply that the online customers may feel more welcomed due to the warm feelings associated with Kicks.se. Furthermore, the emotions evoked by the product assortment also pointed to a slight misalignment in Kicks' brand image. Kicks' offline customers expressed disappointment when products were out of stock, which was not stressed by any of the customers for the online

channel. Kremer and Viot (2012) explain that associations to a retailer's brand image include factors such as variety and quality of the assortment. As a result, the offline customers' disappointed emotion could reflect negatively onto Kicks' offline brand image.

Finally, the empirical data showed a dissimilarity between Kicks' offline and online brand personality, suggesting a misalignment in the brand image. The human traits are created by customers, allowing them to identify with brands (Aaker, 1997). Although it was possible to discover a commonality in terms of the personality trait competent, Kicks' offline channel was also associated with sincere, whereas Kicks' online channel was considered more exciting. As only customers' secondary associations differ, there is not an entire brand image misalignment in regard to brand personality. However, Kicks' offline and online channels may thus have a different value and meaning for the respective customers.

Table 6. Summary of Findings

Categories	Offline Brand Image	Online Brand Image
Product-Related Attributes	Wide and varied assortment	Wide and varied assortment
	Satisfying quality	Satisfying quality
	Make-up and perfume	Make-up and skincare
	Lacking international brands	Lacking advances skincare products
Non-Product-Related Attributes	Attractive prices but more expensive than competitors	Attractive prices and sometimes cheaper than competitors
	Daily use	Daily use
Functional Benefits	Wide and varied assortment	Wide and varied assortment
	Satisfy spontaneous needs	Convenient when no instant purchasing need
	Accessible	
Experiential Benefits	Black and white, clean, appealing	Logotype is neutral, classic, clean, black and white
	Logotype and store layout have consistent colour scheme	Website is feminine and creates warm feelings
	Organised	Organised
	Inclusivity	Easily available, trustworthy, safety, pleasantness
Symbolic Benefits	Inclusivity	Clarity
	Kind and service-minded store personnel	Transparency
		Sustainability
Brand Personality	Competence	Competence
	Sincerity	Excitement

The purpose of this study was to explore the alignments or misalignments between a beauty retailer's offline and online brand image through customers' association to the brand. More specifically, we strived to gain an understanding of what elements within the brand image that are aligned or misaligned. This led to the question "What (mis)alignments can be found in retailers' offline and online brand image based on customers' brand associations?". By fulfilling the purpose, we have contributed with new knowledge to the current body of literature as well as provided in-depth managerial insights into what to consider when aiming at establishing a consistent brand image when operating a multichannel strategy.

Concludingly, the results of this study show that both alignments and misalignments can be discovered between Kicks' offline and online brand image. As showcased in Table 6, none of the elements are to its entirety aligned. Firstly, the findings show that Kicks' brand image is aligned in the physical aspects of the offered products in regard to the assortment and quality. However, misalignments have been found in consideration to what products customers associate the brand with as well as what products Kicks is believed to lack. Secondly, the findings present a brand image alignment in regard to the external aspects of the products offered by Kicks. Customers purchase products at Kicks' physical store and website to use on a daily basis and believe that it offers attractive prices. However, a slight misalignment can be found in regard to the price, where customers associate the physical store with more expensive prices than competitors, and Kicks.se with more inexpensive prices.

Thirdly, the findings present a brand image alignment in regard to the motivations for purchasing at Kicks. Here, both Kicks' physical store and website's wide and varied product assortment is emphasised. However, a misalignment was discovered in regard to customers' instant purchasing needs, where customers who visit Kicks' physical store want to satisfy an instant and spontaneous need, whereas the customers for Kicks.se did not have the same immediate need for the products. Fourthly, the findings indicate that Kicks' has an aligned brand image in regard to customers' brand associations to Kicks' logotype. However, the layout in-store and on the website shows a misalignment in Kicks' brand image since the physical store was perceived to be more in line with the logotype, whereas Kicks.se was regarded differently. Moreover, the feelings evoked on Kicks' different channels also showed misalignment in the brand image. Customers felt that Kicks' physical store evoked emotions of inclusiveness, where customers of Kicks.se felt trust for the brand, as well as safety and pleasantness while visiting the website.

Fifthly, the results show that symbolic benefits is the only brand element found to be misaligned to its entirety, showing a complete misalignment between Kicks' offline and online brand image in this aspect. Lastly, it was found that both Kicks' offline and online brand images can be applied to two personality traits each. One trait was found to be describing both Kicks' offline and online brand image, showing an alignment. However, the second personality trait was dissimilar, showing a misalignment in the brand image. Interestingly, the findings of this study indicate that the alignment of a retailer's offline and online brand image must be inquired in depth and detail to discover what aspects of the different brand elements are aligned and misaligned.

6. Implications

The final chapter presents the contribution of this study to academia and management practices, namely, the theoretical and managerial implications. Firstly, the extensiveness of the conceptual framework is emphasised as well as how this study has contributed to the literature on brand image. Thereafter, valuable insights for brands and brand managers are presented, showing the practicality of this study in a business setting. Finally, the limited capacity of this research is discussed, stressing the restricted context of beauty retailers and multichannel strategy, followed by suggestions for future research.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study conceptualises the notion of retailer brand image alignment and presents a conceptual framework through a modified combination of Keller's (1993) brand image framework and Aaker's (1997) brand personality framework. This results in a suggested comprehensive outline to explore the alignments or misalignments between a retailers' offline and online brand image. Although the conceptual framework was solely used in this study to review alignments or misalignments between a beauty retailer's offline and online brand image, it can be applied in other brand image related settings and industries. Thus, showing the extensive applicability of the presented framework.

In terms of academia, the empirical findings contribute to the field of brand image research. Previous literature has taken a quantitative approach to brand image alignment, focusing on causality and theory testing. Others have analysed the effects of a retailers' offline and online store on various factors. Thus, we found an opportunity to contribute qualitatively to ongoing literature through the approach from a new perspective in terms of the study's context. More specifically, in regard to retailers' offline and online brand image alignment in the context of a Swedish beauty retailer. This has further provided academics with valuable knowledge into the brand associations Swedish female customers, aged 16-34, have toward beauty retailers' offline and online brand image.

6.2. Managerial Implications

Even though this study is highly academic, it also presents valuable insights for brands and brand managers operating across various channels. The findings of this research contribute with

a deeper understanding of how beauty retailers' offline and online brand images align, or misalign, based on customers' brand associations, which brand managers can benefit from. As the findings showed that most elements are not to its entirety aligned or misaligned, a suggestion for brand managers is to make a thorough review of customers' brand associations of the retailer's offline and online channels to discover what differs in the brand image. This, in turn, ensures that retailers can create an aligned brand image, generating positive customer associations towards a brand. Another managerial suggestion is to be particularly observant when examining the element of symbolic benefits as this was shown to be the only element that was entirely misaligned. Thus, indicating that symbolic benefits may be more responsive toward a change in offline and online settings based on customers' brand associations.

In addition to being applicable in a more theoretical setting, the conceptual framework could be valuable for brands and brand managers operating across various channels. As stated, a suggestion for brand managers is to inquire into one's offline and online brand image to discover alignments and, more importantly, misalignments. Here, the conceptual framework can work as a tool to facilitate and provide a clear outline for the process. As a result, brand managers could possibly resolve the misalignment to achieve an aligned brand image across channels, potentially leading to increased customer loyalty and a greater control over the customer experience.

6.3. Limitations & Suggestions for Future Research

Throughout the research process, limitations were discovered leading to suggestions for future research. As a result of the limited capacity of this study, the emphasis was restricted to a retailer operating with a physical store and a website. However, there are retailers that utilise other channels and different strategies such as omni-channel and cross-channel. As such, a suggestion for future research could be to explore the alignments or misalignments of offline and online brand image of other retailers operating with different strategies. This could potentially pave the way for a comparison to explore whether brand image alignments or misalignments differ depending on the strategy used.

Another limitation derived from the time constraints, was the study of a single case of a beauty retailer. This case is a small representation of the multiple different beauty retailers found in Sweden and elsewhere, thus, generalisations may be difficult to draw. To achieve an increased

generalisable result, it is suggested to study several beauty retailers in a multi-case study. Furthermore, as this study focused on a beauty retail context, a suggestion for future research is to explore other industries to distinguish if there are any differences in what alignments or misalignments can be found between these. Moreover, studying other industries may show differences in how retailers succeed in aligning their online channel with their offline channel, implying that there might be success factors to find and learn from between industries.

The sampling of participants can be viewed as another limitation of this study. We interviewed 13 Swedish customers through convenience sampling, meaning that it is difficult to generalise the findings to customers from other parts of the world. Thus, a suggestion could be to select participants using a different sampling method and include a cross-cultural sample. Researchers could consequently explore whether offline and online brand image alignment differs between countries through a comparative study. A final limitation due to the scope of this study was the inclusion of solely a customer perspective. As brand image is formed through customers' brand associations, a suggestion for future research could therefore be the study of external and internal stakeholder perspectives through a comparison of brand image and brand identity.

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Appendix - Interview Guide

Note: When stated “Kicks.se” we will refer to the online store, and when stated “Kicks store” we will refer to the physical store (/brand).

Product-related Attributes

1. How would you describe Kicks.se/Kicks store’s product assortment?
2. Are you satisfied with the product range? Why?
3. How would you describe the quality of Kicks.se/Kicks store’s products?
4. What products do you buy at Kicks.se/Kicks store?

Non-product-related Attributes

1. Do you find Kicks.se/Kicks’ store prices attractive? Why?
2. Do you live near a Kicks store or not? Would you say this affects your choice of going to the store/purchasing a product online? Why?
3. Focusing on just Kicks.se/Kicks’ store, do you use the products you have purchased there everyday or occasionally? Why is that?

Functional Benefits

1. What are your main reasons for shopping at Kicks.se/Kicks’ store?

Experiential Benefits

1. When you think of Kicks.se/Kicks’ store as a brand, what thoughts come to mind?
2. What does this give you as an overall impression of Kicks?
3. What emotions do you feel when you think of Kicks.se/Kicks’ store? Why?

Symbolic Benefits

1. What values are important to you when you purchase from a beauty retailer?
2. Why is this important to you?
3. Do you feel that Kicks.se/Kicks’ store fulfils these values?

Brand Personality

1. If you could describe Kicks.se/Kicks' store as a person, how would you describe them? (The interviewees will receive a summary of the adjectives used in the brand personality framework)
2. Why would you use those adjectives to describe Kicks.se/Kicks' store as a person?
3. Out of the adjectives you have chosen, which one do you think describes Kicks.se/Kicks' store the most? Why?
4. Out of the adjectives you have chosen, which one do you think describes Kicks.se/Kicks' store the least? Why?