The Connection between a Multitier Private Label Portfolio and Retailer Brand Image: Investigating Consumer Perceptions

by

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Abstract

Thesis Purpose: This thesis aims to understand how a multitier private label portfolio is linked to the retailer brand image from a consumer perspective by using a case study of the Swedish grocery retailer ICA. Furthermore, we aim to comprehend the connection of the contained private labels in a multitier private label to the retailer brand image.

Keywords: private label, multitier private label portfolio, retailer brand image, consumer perceptions

Word count: 23938

Methodology: Based on an epistemological social constructionism point of view and by applying ontological relativism; we aim to investigate the consumer's perceptions in regard to a retailer brand image in connection to the offered multitier private label portfolio. We executed a qualitative research design with an abductive approach, that enabled us to combine theories and empirical findings, in order to identify the link between these two concepts.

Theoretical perspective: We focus on brand image as the main concept of the research field in brand management. For the multitier private label portfolio, we focused on those theories that have incorporated the greatest variety in their approach. To investigate the opinion formation regarding these two concepts, consumer perception-shaping attributes in the retail context were explored.

Empirical data: The empirical data was gathered through 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews, where participants were picked through purposive sampling. These interviews were conducted solely from the viewpoint of consumers.

Findings: The study's main finding is that both the retailer brand image and the multitier private label portfolio have a reciprocal impact on each other both positive and negative. Moreover, we could observe that the different private labels contained in the private label portfolio may have an influence on the retailer brand image. While the *Premium* and *Value-Added, Standard* private labels may have a favorable impact on the brand image, the *Value/Budget* private label can lead to a rather negative connected view on the retailer. By providing a new framework connecting the theoretical concepts of multitier private label portfolio, retailer brand image and consumer perceptions, we could prove the interrelationship of these three concepts.

Practical implications: Retail managers must recognize the interdependence between the retailer brand image and the multitier private label portfolio to maximize the effect of their marketing and branding efforts. Moreover, the developed framework can be used by practitioners to better understand what factors affect the perception of the multitier private label portfolio's and the retailer's brand image.

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1   Introduction

"Private label is one of the tools that [retailers] will use to convince shoppers to continue to walk to those doors rather than walking through the door to their competitors" - Andrew Walker (ET Brand Equity, 2022)

This quote by the client knowledge director at the data analytics and brand consulting company Kantar shows how important private labels have become throughout the last years and the key role they play in competition among retailers. Private labels have long ceased to be inferior and cheap products and have developed into strong brands themselves that not only attract the highly price-sensitive customer segments (Kumar, 2007; Martos-Partal, González-Benito & Fustinoni-Venturini, 2015). NielsenIQ data also indicates an increase in the market share of private label products across 17 European countries, including the Scandinavian countries (PLMA, n.d.). In 2022, the grocery market witnessed a growth of 1.2% from previous years, accounting for 37% of the market, which represents 302 billion euros (PLMA, n.d.). This development can also be observed in the overall product offering of the Swedish grocery retailer ICA. Since 2015, their private label share has increased by 4.5 percent, and the trend is expected to continue (Statista, 2022). In the meantime, entire portfolios, that aim to serve different consumer segments, have developed around the rising phenomenon of private labels. This development inspired us to investigate how these multitier private label portfolios are structured and what influence they have on how consumers perceive the retailer brand image and vice-versa. But before elaborating further on the purpose and aim of this research, it is first necessary to clarify several key terms and take a look at the development of private labels as well as the brand work of retailers.

1.1   Background

In this section we will define the keywords of this thesis and will further provide some essential information regarding the development of the relationship of retailers and manufacturers. Next

to that, we will examine how retailers became strong brands themselves and which role their offered private labels played in this.

1.1.1 Use of terminology

To maintain consistency in our terminology, it is important to comprehend the jargon and terms used in earlier literature. The terms "store brands", "private brands", "own brands" and "private labels" have been used interchangeably by researchers in their papers, which must be considered before we proceed. According to Gielens et al. (2021) private labels or store brands are brands generally owned and marketed by retailers. Although we agree with this definition, we want to use a unified terminology throughout the paper, which is why we decided to use the term "private labels". When talking about the "(multitier) private label portfolio" we are referring to the collection of private labels offered by a retailer that encompasses different quality and price levels.

On the other hand, "manufacturer brands" are owned, produced, managed, and marketed by the manufacturers (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011). In older literature, one can find the term "national brands" for these products (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011). However, we decided to use the term "manufacturer brands" in our thesis to be consistent with the most recent literature and research.

1.1.2 Private labels vs. Manufacturer brands

Retailers have over time consistently been exploring more complex markets to improve their retail operations and value propositions on the market (Steenkamp & Dekimpe, 1997). Historically, manufacturers have had power over retailers and distribution channels, as retailers were relatively small and consequently had to accept the manufacturer's products and policies (Kumar, 2007). However, in the 1970s, retailers were growing into national chains, leading to an overall shift in power in the retail scape (Kumar, 2007). Retailers started carrying more products under their own labels which has been enhancing their growth in a competitive market environment (Kumar, 2007; Kapferer 2012). Nowadays retailers can set the marketing mix for private labels and manufacturer brands being sold in their chains (Meza & Sudhir, 2010). This

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enabled them to strengthen their position towards manufacturer brands, for example in price negotiations (Steenkamp & Dekimbe, 1997).

In the beginning, these private labels were primarily associated with best-value products, however, retailers have started enhancing the quality of their private label offerings to improve their overall image and to encourage customer loyalty to the chain rather than to manufacturer brands (Steenkamp & Dekimbe, 1997). Consumers no longer perceive purchasing private labels as a risk, but they even consider private labels to be of equal or superior quality compared to manufacturer brands (Gorgitano & Sodano, 2019). This shift in consumer perception has allowed retailers to increase the prices of private labels and introduce them to higher market segments (Steenkamp & Dekimbe, 1997). Certainly, this development did not go unnoticed by the manufacturers, and they tried to differentiate themselves by expanding their brands (Gorgitano & Sodano, 2019). To compete with manufacturers' differentiation strategies aimed at regaining their competitiveness against private labels, one of the most commonly used strategies is to offer private labels at multiple quality and price levels (Gorgitano & Sodano, 2019). This multitier approach encompasses the addition of various variants of private labels to the core private label, resulting in the creation of a comprehensive portfolio (Akçura, Sinapuelas & Wang, 2019; Geyskens et al., 2018; Zentes, Morschett and Schramm-Klein, 2011). Typically, this includes budget, standard, value-added, and premium private labels (Kumar, 2007; Keller, Dekimbe & Geyskens, 2016; Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008) which will be defined in more detail in Chapter 2.1.

1.1.3   Retailers as brands

As we mentioned before, retailers have been focusing on positioning their chains as strong, attractive, and unique brands in the heads of consumers in recent years (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004; Verhoef, Langerak, & Donkers, 2007). Ailawadi and Keller (2004) suggest that while several branding principles may apply to retailer brands, they differ significantly from product brands. Retailer brands typically offer multi-sensory experiences and rely on rich consumer interactions to build their brand equity (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Retailers also establish their brand identity in different ways, such as by creating unique associations related to their service quality, product variety, display, pricing, credit policies, etc. (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Ailawadi and Keller (2004) also argue that the private labels of the retailer can be considered

an important aspect of the overall brand portfolio offered by the retailer and that it is the image of the retailer held by customers that is the fundament of the retailer brand. Additionally, retailers utilize manufacturer brands to cultivate consumer interest, patronage, and loyalty within their stores (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to understand how a retailer should position themselves and how the assortment of brands they offer relates to their overall brand image (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Another fact that is not to be underestimated is the retailer brand name. Having a strong brand name may enable factors such as identification and recognition and reflects a level of trust that can lead to the repetition of the purchase (Burt & Davies, 2010). In order to make customers trust a retailer's name, it is important to know that advertising and reputation may be of more significance than quality when it comes to the price difference between popular advertised brands and lesser-known unadvertised brands and private labels (Steiner, 2004).

1.2   Problem formulation and research questions

Private labels have become more prevalent on the retail market during the past few decades and incorporating them into a retailer's assortment is now seen as an effective strategy (Hultman, Opoku & Bui, 2008). In response to the escalating consumer demand for these brands, retailers have expanded to multitier private label portfolios (Gorgitano & Sodano, 2019). Looking at previous literature and research, we can see that multitier private label portfolios have been the subject of research before (Geyskens et al., 2018; Rubio, Villaseñor & Yagüe, 2020; Gorgitano & Sodano, 2019; Geyskens, Gielens & Gijsbrechts, 2010). For instance, Geyskens et al. (2018) took a look at which branding strategies were suitable for the different private labels within a multitier private label portfolio. Rubio, Villaseñor and Yagüe (2020) on the other hand, discussed strategies for how retailers can manage their multitier private label portfolios to increase loyalty among customers. However, these articles dealt exclusively with the branding strategies for specific private labels contained in the portfolio. What we can see is that little research has been conducted about the link between the portfolio as a whole and the retailer brand image. Prior research generally confirms that it is not only the retailer brand image that can influence the private label but most likely the opposite causal direction also exists (Collins-Dodd & Lindley, 2003). Moreover, private label perception and the retailer brand image have been recognized as significant variables, which is due to the fact that they serve as both loyalty

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and distinctiveness factors since they have major influence on consumers' purchasing behavior (Collins-Dodd & Lindley 2003; Mazursky & Jacoby 1986). In contrast to these previously conducted studies, we want to investigate how a multitier private label portfolio influences the retailer brand image, but we also want to consider if the retailer brand image relates to how people see the different private labels in the multitier portfolio.

Taking into account the background information given in the problem formulation, this study is following the purpose to understand the link between a multitier private label portfolio and the retailer brand image in the grocery industry. This purpose serves for the formulation of our first research question:

1. *How is a multitier private label portfolio linked to the brand image of a retailer?*

As this paper aims to address the relationship between the retailer brand image and the private label portfolio, we found it of importance to obtain in-depth knowledge of the associations and emotions regarding the different private labels that are included in such a multitier private label portfolio from a consumer perspective. Therefore, we must comprehend the effect each private label has on the overall retailer brand image, which has not been researched to the extent we are aiming for. Some researchers have investigated how economy and premium private labels influence the choice when buying private label brands, using customer data (Geyskens, Gielens & Gijsbrechts, 2010). While some researchers have studied the development of a values-based premium private label brand reputation within a multitier portfolio among consumers (Arantola & Juntunen, 2023). Gorgitano and Sodano (2019) added another perspective in their research and investigated how different private labels within the portfolio may influence a retailer's marketing activities in regard to manufacturer brands in a multitiered private label setting. However, this article dealt with the comparison of private labels and manufacturer brands, whereas we are aiming to gain a more in-depth understanding of only private labels. Moreover, the link between the different private labels in a multitier private label portfolio and the retailer brand image have not yet been researched from a consumer perspective that extensively. We also believe that the numerous private labels can influence the overall retailer brand image in various ways. Individual consumer perceptions may vary for the retailer and the different offered private labels. Thus, we want to find out how these perceptions may have an influence on the overall retailer brand image. Therefore, we posed a sub-research question, in order to

take into account how the different private labels in the portfolio might relate to the retailer brand image:

2. *How do the private labels in a multitier private label portfolio link to the retailer brand image?*

Our thesis contributes to the existing retail marketing literature in several ways. First, by providing knowledge about the relation of the overall multitier private label portfolio to the retailer brand image, and vice-versa. Second, by looking at the different private labels that are contained in the multitier private label portfolio we will provide an updated understanding of the different influences that each of these private labels may have on the overall perception of the retailer brand image. Third, we will provide insights into this topic from a consumer perspective, which can then serve as the basis for constructing a conceptual retailer brand image.

1.3   Delimitations

This study takes its starting point in the research field of retail management and focuses on investigating attitudes and perceptions regarding the link between multitier private label portfolios and the retailer brand image. Our study is limited to simply focusing on the concept of the brand image. Brand identity and brand reputation which are two other closely linked paradigms in branding, were not taken into account to the same extent. This decision was made in order to meet the objectives of the research and avoid focusing on the broader aspects of brand management. Nonetheless, it is essential to keep in consideration that these concepts might still have an impact on the retailer brand image. Additionally, as private labels are possible to find within many different fields, the decision was made to focus on the grocery retail industry where private labels are strongly present.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

We decided to divide this thesis into six main sections. Chapter 1 serves as introduction to our master thesis and is presenting the background information for the purpose of our study, our problem formulation, which includes our research questions followed by the delimitations. In Chapter 2 we will review existing literature that we determined as relevant to answer our research questions. The three main topics covered here is the multitier private label portfolio, brand image, and consumer perceptions. These theoretical constructs then serve as the foundation for the empirical part of this thesis. Our used methodology will be outlined in Chapter 3. This includes the argumentation for our research design and approach for this thesis. In Chapter 4 we will present and analyze our empirical findings which we will further discuss in Chapter 5. Finally, in Chapter 6 we will then draw conclusions from this discussion and provide theoretical and managerial implications as well as suggestions for future research.

Literature review
- Multitier private label portfolio
- Brand image
- Consumer perceptions

Methodology
- Research design & approach
- Case study: Introduction to ICA
- Consumer interviews

Analysis
- Exploring the perceived brand image of ICA
- ICA's Private labels
- Holistic view on the multitier private label portfolio of ICA
- The link between ICA's multitier private label portfolio and brand image

Discussion
- The interconnection of private labels and their impact on the retailer brand image
- The reciprocal impact of a multitier private label portfolio and retailer brand imange
- The interplay of a multitier private label portfolio, retailer brand image and consumer pereceptions

Conclusion
- Theoretical implicatoins
- Managerial implicatons
- Future research

Figure 1: Thesis outline

2 Literature Review

In the following section we will provide an overview of already existing literature that will assist us in answering our research questions. Firstly, we will introduce the different private labels in a multitier private label portfolio and how these can be managed. After that, we will explore the concept of brand image within the context of retail, followed by the introduction of consumer perception-shaping attributes. We conclude our literature review with a chapter summary before starting the empirical part of our thesis.

2.1 Multitier private label portfolio

Historically, one can see that private labels started off as "cheap, inferior products" (Kumar, 2007, p. 30). These products represented a cheaper option for lower-income and price-sensitive consumers, which enabled retailers to expand their customer base (Kumar, 2007). In the meantime, private labels have evolved and are now available in all price and quality segments for different consumer interests (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011). Consequently, retailer portfolio strategies have been developed around this variety of private labels (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Keller, Dekimpe & Geyskens, 2022). These can be divided into four categories according to their price and strategic orientation (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008): (1) *Value/Budget*, (2) *Standard*, (3) *Value-Added*, and (4) *Premium* (Figure 2). In the following sections, these different private labels will be introduced and provide an overview of how retailers may manage their multitier private label portfolio.
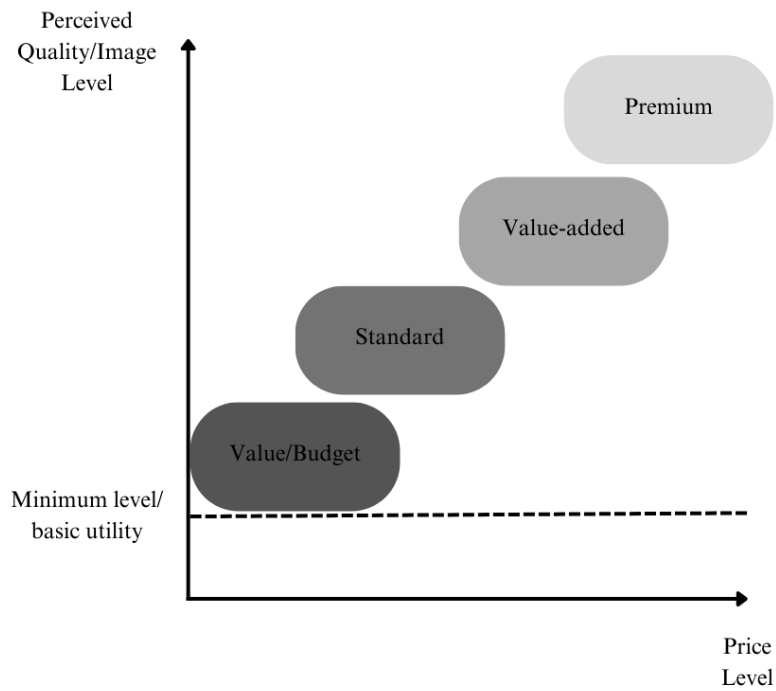
*Figure 2: Private label portfolio strategy (Source: adapted from Zentes, Morschett &
Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008)*

2.1.1 Value/Budget private labels

First, at the entry-level price point are *Value/Budget* private labels (Zentes, Morschett & Krebs,
2008). These products are aimed at variety-seeking consumers who are looking for basic
benefits and standard quality at a lower price point and who are not service-sensitive (Martos-
Partal, González-Benito & Fustinoni-Venturi, 2015; Noormann & Tillmanns, 2017; Zentes,
Morschett & Krebs, 2008). They typically comprise fast-moving consumer goods in the low-
involvement segment, with price differentials of 30 to 35 percent compared to manufacturer
brands (Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008). Retailers introduced *Value/Budget* private labels in
order to compete with discounters (Geyskens, Gielens, & Gijsbrechts, 2010; Hökelekli, Lamey
& Verboven, 2017) and to enhance category sales in their competition with other retailers
(Vroegrijk, Gijsbrechts & Campo, 2016).

2.1.2 Standard private labels

Second, there are the *Standard* private labels. These products are designed to be similar in
quality to manufacturer brands, but they are often copycats or imitations of existing products

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(Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008). These "me-too" products are based on purchase-relevant features or established products that are already popular in the market (Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008). In order to deliver equal quality to the manufacturer brands, retailers analyze the contents of the manufacturer's product and then recreate it step-by-step (Kumar, 2007). Thus, "they are free riding on the manufacturer's innovation, research, product, product development, and image-building efforts for its brand" (Kumar, 2007, p. 34). Furthermore, *Standard* private labels usually aim towards differentiation from competing retailers and improvement of negotiation power with manufacturers (Keller, Dekimpe & Geyskens, 2022). Since *Standard* private labels are still having a large volume in sales they can assist retailers also in realizing higher margins (Keller, Dekimpe & Geyskens, 2022).

2.1.3   Value-Added private labels

The third category of private labels is *Value-Added* private labels (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008). These products are also of high quality, but they come with additional benefits that are perceived by consumers as adding value (Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008). For example, a *Value-Added* private label product might offer organic ingredients, convenience features, or health benefits that are not found in other products (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011). This extension enables retailers to tap into new customer segments whose focus is on ethical and green consumption (Pino, Peluso & Guido, 2012).

2.1.4   Premium private labels

Lastly, there are *Premium* private labels, which offer superior quality at a higher price point (Kumar, 2007; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008). Compared to manufacturer brands, they are lower priced but promoted as being of better quality (Kumar, 2007). Retailers aim to differentiate themselves with *Premium* private labels from manufacturers and their other private labels (Kumar, 2007). Seenivasan, Satheesh and Talukdar (2016) argue that retailers incorporate *Premium* private labels in order to improve the link between the private label and store loyalty. Moreover, retailers are aiming to differentiate themselves with such private labels and to attract new customers (Akçura, Sinapuelas, & Wang, 2019). Usually, this kind of private label is purchased by consumers that are service sensitive, enjoy shopping, and value the

product ingredients, but care less about the price (Martos-Partal, González-Benito & Mariana, 2015).

2.1.5   Multitier private label portfolio management

The retailer aims to reach different customer segments simultaneously by offering a multitier portfolio of private label brands with different value propositions (Martos-Partal, González-Benito & Fustinoni-Venturi, 2015). Therefore, effective management of such a private label portfolio requires careful consideration of its balance and interrelationships (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011). "A portfolio is not a simple collection of brands that just happen to be there as a result of history, but a well-structured and coherent group in which each brand has a place and clearly defined role" (Kapferer, 2012, p. 360). According to Kapferer (2012) assessing the connections between individual brands and their standing within a larger portfolio is a necessary aspect of portfolio management. Santos Junior (2018) agrees with this but also points out the independence of these different brands and brand lines. Therefore, finding the optimal balance is critical for the success of a private label portfolio (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011). Offering several brands provides a company with tactical flexibility which can consequently lead to a competitive advantage (Kapferer, 2012).

Santos Junior (2018) argues that there are three aspects, companies should evaluate before they plan their portfolio strategy: consumers' price perceptions, consumer's quality perceptions, and competition within the targeted market. According to Zentes, Morschett and Schramm-Klein (2011), a private label portfolio entails different kinds of private labels for different reasons. They claim that *Standard* private labels mainly improve the margins of the retailer while the *Value/Budget* ones should enhance the price competitiveness of the retailer. Next to that, the authors argue that the *Premium* and *Value-Added* private labels are mostly there to contribute to the retailer brand image. This point of view is especially interesting for our second posed research question, in order to find out if and what kind of private labels influence the retailers' brand image in the context of our investigated case. The research of Martos-Partal, González-Benito and Fustinoni-Venturi (2015) also corresponds with this, as it shows that *Premium* private labels can improve the retailer's overall brand image. Kapferer (2012) on the other hand argues that precisely the variety within a company's portfolio has a positive influence on the retailer brand image.

2.2 Brand image

As introduced in the previous chapter, several private labels can contribute to the brand image of the retailer. In this section, we will delve deeper into the concept of brand image and put it in the context of retail operations. The term brand image has been widely recognized and is a well-established concept in the fields of business and marketing (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990). Brand image can be seen as the overall perception that certain groups or customers have of a brand or a product (Kapferer, 2012; Aaker, 1991; Peter & Olson, 1993). The concept can also be viewed as the information and associations linking the brand together with the customer's memory, creating an impression that lasts in the mind (Keller, 1993). Aaker (1991) further expands on this definition by emphasizing that the brand image can be composed of different associations consumers might find of importance.

2.2.1 Retailer brand image

When applying the concept of brand image to the context of retail operations, literature often describes it as both retailer brand image and store image. According to McGoldrick (2002), the term store image is closely linked to the retailer brand image and the retailer as a brand. Since the term store image is more connected with the retailer's stores that carry various manufacturer brands and private label brands, we found it of relevance to include. This is because we are looking into private labels in physical stores and want to have a broader understanding of the brand image in the context of retailing. In our thesis, we use the terms "store image" to refer to the physical store and "retailer brand image" to refer to the overall image of the retailer. Moreover, we see the store image as part of the retailer brand image.

The retailer brand image is said to be shaped by the customer's perceptions, which in turn, reflect their thoughts on how they perceive it (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). According to Ailawadi and Keller (2004), a retail brand is offering different services and goods in order to differentiate itself from its competitors. The retailer brand image can be created in several different ways, through various intangible and tangible assets and by connecting these to quality, assortment, pricing, or credit policy (Berg, 2014). With regard to the establishment of the brand image, Ailawadi and Keller (2004) describe that retailers have various techniques and ways to establish

it. For instance, by linking unique associations to the products they offer, such as merchandising, credit policies, and pricing strategies (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004). Burt and Carralero-Encinas (2000) discuss tangible and intangible assets regarding the brand image and highlight the importance of customers' understanding of assets such as functional and symbolic elements. "The interplay of these tangible and intangible elements and the customers' overall interpretation of them, based upon previous knowledge and experiences, is widely accepted to determine store image" (Burt & Carralero-Encinas, 2000, p. 436). This indicates that these mentioned elements have a major impact on the retailer brand image. There are a number of different characteristics that have previously been examined in research that have an impact on the overall retailer brand image, for instance, "the variety and quality of products, services, and brands sold; the physical store appearance; the appearance, behavior and service quality of employees; the price levels, depth and frequency of promotions; and so on" (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004, pp. 332-333).

How consumers perceive a retailer's store image is a key element in the creation of a retail brand, as well as one of the most important distinguishing features in today's competitive retail market (Berg, 2014; Konuk, 2018). Martineau (1958, p. 47) explains store image as "the way in which a store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes". In the research area of retail, studies have indicated that customers do not necessarily perceive the image of a store the same way as the retailer aims to project it (Birtwistle, Clarke & Freathy, 1999; Cheng, Hines & Grime, 2008). A majority of studies focus on how consumers perceive a store's overall image, and this is in relation to their purchasing behavior or specific attributes of a store (Burt & Carralero-Encinas, 2000). On the other hand, various studies have pointed out the difficulties in implementing a store image, and that the perception between the management and the consumer perceptions, can be different when it comes to the view of a store image (Burt & Carralero-Encinas, 2000).

However, it has previously been discussed by researchers that there are no standardized techniques for how the brand image should be measured. Some researchers have previously measured individual dimensions of the specific brand (Pohlman & Mudd, 1973), while other researchers have designed a way to measure brand image overall (Dolich, 1969). Furthermore, previous studies have also described how the brand image has been evaluated from both the retailer perspective and consumer perspective, as well as by itself in isolation and in comparison, to its competitors (Boivin, 1986; McClure & Ryans, 1968). However, since

research has shown various methods of measuring the retailer brand image, we believe it is crucial for retailers to consider how their overall brand offerings may affect their retailer brand image.

2.2.2   The impact of the retailer brand name on the brand image

It has also been proven that the associations consumers have with specific brands and products are influenced by the retailer brand image. According to previous research (Porter & Claycomb, 1997; Shen, 2001), a well-known brand name with a strong brand image can generate positive associations and thereby increase the consumer's interest in purchasing products. As a result, consumers tend to be more attracted and committed to a product when they are familiar with the brand name (Shen, 2001). That being said, a brand name serves the purpose of differentiating the retailer from its competitors and is much more than just a name or a symbol (Collins-Dodd & Lindley, 2003).

2.2.3   Private labels in relation to the retailer brand image

In order to create an effective and successful retailer brand image, it has been argued that private labels have a great influence, in fact, private labels can influence the view of retailers' brand image and how consumers perceive it (Bodur, Tofighi & Grohmann, 2016). Previous research has suggested that a favorable store image can have a positive influence on the attitudes customers have of private labels as well as the loyalty and satisfaction towards the store (Irfan, Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2019; Martenson, 2007). The strategy of using private labels can also help the retailer to create a stronger position and differentiation in relation to their brand image (Sudhir & Talukdar, 2004; Martenson, 2007). Moreover, it is described that the retailer brand image can vary and be perceived differently depending on which manufacturer brands they offer (Berg, 2014). This suggests that the perception of the retailer brand image is strongly influenced by the overall brand offerings. On the other hand, prior research discovered that the retailer brand image impacts the private labels of stores (Collins-Dodd & Lindley, 2003).

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2.3 Consumer perceptions

In the previous chapters, we briefly touched on the term consumer perceptions in connection to brand image and private labels. According to Thiruvenkatraj and Vetrivel (2017) customer perceptions refer to the process by which a customer selects, organizes and interprets information in order to create a meaningful picture of the brand or the product. In fact, several authors (Grohmann, Spangenberg & Sprott, 2007; Martineau, 1958; Lindquist, 1974) have identified lists of attributes that comprise image and form consumer perceptions within retail (e.g. Zimmer & Golden, 1988). Grohmann, Spangenberg and Sprott (2007) take into account the consumer perception attributes such as brand, image, quality, price and risk that identify consumer access to private label products. Martineau (1958) adds four other core attributes in his study that influence consumer perceptions: layout and architecture; symbols and color; advertising; and sales personnel. Lindquist (1974) on the other hand identified nine consumer perception-shaping attributes in his empirical review of 19 previous studies: (1) *merchandise*, including factors such as quality, assortment, styling or fashion, guarantees and price; (2) *service*, entailing the general staff, self-service, ease of return, credit, delivery service and phone order; (3) *clientele*, which consists of social class appeal, self-image congruence and store personnel; (4) *physical facilities*, consider factors such as store layout, architecture and shopping ease; (5) *convenience*, which is mostly related to the location of the store; (6) *promotion*, which stands for sales promotions, displays, advertising, trading stamps, symbols and colors; (7) *store atmosphere,* that connects to the store ambience; (8) *institutional factors*, meaning how modern or conservative a store represents itself, reputation and reliability; and (9) *post-transaction*, which means how satisfied the customers were with their experience. For this study, we decided to go with the theory of Lindquist (1974) since it is one of the most detailed studies on consumer perceptions in the context of retail. Moreover, this framework has also been serving as the groundstone for several other studies (Burt & Carralero-Encinas, 2000; Mondal et al., 2017). We will introduce these consumer perception-shaping attitudes in the context of private labels and retailer brand image. However, the construction of this theoretical model took place almost 50 years ago. Since then a lot has changed in the retail scape, which is why we will enhance the model of Lindquist (1974) with more insights from recent literature in the following sections.

2.3.1 Merchandise

For private brands, price and quality are considered the most important factors affecting consumer attitudes according to Musharraf and Ali (2013). Rubel (1995) also agrees that both the price and quality are crucial factors that need to be taken into account by consumers but if the quality offered is the same for both private labels and other brands, the consumer will give more weight to the price aspect. Quality typically serves as a valuable competitive advantage, as it shapes the consumer's perception of the retailer and fosters brand loyalty through its high standards (Lin et al., 2016). Zeithaml (1988) argues that this perceived quality can be defined as the degree of perceived performance excellence of a product. Perceived quality can differ from the actual quality of a product due to the previous personal experiences of the consumer or the subjective view of the quality of the individual (Aaker, 1996). Sethuraman and Gielens (2014) summarize these findings in their article by stating that consumers will buy private labels if they perceive them as of high quality, have a positive image of them, and think buying these do not represent a risk. Kim and Takashima (2019) also found that both a centralized merchandising authority and branch cooperation can ensure better private label merchandising. As a consequence, the competitiveness of the retailer can be enhanced, giving retail merchants sufficient decision-making power and creating better store collaboration in relation to private label merchandising (Kim & Takashima, 2019). However, we believe that this poses also a certain risk, since retail merchants may decide to replace certain manufacturer brands by private labels only. This may result in a unified overall brand portfolio and consequently poses the risk of consumers only having a limited set of choices.

2.3.2 Service

Among the most important factors that influence consumer decisions is the quality of service (Surjaatmadja & Purnawan, 2018). According to Szymanksi and Henard (2001) a better service can lead to positive behavioral intentions, and as a consequence improve consumer purchase intentions and the frequency of grocery shopping at specific retailers. Barbara and Ma (2021) argue that the combination of both offline and online retail channels can enhance the overall experience and improve service quality. It can also be assumed that profitability is positively correlated with both perceived service quality and labor productivity (Mägi & Julander, 1995). In their study about Swedish grocery retailers Mägi and Julander (1995) found out that

perceived service quality is related to customer satisfaction and customer loyalty of retailers. Rizkalla and Suzanawaty (2012) agrees with these findings and contribute with their research that it is not only the loyalty towards the retailer that is affected by service quality, but also the consumers' purchase behavior towards its private labels. These findings are of particular interest to our study since they show that once a customer is satisfied with the service they may experience at the retailer as well as had a positive experience with their private label(s), they are more likely to become a loyal customer who is holding a positive brand image (Karaoğlan & Durukan, 2022).

2.3.3 Clientele

Usually, the attitude of the clientele towards private labels depends on a positive store image, and money attitude regarding retention and distrust (Liu & Wang, 2008). However, one must keep in mind that attitudes, perceptions, and reasons for individuals consuming private labels may vary. Therefore, it is necessary to identify their different consumption patterns or buying behavior in order to explain the motives that underlie their choice of private label and retailer (Cuneo et al., 2019). In order to identify corresponding consumer segments and predict their consumer behavior, it is essential for marketers to analyze consumer psychographics (He, Zou & Jin, 2010; Martos-Partal, Gonzalez-Beniot & Fustinoni-Venturini, 2015). Using them, particularly lifestyle factors, may offer a more in-depth comprehension of consumers compared to socio-demographic variables to then develop a competitive retailer brand strategy (Ailawadi, Neslin & Gedenk, 2001; Lastovicka et al., 1999). When considering lifestyle factors, it is essential to take individuals' desire into account for a particular self-image and how they wish to be perceived by others. This is particularly relevant in the context of making choices between retailers or private label products. As highlighted by Lindquist (1974), individuals' purchasing decisions can be influenced by their desire to convey a certain image or identity to others. This implies that consumers' buying behavior may not always be driven solely by product attributes or functional needs but can also be shaped by social and psychographic factors that are closely linked to their self-concept. Consequently, we can argue that different consumer psychographics may lead to different consumer choices when it comes to the range of private labels (He, Zou & Jin, 2010; Martos-Partal, Gonzalez-Beniot & Fustinoni-Venturini, 2015).

2.3.4 Physical facilites

When looking at the retailers' physical facilities, factors such as the architecture and the store layout play a significant role (Lindquist, 1974). Tlapana (2021) argues that the store layout is among the most important factors when it comes to consumer buying behavior and the formation of a retailer brand image. In Richardson, Jain and Dick's (1996) article, they explored what impact store aesthetics have on the consumer perception of the retailers' private labels. In fact, they found out that factors such as "upgrading the quality of fixtures, making the aisles easy to navigate, making the store bright and cheerful, keeping the store clean, and making immediate repairs when needed" (Richardson, Jain & Dick, 1996, p. 24) can help to enhance the perception of their private labels. Faria, Carvalho and Vale (2022) also argue that the relationship between satisfaction and product commitment is influenced by the retailer's store design. This means that customers value an appealing store design and layout, which consequently can lead to greater customer satisfaction and commitment to the retailer brand (Faria, Carvalho & Vale, 2022).

2.3.5 Convenience

According to Berry, Seiders and Grewal (2002) all products or methods that save customers time and effort, whether they are physical goods or services can be identified as convenience. In regard to grocery retailers, Lindquist (1974) argues that it is mainly about the location of the store. In fact, statistics showed that the most important factor when choosing a retailer is a good store location, preferably close to work or home (Statista, 2021). Adivar, Hüseyinoğlu and Christopher (2019) and Kaswengi and Lambey-Checcin (2020) both agree that it is necessary that retailers understand the full scope of the customer journey profiles in order to analyze the notion of shopping convenience, that includes the perceived time and effort during the shopping process. Therefore, it can be beneficial for retailers to "offer products that highlight the perceived benefits that can outweigh the effort customers must make to shop" (Kaswengi & Lambey-Checcin, 2020, p. 548). This indicates that convenience is a key element in grocery retailing. Retailers need to understand that in a market that is more focused on convenience, it is necessary to adapt their offerings accordingly in order to create long-term relationships with their customers. We believe that this then can be beneficial for the overall retailer brand image. On the other hand, we argue that customers would not return to a store if they had a negative overall purchasing experience, regardless of how conveniently located it was.

2.3.6 Promotion

Both private labels and manufacturer brands compete for the customers' attention side by side on the retailers' shelves (Alić, Činjarević & Agić, 2020). According to Chen (2009) private label product promotion activities must be valuable, useful, and interesting in order to create shopping preferences. Palazon and Delgado-Ballester (2009) points out that retailers typically utilize in-store promotions such as discounts to stimulate customers' purchase intentions based on the perceived benefits and values of the product. According to Abril and Rodriguez-Canovas (2016), when retailers decrease the price and distribute coupons for their private label products, it gives consumers the perception of receiving greater value at a lower cost. As a result, this strengthens the position of the private label brand in terms of value (Abril & Rodriguez-Canovas, 2016). Next to that, the presentation of the private label plays an essential role in how consumers perceive them. Silayoi and Speece (2004) claim that an attractive package design generates consumer attention and can have an impact on the consumer's purchase decisions. This is of particular interest when looking at how people perceive the design of different private labels and whether this impacts their decision to buy the product. Shelf space is another crucial consideration and promotion strategy for retailers, as it is shared among several brands (Amrouche & Zaccour, 2007). Private labels can thus be put in a strategic location to boost sales since retailers are free to decide where their brands should be displayed in the store (Morton & Zettelmeyer, 2004).

2.3.7   Store atmosphere

Store atmosphere plays another important role when it comes to how customers perceive their shopping experience and private labels. The study by Dang, Nguyen and Wang (2021) demonstrates that hedonic experience is conveying between the store atmosphere of the retailer and purchase intention. Eventually, consumers feel pleased, excited, and enjoyable when they do their groceries in a pleasant atmosphere (Kesari & Atulkar, 2016). Next to that, consumers might also be attracted to purchase products if they are in a comfortable environment of physical stores (Solomon, 2018). Further, the findings of Dang, Nguyen and Wang (2021) show that the indoor environment quality enhances consumers' perceptions of the value of a retail brand. Vahie and Paswan (2006) came to the same conclusion and claim that factors such as the appearance of a store, the overall ambiance, and the dressing of employees contribute to a high quality attitude towards private labels.

2.3.8   Institutional factors

Store reputation and reliability are among the important aspects to consider when looking at institutional factors that influence consumer perceptions. Several researchers found that stockouts may have an influence on consumer purchase behaviors and that repeated stockouts can lead to negative associations towards both the retailer and manufacturer (Corsten & Gruen, 2003; Gruen & Corsten, 2007; Waller et al., 2010). The presence of a diverse range of products in stores has also a significant impact on consumers' intention to visit and make purchases (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006; Mimouni Chaabane, Sabri & Partguel, 2010). This may imply that a lack of certain products in various store concepts can have an impact on consumers' associations with the retailer. It may also have an effect if particular products are not offered by all retailer merchants. If a retailer can offer a wide product variety within a single product category, it can mean that the consumer is spending more time finding a product which then can result in consumers quitting purchasing (Sloot & Verhoef, 2011).

2.3.9   Post-Transaction

When looking at the post-transactional behavior of consumers, customer satisfaction with the private label must be taken into account. Customer satisfaction is a very individual phenomenon

that is constantly changing and primarily relies on the correlation between anticipated outcomes and results, which are subjective and variable over time (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001; Espejel & Fandos, 2009). The level of satisfaction obtained stimulates the customer to act retroactively at different stages of the purchasing process, confirming or changing previous behavior (Sansone et al., 2021). If a consumer is satisfied with the private label they bought, this may lead to repetitive purchasing (Sansone et al., 2021). Therefore, we argue that it is crucial to win over first-time buyers by promoting the quality of both individual private label products and the entire private label portfolio, with the aim of fostering customer loyalty and enhancing a positive brand image. This aligns also with the study of Lucky, Aisjah and Ningrum (2023) that determined a correlation between the retailers' brand image on the repurchase intention through consumer satisfaction. They claim that if a retailer brand is perceived positively by its customers, it is likely to lead to optimistic assumptions by customers regarding their purchase experiences with that particular brand.

2.4   Chapter summary

Based on our review of the literature, we can conclude that a multitier private label portfolio comprises various private labels catering to different value propositions. These labels can be classified into four groups based on their strategic orientation and price (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett, & Krebs, 2008):

1. *Premium:* superior quality, higher price
2. *Value-Added:* high quality and high price level, value-enhancing additional benefits, i.e. in the area of convenience, organic, or health.
3. *Standard:* similar quality to manufacturer brands; "Me-too" products
4. *Value/Budget:* basic benefits and standard quality at a lower price point

As we could see in Chapter 2.1 a broad range of consumer segments can be covered by offering a multitier private label portfolio. Kapferer (2012) also advocates for variety in a company's brand portfolio and states that this may have a positive impact on the retailer brand image. Zentes, Morschett and Schramm-Klein (2011) emphasize that the *Premium* and *Value-Added*

private labels contribute to the retailer brand image. In the empirical part, we will then explore how these points of view are applicable to our case study.

Further, we can conclude that the term retailer brand image is held by consumers and refers to the overall perception or memories of a brand. We further argue that research about the store image is important for this thesis since different stores by retailers carry various brands and product assortments. Moreover, we could see that the retailer's brand image and the view on private labels are shaped by the customer's perceptions (Ailawadi & Keller, 2004) and that these perceptions are influenced by different attributes (Grohmann, Spangenberg & Sprott, 2007; Martineau, 1958; Lindquist, 1974). Our research builds on the nine consumer perception-shaping attributes defined by Lindquist (1974): (1) *merchandise*, (2) *service* (3) *clientele*, (4) *physical facilities*, (5) *convenience*, (6) *promotion*, (7) *store atmosphere* (8) *institutional factors*, and (9) *post-transaction.* However, we find these attributes to be named rather abstract and generic, which is why we adjusted the given terms by Lindquist (1974) to our research in the context of retail brand image and private labels. The consumer perception-shaping attributes will be referred to in the thesis's subsequent sections using the new terminology, which can be found in Table 1.

	Consumer perception-shaping attributes (Lindquist; 1974)	Consumer perception-shaping attributes in relation to retailer brand image & multitier private label portfolio (Abrahamsson & Keppler; 2023)
1.	Merchandise	Product attributes
2.	Service	Customer service
3.	Clientele	Personal background
4.	Physical facilities	Store presentation
5.	Convenience	Store location
6.	Promotion	Product promotion
7.	Store atmosphere	Store atmosphere

8.	Institutional factors	Store reputation & reliability
9.	Post-transaction	Customer satisfaction

Table 1: Consumer perceptions (Source: adapted Lindquist, 1974)

After looking at the three theoretical constructs of a multitier private label portfolio, retailer brand image, and consumer perceptions, we could see that these paradigms are actually interrelated. This interrelationship is displayed in the theoretical framework for our thesis (Figure 3). We argue that consumer perceptions influence both the perception of the multitier private label portfolio and the retailer brand image. Furthermore, we assume that the retailer brand image and the multitier private label portfolio have a reciprocal influence on each other, which we want to prove in the empirical part of this work. Nevertheless, we assume that certain consumer perceptions could have a greater impact on the formation of the retailer brand image, whereas others may shape the perceptions of the multitier private label portfolio. In our empirical part, we are aiming to gain a better understanding, of which of these consumer perception-shaping attributes can be rather associated either with the retailer brand image or multitier private label perception.
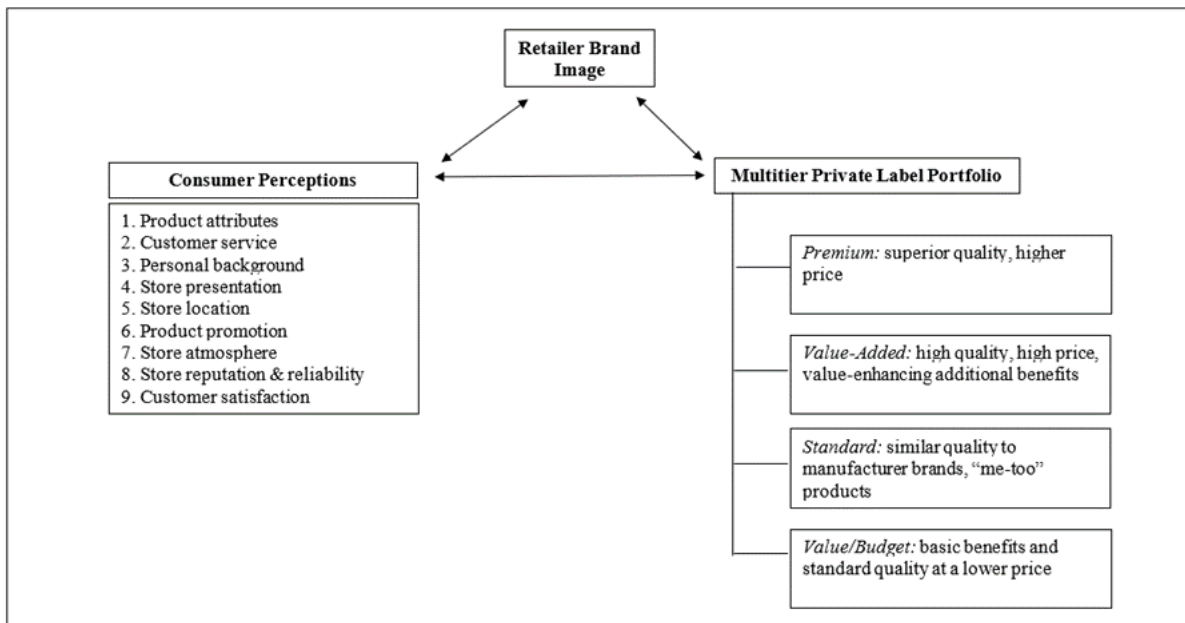
Figure 3: Theoretical framework thesis

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3   Methodology[i]

Within this chapter we will provide a comprehensive discussion of the methodology we have chosen for our thesis. Therefore, we will start by disclosing our research philosophy and approach. After that, the Swedish grocery retailer ICA will be introduced, which serves as a case study for this thesis. Next, we will argue for our sampling strategy and delve into the chosen data collection we have adopted, namely interviews. Thereafter, we will discuss our data analysis strategy and elaborate on the quality, limitations, and ethics of our research.

3.1   Research philosophy

First, we discuss the chosen research philosophy, which outlines our beliefs and approaches about the investigated facts. This framework guided us throughout the entire process and ensured that all written content was logical, coherent and trustworthy. Therefore, we explored our research problematization both from an ontological and epistemological point of view.

Ontology is usually the starting point of every research and deals with the "basic assumptions that the researcher makes about the nature of reality" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 88). In our study, we presented how consumers perceive a retailer's multitier private label portfolio in connection to their brand image, by examining the gathered qualitative data. Consequently, we argue that our posed research question examined the relationship between these two concepts, with a relativistic viewpoint. This also aligns with the definition of Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), who state that in relativism the investigated phenomenon is dependent on the perspectives from which we look at them. Our defined ontology, which determined our perceived reality concerning a multitier private label portfolio and retailer brand image, served as the foundation for our epistemology.

Epistemology logically follows from ontology (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022) and deals with "the study of knowledge and ways of enquiring into the physical and social world" (Easterby-

Smith et al., 2021, p. 94). Since we are investigating the perspective of consumers in this study, we argue that we applied epistemological social constructivism. Social constructivism usually deals with the perceptions of people and not with objective and external factors (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This approach encourages people to express their stories while also acknowledging the social aspects of human life (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). We thought this approach is suitable given that we tried to understand, namely attitudes and emotions consumers have regarding different aspects of private labels and the retailer brand image. Further, it enabled us to get a more nuanced perspective and delve deeper into all the participants' lived experiences. This approach aligns with the aim of our research, namely to understand how a multitier private label portfolio is linked to the retailer brand image from a consumer perspective. Furthermore, this approach recognizes that people construct their own realities based on both experiences and social interactions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022).

3.2   Research approach

In order to answer the research questions "*How is a multitier private label portfolio linked to the brand image of a retailer?*" and "*How do the private labels in a multitier private label portfolio link to the retailer brand image?*" - a qualitative research design has been selected as it was considered most relevant for the purpose. In qualitative research, words are employed instead of numbers, and the participant's perceptions of the social reality are examined at (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This made it particularly appropriate since our research is aimed to understand the link between consumers' perceptions of the retailer brand image and its multitier private label portfolio. However, a negative aspect of qualitative research, according to Bryman and Bell (2011), is that it generates a lot of data quickly, much of which needs to be further analyzed and interpreted in order to be completely understood. To solve this, a thematic analysis can be used to simplify working with larger amounts of data and to organize the data, which will be further elaborated on in Chapter 3.6.

This research was conducted using an abductive approach, which entailed starting with observations of the phenomena (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). This in order to find and identify ideas that are possible to integrate, working backward to arrive at and identify answers that can integrate theory with data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). The abductive research

method has been described as an approach that is closest to the answer (Blaikie, 2000). Using an abductive approach can enable one to nuance existing theories and identify new perspectives that can explain empirical material, rather than just applying collected data to already existing theories. When we conducted our research, we started by analyzing the information we had gathered from our literature review of the collected data about multitier private label portfolios, retailer brand image and consumer perceptions. Through the analysis, we could identify different patterns and gaps in the literature which helped us frame the problem. Thereafter, we used this information to analyze the empirical data. During the process of conducting our research, we were also open to new insights and the addition of new theory and data to our findings in order to supplement both literature review and conclusions. As a result, rather than building a theory based on the empirical material we collected, we used theory and empirical evidence in parallel to better explain the link of a multitier private label portfolio and retailer brand image (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022).

As we wanted to generate new insights in the analysis, we believed this to be a suitable approach as it prevented us from missing unexpected or unusual findings in the research (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The selected technique provided a more flexible approach that was not just there to validate the researcher's results, but also adds to a more dynamic interaction between empiricism and theory, allowing for new insights and discoveries (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

3.3 Case study: Introduction to ICA

In this section, we will provide a deeper introduction to the retailer ICA and argue for choosing ICA as a prime example for this research. A case study with one company was conducted in order to understand the link between the multitier private label portfolio and the retailer brand image. Bryman and Bell (2011) describe the case study design as popular in business economics research and further explain that the research approach can achieve both complexities and explore the specific nature that the case exhibits. It was decided to only include one company in the case study to be able to get more in-depth with a further investigation on their specific multitier private label portfolio. On the other hand, if a multiple case study approach would have been applied, we might have ended up focusing too much on comparing the differences

between the retailers (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Therefore, it was decided to only use one case in the study. Furthermore, the retailer ICA was selected for this case study and is interesting from a private label perspective as they offer a broader multitier private label portfolio with different attributes. Moreover, the retailer is one of the major players in Sweden and well known among the Swedish population (ICA Gruppen, 2022).

ICA is a leading grocery retailer company based in Sweden and operates a chain of various grocery stores and supermarkets around the country. As one of the major companies in the retailing industry in Sweden, they have a market share of around roughly 35 % (ICA Gruppen, 2022). The vision of ICA has always been to make life simpler for the everyday customer, by providing them with a diverse selection of products and services such as groceries, home supplies, and medications (ICA Gruppen, n.d.). ICA operates under a franchise model, the so-called "ICA idea", which means that the shop owners manage their own businesses under the brand of ICA while they at the same time receive assistance from the company by paying to the Association of ICA retailers (ICA Gruppen, 2022; ICA handlarnas förbund, n.d.). To meet the diverse needs of its customers, ICA Sweden offers four different distinct store concepts that vary depending on size, location, and product range. ICA also provides a range of different private labels to meet all the customers' various preferences, ranging from more basic options to more premium options (Grewal, 2019; ICA, n.d.), which we will introduce further in Chapter 4.2.

3.4   Sampling

The participants of this study were selected through a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is a non-probability strategy in which the sample units are chosen with consideration for the study's aim (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This goes in line with what Bellman, Bryman and Harley (2022) suggest, that the sampling method should be aligned with the research goal and criteria for collecting insights. To achieve the objective of the research, a random sampling technique may not be always sufficient. In such cases, non-probability sampling methods are necessary instead (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). Therefore, by selecting participants based on the goal and objectives of the study, and not choosing randomly, we believed that the selected sampling method may be suitable to find participants who can answer the research

question in the best possible way. Moreover, this sampling method allowed the respondents to provide meaningful insights into how a multitier private label portfolio can be connected to the image of a retailer brand. With the respondent's prior experiences and knowledge, we believed they could offer a more valuable perspective on the phenomenon that may enrich the paper.

The collected data was gathered through interviews with Swedish individuals who were familiar with the retailer ICA and their private labels, which was one of the main criteria for the sampling groups. The decision was made to select two different consumer groups in order to gain a deeper understanding of the research and private labels. The two selected customer groups were students and families, and they vary from each other regarding both family composition, economy and purchase habits. This study's use of two distinct consumer groups enabled us to examine consumers' attitudes from different perspectives. As the groups had diverse needs and were likely to have strong opinions in contrast to each other, we believed they could contribute value to our study as well as enhance the comprehension of the problematization of this research. The first group of participants for this study were students, who were chosen since they are known to be more price-conscious and on a tighter budget. Therefore, we believed private labels could be of greater interest for this consumer group because some of the private label brands target these more price-sensitive consumers. This group was also selected because of their accessibility since they were easy to reach and conduct interviews with. The second customer group were families, chosen on the criteria that they had children in the household. We decided to select the group as we believed they had different expectations towards private labels since we thought the expectations regarding aspects such as quality, product assortment and price, changes when having children. We assumed that individuals who are less familiar with the research topic would deliver inaccurate data due to a lack of knowledge. Some of the participants had a background within marketing, and branding and had previous knowledge with the concepts of private labels which could provide the study with a more nuanced perspective. Additionally, we believed that the selection of two customer groups would make it possible to provide a solid overview of how different groups reason about ICA's private labels in relation to the retailer brand image.

3.5   Data collection

In the following we will introduce our driving motivation for our data collection method and argue for our qualitative research method, namely interviews.

3.5.1   Data collection method

The paper was based on primary data, which has been gathered and collected via our own research and observations (Bell & Bryman, 2011; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). "In contrast to research aiming at the collection and analysis of secondary data, primary research aims at the creation of original (primary) data" (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021, p. 194). This is of special interest to our research since it is case-based and aims toward the perceptions of consumers. Using secondary data, from previously conducted research, would have not assisted in determining their point of view regarding the private labels connected to the retailer ICA. Easterby-Smith et al. (2021) also argue that one of the main disadvantages of secondary data is that secondary sources do not necessarily fit the be investigated research question and problematization. The primary data of this study was collected through 14 semi-structured interviews with two different customer groups. The outline of these interviews will be further discussed in the following section.

3.5.2   Interviews

Interviews are widely recognized as a prevalent approach within qualitative research and the methodology is usually being selected for the purpose of facilitating mutual exploration and acquiring information that is not typically visible through observation alone (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). We believe that qualitative interviews may enrich this study and help to gain a deeper understanding of the connection between a multitier private label portfolio and the brand image of a retailer. Qualitative interviews can provide more in-depth, rich and interactive data that can comprehend and convey complex and subtle aspects of the topic (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Moreover, they can capture the complexity and nuances of attitudes, perceptions, and experiences related to the research topic (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021), the chosen method helped identify the underlying reasons why participants have formed specific views regarding

the retailer ICA and its private labels. It is further argued that qualitative interviews allow for an interactive and dynamic exchange between the researcher and the participant (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

In this research, participants' opinions and experiences with private labels may be influenced by different personal and situational factors, and the interactive nature of qualitative interviews could help uncover these underlying dynamics (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). In the case of ICA, this approach enabled us to explore themes and motives underlying the perception of ICA's brand image and private label portfolio, which we would not be able to identify if using a quantitative method. Since statistics and generalizable results would have not allowed us to follow up on emerging themes and explore new avenues during the course of the interview, it would have not been possible to fully understand the underlying perceptions of the retailer brand and multitier private label portfolio.

The reason for choosing semi-structured interviews for this study was due to its flexible nature during interviewing processes. As the purpose is to understand how a multitier private label portfolio is linked to the retailer brand image from a consumer perspective, it was more relevant for the interviewer to be able to ask follow-up questions and delve deeper into certain topics while maintaining a structure during the interview. This approach aligns with the views expressed by Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), who suggests that the structure of semi-structured interviews should be tailored to the specific objectives of the study. We opted to use open-ended questions in our interview guide to allow for more context and explanation (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). By using open-ended questions, participants were encouraged to provide more thoughtful and detailed responses about their opinions in regard to the private labels of ICA and their brand image. By using this approach, we could acquire a better understanding of their experiences and opinions in comparison to closed-ended questions. Moreover, it could reduce biased answers as it fostered an atmosphere where interviewees could express themselves more openly and honestly.

Since we had initially selected predefined areas that we wished to cover, the semi-structured interviews were not entirely open. The areas we chose to cover were based on the theory section and the problematization. As the goal was to be able to delve deeply into the subject of multitier private label portfolios connection with retailer brand image, the semi-structured interviews provided us with flexibility and the opportunity to include questions of relevance during the

interviews. This offered us a more nuanced and collected picture of the area than with standardized interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

This approach enabled us to create an interview guide that was structured into five sets of questions. Throughout the entire guide, we made sure that the used language was easy to understand for any person without prior marketing knowledge. We ensured that the used terms, for example, "private labels", were explained beforehand if needed. Over a period of four weeks, we were then able to conduct a total of 14 interviews with this guide starting with our first interview on 19 April 2023. Over time, we were able to adapt our questions accordingly, as some proved irrelevant to our research questions, contained repetitiveness, or were overly complex. On average, the interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes and while some of the interviews were held on-site, most were conducted online through the platform Zoom. This occurred due to the reason that respondents of our interviews were dispersed throughout Sweden. Moreover, the majority of the interviews were conducted in English, but as most respondents were Swedish, some felt more comfortable being interviewed and answering the questions in their mother language.

The first set of questions served as an introduction and dealt with general questions about personal background such as age, occupation and name. This gathered information we have anonymized by using the acronyms *Participant 1-14* in Table 2. In the second set of questions, the participants talked about their experiences with the retailer ICA. After, we went on with the perceptions and opinions regarding the various private labels of the retailer. Finally, we asked the participants about their feelings about the retailer and how they perceive its image also in connection to its offered private labels. Afterward, these recorded interviews were translated and transcribed for analysis later in this paper.

Customer Group	Participant	Age	Background
Student	*Participant 1*	24	Marketing student
	Participant 2	26	Marketing student, marketing coordinator
	Participant 3	25	Entrepreneurship student
	Participant 4	26	Management student
	Participant 5	26	Marketing student
	Participant 6	23	Marketing student
	Participant 7	25	Marketing student
	Participant 8	24	Marketing student, former ICA employee
Family	*Participant 9*	55	Two children, nurse
	Participant 10	33	One child, marketing student
	Participant 11	26	One child, kindergarten teacher
	Participant 12	29	Two children, teacher
	Participant 13	28	One child, working in retail
	Participant 14	32	One child, working in retail, former ICA employee

Table 2: Interview participants

3.6 Data analysis

For this study, a thematic analysis has been chosen since it allows a flexible and accessible approach for interpreting the gathered qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic

analysis enables a systematic identification of patterns or themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), through coding procedures related to data to develop ideas, meanings, and understanding (Ozuem, Willis & Howell, 2021). By conducting a thematic analysis, it is possible to determine whether there are patterns in the interviewee's perception of both private labels and the brand image of the retailer ICA. Since thematic analysis offers a great flexibility, it offers theoretical freedom to effectively organize and describe a set of data with rich and complex details (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consequently, this allowed us to structure the gathered data of the interviews in a detailed and lucid representation. In the analysis, the perceptions and views on the private labels of ICA of the participants, could then be thematically displayed in connection to the perception of the brand and retailer ICA.

However, reliability is one of the major aspects that can be of concern when conducting a thematic analysis due to the scope of interpretation (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012). Nevertheless, we agree with Guest, MacQueen and Namey (2012) that a textual dataset's complex meaning can best be captured by using a thematic analysis. With the division into four topics, one can gain an understanding of various aspects that are essential to comprehend the relationship between a multitier private label portfolio and the retailer brand image.

3.7   Research quality and limitations

According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022) the most important evaluation criteria of business and management research are reliability and validity. However, a distinction must be made between quantitative and qualitative evaluation criteria. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Guba and Lincoln (1994) therefore suggest that for qualitative studies researchers should emphasize two primary criteria: *trustworthiness* and *authenticity*. In this section, we reflect critically about the quality of our research, by assessing these criteria and pointing out resulting limitations.

Trustworthiness deals with the level of trust the research can provide and can be broken down into four categories (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). First, *credibility* which deals with if the researcher represented the data in a comprehensive way, ensuring that they understood the paradigm they studied (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). In our study, we used several theoretical constructs that have already been discussed many times in the context of retail brand

management and private labels. These include the private label portfolio model from Zentes, Morschett and Schramm-Klein (2011) and Zentes, Morschett & Krebs (2008) and the adapted nine consumer perception-shaping attributes from Lindquist (1974). Using these different constructs and sources is certainly enhancing the credibility of our study since we took different perspectives of multiple topics into account.

Second, the *transferability* needs to be taken into account. This refers to the relevance of the outcome of the study to other researchers or studies (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). We consider the findings of our study as transferable for other research in the context of retail and private labels due to our applied method. Our approach enabled us to compare ICA's private labels from the retailer's and consumers' perspective and arrange it accordingly in the used theoretical model of Zentes, Morschett and Schramm-Klein (2011) and Zentes, Morschett & Krebs (2008). The insights we have gained from consumers regarding the variety of these private labels can serve as relevant findings for other studies in this context. However, we must also take into account that we investigated only one grocery retailer with our single case study. If we would have included multiple retailers, we could have provided a more versatile analysis that could have eventually led to other conclusions. However, we decided to investigate a single retailer to get a more complex analysis and not a comparative study. The same applies to the cultural setting of our study. We examined a Swedish grocery retailer and only the perception of Swedish individuals on it. When looking at other cultures, their understanding and perception of specific retailers and their private labels might differ. As it is not possible to take all cultures into consideration for this study, we decided to only focus on one nationality. Next to that, some of the interviews were conducted online through Zoom. According to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2022), this also poses some risks for the data collection, if for example fluctuations in the quality of the connection occur. This happened in one of our interviews, nevertheless, we were able to collect the needed quotes after several tries. We could also see in the interviews that the quality of the responses depends on the prior knowledge the participant had. For example, marketing students, who got in touch with the terms and principles of private labels during their academic career might already have formed specific opinions about the topic. Whereas individuals who enjoyed a different educational background had a broader perspective on the matter.

Third is the *dependability* of the study, which deals with the accuracy of the empirical findings and how properly the researcher kept track of their research process (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Throughout the entire process of our study, we kept constant documentation of our actions regarding the used methodology. We recorded, translated, and transcribed all conducted interviews in a separate file, that can serve as proof of our research. For the used quotes, any grammatical errors were adjusted, and nothing was changed in the content of what was said. Although it should be noted that since some of the interviews were originally conducted in Swedish and then translated into English for this work, there is a possibility of some information being lost in translation.

Fourth is *confirmability*, which relates to the objectivity of the researcher (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022). Even if our study is based on a qualitative methodology, we have tried to always remain objective and to exclude our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs which speaks for the confirmability of our work.

According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2021), *authenticity* pertains to the degree of familiarity that a researcher has regarding the subject under investigation. We believe that we provide a high level of credibility due to the application of several well researched theoretical constructs, which contributes to the authenticity of our research. Since we are using an abductive approach, we ensure that we are referring to the most relevant theories in connection to retail brand management and private labels and connecting them to our empirical findings. Moreover, this abductive approach facilitates our discernment of the novelty of our findings, rather than only confirming existing theories.

However, we are aware of the fact that it is hard to argue for the trustworthiness and authenticity of qualitative research in general. The empirical data gathered through interviews always leaves room for interpretation. Our perceptions on the quotes might differ from others. The perceptions of our chosen sample can also differ from other Swedish individuals. Preferences and opinions on the consumption of private labels can vary greatly and it is difficult to capture behavioral patterns since people are so complex. Nevertheless, we are convinced that we have taken the necessary measures to provide a study that is as trustworthy and authentic as possible.

3.8   Research ethics

When conducting research, one must take into account ethical issues that tend to revolve around the study (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Diener and Crandall (1978) therefore defined four main areas that deal with ethical principles in research: (1) *harm to participants*, (2) *lack of informed consent*, (3) *invasion of privacy*, and (4) *deception*.

The selection of the participants of our study happened without any obligations, rewards, or any kind of compensation. In the analysis of our conducted interviews, we ensured the confidentiality and *privacy* of the participants by anonymizing them with the acronyms of *Participant 1-14*. Next to that, quotes containing identifiable information, such as names or geographical locations were excluded. Additionally, we made sure that the interviewed individuals were above 18 years old. At the beginning of each interview, we first provided information about the academic purpose of our study and clarified that the given quotes will not be disclosed to anyone external to this research. The participant was told that they had the option to decline to answer any questions that caused them discomfort or unease. Furthermore, we obtained *consent* for the analysis of the statements made as well as permission for tape-recording the interviews. Moreover, we made it clear to the participants that they had the option to refuse to answer any questions that they felt not comfortable discussing. By that, we have taken all necessary measures to ensure that the participation of respondents does not cause any direct *harm* or adverse effects to them. Finally, we are aiming to prevent *deception* and manipulation by not using any misleading information or false reporting regarding our data collection.

4   Analysis

In this chapter we will combine the presentation of the empirical data and the analysis. Firstly, we will present the respondents' perceptions of ICA's brand image and analyze the answers in light of the theory. Following that, we will provide an overview of ICA's multitier private label portfolio and participants' associations with the various private labels. After, we will introduce the participants' statements regarding their holistic view of the multitier private label portfolio of ICA. Lastly, we will elaborate on the link between ICA's multitier private label portfolio and its brand image. During the analysis, we will refer to our adapted terms (see Chapter 2.4) regarding the consumer perception-shaping attributes defined by Lindquist (1974).

4.1   Exploring the perceived brand image of ICA

During the interviews, we asked participants about their overall perceptions regarding the retailer ICA. Participants were required to express their opinions about the retailer, and it was evident to see a pattern regarding their impressions. A majority of the participants agreed that ICA is a well-known retailer, with both a positive reputation as well as brand image. At the same time, it was agreed that ICA is perceived as a retailer that is slightly more expensive than the competitors according to the respondents. The participants also highlighted other factors that have an impact on their perceptions of the retailer.

> *My experience with ICA as a retailer in general is that they have their own private labels. I feel like they're always close by and available and I have a good experience. I like the layout and it's been the closest store I've had when I lived here for my 4 years, [...] it's always been my number one selection. (Participant 4)*

> *I think I have a good experience with ICA. [...] They have the main market in Sweden, so they are very big. [...] I like their products and I like how the store is located but also*

like internally how it is in the store and I also like their private label products as well. (Participant 5)

Both participants have favorable opinions towards the retailer ICA, and these attitudes are consistent with the consumer perceptions discussed in the theory sections referring to "store location", "product attributes", "store presentation", and "store atmosphere". Participants mention how essential the store's location is to them and how it creates the feeling of convenience and accessibility, which according to Statista (2021) among the most important factors when choosing a retailer. The participants' positive opinions about the store's layout may indicate that it is both visually appealing and simple to find products. They also mention the availability of the products and that ICA offers private label brands, which aligns with previous research about store reputation and reliability (Corsten & Gruen, 2003; Gruen & Corsten, 2007; Waller et al., 2010). The researchers argue that the availability of products plays an essential role in forming consumer perceptions about a retailer. Moreover, the store location is shown to be an important factor.

I am very positive. We have a very good ICA store that is the closest one to us and has everything in terms of groceries that I really need. So, they always have what I need. It's always positive for me. (Participant 9)

This quote indicates that the participants have an overall positive experience with ICA and that may be due to the perception of the ICA store located closest to the interviewee. Participant 9 highlights that ICA is the closest located store and simplifies access to grocery shopping, this implies that "store location" can be seen as an important element. Moreover, the fact that the store also offers everything the customer needs can imply that the store provides a wide range of groceries which refers to a reliable and well-stocked product assortment. As the ICA store both saves the customers time and effort, it can foster long-term customer relations and loyalty (Berry, Seiders & Grewal, 2002).

If you go to ICA, it's because you know they have most things, [...] You know they have good stuff. You can be sure that you won't go home empty-handed because something is missing, so it's always safe to go to ICA, and that's why I've done a lot of shopping there. (Participant 12)

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Stockouts are said to have a significant impact on customers' purchasing decisions and how they perceive a store and its image (Corsten & Gruen, 2003; Gruen & Corsten, 2007; Waller et al., 2010). As the participant only had positive experiences with the retailer and its variety of goods as well as availability, this created a positive connection with the store and demonstrated the general association with a wide selection. This can then be connected to the consumer perception-shaping attribute of "store reputation and reliability". Moreover, the layout of the store is something that also forms part of the interviewees' view of ICA, which is mentioned during the interview, which refers to "store presentation".

> *I like the concept, and it feels like it's so easy to find an ICA store. So, I feel a bit confused when entering a different type, like Willys or City Gross, because you don't really know where everything is and all the ICA brands, [...] everything that exists at ICA feels so familiar in some way. (Participant 13)*

Participant 13 implies that recognizing something over time can create feelings of familiarity which can lead to repeated purchases. The participant underlines the simplicity to locate in ICA stores, and if not visiting ICA, confusion may arise as the participant is not familiar with how to navigate. Furthermore, when visiting a store, something that is taken into account is the service factor.

> *They have nice staff with a lot of knowledge that always helps you. (Participant 9)*

Participant 9 especially highlights the well-educated staff at the ICA stores. Good service and staff with knowledge can result in increased customer loyalty and may enhance the reputation of the retailer, which emphasizes the importance of the consumer perception-shaping attribute "customer service". In this quote, it is possible to see that the participant has a positive association with retailers as it describes the staff as friendly, helpful, and knowledgeable. This is consistent with what Mägi and Julander (1995) stated about service quality and how it relates to retailer loyalty. By offering a high standard of service, the retailer can create a greater customer experience and stand out from competitors.

> *I have a good experience with ICA. That's usually my choice when I go food shopping. The standard and the service can depend on which ICA you go to. [...] I like the private*

labels products they carry, but also this can differ depending on which ICA you go to. (Participant 10)

However, while some of the people interviewed underlined the retailer's favorable customer service, others emphasized that it depends on which ICA store you visit. Since ICA uses a franchise business model, the brand's reputation and product assortment can change based on how various merchants run their enterprises (ICA Gruppen, 2022). That being said, the presence of a broad range of products in the stores can have a big impact on how consumers perceive a store as well as how it can affect how they make purchases (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006; Mimouni Chaabane, Sabri & Partguel, 2010). Another thing to keep in mind is that the different store concepts can have an impact on how the brand image is seen by customers. As a result, the management and customers may view the brand image differently (Burt & Carralero-Encinas, 2000). This suggests that when a certain ICA store's quality perception is poorer, the store image of other ICA retailers may also be affected. This demonstrates the connection between retailers' store image and the brand image. Furthermore, we could also see that the interviewed individuals expressed that it is important to feel proud as a customer.

I perceive ICA as the best grocery retailer in Sweden and I would say that compared to the others, that's where I feel like the proudest to be a customer. [...] I would rather walk around with the ICA bag in the city than to walk around with the Willys bag and the same goes for Coop. (Participant 7)

This statement depicts that the participant is a proud customer of ICA and has a positive attitude toward the retailer. It further reflects that the person is aware of their self-image and prefers to carry ICA bags over bags from other Swedish grocery retailers such as Willys or Coop. The respondent felt that being identified with ICA is something positive and desirable and that purchasing decisions can shape their identity. This reinforces Lindquist's (1974) observation that the desire to project a particular image or identity on others can impact purchasing decisions, which refers to "personal background".

But I definitely think that it has this status in society, and people may see ICA as something stable that has been around for a long time. (Participant 12)

When it comes to the matter of status, the participant thinks that status can be a deciding factor when choosing a retailer. As ICA is regarded as a reliable and trustworthy retailer, it is a safe choice if you want to buy high-quality food, since it has been around for many years according to the respondent. We could also observe that people want to be associated with a store that stands behind good values.

> *I like the ICA brand. I like what it stands for. I like them. I think they have great products, and it's a variety of products that it's just so great. (Participant 2)*

While some participants acknowledged ICA's physical attributes, some people also spoke about the principles and values the retailer stands for. This indicates that ICA as a brand cares about more than just physical attributes and what makes them the best retailer in terms of quality, selection and customer service. As Burt and Davies (2010) pointed out, a brand must be able to demonstrate factors like identification in order to gain trust and encourage purchases. Being able to identify with the values and ideals of the retailer can give customers the impression that their purchase also reflects what they stand for and believe in, which will leave the customer with a positive feeling and result in repeated visits to the store.

The respondent also points out the value of ICA's overall product variety. This can be attributed to the element of "store reputation and reliability", for instance, researchers found that the availability of a large choice of groceries can influence customers' intents to frequently visit a store (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006; Mimouni Chaabane, Sabri, & Partguel, 2010). The fact that ICA carries both private labels and manufacturer brands leads to customers assuming that ICA has everything they need and that they do not need to visit other retailers. In addition, it suggests that the manufacturer brands the store offers could have an impact on how their brand image is perceived (Berg, 2014) and the wide range in the product assortment might result in a positive brand image. Furthermore, we could observe that the fact how retailers handled the recent inflation, impacted the way the consumer perceives the ICA brand.

> *I think I have quite good experiences with ICA because their stores are usually very like organized fresh, they have a good assortment. Although recently because of the inflation, I think I haven't been going there as much because they're one of the stores that have increased their prices a lot and it was not cheap to start with. So now it's very*

expensive. So for me as a student, it's not as appropriate to shop there anymore, but I still really like their stores. (Participant 1)

I think because of the inflation [...] ICA might lose a lot of trust from some customers, because I feel Willy's and Hemköp, they are growing because [...] they have a lower price range. They also have good quality for a good price. (Participant 7)

Despite the fact that most consumers hold a positive brand image of ICA, many participants note that the current inflation has impacted the retailer's image and made consumers less likely to choose ICA as their main retailer because of the rising prices, which speaks of the dimension of "product attributes". Several participants agree that while ICA has always maintained high quality while being slightly more expensive, it has become harder to justify choosing it as a first option during inflation. As Rubel (1995) highlights, price and quality are important factors for a consumer and these price raises can lead to a change in their attitudes and consequently result in choosing a different retailer. Moreover, consumers became more concerned about the ethical considerations a retailer undertakes.

I trust ICA that they are buying the products from distributors with good working conditions. (Participant 9)

The participants highlighted that it is important to them that retailers purchase products from distributors with decent working conditions. When deciding whether or not to purchase products, this trust in the retailer can be considered a crucial aspect. Berg (2014) is highlighting that the retailer brand image can be developed through a variety of tangible and intangible assets, ICA is developing its brand image by aspects including having favorable working circumstances with its distributors, which can provide a favorable impression in the minds of customers. Moreover, it also turns out that it is not only the individual's own experiences that have an impact on the retailer brand image, but also the upbringing has shaped their experience, which refers to "personal background".

Then there's also a lot of tradition in recognizing something over the years. (Participant 9)

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I believe that one's upbringing definitely influences a person if they have parents who shop at ICA, it provides a sense of security. (Participant 12)

While the assortment and other elements have been emphasized by interviewees, tradition certainly has a significant impact. Some of the participants expressed that visiting a store for a long period of time might foster feelings of familiarity and recognition and make it a tradition to continue doing so. This also corresponds with the consumer perception attribute "personal background", which says that purchasing habits can be driven by consumers' psychographics and not only product attributes or functional needs (Lindquist, 1974). The fact that tradition is an important factor for a lot of customers is an indication that the psychographic influences from one's childhood can affect future purchasing habits.

In conclusion, it is clear that the participants put special emphasis on the consumer perception-shaping attributes "store location", "product attributes" and "personal background" when it comes to ICA's brand image. The factors of "store reputation and reliability", "store presentation", "store atmosphere" and "customer service" were addressed by participants to be of matter. Additionally, there were several aspects that emerged as important factors in determining how a retailer's brand image is shaped, for instance, factors such as ethical concerns, familiarity and upbringing.

4.2   ICA's Private labels

ICA is positioning itself as a retailer that wants to meet all of its customer's needs and requirements by offering a varied range of private label brands, these vary from more affordable and simple products to offerings of higher quality (ICA, n.d.). Grewal (2019) highlights that ICA's journey towards creating several private labels in their assortment reflects various outcomes, including improving and expanding the assortment of the store, creating strong own brands to differentiate themselves from the rest of the retailers on the market making it an exciting destination. It is further emphasized that ICA has established a value ladder for its private labels that make it possible for its customers to either move up or down, depending on preferences, what they want, and based on economic situation (Grewal, 2019).

To delve deeper into the different private labels that are offered by the retailer, we will now present the private labels focused on groceries. Firstly, there is "ICA Basic", the most affordable private label offering cheap and basic products for the more price-conscious customers that can be classified as a *Value/Budget* private label. Secondly, we have "ICA" which is their own brand with products that are selected with care to meet customers' demands for safe, affordable, and high-quality groceries. This can be seen as the *Standard* private label of ICA's portfolio. When it comes to the organic range of products "ICA I Love ECO" is provided, while "ICA Gott Liv" focuses on healthier products with great taste (ICA, n.d.). These two private labels can be seen as *Value-Added* private labels due to their additional value-enhancing benefits. For those interested in high-quality products and sustainable and ethical food production, ICA provides customers with the brand "ICA Selection". Therefore, this can be seen as the *Premium* private label of the retailer. For a clearer overview, we have applied the private label portfolio framework (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008) presented in Chapter 2.1 to the case of the grocery retailer ICA (Figure 4).
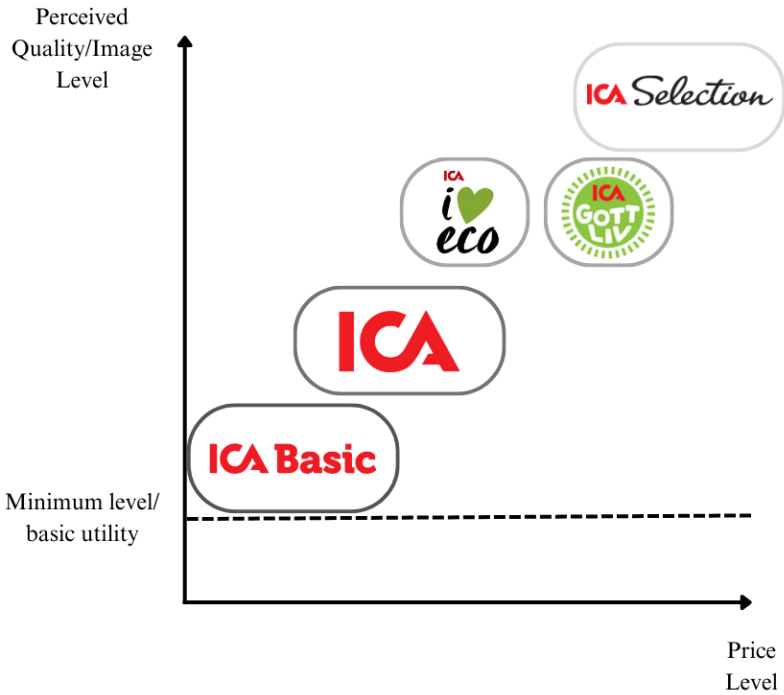

Figure 4: Private label portfolio strategy ICA (Source: adapted from Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008)

In addition, for household and home products, ICA is offering "ICA Skona", and for organic body care, there is "ICA in collaboration with Apotek hjärtat" (ICA, n.d.). However, these will

not be taken into consideration in this study, since we are focusing on the private labels concerning groceries. In the following part, the investigated consumer perceptions and opinions of these different private labels will be introduced and analyzed with the respondent's perspectives.

4.2.1   ICA Basic

Looking at the gathered data from the semi-structured interviews, we could see that the participants agreed that ICA Basic can be seen as the *Value/Budget* private label, as it offers products of basic quality to an affordable price. Whereas some of the participants especially valued the affordability of this private label, we could observe that some of the interviewees have a rather negative connotated view on this private label in the portfolio, as for example Participant 5:

> *I think it looks so cheap. It looks like bad quality [...] It's not attractive. (Participant 5)*

While some participants have rather negative associations with ICA Basic, some take a more liberal view of the matter. Participant 10 for example points out, that for certain products they would consider purchasing ICA Basic products:

> *It kind of depends on the product. When I would shop for ICA Basic if there's something that I don't really need to be high quality or I'm not really worried about the quality, I can get the basic brand sometimes. (Participant 10).*

What emerges from this quote, is that the price factor outperforms the quality factor in certain product categories. This also aligns with the statement of Rubel (1995), that the consumer will give more weight to the price aspect under certain circumstances. We could also see that the interviewed individuals demonstrated a tendency to consider purchasing ICA Basic products when larger quantities of items are needed.

> *And sometimes, as I said, we do end up buying something from ICA Basic, but it often comes down to a huge price difference for something that may not be available in-*

between or when we need a larger package, right? Maybe for a larger quantity or something like that. ICA Basic tends to be often for larger quantities. (Participant 12)

This indicates that consumers who require more substantial amounts of certain products may choose ICA Basic as an option. With that, we can see that in certain purchasing scenarios, the factor of quality gives way to affordability and cost-effectiveness, which again shows that the consumer perception of "product attributes" plays a significant role.

When considering how ICA is promoting this kind of private label, we could see that the participants' perception aligns with how ICA is trying to position ICA Basic in their portfolio, namely as a *Value/Budget* private label with utilitarian functionalities.

I mean it's obvious in their design choice of the package that they're not putting a lot of emphasis on communicating. I mean it's like the most basic colors. It's usually one or two colors that they use which shows that they're not putting a lot of effort into packaging and you know that the products are super basic. I mean you get what you pay for and they taste alright and do what they are supposed to I guess. (Participant 2)

This underlines again that packaging plays a major role in the "product promotion" of the private label. As Silayoi and Speece (2004) claim, it is also the package design that can influence a customer's motivation to buy a product. Therefore, we argue that "product packaging" plays an important factor for retailers to consider, in order to shape consumer perceptions.

As we saw in Chapter 4.1, the self-image in connection to the overall retailer brand ICA plays an important role in the consumer perception of "personal background". The same applies to the purchase decision of their private labels, especially ICA Basic. We could observe that people do not necessarily want to be associated with being a consumer of ICA Basic products.

It's just the essentials, but nothing more. It's not fancy, [...] it's cheaper, so you don't care about quality when you choose that, you care about [...] a standard product for a good cost sort of. [...] But I wouldn't buy this pasta for a first date, it would look like I'm very cheap. (Participant 4)

This implies the importance of image and perception when purchasing this kind of private label. Thus, it can be assumed that the consumers' desire to present themselves in a positive light can influence their purchasing decision. Individuals strive to align their consumption habits with their desired self-image and societal expectations, which can go beyond mere product functionality and price.

In Table 3 we have summarized the findings from the analysis of our empirical material regarding the *Value/Budget* private label in a multitier private label portfolio.

Value/Budget	• Entails products of basic quality to an affordable price • Under certain circumstances the pricing of the *Value/Budget* private label surpasses the importance of their quality positioning. • Private label of choice when it comes to larger quantities • Packaging of the products of a *Value/Budget* private label is an important aspect to position as such • Individuals do not necessarily want to be associated with being a consumer of *Value/Budget* private labels

Table 3: Findings summary Value/Budget private label

4.2.2   ICA

The participants agree that the private label "ICA" can be classified as the *Standard* private label of the grocery retailer.

> *I would just say like your average groceries. These are the ones that I would usually buy and they have good quality. It's nothing super exclusive, but it's not bad and I think the packaging is also telling all. They look kind of similar to the manufacturer brands. (Participant 1)*

These products fulfill the standard needs, but with a higher quality than the ICA Basic products. They also assign them the same level of quality as the equivalent manufacturer brand in this

product category. This statement also aligns with Zentes, Morschett and Krebs (2008), that *Standard* private labels often happen to have a comparable quality to manufacturer brands and are perceived as copycats or imitations of existing products. In general, the majority of the participants had positive associations with this *Standard* private label of ICA.

> *They maintain good quality. When it comes to this private label, they offer a reasonably good price compared to other individual companies in the same category while maintaining good quality. A variety of products, that brand is the one we mostly shop for because they have everything and a wide selection of items. (Participant 14)*

Participant 14 especially highlights the great variety within the *Standard* private label offerings of ICA and points out their quality. This vast selection serves as a compelling reason for Participant 14 to choose this private label above others within the portfolio and similar manufacturer brands. By encompassing a wide range of categories within this private label the retailer ensures that shoppers could find everything they need and thus position themselves as a strong marketer in competition with the manufacturer brands. Another observation we could make is that participants see this kind of private label as a distinct own brand, and not necessarily connect it to the retailer itself:

> *I just see them as own product. [...] I actually think that I buy these products more often than I'm actually aware of. [...] I get that the quality is a bit better than ICA Basic and it's pretty, much equal with the [...] manufacturing brands. (Participant 6)*

> *So I like this brand because I think they have a nice design and I don't really think of it as ICA, but more of a like a good brand on its own. (Participant 7)*

This suggests that ICA would like to appear neutral without any further marketing efforts to distinguish themselves from their overall retailer brand. In this way, they stand out as an independent brand alongside the manufacturers. Customers often buy this type of private label in the portfolio without even being aware of it being a branded product of ICA. It allows ICA to cater to consumers who value the product's attributes on their individual merits, instead of only relying on the ICA brand name.

In Table 4 we have summarized the findings from the analysis of our empirical material regarding the *Standard* private label in a multitier private label portfolio.

Standard	• Fulfills standard needs but with a higher quality then *Value/Budget* private label • Equivalent quality to manufacturer brands • Wide range of products along the *Standard* private label category is appreciated • *Standard* private label is often perceived as distinctive brand itself

Table 4: Findings summary Standard private label

4.2.3 ICA I love ECO

The majority of the participants identified ICA I love ECO as a *Value-Added* private label. As stated by Zentes, Morschett and Krebs (2008) this kind of label often comes with additional benefits, in this case, the organic ingredients.

> *I feel like it's an ethical brand. But like for me personally, I wouldn't really buy it. [...]But I have a positive association with the brand, but I just feel like I can't afford it right now. (Participant 7)*

> *I have a positive feeling towards this. [...] I think of nature when I see it and it's ecological and organic. So I usually pick this one when I look for organic products. (Participant 10)*

The participants associate the brand with feelings of positivity and a connection to nature. They appreciate ICA I love ECO for their organic products and highlight that this private label goes beyond just offering standard products. Even though people hold a positive attitude towards ICA I love ECO, they point out the price difference compared to the previously introduced private labels in the portfolio. Here we could see a difference in the two consumer groups we investigated. While families put more emphasis on the origin and quality of private label products, students are mainly concerned with the price aspect. Even though the students might

have a positive connection to ICA I Love ECO, the price is a crucial factor that influences their decision to buy, or in this case not to buy the private label. However, not every participant had positive experiences in regard to the quality of ICA I love ECO.

> *What they initially focused on was organic products, but the quality of many items, especially fresh produce, is poor. The vacuum packaging often fails, leading to spoilage and waste. In my experience, they want to brand themselves as eco-friendly, but the quality doesn't meet expectations, and their prices are very high. It's not something that appeals to me. (Participant 14)*

Although the participant was initially attracted to ICA I love ECO private label, they noted a significant drawback in regard to the product quality, especially when it came to fresh products. The combination of inadequate quality and high prices ultimately diminished Participant 14's interest in this private label, as it failed to align with their preferences and did not meet their expectations.

Another point brought up by Participant 4 is that this is a *Value-Added* private label, but from their point of view, it is still 'only' a private label. In their opinion, this private label represents a more utilitarian ecological choice.

> *This is more the basic equivalent of ecological choices. [...] If I were to care more about the environment, I might buy more ecological. [...] But if I were to buy these sort of products, I would feel like I'm being cheap doing it. I'm buying the most cheap ecological option, which feels to me that I'm not really trying to do it. (Participant 4)*

They are concerned that they are being perceived as individuals that prioritize affordability over genuine environmental commitment. It shows again that self-image, which can be referred to as "personal background", is important here for the consumers. If customers such as Participant 4 choose an ecological product, it should be from a brand that exclusively represents these values. This also suggests that manufacturer brands that specialize exclusively in the production of organic products are more trusted.

In Table 5 we have summarized the findings from the analysis of our empirical material regarding the *Value-Added* private label, with a focus on its organic ingredients, in a multitier private label portfolio.

Value-Added *(Organic)*	• Organic private label that goes beyond the standard needs • Organic manufacturer brands are still more trusted when then organic *Value-Added* private labels • Individuals are concerned about how they are being perceived by others, consuming an organic *Value-Added* private label compared to equivalent organic manufacturer brands

Table 5: Findings summary Value-Added (Organic) private label

4.2.4   ICA Gott liv

In addition to ICA I love ECO, the participants also categorized ICA Gott Liv as a *Value-Added* private label. The reason for this is the additional health benefits compared to the *Value/Budget* and *Standard* private label of the retailer. This implies that ICA Gott Liv offers added value to consumers by promoting healthier living and providing groceries that are more beneficial for their well-being.

> *I guess it represents having a healthy life and buying groceries that are better for you. (Participant 1)*

They connect leading a healthy lifestyle with consuming this kind of private label and that their products contribute to their overall health and wellness. Next to that the participants acknowledge the quality of the contained ingredients.

> *A healthy brand, I guess I trusted more because there is a good product in there [...] so I would definitely buy that one. (Participant 7)*

The participants' appreciation for the contained ingredients may also stem from the understanding that they put emphasis on the source of their selected ingredients. This can also

be seen in the way they communicate it through their design, which can be assigned to the "product promotion" consumer perception-shaping attribute. It suggests that this type of design makes the product appear as a distinct brand as it is not necessarily associated with the retailer ICA as such.

> *I like this brand because I think they have a nice design and I don't really think of it as ICA, but more of a like a good brand on its own. (Participant 7)*

With that, we could see the same phenomenon as with the *Standard* private label of ICA, namely that the participants do not necessarily connect ICA Gott Liv with the retailer brand. They see the private label as a strong brand itself which indicates double messages in the branding strategy and that the retailer is not always completely clear about what is their own private label and what is not. Despite the positive associations with ICA Gott Liv, Participant 14 points out that they do not necessarily need this *Value-Added* private label within the portfolio of ICA.

> *They focus a lot on health, which is a good initiative, but it didn't go as well as ICA had hoped. I don't have a strong opinion on it. Some products are labeled as ICA Gott Liv, but I don't actively choose them. (Participant 14)*

This statement indicates that the health-oriented approach of ICA Gott Liv has not effectively captured their interest or motivated them to actively choose the labeled products. Moreover, for this individual, the *Standard* private label within the portfolio fulfills their needs. This shows again that it is very dependent on the consumer's preferences, demographics, and psychographics (He, Zou & Jin, 2010; Ailawadi, Neslin & Gedenk, 2001) what kind of private label the customers choose, which can be assigned to consumer perception-shaping attribute of "personal background".

In Table 6 we have summarized the findings from the analysis of our empirical material regarding the *Value-Added* private label, with a focus on its health benefits, in a multitier private label portfolio.

	• Additional health benefits compared to *Value/Budget* and *Standard* private label
Value-Added (Health conscious)	• Package design is contributing to the perception as a healthy *Value-Added* private label
	• *Value/Added* health conscious private label is often seen as a distinctive brand itself

Table 6: Findings summary Value-Added (Health conscious) private label

4.2.5 ICA Selection

According to the responses of the interviewee's, the majority sees ICA Selection as the *Premium* private label of the retailer. The participants' responses align with the statements of Kumar (2007) and Zentes, Morschett and Krebs (2008), who outlined that this kind of private label offers superior quality at a higher price point.

> *I have a really good perception of ICA Selection and I really trust them. If I want finer food or more quality, I usually go for that. (Participant 8)*

When people are looking for products with higher quality, they tend to pick ICA Selection and they trust that the products that are labeled as such, offer greater value for them. Once they tried the ICA Selection and were satisfied, there is the possibility of them becoming returning customers.

> *When I'm worried about the quality, then I kind of want the higher selection brands because I know that they can actually deliver quality, which I noticed when I tried the ICA Selection. (Participant 10)*

After trying this private label, the participant got convinced about the quality of ICA Selection and therefore became a loyal customer. This aligns also with what Sansone et al. (2021) suggest in their article, namely if a consumer is satisfied with the private label they buy, this can lead to repetitive purchasing. Therefore, we argue that the consumer perception-shaping attribute "customer satisfaction" plays a significant role. We therefore believe that it is essential for

retailers to win over first-time buyers by promoting the quality of both individual private label products and the entire private label portfolio, with the aim of fostering customer loyalty and enhancing a positive brand image.

Despite this positive association with ICA Selection, some participants also expressed their concerns when it comes to the quality differences among the private labels in the portfolio. As Aaker (1996) stated the perception of quality can differer due to the subjective view of the quality of the individual. It is therefore not surprising that the answers of the participants in regard to the quality of ICA's private labels may differ.

> *I think they look expensive, but here I'm kind of thinking, whether they really are that good? If I was to [...] buy something expensive, I wouldn't buy the ICA Selection one, but rather another brand. [...] I also have a little bit of hesitation because I wonder if they put the same thing in ICA Basic as this. [...] Here I don't know if ICA uses the same peers for that marmalade as they would do for the ICA Basic one. (Participant 7)*

The participant is not certain, whether in the production process distinctions are being made between the different private labels. Because of this concern, this participant would rather trust manufacturer brands if they were to spend more money on a product. We could also observe that not every customer needs a *Premium* label in the portfolio and is satisfied with the *Standard* or *Value/Budget* private label for example.

> *I would probably just buy ICA's own brand or even ICA Basic because I'm not that picky [...] I don't need premium goods. [...] I'm satisfied with the bare minimum. (Participant 2)*

> *They branded themselves with stylish products, aiming for higher quality. However, ICA's own products have better quality and pricing. It was a good intention but didn't quite deliver. (Participant 14)*

While these participants may not necessarily need a *Premium* private label to meet their needs, other previously cited participants value quality in their private label choice. This also shows what Martos-Partal, González-Benito and Fustinoni-Venturi (2015) claim, namely that retailers hope to reach different customer segments simultaneously by offering a portfolio of private

label brands with different value propositions. Therefore, we argue, even if not every customer can be addressed with every private label, that each has its raison d'être.

In Table 7 we have summarized the findings from the analysis of our empirical material regarding the *Premium* private label in a multitier private label portfolio.

Premium	• Private label of superior quality at a higher price point • Consumers are concerned that the same ingredients are contained in the *Premium* private label as in the ones that are positioned lower in the value ladder in the multitier private label portfolio • Manufacturer brands are often more favored than the *Premium* private label when both are equally expensive • Not every customer has the need for a *Premium* private label and may be satisfied with the *Standard* or *Value/Budget* private label

Table 7: Findings summary Premium private label

4.3   Holistic view on the multitier private label portfolio of ICA

When examining the gathered data, we can see that a multitier private label portfolio is seen to be advantageous in many different ways. A majority of the respondents had a positive opinion of the variety and range of options regarding private labels.

> *I think it's great that they have different types of private labels at different price levels. (Participant 7)*

> *It's always good to have a wide range of options, so that it caters to different target audiences. Having choices is always positive. (Participant 9)*

The quotes underline the significance of providing several private labels at various pricing points. By providing many private label brands in different price ranges to a larger target group

with varied needs and preferences, it is possible for the retailer to reach out to more than one group, whether it comes to terms of quality, price, value or packaging. Through a variety of tangible and intangible assets, as well as by linking them to factors like quality, assortment, and pricing, retailers can develop their own unique brand identities (Berg, 2014), and hence appeal to a larger audience. Next to that, participants acknowledge the significance of offering products with good prices in the assortment of the portfolio.

> *I think it's great. I mean, everyone has different financial situations, and having affordable alternatives is what allows everyone to shop at ICA. Otherwise, some might prefer, well, something like Lidl or another low price store. (Participant 13)*

This suggests that price is an important factor since financial situations must be taken into account for many consumers, which refers to "product attributes". It indicates that ICA can then serve a wider mass by providing a variety of solutions that fit people's budgets better. The fact that ICA sells private labels that go under the category *Value/Budget*, can prevent customers from choosing other low-price chains. Why customers decide to choose ICA instead of other low-price chains may be because ICA can offer more than just budget products with its brand image and the overall status of quality. Given that feeling that they can relate and get identified to their everyday choices is important to some customers. In fact, even if customers are buying budget products, they can still identify with the retailer and feel that they are purchasing products of quality. When it comes to the variety of private labels, another thing that is also addressed is that there are more options for organic groceries.

> *I suppose that it's positive [...] that there's ICA Basic for those who can't afford it, and a little bit better for those who want to buy eco-friendly products and for those who want to buy better quality. So there are more possibilities, more choices. I think that's really great. (Participant 11)*

The participant points out that there are also alternatives for those who have other priorities, such as quality and environmental responsibility, which may help a customer feel as if the store is offering what they are searching for. Ailawadi and Keller (2004) assert that a retail brand distinguishes itself from its competitors by providing various groceries that creates added value which ICA's wide range of private labels provides. In terms of variety, ICA appeals to a wide range of distinct customer groups according to the participants.

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I mean, since this is a good variety, it covers for the ones like me, [...] that are living as cheap as possible and it covers for those who are fitness oriented and eat healthy [...] and those who want a little bit more premium price and premium quality goods. And it also covers the regular shopper who just wants to buy regular things. So yeah, it's a good variety. (Participant 2)

Participant 2 appreciates that different consumer segments can find products in the private label portfolio that best suit their needs, whether they are concerned with eating healthy, are into fitness, living on a budget, or spending more money. According to Martos-Partal, González-Benito and Fustinoni-Venturi (2015), by offering a variety of private label products with various value propositions, the retailer seeks to simultaneously engage with several client categories. When it comes to the private label product assortment, participants believe it has improved and offers a bigger variety of products.

But then I think they have improved on the private label since then, they've been very concerned with you know putting local products, like they really try to put Swedish meat or they try to want to do organic and things like that. (Participant 10)

This quote highlights that the variety and inclusion of new product assortment such as locally produced products as well as organic products have improved the perception of the private labels. Offering many brands with different value propositions gives a business tactical flexibility, which can ultimately result in a competitive advantage (Kapferer, 2012). Participant 10 also highlights how manufacturer brands and private labels have changed throughout time.

Well, I always thought that the manufacturer brands would carry more expertise when it comes to the products. So that's usually why I wanted to buy the manufacturer brands. And I also wanted to support them. But nowadays they have developed their private brands, so they try to bring quality. I mean that's why they have these different levels basically. (Participant 10)

The participant's point is that the retailer's own brands are often considered to lack the manufacturer brands' level of competence. At the same time, the participant makes clear that

they are aware of the growth of private label brands and that they nowadays provide more quality brands at different levels.

To summarize, we could see that a multitier private label portfolio can be advantageous in several different ways as there are diverse needs among different customer groups. By providing a broader selection of private labels, retailers can reach out to a larger audience with various preferences such as cost, quality, packaging, and environmental responsibility products. Additionally, by providing *Value-Added* options, it might give customers the impression that the retailer is offering what the customers are looking for and can accommodate various lifestyles of the many customer groups.

4.4 The link of ICA's multitier private label portfolio and brand image

In following sections we will present and analyze the link between ICA's multitier private label portfolio and their retailer brand image. Firstly, we will delve deeper into what impact ICA's multitier private label portfolio has on the brand image and thereafter we will discuss it the other way around.

4.4.1 Impact of ICA's multitier private label portfolio on the brand image

We could observe that how the participants perceive the multitier private label portfolio of ICA can have an impact on how they see the retailer as such. An interesting finding here was that the customers overall value the variety within the multitier private label portfolio and see it as something beneficial for ICA's brand image. However, they also raise concerns that some of the contained private labels might affect their perception of the retailer in a negative way.

> *I think it's both positive and negative. It's positive in the sense that there's a wider range of prices. But then negative in the sense that [...] you could think that it's really cheap and it does take away some of this exclusive feeling of ICA and if you get that like the shopping experience is nicer without ICA Basic. (Participant 7)*

The participants argue that the presence of *Value/Budget* private labels, such as ICA Basic, may diminish the exclusivity of the ICA experience. This in turn might have an impact on the entire shopping experience and ICA's overall brand image. When offering more competitively priced products, the retailer is facing the risk that people perceive ICA's overall brand in a different sense. For instance, they might associate the *Value/Budget* private label with the overall brand of ICA, which may make ICA appear less exclusive to some customers. A multitier private label portfolio must therefore, carefully be managed in order to maintain balance and interrelationships (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011). While some customers may desire a more luxurious or exclusive shopping experience, some customers would value having access to more competitively priced products. Therefore, a crucial component of portfolio management, according to Kapferer (2012), is evaluating the relationships between certain brands and their position within a larger portfolio before applying them. Moreover, the interviewees also expressed dissatisfaction with the substitution of manufacturer brands in the store for private labels.

> *But what I don't like is when they exchange the like normal products for the private label ones. So for example at my ICA they stopped with delicatobollar […] and now they only have ICA's instead, and then I really miss my manufacturer one. (Participant 7)*

Participant 7 does not appreciate how private labels are replacing some manufacturing brands. This poses a risk for the brand image, if the appearance of the private labels becomes too dominant in the shelves and the consumers cannot find the brands they have come to buy. This might result in consumers not seeing ICA as the brand with the great overall brand portfolio, but instead, getting annoyed by their narrow range of manufacturer brands. It is described in the theory that based on the manufacturer brands the retail stores offer, their brand image can change and be viewed in different ways (Berg, 2014). In this case, the store's decision to exclude certain brands has an impact on how the public perceives the retailer. On the other hand, from the empirical data, it is seen that the participants would not be pleased if ICA decided to stop offering their private label items.

> *That would be funny. Everyone has their private label. Well, now, since there are private label products I like, it would probably be weird if they did not offer those things*

anymore, [...] So yes. Then I would not be happy if they took away [...] certain products that I like. (Participant 10)

I believe they would lose customers due to this because many people also think about having the cheaper alternative. In that case, they might shop at other places. (Participant 13)

Regarding if ICA would not offer private labels to their customers, it is said that the respondents might do their grocery shopping at other places due to their big impact on their shopping behavior. This confirms what Bodur, Tofighi and Grohmann (2016) stated about private labels, that retailers' private labels have a great influence on the brand image and that customers would have another opinion about the retailer if the same products were not offered. Therefore, we argue that offering a multitier private label portfolio is important to retain a strong retailer brand image.

After analyzing these quotes, it became obvious that the perception of the components and the multitier private label portfolio as such can have an impact on the retailer brand image of ICA. Offering multiple private labels is being seen as a prerequisite nowadays, and if ICA would not fulfill these expectations, it may result in a negative brand image. Furthermore, we could see that how customers perceive the *Value/Budget* private label ICA Basic can have a negative impact on the retailer brand image. The same applies when retailers decide to replace a large part of the manufacturer brands with their various private labels.

4.4.2   Impact of ICA's brand image on the multitier private label portfolio

As we already mentioned in the previous chapters of the analysis, the majority of the participants described ICA as a well-known retailer, with a positive reputation and brand image. Interesting to see here was that the participants associate ICA as a brand, with positive values, and quality assurance and attribute these factors to ICA's private labels. Here our collected data match the findings of Irfan, Siddiqui and Ahmed (2019) and Martenson (2007), namely that a favorable store image can have a positive influence on the attitudes customers hold towards the offered private labels.

They have a strong brand and they represent good values and I think that's also reflected in all their products. [...] They have the pride of their brand and that [...] they actually put their logo on all their products means that they have to have some quality insurance in them. (Participant 1)

If I would not feel a positive connection to ICA as a brand then I would probably not feel it with the private labels as well, because ICA is such a prominent feature of the label. But since I like ICA, I feel positive towards this because it sort of gets represented on them. (Participant 4)

We could observe that these participants take the logotype of the retailer ICA on the private labels as an indicator for quality. As stated by Participant 4, people who hold a positive view of the retailer may naturally extend this to the private labels in the portfolio. This finding highlights that the logo of ICA may serve as a symbol of the brand's values and reputation, which then can consequently lead to participants extending their positive perception of ICA to their private labels. Therefore, we argue that the visibility of the retailer on the private labels can shape consumers' perceptions and preferences, ultimately influencing their evaluation of the quality. However, some participants pointed out concerns in regard to ICA not being visible enough on the private label product.

I bought the bread [...] and then it didn't say ICA on the packaging, not very clearly at all.[..] Then I got home and I felt a bit like I was pulled in a sense. [...] When I buy a private label I want to know what's private label. [...] But I don't know if it's a new strategy of theirs to hide it [...] but I didn't appreciate it. (Participant 7)

Some customers might feel betrayed by ICA, when it is not obvious that this is a private label of the retailer. This raises concerns that insufficient declaration of private labels within the ICA portfolio can have a negative impact on the retailer brand image. As mentioned by Keller (1993) the retailer brand image can leave an impression that stays in mind. If consumers develop negative associations towards the retailer brand in their own memories, it can adversely affect the retailer brand image. It can therefore be of particular interest to ICA to ensure transparency and visibly display its logo on its private label products. This allows customers to make an informed purchasing decision and enables the retailer to preserve the trust of their customers. Even though the participants acknowledge the differences in the value ladder of the multitier

portfolio and do not have the same expectations for each private label, they still expect a certain level of quality across the portfolio. This also aligns with what Porter and Claycomb (1997) and Shen (2001) state, that a retailer brand name carries specific associations and expectations that can be extended to the multitier private label portfolio associated with that retailer brand name.

> *Well, I trust ICA as a retailer. So I guess it makes me trust the product as well. I would think that ICA has a good ethic, like morale. So I expect them to also have that for the private label products, even for the cheaper ones. (Participant 7)*

This quote indicates that participants such as Participant 7 demonstrate a sense of confidence in ICA's ability to deliver products that go along with their expected outcome. This participant expects the same level of commitment to ICA's values in their private labels, even for the cheaper ones. This suggests consumers are striving for a consistent level of quality across the entire private label portfolio based on their trust in the ICA brand.

Even if the majority of those surveyed have mainly positive associations with the ICA brand, Participant 14, brings a different perspective to the debate. They noted that when consumers see the ICA logo on products, they tend to associate it with affordability, a slightly lower price range, and a potential loss in quality.

> *I think ICA's products maintain high quality, but I believe that the visibility of ICA's own logo leads people to perceive them as more budget-friendly and not as exclusive. Perhaps if that perception changed, and people gained more insight into the work behind the products, they might reconsider. [...] If you see the ICA logo, you think it's affordable, a bit cheaper, but if I were to buy something nice with good quality, I wouldn't look for the ICA logo. (Participant 14)*

Although Participant 14 believes that the goods meet good quality standards, customers could perceive the products as less valuable due to the visibility of the retailer ICA. It is noteworthy that Participant 14's perspective stands out from the majority of participants who showed a strong positive association with the ICA brand. This difference in viewpoints indicates that consumer perceptions vary and are very individual. This supports what He, Zou and Jin, (2010) and Martos-Partal, Gonzalez-Beniot and Fustinoni-Venturini (2015) stated, namely that these

perceptions may be influenced by consumer psychographics such as personal experiences, preferences, and in this case professional background.

We can summarize that with the visibility of ICA on their private labels certain expectations to the quality of the contained products come along. This suggests that how ICA as a retailer is perceived has an influence on the multitier private label portfolio. We can also conclude that an insufficient declaration of the private labels may have a negative impact on ICA's retailer brand image, because consumers might feel betrayed not knowing that it is the retailer who stands behind the product.

5   Discussion

In the following section, we will discuss the outcomes of our empirical data analysis along with findings from previous studies. To address our research questions, we focused in this part to discuss the relationship between the multitier private label portfolio and the retailer brand image. Further, we will take a look at how the different private labels are related to the retailer brand image and introduce our framework regarding the interplay of the three concepts of retailer brand image, multitier private label portfolio and consumer perceptions.

5.1   The interconnection of private labels and their impact on the retailer brand image

Private labels are said to have a significant impact on the development of an effective and profitable retailer brand image, in fact, it can even change the way consumers perceive the retailer (Bodur, Tofighi & Grohmann, 2016). Looking at the value ladder within the multitier private label portfolio of ICA, we were able to see that for our case study, the private label portfolio strategy (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008) was applicable. We successfully integrated the private labels into the framework and created an enhanced description for each private label with insights that were contained from consumers in regard to the case of ICA. The insights will hereafter be presented in order to discuss the impact they have on the retailer brand image.

It became evident when examining the various private labels that each served a unique purpose for various consumers and situations. For instance, the *Value/Budget* was perceived as rather cheap and of inferior quality, and customers did not always want to be associated with these attributes. However, customers claim that having the option to choose this private label is essential for certain types of groceries. What we noticed was that the *Standard* private label fulfills the ulitarian needs but with higher quality than the *Value/Budget* private label does.

Moreover, we could see that the *Value-Added* private labels have more value to offer than the *Standard* private label. Although consumers value the different value propositions and variety of private labels, they sometimes still place more trust in manufacturer brands when it comes to products with added value. Furthermore, we could also observe that private label products from the category of *Value-Added* are not necessarily associated with the retailer and are perceived as independent brands. However, this entails corresponding risks if the products are not associated with the retailer and if they cannot contribute to the branding of the retailer ICA. Furthermore, it was evident that consumers mostly thought *Premium* private labels were of superior quality although there were divided opinions. Since all of the private labels in the portfolio originate from the same retailer, there were some concerns about whether the quality was consistent and whether they contain the same ingredients. This can be problematic because these products of different quality and price ranges in the portfolio somehow might share the same customer perception in relation to the retailer. That being said, the connections between the private labels in the portfolio also caught our attention and the fact that we could see an interdependence between them. It was feasible to discover that the *Value/Budget* private labels have an impact on private labels with higher quality levels and prices in the value chain. Considering that consumers believe the private labels are somehow related, they might also mix up the value propositions of each private label and transfer it to the overall portfolio. However, to make it possible for the various private labels to differentiate themselves from one another in the portfolio, we found out that packaging plays an important role in positioning. Customers noted that a product's packaging can influence their impressions and reveal a lot about the product's quality.

Nevertheless, opinions regarding whether the different private labels contribute to the retailer brand image may vary depending on the private label. We believe that the *Value/Budget* private label does not necessarily contribute to the retailer's brand image formation, considering that customers felt that this kind of private label took away some of the exclusive feelings they might usually associate with the retailer. Consequently, it can even be assumed that in the most extreme scenario, it can even have a negative impact on the retailer brand image if the associations with the *Value/Budget* private label contradict too much with the core values of the retailer brand. On the other hand, we could observe that the *Value-Added, Standard* and *Premium* private labels are mainly positively associated and therefore may contribute to the retailer brand image. We therefore add another perspective to the approach of Zentes, Morschett

and Schramm-Klein (2011), who claim that it is only the *Value-Added* and *Premium* private labels that contribute to the retailer brand image.

5.2 The reciprocal impact of a multitier private portfolio and the retailer brand image

After analyzing our empirical material, we could see a reciprocal impact of multitier private label portfolio and retailer brand image. We could observe that the participants hold a positive opinion towards the multitier private label portfolio of ICA because they perceive the brand image of ICA as favorable. In connection with this, it is important to acknowledge the visibility of ICA on their private label products, as the name of the retailer can serve as a quality indicator of the product for the consumer. Which in fact also aligns with the findings of Shen (2001) and Collins-Dodd and Lindley (2003). This positive perception of the brand image of ICA, can therefore be translated into a positive opinion towards the multitier private label portfolio of the retailer. However, it is important to be aware of the posed risk if the retailer's name is not obviously recognizable, especially if the customer discovers later that it was a private label. This then can lead customers to develop a negative image of the retailer. The participants further expressed their willingness to explore and purchase various products under the ICA private label due to the belief that they would receive products of consistent quality and value. With that, a correlation between the participants' positive opinion towards the multitier private label portfolio of ICA and their favorable perception of the brand image can be observed. This highlights how crucial the brand image of a retailer is in influencing consumer attitudes and perceptions in the context of private label products.

Next to that, it is important to point out that if the multitier private label portfolio in the overall product offerings of ICA becomes too dominant, this might result in a negative perceived brand image of the retailer. This also aligns with what Kapferer (2012) said, that it is precisely the variety in a portfolio that can have a positive influence on the brand image. This applies not only to the multitier private label portfolio, but also to the retailer's overall offering of brands. After all, it is important to acknowledge that the diverse range of offerings by ICA has played a significant role in establishing its reputation as a reliable retailer with a positive brand image in the first place. Furthermore, it is important to point out that if ICA would decide to forego offering different private labels altogether, it may result in a negative brand image, as customers

have come to expect and are used to a certain variety. This means in general that by offering a multitier private label portfolio, the consumer expectation can be met, possibly even exceeded by the wide variety, and thus can make a positive contribution to the overall retailer brand image.

5.3 The interplay of a multitier private label portfolio, retailer brand image and consumer perceptions

By connecting our empirical material to three introduced theoretical concepts in the literature review, we could prove the interdependence of the three concepts of a multitier private label portfolio, retailer brand image and consumer perceptions for our case ICA. Therefore, we developed our own framework (Figure 5) that depicts this interplay.
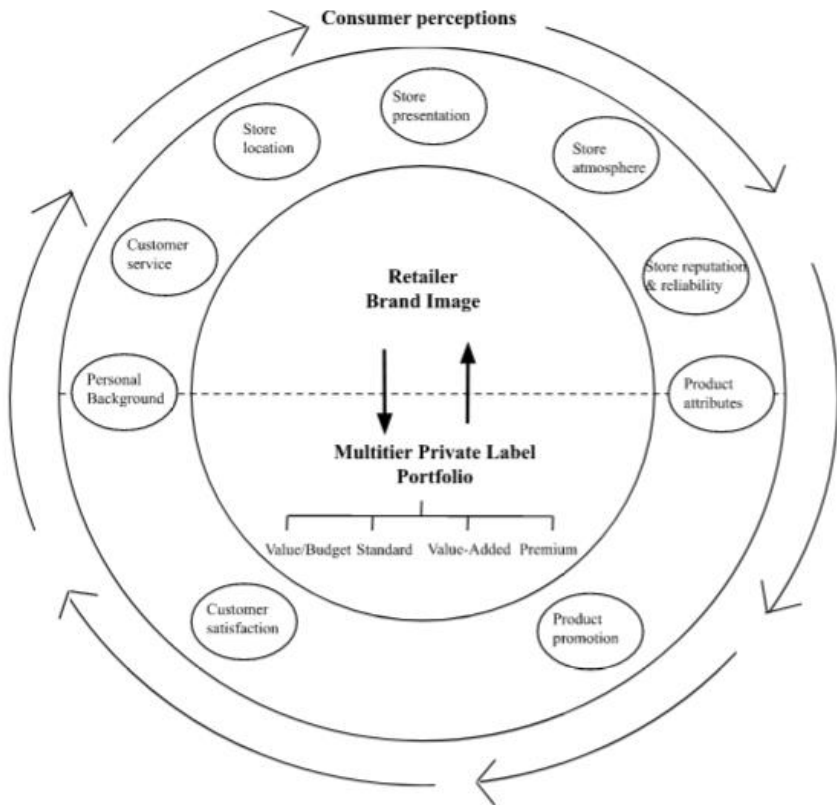

Figure 5: The interplay of a multitier private label portfolio, retailer brand image and consumer perceptions (Abrahamsson & Keppler, 2023)

We propose that consumer perceptions play a significant role in shaping both the retailer brand image and the perception of a multitier private label portfolio. We argue that the nine pre-defined consumer perceptions (see Table 1, Chapter 2.4) are ubiquitous and can affect both concepts. However, after analyzing our empirical material we could see that some of them have had a greater impact on the retailer brand image or the perception of the multitier private label portfolio for our introduced case of ICA. We argue that both "personal background" and "product attributes" can equally have an impact on both retailer brand image and multitier private label portfolio. We could see that "customer satisfaction" and "product promotion" are more related to the concept of a multitier private label portfolio, whereas "customer service", "store location", "store presentation", "store atmosphere" and "store reliability & reputation" can mainly be brought in connection with the brand image of the retailer. However, since the multitier private label portfolio and the retailer brand image mutually influence each other, it is challenging to establish a definitive demarcation of consumer perception-shaping attributes that applies universally.

6   Conclusion

In this final chapter, we will conclude our thesis by stating our theoretical as well as managerial contributions. In addition to that, we will provide suggestions for future research in this field of research.

6.1   Theoretical contributions

The purpose of this thesis was to understand how a multitier private label portfolio is linked to the retailer brand image from a consumer perspective. With our main finding, namely, that both the retailer brand image and the multitier private label portfolio have a reciprocal impact on each other, we contribute to previously executed studies within this field of research. However, we were also able to provide further theoretical contributions:

Firstly, we were able to develop a theoretical framework around the interplay of a multitier private label portfolio, retailer brand image and consumer perceptions. With this framework, we are illustrating that consumer perceptions are shaping how individuals build a retailer brand image and their view on a multitier private label portfolio. It also depicts the reciprocal influence of both multitier private label portfolios and retailer brand image.

Second, we could see that certain attributes identified in Lindquist's (1974) model of consumer perceptions can have varying degrees of influencing the formation of the retailer brand image or the perception of their multitier private label portfolio. We were able to arrange these attributes accordingly with the findings of our empirical material and thus provide a new more complex perspective on this model.

Thirdly, we could prove the theoretical framework of the private label portfolio strategy (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008) compatible with the private label strategy of ICA. We show that this model can be used for research in the

field of multitier private label portfolios and can also assist other researchers in their studies. Moreover, we contribute an updated description of the value propositions associated with each private label for this model. These updated descriptions have the potential to enrich the understanding of each individual private label within the examined research field.

6.2   Managerial contributions

In addition to the theoretical contributions, we can also provide several managerial contributions. These are not only relevant for retail managers, but also for the managers of manufacturer brands. The following insights can help to better understand how the private label product assortment can be connected to a retailer's brand image.

From a managerial standpoint is it essential to remember that the multitier private label portfolio and the retailer brand image are interconnected and that marketing efforts in one direction, might have a positive effect on the other due to their interdependence. This applies even when addressing unfavorable rumors or associations. Understanding how they are interconnected is crucial, especially if a retailer shares the same name as its private labels. Being aware of the weaknesses and strengths regarding effects of the interdependence can provide managers advantages when creating marketing strategies for their private label portfolios.

In particular, the finding that customers do not appreciate it when manufacturer brands are excessively replaced with private labels can be of great concern to retail managers. Despite the ever-increasing success of private labels, retail managers should keep in mind that they maintain a certain diversity in their overall retail offerings and that they do not replace their product assortment with private labels only.

Furthermore, we could observe that the private labels in the multitier portfolio with different value propositions, can influence each other as well as the retailer brand's image. The fact that the *Value/Budget* private labels can influence how consumers associate other labels in the portfolio, for instance, the *Value-Added* and *Premium* private labels, was also an interesting finding. When positioning private labels that stand out significantly from the rest of the

portfolio, managers must exercise caution. This in order to not transfer one association connected to a specific private label to the rest of the portfolio.

In addition to that, the finding that customers in certain private label categories still favor manufacturer brands over private labels is of significant value to manufacturer brand managers. In order to retain the position as the preferred brand, it is important to ensure that the product attributes responsible for this consumer preference are consistently of high quality or enhanced. In addition to that, effective marketing measures should be taken to strengthen the brand and ensure continued customer preference for these products.

6.3   Future research

After conducting our study we could determine several potential areas for further research. First, we could see that the model regarding private label portfolio strategy (Zentes, Morschett & Schramm-Klein, 2011; Zentes, Morschett & Krebs, 2008) in relation to *Value-Added* private labels still needs a more sophisticated representation. Since these can differ from each other in various aspects, such as in our study in regard to health or organic ingredients. In future research, this model could be therefore further developed and a distinction within this category could be explored.

Second, we have viewed the phenomenon of multitier private labels and their influence on the brand image from a consumer perspective. It would be beneficial to also explore this from a managerial perspective to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. Conducting interviews with retail and/or manufacturer managers could offer valuable insights about their motivations behind offering a range of private labels in a value ladder.

Third, a comparative analysis of the brand image in connection to multitier private label portfolios across multiple retailers in the same market could offer additional insights. By examining how different retailers' private label strategies and brand images influence consumer perceptions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the broader retail landscape. Moreover, it would be interesting to delve further into strategies employed by the

retailer of using its brand name on its private labels and examine the potential benefits of this further.

Fourth, we find it of relevance to investigate the optimal level of private label penetration for a retailer. We think it is important to understand how many private labels to include in a multitier private label portfolio given the valued variety of both manufacturer brands and private labels in a retailer's brand assortment.

Lastly, exploring subjects that are directly related to brand image could be a new area of inquiry. Delving deeper into closely related subjects within brand management, for instance, brand identity and brand reputation could add another perspective to our study.

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