

Master's Programme in Marketing

# The Role of Multi-Sensory Marketing in Shaping Consumers' Brand Perceptions

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### **Abstract**

As e-commerce reshapes consumer behavior and intensifies competition, physical stores must find new ways to attract and engage customers. In industries like cosmetics, where sensory experiences are vital, brick-and-mortar retailers increasingly use multi-sensory marketing to create immersive environments. However, most research has focused on individual sensory elements, with limited attention to the overall impact of multi-sensory marketing on brand perception and consumer behavior.

This study explores how multi-sensory marketing shapes brand perceptions in cosmetics retail, using the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Through twelve semi-structured interviews with consumers familiar with Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics, the research investigates how environmental stimuli influence emotions, brand perceptions and behavioral responses. Key themes were identified through the analysis of qualitative data using thematic coding.

The findings of this research confirm that effective multi-sensory strategies enhance consumer experiences, strengthen brand perceptions through emotional connections and drive desired behaviors. However, the study also highlights the need for balance, as overstimulation or poorly aligned sensory cues can harm the brand experience.

This research contributes to existing literature by integrating the S-O-R model with brand perceptions and examining the roles of sensory congruence and sensory overload. Future studies could broaden the sample and explore the long-term effects of sensory marketing on brand loyalty and purchase behavior.

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**Keywords** multi-sensory marketing, brand perceptions, Stimulus-Organism-Response model, cosmetics, marketing

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### **Tiivistelmä**

Verkkokaupan nopean kasvun muuttaessa kuluttajakäyttäytymistä ja kiristäessä kilpailua kivijalkamyymälät etsivät uusia keinoja houkutella ja sitouttaa asiakkaita. Kosmetiikka-alalla, jossa aistikokemukset ovat todella keskeisiä, myymälät hyödyntävät yhä enemmän moniaistista markkinointia luodakseen elämyksellisiä ympäristöjä. Aiempi tutkimus aiheesta on keskittynyt lähinnä yksittäisiin aistikokemuksiin, eikä kokonaisvaltaista moniaistisen markkinoinnin vaikutusta brändimielikuvaan ja kuluttajakäyttäytymiseen ole juuri tarkasteltu.

Tässä tutkimuksessa pyritään selvittämään, miten moniaistinen markkinointi vaikuttaa brändimielikuvien muodostumiseen kosmetiikkamyymälöissä hyödyntäen Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) -mallia (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Tutkimus pohjautuu kahdentoista Rituals Cosmetics- ja Lush Cosmetics -myymälöiden asiakkaan haastatteluihin. Keskeiset teemat tunnistettiin laadullisen aineiston temaattisella analyysillä.

Tutkimuksen tulokset vahvistavat, että onnistuneesti toteutettu moniaistimarkkinointi monipuolistaa asiakaskokemusta, vahvistaa tunnesiteitä brändiin ja ohjaa kuluttajakäyttäytymistä toivottuihin suuntiin. Samalla tutkimus korostaa tasapainon merkitystä, sillä aistiärsykkeiden liiallinen määrä tai huonosti yhteen sopivat aistivihjeet voivat heikentää kokemusta.

Tutkimus laajentaa aiempaa tutkimusta yhdistämällä S-O-R-mallin brändimielikuvien tutkimukseen ja tarkastelemalla aistien yhteensopivuuden sekä ylikuormituksen vaikutuksia. Jatkossa olisi hyödyllistä tutkia laajemmalla otannalla moniaistisen markkinoinnin pitkäaikaisia vaikutuksia brändiuskollisuuteen ja ostopäätöksiin.

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**Avainsanat** moniaistimarkkinointi, brändimielikuvat, Stimulus-Organism-Response-malli, kosmetiikka, markkinointi

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## **Preface and acknowledgements**

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Otaniemi, 17 April 2025  
Patrik Danielsson



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction to the Topic

*Almost our entire understanding of the world is experienced through our senses. Our senses are our link to memory and can tap right into emotion. A bright fresh spring day has a particular smell to it. Manufacturers try to bottle this feeling of life's renewal. Then the marketers use the emotional connection to spring to sell their dishwashing liquids, toilet cleaners, shampoos, soaps, window cleaners and, well, you name it... (Lindstrom, 2005).*

Traditionally focused on brick-and-mortar stores, the retail industry has experienced a transformative shift driven by the continuous advancement of digital technology (Sagar, 2024). With digital transformation, e-commerce has grown rapidly (Alexandrova & Poddubnaya, 2021), and multi-channel shopping has changed consumer behavior (Mittal, 2013). Consumers find online shopping easier and faster, reducing the role of physical stores, particularly in the cosmetics sector. Subsequently, the phenomenon of "showrooming" has become more prevalent, further undermining the value of physical stores.

*But one can't really smell the products through your cellphone or computer, right? Cosmetics are such a physical and emotional experience, and they require a proper environment to actually feel them.*

In addition to allowing consumers to interact with products, physical cosmetics stores also offer important communication possibilities for companies. The trend of online shopping has reduced the marketing and branding advantages of physical stores, which help companies communicate their brand identities through their in-store environments. For this reason, there is still a strong need for brick-and-mortar stores, especially in the cosmetics retail

sector, where sensory experiences play a crucial role in the consumer journey.

*How does one know what a brand is supposed to look, smell, sound and feel like if all of the physical touchpoints are stripped away?*

In addition to consumers not getting a chance to experience brands, traditional marketing alone is no longer enough for brands to stay competitive in today's saturated market (Kumar & Kumar, 2017). As products and services become increasingly homogenized, companies must seek new ways to differentiate themselves from their competitors to maintain a competitive edge (Haase et al., 2018). Additionally, with customer touchpoints expanding across both physical and digital channels, delivering superior customer experiences has become a strategic priority (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). This is why brands are increasingly striving to create rich sensory and emotional experiences for consumers (Kumar & Kumar, 2017). In this increasingly customer-centric and competitive environment, the in-store experience remains a powerful way for brands to build connections with consumers and stand out.

One way to enhance the attractiveness of the in-store environment while simultaneously communicating the company's brand to consumers is through sensory marketing. Traditionally, marketing has been heavily visual, but studies have shown that a multi-sensory approach, incorporating sound, smell, taste and touch in addition to sight, can significantly influence consumers' brand perceptions and purchasing behavior. The importance of experientialism has increased, and successful multi-sensory marketing can create a more appealing and engaging store environment, leading to positive consumer experiences, stronger emotional connections, and increased satisfaction, engagement and spending (Jayakrishnan, 2013; Turley & Milliman, 2000).

The idea that store environments can influence consumer behavior through sensory and atmospheric elements was first introduced by Kotler in 1974. He argued that environmental stimuli could be strategically designed to evoke emotional responses in consumers, increasing their likelihood of making a purchase. Building on this, Donovan and Rossiter (1982) expanded the discussion by emphasizing the role of emotions in shaping consumption behavior. They adopted the framework developed by environmental psychologists Mehrabian and Russell (1974), that connects retail environments, emotional responses and consumer behavior. The Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model has since served as the foundation for extensive research on how retail environments impact consumers' emotional states and shopping behaviors.

Much of the existing literature has focused on how retailers promote consumer engagement through sensory stimuli (Ballantine et al., 2010; Chebat and Michon, 2003). However, the research has mostly focused on individual sensory modalities and cues such as smell, sight and hearing, and their impact on consumer experience and consumer behavior (Donovan et al., 1994; Hultén, 2011). Some studies have explored the combined effects of senses, such as olfaction and sound, on consumer behavior (Mattila & Wirtz, 2001). In addition to the limited research on the combined effects of sensory modalities, relatively little attention has been paid to how sensory stimuli influence brand perception and store choice. In particular, the application of the S-O-R framework to brand experience and perception is still limited in the current literature.

As competition in the retail sector grows, brands are increasingly turning to multi-sensory marketing, purposefully designing environments that engage multiple senses simultaneously to create memorable and emotionally engaging experiences (Lindstrom, 2010). Research shows that the impact of marketing communications significantly increases when several senses are stimulated at once (Lindstrom, 2005). This multi-sensory approach has become

a key strategy in both marketing communications and distribution, enhancing the overall consumer experience.

At the same time, the importance of brand perceptions has grown dramatically in response to market saturation. With a substantial quantity of competing brands, consumers often base their purchasing decisions largely on the image of a brand rather than the product itself (Zhang, 2015). Brand perceptions, shaped by various mental associations, play a key role in building emotional connections between consumers and brands.

In light of this, the aim of this study is to investigate how multi-sensory marketing, as implemented in the store environments of cosmetics chains, contributes to consumers' brand perceptions. The empirical section of the research examines the implementation and effects of sensory marketing in two cosmetics retailers: Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics. The findings provide insights into how sensory congruence and incongruence influence consumer emotions, how sensory overload affects shopping experiences and how these factors ultimately shape consumer brand perceptions. The study contributes to the existing literature by offering a comprehensive perspective on the synergistic effects of multi-sensory marketing in retail environments.

## **1.2 Research Objective and Questions**

The objective of this study is to examine how multi-sensory marketing used in cosmetics retail stores influences consumers' emotions and perceptions of the brands and, ultimately, their behavioral responses. The research places a particular focus on the role of sensory congruence and sensory overload in shaping consumer experiences. The empirical section investigates the implementation of these sensory elements and their effects in the stores of two different cosmetics chains: Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics. The study aims to answer the following research questions and sub-questions:

RQ1. *What is the role of sensory marketing in shaping consumers' brand perceptions?*

RQ1b. *What's the role of sensory cue congruence and incongruence in shaping consumers' perceptions?*

RQ1c. *How does sensory overload affect consumers' perceptions?*

RQ2. *How do consumers' emotions and brand perceptions shape their approach and avoidance behaviors?*

To address these research questions, this study adopts a qualitative approach, incorporating semi-structured consumer interviews. In addition to the impact of multi-sensory marketing on brand perception, the findings provide insights into how multi-sensory marketing and sensory congruence and incongruence influence consumers' in-store emotions, how sensory overload affects shopping experiences and how these factors affect consumers' brand perceptions ultimately leading to behavioral responses. The study contributes to the existing literature by offering a comprehensive perspective on the synergistic effects of multi-sensory marketing in retail environments.

This research places particular focus on two cosmetics retailers in Finland, Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics, which actively utilize multi-sensory marketing in their store environments. Both brands exemplify how strategic sensory elements create a cohesive and engaging shopping environment. By analyzing the sensory experiences of customers, this research aims to expand the understanding of how sensory cues work together and contribute to brand perceptions, consumer experiences and approach-avoidance behaviors. By examining how these sensory components are implemented in these two cosmetics retail chains, the research aims to provide practical insights for marketers, retail designers and business owners. The findings of this research will contribute to a broader understanding of how sensory stimuli shape consumer decision-making in physical stores. The research was not conducted in collaboration with these brands.

### **1.3 Structure of the Thesis**

After the introduction, the second chapter of the thesis, the literature review, discusses prior literature on the topic and aims to provide a coherent theoretical basis. The first section of the literature review describes in more detail the concepts of multi-sensory marketing, the atmosphere of retail environments and the five sensory modalities of sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, which will be examined, specifically in the context of marketing. The second section deals with brand perceptions and how they influence consumers. The final section of the literature review presents the theoretical framework, which aims to bring together the concepts from the previous sections into a coherent whole. The third chapter discusses the methodology of the empirical study in more detail and explains the rationale for conducting the study. The fourth chapter then presents an overview of the results of the study and the fifth chapter discusses these findings considering the theoretical background. Finally, chapter six concludes the thesis, considers the limitations of the study and discusses possible future research.

## **2 Theoretical Framework**

This literature review examines the impact of multi-sensory marketing on consumers' emotional responses and brand perceptions, and how these factors ultimately influence their behavioral reactions. This chapter begins by introducing the background and key concepts related to the store environment, its sensory stimuli and consumers' multi-sensory experiences. The second section explores brand perceptions, their formation and their effects. In the third section, these concepts are brought together following the framework developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974).

### **2.1 Multi-Sensory Marketing in Retail Environments**

This section explores multi-sensory marketing. The section begins by introducing its historical foundation through the concept of store atmospherics. After that, sensory marketing is presented through the five senses: sight, sound, smell, touch and taste, before examining how these senses interact to shape consumer experiences in a multi-sensory marketing context. In addition, concepts related to multi-sensory marketing, such as sensory congruence and sensory overload, are also discussed.

#### **2.1.1 Store Atmospherics**

Research on sensory marketing largely stems from studies on store atmospherics. Kotler's seminal work, *Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool* (1974), defines atmospherics as the deliberate design of retail spaces to elicit desired consumer responses. Atmosphere is experienced through the senses, such as sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell. Store atmospherics play a key role in shaping consumer behavior by influencing their perceptions of the environment and guiding their decisions (Turley & Milliman, 2000).

According to Kotler (1974), well-designed retail atmospheres encourage specific behaviors, such as increasing purchase likelihood, shaping brand perceptions and reinforcing brand identity. Adding to this, Akhter et al. (1994) found that a favorable store atmosphere positively influenced brand image when consumers were unfamiliar with the brand. However, for familiar brands, consistency between the store environment and the product was more critical, demonstrating how consumers use environmental cues to form evaluations of brands, especially in unfamiliar contexts.

Store atmosphere consists of atmospheric variables, stimuli that create cognitive effects and behavioral responses (Turley & Milliman, 2000). Kotler (1974) distinguishes between intended atmosphere (deliberately designed sensory elements) and perceived atmosphere (subjective customer experiences). Individual perceptions vary due to selective attention and cognitive biases, influencing emotional and informational processing.

In addition, Kotler (1974) identifies three ways atmospheres affect consumers:

1. **Attention-Creating Medium:** The environment utilizes elements such as color, sound and movement to capture consumer attention.
2. **Message-Creating Medium:** The environment communicates the brand's differentiating factors, guiding decision-making.
3. **Affect-Creating Medium:** The atmosphere generates emotional responses, shaping purchase intentions. Kotler compares this to Pavlov's conditioning, where environmental cues trigger learned behaviors.

Since then, the focus has shifted towards the complexity of the customer experience, with particular emphasis on individual senses and their interactions.



### 2.1.2 Sensory Marketing

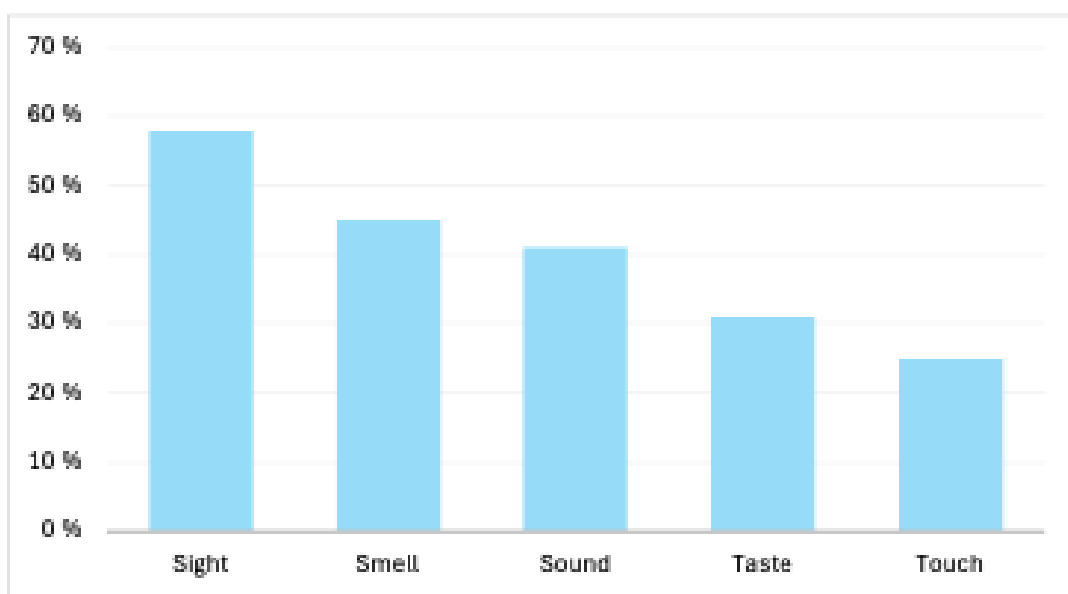
Sensory marketing, as defined by Krishna (2012), refers to "*marketing that engages the consumers' senses and affects their perception, judgment and behaviour*". The primary goal is to stimulate the right hemisphere of the brain and establish a strong connection between consumers and products, ultimately leading them towards purchase (Costa et al., 2012).

While sensory marketing is largely based on Kotler's (1974) research on atmospherics and their impact on consumers, it has been explored from slightly varying perspectives. Jayakrishnan (2013) emphasizes its role in brand differentiation, arguing that sensory marketing is essential for establishing a distinct brand identity in highly competitive markets. A strong brand identity, shaped through sensory experiences, should naturally connect itself in consumers' minds. This aligns with Kotler's (1974) argument that a store's atmosphere can sometimes influence purchasing decisions even more than the products themselves. Lindstrom (2005, 2010) expands on this perspective by highlighting the role of multi-sensory marketing in strengthening brand connections, which can even lead to increasing consumers' perceived value. Meanwhile, Soars (2009) examines sensory marketing from a more customer-centric perspective, suggesting that aligning sensory elements with consumer preferences enhances product appeal and attracts customers. Soars argues that creating positive retail environments boosts engagement and sales, as shoppers spend more in comfortable spaces. Tailoring sensory stimuli to customer preferences also fosters repeat visits and long-term brand loyalty.

Overall, sensory marketing shifts focus from traditional methods of marketing towards a more customer-centric approach by engaging all five senses. Although perspectives on sensory marketing in previous literature vary, they consistently convey the idea of designing and leveraging sensory experiences to shape consumer perceptions and behaviors.

### 2.1.2.1 Sensory Modalities

Sensory marketing is based on the five main sensory modalities: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. **Figure 1** below shows the relevance of the senses in the context of sensory marketing. As illustrated, sight is the most dominant sense utilized in sensory marketing, followed by smell, hearing, taste and touch (Lindstrom, 2005).



**Figure 1.** *Sensory dominance according to Lindstrom (2005)*

#### **Sight**

The sense of sight is the most dominant of the five senses, heavily influencing how most people perceive their surroundings. This dominance is so profound that visual stimuli can, in some cases, overrule information from other senses (Lindstrom, 2005). In retail context, the visual sense is essential to creating an engaging atmosphere, as studies highlight that over 80% of commercial and store communications rely on visual elements (Jayakrishnan, 2013). Retailers can utilize this by carefully designing their in-store spaces to appeal to consumers by implementing deliberate visual strategies.

There are numerous visual dimensions that shape the atmosphere. Kotler (1974) defined these as color, brightness, size and shape, later complemented in subsequent research by more specific factors such as the use of lighting, interior architecture, cleanliness, temporary exhibits and store layout (Daucé and Rieunier, 2002). In addition, logos and product packaging design also serve as powerful visual tools (Hultén, 2013).

The visual appearance of a store can influence consumers in various ways. Farias et al. (2012) point out that colors play a key role in attracting consumers' attention to a product. However, Hultén (2013) points out that visual stimuli influence consumers beyond simply catching their attention. For example, colors can elicit different biological and psychological responses (Farias et al., 2012). Key visual elements of products, such as logos, packaging, colors, designs and attractive shapes, help to create and reinforce the intended image of the product in consumers' minds (Hultén et al., 2009).

## **Smell**

Another relevant sense in sensory marketing is the sense of smell. Scents play a key role in shaping physical service environments (Hultén et al., 2009). Among the senses, the sense of smell is unique due to its direct link to the brain's limbic system, which governs emotions and memory (De Luca & Botelho, 2021; Halloway, 1999). Expanding on this, research highlights that up to 75% of emotions are triggered by the scents we perceive (Lindstrom, 2005). In addition to emotions, the close relationship between the sense of smell and memories makes it a strategically valuable tool in sensory marketing. Krishna, Lwin, and Morris (2010) found that product scents evoke memories and convey key information about products, meaning that the scents of products therefore help consumers to distinguish the product from its surrounding context.

In retail environments, marketing through scent focuses mainly on two categories: ambient scents and product scents. Ambient scents are fragrances introduced into the environment to create a specific mood for the consumers, even when unrelated to the brand (Rieunier, 2001; Chebat & Michon, 2003). Product scents, on the other hand, are directly tied to the product and play a key role in consumer preference. Research shows that products with fragrances are more memorable and attractive to consumers than non-fragrant alternatives (Krishna et al., 2010). Chebat and Michon (2003) also noted an indirect link between fragrances and customers' perception of product quality.

## **Hearing**

After sight, hearing is anatomically the second most developed sense (Björklund, 2010). In contrast to the sense of smell being closely linked to memory, hearing is primarily linked to mood (Lindstrom, 2005). Research shows that music, in particular, significantly influences consumers' emotions and moods (Bartholmé & Melewar, 2009). In sensory marketing, music is utilized both in communication strategies and in retail environments, but ambient music is more relevant in the context of the atmosphere of a retail environment. The effects of ambient music on consumer behavior are extensively researched and recognized in a variety of retail settings and situations (Grewal et al., 2003). Studies consistently conclude that music enhances consumers' moods, leading them to spend more time in stores and, consequently, consume more (Turley & Milliman, 2000). However, auditory stimuli in retail settings encompass more than just ambient background music. Daucé and Rieunier (2002) highlight that a consumer's auditory experience in a store is shaped not only by music but also by general noise, including sounds from appliances, environmental elements, and even items for sale.

## **Taste**

A distinctive feature of the sense of taste is that it rarely provides a complete sensory experience on its own, as distinguishing between foods with similar textures relies also on sight and smell (Krishna & Elder, 2021). While traditionally defined as a tongue-based perception, taste also usually encompasses contextual and sensory cues that shape food consumption (Krishna & Elder, 2020).

The sense of taste is more prevalent in foodservice environments such as restaurants and cafés, but in other retail environments taste experiences often come from samples offered at the point of sale (Daucé & Rieunier, 2002). However, Kotler (1974) argues that taste is not directly tied to the store's atmosphere, distinguishing it as a separate sensory element.

Despite its potential to create strong consumer connections, few brands integrate taste into marketing (Lindström, 2005). Since eating and drinking are linked to positive memories, taste stimuli can enhance customer experiences. Simple gestures, like offering coffee, can differentiate a brand, make consumers feel more comfortable and increase time spent in-store (Gobé, 2001).

## **Touch**

The sense of touch is the least researched and least utilized sense in sensory marketing, resulting in limited empirical support regarding its effects (Peck & Childers, 2003b; Lindstrom, 2005). Despite this, Lindstrom (2005) emphasizes that its impact can be significant when effectively integrated into marketing strategies.

Tactile experiences in retail stem from both environmental factors and product haptic properties. While in-store materials, temperature and humidity

shape touch perception (Daucé & Rieunier, 2002), product texture, hardness, temperature and weight are crucial for assessing quality and purchase decisions (Klatzky et al., 1991; Peck & Childers, 2003a; Peck & Wiggins, 2006). The opportunity to touch products has been found to influence consumers' store choice (Krishna and Morrin, 2008) and increase purchase likelihood through perceived ownership (Krishna, 2012), which can even occur through imagined touch (Peck & Shu, 2009).

Touch in retail serves three functions: gathering sensory information (e.g., checking fruit ripeness), providing haptic pleasure (e.g., feeling fabric texture) and fulfilling nonhaptic functional needs (e.g., reading labels) (Krishna et al., 2024). However, the relevance of tactile experiences varies by product category, function and brand (Spence & Gallace, 2011). Individual differences also affect the importance of tactile experiences (Hultén, 2013).

### **2.1.3 Multi-Sensory Marketing**

Traditional sensory research has largely focused on individual senses, but recently the interest has shifted toward their interplay (Driver & Noesselt, 2008). Sensory stimuli significantly influence consumer behavior and mood, with Turley and Milliman (2000) showing that engaging all five senses in retail enhances shopping intention, time spent in-store, product involvement, satisfaction, spending and enjoyment. According to them, the aim of sensory marketing is to create optimal sensory stimuli to enhance customer behavior.

A multi-sensory experience occurs when multiple senses contribute to perception (Hultén et al., 2009). Sensory inputs interact dynamically, as the brain integrates information across modalities to create cohesive perceptions (Ernst & Bühlhoff, 2004). This aligns with Gestalt theory, which suggests that consumers perceive sensory cues as a whole rather than in isolation (Fürst et al., 2021). This integration is possible because certain regions of the brain are multi-sensory, meaning they are specialized to process information from

more than one sensory input (Biswas et al., 2019), influencing consumers' feelings and impressions about products (Krishna, 2012).

Consumers' perceptions of environments and objects are shaped by the ability to process and integrate information from all sensory inputs (Seitz et al., 2007). This integration allows the senses to influence one another, modifying each other's processing and ultimately shaping our overall perception (Collins & Kapralos, 2019). The interdependences of sensory modalities are evident in studies examining how sensory information from one modality can influence another, such as olfactory cues shaping visual perception (Rimkute et al., 2015) or vision inputs altering hearing, touch and smell (Thesen et al., 2004). The interconnected nature of our senses allows characteristics from one sense to be linked with features of another, a phenomenon known as cross-modal correspondence (Spence, 2011). This means that a specific sensory characteristic can naturally shape consumer perceptions and behavior by influencing how they experience other senses. Marketers utilize cross-modal correspondence and aim to enhance the consumption experience by engaging multiple consumer senses (Elder & Krishna, 2010).

The importance of a multi-sensory approach is highlighted by Lindstrom's (2011) claim that brands engaging multiple senses outperform those focusing on just one or two. He emphasizes that in today's visually overstimulated world, multi-sensory touchpoints are essential for distinguishing a brand. The more sensory memories activated, the stronger the connection between a brand and a consumer (Lindstrom, 2005). However, in a retail environment, there is an optimal level of sensory stimulation for customers, leading to positive attitudes and behaviors. Beyond this threshold, sensory overload can disengage consumers from the shopping experience. Therefore, achieving the perfect sensory environment requires a holistic approach that balances all five senses.

There are challenges in studying multi-sensory marketing. A key challenge is the holistic nature of consumer experiences. Specifically, the fact that consumers do not experience environmental stimuli in isolation and that senses are interconnected. Rather than paying attention to individual sensory stimuli, typical consumers experience their environment as a seamless, collective experience rather than as discrete inputs (Ballantine et al., 2010). This means that when studying multi-sensory experiences, a holistic and integrated approach must be adopted to effectively examine the interconnected nature of consumers' sensory perceptions.

### **2.1.3.1 Cue Congruence**

An essential factor of multi-sensory marketing is the alignment and consistency of sensory stimuli, a phenomenon referred to as cue congruence (or sensory congruence). Cue congruence is defined as the degree of fit between stimulus features (Krishna et al., 2010).

Generally, when the atmospheric cues are congruent in terms of quality or dimension, they elicit more positive consumer responses compared to incongruent stimuli (Doucé & Adams, 2020). Multi-sensory congruence plays a significant role in sensory perception, as prior research demonstrates that the presence of multiple congruent cues across sensory modalities can enhance consumers' cognitive processes.

For example, congruent stimuli have been shown to increase consumers' behavioral performance by speeding up response times, increasing accuracy, improving stimulus detection (Laurienti et al., 2004) and facilitating better information processing (Mandler, 2014). Furthermore, congruent multi-sensory in-store environments are also rated as more appealing and attractive to consumers than environments that stimulate less of the customer's senses or offer non-congruent multi-sensory experiences (Spence et al., 2014; Krishna et al., 2010).



Congruity is preferred by consumers because it confirms their expectations, leading to a positive affective response through affect transfer (Doucé & Adams, 2020). In other words, when consumers' expectations are confirmed, the resulting positive emotions can enhance the consumer's evaluation of the object being examined. Additionally, congruent atmospheric cues may lead to easier processing of environmental stimuli (Schwarz, 2004), which can contribute to a “feel-good” effect. This effect can often be attributed to the stimulus itself rather than the ease of processing (Winkielman, Schwarz; Fazendeiro & Reber, 2003). As a result, consumers' perceptions of a congruent environment may lead to a positive experience that enhances their overall evaluation of the object being presented.

The significance of the congruency of sensory cues is well illustrated by Lindstrom's (2005) argument that the impact of brand communication can be even doubled through high sensory synergy. Although, in some cases, retailers can intentionally create tension between different sensory stimuli to capture consumers' attention (Lindblom, 2023a; Lindblom, 2023b). However, this strategy must be carefully controlled to prevent evoking negative reactions from consumers. Overall, to create a strong sensory experience, retailers must deliberately design sensory elements to work together as a cohesive, unified whole.

#### **2.1.3.2 Sensory Overload**

While adding sensory stimuli to a retail environment can increase the number of touchpoints for consumers, it may also increase the risk of sensory overload, which can lead to negative consumer reactions (Spence et al., 2014). In addition to the fact that the quantity of cues may heighten the level of arousal experienced, the cues' own stimulating properties may also play a role. The type and intensity of stimuli significantly influence how they are

processed and perceived. The more stimulating characteristics a sensory cue has, the higher the level of perceived arousal.

Doucé & Adams (2020) define sensory overload as a state in which an individual's capacity to perceive and process sensory stimuli is exceeded. When the level of stimulation in the store environment is too high, it may overwhelm cognitive processing, making it difficult for the consumer to manage the perceptual and cognitive demands imposed by the surroundings. As a result, sensory overload occurs when the environment exceeds a person's ability to cope with its cognitive and perceptual demands. The level of arousal consumers experience depends on the type of atmospheric cues present. Sensory stimuli can be categorized into "higher" and "lower" senses, each influencing perceived arousal differently (Doucé & Adams, 2020). Cues perceived by "higher" senses, such as vision and audition, tend to be more attention-grabbing, while those associated with "lower" senses, like smell, taste, and touch, are less central to attention, reducing the risk of sensory overload.

## **2.2 Brand Perception**

In this section, the concept of brand perception and its impact on consumers is explored. First, the definition and characteristics of brand perception are examined, followed by a description of its influence on consumers.

### **2.2.1 Definition of Brand Perception**

In literature, the terms *brand perception* and *brand image* are often used interchangeably. In this research, these terms are considered conceptually similar and will be discussed under the general term *brand perception*, except when referring to specific definitions from original sources. Brand perception refers to "the act of using only one's own sense organs to gain knowledge about, interact with, and experience the environment" (Boothe, 2002, p.2). It reflects how people interpret a brand's identity based on their own beliefs

and perceptions, rather than solely relying on the brand's intended messaging (Kervyn, Fiske & Malone, 2012). In simpler terms, brand image refers to the overall impressions, feelings and associations that consumers have about a brand (Roy & Banerjee, 2008). Möller and Herm (2013) suggest that these perceptions are significantly shaped by in-store sensory experiences.

In the more modern definitions, brand image is viewed as the sum of a consumer's experiences with a brand's products or services (Keller & Lehmann, 2006). Bibby (2011) also highlights the idea of brand image as the consumer's "mental image" of the brand's offerings, which includes symbolic meanings that consumers associate with certain product features or services, which helps consumers differentiate between brands and products, especially when their tangible qualities are hard to distinguish. Since brand image represents the overall impression consumers have of a brand, which is made up of both reasoned and emotional perceptions (Aaker, 2011), marketers seek to create a positive brand image by creating a strong link between the brand and its image in the consumer's mind.

Keller (1993) defines brand image as "*perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory.*" He divides these brand associations into three categories: attributes, benefits and attitudes.

Brand attributes are characteristics that define a product or service and influence consumer perceptions of what it is and what it offers. These can be product-related, such as the product's features, or non-product-related, including external factors like price, packaging and the brand's personality or user and usage imagery, which shape consumer impressions and emotions (Keller, 1993).

Brand benefits refer to the value or advantages that consumers expect to receive from a brand's products or services. Huang et al. (2015) presented three categories of brand benefits based on previous research: functional, symbolic

and experiential. Functional benefits relate to a product's reliability and performance in solving problems. Symbolic benefits fulfill needs for self-expression and social approval, while experiential benefits provide sensory and cognitive stimulation.

Brand attitude refers to a person's overall perception of a brand, which is a combination of tangible and intangible factors (Park et al., 2015; Veloutsou, 2015). Rossiter (2014) emphasizes the complexity of brand attitudes from a more practical perspective, defining them as consumers' evaluations of a brand based on its ability to fulfill a currently relevant buying motive. This means that consumers can hold multiple, situation-dependent brand attitudes. Ultimately, brand attitudes play an important role in shaping consumer behavior and influencing brand choice (Keller, 1993).

### **2.2.2 The Influence of Brand Perceptions on Consumer Behavior**

Although research on the impact of brand image on consumer behavior remains limited, it is widely recognized that brand image plays a crucial role in shaping consumer emotions, cognition and decision-making. Möller and Herm (2013) highlight that in the context of in-store sensory stimuli, strategically shaping brand personality enhances the overall store image, strengthens positioning efforts and fosters customer loyalty, leading to higher retail sales and profitability.

Marketers often consider brand image the foundation upon which consumers assess product or service quality (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). In this regard, brand image functions as an external cue that influences consumers' quality perceptions and purchase decisions (Torres & Bijmolt, 2009). A well-established brand image helps consumers simplify decision-making, particularly in competitive markets where product differences may be minimal. Moreover, Haase et al. (2018) found that brand image and satisfaction influence consumer loyalty, price premium and buying intention. The indirect impact

of brand experience through these factors is stronger than the direct effect, and a positive experience enhances consumers' perception of the brand.

Beyond its role in quality perception, brand image also plays a role in shaping consumer self-identity. Consumers tend to prefer brands that align with their self-image (Tepeci, 1999). In this way, brand image not only differentiates products but also allows consumers to express themselves through their choices.

### **2.3 The Stimulus-Organism-Response Model**

In this section, the concepts presented in previous sections are integrated using the S-O-R model. The section explores how, through the S-O-R framework, in-store sensory marketing and atmosphere shape consumer experiences of the store environment, influence brand perception formation and ultimately consumer behavior.

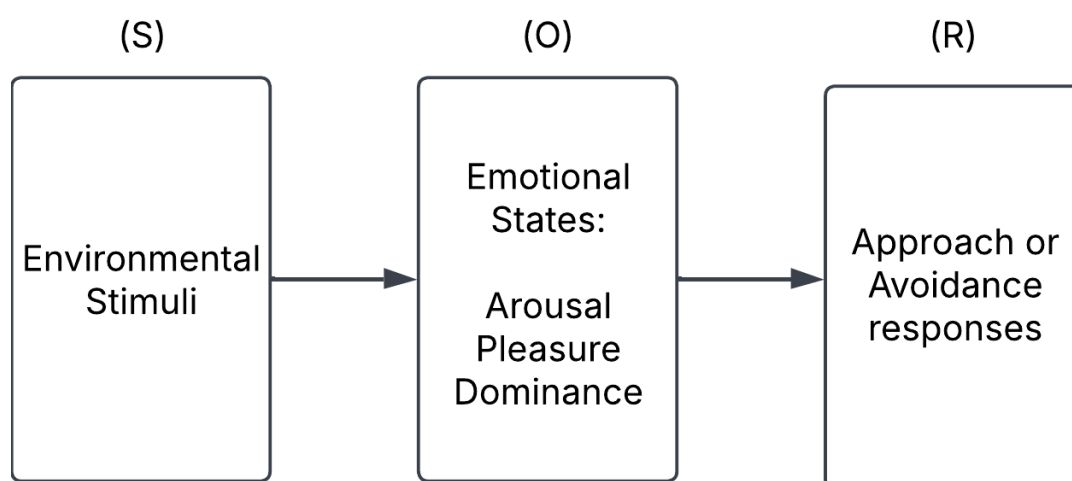
Environmental psychologists Mehrabian and Russell (1974) developed a framework for understanding how store atmosphere influences consumer behavior using the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm. This model posits that environmental stimuli (S) trigger emotional responses (O), which then drive the behavioral responses of consumers (R).

According to the model, consumers can react to sensory stimuli (S) with one or a combination of three emotional states (O): pleasure, arousal and dominance (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Pleasure refers to positive emotions such as happiness, satisfaction and contentment (Graa & Dani-elKebir, 2012). Arousal reflects a consumer's level of activation and readiness to act (Graa & Dani-elKebir, 2012). Arousal is often seen as the driver of pleasure, but research suggests an inverted U-relationship (Russell & Mehrabian, 1978), meaning environments that are stimulating only lead to positive responses if they are also pleasant (Doucé & Adams, 2020). In other words,

high arousal without pleasantness may result in negative arousal. Finally, dominance measures the extent to which an individual feels in control of their environment, or how overpowered they feel by it (Graa & Dani-elKebir, 2012). The stronger the sense of dominance in a situation, the more submissive the individual's state tends to be.

These three emotional responses influence consumer outcomes, leading to either approach or avoidance behavior. Approach behavior includes staying longer, exploring, engaging with others and feeling satisfied and enchanted with tasks in the environment (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). On the other hand, avoidance behavior involves escaping from the environment, remaining inanimate and having a hindrance of enchantment and satisfaction while performing a task, and ignoring other attempts to communicate (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982).

The Mehrabian-Russell model is widely used to explain how physical environmental stimuli affect consumer behavior (Liu & Jang, 2009). While originally designed for general environmental psychology, it has since been extensively validated in retail settings (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982).



**Figure 2.** The Stimulus-Organism-Response model based on Donovan & Rossiter (1982)

The S-O-R model provides important insights into the complex interactions of retail environment stimuli, consumers' perceptions, emotions and behavioral responses.

### **2.3.1 Sensory Stimuli (S) and Their Influence on Consumer Emotions and Brand Perceptions (O)**

When examining the S-O-R model in the context of multi-sensory marketing, the first component, stimulus (S), relates to consumers' sensory perceptions arising from the stimuli present in the retail environment. Previous studies have shown that in-store environmental stimuli positively influence consumers' emotional experiences (O) (Chang et al., 2011; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). Additionally, the positive influence of multi-sensory marketing on consumers' emotional states has also been explored (Le et al., 2024).

The organism (O) component of the S-O-R model includes both consumer emotions, which form from exposure to sensory stimuli in the retail environment. In the context of this study, the organism component also encompasses consumers' brand perceptions. Emotional responses are central to consumer responses and are strongly influenced by atmospheric stimuli. These emotions, specifically pleasure and arousal, are essential for understanding consumer behavior within retail environments (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). While the S-O-R model traditionally includes pleasure, arousal and dominance as key emotional responses, Donovan and Rossiter (1982) found that in a retail environmental context, pleasure and arousal play a significant role, whereas dominance has a less significant impact (Afonso & Vaz, 2014).

There is limited empirical research on the role of multi-sensory effects in the emergence of arousal and pleasure emotions and the impact of each sense and sensory combination has not been comprehensively studied. It has generally been researched that pleasant sensory stimuli play a significant role in

making consumers feel comfortable and fostering positive emotions (Haase et al., 2018). Previous research on the effects of senses on consumers' emotions has shown that environmental stimuli such as scents, sounds or attractive product displays have a positive effect on consumers' arousal and pleasure levels (Graa & Daniel-Kebir, 2012).

Previous research clearly highlights the importance of arousal levels in consumer responses, including approach behavior, excitement, engagement and purchase intentions. Sensory stimuli should generally be arousing for consumers to respond positively to the environment. However, the optimal arousal level is context-dependent, and both excessively high and low arousal levels can have negative consequences. For example, excessive arousal levels can lead to sensory overload, particularly when stimuli intensity exceeds an optimal level (Spence et al., 2014).

There has been a considerable amount of research on the effects of ambient scents in retail environments on the emotions experienced by consumers. The research has highlighted the impact of scents on consumers' arousal levels. It is well-known that scents can affect the consumer's arousal level (Mattiola and Wirtz, 2001; Lorig & Schwartz, 1988) and the pleasure experienced by consumers (Doucé & Janssens, 2013), proving a direct effect of sensory stimuli on consumers' arousal levels. In addition to arousal and pleasure, Schifferstein et al. (2011) found that scents also positively influence consumers' moods in the retail environment.

A key factor in consumers' sensory perceptions is cue congruence, which refers to the alignment between different sensory cues. In research exploring the multi-sensory interaction of senses, the impact of cue congruence between stimuli emerged as an important factor in shaping the emotions experienced by consumers. The congruence between sensory cues is influenced by factors such as the quality and intensity of the cues. Extensive research has examined the combined effects of scents and other sensory stimuli.



Mattila and Wirtz (2001) found that consumer satisfaction, impulse buying and approach behavior increase significantly when the arousal levels of music and scent are matched (high vs. low), while pleasure levels increase only slightly. In line with this, Spangenberg et al. (2005) found that a Christmas scent paired with Christmas music increased store attitudes, visit intentions, pleasure, arousal and environment evaluations. However, when paired with unrelated music, it had no positive effects and even reduced dominance, store attitudes, and visit intentions.

These findings align with Morrison et al. (2011), who observed that congruent stimuli, such as loud music and vanilla scent, both of which triggered arousal, significantly increased consumers' pleasure and positively influenced purchasing behavior. The interaction between scent and tactile stimuli is highlighted in the study by Krishna et al. (2010), which found that the combined congruence of olfactory and tactile cues enhances positive evaluations, while incongruent stimuli negatively affect perceptions of the environment or product.

The relationship between product categories and scents has also been studied. For example, research by Mitchell et al. (1995) shows that when a scent aligns with the product category, it fosters cognitive engagement, encouraging consumers to process information more deeply and rely on their past experiences. In contrast, scents that are inconsistent with the product category disrupt cognition and may trigger irrelevant memories. While Bosmans (2006) argued that the pleasantness of environmental scents alone can facilitate positive cognitive responses, more recent findings challenge this finding. Olofsson et al. (2012) emphasized that congruence plays a more significant role than pleasantness when processing scents at a cognitive level, reinforcing the importance of alignment between scent and product expectations. Although a significant portion of previous research focuses on the congruency between scent and other sensory cues, there is also research on the congruency of other types of sensory cues. Fiore, Yah, and Yoh (2000) found that

a product display with a congruent fragrance led to more positive approach responses and pleasurable experiences compared to an inappropriate fragrance, the product alone or the product with no fragrance.

The influence of retail environment stimuli on brand perceptions has been less extensively studied; however, existing research indicates that these stimuli play a significant role in shaping brand image. The retail environment subtly shapes these perceptions through bodily experiences (e.g., seating comfort, temperature) and visual stimuli, often without consumers' conscious awareness (Möller & Herm, 2013). By strategically using both subtle and noticeable sensory cues, brands can shape consumer perceptions while minimizing resistance to persuasion.

When examining the factors that lead to emotional responses in consumers, it's essential to consider external influences in the store environment, particularly mood states, which are present in all shopping encounters and significantly impact consumer behavior (Swiyard, 1993). Research by Sherman et al. (1997) suggests that the atmospheric effects of a store on consumer behavior are mediated by the consumer's emotional state. Additionally, Dawson et al. (1990) highlight that emotional states within a store environment may stem from emotions introduced into the space, rather than solely from the store's atmosphere itself. These emotional states can be considered situational variables that pose a challenge to the assumption that consumers' positive or negative emotional experiences are induced by the store environment alone.

### **2.3.2 Consumer Emotions, Brand Perceptions (O) and Behavioral Responses (R)**

In the context of multi-sensory marketing and brand image, the Response component of the S-O-R model refers to the behavioral reactions triggered by the emotions elicited in consumers through stimuli in the retail

environment. Previous research on this topic generally suggests that pleasure and arousal in the store environment are strong predictors of consumers' behavioral intentions (Kenhove & Desrumaux, 1997).

### **2.3.2.1 Approach behavior**

According to Mehrabian and Russell's model, there is a conditional interaction between pleasurable and arousal in determining approach and avoidance behavior. In this hypothesis, in a pleasant environment, higher arousal is expected to lead to greater approach behavior (Donovan and Rossiter 1982). However, the authors have since found conflicting results based on these hypotheses (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al., 1994).

Similarly, Lam (2001) found evidence indicating a nuanced relationship between arousal and purchase behavior, showing that arousal's influence is moderated by the presence of pleasure. Research has generally recognized that pleasant environments encourage approach behavior (Bone & Ellen, 1999). Kenhove and Desrumaux (1997) found that in a neutral environment, inducing pleasure leads to higher approach behavior. Although their results were not statistically very significant, they suggest that enhancing pleasure plays a more crucial role in generating approach behavior than increasing the level of arousal.

Furthermore, research has also explored how approach behavior manifests. Studies have shown that emotional reactions of pleasure and arousal caused by the store environment directly encourage consumers to spend more time in the store and potentially spend more (Donovan et al., 1994; Sherman et al., 1997). Additionally, previous research has identified findings where consumer emotional states are not considered, instead focusing on the direct impact of sensory stimuli on consumer behavior. For example, Errajaa et al. (2021) found a positive relationship between environmental scents and

approach behavior, suggesting that well-chosen scents can enhance consumers' willingness to engage with the environment.

Brand perception has also been found to influence consumer behavior. Specifically, consumers' brand perception has been shown to have a positive impact on both customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. However, some studies challenge the notion that brand image directly influences customer loyalty, suggesting instead that the influence is indirect and is mediated through customer satisfaction (Zhang, 2015). This means that customer loyalty itself can be seen as a driver of customer satisfaction. However, Walsh et al. (2011) found that emotions of pleasure and arousal generated by store environmental cues positively impact customer satisfaction with the store, which in turn enhances customer loyalty. This highlights the direct influence of pleasant environments on consumers' store choices. Similarly, Sherman et al. (1997) discovered that pleasure induced by sensory stimuli has a direct effect on customers' store liking and increased spending. Keller (1993) also states that customer loyalty typically stems from consumer acceptance of a brand, leading to repeated purchases and ultimately generating profit for the company. Therefore, it can be assumed that consumer-experienced pleasure has a particularly positive impact on brand perception.

### **2.3.2.2 Avoidance Behavior**

The hypothesis proposed by the Mehrabian and Russell model suggests that in an unpleasant environment, higher levels of arousal can increase avoidance behavior (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). In such situations, increased arousal does not lead to greater engagement but rather strengthens the individual's desire to withdraw from the environment. However, similar to the approach-behavior hypothesis, empirical findings on the avoidance hypothesis have been somewhat inconsistent. Conflicting results suggest that the relationship between arousal and avoidance may be influenced by additional

factors not fully accounted for in the original model (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Donovan et al., 1994).

Wirtz et al. (2007) further support this view, arguing that when arousal levels exceed an individual's optimal level, they trigger a desire to escape the situation, such as leaving a store. This aligns with arguments about sensory overload, suggesting that excessively arousing environments may overwhelm individuals, leading to avoidance responses.

Previous studies have also shown that an unpleasant environment, regardless of the arousal level, is often enough to prompt avoidance behaviors. Donovan and Rossiter (1982) highlight that unpleasant environments can inherently lead to avoidance. Thus, avoidance behavior can stem not only from high arousal levels but also from the unpleasantness of the environment itself.

Together, these arguments emphasize the complex interplay between environmental pleasantness, arousal levels and behavioral responses. They highlight that both high arousal levels and the overall unpleasantness of an environment can lead to avoidance behavior, either independently or in combination.

### **2.3.3 Summary of the Theoretical Framework**

In this section, the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model, developed by Mehrabian and Russell, was introduced. The model is especially useful for studying how sensory stimuli impact individual behavior, and it has been widely applied in research on retail environments. In this study, the model is adopted to explore how multi-sensory marketing influences consumers' emotional responses, brand perceptions and, ultimately, their behavior.

In the S-O-R model, the focus is on how sensory stimuli in the environment, such as sounds, smells and visuals in a store, affect consumers' emotional reactions, specifically arousal and pleasure, which influence consumer behavior. This section also connects brand perceptions to emotional responses, suggesting that consumers' brand perceptions can affect their behavioral responses. Prior research has consistently shown that pleasurable and arousing retail environments encourage consumers to spend more time in stores, feel more comfortable, increase purchasing behavior and even increase brand perceptions. However, brand perceptions have not been as extensively studied in relation to the model, indicating a gap that this research aims to address. Studies have found that positive brand perceptions enhance consumer satisfaction and loyalty. However, the relationship between brand perception and loyalty remains somewhat complex, as some research suggests that the influence is indirect, operating through customer satisfaction rather than as a direct effect. Emotional responses, particularly pleasure, significantly contribute to shaping brand perceptions and influencing consumer behavior.

A key factor in how sensory stimuli affect emotional responses is sensory cue congruence, which refers to how well the different sensory elements in the environment function and align together. When sensory cues are congruent, they strengthen the emotional reactions of arousal and pleasure. However, if arousal levels become too high, the stimuli can lead to sensory overload, which may result in avoidance behaviors, such as leaving the store.

Although the S-O-R model has been widely validated in the context of retail studies, there is still some uncertainty regarding the roles of arousal and pleasure and their relation to each other. In general, the effect of high arousal depends on the level of pleasure in the environment. High arousal in a pleasant environment encourages consumers to engage with the store, while high arousal in an unpleasant environment can cause them to avoid it, often due to sensory overload. This suggests that the ideal level of arousal depends on

the specific context, highlighting the importance of carefully designing multi-sensory elements in retail settings.

In conclusion, the application of the S-O-R model in multi-sensory marketing provides valuable insights into the shaping of consumer behavior. By strategically designing retail environments with congruent, well-balanced and holistic sensory stimuli, businesses can enhance consumer experiences, strengthen brand perceptions and, ultimately, drive sales and customer loyalty.

### **3 Methodology**

This research explores the role of multi-sensory marketing in store environments on consumers' brand perceptions of cosmetic retail chains, focusing on Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics. This research employs a qualitative methodology, utilizing semi-structured interviews to understand how sensory stimuli in physical store environments shape consumers' brand perceptions. In addition, this study examines the role of sensory congruence and incongruence in influencing the customer experience, as well as the effects of sensory overload. A qualitative approach was selected for this study as it aligns effectively with its objectives and provides a deeper understanding on consumer perceptions. The data was gathered using semi-structured interviews, all of which followed a standardized interview protocol (see **Appendix 1**).

This chapter focuses on the methodological decisions made throughout the following stages of the study. These decisions were carefully chosen to support the goal of understanding how multi-sensory stimuli in the cosmetics store environment influence consumers' brand perceptions. The chapter provides a detailed description of the research design and methods used in this study. It begins by presenting the chosen research approach, along with the rationale behind selecting these methods. This is followed by a description of the data collection process and an explanation of the data analysis process.

#### **3.1 Research Approach**

Research methods can generally be divided into two categories: quantitative and qualitative (Hirsjärvi, Remes, Sajavaara, & Sinivuori, 2009). In this thesis, a qualitative approach is used for several key reasons.



Qualitative research is ideal for exploring and understanding a topic in its natural context. It focuses on providing a deep, holistic understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon being studied, which makes it particularly suitable for addressing the research questions of this thesis (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015; Hirsjärvi et al., 2009). The primary aim of qualitative research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon and its context (Hirsjärvi et al., 2009; Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). This approach is particularly useful when exploring issues related to human experiences and the meanings individuals attach to those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Although some critique qualitative research for its limited generalizability, the focus of qualitative studies is not on statistical generalization or causality, as it is in quantitative research (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2015). Instead, the aim is to explain a phenomenon in a detailed and contextual manner. In fact, attempting to generalize in qualitative research can sometimes obscure the true understanding of the phenomenon, as it may detach the study from the context in which the phenomenon occurs (Bonoma, 1985).

In this study, a qualitative approach is chosen because it aligns best with the objectives. The goal is to provide a detailed description of how multi-sensory marketing influences consumer brand perceptions. This is a relatively under-explored area, and qualitative research is particularly useful when there is limited existing information on the topic (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Additionally, the focus on cosmetics stores specifically further highlights the need for a qualitative approach, as existing research on the topic, particularly in cosmetics retail context, is limited.

### **3.2 Data Collection and Methods**

The data for this research was collected through semi-structured interviews. A total of twelve informants were individually interviewed using a semi-structured approach. Eleven were recruited through referrals within the

researcher's extended network, while one informant was found online via social media. All informants were consumers familiar with Rituals Cosmetics and/or Lush Cosmetics stores. The informants were selected through purposive sampling, a method that ensures the most relevant individuals are chosen to provide the richest possible data. This approach allows the researcher to assess in advance how comprehensive and in-depth data can be collected from the informants. The informants were chosen based on their self-reported familiarity and visiting frequency of the stores, ensuring consistency in the sample and relevance to the research question. The sample included an equal number of occasional (light users) and regular (heavy users) customers, enabling a balanced perspective on brand perception in multi-sensory retail environments. However, during the pre-interview process of mapping the informants' activity levels, it became evident that defining activity levels was highly interpretative and subjective. Differences in individual perceptions made it challenging to systematically map customer activity, meaning that the classification of activity levels could only be determined through post-interview analysis. The limited age range and sample size may be considered a limitation of this study and should be considered when evaluating the results.

The informants (**Table 1**) were residents of the Helsinki metropolitan area, as most of the stores included in this research were all located in Helsinki, Vantaa and Espoo. The informants were young adults, aged between 22 and 29. No specific gender distribution was considered, as gender was not a primary focus of the study. However, the majority of the informants were female, with one male and one informant who did not specify their gender. This demographic homogeneity can be seen as a limitation of the study. Although gender was not the central variable under investigation, the larger proportion of female informants is considered when analyzing the findings.

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Usage</b>	<b>More Familiar Brand</b>
Informant 1	24	Female	Student	Occasional	Lush Cosmetics
Informant 2	26	Female	Employed	Occasional	Rituals Cosmetics
Informant 3	23	Female	Student	Occasional	Rituals Cosmetics
Informant 4	25	Female	Employed/ Student	Regular	Rituals Cosmetics
Informant 5	22	Female	Employed/ Student	Occasional	Lush Cosmetics
Informant 6	24	Female	N/A	Regular	Rituals Cosmetics
Informant 7	24	Female	Employed	Regular	Rituals Cosmetics
Informant 8	29	Female	Employed/ Student	Semi-regular	Rituals Cosmetics
Informant 9	26	Female	Employed/ Student	Occasional	Lush Cosmetics

Informant 10	N/A	N/A	Student	Semi-regular	Rituals Cosmetics
Informant 11	25	Female	Student	Regular	Lush Cosmetics
Informant 12	29	Male	Employed	Semi-regular	Rituals Cosmetics

**Table 1.** Informant participation table

Interviews are one of the most commonly used data collection methods in qualitative research (Sarajärvi & Tuomi, 2017). This method was chosen for this study because it allows for in-depth data collection while maintaining flexibility, which allows the ability to adjust the sequence and phrasing of questions, ask follow-up questions based on the informants' responses and provide the informant the opportunity to answer in ways that may lead the conversation in previously unexpected directions (Saunders, 2007). In a semi-structured format, interviews balance open-ended, informal discussions with structured elements. This approach allows for the exploration of deeper, unexpected insights while maintaining a systematic and comprehensive understanding of the topic (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015).

A well-structured interview consists of a set of pre-defined questions designed to address specific issues directly related to the objectives of the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). To ensure alignment with the research objectives, interview questions were designed to directly address the main research question and sub-questions. The interview structure (**Appendix 1**) was built around the in-store experience, beginning with general questions before delving into sensory stimuli and their effects, followed by brand perceptions and consumer responses. The goal was to gather insights into how

multi-sensory retail environments shape consumer emotions, perceptions and responses.

This interview protocol was fairly consistently followed for all 12 interviews, though deviations occurred when necessary to explore emerging themes. If one of the brands was more familiar to the informant than the other, the interview questions were adapted accordingly. Interviews were conducted in two formats: 3 were conducted face-to-face and 9 online via Microsoft Teams. All interviews were recorded with verbal consent from the informants and the recordings were solely used for transcription and in-depth analysis. The duration of the interviews ranged from 27 minutes to 57 minutes.

The structure of the interview questions was revised once during the interview process. The first three interviews provided insight into how informants interpreted and responded to the questions. However, it was noted that many answers were repetitive and did not fully address the research questions as intended. After the third interview, the structure and wording of the questions were adjusted to ensure that the responses provided deeper insights and more directly addressed the research questions. Along with the changes, a few new and more in-depth questions were added. The revised structure was used for interviews 4–12, with the attached interview structure (**Appendix 1**) reflecting this final version.

During the interviews, informants were displayed images of Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics store environments to help refresh their memories. However, the use of visual materials may have unintentionally led informants to focus more on visual aspects of the stores, potentially limiting reflections on other sensory elements. To address this, the interview questions were designed to guide informants to consider a full range of sensory stimuli. Additionally, the "About Us" pages from each brand's website were reviewed during the interviews to enable a comparison between the brands' self-presented identities and their in-store environments.

### **3.3 Research Material Analysis**

The interviews were followed by a thematic analysis, a method used to identify, analyze and report patterns (or themes) within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen for this study due to its flexibility, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the data without the constraints of a predetermined theoretical framework.

Thematic analysis can be categorized into two approaches: inductive and deductive (or theoretical) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this research, an inductive approach was selected, as it allows for the exploration of themes that emerge directly from the data, rather than being influenced by existing theoretical concepts. This methodology provides a richer understanding of the overall data and allows for a comprehensive exploration of the study's subject matter.

Braun and Clarke (2006) have presented a clear and structured approach to conducting thematic analysis, dividing the process into six distinct stages:

1. Familiarizing with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing the themes
5. Defining and naming the themes
6. Producing the final report

This step-by-step process ensures that the analysis is both systematic and in-depth, guiding the researcher through the key stages of interpreting the data. Before starting the analysis, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Since the interviews were conducted in Finnish, the transcriptions were also done in Finnish to preserve the accuracy and context of the informants' responses.

Once the data was transcribed, the next phase involved generating initial codes using ATLAS.ti software. This process involved preliminary categorization of identified themes, ensuring that all relevant observations were captured for further analysis (Hair et al., 2015). During the coding process, recurring patterns, common themes and differences within the interview data were identified (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Codes are used to capture aspects of the data that are relevant to the research question (Clarke and Braun, 2017). The codes were created with precision to reflect specific elements of the interview data relevant to the research question, minimizing the risk of ambiguity that could arise from overly broad codes. These codes were reviewed, refined and merged where necessary to ensure clarity and precision.

Once the initial codes were refined, they were organized into broader thematic areas. These thematic areas served as the basis for deriving key findings and drawing conclusions. As the analysis progressed, some codes were modified and merged, reflecting clearer connections between themes.

A common method of analyzing qualitative data is thematic classification, in which the data is grouped into different thematic areas (Sarajärvi & Tuomi, 2017). After the coding process, the codes were grouped into overarching themes that shared central ideas (Clarke & Braun, 2017). These themes can then serve as a framework for organizing and reporting the empirical findings of the study (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

The next chapter reviews the results of the study and provides a preliminary summary of the findings relevant to the study.

### **3.4 Trustworthiness of the Study**

When designing, conducting and reporting research, particular attention must be paid to the trustworthiness of the study. The study's reliability depends on the researcher's adherence to responsible research conduct (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). In qualitative research, the trustworthiness of the study is often evaluated through the concepts of reliability and validity. Reliability refers to the consistency of the research process whether the same methods would produce similar results if repeated under comparable conditions. On the other hand, validity refers to how well the research findings capture or reflect the reality of the phenomenon being studied. (Saaranen-Kauppanen & Puusniekka, 2009).

A crucial factor in ensuring reliability is the consistent quality of sources used in the theoretical section and adherence to proper citation practices. Correct referencing not only enables the verification of information but also clearly separates the researcher's own contributions from existing literature. For this thesis, the literature review was compiled from sources directly relevant to the research topic and the quality and reliability of the references were carefully evaluated.

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2015) highlight that in qualitative research, reliability refers to the credibility of both the research process and its findings. This is particularly important in qualitative studies, where semi-structured interviews often involve multiple interpretive stages and subjective elements. To enhance credibility during the interviews, efforts were made to ensure that the informants fully understood the questions and responded as accurately and truthfully as possible. This was achieved by providing examples where necessary and asking clarifying follow-up questions during the interviews.



Ensuring trustworthiness also extends to the analysis of interview data. A common risk in qualitative data analysis is the potential loss of context or tone during transcription, which can lead to misinterpretation of the informants' intended meanings. To mitigate this risk, the analysis process relied heavily on the original audio recordings whenever ambiguities or context-dependent statements appeared in the transcribed material.

Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge possible biases within the data itself. In qualitative research, the researcher's active role in data collection, particularly in semi-structured interviews, introduces the possibility of unintentionally influencing the informants. The interviewer's assumptions, phrasing or prompts may guide the informants' responses, especially when discussing topics like perceptions of store environments or sensory experiences that consumers typically do not consciously analyze or recall in detail. As a result, the informants may reconstruct their experiences during the interview, potentially leading to memory gaps or inaccuracies.

## **4 Findings**

In this section, the focal companies of the study, Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics, are introduced. An overview of their backgrounds is provided, along with a description of their in-store environments. The store environments of the brands are described using an ethnographic observation approach to provide a comprehensive view of the sensory stimuli present in the atmosphere.

### **4.1 Overview of the Case Companies**

#### **4.1.1 Rituals Cosmetics**

Rituals Cosmetics is a Dutch cosmetics company founded by Raymond Cloosterman in Amsterdam in 2000, following his professional background at Unilever (Rituals Cosmetics, n.d.). The brand specializes in personal care products such as soaps, body scrubs and creams, which are characterized by the use of oriental-inspired scents. In addition to cosmetics, the product range includes home-related items such as scented candles, room fragrances and teas.

The company's stated mission is to enhance everyday routines by incorporating experiences that promote well-being. Rather than focusing solely on beauty, Rituals Cosmetics positions its products as tools for creating moments of relaxation and mindfulness in daily life. Rituals Cosmetics' tagline is "We're not here to sell you beauty; we are here to make you feel good."

#### **Rituals Cosmetics Stores**

Visiting Rituals Cosmetics stores offers a comprehensive multi-sensory experience. One of the most prominent visual elements is an artificial tree,

typically located in the center of the stores and designed to resemble a cherry blossom tree. Wood materials are also integrated throughout the store's design, including on the floors, product tables and often on the walls.

The consumer's eye is drawn to the product displays, which are arranged by product lines, referred to as different "rituals". The seasonal product display, usually placed near the store entrance, is the most visually dominant during observations. Each product line is color-coded, with packaging in shades such as deep green, rich red, turquoise, amber, pink, black and white. While the colors vary, the packaging consistently conveys a sense of luxury.

Each product line includes a range of different product categories, hand soaps, shower products, room fragrances etc., all with uniform design elements but distinct enough for customers to differentiate between product types. The product arrangement is relatively minimalist, avoiding visual clutter or a sense of "busyness". This visual impression is further emphasized by the store staff's dark clothing, which aligns with the overall dark, moody aesthetic.

Lighting in the stores is provided mainly by spotlights, which highlight product displays and the central cherry blossom tree. This creates a somewhat gallery-like atmosphere with a dimmer overall ambiance, highlighted by the typically dark-colored ceilings.

One of the most noticeable sensory elements in Rituals Cosmetics stores is the scent. The stores feature a pleasant, ambient fragrance likely originating from the various room scent testers within the store. The scent is not overpowering but blends naturally with the environment, reinforcing the focus on displaying products. Customers can also sample scents directly from the testers. Additionally, the scent experience extends beyond the store: when purchasing something, staff often spray the fragrance into the shopping bag, allowing the customer to take the store's scents home.

The auditory environment is characterized by calming music played at a relatively low volume. On several visits, the music complemented the Japanese-inspired atmosphere created by the cherry blossom tree. Although the playlist varied, the music remained slow-tempo and relaxing.

Tactile stimuli are also present and play a significant role in the in-store experience. Customers are encouraged to test products, with a dedicated hand-washing station being available for use. Scent testers and fragrance sticks are also provided near product displays. A more specific tactile element is the use of glass domes placed over certain products, such as candles. To smell the product, customers must lift the glass dome, creating an intentional interaction between the customer and the product.

Additionally, Rituals Cosmetics stores incorporate the sense of taste into the shopping experience. On several visits, staff offered the customers a small cup of tea upon entering the store. This gesture not only engages another sensory modality but also encourages consumers to stay longer and slow down while shopping.

Overall, Rituals Cosmetics stores create a carefully balanced multi-sensory retail environment. All five senses are thoughtfully engaged, and the sensory elements are aligned well. No single sensory cue dominates the space and instead, the elements work together seamlessly. This multi-sensory environment supports the brand's image and its emphasis on "rituals," both in product naming and store atmosphere. Combined, these elements create a somewhat "mystical" and luxurious feeling throughout the store.

A visual representation of the Rituals Cosmetics store interior is provided in **Appendix 2**.

#### **4.1.2 Lush Cosmetics**

Lush Cosmetics is a UK-based cosmetics company founded in 1995 by Mo Constantine, Mark Constantine, Rowena Bird, Helen Ambrosen, Liz Bennett and Paul Greeves (Lush Cosmetics, n.d.). The company produces and sells handmade cosmetic products, including soaps, lotions, scrubs, masks and shampoos. According to its website, Lush Cosmetics operates 886 stores worldwide and maintains seven manufacturing facilities across Canada, Japan, Australia, Croatia, Germany and the UK, with its headquarters in Poole, England.

Lush Cosmetics highlights its strong environmental and ethical commitments. The company emphasizes sustainability through handmade production, the use of fresh ingredients and efforts to reduce packaging waste. Animal testing is avoided, with all products tested on human volunteers. According to the Lush Cosmetics website, currently, 100% of Lush products are vegetarian, 94% vegan, 47% packaging-free ("naked") and 87% preservative-free. Initiatives such as palm oil removal and plastic-free product formats further reflect the brand's focus on minimizing environmental impact and promoting ethical business practices.

#### **Lush Cosmetics Stores**

Lush Cosmetics stores utilize multi-sensory elements extensively to create a distinctive store environment. Upon entering the store, the most immediate and noticeable sensory cue is the strong, sweet scent present throughout the space. This ambient scent likely results from the combination of the fragrances of the various products on display. In Helsinki, both Lush Cosmetics store locations share this exact same scent, making it immediately recognizable and strongly associated with the Lush Cosmetics brand.

Following the initial olfactory impression, the stores' visual elements become prominent. The layout of the store is dense, somewhat bold and visually busy, with large quantities of products displayed closely together. The products are generally colorful and arranged according to product categories such as shower products, fragrances, bath bombs and skincare items etc. The bath bombs, in particular, stand out due to their vibrant colors and creative shapes resembling animals, fruits, berries and fictional characters. Many products, including the bath bombs, are sold without packaging.

The way the products are displayed resembles a fresh produce section or a candy store, mainly due to the colorful appearance and the density of the displays. Store staff wear aprons, which, combined with the in-store preparing and weighing of certain products, contributes to a handmade impression. In addition, handwritten-style fonts contribute to this aesthetic, handwritten fonts on contrasting black-and-white "chalkboard" style signs emphasize a crafted, artisanal vibe. The overall lighting in the stores is bright and highlights the visual elements.

Auditory stimuli are also present in Lush Cosmetics stores. Background music is always present and during each visit, typical pop music was playing. The music volume is somewhat low, functioning mainly as ambient background sound rather than dominating the sensory experience.

Lush Cosmetics stores also incorporate the sense of touch. Customers are encouraged to physically interact with the products with a round water basin being available in the store, providing an area where products can be tried. Additionally, certain products, such as face masks, are placed in bowls next to the basin, allowing for hands-on testing.

Overall, Lush Cosmetics stores create a multi-sensory environment where especially olfactory and visual stimuli are particularly strong and well-aligned. The scent and colorful, dense product displays work together to attract

attention and create an engaging atmosphere. The volume of the background music is noticeably lower than one might expect, allowing the scent and visual elements to remain dominant. The possibility for tactile interaction with the products is present, reinforcing the store's handmade and experimental feeling. The unpackaged presentation of many products emphasizes their textures and materials, often resembling edible items. Combined with staff presentation, these elements contribute to a distinctive sensory retail experience.

A visual representation showcasing key elements of the Lush Cosmetics stores can be found in **Appendix 3**.

## **4.2 Qualitative Interviews**

This section presents the interpretation and analysis of the interview data. Based on the coding process, key themes were identified and used to address the research questions. First, the brand perceptions that emerged from the interviews are explored, along with the role of sensory stimuli in shaping these perceptions within the store environment. Next, sensory congruence and incongruence are examined, based on the informants' responses. Following that, insights from the interviews regarding sensory overload and its effects are discussed. Finally, the impact of brand perceptions on consumers' approach-avoidance behavior is addressed. The section concludes with a summary of the key findings, presented in **Table 2**.

### **4.2.1 Sensory Cues in Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics Stores**

This section presents the findings from interviews exploring the sensory stimuli experienced by customers in the store environments of Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics. According to the interviews, the most prominent sensory stimulus in both chains was scent, although perceptions of the intensity and nature of the scents varied significantly. Other notable sensory

elements included visual aspects such as colors, lighting and store design, as well as the sense of touch with the opportunity to physically interact with and test products. In contrast, auditory and gustatory stimuli were less frequently mentioned. Notably, only a few informants recalled the presence of music in either store, with some unable to remember whether Lush Cosmetics played music at all, suggesting that while scent and visual elements leave a more lasting impression, auditory stimuli may not be as central to the overall customer experience. A more detailed discussion of the sensory experiences unique to each brand follows.

### **Rituals Cosmetics**

The most frequently mentioned sensory stimulus in Rituals Cosmetics stores was scent. Multiple informants described the store's scent as subtle and pleasant, enhancing the overall shopping experience. However, a couple informants found the combination of different products' scents overwhelming and confusing, which indicates that individual scent preferences play a role in how the in-store environment's scent is perceived. However, most of the informants found the scent of Rituals Cosmetics to be pleasant and one informant even mentioned that the scent makes the customer want to return to the store.

*Informant 1: "At Rituals, I think their store's general scent isn't too strong; the shop itself smells quite fresh."*

An interesting observation from Informant 2 was that Rituals Cosmetics sprays a fragrance into customers' shopping bags upon purchase, which they found to be a luxurious detail that extended the sensory experience beyond the store itself. The practice of spraying a scent into the shopping bags creates a longer-lasting impression on consumers even after leaving the store.



*Informant 2: "...And when you buy something, they spray your bag with perfume, which adds to the luxurious experience."*

Visual aesthetics was another significant aspect of the sensory experience in Rituals Cosmetics stores. Several informants noted the pleasant and distinct store design, mentioning elements such as product colors, materials, lighting and decorative pieces such as artificial trees. Along with the uniform dress attire of the employees, layout and arrangement of products and other decorations, these elements contribute to an immersive and pleasant atmosphere.

*Informant 10: "I feel like the visual aspect stands out first, it immediately creates a visual experience. When you see it from a distance, and then step into Rituals, where there are often cherry blossoms, it almost feels like entering a different world or even another country."*

*Informant 5: "At Rituals, everything is always arranged so beautifully. Everything is neatly lined up, organized by scents and categories. The way they structure it based on their fragrances is really nice, it's tidy and enjoyable."*

*Informant 6: "For example, when thinking about Rituals stores, I always notice the nice ambient lighting. It's not too dim, but at the same time, there aren't overly bright spotlights either. It creates a cozy and pleasant atmosphere."*

The in-store music was mentioned in a few interviews, where it was described as relaxing and spa-like. Informant 4 pointed out that the music in the store features an East Asian-inspired ambiance. While not as frequently noted as scent or visual elements, background music appeared to subtly contribute to the overall coherence of the shopping experience.

*Informant 7: "Rituals has a noticeably milder scent, and there's also that relaxing spa music playing in the background."*

Additionally, several informants noted that in Rituals Cosmetics the customers are offered a cup of tea upon entering the store, which enhances the overall sensory experience by incorporating the sense of taste. This allows the cosmetics store to create a slightly more holistic sensory experience by incorporating the usually neglected sense of taste into the in-store experience. Three informants specifically mentioned the tea service, with Informant 6 noting that it created a sense of caring within the store.

*Informant 6: "And then there's usually that tea service, where you get a small cup of tea, which I think adds a sense of luxury. It makes you feel like you're really being taken care of as a customer."*

## **Lush Cosmetics**

In contrast to Rituals Cosmetics, Lush Cosmetics was overwhelmingly associated with a strong scent. All 12 informants mentioned the scent, with opinions divided on whether it was pleasant or overwhelming. However, most informants agreed that the smell was very strong. Many noted that the store's scent was detectable even before entering and a couple informants mentioned finding it distracting when trying to distinguish individual product fragrances. The scent revealed that the individual differences of the informants significantly influenced their opinions on the scent of the Lush Cosmetics stores. While the strong scent contributes to a distinctive and recognizable store atmosphere, it may also deter consumers who are sensitive to strong fragrances. Several informants acknowledged that even if they personally enjoyed or were unbothered by the scent, it could still be uncomfortable for those who are sensitive to scents.

*Informant 4: "I remember Lush from my childhood because I've smelled that same scent near Lush stores. It's just so over-the-top. And then, of course, there are also the tactile sensations. But the scent is just so extreme that nothing can top it. I can't think of any other store with such a strong sensory impact. And it's really funny because even abroad, it smells the same. It smells just as overpowering abroad, you can smell it from so far away. It's so fascinating. Even though Lush has a lot more to offer, the scent is just so intense. If someone doesn't like strong scents, I'd stay as far away from Lush as possible, and I do think that scent drives some people away."*

*Informant 6: "Well, as I mentioned earlier, the scents or fragrances don't bother me. For example, in that Lush store, the scent is really strong and it can even spread outside the store, but it doesn't bother me at all. To me, it's just a lovely thing."*

Beyond scent, Lush Cosmetics' visual elements were also perceived as strong, with multiple informants noting the colorfulness of the store. The bright hues, handwritten product labels and bold typography were frequently mentioned, contributing to the store's distinctive aesthetic. Informants mentioned the visual look of Lush Cosmetics in a fairly neutral way, with a couple of informants calling it "wild" or "chaotic". Overall, this visual style contrasts with the more organized and minimalist approach of Rituals Cosmetics.

*Informant 7: "So, after my workday, I went there [Lush Cosmetics store] and it has a really strong scent. It's not really my favorite kind of scent, it's like everything they sell there just blends together in a chaotic way. And then there's the loud music, so it's maybe a bit much. It doesn't give me any kind of luxurious feeling, and I prefer places that make me feel relaxed."*

*Informant 9: “But, to me, Lush is just so chaotic. There are so many colors, and the font is kind of aggressive. Then there are the chalkboard-style signs and everything else, it’s just, I don’t know.”*

A key factor mentioned by multiple informants for Lush Cosmetics was the significance of the sense of touch. Many informants highlighted the ability to physically interact with and test products as a primary reason for visiting a Lush Cosmetics store. This aspect of customer engagement appears to be a defining feature of Lush Cosmetics’ brick-and-mortar experience.

*Informant 4: “But if I want to go and touch things, which is probably the main sensory experience I’m looking for in a brick-and-mortar store, then I want to be able to try things out. That’s why I go to physical stores, so I can get my hands on everything.”*

The sense of taste was entirely absent from the interview responses, in contrast to its mentions in the context of Rituals Cosmetics. Auditory stimuli were mentioned only a few times, with one informant unsure if there was any music or only low-volume background music, another recalling pop music and one noting loud music. These findings suggest that auditory elements are not a prominent component of the in-store experience at Lush Cosmetics stores.

#### **4.2.2 Brand Perceptions and the Role of Multi-sensory Marketing**

The significance of multi-sensory marketing and store environments on consumers’ perceptions of the brands and the stores themselves became evident in the interviews. The importance of store environments is particularly emphasized in the context of cosmetics stores, as cosmetic products are typically highly dependent on the senses. In several interviews, the significant role of the store environment in relation to brand perceptions was highlighted. Both Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics are store brands where scent, product

appearance and touch play a major role. The importance of physical stores, compared to other touchpoints, was particularly emphasized. The majority of the informants had not previously encountered these chains through any other touchpoints than the physical stores.

*Informant 10: "In this context, it [in-store environment] matters a lot because the products, you need to experience them before you can form an impression of them. For example, the scent experience at Rituals is such a big part of the brand. So, the store experience, the scent experience, might actually shape your perception of the brand. In this situation, I think the store experience is a huge part of the brand and its brand image. What you get from that is that it's hard to form an opinion before you've been to the store. Of course, if there's some hype or trends that you see, that can give you some kind of expectation, but still, I wouldn't say that you can form an opinion just from that."*

*Informant 8: "I think the thing here is that both of these brands are ones that I've mainly become familiar with through their physical stores. I've visited their stores, and they're quite prominently displayed, the stores, the brand name and everything really stand out that way. I haven't really come across either brand much in other environments. Sure, maybe I've seen them briefly on some online store, but I haven't really checked their social media channels or anything like that. So, in that sense, my experience with the brands is mostly through their physical stores. In fact, it feels like the stores themselves very strongly represent the brand."*

## **Rituals Cosmetics**

The most common brand perception that emerged regarding Rituals Cosmetics' brand image was "luxury". Other frequently mentioned impressions in the interviews included tranquillity, a spa-like atmosphere closely related to

the perception of luxury, an East Asian ambiance and the perception that Rituals Cosmetics is slightly more targeted toward an older audience compared to Lush Cosmetics. Other individual impressions included femininity, aestheticity and reliability.

According to the informants, the luxury associated with Rituals Cosmetics' brand is created by the consistency and clarity of the store's elements. The most frequently mentioned elements contributing to this luxurious image included the opportunity to test products at dedicated hand-washing stations, the product displays, and the uniform attire of the store staff. The dim lighting, packaging design and warm, wooden tones of the store environment and materials also contributed to the luxurious image. One informant also mentioned glass domes that need to be lifted up to interact with the products.

*Informant 6: "Yeah, it's definitely a completely different vibe there. Even just the fact that they have the handwashing stations where you can test the products, it's got the scrubs, hand creams and everything. And especially the way everything is displayed, it's so different. The layout is really clear and organized. Even the staff adds to the feel of luxury; their uniforms kind of give off a flight attendant vibe."*

*Informant 7: "Rituals, on the other hand, has more of a mysterious vibe. The stores are a bit darker, and there's something about that darkness that makes it feel luxurious and intriguing. It gives off a sense of elegance and curiosity."*

*Informant 5: "Well, probably the natural materials, like wood and even the plastic tree, give off that [luxurious] feeling. I'm not sure if the scent is too strong at Rituals, but when you go and smell a product, it's usually under those glass displays. You can lift them up and feel the texture as well."*

Several informants also noted that if they were unfamiliar with Rituals Cosmetics, they might assume, based on the luxurious store environment, that the brand is more expensive than it actually is. One informant also mentioned that despite the luxurious perception of Rituals Cosmetics, the stores are still more approachable compared to other luxury stores, particularly due to, for example, the customer service experience.

The perception of tranquillity and relaxation was influenced by elements such as tea service and the assistance of store staff in testing the products. This finding is particularly noteworthy, as cosmetics companies rarely engage consumers' sense of taste. Typically, tactile stimulation is a more dominant sensory modality in terms of cosmetics stores. According to the interviews, the calming perception is created by the dark colors of the environment, atmospheric lighting, a large artificial tree in the center of the store, the clear arrangement of products and the scent, which is not too strong.

*Informant 3: "There, it's really calm, like a spa atmosphere. I've been there where they offer tea, wash your hands and you get to try the products. It really feels luxurious, and you get this sense that you need those things, even if you didn't plan on buying anything."*

*Informant 1: "Rituals makes me think of calmness. There's often dim lighting, like in this picture, with dark walls and wallpaper. Is there a cherry tree there? I think the cherry tree is something special, or maybe it's just that everything is so neatly arranged. In my experience, the stores are more spacious compared to Lush. At Rituals, the scent isn't as strong, and the lighting is darker. I think the staff has a specific uniform, and there's a calm atmosphere. You can just go there and be in a Zen-like state."*

*Informant 10: "Yeah, I think at least at Rituals, the lighting isn't as bright or harsh compared to Lush. It's a bit softer, with certain*

*products being highlighted by the lighting, but overall, the lighting is dimmer. It creates a more relaxed vibe, like you're in a spa or something."*

## **Lush Cosmetics**

The most frequently mentioned brand perception associated with Lush Cosmetics was playfulness. The factors contributing to this playful image included the vibrant store environment, the appearance and arrangement of the products and the opportunity to test the products.

*Informant 1: "Lush gives off a playful vibe, and it also feels like a bit of a "girls' thing," you know? All the fun bath bombs that fizz and explode in the water, the lip scrubs that taste like bubblegum and all that."*

*Informant 11: "I'd say that Lush also reinforces this image by the way they display their products. They have testers, and there's that water basin where you can drop in a bath bomb and see how it works. It adds a playful element, letting you try out the products right there in the store."*

Another recurring perception of Lush Cosmetics was its experimental and innovative nature. One informant described Lush Cosmetics stores as having a lab-like feel, with hands-on experiences such as trying out different textures and seeing how products react. The ability to touch and test the products was a common theme across multiple interviews, reinforcing not only the brand's experimental perception but also the association with playfulness. The interactive nature of product testing, combined with the visually appealing products, further contributed to this perception.

*Informant 4: "I think the brand image they want to convey is really reflected in their stores. With Lush, it's all about being hands-on, you*



*can wash your hands, stick your fingers into some weird-looking clay and try out tons of testers. There's also a bit of a lab-like feel to it, which I think is quite strong with Lush. Everything kind of looks like lab samples, the way the labels are written in black, almost as if someone just grabbed a black jar and scribbled "Test 1, Product..." on it."*

Many informants noted that, in addition to its strong scent, the Lush Cosmetics store environment was characterized by its vibrant colors. Some informants associated this colorfulness with a youthful or even childlike impression. This perception was also reflected in the appearance of the products, as Lush Cosmetics' items often resemble characters familiar from movies and games.

*Informant 11: "It can easily give off a bit of a "this is for kids" vibe, especially when you think about all the bright colors and how there's just so much going on. It can easily feel kind of like a candy store. That's kind of the feeling it gives off."*

In the interviews, the perception of Lush Cosmetics as a natural brand also came up repeatedly. Several informants mentioned the idea of Lush Cosmetics being organic in their responses. However, this image did not come across as the primary association, but rather as more of an observation. In many the interviews, the image that stood out was that Lush Cosmetics' products are handmade.

In the interviews, the perception of Lush Cosmetics as a natural and organic brand was frequently mentioned. Several informants expressed the idea that they perceive Lush Cosmetics products as being organic. However, this image was not necessarily the first impression people had, but it rather seemed to be a secondary observation. A recurring perception in many of the interviews was that Lush Cosmetics products are handmade.

*Informant 1: "Well, as far as I know, Lush is a bit more organic. Their products are likely made on a smaller scale, possibly by hand, using more natural ingredients. And the packaging is completely different too."*

*Informant 7: "Lush definitely gives off more of that kind of vibe... I know it's probably not fully organic or anything, but it still kind of feels that way. I'm not sure if that's the right way to put it, but it has a bit of a hippie, organic, natural kind of feel."*

Interestingly, one informant shared that the natural image associated with Lush Cosmetics products led to a negative perception. They explained that because the products are seen as natural and handmade, there's an underlying assumption that they have a shorter shelf life. This perception suggests that products may expire quickly or spoil, leading the informant to feel that they must be used within a short period of time.

*Informant 4: "Lush products need to be used quickly because they expire fast. Since they're natural and handmade, it gives the impression that they might get moldy within six months."*

While it wasn't always clear in the interviews where the perception of naturalness and handmade qualities originated, a few informants mentioned that these impressions were influenced by factors such as the arrangement of the products, which resembled a fresh produce display, as well as the packaging.

*Informant 11: "In general, cosmetics often aim for a kind of clinical perfection, but with Lush, there's more of a feeling like, "Hey, look, here's this person who, with their own little hands, has made this, bar of soap or something, for you."*

### **4.2.3 Cue Congruence and Incongruence**

The interviews provided a clear picture of how the informants perceived the sensory stimuli congruence in the two cosmetic retail chains' stores. However, assessing congruence or incongruence solely based on the informants' personal experiences can be challenging. Since their responses rely on memory, they may be somewhat superficial or lack depth. This highlights the difficulty of capturing the specific details of sensory perception in a retail environment, as people often process such stimuli subconsciously rather than through deliberate reflection.

An interesting detail mentioned in multiple interviews, in relation to the concept of incongruence, was the incongruence between the store's environment and the shopping center environment. This incongruence arises because the environmental atmosphere of the stores, that are typically located within shopping malls, is so immersive that it creates a contrast between the store's atmosphere and the shopping center's more hectic atmosphere.

#### **Rituals Cosmetics**

The interview responses showed that the sensory elements of Rituals Cosmetics stores are harmonious. A clear majority of informants described the store environment as very harmonious, right down to the uniforms worn by the employees. Many informants highlighted how well the different sensory elements, such as scent, music and visuals, work together to reinforce the informants' perceptions of the stores and the brand.

*Informant 10: "Rituals, I think, is really, really carefully thought out, and it creates a cohesive experience with the scent and the visual aspects. They fit together really well. It gives you a luxurious feeling both from the interior design and the scent; they complement each other perfectly, and that's really important. You don't want to have a store*

*that's decorated really luxuriously, but then the scents smell cheap. That wouldn't work, it creates a bit of a contradiction, like, 'Is this some kind of scam? This place looks so nice, but these scents are just like something from a discount store.'*

This perception of a carefully curated and cohesive sensory experience was repeated by multiple informants. Several noted that the combination of elements such as lighting, music and even features such as a water basin, contributed to the overall feeling of sensory harmony.

*Informant 4: "I think Rituals has a pretty cohesive atmosphere, the music is calm, the staff uniforms have a certain look, I can't remember exactly when I noticed, but aren't they those simple, dark outfits?, and there's that hand-washing basin where the water flows beautifully. To me, it all feels quite harmonious."*

This reflects how even the smaller details, like the store's water feature, contribute to the overall sensory experience, reinforcing the feeling of tranquility and consistency.

Another key theme was the brand's ability to embody the concept of luxury, ensuring that all sensory elements aligned with this message.

*Informant 8: "I think it's a really well-built brand in the sense that it represents, as I mentioned, everyday luxury. Many elements are closely connected to that idea, and everything feels very seamlessly in harmony. It's like all the elements come together in a way that really reflects that concept."*

Finally, while many informants pointed out specific elements that contributed to Rituals Cosmetics' sensory congruence, a couple informants simply noted that there were no apparent inconsistencies.

*Informant 6: "I feel like there aren't any downsides for me personally; everything fits together quite well. All the sensory stimuli work in harmony, and they're all consistent with each other."*

*Informant 7: "I think Rituals has a really well-thought-out, harmonious combination. They have the calm music, slightly dimmer lighting and the scents, it all works really well together in my opinion."*

## **Lush Cosmetics**

When it came to the sensory congruence of Lush Cosmetics stores, opinions were a bit more divided. While several informants felt that the store environment was congruent, others pointed out inconsistencies.

*Informant 11: "Yeah, I'd say they're pretty much in harmony. Like, everything kind of fits together, and, like... there's nothing that really... or I don't know. I feel like if, for example, since the scents are so strong, you walked in and everything was just white and beige, it would feel kind of conflicting. But I think at Lush, everything fits together quite well."*

Similarly, another informant highlighted Lush Cosmetics' playful and interactive elements as part of its cohesive atmosphere.

*Informant 4: "I wouldn't say that Lush isn't cohesive, it definitely is. They also have that certain experimental vibe, like we've talked about, with all sorts of things you can try out. That fits really well with the idea of experimentation, playfulness, and that handmade feel as well."*

Interestingly, even among those who found Lush Cosmetics' scent overpowering, many still felt that it was congruent with the rest of the store's atmosphere. This suggests that while the intensity of the fragrance was a point of

contention, its overall fit within the sensory experience was not as strongly questioned. However, the opinion on congruence was not uniform among informants. One informant questioned whether the scent's dominance contributed to the overall experience.

*Informant 4: "It's too much, I'd say. It's not necessarily too much for me personally, but it is too much. It's so over-the-top that it easily overrides other stimuli, and many people don't actually like that either."*

Beyond scent, another informant raised an interesting perspective on the scent being incongruent, arguing that while Lush Cosmetics' fragrance is a defining sensory feature, the rest of the store environment does not match its intensity in terms of engagement.

*Informant 8: "Even though the scent is a very distinctive feature of the brand and its products, the store environment itself isn't that interesting. The lighting is quite even, which makes it feel really plain, and there aren't really any captivating elements that catch your attention, except for the scents."*

#### **4.2.4 The Effects of Sensory Overload**

The interviews revealed some interesting insights into the informants' experiences of sensory overload. Around three-quarters of the informants reported generally having experienced sensory overload but only a few had encountered this feeling in either of the two store chains discussed. One common notion that emerged from the interviews was that sensory overload led to an immediate feeling of irritation and tension within the store environment. Several informants also mentioned struggling with concentration and generally feeling uncomfortable as a result.

*Informant 1: "It makes me feel irritated, and it makes me feel like I can't concentrate, which will likely lead to me leaving the store."*

*Informant 12: "I feel like it makes me tense. It creates an atmosphere where I don't enjoy the situation at all, it kind of makes me feel on edge, like, "Hey, can we just leave this store now? I don't want to be here."*

Several informants identified scents as a primary cause of sensory overload. However, it wasn't always clear whether it was the overpowering individual scents or the combined effect of multiple scents that contributed to the feeling of being overwhelmed. A few informants specifically mentioned experiencing sensory overload in Lush Cosmetics stores due to the strong scent.

*Informant 10: "Maybe at Lush, I've experienced that the scent is really strong, and it's so overpowering that it's actually no longer pleasant."*

However, one informant pointed out that in Rituals Cosmetics stores, the fragrances sprayed by the sales staff were the source of the overwhelming sensory experience.

In addition to scent, another frequent contributing factor to sensory overload was the amount of crowding inside the store. However, crowding is an external factor and not directly related to the deliberate store environment or the brand itself.

Other factors that were mentioned as contributing to sensory overload included the number of stimuli and the amount and arrangement of products within the stores. One particularly interesting observation from a few of the interviews was that decision overload could also lead to sensory overload. However, it was not clear from the interviews whether this sense of overload was caused by the store's sensory environment or external factors.

*Informant 4: “Maybe with Rituals, it's more about the decision-making issue. It's not necessarily too many options, but for example, when I want a hand soap and there are twelve different scents to choose from, it becomes a bit overwhelming. The decision dilemma.”*

This suggests that having to choose between several options can increase stress, and when combined with other sensory factors, can increase the feeling of sensory overload. However, it remains unclear whether overload is primarily due to the sensory environment of the store or whether external pressures, such as time constraints or personal preferences, also contribute to aggravating this experience.

#### **4.2.5 Approach and Avoidance Behaviors**

The interviews revealed a variety of factors influencing both approach and avoidance behavior in relation to these cosmetics retail chains, their brand images and retail environments in general. The responses are analyzed and divided into four parts according to approach and avoidance behavior, as well as store environment and brand perception.

##### **Store Environment and Approach Behavior**

Many informants said that they visit certain cosmetics stores primarily for the in-store experience, even if they do not intend to buy anything. A pleasing sensory environment can encourage consumers to enter the store, stay longer and explore products.

Rituals Cosmetics was mentioned as an example of a brand that creates a luxurious store atmosphere that makes customers want to return. Many informants expressed that they sometimes visit Rituals Cosmetics stores simply because the store environment and the experience it creates is pleasant.



Informant 10: *"The experience of going there... Well, for example, with Rituals, you get this really luxurious feeling, like you've stepped into something special. Almost like a high-end spa. And I feel like it's the scent that elevates the experience to another level. It kind of makes the consumer want to keep coming back, because even if they don't buy anything, they just want to experience that scent. It creates a good feeling just by stepping into the store."*

Informant 6: *"Yeah, often I go there just because I want to look around, not necessarily to buy anything. I just want to browse and smell the products because they're so lovely. It's nice to visit the store and enjoy the experience."*

The interviews also revealed that in-store environments encourage approach behavior because they offer sensory experiences that cannot be replicated online. This is particularly important in industries such as cosmetics, where sensory experiences such as scent and texture are an essential part of the offerings.

Informant 11: *"Well, I would say that Lush is an example of a store where the brick-and-mortar experience is better, because there are so many smells and things like that, which you can't get through an online store. So, I would say that if you're buying something you don't know about, like something you're buying for the first time, then a physical store is better. But if you already know what you're buying, then online is more convenient."*

Informant 10: *"When I go to a brick-and-mortar store, it's because I want to either see the product physically or test it, like smelling it. For example, if it's a body product, I want to see how it feels on the skin, or if it's a fragrance, I want to see how it smells. I feel like for products like that, unless you've tested them before, it's really difficult to order*

*them online because you don't know what to expect from the product. Of course, before making the purchase decision, you want to know what kind of product you're dealing with."*

Beyond sensory stimuli, other factors influenced whether respondents returned to a store. One significant factor was product turnover, many informants mentioned that they liked stores where the product selection changed frequently, for example, with seasonal collections or new releases. While there were differences between the two retail chains, the informants generally showed a stronger interest in revisiting the store they were already more familiar with. In some cases, this interest was linked to sensory experiences, many respondents returned to stores specifically to smell and test new products. However, in most cases, the store environment itself was not necessarily the driving force behind the approach behavior.

*Informant 4: "If I think about it, there's always something new to smell there, probably because, while Lush does have some really old, classic scent lines, they also have a strong seasonal aspect. It's quite different from Rituals. Lush always has new product lines for Halloween, Christmas, probably spring and Valentine's Day too. That presence is really strong. Whereas with Rituals, it's much more subtle. So if someone is specifically looking for the excitement of new products in a brick-and-mortar store, Lush really delivers on that."*

### **Store Environment and Avoidance Behavior**

An unpleasant store environment can also serve as a way to deter some customers from shopping there. However, based on the informants' responses, this was not as common a phenomenon as the approach behavior driven by a pleasant store environment.

Several informants reported experiencing sensory overload, which in most cases led to avoidance behavior. However, in these cases, the avoidance behavior was only temporary. Most common response to sensory overload was leaving the store immediately to alleviate discomfort. For most informants, experiencing sensory overload did not result in permanent avoidance of the store, though it might make them more hesitant to visit in the future.

*Informant 10: "When there's a really strong scent, especially if I've been in the store for more than 5 minutes, it starts to feel like sensory overload, and I just want to get out of there where I can get some fresh air. So, I just run outside and breathe in some fresh air. It's not a good thing if it makes me feel bad, because then my brain associates that with a bad feeling, and it creates a negative association, yeah."*

Interestingly, one informant mentioned that rather than leaving the store immediately, experiencing sensory overload actually made them finalize their purchase decision more quickly in order to leave the overwhelming environment as soon as possible.

### **Brand Perception and Approach Behavior**

The interviews showed that brand perception had some impact on approach and avoidance behavior, but it was not a recurring theme for most informants. In fact, brand image was rarely mentioned as a primary reason for choosing to visit a store, with most informants focusing instead on the store experience itself. This theme only came up in a few cases, suggesting that while brand image may be important, it is not usually the dominant factor driving approach behavior, at least not to the extent that informants are consciously aware of it.

For Rituals Cosmetics, the brand perception and the perception of the in-store environment appeared to be closely aligned based on the interviews.

Several informants stated that they would visit a Rituals Cosmetics store due to its pleasant atmosphere, which may suggest that their brand perception is also positive. However, it remains unclear whether the brand image itself actively drives approach behavior or if the store environment independently fosters positive associations that are retrospectively attributed to the brand. This overlap between brand perception and store experience warrants further investigation to determine the extent to which the brand perception influences consumer behavior.

In the case of Lush Cosmetics, the influence of brand perception on approach behavior did not emerge as a significant theme in the interviews. However, one informant mentioned that they would visit Lush Cosmetics and buy their products solely due to its natural and eco-friendly brand image. This particularly highlights how brand perception, shaped in part by, in this informant's case, the product packaging, also plays a role in approach behavior.

Overall, while brand perception was mentioned as a factor in approach behavior in a few cases, it did not emerge as a key driver for most informants. Instead, the sensory experience of the physical store played a far more significant role in influencing approach behavior.

### **Brand Perception and Avoidance Behavior**

Brand perception was also a key factor in whether informants chose to approach or avoid a store. However, the topic was not explored in depth, as the informants did not extensively elaborate on the effects of a positive brand image on their behavior. Instead, avoidance behavior was more commonly linked to brands that informants had a generally negative perception of. This suggests that unfavorable brand associations may have a stronger and more immediate effect than positive ones.

*Informant 11: "Yeah, I'd say that if I get a bad impression of a store or if I perceive it in a certain way, I probably won't even give it a chance. It definitely has a strong influence on my decision."*

*Informant 10: "Definitely, if I've gotten a negative impression of a brand from somewhere, I probably wouldn't voluntarily go to their store."*

Interestingly, in one interview, Rituals Cosmetics' luxurious brand perception was mentioned as a potential reason for avoidance, especially if the informant did not personally value the product category. This is notable, as luxury was typically seen as a more positive perception of a brand. This is particularly notable, as luxury is generally perceived as a positive attribute in branding. However, this finding highlights that the perception of luxury may not appeal to all consumers and in some cases, could even cause avoidance behavior in some consumers.

*Informant 9: "Of course it has an impact. I feel like Rituals is really overpriced. Basically, you're just buying water, soap and fragrances, which are either chemical combinations or essential oils. And you can get the same stuff from somewhere else."*

#### **4.2.6 The Influence of Informants' Backgrounds on Their Perceptions**

The interviews revealed perceptions and insights that may be influenced by factors in the informants' background demographics.

Two-thirds of the informants were more familiar with Rituals Cosmetics. Several informants described Rituals Cosmetics as a slightly more mature and sophisticated brand compared to Lush Cosmetics. Interestingly, a few informants recalled visiting Lush Cosmetics as children or teenagers,

suggesting that Lush Cosmetics had been more relevant to them at a younger age.

Most of the regular users in the sample were more familiar with Rituals Cosmetics, while those who were more familiar with Lush Cosmetics tended to be less frequent visitors. This could indicate that the age group represented in this study aligns more closely with Rituals Cosmetics' target demographic and may have, to some extent, "grown out" of Lush Cosmetics' perceived youthful appeal.

An interesting detail emerged concerning the gender demographic; however, this observation should be treated with caution, as the predominantly female sample makes it difficult to draw generalizations. The only male informant approached the store experience from a more functional and practical perspective. They specifically considered how environmental factors, such as being approached by staff, influenced the shopping process, vocally describing their shopping experience step by step. Additionally, they expressed discomfort in overly stimulating environments, preferring stores that offered a calmer, more straightforward experience.

#### **4.2.7 Key Difference Between Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics**

The interviews highlighted how much the sensory environment can shape consumers' experiences and perceptions. Informants described both chains' stores as immersive, multi-sensory experiences, yet the brand perceptions associated with both brands were distinctly different. In both cases, scents and visual stimuli stood out, with informants identifying these as the most dominant features of both brands' multi-sensory marketing.

Rituals Cosmetics was perceived as calm and was often described as spa-like due to its subtle sensory cues, such as dim lighting, moderate scents, tea service and organized product placement. Lush Cosmetics, on the other hand,

was not described as calm. Instead, its store's sensory stimuli were perceived as more stimulating, with strong scents, bright colors and busy visuals that create an energetic and lively atmosphere.

Luxury was also a key theme associated with Rituals Cosmetics. Elements such as the handwashing stations, staff uniforms, dark color palette, wooden materials and sophisticated displays reinforced this perception. Lush Cosmetics, on the other hand, felt was described as more casual. Its handmade aesthetic and playful displays reduced the sense of luxury, making the brand feel more accessible and informal.

Multiple informants also described Lush Cosmetics as natural, organic and giving the impression that the products are handmade. Factors contributing to this perception included, in particular, the packaging, or the lack of it, and the display of products in a way that resembled a fresh produce counter. In contrast, naturalness was not mentioned at all in relation to Rituals Cosmetics. Informants were shown Rituals Cosmetics' value propositions from its website, which also referenced environmental values, but they did not feel that the store reflected these, for example, due to the use of plastic packaging.

Lush Cosmetics was often described as playful and experimental. Contributing to these perceptions were elements such as the store's colorful visual appearance and the opportunity to try out products, including bath bombs and other visually playful items that often resemble berries, fruits, animals or fictional characters. Lush Cosmetics was frequently compared to a candy store, and many informants recalled visiting the store as children. As the childlike and playful image of Lush Cosmetics suggests, it was often perceived as targeting a younger audience. Rituals Cosmetics, on the other hand, was seen as appealing to a slightly older customer group.

Rituals Cosmetics was perceived as a personal and intimate experience by several informants, due to details such as the tea service and the scent sprayed into the shopping bag. In contrast, Lush Cosmetics was seen as more

interactive than intimate. This interactive perception stemmed from the lab-like opportunity to engage hands-on with the products and test them.

Both store chains were perceived as holistic sensory experiences, with both highlighting the importance of sensory congruence and how the alignment of sensory cues enhances sensory perceptions and ultimately strengthens brand perception. In the case of Rituals Cosmetics, there was a strong emphasis on high sensory congruence, with scent, sound and visuals all working together to establish the calm, luxurious atmosphere. Lush Cosmetics' sensory experience, on the other hand, was more mixed. While it was perceived as energetic and vibrant, the strong scent could at times clash with the visuals and feel overwhelming. However, the informants still associated the scent strongly with the Lush Cosmetics brand, highlighting that congruence is not the only way to shape brand perceptions.

Finally, in terms of approach or avoidance behavior, Rituals Cosmetics tends to encourage the informants to explore and browse, even making unplanned purchases and entering the store impulsively just to experience the atmosphere. Lush Cosmetics' impact is more mixed. While some informants enjoy the vibrant experience, others feel overwhelmed and choose to leave quickly.

Based on the findings of this research, the following table (**Table 2**) was created to illustrate the brand perceptions and sensory experiences that were identified in the interviews. The table was constructed by comparing the two cosmetics brands examined in the study: Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics. The first column presents the perceptions of the brands and qualities and consequences of the sensory stimuli, while the second and third columns present a comparison between the cosmetics brands.



<b>Brand Perceptions</b>	<b>Sensory Factors Shaping Perception (Rituals Cosmetics)</b>	<b>Sensory Factors Shaping Perception (Lush Cosmetics)</b>
<b>Relaxing / Exciting</b>	Calm, spa-like, dim lighting, subtle scent. Tea service and clear layout enhance relaxation.	Rarely described as relaxing. Strong scent, bright colors and busy visuals feel stimulating.
<b>Luxurious</b>	Luxurious feel from handwashing stations, staff uniforms, dark colors, wood materials and elegant displays.	Handmade look and playful displays reduce luxury perception and feels casual.
<b>Natural</b>	Natural perception was not strongly present or mentioned.	Frequently seen as natural and handmade. Fresh display and package design reinforce small-batch, organic feel.
<b>Playful &amp; Fun</b>	Not described as playful or fun.	Strongly playful, bright colors, bath bombs and testers. Compared to a candy shop or for kids.
<b>Personal &amp; Intimate Experience</b>	Tea service, staff attention and scents on bags create a personal feeling.	Interactive but less intimate. Hands-on testing gives a lab-like feel.
<b>Perceived Target Group Age</b>	Feels aimed at adults seeking calm and premium experiences.	Feels youthful or child-like due to colors, fun products and playful atmosphere.

<b>Sensory Congruence</b>	High sensory alignment: scent, sound, visuals all support calm and luxury.	Mixed: strong scent sometimes clashes with visuals. Can feel overwhelming.
<b>Approach / Avoidance Behavior</b>	Encourages exploring and browsing. Creates desire to enter the store or buy, even unplanned.	Mixed: some informants enjoy, others feel overwhelmed and leave quickly.

**Table 2.** Comparison of the key findings between the two brands

## **5 Discussion**

The goal of this thesis is to examine how multi-sensory marketing in-store environments influences consumers' experiences and brand perceptions, particularly in the context of Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics stores. Additionally, it explores the roles of sensory congruence and incongruence and sensory overload in shaping the consumer experience and their behavior.

This research is structured around the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974), which provides a framework for understanding how environmental stimuli trigger emotional and cognitive responses and how they lead to behavioral outcomes. By connecting the empirical findings to the theoretical framework and previous literature reviewed in Chapter 2, this chapter explores how multi-sensory marketing impacts consumer brand perceptions, emotional responses and approach-avoidance behaviors in the case stores.

The interviews revealed numerous observations that both reinforce prior theoretical claims and introduce new, interesting perspectives. Informants shared insights on the sensory stimuli present in the store environment, their specific characteristics, how these stimuli interact and how they influence the overall store experience while shaping the informants' brand perceptions.

### **5.1 Sensory Stimuli in Retail Environments**

Sensory marketing influences consumer perceptions and in-store experiences by integrating cues from various sensory modalities, including sight, smell, touch and sound (Krishna, 2012). Sensory marketing is widely used in the retail sector, but its role becomes particularly significant in the context of cosmetics stores, where it shapes both the shopping experience and brand perceptions. The informants consistently emphasized the importance of a

sensorially appealing retail environment, especially in this context, where the physical store often serves as the most practical and in some cases, the only, touchpoint between the brand and the consumer.

As presented in Gestalt theory, consumers perceive sensory stimuli as a seamless, holistic experience rather than as individual cues (Fürst et al., 2021; Ballantine et al., 2010). This perspective aligns with the concept of multi-sensory marketing, where multiple sensory cues work together and create an immersive environment. In the context of the S-O-R model, these multi-sensory stimuli form the Stimulus (S) component, triggering emotional and cognitive processes within the consumer (Organism, O), which ultimately shape their behavior (Response, R). The findings of this research reinforce the significant role of multi-sensory stimuli in shaping consumer experiences in physical retail environments.

One of the most prominent findings that emerged from the interviews was the significance of scent in shaping the cosmetics store experience. Both the ambient scents in the store environment and the ability to test and smell individual products were consistently described as dominant sensory experiences in both Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics stores. Informants mentioned that scent had a strong influence not only on their emotional responses but also on their perceptions of the brands themselves. This finding reflects the critical role of the store environment in shaping brand image, aligning with Krishna's (2012) concept of sensory marketing, where olfactory cues play a significant role in shaping consumer evaluations. It also supports Schifferstein et al. (2011), who found that scents positively influence consumers' moods in retail environments. Furthermore, the volume of informant comments related to scent stimuli is consistent with the broader body of research on sensory marketing, which has extensively examined the effects of scents and their interactions with other sensory stimuli.

An interesting finding from the interviews was the connection between the scents experienced in the stores and the childhood memories they evoked. Several informants associated the scent of Lush Cosmetics with their childhood, recalling having encountered the same fragrance in the store at that time. This supports previous research on the strong link between the sense of smell and memory (De Luca & Botelho, 2021; Halloway, 1999).

Informants described Rituals Cosmetics as "calming" and "luxurious" due to its stores' cohesive blend of visuals, materials, ambient scents, tactile product interaction and music. This aligns with the concept of cue congruence (Doucé & Adams, 2020), which suggests that when sensory elements are successfully aligned, consumers experience increased pleasure and positive emotional responses. Informants also highlighted that especially Rituals Cosmetics effectively engages all five sensory modalities, creating a holistic multi-sensory experience. These findings are consistent with the work of Mattila and Wirtz (2001) and Morrison et al. (2011), which demonstrate that when the arousal levels of sensory stimuli are aligned, consumer satisfaction and enjoyment are significantly enhanced.

Uniquely, compared to many other retail environments, Rituals Cosmetics incorporated taste by offering tea to customers in-store. This use of taste is particularly impactful, as eating and drinking are strongly connected to positive memories, which enhances the customer experience and helps consumers feel more relaxed (Gobé, 2001). As suggested by Krishna (2012) and Lindstrom (2005), engaging multiple senses creates a rich and immersive experience in both case stores, but this was especially evident in Rituals Cosmetics.

Lush Cosmetics' more intense sensory environment, characterized by overpowering fragrances and vibrant colors, prompted mixed reactions from the informants. While the regular customers enjoyed the brand's unique style, the occasional customers described feelings of overwhelm, supporting Doucé

& Adams' (2020) definitions of sensory overload. This also confirms that the effectiveness of sensory marketing depends on achieving an optimal arousal level, as displayed by the inverted U-shaped relationship in the S-O-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Furthermore, this may suggest that other sensory stimuli in the store does not reach the same level of arousal as the scent, supporting Mattila and Wirtz's (2001) argument that the arousal levels of sensory cues like scent and music need to be aligned to enhance customer satisfaction and approach behavior.

## **5.2 The Role of Cue Congruence and Incongruence**

The findings of this study regarding sensory congruence and incongruence align with previous research on the topic. Rituals Cosmetics' in-store environment, where scent, sound, tactile elements, visual cues and in some cases, even taste cues interact in synergy, serves as a strong example of Lindstrom's (2005) concept of sensory alignment enhancing brand communication. Informants consistently mentioned perceiving the Rituals Cosmetics' brand as luxurious and calming, suggesting that congruent sensory stimuli positively influenced the informants' emotional responses and, ultimately, their brand perceptions.

In contrast, perceptions of Lush Cosmetics were more varied, illustrating how overly dominant sensory cues can impact consumer perceptions. Opinions were particularly divided regarding the congruence of scent in Lush Cosmetics' stores. While some informants felt that the scent was consistent with the store environment, a majority perceived it as excessively strong, even clashing with expectations of a relaxing cosmetics retail experience. This supports Doucé and Adams' (2020) assertion that incongruent sensory stimuli tend to generate less positive consumer perceptions compared to congruent stimuli. However, it is important to acknowledge that sensory incongruence can also be used deliberately to capture consumers' attention (Lindblom,

2023a; Lindblom, 2023b). This may suggest that the store's scent stimuli are intentionally designed to be distinct and noticeable.

An interesting observation regarding both brands, but especially Rituals Cosmetics, was that although the store's internal sensory stimuli were perceived as well-aligned and harmonious, the stores themselves felt incongruent with the external shopping mall environment, typically perceived as busy and hectic (Sherman et al., 1997).

### **5.3 Sensory Overload in Retail Context**

According to Doucé and Adams (2020), the sense of smell is classified as a "lower" sense, which is less central to attention, and therefore, the risk of sensory overload from it is lower. However, in the case of both of these retail chains, the significance of olfactory stimuli emerged as a significant component of the cosmetics store experience. Many informants reported experiencing sensory overload in Lush Cosmetics stores specifically due to the scent. Similarly, in Rituals Cosmetics stores, interviews indicated that mixed product scents led to sensory overload. The interview data somewhat contradicts Doucé and Adams' (2020) argument, as olfactory stimuli were the most prominent among sensory modalities in relation to sensory overload. Other sensory stimuli, such as "higher" senses like vision and audition, were not as significant as scents. Otherwise, the findings of this study are in line with previous research on sensory overload.

Doucé and Adams (2020) highlight the individual-dependent nature of sensory overload in their definition. According to them, sensory overload occurs when an individual's capacity to perceive and process sensory stimuli is surpassed, which varies according to each person's individual factors. This was also highlighted in the interviews, as the intense sensory stimuli in Lush Cosmetics stores elicited mixed opinions among informants. For some, the

combination of scents and sensory stimuli was overwhelming and led to sensory overload, while others enjoyed the experience.

#### **5.4 Emotional Reactions, Brand Perceptions and Approach-Avoidance Behaviors**

Measuring arousal and pleasure through qualitative interviews presents significant challenges, making it difficult to examine the relationship between the Organism and Response stages of the S-O-R model. Challenges emerge especially when studying the interaction between arousal and pleasure. However, qualitative interviews allow the overall exploration of how store environment stimuli influence emotional responses and the formation of brand perceptions, as well as how these factors lead consumers toward approach or avoidance behavior. Although the specific influence of arousal and pleasure cannot be reliably studied through interviews alone, the data still reveals how store environments shape customer experiences and responses.

A clear example of emotional responses leading to behavioral approach responses in the findings is Rituals Cosmetics, where regular customers repeatedly emphasized the pleasant and harmonious atmosphere of the store. This supports Walsh et al. (2011), who argue that pleasure and arousal generated by store environmental cues positively influence customer satisfaction with the store, which in turn strengthens customer loyalty. It also highlights the importance of cue congruence in influencing approach behavior. As demonstrated in the studies by Mattila and Wirtz (2001) and Morrison et al. (2011), aligning the arousal levels of sensory stimuli can encourage approach behavior. When sensory stimuli are in harmony, they not only make the overall experience more satisfying and enjoyable but also motivate consumers to approach the brand, store or products, reinforcing the idea that congruent sensory cues can drive positive behavioral outcomes.



The findings also revealed the significant role of sensory experiences in shaping avoidance behaviors, particularly in terms of sensory overload and the relationship between pleasure and arousal. For example, Lush Cosmetics stores' strong scents elicited negative arousal for some informants, leading to them reducing their time in-store or avoid entering the stores altogether. These findings are consistent with the S-O-R model. However, for informants who resonated with Lush Cosmetics' brand personality, these same stimuli reinforced the youthful and playful brand perceptions, suggesting that arousal capable of eliciting emotional reactions can trigger either approach or avoidance, depending on individual consumer factors.

The findings also illustrate how negative brand perceptions can lead to avoidance behavior. According to the interviews, negative brand perceptions can lead to avoidance behavior, with several informants reporting that they avoid brands due to negative perceptions. However, these perceptions often developed from external influences even before visiting the store. This suggests that non-product-related brand attributes (Keller, 1993) and intangible brand attitudes (Park et al., 2015) contribute to avoidance behaviors. The interviews specifically noted that when informants developed negative perceptions of a brand through word of mouth or widely shared public opinions, they tended to avoid the brand. This highlights that brand perceptions may not necessarily arise from sensory experiences or even personal encounters with the brand.

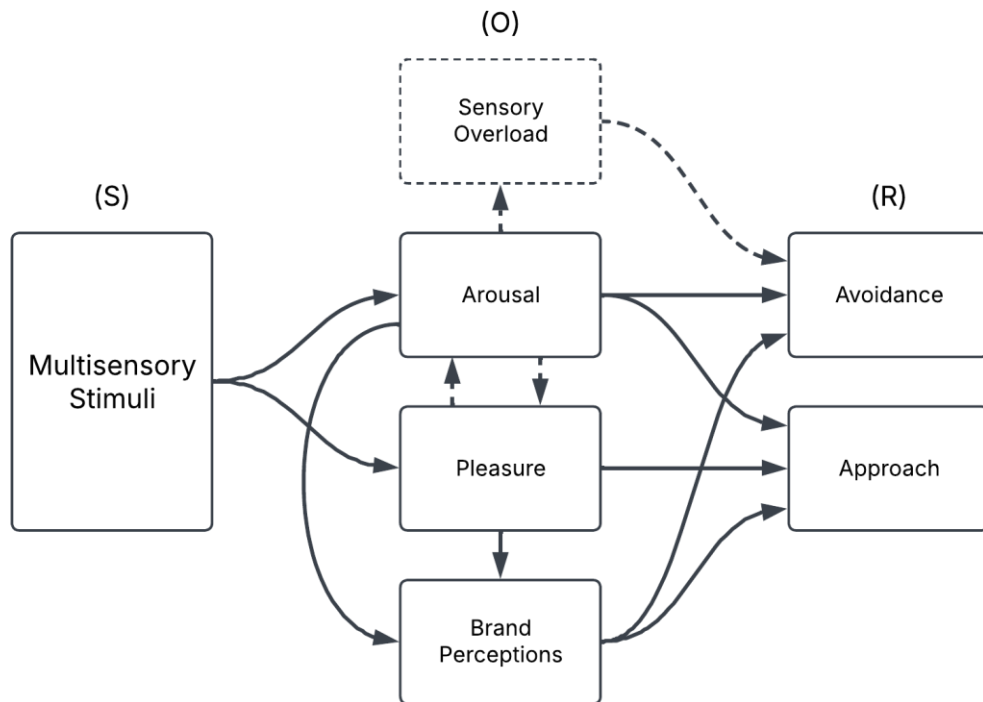
However, one interview also highlighted avoidance behavior based on the benefits derived from the product (Keller, 1993), as the informant did not feel that the product's attributes justified its high price. On the other hand, brand attitudes (Park, 2015) associated with the brand and its products may also influence approach behavior, as seen in the case of one informant, who mentioned possibly approaching Lush Cosmetics due to its natural products.

Interestingly, the relationship between sensory overload, emotional responses and brand perceptions proved to be more complex than initially expected. While excessive sensory stimuli led to heightened arousal, negative emotional reactions and avoidance behaviors, such as leaving the store, this did not necessarily translate into lasting negative brand perceptions. Informants who had experienced sensory overload reported leaving the store but did not typically avoid returning there in the future. This indicates that, although sensory overload impacts in-the-moment behavior, it does not automatically affect their perceptions of the brand, pointing to a more nuanced relationship where negative emotional responses may be temporary and context-specific, while brand perceptions remain somewhat stable.

Furthermore, the results highlight how a polarizing sensory environment such as Lush Cosmetics store can lead to divided perceptions of the brand. Some informants appreciated the playfulness, creativity and environmental values of the store, while other informants were overwhelmed by the sensory intensity and avoided the store altogether. This reflects the delicate balance required in sensory marketing, while sensory stimulation can increase excitement and engagement, too much intensity without sufficient enjoyment can repel consumers. Finding the right sensory balance is crucial to creating positive experiences without overwhelming consumers.

Overall, the study further validates the applicability of the S-O-R model in multi-sensory retail environments, especially in the cosmetics sector. Stimuli in the form of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile cues were found to trigger emotional responses and shape brand perceptions, which in turn influenced consumer behaviors. Harmonious and pleasant environments like Rituals Cosmetics successfully generated approach behavior and strengthened brand perceptions, while sensory stimuli with an excessive level of arousal, evident in Lush Cosmetics' case, triggered avoidance behavior in some informants' cases and produced mixed brand evaluations. The updated S-O-R model (**Figure 3**) integrates brand perception formation,

sensory overload and their influence on consumer behavior. The model presented in **Figure 3** is the model validated in retail environments (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982) that considers only pleasure and arousal as relevant emotional responses.



**Figure 3.** Revised Stimulus-Organism-Response model

## 6 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of in-store multi-sensory marketing on consumers' brand perceptions. The focus of the study was on the cosmetics retail sector, specifically examining two store chains: Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics.

### 6.1 Main Findings and Theoretical Contribution

This study utilized a qualitative research approach with the aim of answering the research questions: *“What is the role of sensory marketing in shaping consumers' brand perceptions?”* and *“How do consumers' perceptions influence their approach-avoidance behavior?”*. The following sub-questions were also examined: *“What is the role of sensory cue congruence and incongruence in shaping consumers' perceptions?”* and *“How does sensory overload affect consumers' perceptions?”*. A qualitative method was chosen for this research as it enables a more comprehensive understanding of consumers' personal perceptions and behavioral responses. The empirical study involved twelve semi-structured consumer interviews about their experiences in two cosmetics stores, Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effect of multi-sensory marketing in practice.

This research builds on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model by Mehrabian and Russell (1974). Traditionally, the S-O-R model has been applied in retail contexts to examine how sensory stimuli within store environments influence consumers' emotional responses and consequently, their behavioral responses. In this research, the model was extended by incorporating the perspective of brand perception formation. The goal was to explore whether the S-O-R framework could also be applied to studying how multi-sensory marketing affects the development of brand perceptions.

The findings of this study demonstrated that multi-sensory marketing plays a significant role in shaping consumers' perceptions of both the studied brands and brands in general. In addition to confirming previous findings within the S-O-R framework regarding the impact of sensory stimuli on consumers' immediate emotional responses and subsequent behavioral reactions, this study also revealed that the model can be applied to examining the formation of brand perceptions. Congruent retail environments that were pleasurable and maintained an optimal level of arousal not only encouraged approach behavior but also positively reinforced brand perceptions. Well-aligned sensory environments created stronger positive emotions and strengthened favorable brand associations. This was particularly evident in Rituals Cosmetics stores, where the well-aligned combination of visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory and even gustatory elements created a calm, luxurious atmosphere strongly associated with relaxation and well-being.

On the other hand, the study also revealed that an excessively high level of arousal caused by sensory stimuli negatively impacts consumers' approach behavior, though it does not necessarily harm brand perceptions. In extreme cases, heightened arousal can even lead to sensory overload, causing customers to leave the store. Especially in the case of Lush Cosmetics stores, many informants reported that strong sensory stimuli, particularly intense scents, sometimes resulted in feelings of discomfort, sensory fatigue and, ultimately, avoidance behavior. This highlights that while multi-sensory marketing can be a powerful tool in enhancing the pleasantness and attractiveness of store environments as well as in brand building, excessive or poorly balanced stimuli may produce the opposite effect.

Theoretically, this thesis contributes to the existing sensory marketing literature by integrating brand perceptions within the S-O-R framework. The study also highlights the importance of sensory congruence and sensory overload alongside this model. The findings demonstrate that the S-O-R

framework is applicable not only for examining immediate approach-avoidance behaviors but also for understanding how brand perceptions are formed in multi-sensory retail environments. The study particularly emphasizes that sensory congruence in pleasurable environments enhances consumers' emotional engagement and strengthens brand perceptions. In contrast, excessively high levels of arousal can disrupt the experience, leading to immediate avoidance behavior. However, this heightened arousal does not necessarily result in long-term avoidance or a weakened brand perception.

Overall, this thesis provides a comprehensive perspective on the role of multi-sensory marketing in the formation of brand perceptions. It emphasizes that successful multi-sensory marketing is not only about stimulating as many senses as possible simultaneously, but rather about achieving compatibility and balance between sensory cues. A well-designed sensory environment not only enhances the emotional experience within the store but also strengthens the emotional connection to the brand, reinforces positive brand perceptions and encourages approach behavior.

## **6.2 Managerial Implications**

The findings of this research emphasized the importance of carefully designed multi-sensory marketing strategies in retail environments. For managers, marketers and retailers, this means that sensory cues, such as scents, visual elements, tactile stimuli, auditory components and even gustatory experiences, should not be considered in isolation, but rather as parts of a cohesive and intentionally designed sensory environment. When executed well, a multi-sensory approach can create a pleasant and engaging atmosphere that evokes positive emotional responses in consumers, ultimately leading to favorable behavioral reactions, such as increased time spent in-store or a higher likelihood of purchase. Additionally, a well-designed sensory experience can shape and reinforce brand perceptions. The store environment can

therefore be designed to align with the brand's identity and convey the desired brand image to consumers.

However, the research also highlights the risks associated with excessive or poorly balanced sensory stimuli, which may result in sensory overload. When the retail environment's sensory cues are too intense or incongruent, customers may experience discomfort, leading to avoidance behaviors, such as shortening their visit or leaving the store altogether. For this reason, marketers should carefully design the intensity and compatibility of sensory elements to avoid overstimulation.

This study underlines the importance of achieving balance and congruence in multi-sensory marketing. Sensory elements should be designed to complement one another and consistently reflect the brand's values and identity, while also balancing the levels of sensory stimulation to maintain consumer comfort.

The study demonstrates that while sensory experiences influence consumers' immediate reactions, they can also shape long-term perceptions and emotional connections to the brand. It is essential for marketers to recognize that multi-sensory marketing extends beyond creating a pleasant momentary shopping experience; it can also build long-lasting brand associations. In an increasingly digital cosmetics retail landscape, physical stores have the unique potential to create immersive, multi-sensory experiences that set the brand apart from its competitors. When thoughtfully and successfully implemented, sensory marketing can become a significant competitive advantage by making the shopping experience more memorable, emotionally engaging and reflective of the brand's identity.

### **6.3 Limitations and Future Research**

While this study provides valuable insights, it also has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The use of only semi-structured interviews as the data collection method may have introduced biases or limited the depth of the results. Semi-structured interviews inherently carry the risk of subjectivity from both the informants and the interviewer. This can lead to challenges such as personal biases, pressure created by the interview situation, unreliable responses and potential misunderstandings of the questions or answers. These concerns are particularly relevant when studying perceptions of store environments, as consumers may not fully recall or reflect on their experiences accurately. Additionally, the interviewer's guidance during the conversation may have led informants to unconsciously fill memory gaps or assess situations inaccurately. Therefore, the lack of methodological triangulation is a limitation. Since the data was based only on semi-structured interviews, the study relied entirely on the informants' self-reported perceptions. Incorporating other methods such as experimental designs, observations or physiological measurements would strengthen the reliability and depth of future findings by providing more objective data on consumers' emotional responses to multi-sensory stimuli in retail environments.

The small sample size of twelve young adults also limits the generalizability of the findings. Most of the informants were female, which may further affect the applicability of the results to a broader consumer demographic. To increase the robustness and generalizability of the findings, future research could expand the sample size and include a more diverse demographic.

Another significant limitation lies in the research topic itself. Studying the role of multi-sensory stimuli in shaping consumers' emotional reactions is inherently challenging through interviews alone. Consumers may not be fully aware of all sensory stimuli, or their emotional responses triggered by them, which affects the reliability of the results. To gain a more accurate



understanding, future research should examine the effects of sensory stimuli on emotional reactions in a controlled research environment. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to explore how these emotional reactions influence consumer behavior.

Additionally, the study is subject to recall bias. Since the informants were asked to reflect on their past in-store experiences, their memories may have distorted or faded over time. This can negatively influence the accuracy of their interview responses. Future research could address this limitation by collecting real-time data, for example, by interviewing consumers while inside the stores or right after exiting the stores to better capture immediate emotional reactions in actual shopping environments.

Future studies should expand on the application of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model in researching brand perceptions. Specifically, there is a need for deeper exploration of how brand images are formed, developed and strengthened. In this study, the influence of brand perception on approach and avoidance behavior remained rather limited, highlighting the need for further research on this topic.

Finally, it would be valuable to investigate the long-term effects of sensory overload and negative store experiences. In several interviews, the informants emphasized that sensory overload or excessively high arousal levels did not necessarily lead to long-term store avoidance, but only to immediate avoidance behavior. This is an interesting avenue for future research, as understanding the lasting impact of negative sensory experiences could provide important insights for both theory and practice.

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# Appendix

## Appendix 1

### Final Interview Structure

#### **Introduction and Background**

I am studying in-store sensory stimuli and their effects on consumers' perceptions on brands. The research focuses on two brands: Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics.

The research will be conducted anonymously. If you would like any information to be excluded from the study, please let me know.

Is it okay if this interview is recorded for transcription purposes?

Could you briefly describe yourself and your relationship with cosmetics and purchasing cosmetics in general?

#### **General Experiences and Customer Status**

1. Are you more familiar with Rituals Cosmetics or Lush Cosmetics?
2. What kind of customer are you for Rituals Cosmetics and/or Lush Cosmetics? You can describe your activity, for example, in terms of visit frequency or spending habits.
3. Describe your experiences in Lush Cosmetics and Rituals Cosmetics stores. When did you last visit them, and what was your experience like?
4. In what situations do you prefer brick-and-mortar stores over online shopping, and what do you expect from the store experience in these situations?

5. Which factors in the store environment influence whether you find the experience pleasant? What kind of environment is unpleasant?

### **Brand Perceptions and Store Experience**

1. How would you describe the store environment and general atmosphere of these stores? What do you remember about them?
2. How would you describe the brands of these chains? What kind of images come to mind when you think of them (e.g., luxurious, clean, playful, bold, safe, relaxing, pleasant, innovative, ordinary, reliable, unique)? Which elements in the store reinforce these images?
3. To what extent do you feel the store environment affects your perception of the brand?
4. Imagine you knew nothing about Rituals Cosmetics or Lush Cosmetics before entering the store. What kind of impression would you get based only on the store environment?
5. Does your brand perception influence whether you decide to enter or avoid the store? What about whether you purchase products?

### **Sensory Stimuli in Store Environments**

1. In what ways have you noticed sensory stimuli (e.g., scents, colors, music, lighting, etc.) in Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics stores? Do any specific stimuli come to mind first?
2. How do different sensory stimuli (e.g., scents, colors, music, lighting, etc.) seem to work together in Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics stores? Does any element feel particularly fitting or stand out in a way that doesn't seem to match the overall atmosphere?
3. When you think about Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics brands, how well do the sensory stimuli in their stores support the brand image? Does anything seem particularly successful or perhaps contradictory?

4. Have you ever chosen to visit a Lush Cosmetics or Rituals Cosmetics store or avoided going there simply because the store environment was particularly pleasant or unpleasant?
5. Have you experienced a sensory stimulus as disruptive in either store? If so, could you describe it?
6. Do you remember an instance when the store's sensory environment felt overwhelming or confusing? Was it because the sensory stimuli didn't match well together?
  - If you have experienced sensory overload, how did it affect your emotional state in the store?
  - Did you leave or have you avoided visiting the store in the future?

### **Comparison of Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics**

1. If you had to choose one store from these chains based solely on the sensory experience, which would you choose? Please justify your choice. Did any specific sensory stimuli make an impact?
2. When considering both the brand's self-image and the store experience together, which store environment better supports the brand's message in your opinion? How and why?
3. When comparing Rituals Cosmetics and Lush Cosmetics stores, where do the sensory stimuli seem to work better together? Why? Did you notice anything in either store that felt particularly harmonious or contradictory?

### **Conclusion**

1. How significant do you consider the store environment in the overall shopping experience? Does it influence your choice of store?
2. Did this interview make you notice anything about your store experience that you hadn't thought about before?
3. Is there anything else you would like to mention about your store experiences?

## Appendix 2

Rituals Cosmetics Store Interior

*Note.* From Kunnas, A. (2023, April 4). *Aamulehti*. Retrieved from <https://www.aamulehti.fi/pirkanmaa/art-2000009498864.html>



## Appendix 3

Lush Cosmetics Store interior

*Note.* From Lush Cosmetics. (n.d.). *Yhteystiedot*. Retrieved from <https://www.lush.fi/page/2/yhteystiedot>



