

UNIVERSITY OF DERBY

EXPLORING DEPARTMENT STORE
OFFERINGS: A ZMET STUDY

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Doctor of Philosophy

2023

Abstract

Department stores in the UK have faced challenging retail conditions, which were affected by the everchanging external retail competition such as out-of-town and online retailers. As the boundaries between different retail institutions have blurred increasingly with an inclining similarity of their commodity offerings, the multi-department one-stop shopping experience is no longer unique to department stores. But the department stores are nevertheless still regarded as the anchor of the high street due to their strong brand associations linked to their heritage, physical presence, and emphasis on service quality. However, it is not clear if these associations are still relevant, particularly as customers are increasingly adopting a hybrid online/offline approach to shopping. This study, therefore, adopts a customer-based brand equity (CBBE) lens to explore the key constructs that are valued by customers in the current turbulent retail environment.

This study was a mono-method qualitative study using Zaltman Metaphor Elimination Technique (ZMET). Data were collected from 24 UK high street department store shoppers in Derby using a cross-sectional time horizon. The use of ZMET method elicited deep thoughts and feelings in the UK high street department stores by customers based on the participant's choice of image. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data extracted from both the verbal interview, the participant's choice of images and the montage created by the participants. A new onion model of customer-based brand equity (CBBE) in the current department store context was identified in this study, named customer-based department store brand equity (CBDSBE). This model showed that four out of Zaltman's seven deep metaphors are more relevant to the current context, which are balance, resource, journey and connection. By identifying these deep metaphors, brand managers would gain in-depth understanding of their customers, and thus, establish enhanced marketing strategies accordingly. This study also identified that brand accessibility was a new construct that emerged from this study that contributed to the customer-based department store brand equity. It was identified that the department store provided access to the participants where they could access the individual brands, the physical products, and the experiences available at a department store. The outcomes of this study argued that the department store is not reaching the end of its lifecycle. It is

suggested that a new definition of the department store is needed, which would ultimately distinguish the department store from its competitors who offered similar commodities and re-establish competitive advantage in the current turbulent retail environment by enhancing its customer-based department store brand equity.

Acknowledgement

This thesis is a milestone of my life, and I would like to use this space to express my deep gratitude to the people who supported me along this special journey. I would like to thank the University of Derby, the Postgraduate Research Office and the University Research Knowledge and Exchange Office (URKEO) for providing enormous number of resources that supported the development of this thesis and my personal development.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my director of study (DoS), Prof. Carley Foster, for her dedicated supervision, her guidance, and her understanding. I was never the best student she had, but she guided me patiently to grow to work at PhD-level. My sincere thanks must also go to my first supervisor, Dr. Charles Hancock. It was his passion of marketing and aspirational thinking that inspired my passion of the subject and my decision to start this PhD research. During the development of this thesis, I have encountered many down times when I found it difficult to make progress. Each time, both of my supervisors have always been very supportive by showing understanding of my situations and providing suggestions accordingly. Because of their kind helps, I was never afraid to explore new things and make mistakes. Without those trying, I would never become the better person presenting this thesis hereby.

Secondly, I would like to thank the friends that I made during this PhD journey, with no particular orders. Each friend kindly supported me for my good, for which I cannot be more grateful. Melissa Di Giovanni, the most wonderful person I have ever met in my life. She has a pure kind heart which is all about helping people, especially her students. She was a role model, a good friend, and a big sister to me. She has always been there when I needed help. Because of her, I explored different opportunities and widened my horizon to learn about different cultures. I am very grateful and proud to be her friend. Jiahui Hu, my fifteen-year best friend. We shared all values and have always been there when we needed each other. The PhD journey was like climbing a mountain and she accompanied me through every downhill. We will carry on playing this important role as we always do. Tingan Li, who has always been the shoulder to cry on and the best listener to all my concerns. Thanks to his cherishment and love, I can see that inside myself, there is a strong heart. And Jiayi Liu, a precious friend. We

only met at her last year here at Derby, but we went through a lot together and she was the best accompany. From study to life and work, she embraced me and showed me a new world that I would not know without her. Last but not the least, I would like to thank Yetong Xiao and Xuelin Yu. Living alone in the UK for ten years, I feel the sense of family for the first time because of their presence. When I am with them, I always feel so secure and comfortable, which empowered me to face my challenges bravely. With the help of these precious friends, I have become more resilient, stronger and is ready to explore the next stage of my life.

I am most grateful to my family who have always been supportive to my decisions. My parents Zheng Liu and Qiang Shang devoted themselves to our family and supported every aspect of my life. It was their love and endless patience that encouraged me to explore the world. Thank you for always being there for me despite the distance and time difference between us. Finally, I would like to thank myself for never giving up however enormous the challenge I believed it was, it is now overcome.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1. Aims and objectives of the study

This section explains the focus of this research study by establishing the research aims and clearly defining the research questions which frame the direction of the overall research project. Also, the rationale of this research is presented by identifying the key research gaps which informed the composition of the research question and methodologies. In brief, the aim of this study is to explore customers' perceptions of the UK high street department store corporate brands, through the lens of the customer-based retailer equity (CBRE) framework. The context is situated in the current turbulent retail environment, using the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) to collect and analyse qualitative data. In order to complete the aims of the study, three research questions have been established:

- i. What are the customer's perceptions of the UK high street department store's brands?
- ii. How can the existing customer-based retailer brand equity framework be adapted, considering the context of the changing and turbulent retail environment?
- iii. Can a new definition of the department store be sourced from customers' perceptions explored in this study?

1.2. Context and rationale of the study

1.2.1. Observing the decline of the UK high street

Over the centuries, the department store has been the anchor of the high street in town centres (Knee, 2002). The anchor of the high street usually features a high level of brand awareness and attracts footfall to the store, as well as to the region, using its brand reputation (Pashigian and Gould, 1998). However, the UK high street has been declining in the past decades, with an observation of mass store closures and the retailer leaving the high street (Simpson, 2021a); 83% of department stores have been lost since 2016 (Simpson, 2021b). Over the past decades, the retail environment has been facing challenges in many areas. Affected by the weak UK economy after the

financial crisis in 2008, the economic recession accelerated the change in customers' shopping experiences, which resulted in the end of customers' willingness to spend, especially using credit (BIS, 2011). The effect of the weak economy also suggested customers now have less money to spend on the high street (Portas, 2011). From the perspective of businesses, there are other factors that create challenges to the UK high street (see section **Error! Reference source not found.**): the increase in business rates; the fragmented ownership of commercial properties on the high street; too much retail space; and competition from other types of retailers (Portas, 2011). It has been criticised that the high street is facing its demise because of the challenges of the weak UK economy and the impact of e-commerce. This has affected stakeholders and retailers on the high streets (Reynard, 2018; Osborne and Butler, 2019).

The current retail environment has shown a major trend towards online retail, where most bricks-and-mortar retailers are integrating online, which was accelerated by the COVID-19 Pandemic (Intel, 2020). The outbreak of COVID-19 was not foreseen when this research started, but it indeed has had a significant effect on the department store, the customers, and the retail environment (Intel, 2020). The lockdown due to the pandemic has made footfall on the high street decline overnight. Working from home also limited people's shopping activities to picking up essential goods in their neighbourhoods (Deloitte, 2021). Since the stabilisation of the pandemic, the high street has retained its position as an important retail outlet and many consumers are showing an intention to return to the high street post pandemic (Landi, 2021). However, retail will not be the same in the post pandemic era, but to retain the "new norm" established over the pandemic (White, 2021), life will be dominated by digitalisation and hybrid modes (Xiong, 2021). This has led some to state that the high street is evolving rather than declining (Evans, 2011).

1.2.2. The high street department store in its decline phase

An abundance of market indicators and changes in the department store industry were a reaction to events in the 1970s (Johnson and Kim, 2019). Nonetheless, little evidence has been found of any department store being capable of breaking the declining trajectory (Johnson and Kim, 2019). The issue of department stores falling into the 'decline trap' was suggested to have resulted from its 'one-stop shopping' business model (Johnson and Kim, 2019). The model worked well for its customers

before the 1970s despite its high operating cost. However, regarding the significant change brought about by e-commerce and wider changes in retail outlined earlier, it is suggested that the model is not enough to meet consumers' needs in the current retail environment. In fact, department stores now compete against almost all types of retailers and service providers (Knee, 2002). With the development of retail formats, the boundaries between department stores and 'traditional' retail formats have become increasingly blurred over time (Reynolds *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, the conventional definitions of department stores are no longer exclusive to them (Willans, 1997) and also could be applied to other retail institutions such as supermarket superstores, for example, Tesco Metro, and apparel retailers such as NEXT and Primark. Major department stores are still struggling to create a unique competitive advantage despite being a source of aspiration and providing a one-stop shopping experience under one roof (Oliver, 2018). This competitive advantage has also been challenged by the emergence of e-commerce and is in competition with online multiple-department retailers such as Amazon (BIS, 2011) and ASOS (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020).

This means that department stores are potentially approaching the decline phase of their retail life cycle (Davidson, Bates and Bass, 1976; McGoldrick, 2002; Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020). Davidson, Bates and Bass (1976) suggest retailing institutions follow an identifiable cyclical pattern similar to the product life cycle with four key stages: innovation, accelerated development, maturity and decline. Figure 1 illustrates the retail life cycle using time against sales/market share. The generally regarded stage of many main-stream retailer formats, such as superstores and high street department stores, also are marked in Figure 1 as examples.

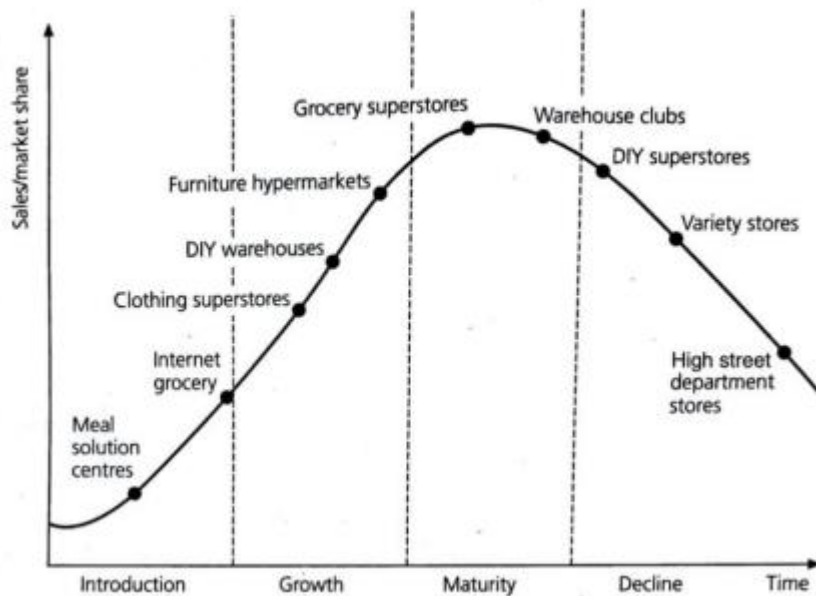


Figure 1 The four stages of the retail life cycle with examples of retailer formats marked at their generally regarded stage. Adapted from: (McGoldrick, 2002, p.22).

However, major department stores such as John Lewis and Selfridges have shown growth in performance (Mintel, 2019a) and are a driving force in the department store sector (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020). Both department stores have demonstrated a strong brand identity and an understanding of their customers' experiences (Oliver, 2018) including the development of complementary online offer. This suggests that key to any brand's success, in this case the department store retail brand, is to embrace and evolve with the changes in customers' behaviours (O'Connor, 2018) suggesting that department stores, with a strong brand presence, may still have an important role to play on the high street and more widely and may not necessarily be in the decline phase. In comparison to other forms of retailers such as the specialist clothing store, department store still holds a stronger customer-based brand equity because of its high brand awareness and the association with high service level and high perceived quality (Pappu and Quester, 2008). Consequently, department store has the advantage to extend its offline brand equity to its online channels to adapt to the era of e-commerce. Despite the decline of the physical department store, a growth of online sales has been observed which accounted for a quarter of the sales of most of the main department stores but three quarters of all revenues of John Lewis (Mintel, 2021). The new norm initiated by the COVID-19 pandemic also created the opportunity to develop the online channel of the department stores as well as a better link between

the online and the physical store in adaptation to the change of customer behaviour (Intel, 2021). A rising of the concept of retail experience store (Jones *et al.*, 2010) also opened the horizon for the reform of the physical department store.

Indeed, the predecessors of department stores were street vendors and specialist shops, where already people started to associate the quality of the product and service with a specific store's craftsman, shopkeeper or address (Stobart, 2014). Over time, this customer association with an organisation developed into the concept of a 'brand', which is widely used by organisations, including department stores, to distinguish themselves from competitors as well as to enhance the value of the organisations (Farquhar, 1989; Aaker, 1991). The most widely adopted definition of the term brand is by Aaker (1991, p.7) who states that, "[a] brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services from those of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors". Over time, the concept of the brand is no longer exclusive to the product but can be applied to a service or the service provider like organisations or retailers. A brand today is a touchpoint with the consumers, it embeds the promises of a constancy of quality, which helps consumers to simplify their decision-making process, reduce risk, as well as establishing trust and emotion with the brand (Baalbaki, 2012; Brahmhatt and Shah, 2017)

1.2.3. Brand equity

To further understand how and why consumers' have changed their perceptions of department stores and to readdress the department store's purpose on the high street, this study will explore these issues through a brand equity framework (Pappu and Quester, 2006a). This is because branding can protect businesses during turbulent times as observed in the retail sector (King, 1991). Brands represent a collection of ideas, feelings, and attitudes about the product or service being offered by a company. Amongst these collections of ideas, it is the most appealing elements that induce consumers to make their purchasing choices (Gardner and Levy, 1955). Brand equity is a concept which assesses those intangible features of the brand valued by consumers (Davcik, da Silva and Hair, 2015). Wood (2000) additionally suggests that through a brand equity perspective, consumers' values and emotional associations with the brand can be effectively measured. The measurement of brand equity is important because if a brand has no meaning or value to its customers, then ultimately

the brand is worthless to the stakeholders of the brand such as investors (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble and Donthu, 1995). Given the turbulent retail environment it is therefore important that department stores are able to adapt and build their brand equity, however, it is unclear how department stores can do this.

The term “brand equity” was first introduced and widely recognised in the late 1980’s. Since then, many practitioners and researchers began to attempt to conceptualise and define it (Shocker and Weitz, 1988; Farquhar, 1989; Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993; Lassar, Mittal and Sharma, 1995; Wood, 2000; Baalbaki, 2012; Brahmhatt and Shah, 2017). Brand equity has therefore been defined and discussed from a variety of different perspectives including the manufacturer, retailer (Pappu and Quester, 2008; Jara and Clique, 2012), employees (King and Grace, 2009) or the customers (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Additionally, it has been defined in the ways in which it is applied, for example, financial (Simon and Sullivan, 1993), product branding (Anselmsson, Johansson and Persson, 2007), service branding (Berry, 2000) and retailer branding (Pappu and Quester, 2006a). None have explored retail brand equity in the context of department stores alone and in the context of difficult retail trading conditions.

To systematically discuss these perspectives on researching brand equity, Baalbaki (2012) developed a brand equity framework which shows the relationships between the mainstream brand equity perspectives and approaches. Baalbaki (2012) mentioned that brand equity can be understood from three different perspectives: customer-based brand equity (CBBE), financial-based brand equity (FBBE) and employee-based brand equity. CBBE, as its terminology suggests, discusses the value of brand equity from a consumers’ perspective regardless of the nature of the customer (i.e., both organisational customers (B2B) and individual customers (B2C) (Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinci, 2005) at. While another scholar, Keller (1993, p.1), defined CBBE in a slightly different way, “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand”. Keller (1993, p.1) believed that CBBE occurs when consumers of a brand recognise the feature of the brand and its product while having affective, strong, and unique brand associations in their memory. Based on the frameworks created by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), a recent concept of *retailer* brand equity was suggested in order to view the value created by retailer brands (Jara and Clique, 2012). Combining a consumer perspective in a retail context has led to the emergence of consumer-based retailer equity, defined by Pappu and

Quester (2006b, p.5), as “the value associated by the consumer with the name of a retailer, as reflected in the dimension of retailer awareness, retailer associations, retailer perceived quality and retailer loyalty”. This study develops the consumer-based retailer equity framework to explore how department stores are perceived by customers whilst taking account of the turbulent retail environment. Previous studies in this area are dated and do not take into account the current retail context. Therefore, it is important to explore the issue deeply to fully comprehend the current context and the department store customers.

1.2.4. Understanding customers’ unconscious minds through metaphors

In order to understand customers’ perceptions of department stores through a brand equity lens and to address the research questions guiding the project, it is important to explore how customers think. Current qualitative research methods have experienced a deficit, which lacks an in-depth understanding of the customers’ perspectives (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Research methods such as structured interviews have been criticised for their validity and reliability of the findings because individuals may not be able to articulate, in an accurate manner, their cognitive reasons behind their choices (Khoo-Lattimore and Prideaux, 2013). Meanwhile, people may only choose to mention facts from ideal situations because they are conscious that their words and behaviours are being captured as part of the data collection (Lawson *et al.*, 1996), causing the perspectives to be biased towards idealisations and deviated from truth and reality. Similarly, an existing study identified that there is a “say-mean gap” between the consumers’ words and their thoughts (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Focusing on the verbal language will only produce surface-level thoughts (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Therefore, there is the need to explore the genuine meaning of what the customer thinks about “what they don’t know that they know” (Hancock and Foster, 2019).

This study adopts the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) methodology, which is known for gaining an in-depth understanding of customer’s thoughts and decisions (Khoo-Lattimore, Thyne and Robertson, 2009). ZMET, as an image-based research method, can elicit unconscious meanings of the consumers because human communications are built on non-verbal cues such as image, sound, smell and touch

(Zaltman, 1997). By engaging visual imagery, a richer verbal description of feelings can be elicited using metaphors (Zaltman, 2003). Metaphor, defined by Zaltman (2003, p.37), is “the representation of one thing in term of another”, which can help the customers to bring their unconscious thoughts and feelings to the surface and ease the communication of those thoughts (Zaltman, 2003). Metaphors are classified into three levels: surface metaphor, metaphor themes and deep metaphors. This reflects verbal language, the transitioning metaphor between the verbal language and the unconscious mind and the basic view lens, respectively (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). A consumer’s behaviour can be elicited, as a result of unconscious thoughts by probing from surface metaphor, step by step, into deep metaphors. Through these unconscious thoughts valuable insights can be gained to help develop theory but also create marketing opportunities. This study is novel as the ZMET methodology facilitates the exploration of department store brand equity from a consumer’s perspective. Exploring concepts like branding lends itself to this type of methodology as participants can often have difficulties articulating their subconscious associations with a product, service, or organisation (Zaltman and Zaltman 2008).

1.3. Research contribution

This study is guided by the research questions outlined at the start of this chapter. It aims to contribute to the body of knowledge in several ways. It is evident that existing brand equity models are predominantly based on Aaker (1991) and Keller's (1993) work. These frameworks have been explored mainly in the context of a pure product brand or service brand. Even though in recent years, many researchers (Pappu and Quester, 2006a; Das, 2015a; Anselmsson, Burt and Tunca, 2017) have expanded brand equity frameworks into the retailer context, with the aim to develop consumer-based retailer equity or retailer brand equity concepts, their research is mostly based on the framework proposed by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993). Brand equity in retailing is still a relatively new concept and is an under-researched area that is worth the focus of researchers (Pappu and Quester, 2017). The concept of retailer brand equity has not previously been researched considering the current change in the retail sector nor has it been explored exclusively within the department store category. Therefore, this study aims to adopt the retailer brand equity models as a foundation to explore brand perceptions across different department stores. This study fills the gap

of the limited research into brand equity, specifically in the context of the department stores, but more importantly, it contributes to the identification of a new construct of the customer-based department store brand equity framework.

Existing research on brand equity models are mostly conceptualisations that assume product or service brand equity is parallel to those of retailers, where studies using empirical evidence are scarce (Troiville, Hair and Cliquet, 2019). More importantly, existing brand equity studies mainly adopt a quantitative approach in order to identify the relationship between brand equity attributes (Davicik, da Silva and Hair, 2015; Baalbaki and Guzmán, 2016; Anselmsson, Burt and Tunca, 2017; Pappu and Quester, 2017), leaving a research gap in relation to exploring brand equity concepts from a qualitative perspective. As a consequence, the gap of limited qualitative studies suggests that existing literature has focused on what variables are important to brand equity frameworks, rather than providing a justification of why those attributes are important from a customer's point of view. Furthermore, the limited existing qualitative studies do not examine the customer's viewpoint in-depth by exploring more deeply customers' thoughts and experiences. In order to address this, this study uses visual based research methods to provide a greater depth (Hancock and Foster 2019). This is a novel method which has not been used in the retailer brand equity field previously. Thus, this study will propose an adapted department store and retail brand equity framework, drawing upon a novel visual-based qualitative methodology, ZMET, in order to understand the changing customer shopping perceptions of department stores and their respective brand equity at a deeper level. This study also contributes to our understanding of the department store as a category in relation to other retail institutions, such as supermarkets, fashion retailers and online multi-department retailers. Thus, this research will propose a new definition of the department store based upon a department store's unique competitive advantages. The study will also contribute to managerial practice by providing recommendations to brand and retail managers in relation to more targeted brand strategies for department stores to regain a competitive advantage and thrive in the future high street.

1.4. Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Chapter 1 introduces the context of this study undertaken over a four-year period. The aim of the research and subsequent questions are established. Key gaps in the research are identified and considered. An explanation of the importance of this research and its contribution to knowledge is presented.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Chapter 2 draws upon the key literature which explains the context of this study. This chapter is divided into four main sections. *Section 2.1 Introduction* provides a brief introduction of the structure and context of Chapter 2. *Section 2.2 Understanding the Concept of the High Street* which illustrates the current turbulent retail landscape from the perspective of retail evolution. It identifies the external factors that affect department stores, as well as establishing the main argument for the death of department stores and the high street. *Section 2.3 Brand and Branding* introduces the relevant branding concepts and critiques the nature of department store as a retailer corporate brand. *Section 2.4 Brand Equity* discusses the perspective of brand equity and conceptualises the consumer-based department store brand equity to inform this exploratory study. *Section 2.4. Zaltman's Deep Metaphors* introduces Zaltman's seven giants which are the most universally deep metaphors being identified from topics regardless of participants' background and the topic being researched. Further exploration of this approach is provided in the next chapter. At the end of the chapter in *Section 2.5 Conceptual Framework*, an informative conceptual framework was developed to guide this exploratory study.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

An inductive interpretive exploratory approach is used in this study to gain an in-depth understanding of the department stores' customers. A rationale is given for the choice of methods and the stance of the research philosophy. This study adopted a mono-qualitative research method using ZMET as the single qualitative research technique. Further justification is given for the use and contribution of ZMET in this study. This study is a cross-sectional study which purposively segmented the department store shoppers of Derby due to the limitation of the outbreak of COVID-19. An explanation

of the application of this methodology and the process of candidate selection is also justified in this chapter.

Chapter 4 – Data and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings of the research using thematic analysis and the analysis of deep metaphors. Images, quotes and Emotional Value Maps (EVM) are used as evidence. Themes covered in this section are summarised into three aspects: Accessing the individual product brand (see section 4.2), accessing the physical product (see section 4.3) and accessing the department store corporate brand (see section 4.4).

Chapter 5 – Discussion

This chapter considers the implications of the research findings and their contribution to academic knowledge. By exploring the deep metaphors, this research presents an in-depth understanding of the current department stores' customers, and their thoughts and feelings regarding department stores' retailer brand equity. A revised conceptual framework is presented to illustrate the overall landscape of the relationships between the customers, the department store, and the external impacts of the turbulent retail environment.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter 6 summarises the entire study including academic contributions and practical implications. An evaluation of the limitations of this research are presented, as are recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews the relevant literature to establish the background context of the study. In this chapter, literature in three areas is reviewed in relation to justify the research gaps and inform the concepts involved in this research. First, Section 2.2 defines the current retail environment and identifies the relevant phenomena observed by researchers. To define the frame of the research, it is important to conceptualise the high street and the department store. Hence, an analysis of the current turbulent retail environment in which the department store lies in has been conducted. The key drivers of high street decline are identified in order to understand the external environment of the department store. Then, the lifetime of the UK department store is reviewed followed by an assessment of the status of the department store using cyclic theory. This section is concluded with a discussion of whether the department store is facing its 'death'. Section 2.3 explains the relevant branding concepts related to this study. The discussion is carried out to understand the department store as a retailer corporation and retailer corporate brand perspective. Section 2.4 then reviews the brand equity theory to establish the theoretical lens adopted in this study. The methodology of this study adopts the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) which uses the theory of the unconscious mind and the use of metaphor as its basis. Therefore, Section **Error! Reference source not found.** explains the rationale of image-based research and the use of metaphor. The ZMET technique is also explained further in the Methodology chapter. Towards the end of this chapter, a conceptual framework is presented in Section 2.5 to summarise the concepts and issues which underpin the study. In Section 2.6, the research gaps identified in this literature review are summarised.

2.2. Understanding the concept of the high street

2.2.1. Defining the British high street

The high street has long been the core of the retail experience (Office for National Statistics, 2019). In the United Kingdom, the high street is “a metonym for the primary commercial street (or streets) of towns or cities, and such spaces collectively”

(Carmona, 2015, p.3). However, a high street is not usually named 'High Street'. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that the top-five ranking names of the high street in the UK are: High Street, Market Place, Market Street, Station Road, and London Road (Office for National Statistics, 2019). In the rest of the world equivalents can be expressed in a variety of ways, such as Main Street, Market Street, Front Street and Rue Principale (equals Principal Street). As a high street is typically perceived to be located in the centre of a city, with the focus on shops and retailing (Carmona, 2015), it is generally used interchangeably with the term 'town centre' (BIS, 2011). However, it is also argued that a high street is not necessarily equivalent to a town centre (Greenhalgh, Johnson and Huntley, 2019). A 'town centre' represents the centre area in a wide sense, while a 'high street' refers to the primary street within the town centre (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013). Greenhalgh, Johnson and Huntley (2019) categorised the high street into two categories, namely the primary high streets and secondary high streets. They state that primary high streets are situated in cities or large town centres and are mainly composed of big brands and chains, while secondary high streets are more likely to be in smaller town centres; the latter focusing on serving local people and are mainly populated with a variety of small independent retailers and large brands.

Apart from the geographic perspective, the high street also plays an important role in the local community. Conventionally, the high street could be referred to as the retail centre that serves the needs of a community (Fenech, 2013). Griffiths *et al.* (2008) argued that the term 'high street' contains a cultural reassurance of social stability and an enduring local identity of small towns or suburban neighbourhoods. In '*Understanding High Street Performance*,' a report by BIS (2011), states that the function of a high street depends on the type of town centre in which it is located. For example, high streets in multi-dimensional town centres are driven by catchment and geography. They serve primarily sub-regional markets, which offer functions such as the provision of labour, a location for businesses and an environmental asset. In contrast, high streets in 'destination' town centres are more closely oriented to specialist appeals or particular products. In this type of high street, retail and service offering outweighs functional roles. Conversely, high streets in suburban areas are service based, intending to serve more localised residential catchments (BIS, 2011).

Therefore, it is shown that high streets often resonate with the communities they serve, either in terms of historical or emotional affection (BIS, 2011).

Overall, it is observed that current attempts to define the high street are based on its role in a location or neighbourhood community. These attempts to define the 'high street', found in existing studies, illustrate the significance of the high street to the surrounding city. However, still missing is a proper definition with a specified description of the constructs of a high street. The reason for lacking a commonly accepted definition of 'high street', is the high street is a fast-changing marketplace with diversity and complexity (BIS, 2011). Furthermore, each high street is unique to the scale of location, catchment, function and form they serve, as well as the wider economic environment and other factors that are place specific (BIS, 2011). As a result, what constitutes a cause in decline for one high street, may act positively for another. In addition, it can be argued that the lack of a common configuration of the high street is because each high street has a unique development in their retail history. Moreover, it can be argued that there is a rise in the 'high street' within out-of-town outlet villages and regional shopping centres. However, because of the exclusiveness of the regional retail environment and lack of typical high street department stores in those centres, this type of high street is excluded from the discussion of this study. Therefore, it is important to illustrate the image of a typical high street to provide a more comprehensive perception of its current state.

2.2.1.1. A typical component of a high street

The high street originated from street markets and/or developed from residential properties to provide services to residents and neighbourhoods (Greenhalgh, Johnson and Huntley, 2019). A visualised image of a typical high street was illustrated by Griffiths *et al.* (2008, p.1155), stating that the high street is the heart of activities of a local community:

The high street functions as the communal hub, a place where near neighbours 'bump' into each other on their way to the post office, parents accompany children to the library and the elderly swap local gossip at the bus stop.

Griffiths *et al.* (2008) identified that the concept of the high street is usually associated with a wide selection of small local shops, with easy pedestrian access to groceries, domestic goods and everyday services. Furthermore, Griffiths *et al.* (2008) observed

the credibility of this typical high street image has decreased over time, as a result of the growing competition from out-of-town shopping and retail superstores. During the past thirty years, the geography of retail provision has changed dramatically. From the development of food superstores to retail warehouses, and then to out-of-centre retail parks, off-town retail institutions, all of which have posed a significant threat to town centres and high streets (Jones and Hillier, 2000). With the boost of out-of-town retail centres, a growing trend is for multiple retail expansion, where chain retailers are more likely to be found in these retail centres. As a result, the trading environment of independent high street retailers has been damaged.

In recent years, the components of the high street have varied slightly. A 'typical' high street or town centre, as suggested by BIS (2011, p.4), are commonly agreed to have functions such as:

Leisure, retail, entertainment and cultural facilities; business office and other employment opportunities; public and private services; residential opportunities; high density, mixed-use and sustainable developments; quality, design, sense of place and focus on public realm; and a place for the local (and other) community.

Hubbard (2017) referred to the traditional function of the high street as a marketplace where the trading of goods and services between buyers and sellers takes place, serving as a physical browsing platform for consumers before making purchasing decisions. Also Hubbard (2017) highlighted that the high street today functions beyond a commercial hub, where people can use services such as the hairdressers, post office, library and pharmacy; or socialise with friends, have a meal, a drink, or watch a movie; and exercise.

In 2021 there are almost 7,000 high streets in the United Kingdom; a third of shops are retailers, while more than half of the properties on UK high streets are used for residential purposes (ONS, 2019). Also, the ONS (2019) reported that in most high streets, about 10% of the properties are offices and only two to three percent are infrastructures used for leisure and community-based activities. The same source also mentions that, apart from retailers, a high street usually provides residential housing and offices for business as well as a range of local services, accommodation, and food and drink to residents and visitors alike. Overall, even though the typical high streets

discussed by existing studies (Griffiths *et al.*, 2008; BIS, 2011; Parker *et al.*, 2017; Office for National Statistics, 2019) have a focus on community, these high-street commercial premises are still mainly occupied by retailers and used for accommodation.

2.2.2. Department store: the anchor of high street

Within high streets, there are certain retail institutions that are commonly found, including department stores, fashion retailers, restaurants or cafés, coffee shops, homeware stores, electronic goods stores and charity shops (Smith, 2018; Jill, 2019). Historically, among high street retailers, department stores are mostly found at the core of a centre (Ferry, 1960). Knee (2002) denoted that at least one major department store can be found in a world-class capital city; in many other cities, several can be found. In most cities, department stores act beyond just the anchor of the high streets but of the region (Knee, 2002; Konishi and Sandfort, 2003). An anchor store usually refers to a unit that increases the customer footfall at the shopping centre, or the shopping area nearby through the reputation of its name (Konishi and Sandfort, 2003). It typically contains features including a large store size or multiples as a part of a chain store. An anchor store has a strong brand with a high level of awareness, which allows it to drive significant customer footfall, trade successfully as a stand-alone unit, and has a high store appeal level (Konishi and Sandfort, 2003). These advantages enabled the anchor retailer to bargain in terms of rent and service charges (Damian, Curto and Castro, 2011), as well as a competition-free environment (Johnson and Kim, 2009). In fact, the department store functions as the anchor despite its form as a stand-alone store on the high street or as a unit in the shopping centre. With the presence of an anchor department store in the shopping area, consumers are more likely to be attracted to the location of the anchor store, and thus stores nearby will benefit from the increased footfall driven by the anchor store (Pashigian and Gould, 1998). This increase of footfall potentially results from the one-stop shopping experience provided by department stores (Konishi and Sandfort, 2003). Nonetheless, the iconic historical building can be the point of attraction for tourists. Tourists are drawn to specific department stores, such as Harrods in London and Selfridges in Birmingham, by the juxtaposition of modern designer products with the old brick buildings, to shop or take photographs (Eleonora and Dennis, 2019). Furthermore, this suggests the buildings are an important asset to the department store brand. Even though there are a variety

of specialist retailers, including shoes, men's fashion and women's fashion, found in town centres and on the high streets, a department store is still present, as a premium go-to store. Consumers expect a lower travel cost to commute to the department store, as well as less time and effort to travel across different stores (Damian, Curto and Castro, 2011). It has therefore been recognised that chain stores can not completely replicate the great range and depth of selection of goods, as well as the novelty and atmosphere that brings excitement in a department store (Konishi and Sandfort, 2003).

2.2.2.1. Defining the department store

The importance of the department store initially stemmed from its wide range of offerings, which is reflected in the way the department store was defined. Early definitions focused on the range of product being provided in the department stores. For example, Willans (1997) referred to department stores as a store which has at least four departments under one roof; among these four departments, one needed to be womenswear or girls wear (Laermans, 1993). The emphasis on womenswear is reflected in the evolution of department stores where traditionally women were the main target customer group. Over time, the offering of department stores has expanded, beyond the focus on apparel and textiles, into food and homewares (McGoldrick, 2002). McGoldrick (2002, p.65) quoted a definition of the department store: department stores are 'stores selling a wide range of goods including significant proportions of clothing and household goods, usually on several floors within one building, with sales area over 2,000m² and at least 25 sales employees'. Johnson and Kim (2009) also included a definition provided by the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) that department stores are retail stores which sell a diverse range of products arranged in separate departments, including apparel, furniture appliances and homewares, with no line of commodity dominating. Previously, the difficulty of defining a department store still is concerning, as Mintel analysts suggested: there are no clear rules (Mintel, 2021). Therefore, Mintel defined department stores as stores that trade from more than 1,000 square metre retail space, stocking an assortment of product categories, with no one category dominating more than two thirds of the store's turnover; the store must carry a range of different brands which are well-organised by departments (Mintel, 2021). As suggested by Mintel (2021), the commodity range should include at least the following departments:

'menswear, womenswear, children's wear, underwear, footwear, fashion accessories, beauty and grooming products, homewares and at least one café or restaurant.' These definitions shared a narrow focus on the type of commodities offered by the department store. From an all-round perspective, Wang and Ha (2011, p.327) argued that

A department store provides an extensive assortment (variety and range) of products and services which are organised into different departments for purchasing, promotion, consumer service, control, while often serving as the anchor store in a shopping district.

Knee (2002) similarly identified that department stores are often located in a city centre with convenient transportations, and typically offer a wide selection of goods, including staple goods and clothing, homeware, accessories, furniture, and fresh food, as well as services, events, entertainment, restaurants, and banks on a number of floors. Also the level of service has been recognised as being at a higher level at the department stores than at other retailer institutions (Danica, 1979).

2.2.2.2. Validity of the department store definitions

Department stores have competed against almost all types of retailers and service providers (Knee, 2002), however, with the development of retail formats over time, the boundaries between department stores and 'traditional' retail formats are increasingly blurred (Reynolds *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, the definitions mentioned in Section 2.2.2.1. are no longer exclusive to department stores but could be applied to other retail institutions. So for example, McGoldrick (2002) argues that UK retailers such as Marks & Spencer, Boots, WHSmith, formerly Littlewoods and BHS could be classified as department stores, and could be defined as sector specific, for example, Boots as a pharmacy. More recently, the competition not only occurs between the traditional department stores, such as John Lewis, the erstwhile Debenhams and House of Fraser (McGoldrick, 2002), but also those who recently started to provide similar offerings to that of traditional department stores such as major grocery chains and Amazon (Genecon and Partners, 2011). With the rapid development of retailing and e-commerce, increasing numbers of retail institutions have associated themselves with the department store format by improving their variety of offerings. For example,

Tesco's superstores now offer similar departments (electrical goods, clothing, et cetera) to traditional department stores. Similarly, e-commerce retailers like Amazon now directly compete with department stores because of the variety of products available. Over time, Amazon has transferred successfully from an online book retailer to the online shop with "*the Earth's biggest selection*", which now offers a vast variety of goods, ranging from electronics goods to fashion items (Amazon, 2019).

The increasing blurred functions between department store and other forms of retailers thus challenges the existing definition of the department store. Retailers who used to specialise in apparel and grocery, now also operate a similar function to the department stores by becoming multi-department, super-sized stores, which equate to the brand features suggested by the definition of the department stores. As these functions were previously unique to department stores and they brought a competitive advantage to the store, such change has increased a threat to the department store's uniqueness and therefore may potentially weaken their anchor position on the high street. Trapped between the spiralling rivalry of retailer institutions, department stores have been placed at the centre of the rapid high street decline. Whilst online commerce comparisons have been introduced more recently when discussing the physical department store, the online function of the department store has not been highlighted in previous definitions of a department store. There is a need therefore, to develop a new department store definition which reflects the current retail context.

In response to the rise of e-commerce, the department stores have established two forms of strategies. Firstly, the department stores have started to operate online platforms jointly with their physical stores to gain a market share of online retailing. Many choose to provide home delivery and click-and-collect services to ensure this convenience aspect of shopping. John Lewis successfully responded to the online competition, reacting quickly to the change to the online retail landscape and has taken a lead ever since (Oliver, 2018; Mintel, 2020). Secondly, some department stores such as Debenhams and House of Fraser have led a discounted pricing strategy; an important strategy adopted by department stores to attract customers away from the online and offline competition (Thomas, 2018). However, this type of pricing strategy is not a proper solution to the current change in the retail landscape and has accelerated the fall of these department stores (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020). In fact, the issue has been about the loss of differentiation between the

department store and online retailers rather than with the price itself. Customers nowadays are confident in knowing what they would like to see in store and how to compare prices online to ensure value (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020). Therefore, reliance on the discounted pricing strategy, tightened margins and minimised cash flow, has constrained the department store's ability to improve the customers' experiences (Thomas, 2018). A successful case of using a discounted strategy, adopted by Selfridges, is to eliminate outdated stock and acquire revenue, rather than adopting a promotional strategy, which demolishes the unique value of department stores (Mustoe, 2019). This suggests that the existing department store definition as both the integration of the department store online and the online retailers has a significant impact on the department store beyond a description of function. The researcher believes that through the exploration of an adapted definition of department store, the future of the department store in the current hybrid retailing environment could be more clearly identified. Current marketing strategies by department store management have mostly focused on attracting customers, alternatively it is proposed that this study can provide a valuable customer-based perspective to inform the department store management regarding the future transitions to fit to customers' needs better.

2.2.3. The department store life cycle

The importance of department stores in retail history has been widely confirmed (Ferry, 1960; Knee, 2002; Ingene, 2014; Stobart, 2014; Johnson and Kim, 2019). As one of the oldest retail formats, the first department store can be dated back 150 years (McGoldrick, 2002). The first department stores in retail history are 'Bon Marché', which opened in Paris in 1852 (Knee, 2002) and the 'Marble Dry Good Palace', which opened in New York in 1848 (Willans, 1997). Before the arrival of department stores, consumers had been shopping mainly for their utilitarian needs. Laermans (1993) suggested that domestic goods were supplied by local markets, peddlers and street vendors, whereas the trade of luxury goods such as silk, furniture, and china goods were separated out into specialist stores, which were away from the daily shops. The new department store, initiated a revolutionary change towards a modern consumer society in the 1850s (McArthur, 2013). When department stores were first built, they were positioned as up-market shops and their target customers were the elite upper

and middle classes (Sharpe, 1982). Over time, department stores have established a longevity in retail history. The arrival of department stores also signified a key change as society shifted from production-oriented to consumption-centred shopping (Porter Benson, 1986). The early department store not only brought consumers closer to commercial innovations, but dominated the shaping of contemporary consumer culture, helping consumers to embrace the hedonic side of consumption rather than feeling guilty about being part of the bourgeoisie society (Laermans, 1993). The change of the retail environment in which the department stores operated in, is illustrated using the detail life cycle model (Davidson, Bates and Bass, 1976). The lifetime of each form of retail institution falls inevitably into a cyclical pattern which is initiated with some sort of innovation, then maturity, eventually decline, and later the start of a new cycle due to another innovation. This cyclical pattern shows that retail institutions, such as department stores, have been continuously changing and evolving over time (Davidson, Bates and Bass, 1976). These changes in retail over time are summarised in the diagram shown below (See Figure 2).

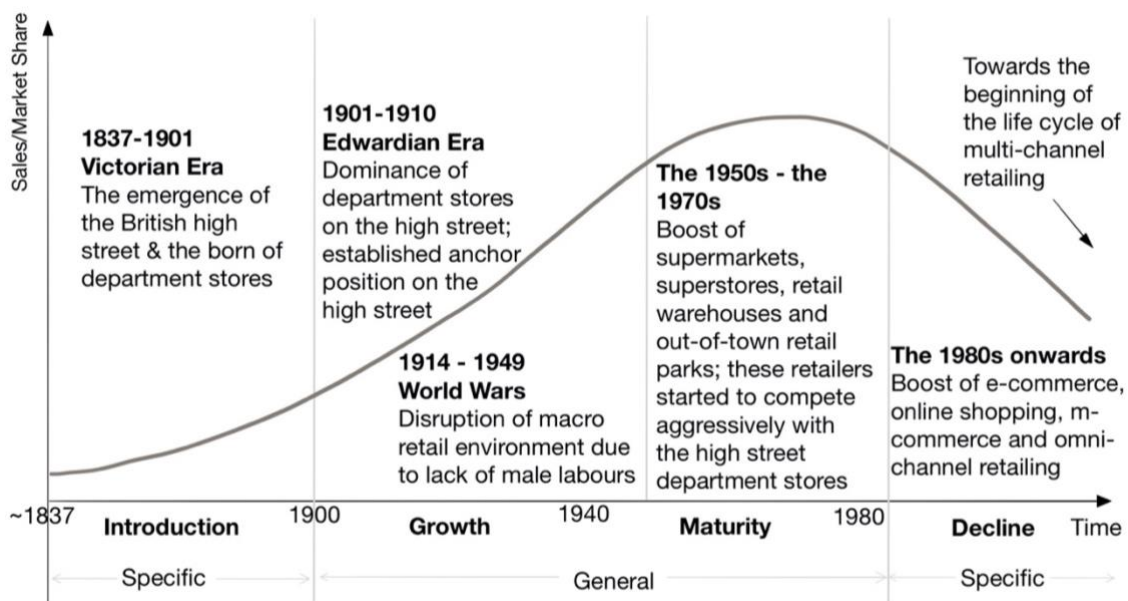


Figure 2. Department store life cycle in comparison with the timeline of the surrounding retail environment. Model adapted from Hollander (1966); Brown (1990); McGoldrick, (2002).

2.2.3.1. The Victorian era: the beginning of specialist brick-and-mortar retailing

The birth of the high street, known by people today, can be dated back to the Victorian era (around 1837-1901) (*BBC History*, 2010; Evans, 2011). Before the Victoria era, there were relatively few shops either in town or suburban regions (Fowler, 1998). Those shops functioned as general stores which sold everything available in the local area. Specialist stores were only found in a few urban areas pertaining to a relatively large population. Food was most likely home-grown, whereas domestic non-food retailing was carried out either door-to-door or at prearranged fairs held regularly. The beginning of the Victorian era occurred in the early phase of the first Industrial Revolution which brought new markets, a boom of consumers and greater prosperity for most classes (Evans, 2011). The eighteenth-century also saw an increase in the urban population choosing industry-related work and wages, while the agricultural employee decreased by half (Fowler, 1998). Consequently, most people no longer lived on self-sufficiency, and the opportunity to purchase farm food directly from farmers was largely reduced. Urbanisation resulted in a transformation of farming land and market stalls into shops which offered products and services at fixed prices (Lane, 2010). *BBC History* (2010) illustrated a picture of Victorian-era shops: outside the shops displayed meat and vegetables for people to see, the buildings of the shops had small windows to create a cool environment to preserve their goods. In addition, some shops would have workrooms to craft products. Therefore, the early high street performed a similar role to the one consumer see today. Without farming goods in their own yards, people became increasingly dependent on shops for food and other goods, and similarly, fixed shops became important sources of consumer goods (Stobart, 2014). As a result, clusters of shopkeepers, including tailors, grocers, shoemakers, butchers, tobacconists and confectioners, could be found on the streets of larger towns (Stobart, 2014).

Many prominent department stores' names, seen today on the high streets, were born in this period. They shared a similar way of development by starting from draper stores or penny shops and later expanded their commodities into wholesale businesses. For example, Debenhams originated in 1778, when William Clark started a draper's store in London, selling expensive fabrics, bonnets, gloves and parasols, which later became Clark & Debenham when William Debenham invested in the firm in 1813 (FT

reporters, 2019). In 1851, the firm was renamed Debenham & Freebody with the investment from Clement Freebody, focusing on retail as well as a wholesale business selling cloth and other items to dressmakers and other larger retailers (*History of Debenhams*, no date). Similar to the establishment of Debenhams, in 1849, Hugh Fraser and James Arthur opened its first drapery shop in Glasgow, the business soon expanded and stepped into the wholesale business in 1856 (*House of Fraser: Brief summary of company history*, 2011). Marks & Spencer started as a 'Penny Bazaar' in the form of a market stall by Michael Marks in Leeds in 1884 (*History*, no date). When Thomas Spencer joined him in 1894, they managed to open their first shop in a covered arcade in Leeds (*A Short History of Marks & Spencer*, no date). Overall, retailing established its central position in the consumers' daily life from small shops and market stalls in the prosperity of the Victorian era. Most shops supported consumers food and non-food supply with their own speciality and many big names of the department stores we see today, begun to emerge during this period. Born during same period as the high street, the department store initiated its long history and begun to establish its longevity on the high street by providing values such as the range of offering and convenience that exceeded the customers' functional needs.

2.2.3.2. Edwardian era to World War One: the prevalence of service-oriented retail consumption

The Edwardian era (1901-1910) saw a fast development of public transport which largely increased domestic and international mobility across the classes ('Timeline: Edwardian era', 2012; Watson-Smyth, 2013). As a result, exotic products, including glass and Japanese bamboo, became available in shops, and meat and canned food became increasingly affordable (*BBC History*, 2010). In the programme, 'Turn Back Time – The High Street', Klein and Hall (2010) recreated the Edwardian high street. The core principle adopted by Edwardian shopkeepers was the provision of good customer service, which provided a sense of privilege to their customers. It was believed that retail service and customer behaviour in the Edwardian era, to some extent, shared a common belief with those of today. Edwardian wealthy ladies considered shopping and going to tea rooms with their female friends as a form of social activity. The recognition of females as the major consumer group of department stores was because males were mainly working and responsible for making the money needed for family consumption. Conversely, females were non-productive and

primarily seen as responsible for the actual purchase of household items. The arrival of the department store gave women a public and social space of their own where they were treated in a polite manner without the traditional harassment from males, making the department stores a place for the women to escape from everyday life (Laermans, 1993). In 1905, after the acquisition of retail, wholesale and manufacturing businesses, Debenhams Ltd opened branches across the world. While in 1909, the establishment of Selfridges brought the concept of the luxury department store to the high street (*History Extra*, 2015), which resonated with the need for quality products and services for the customers.

2.2.3.3. The 1950 to 1980s: The rise of supermarkets and out-of-town retailing

Post-war retailing has greatly reflected the spatial decentralisation of populations and the resulting changes of behaviours. The 1950s was a time when customers became increasingly mobile, with more cars, and populations began to move out of the town centres (Stanton, 2018). Supermarkets moved out-of-town taking their customers, where the commodity and store offering was basically the same as the department store but the size of store was slightly larger (Stanton, 2018). In the early 1970s, the popularity of the car transformed consumer shopping patterns and retail development (Jones and Livingstone, 2018). In response to the increased mobility, an emergence of regional centres and innovative retail institutions such as retail warehouses and retail parks (Jones and Livingstone, 2018). For example, Carrefour was the first in Europe to open a store which had the function of a hypermarket, a supermarket and a department store. While the US variety store, Walmart, has successfully transformed to a supermarket when entering the European market, and later became a supercentre (Stanton, 2018). In the 1980s, warehouses such as Costco appeared. They were initially marketed as a lower price alternative to compete with traditional supermarkets, and then developed to a “club store market” where a small initial membership was paid in exchange for significantly discounted prices (Stanton, 2018). Accordingly, customers were largely attracted by the new convenience in suburbia and low prices, leaving the high streets less competitive among the customers.

When the position of the department store was threatened, it was commented by Danica (1979) that the department store, in order to remain competitive, should still

position itself as a high-end retailer and continue with their original offering, which centred on aspects such as leisure, quality and service. Whether the department store should compete against the range of goods provided by its rivals, it was concluded by Danica (1979) that the department store should not specialise in any type of goods, including clothing, leisure goods or sports equipment. Danica (1979) also commented that the department store should carry on aiming for wide availability and depth of provision of goods, amongst which fashion and household departments should be of the largest offering.

Providing a pleasant experience whilst shopping was also important for department stores, with the physical building being an important element to facilitate this (Danica, 1979). An abundance of market signals and change efforts have been announced in the department store industry in reaction to the changes which occurred during the 1970s (Johnson and Kim, 2009). Nonetheless, little evidence has been found of any department store being capable of breaking the declining trajectory (Johnson and Kim, 2009). The issue of department stores falling into the 'decline trap' was suggested to have resulted from its 'one-stop shopping' business model (Johnson and Kim, 2009). The model worked well for its customers before the 1970s, despite its high operating cost. However, regarding the significant change brought by e-commerce, it is suggested that the model is not enough to meet consumers' needs under the current retailing environment. In fact, department stores now compete against almost all types of retailers and service providers (Johnson and Kim, 2009). With the development of retail formats, the boundaries between department stores and 'traditional' retail formats have become increasingly blurred over time (Knee, 2002). Consequently, the conventional definitions of department stores are no longer exclusive to them (Reynolds *et al.*, 2007) and also could be applied to other retail institutions such as supermarket superstores such as Tesco Metro, and apparel retailers, for example, NEXT and Primark.

2.2.3.4. The millennium onwards: the era of e-commerce, service and the COVID-19 pandemic

The emergence of the internet accelerated the digitalisation process and has transformed the retail sector. This includes the transformation of physical products into digital services, consumer reviews and information exchange on social media (named

'social commerce') and the incorporation of digital devices into the shopping process, such as click-and-collect and mobile payment (Garett *et al.*, 2014; Hagberg, Sundstrom and Egels-Zandén, 2016) see also Section 2.2.1.4. However, many department stores still rely heavily on in-store sales, such as Fenwick, which only launched its online store in 2018. Sales online have grown to 13% in comparison to 6% ten years ago, which suggests that the move to provide e-commerce offerings by department stores is a necessity (Mintel, 2020). John Lewis is now the department store brand with the most well-established online business, with online sales accounting for 45% of its overall sales. However, footfall of the physical John Lewis stores has declined as its online counterpart grows. John Lewis encourages efficient omnichannel shopping experiences by, for example, providing options to select delivery on a specific date and time with frequent updates of the status of the order. However, such convenience and efficiency of online shopping should not take place in the sacrifice of sales of the physical stores. It is still important for customers to have a reason to visit the physical store, such as to receive quality of service and an enjoyable experience. This is where a shift toward a service economy has been observed by Gallouj *et al.* (2015).

Retail focus has migrated from engaging consumers in value co-creation, to the application of value co-creation in the process of service exchange (Akaka, Schau and Vargo, 2015). Therefore, the role of the retailer tends to be redefined towards service integrators rather than just service providers in the new service-oriented retail background (Hagberg, Sundstrom and Egels-Zandén, 2016). Moreover, the purpose of shopping has evolved from necessity to a leisure activity. It is observed that the main use of the high street by consumers are banking services and leisure activities such as visiting coffee shops. Many consumers also use the high street for social gathering, health services, for instance, visiting their GP, and for daily services (for example, dry cleaning or beauty services). The Local Data Company (2018) reported that most retail sectors experienced a drop of the number of stores. Meanwhile, the occupancy of specialist beauty services such as barbers, beauty salons and nail bars on the high street are increasing. The increasing need of beauty services indicated that consumers still value the type of services that could not be obtained from online channels (Rhodes, 2018). Also many department stores provide leisure services as an experiment of new types of leisure, for example, Selfridges now have added cinema

facilities and House of Fraser have included a gaming arena for events and training in its store on Oxford Street (Intel, 2020). Apart from the transformation of existing retail activities and form of products, new shopping values, for example, accessibility (shopping can be 24/7) and availability (product availability has significantly increased), has also been created (Amit and Zott, 2001). Major retailers, including department stores, have integrated online channels, from online ordering to click and collect (either in-store, at the service point, a petrol station or from a locker), shifting towards an omnichannel retailing approach to meet consumers' needs of convenience (Jones and Livingstone, 2018). However, consumers are sophisticated and have an elevated expectation of a seamless shopping experience at all touchpoints with the retailers on any channel (Melero, Oliván and Verhoef, 2016), which makes it harder to predict and meet their needs. However, evolving with the needs of customers is very important for the department store. Department stores used to demonstrate a strong unique selling point of the convenient one-stop shopping experience and a distinct identity of each department store (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020). The current success of department stores such as John Lewis and Harrods was because of their clear strategy, identity, and a familiarity with what customers can find in the stores, for example, Harrods is usually associated with niche consuming, but John Lewis is more likely to be referred as a family friend (Oliver, 2018). The values and identities that the customers associate with the brand name of the department store contributes to the brand equity of the department store. The differentiation point of the competition between the department store and online-only retailers is that the department store is more involved with human services across all of the platforms of offerings (Oliver, 2018). Traditional physical department stores are typically associated with high quality products and services, wide range and good taste of selection, as well as leading trends of fashion (Johnson and Kim, 2009). High quality and high prices distinguished the department stores from other retailer institutions such as the hypermarket, and their attention to detail can be observed from their store designs, the choice of products, level of service and the overall hedonic shopping experiences (Chang and Fang, 2012).

As mentioned in 2.2.5.1.4, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed people's lifestyle and accelerated the integration of online shopping with physical stores. However, many people still choose to visit the physical department store. In

2020, 76% of customers visited a physical department store but only 66% of them purchased a product (Mintel, 2020). The reason behind the unlikeliness of making an in-store purchase, explained by Mintel (2020), is that customers are more likely to seek an experience in-store and some are more inclined to make the purchase online. Also, the pandemic has disrupted UK tourism. Tourism has been a main sales driver of the leading high-end department stores such as Harrods and Selfridges. From 2018 to 2019, trips to the UK grew by 3%, from 37.9 million to 38.9 million, and the average spending has risen 11% to £25.5 million, making the average spending increase from £604 per visit to £655 (Mintel, 2020). However, the pandemic has significantly affected these high-end department stores who deal with luxury goods and rely on tourism. It has been reported by Mintel (2020) that Chinese tourists accounted for the largest proportion, about 22%, of sales of these luxury goods from department stores, whereas European tourists are more likely to shop in their own countries. Thus, the disruption of Chinese tourists to the UK due to the pandemic has undoubtedly led to the decline of sales in luxury department stores.

2.2.4. Retail theories behind the change

As retailing has continuously evolved over time, many retail theories developed in order to explain the changes observed both in a general sense at the industry level but also at a retail institution level, for example, supermarkets (Palmer, 2005) and department stores (Sun, Kay and Chew, 2009). Cyclical theory, which mainly provided insights into the change of retail institutions, is associated with a large amount of literature (McGoldrick, 2002). Among the collection of cyclical theories, the most adopted three theories are 'the wheel of retailing', 'the retail life cycle' and 'the retail accordion' (Brown, 1990; McGoldrick, 2002; Evans, 2011). The wheel of retailing theory hypothesised that new retail institutions, namely innovative retailers, usually enter the market as 'low-status, low margin, and low-price operators' (entry phase); the innovative retailer then grows by increasing investment but experiences higher operating costs, eventually becoming traditional retailers (trade-up phase); and finally matures as 'high-cost, high-price merchants' and become vulnerable to new entrants who will go through the same cycle (vulnerability phase) (McNair, 1931; Hollander, 1960). However, the retail cycle hypothesised by the wheel of retailing is criticised for being too general (McGoldrick, 2002). Kaynak (1979) argued that the newly entered retailers usually learn from the practice of retailers in the previous cycles so start with

a competitive advantage and then mature by trading down. In another words, innovative retailers may enter with a high price and high status and then start to trade down to lower status and prices. The department stores began as high-end and high price retailers but now many have adhered to discount strategies to compete with low-price retailers and have lost customers along the way, despite the long-held associations many consumers have of these types of retailers (Moller, 2019). Then online retailing entered the retailing market as a new form of innovation and started to affect the traditional physical retailing. Retailers who are trying to integrate their online operations with their physical entities enter the market with a high status built from their physical entity rather than starting as low status.

An alternative explanation for retail evolution can be found in the retail life cycle, proposed by Davidson, Bates and Bass (1976, p.90), they suggested that '[r]etailing institutions, like the products they distribute, pass through an identifiable life cycle'. The retail life cycle has four key stages: innovation, accelerated development, maturity, and decline. The advantage of the retail life cycle theory is that it overcomes two of the major limitations of the wheel of retailing: the limitation of focusing on costs and margins at each phase as well as the underestimation of the diversity of retail innovation by the 'wheel' framework (McGoldrick, 2002). First, cost and margin lie in the core of the wheel of the retailing theory. Since the lifespan of a department store is more than two centuries, the historical data of sales and margins are difficult to retrieve and are scarce. Despite the fact that using the average percentage of margins could provide a clue to expense changes; this is only applicable in the long run rather than the short run or intermediate period (Hollander, 1960). The retail life cycle analyses time versus market share as variables rather than the margin and can present the strength of the retail institution over a certain period of time. Second, as discussed in section 2.2.5.1.4, the high street retailers and department stores have integrated into the innovative online shopping form and some have established a stronger online presence, for example, John Lewis, or offline presence, for instance, Selfridges and Harrods. The single direction of the wheel underestimated the complexity of the integration of the existing retail form with the new entrant retailer form. This suggested that the wheel of retailing theory is not very appropriate to this study. The retail accordion theory, another retail evolution theory, often referred to as a general-specific-general cycle approach, describes the process of retail

development as an accordion pattern: '[d]omination by general line, wide-assortment retailers alternates with domination by specialized, narrow-line merchants' (Hollander, 1966, pp.29-32; Brown, 1990). Patterns suggested by the retail life cycle and retail accordion theories have been observed at different stages of the high street development.

2.2.4.1. The high street department store in its decline phase

Drawing upon the retail evolution theories, the life cycle of the UK high street department store therefore can be summarised in **Error! Reference source not found.** The department store was observed to initiate its life cycle with the emergence of the British high street in the Victorian era, where the market and customers were still learning to consume. In Edwardian times, the focus of shopping as a social activity helped the department store establish its dominant position on the high street, taking the department stores to the growth phase. In the 1950s, rising mobility and decentralisation of the population started to develop a trend of out-of-town retail. However, the anchor position of department stores and the high streets remained but was maturing. Until the 1970s, the boost of out-of-town the supermarkets' superstores, retail warehouses and retail parks started to attract customers away from the city centre towards the suburb, which competed with the 'one-stop' unique selling point of department stores. Since the introduction of e-commerce in the 1970s (Turban, 2012), the threat of an innovative entrant in the form of online retailers has pushed the physical department store towards its decline phase. The wide adoption of e-commerce has changed the customers' mindsets and shopping behaviours. Recently, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the high street led to a further separation of the physical department store sales and their online sales.

Also, a 'general-specific-general' cyclic pattern is relevant to the evolution of the department store. It was observed that the consumers' preference of a retail institution was continuously alternating between specialised, narrow-line merchants and general-line stores who sell a large variety of commodities (Jones and Orr, 1999). Until the arrival of the out-of-town retail park and the boost of online shopping, specialist stores once again became the favoured retail form by meeting the specific need of each consumer.

2.2.5. The 'declining' UK high street

In recent years, the British high street has been facing many challenges and the crisis has affected many sectors on the high street, predominantly in the retail sector. The most widely observed issue faced by most high street retailers is store closure. It is reported that over 50,000 shops have closed down on UK high streets in the past decade (Shaw, 2020). A total of 2,868 store closures occurred in the first half of 2019 alone, which is equivalent to 16 stores per day, the most in the past five years (Hooker, Hussain and Trunkfield, 2019). By September 2021, more than 8,700 chain stores closed in UK high streets, which is equivalent to the disappearance of almost 50 shops per day (Simpson, 2021a). Many big chain retailers, including department stores, have departed from the high street: in June 2016, the 88-year-old UK department store chain British Home Store (BHS) closed all its stores; in April 2018, the toy store giant 'Toys R Us' closed all of its US and UK stores; in February 2018, the leading electronic retailer Maplin fell into administration and closed its last branch in June 2018; and in August 2018, all stores owned by the discounted goods retailer Pound World were shut permanently (Ruson, 2019). Since the closure of BHS, the UK has lost 83% of its main department stores in the five years (Simpson, 2021). However, those retailers are not the only ones on the high street to suffer. Hooker, Hussain and Trunkfield (2019) reported that, in the independent retail sectors, only 15 out of 96 sub-sectors have experienced net growth in store numbers in the first half of 2019, indicating that small retailers are also declining. Among those 96 sub-sectors, the largest net declines were in fashion retail (118 stores), restaurants (103 stores), estate agents (100 stores) and pubs (96 stores). Moreover, retailers with big retail space are also suffering from the crisis. It is claimed by Mike Ashley, Chief Executive of Sports Direct Group, and owner of House of Fraser, that the 500,000 square foot, House of Fraser store in Birmingham town centre, was oversized and no longer fit for the local market, as local property needs had shifted from retail to residentials (House of Commons, 2019).

One direct consequence of closed stores is the increasing amount of empty retail properties. British retail locations such as high streets, shopping malls, and therefore retail parks have suffered significantly from this crisis with the largest number of empty shops in any five year period (Butler, 2019). By August 2019, 10.3% of retail stores were left unoccupied (*BBC News*, 2019a). Meanwhile, department stores, the anchors of the high street, have been significantly underperforming, including Debenhams,

House of Fraser, John Lewis and Marks & Spencer. They were shaken under the current turbulent retail environment (YouGov, 2019). In January 2021, Debenhams collapsed and was bought by the online retailer Boohoo (Sweney and Bulter, 2021). By closing all its physical stores and relaunching as an online-only business, the 243-year-old department store giant has ended its glory time (Butler, 2021). Furthermore, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic which occurred during this study has meant that UK high streets and town centres have suffered because of associated lockdowns and limits to consumer movement. This decline of the physical high street has led to a further shift towards online retailing and the pursuit for retail experiences beyond just 'shopping' (Local Government Association, 2021). The drivers behind the high street decline are discussed further in the following sections.

2.2.5.1. Drivers of high street decline

The challenges faced by UK high street retailers are complex and the causes have many folds (House of Commons, 2019). Despite the weak economy after the financial crisis in 2008, UK retailing has developed rapidly and property value has increased as a result of the easy credit and rising standard of living (Portas, 2011). The credit crisis in 2008 and the recession affected the UK economy with persisting impact (Cribb and Paul, 2018). The combined effect of the short-term and long-term factors has affected the high street performance negatively, raising concerns from various parties on the economic health and vitality of crucial anchors on the high street. The UK economy has been weak since 2008, which means that consumers have less money to spend and this filters into the high street (Portas, 2011). Moreover, business rates have risen to 50.4% of rateable value for standard businesses and 49.1% for small businesses (GOV.UK, 2019), which added more pressure to the high operating costs (BBC News, 2019b).

Apart from the economic impacts, there are many other drivers that place challenges upon trading conditions experienced by the UK high street, including the unaffordable business rates, difficulties in management resulting from fragmented ownership of high street properties, the saturated high street retail space, competition from supermarkets and out-of-town retail centres, and irreversible changes to consumers' mindsets, initiated by digitalization and ecommerce (Portas, 2011). Dover (2018)

reported several extrinsic factors driving the current challenging situation in the UK retailer sector, in particular the issues department stores are experiencing as the result of customer-oriented perspectives.

Firstly, the structure of the UK population is shifting towards an aging population, this grew 3% between 2016 and 2021, with the number of people aged 55 and over to increase by 9.9%; this accounts for 32% for the total population. Mintel reported that people aged 15-34 account for the highest usage of the department store; there was a 1.2% decrease for 15-34-year-olds up to 2021, and this resulted in a significant loss of prospective customers. Secondly, the growth in inflation has put consumers under pressure, even though consumers' current attitudes towards the overall condition of their financial status remains stable in the long run. An increasing number of consumers have adopted more cautious spending habits. This results into the consumers' discretionary spending being affected. Additionally, Brexit has acted as a background driver of the pound being weakened, which also decreased the spending power of UK consumers. The COVID-19 pandemic has further created an unseen challenge for the physical department store and retail more generally leading to unprecedented changes in the buying behaviour of customers (Mintel, 2020). As reported by Mintel (2020), an immediate reaction to the outbreak and the associated lockdown was a shift to using online shopping platforms and a decreased need of apparel commodities. This placed significant challenges on department stores due to their reliance on apparel commodities. In summary, consumers are spending less with an increased cautiousness about what and how they buy.

2.2.5.1.1. Fragmented property ownership

The British commercial property market is argued to be one of the central aspects affecting the high streets and town centres. High costs for retail space, outdated buildings and high debt levels placed a heavy burden on the struggling high street (Evans, 2019). The steady decline in sales of high street retail stores means that the rent has become unaffordable for retailers which makes it even more difficult for retailers to survive the economic downturn (Evans, 2019). A Company Voluntary Agreement (CVA), which is an extension to the creditor for a fixed period (GOV.UK, no date), has become a preferred choice for retailers who close unprofitable stores

due to increasing cost pressures and seek rent reductions (Jahshan, 2019). The increasing number of CVAs has resulted a decline in the values of shopping centres (Jahshan, 2019). A key barrier encountered during the redevelopment of the high streets and town centres is that the ownership of the properties on the high street and town centres is fragmented. The Housing, Communities and Local Government report '*High streets and town centres in 2030*' (2019) explained the general pattern of disparate property holding in most towns: pension funds, insurance companies and private equity-owned by pension funds, typically own large assets such as shopping centres or parts of a town; institutions traditionally own single-let high street shops, but have reduced the majority of their holdings in the past decade; and 75% of the market is gradually taken up by individual shops with individual owners. According to Property Industry Alliance (2017), UK insurance companies and pension funds were the biggest investors in UK commercial property, accounting for 25% in 2005, but now the number fell significantly to 16%. In contrast, overseas investment in UK commercial property has grown rapidly in the past decade. By 2016, overseas investors now hold 29% of UK commercial properties as investments (Property Industry Alliance, 2017). The growing control of UK commercial properties by individual investors has prohibited the redevelopment and planning of the high streets and town centres. Ultimately, it is argued by researchers that fragmented ownership of high street commercial properties have become a barrier to gain a 'coordinated response' to the challenges faced by high streets and town centres (House of Commons, 2019). It is also emphasised that this is particularly the case for smaller town centres where ownership of properties is more diverse, and it is almost impossible to work with those retailers in any cohesive manner. The report also suggested that centred ownership will largely improve the estate management of the high street in a longer-term view. Also a parallel statement was provided by Portas (2011) that town centres and high streets need a visionary, strategic and strong operational management team to champion the high street.

2.2.5.1.2. Too much retail space

A problem faced within the retail sector itself is a retail oversupply on the high street. Typically, town centres are areas with a diverse use of the space (BIS, 2011). Apart from retail activities, town centres facilitate services, offices, residential and public buildings. High streets in town centres are typically retail-focused, with retail being the

main anchor in most places (House of Commons, 2019). High streets are usually the primary shopping area in most towns, especially in those towns without a purpose-built shopping centre (BIS, 2011). However, it is widely criticised that there is currently 'too much retail on the high street' (Wrigley *et al.*, 2015; GOV UK, 2018; House of Commons, 2019; Evans, 2019). Several aspects are suggested to be responsible. The importance of the high street is commonly appreciated by governments and practitioners alike (Swinney and Sivaev, 2013; Hubbard, 2017; Greenhalgh, Johnson and Huntley, 2019). As previously discussed in Section 2.2.1, the high street is the core commercial area of towns and regions and is highly concentrated with retailers. Therefore, many retailers saw the competent marketplace on the high street and were attracted to gain a share. However, evidence showed that four in ten British towns have become clones, each is concentrated with national chain retailers who have almost identical stores everywhere (Poulter, 2010). Poulter (2010) explained that the high street used to have a diversity of department stores, butchers, bakers and grocers, but now they are equipped with 'one or two identikit supermarkets, such as Tesco, a chain bookstore, a Boots or a Superdrug, a Topshop, several banks and various charity shops.' The similarity across high streets and town centres also withered the identity of each region and city and eliminated the choice to buy from the independent retailers (Carvel, 2005). The report produced by (New Economics Foundation, 2005) acknowledged the need for a department store as an anchor of a regional high street, however, it criticised the entrance of chain department stores, such as Debenhams, to local high streets, as they cannot promote the local heritage, but instead hastens the shift towards a clone town.

Portas (2011) also critiqued the clone characteristic of every high street as undermining the uniqueness of British towns and villages. Nevertheless, the convenience of national chains is highly preferred by consumers, reinforcing the need for similar high streets across the country. Second, the expansion of retailers into each high street and town centre caused these towns and high streets to be overloaded with shops. Sir John Timpson claimed that the number of retail outlets in town centres has significantly exceeded consumers' needs and there are twice as many shops as to what is needed on the high street (*BBC News*, 2018). The number of physical shops needed to meet the breadth of British customers' needs has largely decreased because of the power of the internet and online shopping (Portas, 2011) (see further

discussions in Section 2.2.5.1.4. Though the growing availability of retailers on the high street has provided local consumers with more convenience, the vitality of the physical high street has been damaged. Thirdly, individual retail space has expanded over time, and is believed to have exceeded retail capacity. Research indicated that the top 150 retailers in the UK have 20% more store space which they can neither afford nor need (Simpson, 2019). Overall, the current number and size of retail shops exceeded what is needed in the market and led to difficulty in managing the company and individual shops. Accordingly, there are a significant number of empty, large retail properties on the high street. This is a significant issue for department stores, as they occupy a vast space on the high street, either as a single building or as a part of a large shopping centre, due to their flagship positions. When department stores have disappeared from the high street, the resulting empty spaces are problematic for the commercial landlords and the local council. It has been four years since the closure of the department chain store, BHS, and still more than a quarter of its sites still remain empty (Dean, 2020). The collapse of Debenhams, has resulted in approximately 15 million square feet of empty space on the UK high street (Hammond and Hancock, 2021). Hammond and Hancock (2021) also reported that empty space left behind by Debenhams is harder to fill than those of the individual Arcadia stores due to the large size of the space. Moreover, department stores have a high operational cost in terms of rent and providing services such as obtaining costs. It is reported that the average rateable value in England and Wales is about £269 per square meter, with the rateable value being 28 times higher on Oxford Street in London, causing a heavy financial burden for high street retailers (Jahshan, 2019). Since each store owned by the department store is of considerable size, the required rent is pressurising the department store more significantly. In terms of taxation, also when the department store leaves the high street, a significant amount of business rate is lost.

2.2.5.1.3. Out-of-town retail parks

Consumer behaviour and shopping patterns have continuously changed over time. In the late 1990s, the wide introduction of in-and out-of-town supermarkets, megastores, warehouses, and retail parks initiated the first round of challenges for high streets and town centres. They were widely blamed for the decline of in-town retail institutions (House of Common, 2019). The driving force of the migration of consumers from high

streets towards out-of-town parks and shopping centres is motivated by individual value, convenience and choice (Fenech, 2013). For example, the differential ease of vehicle-based shopping trips to out-of-town or regional retail centres provided consumers with easy and cheap parking, as well as the convenience of a 'one-stop' shopping experience (Wrigley, Lambiri, Astbury, *et al.*, 2015). Evidence has shown that a large increase in apparel stores in out-of-town retail centres has been observed by BIS (2011), with a parallel decline in town centres between 1998 and 2010. Statistics show that the number and occupation of retail parks in the UK have accelerated every year since 2013, and exceeded 1,400 by 2018 (Grimsey *et al.*, 2018). Grimsey *et al.* (2018) also highlighted that an increasing number of planning for out-of-town retail centre development has been established, with five times more than those for in-town. However, currently observed is a reduction in car ownership among young people and changing retailer portfolios, together with a growth of urban mega malls and smaller town shopping centres. Overall, out-of-town retail centres have taken footfall away from high streets and town centres, which challenges high street retailers such as the department stores. Consequently, out-of-town retail parks are now also currently under threat since the rise of e-commerce, which provides considerable convenience to consumers (Barrett, 2014).

2.2.5.1.4. Digital acceleration and e-commerce

Technology is regarded as the most recent 'game-changer' for retailing which has benefited both retailers and consumers (Grewal, Roggeveen and Nordfält, 2017). The Internet has redefined the retail landscape with revolutionary and evolutionary change, leading to the emergence of e-commerce (Ellis-Chadwick, Doherty and Hart, 2002). In 2020, the number of internet shoppers rose to 2.05 billion, which accounted for 26.28% of the 7.8 billion global population, and is expected to increase to 2.14 billion by 2021 (Oberlo, 2020). This statistic suggests that one in four people now shop digitally. With the increasing availability and adoption of the Internet, the online channel has become an important part of everyday life (Intel, 2019b). Online shopping became the third most popular internet activity since the 2000's, competing with the top two uses of communication and web browsing (Li and Zhang, 2002). Intel (2019b) claimed that online retail sales have grown in the UK by 14.4% to reach £68.5 billion in 2018. The growth rate in 2018 compared to that seen in 2017, (16%),

showed a deceleration of the online market growth in retail sales. However, growth is still strong, suggesting online shopping will continue to gain competitiveness in the overall retail market. By July 2019, online-only retailers have accounted for 50.4% of all online sales, while the remaining half constitutes sales in store-based retailers. As a result, the boost of online shopping has significantly affected both consumer behaviour and certain types of high street retail. Recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has accelerated the use of online shopping and has been a very challenging year for the retail sector. The need for the navigation of store closures, lockdown and quarantine has been the top priority for companies across the world especially retailers (Clarke, 2020). Under this challenging environment, UK department stores are adapting to the “new normal”, where the digital and physical world have combined to become closer than ever before. During the lockdown periods of the pandemic, all non-essential retailers were closed, the department store was solely reliant on online sales (Clarke, 2020). In fact, a significant uprise of department stores’ online sales was observed: online sales have increased from 19.2% in 2019 to 27.9% in 2020 (Mintel, 2021). With the acknowledgement of this trend created by the pandemic, many department stores quickly adapt to the new hybrid retail environment and made investment in online channels their priority to negate their inability for not investing enough in the past (Mintel, 2021).

As a result of the rise in online shopping, also to emerge is a wide variety of derivative retail formats and shopping patterns, including mobile commerce (Lin *et al.*, 2014), online shopping (Garaus, 2018), click-and-mortar (Steinfeld, 2002), omnichannel shopping (Kang, 2019) and social commerce (Gan and Wang, 2017). Thus, consumers can take advantage of the internet, mobile devices and social media to fulfil their needs of shopping and convenience. Many of these have been embraced by department stores, for example, Selfridges and Harrods, who have launched mobile applications where customers can simply place orders and manage their memberships on their mobile phones. Meanwhile, John Lewis and Debenhams have initiated their click-and-mortar services where customers can place orders online and collect them in their chosen stores.

The online shopping platforms have become increasingly reliable and easy to use (Wrigley, Lambiri, Astbury, *et al.*, 2015) and now most department stores categorise their commodities with clear tags demonstrated on the welcome page of their

websites. Furthermore, online customer services are becoming more user-friendly in the form of, for example, a chat box. The online channel offers consumers more choice and higher convenience as well as the opportunity to make an informed purchase decision solely by themselves (Jones and Livingstone, 2018). Since 2008, consumers have been able to search, share and make purchases through any device that has access to the Internet (Kono, 2009). E-commerce technologies enable consumers to access price, product information and discounts with ease. High information transparency provides convenience for retailers to market their name and products through online channels with access to wider consumer groups, including those who are not their targeted customers. However, such information transparency also makes retailers more vulnerable to competition. Thus, many 'online-only' retailers have an advantage over bricks-and-mortar retailers, such as traditional department stores, primarily because of the avoidance of the presence of a physical store. Consequently, online-only retailers have generally a lower level of cost in terms of rent, staff and taxation, and specifically business rates (Centre for Retail Research, 2019). Therefore, independent high street retailers, especially those without an online presence, are highly disadvantaged against e-commerce retailers and multiple retailers with an online platform due to cost, a relatively small capacity and lack of online exposure.

Through e-commerce, the product research and purchase process can be conducted in many ways. Consumers either can browse and make the purchase online, or research online and make the purchase in-store, as well as browse in-store and make the purchase online (Rhodes, 2018). This is also true for department store customers. Department stores who originally relied solely on a physical space have moved to an omni-channel model. By including online sales into their business model, the department stores can adapt to the change of customer behaviour as well as rescue the decline of their physical stores. In 2014, 14% of John Lewis customers browsed and purchased their products online, 12% browsed in-store and then purchased online, while 23% researched online but made the purchase in the physical store, with the remainder 51% completing the whole decision making and purchase process in-store (Rhodes, 2018). Online retail options also facilitate instant price comparisons and have largely reduced commute cost to visit the high street and the opportunity cost of consumers' time (Wrigley, Lambiri, Astbury Geofutures, *et al.*, 2015). The high flexibility of the new shopping mode has provided consumers with a new level of

convenience. Given the simplicity and convenience provided by online shopping, it is clear that high street retailers, especially those selling products that have virtual substitutes or can easily be found online, are significantly affected, as shoppers shift away towards the online alternatives (Wrigley, Lambiri, Astbury Geofutures, *et al.*, 2015).

2.2.5.2. Central government actions in reaction to the decline

In response to the change and decline on the physical high street, the government has established several policies and actions in its pursuit to resolve the issue. This includes: a relief in the business rate for certain types of retailers; establishing funds to support the redevelopment of the high street; introducing a special strategy to support the high street, as well as pointing out the focus of future high streets. This section discusses the key actions of central government in reaction to the decline of the high street.

Business rate relief

In the UK, most non-domestic properties are charged business rates, including shops, offices, pubs, warehouses, factories and holiday rental homes or guest houses, as well as a building or part of the building for non-domestic usage (GOV.UK, 2019). The Centre for Retail Research (2019) identified that business rates are an annual property tax paid on the rateable value of the property each business occupied for commercial purposes, where rateable value is an estimate of the rent of the properties. In fact, brick-and-mortar retailers are paying disproportionately high business rates, about 42% of their total tax value, while online retailers barely need to pay any of this tax at all (The Centre For Retail Research, 2019). Brick-and-mortar retailers in shopping centres and the high street, mainly located in prime locations, are subscribed to both rental and rateable value (Greenhalgh, Johnson and Huntley, 2019). This is particularly true for department stores who typically occupy flagship positions. Conversely, online retailers are mostly non-store based, which enables them to largely avoid rents and business rates (Centre for Retail Research, 2019). Greenhalgh, Johnson and Huntley (2019) reported that business rates are usually the third highest expense for retailers. Overall, business rates placed a negative impact on the cost and profitability of store-based retailers (The Centre For Retail Research, 2019). The

Centre For Retail Research (2019) also identified that brick-and-mortar retailers only account for 80% of overall retail sales, however, they are responsible for 95% of all business rates. In 2018-19, bricks-and-mortar retailers paid £7,168mn in business rates, accounting for 2.3% of their retailer sales; while e-commerce retailers only paid £457mn, equivalent to 0.6% of online sales (The Centre For Retail Research, 2019). Partington (2019) reported that the government has received demand from more than 50 major UK retailers, including Marks & Spencer, Harrods and Iceland, regarding the removal of taxes to safeguard the rival between the future high street and online retailers. The wide dissatisfaction and unfairness felt by brick-and-mortar retailers, who are subject to business rates, against online retailers, facilitated the need to review and improve the existing business taxation system. In 2015-2016, a review took place, the result showed that the business rate system should remain. Soon after the review, a revaluation of rateable value in England and Wales was established in 2017 (GOV.UK, 2016). However, retailers' concerns were still not resolved as further complaints from many national retailers were received (Greenhalgh, Johnson and Huntley, 2019). Consequently, business rates are increasingly being blamed for high street shop closures and large retailers entering company voluntary arrangements (CVA) (Greenhalgh, Johnson and Huntley, 2019).

As the crisis of high street retailers continued to worsen, a business rate discount was issued in April 2019, from which small retailers would benefit from a reduction of their bills by a third for two years (HM Treasury, 2018). Occupied retail properties with a rateable value below £51,000 are eligible for this discount, this covers 90% of the retailers. Eligibility for the relief scheme is subject to the geographic locations of the retailers. This is because business rates are handled differently in Scotland and Northern Ireland, whereas England and Wales have different rating processes (GOV UK, 2019).

Future High Streets Funds

On the 29th October 2018, Her Majesty's Treasury (HM Treasury) announced in the report entitled, *Budget 2018 Our Plan for the High Street* (2018), that in addition to the business rate discount, a further £675 million for the Future High Street Funds would be established to support the evolutionary transformation of high streets and town centres. This would support the high street to keep up with the changing consumer behaviour, and thus secure their central position in the community. The predominant

use of the fund is reflected in investments for improving the physical town centres' infrastructures, to improve the accessibility to the high streets in terms of transport access, traffic flow and circulation in the area as well as to create more housing and new offices. Though the detail of the implementation of the funds has not been published, positive responses were received from witnesses of high street redevelopment projects (House of Commons, 2019). Sir Timpson indicated in *The High Street Report* (2018) that there is no 'one size fit[s] all' solution for all high streets, the fund should be applied in a manner to support each high street regarding its individual needs. Wrigley and Lambiri (2014) also emphasised the need to understand that the high street's transformation is not the same for every town or city. They explained that long-term structural imbalances and differentiation within regional economies themselves should be reflected in the reforming plan, which is subject to each geographical area. Therefore, it is important that the funds are used wisely as well as following a long-term strategic planning. In *The High Street Report* (GOV UK, 2018), Sir Timpson suggested that the bidders should demonstrate an initiative that matches the local capacity and vision to ultimately change the current situations. Moreover, the project should illustrate a long-term sustainable impact, with a lifetime beyond the project due date. By 2021, the Fund has invested £830 million to local town centres to rejuvenate the area with the evolution of the high streets and recover from the pandemic and ultimately to create more vibrant high streets that is suitable to live, work and shop (GOV UK, 2020, 2021). As the anchor of the high streets, the department store would strongly benefit from the implementation of the Fund on the related high streets.

High Street Task Force

The Future High Street Funds aimed to support the establishment of a new High Street Taskforce to provide support to the development of innovative strategies exclusive to each local area (HM Treasury, 2018). The issue faced by the high street falls in a range of sectors, the focus of the High Street Taskforce is argued by Sir Timpson that it should ensure each town centre has a single voice with the aim to provide cross-sector support to engage the collaboration of local authorities, business leaders and community leaders (GOV UK, 2018). It is also emphasised by Sir Timpson that the High Street Taskforce should represent town centres to feedback the process to central government, to share data and best practices to the right people, as well as to

facilitate networks and to support local leaders to develop skills and capacities according to local need. In fact, before the establishment of the High Street Taskforce, Portas (2011, p.5) mentioned the need for 'a visionary, strategic and [a] strong operational management team for the high street'. She also stated the potential role of the 'Town Teams' was to focus the planning and redevelopment of the high streets on making them accessible, attractive and safe. Since the launch of the Task Force, it has been committed to provide solutions to local authorities to revive the local town centres and high streets with a unique sense of place and a strong identity (High Street Task Force, 2020). The Task Force published the research of Institute of Place Management which identified the top 25 vital and viable priorities of the high street, where the importance of the role of anchor was commented (Institute of Place Management, 2021). Department stores was identified as one of the anchors of the high street, which is an important contributor to the competitiveness, attractiveness of a local area as well as to enhance the entire retail offer and the diversity of the town centre (Institute of Place Management, 2021). With tailored marketing strategies based on the character of anchor such as the department store, town centres can attract footfall and increase the spill-over effect to the places and activities in the nearby area (Institute of Place Management, 2021).

Reform planning

In the '*Budget 2018 Our Plan for the High Street*' report (2018), the government claimed to provide consultations on the conversion of commercial properties into offices or domestic housing. The implementation of new mixed-used business models could benefit the formation of future high streets, as well as on supporting the effective use of planning tools by local areas. The government also suggested to register a selection of empty commercial properties for the pilot study and match these properties with prospective retailers, to resolve the issue of fragmented ownership of high street properties. According to Sir Timpson, it is the local authorities' responsibility to use their initiative to engage landlords in the innovative use of the empty properties on the high streets (GOV UK, 2018). Additionally, this suggests that the High Street Task Force could learn from the pilot study and disseminate best practices to improve the property matching process to resolve the issue of too much retail space suggested in section 2.2.5.1.2. Wrigley and Lambiri (2014) also emphasised that in reaction to the change, the core of high street evolutions will lie in the long-term structural shift

away from retail provision to service all types, especially intangible services, such as leisure, health and beauty, and medical-related services. Consequently, for retailers to survive in the evolution process, they should provide more innovative offerings that tailor to the complex needs of today's consumers. With a reformed identity of local town centres and high streets, the department stores can develop adapted retail model to better incorporate local facilities and boost diversity which ultimately creates a more sustainable community systems on the high street that fits for the future.

Strengthening community assets

The high street and other community spaces, such as the landscapes and places where people can socialise, is what frames people's lives (Yuill, 2009). The loss of the community aspect of the town centre and high street could lead to a wide range of negative outcomes, such as the disappearance of social contact, a decline in self-identity as a part of the local community, as well as many crimes and crisis that usually accompany urban decline (Yuill, 2009). The government stated that it is important to restore local historic buildings and destinations to secure the civic and cultural characteristics of local communities. This could also include department store buildings which are often large, iconic destinations. Also the empty property match trial could be helpful to community groups looking for affordable space (HM Treasury, 2018). The report also announced two actions to be taken to strengthen local vital community assets: first, to introduce a 100% business rate relief for public lavatories; second, to continue the £1,500 business rate discount on officing properties occupied by local newspapers in the year 2019 to 2020 to support a strong and vibrant local press. Moreover, community assets should be considered when bidding for funding. Sir Timpson emphasized that the projects should involve a wider community in articulating a shared vision, those of young people. The project should be initiated by empowering local people, organisations, businesses, and institutions to be a part of and contribute to transformation of high streets (GOV UK, 2018). Similarly, Millington *et al.* (2018) suggested that the future high street should be oriented towards providing more individual and collective experiences, especially something that echoes with young generations to strengthen the community. The research carried out by Millington *et al.* (2018) identified that there are many elements local people would like to see retained in the future high street, such as independent shops, key service providers, a community atmosphere, good transportation, entertainment and leisure,

heritage, greenspace and some distinctive features that make their place special. Millington *et al.* (2018) also suggested that people value the opportunity of having a physical space for shopping and community. Mintel (2020) also reported that customers are likely to visit the physical store for gift ideas and experiences.

2.2.6. Death or the evolution of high street retail?

The previous sections have discussed the key issues facing the high street and in turn, department stores. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, competition from online retailing and out-of-town retailing, high operating costs for retailers, as well as a significant change in consumer behaviour (Grewal, Roggeveen and Nordfält, 2017; Evans, 2019; Sajal *et al.*, 2020). Concerns have been raised as the rising vacancy rate may imply that high street retail is obsolete (Hughes and Jackson, 2015) and Grimsey *et al.* (2013) even ten years ago reported that 46% of retailers in the UK are under severe risk of failing. This would suggest that in this complex and turbulent period, it seems like the high street is indeed reaching the end of its life cycle (Hughes and Jackson, 2015; Reynard, 2018; Evans, 2019; Osborne and Butler, 2019) and the physical department store has entered the decline phase.

In contrast, others have argued that the current declining situation does not imply the death of the high street, but that of an evolving stage with opportunities to make changes on the high street (Wrigley, Lambiri, Astbury Geofutures, *et al.*, 2015; House of Commons, 2019; Valentine, 2019). In fact, retail is a sector that has been continuously changing over time (Reynolds *et al.*, 2007). Evans (2011) emphasised that the retail sector is evolutionary not revolutionary in nature, and retail institutions not only change, but evolve over time. Therefore, the challenges currently facing the high street can be regarded as another stage in retail evolution. In the current era when online retailing is entering the retail market as an innovation, many physical high-street multiple retailers, including department stores, already have integrated their business models into multiple shopping channels, by including an online platform, physical stores, as well as integrating online and offline shopping through services such as click and collect to reclaim competitive advantages against pure online retailers (Mintel, 2020)

Moreover, the actions taken by the government have justified that the high street is still worth governmental resources to rescue them. From the customers' point of view,

the need for physical space for shopping and community use (Millington *et al.*, 2018), has implied the significance of keeping and restoring the physical high street. Furthermore, consumers have strong heritage associations with certain retailers, particularly department stores who have a long history on the high street. Like other multiple retailers on the physical high street, the department store, which acts as the anchor and the destination of the high street, is evolving. With the integration of multiple retail channels, the life cycle of the department store has separated across the offline and online platforms. Whilst for many, the physical department stores have continued the trajectory of decline, the online stores of some department stores are successful. The share of online sales of the department stores has grown, for example, 45% of the sales by John Lewis occurred online and 25% of sales by M&S happened online in 2019 (Intel, 2020). The increase of the online market share by the department stores implies that the online channel has entered a new innovation phase and has impacted upon the overall lifecycle of the department stores. Despite that the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened the existing trend of the decline of the brick-and-mortar retailing and accelerated the online retailing, it has created new opportunities for the department stores. Intel (2021) observed, for example, that customers' post-pandemic behaviour involves seeking out occasions to spend a day out with family and friends such as through an immersive shopping experience provided by department stores. The change of the retail focus of department store was summarised in Figure 3, with an indication of the timeline of the key retailer formats favoured at each stage of the department store life cycle.

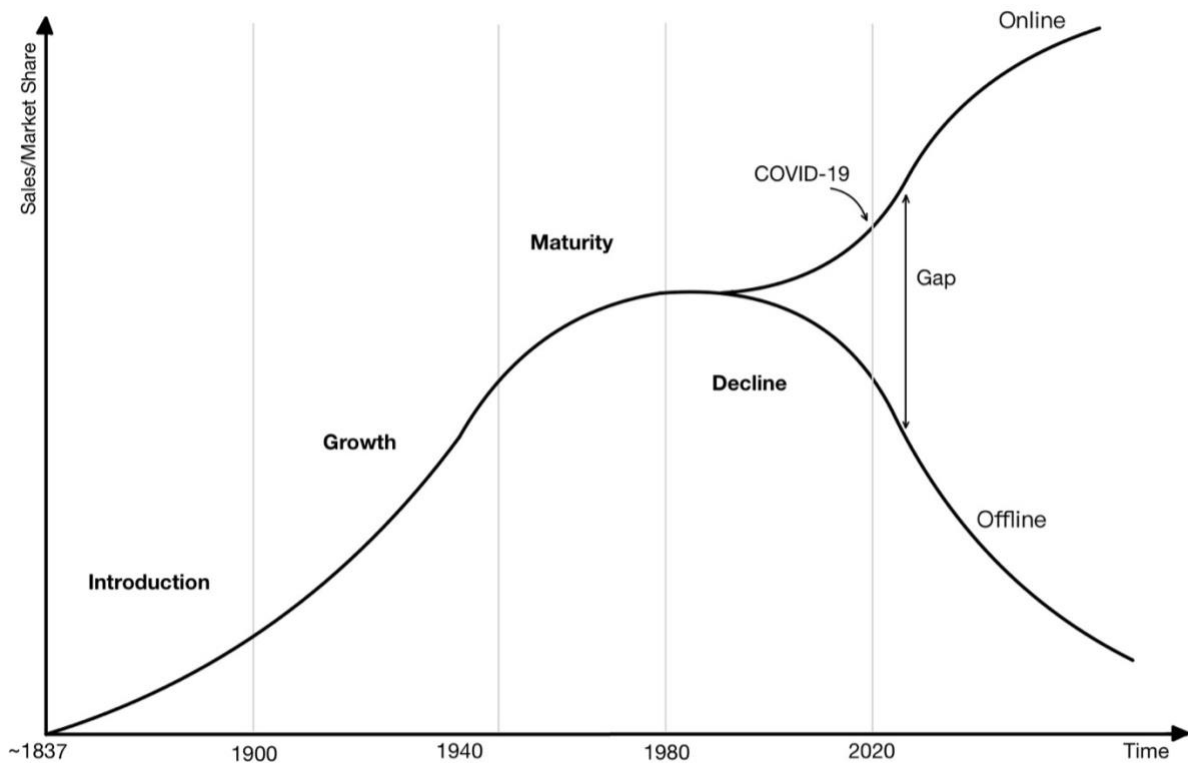


Figure 3 Retail life cycle of the department store with e-commerce separating the online platforms and offline sales.

Figure 3, developed by the author, shows how the emergence of online shopping and COVID-19 impacted the current retail life cycle of the department stores. It illustrates how e-commerce is causing the mass decline of the physical high street retailers, the department store is significantly impacted and has entered the decline phase. However, as department stores start to penetrate online retail marketing by providing online platforms together with the offline store, the life cycle of the department store may have started to change its trajectory. The market share of online retailing has been continuously increasing at the expense of the physical stores (Mintel, 2020). When the outbreak of COVID-19 occurred, the separation between the online and offline sales accelerated. Quarantine and lockdown forced the closure of non-essential stores, including the physical department stores. As a result, customers were forced to choose the online alternative to support their daily needs and survive the pandemic. Over the year of living during the pandemic, customers rapidly adapted to the “new normal” with the online and offline shopping form being brought more closely together.

2.2.7. Summary

In sum, high streets and physical department stores have faced many challenges leading to the suggestion that they are declining. These challenges include competition with out-of-town retailers, the rivalry and shift towards an online shopping platform, the decline in sales, the pressure of operational costs such as rent and business rates, the impact of COVID-19 and resulting change of customer behaviour in favour of an online shopping experience. Viewing the decline from a macro lens, the cyclical pattern of the retail accordion and the retail life cycle can be applied as a way of understating the lifetime of the department store. The change from customers' needs of general to specific suggested that, with the emergence of e-commerce, the need for a wide range of products can be easily satisfied and it is the specialty and the depth of product provision that is attractive to the customers. The department store has been known for its wide range of commodities and quality of services. Therefore, the change from general to specific suggested that the target of specialty has been missing from the department stores' product ranges. However, it might be argued that the specialty aspect can be provided through a stronger level of customer service. Currently, the department store has gone through the first three stages of its retail life cycle and appears to be in the decline stage due to the impact of innovation by other forms of retailers. However, it can be argued that neither the department store nor the high street is necessarily facing their death in terms of physical presence but are experiencing an evolutionary change to embrace e-commerce and the post pandemic era particularly if department stores follow the cyclical retail patterns already identified in the literature. Indeed, the fact that department stores have begun to embrace online retailing suggests that they are developing their business model to avoid the outcome of the decline stage.

The review finds that the definition of the department store, implies the business model of the department store focused on the type of commodity and size of the store being offered. Since the rise of superstores, the unique selling point of department stores' wide range of commodity provision was demolished. Therefore, this suggests that a new definition of the department store, considering the evolving retail context, is required and that being one that moves away from a focus solely on its range of offering. With customers becoming increasingly sophisticated, it is also important to understand the customers' mindset towards the offerings of the department stores.

However, existing research viewed the decline of the high street from an external perspective, where an adaptation of the retail environment or the future obligation of town centre development was the main research focus (BIS, 2011; Millington and Ntounis, 2017; Theodoridis and Ntounis, 2020). Customer-oriented research is missing in this area. Moreover, the department store has demonstrated a significance on both the high street and with its customers. As a recognised anchor in the high street, the department store has a long history and brand heritage and occupied an enviable position based on its unique position as a retailer that offers high end products, high levels of service, convenience and a place for leisure and community activities. The predecessors of department stores were street vendors and specialist shops, where people had already started to associate the quality of product and service with a specific store's craftsman, shopkeeper or address (Willans, 1997). Over time, this customer association with an organisation has developed into the concept of a 'brand', which is widely used by firms, including department stores, to distinguish themselves from competitors as well as to enhance the value of the firm (Stobart, 2014). Given the unique position occupied by department stores, this suggests that a better understanding of how department stores are perceived by customers can be gained by using a branding lens. Branding plays an important role when understanding the relationships between the department stores and its customers. The next section will therefore explore the branding concepts that are critical to this study.

2.3. Brand and Branding

2.3.1. What is a “brand”?

The concept of ‘brand’ has existed for centuries, and its meaning has been continuously developed by academics and practitioners. Branding principles have been closely associated where customer choices are involved, either with physical goods, services, retail stores, people, organisations, places or ideas (Baalbaki, 2012; Brahmhatt and Shah, 2017). A brand has been defined, as:

[A] name, term, design, symbol, or a combination of these, that identifies the products or services from one sellers or groups of sellers and differentiate them from those of competitors’ (Kotler and Armstrong, 2012, p.231).

This definition focuses on the significance of the name and the visual identity devices available to a company (Muzellec and Lambkin, 2006). Such visual identity in a retail context can be the physical attributes such as a store’s architecture and visual façade, which attracts tourists and customers to visit the store for example, the unusual iconic Selfridges building in Birmingham (Pantano and Deninis, 2019). A brand can also be formed when a new name, symbol or logo has been created linked to an offering (Keller, 2003). However, a brand functions beyond simply these visual features mentioned. Branding plays an important role in all types of organisations and serves many critical functions. According to Keller and Lehmann (2006), brands are initially based on the offering itself, the related marketing activity, and the usage by stakeholders, especially the customers, and it ultimately reflects the complete experience that customers have with, in this context, the retailer’s products or services.

The original purpose of branding is to identify the source and maker of a product or offering (Roper and Parker, 2006). Aaker (1991) stated that:

[A] brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol (such as a logo, trademark, or package design) intended to identify the goods or services from those of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors.

Aaker’s (1991) definition suggested that the term “brand” is not simply the name of a product or the company, it functions as the sign to help stakeholders to identify the source of the product and ultimately protect both the consumers and manufacturers

from the identical products produced by different manufacturers in the same competition pool. From an alternative viewpoint, the brand can be considered as a source of promises, which could help consumers to reduce risk and uncertainty. Customers store a certain amount of brand knowledge from their past experiences with the brand, either from their personal experience, word-of-mouth, or from the advertisement (Aaker, 1991). Applying this to the retail context of this study, the centuries-long lifetime of the department stores means that generations of customers have established a high level of brand knowledge of the department store brands. For example, customers are aware that John Lewis is famous for its partnership business structure and the “Never Knowingly Undersold” price match policy (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020). When making purchase decisions, it is the brand knowledge therefore that helps the customer to decide which brand to buy from, either when encountering an unknown brand, or an unknown product or service from a known brand. Kotler (2000) referred to a brand as a product (or service) offered by a recognised source. Customers are more likely to make a purchase from a known source to reduce such risk and uncertainty, particularly when customers already have achieved associations and established strong associations with a proven brand name (Aaker, 1992). A department store sells a wide range of commodities, as such many brands sold in department stores are sometimes not within a range with which customers are familiar. Thus, when purchasing these unknown brands, there is a certain level of risk and uncertainty of performance of the product or service of that unknown brand. Therefore, department store brand can signify the trustworthiness of the unknown brands which then influences a customer’s purchase decision.

Keller and Lehmann (2006) also suggested that brands act as the marker of a company’s offerings. For example, department stores such as Harrods and Selfridges are known for selling luxurious brands and products. A high level of trust is associated with the customer’s product and services offered by Harrods and Selfridges, where customers are reassured that what they purchase from Harrods and Selfridges are genuine and of a high quality. Based on the function of a brand as an identification tool, also a brand can be used to differentiate one brand from another. Initially, the source of differentiation of a brand’s offering was through tangible features such as packaging, quality, availability and price, or through marketing activities (Kotler *et al.*, 2013). As suggested by the definition of brand, the function of the brand features as a

differentiation tool to separate the tangible feature of a brand's offering from another. The value occurred with such tangible features is referred to as the functional value, which is associated with one's need to manage the physical environment and to satisfy one's utilitarian need (Vazquez, Del Rio and Iglesias, 2002). Whereas the brand also functions as the differentiating tool of non-functional and intangible features (Kotler *et al.*, 2013). This is supported by Davcik, da Silva and Hair, (2015) who referred to a brand as '[a] name, symbol, design, or mark that enhances the value of a product beyond its functional purpose'.

2.3.2. Department store as a corporate brand

There are a variety of brand types, the most common seen genres are product brands, service brands and corporate brands. A product brand is the brand of a physical product (De Chernatony, McDonald and Wallace, 2010), such as a clothing item whereas a service brand is the brand of an intangible service (De Chernatony, McDonald and Wallace, 2010), such as Collect+ which is the click-and-collect service offered by Selfridges. Beyond these offerings, brands are of irrefutable importance at an organisational level (Balmer and Gray, 2003). For a company with physical products, the packaged good itself is primarily the brand; whereas for service providers, only intangible features are provided, making the company primarily the brand (Wood, 2000; Davcik, da Silva and Hair, 2015). Department stores have a complex branding offer as they sell a combination of products and services, some of which are own-brand and others national/international brands, which distinguish department stores from pure product or service brands in terms of their disciplinary scope and management. This additional scope features department store brands as corporate brands, which suggests that the department store features beyond product identity and/or service identity, but is also linked to corporate identity (Balmer, 2022). A corporate brand is typically found within corporate bodies regardless of the nature of the corporations (either service or product based) and the sector (either public or not-for-profit sector) in which the corporation lies (Balmer, 2005). A brand is additionally important to corporate businesses such as manufacturers, service providers, and retailers. For these companies, the corporate brand (such as John Lewis) is the portfolio of the organisation, acting as the first-point of contact with its customers and helps them differentiate products that have asymmetric information regarding the quality, performance and added benefits against its competitors (Wood,

2000; Davcik, da Silva and Hair, 2015). These perceptions, interference and beliefs about the corporate brand are known as the corporate brand image (Lin and He, 2015). The term corporate brand image is used interchangeably with corporate identity and corporate reputation because of the overlap in concepts (Lin and He, 2015). However, these concepts are indeed distinct and should be applied separately to the context. Corporate identity is viewed from the perspective of the organisation and relates to the vision, mission and strategy of a corporation (Abratt and Kleyn, 2012). While corporate brand image and reputation are defined as being often beyond the control of the organisation such as in relation to how the organisation is viewed externally (Urde, 2013). Therefore, a corporate brand image can serve as an organisation's most valuable asset in their long term strategy (Balmer, 2022). Moreover, it serves as a signalling tool which directs their stakeholders, such as retail customers, to a variety of purposes including consumer buying behaviour (Balmer and Gray, 2003). The corporate brands are normally seen in five ways. Traditionally, corporate brands were seen from a sender's perspective in relation to a name, a logo or a trademark to denote the ownership of the product manufacturer or the service provider (Barwise, Dunham and Ritson, 2000). Later, brands started to be associated with corporate image building and were something offered to the customer from the corporation perspective (Balmer and Gray, 2003). More recently, corporate brands function as a symbol for added values associated with the corporation or its product or services, as well as a promise of quality and an assurance of product performance and financial risk (Balmer and Gray, 2003). By recognising the brand name of a department store, customers are aware of what they will receive at that department store. For example, according to Mintel (2020), John Lewis is associated with high levels of trust and differentiation and is likely to be recommended by customers. Whereas Debenhams is perceived as more accessible with lower prices leading to a belief amongst customers that the offering is more basic and less high-end than other department stores. In contrast, Harvey Nichols has a high level of awareness and has been associated with innovation by customers. As a luxury department store, Harvey Nichols is regarded as expensive but it has been reported by Mintel (2020) that customers still find that Harvey Nichols provides value. Even though customers may be unfamiliar with all the products or services offered by a department store, their trust in the brand and the associations they have with the brand can transfer to unfamiliar products or services, thus reducing the perceived risk in purchasing these items.

Furthermore, in the current era of e-commerce, a customer's trust towards online shopping platforms is significant. With prior experience of the physical department store, customers are more likely to have similar brand associations, such as trust or high levels of service, with the retailer's online platform (Clemons *et al.*, 2016). Customers may also identify with a retail corporate brand because they share similar values (see Section 2.3.2.3) (Simoes and Dibb, 2001). Customers, may for example, want to be associated with a high-end, expensive store such as Harrods as this reflects their aspirational values. In recent years, the emergence of online retailing and omnichannel retailing has shown the importance of corporate brand image from a new perspective. This perspective is of importance considering the increasing adoption of online and multichannel shopping by current consumers (Sharon and Mothersbaugh, 2009). Since the shopping mindset and behaviour of online and in-store purchasing are inherently different, the issue of inconsistency of retailer corporate image across platforms has raised concern of researchers (Landers *et al.*, 2015). Landers *et al.* (2015) emphasised the significant role played during the flow from physical to online platforms of the retailers, where customers' impression of retailer (corporate) brand image can be extended and superimposed from physical to online platforms. It is also argued that negative experiences and emotions will be induced when customers experience inconsistencies of corporate brand image across different channels due to a lack of control of experience and sense of unfamiliarity (Nadkarni and Gupta, 2007). It is still therefore important for this study to understand the impact of corporate brand image in a department store context given the unique heritage and position of department stores on the high street.

2.3.2.1. Department store heritage

As discussed in the previous section corporate brand normally demonstrates a unique corporate brand identity that represents what the brand does and what the brand is (Balmer, 2005). Such corporate brand identity was suggested to be able to reflect the stories and roots of the brand, particularly for those who have a strong brand heritage, like department stores (Sammour *et al.*, 2020). Department stores, established on the high street for more than 200 years, have shown its longevity as a retailer. Longevity, according to Urde, Greyser and Balmer (2007), captures a consistent demonstration of the use of symbols and a track record in delivering core values to both customer and non-customer stakeholders over a long period of time. These long-held core

values establish the perceived positioning of the brand in terms of promises or covenant which externally promotes communications with the customers and intrinsically guides customer behaviours and influences their mindsets.

Along with the delivery of core values, the use of symbols by a company can be significant when expressing the company's heritage (Urde, Greyser and Balmer, 2007). These symbols typically can be a logo, mascot, designs or symbolic colours. For example, Selfridges uses a symbolic yellow colour on both its store furnishing and product packaging that makes it a recognisable visual element across the globe. While Harrods' choice of olive green and a capital letter 'H' for Harrods, written in metallic gold, reinforces its prestige identity. History is another aspect that reflects brand heritage in its brand identity; in other words, what and who the company is. Understanding their own history is important for heritage companies, like department stores, because it not only influences how the company operated in the past, but more importantly how the choices will be made for its future direction (Urde, Greyser and Balmer, 2007). For example, the department store M&S states "EST. 1884" besides its logo to highlight how long it has been established. Overall, department stores have developed a strong and long corporate history, becoming known for their brand heritage (Moller, 2019). The identity of corporate brands with the notion of heritage can also act as a strategic tool to help establish brand authenticity and reputation (Balmer, 2011). The heritage reflects the core value that a brand delivers to its stakeholders as well as the long history that the stakeholders have been communicated to about the corporate brand (Balmer, 2001; Sammour *et al.*, 2020). Sammour (2017) stated that it is the elements, namely price, quality, design and symbol of the heritage of the corporate brand which contributes to the continuity of the corporate brand heritage, that makes the brand's identity powerful. Urde, Greyser and Balmer (2007) denoted that a corporate brand heritage is an essential dimension of a brand found in its core values, track record, longevity, use of symbols and particularly for an organisation who is convinced that its history is important. Existing for more than a century and a half, department stores have developed strong brand heritage based on their long history on the high street. Heritage is believed to be one of the most important characteristics of the corporate brand, the presence of corporate heritage shows that the organisation has brand assets which could ultimately provide additional value to both the organisation and its stakeholders (Sammour, Chen and Balmer,

2020). Such heritage identity is suggested to be consistently evolving, including new features and focuses to attract various stakeholders (Blombäck and Scandeliuss, 2013). For example, Selfridges offered an innovative peer-to-peer rental service, Hurr, from which customers can rent the curated one-off items from a selection of designer brands for a couple of days (Mintel, 2020). Selfridges also introduced an interactive iMirror, which provide the customers with a tailored experience, which seamlessly combines the online and in-store shopping experience (Mintel, 2020).

Through the communication of corporate heritage with the stakeholders, the level of identification by the organisation's stakeholders towards the brand could be increased (Balmer, 2009). The brand heritage of department stores has created a higher awareness of their brands through their lifetime on the high street. Before the arrival of e-commerce, customers' awareness towards the department store brand is concentrated on the physical presence of that department store. After the integration of online shopping platforms by the department stores, it could be argued that customers' trust of a department store brand could be transferred from their awareness of the physical stores towards their online counterpart (Ke et al., 2016). Therefore, it is possible that new customers build up awareness of the department store brand through their online platforms, which also may initiate the recognition and use of the physical stores by these customers. However, no research has explored this relationship and how brand awareness manifests itself across different platforms of the department store brand. Nonetheless, customers' awareness towards the physical store and/or the online platform of the brand, contributes to the overall brand awareness and such brand awareness, according to Pappu and Quester (2017), will contribute to the development of the brand's brand equity. Balmer (2011) also suggested that corporate heritage is a multi-dimensional time process that reflects the past, present, and future perspectives for brands to develop in the long run rather than a single-time management task. This track record retains a positive history of how the department store brand serves their customers. A brand with heritage also demonstrate a strong "longevity" element where the time stream of the corporation is signified and shows the continuity of the brand within which the core value was reflected (Sammour *et al.*, 2020). So, for example, the John Lewis Partnership was founded over 100 years ago as a business experiment of the inclusion of staff decisions during the operation of the corporation (John Lewis Partnership, 2021). The

importance of partners has been carried on for over a hundred years and still lies at the centre of the values of the John Lewis Partnership. Furthermore, corporate heritage provides a company with a heritage framework which reflects the brand identity and also strengthens stakeholder loyalty (Balmer, 2011).

2.3.2.2. Store as a symbol of the retailer's corporate brand

When referring to a brand in retailing, customers often refer to a name of the retail corporation or one of their stores (Burt and Davies, 2010), for example, Marks and Spencer, Debenhams, House of Fraser and Harrods. Customers often have decided which retailer or groups of retailers to visit before making the trip to the stores (Cox and Brittain, 2004). Such decisions are often made based on customers' perceptions and past experiences with the stores or the organisations (Burt and Davies, 2010). In this study, a retailer's name is prominent on the high street and thus over time has become a recognised brand (McGoldrick, 2002). The big retailer corporate brand names such as John Lewis and Marks and Spencer have been recognised for their corporate identity, the quality of product and service being provided, as well as the individual emotional attachments that has passed on across the generations.

Martineau (1958) argued the importance of store to retailer branding, where the store is their retail product. This occurs when the physical store is the place where customers experience the brand in the physical world, and where many of the retailers only sell national brands (Porter and Claycomb, 1997). A product brand adds value to their products and a service brand focus adds value from the quality of the service they sell. Whereas for the retailer corporate brands, who own a physical store, their values are created beyond what is sold in store, their added values can be derived from the experiences created in the store (Troiville, Hair and Cliquet, 2019), as shown in Figure 4.

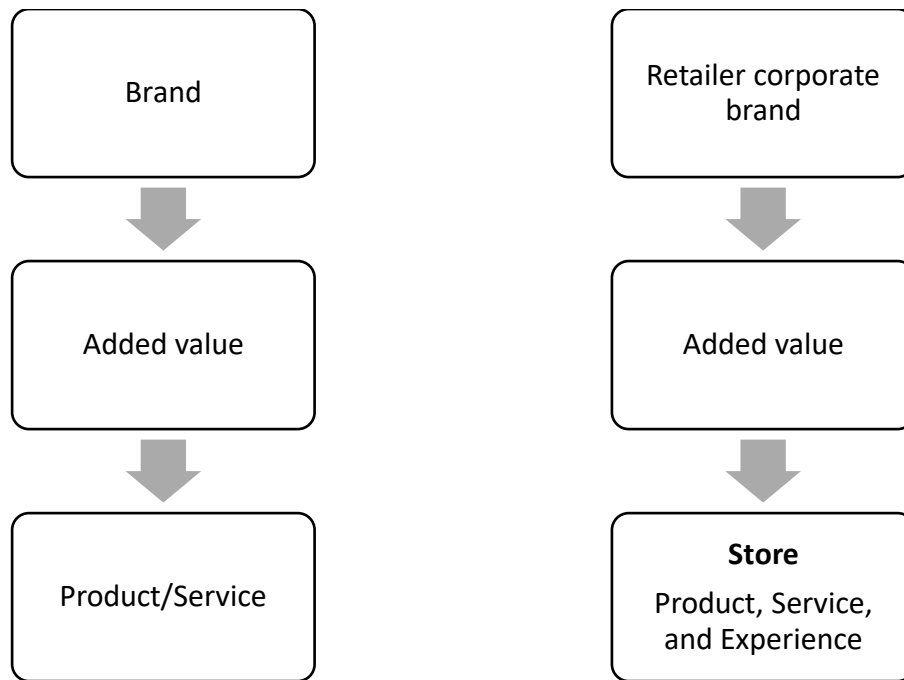


Figure 4 Mapping retailer brand equity (right) with brand equity (left). Adapted from: (Troville, Hair and Cliquet, 2019).

Traditionally, a store means a physical retail unit. However, the department store goes beyond this as it provides an in-store atmosphere, which creates unique experiences providing alternative value to their stakeholders. The department stores are generally well-furnished with a high-end style. They are spacious, use light, background music and the smell of fragrances and they are unique to each particular department store. Therefore, the specific store's atmospherics reinforce the department store brand values (Das, 2015). Bedbury and Fenichell (2002) referred to a brand as a psychological concept inside consumers' minds, where content, images, feelings, sensations, and experiences are involved in this process. Therefore, such sensory long-held memories will be recorded together with the name of the department store, which in turn will be recalled when the department store brand name is mentioned. However, department stores are not only physical stores, but also online stores. Customer experience on these platforms is created from the design of the visual and flow of the web links, as well as the seamlessness of the flow from online platforms to the receipt of the product through delivery or collection services. The characteristic of branding allows customers to identify offerings with reduced search costs. Therefore, the retail corporate brand name and the retail context in which the product was sold becomes more important.

Currently, the brand acts as the bridge that connects different channels of the department stores. Customers usually start shopping from one type of channel offered by department stores and later integrate into other channels at that store. Most retailers adopted the strategy to retain their tradition by replicating their product selection and prices on their online channels (Wu and Li, 2016). In the integration process, retaining the salient and relevant association of the physical store was regarded as the crucial success factor of the online channel, as this was extended from the physical presence of the brand (Wu and Li, 2016). The impact of brand equity also exists when one channel is no longer available. The store is usually the '*physical symbol*' of the brand where customers make real-life contact and experience the brand. For example, during the pandemic, customers did not have access to the physical store (Das, 2015). Therefore, customers continued to shop at the brand through its online platform. For example, when Debenhams collapsed and lost all their physical stores, their intellectual property such as their website and brand was bought by Boohoo, and it is now operating as an online-only retailer under the Boohoo umbrella (Butler, 2021). But many past experiences of customers with Debenhams have not been lost nor changed, potentially these customer memories will be carried forward to today's online only version of Debenhams. However, it can be critiqued that once the brand repositioned itself after the acquisition, the brand effect of a pre-acquired brand would be lost (Chung and Kim, 2020).

2.3.2.3. Department store brand values

As discussed in the earlier sections, the department store brands provide both tangible values and intangible values. Brand tangible value is considered a function of the physical attributes, and the value, not arising from physical attributes, is termed brand intangible value. Tangible brand values are the gains that accrue when brand strength is leveraged to obtain superior current and future profits. Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinci, (2005) defined brand value as "[t]he perceived brand utility relative to its costs, assessed by the consumer and based on simultaneous considerations of what is received and what is given up receiving it." In other word, consumers' choice of brand depends on the balance between the cost of price and the utility of the product. Lassar, Mittal and Sharma (1995) suggested that some brands have a higher brand equity, because they have a greater brand 'price value' and thus other brands' high brand equity, may be driven from their high quality and social image. Similarly, value is not

just about low price, but the quality of it, which increases or decreases the desirability of an offering (Cassill, Thomas and Bailey, 1997). Today, scarcity is no longer just about money but about energy, time, and stress. Therefore, the less time, money, stress and energy involved, the more the value it has for the customers (Cassill, Thomas and Bailey, 1997). In the context of department store retailing, brand values are embedded in the products offered by the store, such as their pricing, as well as the additional services provided by the department stores (Cassill, Thomas and Bailey, 1997). Brand intangible value consists of the values derived by the consumer from brand name associations (Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinci, 2005). The values, more precisely being the symbolic value, relates to the need of the favourable management of the social and psychological environment. These were referred to by Maslow (1943), as the top three needs in the Maslow’s hierarchy of need, namely esteem, social and self-fulfilment. Such symbolic value is suggested by Vazquez, Del Rio and Iglesias (2002) to be able to help the customers to connect with their favoured social groups, values and individual identities. From this perspective, intangible features and benefits of a brand is of importance and can be a source of uniqueness (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Always a corporate brand should deliver a set of core values to its customers and which the customers can resonate. Table 1 Examples of department store values, extracted from official websites of the department stores. Table 1 shows the values of three prominent department stores in the UK as an example, each set of statements reflects the unique set of values that are perceived by the stakeholders of that department store brand, irrespective of whether it is the physical store offering or online offering.

Name	Value	Explanation
Selfridges	We build trust	“Openness is the foundation of an ethical and inclusive community. Selfridges Group are transparent in the way we communicate with people and in the way we communicate with the world. We are committed to learning, to growing and to continuously doing better.”
	We respect our world	“Our commitment is to people and planet. We all must rigorously assess the impact of every project and every action and ask if we are actively contributing to a sustainable future.”

	We value creativity and innovation	“Creativity is the heart of our organisation, and is expressed in every role, campaign, project and destination. Selfridges Group operates flexibly, giving our people the freedom to engage their curiosity, express their imagination and allow their innovative drive to flourish.”
Harrods	We are human	“Our people make the difference and set us apart. We are warm, curious, humble and genuinely interested in others. We believe there is no substitute for thoughtfulness, civility and care. We really care. About our people, our customers and each other.”
	We strive to exceed	“We believe there is great reward in going further, pushing for greater and exceeding expectations. It's our pleasure to bring magic and create marked moments of delight. This is what drives us to go beyond, for each other, and for our customers.”
	We build trust	“We act all times with initiative, confidence, good manners, integrity and discretion. We work hard to continuously build our knowledge and cherish our relationships to be trusted experts and guides. We act responsibly and do the right thing.”
	We take pride	“We are very proud of our trusted brand, our heritage and our store. We recognise it is our people who bring the brand to life by doing things properly, taking ownership and being attentive to detail. We believe every detail matters, and everything means something.”
	We are one	“We believe we are so much better when we work together. We really value teamwork. We celebrate all cultures, backgrounds and experiences, and look outward (as well as inward) for inspiration and ideas. We are not one voice, but many, aligned by our values but free to be ourselves.”

John Lewis	Do right	"We act with integrity and use our judgement to do the right thing."
	All or nothing	"We put everything we have into everything we do."
	Give more than you take	"We put more in, so everyone gets more out."
	Be yourself. Always	"We're quirky, proud and at our best when we are free to be ourselves."
	We not me	"When we work together anything is possible."

Table 1 Examples of department store values, extracted from official websites of the department stores.

The competitive advantage of the tangible value of department stores, such as a one-stop shopping experience and the provision of a wide range of commodities has been challenged by rival retailers such as out-of-town retailers and online-only retailers, who sell a certain percentage of the same brands as department stores (see section 2.2.5.1.4). Operating in a highly competitive environment, it is the brand name of the department store that adds extra value for their customers and thus encouraging them to stay loyal to the department store brand. Therefore, it is important to explore the brand equity of the department store brands to understand what effects customers' perceptions of department stores, particularly in the challenging retail context as outlined in section 2.2.5. Included in that exploration is to understand what makes the department store brands so different to the customers, despite the rivalry and wide range of choices in the current retail environment. This study therefore addresses this gap by exploring department store brand equity from a consumer's perspective.

2.4. Brand Equity

2.4.1. Conceptualising brand equity

The term "brand equity" was introduced and soon widely recognised in the late 1980's. Since then, many practitioners and researchers began to attempt to define, conceptualise, and define it (Kim, Kim and An, 2003). Early definitions of brand equity

were established from various perspectives. Farquhar (1989, p.24) defined brand equity as the '[a]dded value with which a given brand endows a product'. Even though both scholars emphasised the "added value" that a brand could bring in a general sense, they were discussed from different perspectives: Shocker and Weitz (1988) focused on the net accounting added value, driven by the brand name, which can be shown on the balance sheet; whereas Farquhar (1989) suggested from the perspective of intangible benefit, which customers can obtain by being aware of the brand name, beyond the functional value of the product. From time to time, the definition of brand equity changes and the variety of brand equity evolves. Feldwick (1996) defined brand equity through brand value perception as 'the total value of a brand which is a separable asset – when it is sold, or included in a balance sheet' (Wood, 2000; Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinici, 2005, p.238). Feldwick (1996) also defined brand equity from two consumer-based perspectives.

The first definition was [a] measure of the strength of consumers' attachment to a brand", which was later summarised by Wood (2000, p.662) as a focus of brand strength. The second definition was '[a] description of the associations and beliefs the consumer has about the brand', which discussed brand equity through a brand image perspective (Wood, 2000, p.662). Moreover, Wood (2000) suggested brand equity is a way to define the customer-brand relationship. In their studies, the value of the brand was evaluated from the non-brand related assets using their estimation method which is based on the business's financial value in the market. Similarly, Yoo and Donthu (2000, p.196) define brand equity as '[t]he differences in consumer choice between the focal branded product and a product given the same level of product features'. This definition compares two identical products whose only difference was the brand name. In another word, the comparison is between the extra value embedded in the name of the brand and the identical product without that brand name.

2.4.2. Perspectives of brand equity

Apart from the widely adopted definitions discussed in the previous section, brand equity has been mainly defined and discussed from three perspectives: the employees (King and Grace, 2009) the customers (King and Grace, 2009) or the finances (Simon and Sullivan, 1993; Kim, Kim and An, 2003). To systematically discuss these perspectives of researching brand equity, Baalbaki (2012) elaborated a brand equity review system, which shows the relationships between the mainstream brand equity

perspectives and approaches. Baalbaki (2012) suggested that brand equity can be understood from three different perspectives: customer-based brand equity (CBBE), financial-based brand equity (FBBE), and employee-based brand equity (EBBE) (See Figure 5).

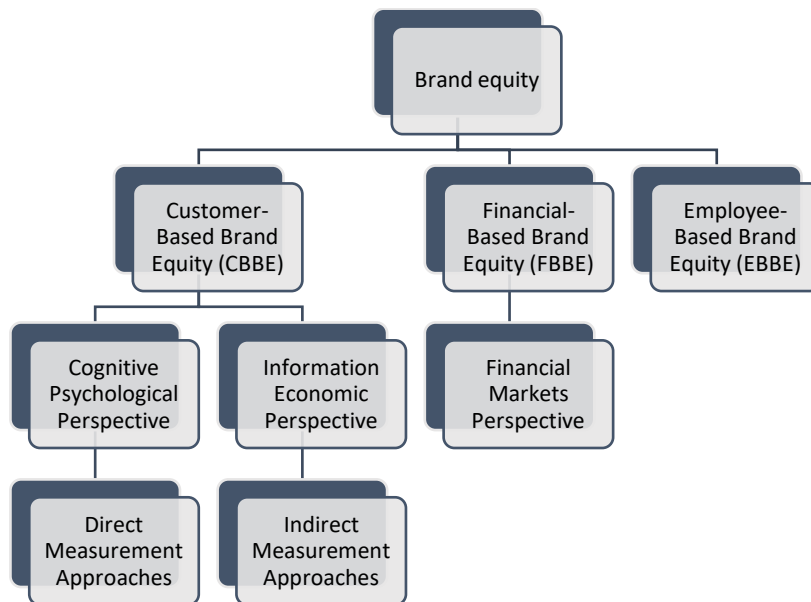


Figure 5 Brand equity perspective diagram, Source: (Baalbaki, 2012)

Information economics perspective

The information economics perspective, views brand as a signalling indicator of the product quality (Erdem and Swait, 1998; Baalbaki, 2012). More specifically, (Erdem and Swait, 1998; Baalbaki, 2012) suggested that the “content, clarity, and credibility of a brand”, when acting as a sign of a production’s positioning strategy, may increase consumers’ perception of product quality, decrease information costs, and reduce consumers’ perceived risk. The ultimate effect of these factors will increase consumer perceived utility. Farquhar's (1989, p.24) definition of brand equity fits into this perspective. His definition of brand equity, “added value with which a given brand endows a product”, suggested that the value of a brand is a signal to consumers (Erdem and Swait, 1998). The significance of this perspective lies with the manager and practitioner, emphasising that a firm should take brand equity into account when measuring brand equity in the decision-making process of making investments and incurring costs (Erdem and Swait, 1998).

2.4.2.1. Financial-based perspectives (financial-based brand equity/FBBE)

A widely cited financial definition was given by (Anderson, 2007): they define brand equity as “the incremental cash flows which accrue to branded products over and above the cash flows which would result from the sale of unbranded products”. Differing from CBBE, financial-based brand equity (FBBE) refers to objective accounting factors relating to branding rather than the subjective perceptions customers hold of a brand (Lassar, Mittal and Sharma, 1995). This FBBE perspective has certain limitations (Lassar, Mittal and Sharma, 1995). First, brand is the only accountable intangible asset, leaving other intangible assets such as intellectual properties and human capital excluded from the measurement scale. Second, only corporate-level brands were considered, not the product-level brands the firm owns. However, Baalbaki, (2012) found that positive brand equity leads to various financial advantages such as higher revenue, lower costs, and greater profits. Furthermore, their study suggests that when brand equity is objectively and correctly measured, it becomes a proper technique for measuring the success of a firm’s long-term marketing strategies (Simon and Sullivan, 1993). Anderson (2007) also agreed on the significance of FBBE on the forward-looking brand equity measurement.

2.4.2.2. Employee-based perspectives (employee-based brand equity/EBBE)

Over time, the importance of brand equity has been widely acknowledged by academics and practitioners. As discussed in previous sections, consumer-based and financial-based perspectives are dominant amongst academic and practical research, thus, the perspectives of other stakeholders are far less understood. In the retail store, employees are an important source of capital and are often treated as brand ambassadors due to their importance in the brand building process. Indeed, for department stores who compete on high levels of service, the role of staff is to perform satisfactory service to the customers. Thus, Keller and Lehmann (2006) suggested a third perspective of understanding brand equity based on Keller’s (1993) work, namely Employee-Based Brand Equity (EBBE). EBBE is defined by King and Grace (2009, p.130) as “the differential effect that brand knowledge has on an employee’s response to their work environment”.

2.4.2.3. Customer-based perspective (customer-based brand equity/CBBE)

The term customer-based brand equity (CBBE) is often used to refer to brand equity in a general sense (Rajasekar and Nalina, 2008). Among the brand equity literature, Rajasekar and Nalina, (2008) and Aaker (1991) established the foundation for brand equity conceptualisation. Aaker (1991) suggested brand equity is “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or a firm and or to that firm’s customer” (Aaker, 1991, p.15). This type of brand equity perspectives focused on the cognitive psychology of customers referred to as customer-based brand equity (CBBE) and is the perspective adopted in this study. This approach is the dominant research perspective which has been adopted by many academics and practitioners. Customer-based brand equity, discuss the value of brand equity from the consumers’ perspective, regardless of the nature of the customer (i.e. both organisational customers (B2B) and individual customers (B2C) (Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinci, 2005). While other scholars, Atilgan, Aksoy and Akinci, (2005), defined CBBE in a slightly different way, “the differential effect of brand knowledge on the consumer response to the marketing of the brand”. Keller (1993, p.1) believed that CBBE occurs when consumers of a brand recognise the feature of the brand and its product while showing certain affective, strong, and unique brand associations in their memory, where brand association means other information linked to the brand in memory and contains the value of the brand is held subjectively by the customer. For example, family has been considered as an external influencer on the customer-brand relationship which may result in customer-based brand equity (Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz, 2002). The family enables members’ recognition of brands consumed at home which creates higher level of brand knowledge within the family (Gil, Andrés and Salinas, 2007). This brand knowledge may also link to unique family memories which provide emotional attachments (Fournier, 1998). The most adopted fundamental frameworks were proposed by brand management gurus, Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993). Aaker (1991) proposed a five-dimension framework from the perspective of aiding brand managers to build stronger brands through the management of brand equity. The assets and liabilities on which brand equity is based will differ from context to context but can often

be grouped into five categories, brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and other proprietary brand assets.

Brand loyalty

Consumers' loyalty to the brand is the core of a brand's equity. For retailers, it is the brand loyalty that secures the customer base of the brand because the loyal customers have little motivation to learn about alternative retailers selling the same national brands (Aaker, 1992). Aaker (1991) defined brand loyalty as the likelihood that a customer will switch to another brand, especially when a change to the brand is encountered. Liu *et al.* (2017) defined brand loyalty as "the attachment [a] customer has to a brand". Consumers with high brand loyalty will continue to purchase the brand, even when facing direct competition with superior quality and cheaper price (Reicbbeld, 1996). Burt and Davies (2010) suggested that brand loyalty can be measured in three different perspectives: behavioural (number of purchases for a particular brand), attitudinal (consumer brand dispositions) and choice (the reasons behind each purchase or the factors that potentially affect choices). Aaker (1991), similarly, suggested that brand loyalty has many advantages for the company such as reduced marketing costs, trade leverage, time to respond to competitive threats and attracting new customers (which create customer brand awareness and increase reassurance). Still to be discovered is the relationship between brand loyalty and brand awareness. These are elements weighted with equal relevance when measuring brand equity (See Figure 6). However, according to Aaker's (1991) statement, there is a link between brand loyalty and brand awareness, which has not been included in brand equity frameworks.

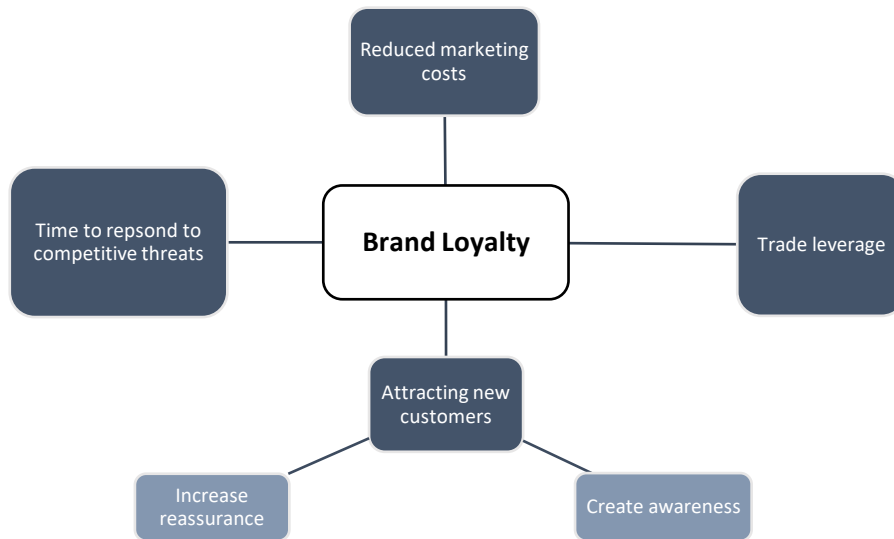


Figure 6 Brand loyalty dimensional framework. Source: (Aaker, 1991)

Behavioural brand loyalty was originally suggested by Aaker (1991) to be measured in three ways: repurchase rate, percentage of purchase, and number of brands purchased. In this case, consumer brand loyalty was directly measured based on their shopping behaviour either on aggregate or individual level. Repurchase rate measures on the aggregate level indicating the number of consumers returned to the brand for another purchase. This shows the likelihood of consumers to buy the brands again. Grover and Srinivasan (1992) identified that loyal customers respond more favourably to a brand than non-loyalty or switching customers. Yoo, Donthu and Lee (2000) also identified that loyal customers purchase the brand on a regular basis and are less likely to switch. In this case, a customer who is loyal to one department store is less likely to switch to another. Percentage of purchases measures the individual use of a brand, suggesting what percentage of a certain brand's product the consumer buys out of their overall expenditure. The result implies how positively the consumer responds to the brand. This response relates to affective loyalty which reflects the past experience that a customer has with the brand and accumulated attitude orientation towards the brand (Oliver, 1999). The number of brands purchased by a consumer measures the competition of the specific product category, showing the number of other brands bought in that product category. This measurement helps brand managers to identify competitors in the market. However, it is critiqued that brand loyalty is not only a construct of brand equity but is also an outcome. Hence, it is important to distinguish the brand loyalty before and after the management of

customer-based brand equity (Berry, 2000). As discussed in earlier sections, department stores have a strong brand heritage that has developed over a hundred years. Accompanied by generations of customers, department store brands have developed their own loyal customer groups. Under the current overt competition across different retailing institutions, department stores have integrated into different channels which it can be suggested, protects the department stores from their customers moving to other retailers.

Brand awareness

Brand awareness was defined by Aaker (1991) as the ability of prospective customers to recognise and match the brand with its product category. While the American Marketing Association (2014) suggested that brand awareness implies the amount and level of knowledge that a customer holds about a particular brand. Brand awareness provides a link between the product category and the brand (Berry, 2000). Through psychological associations, customers can trigger values individually when they refer to a particular brand (see section 2.3.2.3) (Graciola *et al.*, 2020). The value triggered from the brand can be either functional or emotional. Functionally, Konishi and Sandfort (2003) suggest consumers' familiarity with a retailer's brand name implies that they know about the characteristics and prices of the products sold in a department store compared to independent specialist retailers. As a result, consumers are determined that the offering of that specific department store suits their taste and affordability before they walk into the store. Choice might be generated by the department store having a wider range of products or because of their loyalty to a specific department store. However, such a competitive advantage has been challenged, since many online retailers' offerings are also very inclusive and have a large stock. This makes online retailers more powerful in terms of cheap prices as well as the generalised and specialist product offerings. While in specialist retailer shops, there is a high risk that the consumers are unable to find the product they want, due to, for example, a limited range of offerings or a lack of sizes (Konishi and Sandfort, 2003). As reflected by Davcik, da Silva and Hair (2015), brands represent information embedded with the promise of a constant quality of the offering, which helps them simplify the decision-making process, reduce risk, and establish trust with the brand.

Emotionally, brand awareness is a range of feelings by consumers to the brand at different levels, from simply recognising the brand as a top-of-mind belief, the brand is the only one in the product category. However, a customer's experience of brand awareness can be influenced by a close family member or friends (Aaker, 1991) and if a customer knows about a particular brand, whether the knowledge of the brand is obtained actively or passively, such level of knowledge can be described as a higher knowledge of the brand (Aaker, 1991). Aaker (1991) suggested a pyramid of brand awareness: top-of-mind, brand recall, brand recognition, unaware of brand, shown in Figure 7.

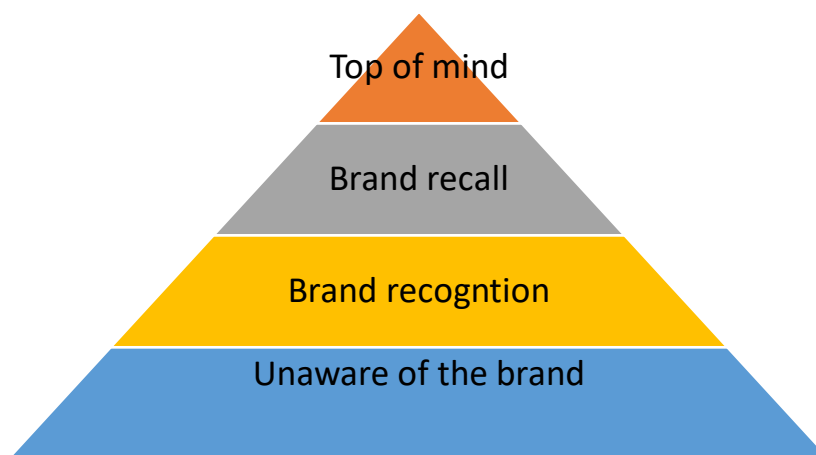


Figure 7 Pyramid of brand awareness (Source: Aaker 1991)

Among the four levels of awareness, brand recall and brand recognition are the two indicators that should be better understood. As gradation between the top-of-mind and unaware of the brand status, are the two elements that cause the drive of consumers to the elements either side, as indicated on the diagram (Valkenburg and Buijzen, 2005). According to Aaker (1991), brand recall and brand recognition involves the cause of gaining brand name identity and linking the brand name to the product category. Pappu (2008) also suggested that customers are able to classify retailers to a certain category and make comparisons of the members within each category, such as across the department stores and specialist stores. In comparison, brand recall requires more effort to develop than brand recognition. Building brand recall can be achieved through repetitive exposure to the brand to tighten the link between the brand and the product class, but eventually fades over time. Recognition of a brand can be

achieved by only a few exposures for a customer to recognise a feature of the brand such as logo and slogan. In a study by Huang and Sarigollu (2012), brand awareness showed a positive relationship with and influence on, customer reactions. This relationship represents better brand performance, while also influencing consumer decision-making and purchase intention; this is important for department stores.

The department stores, as discussed in section 3.2.1, have developed a long history on the high street and have established strong brand awareness by the customers across generations through word-of-mouth (WOM). WOM can provide a positive impact for organisations. However, WOM is not the ideal communication medium because customers are becoming increasingly powerful especially with the use of social media (Jill, 2019). During the longevity of the department store development, stories have developed. These stories have been communicated by customers through WOM. WOM can relate to positive or negative experiences and ultimately create an impact on customer behaviour (Fournier and Avery, 2011). However, the relationship between the impact of positive and negative WOM on customer behaviour is not clear in the literature (Jill, 2019).

Brand awareness increases a brand's probability of being considered by the customer according to a set of considerations, as several brands receive serious consideration for making a purchase (Kim and Kim, 2016). According to (Chi, Yeh and Yang, 2009), a brand with high awareness and a good image can foment brand awareness, increase brand trust, and improve customer purchase intentions. However, presently consumers are overloaded with brand choice and information. Moreover, consumers are heavily affected by social commerce, where consumers share and seek information about a product from other consumers consciously and unconsciously (Park et al., 2010). Therefore, the level of brand awareness in a consumer's mind may be affected randomly and may change significantly in a very short period. Considering the diversity of shopping channels and the range of choice faced by customers, brand awareness has become more important for retailers to ensure customers purchase from them. Apart from traditional marketing channels, customers now receive information from sources across social media, pop-up advertisements, video advertisements, celebrities and reviews of strangers online. Therefore, it is important to gain an in-depth understanding of how consumers' awareness of a brand is formed and how the recognition and recall are affected by customer shopping and browsing

behaviour in a shopping environment. This consists of multiple channels (offline and online), unlimited choice and high levels of information for customers to process.

Brand associations

Brand associations are defined as “anything linked to the memory of a brand” (Aaker, 1991, p.109). For retailers, they are customers’ thoughts linked to the memories that are associated with the name of the retailer (Pappu and Quester, 2006a). It can help customers to process and retrieve information, set the foundation for extension and differentiation of brands, act as a motivation for purchase, and create positive feelings (Aaker, 1992). In general, department stores are usually associated with a wide range of commodities (Howard, 2021). Therefore, in comparison to other forms of retailers, such as the clothing stores, department store brands are more likely to be recalled due to the wider range of commodities and their variety of products, which are expected to be higher (Pappu and Quester, 2008). Department store brands are often associated with a high service level (Tsai, Wu and Liang, 2008). Furthermore, the association of the brand may exist in certain contexts such as the situation in which the product is used or the expansion of the association of the product in its main category to a related category. This can provide a reason to buy and thus attract the customers towards the brand. For example, increasing numbers of retailers participated in producing Christmas advertisements such as M&S and John Lewis, with a strong association with family values (Butler, 2022). In fact, customers form unique associations of department store brands in their memories (Pappu and Quester, 2008). Brand associations acted as an information collecting tool which informs the customers when making differentiation between brands (Osselaer and Janiszewski, 2001). The information recalled from memories are connected with the brand and reflect the image of the department store brands (Pappu and Quester, 2008). Also, a strong brand association will result in brand loyalty (Sasmita, 2015).

Perceived quality

Perceived quality, means the consumer’s perception of the overall quality of a product or service regarding its intended purpose when compared to its alternatives (Maio Mackay, 2001; White, Joseph-Mathews and Voorhees, 2013). Also, perceived quality sometimes is considered as a component of brand value (Zeithaml, 2000). Aaker (1992) suggested that perceived quality provides value to a brand by providing a

reason to buy, to differentiate the brand from another, to act as a foundation of line extension as well as acting as a strong support to charge premium prices. Perceived quality depends on customers' judgements formed between their expectations of the quality of the offering and their perceptions of the actual performance (Bentzen, Christiansen and Varnes, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2017). Companies with a high perceived quality can increase brand preference over its competitors (Yoo, Donthu and Lee, 2000; Liu *et al.*, 2014). Perceived quality in this case motivates customers to buy frequently from the brand by distinguishing the brand from its competitors (Aaker, 1991a). Horng *et al.* (2012) also identified that perceived quality demonstrated a positive relationship with customers' behavioural intention. Applying this to the retail context, the department store has been known for its quality of product and services. Since the rise of online shopping, the physical environment of the department store and its service quality of both the online and offline platforms have been the key driver to customers' perceptions of retailer brands. It has been identified that the service quality of both online and offline platforms, has a direct effect on the brand equity of multiple channel retailers (White, Joseph-Mathews and Voorhees, 2013).

2.4.3. Conceptualising consumer-based department store brand equity

In recent years, the strategic importance of brand equity in the context of retailer corporate brand has gained a spotlight in retail management studies (Troiville, Hair and Cliquet, 2019). Brand equity in the context of retailer corporate brand has been referred in a variety of terms with similar meanings, such as retailer brand equity, retailer equity and store equity. For example, Troiville, Hair and Cliquet (2019) drew upon the notion of "retailer equity" from a service marketing perspective, driving the definition of retailer equity, based on Aaker's (1991) definition of brand equity. Retailer equity was defined by Arnett, Laverie and Meiers, (2003, p.168) as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a store brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the perceived value of the store brand by its customer (or potential customers)." In their research, Arnett, Laverie and Meiers (2003) adopted Keller's (1998) view that retailer brand equity, as a form of brand equity, is parallel to the structures of general brand equity. They suggested that retailer equity has four dimensions: store loyalty, name awareness, service quality and retailer associations, with the former three dimensions being constant across all retailers. This

conceptualisation was then criticised by Pappu and Quester (2006) on three aspects. First, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the compatibility of the framework of brand equity and retailer equity. Second, the description of the number and nature of dimensions are robust. Finally, an indicator for measuring retailer associations also is missing from the framework.

Considering the differences between retailers, manufacturers and pure service providers, discussed earlier in Section **Error! Reference source not found.**, as well as the unique challenges involved in specific industries, it is important to conceptualise brand equity models with respect to retailer brand contexts (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004). Ailawadi and Keller(2004) integrated Keller's (1993) model into "retailer brand equity" when studying the differences of brand equity between different types of retailers. Pappu and Quester (2006) define retailer brand equity as, "the value associated by the consumers with the name of a retailer, as reflected in the dimension of retailer awareness, retailer associations, retailer perceived quality and retailer loyalty." This definition overcame the limitations mentioned above and is parallel to the conceptual dimensions suggested by Aaker (1991). Das, Datta and Guin (2012) also adopted Pappu and Quester's (2006) definition of retailer brand equity and expanded the concept to the term "consumer-based retailer equity" when studying retailer personality. Similarly, Hartman and Spiro (2005, p.1113) derived the concept of "consumer-based store equity" from Keller's (1993) model, where consumer-based store equity was defined as "the differential effect of store knowledge on customer response to the marketing of the store". However key consumer-based dimensions such as perceived quality and brand loyalty were not adopted in their model (Pappu and Quester, 2006). Evidence also supported that it is important for the brand equity models to be adapted and used regarding the specific context of the market or the nature of the brand. For example, Troiville, Hair and Cliquet (2019) critiqued that most existing studies failed to focus on the early stage of the definition and conceptualisation of retailer brand equity. Recently studies were criticised to have inadequately applied generalised Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) models to the retail context. Consequently, inadequate results may be collected and may falsely narrow the direction of future research of retailer brand equity study (Troiville, Hair and Cliquet, 2019). In fact, researchers are aware that retailer brands are sufficiently different from manufacturer brands (Troiville, Hair and Cliquet, 2019).

2.4.4. Summary

In section 2.3 and section 2.4, the contextual branding concepts have been explained. These sections explored the importance of differentiating retailer corporate brands from brands that offers physical products or services only. Through the identification of this distinguishment, the importance of exploring brand equity frameworks in the context of retailer corporate brands such as department store has been acknowledged. As summarised in section 2.2.7, the department store has developed a longevity on the high street. This reflected the uniqueness of department store as a retailer corporate brand who has a strong brand heritage. Consequently, department stores have been famous for a high level of brand awareness of the brand values and brand image which resulted in a strong brand equity. However, the decline of department store in the current retail environment showed that the uniqueness has been lost and the brand equity is fading. In order to explore the brand equity of department store corporate brands in the current context, there are a few gaps needed to be addressed. Firstly, most existing studies are based on the conceptualization established Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) which was developed before the establishment of multi-channel retailing. Therefore, it is important to understand whether those attributes are still valid in the current retail environment. Secondly, existing studies are mostly quantitative studies which focused on examining relationships on known variables rather than exploring new attributes (Pappu and Quester, 2017). Thus, an in-depth exploration of brand equity frameworks using qualitative study is necessary to validate any emerging concepts that may contribute to the formation of retailer brand equity. Thirdly, brand equity frameworks have not been explicitly applied to department stores as individual subject in recent years, especially from the lens of multi-channel retailing. Therefore, this study aims to explore the UK high street department store corporate brands from a customer-based department store brand equity perspective to contribute a new insight of department store corporate brand equity in the current turbulent retail environment. In the next section, a conceptual framework which informs the key themes that might emerge from the findings is established and explained in detail.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

Through the review of literature, it has been identified that there are two main influencers with regards to the department store: the retail environment in which the department store lies and the customers' perceptions of the department store. As discussed in section 2.2.4, the evolution of the department store is demonstrated by a cyclical pattern following both the typical retail lifecycle and retail accordion patterns. The current external retail environment has been significantly affected by five factors, as mentioned in section 2.2.5.1: i) the COVID-19 pandemic; ii) the rise of e-commerce; iii) the fragmented ownership of high street properties, which has increased the difficulty of town centre management; iv) the increase in the similarity of offerings by different types of retailers, across different channels either online or offline; and v) the actions taken by central UK governments (see discussions in section 2.2.5.2).

Apart from external factors, customer also affect the department store brand equity. Living in the current retail landscape, the customers' demands, and shopping behaviours have been significantly impacted. The prominence of online shopping platforms has reshaped customers' shopping mindsets and customers are likely to react to changes to their surrounding retail environment. However, the department store has been around for centuries, and customers have built up strong perceptions towards the department store's brand name. The customers perceptions towards the brand contributes to the brand equity of the department stores, where customers' past experiences and emotional attachment to the department store brand is significant. Research identified that brand association, brand awareness, brand loyalty and perceived quality (Aaker, 1991), as well as brand knowledge and brand image (Keller, 1993) perceived by the customers, has a direct impact on the customer-based brand equity. These brand equity dimensions has been widely adopted when building up the brand equity frameworks across different types of brands (Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Pappu, Quester and Cooksey, 2005; Tong and Hawley, 2009; Asli, 2020). Through the review of literature, it has been identified that there are other brand assets that are relevant to customers' perception of department store brands. These constructs are brand heritage (see section 2.3.2.1), the characteristic of the store as a symbol of the brand (see section 2.3.2.2) and brand values (2.3.2.3).

Overall, the department store is facing a turbulent retail environment where customers are sophisticated and are adapting to new ways of shopping. Trapped in the competition of online shopping and the increased similarity of offers from all forms of retailers, the department store has lost its point of differentiation. Its competitive advantage has been weakened significantly, particularly in relation to physical stores. Therefore, it is believed that by exploring the impact of retailer environment on the customers and the department stores as well as gaining an understanding of customers' perceptions of department store brands, this research can contribute to brand equity theory and our wider understanding of department stores as a retail institution. To recap, the questions which will be addressed in this study are:

- i. What are the customer's perceptions of the UK high street department store's brands?
- ii. How can the existing customer-based retailer brand equity framework be adapted, considering the context of the changing and turbulent retail environment?
- iii. Can a new definition of the department store be sourced from customers' perceptions explored in this study?

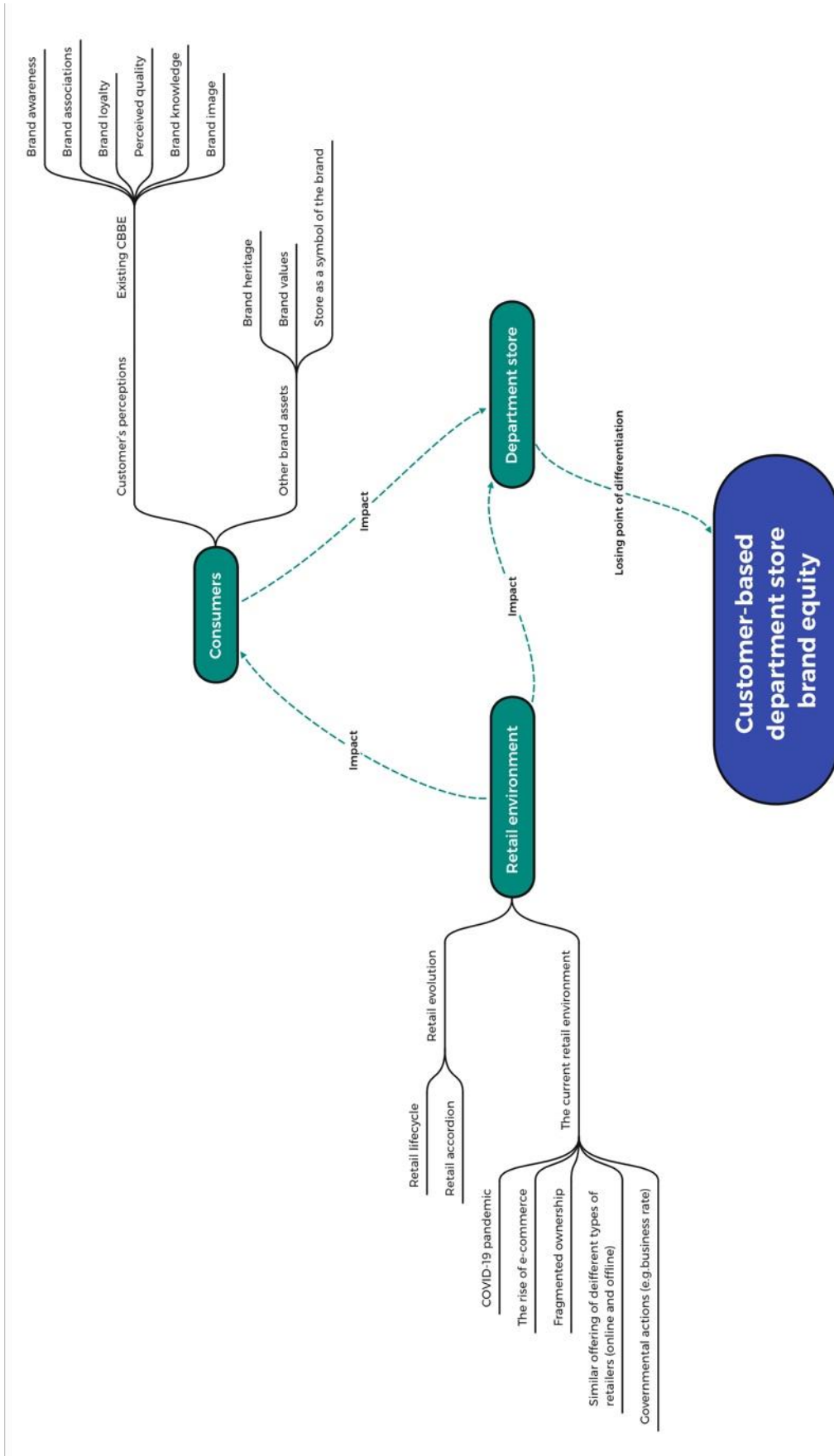


Figure 8 Conceptual framework of customer-based department store brand equity.

2.6. Chapter Summary

Through the review of literature, the department store and the high street appear to have fallen into a decline trajectory as a result of a number of external drivers, such as rising retail operating costs. In this turbulent retail environment, the anchor and unique position of the department store has been shaken further by the challenges created by out-of-town retail parks, retail warehouses and the rise of e-commerce. The outbreak and effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has also hastened this decline trajectory. Many believe then that this indicates the death of brick-and-mortar department stores and the high street. However, opportunities have emerged as many retailers have shifted to online and hybrid modes, including department stores. Therefore, it is important to understand the customers' perceptions of the department store in the current turbulent context, given their heritage status, their position as an important retail institution and their relatively recent entry into the online retail market.

This study therefore takes a branding lens to explore perceptions of the department store. Having a successful brand creates competitive advantages for an organisation, including high market shares, the right to charge premium prices, inelastic sensitivity to a rise in price, and the opportunities to expand to new product lines or businesses (Vázquez, del Río and Iglesias, 2002; Keller and Lehmann, 2003; Farjam and Hongyi, 2015). The value created, along with these benefits, is often referred to as brand equity made up of four constructs: brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty and perceived quality (Vázquez, del Río and Iglesias, 2002; Keller and Lehmann, 2003; Farjam and Hongyi, 2015). The fact that the department store has been present for over 200 years means that this retail institution has created strong levels of awareness amongst customers and earned a reputation built upon product and service quality.

The long history of the department store and its associations with generations of customers suggests that each department store brand has a strong brand heritage with customers potentially having an emotional attachment to the corporate retail brand linked to the department store. However, brand heritage has not been explored in existing research when discussing customer brand perceptions and brand equity frameworks. Therefore, explored in the context of this study, are the relationships between brand heritage and brand equity, as constructs of the department store

corporate brand from the lens of customers rather than financial-based or employee-based perspectives. Second, the relationship between brand loyalty, brand awareness and retailer brand equity are unclear in the literature. By understanding the relationship between these three concepts in a retail context, this study contributes to the theory of brand equity frameworks. Up until this study, brand equity studies have not sufficiently explored this concept in more complex settings like the one investigated in this research. Department stores operate both online and physical stores, which has increased the complexity of understanding brand equity. Here, the offering is based upon both individual offline and online products and services, each with their own brand, all sold through a wider corporate retail brand.

Instead, studies exploring department stores mainly focus on the individual store brand (Gan and Wang, 2017), products (Delgado-Ballester, Hernandez-Espallardo and Rodriguez-Orejuela, 2014) or services (Moschis, Ferguson and Zhu, 2011) rather than the entire offer. Furthermore, studies (Pappu and Quester, 2006b, 2017; Samu, Lyndem and Litz, 2012; Das, 2015; Anselmsson, Burt and Tunca, 2017) that explore retailer's brand equity have not considered important retail institutions like department stores.

A conceptual framework, based on the literature, has been provided. This will act as a guide to the study (see section 2.5). The next chapter explains the research philosophy and methodologies chosen to conduct this study in further detail, developing the discussion of ZMET introduced here.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1. Introduction

Research is the process of knowledge development. This makes the clarification of what is acceptable knowledge crucial in a research study. Such clarification of acceptable knowledge is known as a research philosophy, which defines the relationship between the methods, data, theories, and ontology held by the researcher (Ghauri, Grønhaug and Strange, 2020). Research philosophy is '[a] system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019, p.130). Research philosophies can adopt very different beliefs and values towards the world. The way assumptions are made shape the study to establish the research questions, the methods used, the data collected and the interpretation of the respective findings (Crotty, 1998). By clearly demonstrating these assumptions, the research should demonstrate a coherent research design with a solid justification of the decision-making process. The purpose of discussing the research philosophy is to justify the validity and reliability of the data through the choices and the beliefs adopted. Thus the procedures can inform other researchers how to replicate future research studies (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler, 2014). This chapter explains the research paradigm, approach and methods adopted in this thesis, as well as the sample selection of participants, the process of data collection, interpretation, and analysis. The justification of the methods builds a solid foundation for drawing the discussion to a sufficient conclusion and consolidate the design of this research to answer the research question stated in Chapter 1 (Introduction).

3.2. Research Philosophy

3.2.1. Research Paradigms

A research paradigm is a philosophical framework that guides how research should be conducted, based on the researcher's philosophies and assumptions about the world and nature of knowledge (Collis and Hussey, 2009). Bryman and Bell (2015) provided a similar definition where the paradigm is referred to as a set of beliefs that is taken for granted in a particular discipline regarding what should be studied, how research should be done and how results should be interpreted. The philosophy of

research has many theoretical strands and paradigms that serves to inform and shape the design and implementation of the research (Crowther and Lancaster, 2009). The grounded paradigms of a research philosophy are subjectivism and objectivism. Subjectivism represents the social reality incorporated from the perceptions and resulting behaviours of people (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). While objectivism argues that the social phenomena and its meaning is independent to an individual's beliefs and is separated from social actors (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The aim of this research is to understand customers' perceptions of the UK high street department stores' online and offline offerings, where the core data is opinions directly collected from the customers. Reality and truth are subjective to the individual customer, rather than universally accepted, which thus implies that this research adopts a subjective paradigm. Subjectivism is normally associated with interpretivism whereas objectivism usually adopts a positive approach.

3.2.2. Positivism

Positivism is a paradigm that was originated in the field of natural sciences (Collis and Hussey, 2009). It describes a belief that the world can be interpreted through an objective perspective and social science should follow the rules and methods established from natural sciences (Hammond and Wellington, 2020). Hammond and Wellington (2020) argue that positivists, in research terms, make implications from open to critical scrutiny rather than simply making positive depositions. Positivism argues that the validity of reliable human knowledge to be meaningful, should be verified and only through analytical or logical analysis or using scientific methods such as observation and experiments (Collis and Hussey, 2009). It focuses on adopting empirical scientific methods to collect pure data and facts that are unaffected by human interpretation or bias (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This suggests that there is an objective single reality that can be observed regardless of the belief of social actors (Lee and Lings, 2013; Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). Therefore, it is the factors that impact the validity of data and eliminates bias which is important to positivists, in addition the research is usually expressed in the third person. Hammond and Wellington (2020) argue that the world is actually more complicated than the consideration of positivism, especially when exploring human beliefs and behaviour. Positivism involves minimum intellectual choice and considered questions of belief as unverifiable and thus focuses only on logic and the use of language. In social research,

it is impossible to separate human factors from the social context in which they exist, and people's behaviour cannot be understood without the exploration of their perceptions of those behaviours (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

In positivism, there are generally two ways to establish knowledge, either through a deductive or an inductive approach (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Positivism usually proposes a theory generated from a hypothesis which is tested and allows the use of laws to explain and assess the theory; this reflects elements of a deductive approach. Theory is the basis of most academic research, it acts to explain the relationship of factors and variables behind the research (Lee and Lings, 2013). As suggested earlier in this section, it is important to clarify the credibility of knowledge claims adopted in the research to ensure the replicability of this research by other investigators. And such credibility is achieved, even though not ultimately proven, through the comparison and replication of the empirical work by different researchers in the same context.

However, positivism also produces knowledge by gathering facts that build the foundation for principles; this reflects the inductive approach. Generally, positivism adopts a quantitative research strategy that works with statistical and numerical data through research techniques such as surveys and questionnaires. It is capable of gathering managing large quantities of data in a short amount of time which enabled a wide coverage of sample entry for analysis. Despite the advantage demonstrated above, positivism has been criticised for its inadequacy to meet the needs of the social scientist's research. Hammond and Wellington (2020) critiqued that the world is in fact more complicated than the consideration of positivism especial when exploring human believes and behaviours. Researchers' values and beliefs are usually reflected in their interpretation of the social phenomena (Creswell, 1994). As previously stated, the aim of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the customers' perceptions of UK high street department store brands. However, people's values and perceptions cannot be measured in a pure numerical and objective context. Therefore, it is important to explore another paradigm other than positivism to address the values deficit accompanied by positivism, which is interpretivism.

3.2.3. Interpretivism

Interpretivism views the world in a different way to positivism. Interpretivism is defined as 'a philosophy which advocates the necessity to understand differences between humans in their role as social actors' (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). The term 'social actor' suggests a use of metaphor in the form of theatre of the social phenomena, and humans who live in the social phenomena are the actors. The use of metaphor reveals the role of research resembled by theatrical actors, which is to interpret the role in a particular way and to act according to their own interpretations (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017; Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Interpretivist research focuses on creating new, richer understanding and interpretations of the social world and contexts by collecting opinions from different groups of people (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Interpretivist researchers seek to explore the reason why people have different experiences and to understand the outcome by the differences in these experiences. It is also suggested that an interpretivist seeks to describe, translate and arrives at meaning in the social world (Van Maanen, 1983). Interpretative research focuses on how meanings is produced through language practices, as opposed to empirical data (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Therefore, interpretivists normally are not involved with seeking for numerical certainty and proof as scientific research does, but more likely to explore concepts, unsettle ideas and communicate understandings. The researchers themselves are also a part of the research observations and within the research all values are free to be explored (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler, 2014). It has been identified that there is a clear interrelationship between the researchers and the people being researched, and that the researcher's belief might influence the way that they interpret the social phenomena (O'Gorman, Lochrie and Watson, 2014). All human beings view the world with their own way of interpretation, it is argued that there are multiple realities in interpretivism (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). Hammond and Wellington (2020) referred to a phenomenologist perspective of interpretivism that human consciousness is intentional, i.e., the way the world is seen by people is what they have intentionally adapted to. Checkland (1999) proposed a similar perspective that humans are self-conscious and have freedom of choice. This suggests that researchers can hardly obtain an up-to-date account of the subject's mind because the subject's conscious mind can make judgements based on

instances. As a result, an interpretivist researcher can uncover trends instead of fixed laws (O’Gorman, Lochrie and Watson, 2014).

Interpretivism emphasises that the physical phenomena are distinct from humans because humans create meaning and therefore should be studied differently (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). It is argued that an objective observation of the social world is impossible, because the social world is constricted by intentional behaviour and actions of human beings who creates meaning within the social world (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler, 2014). It is the meaning being created, which is important for interpretivists and the exploration of these meanings should not be limited to one single method, methodology or theoretical perspective, but to see the world subjectively, with the consideration of the unique character of human activities which creates a social phenomenon (Hammond and Wellington, 2020).

3.2.4. Research paradigms

Previously discussed earlier, positivism and interpretivism are two extreme polarities of research paradigms (Bryman and Bell, 2015), see Figure 9 below. The key features of positivism and interpretivism are summarised and compared by O’Gorman, Lochrie and Watson (2014) in Table 2 A comparison of positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Adapted from: (O’Gorman, Lochrie and Watson, 2014).



Figure 9 A continuum of paradigms. Adapted from: (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

Positivists focus on facts, seeking causal relationships and simple phenomena so that they can be controlled and measured. Positivists’ research studies are value-free, it can usually be applied to large sample size and also generalised. Whereas an interpretivist paradigm focuses on understanding meanings and their reasons behind in a comprehensive perspective. Results of interpretivist research forms ideas through an inductive approach and can be applied through a range of methods to establish different views on a social phenomenon. Researchers should decide which paradigm

fits most properly with their research questions based on the characteristics of the paradigm.

Positivist Paradigm	Interpretivist Paradigm
Focus on facts, empirical data	Focus on meanings
Look of causality and fundamental laws	Try to understand the reason behind the social phenomena
Reduce phenomena to the simplest elements	Look at the totality of each situation
Formulate hypotheses and test to form theory	Develop ideas through induction from the data
Operationalise concepts so that they can be measured	Use multiple methods to establish different views of phenomena

Table 2 A comparison of positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Adapted from: (O’Gorman, Lochrie and Watson, 2014).

Over time, other research paradigms have emerged. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) suggested that there are research paradigms that lie in between the two extremes, such as critical realism, postmodernism and pragmatism that can be adopted subjectively to the beliefs held by the researcher of the study (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). These paradigms are differentiated by the difference in the philosophical assumptions on which they are based (Collis and Hussey, 2009). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) illustrated the research paradigms through a research onion model, shown in Figure 10. The research onion resembles the research process as an onion, which uncovers the paradigms encountered at each step of the research like peeling an onion layer by layer, from outside to inside. There are mainly three philosophical strands of assumptions of paradigms: ontology, epistemology, and axiology. The characteristics of positivism and interpretivism discussed previously, lies in the strands of these assumptions and is expanded and categorised in this section.

(Content removed due to copyright restrictions)

Figure 10 The 'research onion' created by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019, p.130).

The first strand of philosophical assumption is ontology. Ontology is the assumptions of the nature of reality and refers to how the researcher views the world and defines social phenomenon. Ontological assumptions informs the formulation of research questions and how the research is conducted (Bryman and Bell, 2015). Ontologically, positivists believe social reality is objective and is independent of the researcher, therefore only one reality is believed to exist. As discussed in earlier sections, interpretivists believe that the social world is socially constructed, making the social reality subjective to each individual, which results in multiple realities (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

The second strand of philosophical assumptions, epistemology, refers to the assumptions made to identify and communicate acceptable, valid and legitimate knowledge to the others (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). In another words, epistemology deals with how things can be viewed and what can be regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline (Walliman, 2018). Gilbert (1993) suggested that theories are built on the foundation of gaining knowledge of the world and an epistemological approach obtains knowledge to inform the theories. Therefore, identifying what is acceptable knowledge is important for researchers when creating theories. Positivists hold a belief which validates how knowledge is constructed and derived from phenomena which are observable and measurable, where knowledge is

established objectively. On the contrary, an interpretivist tends to decide what is considered are subjective facts (Collis and Hussey, 2009).

A third philosophical perspective named axiology which makes assumptions regarding value and ethical aspects (Collis and Hussey, 2009; O’Gorman, Lochrie and Watson, 2014; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). However, an axiological assumption sometimes is not identified as a separate philosophical assumption, but evaluated under the theme of epistemology (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Bryman and Bell, 2015; Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). Collis and Hussey (2009) identified the differences between the positivist and interpretivist paradigms: positivists’ axiological assumption believe that research is a value-free process, where researchers are independent of what they are researching and facts have existed before the start of their research, i.e., the facts are external and eternal (O’Gorman, Lochrie and Watson, 2014). Positivists seek identification of relationships between research objects, which are unaffected by research activities and still will be present even after the completion of the research (Collis and Hussey, 2009). On the other hand, interpretivists respect researchers’ personal beliefs and thus such beliefs are acceptable to help researchers identify the eligibility of facts and then make interpretations accordingly. Thus, interpretivists are described as value-laden and potentially biased in nature.

Research Philosophy	Positivism	Interpretivism
Epistemological principles	Scientifically tested	Socially constructed
	Objective	Subjective
Ontological principles	There is single reality or truth which may be tested and proven	There is no single reality or truth; rather, understanding and meaning is subjective to the interpretation of actors in different social contexts
Axiological principles	Research is value-free and unbiased	Research is value-laden and biased

Table 3 Comparing research paradigms: positivism and interpretivism. Adapted from : (Collis and Hussey, 2009; O’Gorman, Lochrie and Watson, 2014; Longbottom and Lawson, 2017).

In summary, positivism and interpretivism adopt different ontological, epistemological, and axiological principles, as summarised in Table 3. These principles should be adopted according to the need of each individual researcher. The aim of this research

is to gain in-depth understanding of the perceptions of the variety of high street department store customers in the context of the current turbulent retail environment. Customer's perceptions will be explored in order to understand their thoughts and feelings towards the UK department store. Such thoughts and feelings are the meanings created by the department store customers based on their personal experiences of the store over time. Considering the aim of this study, subjective meanings and languages created by department store customers is the data to be gathered and explored. As discussed earlier, humans create meaning which are unique to individuals, there are multiple realities which are dependent upon customers' personal experiences. Positivism ignores the individuality of each person and the differences in behaviour shaped by an individual and treats the visceral facts from a rational perspective. Moreover, customers' shopping behaviours are driven by their individual mindset, thus the emotional linkage between mindset is likely to be underestimated when using a positivist perspective. Whereas using an interpretivist perspective, the research will not only explore what social phenomenon is being observed, but more importantly the reason behind the social phenomenon in terms of why the department store shoppers demonstrate those behaviours when recalling their experiences. As a result, the paradigm of this research fits with the interpretivism paradigm.

3.3. Research approach

3.3.1. Inductive, deductive and abductive approach

The research onion model illustrates that the research design process consists of six logical stages, each stage reflects a set of critical decisions made at the time. In this section, the second stage of the research design process is introduced, which is the research approach. Each approach represents a particular way of reasoning and informs the way the research process has been conducted, which is critical when acquiring knowledge in research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).

There are three main types of research approaches: deductive, inductive, and abductive which can be used to introduce a theory. Eriksson and Kovalainen, (2008, p.22) stated that 'deduction rests on the idea that the theory is the first source of knowledge'. The deductive approach seeks to draw valid conclusions from initial hypothesis (Hammond and Wellington, 2020). In another words, if a statement has

been made, then deductive research could draw upon an experiment or case study to test the validity of that statement (Crowther and Lancaster, 2009). If the data being collected supported the statement in the chosen context, then a conclusion, that the statement is valid in that context, could be drawn. If not, assuming that the research was well-designed and properly implemented, the hypothesis is challenged, at least to limit it to this particular context, where the hypothesis is tested. A deductive approach generally adopts a highly-structured methodology to facilitate reliability and generalisability (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). A deductive study is meaningful as it continuously refines the theory and discovers the edges of the limitations of that theory. Thus, it is widely adopted in the natural sciences (Crowther and Lancaster, 2009). However, a deductive study has been criticised for only leading to assumptions that the researcher aims to find out (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Considering the linear process and the nature of theories, deduction is considered inadequate for most qualitative business research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) denoted that inductive research reverts the deductive process by starting with a collection of data to explore a phenomenon and ultimately builds up the theory. The inductive approach seeks to interpret the empirical data collected, to formulate a theory, and develop the understanding of the research field. The inductive process seeks to generate data first, then analyse and reflect upon the implications behind the data to create theoretical themes. In this case, theories are considered as the outcomes of empirical research rather than existing prior to the research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). The inductive approach bridges the gap between the conclusion and problem, where the judgement of the conclusion is being supported by the observation made through data collection (Ketokivi and Mantere, 2010). It is argued that the inductive approach sometimes involves logical issues to some extent (Hammond and Wellington, 2020). First, the number of observations, before the arrival of a reasonable conclusion, should be considered with clear justification using appropriate methods. It is important to be aware that some obvious findings may not be enough to reach a reliable conclusion. Second, the context and conditions in which the observation and conclusion are made should be explored comprehensively to validate the context in which the conclusion is generalised (Walliman, 2018). With a rigorous justification of the context and methods in which the

observation and conclusion is drawn, the inductive approach is useful when exploring and developing new grounded theories. A follow-up study, using deductive or abductive methods, could be used to justify the generalisability and validity of the findings discovered using an inductive approach (Hammond and Wellington, 2020).

An abductive approach does not follow the logic simply from data to theory or vice versa as with a linear process in an inductive or deductive approach (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Staat (1993) suggested that abduction is usually associated with exploratory data analysis because it can combine deduction and induction to generate new ideas or hypotheses. The hypotheses can be first tested via deduction and then justified with empirical data using an inductive approach (Staat, 1993). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) provide an example, where abduction could start with observation and form a theory based on the observations. It then forms a theory of how this phenomenon could have been caused. The application of an abductive approach may begin with obtaining data to sufficiently explaining the phenomenon and identify key themes regarding the issue to be observed. It might then compose a conceptual framework to build a new theory and to test the new theory using previous and new data. The importance of having an abductive approach is that it is so flexible that it could overcome the complexity that cannot be dealt with using pure inductive or pure deductive approaches (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

3.3.2. Approach chosen for this study

The objective of this study is to empirically explore the high street department stores' customers' individual experiences with the department stores' channels, and thus gain new insights of customers' emotional associations between their personal experience and their perceptions of the brand. The comparison of key characters of each research approach is summarised in Table 4.

	Deduction	Induction	Abduction
Logic	In a deductive inference, when the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true	In an inductive inference, known premises are used to generate untested conclusions	In an abductive inference, known premises are used to generate testable conclusions
Generalisability	Generalising from the general to the specific	Generalising from the specific to the general	Generalising from the interactions between the specific and the general
Use of data	Data collection is used to evaluate propositions or hypotheses related to an existing theory	Data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns and create a conceptual framework	Data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, locate these in a conceptual framework and test this through subsequent data collection and so forth
Theory	Theory falsification or verification	Theory generation and building	Theory generation or modification; incorporating existing theory where appropriate, to build new theory or modify existing theory

Table 4 Comparison of inductive, deductive and abductive approach. Source: (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

As discussed earlier, the deductive approach only tests a known statement, which does not comply with the research aim of this study. Even though a “theoretical framework” has been introduced in Chapter 2, it is only used to inform the key concepts and possible themes that might occur in the data collection stage. In order to understand customers’ perceptions of the high street department stores, an inductive approach is used. The context in which the conclusion is drawn is discussed in the literature review chapter, where a few key gaps were identified, and these formulated the research questions of this study. Accordingly, this study should adopt an exploratory research purpose, which is to uncover a social phenomenon that is not understood clearly by existing research and to gain new insights (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). An exploratory approach usually adopts a qualitative research strategy and aims to develop a deep understanding of a social phenomenon and its causes and effects. This may lead to the development of a hypothesis but this hypothesis is not tested (Zikmund, 2015). It is identified through literature that the customers’ behaviours are observed with a change of behaviours towards e-commerce and changes in attitude (Intel, 2020). However, the mindset behind the change and the attitude behind the changes is not explained. Through an inductive exploratory

approach, the under-researched deep emotional associations of customers are uncovered to provide a more in-depth insight into the building of department store brand equity theory in the context of the current turbulent retail environment.

3.4. Research methods and strategy

3.4.1. Research methods

In order to achieve coherence in the research design, it is important to identify the choice of research methods (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Previous discussions have identified that this study adopts an interpretivist philosophical position and an inductive research approach, where the first two layers of the research onion model is justified. However, there are still more decisions to be considered within the design of this research. In this section, the third and fourth milestones of research design, which are research methods and relevant research strategies, are explained to demonstrate the type of data obtained and the method used to collect the type of data. There are generally two types of data, primary data and secondary data. Primary data is first-hand data collected by the researcher specifically for the research project being undertaken. Whereas secondary data is the existing data archive that was originally collected for some other purposes but is accessible by the public, such as industrial and government reports as well as historical archives (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) suggested that for each type of data, there are three main types of methodological choices to obtain such data, quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods.

A general way to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research is whether it deals with numerical data. Quantitative methods normally involve any data collection or analysis methods that work with or generate numerical data (i.e., numbers) such as questionnaires or statistical analysis. As suggested in this Chapter, quantitative methods are usually associated with a highly structured research design which is a positivist, deductive approach (Bryman, 1998). The quantitative approach is capable of working with a large quantity of data and generates patterns that can be generalised with a wide context (Ghauri, Grønhaug and Strange, 2020). While qualitative methods normally involve non-numerical data such as words, images, videos and audio recordings. Qualitative studies usually explore data that is textual, visual and oral, and focus stories, visual images, meaningful characterisations, interpretations and

expressive descriptions (Zikmund, 2015). In alignment with previous discussions, this research seeks to explore non-numerical customer opinions and makes in-depth interpretations based on the data collected, suggesting that a qualitative research method is best suited for the needs of this study.

3.4.2. Research strategy

The research strategy determines the appropriate methods to formulate the research design and to develop research techniques (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). There is a myriad of methodological choices beyond qualitative and quantitative methods through the mix-and-match of research strategies, see Figure 11 (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The use of a single strategy of the same research method (i.e., pure qualitative or pure quantitative) is named mono-methods and the use of a different strategy of the same research method is called multiple methods. Within each genre of research methods, there are a variety of strategies that can be used for data collection.

For quantitative methods, research strategies are generally associated with experiments and surveys through methods such as questionnaires or structured interviews or observations. Therefore, if a research study uses both surveys and observations, then the research is a multiple quantitative study. In qualitative research, the strategies used for data collection is more diverse. Examples of qualitative research strategies are action research, case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, and archive research. It is noted by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) that data collected using quantitative methods can be used in qualitative research and vice versa; this research design is called mixed methods. Thus a mixed methods research design is defined as a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The advantage of mixed methods is that it can combine the characteristics of quantitative and qualitative research and provides a more comprehensive perspective on the issue. For example, a research project can start with a questionnaire that identifies a pattern of the participants then explores the reasons behind the pattern using in-depth qualitative research techniques such as an interview or a focus group. In contrast, a research project can start with an in-depth interview to identify themes and raise questions and then establish a questionnaire based on the outcome of the interview to test whether such an outcome is generalisable in a wide participant population.

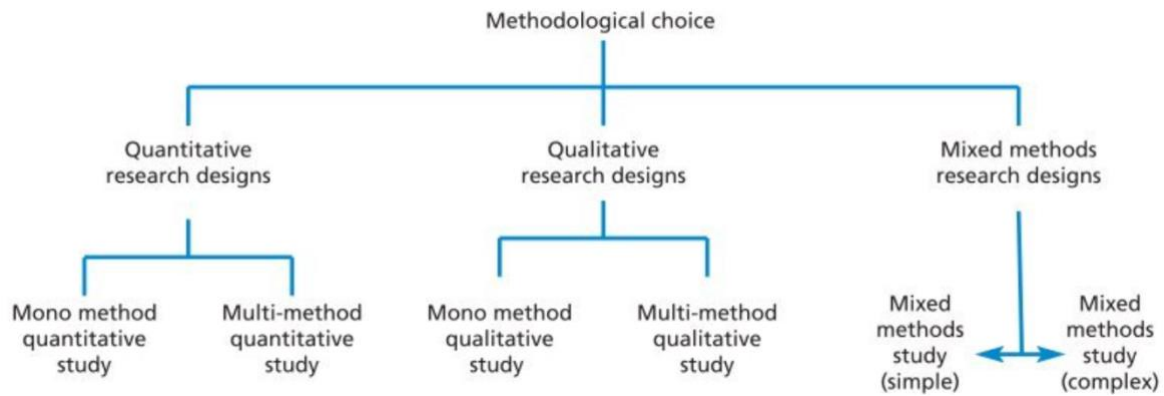


Figure 11 Configuration of research methodological choices. Source: (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

3.4.2.1. Quantitative research strategies

Brand is an important asset of organisations. Extensive research has been conducted in exploring how customers' perceptions of certain brands affect their shopping behaviours (Jaakkola, 2020). Exploring what and how these perceptions are formed are important to brand managers (Manolica, Muntean and Raluca-Alexandra, 2021). CBBE focuses on exploring the set of associations that customer's hold of a brand which add or subtract values from the brand (Aaker, 1991). These associations existed as memories in customers' minds and are empowering as customers think more about the meaning of a brand's product or services (Manolica, Muntean and Raluca-Alexandra, 2021). Existing branding research holds a strong reliance on quantitative methods. The aim of quantitative studies, defined by Taheri, Lu and Valantasis (2014), is to quantify the problem and then understand how dispreading it is, by seeking projectable outcomes for a larger population, and which are associated with the interpretation and presentation of numerical information. Quantitative methods have a long standing in academic research for their ability to handle large scale data, which can be easily analysed into grouped analysis that summarises the opinions of individuals (Perrin and McFarland, 2011)

Taheri, Lu and Valantasis (2014) also stated that quantitative studies have four main features: they follow a systematic logic and a linear process; obtain numerical data, adopt positivist principles, and have an emphasis on measuring variables and testing hypotheses; and they seek to test or establish causal relationships. Collis and Hussey (2009) summarised the four different types of quantitative measurements. First,

nominal measurements identify categories or classes including demographic attributes, forms of human activity or an action or statement has discrete categories. The second measurement is ordinal, where attributes can be ordered in ranking to see whether one observation is ranked higher than another. For example; a question in this case may look like “please rank the following qualifications according to the level of educations” (Taheri, Lu and Valantasis, 2014). Then the participant can rank the given qualification based on their knowledge. Moreover, quantitative methods can measure intervals, where the interval between values can be interpreted. The interval can be used to measure the likelihood of visiting a shop or to calculate an average. Finally, quantitative methods can be used to calculate ratio, where a meaningful fraction can be created with a ratio variable.

A typical example of quantitative research techniques is via a survey approach. A quantitative survey method is usually associated with a deductive approach, which seeks to answer the questions, where, who, what, how much and how many (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). A quantitative survey usually uses a questionnaire to collect standardised data which are easy and fast to obtain. The formation of a questionnaire may lead to specific answers to the questions, but it can lead to a high response rate and to arrive at reasonable numerical comparisons (Taheri, Lu and Valantasis, 2014). It is worth mentioning that the word ‘survey’ has been used interchangeably with questionnaire (Taheri, Lu and Valantasis, 2014). However, it has been argued by Sarantakos (1988) that surveys generally refer to the data collection methods that gather data through oral, for example, interviewing or written questioning such as questionnaires. Nonetheless, quantitative methods with close-ended answers limit customers to the dimensions framed by the questions given by the researcher (Anghelcev *et al.*, 2015). In this study, none of the four types of measurements of quantitative methods provides a useful explanation of the ‘why’ factor and reaches a depth in the research question. As critiqued by Zaltman (1997), quantitative methods demonstrated a depth deficit in understanding the customers (Zaltman, 1997). This suggests that the quantitative approach is inappropriate to this study and the introduction of qualitative methods are necessary.

3.4.2.2. Qualitative research strategies

Qualitative studies captured the opinions of respondents with their interpretations of the context of the research (Bryman, 2016). Most qualitative research focuses on

human actions, to understand and then interpret the respective meanings, thus interpretivism is closely associated with subjective qualitative approaches (Alvesson and Willmott, 2003). Like the quantitative approach, qualitative research can work with either primary data or secondary data. Research techniques such as archival research explores existing qualitative archives usually working with secondary data, whereas interviews, focus group, case study and ethnography generally work with primary data. As mentioned in section 3.4.2.1, the survey strategy can be applied to interviews, which is the most widely adopted qualitative research strategy. A case study takes a single case or a few selected examples of a social entity as the research subject where a case can be an individual person or an organisation (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). The case study approach is relevant when exploring a specific context or organisational process and is likely linked to the data analysis method called triangulation.

Triangulation is the use of different data collection techniques within one study to ensure the data is being interpreted correctly (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Ethnography records people's behaviour by blending in and observing them in their normal way of living; this usually involves the use of digital audio or video recordings. The advantages of ethnography is that it records the event as it occurs; however, to immerse in participants' lives without causing an impact, is difficult to achieve (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). The aim of this study is to explore in-depth the customers' perceptions of UK department store brands' offerings, where the meaning created by the customers is essential for this study. Accordingly, a qualitative research method is best placed to explore the meanings. Since a gap between the understanding of the customers' behaviour and mindset in the current environment has been identified, this research seeks to explore the perceptions of customers rather testing a hypothesis, which suggests that this research is an inductive exploratory study.

3.5. Data collection methods

3.5.1. Customer emotions and an image-based elicitation technique

Understanding customers' needs is significant for companies to evaluate the effectiveness of their marketing strategies. However, customers' thoughts are usually difficult to capture and measure (Ling *et al.*, 2009). Traditional qualitative brand research adopts research methods such as interviews and focus groups. These studies failed to explore the emotional involvement of stakeholders, especially that of the customers (Davicik, da Silva and Hair, 2015). However, these common qualitative research methods are suggested to have shallow or medium understanding of the participants' views (Hancock and Foster, 2019). Qualitative research methods including focus groups and interviews are based on verbal languages. Kapoulas and Mitic (2012) critiqued that it is arguable that words may not be able to fully express the meanings embedded in people's minds when a large proportion of the meanings are subtle and hidden and exclusive to context. Anghelcev *et al.* (2015) also argued that verbal language under-researched the complexity of consumers' minds because it is limiting when expressing complex thoughts and emotions. Even though language may be a useful tool to convey meaningful thoughts and the beliefs of brands, it cannot fully address the nuances hidden in complex emotions, feelings, or interpretive knowledge. Hancock and Foster (2019) argued that traditional qualitative research methods such as interviews are associated with the shortcomings of depth deficit of not probing enough to the subconscious mind of consumers' opinions. Zaltman (2003) also commented that standard research methods acquire information from customers' conscious thinking which only takes 5% of a human's cognition. As a result, the unconscious mind, which is usually explained by conscious thinking, is unexplored (Zaltman, 2003). The gap between the conscious and the unconscious mind is described by Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) as a "say-mean gap", which suggested that customers do not know what they know, because what they say may not correctly express the full picture of their thoughts. The say-mean gap typically occurs when customers encounter a new product or switch between brands (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Focusing on only the verbal language will produce a surface level of thinking which contributes to the existing depth deficit. Thereby managers fail to explore the psychological benefits resulting from the depth of thinking.

Among the methodologies that provide the depth of understanding, visual-based research methods are of importance, because the visual cue carries the significant meanings that are core to the construction of the Western social culture (Rose, 2016). Human minds are dominated by non-verbal communications (Howe, 1991). Evidence showed that images are formed in a human's mind even before language is formed (Edelman, 1992). Harper (2002) also suggested that imagery has a stronger ability to uncover people's complex mental structures and the deep configurations of a human's consciousness as opposed to verbal language. A photo can act as a stimulant for participants to respond to and share their experiences with rich conversations during the interviews (Zaltman, 1997; Hancock and Foster, 2019). Images, therefore, can be regarded as a qualitative research technique to support interviews (Foster, 2011). In fact, image and photo-based elicitation techniques have been widely used in social and psychological research since the 1950s (Harper, 2002). There are three ways that visual research methods can be used: to capture an objective reality, via photography to study changes, to narratively elicit the subjective world of individuals as in interviews (usually being referred as "photo elicitation" which is the most prominent method being used in social science studies), and to exploit the expression and knowledge embedded in the spiritual or psychological aspects (Harper, 1988; Ji and King, 2018). The use of photography in social science research is useful, making the thoughts and feeling of the participants visible and to gain access to their hidden behaviour and senses (Ji and King, 2018). However, marketing research is critiqued as visual based photo elicitation methods are scarce in-service marketing (Hancock and Foster, 2019) and branding fields.

Nonetheless, the implication of photo elicitation has many limitations. Firstly, photo elicitation still relies on the interview using verbal language (Lester and Scarles, 2014). Humans, when making a decision, cannot express the exact reason why they made a particular choice, the reason is that they are dominated by their subconscious mind when making those decisions (Ling *et al.*, 2009). The difficulty of expressing thoughts and emotions in words, i.e., the say-mean gap, therefore limits the visual cue of the image. Secondly, the photo in this case only serves as a reference that supports the interview. The importance of visuals are beyond the object captured in the photo and should be explained in-depth (Scarles, 2012). In reaction to the critique of photo elicitation, metaphor has been recognised as a way to overcome the objectiveness of

the photo documentary and to engage subjective feelings and thoughts. As suggested Zaltman and Zaltman (2008), metaphors can be adopted as the tool to bridge the say-mean gap.

However, the interpretation of metaphor requires the adoption of specific techniques to uncover the meaning behind the thoughts and feelings. Among the photo elicitation methods, ZMET has been regarded as a helpful visual-based research method, which uses image and metaphor as a cue to collect consumers' thoughts and opinions of complex issues (Hancock and Foster, 2019). It is able to balance the pros and cons of subjectiveness and objectiveness of photo elicitation. ZMET showed its uniqueness because of its property as a method that combines semi-structured interview and photo elicitation techniques to form a decent understanding of customers' perceptions (Ji and King, 2018). As a participant-led interviewing method, ZMET enables deep emotions to emerge naturally from the participants, as opposed to most qualitative research in which the direction of the conversation is controlled by the researcher (Ji and King, 2008). ZMET uses sensory cues such as visual, taste, sound, touch and smell to immerse the participant in the image, which in turn pinpoints them to the moment of shopping and is metaphorised in the image selected. As a result, participants can choose to share what is important to them in terms of shopping experience feeling secure, because of privacy exposure. Therefore, ZMET can allow customers to express their view freely and ultimately gain a deep insight of the relevant perceptions and is particularly useful when studying areas like branding where individuals may hold subconscious associations which can be hard to articulate (Coulter, Zaltman and Coulter, 2001). This fits profoundly with exploratory studies that would like to gain new and in-depth insights of the origin of social phenomena. Therefore, this study uses ZMET as a mono qualitative research strategy to uncover the deep emotions of the department store customers. Validation of the strength of ZMET suggested that 4 to 5 ZMET interviews can cover 90% of the findings collected through large-scale interviews on the same topic (Manolica, Muntean and Raluca-Alexandra, 2021). Despite the advantages, ZMET also has its own limitation, which will be discussed further.

3.5.2. The Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET)

Zaltman and Coulter (1995), developed ZMET, a qualitative approach designed to identify the mental frameworks that drive consumer thinking, behaviour and analysis,

these frameworks emerge in the form of metaphors. ZMET was first introduced in the United States as a patent research method (Zaltman, 1997). After the patent expired in 2013, ZMET regained the attention in academia and an increasing amount of ZMET research has been published (Khoo-Lattimore and Prideaux, 2013). ZMET has been developed to explore the hidden knowledge in humans' unconscious minds and to understand 'what people don't know that they know' (Pink, 1998, p.214). It has been widely used to improve the understanding of consumers, the perception of brands, brand associations and attributes, brand equity, product usage and purchase experience, and customer perceptions of contemporary issues in marketing research (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995; Hogan, Romaniuk and Faulkner, 2016; Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2017; Jain *et al.*, 2018; Ji and King, 2018). The goal of ZMET is to elicit, describe, and map consumer's thoughts and feelings, for example, to emphasize both beliefs and emotions. ZMET is particularly useful when identifying the deeper abstract and therefore of more unconscious and elusive aspects (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). However, managers and researchers were not aware of the power of metaphors; indeed, metaphor is a powerful tool to evoke the hidden thoughts and feelings of consumers that profoundly affect their decisions (Zaltman, 2003).

The rationale of ZMET is that the comprehension of humans about their surroundings, is seen via metaphors (Ji and King, 2018). Metaphor is the representation of one thing by another, which stimulates the way human minds work and aids a human's ability to express and interpret their feelings and perceptions of things in their lives (Zaltman, 2003). A metaphor is confirmed to be fundamental to language, thought and experience (Kövecses, 2010). The ability of metaphor to approach 'depth' is because they operate largely in the unconscious part of humans' minds (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Since most factors influencing what we say and do exists below the level of our awareness, According to Zaltman and Zaltman (2008), there are three levels of metaphors, namely surface metaphor, metaphor themes and deep metaphors. Surface metaphors are meaningful words which have meaning by themselves but are also aspects that can be probed for deeper thoughts and meanings. Metaphor themes sit below the level of surface metaphors and reflect the conscious and unconscious mind. By probing deeper into metaphor themes, a deep metaphor should then emerge Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) identified seven deep metaphors, named 'seven giants', that accounted for 70 percent of all deep metaphors encountered in their customers'

research across different topics regardless of the participants' demographic, gender, occupation, ethnicity and backgrounds. These seven giants are: balance, transformation, journey, container, connection, control and resource. These deep metaphors can be either positive or negative, such as balance and imbalance, control and out of control, connection and lack of connection—More than one deep metaphor may occur from the same topic while one deep metaphor may demonstrate a stronger relevance than another.

According to Zaltman and Zaltman (2008), the meanings of the seven giants can be summarised in brief. Balance or imbalance reflects the need of equilibrium in either social or psychological states. It acts as a force of adjustment, maintenance or restoring things to the way they should be. Transformation reveals a change of status, either physically or emotionally, and may be actively sought or avoided by consumers. Transformations can be identified in a major life change such as getting married or becoming a parent or a change of an objects physical state such water to ice. Journey reflects any trips from one place to another, such as travelling or a life journey. Journeys can be fast or slow, predictable or unpredictable and may result in a known or unknown outcome. Consequently, consumers may experience uphill and downhill emotions on different journeys. Contain has a function of keeping things in or out, which are reflected in physical, psychological and social states. It can be opened or closed, positive or negative. This usually reflects expectations of people, but the reality shows a difference to their expectations. Connection and disconnection evoke the sense of being included or excluded in terms of relationships. A psychological ownership is usually demonstrated in this deep metaphor by using the term 'my'. Resource is the basics of survival such as food and water, family and friends. Products and services are also important resources to both the company and consumers. Knowledge and information, as well as a human's intelligence are also important resources. Finally, control is an important state that provides a sense of security, reflected as the need of feeling in control. Without the power of control, emotions such as powerless and anxiety may emerge. There are other deep metaphors that are less universal such as motion, force and nature, but they are less common as the seven giants.

ZMET is meaningful, since the natural communication of a human is nonverbal, and a great proportion of human's verbal language is determined by non-verbal cues. Image, in this case is the visual cue, which is more appropriate than words to reflect consumers mental thoughts in the unconscious mind, whereas language is the expression of conscious thoughts (Danilet and Stoian (Bobâlca), 2017). Once there is a contradiction between the verbal and the reaction, the nonverbal interaction is the cue that tends to be believed because it is unconscious (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995). Thus, the consumers are not encumbered with accessing their unconscious minds by themselves (Zaltman, Olson and Forr, 2015). ZMET allows the researcher to gain and elicit deeper insights than other quantitative and qualitative methods (Hancock and Foster, 2019). The common qualitative methodology used in brand equity research fails to understand the complex issues of consumers' emotion by continuously adopting a linear model, often based on Aaker (1991) and Keller's (1993) work. The adoption of ZMET will therefore make a methodological contribution to the brand equity literature. Finally, by using ZMET, it also provides an in-depth and rich understanding of the department store consumers' unconscious mind, i.e., 'what they don't know that they know', and therefore revealing their actual perceptions of department store brand equity.

3.5.3. Outline of data collection methods

This research adopts a mono qualitative data collection approach, using a visual-based method, ZMET. The challenges faced by British high street retailers today are a prominent concern of academics and practitioners, however, the topic is still under-researched. Existing brand studies has been observed with a depth deficit in understanding customers' deep thoughts (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Therefore, in order to overcome the depth deficit of existing qualitative research methodologies, ZMET is applied to this study as the data collection method. This study follows the four-stage methodology of ZMET suggested by Hancock and Foster (2019) (See Figure 12). It is acknowledged that the success of ZMET is reliant on researchers' knowledge and ability to conduct interviews (Supphellen, 2000; Ramjaun, 2021). Ramjaun (2021) suggested that because of the nature of ZMET as a process which combines different techniques across social science fields, the implementation of the seemingly simple process into practice can be challenging. In addition, pilot studies

are suggested, to be conducted before collection data (Ramjaun, 2021). In alignment with the guideline of Ramjaun (2021), the researcher of this study received training on ZMET from an ZMET expert and conducted four pilot studies for the research to fully adopt the ZMET interview technique.

(Content removed due to copyright restrictions)

Figure 12 The 4 stages and 9 steps interview process. Source: Hancock and Foster (2019).

3.5.3.1. Stage 1: The brief

The first stage is to recruit participants using a random sampling approach. According to Coutler and Zaltman (1994), the recommended participant number is between 20-25. Hancock and Foster (2019) recommended 24 participants in their study. Therefore, 24 participants were recruited for this study. The participants were required to prepare six to eight images reflecting the research statement: 'how do you perceive your experience with department store brands?' Participants were asked to nominate their preferred department store brand, as this enabled a richer analysis of department store comparisons. Participants were informed not to include images of the chosen department store directly, but to use images as metaphors that reflect their thoughts, feelings and emotions towards the department store brands, for example, a rolling hill could reflect their experiences with the department store which changes from case to case. Images could be selected from online archives, book, magazines or pictures they already own. Applying an on-site photoshoot in a physical department store was not recommended as this would be a direct photo of the store as opposed to digging

into the customer deeper thoughts and feelings. To help participants understand the ZMET methodology, an example of the researcher's ZMET case study of her feelings about starting her PhD was enclosed in the instruction sheet. Consumers were contacted to return to the interview stage within 7 to 10 days with a PowerPoint presentation of their chosen images, including a short summary or title of each individual picture.

3.5.3.2. Stage 2: The interview

In stage two, the participant returned 7 to 10 days later post briefing, with their images for a 60-to-90-minute one-to-one ZMET interview. All interviews were taken place online via Microsoft Teams and is record on Microsoft Teams with the consent of the participants. Each image was uploaded and shown on the screen and the participant discusses the reason behind the choice of the image respectively with the researcher. The whole interview process was participant-led with the image acting as the stimulus for questioning the candidate. Led by the participants, the researcher is more likely to explore the issue inductively, through the perspectives of the participants, which is rarely achieved using other data collection methods. Through this participant-led method, the research is less biased in comparison to conventional qualitative research methods such as focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The nine-step ZMET interview technique was applied during the interview (Hancock and Foster, 2019).

The first step was storytelling, participants were asked to tell the story behind each picture selected in the interview. The main initiative behind this step was to understand the reason why each picture was selected, as well as to uncover the deeper meaning behind each image. The interviewer referred to each image with probing questions concerning the thoughts and feelings connected to each individual image and how those images are related to their experience with the department stores. At this stage, the interviewer was required to stay alert to identify interesting responses, as well as the connections of the associations between the concepts and probes emerging from the stories being told (Khoo-Lattimore and Prideaux, 2013). The probing questions were enhanced using the technique listed from step 2 to step 7. Due the nature of the participant-led interview, the order of step 2 to step 7 could happen with random order depending on how the story was told by the participants. For example, when probing

deep into one object, it would be helpful to ask the participants to include the sensory feelings rather than describe the senses at a later stage to interrupt participant's focused thinking.

Step 2 focused on the missing concepts. The interviewer asked the participants if there were any images that were not included in this interview and the reasons for not being able to retrieve the picture, perhaps due to an inaccessibility of the particular image or other inhibitors that stopped the participants from selecting the desired image. Alternatively, the interviewer asked the participants about any thoughts and feelings that were not mentioned or included in the pictures discussed in step 1 of the interview. A description of the missing images helped the participants to expand their thoughts and feelings to a higher level and the emotions were documented, as if the image was available. Khoo-Lattimore and Prideaux (2013) critiqued that, by taking this step, the chance that the constructs that maybe missing were ruled out due to the inaccessibility to a particular image.

Step 3 used a triad task to explore the differences and similarities between the images chosen by the interviewer. Even though ZMET is a participant-led approach, it is stated in the ZMET interview manual (2003) that interviewers can intentionally select images that have similar meanings to explore specific aspects.

Step 4 focused on the metaphor probe embedded in each image. In this step, the interviewer asked questions concerning specific metaphoric nodes in the images without intentionally leading the participants' original perspectives of the image. For example, the researcher may select a relevant probe by asking 'what does this (probe) mean to you?' and 'how does that make you feel?' This form of laddering of the questions could lead to responses on a deeper level. It is suggested that this process is repeated at least seven or eight times until the desired depth of response has been reached (Hancock and Foster, 2019).

In step 5, the participants were asked to imagine the scene when the frame of the image was expanded infinitely to identify what might be entering the frame. By involving the action of imagination, participants thoughts and feelings are reinforced with a further understanding of the context of the image. This step reinforced the

meanings for the participants and engages the participants to explore their additional thoughts and feelings (Khoo-Lattimore and Prideaux, 2013).

In step 6, the interviewer focused on the sensory metaphor beyond visual cues, where participants were encouraged to relate their images to sensory symbols like colour, smell, touch, taste and sound, which tapped much deeper into the unconscious thoughts (Coulter, 2006; Hancock and Foster, 2019).

The next step (step 7) was named the vignette, which involved the participants creating a story about the phenomenon being studied. Hancock and Foster (2019) recommended that the participants should include three key elements in their story: their selves, the objects, and what happened. It is also stated by Hancock and Foster (2019) that this step is particularly challenging for the participants and a clear protocol of how this might work in practice is still missing. In order to transform the images into a verbalised story, it is suggested that the participants use all the images together.

3.5.3.3. Stage 3: The visual executive montage

In stage three, the participants are asked to create a montage of the chosen images as a visual executive summary at the end of the interview. Zaltman (2003) claimed that the thoughts and feelings about a phenomenon often are interconnected and can be demonstrated in a visual mind map. Hancock and Foster (2019) suggested that since the mind map could be developed individually, different people often show some similarities in their mind maps. This mind map is named by Hancock and Foster (2019) as an emotional value map (EVM). This is to illustrate how the images related to each other and how the images would look when compiled as a collage or montage. This visual summary provided a snapshot of their mind in relation to the research topic of this study. In the method suggested by Hancock and Foster (2019), the montage was firstly sketched under the lead of the participants. The position and size of each image was directed by the participants to understand how the participants perceived the relationships of their images. Then the sketches were redrawn digitally after the interviews, and they were sent to the participants to confirm whether the montage represented their viewpoints accurately. In this research, because of the evolution of technology, this step can now take place on the PowerPoint as the online meeting happens. PowerPoint is currently equipped with the function of image editing that is required to make a montage. Through PowerPoint and the 'share screen' function on

Microsoft Teams, the researcher can produce the montage as the participant describes them and have the montage-making process monitored and confirmed by the participant during the interview. Finally, the participants were asked to title their montage to record their overall feelings of the phenomenon being researched. Hancock and Foster (2019) suggested that the montage is a significant step of the ZMET process because it is where the overall thoughts are collected before the ending of the interview.

3.5.3.4. Stage 4: Transcribe, analyse and construct

In stage four, the researcher transcribed the interview and created an emotional value map (EVM) (Hancock and Foster, 2019). This was developed from the interview which contains rich data and was analysed to identify metaphors and relevant constructs to be coded. Each participants' chosen images and montage were reviewed in relation to their transcripts. Surface metaphors and deep metaphors were identified and coded manually. Emerging themes were identified from each set of data which includes the images and the transcripts. The montage created by each participant was then reviewed to understand the story being told and to elicit the centre deep metaphor which reflects how the participants interpret their own thoughts and emotions at the time of the interview. Participants' images and their transcripts were analysed across all 24 participants to identify the similarity and differences between the use and meanings of the images, from which themes were established by grouping similar meanings of several participants. All of the 24 participants' montages were then analysed holistically to identify common themes emerging from the narratives of the image placement and the convey of deep metaphors. Finally, all data was compiled to establish the finalised themes emerged.

By applying the five-step deep value mining method, the key constructs emerging from the data were adapted into a new brand equity model to reflect the consumers' perceptions of department store brands under the current turbulent retail environment in the UK. Based on the results of the ZMET interviews with consumers, this study created a new definition of the department stores to distinguish department stores from other innovative retail institutions that provide similar 'one-stop' and 'multiple-department' experiences.

3.6. Time horizon

The time horizon describes the vision of the research in terms of a time period. There are two ways of portraying the research time horizon: cross-sectional and longitudinal (Bryman and Bell, 2015). A cross-sectional study takes a snapshot of a particular period and views a phenomenon through this particular time period. A longitudinal study is a diary of a series of snapshots and represents an event across a period of time. In a longitudinal study, one of the variables is time and other variables are what is to be measured (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This research is constrained by the length of this PhD study, i.e., four years, within which time, time as a variable is not meaningful. It might be argued that two different snapshots of the customers' perceptions of department store brands before and after the COVID-19 pandemic has taken place. However, since the arrival of the pandemic before the start of the research was not predictable, and no data of the target participants was collected before the outbreak of the pandemic, it is not possible to arrive at a comparison. Thus, it is necessary to view customers' behaviour with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, a cross-sectional study is the best time horizon to choose for this study. The data was collected from September 2021 to November 2021, looking at the past experiences of everyone during this time.

3.7. Sampling methods

It is important to identify who is the sample of participants in this research. In research, apart from a minority of research, whose target is a small and feasible number of the population, it is nearly impossible to identify and access the whole target population from whom data might be collected (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Researchers should establish a balance between what is important for the research and what is feasible within the time and resources of the current research project (Papachroni and MacIntosh, 2014). Therefore, what is required is a suitable sample, which is a subgroup of the whole population, that best represents the whole picture.

In quantitative research, there are clear sets of rules and protocols which can be followed to support the validity and reliability of the data and findings of the research. Whereas in qualitative studies, careful sampling selection is necessary in order to consolidate the research finding, when validity, reliability, and bias of the research is being challenged (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). There are mainly two ways of

sample selection, which are probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling consists of a variety of sampling techniques for selecting a sample randomly from the full list of the target population (i.e. the sampling frame), with a known probability (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). However, when the sampling frame is too wide and inaccessible, it is neither possible to select samples at random nor to make statistical inference from the data. Rather, the sample selected is with the researcher's own initiative (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017).

In this study, the target population are customers who shop at a UK high street department store. The whole sampling frame is in fact too wide to access. The sampling method adopted in this study is a multi-tier sampling method. The first tier sampling method is purposive sampling, which is used to select a sample based on the researcher's judgement on specific reasons and premises within the sample frame (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). This sampling method aims to include the potential participants who have the appropriate level knowledge of the department store to be explored more deeply using ZMET. During the recruitment period, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. Therefore, further consideration of participant recruitment was needed due to the limitation caused by COVID-19. As a result, the recruitment and interview were carried out online, this raised the requirement of participants' knowledge of online meeting software such as Microsoft Teams and using Power Point. The researcher lives in Derby, England, United Kingdom. Derby is located in the middle of England with convenient public transport to cities nearby such as Nottingham, Manchester, Birmingham and London; and the inhabitants of Derby have a high mobility to access shops and department stores in and outside Derby. It is reported that the customers of department store ranged from 16 to 55+ (Mintel, 2020). It is observed by the researcher that the demographics of students, academic staff, and non-academic staff, such as cleaners and security staff fitted very closely with the demographic profile of department stores, as well as having the knowledge of technology required due to their nature of activities within the institution. Therefore, the sample entry of this study was initiated within the University of Derby. Initially, participants were recruited online where an invitation and briefing letters were sent to their university email address. Potential participants could then decide to be self-identified as shoppers of the online and physical department stores based on the information given and self-enrol to participate this study. To widen the demographic of

the participants of this research, colleagues, friends, and relatives of the participants selected using purposive sampling method were also considered as an eligible entry of data. During the recruiting period, it was identified that participants found written instructions difficult in terms of understanding the ZMET method. As a result, the response rate of the online invitation was low. After the easing of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research adopted the convenience sampling method by recruiting participants face-to-face at the University of Derby to enhance participant engagement and knowledge of this ZMET research. In alignment with the requirement of the ZMET methodology, 24 participants were recruited to reach the saturation point. Considering the health restrictions of COVID-19, the interview phase was still carried out online. The participants were interviewed using online video software which was Microsoft Teams, and the interview was recorded for transcription.

3.8. Trustworthiness

As discussed in earlier sections, interpretive qualitative research is highly subjective and involves judgement. Thus, research results can be variable in comparison to quantitative research. Consequently, it is important to justify the rigorous nature of qualitative research to ensure its trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced four criteria of trustworthiness to parallel the conventional validity, reliability and replicability associated with quantitative research, This helps to justify the legitimacy of qualitative research to researchers and other stakeholders who may be interested in this type of research (Nowell et al., 2017). The four criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.8.1. Credibility

Credibility assesses the congruency of the research findings to the reality, that the researchers are confident with the appropriateness of the data interpretation (Johnson and Rasulova, 2017). Credibility is suggested to be the parallel criteria to internal validity of quantitative research, where a set of procedures have been suggested to improve credibility of qualitative research, for example, prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing and member check (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). The nature of ZMET ensured triangulation of results. The basis of ZMET interpretation is the metaphors introduced by Zaltman and Zaltman (2008), where metaphors are defined clearly with a detailed explanation of the rationale to match

data with the metaphors to reach the depth of understanding. With the triangulation of the participant's perception, the researcher's understanding and the standardized interpretation methodology, the research outcome can be regarded as credible.

3.8.2. Transferability and Dependability

Transferability refers to the external generalisability of research results (Johnson and Rasulova, 2017). It is suggested that the researcher should provide a detailed description of how researchers outside this research can transfer the original findings of the study to other contexts (Morse, 2015). Dependability focuses on the documentation of the research process that the research is logical, traceable and the process can be followed and replicated by future researchers (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Morse, 2015). As the interpretation of the metaphor is standardised, with interviews being led-by participants, a judgemental decision of this research is either being instructed or dominated by the participants. Consequently, when the result is transferred to another context, the impact of the researcher' judgement is minimised. In terms of methodology, ZMET is a standardized method with a structured protocol to follow as illustrated by Hancock and Foster (2019). With the high transparency of the data interpretation process, future researchers or practitioners can make their own judgement of the extent of transferability of this piece of research to their contexts. This also created reassurance of the dependability of this research as the process of ZMET is transparent, replicable, and ultimately dependable.

3.8.3. Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the reassurance of bias in qualitative research (Morse, 2015). As discussed in earlier chapters, qualitative studies are likely to be biased because the researcher's beliefs are involved when questioning and interpreting the sample. Bias refers to the extent to which the researcher may impact the sample being collected (Longbottom and Lawson, 2017). However, the use of ZMET can minimize the bias from the researcher, as ZMET is a participant-led research technique. In which case, the participant is less likely to be influenced by the researchers, but able to answer the research question on their own initiative via the inspiration from their own choice of metaphors. Thus, the research result is less biased in comparison to other forms of qualitative research. It is suggested that the confirmability can only be

achieved when credibility, transferability and dependability of the research has been established (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.9. Ethics

This research is carried out with the approval of the Ethical Committee of the University of Derby following their ethical regulations, following a set protocol for ethical approval. No participants are harmed in any way either physically or mentally, and the risk of this research is ranked 'very low'. All participants are presented with a briefing and consent form before the collection of images, participants. They received a debriefing form after the ZMET interview was completed. All data from the participants is coded and protected in line with GDPR regulations and the University of Derby's Research Policy on data protection. All participants are free to take part and leave the study within the given notice period.

3.10. Summary

Overall, the methodologies used in this research, are the research philosophy, approach, strategy, methods, time horizon, and data collection and analysis, as summarised in Table 5. Thus, it meets the requirement and can support the aim and research questions of this research.

Research philosophy	Interpretivism
Research approach	Inductive
Research strategy	Exploratory
Research methods	Mono qualitative methods
Time horizon	Cross-sectional
Data collection and analysis method	Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET)

Table 5 Summary of the methodology of this research.

This research has been designed and justified to meet the aim of the research question of the project using the ZMET. The research philosophy used is interpretivism with an inductive approach because it seeks to gain new insights from a research area that has a gap in knowledge. A mono qualitative method is used to implement the

exploratory strategy of the research to fulfil the need for depth within the research question. The time horizon of the research is a cross-sectional study carried out from 2019 to 2023 and is restricted to the time span of this PhD study. The method to be used for data collection and analysis is a visual based technique, the ZMET.

Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the 24 ZMET interviews. The significant theme that emerged from the findings is 'brand accessibility', which relates to how customers access the brand. As there are many types of brands available at a department store, how accessible each brand offering is, has different implications for the participants. For example, the findings showed that participants had different views of accessibility according to each department store platform. This could be the online platform such as the website or an application on an electronic device or the physical store on the high street. However, when discussing the term 'department store', participants were likely to refer to the physical department store, despite the study exploring the entire offering of the department store across all platforms. Accessibility was also discussed in relation to the individual national brands, the physical products of the individual brands and the department store itself as a corporate brand. The accessibility of the individual national brands reflected participants' need to access a range of brands in one place at the department store. The accessibility of the physical product revealed the differences between the mode of shopping in department stores either online and/or in-store. Of particular importance was whether the participants could access the physical product before buying. Finally, accessing the department store corporate brand was in terms of the value created by the overall department store corporate brand.

The chapter explains these findings of brand accessibility in more detail through three distinct sections: accessing the individual brand, accessing physical products, and accessing the department store corporate brand. The data from this ZMET study was analysed using thematic analysis; meanings were interpreted and categorised into groups of themes. The findings draw upon data extracted from the verbal interviews, the images selected by the participants, and the final montage, namely the visual executive summary created during the interviews. Analysis was drawn upon the deep metaphors introduced by Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) as discussed in Section 3.5.2. The primary evidence from the data interpretation were the deep thoughts and feelings of participants' statements and their stories behind the images. In presenting the data, the participants' statements are quoted within quotation marks and/or presented with

a relevant image chosen by the participants. Statements that contribute to the themes are in a blue font. Each of the images were selected and titled by the participants. However, the title of an image may not reflect the thoughts of the participants behind the images, as this was later revealed in the verbal interviews by probing the participants. The title of the image tended to be the initial surface level or conscious thought, whereas subconscious or unconscious thoughts were elicited later in the verbal interviews and the constructions of the montages. The themes discussed in this chapter are summarised in the diagram shown in Figure 13.

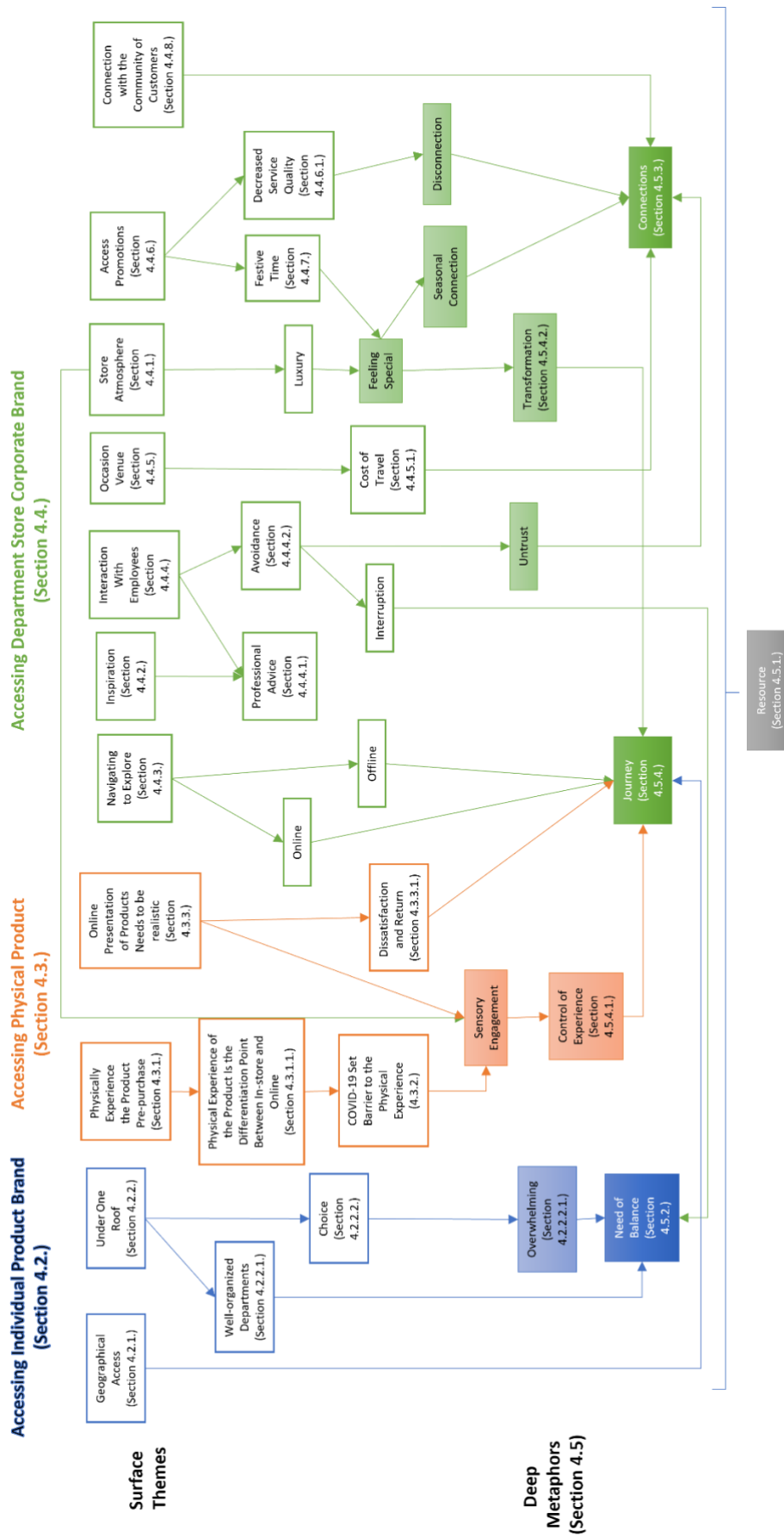


Figure 13 Summarised theme structures of brand accessibility.

The demographics of the participants are summarised in Table 6. Most participants were female in roles ranging from students to university administrative staff and university academics. The age ranged from 21 to 55. Table 6 also highlighted which images belong to each participant that are included in the discussion of findings in this chapter.

Participant code	Gender	Age	Occupation	Image reference
Participant 1	Female	36	University student	-
Participant 2	Female	40	University administrative staff	Figure 16, Figure 18, Figure 27, Figure 32, Figure 33, Figure 48
Participant 3	Female	36	Marketing officer	Figure 24, Figure 25, Figure 26, Figure 34, Figure 74
Participant 4	Female	23	University student	Figure 55, Figure 55 Figure 65
Participant 5	Female	55	University academic	Figure 19, Figure 53, Figure 62
Participant 6	Female	36	University academic	Figure 17, Figure 21, Figure 40, Figure 41, Figure 45, Figure 49, Figure 51, Figure 63, Figure 71
Participant 7	Male	24	Marketing assistant	Figure 20, Figure 46, Figure 47, Figure 54, Figure 57
Participant 8	Female	36	Urban designer	Figure 29, Figure 30, Figure 37
Participant 9	Male	37	Interior designer	-
Participant 10	Female	39	Interior designer	Figure 39, Figure 42, Figure 72
Participant 11	Female	36	Psychologist	Figure 52, Figure 66, Figure 70
Participant 12	Male	36	IT engineer	Figure 23, Figure 50

Participant 13	Female	25	Marketing assistant	Figure 35, Figure 36, Figure 38, Figure 68, Figure 76
Participant 14	Male	22	University student	Figure 43, Figure 44, Figure 73
Participant 15	Male	37	University administrative staff	Figure 64, Figure 67, Figure 69
Participant 16	Female	23	University student	Figure 75
Participant 17	Male	49	University academic	-
Participant 18	Female	22	University student	Figure 58, Figure 59
Participant 19	Male	27	Architect	-
Participant 20	Female	41	University academic	-
Participant 21	Female	36	University administrative staff	Figure 31
Participant 22	Female	21	University student	Figure 14, Figure 15
Participant 23	Female	26	Marketing assistant	Figure 22
Participant 24	Female	27	Mature university student	-

Table 6 Summary of participant demographic.

4.2. Accessing the individual product brand

4.2.1. Geographical access

One of the key themes that emerged from the data is ‘accessing the individual product brand’. The participants of this study revealed access to a variety of individual product

brands available in one place at the department store is highly valued. The statements regarding this theme were centred around the physical department store. The theme identified that, for some, the physical department store because of its geographic location, enabled customers to access individual product brands such as clothing, which they would not normally have direct access to if it was not for the department store on the high street.

For example, Participant 22 selected a vibrant image of the Flannels department store (See

Figure 14). The participant suggested that Flannels is one of the departments stores they normally visit. According to the participant's statement shown below, they observed that in the small city where they live, there is limited physical access to luxury brands. As highlighted in blue, before Flannels entered the local market, they travelled to other cities to go to department stores such as Selfridges to access the same range of luxury brands. It is suggested that Flannels, as a department store, has a good range of luxury brands. Therefore, having a local Flannels store made luxury brands geographically available in this city, which reflected that the participant valued the convenience and the choice offered by the locally sited department stores.

'Where I am, our city is a small place where we don't have lots of luxury brands. Flannels had a lot of brands in [it], [it] is very good that people don't have to go far out like to Selfridges in a big city to get what they want.' (Participant 22, image 4)



Figure 14 (Participant 22, image 4) – ‘Flannels’.

Interestingly, other participants were willing to travel larger distances to some department stores to access the brands. Participant 5 suggested that department stores in big cities such as London are a better option, ‘when I think about buying quality gifts for people, and I often go to London. Or at least once around Christmas to buy gifts and I tend to gravitate towards that store [Selfridges]’. For some participants, the department store was also about the wider experience which was worth travelling to. Participant 11 suggested, ‘I would go all the way to Birmingham just so we can go around this department store [Selfridges], because it does have like a nice feeling to it.’ They explained,

The one in Birmingham, Selfridges. We definitely go there as [an occasion](#). Because we’ll go up and we sort of [spend the whole day](#). Probably [at the same place](#), we’ll have [food](#) there and we [sat](#), but we quite like [going up and down with the kids](#) because they enjoy them. And it has [nice views](#).

The participant was attracted by the features of the department store which functions as an interesting place to spend the day, to enjoy food as well as having good store attributes, such as the views. In this instance, convenience is not interpreted as having

easy geographical access but based on the fact that a department store can satisfy a range of family needs for an entire day. For this participant, who was a parent and a working professional who could drive, travelling was not an effort compared to the pleasure gained by the whole family. This point is discussed further in the next section.

Participants also recognised that brands which had dedicated shops, were accessible to more customers through the department stores. Participant 15 said that '[t]hey might only have, say, one shop in London in this country, and they might then do the rest of it through department stores.' They also stated that 'I think the attractive point of them to consumers is that you get to go and see lots of brands that might not necessarily be able to sell enough to warrant their store.' This indicates that the department store acts as a channel for the brands, who do not have enough footfall and resources by themselves, to widen the reach and geographical access of the brand to more customers.

As well as being able to access brands in one place, the location of a department store was also a factor of convenience as it helped participants to locate other similar quality stores nearby. Participant 14, said, 'they [the department stores] often would be almost the anchor points of huge shopping centres', suggesting that the department store always would be located in an advantageous location of a shopping mall. When describing an image regarding the department store, Harrods (see Figure 15), Participant 22 suggested that the high-end shops were usually located in the same area, shown in the quotation below.

This one is what I would see or imagined in a more luxury or high end [department store] like in uptown or downtown, depending on where you are and those are usually where the good malls are. (Participant 22, image 3)



Figure 15 (Participant 22, image 3) – ‘Harrods’.

Participant 11 also commented that department stores are usually located at an advantageous location in terms of amenities, such as parking. As they explained, ‘I tend to go to Nottingham a lot, and there’s a Debenhams at one end and a John Lewis at the other end. So, it’s very easy to just shop effectively. The John Lewis is right by the car park entrance as well, so you could park, go straight to get everything and then you are right by the car again.’

4.2.2. Accessing a wide range of product brands under one roof

Department stores were regarded to have a wide range of products and brands all in one building. Few made this point in relation to the online store. With the physical convenience provided by the department store, customers suggested they only need to go to the one shop to satisfy all their needs, instead of travelling around many shops to buy different products. The strength of the physical department stores is in providing convenience and it was this that was widely confirmed by participants in the research data. They used the term ‘everything’ repeatedly to describe the department store offer and that a wide range of products were on offer in an organised fashion, where products are categorised and showcased in different departments. The wide range of availability under one roof enables each customer to shop for a range of products in one single trip to a department store. Thus, this ‘one-stop’ shopping experience is a unique selling point, as well as a distinction between a department store and a

specialist shop, as suggested by Participant 7, 'The difference between a clothes shop or a particular specialist shop is that you could go to a department store, and you can pick up anything that you need really.' The participant then explained the concept of convenience at a department store from their perspective: 'So, if you need clothes, you can pick them up, if you need an aftershave, you can pick it up, homeware, sofas, TVs, all of that kind of stuff, so you've got everything that you need under one roof'. In many ways participants exaggerated when they said that the stores sold 'everything' they needed. However, this implies that participants were confident that the offering of a department store could satisfy their demands. Similarly, Participant 24 also appreciated the convenience of the department store from a mother's perspective by saying 'I think for somebody like me now, who has a small child and I think the convenience is that I can walk into one store, and I can get everything...So I guess the department store offers convenience and I guess that's why it's so attractive to people'. Participant 2 also selected an image of a market under a huge roof to represent the nature of the department store. They titled the image 'Easy as all under one roof together so not far to go', shown as Figure 16. The participant explained that the individual market stalls represented the individual brands and well-organised departments were available at the department store. The participant negatively associated the shopping experience of going to lots of shops and places with a feeling of being overwhelmed (a theme discussed in 4.2.2.2.1). Therefore, the opportunity of fulfilling multiple buying tasks in a one-stop-shop was critical for the participant. The one-stop shopping experience at the department store reduced the time and effort required to complete the same shopping goal. This was achieved by reducing traveling time and the number of decisions to make. The reduction in time and effort was considered as a convenience, which could reduce the complexity of the anticipated shopping journey. As they explained,

...where you're getting **lots of different things**, then somewhere I will be able to **just go to one shop** and go 'right, **I can do it in one go**'. They've got this, they've got that, something else. So, you're able to **pick up all of the different things**. And it does **make it easier**, so I feel like, 'oh, **I don't have to walk so far**' '**I don't have to go so far**' '**I don't have to look at lots of places**'. It's not going to take a lot of my time and it's just **very convenient**. And so, it does **make shopping experience easier** as well.' (Participant 2, image 4)



Figure 16 (Participant 2, image 4) – ‘Ease as all under one roof together, not so far to go’.

Apart from individual convenience, the department store could also provide convenience to a group of customers who choose to shop together, such as a group of family members with different demographics. Participant 11 explained that a department store was a place in which different generations of her whole family visited. As a child, her father would drive to Nottingham to work and take her, her mother and grandmother to a department store in Nottingham to spend the day, ‘...it would be like the three generations and there would be something there for all of us’. This suggested that the department store could satisfy the needs of all three generations during the same trip. She also explained that she had shopped with her family for a special occasion and purchased everything in one place ‘...often if somebody is getting married. We will go to a department store and buy a new outfit because you can go and get shoes, jewellery, makeup, perfume, a dress, and my dad can get a suit while I get a dress, or my partner can go and get a shirt while I’m getting some shoes.... I like that individuality, but you are all together.’ This she felt was an effective way of shopping as she explained further,

‘Being in a department store, it’s a lot more efficient, and it’s a lot simpler to get around, whereas if you’re trying to get that amount of variation in what you’re buying, it’s much more difficult to be going around the whole mall or the whole

city to try and please everybody...I think it's a bit calmer than running around lots of places, so if you go to a big city and you want to get lots of different things because you've got lots of people to cater for'.

Comparably, Participant 6 selected an image to reflect that the department store is the place for everyone. They chose an image of a large family which contains several generations, shown in Figure 17, and titled the image 'I will find something for everyone'. The participant acknowledged that the department store offered a diverse range of products which could satisfy family and friends of different generations and backgrounds, all shopping together. They stated,

'So, the **good thing** about the apartment store, you always find **something for everyone**, you will find something **for the elderly or child or my friends from different backgrounds**.' (Participant 6, image 5)



Figure 17 (Participant 6 image 5) – 'I will find something for everyone'.

4.2.2.1. Department store organisation, enabling access to brands

During the interviews, each participant was asked to provide a definition of the department store to provide a context. Accordingly, one of the main resources provided by the department store was access to a wide variety of products and brands.

Several participants mentioned that department stores provided many different brands or several departments, for example, Participant 13 said that 'there are so many things and different brands...'. It was identified that participants tended to define the department store by naming the wide range of products and the range of departments in which the products are showcased. Participants observed that the products showcased in the department stores were organised around product categories, as suggested by Participant 14, 'I would describe a department store as a commercial location that has a lot of items that are categorised based on their type and grouped into specific locations throughout the store'. Participant 2 also selected an image to reflect on the organisation of department store by product categories, shown in Figure 18. The participant metaphorised the department store as a candy shop which sells a diversity of sweets, each type of candy was stored separately from one another rather than mixed together. The participant observed that each individual brand available at the department store had a designated place which signposts the participant to the right location of the product in a straightforward way. Below the conscious level of thought, the participant identified that this was convenient because of the well-organised presentation of the product. This provided a level of control to the participant in relation to their shopping journey, so that they could access the specific brand or product category in an easy way. They explained,

You know when you walk into like a department store, they normally got [that] **this is your square for your brand**, this is your square for your clothing, so they're all **quite different and distinct**. So, you can pick a perfume up from the kind of perfume counter, and then some make up from a makeup counter, and then some clothes from the clothing area. (Participant 2, image 2)



Figure 18 (Participant 2, image 2) – ‘different choice of stores from beauty, clothing, home’.

Participants also provided examples of departments that could be found in a department store. These included menswear, womenswear, kitchenware, homeware, perfumes and beauty sections as well as food and a cafe. For example, Participant 13 said that ‘I define a department store as a store that has got lots of different brands or departments within it. Beauty and lots of different stalls like a handbag section, clothes section, home section, perfume. Each with lots of different brands.’ Similarly, Participant 5 stated that the department store includes different brands as well as designated departments such as homeware, fashion, and cosmetics. Participant 15 suggested that a department store is ‘...a large venue over multiple floors that is broken down into different sections. Sometimes by items that it’s selling. So, it could be a male department, a female department, a children’s department, food, travel, with a sitting area before a toy section. Normally they’re big enough to have their cafe or a bit of a refreshments area within them’. Participant 13 also stated that ‘a department store is like a big brand that offers different kinds of goods like it must have a home line, and of course, clothes, accessories, and cosmetics and sometimes even food.’

A similar statement was given by Participant 21: ‘So, to me, in department stores, you can find multiple labels, multiple lines of products and for different ages and different

genders, and also typically they would have items like fashion items as well as home items. To me, they would also have some refreshment facilities like a cafe and restaurants.’ One respondent (Participant 23) expressed a sense of relief associated with the well-defined sections of the departments and wide choices at department stores, ‘I felt that they gave me a sense of relief when I went into a department store because they had a variety of departments and sections that I could purchase from’. With the help of the well-organised sections of products, participants can easily locate where the products are and there is a sense of familiarity, as one participant 23 continues, ‘...you know you go in and you know exactly where it is and it's a bit more well organised’. The well-defined departments simplified the product-seeking process into a set of clear journeys. With a clear sense of location, participant’s anxiety was reduced which resulted in the sense of relief being mentioned in the quote.

Many participants, however, found it challenging to provide a clear definition of a department store. For example, Participant 5 declared that ‘I had to think about what a department store was. Some participants selected an image of a supermarket to reflect the increased similarity between the department store and supermarkets. One image was titled ‘Sainsbury’s’, shown in Figure 19. The participant explained that the supermarkets were different from the department stores because the supermarkets were more focused on groceries. However, they also felt that they were offering home and fashion departments that had become increasingly similar to the range offered at department stores. The interviewee stated,

Although I don't, I wouldn't call it a department store. It seems to be [gravitating more to that side of things](#), because of course it has both homes side of things. It has a fashion side of things and now it has smaller outlets such as Argos or Habitat in there as well. So, I think it's gravitated more towards that. And of course, you have [sushi bars](#) and things like that as well. (Participant 5, image 5)



Figure 19 (Participant 5, image 5) – ‘Sainsbury’s’.

4.2.2.2. Accessing a wide range of choices

Choice is also a significant theme that emerged from this research study. As previously discussed, the department store offers a wide availability of products and brands both online and in store. Within the same categories, there are many brands and products between which customers can choose. This meant there was a wide range of choices available at the department stores. For example, one participant (Participant 10) said a department ‘... is a place where they’re giving me options’. Another participant (Participant 7) selected an image to metaphorise department stores’ abilities to provide choices. The participant applied the metaphor of a ‘toybox’ by selecting an image full of LEGO bricks (See Figure 20 below) and noted ‘everything you could ever need is under one roof...’ From the interview, the participant symbolised the department store as a toybox for a child, where each brick is a section of the department store and eventually those bricks created the offering of a department store. They explained, ‘...it’s just a children’s toy box with everything in. It’s a bit like a department store because *it’s got everything there.*’ (Participant 7, image 3). The idea that department stores offer ‘everything’ has been introduced in Section 4.2.2



Figure 20 Participant 7, image 3 – ‘everything you need is under one roof...’.

Similarly, Participant 6 was excited about going into a physical department store to explore the diversity of choices available there. The participant selected an image of an open natural landscape which embodied clouds, mountain, trees, grass and flowers. The diversity of elements in this image reflected the diversity of products and choices inside a department store (See Figure 21). The participant enjoyed the options the department store offered, including more than one option of a product, as well as the combination of different product categories. The participant’s affirmation of the department store’s offerings was embedded in the use of the phrase ‘everything’ and ‘beautiful’, which were highlighted in blue in the quotation below. At a conscious level of thought, the participant demonstrates a strong, positive emotion towards the wide range of choices available. The participant explained,

It's this kind of diversity of stuff inside this department store. I like them in a combination you **don't have just one style** or one colour or one type of materials you have **a combination of everything**. They are together, making it a beautiful portrait like this one, even they are different. They are all together in this frame which looks **beautiful**. (Participant 6, image 2)



Figure 21 (Participant 6, image 2) – ‘I like the diversity in one place’.

Moreover, the statements of the participants indicated that choice is a significant factor in a department store. Participant 15 said, ‘[g]etting that range of products is a big thing. While going to the department store ... I've got a greater chance of finding something that's going to fit me’. This suggested that the offering of a wide range of products contributed to a greater chance for customers to find the desired products. Similarly, Participant 7 stated that the wide range of availability guarantees making a purchase, even if it was not the original choice. If the desired product was out-of-stock, they could buy a satisfactory alternative as quoted ‘.....but if that wasn't in stock, he could [guarantee](#) that they'd have [another pack](#) or [a brand that they could suggest](#). So, it's about the overall [range of products and varieties](#) of things.’

4.2.2.2.1. *Overwhelming*

Despite the benefits of having many brands on offer, participants noted that this choice could be overwhelming. Having too many choices, too many options and too much advertisement may cause information overload, which created confusion for participants to make purchasing decisions. Participant 23 selected an image of a small lane, which was full of advisement display boards, shown in Figure 22. It is titled

'Cluttered/ Too much information/ overwhelmed' to express the chaotic feeling when shopping at a department store. The participant suggested that the information overload created a distraction from their designated shopping journey: 'I was trying to search for something that was just loads of advertisements and this is a prime example of just **too many choices, too many options and too much advertising**. ... And I think it's a bit chaotic.'



Figure 22 (Participant 23, image 3) – 'Cluttered/ Too much information/ overwhelmed'.

Similarly, Participant 10 stated that 'it used to be difficult for me to make decisions in a department store because there were so many options'. This suggests that an excess number of choices may have negatively affected their abilities to make purchasing decisions at a department store. This perspective was supported by the statement of participant 12, who selected an image of a confused boy standing in front of a vending machine which displayed a selection of similar soft drinks (See Figure 23). The image was titled 'the level of choice for each item feels overwhelming'. The phrases highlighted in blue, 'slight variations' and 'almost identical' emphasised that from the participant's perspective, it was difficult to differentiate between products in the same categories when being displayed together. The use of 'wall' in this quote implied the overpowering feeling acting almost as a barrier associated with the

observation of all the products being displayed at once. The participant describes the overwhelming feeling, when asked to imagine the smell associated with this image. They recalled the smell of perfume, which was strong and overpowering, and stated, 'I think I couldn't work with the idea of excess. Like there's too much of something'. This statement further emphasised the participant's concern about their incapability of making decisions when dealing with too many choices:

There's just so many **slight variations** of it all displayed in front of you. And it often becomes **difficult to decide** which **one of that many options would be right for me**, because you don't have much to go on really. They're just faced with a wall of **almost identical** looking products. (Participant 12 image 1)



Figure 23 (Participant 12, image 1) - the level of choice for each item feels overwhelming.

Participant 3 also suggested that choice can be overwhelming by describing an image of a person that is pushed into a corner of a wall and his face is covered by numerous sticky notes (See Figure 24). They explained how the image implied the desperation felt by the participant when shopping in a department store. Each sticky note represented either a person (another shopper or member of staff) to be encountered or a shopping decision on the day and there were too many decisions to make (highlighted in blue, in the quote). The participant's conscious thought of the image was reflected in the title of this image: 'The feeling that I have too much to observe

and too many decisions to make at the moment'. Therefore, despite the wide choice of products and brands, some participants felt overwhelmed by the number of choices, complexity and pressure surrounding their encounter. They said, '...that just represents like *lots of things coming at me.*'



Figure 24 (Participant 3, image 1) – 'The feeling that I have too much to observe and too many decisions to make in the moment'.

The same participant also selected two further images (Figure 25 & Figure 26) to express the overwhelming, strong emotion they felt in store. Figure 25 represented the feeling that Participant 2 felt when anticipating the department store's shopping environment. Participant 3 titled the image 'What I feel store shopping feels and looks like in my head'. As shown in the first quotation below, the participant was conscious

that they perhaps overdramatised the physical shopping trip. However, they believed that the physical stores were busy, even though they were conscious that the department stores and the high street where the department store is located were not as busy as they imagined, ‘...even just walking around [the city] makes me feel, you know the High Street with McDonald’s on. That’s what it is like. I link it with that picture, that’s how busy I think it is. It’s not even busy’. These contrasting views may reflect the fact that the high street and department stores were experiencing less footfall at the time of data collection due to the pandemic.



Figure 25 (Participant 3, image 4) – ‘What I feel store shopping feels and looks like in my head’.

There were other negative emotions associated with the overwhelming choice on offer. Due to the copious offering in the department store, the same participant felt pressured when they were in the physical store, particularly when with family members (see Figure 26). They were pushed to make decisions within the limited time they had in store. The participant compared the department store shopping day to an eight-hour working day although they were only in the store for a relatively short period. At the end of the shopping experience, the participant would feel exhausted both mentally and physically. Interestingly, to counteract this, the participant used the online platform of the department store to feel less overwhelmed and more comfortable. This was

reflected in the title of the image given by the participant, 'My head hurts and I feel time pressured, there are other ways to find what I want in the comfort of my bed'. They also stated, 'It's just probably the expression that I make when I'm out of the shop that's what I will look like next Friday with my mum.'



Figure 26 (Participant 3 image 2) – 'My head hurts and I feel time pressured, there are other ways to find what I want in the comfort of my bed'.

However, one participant declared that the overwhelming emotion was not completely negative. Participant 2 selected an image of a person looking up with a facial expression of smiling with her eyes closed. They titled that image, 'Feeling overwhelmed walking in, at everything to look at', shown in Figure 27, and said 'So, I feel sometimes I need to make sure I've got a lot of time I can idle, and I need to feel strong enough to be able to deal with all the different places to look at and things that I wanted to see.'



Figure 27 (Participant 2, image 1) – 'Feeling overwhelmed walking in at everything to look at'.

At a conscious level, the participant perceived the shopping trip to the department store would require time and energy in order to explore the wide range of places and products. As a result, the participant needed to be 'emotionally ready to go into the shop' due to the perceived complexity of the journey. However, the participant also suggested that the level of overwhelmingness was acceptable because this was a

result of everything being in one location. They stated, 'because you've got lots of things under one roof, then sometimes you need to be ready for that'.

Overall, the sub-conscious and unconscious feelings of participants behind this theme relates to the need for balance between choice and complexity of the shopping journey. When the number of choices is beyond a reasonable level, the participants were more likely to feel overwhelmed. In another words, when the balance becomes uneven, a wide range of choices is no longer regarded as a positive attribute of the store but instead has an adverse effect on the participants. Consequently, participants began to struggle to make the right decisions as a result of too many choices and were left feeling confused.

4.3. Accessing the physical product

According to participants, the physical product was a very important aspect and valued by the participants when shopping at a department store, regardless of the shopping platform. In the physical department store, participants used their senses such as sight, touch, smell and hearing to evaluate a product. For most participants, this sensory process was an important experience that could not be replicated online. In contrast, participants believed that the online platform could not always provide a holistic, or realistic view of the product brand. As a result, the customer's ability to fully evaluate the product and select the right one was strongly affected. This section now explores these findings in detail, as per Figure 13 Summarised theme structures of brand accessibility.

4.3.1. Physically experiencing the product pre-purchase

The process of being able to physically touch, feel, select, and try on the product before purchasing it, was an important experience associated with the physical department store. This was reflected in two aspects. First, participants highly valued the process of measuring and trying on the product using their own physical senses. Being able to see, touch and feel the product helped the participants evaluate the function of the product. For example, Participant 15 selected an image of a magnifying glass leaning on a gavel (See Figure 28 below) and titled the image 'Chance to explore the quality and judge the products'.

(Content removed due to copyright restrictions)

Figure 28 (Participant 15, image 1) – Chance to explore the quality and judge the products.

This participant explained that she had an unusual body shape. 'I have to try things on clothes-wise. I'm six-foot tall, but I've got tiny legs.' Therefore, the chance to physically evaluate the product before purchasing helped them identify the right product that suited them, as they stated, 'you can sample different products in a department store'. At the surface level of thought, the magnifying glass metaphorised the process of exploring the product range and the gavel represented the participant's judgement of the quality of the product when they were in the physical department store. The position of the magnifying glass leaning on the gavel implied that the searching process is supported by the participants' judgement. Consequently, being able to physically try on or test the product became a decisive aspect for the participant. This was supported by the statement of Participant 15, who said, 'There was a brilliant range there I really liked, so I would be willing to pay for the quality of the products that they're selling there because you could see them, and you could judge them and smell them.' This showed that participants were using their sensory experiences to evaluate product brands as Participant 18 also stated 'I would like to go into the department store, where I really feel it and try it.'

Secondly, participants considered the process of exploring and evaluating the products as a hedonic experience. Participants stated that it is more than merely achieving the end result of selecting the right product. Also, with the help of sensory evaluation, was the pleasurable process of experiencing different textures and selecting products. Participants enjoyed '[j]ust wandering around the shops,

trying things’, as commented by Participant 20. Participant 8 selected an image of a man sitting in a café, holding a newspaper and watching his surroundings to illustrate this point (see Figure 29). The participant titled the image, ‘A place where I can combine different types of consuming’. The participant considered the department store as a place that they can compare and experience a wide range of commodities from a variety of product brands, as quoted below. The phrases highlighted in blue emphasised that the participant considered the opportunity to engage their senses, to compare and to observe, as well as to physically judge the quality of the product of significance.

What I like in a physical department store is the possibility to **touch the objects and ... to see with my eyes** in not the natural light, because you're always inside the place with artificial lights, but with your presence to **compare the objects** and to see if they match and also the material. It is very important to **experience or to see** if it's good quality and if a piece suits you so you can **try** it. (Participant 8, image 4)



Figure 29 (Participant 8, image 4) – ‘A place where I can combine different types of consuming’.

Further hedonic experiences were recalled by Participant 13 who explained that department stores used to give perfume samples, so that customers could smell the actual product while they are in store: 'I think they always do smell nice. When I think of a department store, I always think of the perfume section that I like. I mean, it used to be people there and handing them out.' As a result, every time they recalled their experiences of a department store, they would always recall the smell of the perfume. The participants, therefore, not only found the process of physically trying and sensing the products helpful in a functional way, but also from a hedonic perspective.

4.3.2. Physical experience of the product brands: the differentiation between in store and online

The outcome of this theme suggests that the physical experience of the product is the main reason that participants decide to go into the physical store rather than shop online. Several participants stated that the physical experience cannot be replicated online. For some participants, online shopping was simply difficult to use. For example, Participant 10 stated, 'I like to look at a 3D object. I think if I'm buying something online, it's this view and that view, and I can't quite understand the garments.' This suggested that some people were less capable of visualising products online because they cannot process the information by piecing a 2-dimension picture into the 3-dimension product. Similarly, Participant 3 suggested that they would choose to go to the physical store if they needed a product in a certain size, such as a mirror to fit in the room. As a result, physically experiencing the product was the only way for them to evaluate the product. Comparably, the physical experience of the product was still an important aspect for people who adopted the approach of hybrid shopping. Participant 8 chose an image to reflect their different shopping modes. The image is shown as Figure 30 and was titled 'A place where I can confront [face and compare] different items'. The coloured matches represent the variety of items offered in categories at the department stores. This participant adopted a hybrid shopping mode where they would conduct research online to narrow down the product range, then experiment with the product in the store with different lighting. The participant compared the hybrid shopping mode as like borrowing books from a library, as they explain in their quote:

But on the other side there are also the libraries where you go to the shelf. You find the book that you're interested in, and then maybe around there are other

books and you stop there. You browse them and you make another type of experience but even more interesting, it's researching. (Participant 8, image 2)



Figure 30 (Participant 8 image 2) – ‘A place where I can confront different items’.

From an experience-based perspective, Participant 21 commented that ‘...online shopping for me is never going to replace the whole actual shopping experience where you can walk around, touch things, try them on.’ The participant emphasised that the entire process of experiencing the products is an important differentiating aspect that fully distinguishes the in-store shopping experience from the online experience. Similarly, Participant 19 suggested that ‘...especially for clothing, I need to try them on my own before I purchase it. Otherwise, I don't know if it fits or not and I like the feeling of going into a store, pick it by yourself, then pay for it, and then take it home.’ Apart from the need to find out the right fit of clothing, Participant 19 also enjoyed the process of selecting the product in store and the convenience of taking the product home instantly. This demonstrates a preference of in-store over online shopping because of the immediacy of receiving the product at the point of sale.

4.3.3. COVID-19 set a barrier to experiencing the product

Whilst the impact of the pandemic was not the focus of the study, the outbreak of COVID-19 did impact the participants' ability to physically experience the products in the department stores. In particular COVID-19 influenced customers' access to the physical products in two ways: store policies and the change of customers' mindsets. During the lockdown many physical stores were closed and customers' only access was via ordering online. Thus, customers were forcibly separated from the physical store and the in-store experience. Many participants demonstrated an acceptance towards the shift to online shopping and this made them more comfortable using online platforms than before the breakout of COVID-19.

In a period after the lockdown, there were still COVID-19 related store regulations in place. Such regulations included the two-metre social distancing and the closure of fitting rooms. Participant 19 complained about this change to the in-store experience, who commented on the two-metre distance 'At some place[s] you can't even try the clothes on. That's the most annoying bit. I'm kind of keen to go to the shop, pick the clothes and then try it on before I purchase it. Well, recently you're not allowed to try them on. So, it would be the same feeling as online shopping'. The use of the term 'annoying' reflected a strong negative emotion of the participant towards the in-store shopping experience and not being allowed to try the product. For them, this was effectively the same experience as shopping online.

Participant 2 commented that whilst the COVID-19 pandemic had shifted their shopping habits entirely to online platforms during the lockdown, they complained that textures and materials were difficult to understand through the description online. They also suggested that they were unfamiliar with the new store policies during the pandemic which made their shopping experience worse '... I don't know how many places allow you to try on at the moment, but in theory you can try it on.' The closure of the fitting room led to participants experiencing a greater effort to shop, as suggested by Participant 6: 'but for a while they were closing all the fitting places, so you have to try them at home and if they are not fitting right, you need to return them'.

The impact of COVID-19 also impacted customers' mindsets in terms of the physical department store experience. Some participants explained how they avoided touching and trying on the product because of health and safety concerns. One participant

(Participant 20) said that 'COVID did put a stop to this kind of experiences of being able to shop with friends and stuff. Now you just go in and pick what you want and then you leave, you don't want to just see or try it on and so on.' This means that despite the participant preferred the opportunity to physically experience the product, the COVID-19 made them compromise their preference with the concern of their own safety. In another word, the COVID-19 placed a psychological barrier on the participant to compromise their shopping preference. Another participant (Participant 16) was more concerned with the spread of the virus, as they said, 'I just never touch things anymore, especially after COVID.' In this statement, the participant also denoted that they would remain conscious to avoid physical contact even when they believed that COVID was no longer a threat. Participant 21 suggested that they had learnt a new skill from the pandemic which was to avoid contact. This meaning was elicited from an image selected by the participant (See Figure 31) which illustrated a man standing in front of five image frames hanging on the wall. The participant's original meaning of this image was about how John Lewis provides inspiration. Therefore, the participant named this image 'John Lewis'. The theme inspiration is explained later in the chapter (See Section 4.4.2). However, as part of the ZMET method, the participant was asked to imagine the sense of touch as they look at this image. Surprisingly, the participant denoted that they would not touch the frames. They said:

In the second or third year of the pandemic, I've [learnt not to touch things](#), so I probably [wouldn't see myself reaching out to the pictures...](#) Only touch what you are intending to buy. I think that's the one thing, that I kind of got used to.
(Participant 21, image 2)



Figure 31 (Participant 21 image 2) – ‘John Lewis’.

4.3.4. Products need to be realistically showcased online

Participants identified an issue solely with the online platform. For many, the online platform was not showing enough information about the product brands. Participant 2

selected one image to comment on this issue. The power of the online platform was embedded in the title of this image: 'Online shopping: you are shown the item the way they want you see it'. The image illustrates a person holding a glass ball. On the glass ball, the background scene was reflected in a distorted manner where the reality was shown upside down (See Figure 32). The person on the image represented the department store who operates the online platform, and the glass ball is the screen of the device they are using to access the product online. The lens of the electronic device was suggested by the participant to cause an information mismatch between what people see and what they believe. In this image, the participant suggests the online presentation of the product was manipulated in an artistic way by the department store's online platform and the customers could only see the distorted reality shown on the glass ball, as quoted below:

The person is showing you [a version of](#) that because they're showing you the picture of what it is, but they're showing it [through that glass ball](#) that they've got, so you're seeing a [distorted](#) image of what's happening, because that [one's upside down and backwards](#). (Participant 2, image 5)



Figure 32 (Participant 2, image 5) - 'Online shopping: you are shown the item the way they want you to see it'.

The participant stated that the manipulation does not necessarily mean there is a fake product, but the way the online platforms introduce a product creates an illusion that may affect their judgement. Furthermore, in order to showcase a clothing product online, the department stores tend to use a model to demonstrate the product. In reality, the participant did not share the same physical figure with the model. Therefore, the participant believed that the model was the glass ball that affected how they see the product, as they stated, 'they're showing you an actual, a real product, but the person wearing it, is a model which may not look like how I look. I'm not a model, so it doesn't look like me.' The participant felt that the online information was therefore inaccurate and unhelpful for making decisions when shopping online. The participant wanted more control over the shopping experience so that they could see the product without being manipulated.

4.3.4.1. Consequences of products not being realistically showcased online

There are a set of consequences if the product is not realistically showcased online, it may affect customers shopping experience with the department store and their perceptions of the corporate brand and individual product brand. The most common consequence raised by the participants was the dissatisfaction of the product. Participants stated that the physical product they received from the order placed online was not what they expected and could lead to disappointment. Participant 2 said that '[a]lthough in theory you do know what you're going to get, because they've shown you, they've given you the description and everything. Actually, when it turns up, it's not what you expect'. The participant trusted the information provided online, primarily because an online retail platform usually provides dimensions and descriptions of the product. However, the difference between the actual product received and the online presentation can still lead to disappointment, as the participant said, '[i]t could be quite different when it turns up at your door and you're like, 'oh, that wasn't what I thought it was''.

A further consequence after the dissatisfaction was the need to return the product, which added extra effort for the customers. Participant 20 described the return process as 'the worst job ever just doing the return of the things you bought online'. Participant 15 also explained the reason why they tried to avoid shopping online: '...the

annoyance of having done online shopping and normally ends up always having to send it back.’ Another participant (Participant 13) stated that the return process requires a considerable amount of effort, they said, ‘because I’m really bad with returning things online. I’ve got so much to do to return, and I think it’s just one of those things where I don’t want to have to order something online to then return it, and so, I’m conscious of that’. Participant 2 also selected an image to comment on the effort required to make a return (See Figure 33). The image illustrated a map, and they titled the image ‘working out how to send things back that aren’t right’.

And particularly online, because I think things **aren't** necessarily what you expect sometimes. Trying to find out how to send things back can be **quite difficult**. There might be **more than one options** of how to do it. (Participant 2, image 6)



Figure 33 (Participant 2, image 6) – ‘Working out how to send things back that aren’t right’.

Making a purchase decision was regarded by this participant as a troublesome process. Table 7 states the fourteen questions the participant asked themselves about making a return before a product was bought online. They stated these as part of the ZMET interview.

Question number	Direct quote of the question asked by Participant 2
1	'What day can I do it?'
2	'What time do they open?'
3	'How do I get there?'
4	'Is there parking to be able to do it?'
5	'Do I need to take my receipt?'
6	'Do we need to do something else?'
7	'Where's the nearest one to me?'
8	'Do they know what they're going to do?'
9	'Or am I going to have to stay there?'
10	'Is it going to cause more problems?'
11	'Do I have to include the extra bit paper that tells them what's wrong with it?'
12	'Do I want to send it back?'
13	'Do I really want it?'
14	'If I have to send this back, is it going to be a real problem?'

Table 7 Quotation of the 14 Questions asked to Participant 2 regarding the return process.

Furthermore, the costs involved for the return were a concern to the participants. Participants believed they should be offered a free delivery and a free return, with no extra cost to the customers leading to further dissatisfaction with the shopping experience and potentially a negative view of the corporate retail brand. If a cost to return is involved, it is likely that a product would not be returned, which may result in a waste of money and resource. As an example, Participant 3 selected an image of burning money to reinforce her concern of the cost to return, shown as Figure 34. This concern was closely associated with the service of free delivery and free return. They said,

I'd probably just buy it to know that it's got a free refund, free delivery and free return, so I would have been fine with that. If I'd have had to pay for their delivery or return, I probably wouldn't approach it in that way. I'd just choose one thing

and if they really didn't fit me, or I didn't like it. I would definitely return it, but I'd probably may just keep it. (Participant 3, image 6)



Figure 34 (Participant 3, image 6) – ‘What often happens when I store shop, because I can’t make decisions fast enough’

However not all products could be returned if purchased online, so in this case shopping in a physical store was preferable, as Participant 22 stated ‘If I’m buying perfumes, I can’t smell it. And if I get it and I smelled it, it’s already opened, I can’t return it. That’s why I do prefer to go on site in person’.

4.4. Accessing the department store corporate brand

As discussed in Chapter 2, the department store is a corporate brand that offers both products and services. From the service point of view, it was discovered that department stores were more likely to be perceived as a physical place of service and experience which attracted customers footfall to the venue. In Section 4.3.2, it has been discussed that the physical experience of products before purchasing differentiated the in-store with online shopping experiences. Apart from the process of exploring and evaluating products, participants also found the shopping experience on the physical venue and online platform distinguishable despite both belonging to the same department store corporate brand. It was commented by Participant 11 that ‘[t]he

differences between online and [the physical] department store is massive.’ The participant demonstrated a preference towards the physical department store by stating, ‘...I think it’s really nice to shop online, but I don’t think it’s as much fun.’ The physical in-store experience was identified as more entertaining and enjoyable. This section expands upon the context of experience, beyond simply the experience of the product, to the overall store experiences.

In brief, firstly, the participants appreciated the store atmosphere at the physical department store, which provided a luxurious experience to customers. Secondly, the participants tended to go to the department store to look for inspiration, such as gift and home decoration ideas. Thirdly, participants enjoyed the process of exploring in the physical store, which did not appear to be replicated online. The locations of the departments are fixed. Hence, on customers’ way to the product they were looking for, they would unavoidably see and walk pass the display shelves and have their senses stimulated by the products on display. Surprisingly, some participants preferred the surprise factor associated with physical store. On the other hand, participants perceived that the navigation route of the online platform was different from that of the physical store. Many participants found the physical store difficult to navigate because of the large size of the store, whereas the filters and tags online eased customers’ journey to find the products. Moreover, participants appreciated the in-store interaction with the employees working at the department store, from whom they could receive useful advice. As a result of the diverse experience available at the physical department store, participants considered the department store as an occasion venue where they could spend time with friends and family preparing to celebrate a national holiday, for example, Christmas. Finally, the promotions offered at a physical department store were attractive to most participants and created some new behaviours at the time of seasonal sales. Meanwhile, the online channels of the department stores have become a substitute to the physical department store for customers to avoid the crowd, or to reduce the pressure to complete their Christmas shopping list. This section now expands on these findings.

4.4.1. Store atmosphere

Store atmosphere was an important aspect of the physical department store and a reflection of the corporate brand. From the window display to the store decoration, all

of the physical presentations in store were considered a visual communication of the department store brand to its customers. Participant 9 (interior designer) explained how they thought the storytelling of window displays enhances the brand identity of the department store, they said, 'Liberty, London has a very good way of telling stories. It's stunning [the] stories in the way ... they start introducing their stories right in the front of a window display and it is not a windows-based notice about [the] abundance of products. It's really about let me show you a little bit and then come and explore the rest.' This statement suggests that the function of the window display was not simply to show the basic function of the department store but to communicate the brand identity with its customers. The window display is the first impression of the department store corporate brand.

The interior design of the department store was also an aspect that brought pleasure to other participants. Many of the materials used stimulated the senses. Participant 13 selected a vibrant image of a woman exploring a space with shining strip lights (See Figure 35). The title of the image is 'I feel like I am surrounded by lots of things that will stimulate lots of senses – pretty things to look at, nice smells, and it will be light



and bright', which expressed the sensory stimulation initiated by the engagement of visual and olfactory sensations. The bright and exquisite in-store environment provided an uplifting emotion to the participant, as they expressed in this quote:

'...to me department stores are always really bright, everything is shiny and it's a bit exciting in there. So, there's going to be lots of things that will stimulate all your senses not consciously but subconsciously in your mind. I'm looking around. There's so much to see and everything is quite polished and it's kind of like that lifestyle element of it, I guess. While you're in, you are just very aware that there's lots of nice pretty things and it's always really light and bright, and I thought this particular image resonated [with] me...' (Participant 13, image 1)

Figure 35 (Participant 13, image 1) – ‘I feel like I am surrounded by lots of things that will stimulate lots of senses – pretty things to look at, nice smells, and it will be light and bright’.

During the discussion with the participants, also identified was the theme of ‘luxury’ in terms of store atmosphere consistently associated with department stores. When being asked to describe the smell of Figure 35, Participant 13 recalled a smell of perfume and said, ‘it always smells expensive’. Similar to Participant 13, Participant 22 also used the smell of perfume to explain the feeling of luxury. ‘It’s something that you smell, and you feel great that it smells super nice, it feels great on you. In my opinion that, a higher and more expensive perfume would make you smell better. Like when you smell into it. It is not very strong. It is not very stinky, and it relaxes you and you can enjoy that smell. Nice to smell, I would see in those places.’ They described the perfume representing a department store as a smell that enlightens a person. Participant 22 also selected an image to describe the luxurious feeling of the department store decorations (See Figure 15). The image showed a glamorous chandelier which lights the department store. This suggests that the luxury feeling of the department store is pleasurable and comfortable to the participant. The sense of ‘feeling nicer’ could be translated into the deep metaphor of transformation. The immersive experience of the glamorous department store has equipped the participant with a luxury feeling.



‘They’re generally quite expensive and that’s what I would think. This should be the mall. This should be shiny and glamorous and luxury.’ (Participant 22, image 3)

Figure 15 (Participant 22, image 3) – ‘Harrods’.

Also, terms 'Professional' and 'sophisticated' were used to describe the department store's atmosphere. Participant 13 selected an image to reflect their belief that people who work at a department store are professional and sophisticated, shown in Figure 36. Here, the image is of a man wearing a stylish suit and an expensive watch. They titled the image 'I feel sophisticated, and everything is a bit fancier'. The accompanying



quote also highlights how the appearance of staff made the participant feel more elegant and mature when shopping, leading to a below-conscious thought associated with a sense of personal transformation.

'Obviously, there's like sometimes like nicer brands and stuff. I think because you can look around, you've got more freedom to enjoy the experience... Also, I feel like maybe you're a bit more grown up when you're in a department.' (Participant 15, image 5)

Figure 36 (Participant 13, image 5) – 'I feel sophisticated and everything is a bit fancier'.

In addition, participants appreciated the vast landscape of the department store. It was commonly believed that the department store is busy and crowded, when compared to shopping at smaller shops. The size of a department store could provide a calm feeling to ease the claustrophobic feeling created by the busy customer flows. For example, participant 11 said, 'I would say that all of them have sort of quite a nice open space at some point, not necessarily the whole way through, but further in. I've got a crowd picture, so some of them are definitely a lot more crowded, and this is more towards the really big ones rather than smaller ones...I prefer the big ones than the small ones. It definitely feels that much more of an event and a lot less claustrophobic, so some of them feel quite small and claustrophobic and it's not as pleasant.'

4.4.2. Inspiration

In the previous section, it has been identified that the department store created a stimulating store atmosphere that participants found enjoyable. Through the stimulating and engaging experiences, the physical department stores were considered by the participants as a place to seek inspiration for gift ideas for friends and families as well as for themselves. As mentioned earlier in Section 4.2.1, Participant 5 was willing to travel across the country to buy a Christmas gift at a specific department store in London. The term 'quality gift' also reflected that the department store has a high perception of quality by the participant. Participant 6 suggested that they preferred a particular department store brand for gift inspirations for family and friends: '[s]o always, when I want to buy a gift, I just go there [the department store], and I know I will find something for the person I'm trying to buy the gift for.' Two participants selected images specifically to describe how department stores were used as an inspiration when buying gifts. Firstly, Participant 8 selected an image of a person holding a sparkler out of the surface of water (See Figure 37). This image reflected the moment when the participant walked into the department store with the need to purchase a gift but did not have a clear idea of what to buy. They viewed the range of products available in store as the surface of water, where nothing stands out specifically. The hand in the water represented the product recommended on the store shelf which shined as a sparkler to attract the participant to buy it. They said,

It's a place where I can find suggestions from the display that the department store proposed to you, so you can maybe go there and see if you find some sort of inspiration or suggestion. If you have to make a present or you have to buy a gift or something. Maybe you go there, and you can find something. (Participant 8, image 3)



Figure 37 (Participant 8, image 3) – ‘A place where I can find suggestions’.

Similarly, participant 16 suggested that ‘...they have something on display and I'm like ‘oh that looks really cool’, and I just want to see it because I know that someone else would like it.’ The display in the department store was identified as the source of inspiration. Participant 13 selected an image of inspiration (See Figure 38). This differed to Participant 8, as the feeling behind this image was more positive. The light bulb represented the ideas and inspirations found in store, but the fact that the light bulb is not shining strongly suggested that the department store did not overwhelm its customers by pushing the customers to buy or providing suggestions in a discomfortable way.

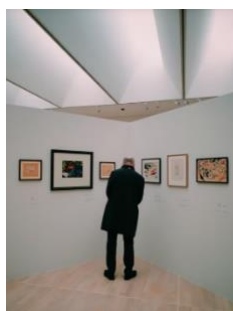


‘I like the fact that it was quite pretty like it's a pretty image, so it wasn't like you get ideas and inspir[ation] like an overwhelming way. It was just like ‘that would be a really nice gift’...’ (Participant 13, image 2)

Figure 38 (Participant 13, image 2) – ‘I will get lots of inspiration and ideas – but won’t be overwhelmed’.

Another participant (Participant 24) suggested that the display is the first impression of a store. Once they walked into the store, the concentration focuses on the display and the mannequins. They said, ‘...whenever I do enter John Lewis, it's kind of like ‘Oh wow!’. That display is always the first thing that I look at. Now when I walk into John Lewis, it's kind of like how they display things and how their product looks and how their clothes and their mannequins look.’ Participant 11 also appreciated the window display which contributed to the participant’s perception of the department store brand. They stated that ‘Probably John Lewis is my favourite one to go to as well. They have a lot of displays, and they have a nice window display, so everything is quite attractive.’ As a result, the participant developed a positive association between the window display and the perception of the corporate brand, which may contribute to a more positive attitude to the department store corporate brand overall.

Participants also considered the department store as a place of inspiration for their own lifestyle, particularly the in-store displays. They appreciated the artistic way the department store used colours and showcased the trendy products. The participants could gain inspiration without buying anything. Participant 21 also selected an image to reflect on how the department store provided inspiration (See Figure 31). This image was mentioned earlier in section 4.3.3. The original meaning of this image was to reflect on Participant 21’s belief that John Lewis had ‘good taste’ and could constantly provide inspiration. Furthermore, the participant commented that ‘Their display and shop arrangement and their colour coordination are very pleasant, very clean, a very enjoyable experience so I would go there to look for inspiration and



always be open-minded when I am there...’. This quote highlights how this participant was ready to make unplanned purchases as a result of the inspiration gained inside the department store. As a result of the combination of trust in the department store and the affirmation of the function of resources provided at John Lewis, the participant was willing to act more bravely to try new things and challenge the potential risk of unplanned buying.

'I know they have a good taste. So, when I'm doing in person shopping in their stores, I would always find inspiration. I would always get things that I wasn't looking for.'

(Participant 21, image 2)

Figure 31 (Participant 21 image 2) – 'John Lewis'.

Participant 13 highlighted how the store display could be an inspiration for house décor and personal outfits, stating, '... '[t]his might look really nice in the house'... I'd get inspired by how they've pieced outfits together.' For some participants, the department store was a place to learn about new trends. One participant (Participant 12) said, 'It's like the star pieces and stuff like that. And then, there's obviously different stands-for-a-week product'. The product was exhibited with a context so that the participant could learn and apply the ideas to themselves. Another participant (Participant 10) used Figure 39 as an image to show how department stores could highlight future trends through their displays. They named the image 'Inspired' and selected a futuristic building to represent their experiences in the department store. Her statement below suggested that she is willing to explore the store to learn fashion trends and get inspired.

I just want to be inspired like 'oh wow OK, let's see what I can find here and it's like the future'. The shapes or futuristic. So, it's about trends because I don't look through magazines, so that's my chance to see what's new and in vogue and in fashion. (Participant 10, image 8)



Figure 39 Participant 10, image 8 – 'Inspired'.

Similarly, one participant (Participant 6) chose an image which was a person set to explore the great outdoors and was looking at the view ahead. They have titled it, 'I am ready to explore' (See Figure 40). The scene in the image represents the entrance of the physical department store, where the participant saw the escalators and was ready to go into the store. At a conscious level of thought, the participant had explicitly mentioned exploring, which is a surface level metaphor relating to the shopping experience. The participant depicted that the retail experience is about exploring the wide range of offering. The action of always bringing a bag with them implied that they were prepared for being surprised and inspired by the department store's offerings and they were ready to buy. They explained,

I think this is what I start with when I go to the department stores, like I'm **ready to explore** and **see what is there**. Usually, I have a bag as well. Like if I buy lots of stuff, so I'm ready. So, it's just in this photo, I think it is like there is a wide landscape in front of you and you just standing in front of it and **ready to go and explore and see what is there**. (Participant 6, image 1)



Figure 40 (Participant 6, image 1) – ‘I am ready to explore’.

4.4.3. Navigating to explore

With the wide range of services and products available at the department store, participants depicted the physical store as a place to explore and emphasised the exploring process itself. Some participants enjoyed the free space to explore in the department store. Participant 6 selected an image to reflect their shopping experience at Marks & Spencer. They titled the image ‘I like to have the big space’, shown as



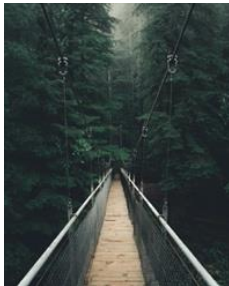
Figure 41. The ocean in the image represented the space in the store and the person laying on the surfboard represented the participant navigating their way freely around the store, as the accompanying quote highlights.

‘I like the **space** you have in a department store. You’re **free to go anywhere** and you have this space around you where you can navigate, so I **feel more comfortable**. Because when you go to a **small store**, it’s just lots of people are like, even the people working there, they could just **follow you or push you to buy some stuff**. But in the department store

you're free to go and navigate this way or this way. And I like this kind of free space.’
(Participant 6, image 4)

Figure 41 (Participant 6, image 4) – ‘I like to have the big space’.

When describing their in-store experience, another participant selected an image of a suspension bridge which led the way into the woods and titled the image ‘Exploring’ (See Figure 42). As the quote illustrates, the participant saw shopping in a department store as an adventurous opportunity and something they enjoyed.



‘So, for me, this picture was about exploring, and I wouldn't say daunting in exploration, but more like just comfortable. I suppose it looks like I'm on a rope bridge and it looks scary, but for me it's not scary, it's just an exciting exploration.’ (Participant 10, image 1)

Figure 42 Participant 10, image 1 – ‘Exploring’.

Participant 14 selected a set of images to describe their feelings when navigating the department store to try and find a product. The first image illustrated a person walking in the desert. This describes how the participant felt when they were wandering around the department store but had not yet found what they were looking for (See Figure 43). The person in the image represents the participant, who felt hot, dry and were having difficulties breathing. When describing the image, they said that they would then discover an oasis in the dessert. The oasis represented the illusion of finding the right product. Miscommunications caused by the signs in store led to the participant wandering around before finding the oasis. Participant 14 explained that this the signs in store should ideally help shoppers rather than confuse them, as the quotes below illustrate, ‘...in IKEA they use English and Swedish. I read the Swedish word, so I go and think it's the item, but I realised ‘wait a second. This is the wrong language. This isn't what I meant. This is what I was looking for’.’ In addition, participant 14 commented on the confusion of store sign that they did not fulfil the appropriate

function of signposting. He said, 'even these signposts. Sometimes they don't specify what sorts of technologies that they have, so you might go there and then it's not exactly what you're looking for.' (Participant 14, image 8)



Figure 43 (Participant 14, image 8) – 'Walking in the dessert'.

The second image shows a position near the exit of a dark cave where a stream of light shines into the cave, shown in Figure 44. This image was titled 'Opening'. This image continued the story illustrated in Figure 43 by the same participant and is described in the accompanying quote. After a long journey of feeling lost and confused, the participant felt that they were in a dark cave. The participant described how they had been walking around the department store without knowing where to go because of the constant change of store arrangement and lack of accurate signage and information. The stream of light represented the end point of the shopping journey where the participant finally found the right product and was ready to leave the cave and the darkness. He said,

I picked this image because it describes how I would feel in a department store when I finally found the item or the location that I'm supposed to be in, because in a department store, it often feels like you're **roaming around** and you're **not**

really sure where to go and there's so much and things change all the time. It feels like you're just struggling along in the darkness.' (Participant 14, image 1)

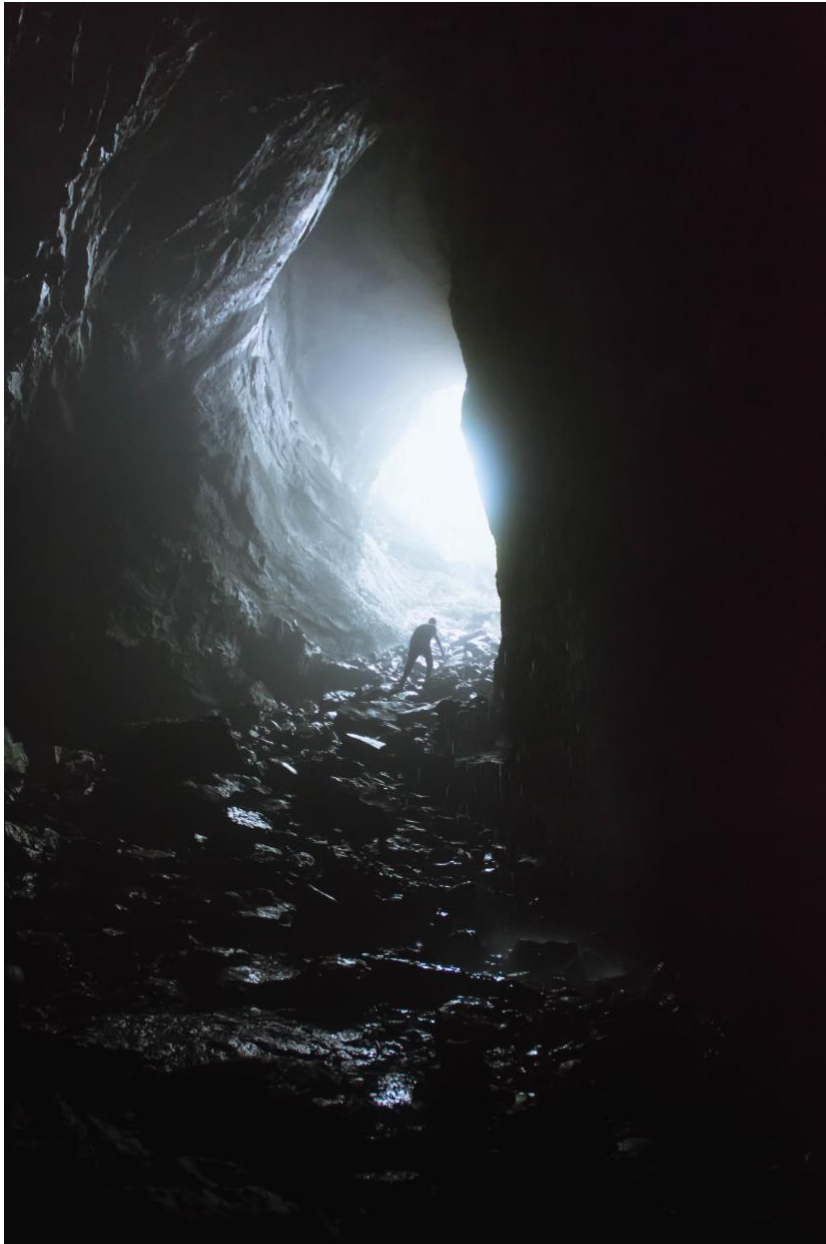


Figure 44 (Participant 14, image 1) – 'Opening'.

Without a clear signpost system and a familiarity with the department store, it would be challenging to navigate to find the desired product. Participant 6 selected an image which also identified a similar issue. The participant selected an image of a puzzle and titled the image 'I am sometimes confused where to go', particularly in relation to shelf arrangements. Previously in Figure 45, the participant suggested that they were excited to explore in the department store. However, when the shelf arrangement was

changed from time to time, participant would lose their familiarity of the store and eventually felt lost in the vast department store. They explained,

You are usually **confused** where to go and sometimes I get confused when I go there. And they **keep changing where the stands are set**. So it's OK. It's like I'm **partially excited**, so if I know where to go, I would be **more comfortable** to be there, but I know they try to change... Like even Primark, every month or every week, they **changed the setting and where stuff is placed**. So for someone with vision issues, **it could be a problem and you get confused**. Like you used to go to this place to find something and **now the place is changed**. And you feel like you are in a **puzzle**, and you don't know where to go, where to find your stuff. (Participant 6, image 3)



Figure 45 (Participant 6 image 3) – 'I am sometimes confused where to go'.

Whilst most participants describe their navigational journey in terms of the physical store, some interviewees explained how they also navigated across different platforms. For example, Participant 7 used an image to tell the story of navigation both inside the store and online (See Figure 46). An image of a flock of ducks in a pond was selected and the image was titled ‘The hustle and bustle of a department store can often be busy with lots of duplication and multiple brands’. When describing the in-store experience, the participant said that each duck could represent the customers scattered in store, a brand or a product and the end of the pond represented the



desired product. In order to reach the product, the participant stated that they needed to go through the ‘hustle and bustle’ and all the offerings in store that they don’t want to see. In a similar way, the participant said that each duck could represent the filters, tabs, or the products showcased on the website. In contrast to the physical store, the participant felt they could navigate more easily online by clicking through a few tabs to get to the product they wanted. They stated,

‘...there’s just lots of stuff that is going on there. So, if I want to get to the end of that pond, for example, I’ve got to get through and wade through all those different ducks.’
(Participant 7, image 1)

Figure 46 (Participant 7, image 1) – ‘The hustle and bustle of a department store can often be busy with lots of duplication and multiple brands’.

However, Participant 7 commented that the online platform was outdated. They chose an image of an outdated computer to represent their feeling of using the online platforms of the department store. The image was titled ‘The online experience can often feel old, clunky, and out of date’, shown as Figure 47. The use of old computer

as a surface metaphor was to reflect on the unengaging function of the online platform of the department store. In the accompanying quote, the participant commented that the feeling of using the department store online was like using this old computer in the era of smart technology. The participant observed that online functions were not stable, and it was not an enjoyable experience online. He commented,

It feels like everyone else, or most people are there with an iPhone or an Apple Mac or something quite cool and quirky, but to try and use their website is a bit like using this old computer where it can do the job, but it probably can't do the job that well. It's not the nicest thing to carry around or to work on, or to use, and it's a bit like a department store website. In that aspect, it's not the nicest thing to engage or purchase something from. (Participant 7, image 5)



Figure 47 (Participant 7, image 5) – ‘The online experience can often feel old, clunky, and out of date’.

Participant 2 differentiated the physical department store experience from the online department store in terms of navigation. They selected an image of interlaced highways and titled the image ‘Finding my favourite places to shop in the store’, shown in Figure 48. The intertwined motorways represented the different route to navigate in a department store. The difference of navigation route in a physical shop and the

online platform of a department store was shown in the quote next to the image. They suggested that the online platform was quick to navigate because the electronic menu allowed them to directly locate the product using filters. Whereas the in-store shopping journey requested them to walk through all the necessary departments to access the product, as the accompanying quote to

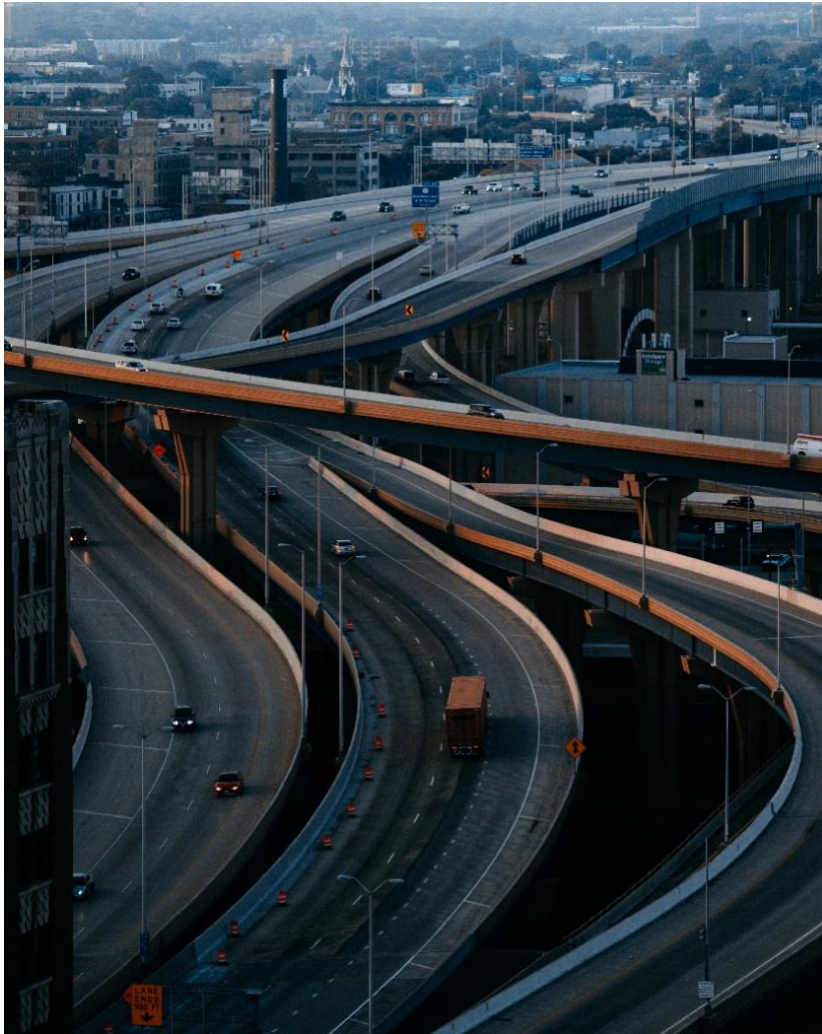


Figure 48 illustrates.

So, in a shop, you might have to get to and from the [main entrance](#) to the [homeware department](#). And you have to walk through [beauty](#), you have to walk through [men's clothing](#), [women's clothing](#) and [handbags](#) to get to the [homeware](#), whereas if you're [online](#) you [go straight from the menu to where you want to go](#), so you don't go through some of those things, [so you wouldn't necessarily see some of those bits](#), I guess not even to the point of sale, is it? because it's just that kind of walk way. (Participant 2, image 3)

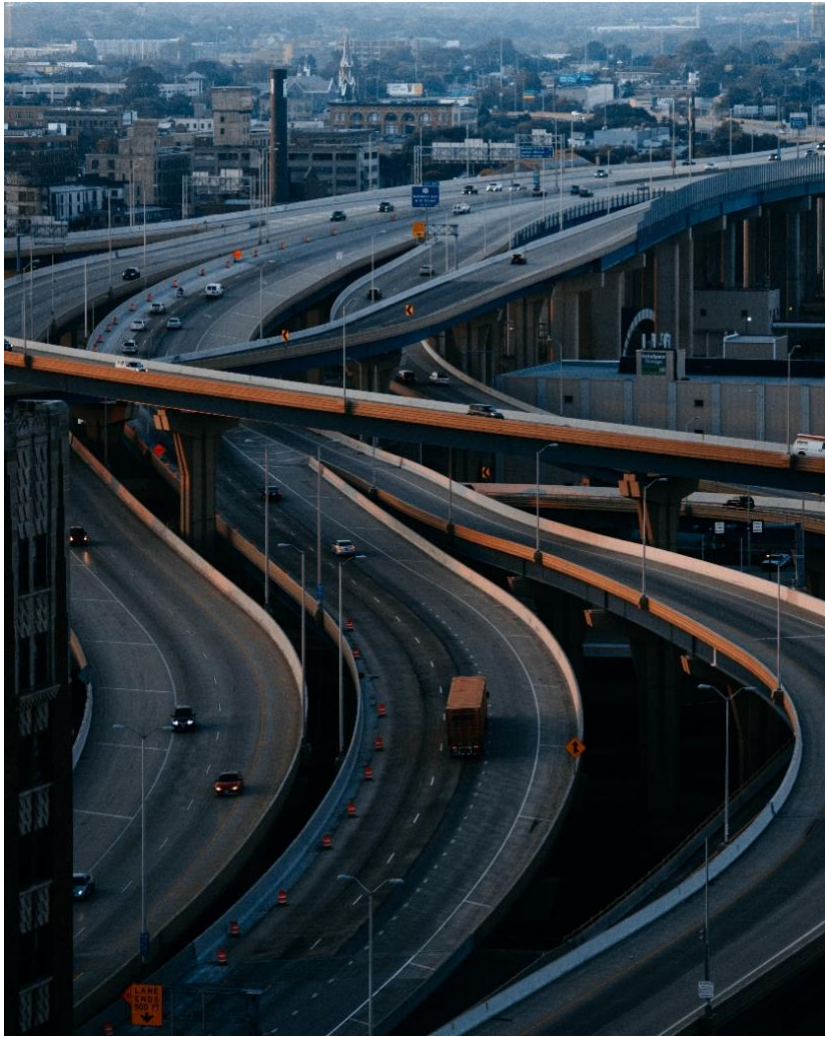


Figure 48 (Participant 2 image 3) – ‘Finding my favourite places to shop in the store’.

However, this enabled the participant to fully immerse themselves into the physical department store so that they could fully observe the store displays. As a result, even though the participant had walked further to reach the product, they received the extra experience of exploring the store offerings. In contrast, shopping online limited the ability to explore and be inspired because of the filters. They said, ‘I suppose that's the bigger difference - that you wouldn't get some of those extra things you would have seen, which sometimes I think is quite nice that you got to see them, and you get to see how they've dressed them because they put the mannequins in the outfits as well. So, things that I wouldn't necessarily have looked at previously, I would then look at it because it's been put together.’

Navigating through the physical store was described by Participant 6 as like climbing which made them tired (Shown as Figure 49). Usually, their shopping journey inside

the department store was unplanned and as a result, the participant would walk around the store back and forth as well as visiting the same floor several times in order to find all the products they needed. At the end of the shopping trip, the participant was exhausted because of the extended journey, poor planning and unfamiliarity with the store. Hence, the participant suggested that this feeling of exhaustion could also happen online if signposting on the website was not logical, particularly in relation to sizing. They said, 'Sometimes it's tiring, especially if the filter option is not that good.'



'They are **not always in the same floor**. So, you need to try to find the right floor for you. They usually have like a sign or something for what is there in each floor. But sometimes it was just there, and you remember something, so you have to **go back to the other floor**, so sometimes, **it's exhausting at the end of the experience**.' (Participant 6, image 8)

Figure 49 (Participant 6, image 8) – 'I am tired climbing'.

Similarly, Participant 12 selected an image regarding the confusion of navigation in the physical department store, shown in



Figure 50 and in the accompanying quote. They chose an image of a maze and titled the image 'When shopping in one I generally feel quite lost'. The participant felt overwhelmed in the physical department store because of the number of departments and the amount of information to be processed when they were in store. The lack of guidance inside the department store made it challenging to identify where to locate the product. They commented on the difficulty of navigating in the physical store as walking in the mase, see the quote below:

...so many floors to it and there's **very little guidance** usually on **where anything is**. That's why I only really go shopping if I'm looking for **a specific thing**. And when you walk in, it's like 'OK, **what floor is it going to be on?**' '**Whereabouts** from that floor is it going to be?' ...And it's almost like the actual department store itself is **a maze** and you **can't find** what you're looking for in it to begin with or **where** you're looking for in it.' (Participant 12, image 2)



Figure 50 (Participant 12, image 2) – ‘When shopping in one I generally feel quite lost’.

As a result, the participant only chose to go to the physical department store when they were looking for a specific product to simplify the navigation process. This further led to the participant’s preference of using the online department stores because they were easier to navigate and manipulate, as they said, ‘While I’m shopping online, I feel a lot more certain about what I’m looking for, how quickly I can get to the things I’m looking for.’

In contrast, Participant 6 suggested that they could find more styles and more products available online, than in store despite other participants claiming department stores sell ‘everything’. This reflected on the difference between online and in-store that the online platform of department store is easier to navigate and explore, as they commented that ‘I found it easier to navigate online in Next. Usually, I find this stuff I haven’t seen in a store - I would say it’s easier to navigate online.’ Participant 5 suggested that they could manipulate their experience towards certain brands when they were online because of the way they navigate across the platforms. They said, ‘I think when I shop online, I can identify more unique brands. And perhaps when you are in store, you might not necessarily go to that area where you could identify those unique brands’. Similarly, Participant 6, who selected an image titled ‘There is always

a beautiful hidden gem' (See Figure 51), felt that unique products were easier to find online as highlighted in the corresponding quote. The participant metaphorised the flowers as the products in the department store and used the flower in the centre to represent the final product they had discovered.



'So usually, you have **lots of stuff** and then **it's messy**, but you usually find this **very nice piece there in the middle of the mess**. And this usually happens in **online shopping....** I usually find this stuff which is **hidden there in the online store** which **you didn't see in on-site stores.**' (Participant 6, image 7)

Figure 51 (Participant 6, image 7) – 'There is always a beautiful hidden gem'.

4.4.4. Interaction with employees

4.4.4.1. Receiving professional advice

A reason participants decided to go to the physical department store was to ask for professional advice. Therefore, the participant could receive useful and personalised help. Participant 11 selected an image titled 'Fashion', shown in Figure 52. This image showed a rack of clothes to reflect a situation when the participant sought the advice from a department store employee. They said, 'I trust that they've got experience and probably training as well, because I feel like you always get a really good service and knowledge of what you should be wearing.' This statement indicated that the participant had a high level of trust in the professionalism and knowledge of the employees of department stores. As a result, the perceived service quality was very high which reflects a common brand value of department stores. Moreover, this participant believed that the advice given by the employee was more critical, as illustrated in the quote below. When shopping with friends and families, they were more likely to receive positive comments which were intended to make the participant

feel better because of their intimate relationships. In comparison, the employee would provide more genuine advice to the participant when shopping alone so that they would choose the products that genuinely fit the customer's need for the occasion. They stated,

When you go in to buy something important, I do feel like how I want **somebody's opinion** and I think often when you go in with **a family member** or friend, they're trying **to make you feel nice** about yourself, so they'll often say, 'Oh yeah, really nice' and I want somebody to kind of say **'I'm not sure this is right for your body type. This is a better thing'**. And I feel like you can get that from **somebody who doesn't know you**. (Participant 11, image 4)



Figure 52 (Participant 11, image 4) – 'Fashion'.

Another participant associated a pleasurable emotion with John Lewis' physical department store because of the staff and how they worked together to support customers (Figure 53, and the accompanying quote). The employees were professional and proactive when providing services which resulted in a sense of respect received by the participant. At a subconscious level, the participant benefited from the employee's knowledge and thus receives more information about the product.

The high-quality services the consumers enjoyed through their interactions with the employees in the department store resulted in a positive perception of the department store corporate brand.

'I don't necessarily go shopping with friends to it, but I certainly **feel happy** when I'm walking into the store. Whenever I go to the cosmetics counter, they're **always really happy to advise you** about the cosmetics you should be using and **treating you quite individually**. So, this picture illustrates my perception of how I think that **the colleagues work together**' (Participant 5, image 1)



Figure 53 (Participant 5, image 1) – 'John Lewis'.

Participant 15 also had a positive perception of the service at a department store in Birmingham where the employee told them to try another retailer, they said, '...and a lady said we probably don't do that but go to John Lewis and you'll find it there. So, I appreciate that kind of honesty.' Also, the quality of service from John Lewis was perceived highly by Participant 5. The employee demonstrated a level of knowledge that exceeded the participant's expectation. The signposting of the employee positively helped the participant access the resources they needed. For example, Participant 22 commented on how they used the service in IKEA. They made purchase

decisions based on the employee's suggestion. The participant demonstrated a higher level of trust with the employee's knowledge, as they said, 'I would just pick things I like first, then I go to IKEA and ask them - do you have this type for this purpose? Do you think this is good enough and if not then I would accept their suggestions'. The advice offered by staff was also appreciated by Participant 7 who stated, '...even if you wanted to go to just look at a pair of trainers, there's always someone that wants to question you and find out more about you and wants to help you with your decision, which is great...I would say that the customer experience is great sometimes because they do have that presence'.

4.4.4.2. Avoidance

Contradicting participants' appreciation of staff in section 4.4.4.1, some participants avoided department store staff. Several participants criticised the proactive service offered by the department store as they felt this was overwhelming – a theme already discussed in section 4.2.2.2.1 but in relation to products. One participant (Participant 7) selected an image to reflect on their perceptions of the interactions with the department store employees, shown as Figure 54. The image showed a lady holding a megaphone. The participant imagined this lady to be the employee in the physical department stores who was over-actively trying to get their attention. The participant felt 'awkward' and the interference was 'off-putting', as suggested by the quote below:

...but for some people that's quite off-putting and not everyone wants that in-your-face interaction... But actually, for someone that is a little bit kind of awkward around people or doesn't want to be around people. It's quite off putting because someone is always there in your face.' (Participant 7, image 2)



Figure 54 (Participant 7, image 2) – ‘You can always expect to be approached, even if you have only gone in to browse’.

Moreover, participant 7 stated that the level of interaction had to be in proportion and ‘balanced’ to reflect the amount of money spent: ‘So, if I was to buy a telly in the department store. I want a bit more conversation before I pay with a lot of cash. If I was going to just buy a £50 pair of trainers, I don’t need that full interaction. That £50 trainer, as long as I can try them on and they feel nice, that’s all I need to know. I don’t need to know about the additional features because I’m no athlete.’ The participant preferred to access the service of the employee when they needed it rather than being constantly interrupted by the employee. When the staff presence exceeded a certain level, the interaction was seen as an interruption and the service was no longer helpful to the participant.

Some participants did not trust the employee. A common concern raised by the participants was about dealing with ‘hard’ sales. For example, Participant 23 said, ‘... part of me just feels like they’re just trying to sell an item to me, regardless of whether I like it or not, so they are like, ‘it’s amazing’, but I don’t trust you very much.’ In addition to this, Participant 18 demonstrated a concern that their own views about what they liked might not be the same as the sales staff and so they were sceptical of the advice.

They said, '[a]nd besides, I'm Asian, so I'm not sure whether their tastes of beauty actually fit with my own standard.' Consequently, this participant tended to ask friends' opinions rather than seek advice from the employees: 'I will probably just take a picture of the product and send it to my friends and make that decision.'

Moreover, some participants sensed a judgemental attitude from the employees. This was more likely to happen in the high-end department stores. One participant chose two images to reflect on their thoughts of being judged at Selfridges. The first image was a lady showing a judgemental face, shown in Figure 55. The second image was a group of professionals whispering to each other, shown in Figure 57. By combining the two images, the participant's intention is of a judgemental sales assistant and staff whispering about their judgements of customers. As the quote illustrates, the participant suggested that the salesperson would judge the outfit of the customer with an unfriendly expression in their eyes. This led to a negative view of the store by the participant. As a result, the participant would rather shop online than go to the physical store. They explained,

'I would probably just think some judgemental sales assistants looking up and down on the customers, looking at what they are wearing. I just find it very uncomfortable. I don't really go in there in the stores. If I was to get something, I would order online just to save myself from that environment, which I guess is a downfall for their part. I don't know if it is their job, obviously they have to maintain a professional persona and they have to keep an eye on potential shoplifts as well. But I just did not get a friendly atmosphere from them.'

(Participant 4, image 2)



Figure 55 (Participant 4, image 2(1)) – 'Selfridges'. Figure 56 (Participant 4, image 2(2)) – 'Selfridges'.

Comparably, feeling untrusted was a surface theme elicited from Participant 19, who received poor service at a department store. The employees locked products away to

avoid shoplifting. Since the participant had a preference for trying products in store before buying them, the participant had to wait for the employees to unlock the products for them. As a consequence, the participant felt embarrassed before they could experience the product. As a loyal customer, the participant visited different branches of this retail brand in different cities and the same service was received. The participant declared the lock conveyed a strong sense of distrust as well as a judgement of customers' integrity and affordability. The participant explained, 'I did ask them say why you literally lock them up. They said 'because they worry people [are] going to steal their products because they are going to be expensive... But they lock them here, is like a really strong feeling it's you - only try it if you want to buy it.'

Participant 22 recalled a story of their parents who shopped at a high-end department store. Whilst discussing Figure 15, the participant explained that they felt the sales staff had been judgemental when their parent was looking at an outfit. The salespersons speculated that they would not be able to afford it, as the accompanying quote highlights. As a result, the parent did not receive a positive service from the employee.



'It happened with my mom in luxury stores. I wasn't with her; she was there alone. She went in a very expensive one. My mom doesn't dress like those rich women or rich ladies with a lot of money. So, she [was] just going with the regular thing like jeans and a regular bag, the sales [staff] didn't serve her at all. And there's the sales looked up and down about her and just walked away.' (Participant 22, image 3)

Figure 15 (Participant 22, image 3) – 'Harrods'.

4.4.5. Department store as an occasion venue

As discussed in the previous sections in Section 4.2.2, the department store offered a wide range of services and experiences. This enabled participants to meet multiple needs in one single trip and resulted in their willingness to visit and explore. In the ZMET interviews, six participants clearly stated that the department store was considered as a place to spend time with family and friends. As such the department

store was a venue for a social experience rather than as a retailer who simply satisfies customers' functional need of purchasing products. The brand reputation of the department store encouraged people to travel across different cities just to go to the department store to access the in-store experience both in terms of the products (see section 4.2.2.1) and the wider sense of occasion.

Many participants described how shopping at a physical store was an enjoyable social, shared experience particularly with their family or friends: 'When I was thinking about it, I thought about the time when I was shopping with friends and family, we really had a good time', (Participant 20). One participant (Participant 16) also said, '...I don't always go alone. I sometimes go with friends.' In some cases, participants regarded a department store visit as a tourist experience and an opportunity to meet up with people with whom they do not live. For example, Participant 8 would go to Harrods, London, with her sister 'just as a tourist... I went to a couple of places because my sister lived there... It was Harrods and it was just for the sake of visiting and it is sort of attraction and landmark...'. Participant 22, who recalled a time when they used to shop with their family said, 'I tend to go with my family because we used to live together before, so we tend to look at furniture that we all like.' Likewise, participant 2 considered the department store as a place where they can take children, '...if I go with my nieces or nephews or my friends' children then ... we probably would go in there.'

4.4.5.1. Cost of travel

Despite the perceived benefits of the department store and some participants stating they were willing to travel to a department store (see Section 4.2.1), cost is always an inhibitor of travel. Parking was a major concern for the participants. It is identified that the parking fee is considered by the participants as an extra cost to go to the department store. To illustrate this point Participant 7 selected an image of a ticket machine in the car park (See

Figure 57). Participant 24 commented: '...parking is so expensive as well'. However, one participant stated that a parking charge had similarities to online delivery charges, so either method had an extra cost. They explained,



'...you've always got that **additional cost** that you have to consider, and so you've got the **delivery charge online**. But then you've also got the **charge of going in person**, so it feels like people are not engaging with them, because although **it's £5 or £6 for delivery or visiting that's another lot of money**' (Participant 7, image 6).

Figure 57 (Participant 7, image 6) - They are often located in town/city centres where there is an additional charge to pay to park.

In addition to the parking charge, traveling to a department store involved more time and driving. Participant 3 explained, '...it's the driving through traffic and parking somewhere that I don't want to do.' The same participant denoted it was difficult to control costs to a trip to the department store. This surface metaphor was also elicited from Figure 34, which first appeared in Section 4.3.4.1. On reflection, the metaphor of burning money represented two issues: cost and time-pressure. As the quote illustrates, the participant mentioned that, once the journey started, they had to pay for all the resources they would like to access such as petrol, lunch, coffee, snacks, et cetera. The cost of each individual item built up to an aggregated cost that was much higher than anticipated. Secondly, the participant felt pressured by the time they had to purchase an item on the trip because they had devoted time and effort to physically be in the shop. In comparison, online shopping only involved the cost of the product and potentially delivery fee. The participant could take an extra step to review the shopping basket to reduce the unnecessary cost before checking out. Therefore, the participant preferred to stay at home and browse online, that way they would have more control of cost and time. They explained,

This is how I tie it up in my head. It's more dramatic than it sounds, but there's like **petrol**. Then we'll get on the **tram**, or there'll be **parking**. Then you **buy lunch**, then you **buy coffee**, and then **bought things** around the shop and probably some unnecessary things, probably even some **more snacks**. So, it just like [it] **builds up so you've spent more**. And I'm like 'I just [could have] done at home by myself.' (Participant 3, image 6)



Figure 34 (Participant 3, image 6) – ‘What often happens when I store shop, because I can’t make decisions fast enough’.

Whilst participants recognised the additional costs associated with physically shopping in a department store, participants were concerned with delivery charges if ordering online. Participant 3 declared that they were particularly concerned whether they would receive a free delivery, a free refund, and a free return (See Section 4.3.4.1. for detail discussions). If they had to pay for their delivery or return, they would try alternative methods rather than paying the fees. Another participant (Participant 18) selected an image of a spider web, which resembles the feeling of being trapped in the process of buying the right product and extra spending (See Figure 58). Among all the factors that created the spider web, the participant considered the delivery fee as an unacceptable cost. Online platforms of the department store usually have a service of free delivery over a certain amount of money to encourage customer buying. As a result, the participant felt forced to spend a further funds to gain free delivery. However, the participant felt more comfortable buying more products to gain free delivery than paying for the delivery. The deep meaning behind this image was the loss of control of the online department store shopping experience. They stated,



'That's something that actually troubles me a lot, if I'm spending £100 on that, why do I still have to pay for the delivery fee? But actually, at a lot of times, I'm spending much more money on that because I don't want to pay for that fee.' (Participant 18, image 4)

'...sometimes I really need one lipstick in that it's like £20 or something like that and the website usually says we go free delivery on over £50, so I'll buy extra £25 of products rather than pay for that £4 delivery fee. I know it's quite crazy, but...'

(Participant 18, image 4)

Figure 58 (Participant 18 image 4) – 'feeling trapped'.

4.4.6. Promotions

Promotions prompted participants to browse the physical and online department store. For some participants, the promotional event was the only reason that they accessed a specific platform of the department stores. The participant stated that 'Harvey Nichols and Debenhams, I would only go on their website when I know there is some sort of sale going on or some offers.' In terms of browsing during promotional periods, one participant metaphorised the experience by likening it to 'gold digging'. They selected an image of gold coins and titled the image 'Discount and sales' (See Figure 59). The two statements below reflected the customer's mindset of shopping during sales and highlights how the participant enjoyed the element of surprise when they discovered a favoured product at a low price.

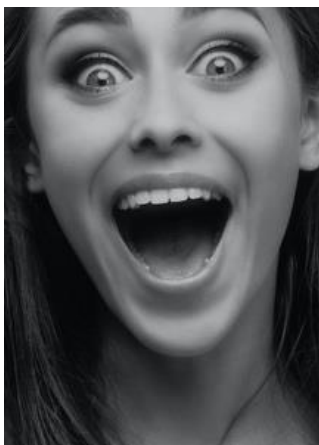
'Just like someone's like digging for gold, that you spend a lot of time doing it? And if you're lucky enough, you're finally find one that really suits you and usually at lower price. That is a really pleasant thing to do.' (Participant 18, image 2)

'When I don't have a specific target, I'll just look for those on sale. If they are all without brands and without price tags, the most thing that attracts me would be the discount and sale tag on it.' (Participant 18, image 2)



Figure 59 (Participant 18, image 2) – ‘Discount and sales’.

However, the sales were considered as a trap for some participants. Participant 18 complained, ‘for Debenhams, I’m mainly trapped by the sales, by the discounts. They are so cheap! I feel like I should go and dig in deeper. Maybe I could find one.’ For this participant it almost became an obsession to try and locate the ‘gold’ product and if



they could not find the product it led to a sense of failure and bewilderment because of the time and effort put into the ‘digging’ process. In contrast, Participant 16 had positive feelings towards department store sales. They felt relaxed and excited as shown in Figure 60 and the accompanying title below,

‘I am [excited when I see a sale](#) or something that I know would [make someone in my life happy](#). Sometimes it can be a really

cool design that I have not seen before on a T-Shirt that makes me excited’ (Participant 16, image 3)

'So actually, the other day we went shopping and I was like, 'Oh, there's a sale!' and like suddenly, my mood just changed because it was one of the shops I really like to shop at.' (Participant 16, image 3)

Figure 60 (Participant 16 image 3) – 'I am excited when I see a sale or something that I know would make someone in my life happy. Sometimes it can be a really cool design that I have not seen before on a T-Shirt that makes me excited'.

4.4.6.1. The quality of the in-store shopping experience decreases during sales and festive times

Whilst promotions and sales could excite some participants, others felt the in-store shopping experience was often considered to be busy and crowded, becoming busier during sales and holiday periods. As already highlighted in Section 4.2.2.2.1, this led to overwhelming feelings. Participant 3 described when shopping around the Black Friday period, that 'I just feel like there's just too much going on around me.' Similarly, Participant 7 described how they needed to weave through the crowd in order to reach the sales sections. Participant 14 commented on the impact of the store size during the sales season in the department stores, they said,

[I]t depends on the size, and it also depends on the season, because when it comes to Christmas things get really busy and it's often hard to move around. And the bigger the store is, the more time you have to spend walking around looking for what you want, especially with the place like TK Maxx or in places like Selfridges, it's so big and there's so many floors and you don't even know where to start when you go. (Participant 14)

This comment relates to the idea of 'navigating', already explored in section 4.4.3. In this case, when sales were on or it was seasonally busy, the navigation through the physical store became more complex and overwhelming (see section 4.2.2.2.1), particularly if the store was large. Participant 16 selected an image to reflect the crowdedness in the department store during Christmas and titled the image, 'I feel like I am going in the wrong direction, and I have to avoid people all the time'. The image shows a person standing on a busy zebra crossing where people around the person are walking, passing by her quickly, shown in Figure 61. This image reflects the participant's feelings when they were in the physical department store. The quick flow of people caused the participant to be bumped around in the crowd. As a result, the

participant needed to be cautious to avoid physical contact with the fast-flowing crowd. At a below-conscious thought, the participant felt out of control of their shopping experience at this time. They explained,

...Especially around Christmas or around New Year's Eve or big events. It's just very crowded. And I just feel like no matter where I go, there are always people and I always have to avoid someone, like you don't want to bump into someone. And then, you just follow this rule like on the left you go that way, on the right, you go the other way. But not everybody is following the rules. So, you have to just swing around and it's tiring.' (Participant 16, image 2)



Figure 61 (Participant 16, image 2) – 'I feel like I am going in the wrong direction and I have to avoid people all the time'.

During sales and busy periods, participants felt that the physical store environment and service quality levels suffered having a potentially negative impact on the department store corporate brand. Two participants had selected two similar images to reflect the messy shelves. The first image was selected by Participant 5 to reflect



on their thoughts of visiting a messy department store (See

Figure 62) and they explained how this poor shopping environment had increased the difficulty of making purchasing decisions.

'Just **frantic** and **jumbled up** and **difficult** to ascertain what you really want.' (Participant 5, image 4)

Figure 62 (Participant 5 image 4) – 'Primark'.

Similarly, participant 6 selected an image of a messy shelf. However, Participant 6's image was more oriented towards the sales period. They titled the image 'It is always messy during sales', shown in Figure 63. In the image, the clothes were not arranged in size nor in terms of style. The participant observed the shoppers leaving products around the store. As a result, sizes were missing, and the full-priced products were mixed with sales items. They stated,



'But going there and during sale, people are **not putting them back** in the right place or even the one who's arranging them, they are just bringing stuff back **without paying attention** to the good presentation **as you do with full-priced stuff.**' (Participant 6, image 6)

Figure 63 (Participant 6, image 6) – 'It is always messy during sale'.

A significant difference was observed with the service quality between the sales and the non-sales periods. Employees paid less attention to keeping displays tidy and the shopping experience decreased to below the standard of the department store in non-sale periods, negatively impacting the corporate brand. In reaction to the decreases service quality, one participant shared that they would choose the online platform of the department store as an alternative to avoid this overwhelming, messy environment. They said, 'I shop in some places during sales time, but I prefer to do it online because it's less busy there'. Participant 18 conveyed a preference for the online platform during the sales period because stock availability was normally better. They commented that 'I just do it online, and usually online offers more sales and options. I think it's quite disappointing when the item I look for is actually out of stock

in store.' Participant 15 described in-store promotional periods as 'hell', as stated below:

'Oh, it's horrible. It's absolutely hell. There's nothing worse than people queue[ing] in the morning for, like I don't understand it. My sister is one of them. She'll go to bed early on Christmas Day to get up for being in a 6:00 AM sale, 'like why, just to save a few pounds?' like 'no. Forget that'. I'd rather pay more for it and have less stress.' (Participant 15, image 2)

They selected an image which reflected a metaphor of balance, shown in Figure 64. The title of the image was 'Brands have to balance value for money versus the price they cost'. The participant declared that they would rather pay a higher price to avoid the stress of these busy periods in-store, unlike their relative who enjoyed the sale periods. Participant 15 criticised the change of service quality during the sales period. The participant agreed service standards decrease when the employees become impatient to serve the customers, as the following quote highlights:

'I'm fully against Boxing Day sales. But I've had to ensure that once you go in, and then, you might buy an item and it might be folded neatly with care. But when you are not going to get it on the Christmas Eve, perhaps you go on the Boxing Day and the things are shoved in a bag and you get it out quickly. The standards drop. And I hate that so that for me is a big difference that you see.' (Participant 15)

(Content removed due to copyright restrictions)

Figure 64 (Participant 15, image 2) – ‘Brands have to balance value for money versus the price they cost’.

4.4.7. Festive time makes department stores special

As suggested earlier in section 4.4.6, participants showed a love-and-hate relationship with the sale events, due to the increase of busyness and the reduced quality of the in-store experience. However, when it comes to festive sales, such as during Christmas, still participants are willing to travel to the store despite knowing the store is going to be busy, because the decoration and the store experience is described as ‘magical’ and ‘special’ to them. Many participants associated the department store with Christmas, although it is acknowledged that at the time of data collection it was during the Christmas period. Therefore, in order to eliminate the bias of external environments, the participants were asked to compare the feeling of Christmas with other festive times. Nonetheless, the culture of Christmas has shown a unique position in the participants’ minds that exceeds other festivals such as Easter. For example, Participant 4 selected an image of a house with Christmas decorations and titled the image ‘John Lewis’ (See Figure 65). The participant recalled the annual Christmas advertisement by John Lewis. In the accompanying quote they recognise how John Lewis has a strong brand association with Christmas and how it is used as part of their marketing strategy every year. In this example, the John Lewis advert acts as a strong symbol for the start of Christmas. They explained,

When I think about John Lewis, I don’t shop there **unless it is Christmas time** because it really promotes the sense of Christmas, the season of Christmas. Especially **reinforcing** the annual season of Christmas, I feel like they have **created a reputation over the time of Christmas** and people **just expect and wait to see the John Lewis Christmas advert on the TV** and be like ‘woo, it’s the Christmas season!’. (Participant 4, image 1)



Figure 65 (Participant 4, image 1) – ‘John Lewis’.

Other participants recalled. they liked how department stores had additional quality services in place during Christmas, such as ‘[p]roducts gift wrapped up, there’s often nice music, and there’s usually a café in [the] department store, so there is usually festive food on like mince pies and it’s just more of a luxury experience than going to somewhere else. And even if there are other places like if you go to a supermarket, they often have mince pies, but the ones in the department tend to be better quality and just nicer and more special.’ Similarly, participant 11 selected an image of a Christmas tree placed in the corner of the house to reflect on the theme of Christmas and its association with physical department stores (See Figure 59). According to Participant 11, they only visited department stores at Christmas and were prepared to pay more because of the enjoyable, convenient experience in-store as the quote illustrates.



'In general, I would say I think that's another reason we often don't go until Christmas because I do find it a bit more expensive than other shops. But when it's Christmas time and you've got the experience to go along with it, I don't mind paying a bit more. So, it gets really busy at Christmas when you're shopping, whereas in a department store I think it's a bit calmer than running around lots of places...'

(Participant 11, image 2)

Figure 66 (Participant 11, image 2) – 'Christmas'.

4.4.8. Connection with the community of customers

When participants were in the physical department store, they felt a connection with other customers inside the same department store. Especially in the high-end department stores, participants would resonate with other participants' tastes of the product or even envy them living the same lifestyle as the people who shop at a particular department store. For example, Participant 15 selected an image of a couple sitting in a private jet and were enjoying their meals, shown as Figure 67. The private jet reflected the social class of people who shop at top-end department stores such as Harrods. The participant imagined that the private jet would smell of champagne, the seat would be made of premium leather and walnut wood and the food would be healthy. The participant suggested that only a minority of people would be financially capable of buying the products offered at Harrods. As a result, they envied the spending power of these people, as the quote explains.

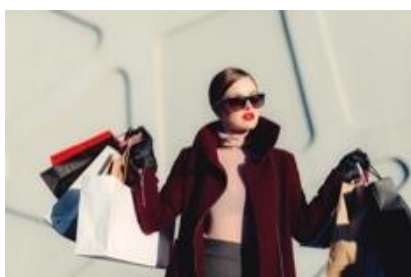
'But I think that for me is that top end of department stores, like Harrods, are like this. Is this what you could have done if you could afford it. It's maybe even beyond aspirational because not everyone is ever going to get that chance to just spending, for some people, a month salary on a purse or a handbag. There would never, never, ever be able to afford that. But some people can, and that's great, and they obviously contributed a lot to economies. And I want to do that.'

(Participant 15, image 5)

(Content removed due to copyright restrictions)

Figure 67 (Participant 15 image 5) – ‘Some brands are beyond aspirational and not completely accessible. Reserved for the elites of society’.

Also highlighted by Participant 13, was a sense of envy of achievement associated with the perceived buying power of department store shoppers. They selected an image of a lady holding a set of shopping bags walking out of the department store. The image was titled ‘I can buy lots of things from the different brands/areas of the department store’, shown in Figure 68 and the accompanying quote. The participant imagined the lady to be themselves if they had their buying power. They saw the woman as aspirational, stating that ‘I think it’s nice to pretend that you could do this if you wanted to’.



‘I think first, she looks like [she's had a really good treat-yourself shopping.](#)’ (Participant 13, image 4)

Figure 68 (Participant 13 image 4) – ‘I can buy lots of things from the different brands/areas of the department store’.

4.5. Deep metaphors

Through the thematic analysis conducted in this chapter, Zaltman’s deep metaphors can also be applied to these findings. However, not all of the seven ‘giants’ reported by Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) occur. Instead, only four out of the seven giants are applicable, and these consist of resource, journey, balance and connection. They are

the feature of this section and are explained individually. These deep metaphors operate at the root of participants' perceptions of the department stores and reflect the core values that construct the brand equity of department stores. Deep metaphors can be elicited from the individual image as well as the montage. The montages are the visual summary of participants' thoughts and feelings and reflect the holistic story of each participant. In each montage, a central deep metaphor that is valued the most by the participant is elicited. These montages and the associated deep metaphor are more complex and reflect deeper thoughts than each individual image reported on in the previous section. In this section, relevant participants' montages are introduced as examples to support the identification of each deep metaphor except for 'resource', further reason will be explained in Section 4.5.1. Some participants' montages are more representative than others. Therefore, only the most representative montages are shown in this section.

4.5.1. 'Resource'

'Resource', one of the seven 'giants', features in relation to the department store's offerings such as the assortment of commodities from a variety of product brands and the services provided by the department store corporate brand. Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) referred resource as an agent that enabling people to achieve goals. In this study's context, the goal for customers to go to the department store is to either purchase products or access the services and experiences being provided by the department store corporate brand. In another word, the individual product brands and the department store corporate brand act as resources which the participants draw upon or 'access' to make their purchasing decisions and thus fulfil their needs. This then leads to the finding of this study on the notion of brand accessibility which is discussed at the end of the chapter in section 4.6. In terms of individual product brands, participants were, for example, able to access this 'resource' because of the department store's geographic location. This gave customers the opportunity to buy individual product brands they would not otherwise have access to. In terms of the department store corporate brand, this acted as a 'resource' in terms of two aspects. Firstly, as discussed in section 4.2.2, participants chose to shop at the department store because it offered a wide variety of products which were categorised into detailed departments under one roof. The product's variety and the one-stop shopping experience were the core resources available at the department store which met a

customer's needs in one single trip. As a result, participants benefited from this convenience to avoid physically travelling to different shops in order to buy different products. Secondly, the service level and experiences were identified as valuable resources of department stores. Section 4.3 explicitly discussed how department stores offered the opportunity to physically experience the product before buying in addition to interacting with staff to gain more knowledge about a product (see section 4.4.4). These were important resources valued by the participants. Therefore, 'resource' served as the fundamental deep metaphor on which the other three metaphor functions and is inseparable from them. The other three deep metaphors reflected aspects of these resources in the way they were valued by the participants of this study. As a result, all images and montages would reflect 'resource' to some extent but emphasise more on the aspects of resource through further elicitation of other deep metaphors.

4.5.2. 'Balance'

'Balance' reflects the need for a state of equilibrium (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). In this study, there are three aspects reflecting the deep metaphor of 'balance'. Firstly, participants demonstrated a need of balance in terms of the number of products displayed in both of the department stores' online platform and in-store. As discussed in 4.5.1, the diversity of commodities was a valuable resource acknowledged by the participants. However, in Section 4.2.2.2.1 participants' statements suggested that they felt overwhelmed when faced with a large number of choices. Even though the department store was known for its assortment of products, a strong negative emotion occurred when the range of commodities exceeded an appropriate level. Intrinsically, this means participants established a need for a balance between too much, and too little, choice.

Section 4.4.4.2 also indicated that balance is needed within the service, especially service quality at the department store. Participants complained that the service level was unstable when they visited the department stores. In some cases, services were offered too proactively by staff which interrupted the customers' immersive shopping experience. Alternatively, participants were ignored by the employees because of their judgemental behaviour. On reflection, there is a need to provide a balanced service at an appropriate level, which is essential to the in-store shopping experience. Moreover, the statements shown in section 4.4.6.1 suggest that the quality of service fluctuates

at promotional periods. During the sales, the stores are busy, and service quality is lower than regular times. During the sales, participants expect a price reduction but not a decrease in service quality. Consequently, the busyness in store and the poor service quality, decreased the perceived value of the shopping experience, having a negative impact on the corporate department store brand. Accordingly, the participants avoided the physical department store at this time. Consequently, this reflects that participants always need the balance of quality and price at the department store across all platforms.

The montage created by Participant 15 is representative for the need of balance (see Figure 69). The image showing balance and price was set as the background of this montage because the participant believed that a good brand needs to balance value for money versus the price of the product. Thus, the narrative of the image was divided into left and right sections with no orders on the vertical layout of the images. On the top left, the magnitude lens emphasised the need of good quality and value of the products offered by the department store. On the bottom left, the group of wealth people on the private jet reflects the participants' acknowledgement of the value of prestige associated with the department store corporate brands. On the bottom right, the image of a man facing many doors represented the feeling of facing too many choices at the same time. The decision of purchasing a product is usually related to the price which was justified by the last image on the top right corner, which represented the completion of the shopping journey. Last, in the middle of the image, the speaker reflected the increase in the use of social media associated with the use of department stores. Nowadays, shoppers tend to post their shopping experience and the product they purchase from the department stores and tag the name of the product brand and the department store corporate brand on social media to show their lifestyle. As a result, the brand name of the department store corporate brand is the symbol of a type of lifestyle, a reflection of value or an experience. The content on social media is judgemental and could be either positive or negative depending on the way of the post being composed. Therefore, the image was placed in the middle of the montage to convey the sense of the double-sided character of social media. Overall, the participant described their shopping experience in the title of this montage, 'the balancing act of the modern-day department store', because he was constantly

making judgement between the value and the price of the product and service being received.

(Content removed due to copyright restrictions)

Figure 69 (Participant 15, montage) – ‘The balancing act of the modern-day department store’.

4.5.3. ‘Connection’

Participants demonstrated a sense of connection with the department store brand’s image. Firstly, participants identified with their store displays, such as the trendy products and the mannequins. By matching the taste of the customers with the department store brand, it created resonance with the customers. Then, this resonance with the brand, established and created a sense of being included and targeted on the part of the customer, which ultimately created for the participant a sense of belonging to the brand. Secondly, participants associated the department stores with the concept of luxury and prestige which means a higher quality and a higher price. When shopping at the department store, especially when fully immersed into the luxury physical environment, participants were more likely to connect to the brand image. Sometimes though the premium price was not always affordable to the participants, however, participants still had an aspirational connection to the department store corporate brand. Section 4.4.8 demonstrates that participants admired the department store customers who had a high level of spending power. As a result, the participants would access the same shopping environment, the same department store brand, to feel the same level of prestige as the customers they would

like to become. Moreover, there is a building of connection from the aspect of friends and family. As discussed in section 4.2.2, the department store provided the convenience for a group of customers who choose to shop together. Consequently, participants considered the department store as the occasion venue where customers go with their family and friends to build connections between each other (see section 4.4.5). Finally, because of the longevity of the department stores on the high street, participants have grown up with the department store since their childhood. Despite their change of life stage from childhood to adult and to the form their new family, participants still stay connected with the same department store brand (see Participant 11's statements in Section 4.2.1). This also demonstrated long-term brand loyalty despite not explicitly being said by the participants.

The montage of Participant 11 alludes to the metaphor of connection as shown in Figure 70. The background of a large ceiling represents the large store size and inclusion of commodities in the department store. The narrative of this montage starts from top left and ends in the top right. To begin with, Christmas was the prime time for this participant to go into the department store. The participant would go to the department store as an occasion venue to spend time and connect with their family. The participant appreciated the critical advice received from the department store's employees and was happy to build a connection with the department store through them. The experience in the department store was crowded and busy, especially during Christmas time. Therefore, once the shopping was completed, the participant would rest in the café in the department store to wait for the rest of their family. The family would enjoy a group trip while each member had a chance to have individual shopping experiences. At the café, the family would also share their individual experiences and show each other the products they bought. Ultimately, this shared experience enhanced the connection within the family. At the end of the shopping day, the participant would go to the bookshop nearby as a treat and escape from the 'hustle and bustle' of the busy department stores.



Figure 70 (Participant 11, montage) – ‘Festive treats’.

On the other hand, connection may also refer to disconnection. As discussed in section 4.4.6.1, the service quality at the department store decreased during sales period. At this time, customers who prioritise service quality and do not wish compromise for reduced service quality will be distanced away from the physical department store. This reflected the deep metaphor ‘disconnection’ that customers would prefer stay disconnected with the physical department store by using the online department store as a substitute. However, for some participants, the magic of festive time such as Christmas may act as another driving force for them to return to the physical store to experience the festive atmosphere in store (see discussion in section 4.4.7). Consequently, customer would stay connected with the physical department store again because of their need to feel special at festive time.

4.5.4. ‘Journey’

The most significant deep metaphor emerging from the montages was the notion of ‘Journey’ both in a physical and psychological sense. This metaphor was relevant to both the online and physical shopping experiences. Participants considered the shopping experience at the department store as a form of a physical and psychological journey. Section 4.4.3 explained the customers’ mindsets when they were shopping at the department store’s physical and online channels. Many considered that the physical store is a more complex journey than the online channels because the online

journey was more predictable and controllable by using filters and tags. Conversely in the physical store, the participants needed to navigate inside the huge landscape of the department store, and this might involve an effort to walk repeated routes as a result of the poor signposting system and unfamiliarity with the stores. Furthermore, the importance of 'journey', as a deep metaphor, was recognised at final stage of the interview, where a montage was created to summarise the participants' perceptions of the department stores. Across all the montages, 'journey' was the most frequently reflected deep metaphor which acts as the core of each montage. For example, Participant 6 described their montage, (shown in Figure 71) 'My shopping journey', as a psychological journey of finding the right product. The background image represents the entrance to the department store and the person with a backpack represents the participant who was ready to explore the offering at the department store. The image of the flower and the grass represents the diversity of products the participant was ready to explore. The story of this montage was divided into different stages and starts from the bottom to top and right to left to centre. The first stage is the two images at the bottom level which represents the participant's state of 'expectation'. The participant was expecting to buy presents for friends and family, and they anticipated confusion before a gift idea was purchased. The images in the second level from the bottom represent the participant's mindset when they were in the store. During the process of exploring, the participant has the freedom to discover the enormous space. Sometimes during the sales, they observe the department store being messy. Eventually, the participant finds the hidden gem which was the product they wanted. The third stage, climbing, at the top of the montage, reflects the moment of success but also of exhaustion.



Figure 71 (Participant 6, montage) – ‘My shopping journey’.

Interestingly, the ‘journey’ of Participant 10 has a similar structure as Participant 6. The image was titled ‘Sensory exploration: Navigating through a store with classic but new trends which makes me feel excited to make decisions after envisioning and creating an ensemble of clothing’, shown as Figure 72. The journey of Participant 10 starts from the bottom of the montage, representing the beginning of the navigation into the department store. The participant felt excited initially, like the baby in the picture, as they are able to explore the colour and materials in the physical department store. Following the image of the navigation, in the centre of the montage was another image of exploration. At this stage, the end of the route is not shown, and the route led the participant into a deep wood reflecting an unpredictable journey with an unknown outcome. This represents the stage of exploring further the other floors of the department store where the different departments are located. Moreover, the participant describes their feeling of how this journey may make depressed because of the premium prices charged at the department store. Meanwhile, the participant may experience some challenges to make purchase decisions. Therefore, they would engage sensory judgements on the products to help them decide. Overall, the participant has enjoyed the opportunity to be inspired and create their unique outfit using the resources available at the department store.

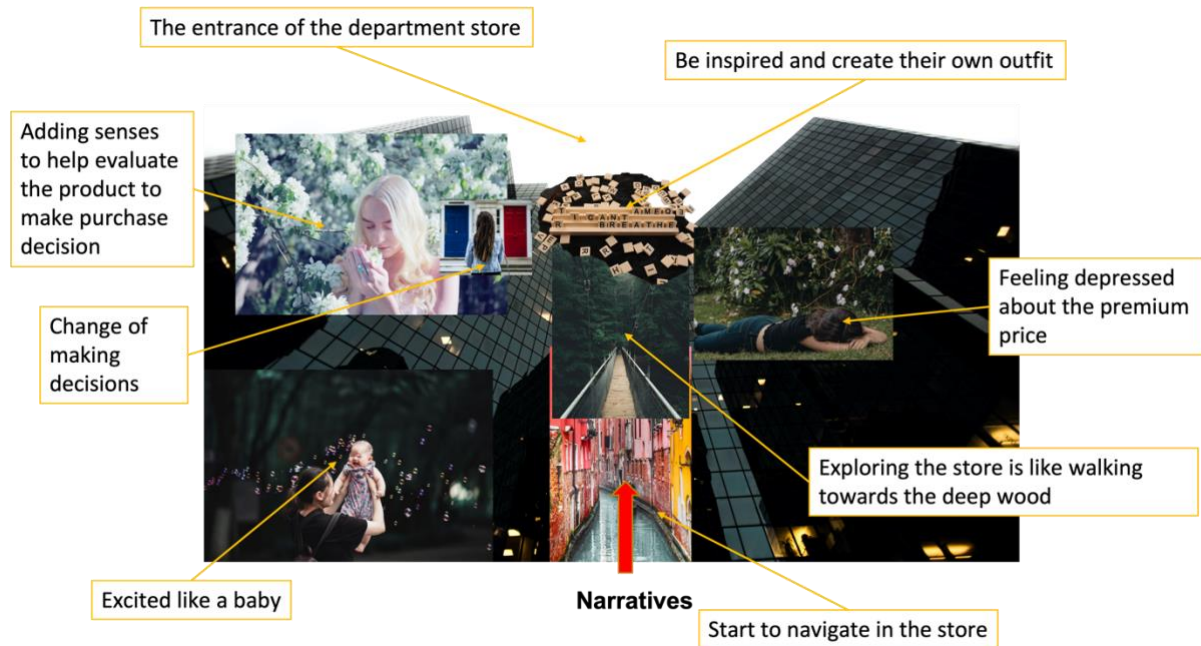


Figure 72 (Participant 10, montage) – ‘Sensory exploration: Navigating through a store with classic but new trends make me feel excited to make decisions after envisioning and creating an ensemble of clothing’.

Similarly, Participant 14 drew upon the metaphor of a journey of discovery, shown as Figure 73. The montage was titled ‘Discovery’ and the participant perceived their shopping journey as one that involved detailed planning as represented by the map in the background. The participant starts from the bottom left to investigate the route to navigate to and within the department store. Once the route is decided, the participant moves on to the blank paper in the middle of the montage to record their thoughts of the planned journey. To begin with, the participant creates a shopping list to set up the goal. At the beginning of the shopping journey, the participant had a feeling of being lost in the darkness because they were unsure of what to do and where to go. The nature of this participant was a purposive shopper. Therefore, before they could locate the specific product, they were aiming to purchase, they always felt in the dark, but they carried on pursuing the target product. The picture on the top left of the notebook indicates the participant is halfway through their shopping journey. At this stage, the participant selected an image of a suspended bridge, which is the same image as the one chosen by Participant 10 in Figure 72. However, in contrast to Participant 10, who used this image to illustrate the theme of exploring freely, Participant 14’s selection illustrates their sense of insecurity, that they may not find the right product, as well as a concern of budget limitations. Before the target product was found, products

displayed in the shop seemed identical to the participant just like the identical signs in the images, and the participant felt they were walking in the fog. With the increased amount of time spent in the department store, the energy of the participant was drained, as highlighted by the feeling of walking in the desert.



Figure 73 (Participant 14, montage) – ‘Discovery’.

4.5.4.1. A ‘controlled’ journey

The idea of ‘control’ emerged as a subtheme of the deep metaphor ‘journey’. However, it also exists as a reflection of the shopping journey at the department store. As suggested in the previous section (Section 4.5.4), participants associated more control and flexibility when they are at the online platform of the department stores. Among all the montages, one participant particularly emphasised the important of having a controlled journey at the department store. Participant 3’s montage (Figure 74) is named ‘My sense of reality and perception of the high street is busy, congested and rushed, however, how I want it to feel is warm, comforting, relaxed – spending time with loved ones or time alone’. The participant used a layered three-dimension narrative whereby the story of the montage starts from the back layer and ended on the front layer. The back layer of the image was the image of burning money which formed the foundation of the montage. The participant felt they were burning money because the participant was stressed, overwhelmed and time-pressured to buy

products in-store. Sometimes the participants felt like they were drowning in a dirty environment. The front layer used to illustrate how, in contrast, a coffee shop symbolises relaxation to the participant. Contradicting the reality, the participant wished they could shop in a nice, calm environment where the products are cheap, and they had control over what they were experiencing when shopping.

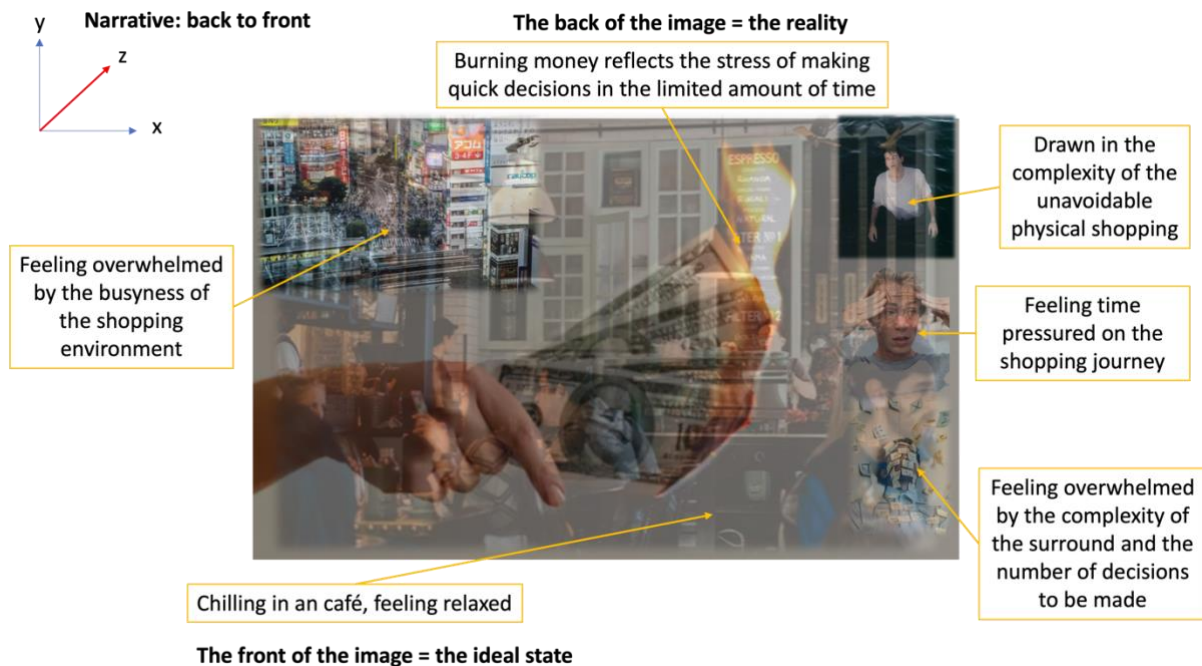


Figure 74 (Participant 3, montage) – ‘My sense of reality and perception of the high street is busy, congested and rushed, however, how I want it to feel is warm, comforting, relaxed – spending time with loved ones or time alone’.

Participant 16’s montage also demonstrates an urge for control of their shopping journey, as they experienced a range of mixed emotions when in-store. The montage was titled ‘The emotions of shopping’, shown in Figure 75. The baby in the middle of the image represents the participant themselves who was naturally excited to explore the world of the department store. In contrast, the bottom left of this montage, illustrates how the participant felt anxious when going into the department store, despite being initially excited. When in store they felt disorientated due to the overwhelming number of customers, but the for-sale signs and Christmas decorations create excitement. Finally, the end point of leaving the department store, reflects a strong sense of relief.

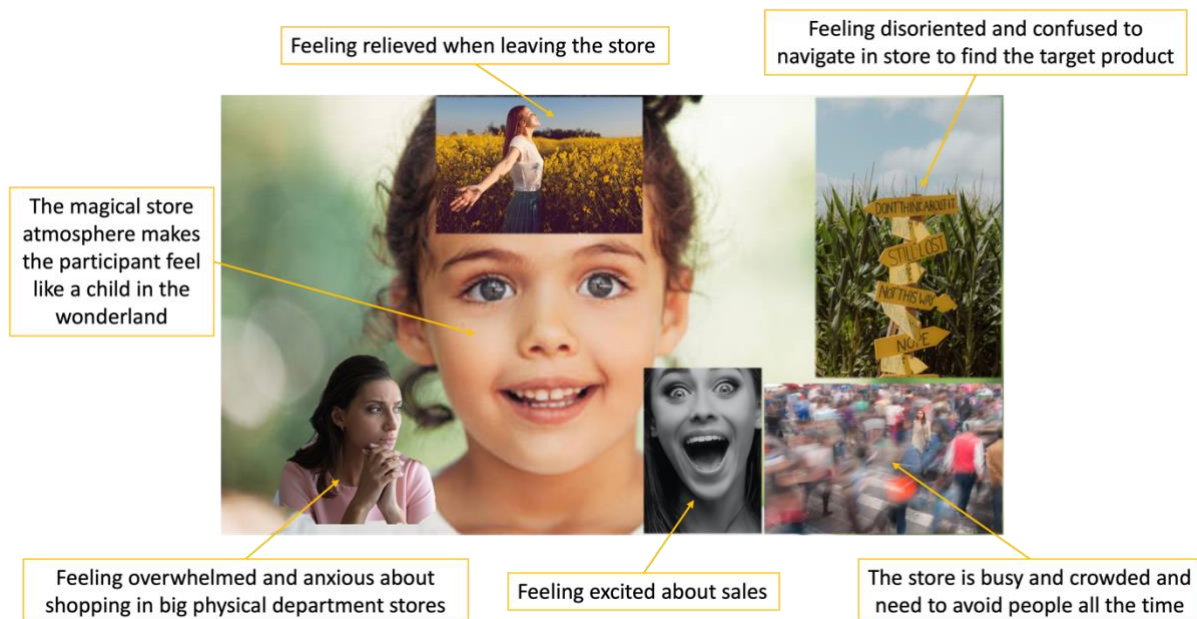


Figure 75 (Participant 16, montage) – ‘The emotions of shopping’.

4.5.4.2. A ‘Transformational’ journey

‘Transformation’ emerged as another subtheme of ‘journey’. Participant 13 reveals another perspective of journey which can transform someone. Her montage was titled ‘From inspiration to treat’, shown as Figure 76. Through the use of the background image, Participant 13 illustrates their perception of the department store attributes which stimulated their senses in terms of a nice smell, beautiful decorations and wide range of fancy products. At the start of their shopping journey, they explore a wide range of offerings. However, in contrast to the participants listed in 4.2.2.2.1, Participant 13 did not feel overwhelmed but inspired. Before starting to buy products, Participant 13 observes the salesperson in store, who has a character of sophistication. Meanwhile, she associated the store and its offerings with a fancier feeling than those of other retailers. During the shopping journey, they were conscious that the department store charges a premium price. However, they did not dispute the price but associated the ability to pay the premium price and work with the professional salesperson in a mature manner. The deep metaphor highlights that department store shopping journey can be transformational which changes the customers’ feeling from a young customer to a more mature and responsible individual. Then, the participant started to fulfil her shopping task which was to buy gifts for family members or to treat herself. At the end of the shopping journey, she would desire to walk out of the department store with several shopping bags from different brand logos. The lady in

the image was the avatar of the participant's ideal state. Nevertheless, Participant 13 is conscious that she could not be the lady in the image because of her lack of affordability. Therefore, the participant suggested that the lady in the image was more likely to be other customers she encountered in the department store. This reinforced the deep metaphor of connection stated in 4.5.3.

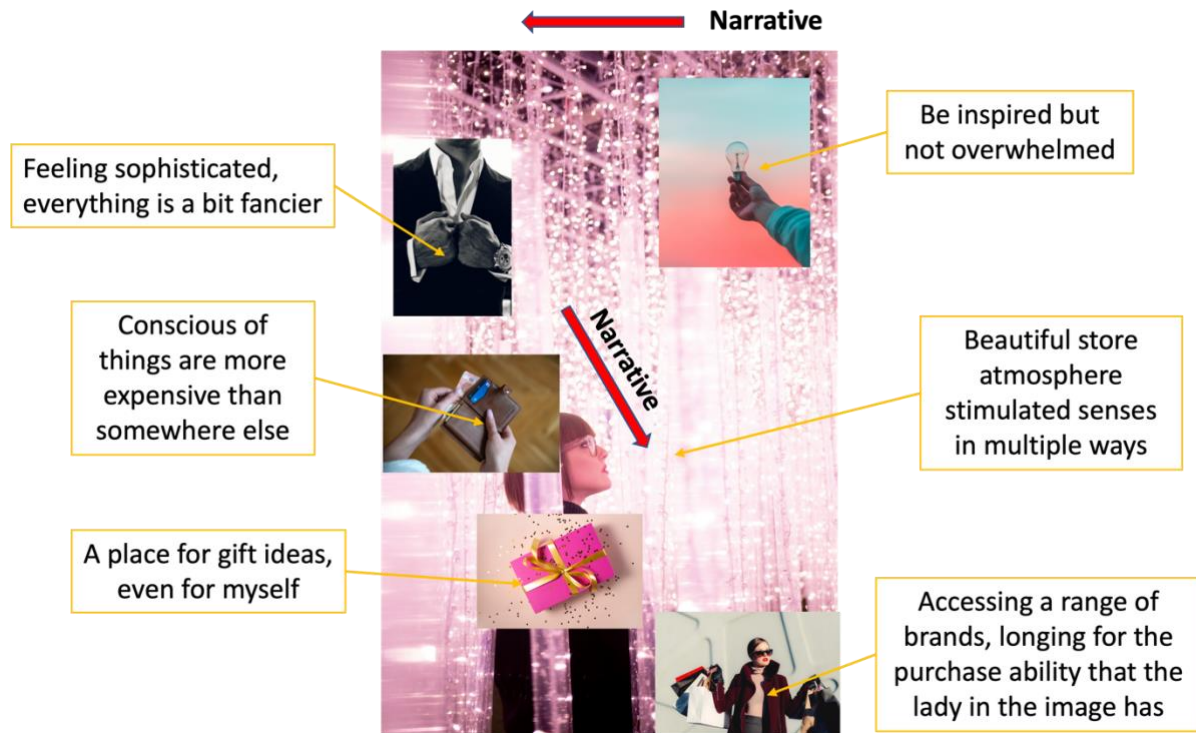


Figure 76 (Participant 13, montage) – ‘From inspiration to treat’.

4.6. Summary of findings

In summary, a number of surface themes and deep metaphor themes emerged from the findings, all of which relate to the notion of ‘Brand Accessibility’, summarised in Figure 13. Brand accessibility is understood in terms of three main themes: ‘accessing the individual product brand’, ‘accessing the physical product’ and ‘accessing the department store corporate brand’. Four deep metaphors emerge relating to ‘resource’, ‘balance’, ‘connections’, and ‘journey’.

In terms of accessing the individual brand, the participants value two aspects that create access to the individual brands for them which are ‘Geographical access’ and the idea that a wide range of products located ‘Under one roof’. Additionally, it is

important for the participants to have a local physical department store, granting access to luxury brands without traveling far. This creates convenience and a simpler journey for the participants. Nevertheless, too much choice could be overwhelming to the participants, from which the deep metaphor of 'balance' was elicited.

The second main theme is 'accessing the physical product'. Most participants considered physically experiencing the product met a fundamental need, whilst creating a hedonic experience. As a result, when an external impact such as the COVID-19 occurred, the access to the physical product was disrupted. Comparably, the online platform was criticised as participants felt it did not provide reliable information because of the way products were presented. This was negatively received because participants were unable to physically evaluate the product before point-of-sale. Therefore, the physical experience of the product became the point of differentiation between online and in store shopping.

The third main theme is 'accessing the department store corporate brand', which represents the participants' perception of how they would like to access the department store corporate brand. There are eight sub-themes that made up this theme. Firstly, the participant valued the journey of 'navigation' in a department store. The navigation route of the online and physical department store was perceived differently based on the difficulty of navigation. The physical department store was more difficult to navigate because of the size of the physical store. The deep metaphor elicited from this theme was that the online platform granted the participants a more controlled shopping journey than in the physical store. Secondly, the participants consider the department store as a place for inspiration. From the store set-up and shelf arrangement, the participant could explore ideas for gifts and lifestyle and gain suggestions from observing the physical store. At a deeper level of thought, this suggests the department store offers access to resources beyond just selling products. Thirdly, the participants would visit the physical department store to seek interactions with the employees. However, some participants declared that they would avoid interacting with the employees in store, named the theme of 'Avoidance'. One reason is the employees can overreact and in turn their service level interrupted the participants' shopping experience. This reflects the need for the deep metaphor of balance. The other reason is participants do not trust the employees and therefore would like to stay disconnected from them. To continue with the third theme, the

participants appreciated the store atmosphere which brings the feeling of luxury, as well as being immersed into an experience that fully engages their senses. As a result, the participants develop a feeling of 'Special' and they feel transformed into the personality of the brand's community, which resonates with the brand image of the department store corporate brand.

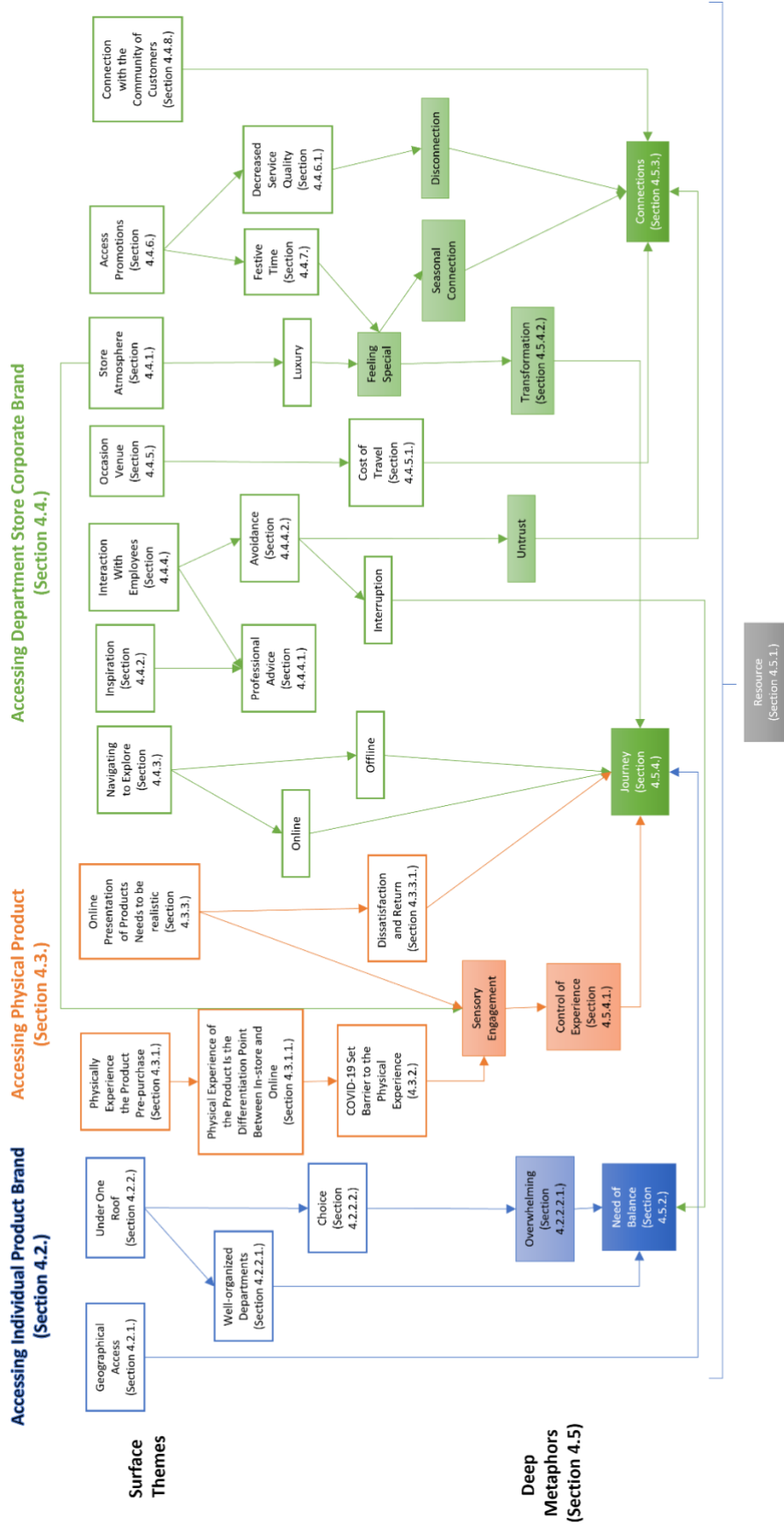


Figure 13 Summary of themes of Brand Accessibility.

As a result of the above advantages, the department store was identified as an occasion venue where participants could bring family and friends to visit and spend time together. The deep metaphor of this theme is 'connection' because the participants would like to consider the department store as a medium to maintain connections with their family and friends as well as to enjoy themselves. Finally, the department store provides access to promotions. At sales periods, the participants identified that the quality of service decreased at this specific time. Therefore, participants would avoid shopping at the physical department store during this time and stay disconnected with the physical department store. However, when it comes to sales and festive times such as Christmas, the power of Christmas transforms the department store and enchants the participants. They feel special and stay connected with the department stores.

In the next chapter, the deep metaphors and the new attribute brand accessibility will be discussed with reference to existing literature. Based on the discussions, practical and academic implications of the findings will be explained to validate the findings. As an outcome of the research study, a new definition of the department store and an adapted CBBE model in the department store context will be introduced.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1. Introduction

This research adopted a ZMET approach, drawing upon 24 in-depth ZMET-based interviews. The detailed findings are explained in Chapter 4. This chapter discusses the findings in relation to the literature and the implications they have for retail practice. In the previous chapter, the themes emerging from the findings were highlighted, including how they linked to Zaltman and Zaltman's (2008) seven deep metaphors. The theorists argue that there are seven common deep metaphors, which are resource, container, transformation, journey, control, connection, and balance. These seven deep metaphors have a universality which are shared by consumers with different backgrounds and demographics in relation to any topic. However, it is suggested that these deep metaphors are not of equal importance to every brand and using the right deep metaphor in the wrong way would place an adverse effect on what is intended (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). In this study this was found to be the case as not all of the seven metaphors emerged from the interviews. This is likely due to the fact that the rest of the deep metaphors are not as relevant to the retail context of this study.

Therefore, this study explores what the most appropriate deep metaphors are in the context of the department store corporate brand and the implications this has for theory and retailers. Thus, this may go some way to address the depth deficit in understanding the department store customers' perceptions towards department stores and how department store managers can use this knowledge to enhance their marketing strategies. In sum, the findings of this study reveal four out of the seven deep metaphors emerged from the interviews. These were balance, journey, connection, and resource, which are explored in more detail in this chapter. From the exploration of these deep metaphors, it has been identified that participants are unconsciously seeking values associated with the four deep metaphors being identified. In addition to the deep metaphors, this section discusses the findings in relation to brand accessibility and redefining the department store. Methodological implications are explored and finally the conceptual framework is revisited to reflect the findings presented.

5.2. Balance

Balance is one of the core deep metaphors that was elicited from the data. As discussed in section 3.5.2 and 4.5.2, balance as a deep metaphor describes a need of equilibrium state, either socially, physically, and or psychologically by an individual (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). This study found that emotional balance played an important role in how customers perceived the products and services in the department store. Balance is not a fixed state but a dynamic equilibrium that interplays between various dimensions in a complex way (Zaltman and Zaltman 2008). This project found there were several interrelated dimensions to balance, which concerns a customer's shopping experience, and each aspect affected how the customer achieved an overall sense of a 'balanced' department store retail experience. There are three types of balance that the participants were seeking during their shopping experiences at the department store: too little/too much choice (both online and in store), the appropriate level of employee interaction (in store) and quality verses price (both online and in store).

5.2.1.Amount of choice

In terms of choice, participants of this study particularly valued the amount of choice available at the department store, by having more options, customers were more likely to find the product they wanted to purchase. Traditionally, it is believed choice is beneficial for customers in many ways and is regarded as a positive thing because it can increase a person's willingness to make a decision (Benartzi and Thaler, 2001)and enable customers to achieve their shopping goals (Chernev, Böckenholt and Goodman, 2015). When exploring the surface metaphor of choice in the interviews, the deep metaphor of emotional 'balance' was elicited. The data from this study suggests participants appreciated the assortment of choices available at the department store, but at the same time, they also felt overwhelmed by the enormous number of choices. The participants demonstrated a high level of emotional disequilibrium when they were processing choices at department stores. This suggests a balance has to be found between the myriad of product ranges and a balance of choices that are suitable for the customer. This agreed with the two findings of Donnelly, Gee and Silva (2020) that department store customers still prefer a larger range of commodities, meanwhile a reduced assortment domain would ease the

difficulty of making purchase decisions. Having too many choices meant that the customers were facing choice overload, which could lead to difficulties in decision making which an individual does not have the ability to resolve (Chernev et al., 2015).

Literature suggests this level of overwhelmingness was felt by the customers because of choice overload, which depends on a customer's brand knowledge of the choice domain (Chernev, 2003). For customers who are familiar with the product range, a high range of commodities are preferred which can lead to purchasing satisfaction. Whereas when customers have a low familiarity with the brand, a high number of product brands would result in a negative effect on customer satisfaction (Mogilner, Aaker and Pennington, 2008). However, research suggests that where there is a complexity of choice, if these product ranges are displayed in an organised, rather than a random manner, it can aid the decision-making process (Hoch, Bradlow and Wansink, 1999). Findings from this study support this statement. Evidence from the interviews suggest that generally interviewees favoured the layout of department stores because products were well organised around product categories, indicating that organised displays can help to restore this perceived 'balance'.

5.2.2. Appropriate level of employee interaction

Findings from this also study show customers chose to shop at the physical department stores to seek face-to-face interactions with the employees and to experience the service quality provided by staff. This high level of customer service has traditionally been a point of differentiation for department stores as discussed in section 4.3.2. In this study, the employees also played an important part in customers' decisions to shop at department stores. The department store as a corporate brand has a stakeholder-focused feature, where the employee has the responsibility of delivering a brand's promise (Balmer, 2022). A corporate brand should develop its members to align their behaviours to correspond to the corporate value (Balmer, 2022). In department stores, assurance of constant and appropriate quality of service delivery is the realisation of corporate brand identity. Previous research has shown that department stores with enhanced high service quality attract and retain customers (Chen, Lin and Chen, 2015) and personal interactions is an important factor that contributes to service quality (Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz, 1996; Siu and Tak-Hing Cheung, 2001). This project agreed with Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996) and Siu and Cheung's (2001) studies, as being courteous was an important factor for personal

interactions between customers and the salesperson. In contrast, (Zia, 2020) discovered a negative relationship between personal interactions and service quality. Zia (2020) identified that service quality would diminish as retailers increase the level of personal interactions with customers, because customers can feel uncomfortable. This study also found similar findings. Participants of this study suggested service quality of the department stores provided by staff could be 'unbalanced' and varied in terms of the level and quality of interactions they had with different employees at different stores. In agreement with Zia's (2020) findings using a customer's perspective, too much interaction was problematic as it disrupted them and prevented shoppers from a fully immersive shopping experience. In contrast, too little interaction, either caused by an employee's judgemental attitude towards the customer's ability to pay for the goods or because of a low service level, had an adverse effect on customers' perceptions of a department corporate store brand. This indicated that customers were seeking a balanced level of interaction with the department stores' employees. The need for balance is in contrast to previous studies (Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz, 1996; Siu and Tak-Hing Cheung, 2001) because in those studies, the appropriate level of service was determined by the employee or retailer to reflect the corporate retailer brand, rather than being based on each individual customer's needs. This finding therefore represents a contribution to the literature as existing studies tend not to explore what level of service is appropriate to meet customers' needs, nor do they identify the impact of appropriate service levels on the corporate retailer brand, particularly those who positioned themselves as having high levels of service like department stores.

5.2.3. Quality versus price

The final aspect of balance relates to the perceived quality and price. Existing studies suggest that one outcome of brand equity is customers are willing to pay a premium price for products and services belonging to a specific brand (Aaker, 1991). Balmer (2022) states that corporate brand identity reflects beyond the logo and symbol of a department store brand, but what the brand actually represents and how it behaves. Department stores are positioned as premium retailers who offer more premium-priced products but ones which are of higher quality than other retailer institutions (Pappu and Quester, 2008) (see discussion in section 2.2.3.4). However, the participants of this study did not always favour the premium prices but interestingly this was more

acceptable at special occasions, such as when shopping as a family or at specific festive times. The physical department store experience helped to justify the costs charged by the retailer. At festive times such as Christmas, luxury festive foods, gift wrapping, packaging and store decorations added further value and quality to the shopping experience. This study showed that department store brands have a higher perceived quality at festive times and other special occasions, than other types of retailer brands. According to Keller (2004), the customer-based department store brand equity occurs when customers demonstrated differential responses to the marketing of brands. In this case, customers responded more favourably towards the offerings of department store brands than other retailer brands, such as supermarkets, because of added value, namely, 'feeling special'. The special feeling was a successful translation of the luxury corporate brand identity of the department store into a distinctive store experience, which differentiates the department store from other retail platforms and develops an emotional connection between the customers and the department store corporate brand (Jones *et al.*, 2010). The importance of the retail experience and customer-brand connection was emphasised because of its advantageous contribution to brand equity (Smit, Bronner and Tolboom, 2007). This ultimately increased department store brands' customer-based brand equity but only at specific time periods. When the perceived quality of retail brands increased, the balance between price and quality was more likely to be at an equilibrium which was favoured by the participants. Outside of special occasions, creating a balance between premium pricing and quality was harder to achieve, according to the findings. Therefore, this finding suggested that perceived quality is still a valid construct to the composition of customer-based department store brand equity.

In fact, only one study mentioned the change of balance between quality and price by examining how quality perception varies as a result of retail discount pricing (Zheng *et al.*, 2021). However, change of occasion beyond discount was not a variable examined in the study conducted by Zheng *et al.* (2021). This represents a contribution to the literature as it is assumed that the relationship between retail quality and price should remain balanced for retailers and does not fluctuate according to the occasion or time of year. This presents a challenge to retail practice because the department store may not always be perceived to offer consistently good value throughout the year. Constant and heavy discounted strategies are criticised as detrimental to department stores

(Anderson, 2016). Instead, department store managers should place more effort on providing a balanced and immersive shopping experience year-round which helps to justify the premium prices associated with this retailer.

5.3. Journey

The department store shopping experience, either online or in-store, also reflected the deep metaphor of journey. Participants of this study cared about their shopping journey as they recognised this would affect their overall shopping experience. As suggested in the literature review, journey as a deep metaphor could refer to a trip, distance travelled or even a life journey, which are usually elicited when talking about human consciousness, awareness of time, notions of cause and effect, as well as using existing memories to inform the future (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). In this study, the deep metaphor journey reflected how the customers framed their overall shopping experience, and concerned three aspects: transformational, functional, and exploratory.

5.3.1. Transformational journey

For young customers in particular, the department store journey was 'transformational'. This finding agreed with Zaltman and Zaltman (2008), who stated that shopping journeys can have transformational consequences. These customers associated the department store brand with luxury, prestige and high monetary value. Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) suggested that a shopping experience may 'magically' change customers' moods and self-esteem. Customers may recall positive emotions associated with their shopping journey to make themselves feel more stimulated or inspired (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Therefore, being able to shop at the department store, with which customers associated perceived high self-esteem and financial value, meant they felt they had been transformed into an older, aspirational, more responsible individual. However, for most participants, the department store journey was more likely to be functional and exploratory.

5.3.2. Functional journey

A functional perspective, also named a utilitarian perspective, considers consumption as 'a means to accomplish some predefined end' (Rintamäki *et al.* 2006, p.12). In a functional journey, participants adopted a more straightforward shopping method to

purely look for specific products. This type of journey has known outcomes (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008) and adopts a utilitarian approach, rather than a hedonic one (Rintamäki *et al.*, 2006). Adopting a functional approach, customers go to the department store, evaluate a few choices, then decide whether they are buying the product or not. In this case, participants preferred a predictable and straight forward shopping journey in which they are clear where and how to navigate the physical store or the website. However, as suggested by Mowrey, Parikh and Gue (2019), customer travel paths in the physical store can be unpredictable and subjective to the product placement, promotions, and stimuli available. This was found to be the case for some participants of this study who found it challenging to navigate the department store, especially in terms of locating products and services in the physical and online store. Although participants commented that the online shopping journey was less confusing than in the physical store because of the filtering functions. Through tags and category filters, customers can easily control and customise what they would like to see when they visited the website. The clear signpost of category-based information enabled customers to simplify their information processing journey and capable of working effectively with more complicated circumstances such as making purchase decisions at the department store.

5.3.3. Exploratory journey

In contrast to the functional journey, other participants were more exploratory. An exploratory journey has an unknown outcome, and the journey is unpredictable which can result in emotions such as anxiety or excitement. In the journeys with a negative outcome, procrastination and avoidance of the destination may also occur (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Interviewees appreciated the chance to explore the range of products and the experience, either by themselves or as a family or friend-gathering occasion, suggesting a more hedonistic, shared approach to the shopping experience (Holbrook, 1999). This reflects the literature mentioned in section 2.2.5.2 which suggests that there is now more importance placed on the individual and collective shopping experience in town centre and high streets; and the store is beyond simply a place in which customers browse and purchase products (Millington *et al.*, 2018). The department store is a place where shoppers spend their time, test products and seek for information about latest trends (Paolanti *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the

department stores on the physical high streets need to offer more experiential elements to enhance customers' experiences.

The deep metaphor 'control' also occurred when eliciting the deep metaphor 'journey'. As suggested by Zaltman and Zaltman (2008), the difference between a known and unknown journey is control because an appropriate level of losing control can create thrill and excitement. Gaining control matters significantly to customers, especially in the exploratory journeys. Feeling overwhelmed when shopping, as some participants explained, is usually a reflection of their sense of being out of control. For participants with an exploratory perspective, a journey with an unknown outcome was not necessarily a problem. These participants enjoyed the opportunity to be surprised whilst shopping and have metaphorised the journey as a "treasure hunt" and discovering a "hidden gem", which led to feelings of excitement, reward and satisfaction. Any sense of anxiety often associated with this type of exploratory journey was lessened because participants felt they were in control, as they trusted, and were familiar with, the department store corporate brand's product selection and clear layout. Participants were therefore happy to be opened to product suggestions and inspired when selecting gifts, personal outfits and home decorations. In this case, 'control' is elicited as part of the journey deep metaphor because the journey itself is the aspect that matters to the customers. In journey reflected the different ways that customers' demands can be met at the department stores.

5.3.4. Implications of journey

Each of these journeys has implications for retail practice. For those on a transformational journey, department stores need to be inspirational and a destination to which to aspire to. A transformational journey is more likely to be found in the physical department store where appropriate face-to-face interactions and immersive shopping experiences can be found. In this case, participant values are focused on the quality of the employee service, product display, and store atmosphere. Similarly, participants on an exploratory journey, also enjoy being inspired, providing they feel in control in a comfortable way. An exploratory journey could take place online or in store depending on the customer's preference of a sensory experience or control of their shopping journey. One way to do this is for managers to curate more targeted store displays, use familiar brands, employ staff with deeper knowledge of the product to reduce uncertainty in the exploratory journey. On the contrary, a functional journey

reflects more specifically the online channels of the department stores. Those adopting a more functional journey needed to feel that their utilitarian values are met through the department store such as convenience and an easy and clear shopping journey. The core values of the journeys are summarised on a new continuum in Figure 77, shown below.

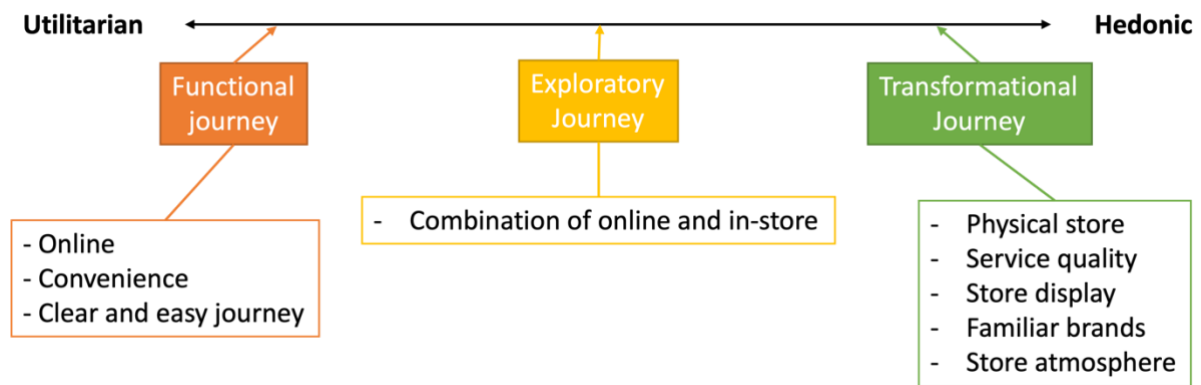


Figure 77 Summary of the perspectives of journey.

Overall, it is presented in the research that through different types of shopping journeys, customers are seeking different values via different channels of a department store brand. This suggests, different channels of a department store brand, have different brand equities. On the online channel, brand equity has an ease of use to meet customers' demands which reflect utilitarian values. Whereas in the physical store of significance was employee service quality, store display, brand selections and the overall store atmosphere, creating an overall immersive shopping experience. This contrast the literature discussed in section 2.3.2, where the consistency of retailer image across channel should be adopted as part of the corporate identity. Since the functions and the incremental values associated with each channel are distinguishable, it is not worthwhile focusing on recreating the physical experience online but to enhance the uniqueness of each channel with a clear positioning strategy.

Consequently, using the same marketing strategy for different department store channels will not satisfy customer's needs nor increase the overall brand equity of the department store corporate brand. Therefore, the online and physical store of a department store brand should be treated separately to distinguish the unique brand equity of each channel. This recommendation is a new contribution as department

stores have traditionally not differentiated between their retail channel, assuming a consistent corporate brand overall (Herath, Mallawaarachchi and Rathnayake, 2019). Adopting a 'brand architecture' approach could be one way to manage this. From a brand architecture perspective, separating the online channel and physical store into different sub-brands, under the umbrella of the department store corporate brand, is a branded house strategy. A branded house strategy is where all the sub-brands are named after the corporate brand's name to anchor the salience of the corporate brand name (Gabrielli and Baghi, 2016). In this way, the perspectives of the corporate brand are superimposed into the sub-brands (Berens, van Riel and van Bruggen, 2005) and the perceptions of the sub-brands also contributes to the evaluation of the corporate brand image (Lei, Dawar and Lemmink, 2008). The findings of Gabrielli and Baghi (2016) discovered that the formation of a branded house strategy with less than four sub-brands will not trigger the dilution effect on the overall CBBE of the corporate brand. Instead, each individual sub-brand has concurrent informational cues, which aggregate to contribute to the overall CBBE of the corporate brand (Gabrielli and Baghi, 2016). By applying the branded house strategy to separate each channel of the department store corporate brand, as a distinctive brand entity, brand managers can establish more appropriate marketing strategies to target the users of the channel and the different 'journeys' they embark on when shopping with them. Ultimately, the increase of the brand equity of each sub-brand would aggregate to increase the overall CBBE of the department store corporate brand.

5.4. Connection

"Connection" also appeared as a core deep metaphor to emerge from the findings. A sense of connection is an essential human need as one which leads individuals to constantly seek social interactions, either with people, animals, objects, places or memories of events. Customers' perceptions would unconsciously affect their judgement towards those attributes (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008). Findings of this study show that customers treated the department store as an occasion venue where they spend time with their family and friends. As participant 11 said, her family would go to the department store occasionally. They separate when they arrive and meet at the café when they are finished. At the café, they would share their experience and show each other what they bought. With a wide range of products, restaurants and

cafés and entertainment that fulfils the need of different demographics, the department store acts as a venue that connects the family and friends through a shared shopping experience. This represents a contribution to the retail literature as although the benefits of shopping with others have already been reported (Wenzel and Benkenstein, 2018), these studies have looked at the retail experience generally rather than how this might occur in one store. Until very recently, a study carried out by Wilken, Stimmer and Bürgin (2022) opened lens of research into joint consumption decisions between couples. Therefore, this study further contributed to the academic field from a family and friends' perspective. In addition, customers shopped at the department store to buy high quality gifts for their loved ones. Being inspired by the gift ideas offered by the department store, customers could facilitate the product as a medium to connect with their family members and friends. Moreover, the connection with family has been carried forward to become the department store corporate brand' brand heritage. Participants of this study has experienced several changes in their life stages since childhood. In each stage, the department store corporate brand has been continuously catching up with their evolving needs and the associated brand knowledge has been passed on to the next generation of the family. This reflected a long-term brand loyalty and brand awareness developed within the family which established the brand heritage of the department store corporate brand. By facilitating the deep metaphor of 'connection' with family and friends into the marketing strategies of the department store corporate brands, managers can create new opportunities to rejuvenate the department store and leverage its brand equity (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008), from which customers' needs can be leveraged and encourage footfall and sales at the department store. Thus, brand heritage, brand association and brand loyalty are reflected, by customers, as valuable attributes to the department store corporate brands' brand equity. This reinforces the importance of department stores retaining their flagship and destination status on the high street in the long run (Konishi and Sandfort, 2003), particularly in terms of offering an immersive, group retail experience. Furthermore, the deep metaphor 'connection' appeared to relate to how customers identify and interact with the department store corporate brand as well as the product brands available in store (Fazli-Salehi *et al.*, 2021). Participants strongly associated the department stores with luxury, and prestige is a strong brand association with the department store brands. Such strong brand association reflected positive memories

in customers' minds (Emari, 2012). When customers identified that a brand may contribute to their self-esteem needs, they were more likely to build connections with the brand (Sheth, 2021). Customers would then buy from the department store as a way of showing they are valued members of the customer community (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008; Ewing, Wagstaff and Powell, 2013). Consequently, the strong brand association held by customers and their self-initiated connection with the department store corporate brand contributes to the CBBE of the department store, resulting in brand loyalty (Berry, 2000).

However, the connection with the department store brand was observed to have a seasonal pattern and fluctuate throughout the year, in a similar way to that reported in Section 0 Balance. The department stores were perceived to be busy and crowded, especially during the sales period. The service quality was perceived to be low because of the crowds. Participants identified messy store shelves and the employees were less patient due to the high demand from the customers. Therefore, customers would choose to avoid the peak time in store, breaking their connection to the physical shop, or visit via online platforms of the same department store as an alternative to ensure service quality and avoid the crowds. Festive times, especially Christmas, would also affect some customers' willingness to connect with the department store brand because of the busy, hectic shopping experience in store. In contrast though some customers would still choose to go to the physical store simply to experience the festive atmosphere at Christmas, despite knowing the service quality might not be the same as non-festive days. Christmas created a strong connection to the physical department store because of the special, magical products and services, such as gift wrapping and displays, associated with this period.

Overall, participants demonstrated a stronger brand association during the festivities, especially at Christmas, in comparison to a non-festive time. The implication of this finding suggests that in contrast to the literature, brand equity may not be stable throughout the year because customers hold stronger brand association at certain times and consider the physical department store to be more valuable at this time. This study discovered that memories associated with relationships, shared shopping experiences and festive times are more likely to lead to a strong emotional connection to the department store brand. Therefore, brand managers should be aware of this emotional cue to create balanced brand equity throughout the year via the facilitation

of the deep metaphor 'connection' at different times of the year to engage and retain customers.

5.5. Resource

Accessing resources are the customers' main purpose when they visit the department store. As discussed in Chapter 4, the deep metaphor 'resource' is the grounded deep metaphor which represents the resource of a department stores such as its product offering, services and experiences. Results of this study justified that these elements are valuable resources of the department store that attracts customers to go to the department stores. 'Balance', 'journey' and 'connection' are aspects of the deep metaphor 'resources'. The four deep metaphors reflect the way those aspect of the resources could be offered by a department store from the perspective of the participants of this study. Firstly, customers choose to shop at the department store because they wanted to access a wide assortment of premium products selected by the department store corporate brand, a wide of range of high-end individual product brands, high-quality full services (Chang and Fang, 2012), excited and comfortable shopping atmosphere (Shergill and Chen, 2008) in a balanced way. Thus, 'balance' reflects a balanced offering of department store's resources in terms of product and service. Secondly, customers emphasised the importance of a customer-focused experiences in one stop (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020), where journey can be understood as the way resource is provided in terms of customers' physical route and mind map. Thirdly, 'connection' reflects the way customers are connect with the resource of department by resonating with a strong brand identity and corporate brand image (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020). In the perspective of the customers, a department store corporate brand should provide the right level of access to those resources to meet their various demands. These accesses are summarised into the themes "accessing individual product brands", "accessing physical product", and "accessing the department store corporate brand". Holistically, the four deep metaphors act as information cues that help customers decide which department store to shop and how they shop at those department stores. In another word, the emotions and feelings associated with the four deep metaphors shaped the formation of customers' perceptions of the department store brand and their behaviour in accordance with those perceptions. Therefore, the accessibility of the resource of each

department stores corporate brand creates a set of added value to the department store corporate brand and connected the customers with the values of the department store corporate brand. Through the understanding of how customers' perceptions of department store corporate brands which were formed regarding the need of accessibility of department store corporate brands, it is identified in this study (see Chapter 4) that there is a new attribute to the customer-based brand equity not previously considered which is brand accessibility when considered in a department store context.

Existing research has briefly explored the concept of 'access' in a retail context, but this is limited to the geographical accessibility of their physical stores rather than 'accessing' the corporate level of the retailer brand. For example, Swoboda *et al.* (2013) explored the influence of retailer brand equity and store accessibility on customers' loyalty to a focal retailer amongst local competition. They adopted Teller and Reutterer's (2008) definition that store accessibility is in relation to the convenience of the store as perceived by customers in terms of ease, speed, and simplicity. Typically, this store accessibility research has focused on store grocery retailers (Ashley, Ligas and Chaudhuri, 2010; Jiao and Azimian, 2021). Furthermore, studies which focused on brand accessibility were mostly conducted in the context of brand extensions (Meyvis and Janiszewski, 2004; Boisvert, 2016) and brand alliance (Esch *et al.*, 2009) rather than multi-channel department stores. As a result, there is still a gap in the literature, regarding the attribute of brand accessibility and its impact on brand equity, in the context of department stores.

5.6. Brand accessibility

The participants of this study highly valued accessibility to the department store corporate brands, as well as the product brands and services, available at the department store across all channels. In a department store, there are several elements that make up the offers that are 'accessed' by customers. This includes the individual product and service brands, services provided by the department store employees and the overall experience created by the physical store atmosphere or online webpage functions. The way participants access those resources has significant impact on how customers perceive a department store brand. Therefore, department store brand accessibility in this study is defined as customers' accessibility

to a department store corporate brands' resource, including individual product brands, physical experiences and services, and the brand's customer community. As discussed in section 5.3, it has been identified that customers valued the physical store and online channel of the department store differently. As a result, the department brand accessibility across channels has distinctive implications.

5.6.1. Brand accessibility in the physical store

Online shopping has brought convenience to customers and was more widely adopted after the COVID-19 pandemic (see Section 2.2.3.4). However, recent data suggests that 43% of consumers still intend to shop on the high street and young consumers have shown a stronger intention than older consumers to do this in addition to a stronger willingness to spend (Carroll, 2021). In this study when discussing their experiences, participants tended to recall physical department store examples rather than online. This may be because participants had more experience of the physical department store, particularly if this had been part of a family tradition as discussed in Section 2.4.2.3.

Moreover, the research methods of this study focused on engaging customers' senses during the interviews, which may affect customers' responses. Participants declared they had different sensory experiences when they were shopping in store and online. When they were in the physical store, there were more interesting stimuli to engage their senses which resulted in more memories being created and stored to be readily recalled. By contrast, online shopping only generated sensory cues to their private surroundings such as their room, beds and personal electronic device, which were less likely to be connected to the department store. Hence, it can be suggested that customers had higher brand awareness and strong brand recall of the physical shopping experience at the department store than online. Accordingly, this suggests that the physical store is the place to create more memorable experiences via both the conscious and unconscious level of the minds of customers, which reflected that accessing physical products and brands in a bricks and mortar store is still important. Recent increases in studies focusing on creating physical customer experiences and reinvention of the physical retail space, also consolidated the importance of physical experiences in the physical store (Bustamante and Rubio, 2017; Dalmoro *et al.*, 2019; Alexander and Blazquez Cano, 2020; Nöjd *et al.*, 2020; Kumagai and Nagasawa, 2022). Similarly, the findings from this study found this to be the case with participants

suggesting that the accessibility of brands, whether they were the individual brands sold by the department store or the corporate brand itself, was important in a physical retail setting. Brand accessibility in this physical context was understood to be related to choose geography and meeting multiple needs.

In terms of choice, which has already been explored in the deep metaphor of 'balance', participants appreciated the functional value of accessing a wide, but balanced product range, provided by the department store presented in well-defined categories, conveniently located under one roof. When the number of choices is beyond a reasonable amount, customers became overwhelmed rather than finding the access functionally useful. As suggested in the literature review (See Chapter 2 section 2.4.1), brand equity is 'a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or a firm and or to that firm's customer' (Aaker, 1991, p.15). Accordingly, a department store, which can provide an accessible, balanced product range and choice, can create a unique brand asset that adds value linked to their brand. Adversely, department store brands who cannot reach this balance of choice may overwhelm the customers, leading to an inaccessible brand, which devalues the customer-based department store brand equity.

With regards to geographic access, the participants also valued access to specific brands through the physical department store that were otherwise not available to them on the high street. The department store thus brings local, physical access to luxury goods and acts as a bridging channel between customers and the luxury brands. Accessing these physical products locally meant that customers could avoid extra effort and resources travelling to buy these brands from other retailers located elsewhere in the UK. Where certain department stores were not available in every city, but limited to big cities, such as Selfridges and Harrods, here department stores are the anchor, so that participants would travel to access products, services and experiences in a single trip. The anchor position of department stores attracts customer footfall using high brand awareness and reputation (Konishi and Sandfort, 2003; Arrigo, 2015). This study identified that the advantage of exclusive brands, products and experiences under one roof continues to attract customers who are willing to travel long distances to go to those department stores. Despite the longer travel distance and time, participants still associate the trip to department stores, to a

city with convenience, because of the avoidance of travel and parking at multiple premises. In other words, the department store has the uniqueness to meet multiple needs under one roof. This is an important finding as retail studies are suggesting that department stores and the high street more generally are failing to attract shoppers (Donnelly, Gee and Silva, 2020).

The willingness of participants of this study to commute to department store was further explored in the concept of brand accessibility in relation to convenience. Department store offers a wide range of products provided a high level of physical convenience that could satisfy both individual consumers, with multiple needs, as well as a group of customers that chose to shop together. Brand equity was created in this instance through a shared shopping experience where aggregated individual needs were met. Existing research, which explores retail brand equity, focuses on exploring individual consumers shopping across product departments (Pappu, 2008), rather than considering the customer groups who choose to shop together. Participants in this study chose to shop with family members and friends and accessed the physical department store as an 'occasion' venue, which provided both a shopping experience, as well as leisure experiences, such as a café and restaurant. In some instances, participants were willing to travel across the country to a specific department store to access such shared experiences exclusive to that department store brand. The finding of this study supports the work of De Chernatony, McDonald and Wallace (2010) who state that department stores brands such as Selfridges and Harrods act as a destination in themselves to attract customers using their own brand reputation. Interestingly here though, travelling distances to a department store was only favoured when associated with a shared shopping experience and special occasion, rather than as a means to conveniently access brands, as reported earlier. Such shared, therefore, created intangible value associated with the specific department store brand, leading to increased department store customer-based brand equity.

5.6.2. Brand accessibility online

Brand accessibility was not perceived in the same way across all channels. This study identified that accessing the brand, in terms of service, products and experience within the same department brand, varied across the online and physical channels, but this was not necessarily problematic. This examination of online and offline brand experiences in the same retailer represents a contribution to the literature as most

studies examine the online or physical shopping environment separately. In the context of department store, only one study was found to examine the fluency between channels of US fashion department store (Kopot and Cude, 2021) but not the role of each channel of the UK department store as explored in this study. Participants stated that the online platforms of department stores do not necessarily need to replicate the physical in-store experience. This is in contrast to much of the branding literature which suggests that consistency is important when communicating content and process across different channels (Gao and Fan, 2021; Kopot and Cude, 2021). In contrast to this existing research, the findings of this study suggest that experiencing the department store brand is different across different channels but as explained in section 5.3.4 and Figure 77, this enables the department store to meet the different needs of customers.

Participants of this study demonstrated preferences towards the physical department store and mostly viewed the department store's online platforms as a substitute to the physical department store. The finding of this study agreed with Childers *et al.* (2001) that the online platform was viewed as a utilitarian tool which enabled customers to shop efficiently with limited irritation. Melero, Oliván and Verhoef (2016) also commented that customers seek the most suitable retail channel at every step of their shopping journey. Thus, if department store customers are seeking a utilitarian, functional and controlled journey, as explored in the deep metaphor section, the online platform would seem more appropriate. There were other factors that made customers prefer to access the department store brand through the online platform. Firstly, participants demonstrated a concern for the busy and crowded nature of the physical store particularly in terms of a fear of contact with people and objects after the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, some participants had found the in-store navigation very challenging because of the huge product range displayed in store as well as the vast store size. By shopping in the same department store but online, they could navigate to the desired products much faster without being disturbed by the products they did not want to see. In this study, customers valued their online shopping experience at a department store because of the level of control they had. Participants felt they were equipped with more control of their shopping journey through the function of tags and filters. Madhavaram, Badrinarayanan and McDonald (2005) also commented that when customers perceive that they have control of the shopping journey, they tend to

positively perceive brand image and brand association. In another words, department store brands, who are able to provide this controlled access to their brand experiences, have a stronger customer-based department store brand equity. By shopping at the department store online, participants could avoid the interpersonal interaction with store employees and use online filters to avoid the overwhelmingness of seeing too much product at the same time. Furthermore, they are able to control how they use the website in terms of time span and what to see first on the website. This finding critiques the concept of process consistency (Kopot and Cude, 2021) because participants did not demonstrate the pursuit of features such as an immersive shopping experience and interpersonal services, which they would receive in store, but an easy, simpler and functional shopping journey online. Research agrees with these findings, stating that customers may seek psychological benefits such as entertainment, reduced anxiety and comfort when browsing online (Fernández-Sabiote and Román, 2016).

On the other hand, participants identified that information on the website was less accurate, and they felt manipulated by the way in which the information was presented. Participants' judgements of the products were negatively affected by the artistic ways of presenting the pictures of products online. Participants stated they could not resonate with the way the model presents the product on the website in comparison to the way they would use it in their real life. In addition, the product information online was limited as they could not use their physical senses to evaluate the product. This finding is commonly reported in the literature, whereby customers prefer shopping in physical stores as they are able to, for example, touch, smell and taste products (Liu, Burns and Hou, 2013). This affected customers' judgements of the quality of the product and usually led to dissatisfaction and the extra effort of returning the items. The perceived dissatisfaction and problematic return process, reduced customers' willingness to buy which reduced the brand equity of the department store. In this case, information consistency was not identified across the physical and online channels of the same department store because of the lack of the opportunity to see, touch, feel the product in person.

5.6.3. Practical implications for brand accessibility

The literature review (See Section 2.4) identified that existing brand equity research mostly focuses on either a pure product or service rather than a combination of the

two as is the case with a retailer corporate brand. Similarly, retailer equity research is limited to the retailer store brands of brick-and-mortar retailers rather than the products/services provided by the retailer (Arnett, Laverie and Meiers, 2003; Londoño, Elms and Davies, 2016). There is limited branding research which focuses on the brand equity of retailers who operate across multiple platforms i.e online and the physical high street (Swoboda et al.,2013; Troville, Hair, and Cliquet, 2019). Thus, these studies fail to consider the contribution of other retail channels such as the online platform, to the overall retailer brand equity. Furthermore, none of these studies consider brand equity in relation to the department store. This study, therefore, has addressed the limitations of existing brand equity research by exploring the entire department store offering – the online and physical platforms, product brands, services, and the corporate department store brand. As this chapter has highlighted, the notion of brand accessibility emerged as a new dimension to consumer-based department store brand equity and can be understood in terms of choices, geography, meeting multiple needs and functionality, in the case of the online platform.

Brand accessibility findings have several implications for retail practice. Different platforms meet different customer needs, despite them being all part of the same department store offering. The physical bricks-and-mortar channel of the department store demonstrated its distinctive value through the hedonic and immersive shopping experience (Kumagai and Nagasawa, 2022). In contrast the online channel is more utilitarian where customers seek a functional and simplified shopping journey. Customers deliberately chose different platforms to meet their specific need for the occasion. This is in contrast to the retail practice, and the literature which argues that consistency and the same shopping experience is key in terms of branding and building brand equity (Kopot and Cude, 2021). Instead, department store managers should consider the online and physical stores as separate entities – one meets the hedonic needs, the other more utilitarian needs. Department store managers need to establish marketing strategies which specifically enhance their brand accessibility across different channels. So for example, in-store, elements like luxury brands, services and immersive experiences that appeal to the senses are favoured but these require significant investment (Kumagai and Nagasawa, 2022). However, the online channel does not necessarily need to replicate the full in store shopping experience. Customers who seek for transformational journey and immersive experience would

require the engagement of the customers' own physical senses which are not applicable when shopping online. Henceforth, it is not wise to extravagantly spend budget on pursuing service consistency across retail channels. Instead, department store brand managers should focus on what is appropriate to satisfy customers' needs depending on what platform the shopper is using. Therefore, in the transformational journey, department store corporate brand managers should focus on providing the appropriate opportunities to engage customers' senses to create interactions between the customers and the product and/or the service. Whereas in a functional journey, the requirement is relatively basic which is a simple and straightforward journey to identify the product. In an in-store functional journey, factors such as stock level and a clear store layout in store is important. A potential opportunity to extend the functional journey to a transformation or exploratory journey is also worthwhile. Whereas in an online functional journey, the fluency between the webpages, the design of filter, the description of product information, as well as a seamless delivery service are more important. Thus, creating service consistency across channels of the same department store is not recommended.

5.7. The need to redefine the department store category

The context of this study focuses on the current turbulent retail environment. The literature review (See Section 2.2.3) revealed that mass store closure was a result of the decline of the UK high street. This was due to a set of external factors: fragmented property ownership, too much retail space, the impact of out-of-town retail parks and the impact of the digital acceleration and e-commerce. The outcome of the literature review (See Section 2.2.4.1) suggested that the department store is not necessarily in the decline phase but is experiencing an evolutionary change related to embracing e-commerce.

During the process of this research, an outbreak of COVID-19 occurred, which initiated a global change in the retail environment and customers' shopping behaviours (Mintel, 2020). Data of this study showed how an external disaster, such as COVID-19, impacted customer behaviours due to the policies and restrictions regarding preserving public health. The participants of this study declared they had developed new shopping mindsets which had made them more cautious of making physical contact with products and people. This behaviour aligned with (Mintel, 2021) report

that COVID-19 led to customers' becoming concerned about being exposed to the virus, which resulted in a restricted lifestyle. In this study the lockdown prevented participants being able to access the physical shopping experience to see, touch and evaluate the product. This finding supports the study of Larke, Kilgour and O'Connor (2018) in that many consumers still require a physical interaction with products and an in-store sales experience. Specifically, Rigby (2011) emphasised how the physical store allowed customers to touch, try and feel the products. Results of this study showed that this statement is still valid in a department store and customers were still constantly seeking such an experience even after the outbreak and the lockdown of COVID-19. This finding reinforced the importance of the sense of physical touch and experience to the customers. Therefore, it can be argued that the COVID-19, despite created limitation to the in-store experience, it also brought new opportunities to the department stores. Managers of department stores should take this opportunity to focus their offerings on facilitating the customer's ability to physically experience the products in store to meet the need of the customer in the post-pandemic retail environment.

In response to the change of the retail environment and customers' shopping behaviours, it is important to review the nature of the department store and how it should be re-defined to establish its competitive advantage in the current environment. In Section 2.2.2.2, it was argued that the boundary between different retailer categories was blurred because of the increase in the diversity of products and services offered by different types of retailers such as supermarkets, fashion retailers and online retailers (BIS, 2011). The findings of this study support this phenomenon, as interestingly many participants had not only selected images of traditional department stores, including John Lewis, Debenhams, Marks and Spencer, Selfridges and Harrods, but some included images of online-only retailers (Amazon), supermarkets (ASDA, Sainsbury's and Waitrose) as well as furniture retailers (IKEA). This suggests that the participants of this study are confused, to a certain extent, with the category of department stores, but still recognise department stores have a range of product categories (Intel, 2021). The implication of this confusion suggests that the category of department store, fashion retailers, supermarkets, furniture and online retailers is blurred and less distinct than it is currently reported in the literature (Thomas, 2018). This also means there is an increase in size of the department store competition

pool and customers can potentially shop at a range of different retailers both online and offline. The customers' ability to retrieve a specific department store brand from their memory has potentially lessened, which means the brand recall of a specific department store has also decreased, leading to a reduction in the customer brand equity of the traditional department store (Keller, 2003). A reduction in customer brand equity is further illustrated by the finding, which suggests customers may feel overwhelmed when facing many choices in a traditional department store. In this case, the customers' differential response was very low to the individual product brands and the retail corporate brand, which may prompt the customer to visit other types of retailers (Keller, 2003). Accordingly, this study suggests there needs to be a redefinition of the department store so it can increase its customer brand equity and differentiate itself from the competition.

Existing studies showed department stores are perceived differently to retailers in other categories such as hypermarkets (Chang and Fang, 2012), factory-owned stores (Shergill and Chen, 2008), mass merchandise stores (Davis and Dyer, 2012) and shopping centres (Emmaru, 2021), but they failed to establish a difference from the perspective of customers which is the perspective adopted in this study (Emmaru, 2021). According to the literature, in comparison to those retailers, the department store is considered a luxury retailer, which offers an extensive range of high quality and high price commodities in a single large retail unit (Davis and Dyer, 2012; Emmaru, 2021). The range of commodities can meet the various demands of the customer by focusing on providing up-to-date fashion at reasonable prices (Shergill and Chen, 2008). It usually offers a full service rather than self-service and thereby pays more attention to the design of the store as well as the way products and service are provided (Chang and Fang, 2012). The physical store is the place which offers more hedonic values such as excitement and entertainment (Shergill and Chen, 2008). Customers shop at the department store to explore their product offering and buy unnecessary products rather than daily essentials (Chang and Fang, 2012). More importantly, a department store has a stronger brand image because of its longevity. As a result, it serves a wide customer base and plays an important role as the anchor of the shopping area (Davis and Dyer, 2012). Consequently, the department store has a stronger social impact on the retail market place (Davis and Dyer, 2012) and

customers are more likely to accept the lifestyle promoted by the department store with which they are familiar (Emmaru, 2021).

Results of this study suggest that whilst some of these aspects are still valid particularly in relation to the physical store, the department store is a place which needs to provide a balanced range of products and a variety of shopping journeys ranging from ones that make customers feel inspired and transformed to journeys that are purely functional. Existing definitions and studies of department stores do not take this into account. Thus, a new definition of department stores is required to enable managers and customers to differentiate the department store offering. This study also discovered that the department store provides brand accessibility in terms of accessing individual product brands, the customer's physical experiences of the products, and the overall department store corporate brand's resource. Ultimately, the new definition which aggregated the aspects mentioned above is established. In this study, department store is defined as:

[a] high-end retailer corporation that offers a wide range of resources (products, services, product brands and experiences) under one roof and operates both functional online channel(s) and hedonic physical store (s) which meets various needs of customers across a wide demographic. Its online channel store is straightforward and easy to use; its physical store provides access to a balanced range of individual product brands and extensive selection of high-quality products, an exciting in-store shopping experience, usually in a large retail unit that anchors the local commercial area.

5.8. Methodological contribution

This study has also furthered methodological understanding. The research adopted the ZMET method which aimed to elicit the deep thoughts and feelings of the participants towards the UK high street department store. ZMET is a complex research method not widely known by potential respondents and requires a lot of engagement from the participants. Therefore, interviewees who are not familiar with this type of research method may not show an interest in participating because they are unable to understand what is required from them. It is therefore important to fully explain this method to participants before collecting data. The researcher did this by provided an information sheet which included an example of the researcher's choice of images

regarding how she perceived her PhD journey at the beginning of the PhD study. The researcher also placed a physical stand within the university when recruiting participants to explain the rationale of ZMET to any potential participants. Having the opportunity to explain the method face-to-face to increase the number people interested in participating in the study. The suggestion for future ZMET research is to increase participants' understanding of ZMET prior to recruitment by increasing their interest in ZMET as a visual and sensory based research method in the hope that this will improve participation rates.

Using this methodology raised two further issues which have not been highlighted in the literature: using the senses to explore an issue and the framing of the main ZMET question. Some participants were more comfortable engaging their senses when exploring the phenomenon, while others were less capable of using their senses to describe their emotions. Ramjaun (2021) commented that it is important for research to not assume that every participant will complete all the ZMET activities with ease. Therefore, it is proposed that researchers should focus more on the responses elicited with the senses, rather than the senses themselves. This would maintain a participant's engagement by making them more comfortable in the interview process, particularly if they are unable to speak about a particular sense in the data collection phase of the ZMET methodology. If participants feel uncomfortable, there is a risk the ZMET methodology will not achieve the goal of an in-depth exploration of the problem. Furthermore, it may potentially cause ethical issues with the participant's wellbeing, as reported in other qualitative studies, where participants may feel physically or emotionally tired due to the complexity of ZMET (Ramjaun, 2021). Therefore, researchers must stay alert throughout the ZMET process to ensure participants are not harmed indirectly by the probing process which may be distressing for the participants (Ramjaun, 2021).

Framing the ZMET question to participants correctly is also important. From the results of this study, it is suggested that the ZMET methodology is beneficial when applied to a more commonly, well-defined or tangible phenomenon, rather than a concept to be explored. Studies have, for example, explored the impact of climate change on tourists' travel decisions (Khoo-Lattimore and Prideaux, 2013), consumer's perception on food safety (Lagerkvist, Okello and Karanja, 2015), and travel risk associated with COVID-19 (Jung, 2022). All of these studies explored a commonly known subject that

has relatively less ambiguity. For some participants in this study, due to their own confusion of the definition of the department store, they tended to include other retailer institutions such as shopping centres and supermarkets. However, this was not an issue for this research because one of the aims of the study was to explore the meaning of the department store in the current context. The discussion of the reason behind including those retailer institution with participants helped the researcher identify the origin of confusion. A ZMET methodology is therefore more appropriate for studies which explore a more tangible, recognised phenomenon unless the aim of the study is to explore the meaning of a poorly defined issue as was the case with this research.

5.9. Revised conceptual framework

In Chapter 2, an initial conceptual framework was established to inform the direction of this exploratory study, shown in Figure 8 on the next page. As an informative conceptual framework, it summarised the findings of the literature review. From the literature, it was identified that there were three dimensions that are closely linked to the customer-based department store brand equity concept: the external retail environment, the department store itself and the consumers. The retail environment dimension summarised the key external factors that affected the retail environment in which the department store operates. The department store reflects the value of its brand assets, granting it a prominent position on the high street. The consumer dimension reflects the key constructs of the existing customer-based brand equity frameworks, which are brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand knowledge and brand image.

The outcome of this research identified new attributes which also contribute to the conceptualisation of customer-based department store brand equity. This study identified brand accessibility as a new attribute affecting customers' perceptions of the department store corporate brand and the individual product brands available therein. The findings of this study also identified four out of seven deep metaphors raised by Zaltman and Zaltman (2008) which informed how brand accessibility is perceived. Brand accessibility is considered in terms of how customers access the resource and shopping journey in a balanced and controlled way. By applying the right deep metaphor to the marketing strategies, the department store would provide added value

to the participants through a strong and balanced brand accessibility. This would differentiate the department store from its competitors, ultimately enhancing the customer-based department store brand equity. Reflecting upon the informative conceptual framework, this study also identified that the links between the attributes are no longer linear as first suggested in the original framework, but a process of osmosis, as shown in Figure 78. Figure 78 presents a revised customer-based department store brand equity model (the department store CBBE model). This department store CBBE model consists of four layers, from outside to inside, namely: 1) retail evolution; 2) external factors; 3) brand equity; and 4) deep metaphor. For the ease of presenting change in the conceptual framework, new findings are highlighted in orange.

Layer 1 – Retail revolution

This layer shows the long-term observation of a department store's lifetime from initiation to decline and to the future rejuvenation. The retail life cycle and retail accordion theories (Hollander, 1966; Davidson, Bates and Bass, 1976) have shown that the department store has reached its decline phase but also faces an opportunity to transform, particularly in relation to meeting the different needs of customers across different retail platforms. The findings of this study also show there is a need to redefine the department store to enhance its customer-based brand equity and unique competitive advantage (see Section 0). The redefinition suggested that the department store is a high-market retailer corporation which offers a wide range of commodity, service, product brands and services under one roof, which serves multiple needs of customers with a wide range of demographics through different use of online channel[s] and physical store[s].

Layer 2 – External factors

This layer shows the five external factors that impact the current retail environment identified in the literature review which still remain. These include: i) too much retail space, ii) governmental policies, iii) fragmented ownership, iv) digitalisation and e-commerce, and v) similar offering by other retailers. Reflecting the literature, the findings identified that COVID-19 had directly impacted people's shopping habits beyond accelerating online shopping. The study found that customers still needed to physically access and evaluate the product before making a purchase. COVID-19 is

therefore highlighted in orange as it represents a new and different contribution to the literature in terms of external factors influencing customer's perceptions of department stores.

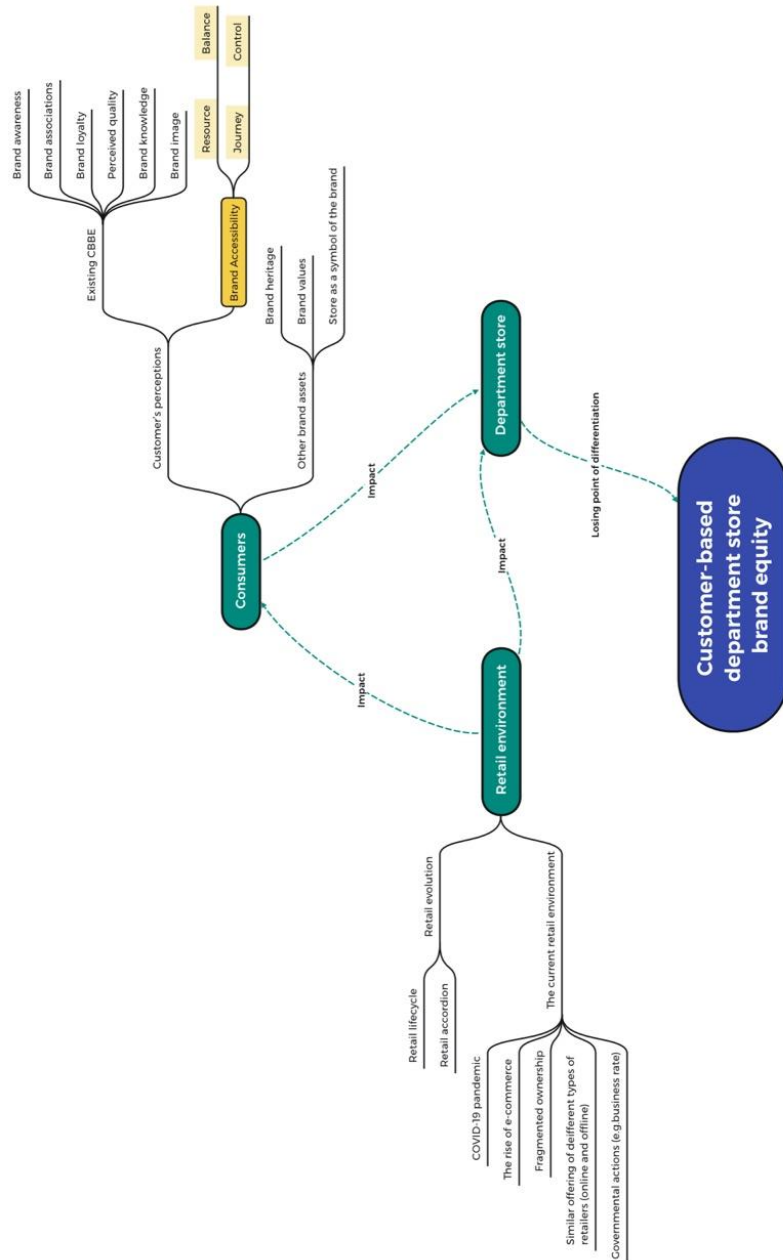


Figure 8 Conceptual framework of the customer-based department store brand equity from Chapter 2 literature review.

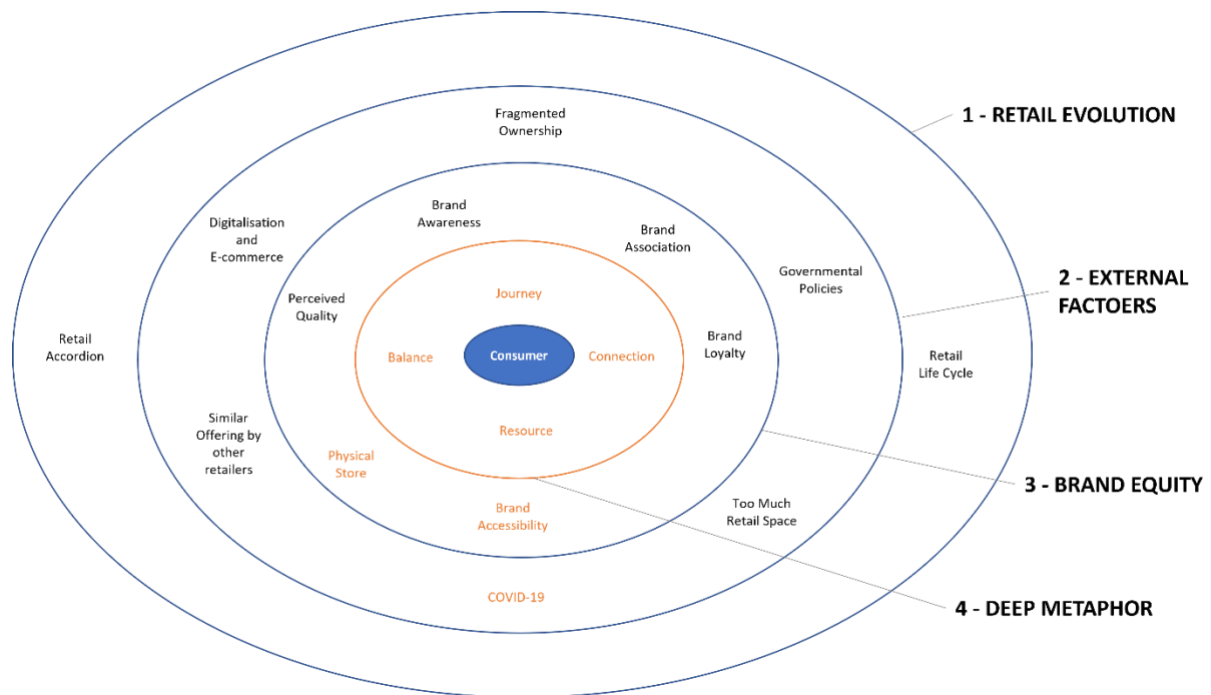


Figure 78 Conceptual Framework – the Customer-based Department Store Brand Equity Onion.

Layer 3 – Brand equity

According to the literature, this layer contains the six basic attributes of the existing customer-based brand equity frameworks, which are brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty and perceived quality (Aaker, 1991). Highlighted in orange are two new attributes identified in this study, brand accessibility and the physical store. Brand accessibility, as discussed in this chapter, highlights how a customer can access individual brands and experiences through in-store and the online channel of the department store. The physical store was highly valued by the customers as a contact point, where customers could experience and build memories with the brand. Brands were accessed in the physical store in relation to choices, geography, and hedonic physical experiences. Thus, the physical store plays a different role to the online platform and is of increasingly high value at this specific time after the pandemic. Conversely, the online channel is more functional, rather than a complete replication of the physical store. The attributes of the existing customers' perceptions shown in Figure 8 Conceptual framework of the customer-based department store brand equity from Chapter 2 literature review. were condensed into four attributes shown in Figure 78. Brand association in this framework consists of both brand value and brand image. As suggested in the literature review, brand values, according to Zamith Brito *et al.* (2015), is defined as the associations customers and stakeholders have towards a

brand. They viewed brand value similar to brand image as brand image is the promise that a brand makes to its stakeholders. Therefore, it can be argued that brand image links to brand association in terms of values. Rubio, Villaseñor and Oubiña (2014) also suggested that brand image is the concept that relates to customer's memories of a specific brand. Therefore, this study uses brand association as the bridging term to simplify the framework to avoid complexity and confusion. Participants of this study demonstrated a strong level of association with the department store brands. Department store brands were related to more positive associations, particularly in terms of luxury. This provided an aspirational and exploratory experience in store and a functional experience online. In other words, these intangible values contributed to increasing the department store's equity from the participants' perspectives.

Similarly, brand awareness and brand knowledge convey similar meanings. Brand awareness was defined as how a consumer can relate to a product with a brand based on their knowledge of the brand (Sasmita, 2015). Brand heritage is the core value that reflected the past of a brand's longevity which also reflects how much awareness customers have of the department store brand. Therefore, brand heritage is merged with the concept of brand awareness. Participants in this study acknowledged the longevity of the department store brands on the high street and developed an extensive number of valuable memories with the department store accordingly, particularly in relation to shopping with family and friends. This led to a strong connection with the department store's corporate brand and its customer community. Due to the high brand awareness of the physical department stores, participants were also motivated to travel long distances, despite the availability of the online channel of the same department store brand. This reflected the department store's high brand awareness held by the participants.

Brand loyalty developed from high brand awareness of the department store brand. Participants demonstrated loyalty to specific department stores to purchase products for certain occasions. Customers nowadays do not demonstrate a high level of loyalty to a single brand at all cases but would have a range of top-of-mind brands available to be selected (Aaker, 1991a). As a result, department stores who are more capable of meeting demand and resonating with the values of the customers, are more likely to create stronger brand equity and receive loyalty from the customers. Moreover, through the recognition of the brand's value, participants are willing to make

connections with the brand by establishing a sense of belonging to the brand's customer community. Quality perceived by the participants was reflected in the discussion of the deep metaphor balance (see section 0). The finding of this study critiqued the importance of perceived quality. Despite continually offering high quality products as already perceived by the participants, the department store should also devote resources to develop strategies to ensure the perceived quality of services and products are in a balanced state throughout the year. Findings of this study suggested the perceived quality of service decreases at sales periods, which reduces the brand equity of department store.

Layer 4 – Deep metaphor

This layer is about the deep thoughts of the customers which emerged as overarching themes of the study. It contains the four deep metaphors that are relevant to customer-based department store brand equity identified using ZMET, which are journey, balance, resource, and connection. The attributes in this layer are linked closely to the attributes in layer 3. Brand awareness reflected the deep metaphor of journey because customer's experience and perceptions with a brand can be viewed as a form of a journey. The deep metaphor "Balance" lies at the core of perceived quality because customers are constantly making judgements between the quality and price of products and services offered at a department store. When the price and product/service achieved the right balance, the perceived quality of the product/service is high. Brand association and brand loyalty are both relevant to a customer's willingness to connect with a department store brand. If the customer holds a positive attitude towards the brand image, they are more likely to build connections with the brand and its community. High brand loyalty also means customers are willing to building long-term connections with the brand. The new attribute of brand accessibility focuses on the resource deep metaphor, which comments on how department stores would enable customers' access to the resources of brands and services available at a department store.

Overall, the four layers of the department store CBBE model work holistically. The outer layers set the external environment in which the department store lies. However, towards the inner two layers, the customers' perceptions of the department stores begin to emerge. All four layers help to create a new configuration of customer-based brand equity in a department store in the current context. By understanding each layer

of the model, the department store brand manager would gain an in-depth understanding of how customers' thoughts affect the added value that a department store could offer. Accordingly, these thoughts and values can be embedded to increase the brand equity of the department store corporate brand in the current turbulent retail environment. This would ultimately help the department store to adapt and transform in the current environment leading to success in the long run.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.1. Introduction

The current research aimed to explore customers' perceptions of the UK department store corporate brands in the current turbulent retail environment using ZMET as the main method for collecting data. Three research questions were identified, stated as follows:

- I. What are the customer's perceptions of the UK high street department store's brands?
- II. How can the existing customer-based retailer brand equity framework be adapted, considering the context of the changing and turbulent retail environment?
- III. Can a new definition of the department store be sourced from customers' perceptions explored in this study?

This chapter summarises the contribution of this research. Firstly, it explains how the research results answer each of the research questions. Secondly, the chapter discusses the way the implications fit the research gap and the contribution to the practical management of department store brands. Finally, limitations of this study are addressed with recommendations for future studies in this field.

6.2. Concluding the research findings

6.2.1. Research question I: What are the customer's perceptions of the UK high street department store's brands?

The answer, to research question one, was explored in Chapter 5. In summary, this study identified that four out of seven Zaltman's deep metaphors are closely associated with customers' perceptions of the department store corporate brands, which are balance, journey, connection, and resource. Three deep metaphors were not emerged strongly from the findings as the four deep metaphors being mentioned. This might be resulted from the retail context captured in this study. Despite that control was emphasised by existing studies, it was not as important to the participants of this study. Transformation and control were elicited as part of the journey deep metaphor because what matters to the customers is the way the shopping journey is

designed to meet their demands. By summarising transformation and control as subthemes of 'journey', this study would like to draw department store brand managers' attention on the nature of customers' journey at the department store. Department store corporate brand managers need to view the journey from the customers' incentive and providing those values throughout the journey rather than implementing the meaning behind the deep metaphors at any place. As a result, brand managers could emphasize on providing different routes of shopping journeys when developing the department stores' branding strategies and put customers at the heart of their brand. Among the four deep metaphors, identified in this study resource refers to the notion that customers choose to access the department store because of its vast number of 'resources'. In this context this refers to products, services, experiences and information available to customers, all under one roof, when they choose to shop at these types of stores. Balance reflects customers' internal pursuit of equilibrium in relation to a department stores' offerings. Customers emphasised balance in terms of three aspects: the amount of choice, the level of interaction with staff and the balance between price and quality. This study found that an overload of choice caused a feeling of overwhelmingness for the customers when making decisions at the department store. Instead, customers preferred that department stores offered a balanced set of product choices. This would reduce customers' anxiety levels, when making choices at the department stores. This study also identified that even though customers seek interpersonal interactions with department store employees, they favoured a balanced service level where they were neither ignored nor disturbed from their immersive shopping experience. Moreover, this study discovered that a balance between quality and price fluctuate according to the time of year and occasions. The perceived quality of the department store brand was lowered at sales periods and increased at festive times such as Christmas. The findings associated with 'balance' contribute to the literature and managerial knowledge in several ways. Firstly, retail managers need to ensure that their product displays and brand availability create a sense of equilibrium as too much choice is likely to deter shoppers and create negative perceptions of the department store corporate brand, particularly in relation to physical stores. Secondly, whilst department store brands are associated with high levels of customer service, this is only viewed favourably when that level of service is appropriate and, in some cases, may act as a differentiator. Finally, in contrast to the branding literature which emphasises the role of consistency,

perceptions of a department store corporate brand are likely to fluctuate throughout the year according to the shopping occasion.

Customers also viewed their department store shopping experience in terms of the deep metaphor 'journey'. Here, customers explored their shopping journeys according to the channel, either in the physical store or online. According to the different needs of the customers, this deep metaphor fell into three types: transformational, functional and an exploratory journey. This was presented in Figure 77 as a new continuum of customer experiences. Customers experienced a functional, utilitarian journey when using the online platforms of the department stores. Here, customers had a sense of control when shopping which they did not always have when visiting the physical store. Other customers experienced an exploratory journey in relation to shopping online and in the physical department store. In this case, customers are familiar with the department store corporate brands' product selection and a clear layout by category. Their trust on the department stores corporate brand resulted in their confidence to freely explore the department store's offering and are willing to be surprised by journeys with unknown outcomes. Finally, others underwent a transformational journey where they expected a shift towards a higher self-esteem associated with the department store brand images and brand values, which resulted a sense of transformation into more responsible and aspired individual. This was only experienced in the physical store alone. The findings associated with journey represent a contribution to the literature. Customers appear to be benefitting in different ways from experiencing the department store corporate brand and this is reflected in the retail channel they use. Physical stores therefore have a different brand proposition to online stores, despite them both belonging to the same retail corporate brand. This contrasts with the literature which emphasises process and content consistency across all channels of the same brand (Kopot and Cude, 2021). Participants of this study demonstrated different expectations and behaviours of using online and physical channels of the same department store corporate brand which showed that process and content consistency is not essential to customers. This suggests that different channels of the department stores should be managed with different strategies. A branded house strategy which views the department store's online, and physical store as separate sub-brands could be helpful for the brand management of the retailer.

The deep metaphor of 'connection' reflected customers' resonance with the department store's corporate brand values. In this study, customers had a high brand awareness of its offerings, and recognised that department stores were associated with luxury and prestige. By shopping at these stores, customers felt they had connected with the aspirational target customer group. This suggests that whilst department stores may be evolving, these core values still remain from when department stores first appeared on the high street. Moreover, connection is reflected in the context of family and friends' gatherings. The physical department store acted as the place for families and friends to spend time together, whether they can enjoy both individual and collective experiences on the same trip. For many customers, the department store accompanied them since their childhood and has been continuously meeting the evolving needs of the same participants as they change phases in their life. The connection with the department store always existed and was reinforced in relation to the context of family. This heritage is unique to department store corporate brands in comparison to other forms of retailer's brands and should be carried forward to the future development of branding strategies of the department store corporate brands.

Finally, the deep metaphor 'resource' served as the grounded metaphor of the three deep metaphors being mentioned above. All three metaphors reflected the way customers would like to access certain aspects of the resource offered by the department store corporate brand. Resource is the incentive that customers go to the department store's platforms. For example, resource could be the assortment of commodity and product brands, the service, the experience the emotional benefit attached to the department store corporate brand. The accessibility of these resources at a department store corporate brand determined the level of the added values the department store corporate brand can provide to the customers by shopping at their brand's channels. Ultimately, these added values will contribute to the building of the department store corporate brands' brand equity in the current retail environment. As a result, the accessibility, named brand accessibility, is identified as a new attribute the customer-based department store corporate brand equity model.

6.2.2. Research question II: How can the existing customer-based retailer brand equity framework be adapted, considering the context of the changing and turbulent retail environment?

Brand accessibility emerged as a new concept from the findings. This relates to how customers accessed resources of the department store corporate brand and the individual product brands across online and physical channels of a department store corporate brand. More specifically, brand accessibility reflects the geographical access and choice in the physical store (see section 5.6.1), while utilitarian function and accuracy of information is more important to the online counterpart (see section 5.6.2). Brand accessibility represents a contribution to the literature because existing study did not explore accessibility of the online and physical channel together from a corporate brand perspective. Brand accessibility has therefore been identified as a new attribute to the CBDSBE model (Figure 78) in the current department store and high street context. This adapted framework, called Customer-based Department Store Brand Equity (CBDSBE), shows the four areas which contribute to the department store brand equity. These 'layers' are retail evolution, external factors, brand equity, and deep metaphors. In brief, retail evolution refers to the cyclical change that the department store is following through its lifetime, external factors relate to the five major causes of the decline of the high street in which department store sits in, brand equity in relation to the attributes that explicitly contributes the brand equity of a department store brand, and deep metaphors in relation to the four deep metaphors identified in this study. This new model therefore demonstrates the complexity of department store customer brand equity and the range of factors that influence this. By presenting a model like this, retail managers now have a greater understanding of how they can build their department store equity by considering comprehensively the core elements that affects the customers, the brand, and the external environment. This new CBDSBE model also contributes to existing research by proposing that CBBE in this context is not a linear model but instead one that has several influencing factors which all vary and alter according to, for example, the customer's needs, habits and sub-conscious perceptions. Furthermore, the limited research which explores department stores, and their corporate brands has not been conducted in light of recent retail sector changes. This model therefore addresses this gap.

6.2.3. Research question III: Can a new definition of the department store be sourced from customers' perceptions explored in this study?

Existing literature suggested that retailers' offerings are becoming similar, which increases the competition between the department store and other types of retailers. Reflected in the discussion of Section 5.7, the study suggested a new definition of the department store is needed in order to establish a clear difference between department stores and its competitors, such as supermarkets, shopping centres and out-of-town retail parks. It is proposed that this new definition should incorporate existing points of differentiation already reported in the literature such as the associations with luxury, a range of commodities and individual product brands as well as experiential elements, but also acknowledge that department stores are both online and offline. This definition should also incorporate the difference in customers' need of functions regarding online and offline channels, that the physical store is more hedonic and online is more utilitarian.

Using this proposed definition would help retail managers to strengthen their brand equity by identifying which elements have positive associations for customers. This would help retailers to reverse the 'decline' of department stores and the high street. Data supported this need for clarification because the participants of this study were also confused when trying to identify department stores, particularly when compared to other retailers and when selecting the images. During the longevity of the department store corporate brands, the brand values of department store corporate brands being conveyed was about premium product and services as well as customer-focused experiences which connected the customers with the department store corporate brands. The values are mostly about the physical store because the department store was first introduced physically and migrated online at a later stage. The statement of the difference between the physical store and online platform in the new definition reflected the inconsistency regarding the communication of brand values because the values of the physical store required the full engagement of sensory stimulus which cannot be replicated online. Therefore, the brand equity of the department store corporate brand is diluted through the loss of value when being communicated across channels. To strengthen the brand equity of department store corporate brands, a restructure of the brand structure of department store corporate using a branded house strategy is recommended as a way which could resolve the

issue. In this case, the physical store and online channels could be considered as separate brand entities which communicates different brand values to re-establish the unique selling point of each channel. Ultimately, this would assist on the establishment of clearer brand positioning strategy and more recognisable brand among its competitors.

6.3. Limitations

Apart from the significant contributions stated in Section 6.3, this study is not without its limitations. This study adopted ZMET to gain a deep insight into the research topic. ZMET is a research methodology that explored deeply into customers' unconscious thoughts and feelings. This study consists of 24 participants, each participating in 60-90 minutes interview that was rich in words and images. The analysis of the data included transcription and deep thematic analysis. Therefore, the analysis of ZMET is very time consuming but can provide deep knowledge of the topic. Saturation was reached at 24 interviews, however, in order to generalise these findings further, a follow up study using quantitative methods with a wider consumer group would be recommended, particularly in terms of testing elements of the new CBDSBE model. In section 5.8, methodological contributions were identified. In this discussion it was recognised that the way ZMET question was framed played a critical role in ZMET research. The subject of ZMET research should be selected carefully towards a concept with less ambiguity to avoid the dilution of the depth of research. Unless the aim of the research is to identify the confusion of two concepts, a concept with ambiguity could be potentially selected. However, researchers conducting ZMET in this way should be familiar with the ZMET process by receiving trainings and conducting pilot study to ensure the successful implementation of ZMET.

A multi-tier sampling method, which included purposive sampling first, then convenience sampling was conducted as a direct result of the limitations the COVID-19 pandemic presented. Initially, the data was collected using a purposive data collection method which targeted department store shoppers of the researcher's immediate local area and their related persons who self-identified as a department shopper and who may be interested in this research study. However, when the pandemic occurred, it was before the data collection stage was implemented and created considerable issues for the researcher in terms of carrying out the fieldwork.

It restricted the researcher from approaching wider audiences, creating a barrier for the researcher to recruit participants. Accordingly, most of the respondents were not as familiar with online meetings as they would be post-pandemic. Therefore, a requirement on participants' skill of using relevant technology became essential for collecting appropriate and sufficient data for this research. Additionally, ZMET is a method that requires a relatively high level of engagement from participants. For those who are not familiar with ZMET, the process may dissuade potential participants, especially due to the reading and writing instructions shown online. The invitation to interview was initially posted online but received a low response rate. As a result, after the easing of the COVID-19 health and safety regulations, the researcher adopted the convenience sampling method by approaching potential participants in person to increase the participation rate. They were recruited from the campus of the University of Derby. Whilst this may have some limitations in terms of a data collection site (for example, higher education and skill levels,) the demographic of students, academics and general staff at the University of Derby has a high female population, with a wide age range, reflecting the typical department store customer. However, it is worth acknowledging the change of contemporary customer that they have become increasingly more difficult to categorise using pure demographics or social economic groups. Existing department store customer studies currently focus more specifically on the type of behaviour demonstrated by the customers and the value that is driving the behaviour (Hur and Claridge, 2021). This is because customers today are more complex and value-driven (Hur and Claridge, 2021). Department stores also report more proactively to customer-value and emphasise less on customer demographics (Selfridges, 2021; John Lewis Partnership LLC, 2023; M&S, 2023). Consequently, future study is liable to explore further to understand the relationship between customer values and needs of contemporary customers, for example, Generation Z, who are more familiar with online shopping. It is also recognised that the pandemic influenced participant's responses for example, in terms of their willingness to visit physical stores, which would probably not have been a factor if the data had been collected at another time.

6.4. Future recommendations

6.4.1. Conducting ZMET research

For future researchers considering ZMET, there are several aspects of which they should be aware. Firstly, the researcher must receive proper training on ZMET and be familiar with the ZMET process. ZMET is a complex process, and each interview is different to the next. Therefore, the researcher needs to understand ZMET to ensure the success of the data collection process, from the stage of image collection to the interview. Knowledge of technologies is mandatory, specifically those regarding online meetings using Microsoft Teams and the presentation of images, using PowerPoint. These are significant technical elements to capture the interview and the manipulation of images. Researchers should therefore be confident in supporting the participants regarding these technologies at all touchpoints within the data collection process. It is important to master these processes to ensure participants feel comfortable and confident throughout the process, so they can share their feelings and thoughts in a relaxed way to ensure the depth of data collected.

Secondly, when deciding whether ZMET is the appropriate method for the research, the subject of research should be commonly known and properly defined with little ambiguity, unless the ambiguity is the topic of the research. If the subject of research does have ambiguity, then the researcher should define the subject with a context, for example, a snapshot of department store's interior was shown to the participants in this study. Otherwise, the depth of insight may be diluted because the research subject is too broad. A mutual understanding of the research subject should be established before the collection of images to avoid any extra effort on the part of the participants. This extra effort may negatively affect the participants' confidence in participating in the research and harm their mental wellbeing such as losing confidence in themselves and decrease of self-esteem level. Therefore, to overcome the issues a pilot is strongly recommended to be conducted before implementing the formal data collection process. Through pilot studies, the researcher may develop practical ZMET skills and be more familiar with the ZMET process. Furthermore, a pilot study can test the ZMET question to be asked at the image collection stage to ensure mutual understanding is established. Finally, the researcher should be mindful about the demographics of the respondents. Since ZMET research is likely to use purposive sampling to target

participants with a better knowledge of the topic, the researcher should focus on including as wider range of the demographics as possible. From the observations of this research, females were more willing to respond to this research due to the limitation of convenience sampling during the pandemic. Therefore, when conducting purposive sampling, a detailed consideration of participants' demographics is required.

6.4.2. Future research area to be considered

This research adopted a brand equity perspective to explore the attributes that customers associated with the department store brand, which increase the brand's intangible added values. In order to develop the findings further, department store customer's brand equity could be explored with a co-creation lens. The brand value co-creation theory focuses on the role the customer plays in the value creation process with the brand. The value co-creation perspective was not adopted in this study because the brand equity perspective focuses on exploring what the values are whereas the value co-creation theory focuses on how the values are created. Since the department store is potentially facing its demise, a consideration of value co-creation would be beneficial. Studies might, for example, explore how department store brands can co-create the brand value that reflects the four deep metaphors identified in this study. Future study may also take the lens of CBBE and apply it to other types of retailers such as supermarkets, fashion retailers, and out-of-town retailers. Since this study explored the overall offering of the department store, it is also worthwhile to explore solely into the online channel of department store to gain in-depth understanding of customers' perceptions of the e-commerce and m-commerce platforms provided by the department store corporate brands. Further studies could also draw upon the contemporary experiences of a more diverse range of consumers (age, gender, socio-economic group) who frequently shop both offline and online using multiple platforms (mobile, physical stores, websites). This could help to unpack any consumer patterns or trends associated with department store shopping.

6.5. Conclusion of the research

The current research shows the department store still has potential from the perspective of the UK high street department store's customers. The department store

is not necessarily declining but there is a need to re-innovation so as to evolve and respond to the changing retail environment. Previously, frameworks reflecting the UK department store brand equity from a retailer corporate branding perspective did not use up-to-date data which takes into account the complex retail context. Results of this study filled in the gap of the depth deficit of understanding customers' mindsets in the current turbulent retail environment. The use of ZMET provided this research with a deeper understanding of the department stores' customers. It elicited rich data to inform several implications for the department stores and their customers in the current context. From the perspective of this study, managers of department stores can view the channels owned by the department store corporate brand through a branded house perspective. Separate management of the brand equity of each channel could assist the department stores to locate their budgets in a more targeted way. Through the use of the new CBDSBE framework, department store brand managers could establish more targeted brand strategies on their customers' utilitarian and hedonic needs. Department stores should stop matching themselves with innovative competitors but focus on their own strategies to establish differentiation. The new definition produced in this study shares a new insight that the department store does not necessarily to pursuit a brand consistency across all channels but to establish uniqueness on each channel to achieve differentiation with its competitors. The value of the department store corporate brand lies within its customers' associations. By enhancing the CBDSBE, the department stores could gain an in-depth understanding of its customers in the current context which helps the department store to transform the decline phase into a new innovation phase into the department store's life cycle.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Title of Research Project

Exploring the UK Department Store Offerings: A ZMET-based Brand Equity Study

1. What do I have to do if I take part?



If you decide to take part in this study, you will be invited to a two-stage interview.

Step 1 – Collecting Images

This stage takes about 7 to 10 days, where you will be asked to collect a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 8 images that represent your department store experience in the UK. Please consider a variety of the high street department store brands and include both of your online and in-store experiences.

A department store, in general, is a store which have at least four departments under one roof; among these four departments, one needs to be womenswear or girlsweare. See the picture as an example:



When selecting the images, please **do not** choose images of department stores **interiors or exteriors**, for example, the appearance of the store. Please use metaphors to represent your thoughts and feelings.

Please select images from the Unsplash website: <https://unsplash.com/>.

Once you have selected all the images, please collect the images onto a PowerPoint presentation, one image per slide and then all images together on one slide. Please title each image with a sentence that explains what that image means to you.

An example is given in Page 4 and 5 to help you understand the type of image needed in this interview.

When the image has been collected, please send your PowerPoint slides to B.Shang@derby.ac.uk and we will arrange a time for our interview.

Step 2 – ZMET Interview

Once you have collected all the images, we will meet and discuss those images in a ZMET interview.

In the interview, you will be asked sensory questions based on the images you chose. Some of the questions may seem weird and a bit difficult to answer immediately.

Please feel free to pause and think and please don't worry about whether your answers are correct. There is no right or wrong answer in this interview and it is your real feeling that matters to this study.

2. Will I be recorded?

Yes, the interview will be conducted through online interview and will be video recorded. The video recording collected, and the extracted transcription will only be used in this study, its conference presentation, and its publications. No other use of the data will be made without your written permission and no other parties beyond the researcher will have access to the recordings.

3. Will my data be kept confidential?

Yes, your data will be stored confidentially with encryption under the GDPR regulation and the supervision of University of Derby Ethics Committee. Your data will only be accessible to the researcher. You will not be identified in any form of reports or publications.

4. What are the possible risk and disadvantages of taking part?

Participating in this study will cause you no harm to your physical and mental health. This study should cause you no disadvantage. The potential discomfort might be involved when

recalling memories and experiences. However, it is your right to decide what to reveal in this interview.

5. What if I want to withdraw?

You are free to withdraw from this study within 14 days of the interview has taken place.

If you do decide to withdraw, please contact Bowen Shang through B.Shang@derby.ac.uk and your data will be removed from the data set.

Thank you very much for your time and effort in advance! I am very looking forward to meeting you at our interview!

Example of researcher's ZMET case study of her feeling of starting a PhD degree



Image 1

I am so excited about the new start and new life!



Image 2

I love the University of Derby like being hugged by the sunshine, so warm and welcoming.



Image 3

I can imagine PhD as a long journey, that is not straight and has no short cut.



Image 4

I can image there will be a mountain of literature needs to be read



Image 5

I feel like a bud breaking out from the soil, and through my PhD journey, I will keep growing and sprouting.



Image 6

Though I am only at the beginning of the programme, I am so looking forward to my graduation and being titled Dr.!

Appendix II: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the contents of **the Invitation and Briefing Letter** and this **Consent Form**, and freely and voluntarily agree to participate in this research.

I am happy to be identified as a participant in the research by my demographics (for example, age, gender, experiences, et cetera)

I am happy for the entire interview to be video recorded including my verbal language, body language and facial expressions.

Signed

Please print name

Date.....

Appendix III: Debriefing Letter

DEBRIEFING LETTER

Title of Research Project

Exploring the UK Department Store Offerings: A ZMET-based Brand Equity Study

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research, your help is much appreciated, and I can confirm the following:

- The information I collected from you will be used in my dissertation as part of my PhD degree research project at the University of Derby.
- The dissertation research aims to explore UK consumers' perceptions of department store brands on the UK high streets operating in the current turbulent retail environment using the ZMET qualitative methodology. The information you will be asked to provide will be used to help to provide insights to achieve this objective.
- The information you provided will only be used for this specific dissertation, and will not be disclosed to any third party, except as part of the dissertation findings, or as part of the supervisory or assessment processes of the University of Derby.
- The data you provided will be kept until **20th September 2023** so that it is available for scrutiny by the University of Derby as part of the assessment process.
- If you later decide that you wish to withdraw from the study, please email me at B.Shang@derby.ac.uk before **15th September 2021** and I will be able to remove your response from my analysis and findings and erase your data.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries relating to this study.

Kind Regards,

Bowen Shang

Date:

