



Taking the experience home: an exploration of how brands have used digital transformation to shift brand experience in a crisis.

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in business and brands globally needing to shift their strategies to include digital transformation. Whether it has been learning to work remotely on channels such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, or needing to change their entire experience offerings to become more digitally inclined, everyone has been affected by the pandemic. This study aimed to explore these changes in terms of how they have been implemented, specifically looking at Virgin Active South Africa, whose business plan relies on consumers exercising in their gyms. Using the sensory marketing model proposed by Bertil Hultén (2009), this shift was explored using our five senses as the method to understand the how. Findings showed that while digital transformation is a reality, there are still limitations to a digital brand experience in terms of expressing sensory connections. Taste, touch, and smell still need to be explored deeper to find ways to incorporate them into a digital experience. A limitation to the model was that it excludes the emotional connection between consumer and brand – a vital characteristic in brand experience. This is a potential study that can be conducted in the future.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This research paper reports on a qualitative study into the exchangeability of digital and physical brand experiences based on multi-sensory factors. The aim of this study was to explore how Virgin Active South Africa, whose brand experience centres around consumers being active in the physical Virgin Active facilities, managed to adjust to digital brand experiences and consumers' home environments, for their consumers to stay active during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Background and orientation (contextualisation)

No brand is immune to crisis and having an agile organisation, specifically one that embraces digital transformation, is imperative (Hardy, 2020). Recent circumstantial changes resulting from the Covid-19 health pandemic saw a need for the acceleration of brands' digital transformation, with brands needing to adapt, not only to a new, remote, working environment, but also their marketing and social media strategies to ensure the survival of their business (Durant, 2020; Hardy, 2020).

While Covid-19 has had an adverse effect on the economy, it has also produced new opportunities for the development of digital transformation (Durant, 2020). One of these opportunities, and a focus for this study, is the reinvention of brand experience to include digital channels (Durant, 2020). Brand experience refers to the encounters between brand and consumer that emit different sensory feelings and emotions for the consumer, helping them to identify with the said brand (Kharat and Kharat, 2017). Experiences are a brands' value-add moments (Kharat and Kharat, 2017). Similarly, online brand experience generates the same connections (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2010). Even in a digital format, mediated by a computer, a brand still represents something that consumers can identify with, and find value (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2010). Moreover, the interactivity and two-way experience between brand and consumer, and consumer and consumer, opens a whole new element to how a brand can create experience (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2010).

A notable brand who has embraced digital transformation effectively, and the brand of focus for this study, is Virgin Active South Africa (Durant, 2020). Virgin Active, the world's leading health club, exists with the intention of making exercise as enticing and appealing as possible for its consumers (Virgin, 2020). Living by their motto *Live*

Happily Ever Active, their experience offering is that they want their consumers to love coming to a Virgin Active club to exercise; it is about the status of belonging to a Virgin Active club (Virgin, 2020). Their experience lies in the variety of stimulating exercise classes that they offer, the high-end equipment and sophisticated facilities and services, and the sense of being part of the Virgin Active community (Virgin, 2020). However, with gyms closing due to Covid-19, a need arose for them to find a way to provide this same experience to their consumer, but in a digitally focused manner.

Many digital brands have taken advantage of the need to provide digital experiences. Brands who have adapted to digital transformation include Zoom, Slack and Microsoft teams, who have needed to extend their offerings to accommodate for an increase in new subscribers (Ryan, 2020). Even government organisations such as SARS have transformed their services into digital offerings (Ryan, 2020).

For purposes of this study, the researcher looked at what holistic adjustments Virgin Active made to their experience strategy, to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic, while still providing consumers with the same Virgin Active experience, but in a digitally focused manner.

Rationale

A lesson learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic is that life is unpredictable, and change is inevitable. Digital transformation has become more rapid, making it even more important for brands and businesses to be agile (Durant, 2020). From a brand/business perspective, to be agile means to strategically and tactically cope with, and respond to, a changing environment (Tilman et al, 2019). Successful and agile organisations are known to find opportunities for innovation in each shift or disruption in their environment, giving them a competitive advantage (Setili, 2014; Tilman et al, 2019). In previous years, persevering with one strategy that worked for a brand was optimal for success, however, with the faster nature of change, brands can now quickly fall behind competitors if they are not agile (Setili, 2014). Due to the Covid-19 lockdown, there has been a need for brands to adapt their strategies to effectively include digital transformation (Durant, 2020).

An element of this strategic change that was explored by this study was brand experience. The experience that a brand provides to its consumer is a vital

characteristic in its differentiation from its competitors (Riza and Wiyanti, 2018). Elements of a brand's character such as design, packaging, environment and communication all play a part in arousing feelings, sensations, and behavioural responses in a consumer, which makes up a brand experience (Riza and Wiyanti, 2018).

A brand recognised as being agile during Covid-19 has been Virgin Active South Africa (Durant, 2019). They swiftly shifted to a more digitally inclined approach to keep consumers fit and happy during the lockdown period, which was done through upgrades to their mobile app, and through consistent uploads of workout videos onto their social media platforms (Durant, 2020). However, how has this change to Virgin Active South Africa's strategy affected their experience offering? If brand experience is reliant on sensory experiences (Riza and Wiyanti, 2018), how have Virgin Active South Africa brought elements of their physical experience offering into their digital experience?

This study therefore aimed to explore the relationship between brand experience and digital transformation. It focused on how Virgin Active transformed their online experience offering during Covid-19 pandemic, as well as if online brand experience can be matched to physical brand experience through a person's five senses.

Problem statement

According to Cleff, Walter and Xie (2018), brand experience is the emotional connection that takes place between a brand and consumer, created through the tangibility of a consumers five senses. It is how they connect physically to brand stimuli using their senses of touch, taste, sound, smell, and sight that creates the experience (Cleff, et al. 2018). On the other hand, consumers may not be able to experience the same physical connection with an online brand (Cleff, et al. 2018), however the extensive reach and interaction abilities that the virtual world provides, offers the consumer an array of diverse stimuli that can influence their identification with a brand (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2013). The lockdown period resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic created the need for brands such as Virgin Active South Africa to find a way to still provide the same experience to their consumer, but now in a digital manner (Durant, 2020). Therefore, the aim of this

study was to explore how Virgin Active translated the physicality of brand experience to a digital experience.

Why is the problem worth investigating?

This problem was worth investigating as it refers to current, real-world matters that are affecting our society. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected the global economy in completely unexpected ways, pushing brands and people to change their ways of living (Durant, 2020). Digital transformation is increasingly affecting the population, with new types of technologies and ways of living being introduced almost daily (Rodrigues, 2017). The brand chosen for this study, Virgin Active, has been directly affected by both these changes, needing to be agile in how they provide experiences to their consumer. Therefore, all these matters can potentially bring about new findings, and new potential for research that will assist brands in the future.

Purpose statement

The purpose of this study was to use the sensory marketing model, based on the multi-sensory brand experience concept (Hulten, 2009), to explore if the Virgin Active South Africa's digital experience is like its counterpart, physical experience. It was exploring if a multi-sensory approach can be applied to digital experiences, and how.

Research questions

The primary research questions for this study are stated as follows:

Question 1: How have Virgin Active South Africa extended their physical, sensory experience to a digital, sensory experience during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Question 2: To what extent can the sensory marketing model (Hultén, 2009) be applied to digital experiences?

Research objectives

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between physical brand experiences and digital transformation using the five senses to assess if they can be used interchangeably.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To explore how Virgin Active South Africa extended their physical, sensory experience to a digital, sensory experience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. To assess to what extent the sensory marketing model (Hultén, 2009) can be applied to digital experiences.

Conceptualisation of key concepts

For this study, the key concepts that were examined were online and offline brand experience, i.e. a physical gym experience vs. a digital gym experience, and multi-sensory brand experiences.

As mentioned previously, brand experiences are theorised to be trigger responses to brand related stimuli, evoking certain feelings, and sentiments to a brand, driven by consumer emotion, perception, and attitudes (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2009; Kharat and Kharat, 2017). Brand experiences are the physical and tangible aspects of a brand with which a consumer can interact, providing a value-add to the consumer and an opportunity for a brand to become more than just the service it sells (Kharat and Kharat, 2017; Pine and Gilmore, 2011). When it comes to online brand experiences, the same holds true as consumers are still seeking to create valuable relationships with brands, even in their digital form (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2010). However, in contrast to the physical experience a brand offers, online brand experience adds an element of two-way, interactive communication between brand and consumer, providing additional methods for a brand to create a meaningful relationship with its consumer (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2010).

The next key concept that was explored was the multi-sensory brand experience concept by Hultén (2009). This concept examined the way a consumer experiences a brand based on their five senses: touch, taste, sight, sound and scent (Hultén, 2009). The sensory marketing (SM) model, which was created from the multi-sensory brand experience approach concept, explores how a brand can create valuable experiences based on the sensors, sensations, and sensory expressions of the consumer (Hultén, 2009). It is the experiences that speak to each of our senses that are perceived as most valuable (Rodrigues, 2017).

This model was originally created based on offline, physical experiences (Hultén, 2009).

Overview of research methodology

A non-empirical, deductive approach was taken in the generation of knowledge for this study. Qualitative data was collected in an unobtrusive manner from Virgin Active South Africa's Facebook page, and using a qualitative content analysis method, the data was analysed. A detailed discussion on methodology can be found in chapter 3.

Structure of paper

This research paper will be structured in the following manner:

1. Chapter two focuses on the literature and theory that the researcher used to inform the research problem being investigated.
2. Chapter three focuses on the different research methodologies used for the study. This includes the research paradigm, the research approach, the research design, population and sampling, data collection and analysis methods used, and finally, the limitation and delimitations of the study.
3. Chapter four explores the findings of the research, including the interpretation and discussion about the findings and insights. It also includes a discussion about why the findings are trustworthy and reliable.
4. Chapter five concludes the research document outlining the findings to the study's research problem, any potential implications for future practices, ethical considerations, and a final conclusive discussion about the study.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Chapter one addressed the purpose of this study, as to explore Virgin Active's shift from physical brand experience to digital brand experience due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Henceforth, a literature review was conducted to understand the key concepts of online vs. offline brand experience, and the multi-sensory brand experience concept. It is important to note that while this study looked at how experience was created from a brand's perspective, it was still vital to understand how a consumer engages in experience from both a physical and digital viewpoint.

Online vs. offline brand experience

Brand experience may be a distinct concept in branding; however, it cannot stand as its own entity (Shamim and Butt, 2013). Brand experience is linked to concepts such as brand awareness, brand image, brand attitude, brand credibility and consumer-based brand equity (Shamim and Butt, 2013). Review of literature also showed that brand experiences that provide real value to a consumer can influence consumer satisfaction, retention and brand loyalty (Khan, Hollebeek, Islam and Rahman, 2019; Ong, Lee and Ramayah, 2018; Riza and Wijayanti, 2018). Brand loyalty is crucial for the sustainability of a brand; therefore, brands need to put increased effort into creating meaningful experiences (Ong et al, 2018).

When selling an experience, a brand needs to make sure that it will stimulate sensory-emotive feelings in their consumer, creating a bond that will evoke the desire to stay loyal to a brand (Shobeiri, 2015; Wala, Czyrka and Fras, 2019). However, this cannot take place if there is disconnect in a brand's structure, emphasising the importance of the relationship between consumer and brand (Shobeiri, 2015).

Brands become facilitators of value creation in an experience, which is vital in building a mutually beneficial relationship between brand and consumer (Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2010; Prahat and Ramaswamy, 2004). This means that brand experience needs to be co-created between consumer and brand to maintain solid brand equity (Omar, Kassim, Shah, Alam, and Che Wel, 2019).

The experience environment of a consumer needs to be one where they can create their own individualistic experience, and co-creation can also provide brands with a competitive advantage (Omar et al., 2019; Prahat and Ramaswamy, 2004). For this reason, the study considers online experiences as an element of offline brand experiences as potentially meaningful, as online experiences have become vital, not only as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also as part of the way forward to digital transformation.

Digital transformation has brought about significant shifts in the way consumers and brands interact with one another, with consumers now forming stronger bonds with brands that resonate with them (Khan et al, 2019; Rodrigues, 2017). Communication between brand and consumer has become more efficient (Khan et al, 2019). This is because real-time communication abilities, where a brand can communicate with consumers in an instantaneous manner, gives a consumer direct access to a brand (Khan et al, 2019). This means that the consumer has a more proactive role in a brand's success, therefore, it has never been more important for a brand to carve out their digital footprint to stay relevant (Khan et al, 2019). Additionally, with digital transformation comes new opportunity for brands to be agile and more innovative with the way that they create experiences, particularly if they want to stay ahead of their competition, and maintain brand loyalty (Hanelt, Leonhardt, Hildebrandt, Piccinini & Kolbe, 2018; Vial, 2019). One of these opportunities is for brands to create unique and personalised online brand experiences based on feedback received by consumers (Anton, 2018; Morgan-Thomas and Veloutsou, 2010).

Differing schools of thought exist when defining the concept of brand experience. For this study, the two definitions that were looked at focused on offline brand experience. Holbrook and Hirschman, the founders of experiential marketing, explain brand experience from the perspective of how consumers consume an experience based on fantasies, feelings and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, cited in Kharat and Kharat, 2017). They believed that brand experience goes beyond its economic and material value, and instead describe experience in terms of its psychosocial value, which includes personal beliefs and the emotional consequences that the experience emits for the consumer (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). This view that consumers connect with brands based on emotional output is supported by sensory marketing, an

extension of experiential marketing, which speaks to the impact that a human's five senses have on brand experience and brand loyalty (Hussain, 2019).

The second definition looks at brand experience as a demand or need of a consumer that a brand must fulfil (Pine and Gilmore 1999, cited in Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011, p.238). Experiences are described as value-added services that a brand provides to distinguish themselves from competition making brand experiences something that are both staged and consumed (Pine and Gilmore 1999, cited in Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011, p.238). The view is that experiences, as customised events, need to engage individuals in a personalised manner (Kharat and Kharat, 2017). To create value from experience, Pine and Gilmore developed their Experience Economy model, which they viewed as the final stage in the process of brand marketing (Pine and Gilmore 1999, cited in Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011, p.238). The model is based on four stages, namely education, escapism, aesthetics, and entertainment, with each stage representing the creation of experience (Pine and Gilmore 1999, cited in Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011, p.242)

The educational stage refers to the active absorption of an experience in real-time; the escapism stage refers to the engagements and participation in an experience; aesthetics refers to the passive participation in an experience, but with a level of respect and understanding for what is taking place, and the entertainment stage is the passive absorption of an experience (Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011). However, literature showed that each educational stage provides a different type of experience, affecting the overall experience of a consumer (Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011).

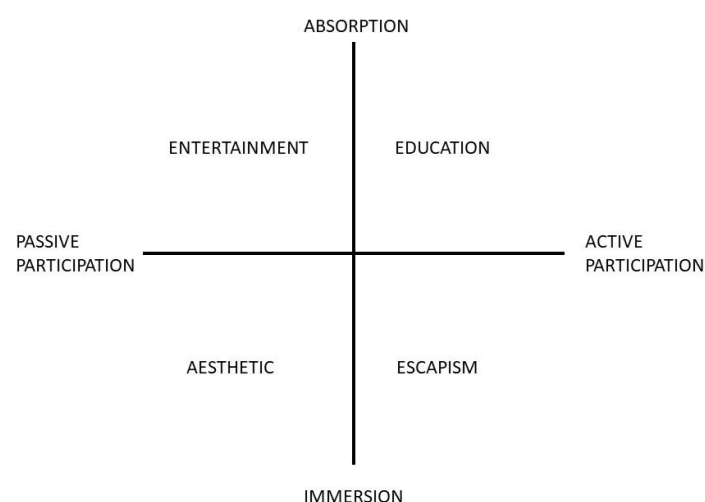


Figure 1: Pine & Gilmore's four-dimensional brand experience (Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011)

These two schools of thought reinforce that brand experience denotes the overall feelings a consumer associates with a brand and that a consumer needs to identify with a brand to connect with it (Kharat and Kharat, 2017). Brands need to create value through their experiences, reinforcing that consumer and brand perspectives are closely tied together in the concept of brand experience (Kharat and Kharat, 2017). When it comes to online brand experience, not much differs in that even when a brand is online, it still identifies as an entity in which consumers need to find value (Morgan-Thomas et al, 2010).

As previously mentioned, with consumers being more proactive in their interactions with online brands, there is a need for brands to add an extra element of personalised activity into these interactions (Khan, et al, 2019; Morgan-Thomas et al, 2010). A virtual experience may lack physical elements, giving way to some sense of uncertainty (Morgan-Thomas et al, 2010), however, the continuous possibility of two-way communication between brand and consumer empowers a consumer, giving them more opportunity to have a subjective view of their experience (Morgan-Thomas et al, 2010). Both online and offline brand experiences include logical, perceptive, and goal-oriented responses, as well as emotive and sentimental brand responses, it is just the practice of the experience that differs (Morgan-Thomas et al, 2010).

The similarities between online and offline experience reaffirm the importance of value creation between brand and consumer in having a successful experience (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). This means that it is imperative for engagement and experience to be memorable and personal (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Furthermore, the objective of brand experience is to provide opportunities for consumers to connect and engage with a brand in a physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual way (Shamim and Butt, 2013).

Changes due to Covid-19 have come with their challenges and opportunities. However, no matter how technologically advanced society becomes, it is still up to human beings to shape its future according to their beliefs and values (Schwab, 2016). Digital transformation has provided significant opportunities for brands to become innovative, giving rise to new business models, new products and services and new types of consumers and brand experiences (Nambisan, Wright and Feldman, 2019).

Value within digital transformation, and value within brand experience, both online and off, make an impact on the success of a brand as it contributes to brand loyalty (Schwab, 2016). Therefore, it has never been more important for brands to be strategically agile in how they work, and with global access to digital resource platforms, innovation and competitiveness within industries has never been higher (Schwab, 2016).

For example, for Virgin Active, their online, digital brand experience may look different to the physical experience that the consumer is used - no longer does the consumer need to travel to the gym or wait for a piece of equipment. However, how does the new experience correlate to the old experience? Did Virgin Active manage to pull elements of their physical experience into their digital one, and how interchangeable are the two experience types? To explore this, this study used a brand experience model that focuses on a consumer's five senses and applied it to Virgin Active's online brand experience, which will be discussed in the next section (Hultén, 2009).

The multi-sensory brand concept

The multi-sensory brand experience concept takes value generation in brand experience a step further (Rodrigues, 2017). This concept describes brands as the facilitators of value, which is created through a person's five senses: smell, sound, sight, taste, and touch (Hultén, 2009). It is a form of experiential marketing whereby brands create experiences that can be touched, heard, seen, felt, tasted and smelled by the consumer using brand related stimuli such as design, sounds, textures etc. (Kumar, 2014; Hultén, 2009). This impacts the way that a consumer relates to a brand on an emotional level, and shows how pleasurable brand experiences are those that appeal to each of the senses, providing a unique, sensorial brand identity (Hultén, 2009; Rodrigues, 2017).

From the multi-sensory brand experience concept comes the Sensory Marketing Model (SM model), which places emphasis on the multi-sensory sensations that a brand experience emits for a consumer, rather than placing emphasis on the goods or services of the brand (Hultén 2009). This model was used for the collection and analysis of data for this study. Literature has shown that sensory marketing is a key component in the creation of consumer satisfaction, as the direct influence on a consumer's senses helps create lasting, emotional connections between brand and

consumer (Hussain, 2019; Kumar, 2014). It is said that brand experience is the mediator between consumer and brand loyalty, and giving that it is our senses that link memory to emotions, employing multi-sensory brand experiences can be the differentiating factor for a brand against its competitor (Kumar, 2014; Riza et al, 2018).

Using sensorial sensations, a consumer creates an image in their mind of what a brand represents to them, and therefore a brand needs to take the time to understand who their consumer is, and what their consumption processes are when creating a brand experience (Hultén, 2009; Hussain, 2019). These sensations include sensors, sensations and sensory expressions that are based on intellectual, emotive or value-based stimuli in relation to the human mind and senses (Hultén, 2009). This means that a brand uses this model to create and market experience based on deeper human connection, as it speaks to an individual's feelings, beliefs, thoughts, and opinions about a brand (Hultén 2009). If used correctly, sensory marketing will emit feelings of positivity, satisfaction and pleasure for the consumer, leading to brand loyalty (Hussain, 2019). This notion ties into the definition of brand experience defined by Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982).

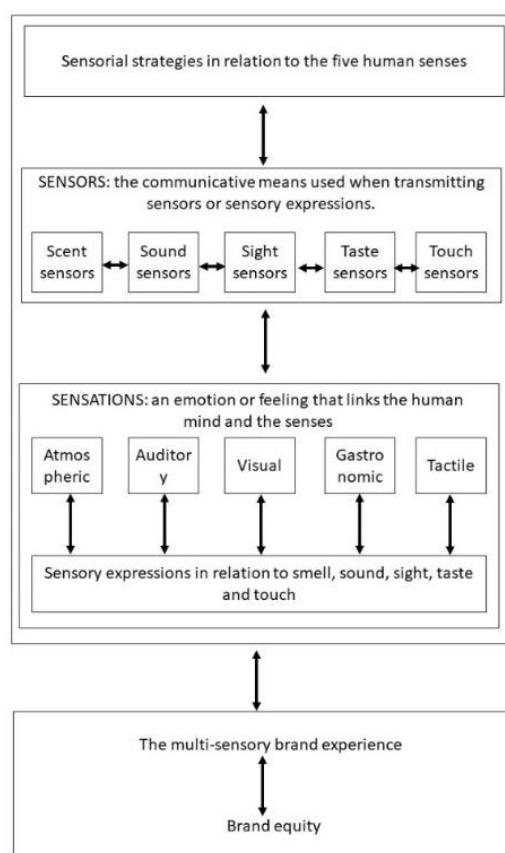


Figure 2: Sensory Marketing Model by Hulten, 2009

The above also reiterates that a brand cannot stand alone when creating experience, and that there needs to be input from the consumer (Prahat and Ramaswamy, 2004). *Figure two*, represents the three levels of the SM model, namely sensors, sensations, and sensory expressions, developed by Hultén (2009).

The sensor of smell and atmospheric sensations

A motivational factor in human behavioural responses is the sensor of smell (Hussain, 2019; Wala et al, 2019). Atmospheric sensations stimulate the part of the brain where emotions are regulated, enhancing memory and the emotional state of consumers, and therefore affecting behavioural patterns (Hultén 2009; Hussain, 2019; Wala et al, 2019). Aromas and odours aid consumers' decision-making process as they provide a positive experience (Hultén 2009; Hussain, 2019; Kumar, 2014). It is a key part of brand experience (Hultén 2009).

The sensor of taste and gastronomic sensations

Taste refers to the multi-sensory feelings that a brand emits for the consumer, stimulated by smell, shape, colour and symbolic gestures such as offering a cup of coffee in a store (Hultén 2009; Hussain, 2019; Wala et al, 2019). Therefore, when utilising the sensor of taste for marketing activities, our other sensors are used to express taste (Hussain, 2019).

The sensor of sound and auditory sensations

The use of sound in brand building is a powerful tool as it can provoke emotional responses in a person through the release of endorphins, creating a brand's atmosphere (Hussain, 2019 Kumar, 2014; Wala et al, 2019). When used correctly, sound creates an ambience that consumers either consciously, or sub-consciously, associate with a brand, and can affect purchasing behaviour based on their emotional responses (Hussain, 2019 Kumar, 2014; Wala et al, 2019). In context of this study, music has been said to be a large contributor to the enjoyment of exercising as it stimulates a part of our brain that detracts a person from feeling fatigued during a workout, motivating them to carry on (Bigliasso, Karageorghis, Bishop, Nowicky and Wright, 2018).

The sensor of sight and visual sensations

Our sense of sight is our most dominant sensor, allowing us to make sense of our environment using visible and tangible stimuli (Kumar 2014; Hussain, 2019). These stimuli provide perception of the quality of a brand, and can persuade decision, therefore directly impacting the strength of a brand's experience (Hussain, 2019). The sight sensor includes elements of a brand's visual identity such as lighting, graphics, colours, typography, as well as brand values (Hultén 2009; Hussain, 2019).

The sensor of touch and tactile sensations

Touch sensors are the tangible components of a brand's identity, triggered by textures that enhance the touch experience (Hultén 2009; Hussain, 2019). Quality of a brand's products is perceived through touch, with observations from previous literature stating that consumers tend to touch a product before making a purchase decision, opting for products that feel good (Hussain, 2019; Wala et al, 2019). Consumer satisfaction and brand loyalty comes down to the consumer having an enjoyable touch experience with a brand (Hussain, 2019).

As Virgin Active has relied heavily on sensory experience prior to Covid-19, the research used the model to evaluate how their online experience measures against these senses. It has been noted that there are still gaps in literature pertaining to sensory marketing, with reference to its effects on brand experience, specifically digital brand experiences (Kumar, 2014; Hussain, 2019; Musiolik, Karunanayaka and Cheok, 2019; Riza and Wijayanti, 2018). However, while virtual experiences may lack physical elements, giving way to uncertainty (Morgan-Thomas et al, 2010), the continuous possibility of two-way communication between brand and consumer, empowers a consumer, giving them more opportunity to have a subjective view of their experience (Morgan-Thomas et al, 2010).

To conclude, multi-sensory marketing has evolved from traditional approaches to include the five senses as vital characteristics to elevate brand experience (Kumar, 2014). It draws on personal experiences of the consumer to create a valuable experience that ultimately affects brand loyalty, and purchasing decisions (Wala et al, 2019). However, gaps in literature read for this study still show the need for more research to be done on the use of the five senses in digital experiences

(Hultén, 2009; Hussain, 2019; Kumar, 2014; Morgan-Thomas et al, 2010; Riza and Wijayanti, 2018; Wala et al, 2019). This is something that this study hopes to achieve.

The researcher has used the literature to address the purpose of this study, ensuring that the research questions of [1] how Virgin Active South Africa extended their physical, sensory experience to a digital, sensory experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, and [2] to what extent could the sensory marketing model be applied to digital experiences can be adequately spoken to.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

This study explored the relationship between offline and online brand experience, looking specifically at how Virgin Active shifted to a more online oriented experience, to help ensure business survival due to circumstances surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. It looked at Virgin Active's digital experience from a multi-sensory perspective, which gave rise to the research questions.

Research paradigm

Various frameworks, moreover, known as paradigms, are sets of assumptions that researchers use to describe their versions of reality when solving for a problem (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). These paradigms represent the world views of the researcher, acting as a lens for how they interpret reality and generate new forms of knowledge (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014).

While the researcher acknowledged that there are different paradigms in existence, to understand the differences and similarities between online and offline brand experience, the researcher chose to conduct the study from a humanistic perspective, looking at the changes of Virgin Active South Africa's experience from an in-depth, personal perspective (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Therefore, the paradigm of interpretivism was used (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Using this paradigm, the researcher focused on the sharing of meaning and mutual understanding to inform knowledge and the belief that social reality comprises different symbols and events that are understood by the interactions between people and their environment (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). In using an interpretivist approach, the SM model, which focuses on sensory experience, acted as meaning sets to explore the phenomena of offline brand experience for Virgin Active.

There are five different positions that make up a research paradigm, namely, epistemology, ontology, metatheory, methodology and axiology. Each is explored below in context of this study being an interpretivist study.

Epistemology

An epistemological positioning looks at what constitutes knowledge, how it is created and how research can contribute to an already existing body of knowledge (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Interpretivist studies look at knowledge as something that is created by humans based on their social surroundings; human truths

are interpreted based on common sense and beliefs, and phenomenon are looked at from the perspective of an individual (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014; Maree, 2016). Facts are not seen as objective, but rather they depend on interpretation and environmental context (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). This perspective was used in this study as it looked at how Virgin Active South Africa had to become agile due to the social impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic by shifting to an online interface to provide their service to their consumer (Durant, 2019). It considered environmental aspects of this new experience by using the sensory marketing model, which focuses on the use of sensors and sensations that the consumer was exposed to (Wala et al, 2019).

Ontology

An ontological positioning asks questions about what constitutes truth and reality, and if reality is objective or subjective (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Interpretivists believe that reality is based on what a person believes their reality to be; it is subjective and influenced by perception (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). For this study, the researcher explored what Virgin Active South Africa perceived would be the best way to use their digital channels to carry on providing their services to their consumers.

Metatheory

Theory and research will always go hand in hand; therefore, metatheory looks at the theory that will be used to guide the chosen paradigm and describe the phenomenon that the researcher is studying (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). A metatheory refines a researchers' thinking and findings and is used to explore assumptions and indications of the main theory (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). For this study, deductive theorising was used. The researcher chose to use an existing theory, the multi-sensory brand experience concept, to explore Virgin Active South Africa's digital experience based on the integration of a human being's five senses. They then formulated their research questions based on this theory and will deduce how appropriate this was for the study at the end of the process (Payne, 2014).

Methodology

Interpretivist studies are subjective and use qualitative methods to gain an in-depth understanding of their participants as they believe that being empathetic and immersing themselves in the social values of the participants will provide them with the best results (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). Therefore, for this study, the researcher chose to use the qualitative method of unobtrusive data collection to collect data.

Virgin Active South Africa's Facebook workout videos were the chosen points of data for this study, as the researcher felt that videos would be able to represent the five senses most appropriately in a digital format.

Axiology

For interpretivists, values are vital in shaping their research and therefore openly discussing values with participants, as well as using their own interpretations of values to arrive at conclusions, is an important consideration in qualitative research (du Plooy-Cilliers, 2014). The researcher closely examined the different ethical considerations of conducting unobtrusive data collection and qualitative content analysis for this study. This was to ensure that the study is morally correct.

Research approach

To reiterate, qualitative data collection methods were used for this study as they highlight the study of a phenomena from the perspective of the subjects being studied, instead of remaining independent of the phenomena as with quantitative studies (Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer, 2011). Moreover, due to interpretive frameworks, qualitative researchers accept that reality is not always as it seems, and can be clouded by perception, and the researcher took note of the Covid19 pandemic as a new phenomenon that was constantly changing.

Research design

The below research design outlines the structure of how the research process worked for this study. It looked at aspects that assisted the researcher in answering the proposed research questions of [1] how Virgin Active South Africa extended their physical, sensory experience to a digital, sensory experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, and [2] to what extent could the sensory marketing model be applied to digital experiences. As this study was constructed from an interpretivist's viewpoint, each of the below approaches fitted into the realm of an interpretivist study.

Firstly, deductive theorising was used for this study. This means that the study was conducted from a top down approach, moving from general theories and assumptions about what Virgin Actives South Africa's offline and online brand experiences looked like, to specific findings about the extent to which multi-sensory stimuli were integrated into their digital experience (Payne, 2014). It also looked at if the SM model provided an accurate deduction of online brand experience, or if there was room for changes to

the model (Payne, 2014). Figure 3 shows how the deductive theory looked in context of this study.

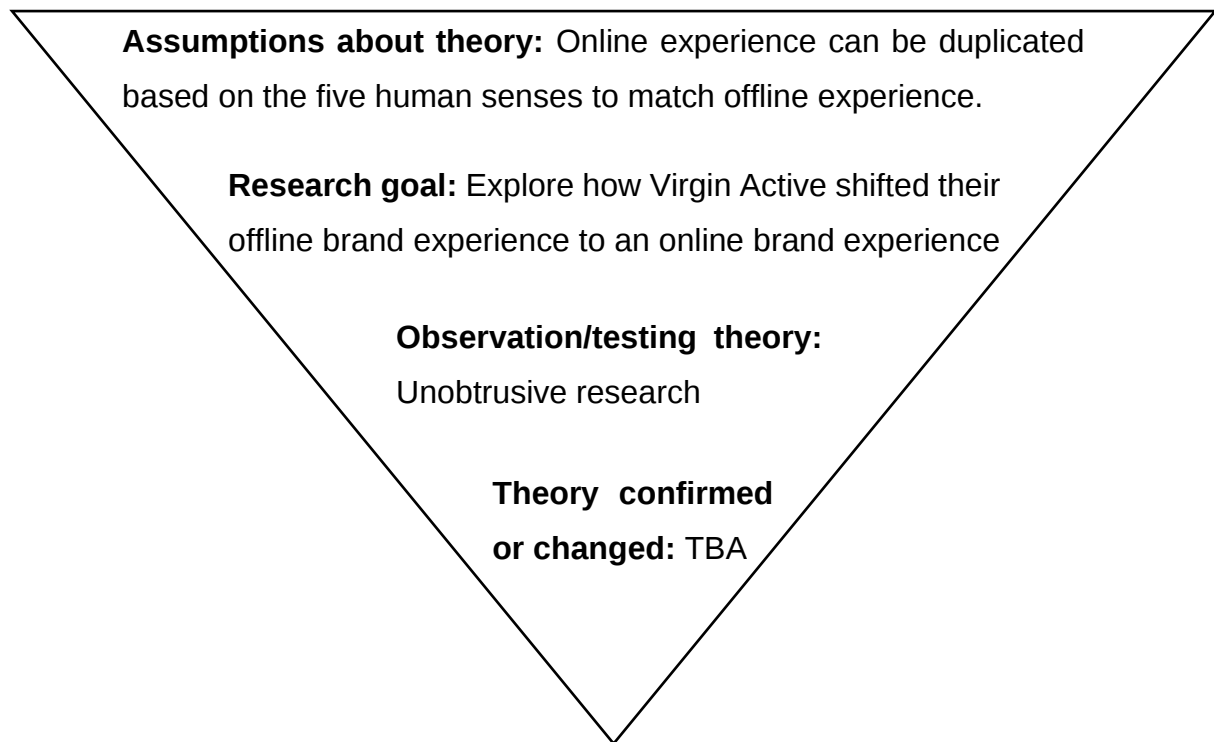


Figure 3: Deductive Theory (Payne, 2014)

Exploratory research in the form of unobtrusive data collection methods was used for this study. The aim of this study was to look at the specific phenomena of digital brand experience from the perspective of how Virgin Active dealt with, and adapted to, changes due to Covid-19 (Davis, 2014). The Covid-19 crisis is a new phenomenon, having only emerged in December 2019, and while conducting the literature review, it was found that little to no academic research had been done about the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, by utilising exploratory research, the hope was to acquire new insights into digital brand experience by analysing the unfamiliar situation of Covid-19, and to identify potential outcomes of the said research problem (Davis, 2014).

Lastly, this study was researched based on a historical-hermeneutic, also known as a historical-phenomenological, approach that tied into the paradigm of interpretivism (du Plooy-Cillers, 2014). Using this approach meant that knowledge gathered from the research was analysed using a thematic coding approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how Virgin Active South Africa used a digital, online

experience to ensure business endurance during the Covid-19 crisis. It was also used to explore what Virgin Active's digital experience looked like, compared to their established physical experience offerings, based on the multi-sensory brand experience concept and the SM model (du Plooy-Cillers, 2014; Hultén 2009).

Population and sampling

Population and sampling methods assisted the researcher in understanding which people or social artefacts had to be accessed to continue the research (Pascoe, 2014). The first step was to determine who and what made up the population, the population parameters, and the unique characteristics of the population (Pascoe, 2014).

It was established that the population would be made up of social artefacts in the form of secondary resources that included communication channels such as social media, e-mailers, digital advertising, the Virgin Active South Africa mobile app and website, and their DStv channel, as well as all Virgin Active South Africa stakeholders who were a part of the process in developing the digital experience strategy. The unique characteristic of the population was that there was a relationship between the person or social artefact, the Virgin Active South Africa brand, and their digital experience strategy.

Unfortunately, the researcher could not look at the entire target as they did not have access to the entire population group, which included consumers and stakeholders from Virgin Active South Africa (Pascoe, 2014). Timing also played a part in deciding the population parameters as there was insufficient time allocated to the researcher to research the entire population. Moreover, focusing on a population size that was too large may have affected the findings of the study, as there may have been too many differing thoughts, opinions, and data (Pascoe, 2014). Therefore, the researcher needed to employ a sampling method that would allow them to ascertain who the accessible population from Virgin Active South Africa was (Pascoe, 2014).

The researcher decided to use non-probability sampling to determine the population parameters for this study. Non-probability sampling is used for qualitative, exploratory research where findings do not need to be generalised to a larger population (Pascoe, 2014). As this was an exploratory study to determine how Virgin Active South Africa changed their digital experience strategy to accommodate restrictions put in place by the Covid-19 pandemic, non-probability sampling was the ideal fit (Pascoe, 2014).

Furthermore, the researcher decided on using non-probability sampling to assist in their goal of investigating the research questions from a more in-depth, and humanistic perspective (Pascoe, 2014).

Gaining access to a reasonable size sample of stakeholders from Virgin Active South Africa was not possible due to time constraints, therefore the researcher based the data collection and data analysis on relevant social artefacts. As mentioned, the social artefacts were made up of communications from Virgin Active, including social media, e-mailers, digital advertising, the Virgin Active South Africa mobile app and website. However, using this large size sample was not conducive to the study due to time restrictions, and due to a non-probability sampling method being used (Pascoe, 201). Therefore, a purposive non-probability sampling method was chosen. Using a purposive method allowed the researcher to choose sources of information that they had ready access to and that they knew fitted the unique characteristics of the population (Pascoe, 2014). Furthermore, if the researcher found that elements of the Facebook sources did not fit the parameters set out for the data collection process, therefore not providing value to the study, they disregarded it (Pascoe, 2014).

The brand experience of Virgin Active South Africa was the unit of analysis measured for this study. It was used to investigate the proposed research questions of how Virgin Active employed the same multisensory experiences of their physical brand experience to their digital one, and to what extent the multi-sensory brand experience concept model could be applied to digital experiences (du Plooy-Cillers, 2014).

Data collection

An unobtrusive research method was used to collect data with the aim to conclude the research questions. This method is both qualitative and non-qualitative in nature, however, as this was an interpretivist study, it was used from a qualitative perspective (Strydom and Bezeidenhout, 2014). An unobtrusive research method allowed the researcher to remove interaction with research participants from the process, decreasing any potential bias from the study (Strydom and Bezeidenhout, 2014). This was also an ideal method due to the researcher not being able to access a reasonable size sample of stakeholders from Virgin Active South Africa. Furthermore, the intention of using this method was due to the nature of this study being focused on the *how*. Unobtrusive research is used by researchers looking to know how something is done,

not why it is done (Blackstone, 2012). The focus for the research was how Virgin Active shifted their experience offering, not why, making unobtrusive research the most appropriate method.

Unobtrusive research was also cost-effective as it required no cost depending to use the data sources (Blackstone, 2012). It was also an effective method to use as the researcher was looking at content and data that had already been created (Blackstone, 2012). The researcher collected data from May 2020, the period where circumstances started shifting and changing due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Blackstone, 2012). It is important to note that the nature of phenomenon was constantly shifting due to situational surroundings, and that this phenomenological study had the potential to change as the study progressed (Zahavi, 2018). Using unobtrusive research assisted the researcher to avert this limitation.

To reiterate, the population size of this study was large as it included all Virgin Active South Africa communications such as social media content, newsletters, and the Virgin Active South Africa website and app. Therefore, the researcher narrowed this pool of content down to videos from Virgin Active South Africa's Facebook page from the month of May 2020, as this was during the first few weeks of the lockdown period. The research was looking to assess the swiftness of the change in experience, which is why this period was chosen. Videos were selected as the data source as it was believed that videos engage one's senses more than other forms of communication such as still imagery or newsletters. The videos were also selected based on the share value of the video, as this showed engagement and popularity. Comments from consumers on the selected videos were also analysed as they provided insights into answering the proposed research questions according to the SM model. These comments also added the digital transformation element of two-way communication necessary for creating value between brand and consumer (Khan et al, 2019). However, a shortcoming of this approach was that the researcher could have missed other aspects of how Virgin Active shifted their brand experience through videos placed on the DStv channel, or the Virgin Active virtual coaching feature on their website (Virgin Active South Africa, 2020). It also needs to be noted that comments from consumers relaying whether they were enjoying or not enjoying the experience were not included as these did not fit in to the research parameters for the study which was not looking at the success of the shift, but rather how the shift took place.

Data analysis

Once the researcher had collected the data, they used a thematic content analysis method, to analyse the data. By using this method of analysis, the researcher was able to identify covert and overt patterns in the videos from where they collected the data (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). This means they looked for patterns that were obvious and stood out, as well as the deeper patterns and truths that needed to be pulled from the data (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). This form of analysis was used to gain a deeper understanding of how Virgin Active shifted to an online experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, and if offline and online experiences are interchangeable when creating them based on the multi-sensory brand experience concept. The researcher watched the videos creating notes where the five sensors stood out to identify patterns. These were then clustered into larger category groups based on the sensations called out in the SM model and used a coding method to analyse the data (Schreier, 2012). This type of coding method is known as thematic coding, whereby the researcher reduces the data being studied according to themes that they know may exist in the data (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). Coding plays a critical part in the analysis of data, and therefore the coding process needed to be followed coherently to provide the best possible results (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014).

A thematic coding method is also a deductive research approach, as it looks at potential themes already found in the literature review (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). The SM model served as the conceptual framework that the researcher based their overall theory on, thereby the themes were our five sensors including, smell, taste, touch, sight and sound (Hussain, 2019). By sifting through the patterns and themes generated from the analysis, the researcher explored more specific parts of the theory that spoke to the research questions (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). It should be noted that this type of approach did not generate results immediately as the researcher needed to interpret the subthemes found in the videos before being able to place them into main themes and categorise them (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). Once the researcher finished going through these cycles, the analysis process was complete and they could report on their findings (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014).

Unlike a quantitative study, the researcher needed to dig deep to find the underlying meanings of the themes and patterns and interpret them in a way that provided in-

depth, and rich findings (Strydom and Bezeidenhout, 2014). A qualitative content analysis allowed the researcher to study how Virgin Active South Africa connected with their consumer from a humanistic perspective and got them to believe in this new experience reality (Blackstone, 2012).

Finally, for the qualitative content analysis process to work seamlessly, the researcher followed the following eight-step guide to achieve optimal results (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). These steps included:

1. Preparing the data: all raw data, which included all Facebook videos for the month of May 2020, was collected from the Virgin Active South Africa Facebook page by saving it to the researchers personal saved items on Facebook (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). There was a total of 46 videos for the month. The researcher then decided to examine the data based on the number of shares the videos got, as this indicated consumer engagement. The total number of shares across the posts was divided by 46 to get an average number. Once this was complete, the researcher used all videos that received above the average shares, and data deemed unnecessary for the study was removed (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). This worked out to 12 videos in total.
2. Defining the code to be analysed: in this step the researcher decided that the thematic coding method would work best for this study, looking for subthemes which were then moved into the main themes which were the sensors from the SM model as themes (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). Data collected ranged from spoken words, to music, to visual cues and written words on the posts.
3. Developing categories and a coding scheme or conceptual framework: the researcher created different coding categories based on the sensations from the SM model to separate the themed data collected into groups (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014).
4. Testing the coding scheme on sample text: in this step the researcher watched one of the videos that did not fall into the data parameters to test if the coding scheme would work for this study (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). The coding scheme did work, and therefore the researcher moved on to coding the rest of the videos.

5. Coding all the text: all videos that fitted into the data collection parameters for this study were watched and analysed. Notes were made on each of the videos, looking for subthemes that would fit into the sensor themes of the SM model. Aspects such as music, interaction and engagement of the fitness instructor, words spoken by the fitness instructor, visual elements such as lighting, environment and clothing were categorised into the appropriate themes and categories.
6. Assessing the consistency in the coding process: consistency in the coding was looked at to see if there were any discrepancies, and if the coding made sense to the study (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014).
7. Interpreting and drawing conclusions from the coded data: it is during this step that the researcher will be looked at all the data collected and interpreted the data to formulate insights and findings (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014). The interpretation was done in a deductive manner based on the chosen SM model (the general) as well as the researchers own sense of interpretation of the data (the specific) (Bezeidenhout and Cronje, 2014).
8. Reporting methods and findings: In Chapter 4, the researcher has laid out their findings from the data collection and analysis sections. They have been able to report on [1] how Virgin Active South Africa extended their physical, sensory experience to a digital, sensory experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, and [2] to what extent could the sensory marketing model be applied to digital experiences.

Limitations and delimitations

Limitations are constraints out of the control of the researcher (Enslin, 2014).

Limitations included:

1. Time: the restricted time period that the researcher had to conduct this study only allowed for the research problem to be researched from the perspective of the brand and using one data analysis method. Insights from the perspective of the Virgin Active South Africa consumer were therefore excluded, however, the researcher did make sure to ensure relevancy of the data being used.
2. Shifts in condition: this study was not only being conducted while the Covid-19 pandemic is taking place, but it was being conducted based on aspects of the situation. Therefore, the Virgin Active South Africa brand were making changes

to their strategy based on real-time consequences of the crisis meaning that the researcher needed to take special care when collecting and analysing data.

3. Lack of previous literature: due to the Covid-19 pandemic being a new phenomenon, there was limited literature speaking to a crisis of this nature. There was also limited literature on digital experiences from a multi-sensory approach (Hussain, 2019; Kumar, 2014; Riza and Wijayanti, 2018; Wala et al, 2019).

Delimitations are specific rules that a researcher sets for themselves that include parameters that they cannot exclude from their study (Enslin, 2014). Delimitations included:

1. Online and offline brand experience: this is the core of what the study represents and therefore it was a vital variable that the researcher always needed to be aware of and include.
2. Virgin Active in South Africa: while the Covid-19 pandemic is global, the researcher needed to remember that this study was looking specifically at Virgin Active in South Africa.
3. Virgin Active the brand: this study focused on brand experience from the perspective of the brand and therefore the researcher could not include data that spoke to the Virgin Active South Africa consumer.

Chapter 4: Findings and discussion

This chapter deals with the findings from the data collected and analysed laid out in Chapter 3. Data was collected using an unobtrusive collection method and analysed using a qualitative content analysis tool. Screenshots and links to the 12 Facebook videos analysed can be found under Appendix B for reference.

Findings

To reiterate, this study was looking to assess the digital experience of Virgin Active South Africa based on the multi-sensory brand experience concept, using the sensory marketing model by Hultén (2009). It wanted to understand how Virgin Active created a digital experience for consumers during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as if digital experiences could incorporate multi-sensory stimuli. The findings were as follows.

Coding process

The following subthemes were developed by the researcher and then grouped into the relevant themes.

Subthemes	Themes (Sensors)
- Music - Talking - Background sounds - Adverts - Environment	Sound
- Virgin Active branding - Movement	Sight

From this, it became evident that the touch, smell, and taste sensors were not present in the Virgin Active digital experience. From the literature presented in Chapter 2, Musiolik et al (2019) state that the sense of sight can stimulate the senses of touch, smell, and taste based on neural triggers, therefore giving brands the ability to incorporate these senses into a digital experience. However, in relation to the Virgin Active South Africa digital experience, no signs of these triggers were found to be present. What is interesting to note is that Musiolik et al (2019), also spoke to the

limitations of digital environments being able to integrate taste and smell into experiences, a limitation with potential to be researched.

Therefore, when categorising the themes into the five sensations from the SM model, the coded data looked as follows:

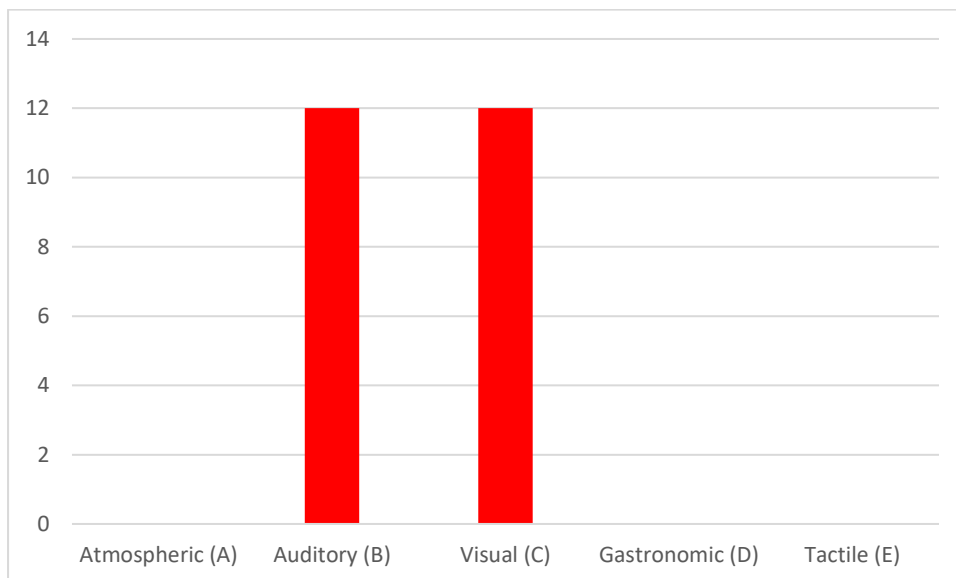


Figure 4: Overview of coded data

Auditory and visual sensations were present in all twelve videos, which was not unexpected, as the idea of videos is that people will be able to see and hear stimuli.

To note, there were subthemes picked up that fell outside of the parameters of the sensors set out by the SM model, so they were not included into the coded data. However, it was believed that they made an impact on the sensors and sensations being fulfilled by the Virgin Active South Africa digital experience. These themes included Facebook live, children, engagement, partnerships, and giveaways. Each will be discussed in context of the appropriate sensation.

Category B: Auditory

As described by Hultén (2009), the auditory sensation comprises any sounds that reinforce a brand's image or identity, including jingles, music or voiceovers. All twelve of the Virgin Active workout videos had some form of music playing in the background; faster, high intensity music was played during boxing, grid and Zumba; while gentler, slower music was played during Yoga and Pilates. For the two videos that were related to activities for children, there was also softer music playing in the background.

Literature showed that music is used as a distractor and motivator in exercise as it can distract exercisers from noticeable fatigue-related cues that they may feel, i.e. burning muscles, therefore motivating the exerciser to carry on as it becomes more enjoyable (Bigliassi et al, 2018). Virgin Active clubs have music playing on repeat in the background, and music is used as a medium in their classes, similarly to how it was used in the videos.

Another form of auditory stimuli used in the videos was the interaction from the Virgin Active instructors. Out of the twelve videos, two had no interaction from the trainer, only showing exercises being done to music, with subtitles overlaid. The trainer's interaction and engagement with the Facebook audience ties into experiences being co-created between brand and consumer (Omar et al, 2019). The Facebook live sessions also laid out opportunity for Virgin Active to create an extra element of two-way, real time communication with the audience, a feature of digital brand experiences (Khan et al, 2019). In video 3 (Annexure B), the live Fitness Fusion session between Virgin Active and Womens' Health, one of the trainers interacted with the audience during each interval. There were giveaways that required the audience to answer questions posed in the comments section, but there were also moments of just the instructor talking about the Virgin Active experience and keeping people positive between classes. Quotes included "Walk into our clubs, which are beautiful, and they are clean, and we are waiting for you. We want those doors to be open. We want to be high fiving you", "Did you get your sweat on?", and "How are you living happily ever active?" (Refer to Video 3 in Annexure B). These quotes speak to the physical experience that Virgin Active offers however, the instructors also addressed the digital experience of the workouts. These quotes included "It's all about community and the fact that we can connect digitally as a fitness industry, I really think that we have done a good job" (Video 3, Annexure B), and "How amazing that we can still stay strong and stay practicing together on these online platforms" (Video 3, Annexure B).

The interactivity from the trainers was also used to motivate and get people excited. In video 6 (Annexure B), the second live Facebook session that was analysed, the instructor asked the audience which classes they wanted to see next on Facebook, and if the audience wanted him to do another round of the exercises. This session took place outside, so the sounds of dogs barking, and birds chirping could be heard. However, in some of the videos, particularly the Facebook live session with Women's

Health (video 3, Annexure B), there were sound issues where the instructors could not be heard due to technicalities, the music was too loud so you could not hear the instructor properly, and at times the music was so soft that it could barely be heard. It is noted that all these factors contributed to the experience that was had by the consumer, however, its analysis was not part of this study's parameters.

The auditory sensation was also fulfilled by Virgin Active overlaying their signature sound onto the videos, as well as advertising clips shown during video one and three, advertising the Fit Fusion live workout. The sounds used in the clips included the Virgin Active signature sound.

Category C: Visual

Visual sensations of the SM model refer to any visual elements of a brand's identity, including colours, graphics, typography etc (Hultén, 2009). In 11 out of 12 videos, there was some form of Virgin Active visual branding present. It ranged from trainers standing in front of Virgin Active branding while teaching (Video 6, Annexure B), to trainers wearing Virgin Active gear (video 3 and 5), to the overlays of messages on the actual Videos being in the Virgin Active red (videos 1,2,4,5,6,7,8,9,10 and 12, Annexure B). The only video that had no visual link to Virgin Active was video 11 (Annexure B).

The movement of the exercises was also viewed as a visual sensation. In videos 4, 8 and 11 (Annexure B) the instructors refer to the movement combinations as something that they have done previously in their Virgin Active classes. In video 8 the instructor says, "for those of you who have been in my class before will know", and in video 11 (Annexure B) the instructor says, "do you remember this?". This type of visual sensation shows the link to the Virgin Active brand identity.

Potential category F: emotion

While conducting the data analysis process, multiple cues relating to emotion were picked up in the videos. Consumers are said to connect with brands based on emotional output, and that it is the feelings that a brand emits for a consumer that helps them to connect to and identify with a brand (Hussain, 2019; Kharat and Kharat, 2017). Sensorial sensations move a consumer to create an image in their mind of what a brand represents to them; pleasurable brand experiences that satisfy the senses of

the consumer leads to brand loyalty (Hultén, 2009; Hussain, 2019). Spoken words from the personal trainers such as “Celebrate the fact that you are moving” and “Become a part of a community”, sounds related to the Virgin Active classes such as a buzzer sound from videos 3 and 6 (Annexure B), and direct engagement with the Facebook audience can be triggers of emotion. In video 8 (Annexure B), the instructor for the baby boomers’ workout relates her skating exercise to old memories. She says “I remember skating at the Carlton Centre, and Wembley before that. Some of us skated like this to impress the opposite sex around us” (Video 8, Annexure B). There were also examples of emotional triggers in the comments sections of the videos. Some of these included: “So grateful to be able to do these workouts at home & Delia is outstanding, love her energy & professionalism” and “I miss the team spirit in shape class! I miss seeing fellow members transform their bodies and gaining strength”.

Although emotion is not a sensor, it is triggered by the five senses and is intricately linked to brand experience. Therefore, adding emotion as an extra element to the SM model could potentially heighten the brand experience. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Validity and reliability/trustworthiness

The below measures were put in place to ensure the trustworthiness of this research study (Koonin, 2014). The purpose of an interpretivist, qualitative study is to look at a phenomenon from a humanistic perspective, always looking for the deep human truth, and therefore to present findings that do not embody this truth makes the study almost meaningless (du Plooy-Cillers 2014; Koonin 2014). For this study, the aim of the researcher was to ensure that whoever reads the study would be able to benefit from the learnings about Virgin Active South Africa’s brand experience, so the following checks were done before choosing the data source.

1. Transferability: this study aimed to provide results that would be able to be applied to more brands within the fitness industry who are trying to create a digital experience (Koonin, 2014). The researcher believes that the findings will be able to contribute to helping more brands, however, there is still potential for further studies to strengthen the model, so this may only fully be achieved later on.

2. Dependability: all methods employed by this study, including the data collection and analysis method, as well as the findings from the theory, were qualitative in nature and spoke to an interpretivist study. Only data that would assist in answering the research questions was used (Koonin, 2014).
3. Confirmability: the researcher aimed to provide findings and interpretations of collected data to the highest standards. They made careful effort to show how everything is connected, and how each part of the research journey connected to the other (Koonin, 2014).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Concluding answers to the research questions

For research question one **“how have Virgin Active South Africa extended their physical, sensory experience to a digital, sensory experience during the Covid-19 pandemic”** the following conclusions were drawn.

Virgin Active South Africa used digital tools such as the Virgin Active app, their website, DStv and social media to provide their consumers with a workout experience. From analysing the workout videos put on Facebook, it became evident that their digital experience offering drew on aspects of their physical offering such as using Virgin Active branding, giving vouchers away for Kauai and Nu which are found in their clubs, bringing in their child care offerings with videos of children’s activities, and using popular Virgin Active trainers to do the workouts. However, the verbal and visual cues were the only senses utilised.

For research questions two **“To what extent can the sensory marketing model (Hultén, 2009) be applied to digital experiences”** the following conclusions were drawn.

Based on Virgin Active South Africa’s digital experience, the sensory marketing model cannot be used to its fullest extent for digital experience. While Musiolik et al (2019) address methods that can assist with the integration, there is still room for innovative methods to be designed. With the acceleration of digital transformation, there is a possibility that these innovations will be shaped sooner rather than later. However, it is important to remember that one of the limitations of this paper was shifts in condition.

The researcher studied a period from the beginning of Covid-19, meaning that the possibility of Virgin Active making changes to their strategy at a later stage does exist.

The researcher believes that they answered the questions clearly and concisely. A deductive research method, which was used for this study, calls for the research to conclude with whether the starting theory was fulfilled, or if changes were needed (Payne, 2014). And while the outcome was different to what was originally expected, and the SM model did not fulfil the need of a digital experience to the full extent, room for new research opportunities was discovered.

Implications of findings for future practices

The researcher found that there were multiple opportunities for future research based on the findings, however, the most noteworthy finding was that of integrating emotions into the SM model.

The multi-sensory brand experience concept describes experience in terms of emotional connects and how by stimulating a consumer's five senses, brands have the opportunity to form an emotional relationship with their consumer; bringing in a new level of sensorial brand identity (Hultén , 2009; Rodrigues, 2017). Findings showed that Virgin Active South Africa's digital experience incorporated levels of emotional connection through music and spoken words. However, the SM model does not incorporate emotions as one of its sensors, and therefore data could not be analysed by looking at emotional connection. This provides opportunity for a new type of model to be created that looks at digital brand experience from the perspective of our five senses, as well as from a perspective of emotional connection between brand and consumer.

Brands also can learn from this study. While the success of Virgin Active's digital experience was not the objective of the study, and was therefore not measured, other brands, specifically within the fitness industry, can use these findings to their advantage. Fitness brands are all under the same pressure to become more digitally savvy in the way that they provide experiences to their consumer. With the knowledge of how impactful our senses can be on a digital experience, these brands can use these findings to find innovative ways to market a sensory digital experience to their consumer.

Conclusions

This research paper has explored how Virgin Active South Africa made the switch to a digital brand experience as the Covid-19 pandemic affected their business interactions. They needed to move swiftly and effectively to ensure customer satisfaction. They employed methods such as posting workout videos to their social media channels, upgrading their app to include workout videos and other features, and they even had their own DStv channel where they uploaded workout sessions to. Out of these methods, Facebook videos were analysed based on a sensory marketing (SM) model, looking at how our five senses, which are present in a physical workout session, were extended to their digital experience offering.

Moreover, the SM model was analysed to see if a physical experience could be directly interchanged with a digital experience. Finding showed that there are still limitations to work through regarding the touch, taste and smell senses being transmitted through digital means.

Findings also reiterated literature from Chapter 2 that stated that digital experiences add an extra element of connection between brand and consumer due to the instantaneous communication that can be achieved (Khan et al, 2019). It has been suggested that these emotional connections between brand and consumer need to be explored more, as finding ways to bring that emotion alive in digital experiences can take the experience to a different level.

Ethical considerations

For this study, the use of unobtrusive research means that no human participants were actively involved in this study (Blackstone, 2012), meaning that there were no direct ethical considerations for participants to plan for (Louw, 2014). However, this does not mean that this study was without ethical considerations. Each stakeholder who played a part in the study directly, or inadvertently, could have been affected, and therefore certain measures were put into place to protect them (Louw, 2014). These stakeholders could include the broader public who have an interest in the research topic, Vega, as the academic institution providing the researcher the opportunity to conduct this study, the broader fitness industry who would like to learn from this study about Virgin Active South Africa and apply it to their own strategies, Virgin Active South Africa, and even the researcher (Louw, 2014).

For the researcher, ethical considerations included:

1. Falsifying information: the researcher may not deliberately have altered data if they were not happy with the outcome of the analysis, or if they wanted to avoid the laborious aspects of analysing the data (Louw, 2014). For example, if the researcher found out that the Virgin Active South Africa digital brand experience was not what they perceived it to be, they cannot alter information to suit themselves.
2. Distorting results: this is closely linked to falsifying information and required that the researcher did not overemphasise certain aspects of the data that they preferred or provide incorrect information that would have distorted the interpretation of the findings (Louw, 2014). Even though this can be difficult in unobtrusive studies as the data being analysed already exists from other sources (Blackstone, 2012), the researcher needed to take extra precaution that they spoke true to all information collected from the Virgin Active South Africa's Facebook profile.
3. Bias: even though bias of Virgin Active South Africa's stakeholders was removed due to the use of unobtrusive research (Strydom and Bezeidenhout, 2014), the researcher still needed to make sure that their own bias did not influence the research (Louw, 2014). As with falsifying information and distorting results, if the researcher for example found that their chosen model did not fit the Virgin Active brand experience, they could not change it to show that their method was most effective (Louw, 2014).

Ethics are the foundation to any research study, and therefore making sure that this study follows the correct ethical codes is of utmost importance to the researcher.

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Appendices:

Annexure A: Ethical clearance form



15 July 2020



Student name: Janine Dana Paiken

[REDACTED]

Campus: Vega Bordeaux



Re: Approval of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Strategic Brand Communication Proposal and Ethics Clearance



Your research proposal and the ethical implications of your proposed research topic were reviewed by your supervisor and the campus research panel, a subcommittee of The Independent Institute of Education's Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee.



Your research proposal posed no significant ethical concerns and we hereby provide you with ethical clearance to proceed with your data collection.



There may be some aspects that you still need to address in your proposal. If this is the case, feedback will be provided to you in writing. You will need to address these aspects in consultation with your supervisor.

In the event of you deciding to change your research topic or methodology in any way, kindly consult your supervisor to ensure that all ethical considerations are adhered to and pose no risk to any participant or party involved. A revised ethical clearance letter will be issued in such instances.

We wish you all the best with your research!

Yours sincerely,

Peet Engelbrecht
Supervisor

[REDACTED]

Dr. Helena van Wyk
Campus Postgraduate
Coordinator – RESM8419

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CONDITIONS TO BE FULFILLED IN RELATION TO RESEARCH

Permission is granted to proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met and may be withdrawn should any of these conditions be flouted.

Please note: The panel has not considered the merits, accuracy or ethical soundness of the research. The only merits examined are the use of The IIE as a sample.

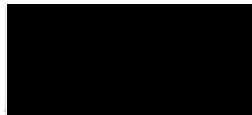
Permission is granted subject to the following conditions:

1. The researcher(s) will need to obtain informed consent in writing from all of the participants in his/ her sample if the study is not anonymous.
2. The researcher(s) may only use the data collected for research purposes and in no other way.
3. Photographs of human subjects may only be taken if relevant to the research, informed consent was obtained, and even with informed consent, the photographs may not be published on any online platforms.
4. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
5. No names or identifying information of participants may be used within the research and the research must be voluntary.
6. Please make it clear that the information will not be used punitively in any way and participants may in no way be counselled/advised based on this.

The Independent Institute of Education Pty Ltd, its associated companies, employees, contractors, representatives and directors, are indemnified against all claims which may arise in connection with or as a result of any loss, damage or injury to you as a researcher entering into an agreement with a participant in the course of your research, provided that such loss, damage or injury is caused by the gross negligence or intentional act(s) or omission(s) of The Independent of Institute Education Pty Ltd, its associated companies, employees, contractors, representatives and directors.

Wishing you the very best of luck.

Yours sincerely,



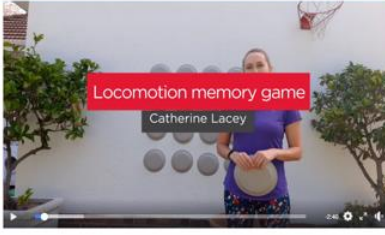
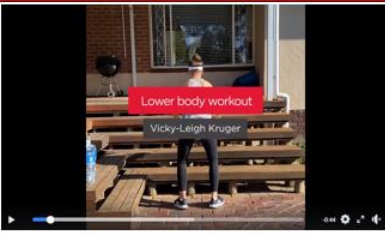
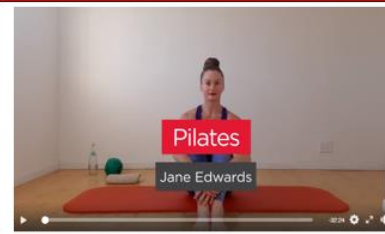
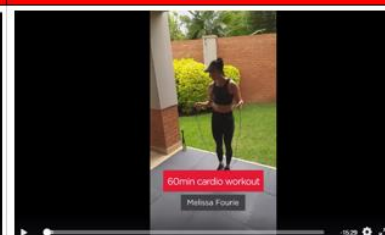
Campus Postgraduate Coordinator – RESM8419

Dr. Ria van Zyl

National Post-graduate Coordinator – IIE-Vega

The Independent Institute of Education

Annexure B: Video screenshots and links

 Video name: Fit Fusion overview	 Video name: Locomotion memory game	 Video name: Fit Fusion with Women's Health SA
 Video name: Shape with Delia	 Video name: Grid with Ceri Hannan	 Video Name: JP Venter Live
 Video name: Lower body workout	 Video name: Baby boomers workout	 Video name: Pilates with Jane
 Video name: Contact paper activity	 Video name: WOD with Adelaine	 Video name: Cardio with Melissa

Video 1:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/670584823698567>

Video 2:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/721024172037780>

Video 3:

https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=255371355831608&ref=watch_permalink

Video 4:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/722920758449360>

Video 5:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/1380337728825761>

Video 6:

<https://www.facebook.com/JPV12motivation/videos/10157028856536128/>

Video 7:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/231745321492672>

Video 8:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/291158498583521>

Video 9:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/2817099495079417>

Video 10:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/716793755729971>

Video 11:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/239200834027194>

Video 12:

<https://www.facebook.com/VirginActiveSA/videos/249629019450740>