International Journal of Applied Business and Management Sciences
Vol. 2, No. 2, 2021, pp. 123-145

ARF INDIA
Academic Open Access Publishing
www.arfjournals.com

GENERATIONS Y AND Z - A CHANGING PERSPECTIVE ON THE EVENT CULTURE OF FACTORY OUTLET CENTERS IN GERMANY

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Received: 4 May 2021	Revised: 15 July 2021	Accepted: 13 September 2021	Publication: 30 December 2021

Abstract: *The presented study analyzes the effects of Experiential Marketing on the attractiveness of German Factory Outlet Centers (FOC) - and associated foreign ones - with their strong focus on luxury and premium brands.*

Due to a changing competitive landscape and societal value changes, the retail sector has to find new ways to remain attractive for consumers; one of these is the use of Experiential Marketing. In FOCs, however, this development has not yet been realized in its entirety. The empirical study answers the question whether FOCs have overseen the relevance of changing market conditions or if there is no demand for experiences and entertainment in FOCs. Another focus of this study is to evaluate how far these marketing approaches have the potential to increase the FOCs attractiveness.

The results indicate that Experiential Marketing is less predominant for center visitors and customers than low prices, discounts and overall brand availability showing that FOC customers are less driven by hedonistic than by monetary motives and it is the scope of available brands that draw them to the centers.

Using data collected at two points in time (pre- and mid-COVID-19 situation) furthermore allows for an analysis of the changes taking place in visitors' perspectives and illustrate an even more drastic loss in relevance of experience-oriented factors in general and in particular in the context of the particular situation than previously suspected.

Keywords: *factory outlet center; experiential marketing; COVID-19; luxury brands; changing market conditions*

JEL Classification: M31, Z30

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world of increasing digitalization and tougher competition, it is all the more important for companies in the lifestyle industry to differentiate themselves from the competition, build a unique selling proposition and address their customers individually. Hence, they are increasingly using Experience and Experiential Marketing to inspire customers (Zimmermann and Littich, 2012, 223).

According to Kief (2008, 41 ff.), society is increasingly transforming into an experience society driven by hedonistic motives, away from need-based and demand-orientated consumption patterns to a pleasure and leisure orientation (Twenge *et al.*, 2010).

This is the cause for the success of theme parks and adventure worlds, as found at Disneyland or in other branded parks, like the Swarovski Crystal World. Conventional shopping centers are also increasingly moving away from a point of sale to a point of experience philosophy, where visitors are offered a holistic experience ranging from shopping and leisure to culture and education (Codina *et al.*, 2019; Gilboa *et al.*, 2016; Kief, 2008, 61 f.).

Since these strategies work for shopping centers, Factory Outlet Centers (FOC) also have the potential to become places of experience where consumers are offered leisure activities and shows in addition to inexpensive discounted branded goods. The central question, thus, is whether consumers perceive FOCs as similar to shopping centers, or whether FOCs should focus solely on selling inexpensive branded goods. This is a problem posed already by Whyatt (2007) for Europe in general and the UK in particular. Up to this point, no study has yet tackled this research question on a country basis and in particular not for German FOCs (German FOCs include FOCs in Germany and FOCs in the border area of Germany. Please also see Table 1.), which report a strong presence of FOCs that focus at least in part on luxury (32%) or premium brands (68%).

The COVID-19 situation in 2020 lead to significant changes in consumer attitudes and behaviours (Eger *et al.*, 2021). Inhowfar it impacted consumers' attitude towards experiential marketing and in particular FOCs remains as of yet an unexplored issue.

This study is thus similar in nature to Park *et al.* (2013) who, however, focus on a single Korean FOC instead on FOCs in general. It furthermore offers a general discussion of consumers attitudes and impact factors. By implementing survey results from 2018 and 2020 the study of the effects of the COVID-19 crisis and respective changes in attitudes has been possible as well. In particular three research questions are developed and answered via an inductive empirical study whereby data from two questionnaires is used to compare consumer attitudes, most prevalently those of generations Y and Z.

2. FACTORY OUTLET CENTER IN THE CONTEXT OF EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING

2.1. Factory Outlet Center - A Definition

FOCs belong to the category of "Value Retail", which is defined as a generic term for all types of retail for high-quality products at low prices. A distinction can be made between classic factory outlets, off-price stores and FOCs (Karande & Ganesh, 2000, 29 f.). Compared to off-price stores, FOCs can be seen as a kind of further development of factory sales, as they represent a combination of different factory outlets of individual retailers in a center complex. FOCs differ from shopping centers only in the type of goods (current goods), the prices (regular prices) and the type of operators. Mostly, their stores are operated by manufacturers and retailers, Guy (1998); Lausberg (1999, 30).

FOCs are used by manufacturers' brands to sell goods from overproduction, the previous season or returns and to sell individual items in various individual sizes and colors at greatly reduced prices to the end consumer. Often, faulty articles, discontinued models or goods produced especially for this distribution channel are also sold here. In many cases, manufacturers use the factory outlet as a direct sales channel to test new products for market success (Chevalier & Gutsatz, 2012, 56 f.; Lambert, 2017; Lausberg, 2002, 12 f.).

The origin of the FOCs lies in the USA, where the first FOC was established in Pennsylvania in the 1970s (Fernie & Fernie, 1997; Lord, 1984). This was followed by a veritable factory outlet center boom, which gradually moved from America to Europe in the 1980s (Fernie, 1996). The first European FOCs were established in France and Great Britain, (Fernie, 1996; Jones *et al.*, 1997). Only in recent years has the phenomenon of FOCs migrated to Asia and China in particular (Jiang & Wang, 2010). Due to restrictive political conditions and the fear of cannibalization of the inner cities, FOCs in Germany developed only slowly. In 2000, the first FOC was established in Germany. To date there are 15 FOCs in Germany (19 if the FOCs in the border area of Germany are included), whose focus is primarily on clothing putting Germany in fifth place in Europe (ecostra, 2018b). The German FOCs have a total shopping area of almost 254.400 sqm and account for approx. 5% of the total trade volume in Germany (as of 2017), (BTE, 2018; ecostra, 2018a; Pittroff, 2007, 10 f.).

The three largest operators McArthurGlen, Neinver and Value Retail mainly manage the 15 German FOCs. Some FOCs were established due to the restrictive market conditions in neighboring countries in order to be able to serve the German market in spite the high entry barriers (Furkert & Sailer, 2017, 136 f.). Thus, the Designer-Outlet Roermond is one of the most important FOCs in Germany's vicinity, as it is located directly on the border and has 65% German customers.

Table 1
German and near border Factory Outlet Centers (State of 03.2021)

Operators	*Name of FOC*	*Number of stores*	*Size (in m²)*	*Positio-ning*	*Example of luxury fashion brands*
Bavaria-Gb	Hanse Outlet Rostock / Broderstorf	19	3.000	Casual	
Hesta Beteiligungs GmbH	Seemaxx (Radolfzell)	44	8.500	Casual	
Value Retail	Ingolstadt Village	146	13.500	Premium / Luxury	Burberry, Gucci, Philipp Plein, Prada
Value Retail	Wertheim Village	138	13.500	Premium	
Neinver	The Style Outlet Montabaur	56	13.900	Casual / Premium	
ROS Retail Outlet Shopping	Designer Outlet Soltau	67	15.000	Casual / Premium	
SJ International Outlet Management GmbH	Ochtrum Park Outlet Bremen	50	15.000	Casual	
City Outlet Bad Münstereifel GmbH	City Outlet Bad Münstereifel	37	16.000	Casual / Premium	
Outlet Center International (OCI)	Designer Outlet Wolfsburg	90	17.000	Casual	
Neinver	The Style Outlet Halle/ Leipzig	71	18.000	Casual / Premium	
McArthur Glen	Designer Outlet Ochtrup	68	19.000	Casual	
McArthur Glen	Designer Outlet Neumünster	121	20.000	Premium / Luxury	Aigner, Armani, Prada, Versace
McArthur Glen	Designer Outlet Berlin	84	21.000	Casual	
Value Retail	Zweibrücken Fashion Outlet	117	21.000	Casual / Premium	
Holy Group	Outlet City Metzingen	136	40.000	Premium / Luxury	Escada, Fendi, Loro Piana, Prada
Value Retail	Maasmechelen Villagen (Belgium)	104	19.700	Premium / Luxury	Armani, Boss, Karl Lagerfeld, Prada
Neinver	The Style Outlet Roppenheim (France)	99	27.000	Casual / Premium	
Mc Arthur Glen	Designer Outlet Salzburg (Austria)	88	28.000	Premium / Luxury	Boss, Escada, Karl Lagerfeld, Philipp Plein
McArthur Glen	Designer Outlet Roermond (Netherlands)	184	46.700	Premium / Luxury	Chloé, Gucci, Roberto Cavalli, Versace

In Germany, most FOCs sell large brands serving the full scope of casual to luxury. Table 1 gives an overview of the exact positioning of the FOCs in Germany and their approximate size. Some FOC outside of Germany are listed due to their relevance for the German market. Of the 19 considered FOCs six (32%) offer a wider selection of luxury fashion brands and 13 (68%) focus either entirely or in combination with luxury or casual brands on the premium segment. This stresses the relevance of the psychological motivations underlying consumer behavior patterns with regard to the purchase of luxury and premium products when shopping in an FOC.

Within the framework of a survey conducted in February 2021 with 50 participants, it could be shown that the luxury sector has a strong connection to FOC for consumers. For this, only the respondents with experience with FOC and luxury were considered (30 participants). The survey has revealed that an FOC becomes more interesting if it can feature more stores from the luxury sector (with an average value of 1,73). Further 43,3% of respondents affirmed that they visit an FOC only because of luxury retailers and 33,3% say that it depends on the respective brands. The study also showed that 62,1% of the respondents already had bought a luxury product in a FOC. Thus, luxury retailers can enhance the perception of an FOC.

FOCs no longer focus solely on the sale of reduced goods, as the competition from e-tailers and vertical chain stores has become much too great. Instead, FOCs developed away from traditional sales centers to experience centers that serve as excursion destinations for families and friends and, with an appropriate range of services and entertainment, to make the visit become an "enjoyable social event" Dubas *et al.* (2015, 30). The fusion of entertainment, leisure and shopping is particularly visible in the Factory Outlet Center Zweibrücken (Zweibrücken Fashion Outlet, 2018). The OutletCity Metzingen or Wertheim Village, for example, also offer a comprehensive tourist program ranging from mountain bike tours to visits to leisure parks and hotel accommodation (OutletCity Metzingen, 2018; Wertheim Village, 2018). In this regard FOCs follow the example of shopping malls who realized the potential of experience oriented shoppers years ago (Sit *et al.*, 2003; Sit & Birch, 2014, 2015).

The question nevertheless remains whether these are the factors visitors of FOCs are looking for. A more detailed analysis of an FOC's clientele as done by Ganim (1998), Karande and Ganesh (2000), Reynolds *et al.* (2002) and more recently Shin *et al.* (2011) who discuss characteristics of shoppers in FOCs or outlet stores more generally become increasingly more important.

The study by Lucas (2019) in particular discusses in more detail the clientele of luxury factory outlets, although with a focus on Portugal.

That experiences are one of the main determinants of FOC visitors can be seen from the results of Park *et al.* (2013) for Korea and Koksal (2019) for the Middle East (Jordan) (he refers to experience oriented motives as hedonistic motives as compared to the price oriented efficient shoppers). Except for (Lucas, 2019) no scientific study on visitors' intentions and motivations regarding European and especially German FOCs is available as of yet.

2.2. Experiential Marketing

The fact that live communication is becoming more and more important is proven by the communication study of FAMAB (2017), showing a continuous increase in sales volume for live communication and integrated brand experiences. However, considering the COVID 19 pandemic and its effects on events and experiences in general, the RIFEL study (RIFEL, 2020) not only illustrates the social and economic problems but highlights that the upwards trend as for earlier years is severely disrupted by the lockdown procedures, a trend that is reflected in customer behavior as well. Still, event marketing is considered a valuable tool that as an instrument is an advancement of experience marketing and thus a form of live communication (Weinberg, 1995, 100).

The increasing prosperity and the change in values at the beginning of the 1980s with an increasing desire for self-realization and the devotion to hedonism leads to a stronger demand for experiences. Additionally, the change in values is a fundamental prerequisite for the consumption of experiences (Kroeber-Riel and Gröppel-Klein, 2013, 61). Considering that values differ across generations (Lyons *et al.*, 2007) with the younger generations Y and Z being more leisure and thus hedonistically inclined (Lissitsa & Kol, 2019; Twenge *et al.*, 2010) a study on FOC customers has either to be broad enough to include all possible generations or focus mainly on a homogenous sub-sample.

Today it is no longer possible to differentiate one's brand by functional benefits alone and lifestyle companies, including FOCs try to position themselves in the market with an emotional consumer approach and appealing advertising messages and to create added value and thus a competitive advantage through emotional benefits (Neumann, 2008, 14 f.) using both classic media platforms and more individual measures, such as the staging of events (Neumann, 2008, 15 f.). Experiential Marketing is therefore characterized by the fact that it is always staged, behavior-oriented, affective and multi-sensory, i.e. appealing to all senses, and hedonistically shaped (Bauer *et al.*, 2012, 14 ff.).

In order to successfully implement Experiential Marketing, companies create staged worlds or theme worlds that inspire, immerse consumers in another world and make them forget everyday life in the idealized world. The idea of brand experience worlds comes from the USA, where branded theme parks such as Hersheypark or Disneyland have their origin (Fernie & Fernie, 1997).

Due to the growing popularity of these facilities, also among older visitors, operators are increasingly expanding the leisure park concept to other industries. This means that more and more theme parks can be found in retail outlets that want to offer consumers a unique shopping experience (Gottschalck, 2013; Heinemann, 2017; Weinberg & Diehl, 2005).

FOCs are characterized by a high degree of consumer orientation and a mixture of product and leisure orientation. The primary goal is the sale of the price-reduced goods. However, due to the experience trend, FOCs are increasingly developing into experience-oriented entertainment centers, which are characterized by a unique ambience, a comprehensive range of gastronomy and an ever-increasing number of events.

2.3. Drivers of Factory-Outlet-Center Consumer Behavior

Section 2.2 argued that German FOCs report a strong focus on luxury and premium brands. The motivations of luxury consumers as shown by Ghosh and Varshney (2013) can be summarized into the three main motives of hedonistic consumption (Vigneron & Johnson, 1999, 2004), conspicuous / Veblenian consumption (Mason, 1981; Veblen, 1899) and consumption as a means for self-expression (including the bandwagon and the snob effect (Leibenstein, 1950) as well as symbolic consumption).

In regards to luxury and premium FOCs it is mainly the hedonistic consumption and the bandwagon effect that drive consumers.

The previous section 2.2 illustrated that due to changing values in the younger generations; hedonistic motives become increasingly more prevalent which leads to the relevance of events and experiences. As shopping itself becomes the experience the hedonistic motive of luxury shopping is satisfied not only by the brand experience but as well by the additional offers of the FOCs.

The rise of social media celebrities and their impact on users' life choices especially in younger generations (Chopra *et al.*, 2021) illustrates the relevance of social belonging in these generations. An FOC allows younger people who in many cases only possess limited income opportunities to purchase luxury or premium brands, which allows them to adhere more strongly to their peer group. Shopping at an FOC focusing on luxury and premium brands especially considering generation Z and in part generation Y as well is thus driven by a bandwagon effect.

Combining both aspects into a comprehensive approach it can be stated that for younger generations shopping at an FOC is mainly driven by hedonistic factors via the experiences they make during shopping and the low prices that allow them a shopping potential beyond their regular means.

2.4. Research Questions

While the previous sections suggest that FOCs and shopping centers have structural similarities, it can be assumed that they attract a different type of consumer. It is obvious that FOCs primarily reach price-oriented consumers through their business model, especially the so-called smart shoppers (Pabst and Brambach, 1999, 166), who have a strong brand orientation and knowledge in addition to a strong price orientation. From this, the first research question is derived:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Do service offers inspire visitors to an FOC more than events, shows and experiences?

This question also goes along with the results by Koksal (2019) and Park *et al.* (2013) and would emphasize a less distinct role of the hedonistic shopping motive.

Based on the prior discussion on experiences and events as a primary tool of experiential marketing, the following question can be formulated:

Research Question 2 (RQ2): Are events a measure for customer retention?

As shown, experiences and events serve to emotionally address the consumer (Neumann, 2008, 14 ff.). This form of addressing consumers leads to a stronger customer loyalty to the brand or the company. Transferred to FOCs, the third research question emerges within the framework of this study:

Research Question 3 (RQ3): Do experiences and events increase the attractiveness of FOCs?

Both RQ2 and RQ3 take up the hedonistic motive and question the scope of its effectiveness.

Note, the bandwagon effect as a driver of frequenting an FOC is not considered separately but will be considered as part of RQ3.

3. METHODOLOGY

The required data was collected through two waves of a quantitative online survey. The first wave was conducted in summer 2018 and the second wave in autumn 2020. The second wave in 2020 also allowed for a detailed analysis of the effects that the COVID-19 situation (still ongoing as of early/mid 2021) has on participants' opinions about shopping at FOCs.

Since, according to Lange *et al.* (2005) and Rosenkranz (1998), it can be assumed that people of different age groups display diverging consumption patterns and motives. This study does not claim representativeness for the whole of Germany, where the study has been conducted, but focuses primarily on the younger generations - Generation Y and Generation Z, defined here as the cohort of people younger than 39 years of age. These are not only the digitally more affine generations with their own purchasing power, but also those generations for whom experiences while shopping play a central role (Karande & Ganesh, 2000; OC&C, 2019). Additionally, these two generations are the central customer groups of FOCs, especially regarding the near future (Karande & Ganesh, 2000; Storefront, 2019).

Due to the stated explorative character of the study, which serves to balance a detailed study, only post-factual representativeness was taken into account and the data collection was carried out in the form of a random convenience sample, whereby care was taken to ideally use channels that are primarily frequented by the target group outlined above.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. Description of the Data Set

After data pre-processing, the data set contains 312 observations. 150 of the 312 respondents resulted from the first wave and the remaining 162 from the second wave. Of the 312 valid respondents, roughly 15% have no prior personal experience with FOCs.

Since the core target group of this study is made up of members of the generations Y and Z, the median age in the sample was 24.74 years and

71.8% of the respondents were women and the rest men (not restricting the representativeness of the study as the main target group of FOCs are women). Due to the young age of the respondents, they have a median net household income of 1.413€, with about 60% having a net household income below 2.000€. The income lies slightly above the median income reported by Eurostat for comparable age cohorts. The generally young age of the respondents is also one of the reasons why 88.8% of those surveyed stated that they were still unmarried and only 23 already have children of their own.

4.2. First Insights on Event Marketing in Factory Outlet Centers

RQ1: Do service offers inspire visitors to an FOC more than events, shows and experiences?

Two sets of questions have been used to determine which service and experience offers are preferred. On average, the respondents gave the following evaluations, whereby the individual offers are already arranged in both tables with regard to their overall average relevance. Table 2 summarizes the average ratings for service offerings and Table 3 for experience offerings.

Table 2
Ranking of the most preferred Services

Rank	*Service*	*Mean*	*2018 Sample*	*2020 Sample*
1	Well-arranged stores	3.45	**3.47**	3.43
2	Factory Outlet Online-store*	**3.44**	**3.29**	3.58
3	Loyalty cards	**3.32**	**3.26**	**3.38**
4	Interactive mirrors	3.25	**3.15**	3.33
5	Interactive displays	3.01	**2.94**	3.08
6	Self-serve check-outs	2.92	2.83	3.01
7	Tablets in the FOC*	2.92	2.74	3.09
8	Personal shopping app	2.88	**2.93**	2.84
9	Digital store features*	2.70	2.54	2.84
10	Group offers	2.69	2.80	2.58
11	Delivery services	2.55	2.65	2.46

Note: Samples with a significant difference between the 2018 and the 2020 results are marked with an asterisk after the service (One-sided Mann-Whitney-U-Test with $p < 0.05$). Significant differences between men and women are marked in bold face (One-sided Mann-Whitney-U-Test with $p<0.05$).

A direct comparison of the two tables would require the use of a multivariate variance analysis with 20 dependent variables and would entail corresponding problems regarding the current sample size. An indirect comparison of the tables by averaging over all services or experiences. For services an average rating of 3.01 results (2.96 in 2018 and 3.06). There is no significant chance from 2018 to 2020 (Mann-Whitney-U-Test: p-value = 0.331). Experiences are rated on average at 2.49 (2.69 in 2018 and 2.29 in 2020). The change from 2018 to 2020 is signficant (Mann-Whitney-U-Test: p-value = 0.000). Comparing the average for services and experiences significant differences results (Wilcoxon-Test: p-value = 0.000) with experiences being rated significantly worse than services on average. This interpretation might however be misleading, since it assumes that the selection of services and experiences is exhaustive and representative for all FOCs.

It is telling that the relevance of services is increasing moderately by 0.1 points on average while the relevance of experiences is sharply declining by 0.4 points when switching from 2018 to 2020. Considering the COVID-19 situation of 2020 might explain this change in customers' values which in turn lead to a different evaluation of experiences and events Kroeber-Riel and Gröppel-Klein (2013).

Since the two tables provide the results for each of the two sampling periods separately, differences can be made out. It is interesting to note that online offers gain a significant boost while events and experiences significantly decline, illustrating a potential effect of the COVID-19 situation, which made offline shopping in an FOC considerably more burdensome leading visitors to focus even less on hedonistic experiences and more on shopping as the main event.

The general trend that services are considered more important than experiences is evident, if only due to the fact that of the experiences only the tasting activities (with an average value of 3.48) are significantly above the theoretical average of 3 (p-value < 0.001). In the case of services, five out of 11 offers are rated as significantly above average (p-value < 0.001). Similarly, the worst category for experiences, with a mean of 1.81, is significantly below the theoretical average (p-value < 0.001); the worst category for services has a mean value of 2.55.

This trend is supported by the fact that 59.3% of the respondents stated that they would not spend more money or plan to spend more if more experiences and events were offered during their visit to an FOC. Likewise, 58% of the respondents would not visit an FOC more often just because events take place there. Although this result may seem counterintuitive at first glance, it is consistent with the findings of Sit *et al.* (2003), who argue that the service-oriented shoppers can also be considered entertainment-oriented. Also during the time of the second survey an overall decline of dwell times in recreational facilities has been reported for the Euro zone in general and in Germany in particular (Deutsche Bundesbank, 2020).

Table 3
Ranking of the most preferred Experiences

Rank	*Experience*	*Mean*	*2018 Sample*	*2020 Sample*
1	Tastings / Trials	**3.48**	**3.56**	**3.41**
2	Changing pop-up worlds	2.94	3.05	2.84
3	Theme worlds*	**2.73**	**2.97**	2.51
4	Tutorials*	**2.66**	**2.87**	2.48
5	Shows (Autographs sessions, Cooking-Shows)*	2.39	2.70	2.10
6	Concerts*	2.17	2.57	1.81
7	Merry-go-rounds, Ice rink	2.16	2.25	2.07
8	Liveshows (Holiday on Ice)*	**2.03**	**2.27**	1.81
9	Readings*	1.81	**2.01**	1.61

Note: Samples with a significant difference between the 2018 and the 2020 results are marked with an asterisk after the experience (One-sided Mann-Whitney-U-Test with $p < 0.05$). Significant differences between men and women are marked in bold face (One-sided Mann-Whitney-U-Test with $p<0.05$).

If the sample is divided according to whether participants have already visited an FOC before, it is remarkable that a significant difference (Mann-Whitney-U-Test: p-value < 0.05) only exists with regard to delivery services and regarding the experiences, with concerts, readings, tutorials and live-shows, while the other categories are evaluated almost identically. A comparable pattern also emerges with regard to the income and age of the respondents. Here there are only slightly significant differences to be noted regarding interactive mirrors (Mann-Whitney-U-Test: p-value < 0.1) and readings (Mann-Whitney-U-Test: p-value < 0.05). Controlling for gender, the picture is more consistent. Even if not significantly so, in all cases women report higher values, so it can be assumed that additional offers are more interesting for them per se than for men.

Table 4
Reasons for Visiting an FOC

Rank	*Reason*	*Mean*	*2018 Sample*	*2020 Sample*
1	Good prices*	4.01	3.45	4.53
2	Brand variety*	3.72	3.13	4.27
3	Brand selection*	**3.66**	3.04	4.23
4	Brand conscious shopping*	**3.38**	2.89	3.82
5	Ample parking*	3.41	2.66	4.11
6	Good reachability*	3.28	2.59	3.93

Rank	*Reason*	*Mean*	*2018 Sample*	*2020 Sample*
7	Positioning of the FOC*	3.14	2.67	3.57
8	Everything in one Place*	2.88	2.41	3.31
9	Holiday	2.33	2.29	2.37
10	Catering*	2.43	1.86	2.95
11	Entertainment	1.76	1.81	1.72
12	Events	1.66	1.70	1.62

Note: Samples with a significant difference between the 2018 and the 2020 results are marked with an asterisk after the reason (One-sided Mann-Whitney-U-Test with $p < 0.05$). Significant differences between men and women are marked in bold face (One-sided Mann-Whitney-U-Test with $p<0.05$).

Considering the reasons for visiting an FOC, as summarized in Table 4, women again report the higher values per se whereas here only in two cases the differences actually become significant. Regardless of gender, it can therefore be concluded that events are the least important aspect for visiting an FOC. A hedonistic motive for the visit of an FOC is thus highly unlikely. In particular, it is more objective factors such as price, product range and breadth as well as accessibility that are valued by customers.

Concluding, this means that services generally play a more important role in visiting an FOC than experiences. However, there are some significant differences between the sexes that may be of interest to FOC operators. Likewise, there are individual types of experiences (trial campaigns) which, although already established, are considered more relevant by the respondents than any other services. These campaigns make the product more tangible and bind the customer via the fact that he has already used the product and is psychologically ready to buy it. This is comparable to the endowment effect according to which a physical or immaterial object is perceived as more valuable if it is considered personal property (Knetsch, 1989; Morewedge & Giblin, 2015).

In 2020, service oriented and objective aspects of the shopping experience, in particular prices and product variety gain in relevance whereas event and experience-oriented aspects decrease in relevance. While a big part of this change might be due to the COVID-19 situation the results, also point to a changing perspective of how FOCs are viewed in particular by the younger generations.

RQ2: Are events a measure for customer retention?

60.9% (59.3% in 2018 and 62.3% in 2020) of the respondents state that events do not increase their willingness-to-spend, while another 28.2% (25.3% in

2018 and 30.9% in 2020) are still uncertain. A Chi-Square-Test (p-value = 0.046) indicates that the willingness-to-spend changed significantly over time with an overall lower willingness in 2020. While this shows that events are not a reliable tool for FOC operators to increase their revenues, it does not necessarily indicate that they cannot contribute to customer loyalty. It also establishes that although the COVID-19 situation let to a more critical stance towards events and an increased uncertainty, there always has been a distinct front representing this opinion from the outset.

In order to focus on customer loyalty, it is possible to ask whether an FOC has already been visited or whether an FOC would be visited more often at events. It is Sierra and Hyman (2011) who show that the customers perception of the FOC impacts the motivation to shop there. In this regard, however, no significant differences can be detected (62.5% of those who have already visited an FOC compared to 64.6% of those who have not yet visited an FOC). Events are thus not a suitable tool to incite customer loyalty or motivate customers to return. Additionally, neither those who have prior experience with visiting FOCs nor those who have prior experience with events at FOCs have a significantly higher inclination to spend more money when events are offered.

This argument nonetheless has to be critically evaluated because, of the 264 (84.6%) respondents who have already visited an FOC, only 46 (17.4%) state that they have already actively taken part in events and can thus report from their own experience.

Combined with the findings of the previous sections, the pattern emerges that respondents do not visit an FOC primarily because of the events. Even when they have visited an FOC and attended an event, it does not significantly increase their motivation to return or spend more money due to the prospect of additional events. This argument holds true as long as the full data set is considered. Once the data set is split into the two sub-samples for 2018 and 2020, the picture slightly changes. For the 2018 sub-sample alone events actually provide an incentive for customers to revisit once they attended them Gildemeister *et al.* (2021). The data from the 2020 sub-sample however distorts these results.

Finally, it should be added that operators of FOCs are well aware of the need to retain customers and that appropriate measures have already been implemented independently of events. About one third of the respondents who have already visited an FOC stated that they already suspect that FOCs are undertaking efforts to retain them as customers, which in turn only includes those who are actively aware of this fact and have first-hand experience with FOCs.

RQ3: Do experiences and events increase the attractiveness of FOCs?

Since experiences and events are, as motivated in the previous section, subordinate to the services of an FOC, the question arises whether they can still contribute to an increase in the attractiveness of an FOC. In this context, the relevant reasons for the visit of an FOC and how visitors imagine an ideal day at an FOC are summarized in Table 5.

If one distinguishes between those respondents who have already visited an FOC and those without this experience, U-tests show significant differences only in regard of events, gastronomy and transport connections (p-value < 0.001). Regardless, entertainment and events share the last two places in both sub-groups. The respondents without FOC experience show a somewhat more pragmatic response behavior and place more emphasis on aspects such as transport infrastructure. The results remain largely unaffected by the control variables of age and income, only a slight difference between the sub-groups with regard to parking facilities arises. In terms of gender, it can be seen that men and women differ in several respects, with women placing more emphasis on the aspects of brand-conscious shopping and the positioning of the FOC, but especially on events, with events nonetheless occupying the penultimate position among women.

To complement the primarily foresighted perspective on the visit of an FOC with a correspondingly backwards looking perspective, the question was asked what a successful day at the FOC looks like for the respondents.

Table 5
Aspects of having a Perfect Stay at an FOC

Rank	*What's a Perfect stay like?*	*Mean*	*2018 Sample*	*2020 Sample*
1	Relaxed shopping, in a comfortable atmosphere	4.47 (4.25 / 4.55)	4.35	4.56
2	Many bargains	4.21 (4.03 / 4.28)	4.19	4.22
3	Being wowed by the offers and attractions	2.85 (2.64 / 2.93)	3.04	2.70
4	Feeling like on a holiday	2.73 (2.48 / 2.82)	2.86	2.63
5	Entertainment and Taking Part in many attractions and events	1.87 (1.91 / 1.86)	2.19	1.64

Table 5 lists entertainment and events as clear subordinates and illustrates that the respondents visit an FOC with a clearly pragmatic base attitude. Therefore, a hedonistic motive for visiting an FOC can be ruled out especially if the results from Table 4 are considered as well.

Controlling for gender (the values in parentheses in the column Mean represent the averages for men and women), age and income, then it shows that age and income raise significant differences only regarding the first aspect. Only controlling for gender leads to significant differences in all five aspects. The corresponding means show that men, except for entertainment, again have lower values than women without any particular structure or change in the order of the aspects.

Table 6
Attractors of FOCs

Rank	*Attractors*	*Percentage share of mentions*	*2018 Sample*	*2020 Sample*
1	Discount promotions*	81.7%	76.0%	87.0%
2	Good prices	81.1%	82.7%	79.6%
3	Brand variety*	79.2%	74.0%	84.0%
4	Wifi	66.0%	62.7%	69.1%
5	Catering	39.1%	40.7%	37.7%
6	Digital Features in the stores*	26.9%	18.7%	34.6%
7	Personal shopping	25.6%	28.7%	22.8%
8	Shopping bag service	23.4%	24.7%	22.2%
9	Entertaining attractions*	9.9%	16.7%	3.7%
10	Child care	9.3%	12.0%	6.8%
11	Concerts*	8.3%	12.7%	4.3%

Reporting on attractors of an FOC Table 6 again underlines customers' pragmatic motives; above all that the price motives far outperform the event motives with regard to what makes a visit to an FOC more attractive. Similarly, to previous section the more objective monetary attractors gain in favor from 2018 to 2020 whereas the event-oriented attractors lose in favor. Asterisks after each of the attractors mark those where the difference between the 2018 and the 2020 averages is significant as tested via a Mann-Whitney-U-test (p-value < 0.001).

While the results do not directly show that a bandwagon effect is driving consumers' views of the attractiveness of an FOC the top three points make it clear that an attractive FOC has to offer good prices via discounts while at the same time offering as well a broad range of interesting brands. This perspective has been previously observed in Table 4 as well. Thus, while a bandwagon effect has not been shown directly all aspects that lead to the assumption of it being one of the main drivers of an FOC's customers clearly hold true.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1. Summary

While theory suggests that events and entertainment programs are a suitable tool for FOCs to both attract new visitors and retain existing ones, this view is only shared to a very limited extent by the respondents. As events and experiences were closely linked to hedonistic shopping motives this link needs to be questioned.

This contradiction allows for two interpretations. Even if events are highly frequented, this does not infer that they are the decisive reason for visiting the FOC or, if they are, that visitors are actively aware of this.

Part of the motivation has been via the link of hedonistic motives for luxury shopping and the strong presence of luxury and premium brands in the portfolio of German FOCs. However, 73% of the FOCs also focus on casual brands and FOCs might not be mentally linked to shopping for luxury goods so that corresponding motives do not become active.

As low prices are the main drivers of customers a point that became even more true in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic a bandwagon effect as a potential driver cannot be ruled out.

5.2. Recommendations for Factory Outlet Centers

The study provides a first systematic overview of the relevance of different services and experiences for customers of an FOC. These can provide a valuable input for the marketing department and the management of an FOC, as they show which offers are particularly desired by the younger, digitally affine clientele and thus by potential future customers. It also shows that events or experiences in general provide potential entertainment but additional services are better suited to boost an FOC's attractiveness. Beyond that, the character as a market place at a favorable location offering a variety of brands should not get lost. It is essential to provide an adequate infrastructure that is appropriate to the digital world as well as to the offline world, including both traffic-related elements such as parking spaces and good reachability as well as digital elements such as WLAN availability and online stores or digital omni-channel offers.

The changes from 2018 to 2020 show that events and experiences lost even more of their relevance. Leading FOCs to consider alternative approaches that neither put them in direct competition with low-price online retailers while still offering their visitors an additional benefit to visiting the center mainly for shopping purposes. This, however, would require a rethinking transcending the ideas of classical experience and event marketing.

The changing situation requires an even better understanding of the customer base. This includes not only understanding the customer types frequenting FOCs as can be realized by implementing CRM tools like RFM(C) analysis (Patel *et al.*, 2021), but also the combination of this type of analysis with more sophisticated AI (artificial intelligence) and ML (machine learning) solutions (Terstiege, 2020).

5.3. Limitations and Outlook

Both surveys included have only a limited sample size and a strong bias in terms of the age distribution, resulting from the focus of the study. Taken together these aspects could limit the representativeness of the study as the average FOC customer is not necessarily of generation Y or Z.

Furthermore, the type of data collection cannot exclude the existence of an attitude-behavior gap with regard to events. In order to address this point, it would be indispensable to collect opinions directly on site (see Park *et al.* (2013)) as to what reasons the FOC was originally visited or what significance the event has had within the decision-making process. An on-site survey would allow the calculation of center specific factors that influence the motivation to visit the FOC per se and analyze the customers it attracts. This approach would also allow to examine to what extent the individual situation differs from the motives for visiting an FOC.

Finally, this study reflects the perception of experience marketing in FOCs pre- and mid-COVID 19. Replicating this study after the COVID 19 pandemic might yield valuable insights into whether a rebound effect occurs with all customers trying to enjoy as many experiences as possible and being positive about any that are offered to them (Mehta *et al.*, 2020; Sheth, 2020).

Alternatively, the observed trend might continue, signifying that FOCs have to rethink their approach towards experience and event marketing. In either case, in the mid to short term a prudent question to ask would be whether advancing experience marketing endeavors towards the online presence of the FOC can counter the decreased interest in live events while instead building on a stronger demand for digital services.

From an academic standpoint, the results of this study illustrate the point that FOCs are significantly different from malls and more dedicated research into this specific type of retail channel is required.

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To cite this article:

Perret, J.K., Gildemeister, C.C. & Mehn, A. Generations Y and Z – A Changing Perspective on the Event Culture of Factory Outlet Centers in Germany. *International Journal of Applied Business and Management Sciences*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2021, pp. 123-145.