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The Impact of a Flagship vs. a Brand Store on Brand Attitude, Brand Attachment and Brand Equity

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Abstract

How can flagships and brand stores contribute to building brands? We inquire about the relationships between store image, brand experience, brand attitude, brand attachment and brand equity using store intercepts. We find that flagships, due to the powerful brand experiences they allow, have a stronger impact on brand attitude, brand attachment and brand equity compared to brand stores. We provide retail marketers with avenues to offer increased in-store brand experiences by appealing to consumers' emotions, senses, behaviors, and cognition.

Keywords: Brand experience; Flagship; Brand store; Branding; Retailing

What makes flagships so special? Flagships are brandished as the apex of branding. An expanding number of brands are now offering consumers experiential retail spaces tailored to deliver powerful brand experience (e.g., *ESPN Zone*: Kozinets et al. 2004; *American Girl Place*: Diamond et al. 2009; *Niketown*: Peñaloza 1998; Sherry 1998). Retailers use in-store brand experiences as a way to differentiate themselves from their competitors, improve their brand image and build brand awareness (Pine and Gilmore 1998) and branding strategy (Kozinets et al. 2002). Previous research regarding flagships focused on brand narrative (Kozinets et al. 2002), sociocultural branding (Diamond et al. 2009), brand ideology (Borghini et al. 2009), and retail spectacle (e.g., Kozinets et al. 2004). These studies do not point out the differential impact of flagships vs. brand stores. Our study is the first to measure the capacity of both types of store for building brands. By doing so, we test the degree to which flagships provide an increased brand experience compared to brand stores. We also suggest that store image impacts three brand constructs (brand attitude, brand attachment and brand equity) through brand experience. Our methodology allows us to provide information on effect sizes for these relationships, and to test them in a retail setting immediately following an in-store brand experience. Finally, we address the limitations of previous studies on brand experiences (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009; Chang and Chieng 2006) by comparing different retail venues and introducing overlooked brand-related constructs.

Brand experience is defined as the "subjective, internal consumer responses (sensations, feelings, and cognition) and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications and environments" (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009, p. 53). Our use of this concept contributes to deepening the understanding of experiential marketing and provides researchers with a concept central to modeling experiential phenomena in shopping venues.

In the next section, we propose our conceptual framework. We then present our methodology and measures, discuss our results, offer ways for retailers to provide increased brand experiences, and highlight the limitations of this study.

Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Our study focuses on the differential impact of flagships vs. brand stores. A flagship is a store "1) carrying a single brand of product, 2) owned by that brand's manufacturer, and 3) *operated – at least in part – with the intention of reinforcing the brand* rather than selling a product at a profit" (Kozinets et al. 2002, p. 17, emphasis added). Only the first two characteristics of

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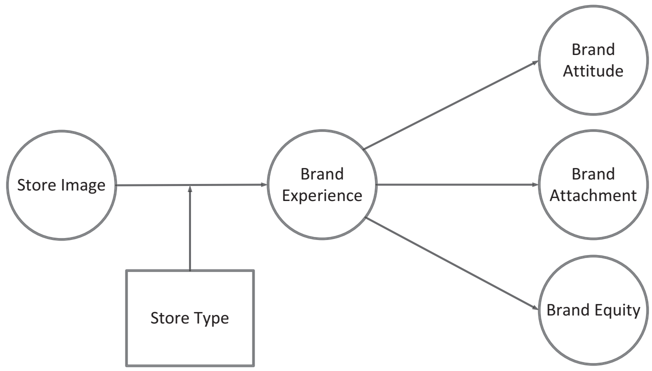

Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

flagships apply to brand stores. In our conceptual framework (see Fig. 1), brand experience is hypothesized to mediate the relationship between store image and three dependent constructs measuring different aspects of a brand–consumer relationship, that is, brand attitude, brand equity, and brand attachment. We hypothesize that the relation between store image and brand experience is moderated by the type of store, that is, flagship vs. brand store.

Store image is the independent variable of our model. It is defined as "the total impression represented in the memory as a gestalt of perceived attributes associated with the store, which are both independent and interdependent in consumer's memory, learned from current and previous exposure to stimuli" (Hartman and Spiro 2005, p. 1113). The link between store image and in-store experience has been argued for in the literature. Antecedents of store image, such as retail atmosphere, merchandize assortment and salespeople, can impact the in-store experience of consumers and therefore their brand experience (e.g., Verhoef et al. 2009). Similarly a "lavish décor, sleek finishes [. . .] interactive display, [. . .] trained labor force, [. . .] and high-profile, high-valued real estate [of a store] make an experience unique and individual" (Kozinets et al. 2002, p. 20). The combined effects of store environment, salespersons, merchandize variety, quality, and other antecedents of store image set the stage in which consumers create their own brand experience (Kozinets et al. 2002). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H1: A more positive store image increases the brand experience.

Flagships are *designed* to provide powerful brand experiences (Borghini et al. 2009). They offer a dramatic stage that embodies the essence of a retailer's brand (Kozinets et al. 2002; Sherry 1998) through "multisensory sensual opportunities" (Sherry et al. 2001, p. 466). Consumers place them in different mental categories from brand stores (Kozinets et al. 2002): they are not a place for solely buying products; they allow for play and fun (Kozinets et al. 2004), for the production of self-relevant brand meanings (Borghini et al. 2009), and for the consumption of spectacle (Peñaloza 1998). Their sales personnel are trained to convey the brand ideology (e.g., Borghini et al. 2009; Peñaloza 1998). Flagships provide more "anchoring points" (experiential offerings conveying the brand ideology) than brand stores (Borghini et al. 2009). Consequently, shoppers in flagships have more opportunities to experience the brand sensorially, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, which facilitates more powerful brand experiences. Flagships act as a quilting point for a brand as they allow for the grouping of multiple brand meanings into a coherent whole (Diamond et al. 2009). The combination of a well-designed shopping experience, well-trained sales personnel, possibility for immersion and co-creation of the spectacle increases the impact of the store image on consumers' in-store brand experience.

H2: Store type moderates the relationship between store image and brand experience, that is, the flagship increases consumers' brand experience in comparison to the brand store.

The dependent constructs of our model capture three different facets of a brand: 1) brand attitude, 2) brand attachment, and 3) brand equity. We propose that both store image and brand experience affect each of these three brand constructs.

Brand attitude is defined as the general appreciation of a brand by a consumer (Mitchell and Olson 1988). Since the components of store image foster positive retail brand associations which are a major aspect of brand attitude (Yoo, Donthu, and Lee 2000), we expect store image to impact brand attitude:

H3: A more positive store image increases brand attitude.

Experiences are pieces of information that convey symbolic and experiential benefits which can influence consumers' brand attitude (Borghini et al. 2009). Positive brand experiences should stimulate consumers' senses, and engage them through emotions, cognition and bodily experiences. As these dimensions converge toward a "feel good" experience, consumers should infer a positive brand attitude (Pham 2004). The more powerful the brand experience is, that is, the more emotions, thoughts, sensations and behaviors are elicited, the more positive the brand attitude should be (Brakus, Schmitt, and Zarantonello 2009). Kozinets et al. (2002, p. 21) argue that a brand experience "may well enhance the appeal of the brand", pointing to an increase in brand attitude. Both experiential marketers (e.g., Pine and Gilmore 1998) and researchers (e.g., Borghini et al. 2009; Peñaloza 1998; Sherry et al. 2001) offer convincing examples, such as Niketown, the American Girl Place, and ESPN Zone, that in-store brand experiences contribute to brand building and positively influence the general evaluation of a brand. Thus, we expect brand experience to influence brand attitude.

H4: A more positive brand experience increases brand attitude.

Brand attachment is defined as "the strength of the cognitive and affective bond connecting the brand with the self" by Park, MacInnis, and Priester (2006, p. 195). They claim that the "aesthetics portrayed through various brand elements" such as stores offer resources to build brand attachment (Park, MacInnis, and