Chapter 3
Multi–Sensory Fashion Retail Experiences:
The Impact of Sound, Smell, Sight and Touch on Consumer Based Brand Equity

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly competitive and digitally driven fashion market, retailers have to find innovative ways to gain consumers' attention and amplify their brand (Brakus et al, 2011; Barclay & Odgen-Barnes, 2011). This paper examines how fashion retailers can reinforce their brand through integrating multi-sensory experiences within the physical store, specifically sound, smell, sight, touch and taste and analyses if sensory retailing really can have a direct influence on consumer perceptions of a fashion retailer and consequently on the strength of its brand.

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly competitive and digitally driven fashion market, retailers have to find innovative ways to gain consumers' attention and amplify their brand (Brakus et al, 2011; Barclay & Odgen-Barnes, 2011). This paper examines how fashion retailers can reinforce their brand through integrating multi-sensory experiences within the physical store, specifically sound, smell, sight, touch and taste and analyses if sensory retailing really can have a direct influence on consumer perceptions of a fashion retailer and consequently on the strength of its brand.

It draws on the theories of experiential and sensory branding and consumer-based brand equity to infer that multi-sensory branding become an essential element for fashion retailers to operate successfully in the current business environment. The field of sensory marketing according to Krishna (2010)

and Hultén (2011) is still considered to be in infancy, yet pioneering studies recognise the importance of the human senses on how customers perceive and experience a brand (Krishna, 2010; Hultén, 2011; Peck & Childers, 2008). Moreover, academic exploration of the concept within fashion specifically is scarce and what does exist, fails to investigate what impact the senses can have when used collectively and strategically across different market levels and different geographies (Parsons, 2011). For example, Parsons (2011) in his study of New Zealand fashion retailers found that interactions between sensory stimuli have a significant effect on the fashion shopper's affect for a store and that fashion retailers are less differentiated in their use of sensory stimuli than they could be. A more recent study by Ballantine, Parsons and Comeskey (2015, p.504), makes explicit the need to examine the sensory experience holistically, stating,

When a customer enters a store they do not experience the music in isolation; they do not smell the scent without seeing the colours as well; they do not walk on the floor-covering without feeling the ambient temperature. The typical customer experiences degrees of stimuli as an on-going, integrated experience.

Similarly, focusing on the sensory retail environment of small fashion boutiques, Wade Clark et al's (2012) research showed that not only tangible cues affect a shopper's experience but also store traits like smell and lighting. Both highlight the benefit arising from assuming an integrated approach to sensory servicescapes for fashion retailers. The imperative nature of scrutinizing the opportunities and impact of the senses for fashion retailers has thus never been stronger (Lindstrom, 2005a; Hultén, 2011; Bronner, 2009). The aim of this study is to not only further reinforce this integrated approach to the senses postulated in these scant studies, but to assess the collective impact of them on the strength of the retail brand across fashion market levels, value, mid and luxury, and across destination fashion cities, notably London and New York.

In the past, priority was given to visual communication elements in order to influence consumers' psychological perceptions and associations (Kotler, 1973). However, traditional retail branding activities are not enough to operate successfully in the current market (Elliott & Percy, 2007; Lindstrom, 2005a). Retailers have to build relationships with consumers and differentiate from competitors by creating unique brand perceptions (Aaker, 1997; Kapferer, 2004; Schmitt & Simpson, 1997). They have to create brand experiences in order to build emotional bonds with consumers. (Gobé, 2001; Aaker, 1991; Smilansky, 2009). For many consumers, fashion brands are more than 'just' brands; they have an emotional and symbolic meaning and are a way for them to articulate their own individualism (Kapferer, 2004; Holbrook & Hirshmann, 1982; Travis, 2000).

Thus, with the growth of omnichannel retailing, the role of the physical store must be rethought as an opportunity to look beyond purely the visual expression, which is arguably replicable digitally, and engage holistically with all of the senses to facilitate distinction and differentiation (Lindstrom, 2005a; Travis, 2000). By addressing all the human senses, sensory branding can help to create stronger visibility and recognition within contemporary retail spaces (Gobé, 2001; Lindstrom, 2005a; Hultén, 2011). Sensory branding is one way to achieve and communicate the 'feel of a brand' and help distinguish from competitors and other commerce channels by generating immersive, emotional relationships with consumers (Travis, 2000; Gobé, 2001; Lindstrom, 2005a, Hultén, 2011; Krishna, 2010).

For the last decade, the five human senses have received increased attention from both academics (Holbrook & Hirschmann, 1982; Schmitt, 1999; Hultén et al, 2009; Krishna, 2010) and practitioners (Gobe, 2001; Lindstrom, 2005, 2008). Research has highlighted that sensory cues of sight, sound,

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