

Retail Spectacles and Brand Meaning: Insights from a Brand Museum Case Study

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Abstract

This article explores the expansion of brand meaning within a spectacular, retail environment. Spectacular retailing environments include themed retailing, brandscapes, flagship brand stores, themed entertainment brand stores, themed flagship brand stores, and brand museums. This research uses an extended case-study method to investigate the World of Coca-Cola brand museum located in Atlanta, Georgia. A brand museum is a type of themed flagship brand store, but there are some unique aspects. One key feature of brand museums is the resemblance to traditional museums, but, in the former, the brand is positioned within historical and educational contexts. Within the brand museum context, this study explains how brand meaning can be expanded along seven dimensions: humanization, socialization, localization, globalization, contextualization, theatricization, and characterization. Retailing implications are discussed.

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Operating in a consumption driven society, organizations are actively seeking ways to differentiate their brands by promoting an experience, rather than specific product attributes. The proliferation of simulated, extravagant “retail spectacles” (2004, p. 122) is an outward sign of an inward paradigm shift, where the United States is moving away from a service-based economy toward an experience-based economy (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Pine and Gilmore 1999). Retail spectacles are structured, manufacturer-controlled retail environments where entertainment serves as the primary means of consumption. Research suggests that consumers visit retail spectacles not only to purchase goods, but also to engage in fantasies, feelings, and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Pine and Gilmore 1999). One such retail spectacle is a “themed flagship brand store” where consumers visit the store to engage in personally relevant, company-staged experiences that focus on an established brand (Kozinets et al. 2002). The brand itself “becomes the basis for a retail approach in which new, entertainment-oriented services are offered” (Kozinets et al. 2002, p. 18). Themed flagship

brand stores are entertainment destinations that provide a place for retailers to leverage brand loyalty, promote a brand image, and convey brand meaning by allowing consumers to experience the brand.

In academic studies, a stream of research has emerged that investigates various characteristics of extraordinary retail spectacles and how these retail environments build relationships with consumers. The goal of many prior studies has been to detail specific consumer experiences (e.g., playful behavior, enchantment, allurements), but the notion of how themed flagship stores enhance brand meaning remains relatively unexplored. Here, we build upon the retail spectacle literature by investigating a contemporary themed flagship brand store: the World of Coca-Cola (WOCC) brand museum. We define a brand museum as a type of themed flagship brand store, with the addition of historical linkages and museum-like characteristics. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how a specific type of themed flagship brand store, the brand museum, enhances brand meaning for consumers. The contribution of this study lies in elaborating on the various paths that brand museums use to widen and deepen brand meaning for consumers.

Using an extended case-study method, this study explores the World of Coca-Cola brand museum. Research questions that guide our inquiry include: (1) What features distinguish brand museums from other themed, flagship brand stores explored in

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the literature? (2) How is brand meaning enhanced within the brand museum context? (3) What insights do brand museums provide for retailers who wish to use physical space to expand the meaning of the brand? First, we review the literature for retail spectacles and explore the unique characteristics of brand museums. Next, we provide an overview of our research method and outline seven dimensions through which a brand's meaning is enhanced. Finally, we discuss our findings and offer insights for leveraging brand meaning through the use of retail spectacles.

Theory on retail spectacles

Sociologists have developed the foundations for understanding an experience-based economy. Baudrillard (1988) coins the term "simulacrum" to capture the cultural order of contemporary consumption as an outgrowth of post-modernity in which the boundaries between real and imaginary are blurred. Based on the theories of Weber and Foucault, Ritzer (2005) proposes the idea that retail spectacles have oppressive nuances, luring consumers to spend ever-increasing amounts of money which never brings full satisfaction. Ritzer refers to this endless cycle of consumption as enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment. Consumers become enchanted with retail spectacles for a while and then are disenchanted, after realizing their lack of personal fulfillment. As a result, retailers develop more impressive spectacles to re-entice consumers. Ritzer (2005, p. 207) suggests that simulated, consumption spectacles are on the rise and will eventually be displaced by even newer means of consumption that are "infinitely more enchanted, spectacular, and effective selling machines."

Marketing researchers are similarly exploring the various means through which consumers oscillate between enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment in retailing contexts (Thompson 2006). In contrast to Ritzer's theory, Kozinets et al. (2004, p. 659) proposes an alternative interpretation of retail spectacles where "surveillance is not oppressive but actually desired and libidinally charged." In exploring ESPN Zone, their findings suggest that consumers are an active part of the retail environment, becoming co-creators of the retail experience. Belk (2000), Gottdiener (1997), Peñaloza (1999), and Sherry (1998) convey that consumers are directed through structured environments, where marketers clearly stage and manipulate consumer experiences. Kozinets et al. (2004) extends these studies by demonstrating that consumers enjoy and actively participate in a dialectical relationship with the marketer in the retail setting. The theoretical foundation for our study is not grounded in critical sociological theory, but in the marketing theory developed around themed retailing environments, such as that described by Kozinets et al. (2004).

The contributors to Sherry's (1998) *Servicescapes* are among those who are developing the concept of themed retailing environments within the field of marketing. Gottdiener (1995, 1998) argues that themes are being increasingly incorporated into commercial spaces. According to Gottdiener, American culture relies heavily on signs and symbols, and retail environments are incorporating such semiotics in the form of themes to attract consumers and increase sales. Although Gottdiener does not directly

define his use of the term "themed environments," he argues that these environments can serve multiple functions (e.g., via a multitude of products, brands, or activities) and include retail spectacles as displayed in shopping malls, theme parks and Las Vegas casinos.

Sherry (1998) is careful to differentiate his study of the "brandscape" Nike Town as slightly different from Gottdiener's idea of an amusement-centered "themed environment." He defines a "brandscape" as a "material and symbolic environment that consumers build with marketplace products, images, and messages that they invest with local meaning, and whose totemic significance largely shapes the adaptation consumers make to the modern world" (Sherry 1998, p. 112). Unlike Gottdiener's "themed environments," the "brandscape" tends to focus on a single brand, and consumers actively create meanings within this marketer constructed environment. Nike Town (Chicago, IL) illustrates how the retail venue of the brandscape combines advertising, merchandising, and entertainment so as to provide the visitors with a consumption experience that is intentionally designed to engage consumers and build relationships with them.

Peñaloza (1999) also examines Nike Town, but from a different theoretical perspective. Peñaloza uses the term "consumption spectacle" to describe Nike Town. She defines a consumption spectacle as a "postmodern market performance that involves consumer participation, exaggerated display, and the amplification of social values with an emphasis on knowledge of its mechanics of production as part of the experience" (Peñaloza 1999, p. 339). Peñaloza's study suggests that consumption spectacles highlight the importance of physical nuances and emphasize the blending of experience and cognition in post-modern retail environments.

Kozinets et al. (2002) flesh out the idea of "brandscape" from a retailing perspective and identify "several types of brand-related stores." First, these authors define flagship brand stores, themed entertainment brand stores, and themed flagship brand stores. Flagship brand stores have three basic characteristics: "(1) carrying a single brand of product, (2) being owned by the manufacturer of the brand, and (3) operated with the intention of building or reinforcing the image of the product rather than operating to sell a product" (Kozinets et al. 2002, p. 17). These types of stores can be exclusive outlets, such as the Body Shop, or non-exclusive as in the case of Nike Town. Themed entertainment brand stores, such as The Hard Rock Café, focus on selling a variety of branded products (i.e., Budweiser, Coca-Cola, Omaha Beef, and Hard Rock Café t-shirts) in an entertaining environment. Themed flagship brand stores, such as ESPN Zone, are hybrids in that they have characteristics of both flagship brand stores and themed entertainment brand stores, while simultaneously possessing an even stronger focus on the brand as the reason for the existence of the retail establishment. As explained by Kozinets et al., "consumers go to themed flagship brand stores not only to purchase products; they go to *experience* the brand, company, and products in an environment largely controlled by the manufacturer" (Kozinets et al. 2002, p. 18).

Kozinets et al. (2004) use the themed flagship brand store as a context to study the interaction between consumer play, agency,

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