

Ranis Cheng
Nottingham Business School
Nottingham Trent University
Chaucer Building
Burton Street
Nottingham
NG1 4BU
U.K.
+44 115 848 2743
ranis.cheng@ntu.ac.uk

Customers Perceptions of Retailers' Identities

Summary

This paper investigates customers' perceptions of retailers' corporate identities, particularly within the fashion retail sector. This research stresses that not only internal stakeholders' perspectives are important to effective corporate identity management, the viewpoints from external stakeholders [especially customers] are crucial to retailers on how to manage corporate identity. In this paper, customers' interpretations of corporate identity will be explored. Moreover, customers' perceptions and experience of retailers' corporate identities will also be examined.

Introduction

There has been an increased interest in corporate identity in recent years as its strategic importance has become more apparent (Balmer 1995; Bick et al. 2003; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Melewar and Akel 2005). Corporate identity is defined as '*the organisation's presentation of itself to its various stakeholders and the means by which it distinguishes itself from all other organisations*' (Marwick and Fill 1997: 397). From a managerial perspective, an effective corporate identity enables organisations to sustain competitive advantage (Balmer and Stotvig 1997; Melewar and Jenkins 2002; Moingeon and Soenen 2002; Motion and Leitch 2002; Schmidt 1995), differential advantage (Hatch and Schultz 2003), and achieve corporate reputation (Dowling 2004). However, in order to achieve these advantages, organisations must address a crucial concept, i.e. their corporate identities [who they are]. This is because differentiation from competitors cannot only rely on product positioning, but it also needs the differentiation of the organisation as a whole (Hatch and Schultz 2003).

It is particularly important to effectively communicate an organisation's identity to customers, especially in the retail sector (Burghausen and Fan 2002; Kennedy 1977). A well-established corporate identity can result in customers having stronger emotional ties to the organisations and greater trust and loyalty (Balmer and Gray 2003). Marketing practitioners have become increasingly aware of the importance of building and maintaining a clear and distinctive corporate identity (Balmer 1995; Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Nevertheless, there is limited empirical research on corporate identity (Balmer 1998; Balmer 2001b; Cornelissen

and Elving 2003) to guide practitioners in managing its corporate identity development, especially within the retail sector.

Within the literature, corporate identity has been seen as an organisational concept. Indeed, corporate identity refers to organisation's unique characteristics and it is rooted in employees' behaviour (Balmer 1995; van Riel and Balmer 1997). Corporate identity emerges from within the organisation. It denotes to how an organisation presents its distinct attributes to the internal and external stakeholders in the aim of achieving competitive advantages. Although there are a vast of research focusing on how internal stakeholders perceive corporate identity, viewpoints from external stakeholders have been neglected. The importance of customers' perceptions is apparent, this is particularly the case in retail sector where customers and the retailers have close interactions. Customers do not only identify with the retailers' products and services, they also identify other aspects of the retailers, such as their social, cultural and ethical policies (Melewar et al. 2005). It is believed that in order to communicate corporate identity effectively to the external stakeholders, organisation should understand customers' perceptions towards their corporate identities. Therefore, the aim of this research is to examine customers' perceptions towards retailers' corporate identities, adopting fast fashion retail sector as the research context.

Corporate Identity and Its Constructs

Today definitions of corporate identity have still not have been agreed due to the complexity and the multidisciplinary nature of the concept (Melewar 2003; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). But as Otubanjo and Melewar (2007) point out that, scholars should not attempt to fragment and address corporate identity by using different terminologies as if they were different; rather, academic should focus on the underling meaning of corporate identity.

The extant literature has considered a number of dimensions of corporate identity as presented in Figure 1. Many authors have developed their own corporate identity mix constructs which may indicate that there is a lack of consensus on the elements that constitute a corporate identity (Balmer 2002; Melewar and Jenkins 2002). However, Otubanjo and Melewar (2007) indicate that this is not the case. They argue that many academics, especially from different management disciplines, tend to use different terminologies to address corporate identity constructs which are conceptually similar. This signifies that terminologies on corporate

identity constructs actually refer to the same concept. This has been clearly shown in Figure 1, a lot of the constructs in the figure overlap with each other.

However, it is important to note that the researcher only uses Schmidt's (1995) five corporate identity constructs and terminology as the foundation of this study. This research has also considered other corporate identity components from the literature as seen in Figure 1, such as Total Corporate Communication which has been proposed by Balmer and Soenen (1999) and it is not in Schmidt's (1995) original framework. However, this component can be incorporated into Schmidt's framework [in the Communication and Design construct] as it is directly related to communication. This would help to widen the measurement of corporate identity. The following section discusses and evaluates each of Schmidt's (1995) corporate identity construct. The research also integrates views by other key corporate identity scholars in the literature, for example, Balmer and Soenen (1999), Melewar (2003), van Riel and Balmer (1997), Stuart (1999); and Hatch and Schultz (2003; 1997).

Corporate Culture

Corporate culture is the most important element of corporate identity formation (Baker and Balmer 1997; Melewar 2003) as it reflects organisation's missions and ethos. A strong corporate culture will improve employees' behaviour consistency (Sorensen 2002) and it may also enhance organisational performance (Lee and Yu 2004) as employees are more likely to commit to the shared values and sub-cultures within the organisation. Corporate culture refers to the mix of employee values and subcultures, history, beliefs and behaviour within the organisation, mission, philosophy, country of origin and sub-culture (Balmer 2001a; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006).

Corporate Behaviour

Corporate behaviour consists of all the behaviours within an organisation, including corporate, management and employees (Melewar 2003). It can be defined as '*the sum of those actions resulting from the corporate attitudes which influence the identity, whether planned in line with the company culture, occurring by chance or arbitrary*' (Schmidt 1995: 36). The behaviour of an organisation should be consistent.

Products and Services

An organisation's products and services should reflect its corporate mission and organisational philosophy (Balmer 1995). Company's branding strategies and its product and service performances can determine their corporate identities (Melewar and Bains 2002). Customer service is also essential in retail sector where customers have close interactions with the employees.

Communications and Designs

Corporate communication has been described as '*the act of effectively conveying to a company's stakeholders the corporate philosophy that the company regards as the ultimate expressions of its corporate culture*' (Yamauchi 2001). The purpose of corporate communication is to ensure that positive perceptions of organisation's identity can be formed (Schmidt 1995). Corporate communication is an important channel to deliver a company's corporate identity to both the internal and external stakeholders.

Corporate designs consists of all the visual elements of an organisation, including its corporate tagline, names, architecture, advertising, interior and exterior designs of company premises and product presentation (Alessandri 2001; Topalian 1984). The concept is often called visual identity (Baker and Balmer 1997). Visual identity is the operational side of an organisation as it is the face of a company (Topalian 1984). It presents the business characteristics and core values of an organisation to the stakeholders ((van den Bosch et al. 2006).

Market Conditions and Strategies

Industry identity can be defined as 'the underlying economic and technical characteristics of an industry' (Melewar 2003: 207). It includes the size of an industry, growth patterns, use of technology and the competitiveness of the organisations within the industry (Melewar 2003). The identity of an industry would project in the company's corporate identity, for instance, corporate strategies are often formulated according to the nature of the industry and the products and services the company offer (Melewar and Wooldridge 2001).

Effective corporate and marketing strategies, including differentiation and positioning strategies also constitute to a company's positive corporate identity (Melewar and Akel 2005; Melewar and Bains 2002; Melewar and Karaosmanoglu 2006). Corporate strategies which are initiated by the top management should be integrated in the mission and visions which will then be translated into positioning strategy (Cornelissen and Elving 2003).

Research Design

The research context lies within the U.K. fast fashion retail sector. Four fast fashion retailers have been chosen purposely for this research. The selection is deemed to be appropriate as all these retailers have international presence and they operate in the U.K market. They also target broadly similar market segments with one another. Moreover, they are established brands in the U.K. high street in their own rights. In examining customers' perceptions of retailers' corporate identities, semi-structured interviews based on Schmidt's (1995) framework have been conducted with fashion customers. Customers were selected conveniently and purposively. They must fit with the retailers' customer profile within a demographic segment between 20 to 45 years of age. Customers must have experience in shopping in at least one of the retailers' stores. They must also have visited the store at least once in the last month. This is to ensure that all participants have appropriate knowledge about the chosen fast fashion retailers. Overall, forty interviews have been carried out with the participants. Each interview lasted 45 minutes to an hour.

Findings

Interpretations of Corporate Identity

Retailers' logo

Participants from the interviews expressed that corporate identity can refer to the corporate graphic logo and its graphical elements. They felt that retailers' logo can help the customers to identify the brands. One participant expressed that the role of logo is to:

‘...it helps me to recognise the brands...’ (Retailer A Interviewee #5)

This opinion is also shared by another interviewee:

‘Graphic [logo] helps us [customers] to distinguish different stores. It helps to attract our attention...’ (Retailer B Interviewee #1)

Retailers’ store attributes

Respondents believed that store also plays an important role in corporate identity as one of the participants explained:

‘Logo doesn’t tell me anything’ about the company, it may help me to recognise the brand. But that’s it. You have to go into the stores in order to understand the identity. I wouldn’t say the logo represents the identity of the company though.’ (Retailer A Interviewee #5)

Customers perceive corporate identities of fashion retailers differently comparing to other sectors, such as the education sector, the banking sector, and so on. In the fashion retail sector, customers have close interactions with the store environment, staff at the store level and fashion clothing when they visit the stores. Customers use their own identities to associate with every aspects of the fashion retailers. Customers perceive these factors including ‘fashionability’, ‘quality’, ‘price’, ‘store environment’, ‘music’, ‘clothing range’, ‘customer services’ and ‘staff’ behaviour’ as important and as part of the company’s corporate identity. Participants have expressed how they perceive fast fashion retailers’ corporate identities, as one interviewee explained:

‘...I think corporate identity refers to how people look at the stores externally and internally... is probably associated with the whole experiences of shopping in the stores, so the staff, the services, the atmosphere of the stores should be part of it. Sometimes even the price and the quality of the clothes would enable customers to guess what kind of retailer it is...’ (Retailer A Interviewee #3)

Another interviewee also shared a similar view on the concept of corporate identity:

‘Graphic [logo] helps us [customers] to distinguish different stores. It helps to attract our attention, but I don’t think it can paint the whole corporate identity picture. The whole company, I mean the whole store represents the identity, including those who work there and us [customers]. It’s about how we [customers] look at the company.’

(Retailer B Interviewee #1)

Representation of an organisation

Interviewees expressed the view that a company’s corporate identity should be ‘*somehow related to what’s happening in the company*’ and should be ‘*about what the organisation is*’. One interviewee used the citizens’ identity cards to explain the concept of corporate identity:

‘Corporate identity is the identity of a company. It’s like if people have identity cards. The identity cards represent who we are individually in a country. It also tells people who you are, all your information, for example where were you born, whether you have any criminal records. So I believe corporate identity shares a similar concept. It informs people who a company is, its background, history, what it is doing and so on. This is particularly important in the fashion industry I think.’ (Retailer C Interviewee #5)

Reflection of customers’ self-identities

Respondents expressed that the corporate identity of an organisation should mirror their customers’ self-identities. This is to ensure that customers can associate with the organisation in a positive way, as one participant expressed:

‘It is quite important for a fashion chain to have a clear corporate identity, and the identity should be reflecting why customers buy fashion from them in the first place. Customers buy fashion from these fashion stores because they use these fashion appearances to reflect who they are, what their personalities are. So you can tell, I like chic fashion and colourful garments. You can kind of guess I am quite confident of myself and I am fun to hang out with. The identity of the fashion stores has to reflect the identity of people whoever they want to dress.’ (Retailer D Interviewee #9)

Customers' Perceptions of Corporate Culture

Unclear country of origin and corporate history

Some of the retailers' nationalities are unclear to the respondents. For example, no respondents could recall Retailer C's country of origin as Irish. A number of participants also failed to recall Retailer A as a Swedish fashion retailer, as one noted:

'I think Retailer A is a German company. It's the way they portray themselves, the way they do business. It's all very German to me.' (Retailer A Interviewee #10)

Participants felt that retailers' countries of origin and their corporate histories were not clearly displayed in the companies' culture. The findings oppose to the existing corporate identity literature where it emphasises that country of origin and corporate history are two important elements in corporate culture (for example, Melewar and Jenkins 2002; Melewar *et al* 2005; Schmidt 1995).

Divergent perceptions of corporate missions

Respondents could clearly identify case retailers' corporate missions as offering fashionable clothing to a wide range of audiences. This reflects the retailers have successfully communicated their missions to the customers. Corporate missions are important to organisations as they help to deliver companies' essential values to the public (Leuthesser and Kohli 1997). However, despite customers' familiarities with retailers' corporate philosophies, they have different perceptions towards their corporate missions. For example, customers perceived Retailer A as a fashion retailer that sells 'cheap', 'a wide range of' but 'low quality' clothing to customers. One participant viewed Retailer A's corporate mission as:

'...it sells bags of cheap disposable clothes to women, men, teenagers and children.'
(Retailer A Interviewee #6)

On the other hand, participants felt that Retailer C's corporate mission is clearly defined and customers were able to identify with the retailer. As one of the participants put it:

‘Retailer C’s corporate identity is very clear. It sells cheap clothes to different audiences, you know, cheap and cheerful. You can find lost of things in here [Retailer C], including the fashion garments, basic t-shirts, bed linens, childrenswear and more. It is really cheap. I think that’s why they attract so many customers.’ (Retailer C Interviewee #3)

Customers’ Perceptions of Corporate Behaviour

Importance of staff behaviour in retail sector

Participants were able to comment on each retailers’ staff behaviour based on their experience and encounter with the employees. The findings were in line with the arguments in the retailing literature. Within the retailing industry, employees at the store levels have close interactions with customers (Turley and Chebat 2002). Customers would be able to assess employees’ behaviour based on their personal experience with the staff.

In this study, fast fashion respondents tend to judge employees’ behaviour based on their knowledgeability of products, working attitudes, helpfulness, understanding of their duties and responsibilities and the degree of customer service. If the employees are knowledgeable of the products and have positive working attitudes, customers have positive perceptions towards the staff and the retailers. For instance, one participant from Retailer D expressed the views on retailer’s employees based on personal experience and observation:

‘They [staff] are all very young, I get the impressions that they enjoy working there. They are enthusiastic of what they do... Most of them are polite... Everyone is committed to their roles and responsibilities. I haven’t had any bad experience with the staff.’ (Retailer D Interviewee #4)

On the other hand, if the employees are not knowledgeable and fail to understand their duties, these would lead to customers to have negative perceptions towards the staff and the companies. For example, Retailer A’s respondents were not satisfied with the retailer’s employees, as one noted:

‘...they don’t really pay much attention to the customers... customer services doesn’t seem to be the priority on their agenda... they staff don’t seem to care, they are just there walking around and chatting... they are not helpful.’ (Retailer A Interviewee #2)

The above findings show that staff behaviour has a great impact on customers’ perceptions towards the employees and the retailers. Furthermore, due to the close relationships between the customers and the staff at the store level, corporate identity can be diluted if the services delivered by the employees are poor and if the staff do not fully understand the organisational culture (Wilson 2001). In Retailer A’s case, respondents had negative perceptions towards the company’s employees due to their behaviour, this could jeopardise how the customers perceive Retailer A’s corporate identity as a whole. It is because organisational culture and characteristics are deeply rooted in employees’ behaviour (Balmer 1995; Balmer and Wilson 1998) customers’ perceptions towards retailers’ staff behaviour would also affect their views on companies’ culture.

Duties of retailers and ethics of fast fashion

Increasingly, many respondents have paid attention to retailers’ other activities, such as their corporate social responsibilities. For instance, one of Retailer A’s participants has recalled the company as opposed to drug abuse because the retailer dropped a fashion model as its face due to the allegation against her drug use.

Fast fashion customers have also started to question the ethics behind the fast fashion concept. They felt that retailers could pay more attention to ethical issues, as one respondent explained:

‘We don’t know the working conditions of the workers. They are all in the Far East, it’s really difficult to regulate. Although the company keeps ensuring customers that their clothes are ethical sourced and workers’ conditions are good, how do we know that’s true? There are a lot of press investigating Retailer C and Retailer A, like under-age workers, long working hours and poor working conditions. Customers are always kept in the dark.’ (Retailer C Interviewee #10)

Some customers acknowledged that fast fashion retailers try to satisfy their needs and their demand for faster fashion clothing. However, this has not halted customers to perceive fast

fashion in a negative way due to retailer's unethical corporate behaviour, as one participant said:

'May be it's our [customers] responsibilities. We all want fashion within a short period of time. Retailers have to put pressure on the suppliers. Suppliers then put pressure on the workers, for example, asking the workers to work longer hours, employing under-aged workers...If you think about it, fast fashion is not very environmentally friendly. It's a vicious cycle...I start to wonder whether fast fashion is ethical.' (Retailer A Interviewee #8)

The findings have shown that fast fashion customers are more knowledgeable of what retailers do and how they operate. They are more conscious of retailers' corporate behaviour. They also pay more attention to ethics of fast fashion and environment. This has been supported by Mintel's research (2008) which shows that more customers pay attentions to the ethical and environmental concerns. Retailers' unethical behaviour does not only have an effect on customers' perceptions towards the companies' corporate identities, but it also puts the concept of fast fashion at risk.

Customers' Perceptions of Products and Services

Wide product ranges and fashion styles

To many participants, product range is one of the most important factors for them to visit the fast fashion stores. The product range should be wide as one customer said:

'I can find all types of fashion styles in Retailer D. It does a tall range which really suits me...they do a petite range as well. Their ranges are massive, from casual wear to smartwear...' (Retailer D Interviewee #1)

Fashionability is no doubt the key selling point of fast fashion retailers. To customers, product styles must fashionable and up-to-the minute, as one respondent expressed:

‘I shop in Retailer C almost every two to three days. The good thing I like Primark is that the latest fashion styles have constantly been brought into the stores, I know I will find something new every time I visit the store...’ (Retailer C Interviewee #2)

Participants were satisfied with all case retailers’ product ranges and styles. The fast fashion retailers have delivered a wide range of and fashionable products to their target customers. This has benefited the fast fashion retailers as more customers visit the stores frequently to seek for new products (Hines 2004).

Interrelationships between product quality and price

Product quality and price are other important factors for customers to shop in fast fashion stores. These factors do not only influence customers’ purchase decisions, but they also affect their perceptions towards the retailers. Many respondents believed that the product quality should be reflected in the price. For instance, if the prices are low, the participants would expect the products are in lower quality and vice versa. Retailer C’s product quality has been shown in the price range, as one customers noted:

‘I think Retailer C is quite honest. It offers cheap and value clothing to customers. So customers know what to expect from them. You pay a really low price, and the quality is acceptable for its price.’ (Retailer C interviewee #5)

While acknowledging that Retailer A offers fashionable clothing at relatively low price to customers, customers felt that its product quality is below standard, especially when Retailer A had been compared to other value clothing retailers, such as Retailer C, where its prices are much lower than Retailer A. Customers believed that Retailer A’s product quality has not been reflected in their prices, as one said:

‘I am very conscious of buying clothes from Retailer A simply because of their quality. The quality is generally quite poor. Giving the price I pay for the clothes, I would expect more from them...’ (Retailer A interviewee #3)

On the other hand, customers were satisfied with Retailer B's quality and this has been reflected in their price range, as one participant explained:

'I think they should be proud of themselves as they offer customers high quality products, although their prices are slightly higher than other high street retailers'.
(Retailer B Interviewee #3)

The findings were not in accordance with the existing fast fashion retail literature. The literature has stressed that fast fashion retailers should focus on delivering fast and new fashion at affordable prices to their customers, (for example, Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2006; Bruce and Daly 2006; Hines 2004; Hines et al. 2007) However, as illustrated in the literature review chapter, due to the fast changing business environment and customer demands, it is becoming increasingly difficult for retailers to sustain their competitive advantages. The results have shown that fast fashion customers do not only demand for new and fast fashion at affordable prices, they also demand for quality. This result has also been in accordance with the research carried out by Mintel. The findings of Mintel (2008) has illustrated that fast fashion has started to lose its attraction because customers have started to seek for higher quality clothing.

Strong awareness of store brands

Respondents were able to identify with retailer's store brands. This is because of fast fashion retailers' high street presence. Participants recognised that all case retailers offer their own label brands in stores, although they could not recall some of the retailers' product brands. This has demonstrated the nature of fast fashion sector where its retailers only offer their own brands to have more direct control and quick decisions over the buying cycles and lead time (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2006; Bruce and Daly 2006).

Fast fashion retailers' store brands can be described as monolithic structure in corporate identity (Olins 1994). The retailers use one corporate name and one consistent visual style to communicate with the stakeholders. Retailers' corporate name and visual style have all been recognised by the participants in this study. According to Melewar (2003), under the monolithic structure, retailers' corporate identities are the brands to the customers.

Variety of services and importance of customer service

A number of participants were pleased with the variety of services provided by the some of the case retailers. This shows that customers do not only shop for the products, they also focus on the variety of services provided by the retailers. For example, respondents were impressed with Retailer B's alteration service which customers can alter their clothing if they do not fit. Customers were delighted with Retailer D's style advisor service which customers were given advices on fashion tips and styles by the staff, as one said:

'They [Retailer D] have introduced the style advisor service to customers. I have never seen this before apart from in designers' stores. The service is free of charge and the advisors will choose the perfect outfits for you...' (Retailer D Interviewee #2)

Customer service was on participants' priority list. According to the customers, customer service is closely related to the behaviour of staff and management. If the staff behaviour is poor, the customer service will be below standard as a result; and the respondents felt that this is the responsibility of management to ensure that all staff have appropriate customer service trainings. Participants felt that Retailer A's customer service was below standard due to the poor staff behaviour, as one participant explained:

'I don't think they [Retailer A] are very good at customer services, not something that they are actually focusing on a lot... they are not customer focused and the staff don't have good working attitudes...' (Retailer A Interviewee #4)

On the other hand, respondents were satisfied with Retailer B's customer service and they praised its staff's behaviour, as one customer noted:

'Customer service in Retailer B is very good. They [staff] are well trained and professional. They know how to serve the customers. Not many retailers have done that well. They must have lots of internal trainings...' (Retailer B Interviewee #10)

The findings have stressed the importance of staff and customer service in retail industry to customers. The customer service provided by the employees is crucial to retailers in sustaining customer loyalty (Wong and Sohal 2003).

Customers' Perceptions of Communications and Designs

Importance of communications between employees

Respondents were dissatisfied with the communications between some retailers' staff. They felt that there is a lack of communication between management and staff as some of the employees do not fully understand their roles and responsibilities, as one participant expressed:

'I don't really like the staff. They don't know what they are doing... They don't seem to know anything, where the clothes are or whether they have any more stock...It looks like the communication between the staff and management have broken down somehow.' (Retailer A Interviewee #10)

Participants could assess the effectiveness of internal communication through the staff's behaviour and attitudes. For example, customers of Retailer D felt that the retailers' staff are knowledgeable and professional; and this is the result of effective communication between management and staff; and the sufficient trainings the employees have had.

Internal communication is one of the important elements in conveying the corporate identity of an organisation to the public (Balmer 2001c; Yamauchi 2001). In Retailer A's case, the internal communication between staff and management has collapsed and this has resulted in customers' satisfaction. Moreover, this would jeopardise customers' perceptions towards its corporate identity.

Unclear communicative messages and the use of stores as communicative channel

Respondents were not only concerned of the channels used by retailers to communicate with the public, they also paid attention to the messages used in the channels. To many participants, the messages should be clear on who the company is and what the company

does. For example, customers of Retailer A did not feel that the retailer has successfully delivered the precise messages to the public, as one explained:

‘There was a TV advert of Retailer A last year. But I couldn’t really understand what the advert is about. Not until I saw the logo of Retailer A at the end of the advert, then I realise it’s a Retailer A commercial. I think it’s a bit of wasting the money. If they are going to do TV adverts, do it properly and go directly to the selling points.’
(Retailer A Interviewee #10)

However, some participants felt that the communication between fast fashion retailers and customers can be delivered through their stores and high street presence. Retailers use their stores to deliver clearly who the companies are and what they do, for example, one customer of Retailer C said:

‘... I don’t think there is a need for them [Retailer C] to communicate directly in anyway. The store says it all really. The store is simple, the design is great. It’s full of garments. It is what Retailer C is about, offering customers lots of choices at low prices.’ (Retailer C Interviewee #1)

Another participant also supported the view which retailers can use their stores to communicate with the public, as one customer of Retailer B expressed:

‘When I see the window display, I know it’s Retailer B because of the clothes they present, how they present it, the colour, the designs... The displays tell people that the company sells clothes, accessories, cosmetics for children, men and women. The message is simple but direct. In my opinion, it connects with the customers.’ (Retailer B Interviewee #7)

Importance of store design and store environment

Participants believed that the environment and design of fashion stores are extremely important to customers. Fast fashion customers do not merely shop for fashion, they also shop for the experience in stores. They seek for store environment and design which can inspire

them with fashion ideas and styles. Customers praised Retailer B's store design and environment and these have made them feel comfortable and pleasant in stores, as one noted:

'The store is tidy most of the time. There are plenty of spaces in stores. There aren't many clothes on the rail racks... This is very similar to top designers' stores where they have small quantity of fashion pieces on racks. This has made it easier for customers to shop.' (Retailer B Interviewee #10)

However, if the store design and environment are not inspiring and unpleasant, this would not only demotivate retailers' customers to shop in stores, but this would also jeopardise customers' perceptions towards the retailers. Respondents also stressed that the store design and environment should reflect who the company is and what they do, as one customer of Retailer A explained:

'Retailer A is like a pound shop. Sometimes you wouldn't have thought they sell fashionable clothes. It's so messy and I could never find anything in there... It is just a nightmare. It's not pleasant at all and I don't find the stores trendy at all. The store is full of rails and tables, the rails are full of clothes.' (Retailer A Interviewee #6)

The importance of store atmosphere in fashion retail sector has been emphasised in the existing literature. Many retailers use their stores to communicate the desired message about themselves to the customers (Turley and Chebat 2002). Participants in this study have assessed retailers' store design and environment when they shop in stores. Store atmosphere is important to them.

Fashionable and fast garments

All respondents regarded case retailers' product designs as excellent and fashionable. Fast fashion customers also sought for fast products. They expected the latest fashion clothing would arrive in stores within a short period time. This indicates the nature of fast fashion retail sector where fashionability and speed are main priority to retailers and customers, as one participant explained:

‘Every time I go down to Retailer D, there are always new arrivals. That encourages me to visit more often. The new arrivals are fashionable. Sometimes I saw a top which I liked in a magazine, and you can find it in Retailer D almost immediately. They [Retailer D] respond to the trends very quickly...’ (Retailer D Interviewee #4)

Participants were pleased with the fast fashion retailers who bring in new and fashionable products into stores as quickly as possible. The retailers have fully operationalised the fast fashion strategy which they have reduced the buying cycle and lead time to deliver new fashion products into stores (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2006).

Customers’ Perceptions of Market Conditions and Strategies

Intense competitions within the sector

Respondents recognised that the competition is intense in the sector. They strongly stated that they did not have loyalty towards any fast fashion retailers. Customers tend to visit different retailers for their fashion wear as each retailer offers different styles and quality, as one participant expressed:

‘...I personally don’t feel loyal to any of them [retailers]. I shop around. I get my whole outfit from different places. I like to mix and match my outfit; it makes my outfit unique in a way. I’m not going to shop in one shop unless they have some sort of loyalty scheme...’ (Retailer D Interviewee #8)

The findings have shown that customers tend to use their experience with the retailers to identify their competitors in the market. If the retailers’ product offering and quality are good; and the store environment is superior and pleasant, customers will compare them with established fashion retailers; on the other hand, if the products offering and quality are poor; and the store atmosphere is not enjoyable, customers will associate them with value clothing retailers. The results have also indicated that the competitions between fast fashion retailers are extremely fierce as customers did not feel loyal to any of the retailers. Retailers may have to offer more unique selling points to their target customers.

Fast strategies

To many respondents, the key factor to retailers' success is their fast strategies. Retailers were able to respond quickly to fashion customers' demand. Retailers were able to deliver the latest fashion from catwalks into stores within a short period of time. They were impressed with retailers' respond to fashion, hence, new products arrive into stores constantly and this creates freshness and newness to customers, as one participant expressed:

'Their [Retailer B] stocks keep changing. It gives me a fresh feel every time I go there. I always find something different. I know if there is something which I like, I have to buy it, otherwise, it won't be there tomorrow. If I don't find anything which I like, I can always come back next week...' (Retailer B Interviewee #3)

Customers' perceptions of retailers' speedy strategy in bringing new arrivals frequently have reflected that the nature of fast fashion. Fast fashion retailers focus on delivering new fashion pieces into stores within a short period of time by reducing their buying cycles and lead times. Overall, participants in this study were amazed with retailers' quick responses to fashion.

Similar product offerings

Despite participants felt that the fast fashion retailers had different differentiation strategies, they all had exceptionally similar product offerings. Their product offerings, including product ranges, styles and trends are almost identical. To some customers, the retailers' products lack of differentiation, as one respondent explained:

'... Their products are very similar. They [retailers] follow the same catwalk trends each season. Sometimes it's hard to tell the differences. They are all the same, so they don't have any advantages over the others. They have to compete with quality, price, and something else.' (Retailer C Interviewee #5)

Conclusion

The findings of this research have clearly shown that customers were able to identify not only the retailers' products and services, they could also identify other aspects of the companies. This is because customers in the fast fashion retail sector have direct interactions and contacts

with the retailers, via their stores and in-store employees. Customers could perceive retailers' corporate identities through their own experience with the retailers and by observations. Customers' perceptions can provide retailers with fruitful insights on how to communicate their corporate identities to the public in an effective way. Retailers have to ensure that their intended and unique corporate identities reflect the reality of customers' experience. If customers' perceptions are different from retailers' intended messages, retailers could potentially lose associations with their customers. Customers would not be able to identify themselves with the retailers.

Bibliography

Alessandri, S W (2001), "Modeling corporate identity: a concept explication and theoretical explanation," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 6 (4), 173-82.

Baker, M J and J M T Balmer (1997), "Visual identity: trappings or substance," *European Journal of Marketing*, 31 (5/6), 366-82.

Balmer, J M T (1995), "Corporate Branding and Connoisseurship," *Journal of General Management*, 21 (1), 24-46.

---- (1998), "Corporate Identity and the Advent of Corporate Marketing," *Journal of Marketing Management*, 14, 963-96.

---- (2001a), "Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing," *European Journal of Marketing*, 35 (3/4), 248-91.

---- (2001b), "Corporate identity, corporate branding and corporate marketing - Seeing through the fog " *European Journal of Marketing* 35 (3/4), 248 - 91

---- (2001c), "The Three Virtues and Seven Deadly Sins of Corporate Brand Management," *Journal of General Management*, 27 (1), 1-17.

Balmer, J M T and E R Gray (2003), "Corporate brands: what are they? what of them?," *European Journal of Marketing*, 37 (7/8), 972-97.

Balmer, J M T and S Stotvig (1997), "Corporate identity and private banking: a review and case study," *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 15 (5), 169-84.

Balmer, J M T and A Wilson (1998), "Corporate Identity. There is More to It Than Meets the Eyes," *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 28 (3), 12-31.

Barnes, L and G Lea-Greenwood (2006), "Fast fashioning the supply chain: shaping the research agenda," *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 10 (3), 259-71.

- Bick, G, M Jacobson, and R Abratt (2003), "The Corporate Identity Management Process Revisited," *Journal of Marketing Management*, 19 (7-8), 835-55.
- Bruce, M and L Daly (2006), "Buyer behaviour for fast fashion," *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 10 (3), 329-44.
- Burghausen, M and Y Fan (2002), "Corporate branding in the retail sector: a pilot study," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 7 (2), 92-99.
- Cornelissen, J P and W J L Elving (2003), "Managing corporate identity: an integrated framework of dimensions and determinants," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 8 (2), 114-20.
- Dowling, G R (2004), "Corporate Reputations: Should you compete on yours?," *California Management Review*, 46 (3), 19-36.
- Harris, F and L de Chernatony (2001), "Corporate branding and corporate brand performance," *European Journal of Marketing*, 35 (3/4), 441-56.
- Hatch, M J and M Schultz (2003), "Bringing the corporate into corporate branding," *European Journal of Marketing*, 37 (7/8), 1041-64.
- Hines, A (2004), *Supply Chains Strategies. Customer Driven and Customer-Focused*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Hines, A, R Cheng, and I Grime (2007), "Fashion retailer desired and perceived identity," in *Fashion Marketing. Contemporary Issues*, A Hines and M Bruce, Eds. 2nd ed. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Kennedy, S H (1977), "Nurturing Corporate Images," *European Journal of Marketing*, 11, 120-64.
- Lee, S.K. J. and K. Yu (2004), "Corporate culture and organizational performance," *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 19 (4), 340-59.
- Marwick, N and C Fill (1997), "Towards a framework for managing corporate identity," *European Journal of Marketing*, 31 (5/6), 396-409.
- Melewar, T C (2003), "Determinants of the corporate identity construct: a review of the literature," *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 9, 195-220.
- Melewar, T C and S Akel (2005), "The role of corporate identity in the higher education sector. A case study," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 10 (1), 41-57.
- Melewar, T C and N Bains (2002), "Industry in transition: corporate identity on hold? ," *International Journal of Bank Marketing*, 20 (2), 57-66.
- Melewar, T C and E Jenkins (2002), "Defining the corporate identity construct," *Corporate Reputation Review*, 5 (1), 76-50.

- Melewar, T C and E Karaosmanoglu (2006), "Seven dimensions of corporate identity: A categorisation from the practitioners' perspectives " *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (7/8), 846 - 69
- Melewar, T C and A R Wooldridge (2001), "The dynamics of corporate identity: a review of a process model," *Journal of Communication Management*, 5 (4), 327-40.
- Melewar, T.C., E Karaosmanoglu, and D Paterson (2005), "Corporate identity: concept, components and contribution," *Journal of General Management*, 31 (1), 59-81.
- Mintel (2008), "Womenswear - UK - March 2008," Vol. 2008: Mintel International Group Limited.
- Moingeon, B and G Soenen (2002), *Corporate and Organizational Identities*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Motion, J and S Leitch (2002), "The Technologies of Corporate Identity," *International Studies of Management and Organisation*, 32 (3), 45-64.
- Olins, W (1994), *Corporate Identity. Making business strategy visible through design*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Otubanjo, B O and T C Melewar (2007), "A Constructionist Philosophy for Approaching Corporate Identity: An Evolving Corporate Marketing Perspective," in 9th Symposium on Corporate Marketing and the Branding of the Organisation, J M T Balmer and S Powell (Eds.). Edinburgh: International Centre for Corporate and Organisational Marketing Studies.
- Schmidt, K (1995), *The quest for identity: Corporate identity, strategies, methods and examples*. London: Cassell.
- Sorensen, J.B. (2002), "The Strength of Corporate Culture and the Reliability of Firm Performance," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 47 (1), 70-91.
- Topalian, A (1984), "Corporate Identity: Beyond the Visual Overstatements," *International Journal of Advertising*, 3, 55-62.
- Turley, L.W. and J.C. Chebat (2002), "Linking Retail Strategy, Atmospheric Design and Shopping Behaviour," *Journal of Marketing Management*, 18, 125-44.
- van den Bosch, A L M, W J L Elving, and M D T de Jong (2006), "The impact of organisational characteristics on corporate visual identity " *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (7/8), 870 - 85
- van Riel, C B M and J M T Balmer (1997), "Corporate identity: the concept, its measurement and management," *European Journal of Marketing*, 31 (5/6), 340-55.
- Wilson, A M (2001), "Understanding organisational culture and the implications for corporate marketing," *European Journal of Marketing*, 35 (3/4), 353-67.

Wong, A. and A. Sohal (2003), "Assessing customer-salesperson interactions in a retail chain: differences between city and country retail districts," *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, 21 (5), 292-304.

Yamauchi, K. (2001), "Corporate communication: a powerful tool for stating corporate missions," *Corporate Communication: An International Journal*, 6 (3), 131-36.

FIGURE 1 CORPORATE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTS

