

Consumer perceptions of apparel brand prestige in upward comparisons with adjacent store brands: The assimilation and contrast effects

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Abstract

This study discusses how consumers' evaluations of a particular brand are affected by upward comparisons with adjacent stores operated for prestigious brands. To investigate the prestige effect of adjacent brands, five store location frames were constructed with adjacent brands of different prestige levels. Across these frames, consumer brand perceptions were assessed via a survey conducted in Japan. The data based on 313 valid cases reveal that a consumer perceives a particular brand's prestige to be higher than before when its adjacent brand prestige is moderately higher than its own (assimilation) while this effect disappears once the prestige disparity becomes large (contrast). The data also suggest that the assimilation effect is more obvious when a consumer's calculative brand commitment is high. These results suggest that managers should assess whether the prestige disparity is adequate between their brands and adjacent ones to predict the location image effect on their brand equities.

Keywords: *Brand prestige; Assimilation; Contrast; Store location; Brand commitment*

1. Introduction

When apparel brand managers develop their own retail, they sometimes attempt to secure prestigious store locations where luxury boutiques are operated, despite low expected profit given the high rent (Kumagai and Nagasawa, 2017a). In such cases, managers are considered to attempt to leverage the secondary association effect (Keller, 1993) based on the luxury image of apparel brands located in adjacent stores (i.e. adjacent brands). When a particular apparel brand store is operated in a location next to prestigious brand stores, consumer perceptions of its brand prestige (i.e. perceived prestige) may reflect the adjacent brand image and become higher than its original level. In fact, previous studies concerning luxury brands suggest the contribution of prestigious store locations to apparel brand equity (e.g. Kapferer and Bastien, 2012).

Previous literature indicates that the effect of information surrounding a brand varies according to a consumer's motivation for information processing relevant to his/her interest (e.g. Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Since consumers' involvement reflects the degree of their motivation (Blackwell et al., 2001), the effect of adjacent brand image may vary based on consumers' involvement level in a particular label (i.e. brand commitment; Taylor, 1981; Inoue, 2009). Even in actual business, apparel brand managers seem to count their target consumers' commitment to their brands when they develop new stores. For instance, Uniqlo operates some stores in very prestigious locations such as Fifth Avenue in New York and Ginza district in Tokyo, where many luxury boutiques are located, although it is an inexpensive brand for the masses. These symbolic stores contribute to building its desirable brand association among consumers who are not interested in it (Nagasawa and Suganami, 2012). However, the location image effect is not easy to compute quantitatively in actual apparel business. Therefore, in practice, this type of effect is estimated based on brand managers' general business experiences. However, store operations incur huge costs. Therefore, store development decisions based on managers' experiences may increase business uncertainty.

Accordingly, this study discusses variations in perceived brand prestige based on the level of adjacent brand prestige. In addition, the effect of adjacent brand prestige is discussed based on the level of consumers' brand commitment to a particular label, since apparel companies need to attract not only consumers with high commitment, but also those with low

commitment for the purposes of business expansion, given endless pressure from investors for business growth. The purpose of this study is to provide strategic implications for apparel brand managers attempting to raise their brand prestige via a store location tactic with reference to the luxury strategy. In addition, few studies report the relationships between the perceived prestige of a particular brand (i.e. evaluated brand), adjacent brand prestige, and consumers' brand commitment. Therefore, this study is also relevant from an academic perspective.

2. Literature review

Previous literature reports that individuals feel self-inferior when they refer to others superior to themselves (i.e. upward comparison). On the other hand, the literature also reports cases in which individuals raise their self-appraisal through upward comparison (Wheeler, 1966). In addition, the literature suggests that individuals tend to perceive a position advocated in communication to be closer to their own stand when the disparity between the advocated position and their own is small. Conversely, individuals tend to perceive the advocated position to be further from theirs when the disparity between the advocated position and their own is large. In such cases, the psychological effect whereby an individual perceives the advocated position to be closer to his/her own is called 'assimilation', while the converse effect whereby he/she perceives it to be further from his/her stand is referred to as 'contrast' (Hovland et al., 1957).

The assimilation and contrast effects are also highlighted in literature on consumer behaviour, such as customer satisfaction and disconfirmation of expectations. Anderson (1973) reports that consumers' perception of product performance rises when their expectation of the performance level is moderately higher than the actual level (assimilation). However, perceived product performance is lowered when the disparity between their expectation and actual performance exceeds a particular threshold (contrast).

Given this perspective, when brand managers implement a strategy of securing a store location close to luxury boutiques, this strategy is considered an attempt to activate consumers' upward comparisons thereby expecting the assimilation effect to increase the perceived prestige of the brand. By leveraging this store location strategy, managers expect to enhance their brand equity by gaining higher brand prestige and premium. However, based on the contrast effect, this strategy may yield a counter effect if the prestige disparity between the evaluated brand and adjacent brands is too large. Consequently, H1 and H2 are proposed as follows:

H1: When adjacent brand prestige is moderately higher than that of a particular brand being evaluated, the latter's perceived prestige rises from its original level.

H2: When adjacent brand prestige is extremely higher than that of a particular brand being evaluated, the latter's perceived prestige does not rise from its original level.

Brand commitment is defined as the pledging or binding of an individual to his/her brand choice. It is the psychological attachment to a particular brand within a product class (Taylor, 1981). In other words, it is a type of involvement in a particular brand that encompasses positive feelings and attitudes (Inoue, 2009).

Previous literature suggests two main sources of commitment, namely consumers' affections and perceived risk. From this view, Amine (1998) suggests two types of commitment: affective commitment based on consumers' attachments, emotions, and feelings concerning a particular brand; and calculative commitment based on consumers' risk perceptions concerning differences and performance variations between alternatives.

According to Kunda (1990), people are more likely to reach their desired conclusion when they are highly motivated. Therefore, people tend to engage in biased processing whereby they accept the information consistent with their attitude. From this view, Ahluwalia

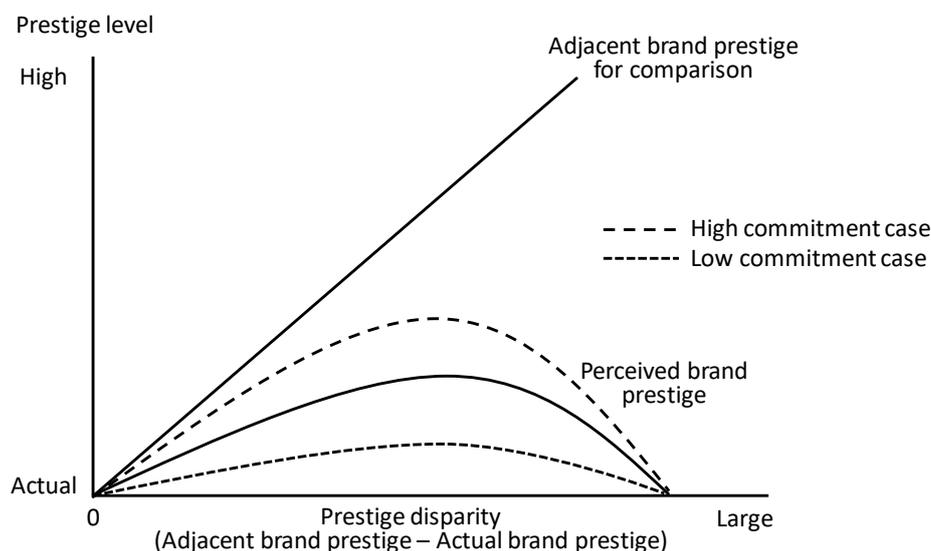
et al. (2001) imply that a consumer highly committed to a particular brand tends to be affected by a third party's endorsement of that brand. Consequently, a positive image such as the prestige of an adjacent brand is assumed to positively and strongly influence a high commitment consumer. On the other hand, when consumers' commitment level is low, it is not expected that they will be affected by a positive image such as the prestige of adjacent brands, since this peripheral brand information is inconsistent with their attitude. Based on this reasoning, H3 and H4 are proposed as follows:

H3: The effect of adjacent brand prestige on the perceived brand image of high affective commitment consumers to a particular brand is stronger than in the case of low affective commitment ones.

H4: The effect of adjacent brand prestige on the perceived brand image of high calculative commitment consumers to a particular brand is stronger than in the case of low calculative commitment ones.

The concept of this hypothesis is displayed in Figure 1 in accordance with Anderson (1973).

Figure 1: Assimilation and contrast effects on perceived brand prestige: Hypothetical variation in consumer perceptions based on upward comparisons with adjacent brands



3. Method

To test the prestige effect of adjacent brands in this study, first, the perceived prestige of 11 apparel brands (comprising a particular apparel brand evaluated in this study and ten apparel brands set as adjacent brands) was assessed. In this test, the lowest prestigious brand was selected as the evaluated one. Five location frames composed of ten others as the adjacent brands were also constructed. Then, the prestige disparity between the evaluated brand and each frame was computed. Second, based on each location frame, consumer perceptions of the evaluated brand were assessed. Consumers' affective commitment and calculative commitment to the evaluated brand were also assessed here. Third, variations in the perceived brand prestige of the evaluated brand across the five location frames were analysed. To exam the effect of brand commitment, perceived prestige based on affective/calculative commitment levels (high vs. low) was also compared. In addition, the effect of commitment was tested via moderated regression analyses, since, although it was simple to interpret, dichotomization of quantitative variables was insufficient to assess

interactions (MacCallum, Zhang, Preacher, & Rucker, 2002). Spotlight analyses testing simple slopes (Spiller et al., 2013) were also performed here.

In this study, 11 apparel brands, namely Hermès, Chanel, Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada, Dior, Burberry, Polo Ralph Lauren, Zara, H&M, and Uniqlo were researched. These are renowned global apparel brands ranked among the top ten valuable brands in the apparel or luxury sector by Millward Brown (2017). To be precise, Millward Brown names ‘Ralph Lauren’ in its report. However, ‘Polo Ralph Lauren’, one of Ralph Lauren’s collections, was employed in this study, because the majority of Ralph Lauren’s business in Japan was ‘Polo’ (Yano Research Institute, 2016), which was better known and hence, practical to include for the respondents of this survey. The prestige levels of these adjacent brands are various. Consequently, we consider these brands to be appropriate for the purposes of this study.

For data collection, an online survey was conducted in the Tokyo area (Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, and Chiba prefectures) on 18–29 May 2018. Macromill, a leading online research firm in Japan, was employed for data collection. This firm conducts government and business researches as well as academic surveys. Today, this company covers more than two million monitored individuals in Japan, whose demographics are representative of the Japanese population based on governmental census data (Macromill, 2013). The survey respondents were males and females aged in their 20s to 60s randomly sampled from Macromill’s pool of monitored individuals. To research general consumer perceptions, socio-economic status was not considered in this study. Once the survey was announced via the Internet, participants responded through their personal computers. The composition of respondents’ age and gender was based on the population structure in the Tokyo area according to the Japanese governmental census. The data were collected through the Internet until each composition of the age and gender groups was completed.

The screening questions confirmed that all respondents recognised every brand presented in this study, since brand evaluation based on location frames composed of unrecognised adjacent brands was impracticable even when they knew the evaluated one. Then, they appraised the prestige level of the 11 apparel brands. Based on this initial assessment, five store location frames composed of ten adjacent brands of different prestige levels were constructed and presented to the respondents. Following this, respondents described their perceptions of the evaluated brand across five store location frames and their brand commitment to it. To avoid response bias, location frames were presented in random order for the questions on perceived brand prestige.

In this survey, brand prestige was measured using four items adopted from Donvito et al. (2016). These four items were extracted from 134 items in an international research project, which previous research verified as having high consistency (Kumagai and Nagasawa, 2017b): *upper class*, *high-price*, *prestigious*, *upscale*. Two types of brand commitment were measured using five items employed from Inoue (2009). Affective commitment was measured using two items: *trust* and *attachment*. Calculative commitment was measured using three items: *avoidance of purchase failure*, *troublesome to choose other brand*, and *choose this brand without a significant reason*. These items were extracted through a literature review and the construct validity of each type of commitment was confirmed in a consumer survey (Inoue, 2009). Every question was asked on a seven-point Likert-type scale.

4. Results

Through the survey, 313 valid data (Male: 156; Female: 157) were collected. At first, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to retest each construct based on the collected data, whereby confirming each factor loading was between .817 and .971. In addition, it was confirmed that composite reliability (CR) was between .881 and .971, and

each average variance extracted (AVE) was between .711 and .894. These results sufficiently confirm the internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and indicator reliability of each construct (Fornell and Larker, 1981; Hair et al., 2014). In this test, each AVE was higher than the squared correlation coefficient between each construct, thereby indicating sufficient discriminant validity (Fornell and Larker, 1981; Hair et al., 2014).

According to the data, it was confirmed that the prestige levels of the 11 brands varied significantly via one-way ANOVA (11-levels, within-subject design; $F_{10,3120} = 1069.814$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .774$). The data showed that the lowest prestigious brand was Uniqlo, which was set as the evaluated brand in this study. In addition, five location frames composed of ten other brands were constructed in order of prestige level. Each location prestige was estimated by the averaged prestige score of the two adjacent brands within each frame respectively. Then, the prestige disparity between each of the five location frames (L_1-L_5) and the original prestige level (O) of Uniqlo were computed (Table 1). According to Bonferroni comparisons, location prestige was significantly different each other at the .001 level.

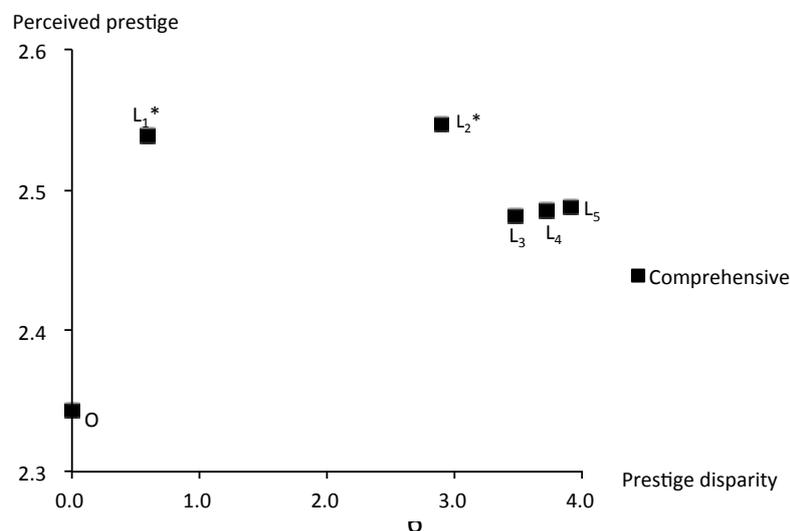
Table 1: Location frames

	O	L ₁		L ₂		L ₃		L ₄		L ₅	
Brand	Uniqlo	H&M	ZARA	Polo	Bur- berry	Dior	Prada	Gucci	Louis Vuitton	Chanel	Hérmes
Brand prestige	2.343	2.545	3.315	4.973	5.488	5.775	5.845	5.933	6.118	6.220	6.276
Location prestige	2.343	2.930		5.231		5.810		6.026		6.248	
Location prestige disparity	.000	.587		2.888		3.467		3.683		3.905	

Note: Location prestige = Mean prestige scores of the two adjacent brands within each frame; Location prestige disparity = Location prestige - Original prestige of the evaluated brand (O); Difference of each location prestige was statistically significant at .001 level.

Figure 2 presents the perceived prestige of Uniqlo based on each location frame. Through multiple Bonferroni comparisons, Uniqlo's perceived prestige in L_1 and L_2 was confirmed as higher than its original prestige level (O). However, in L_3 , L_4 , and L_5 , its perceived prestige did not statistically change from its original level (O). This result shows that the perceived prestige of a particular brand is raised when adjacent brand prestige is moderately higher than its original prestige. Moreover, the perceived prestige level does not change from its original level significantly when adjacent brand prestige is much higher. Consequently, H1 and H2 are supported here.

Figure 2: Variation in perceived prestige based on prestige disparity (Comprehensive)



Note: Perceived prestige = Consumers' perceptions of the evaluated brand (Uniqlo) prestige; Prestige disparity = Location frame prestige - Original prestige of the evaluated brand (Uniqlo); *p < .05 (significance of difference between perceived prestige level and original prestige level).

To assess the effect of brand commitment, the respondents were split into two groups via median split, respectively, as follows:

(1) High affective brand commitment group: 170 (Male: 82; Female: 88)

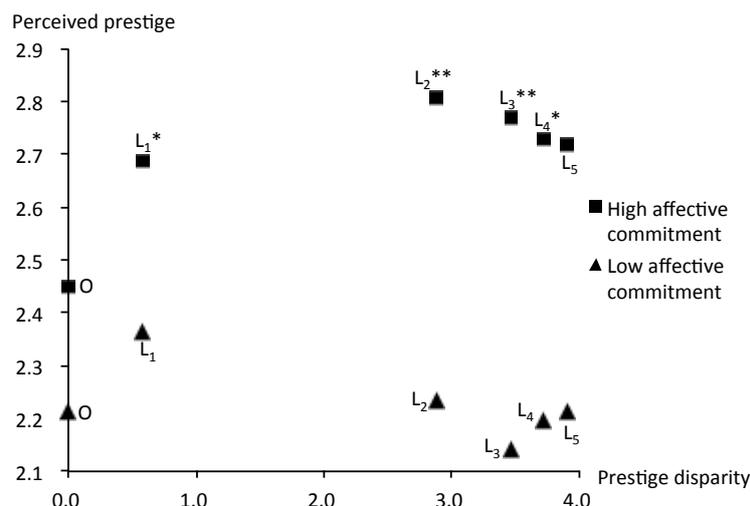
(2) Low affective brand commitment group: 143 (Male: 74; Female: 69)

(3) High calculative brand commitment group: 166 (Male: 90; Female: 76)

(4) Low calculative brand commitment group: 147 (Male: 66; Female: 81)

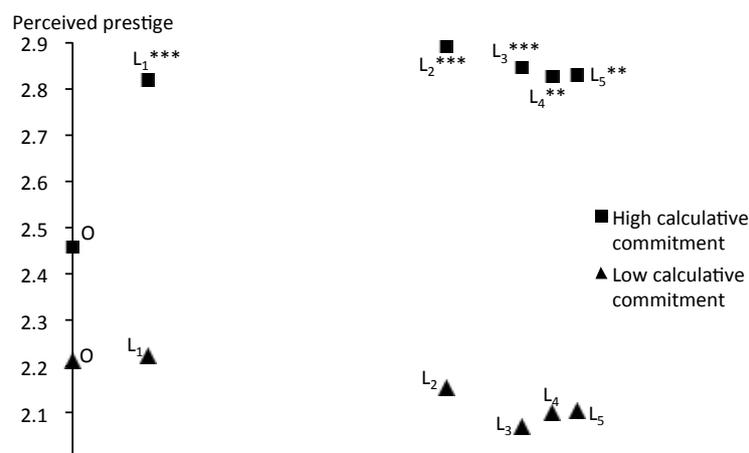
Variations in perceived prestige of Uniqlo across these groups are displayed in Figures 3 and 4. Via Bonferroni comparisons, the results show the positive impact of prestige disparity in the case of high affective/calculative commitment while its impact is insignificant among low commitment group.

Figure 3: Variation in perceived prestige based on prestige disparity (High affective commitment group vs. low affective commitment group)



Note: Perceived prestige = Consumers' perceptions of the evaluated brand (Uniqlo) prestige; Prestige disparity = Location frame prestige - Original prestige of the evaluated brand (Uniqlo); *p < .05, **p < .01 (significance of difference between perceived prestige level and original prestige level).

Figure 4: Variation in perceived prestige based on prestige disparity (High calculative commitment group vs. low calculative commitment group)



Note: Perceived prestige = Consumers' perceptions of the evaluated brand (Uniqlo) prestige; Prestige disparity = Location frame prestige - Original prestige of the evaluated brand (Uniqlo); **p < .01, ***p < .001 (significance of difference between perceived prestige level and original prestige level).

Additionally the interaction between prestige disparity and brand commitment on perceived brand prestige was assessed based on the moderated regression model. Spotlight analyses testing simple slopes (Spiller et al., 2013) were conducted here. Concerning this effect of each moderation factor, the region of significance was also assessed according to the Johnson-Neyman technique (Johnson and Fey, 1950) in the cases of significant interaction. Since the assimilation and contrast effects were presented via a comprehensive assessment and a non-linear relation between perceived prestige and prestige disparity was implied, these tests were conducted based on each location frame respectively. In these tests, we set the mean plus/minus one standard deviation (SD) as the focal level (Spiller et al., 2013; Cohen, J. and Cohen, P., 1983) of affective and calculative commitment as moderation factors. The results of regression analyses show that the interaction between prestige disparity and affective commitment is insignificant in all location frames, although the stronger effect is expected via the test based on dichotomization. On the other hand, the interaction between prestige disparity and calculative commitment on perceived prestige is significant in L₁, L₂, and L₃, while this effect disappears in L₄ and L₅ (Table 2). Moreover, positive simple effect of prestige disparity in the case of high calculative commitment consumers is significant in L₁ and L₂. Therefore, H4 is supported while H3 is rejected here.

Table 2: Regression analyses testing interaction and simple slope (Prestige disparity × Calculative commitment)

Moderation factor: Calculative commitment	L ₁	L ₂	L ₃	L ₄	L ₅
Interaction: β (Prestige disparity × Calculative commitment)	.068	.046	.033	.028	.021
t-value	2.119*	2.747**	2.171*	1.847n.s.	1.449n.s.
Simple slope (Calculative commitment = High)	.193	.068	.024	.018	.009
t-value	3.009**	1.970*	.780n.s.	.603n.s.	.310n.s.
Simple slope (Calculative commitment = Low)	.012n.s.	-.054	-.063	-.057	-.047
t-value	.183n.s.	-1.759n.s.	-2.270*	-2.013*	-1.755n.s.
Region of significance (Upper bound)	3.187	4.602	11.966	—	—
Region of significance (Lower bound)	-18.540	1.679	2.459	—	—

Note: Calculative commitment: Mean = 3.278; SD = 1.333 (Focal level: High = 4.611; Low = 1.945); β (Prestige disparity × Calculative commitment) = Interaction effect on perceived prestige; Region of significance at .05 level (Simple slope is significant outside each region): *p < .05, **p < .01, n.s. = non-significant.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The data imply that a consumer tends to evaluate a particular brand prestige as higher when the prestige level of adjacent stores is moderately higher than the original prestige level of the evaluated brand. We consider this result shows the assimilation caused in an upward comparison with adjacent brand image. This effect of secondary association based on adjacent brand image is expected by general apparel managers when they attempt to secure a

prestigious store location where luxury boutiques are operated. However, once the prestige disparity between a particular brand and its adjacent brands becomes large, this effect disappears. We consider this the contrast effect, which is sometimes caused in an upward comparison with adjacent brands.

The interaction of prestige disparity and calculative commitment is significant according to the tests in the moderated regression model. Adjacent brand prestige is considered to influence high calculative commitment consumers when prestige disparity is moderate (L_1 and L_2). This result implies that the higher the consumer's calculative commitment level, the stronger the assimilation effect. According to this result, we consider that a consumer with a strong and positive psychological connection with a particular brand may activate his/her search for its evaluation and tends to accept peripheral cues that endorse it, especially when his/her interest is based on defensive and calculative reason. In this case, under psychological risk such as anxiety about purchase failure, a consumer may attempt to ensure whether the positive brand evaluation relevant to his/her commitment is correct. Once he/she refers to positive cues surrounding the evaluated brand such as luxury boutiques, he/she may be relieved to reconfirm that his/her commitment is not wrong. This result partially reinforces the implication of Ahluwalia et al. (2001) that a consumer with high brand commitment tends to be affected by a third party's brand endorsement more than in the case of a low commitment one. However, even among the high calculative commitment group, the contribution of prestige disparity disappears once adjacent brand prestige becomes extremely high. Although an obvious contrast effect that lowers consumer perceptions is not observed, we consider that this result implies the existence of the contrast effect.

On the other hand, the interaction of prestige disparity and affective commitment is not significant. This result implies that the additional contribution of adjacent brand prestige among high affective commitment consumers is not expected. Affective brand commitment is based on consumers' attachments and emotions towards a particular label (Amine, 1998). Therefore, when this commitment level is high, a consumer is considered to conduct positive brand evaluation affectively and emotionally. In this case, he/she does not need to evaluate a particular brand comparatively with adjacent brand prestige, since his/her motivation is not cognitive but affective. We consider this psychology underlies the insignificant interaction on brand evaluations.

Based on the above discussion, in general, apparel brand managers may expect higher consumer brand evaluations when their store is built and operated in a location where the prestige level of adjacent brands is moderately higher than that of their own brand. However, they are recommended to avoid a store location where the adjacent brand prestige is extremely higher than that of their own brand. Otherwise, they may face the undesirable consequence of little contribution to their brand equity, despite huge rental investment in a luxury location.

In addition, the assimilation effect is especially strong in the case of consumers with high calculative brand commitment levels. Therefore, it seems that a store location strategy securing a prestigious location is especially effective when high calculative consumers are targeted. By leveraging this strategy, brand managers may be able to present their brand prestige higher, making high calculative commitment consumers recognise their taste is correct. On the other hand, it may be ineffective for managers to control location prestige across target consumers' affective commitment levels to raise the brand equity. It is recommended that managers develop their store neutrally based on the original brand prestige level and adjacent brand prestige regardless of consumers' affective commitment levels.

In the literature, assimilation and contrast effects are mainly discussed with respect to an individual's social comparison. Even in the marketing field, numerous articles approach it from the perspective of consumers' disconfirmed expectations and dissatisfaction. On the

other hand, this study discussed assimilation and contrast concerning general consumers' brand evaluations based on upward comparisons with peripheral cues such as adjacent brand image. This is the originality of this study, which contributing to this research field.

Several studies suggest factors that impact assimilation and contrast, such as similarity (Brown et al., 1992) and relevance (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997) with the target in comparison. Focusing on the apparel store location strategy from this view, assimilation may be more likely when the characteristics of adjacent brands are similar to those of the evaluated brand. In other words, when brand managers attempt to leverage the association with luxury for their store development, it is recommended that they raise their own brand image to the extent that consumers recognise it as similar to other luxury brands. Possibly, a paradox may arise, suggesting that non-luxury brand managers should build their brand luxury when they attempt to leverage the luxury strategy. Further discussion of this similarity effect on assimilation is desirable.

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