

Chapter 7

DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

This chapter examines the results obtained in the study and accordingly compares them with previous research works and discusses the theoretical justification for these findings. Furthermore, on the basis of these discussions, the theoretical contributions and the managerial implications made by this study are also enumerated. Finally the chapter concludes by discussing the limitations of the study and also suggesting the scope for further research.

7.1 The Impact of Store Atmospheric Cues on Brand Experience

7.1.1 The Impact of Ambient Cue

The results of the study show that the ambient cue elements play a very important role in creating favorable perceptions about the brand experience in a single brand apparel (SBA) store. This includes elements like lighting, music, fragrance, temperature etc. Adequate lighting in the store helps in providing better visibility of the merchandise being sold in the store. Stores often use different colored lights to showcase various products. By doing so it facilitates the convergence of specific associations with the image of the brand. Brands like Nike, Lee, Pepe Jeans, etc. are associated with a youthful image, thus the SBA stores of these brands are brightly illuminated which is congruent with their respective brand images. Most SBA stores have a universal theme which is applicable across all the stores of a particular brand. Lighting may also be used to enhance the brand experience of the customer

by influencing customer perceptions. Similarly, background music in a SBA store may be controlled and modified to convey a specific theme. Properties like, the rhythm and the volume of the music in the store may affect the perceived time spent in the store. Favorable perception of the music may influence a customer to stay longer in the store and linger on. Ambient temperature in the store may depend on the air-conditioning of the store. This may also convey a supposed subtle aura which may help in creating a distinctive atmospheric effect. Fragrance in the store may evoke a feeling of comfort thereby creating a relaxed mood while shopping in the retail store. These elements elicit positive responses and affect their subsequent behavior. Thus on the basis of the obtained results it may be concluded that Indian customers generally use the ambient elements to form perceptions about the brand experience in a SBA store.

7.1.2 The Impact of Design Cue

In multi-brand retail stores, products of various brands are sold whereas SBA stores sell merchandise belonging to one specific brand. Unlike the elements that make up the ambient cue which are more peripheral and tend to operate in the background, the design cue is made up of elements that are comparatively much more direct and visible upfront. Customers do not want to focus on those elements of the store environment that tend to distract them from the merchandise. The merchandise available in SBA stores in most cases is exclusive and may not be available in multi-brand stores. The customers who visit SBA stores are more interested in the merchandise available in the store. Moreover, the design elements function as facilitators (Ballantine et al, 2010); they simplify access to the merchandise. Customers might take these features as granted. This is evident from the results of this study which show that the merchandise cue of a SBA store significantly affects the brand experience in

the store unlike the design cue. The design elements by themselves do not influence the customer perception about the brand experience but they help to amplify the effects of the other atmospheric cues via interaction effects.

7.1.3 The Impact of Social Cue

Store employees are a big part of the overall store environment. They serve as the human interface of the store and communicate with the customers on part of the SBA store management. As per Norman (2003), an individual may use five primary social cues (Physical, Psychological, Language, Social Dynamics and Social Roles) to judge sociability. Thus the more responsive the interaction, the higher is the chance of it being registered as an adequate social interaction. A customer and a store employee may come across each other at various occasions but the interaction which takes place between them is usually fleeting. The employee may simply greet the customer or answer a particular query and walk away. In order to connect with customers it is very important to have sustained interactions between the two (customer and employee). As the store employees keep moving around the store rather than being at a single place, it prevents any uninterrupted interaction between the customers and them. Such encounters need to be more personalised and spontaneous, in other words, rather than simply providing basic customer service the exchanges between the customer and store employees need to be more improvised (Harris et al., 2001). Hu and Jasper (2006) state that, being a people-oriented business, retailing needs high levels of interaction. Thus the activities of a store employee, their appearance and their non-verbal interactions with customers (eye-contact, smiling) may not be sufficient enough influence the perception of brand experience in the retail outlet. Furthermore, even if a customer

interacts with a particular employee during a store visit, it may be possible that that particular employee may not be present in the store during the subsequent visits made by that customer or may be busy in some other work in the store. This would again diminish or even cancel any positive perception(s) made during the first meeting. In the absence of repeated interactions, it would be difficult to create positive brand experiences (Koo and Kim, 2013).

7.1.4 The Impact of Merchandise Cue

In the present study, the standardized (β) estimate value of the relationship between merchandise cue and brand experience (H4) is 0.313 which indicates that the merchandise cue has the biggest impact on the customer perception of brand experience in a SBA store. The merchandise in a SBA store belongs to one specific brand, in other words such a store sells its own branded products. This contributes to the overall image of the brand as the variety and quality of the merchandise may influence the perception of its image. When the merchandise image is in synchronization with the brand image, it triggers favorable brand experiences. Wide variety of merchandise and fully-stocked stores also help in this regard. In addition to that, customers who visit SBA stores are permitted to try the products being sold before actual purchase and touch and feel them as well. Such activities to a large extent also serve to generate positive perceptions about the brand experience in the store.

7.2 Interaction Effect between Perceptions of Store Atmospheric Cues on Brand Experience

The overall atmosphere of a SBA store is composed of various elements. As a customer enters the store, he/she interacts with all the atmospheric elements of the store. In other words, the individual encounters multiple cues at the same time. Customers evaluate these cues and if they perceive that these cues are in tune with each other, they may start to feel positively about the brand experience in the SBA store. It is so because congruency among these store atmospheric cues is more likely to affect the customer perceptions and further amplify the experiences associated with the brand. The present study examines the interaction between the store atmospheric cues and their subsequent effect on the customer's perception of brand experience. All the six interaction effects (between store atmospheric cues) were found to affect customer brand experience directly and positively as the values in table no. 6.9 show. Among the six interaction effects, on the basis of the standardized coefficients, it is observed that the ambient cue-design cue interaction ($\beta = 0.61$) has the most effect on the perception of brand experience. These elements of the ambient cue reflect the preferences of the target customers of the SBA store. Similarly, the design cue elements help in differentiating SBA stores from their competition, as the unique features of store design help in projecting a specific brand image. When the customers perceive congruence between these two cues (the brand image projected by the design features is reflected in the elements of the ambience of the store), the customers feel that these elements of the store environment work in tandem and further expand the individual impact of these cues. In SBA stores of brands like, Nike and Reebok, the background music and lighting of store, work in close coordination with the overall décor and design of the interior architecture of the store,

thereby further amplifying the positive perceptions of the customer about the brand experience in the store. Similar results are seen in case of the ambient cue-merchandise cue interaction and design cue-merchandise cue interaction effects. As the merchandise cue is the most important store atmospheric cue, the impact of the other cues like ambient and design is increased if they are compatible with the former. As the merchandise of a SBA store projects a specific image, it is important that the ambient and design elements are in congruence with that image. If the customer perceives that these elements mirror that specific image, they form positive intuitions about the brand experience. SBA stores of Pepe Jeans and Lee, design their ambient and design elements in coordination with the merchandise sold in these stores. These elements mirror the tastes and preferences of their target audience thereby strengthening the perceptions about the brand experience. The interaction effect between design cue and social cue is found to be the lowest ($\beta = 0.066$) amongst all the interaction effects. It is so because both the design as well as the social cue elements does not have a significant effect individually on the brand experience perception of the customers. The findings highlight the importance of understanding the role played by the multi-sensory perception of atmospheric factors on customer experience. The customer is more likely to be influenced by these effects while he is visiting a retail store. The results suggest that in general, the impact of the interaction effects of the store atmospheric cues, affects perception of the Indian customer about the brand experience.

7.3 The Impact of Brand Experience on Brand Love

Experiential marketing is one of the primary drivers of brand experience creation across the world. SBA store managers focus on creating favorable brand experiences for customers.

Those customers who have frequently felt favorable experiences over a period of time may start to feel comfortable with the brand and in the process start depending on the brand. Such customers may further infer that the brand to be consistent in delivering favorable brand experiences and its promised benefits. As a result of this, affection and affinity develops towards that particular brand which in turn strengthens this brand-customer relationship. These experiences may be consciously designed by single- brand retailers which not only serve as precursors to customer attachment by triggering emotions but possibly also end up playing an important role in the buying process. This emotional attachment is manifested in the form of brand love. Such customers fall in love with the brand and start patronizing it. As per the results of the study, (the standardized (β) estimate value of the relationship between brand love and brand experience is 0.938), in general, it can be concluded that favorable brand experiences of Indian customers in a single-brand apparel store affect brand love.

7.4 The Impact of Brand Love on Brand Loyalty

Customers, who are in love with a brand, perceive the brand to be very reliable and capable on delivering the promised benefits. Being in love with the brand makes them patrons of the brand. The management of SBA stores focuses on creating such devotion amongst their customers. This assumes much more importance for them as there are several brands in the market and due to this intense competition it becomes much more important for brand managers of SBA stores to keep them engaged in such long term relationships with the brand. Results of this study show that the standardized (β) estimate value of the relationship between brand love and brand loyalty is 0.901 which indicates that brand love affects brand loyalty positively. In context of Indian customers, it is very important for the SBA store

management to work on loyalty creation and ensure continuous patronage of their customers.

7.5 Theoretical Contributions Made By the Study

This present study discusses the role of store atmospheric cues in context of retail stores and extends the existing literature on brand experience in the following ways.

1. Brakus et al, (2009), accentuated the need to further identify the possible antecedents of brand experience. The present study highlights the role of store atmospheric cues as an antecedent of brand experience and establishes the role played by store atmospherics in brand experience creation.
2. Marketing literature discusses the interaction of store atmospheric cues in a very fragmented way. Most studies have investigated interaction effects between these cues using an experimental design approach, even studies which have taken into account real stores, have mostly considered one set of cues. The present study has taken into consideration all the four sets of atmospheric cues and empirically examined their role in shaping the customer perception about brand experience in context of a SBA store.
3. Next, almost all the studies which have examined customer behavior in single- brand stores have been carried in foreign countries. The present study examines the roles of store atmospherics in context of single-brand stores in the Indian market.
4. The present study provides empirical confirmation regarding the spread of brand love which is a consequence of favorable brand experience. The findings confirm the theoretical propositions made by Roy et al, (2012) and other studies and further highlight the role of customer attachment in brand loyalty literature.

7.6 Managerial Implications of the Study

The following implications may be obtained for retailers from the findings of the present study.

1. The principal managerial implication of the present study is the importance of store atmospheric cues in influencing customer behavior. Store management can harness the elements of a retail store and consciously design the atmosphere in order to evoke favorable responses from shoppers. It can also be pointed out that as customers discern these atmospheric cues collectively, the management can accordingly use them to make the overall experience of the customers more enjoyable by using the elements to project the brand characteristics.
2. In context of the Indian market, the present study reveals that brand loyalty of the customers is derived from brand love, which is similar to the findings of the study carried out in foreign countries. Thus it may be suggested to the managers of single-brand stores that customer attachment is a stepping stone in order to achieve brand loyalty. They should not simply depend on achieving customer satisfaction as it may not necessarily translate into customer patronage intentions.
3. The results of the study show that, the Indian customer finds the ambient cue to be a very important contributor to favorable brand experience creation in a SBA store. The non-visual elements of the store atmosphere like music, lighting, aroma, temperature etc., play a vital role in shaping the customer perception of the store environment. This is contrary to the results obtained in other studies (Koo and Kim, 2013). This means that unlike western

countries where the more visual and more direct messages were preferred, the Indian customer likes more subtle and peripheral elements.

4. Unlike multi-brand retail stores that sell products from various brands, the merchandise in a single-brand store belongs to one specific brand. The results of the present study further strengthen the argument that the merchandise being sold in the store plays the most important role in influencing customer emotions in a single-brand retail setting. It is not simply the brand name associated with the merchandise but the Indian customer also is interested in the variety of products available under that specific brand. It is the main attribute of the store environment which the store management of a SBA store should keep in mind while designing an effectual store environment.

7.7 Limitations and Future Scope

One of the limitations of this study is that it was carried out in Hyderabad and the sample was drawn out from people who were visiting single-brand stores in the city. Thus this may lead to the findings of the study to be geographically specific. In addition to that, this study is cross-sectional, thus the relationships between the latent constructs could have been understood better if a longitudinal research design (investigated over a period of time) was carried out. Finally, Quota sampling with checks and measures was used in order to select and gather responses for this study. This was done to ensure that the selected sample is a true reflection of the target population but store managers are suggested to advance with the results of the study with discretion. The role of brand love as an antecedent of other consequences in context of single-brand stores can also be investigated. Finally, a comparative examination of the role of store atmospheric cues in creating brand experience online contrasted with offline stores can be carried out in future studies.