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From words to actions: the effects of the transformation of core values through the physical stores

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Abstract

Purpose: To examine how core values can be concretely transformed in the physical stores in order to help with the creation of favorable brand associations and the shaping of the brand image.

Methodology: The paper combines both primary and secondary data, with a specific focus on two brands as case studies: Lush and Kiehl's. Primary data was collected through a questionnaire that includes both quantitative and qualitative questions, to understand the relevance of the delivery of core values through the physical store and the results this has in terms of brand associations and image. Secondary data comes in the form of a literature review to give a proper theoretical foundation to the research, coupled with the analysis of the selected brands through online articles and their respective websites.

Findings: The research shows that today physical stores are still highly relevant. Most importantly, it delineates how a good and clear store branding strategy can help to acquire a desirable positioning, while an improper plan can instead damage it by failing with the first step of the value transformation process.

Originality/value: The paper is the first of its kind to focus on the transformation of the core values into physical realities through the interior design and physical elements of the store, combined with the effects that this has on people. Moreover, a theoretical contribution is given by proposing a framework that can be adapted to analyze the efficiency of the brands' actions in the physical world.

Keywords: transformation of core values, brand associations, visual identity, store branding, brand experience, brand image, Lush, Kiehl's.

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

The buying behavior has faced many changes due to Covid-19. Specifically, after the pandemic outbreak, online purchases have significantly increased. When pondering the actions and strategies, this fact has frequently misled the companies into neglecting the relevance of the physical world to privilege the digital one. It is a change that deeply concerned us and made us wonder to what extent physical stores are still important nowadays. Additionally, throughout the years the interest in the creation and delivery of the core values has exponentially raised, due to the need to stand out from the competitors when facing an overgrowing saturation in different market areas. According to Urde (2003), the main function of core values is to serve as a guide in the brand-building process, which is then reflected in behaviors. However, many firms do not effectively and efficiently deliver them because they do not put much consideration into all the ways in which these can be transmitted to people. This paper will illustrate how the core values can be concretely transformed in terms of visual experience in the physical stores and, more specifically, how being successful with this step helps with the creation of favorable brand associations and the shaping of the brand image. After coming across the lack of information and research regarding this topic, one objective of the paper is also to fulfill the gap by providing relevant insights that can be further used by the brand management teams of different brands.

To begin, a literature review is therefore developed on the concepts of core values, brand associations, brand image, brand experience, store branding, and visual identity, to give an outline regarding the framework that we will further implement for this study. Moreover, two brands of the cosmetic market are presented to dive deeper into the analysis of the topic:

Kiehl's and Lush. The same field was chosen to compare more in detail actions and results. Furthermore, the empirical data is collected with an online questionnaire and by inspecting the case studies. This is done to both gain a panoramic view regarding the relevance of the store environment and to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the brands in action. Therefore, our framework will be applied to each case study to evaluate how well Lush and Kiehl's are doing with the management of the store settings for branding purposes.

Literature review

Core values

According to Urde (2003), values can be classified into three categories, namely "values that are related to the organization", "values that summarize the brand" and "values as they are experienced by customers". Here we focus on the latter two. The values that summarize a brand are also called brand essence, which is the innermost core of a brand (Urde, 2003). These core values can be both exemplified by a few short phrases or words that capture the brand's position (Keller, 1999) and the spiritual center of the brand's soul that defines the brand and permeates all other aspects of it (Randazzo, 1993). Such core values are defined by Kapferer (2012) as kernel values; these have to be defined clearly from the beginning and it is an aspect where managers should use all their talents and energies because of the need to consistently build them over time, in terms of products, consumer relationships, store, online experiences, and so on. Moreover, the values that are experienced by customers are the core values which are embedded in the product and expressed through behavior (Urde, 2003). These core values are categorized as "true", "aspirational", "potential" and "hollow" according to the degree to which they are embedded within the organization and can

be “seen and appreciated” by customers (Urde, 2009; Lencioni, 2002).

Brand associations

According to different experts and further developed by Melin (2002), branding is considered a value-adding creating process. While all the steps are essential, one is particularly crucial to succeed: the creation of strong and positive brand associations. These are reckoned as the several mental connections that people make regarding a specific brand, once coming across something related to it, such as advertising, product packaging, the physical and online stores, brand ambassadors, sales force (Keller, 2006). The associations can be product-affiliated by highlighting practical benefits and elements, but most importantly, they can also be related to values, beliefs, and ideals (Keller, 2006). He also argues that this peculiar distinction composes the "lower-level" brand associations category. It is from here that people will be able to formulate their judgments and develop feelings towards the brand, evolving then to the so-called "high-level" associations (Keller, 2006). Brands should pay an extreme amount of attention to this step of the value-adding creating process because brand associations are the game-changing point, interconnected with the delivery of the added value that can help a brand to stand out from its competitors (Melin 2002). Besides, it is from the accumulation of associations that the brand image is generated; the latter is a big sphere of influence when it comes to making a purchase (Keller 2006). Therefore, since bad associations result in a bad image as well, it is essential to efficiently maneuver and coordinate all the elements that can help to obtain positive brand associations (Keller 2006).

Brand image

As previously explained, brand associations contribute to the creation of either a positive or negative image of the brand, which is obtained through all the

marketing mix activities of a firm (Keller, 1993). Various studies focus on the definition of brand image. According to Anderson (2007), brand image is defined as the associations related to the brand in the consumers' perception. Kotler (1998, p.197) points out that it is “the set of beliefs held about a particular brand” . In this sense, brand image means the cognitive representation of the brand which is formed according to the beliefs, ideas, and impressions of consumers (Malik, Naeem and Munawar, 2012). Therefore, consumers' purchase intentions are made according to the meanings associated with the brand, and not only for the functionality of the product or its physical attributes (cited in Padgett and Allen, 1997). For this reason, building a strong brand image is fundamental since such is developed considering information and previous experiences with the brand (Wijaya, Surachman and Mugiono, 2020). However, many firms are not aware of the relevant outcomes that a strong brand image can build. According to Meenaghan (1995, p. 27-28), a special characteristic of the brands is their associations with particular values, and while this might be a long-term building creation process, it should be considered an investment for the future.

Store branding

Floor (2014) emphasizes that the performance of the store, in terms of clearly communicating what the brand stands for, will determine the consumer's perception of the brand. In the above context, brand architecture is discussed as one of the specific ways to build a store brand. Furthermore, Nistorescu (2008) concludes by combining environmental elements (architectural style, parking, interior design, store decoration, signs, and symbols) and brand building pyramid (recognition, representation, performance, feelings, and resonance), that a range of aspects of the store environment can be used as brand building support elements to create a state of acceptance and

appreciation by customers, thereby gaining recognition, increasing sales and shaping the brand image. In terms of the customer's perspective of store branding, the consumer's sensory perceptions are primarily discussed. Specifically, Sherry (1998) argues that the store is the dramatic stage that gives customers a multi-sensory experience, which is an opportunity to grasp the brand essence, and it is where they can generate self-related brand meanings as well as unique consumer perceptions (Borghini, Diamond, Kozinets, McGrath, Muñiz & Sherry, 2009). As a result, customers have more opportunities to experience the brands sensorially, physically, emotionally, and intellectually, resulting in a more powerful brand experience (Pierre & Chebat, 2013).

Brand experience

While a variety of definitions of the term brand experience have been suggested, most of the research focuses on the product attributes and categories, not on the experience itself delivered by the brand (Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello, 2009). According to Brakus et al. (2009), the term brand experience refers to sensations, feelings, cognition, and behavioral responses which are induced by specific stimuli created by the brand's elements. Additionally, the perception of consumers regarding brand experience is presented in different levels of intensity and valence, which, depending on their experience, may be strong, positive, and in some cases negative (Brakus et al., 2009). When discussing the definition and importance of brand experience, there is an explicit question about its connection with physical stores. Such a relationship is explained by Morrison (1999), who argues that physical spaces can either be an advantage or disadvantage for retail firms depending on the level of attention paid to consumers' brand experience. Moreover, Kerin, Jain and Howard (1992) indicate that both store environments and customer service experiences are necessary for a solid construct in the minds of consumers. This

logic can be extended to argue that attractive in-store environments offer a substantial opportunity to establish differentiation and a unique brand image compared to the competitors (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004).

Visual identity

The term visual identity is defined by Balmer (2006) as "the creation of favorable public images via visual means". A large variety of visual elements might be used to create an identity, which might include shape, logo, color, font, etc. However, such visual elements do not necessarily reflect what the brand stands for but the main attributes, values, and personality of the brand which are acknowledged when a consumer perceives them (Iordache, 2014). According to Phillips, Mc and Griffin (2014, p.226), visual identity is "the holistic visual style that identifies the brand - a recognizable something that cannot be decomposed into a list of its visible parts". To clarify, the visual identity of a brand might be perceived by consumers in both product style and store environment. Recently, businesses have increased their awareness of architecture since there is a notable correlation with identity (Melewar and Jenkins, 2002). In addition to this, Hulten (2011) points out that a sight strategy is believed to be one of the most relevant approaches in communicating brand values. Developing an appealing store branding that delivers visual elements associated with the core values is of fundamental importance to create strong brands or enhance the strengths of well-positioned brands.

Methodology

Research Design

In this research, the qualitative approach is applied for a more comprehensive insight into the topic of how core values can be concretely transformed in the physical stores in order to help with the creation of

strong brand associations and the shaping of the brand image. Another reason for using qualitative method is that this research uses the perceived feelings of people in physical stores in terms of emotional appeal, products and services, vision, social and environmental responsibility as criteria for judging whether the brand accurately communicates its core values; and most of these studies based on descriptive material derived from customers' answers use qualitative analysis (Fombrun, Gardberg & Sever, 2000; Walsh & Wiedmann, 2004; Ou, Russell & Dion, 2006; Pizzi, Vannucci & Aiello, 2020). The qualitative method is used for two case studies and an online questionnaire. The questionnaire survey is used for two reasons, explained from the researchers' and the respondents' point of view, respectively. From the researchers' point of view, questionnaires as a research tool can bring a significant amount of data in the shortest time and at the lowest cost (Market Research, 2022). From the respondents' perspective, anonymous questionnaires make them feel relaxed and are more likely to encourage people to provide truthful responses (Market Research, 2022).

Empirical Data Collection

The empirical data is divided into two parts, descriptive data for the case study and data from the online questionnaire. Descriptive data for the two case studies

are extracted from the two brands' annual reports and social media reports (e.g. industry analysis reports and blogs) to provide a deeper understanding of brand history and evolution of its core values. The online questionnaire consists of 11 questions, including 6 multiple-choice questions and 5 open-ended questions where different pictures of Lush and Kiehl's stores are provided, which allows us to gain an insight of how people perceive the two brands' core values via sight. Each question has a particular goal to be achieved (see *Table 1*).

Sample selection & size

For the empirical case samples, Lush and Kiehl's are the chosen ones to analyze. The reason for choosing Lush and Kiehl's as case samples is that after our observations and discussions regarding numerous brands, the results of Lush and Kiehl's physical stores are very different in terms of core value conversion. The interest drove us to explore how this difference was created and what results it would lead to. The respondents of the questionnaire are collected randomly since a successfully communicated brand value should be perceivable by any person and the brand associations should be directed to everyone. By posting the questionnaire on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Wechat, the responses of 157 respondents from different backgrounds are collected.

Table 1 "Eleven mandatory questions in the questionnaire and description of each question"

<p>1. Do you regularly buy cosmetic products for skin and hair care?</p> <p>a. Yes</p> <p>b. No</p> <p><i>Description:</i> to explore the market importance of the selected industry, using the frequency of purchase of people as the measurement standard.</p>
<p>2. How interested are you in cosmetic products for skin and hair care?</p> <p>1 to 5 (not interested at all - really interested)</p> <p><i>Description:</i> to know how many people have potential to explore the essence of a brand.</p>

3. Do you prefer buying those products online or in the physical stores?
- Online
 - Physical stores
 - Both
 - I don't buy them

Description: to explore the importance of physical stores as one of the elements of branding, using people's preference as the measurement standard.

4. Why? If you don't buy them, put a "." and move on with the questionnaire please.

Description: to explore what physical stores can bring to people (functionally, emotionally, and/or symbolically, etc) (Urde, 2003).

5. If values mean beliefs and ideals of a brand, after looking at these pictures, what do you think are the main values of Lush? What do you perceive?

Description: to understand people's perception of the core values of Lush in terms of visual perspective by providing the pictures of Lush physical stores.

6. If values mean beliefs and ideals of a brand, after looking at these pictures, what do you think are the main values of Kiehl's? What do you perceive?

Description: to understand people's perception of the core values of Kiehl's in terms of visual perspective by providing the pictures of Kiehl's physical stores.

7. Based on the pictures we have shown you, what brand is the one that took you the least to understand their core values?

- Lush
- Kiehl's store

Description: to find out which brand has the core values that are easier to perceive through their stores, i.e. more obvious and straightforward.

8. Can you justify the previous answer?

Description: to understand the reasons for the outcomes in Question 7.

9. After you have looked at these pictures, how much would you like to go to a physical Lush store?

1 to 5 (not at all - very much)

Description: to explore the willingness of people to visit a Lush physical store after providing a series of guiding messages about what brand core values are and whether they are clearly communicated.

10. After you have looked at these pictures, how much would you like to go to a physical Kiehl's store?

1 to 5 (not at all - very much)

Description: to explore the willingness of people to visit a Kiehl's physical store after providing a series of guiding messages about what brand core values are and whether they are clearly communicated.

11. Can you justify the previous answer?

Description: to find out what factors influence people's willingness to visit physical stores.

Case studies

Lush case study

Before Lush, there was Cosmetics to Go founded by Mark Constantine, an herbal trichologist and Liz Weir, a beauty therapist; who shared the same ethics and ideas regarding cruelty-free production and natural cosmetic products (Edithandjune, 2017). Cosmetics to Go was a mail-ordered company that offered innovative products such as shampoo and massage bars, and the iconic bath bombs, which followed a strict ethical policy in order to ensure that all the ingredients purchased were not tested on animals (Lush, n.d.). Even though Cosmetics To Go remained in the market for only 6 years, its end meant the birth of Lush which maintained several values and beliefs with which the firm was created (Lush, n.d.). Lush is a British cosmetic company that was established in Poole in 1995 (Weare.lush, n.d.). Since its beginnings, Lush was founded with the "We believe" ethos: a guiding statement that identifies the firm with their values and all the firm's related-activities for over more than 27 years (Lush, n.d.). They are the inventors of bath bombs and a large range of innovative handmade products that are divided into categories such as skin, face, hair and body care; and a production process that follows its philosophy of delivering fresh, cruelty-free and vegetarian products (Lush, n.d.). Nowadays, Lush owns 900 shops over the world, with presence in 48 countries and 38 websites shipping worldwide (Weare.lush, n.d.).

Throughout the years, Lush has pursued its "We believe" statement in order to build its core values, which are *innovation* under

freshness, transparency and handmade, ethics and sustainability. Lush's products are made with fresh ingredients which are carefully selected in order to deliver not only organic but also sustainable products that are fully vegetarian and free of preservatives (Weare.lush, n.d.). Additionally, all the Lush's operational processes are 100% handmade, including some operationalized activities done by its supply chain's partners (Lush, n.d.). Moreover, the latter are also part of its regenerative farming concept which operates in countries such as Peru, Guatemala, Arizona and Uganda, developing deeper ties with the producers in order to implement more responsible farming practices, fair working conditions and organic ingredients for both products and packaging (Lush, n.d.). Finally, ethics and sustainability are part of their core values signature, any current or future activity strictly pursue the main *ethos* in which the firm was established and do believe: all companies should be ethical (Lush, n.d.). Lush is constantly seeking to develop new innovative and sustainable products that fulfill such mandatory requirements.

Lush stores are characterized for their handcrafted style, meaning that most of the details in the stores are handmade (Lush, n.d.). The signature of Wooden furniture style in any part of the shop's layout worldwide is obtained by their own woodshop in Vancouver (Lush, n.d.). Furthermore, the slogans in the walls are handwritten by experts on their Shop Design Team (Lush, n.d.). Abundant colorful and fresh products are shown in their displays throughout the store which

vary in size, shape, colors and smell depending on the theme (Weare.lush, n.d.). Additionally, Lush is a 5-star service, in which part of the in-store shopping experience is the opportunity to make questions and obtain recommendations from the staff's members in the shop, test the products before buying them to experience the benefits of it (Weare.lush, n.d.): "If you're undecided, we're happy to create fresh samples for you to take home and try so you can be absolutely sure you've found your perfect match" (Weare.lush, n.d.).

Finally, as part of their transparency value, all the products present the information of the company's manufacturer for each product, in which they show the name of the person who made a particular product and the time in which it was produced (Lush, n.d.). Last but not least important, Lush provides a space in every store for activism activities, in this way, they convert its shops into community hubs, in order to turn its customers into activists (Weare.lush, n.d.).

Kiehl's case study

In 1851 a new pharmacy opened in New York City, serving the people living around the corner of 13th street and third avenue (Kiehl's, n.d.). The little store selling compounds as well as exotic natural remedies aroused the interest of John Kiehl that in 1894 bought the apothecary, starting to develop a solid base for the launch of the first Kiehl's product in 1921 when his apprentice Irvin Morse took the lead (Reference for Business, n.d.). From there, the offer of the products increased and expanded to touch different areas of the cosmetic field, with a specific focus on body and hair care. The new formulas they have introduced and the exclusive ingredients of their products were innovative to the point that in 1979 a tribute to the brand was paid at the Smithsonian National Museum in Washington, D.C (Reference for Business, n.d.). After a few years of hardships due to the difficulty in managing the significant

demand for their products, the success of Kiehl's increased after being acquired by L'Oréal in 2000 (L'Oréal, n.d.). Today Kiehl's is present worldwide with more than 400 stores, and it is considered one of the most profitable brands owned by L'Oréal, contributing to its success (L'Oréal, 2020).

In more than 170 years of activity, Kiehl's remained true to itself while constantly developing the brand and the respective products. Since the very beginning, the core values are described as: "*familiarity and service, science and education, along with nature and environmental respect*" (Kiehl's, n.d.). The pivotal point of the brand is identified in its background, which is reflected in each value previously mentioned. Making people perceive Kiehl's as a safe place where they can feel at home, was always a top priority for the brand. A clear example of this is given by the motto "Try Before You Buy" coined by Irving Morse in 1922; this concretely consisted in offering the possibility to test the products with the supervision of an expert before actually purchasing them, as well as gifting a great number of samples (Kiehl's, n.d.). After 95 years, this remains part of the brand's tradition and it underlines the relevance of proximity and care for the customer (Kiehl's, n.d.).

Born as an apothecary, pharmaceutical and medical knowledge is central to the brand and was nurtured throughout the years. In 1961, the chemist Aroon Morse was the one that invented a particular form of penicillin that was subsequently used in a particular formula, combined with Aloe Vera (Kiehl's, n.d.). The product's scientific developments did not stop, as demonstrated by the introduction of new dermatologist solutions in the 2000s, which nowadays are constantly under review for improvements (Kiehl's, n.d.). Although scientific progress is fundamental, for Kiehl's this needs to be coupled with educating people on the topic; from being the first to have their

ingredients written down on the labels in 1924, to hosting webinars and uploading informative videos on their social media platforms (Kiehl's, n.d.).

Finally, the usage of natural ingredients and the respect for the environment reached their peak after the acquisition from L'Oréal, since preserving natural resources and planet care are cardinal aspects for the latter as well (L'Oréal, n.d.). "Aaron Morse once said that a worthwhile firm must have a purpose for its existence and to improve in some way the quality of the community to which it is committed" (L'Oréal, n.d.), today this is reflected in many ways: the use of renewable raw materials for the products (L'Oréal, n.d.), charity programs (Kiehl's Gives, n.d.) or the choice of minimal packaging and recyclable old jars (Kiehl's n.d.).

The physical stores were always very important for Kiehl's, to the point that this was the only way to sell their products for the first 150 years of activity (Chaplin, 2000). The main focus is on the attempt to harmonically combine the different elements that characterize the brand, by also emphasizing the ones that might be a contradiction between each other (Kiehl's n.d.). Consequently, historical photos, chandeliers, wood floors, and brick walls are more or less present in every store, as well as neon signs, LEDs, and pictures of New York's skyscrapers (Kiehl's, n.d.). Furthermore, other elements cannot be missing in a Kiehl's store since they became the icons of the brand: motorcycles and Mr. Bones (Kiehl's, n.d.). While the latter symbolizes the pharmaceutical and science field, the former was introduced in the store by Aaron Morse so that men could have something to do while the women walked around the shop (Schlesinger, 2015). Nowadays, motorcycles also symbolize inclusion and acceptance of the remarkable percentage of men purchasing cosmetics from Kiehl's compared to other brands (Kiehl's, n.d.).

Analysis

Introduction of the framework

The selected research topic is analyzed with the help of a specific framework, and the latter is applied to both case studies: Lush and Kiehl's. The structure (Fig. 1) takes inspiration from two frameworks (Fig. 2, Fig. 3) designed by Melin (2022) by combining and adapting some of their elements. It is a framework that consists of four fundamental categories linearly connected, and it illustrates the results that come from the transformation of core values into physical reality. Specifically, the literature review chapter explained how brand associations arise once in contact with the elements that constitute the brand's world, including the physical stores. It is essential for brands to correctly and efficiently deliver their identity, what they are and what they stand for. Thus, the transmission of the core values is vital, since they easily capture their essence. Therefore, brands can use physical stores to transform their core values into reality by properly planning interior design and general architecture. It is a matter of going from intangible to tangible, to support the creation of the said associations. Based on the ability of the brand to work with the first step of the framework, the outcome when it comes to the associations can be either positive because they reflect what the brand wanted to transmit or unfavorable in the opposite case. Consequently, the next step is the shaping of a brand image. The literature review pointed out how this image derives from the accumulation of associations related to the brand, and an important role is played by the ones coming from the physical store and the experience of the brand in the concrete reality. Therefore, the results of the first two steps of the framework influence the third one, with a plus or minus of image. In particular, if the brand performs well enough, it will be able to help with the development of a strong and unique added value, which is the key for

success. Thus, the last step of this process is represented by a specific position that the brand will have in the mind of different people.

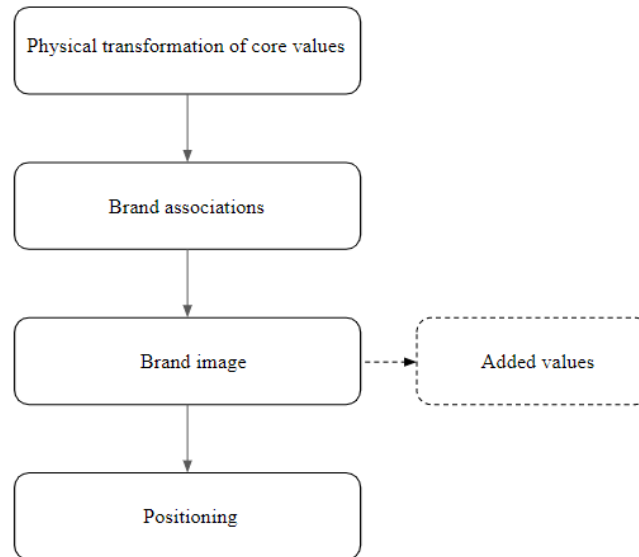


Fig. 1 “Core value transformation: from words to actions”

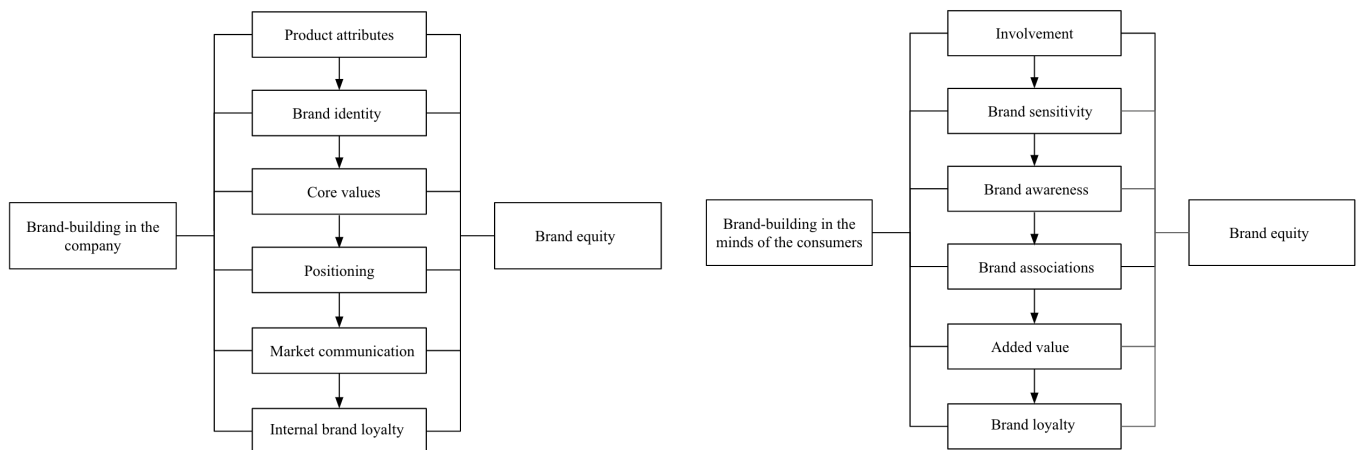


Fig. 2 “Branding: a value-adding process” (Melin, 2022)

Fig. 3 “Critical steps in the branding process” (Melin, 2022)

Empirical Results (see Table 1)

Question 1 and 2

The data collected show that approximately 80% of people regularly buy cosmetic products for skin and hair care. Additionally, 75% of the respondents are interested in cosmetic products, meaning that they have more potential to have an interest in exploring the brands and their values.

Question 3 and 4

Around 33% of the respondents agreed that they prefer buying the products only physically because it increases their shopping experience since they can “look at the way products are organized” and because “there is no fun in clicking a few buttons from your computer and get the things delivered”. Visiting physical stores is described as an important recreational activity to pass the time with friends and family, something that despite the exponential growth of the digital world and the e-commerce platforms (especially after the outbreak of the pandemic) is still considered relevant by many. The difference is strongly perceived even when going alone because of the “[...] possibility to walk in the shop with my headphones on and being immersed into different worlds”. Therefore, the physical environment adds something different and one respondent mentioned that “for products like these, about *care*, online feels so cold and distant every brand seems the same if not for the qualities of the products”. This concept was also stated by different participants and it is because when exploring the store people are able to experience the brand both physically and emotionally, a cardinal trait of the brand experience (Pierre & Chebat, 2013). Additionally, approximately 45% of those who buy both online and at the store agree with the fact that visiting the store and experiencing a physical contact with the brand is necessary to value how to make future purchases: “it is nicer to visit the store first and then maybe buy the products online”.

This shows that the physical store, because of the high level of proximity it conveys, is particularly used to live the brand and to discover its essence, only then the person feels secure enough to buy the products online.

Question 5

In this part of the questionnaire, after looking at the given images of the stores (Fig. 4, Fig. 5, Fig. 6), the respondents mentioned certain values and specific perceptions regarding the brand.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

In particular, Lush appeared to be: sustainable, organic, ethical, peaceful, handmade and homemade, naked and fresh. These words chosen by the big majority of the participants are the ones that describe and completely relate to all the core values rooted in the brand and that Lush also aims to deliver through the physical stores. One specific respondent gave a salient contribution that sums up the other replies collected, by saying: “[...] with the wooden crates and shelves it seems that Lush is not permanently settled but constantly moving, which is a synonym of constant development. These also make me think of the countryside and natural surroundings, so they probably sell handmade and natural products. The raw ambient and disposition make me believe that this brand does not use many chemical elements and is environmentally friendly”. Additionally, from the inspection of the results, only an irrelevant percentage of people suggested a few values that are not a part of the core of the brand but still compose the peripheral sphere.

Question 6

In the case of the Kiehl’s stores, after having visualized the images projected (Fig. 7, Fig. 8, Fig. 9) the majority of the respondents were in doubt regarding its core values and either got them completely wrong or mentioned not more than one of the values that constitute the brand’s essence.



Fig. 7

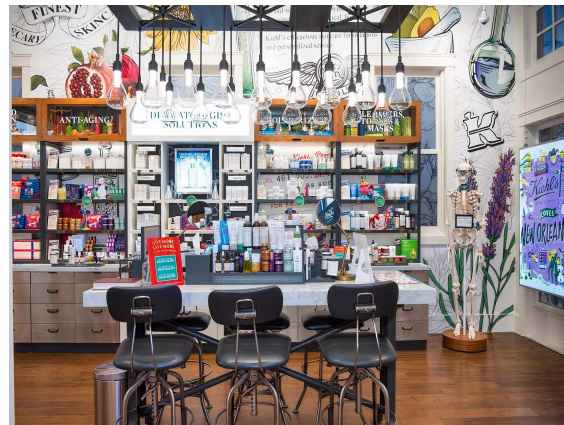


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Regarding this, the results also showed that people were able to grasp slightly better the values that compose the peripheral sphere. What is noticeable is the frequent use of adverbs and verbs of probability as well as question marks, which reiterates the general confusion. For example, one participant affirmed that “Kiehl’s is giving the vibes of hipster pharmacy. **Maybe** they value good quality ingredients? Scientifically tested?” while another one said: “I’ll **guess** their values are exclusivity and time to focus on the client. But I don’t see too many signs about their main values [...]”. Additionally, as the latter reply suggests, some people have explicitly affirmed that they were not able to understand what Kiehl’s aimed to deliver when looking at their stores: “Got no clue with them to be honest... Maybe Youngness?” or “I can’t understand their

values, it's an ordinary store" were some of the answers.

Question 7 and 8

In general, 70,8% of those who replied to the questionnaire agreed that Lush's core values were easier and quicker to understand compared to the ones of Kiehl's. When asked for the reasons for this response, one particular thing that emerges is the contrast between clarity (Lush) and confusion (Kiehl's). In the eyes of multiple people, the store settings with the design and architecture elements showed coherence, and all the details appeared to be harmonically combined to deliver the essence of the brand. Comments like the following ones expressed this feeling: *"Everything with Lush seems pretty clear. The process to understand what they stand for is more straightforward"*, *"Lush has powerful values that immediately catch the eyes"* and *"Everything with Lush follows a specific way of delivering their beliefs and values, it is more consistent"*. Meanwhile, Kiehl's has received the exact opposite feedback, and the difficulty in the process of understanding the brand's core values is well outlined by one respondent *"I have to stop and think about them (Kiehl's) for a while. If I enter the Kiehl's stores I would not probably even think about their values"*. Moreover, a significant result is given by the number of people who stated that the sense of disorientation and confusion they perceive from the picture of the stores, do not make Kiehl's stand up from its competitors: *"What I see when I look at the pictures of their store is that Kiehl's is similar to every other brand"* and *"Kiehl's motives seems a bit over the place and overwhelming, and to me, confusion means that I will just look at the products in terms of quality, they can be good but nothing more"*.

Question 9, 10 and 11

Once the respondents viewed the pictures of the stores, they were asked how much they would like to visit them (on a scale

from 1 to 5). In the case of Lush, the results follow a graphical exponential line. A big percentage of people are more willing to visit Lush's stores once they have seen the way they look (68.7%). The majority of the respondents linked their will to visit them regarding the perceived visual identity and experience prospect: *"In my opinion, Lush seems to be more exciting, it is not simply a store with a bunch of products for people to buy"*, *"It seems like Lush has a something to tell, I imagine myself walking around the shop and feel as if I am catapulted in a different world. A better one somehow"*. Additionally, another reason relies on the values-persona match: *"I like Lush's environment better, it reflects me and my ideals and I'd rather go to a store that I think corresponds to my values and beliefs"*. On the other hand, just around 17% of the respondents mentioned that their interest has not changed and only 13.7% answered that they are not interested in visiting Lush's store. In the case of Kiehl's, more than 35% of the participants showed indifference about visiting their stores after seeing the pictures. Interestingly, the highest interest in visiting the physical stores (rated 5 - very much) was 41,2% for Lush, while for Kiehl's this was the lowest percentage obtained (around 4%). In conclusion, the majority of the people either did not change their mind or worse, they affirmed that they would not like to go to the Kiehl's stores because they do not look appealing enough and do not have a special story delineated: *"If I did not know from friends that Kiehl's has good products when doing shopping I would not be interested in experiencing their store. Will I enter it and walk around? Maybe yes, but not absolutely. Would I remember it and gain something afterward? Probably not"*. The replies also bring up the topic of confusion once again concerning these preferences: *"Kiehl's looks like they want to be young, fresh, and fun while failing in reality because it's just a bunch of things*

put there together with no proper common sense”.

Implementing the framework

Lush

From an interior design and architecture perspective, Lush uses an unstructured display of colorful and unpackaged products on wooden shelves and crates, along with chalkboards displaying handwritten slogans as a backdrop to communicate its core values: innovation under freshness, transparency and handmade, ethics and sustainability. From the questionnaire responses, it is possible to extract how people perceive such visual settings, and it turns out that they can easily grasp the core values conveyed by the environment. Moreover, the big majority was able to delineate them with the exact words used by the brand to describe the pivotal points of its essence. From a branding perspective, this means that through the stores Lush can strongly help with the creation of specific associations that are advantageous for the brand. These will further sustain the building of an image that matches the identity of Lush. Therefore, the success until this step is the launch base for the potential generation of added value. In this way, the brand will be able to stand out not only in the cosmetic field by occupying a strong and specific position in people's minds, but it will also be one step further the others with similar values, due to its clarity and consistency. Specifically, by examining the data, a significant number of respondents indicated that they felt that the ideals of the brand (core values) matched theirs, which means that Lush succeeded in creating a strong connection between the brand ideals and the people's self-ideals. Finally, for the consumers, the added value has a great potential to develop into loyalty; meanwhile, the group of people who are currently not Lush's final consumers could be incentivized to further explore the brand. In particular, those could evolve into consumers or

simply choose the brand when they have to buy the products for a third person.

Kiehl's

Kiehl's stores visually attempt to communicate the core values of familiarity and service, science and education, along with nature and environmental respect through a variety of furnishing and interior design elements. From the data collected, it can be observed that people have wide and completely different perceptions of the brand's core values visually conveyed by Kiehl's stores. By calculation, although 40% of the respondents feel that they could easily perceive them, the problem arises when the 157 respondents discerned disparate things and listed 17 different values, 4 of which are completely irrelevant or even opposite to Kiehl's brand values. Not only that, but sustainability and environmental friendliness, part of the core values that have been highly emphasized since Kiehl's was acquired by L'Oréal, were barely perceived by people through the visual experience offered in stores. This means that the brand was not successful within the first step of the framework. By having an unsuccessful transformation of core values, favorable brand associations will not be created, and worse, the perception coming from their stores can even cause damage to the image of the brand. One possible explanation for the above-mentioned phenomenon is that Kiehl's wants to include too many elements that can remind of its core values without following a proper coherent plan. Each of them is weakly related to the others, which is emphasized by the stores' haphazard and random designs, leading to a fragmented perception of Kiehl's core values. Specifically, embracing all the facets that might be contradictions between each other is an extremely delicate process. Therefore, to avoid confusion the brand should not randomly insert elements and its icons in the stores but instead transform the core values in a way in which the transition from one to the

other is clear. Kiehl's needs to harmonically thematize the whole environment, only by doing this people will be able to grasp the whole essence of the brand. Otherwise, the position of the brand in people's minds can be unclear and Kiehl's would also lose the chance to sustain the added value creation through the powerful instrument of the store.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to examine how core values can be concretely transformed in physical stores to help with the creation of brand associations and the shaping of the brand image. To study this topic, a framework called *Core values: from words to action* was implemented. The main result of the research is the correlation between the visual experience provided by the physical stores and the effects on brand positioning. In particular, to have a positive outcome, the analysis pointed out that the brands need to accurately formulate an action plan to transform their core values through the visual experience in the physical stores. The simple disposition of too many different elements that can remind of the core values is not enough, because of the confusion that might arise. Clarity is the key when it comes to the visual experience since only in this way people will be able to perceive the whole essence of the brand. Specifically, the research shows how a proper in-store transformation of the core values can create appropriate perceptions to produce favorable brand associations. These are helpful to create a brand image that matches the identity of the brand. Once this is built, there will be opportunities for brands to create added value. When the added value is generated among people who are not necessarily consumers, it makes the brand stand out from its competitors and drives people's incentives to explore the brand and immerse themselves in its world. On the other hand, there will be a potential brand

loyalty stimulation if the added value emerges among their consumers. However, the disadvantageous brand associations will appear once failing in the transformation of the core values, which will lead to a vague and fragmented brand image, here exemplified by the Kiehl's case study. Lastly, our framework illustrates how with a favorable brand image, brands can have a positive and strong positioning in people's minds, which is exactly what Lush is doing. The brand, with the help of the store environment, is able not only to stand out in the general cosmetic field but also from the competitors relying on similar values. On the contrary, if from the physical stores the brand image comes out as unclear, the brand will not be as agile in creating a clear positioning in people's minds, which will impact their ability to be different among the multitude of brands.

Managerial implications

- Despite the increased importance of the digital world nowadays, when planning strategic actions for branding purposes, managers should not forget that the physical world is still playing a significant role. In particular, the store environment can influence the general outcome a lot.
- When delivering the brand core values to people through the visual experience of the store, the brand should carefully organize the transformation so that all of them can be related and expressed in a structured way.
- Appropriate transformations are helpful for the creation of a desired brand image that matches the brand identity.
- A positive outcome with the brand image can incentivize people (not necessarily consumers) to explore the brand.

- When there is a match between the brand image and customer's self image, there will be potential customer loyalty.
- A well-built brand image is helpful for competitive positioning.

Limitations and further research

The major limitation of this study is the small empirical data size of both the responses collected from the questionnaire and the case categories, with the study of only two brands coming from the same specific field. Therefore, research conducted based on broader sample size and different fields are needed in the future to get generalizable conclusions. It is also important to note that under a qualitative analysis approach, the interpretation of the data might be biased due to the different cultural, professional, and cognitive backgrounds of the researchers (Creswell, 2013). Although in this study, the bias has been reduced to some extent due to researchers' different national and cultural backgrounds (Italy-Europe, Peru-South America, and China-Asia), and the researchers' specializations (economics, business engineering, and communication), there is a need for more researchers with diversified backgrounds to be involved in this topic.

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