Sex Appeal, Surf Culture and Seduction: Exploring the Hollister Experience

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This exploratory, qualitative study of Hollister draws on written in-depth interviews and subjective personal introspections from customers. Set against the growing literature on sensory servicescapes and experiential branding, the paper demonstrates that the Hollister experience evokes strong and contradictory reactions in those who took part in the study.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This exploratory, qualitative study draws on in-depth interviews and written subjective personal introspections, focuses specifically on how Hollister customers feel about the Hollister store experience.

Hollister Co. (HCO) has established itself as the quintessential American clothing brand, associated with surfing culture and beautiful teenagers. The brand offers laid back, Southern California (SoCal) surfer style clothing in the teen retail sector, and currently achieves international sales in excess of $1.5 billion annually. Since 2008 the parent company has progressively pushed the brand globally, and there has been rapid expansion, particularly in the UK (Ward, 2008).

As a background to the study, three key literatures are briefly reviewed: on branding, servicescapes and sensory marketing. Building on the early insights of Holbrook and Hirschman on experiential consumption (1981; 1982), branding increasingly relies on symbolic associations and lifestyle impressions (see, for example, Holt, 2004; Sherry, 1998; Miller, 2006). This involves creating excitement, connectedness and community (Sheane, 2012), and giving brands energy, visibility and meaning to their target market (Aaker, 1996). Group membership, peer group acceptance and sexual attractiveness are identified as key issues for young consumers (Harwood, 1999).

Much has been written about servicescapes and their importance for creating memorable consumer experiences. There has also been a recognition of the value of “themed flagship brand stores” (Kozinets et al 2002), which provide a memorable and engaging brand encounter, and use tangible and intangible elements to create stimulating brand experiences (see, for example, Mehrabian and Russell, 1974; Bitner, 1992; Kozinets, Sherry, DeBerry-Spence 2002; Gilboa and Rafaeli, 2003; Kearney et al 2007). Music, lighting, design, props, colour schemes, and olfactory and tactile cues appeal to consumers’ five senses as they enter these retail spaces.

Sensory marketing draws attention to the significance of the human senses in creating a ‘supreme sensory experience of a brand’, according to Hulten, Broweus and Van Dijk (2009, p. vii). Oddly enough, these authors make no reference to sex appeal, a key element in many sectors, not least fashion (Pettinger, 2004). Consumers evaluate brands according to the match between brands and their own body image perceptions, and the body signifies membership to particular subcultures (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006: 157). Body awareness and comparison with others is particularly intense for teenage consumers (Festinger, 1954), and indeed Harwood (1999) identified that teenagers buy for three main reasons: to show individualism, to attract the opposite sex, and for acceptance by their desired peer group.

One cannot argue with the old adage that sex sells products (see, for example, Driessen, 2005; Dahl et al. 2009), but Hollister, shamelessly, one might argue, uses an intense form of sensuous marketing with sex appeal at its core, by employing aesthetically pleasing female and male shop floor staff (‘models’) and male ‘lifeguards’. This ‘walking self-marketing’ branding strategy is one of the most visible examples of aesthetic labour in retailing. Shop floor employees are carefully groomed to fit the brand aesthetic of embodying the SoCal lifestyle, in order to encourage customers to buy into the brand.

METHODOLOGY

The study drew on 25 written subjective personal introspections and in-depth interviews in order to explore consumers’ experience of visiting a Hollister store. SPI, pioneered by Holbrook (1986) is a form of autoethnography (Holbrook, 2005), which ideally provides insights into an individual’s reflections, thoughts, mental images, feelings, sensations and behaviours (Gould (1995)). To strengthen and complement this method, and as recommended by Holbrook, we also conducted in-depth interviews with participants. All of the data focused on one particular Hollister store in the UK, which in terms of tangible and intangible cues typifies all Hollister stores worldwide. The research was conducted over a six month period and a total of twenty five SPIs and in-depth interviews were analysed.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

A number of key findings emerged from the data, which illustrate the complexity of the Hollister experience and the pitfalls of engaging in full-scale sensory assaults, and four key responses were identified: Seduction, Intimimation, Nostalgia and Exasperation.

In terms of positive responses, the state of Seduction was characterised as an Alice Through the Looking Glass experience of stepping through the glass into another, more alluring world. The dim lighting and beautiful props immediately created a dream-like, enchanted atmosphere. The profusion of aesthetically pleasing staff increased the sense of being carried away on a fantasy-fuelled tide of abandonment, and of belonging to the exclusive, sexy, SoCal beach club of beautiful people. The styling of the Hollister stores is romantic and glamorous, with dark wood paneling, potted palms, exotic wallpapers, crystal chandeliers, antique armchairs, and retro-styled posters of gorgeous ‘dudes’ and ‘Bettys’. Nostalgia, real or imagined, is thus encouraged, and some participants loved the amorous musings the store invited.

However, other participants found the Hollister experience to be one of Intimimation, feeling as if they had entered an alien, elitist environment in which they didn’t belong. The perceived air of luxury and exclusivity was experienced as intimidating, and this was compounded by the ‘hauteur’ of staff. Other consumers’ sense of intimimation was based on more tangible elements: very loud music, dark, rabbit-warren-like rooms, poor visibility due to the low level lighting, and concern that they would walk into other people in the semi-darkness.

Finally, a number of participants felt Exasperation. This is like no other retail environment, and consumers who didn’t ‘see the beauty within’, as one enamoured participant put it, were infuriated with the dark, disorientating interior; little or no customer service or interaction with staff; the impossibility of seeing colours, sizes and labels; and the nightclub volume of music, which left them feeling dizzy, disorientated, temporarily deafened, and gasping for air and daylight.

To conclude, Hollister creates an environment that its audience either loves or hates: once consumers step ‘through the looking glass’ they either ‘suspend their disbelief’ and allow themselves to succumb to its romantic enchantments, or they remain detached and regard the Hollister experience as a dystopian servicescape nightmare of over-sexed fakery, manipulation and impracticality.

REFERENCES


Hulten, B. Broweus, N. and Van Dijk, M. (2009), Sensory Marketing, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.


