

Retail Spectacles and Brand Meaning: Insights from a Brand Museum Case Study

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Abstract

This article explores the expansion of brand meaning within a spectacular, retail environment. Spectacular retailing environments include themed retailing, brandscapes, flagship brand stores, themed entertainment brand stores, themed flagship brand stores, and brand museums. This research uses an extended case-study method to investigate the World of Coca-Cola brand museum located in Atlanta, Georgia. A brand museum is a type of themed flagship brand store, but there are some unique aspects. One key feature of brand museums is the resemblance to traditional museums, but, in the former, the brand is positioned within historical and educational contexts. Within the brand museum context, this study explains how brand meaning can be expanded along seven dimensions: humanization, socialization, localization, globalization, contextualization, theatricization, and characterization. Retailing implications are discussed.

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Operating in a consumption driven society, organizations are actively seeking ways to differentiate their brands by promoting an experience, rather than specific product attributes. The proliferation of simulated, extravagant “retail spectacles” (2004, p. 122) is an outward sign of an inward paradigm shift, where the United States is moving away from a service-based economy toward an experience-based economy (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Pine and Gilmore 1999). Retail spectacles are structured, manufacturer-controlled retail environments where entertainment serves as the primary means of consumption. Research suggests that consumers visit retail spectacles not only to purchase goods, but also to engage in fantasies, feelings, and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Pine and Gilmore 1999). One such retail spectacle is a “themed flagship brand store” where consumers visit the store to engage in personally relevant, company-staged experiences that focus on an established brand (Kozinets et al. 2002). The brand itself “becomes the basis for a retail approach in which new, entertainment-oriented services are offered” (Kozinets et al. 2002, p. 18). Themed flagship

brand stores are entertainment destinations that provide a place for retailers to leverage brand loyalty, promote a brand image, and convey brand meaning by allowing consumers to experience the brand.

In academic studies, a stream of research has emerged that investigates various characteristics of extraordinary retail spectacles and how these retail environments build relationships with consumers. The goal of many prior studies has been to detail specific consumer experiences (e.g., playful behavior, enchantment, allurements), but the notion of how themed flagship stores enhance brand meaning remains relatively unexplored. Here, we build upon the retail spectacle literature by investigating a contemporary themed flagship brand store: the World of Coca-Cola (WOCC) brand museum. We define a brand museum as a type of themed flagship brand store, with the addition of historical linkages and museum-like characteristics. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore how a specific type of themed flagship brand store, the brand museum, enhances brand meaning for consumers. The contribution of this study lies in elaborating on the various paths that brand museums use to widen and deepen brand meaning for consumers.

Using an extended case-study method, this study explores the World of Coca-Cola brand museum. Research questions that guide our inquiry include: (1) What features distinguish brand museums from other themed, flagship brand stores explored in

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the literature? (2) How is brand meaning enhanced within the brand museum context? (3) What insights do brand museums provide for retailers who wish to use physical space to expand the meaning of the brand? First, we review the literature for retail spectacles and explore the unique characteristics of brand museums. Next, we provide an overview of our research method and outline seven dimensions through which a brand's meaning is enhanced. Finally, we discuss our findings and offer insights for leveraging brand meaning through the use of retail spectacles.

Theory on retail spectacles

Sociologists have developed the foundations for understanding an experience-based economy. Baudrillard (1988) coins the term “simulacrum” to capture the cultural order of contemporary consumption as an outgrowth of post-modernity in which the boundaries between real and imaginary are blurred. Based on the theories of Weber and Foucault, Ritzer (2005) proposes the idea that retail spectacles have oppressive nuances, luring consumers to spend ever-increasing amounts of money which never brings full satisfaction. Ritzer refers to this endless cycle of consumption as enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment. Consumers become enchanted with retail spectacles for a while and then are disenchanted, after realizing their lack of personal fulfillment. As a result, retailers develop more impressive spectacles to re-entice consumers. Ritzer (2005, p. 207) suggests that simulated, consumption spectacles are on the rise and will eventually be displaced by even newer means of consumption that are “infinitely more enchanted, spectacular, and effective selling machines.”

Marketing researchers are similarly exploring the various means through which consumers oscillate between enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment in retailing contexts (Thompson 2006). In contrast to Ritzer's theory, Kozinets et al. (2004, p. 659) proposes an alternative interpretation of retail spectacles where “surveillance is not oppressive but actually desired and libidinally charged.” In exploring ESPN Zone, their findings suggest that consumers are an active part of the retail environment, becoming co-creators of the retail experience. Belk (2000), Gottdiener (1997), Peñaloza (1999), and Sherry (1998) convey that consumers are directed through structured environments, where marketers clearly stage and manipulate consumer experiences. Kozinets et al. (2004) extends these studies by demonstrating that consumers enjoy and actively participate in a dialectical relationship with the marketer in the retail setting. The theoretical foundation for our study is not grounded in critical sociological theory, but in the marketing theory developed around themed retailing environments, such as that described by Kozinets et al. (2004).

The contributors to Sherry's (1998) *Servicescapes* are among those who are developing the concept of themed retailing environments within the field of marketing. Gottdiener (1995, 1998) argues that themes are being increasingly incorporated into commercial spaces. According to Gottdiener, American culture relies heavily on signs and symbols, and retail environments are incorporating such semiotics in the form of themes to attract consumers and increase sales. Although Gottdiener does not directly

define his use of the term “themed environments,” he argues that these environments can serve multiple functions (e.g., via a multitude of products, brands, or activities) and include retail spectacles as displayed in shopping malls, theme parks and Las Vegas casinos.

Sherry (1998) is careful to differentiate his study of the “brandscape” Nike Town as slightly different from Gottdiener's idea of an amusement-centered “themed environment.” He defines a “brandscape” as a “material and symbolic environment that consumers build with marketplace products, images, and messages that they invest with local meaning, and whose totemic significance largely shapes the adaptation consumers make to the modern world” (Sherry 1998, p. 112). Unlike Gottdiener's “themed environments,” the “brandscape” tends to focus on a single brand, and consumers actively create meanings within this marketer constructed environment. Nike Town (Chicago, IL) illustrates how the retail venue of the brandscape combines advertising, merchandising, and entertainment so as to provide the visitors with a consumption experience that is intentionally designed to engage consumers and build relationships with them.

Peñaloza (1999) also examines Nike Town, but from a different theoretical perspective. Peñaloza uses the term “consumption spectacle” to describe Nike Town. She defines a consumption spectacle as a “postmodern market performance that involves consumer participation, exaggerated display, and the amplification of social values with an emphasis on knowledge of its mechanics of production as part of the experience” (Peñaloza 1999, p. 339). Peñaloza's study suggests that consumption spectacles highlight the importance of physical nuances and emphasize the blending of experience and cognition in post-modern retail environments.

Kozinets et al. (2002) flesh out the idea of “brandscapes” from a retailing perspective and identify “several types of brand-related stores.” First, these authors define flagship brand stores, themed entertainment brand stores, and themed flagship brand stores. Flagship brand stores have three basic characteristics: “(1) carrying a single brand of product, (2) being owned by the manufacturer of the brand, and (3) operated with the intention of building or reinforcing the image of the product rather than operating to sell a product” (Kozinets et al. 2002, p. 17). These types of stores can be exclusive outlets, such as the Body Shop, or non-exclusive as in the case of Nike Town. Themed entertainment brand stores, such as The Hard Rock Café, focus on selling a variety of branded products (i.e., Budweiser, Coca-Cola, Omaha Beef, and Hard Rock Café t-shirts) in an entertaining environment. Themed flagship brand stores, such as ESPN Zone, are hybrids in that they have characteristics of both flagship brand stores and themed entertainment brand stores, while simultaneously possessing an even stronger focus on the brand as the reason for the existence of the retail establishment. As explained by Kozinets et al., “consumers go to themed flagship brand stores not only to purchase products; they go to *experience* the brand, company, and products in an environment largely controlled by the manufacturer” (Kozinets et al. 2002, p. 18).

Kozinets et al. (2004) use the themed flagship brand store as a context to study the interaction between consumer play, agency,

and retail spectacle. They argue that ESPN Zone (Chicago, IL) provides an arena for play that gives consumers freedom to explore the self and social relationships within the marketer constructed boundaries of commoditization and commercialization. In essence, consumers willfully perform within the stage created by the producer, resulting in overlapping, interdependent consumption and production experiences. This view is theoretically consistent with the dialectical relationship between marketers and consumers in the Nike Town context as described by both Sherry (1998) and Peñaloza (1999).

Brand museums are slightly different from themed flagship brand stores explored in prior studies (e.g., ESPN Zone) in that they frame their advertising-driven contents as cultural artifacts with historical linkages that connect consumers to both local and international history. Although places such as Niketown have museum-like aspects, the findings of this study differentiate brand museums on the basis of how the historical elements are featured, the modality of their representation, and the focus on various aspects of consumption. These elements come together to represent a wider set of brand meanings. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics and terms used to describe themed retail environments, and highlights how these environments build brand meaning.

Brand museums: an intense brand experience

This study builds upon the theory of themed flagship brand stores. Kozinets et al. (2002, p. 18) conducts a preliminary investigation of the World of Coca-Cola Museum in Atlanta labeling it a themed flagship brand store, stating it is “an elaborate brand building exercise that features themes of nostalgia, American history, Santa Claus, and globalization.” Our investigation delves deeply into the WOCC brand museum, identifying a few unique features that add to the conceptualization of “themed, flagship brand stores.” Ger and Belk (1996) also investigate the WOCC site by examining the impact of globalization upon consumption patterns. We extend this work by examining how the emphasis on globalization can expand the meaning of the brand.

Like themed flagship brand stores, brand museums blend concepts from retailing (e.g., incorporating free product samples, offering a gift shop that sells branded merchandise), advertising (e.g., display of brand ads, promotional activities focused on the brand, the firm, and its products, brand-oriented cultural artifacts), and entertainment (e.g., fantastic, extravagant, simulated experiences through interactive, multi-sensory displays). Brand museums also represent carefully planned, controlled environments where consumers can explore personal fantasies without facing the unpleasant realities of the world (i.e., physical risk), gain a sense of intrinsic enjoyment, and invest personal meanings into the experience. Examples of brand museums in the marketplace include: Hormel’s Spam Museum (Austin, MN), The Heineken Experience Museum (Amsterdam), The Guinness Storehouse Museum (Dublin), Hershey Museum (Hershey, PA), The Crayola Factory (Easton, PA), and Winnebago’s Visitor Center (Forest City, IA). What these brand museums have in common is that they all focus on a recognized brand (important to strengthening emotional connections) and have been in exist-

tence for a given period of time (important for creating historical linkages). They charge an entrance fee, generating revenue from the sales of service entertainment, all of which is based on the history and traditions of the brand and the unique artifacts of the brand.

Three key features distinguish brand museums from other themed retail environments: (a) historical linkages; (b) museum-like qualities (e.g., galleries, exhibits, paid admission); and (c) an education-based mission. For instance, Banana Republic’s primary retail mission is to build and reinforce a brand through selling branded merchandise; Planet Hollywood’s focus is on selling a variety of branded merchandise (Budweiser, Planet Hollywood t-shirts) in an entertaining context; ESPN Zone’s retailing mission is to promote and merchandise a brand through entertainment. In contrast, the World of Coca-Cola’s retail mission is to document, study, and interpret the brand over time.

Indeed, themed environments, brandscapes, flagship brand stores, themed entertainment brand stores, and themed flagship brand stores are all retail environments where consumers are able to experience brands. However, brand museums provide a richer, more intense brand experience. In ESPN Zone, for example, a consumer may purchase a drink or a hamburger while concurrently purchasing ESPN branded clothing, and, at Nike Town, a consumer may purchase shoes and other Nike paraphernalia. When consumers visit the World of Coca-Cola museum, typically the sole purpose of the visit is to experience the brand. For instance, a consumer would not visit the museum simply to buy a Coke; consumers visit the museum to learn about the brand. Fig. 1 illustrates how the intensity of the brand experience increases in spectacular, retail environments discussed thus far. The retail environments are on a continuum which demonstrates how the focus on the brand experience intensifies, with brand museums offering the most concentrated experience.

Brand museums and their resemblance to traditional museums

Brand museums are retail spectacles that resemble traditional museum venues. Brand museums are constructed by a firm, and the museum contents, which consist of objects of consumption, are intentionally framed to strengthen social and emotional connections to the brand. The objects of consumption are framed to appear historical and museum-like in display. Similarly, traditional museums are created for the purpose of preserving a specific collection, and the specific displays are often created by an independent curator. Traditional museums have a history of being designed for the elite or higher social classes (McLean 1995; McTavish 1998). According to McLean, the history of museums has shaped current public attitudes toward these venues; the general public views these spaces as important to education but somewhat lackluster in content. Brand museums overcome this impediment by combining the desire to belong to a coterie (e.g., brand community) and the importance of education with the excitement of spectacular, entertainment destinations. This hybrid retail spectacle is becoming a means for marketers to connect with consumers on an emotional, social, and cultural level.

Table 1
Building brand meaning via themed retail environments

Themed retail environments	Primary retail mission	Presentation of historical elements	Modality of historical elements	Focus of consumption
Flagship brand stores (Banana Republic, Tommy Hilfiger)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To build and reinforce a brand • To sell branded merchandise 	No emphasis on brand history	No emphasis on brand history	Brand attributes are the focus of consumption
Themed entertainment brand stores (Planet Hollywood, The Hard Rock Café)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To sell branded products in an entertaining context • To build a brand and merchandise it 	No emphasis on brand history	No emphasis on brand history	Brand services are the focus of consumption
Themed flagship brand stores (ESPN Zone)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To promote a brand 	Brand may have historical connections, however the emphasis is on entertainment	Use of entertainment to convey a brand's historical and cultural meaning	Brand experiences are the focus of consumption
Brand museums ^a (Coca-Cola Museum, Heineken Museum, Hershey Museum)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To become an entertainment destination • To inform and educate consumers about a brand • To document, study, and interpret a brand 	Strong emphasis on linking a brand to historical elements	Use of art, culture, historical figures, and historical relics to convey a brand's historical and cultural meaning	Brand information and education are the focus of consumption

^a Brand museums include characteristics of themed flagship brand stores with additional elements.

THEMED ENVIRONMENTS Gottdiener (1996)	Intensity based primarily upon amusement.	<u>Examples:</u> Caesar's Palace, Disney Land
↓		
BRANDSCAPES Sherry (1996) Penaloza (1999)	Intensity based upon the dual promotion of a brand, product, or product line.	<u>Example:</u> Nike Town
↓		
FLAGSHIP BRAND STORES Kozinets et al. (2002)	Intensity based upon building the image of the brand.	<u>Examples:</u> Exclusive Outlets (Old Navy, Banana Republic) and Nonexclusive Outlets (Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren)
↓		
THEMED ENTERTAINMENT BRAND STORES Kozinets et al. (2002)	Intensity based upon the simultaneous building of the brand and the merchandising of it (no brand history outside the store).	<u>Examples:</u> Planet Hollywood, The Hard Rock Café, The Rainforest Café
↓		
THEMED FLAGSHIP BRAND STORES Kozinets et al. (2002)	Intensity based upon using an established brand as the basis for the retailing venue.	<u>Example:</u> ESPN Zone
↓		
BRAND MUSEUMS	Intensity based upon complete satiation of the brand, including past, present and future appeals.	<u>Examples:</u> The World of Coca-Cola Museum, Hershey Museum, Guinness Storehouse Museum

Fig. 1. Continuum of brand intensity in spectacular, retail environments.

For financial reasons, traditional museums are increasingly incorporating entertainment and commerce (i.e., shops and cafes) into their venues (Falk and Dierking 2000; McLean 1995; McTavish 1998; Perry et al. 2000). With the introduction of IMAX films, interactive exhibits, and audio guides, 21st century museums are striving to meet the demands of an entertainment-driven economy. Museums, such as New York City's Museum of Modern Art and many others, openly adopt marketing organizational structures, terms and tactics (e.g., MoMA courses, MoMA e-cards collection). These tactics include branding the museum and its exhibits (e.g., the Van Gogh show, Dalí Painting and Film exhibit), in an effort to increase visitation, and ultimately generate greater revenue (McLean 1995; McNichol 2005).

Extended case-study method

To understand the meanings associated with brand museum visits, we employ an extended case-study method. Our study “applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract

the general from the unique” all by building on preexisting theory (Burawoy 1998, p. 5). According to Burawoy, the reflexive science approach remains grounded in theory and enables researchers to thematize participation in the world under study. Hence, by observing consumer behavior and engaging in multiple dialogues, the researchers are able to gain an insider view of brand museum experiences through “intraceptive intuition” (Sherry and Kozinets 2000, p. 169).

We selected an extended case-study design because it provides a framework for reconstructing preexisting theory. Data analysis is based on multiple sources of data collection from one brand museum: The World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta, Georgia. Our data are triangulated using four complementary qualitative data collection methods. The use of multiple methods, multiple investigators, and multiple data sources strengthens the validity of our findings. As shown in Fig. 2, emerging interpretations were examined within all four sources of data collection. Analyses were reformulated and modified until redundancy was reached in all categorical themes.

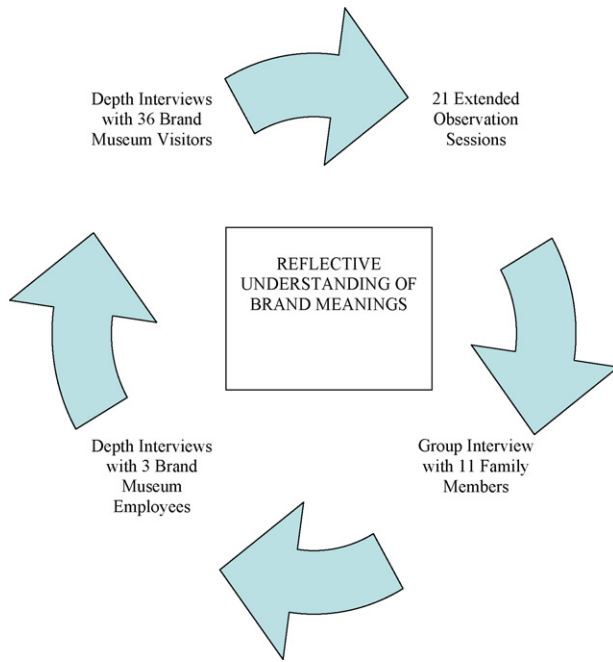


Fig. 2. Triangulation of data.

Over a period of four years, the researchers observed WOCC activity, conducted one-on-one interviews with both WOCC visitors and WOCC employees, led a focus group with family members that visited WOCC, transcribed individual and group interviews verbatim, and analyzed the data according to the protocols of extended case research (Burawoy 1998). This study was neither logistically nor financially supported by the Coca-Cola Company.

Extended observations

Observations served as a means for recording routines, discussions, and behaviors that guided our understanding of the culture and context of this particular brand museum. Observations in this study were recorded by means of field notes and photographs. Over the four-year data collection period, the team of researchers conducted 21 observational sessions. These sessions ranged from 2 to 8 h in length (i.e., all day) and took place on Saturdays at various points throughout each year. During observations, the researchers became silent participants, sitting on benches and standing in lines in the product sampling rooms, taking notes and photographs during the experience. Observational artifacts (e.g., photographs and fieldnotes) are used to triangulate the findings.

Depth interviews

Interviews consisted of 36 depth conversations. As visitors exited the WOCC, the researchers asked for their participation in an interview. Table 2 summarizes the demographic information of the respondents. A range of informants took part in our study representing: a balance of both males and females, various ages from 15 to 59, and a diverse set of occupations (e.g., high school

student to a truck driver). The majority of the informants were first time visitors to the WOCC; however, many had strong commitments to the brand. To ensure confidentiality, all the names reported in this article are pseudonyms.

Interviews lasted anywhere from 30 to 90 min in length and took place in a public setting (i.e., the Everything Coca-Cola store). During the exchange, informants conveyed the details and courses of their brand museum experience through storytelling. Informants were asked open-ended questions regarding their experiences and probed to fully understand concepts, behaviors, or ideas. On three occasions, other WOCC visitors would overhear the interviews and contribute their own stories. The storytelling among visitors became a relational activity, encouraging others to listen, share, and join our research.

Interviews occurred the same day of the museum visit. This ensured vivid memory of the feelings, thoughts and experiences associated with the visit. The sessions were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. We also took advantage of opportunities to interview three staff members who discussed museum operations. All informants were assured of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms and statement accuracy through member checks. For reliability and validity, four informants reviewed a copy of our findings to verify the analysis.

Group interview

Once preliminary findings were reviewed by four informants, a group interview was conducted to extend our “situational knowledge” (Burawoy 1998). One of the 36 original informants was asked to participate in a group interview with other members of his family in an effort to explore a reflective account of the brand museum experience. Participants in the group interview consisted of eleven family members whom all had visited the WOCC brand museum within the past eight months. Projective tasking techniques were used to engage in reflective storytelling and to plumb for unconscious visitation motives (Sherry and Kozinets 2000). The session began with sentence completion, word association, and mental mapping exercises, and concluded with a group discussion about the meanings associated with exercise responses. The group session lasted approximately 90 min and was audio taped and transcribed.

Analysis

Data analysis and interpretation sought to “uncover the macro foundations of a microsociology” (Burawoy 1991, p. 282). First, we identified theoretical propositions premised upon the extant literature. We took advantage of the richness of prior studies exploring retail spectacles and this guided our analysis and interpretation. Next, we aggregated the data (e.g., interview transcripts, fieldnotes, etc.) and then condensed participants’ experiences, using the constant comparative method to interpret common patterns and identify themes. Finally, the authors compared emergent themes with preexisting theory, fleshing out a thick description of the case context with the definitive goal of extending theory.

Table 2
Depth interview demographics

Informant	Occupation	Age	Gender	Interview minutes	# of visits in the past year	Commitment to the Brand
Amy	Graduate student	21	F	90	2	♥
Angela	School teacher	36	F	30	2	* ♥
Ben	School teacher	34	M	50	1	*
Betty	School counselor	59	F	90	2	
Bobby	Truck driver	48	M	40	1	♣
Brian	Graduate student	22	M	60	1	
Casey	High school student	15	F	45	1	
Chuck	School teacher	28	M	60	1	
Dolly	Beauty consultant	52	F	50	2	♣ ♥
Fred	Not-for-profit manager	57	M	45	5	♣ ♥
Gail	School teacher	46	F	65	1	
Grace	Administrative assistant	51	F	55	1	*
Jake	Graduate student	24	M	60	1	
Jane	Administrative assistant	46	F	65	1	* ♥
Jason	Manager	46	M	60	1	♣
Jay	Lawyer	36	M	30	1	*
Jenny	Stay-at-home mom	38	F	30	1	* ♥
Jerry	School teacher	24	M	35	1	* ♥
Jessie	College student	21	F	30	1	
Jim	Engineer	22	M	30	1	*
Joey	Computer analyst	37	M	90	1	*
John	Landscape architect	24	M	40	1	♣
Kate	Sales representative	27	F	60	1	♥
Kay	Real estate agent	29	F	60	3	♣ ♥
Mark	College professor	59	M	35	1	♣
Max	Sales representative	43	M	40	1	
Meri	Photographer	42	F	30	1	
Michelle	Market researcher	31	F	65	2	*
Patsy	College student	21	F	30	1	
Ralph	Graduate student	22	M	45	1	♣ ♥
Sally	Insurance agent	56	F	65	2	* ♥
Sam	Graduate student	23	M	40	1	♥ ♣
Shelly	High school student	16	F	45	2	
Susan	Stay-at-home mom	36	F	60	4	♥
Tony	Store manager	33	M	45	1	
Wally	Accountant	43	M	30	1	

(♣) Member of a Coca-Cola brand club (e.g., collectors club, online discussion group); (*) desires to join a Coca-Cola brand club in the future; (♥) brand devotee who collects or trades Coke memorabilia.

Findings

The retail spectacle

The WOCC brand museum cost \$15 million to build, is 45,000 square feet in size, and attracts 1.5 million visitors per year. The museum is located in heart of downtown Atlanta and is distinguishable by a 26-foot neon sign weighing 12.5 tons. The exterior of the building has a bottle sculpture with glowing red and white streams of color. The museum is open seven days a week, and tickets range from \$9.00 for adults to \$5.00 for children. Inside the museum there are 300 linear feet of displays, capturing over 100 years of history (Coca-Cola 2000).

One distinction that separates a brand museum from other themed brand stores is the retail environment. The retail environment includes aspects of entertainment, service, and consumption (similar to other brand stores, see Table 1), yet it is unique in that the environment simulates a museum with an educational mission (i.e., to document, to study, and to interpret

the brand over time). Similar to how museums display cherished artifacts and reconstructed historical collections, a brand museum uses branded art to convey the relevance, importance, and meaning of a brand. There are four main “galleries” that highlight Coca-Cola’s history and cultural significance (Coca-Cola 2000, p. 8). Visitors enter the WOCC brand museum on the first floor and, after paying for admission, are whisked from the lobby to the third floor at the top of the building for the starting point. The first gallery (on the third floor), Creating a Classic, uses interactive video stations and memorabilia to illustrate the Coca-Cola bottling process, spanning the period 1886–1926. In the second gallery (also on the third floor), Barnes Soda Fountain, an old-fashioned soda jerk demonstrates how Coca-Cola was prepared and served from 1920 to 1950, while radio programs are rebroadcast and original Coca-Cola songs are played on an authentic 1930s jukebox.

The third gallery (also on the third floor), Every Day Everywhere, presents an intriguing musical film on the international character of Coca-Cola, using high-definition projection and

StereoSurround sound. The fourth gallery (located on the second floor), *The Real Thing*, presents classic television commercials spanning over 50 years and uses video to illustrate: the story of Coca-Cola, the evolution in product packaging, the innovation of vending machines, the first soft drink consumed in space, and the story of Coca-Cola and Santa Claus. The manufacturing process, which could be depicted as banal, is transformed into a vivacious story as the process is peppered with hip sounds and psychedelic videos.

Visitors complete their brand museum experience by sampling Coca-Cola products in two rooms, one domestic and another international in scope. In the International Lounge, *Tastes of the World* (on the second floor), visitors are able to taste servings of Coke products distributed in over 20 different countries, including 20 exotic drinks not available in the United States. For our informants, the tasting room is a favorite attraction. This area is the quintessential location within the museum where consumers can comfortably settle back for a while and mingle with one another. Informants referred to this area as the “meeting room” where “social hour” takes place. The atmosphere duplicates a high-tech diner with energetic music, vibrant colors, flamboyant video screens, and shooting fountains of various Coca-Cola flavors.

To exit the brand museum, all visitors must go through the 5,600 square-foot Everything Coca-Cola retail store which features a variety of Coca-Cola memorabilia (Coca-Cola 2000). The store sells only brand-related merchandise, not Coca-Cola brand beverages. Much of the merchandise is only available through the brand museum and several items are considered limited editions or “collector” memorabilia.

Brand meaning

Organizations differentiate their products through branding, and a lack of effective branding can cause products to fail in the marketplace (Aaker 2007). According to Aaker, most brands focus on attributes to develop a brand’s identity, but this focus leads to weak customer loyalty and results in brand traits that are relatively easy for competitors to copy. Strong, successful brands “move beyond attributes to a brand identity based upon a brand personality and a relationship with customers” (Aaker 1994). In building a strong brand, Aaker (1996) suggests focusing on a brand’s identity (how a firm would like to be perceived) through the perspectives of the brand as a person, the brand as an organization, the brand as a symbol, and the brand as a product. The retail environment of a brand museum brings these perspectives together.

Brand museums seek to build a brand’s identity and provide meaning through the use of art, culture, historical figures, artifacts, and relics. The meaning of a brand is its ability to help consumers “create and build their self-identities” (Escalas and Bettman 2005, p. 379). Brands are cultural symbols with identities that can be used to provide meaning (Levy 1959; McCracken 1989, 2005). The congruency between a brand’s identity and a consumer’s identity is an important source of brand meaning. In the following section, we describe how the

WOCC museum engages in advertising, promotion, and brand positioning to provide an artistic, cultural representation that expands the meaning of the brand by strengthening the brand’s identity. Our findings demonstrate that brand museums enhance brand meaning through: (1) humanization of the brand, (2) socialization of the brand, (3) localization of the brand, (4) globalization of the brand, (5) contextualization of the brand, (6) theatricization of the brand, and (7) characterization of the brand.

Humanization of the brand

A brand museum humanizes the brand by instilling tangible, human-like characteristics. When consumers have long-lasting relationships with brands, they perceive those brands as more than passive objects with static qualities. Brands add structure and meaning to consumers’ lives, are anthropomorphized, and embody dyadic, relational connections (Fournier 1998). When a brand’s personality is extended into everyday contexts, consumers participate in activities that foster consumer–brand relationships. In human relationships, partners spend time with one another to develop a deeper sense of knowledge and awareness of the other person. The act of “being together” advances the relationship, creates feelings of closeness, and strengthens emotional bonds. Similar to human relationships, consumers desire to become more familiar with the history and personalities of brands. The brand museum provides an outlet for strengthening these relational associations.

I came here because I wanted to learn about Coke and become more familiar with its products and services. I guess I wanted to know what Coke was all about and this museum definitely gives you an intimate look at the brand. You walk away with a better understanding of Coke and it makes you feel like you know the brand on a personal level. I think in the future that every time when I drink Coke, I will remember this experience. It is so impressive that the company has survived this long and still means so much to so many people. . . Visiting the museum makes Coke more real to me. I mean I’ve always drank Coke, but I guess I feel a little more loyal to the brand after visiting today and being able to see how Coke gives back to society (Sam, 23, M).

For Sam, the museum experience is a palpable reminder of the brand’s role in consumers’ lives. When asked to elaborate on what he meant by “more real to me,” Sam conveyed that “Coke is able to take on a personality of its own . . . it comes off the pages of a magazine and it comes alive in there.” Sam conveys that his brand museum experience makes the brand feel more “real” because it infuses the brand with character and life, much like a human being. He then connects his brand museum experience with a slight increase in loyalty because he is able to connect to the brand “on a personal level.”

Like many people who consume in today’s postmodern marketplace, Sam appears to be seeking “real” products in an effort to make his consumption experience more meaningful and authentic. “I want to see genuine ads and genuine commercials about good products that are going to do something for me,

not just sell me something. I believe that using genuine products equals a genuine life, and I felt that inside the museum.” Sam believes that “authentic” brands add value to the consumption experience. Sam also found he was able to connect Coke with past, present, and future events. These cultural linkages situate the brand within the context of consumers’ lives, making the brand feel more “personal” and “real.”

In the brand museum context, humanization of the brand is consistent with theory on authenticity; authenticity provides a path for how the brand museum deepens the meaning of the brand for consumers. According to Grayson and Martinec (2004) when tourist sites are perceived to have connections with the past and there is perceived evidence of that connection, consumers’ experiences are more likely to be perceived as authentic. By positioning the brand within American history, the brand museum experience is perceived as meaningful, rather than commercialized.

In another interview, Jenny, a 38-year-old stay-at-home mom, discusses her strong need for brands that she trusts and believes in:

My kids and I are constantly bombarded with advertisements and commercials. It can be so overwhelming with all the choices in supermarkets and stores. We are flooded with all these different types of products and brands and I just want to make sense of it all. I think that to connect with a brand helps me find some grounding. I like to have a few brands that I am really loyal to and that gives me some sense of meaning. It just simplifies things to have brands that I really love and want to use, rather than being forced or influenced at the last minute to buy products that I am not going to be satisfied with. I like to surround myself with brands that I love and trust and that makes me feel good as a consumer. I think the museum helps consumers put their trust in Coke because it is a reliable brand that has stood the test of time. When we go to Disney World, it is all about the entertainment and imaginary friends and castles. But coming here to the Coke museum is different because you are able to make connections with the actual brand and learn specific facts about the brand.

Jenny’s narrative informs us about her need to connect with brands that she “loves and trusts.” Like Sam, Jenny’s visit the WOCC museum facilitates tangible, authentic connections with the Coca-Cola brand because it helps her “find some grounding” and “some sense of meaning” with a brand that gives her satisfaction. According to Cohen (1988), consumers seek authentic products through personalized experiences. Correspondingly, authenticity is “relative, contextually determined and ideologically driven” (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006, p. 483). Jenny states that the marketplace can be overwhelming due to the wide variety of brand choices available and the constant bombardment of advertisements. Living in a rapidly changing, mediated marketplace with no clear boundaries of real versus imaginary (Baudrillard 1988) may be too fluctuant for consumers like Jenny. For Jenny, the WOCC brand museum is more real than imaginary because she is “able to make connections with the actual brand and learn specific facts about the brand.” Coke’s

historical linkages, conveyed through the museum, provide comfort for Jenny as she searches for brands with longevity and permanence in the marketplace.

Our humanization theme has potential to broaden marketers’ understanding of the consumer–brand relationship, as outlined by Fournier (1998). According to Fournier (1998, p. 366), “just as the meaning of a given construct is dependent on its relationships with other constructs, so too is the meaning of a given brand relationship a function of other relationships.” Whereas Fournier (1998) examined brand relationships in the broader context of people’s lives, the present study examines brand relationships enhanced by retail spectacles.

The findings of the present study demonstrate that brand museums add an element of humanization to brands through “goal compatibility” (Fournier 1998). Goal compatibility is the balance in consumers’ perceived egos and the brand’s characteristics. While visiting the WOCC, Jenny saw the brand museum as more than an escapist, fantasy environment such as Disney World. She was able to “make connections. . . and learn specific facts about the brand.” Learning facts and making connections to the brand was meaningful to Jenny because it enabled her to obtain personal goals and, at the same time, feel closer to the brand. This finding suggests that the brand museum provides a context where Jenny is simultaneously increasing her knowledge and developing her sense of self. The brand museum facilitates experiential (or self-referential, Rose and Wood 2005) authenticity such that postmodern consumers feel more in touch with their sense of self, because they have experienced personal and subjective feelings activated by partaking in the liminal process of aesthetic, pleasurable activities (Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006). Thus, humanization of the brand is an abstract, experiential process that Jenny and Sam employed so as to make sense of their own lives (through their brand museum experience).

Socialization of the brand

A brand museum socializes the brand by connecting visitors to other brand enthusiasts. The retail spectacle serves as a mechanism that builds brand-centered bonds among consumers. During our group interview with eleven family members, the family explained how visiting the brand museum was a communal venture. “We wanted to do something in Atlanta that would be fun for everyone and visiting the museum seemed like a good fit for the whole family” (Shirley, 45, F). For informants in the group interview session, visiting the WOCC brand museum served to build emotional bonds among family members. One member of the family expressed, “I wasn’t that hip on visiting the museum itself, I just wanted to spend time with my family. . . and the trip to the museum ended up being a great way to spend a Saturday afternoon with my family and I learned a lot about Coke that I didn’t really know before” (Brooke, 17, F).

In addition, twenty informants in our study discussed future plans or present involvement in brand-related clubs or communities (e.g., Collectors Club, web-based brand communities; see Table 2). The museum space provides a bounded place where brand enthusiasts are able to compare brand experiences and collectively affirm their commitment to the brand. Put simply,

a brand museum visit cultivates a sense of brand community, connects like-minded brand enthusiasts, and strengthens brand attachments (see Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Consumers have a need to believe in something transcendent, and a brand museum is a conduit for fulfilling this need. Cultivating a sense of community “clearly affects brand equity” by enhancing perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand associations (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, p. 427).

Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry’s (2003) theory on the revival of retro brands also sheds light on the brand museum as a location that facilitates community, by serving as a bounded space. In their study of the revival of the Volkswagen Beetle, these authors found “arcadia” where the informants identified the brand with an idealized, utopian-like community that has spatial and temporal boundaries. The markers of brand community, along with an associated sense of time and space, strengthened connections to the brand for the Beetle owners. The present study’s findings similarly show that the WOCC museum serves as a utopian (i.e., informants described the WOCC as “safe, friendly, and clean”) place where consumers congregate and socially commune with like-minded others.

Mark, a 59-year-old male, elaborates on how much he enjoys connecting to other like-minded brand enthusiasts through the brand museum:

My wife and I like to come here, it is something like our eighth or ninth time here. We always compare our stories about the brand and how it played such a big role in our lives. We grew up here, so we grew up drinking Coke. We have met some other people here with similar stories and that is always fun to share stories, like when we used to drink Coke from soda fountains or make ice-cream Coke floats. . .and it is a great way to bond with other Coke fans. It makes you feel more loyal to the brand when you meet other people who also use the brand. . . We also like to take our grandkids to the museum and then we get to share our Coca-Cola stories with them. Our grandkids love coming here with us (big smile); they like to try all the different Coke flavors.

The notion of growing up in the South and drinking Coke products provides a consciousness of kind where consumers feel an intrinsic connection to other brand enthusiasts who share similar brand stories. Mark enjoys meeting other brand enthusiasts, and as he suggests, it inculcates shared attitudes toward the brand as consumers “share stories” and “bond with other Coke fans.” The WOCC brand museum serves as an impetus for communal bonding and social camaraderie as generations share their brand stories with succeeding generations. The brand stories get passed down from cohort to cohort, as demonstrated by Mark bringing his grandchildren to the museum. “After we leave the museum, my grandkids always want to go straight home and make Coke floats because they have heard about our Coke float stories. Since coming here that has become one of our family traditions. . .and I hope my grandkids pass the tradition on to their kids.”

Storytelling plays an important role in socializing the brand. In the WOCC brand museum, storytelling typically begins with a core group of devotees who are members of a Coca-Cola brand

community (see Table 2). From the core group of devotees, there is a movement of active storytelling to an outer ring of spectators at the periphery.

Spectators typically observe for a while and eventually they join in the brand storytelling process. One member tells a story and the next person joins in. It is evident that storytelling influences visitors. Even those that may not seem interested become more interested in storytelling because it connects them with other people. All the while, a WOCC brand museum employee is intentionally crafting this community-like experience with a lively round of questions (Fieldnotes, February, 2001).

The WOCC brand museum serves as a physical gathering place for cohering consumers with common Coca-Cola allegiances. The core group of devotees influences the attitudes and ideas of less devoted consumers. Moreover, the atmosphere and layout of the museum is conducive to interacting with the staff and other visitors. (As detailed later, our interviews with three employees revealed that a key component of training is that the employee is to ask visitors to share their “Coke story” while visiting the museum.)

Socially connecting with other like-minded consumers is an important aspect of the brand museum as the experience is not based on “the commercial control of consumer fantasies” (Gottdiener 1997, p. 155), as suggested by Ritzer (2005) and other sociologists who view spectacular, retail spectacles as oppressive. On the contrary, we found that consumers actively engage in the retail environment by becoming an active participant. Similar to Kozinets et al. (2004), our findings demonstrate that “consumer–marketer relations” are “complex and dialectical” where consumers actively engage in “playful,” “ludic” experiences. The brand museum intentionally crafts a “community-like experience” (Fieldnotes, February, 2001) and visitors actively engage in the experience through storytelling and socialization with other visitors.

The interaction between consumers and marketers is dialectical in nature because it is a back and forth exchange where the marketer stages an experience and the consumer engages in that experience and reciprocates the notion of fun. This reciprocal relationship makes the museum experience interesting and entertaining by “using consumption objects as resources to interact with fellow consumers” (Holt 1995, p. 9). In other words, socializing revolves around the brand. For instance, Mark uses the marketer-staged experience as a means for socializing with his family and other brand enthusiasts. Mark and other WOCC visitors share brand stories that invoke both play and communal bonding that deepen brand meaning.

Localization of the brand

A brand museum localizes the brand by building connections between the brand and its geographical origin. The WOCC brand museum poses as a retail venue that celebrates the Coca-Cola brand and its connections to Atlanta and to the South. It is a place of pilgrimage where consumers travel to gain a better

understanding of the history and cultural context of the brand. For instance, when consumers visit the WOCC museum they also learn about the history of Atlanta; when consumers visit the Guinness Storehouse museum they also learn about Dublin; and when consumers visit the Heineken Experience Museum they also learn about Amsterdam.

Similar to how people journey to religious places (Hetherington 1996; Mol 1976), consumers also travel from far places to admire the brand, to express their admiration (and in some cases obsession) for the brand, and to visually survey the brand's geographical origin (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Mary, a WOCC employee, states that "people come from all over to visit the museum and to learn about Coke and the city of Atlanta; people come from all over the U.S. and from many different countries. The WOCC museum is a popular stop for anyone visiting Atlanta."

According to Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), consumers choose to give sacred status to a variety of objects and places. In expressing personal values through consumption, consumers "participate in a celebration of their connection to the society as a whole. . ." (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, p. 31). Localized connections provide benefits to consumers and give "transcendent" meaning to brands (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989, p. 32). John (24, M) describes his pilgrimage to the WOCC brand museum.

I traveled two hours to come here. . . all I drink is Coca-Cola products. . . my wife drinks diet-Coke, my whole extended family drinks nothing by Coke. . . Coke is a Southern brand and we love it. . . Our trip is special' cause we have been planning it for a while now. This museum gives me a better appreciation of the company and of the city of Atlanta. I think more businesses should open up their doors like this and they would probably have a better following. It [the museum] really gives you an appreciation for the company and the city. . . For example, I didn't know that so many of the street names in downtown Atlanta came from the founders of Coke. In the World of Coke, I discovered that connection.

In his interview, John implies that he drinks Coca-Cola products because he wants to support products that originate in the South. John also explains that his loyalty to both his country and the South stems from family members who served in the military and his Southern upbringing. John describes the Coca-Cola brand as "a part of our Southern pride" suggesting that it is "a brand that represents what it means to be an American." The WOCC brand museum serves as a domicile for vestiges of Atlanta, Georgia and in particular the Old South. For instance, the WOCC brand museum displays a Barnes Soda Fountain which is a replica of an actual fountain from a drug store in South Georgia. According to John, "The Barnes Soda Fountain really brings back memories from back home." Drinking Coca-Cola products and supporting the WOCC museum gives John a sense of satisfaction in that he supports products that remind him of his heritage.

From an authenticity perspective, the Barnes Soda Fountain is an important component of the World of Coca-Cola.

Theoretically, Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003, p. 24) use the term "aura" to describe the authenticity of retro brands that creates meaning for consumers. As such, consumers judge retro brand authenticity according to physical characteristics and brand essence. Similarly, Grayson and Martinec (2004) identify two types of authenticity of marketing offerings: (1) when objects have a factual and spatio-temporal link with the world, they are indexical; and (2) when objects physically resemble something, they are iconic. It is important to note that brand authenticity, especially when the brand is iconic, is a consumer perception that occurs through a filter of one's personal experiences (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006). John's interview highlights the connection between the brand museum and brand meaning. For John, the Barnes Soda Fountain, which is framed by Coca-Cola to be indexically authentic, is also iconically authentic as John associates it with memories from home. The combination of these two types of authenticity in the brand museum context creates a connection between John's Southern heritage and his perceptions of the brand.

Jerry, a 24-year-old male, expresses similar symbolic connections between Coca-Cola and his support for American-made products:

I know that I am going to appreciate the flavor more when I drink it [expressing his new appreciation for Coca-Cola after the brand museum visit] and I feel a little bond with Coca-Cola now, especially since I am from Atlanta and an American and I want to support our local products. . . We all tend to spend money on things that we care about and I like buying Coke products because it gives me a sense of satisfaction' cause I am supporting local businesses. From now on I will always support Coke and you won't see me drinking Pepsi [smiles].

For John and Jerry, visiting the brand museum and drinking Coke products provide a means for connecting to the locale by supporting local businesses. As stated by John, "if I'm going to spend money, I want to spend it on something that has meaning and value." In other words, the museum has helped John justify his consumption by highlighting the brand's connections to local traditions, culture, and heritage. Similarly, Jerry states, "buying Coke products is a good investment in our economy. I feel that it's something small that can make a big difference." Jerry enjoys Coke products because his experience in the museum helps him assign American values to the brand. Jerry believes that "everyone should buy products that make them feel good. Coke makes me feel good about myself because I know that I am supporting a brand that is local."

The act of consuming products that have symbolic values contributes to Jerry's life purpose (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), a process facilitated by his brand museum visit. Situating the Coca-Cola brand within history establishes local associations to its Southern heritage and to the broader American culture. In this way, the brand is localized because the brand museum surrounds consumers with objects, artifacts, and pictures that represent the South, Atlanta, and America. For

instance, John discovered that “many of the street names in downtown Atlanta came from the founders of Coke.” Brand meaning was extended as John realized the extent to which the brand plays a role in Atlanta’s history. Similarly, Jerry associated the brand with the American economy which provided him with a purposive connection to the brand. A brand museum is a sacred, consumption destination (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989) as the brand represents meaningful connections to the locale.

Globalization of the brand

A brand museum globalizes the brand by emphasizing its international affiliations. Throughout the brand museum, Coca-Cola emphasizes its world-wide presence and the brand is positioned as “saving the world” (Ger and Belk 1996). This international theme is given prominence as it is first introduced at the entry of the museum. For example, the 26-foot, 12.5 ton neon sign at the entrance the Coca-Cola sign at the entrance flashes “Coke” on one side and “Coca-Cola” on the other, placed inside a globe within longitudinal and latitudinal lines. As the visitor enters the lobby to pay for admission, there are flags from 160 nations, with eight center flags representing the top selling countries of Coca-Cola products. According to Ralph, a 22-year old male Indian graduate student, the global associations made within the museum are appealing to international visitors.

I truly noticed Coca-Cola’s international nature. I saw many international visitors when I was there. When I saw a TV ad from India, I felt at home and nostalgic for a few moments. I was especially happy to talk to some Indian people during my visit. I am sure that this must be an advantage to the other international visitors I saw. In fact, I must have heard four or five international languages spoken there. This suggests to me that Coca-Cola is a brand that belongs to all of us, no matter what part of the world we belong to. We are all noticed and touched by Coke. . . I must confess [smiles] that my wife and I tried to take a picture of ourselves standing near the Indian flag that was at the front of the exhibits. It was great fun.

Ralph conveys that Coca-Cola is a brand that “belongs to all of us.” For Ralph, the brand museum positions Coca-Cola as an international brand, not solely an American brand. The brand’s meaning was embellished for Ralph as he was able to personally confirm Coca-Cola’s global presence by surveying the international flags, the various languages spoken at the museum, and the ads from different countries. Similar to how Jerry and John value the brand’s localized connections, Ralph values the brand’s international affiliations. Ralph conveys that we are all “touched by Coke” regardless of “what part of the world we belong to.”

In addition to the global connections drawn at the entry of the museum, several of the galleries feature international associations between Coke and other cultures throughout the world. For example, in the third-floor theater consumers watch a 10-min film celebrating Coca-Cola’s global presence in which con-

sumers can compare samples of Coke ads in various languages from countries around the world (i.e., Yugoslavia, Japan). In the famous theme song, “I’d like to buy the world a Coke,” the firm also conveys its global nature when it shows the commercial with consumers from all over the world singing the famous jingle. This “mythological motif” captures not only the ethos of the Coca-Cola brand, but the spirit of a brand community that reaches across the world (Randazzo 1993, p. 51). Myths of this nature convey brand meaning as it illustrates that people can put aside their differences and come together regardless of their ethnicity. Under this conception, myths are narratives, which include consumption stories, that shape the structure and content of “the culture’s story stock” (Stern 1995, p. 165).

In addition, the museum establishes the brand as an international leader (Ger and Belk 1996). Throughout the various galleries, consumers are able to link the brand to past, present, and future societal contexts. For example, in different parts of the museum a visitor can find Olympic displays that include materials from the 1996 games held in Atlanta as well as Coca-Cola memorabilia from other Olympic Games throughout history (i.e., from Amsterdam 1928 to Seoul 1988). A popular place for family photos is beside the 1996 Olympic torch. Joseph, a WOCC employee, suggests that the firm purposefully features Coca-Cola’s long support and involvement with the Olympics because it is an association that consumers of all ages and all nationalities will appreciate.

We [WOCC brand museum] like to show how Coca-Cola has always been part of the Olympics. It makes visitors realize how Coke has been a part of our lives in all areas and with all types of people. Not only are our products the first to be consumed in space, but Coke’s also been involved in so many Olympic games. . . We want visitors to understand the significance of Coca-Cola and its part in global history making.

In one of the most popular displays in the museum, the WOCC brand museum boasts its international affiliations through its interactive, international product sampling room. The International Video Lounge represents Tastes of the World providing 22 international drinks that visitors can sample. Most samples are only sold in certain countries (e.g., Krest brand, Thailand’s version of ginger ale). There are tables in this room where guests are able to lounge and socialize. The ambiance in this area is jovial in nature resembling a communal spirit; kids are playing and adults are mingling. As suggested by Kate, a 27-year-old female, “I enjoyed talking with other people in the lounge area. . . I was interacting with other brand lovers. . . brand lovers from all over the world.” Brian, a 22-year-old male Korean graduate student, expressed feelings similar to Kate (27, F).

You may think this is childish but I really liked trying all the new flavors in the drinking room. I loved that Mezzo drink [smiles]. To me the best thing about the museum was that room. That was where I realized that Coke is truly an international brand that appeals to everyone.

As Brian suggests, the museum positions Coca-Cola as a “brand that appeals to everyone.” In order for a brand’s meaning

to be enhanced, consumers must first establish a personal connection to the brand, and a brand museum represents one way of connecting with diverse consumers. For Jerry and John, connection to the brand is enhanced through localized affiliations and for Ralph and Brian, connection to the brand is enhanced through international affiliations. According to Fournier (1998, p. 367), consumers make connections with brands “not only to aid in living but also to give meaning to their lives.” By establishing both local and global connections within the museum context, brands serve “a social purpose by reflecting social ties to one’s family, community, and/or cultural groups” which enhances brand meaning for consumers (Escalas and Bettman 2005, p. 378).

According to Aaker (2004), consumer relationships are affected by a corporate brand’s local or global orientation. The brand’s performance, success, and size also affect the way it is perceived in terms of competence and longevity. Furthermore, glocalization theory suggests that establishing both local and global connections within the brand museum context is an effective branding strategy as “global brandscapes provide a constellation of objectified meanings (i.e., discourses, material goods, and servicescape atmospherics) that consumers can incorporate into their worldviews and put to a wide variety of interpretive and identity-constructive uses” (Thompson and Arsel 2004, p. 632).

Contextualization of the brand

A brand museum contextualizes the brand by illustrating the brand’s achievements and innovations. Enduring brands generally have brand achievements and innovations that idolize the physical product. Achievements are milestones that symbolize a brand’s proficiency in its product category and innovations are manufacturing novelties that demonstrate a brand’s competitive ability. Contextualization of the brand embellishes the physical product attributes by providing visitors with a visual tour of the brand’s successes. For example, the first gallery (on the third floor) has several exhibits that emphasize Coca-Cola’s contribution to technological advancements in the bottling of soft drinks. Visitors can view antique bottling equipment and watch a video that shows old time bottling processes compared to modern day processes. One of the most popular displays illustrates the development of the famous “contour” glass bottle, which took place in 1915. The exhibit explains that “it is known as the most perfectly designed package in the world.” Many of the informants commented on how the bottle display reminded them of a Coke memory, which in turn appeared to impact their views of the brand. Max, a 43-year-old, male, sales representative exemplifies this idea.

Being in there really reminded me of my Grandpa. You know, my Daddy’s daddy. He’s gone now; bless his soul. When I was six or seven my Dad and I used to go down there, to my Paw Paw’s house, to visit him and my Grandma. He [Paw Paw] drank Cokes out of those contour bottles. You know, he never had a Coke out of a can [laughs]. I remember he would have cases of these Cokes. You know in the old wooden boxes. He would save the bottles to take them back for the five cent

rebate. He’d save the tops and we’d play checkers with the tops. We were really big checker players and instead of having red and black we would have red as top turned up and black as down. . . . Now that I think back on it [getting to drink Coke at my Paw Paw’s house] that was something really neat. It was special to go down to their house and have Coke. When I was in there [WOCC], I remembered those times, especially when they’re talking about the contour of the Coke bottle. I mean you don’t get many bottles nowadays. I mean they have plastic contour but it just isn’t the same. For a long time, they only had bottles. Then for a long time they only had cans. Anyway, it [the contour bottle exhibit] made me miss those good old days.

The museum also chronicles brand-related “innovations.” In the second gallery (on the third floor) there are several displays which celebrate the vision of company President Robert Woodruff (1920–1950). There are several artifacts framed as “innovations” developed by Coca-Cola, including: the first six-pack carton (1923), the first standardized cooler for carrying Coke (1929), the first dispenser that combined syrup and carbonated water (1933), and two “rare experimental” metal cans (1941) that never saw production because of metal being diverted for wartime usage. These innovations, among others in the museum, shaped the image of the brand for many informants as explained by Wally (43, M).

I think it [the brand museum] gave me a greater appreciation of the brand because I see how the brand brings generations together. Coke develops innovations that make our world a better place. I was just impressed with the largeness, globalness and innovativeness of the brand. I thought the lady who was acting as the soda jerk was a cool feature. She told us how they mixed up the drink. It was cool because she gave me the recipe of one ounce syrup and five ounces of water and stir. And one other thing I thought was interesting to see was the different bottles. They showed us how they first marketed under an ordinary bottle and then they developed the contour shape. Well, that shape is famous the world over now.

Through the promotion of the firm’s achievements and innovations over time, the brand museum appeals to visitors’ “unconscious psyche” through the use of brand mythology (Randazzo 1993, p. 34). Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989, p. 7) state that myths “socialize participants’ understandings of the collective definitions” of a brand. According to Randazzo (1993, p. 50), brand mythologies “engage, entertain, and amuse the consumer by ‘dressing up reality’ and/or communicating product attributes and/or benefits.” Wally engages in mythology by believing that the brand “brings generations together” and makes the “world a better place.” Mythologies of this nature enhance the meaning of the brand because it conveys a strong, “warrior” image (Randazzo 1993, p. 37). For instance, Wally was impressed by the brand’s strength as the museum highlighted the brand’s “largeness, globalness, and innovativeness.”

Other examples of chronicled achievements include a space display in gallery three (on the second floor). This exhibit demonstrates how Coca-Cola was the first soft drink consumed

in space (on the Challenger mission, 1985). In addition, there is a display of a drink dispenser designed to serve Coke on space travel. These examples demonstrate how the brand museum conveys associations between Coke, various technological innovations, and brand achievements over time. Conceptualizing brands in this manner is consistent with how retro brands create meaning for consumers (termed “antinomy” by Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003, p. 25).

Linking the brand to innovation, technology and achievement provides the “cultural complexity” necessary to animate other dimensions of the brand. According to Brown, Sherry, and Kozinets (2003) “The brand is both alive and not alive, a thing and a personality, a subject and an object: This is a paradoxical kernel of brand meaning.” The intermingling between the past, present and future “vivifies brand meanings” and contextualizes the important role the brand plays in society.

Theatricization of the brand

A brand museum theatricizes the brand by staging the retail spectacle to be an engaging, interactive, and participatory experience. When brand museum visitors participate in multi-sensory, interactive experiences, they are drawn to the brand. For instance, Kozinets et al. (2002, p. 17) states that a themed flagship brand store “not only promotes a more engaging experience of the brand’s essence but also satisfies consumers looking for entertainment alongside their shopping.” According to Joy et al. (2003), environmental elements (e.g., color, light, taste, smell) and their intensity directly affect consumers’ moods. In the brand museum, consumers are entertained by the various colors, lights, and sounds that accompany each exhibit. Consumers engage in interactions with the brand and some enjoy the interchanges so much that they often stay for hours in one area of the museum. For instance, the Club Coca-Cola display on the second floor is a drink dispenser representing eight of Coke’s products that are distributed in the United States. Milly, a WOCC brand museum employee, explains that Coca-Cola positions the brand as a fun, entertaining brand.

The whole idea is to let visitors have a good time by participating in the exhibits and by learning more about the brand. We want visitors to laugh and to have a real good time. People always are impressed by the things we have here in the museum. They really like all the lights, the sounds, and the video, and especially the shooting Coke. Visitors can spend hours catching the Coke that shoots across the room.

In an effort to engage consumers in the museum experience, eight drinks magically shoot through 20 feet of air into a sample size cup. Consumers marvel at the trajectory of the liquid and how it amazingly fills the cup with the exact amount of soda. Another eighteen different drinks (those that are produced in the United States) on the back wall of the room perform a similar function. In this area of the museum, consumers are able to taste Coca-Cola products that are distributed around the world. In 33 of the 36 depth interviews, informants mentioned this display within the museum. Thirty-two informants ranked the tasting exhibit as their favorite part of the museum and 21 informants

said they plan to bring friends and family back to the museum to see the tasting exhibit.

Being able to physically touch, taste, and smell the various Coca-Cola products gave visitors a lasting impression of the brand. Ben (34, M) explains how interacting with the displays in the museum created a brand-related memory.

I will never forget it. It was so much fun. It was fun because you get to interact with all of the displays and you get involved in each one of the galleries. I was overwhelmed when we got off the elevator and I was in the middle of the Cokes that moved around the top of the room. There was so much going on at once. Everyone must have felt that way because it seemed like there were a ton of people in there standing and talking loudly and watching the bottles get magically filled as they moved down the line. . .it was an energizing experience because I felt as if I was at a Coca-Cola party with lots of action, lots of people, and lots of excitement.

As Ben conveys, the participatory experience creates memories as visitors are able to “get involved in each one of the galleries.” When visitors enter the first gallery (described by Ben above) they view a kinetic sculpture blending reality and illusion that enacts how bottles move down the production line and are filled. According to Baker, Levy, and Grewal (1992, p. 457), “design elements such as color, layout, architectural style, or type of furnishings” are important factors that elicit an affective response toward a particular retailing environment. In addition, ambient and social factors can be used to create an environment that offers a high level of atmospheric characteristics which provides a pleasurable experience for consumers (Baker, Levy, and Grewal 1992). Atmospherics are a “silent language” in marketing communications, possessing more influence toward brand meaning than the product itself (Kotler 1973, p. 48). Accordingly, Ben felt as if he were at a party “with lots of action, lots of people, and lots of excitement.” This feeling was induced by the atmospherics of the brand museum. The environment of the WOCC is intentionally designed to energize visitors upon arrival. For instance, on the exterior of the museum, there is an 18 foot abstract of a glowing Coca-Cola bottle sculpture that captures visitors’ attention as intersecting panes of glass, which are internally lighted, serve as a means to draw visitors into the museum.

In addition to these interactive displays, in the first gallery there is an advertisement of Coke being served in 1926 where the face is cut out so that consumers can photograph selves within the aesthetic structure. Field notes indicate that visitors eagerly embraced the opportunity to take pictures with such branded artwork.

As I walked past the fast moving bottles that appear to fill with Coke, I came upon a billboard-like cut out of a woman serving Coke to a man in uniform. The picture conveys a sense of Americanism as Coke is served to the military. It also conveys a sense of loyalty and honor toward the military and positions Coke as the product of choice for Americans. The faces are missing and six visitors are waiting in line to put their face in and take a picture. An older Caucasian

female (who doesn't appear to know the people behind her in the line) asks for a picture. As the Caucasian female and her male companion step up and put their faces into the holes they are providing huge smiles. "Snap!" The picture is taken (Fieldnotes, May, 2001).

Taking pictures within the museum is a popular activity. Visitors craft their pictures around branded art, as described in the fieldnotes. Brand art is artwork that features the brand, positioning it in a way that communicates a message, improves the brand's image, or builds emotional connections between the consumer and the brand. For example, brand art of popular interest includes an original Norman Rockwell painting that positions Coca-Cola as an American-family drink. Rockwell calendars are famous for depicting strong family ties, which are extended to the brand in the brand museum context.

Research by Schroeder (1999) details the process of how brand art can produce meaning for consumers. Specifically, Schroeder argues that art is a visual tool that consumers use to form ideas, beliefs, and values. That is, "visual images play a powerful role in shaping how we view the world" (Schroeder 1999, p. 641). Thus, brand art represents cultural symbols that convey societal meanings and communal structures. The artwork of a man in uniform, as described in the field notes above, communicates messages of loyalty, Americanism, and honor, that center on the brand. Sally (56, F) explains, "I enjoy taking pictures with different art and figures in the museum because it helps me to see that the brand is more than just a product. It gives me a feeling of appreciation as an American and it gives me a feeling of pride." As demonstrated by Sally, consumers use branded artwork to engage in fantasy and personal fulfillment.

In the brand museum context, viewing branded art work takes the associations that consumers make with the brand and extends them beyond the physical object itself to a cultural experience. In place of merely consuming the product, brand museum visitors are taking part in the living history of the brand and incorporating the brand's identity into their own identities. Theoretically, this is consistent with work by McCracken (2005) who suggests that brands are one of our most important templates for constructing our own self image. Similarly, Fournier states (1998, p. 367), "consumers do not choose brands, they choose lives." In other words, consumers choose brands that provide outlets to express their identities. Brand art in WOCC museum is situated in a way that allows consumers to make personal connections. As argued by Kozinets et al. (2004), one of the best ways to connect with consumers is through the use of humor, entertainment, and pleasurable activities. Consistent with this view, the WOCC creates brand meaning for consumers through participation in pleasurable, entertaining, interactive exhibits.

Furthermore, the entertainment, art work, and historical brand artifacts presented in the brand museum helps consumers relate to their physical surroundings. This is akin to what Rose and Wood (2005) describe as self-referential authenticity (or what Leigh, Peters, and Shelton 2006 describe as existential authenticity). The display of brand art and historical artifacts within the brand museum provides associations that consumers use to

feel "in touch" with their sense of self and to make sense of their everyday life worlds.

Characterization of the brand

A brand museum characterizes the brand by associating the brand with real-life personalities including important historical figures, celebrities, the company founders and WOCC employees. Historical figures are people who play a significant role in history. Celebrities are people who are known to the public "for his or her achievements in areas other than that of the product class" (Friedman and Friedman 1979, p. 63). Company founders and WOCC employees represent the lineage of the Coca-Cola family, and they provide a glimpse inside the company. Using historical figures, celebrities, the company founders, and WOCC employees, the brand museum setting is purposively constructed to convey Coke's longevity as a leader in the marketplace by associating the brand with salient personalities.

Historically, video kiosks and other displays document the time periods between 1886 and 1940, highlighting Coke's leadership role during World Wars. There is a display featuring the first bottle of Coca-Cola filled in the Philippines after General MacArthur's return. The bottle includes MacArthur's original signature (i.e., autograph). For Betty, a 59-year-old female, this display is a powerful reminder of Coca-Cola's historical significance.

When I saw the bottle signed by General MacArthur, I just stopped and thought for a minute, and I thought you know what, Coke has played an important role in our American history and I think it is important for us to know about it. I mean, for me visiting the museum is a reminder of our history. . . seeing important people like this who have been so closely tied with Coca-Cola is really powerful. You see how much clout the brand has.

By making direct associations with historical events and esteemed figures, Coca-Cola situates its brand as a significant part of American history and culture. As Betty suggests, historical figures add "clout" and "power" to the brand's meaning. Associating the brand with recognized heroes reduces perceived risks (Biswas, Biswas, and Das 2006) and aids in the recognition and recall of the brand (Friedman and Friedman 1979; Petty, Cacioppo, and Schumann 1983). Another well-known historical figure featured in the museum is Santa Claus. According to Ritzer (2004) Santa Claus is a cultural icon and the most recognized name among children. Original oil paintings created by Haddon Sundbloom are displayed with text detailing the association between Coke and the modern image of Santa Claus. According to Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt (2001), Coke intentionally emphasizes the association between its advertising and the modern day image of Santa Claus in an effort to shape societal images and collective memories.

Through associations with real-life personas, the brand museum expands the characterization of the brand. Linking Coca-Cola to acclaimed celebrities influences the brand's image as consumers are able to relate celebrity virtues to the brand's essence. For instance, the third gallery features famous radio

jingles from Coke as well as classic television commercials that span a 40-year-time frame. These displays highlight luminaries such as Mean Joe Greene in a 1979 commercial, and Michael Jordan in a 1990 commercial. As consumers recognize and recall these commercials, they conveyed a nostalgic feeling. Consumers are able to place a familiar face on the brand, infuse it with the personality of the celebrity, and associate memories of that era. Michelle (31, F), who has a marketing background, illustrates this point with her awareness of celebrity associations.

The commercial of Michael Jordan is so brilliant from a marketing standpoint. I mean sports fans love Jordan and being able to associate a hot celebrity like him with the brand is important for brand recognition. It gives the brand life, a personality, and it makes the consumer remember how Jordan brought in a new fan base to the NBA. Jordan was such a versatile player that excelled at hitting three pointers. He always had flashy slam dunks, and brilliant passes. He brought the excitement of an NBA basketball game to a whole new level. To position Coke along side of him also gives Coke a new fan base and brings the Coke brand to a whole new level.

The company founders also play an important role in constructing the personality of the brand. Several galleries in the museum profile the men who are instrumental in the creation of Coca-Cola as a product and business venture. In the first gallery (on the third floor), artifacts and memorabilia detail the brand's embryonic stages of development: 1886 to 1926. These objects document the creation of Coca-Cola by the pharmacist, John Pemberton. In addition, the displays explain how Asa Candler was instrumental in developing the idea that the new drink would appeal to a mass-market. For example, in this gallery there is a 6-min film discussing the history of the product creation and subsequent business development. Featured artifacts include: the formula book and lab percolator used by Dr. Pemberton; the original patent filed by Dr. Pemberton in 1887; and the 1889 Atlanta Journal news paper advertisement announcing the sole ownership of the Coca-Cola Company by Mr. Candler. These displays influence informants, as explained by Wally, a 43-year-old accountant.

I read the exhibits and learned a lot about history in there. I remembered that Pemberton created Coke. Basically that film at the beginning reminded me of things I had heard in the past. There was a lot of historical information that I got out of it. When Pemberton came up with the concoction, now that was interesting! I remember reading about how he developed this potion and tried to sell it to other pharmacists but it didn't work. I knew that there was this original formula but I didn't know how it came about so to learn about this guy's story was really neat. Now I know the original story from beginning to now.

In addition to more notable historical figures, WOCC employees also serve to personalize the brand. The employees believe it is their duty to highlight important aspects of the brand for consumers. The employees have been trained to act

as brand experts who like to share the company-framed history and making of the brand, as explained by Milly (43, F, WOCC employee).

This museum is place where people can come and get to know the brand. . .Most people walk away from the museum with a new liking toward Coca-Cola. Just as people go to a museum to get to know artists, people come here and get to know Coca-Cola. . .We help visitors learn about certain brand facts and we help make the experience enjoyable. We try to get visitors involved in the exhibits and we put a smiling face on the brand because we are always ready and willing to help visitors learn about Coca-Cola.

Later in her interview Milly explained that part of employee training emphasizes that "tour guides" should interact with visitors. Tour guides are instructed to specifically ask visitors to share their "Coke story." The employees we interviewed said that most visitors enjoyed trading such Coke stories. We also documented this activity in our field notes.

WOCC employees play an important role in rejuvenating early brand-oriented experiences. The employees commix with visitors by asking questions about visitors' experiences with the brand. They also elaborate on brand displays and participate in museum activities by sharing their own Coke experiences (Fieldnotes, February, 2001).

Thus, the WOCC employees help shape the meaning and significance of the brand in the same way docents shape the meaning and significance of art in a traditional museum (Gray and Chadwick 2001). Employee efforts are inconspicuous to most visitors because the employees are not preaching nor proclaiming certain brand characteristics. Instead, they provide a guided tour that focuses on the history and cultural significance of the brand and they subtly ask consumers to reflect on personal brand relations. In addition, the employees amiably share their own personalized Coca-Cola stories. This unobtrusive form of promotion is effective at rousing emotional connections to the WOCC museum content and to the brand.

The story-telling aspects of the brand museum are similar to Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) theory of retro branding in which they purport that "allegory" is key to creating brand meaning. Allegory encompasses "narratives surrounding the brand, which include heritage stories circulated by producers and cultural intermediaries such as media and advertisers" (22). However, it is important to note that Brown, Kozinets and Sherry find that the brand stories constructed and circulated by marketers, media, and advertisers are merely the starting point for retro brand meaning creation. The process actually includes consumers who co-opt, build upon, and individualize these stories and then, in turn, share these brand-centered, personal narratives with others. The WOCC strategy appears to leverage such "allegory." On one level, each exhibit and display in the brand museum conveys heritage stories constructed by the marketer. However, on another level, consumers are active participants in the process (Kozinets et al. 2004), and they are excited about sharing their own Coke stories with the brand museum tour guides and other visitors.

Discussion

Much of the literature investigating retail spectacles characterizes the exchanges between consumers and marketers as either manipulative interactions (Gottdiener 1997; Ritzer 2005) or participatory interactions (Kozinets et al. 2004). Our study is premised upon the latter. Consistent with Kozinets et al. (2004), our findings emphasize the interdependency of structure and agency (termed “interagency” by Kozinets et al. 2004) where the consumer is a co-participant in a complex exchange that is both structured and autonomous. A brand museum, like its parent themed flagship brand store, builds strong connections between the brand and consumers through participatory activities. However, the brand museum provides a richer, more concentrated brand experience when compared to other themed retailing environments. Our research extends prior studies by illustrating how retail spectacles can be used to create a wide set of brand meanings for consumers. The marketer stages a variety of interactive, pleasurable activities in the retail setting, and, through participatory engagement, consumers learn new information about the brand. These participatory experiences extend the meaning of the brand as consumers are able to create and define their self-concept.

Specifically, we find that the brand museum *humanizes* the brand by facilitating relational connections between the consumer and the brand. Inanimate objects, such as a product or brand, become more human-like when consumers are able to engage in activities that personalize their knowledge of the brand. As demonstrated by prior investigations, humanization of a brand can result in strong consumer-brand relationships that are based on the degree to which a brand delivers important identity markers (Fournier 1998) or the degree to which a brand helps consumers achieve a possible or desired self (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995). Our study highlights how retail environments can be orchestrated in such a way that consumers can explore various identity markers and desired selves. The retail environment provides a physical place where consumers can learn about the brand’s identity and attach personal meaning to those identities showcased in a museum-like setting.

The brand museum *globalizes* the brand by impressing the power, expansiveness, and strength of the brand on visitors. According to Kozinets et al. (2002), retail spectacles are most effective for brands with an intrinsically wide appeal, brands that are recognizable to the mass-market, and brands that have powerful images. Our findings demonstrate how the retail environment can be used to emphasize the globalness, the powerfulness, and the expansiveness of the brand. Displays within the museum (e.g., International flags, International tasting room, Olympic Associations) underscore the brand’s mass appeal and remind consumers of the brand’s global leadership. Holt (2004, p. 71) notes “consumers look to global brands as symbols of cultural ideals...transnational companies therefore compete not only to offer the highest value products but also to deliver cultural myths with global appeal.” Ger and Belk (1996) convey consumers are moving toward a global consumer culture and are forced to negotiate between local and global consumption patterns. Our study demonstrates how the brand museum constructs

an imagined global identity that is shared among like-minded brand enthusiasts. This shared identity allows consumers to blend local and global cultures by giving personalized meaning to brands, which helps consumers make sense of their daily experiences.

The brand museum *localizes* the brand by highlighting its partnership with the locale. Localizing the brand positions it as part of the tourist landscape of its founding city and the larger geographical region. One important characteristic of brand museums is that they have strong local appeal. Visitors pilgrimage to the museum not only to learn about the brand, but also to learn about the brand’s localized connections (e.g., The Heineken Experience Museum and Amsterdam, The Guinness Storehouse Museum and Dublin). Furthermore, illustrating connections to the locale strengthens consumer associations between the brand and loyalty to the local culture (e.g., Americanism, Southern heritage). The retail environment contributes to these associations by drawing attention to nostalgic features that symbolize the South (e.g., old fashion soda fountain), Americanism (e.g., Norman Rockwell paintings) or cultural traditions (e.g., Santa Claus).

The brand museum *theatricizes* the brand by showcasing it in an entertainment-based setting. Consumers are able to participate in brand exhibits, take pictures with brand art, and taste the various products distributed around the world. According to Baker, Levy, and Grewal (1992) atmospherics such as the ambience and the social interaction positively influence consumers’ feelings of pleasure, arousal toward the brand, and willingness to purchase the brand. Our study illustrates how atmospherics within retail spectacles expands the brand’s meaning as consumers are entertained by ambient cues (lighting, music), are able to participate in brand exhibits (e.g., tasting room) and are able to socialize with other brand enthusiasts (e.g., members of the brand community).

The brand museum *contextualizes* the brand by positioning the brand as a technological innovator that crosses a variety of contexts (i.e., from past innovations in bottling to the future of space travel). Consumers want to believe in brands and their mythologies that “dress up reality” (Randazzo 1993). Mythologies help consumers feel “spiritually centered” by “nourishing their soul” (Randazzo 1993, p. 30). Images, symbols, feelings and associations created in the museum feature the brand’s leadership, innovativeness, and technological prowess. The history, facts, and folklore presented in the museum are wrapped up in fantasized narratives, as the mythology reflects the values, lifestyles and interests of consumers. The myths conveyed in the museum transcend cultural difference to depict a unified connection among consumers, regardless of their background (e.g., “I’d like to buy the world a Coke,” see Ger and Belk 1996). The brand museum communicates information about the brand using a vehicle that is both entertaining and enthusiastic.

The brand museum *socializes* the brand by centering it within the larger brand community and associated social networks. Muniz and O’Guinn’s (2001) study notes the importance of building communal relationships among consumers. Communities of this nature create strong emotional connections to the

brand. According to Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel (2006), emotional branding encourages consumers to desire a sense of intimacy and cultural distinctiveness with brands. Our study highlights the significant role the retail environment can play in fostering a brand community. Dittmar (1992, p. 35) suggests “people can conceive of and interact with respect to material possession only because they share the same underlying conceptions about them.” The brand museum facilitates commonly shared attitudes and values toward the brand. As consumers visit the brand museum, they are able to meet other brand enthusiasts and engage in brand storytelling which inculcates shared beliefs and values. Communal activities within the brand museum enhance the cohesiveness of the brand community.

Finally, the brand museum *characterizes* the brand when it associates the brand with important real-life people, such as historical figures, celebrities, the company founders and WOCC employees. As consumers gain knowledge about the brand, they engage in a process of comparison between the brand and categorical knowledge that is stored in memory (Cohen and Basu 1987). Regarding historical figures and celebrities, characterization involves the retrieval of existing knowledge and associating it with the brand. McCracken (2005, p. 99) suggests that popular figures serve as focal points for substantive messages as the popular figure “serves as a site in which meanings cohere.” Meaning such as the brand’s credibility, “Americanness,” confidence, maturity, power, or good humor is conveyed through the use of important figures. Company founders are highlighted within the museum to provide a historical context that stimulates a birth story. The use of WOCC employees instills the product with a lively characterization. Research shows that the number, appearance, and behavior of employees shape consumer perceptions of the retailing experiences (Baker, Levy, and Grewal 1992). Our study extends prior research by illustrating how employees within the retail environment shape consumer perceptions of the brand. The connections to real-life people, from celebrities to employees, create part of a set of brand meanings that overlap to create a meaningful appreciation of the brand in the mind of the consumer.

Collectively, the seven ways of extending brand meaning examined in this study create a deeper connection between the consumer and the brand. As suggested by Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), contemporary consumers define certain brands or consumption experiences as representing something more than an ordinary brand. Brands and brand-related experiences have the power to create long-term, emotional connections with consumers (Roberts 2004). As such, consumers develop loyalty to certain brands that transcend objective reasoning. Our study illustrates how brand museums facilitate this process by spotlighting brand features that go beyond utilitarian qualities. In the brand museum, the brand is instilled with personalized attributes which add meaning to consumers’ lives (Fournier 1998), provide idealized self perceptions (Kleine, Kleine, and Allen 1995), and social integration (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Brand museums are rich retailing environments where consumers can build sensory, affective, and cognitive associations with a brand that result in memorable and rewarding experiences.

Retailing implications

In extending brand meaning, the brand museum presents some important considerations for retailers including micro-level implications, macro-level implications, and evolutionary implications. On a micro-level the WOCC as well as other brand museums (e.g., The Heineken Experience Museum, The Guinness Storehouse Museum, Hershey Museum) feature a “gift shop” inside the venue. This is a retail store akin to a museum gift shop. Consumers purchase the merchandise in this retail store as gifts for others or to commemorate their visit to the museum. Brand museum visitors make purchases in the gift shop because they want to purchase unique products and/or have a unique shopping experience. In fact, many of the products sold in the WOCC are intentionally framed as “unique” in that they cannot be purchased in any other retail store, are “one of a kind collector’s memorabilia,” or “limited edition reproductions” of artifacts featured inside the brand museum. Consumers often purchase in this shop as a form of gift giving for other brand fans considered part of the larger brand community. Moreover, brand museum visitors often purchase in the gift shop to be able to have a physical memento that signifies their visit to the museum. In other words, these consumers are making an investment to solidify and signify their brand museum memories.

On a macro-level, when the brand museum creates a deeper appreciation for the brand among consumers, it also has implications for selling the brand across a wider variety of retail environments (i.e., from the museum gift shop to the larger grocery store chains across the country). After visiting the brand museum, a consumer has an intimate view of the brand and its achievements. In addition, the brand museum visitor views the brand as a cultural artifact which draws together a rich set of associations that make the brand more than a physical product. In other words, when the brand museum contents are framed as cultural artifacts worthy of appreciation, the museum visitor sees the brand in a different light. The brand is purchased because the consumer wants to take part in a cultural experience and own a cultural artifact. Furthermore, the consumer wants to purchase the brand to take part in living history. The act of purchase becomes a symbolic reflection of the story told in the museum that will be expanded and told to future generations. Finally, when the brand museum conveys the brand as “locally produced” and “authentic,” the brand again becomes more than a product. It becomes akin to a piece of art in and of itself. Thus, framing the brand as a cultural artifact makes it more important than just a product sold in a grocery store.

This study shows that the brand museum creates a set of brand meanings that heighten the cultural awareness of the brand, creating a deeper appreciation, that consumers use to shape (and potentially justify) their consumption behaviors in an everyday context. Theoretically, the brand museum serves as a retailing tool that can be used to shift the brand to iconic status through myth making, as described by Holt (2003, 2004). In other words, our study shows that the brand museum is a way for marketers to forge a connection between the brand and the consumer through interactive retailing. A brand museum tells stories and creates a set of culturally related brand meanings. This museum-like,

retail environment can serve as a strategy for creating a competitive advantage and for turning a widely recognized brand into an icon.

From an evolutionary perspective, the brand museum can be viewed as part of a process of change within retailing environments. Two brief examples are given here in the areas of: (a) production and (b) entertainment. In the Middle Ages (e.g., under the guild system), a customer would enter a shop (e.g., blacksmith, candle maker, shoemaker) and experience an environment where production was out in the open. In other words, the shopper could observe the master and his apprentices at work on their craft. Starting in the late 19th century, many retail environments changed so that production became more or less invisible to the customer. However, in the late 20th century, it becomes more and more common to expose the shopper to the production process. One example is the Krispy Kreme doughnut chain, where customers can watch the assembly line operation where doughnuts are shaped, prepared and baked. In the World of Coca-Cola, visitors get to experience a traditional soda fountain, where the soda jerk prepares the customers' orders from scratch, starting with basic ingredients such as cola syrup, soda water, essence of cherry, and so forth. Both WOCC and Krispy Kreme feature the production process for a variety of reasons, including educating and entertaining the consumer.

In today's retailing environment, entertainment becomes important because customers have so many attractive alternatives (e.g., shopping online). As an example of this heightened entertainment competition, consider Arundel Mills Mall, located in a suburb of Washington, D.C. In addition to 225 unique stores, this mall also features two key postmodern anchors: (a) Medieval Times Dinner & Tournament and (b) an Egyptian themed 24-screen movie theater. As part of Medieval Times, a shopper can spend a considerable amount of time viewing museum-like exhibits (e.g., suits of armor, ancient weapons, period clothing). There are similar exhibits (e.g., mummies, pyramids, camels) associated with the "Egyptian theaters." The brand museum fits into this trend, as the line blurs between entertainment, marketplace, and museum.

In conclusion, this study elaborates on how the brand museum enhances brand meaning for consumers. By using historical linkages and museum-like qualities combined with an education-driven mission, the brand museum becomes a retailing environment that provides the consumer with a meaningful appreciation of the brand. Creating an appreciation for the brand stimulates consumption in the microscopic museum gift shop and the macroscopic grocery store. The brand museum illustrates the evolution of retailing towards multi-sensory, interactive, theatrical experiences that involve consumers in brand-related, entertaining production and consumption processes.

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