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The store-as-a-brand strategy: The effect of store environment on customer responses

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ABSTRACT

Despite their significance within the apparel industry, retailers selling just their own brand of apparel (single-brand apparel retailers) have not been examined for the relationship between their store environment and customer responses. This study explores the effect of store environment on customers' internal evaluations and behavior toward single-brand apparel retailers. Further, to understand the store-as-a-brand strategy, this study examined whether customers have similar cognitive and affective perceptions toward the store versus merchandise. A mall intercept survey was conducted and a non-recursive structural equation model was employed to test the proposed hypotheses. This study found that social, design, and ambient cues as well as merchandise cues influence internal evaluations and ultimately approach behavior toward single-brand apparel retailers. This study also affirmed that the store-as-a-brand concept is valid for a single-brand apparel retailer.

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1. Introduction

With the abundance of retailers selling similar products, customers choose one retailer over another, driven by their desire to receive unique shopping experiences and products. In such a competitive situation, the retail store must define what is distinctive and special about its offerings to better compete with other stores (Floor, 2007). In an effort to differentiate themselves from others in terms of product offerings, retailers have introduced private brands which are exclusive to the retailers. These private brands directly compete with other private brands and major national brands in that product category (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Kumar and Steenkamp, 2007). However, an increasing number of retailers offer private brands and thus private brands may no longer provide a competitive advantage for the retailers. In this situation, the retailers' sustainable competitive advantage can be achieved by offering unique shopping experiences as well as exclusive products. This could be accomplished by implementing the store-as-a-brand strategy, which requires the retailers to integrate store atmosphere and merchandise image to form cohesive experiences for their customers (Burt and Davies, 2010).

A store-as-a-brand strategy, particularly in the apparel sector, is one of the most important recent developments in the US retail

industry (Floor, 2007; Grewal and Levy, 2009) and has been adopted by several apparel retailers who sell only their own private brands. Such retailers are called single-brand apparel (SBA) retailers and are the focus of this study. Among the SBA retailers adopting the store-as-a-brand strategy are Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle, Aeropostale, and Victoria's Secret in the United States and Zara, H&M, and Top Shop in Europe.

SBA retailers have developed an unique image through their merchandise and marketing efforts such as the planned manipulation of the store atmosphere and creation of distinctive shopping experiences for customers. These retailers try to create a holistic image from the store atmosphere and the products in order to prevent any confusion in the customer's minds that might result from the lack of fit between the store image and product image (Grewal and Levy, 2009; Jones and Kim, 2011). Though retailers selling multiple brands (e.g., Home Depot, Target) have been working toward developing a strong brand (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Swoboda et al., 2013), there is a difference between SBA retailer branding and branding by retailers selling multiple products. In the case of SBA retailers, one of the core branding components is carrying the single brand of merchandise that cannot be purchased anywhere else (Koo and Kim, 2013). Retailers selling multiple brands have a limited control on the branding activities of the merchandise that they sell (Mathews-Lefebvre and Dubois, 2013), whereas SBA retailers have complete control on their merchandise brand.

Although SBA retailers are growing in number, there is a lack of empirical studies that examine consumer motivations to shop at

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these retail stores. There have been several studies that have evaluated consumer behavior toward store brands in general (e.g., Diallo et al., 2013; Diallo, 2012; Wu et al., 2011), but very few that consider the branding process of SBA retailers as a whole (Moller and Herm, 2013). In order to investigate the issue, this study has several objectives. First, this study will determine the impacts of store environment cues (i.e., social, design, ambient and merchandise cues) on customers' internal evaluative states (i.e., cognitive and affective evaluations). Second, this study will examine the relationship between cognitive and affective evaluations toward both store and merchandise. Third, this study will examine the impacts of internal evaluative states on approach behavior. Last, it will test the store-as-a-brand concept to determine whether customers indeed view the store and the merchandise as a holistic entity or not.

2. Literature review

2.1. Store-as-a-brand strategy

A retailer who is a brand itself will have the opportunity to strengthen its emotional as well as rational relationship with its customers. The rational relationship could be achieved if the shopping process is made easier or if the customer perceives value from her purchase. On the other hand, emotional relationship could be achieved if shopping results in a fun and memorable experience for the customer. By attaining both rational and emotional relationships, a retail store can move from being a mere distributor of products to becoming a strong brand that differentiates it from other retailers (Floor, 2007).

Several single-brand apparel retailers have taken the lead and branded their stores. For example, Victoria's Secret, the specialty intimate apparel store, offers a diverse product line inspired from the Victorian era. The merchandise design and styling are inspired by the nineteenth century themes with the store atmosphere replicating a spacious, bedroom-like ambience to evoke a personal intimacy rather than a sales display area (Workman, 1996). Similarly, Abercrombie & Fitch stands out with a distinctive store image of the contemporary look surrounded by hardwood floors, rich wood fixtures, dim lighting, loud music, and strong scent.

As such, SBA retailers can implement the store-as-a-brand strategy by focusing not only on the factors that affect customers' senses (i.e., the atmospheric stimuli) but also on the range of products within the store (i.e., the merchandise) (Floor, 2007). If customers perceive a disconnect between the merchandise and the store atmosphere, they might switch to a different store, translating into a loss of sale to the retailer. In this study, store atmospheric variables (i.e., social, design, and ambient cues) and merchandise are placed under an umbrella construct, store environment.

2.2. Theoretical background

The effect of store atmosphere on customer behavior has been demonstrated by several researchers who argued that the physical and service environment plays an important part in creating the retailer's image (Kotler, 1973), generates cognitive and emotional evaluations leading to behavioral responses (Bitner, 1992), and communicates the identity of the retailer and its image to customers (Hyllgard et al., 2006). The same line of argument can be found in Mehrabian-Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response model. In fact, the Mehrabian-Russell model has been applied to a number of store atmospheric studies (e.g., Anderson, 1986; Eroglu and Machleit, 1990; Lam, 2001). When the Mehrabian-Russell model of environmental psychology model is

applied in the retail context, stimuli (S) are the store environmental cues that affect the internal states (O) of the customer, which then have an effect on approach-avoidance response behavior (R).

When the SOR model is applied in the retail context, stimuli are the store atmospheric cues that affect the internal states of the consumer. A cue is defined as a characteristic, event, or object, external to a person that can be predetermined and used to categorize a stimulus object (Schellinck, 1980). Specifically, stimuli (S) in the retailing context refer to all the physical and non-physical elements of a store, which are within the retailer's control to enhance customers' shopping experience (Eroglu and Machleit, 1990; Turley and Chebat, 2002). Examples of stimuli in a retail store setting are the number of employees present, overhead music, color scheme of the store, temperature within the store, and layout of the store. For a SBA retailer, the store atmospheric cues, along with the exclusive merchandise, become a major reason for customers to visit the store because it is not available in many other retailers. In this study, merchandise (apparel) is considered to be a stimulus for SBA retailers and is posited to have a similar positive impact on cognitive evaluations as the atmospheric stimuli (i.e., social, design, and ambient cues).

Organism (O) refers to the "internal processes and structures intervening between stimuli external to the person and the final actions, reactions, or responses emitted," which consist of perceptual, physiological, feeling, and thinking activities (Bagozzi, 1986, p. 46). Bagozzi (1986) states that the intervening processes and structures consist of perceptual, physiological, feeling, and thinking activities. Researchers have identified two types of individuals' internal evaluation states that are induced by the physical environment: cognitive and affective evaluation (Bellizzi and Hite, 1992; Proshansky et al., 1983; Ward et al., 1992). Cognitive evaluation is associated with a consumer perception process, which originates from information-processing and inference theories (Bettman, 1979; Zeithaml, 1988). Perception is a physiological activity in which sensory stimulation cues are converted into meaningful information (Bettman, 1979). Atmospheric cues provide some important informational cues, based on which consumers can come to a conclusion about price, product, or service quality in the store (Baker et al., 2002). Affective evaluation is associated with emotions and feelings toward an object (Bagozzi, 1986; Ward and Russel, 1981) and is a judgment whether an object is pleasant, attractive, valuable, likable, or preferable (Russell and Snodgrass, 1987). Mehrabian and Russell (1974) hypothesized that any environment is capable of inducing and producing different emotional states to individuals.

Over the years, immense literature has been developed on whether customers first experience cognition or affect when they encounter an environment. Some researchers argue that cognitive states precede emotional states (cognition-emotion sequence) (Lazarus, 1991; Bandura, 1978), while others argue that emotional states precede cognitive states (emotion-cognition sequence) during the process of evaluation (Pham et al., 2001; Swinyard, 1993). In the literature pertaining to store atmosphere, several studies examined only the affective component while not taking into account the cognitive component (e.g., Donovan and Rossiter; 1982; Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006; Yoo et al., 1998). Of the few studies that examined both affective and cognitive components, most of them tested only the emotion-cognition sequence model (e.g., Bitner, 1992; Gulas and Bloch, 1995). However, this model has been challenged because the effect of atmospheric cues on emotions has been found to be not direct but indirect through cognition (e.g., Bone and Ellen, 1999; Chebat and Michon, 2003; Spangenberg et al., 1996). Lazarus (1991) also claimed that cognition is a required condition to generate emotions. In other words, an individual cannot have an emotional reaction to a stimulus in

the absence of some sort of a cognitive appraisal of the stimulus. Chebat and Michon (2003) empirically proved that the model with cognition-emotion sequence better explained the effect of ambient scent on behavior and had a better model fit than its counterpart in a mall environment. Taking this stance, this study considers the cognition-emotion sequence to elaborate the internal evaluations.

Response (R) is associated with behavioral reactions of customers such as satisfaction, patronage intention, number of items purchased, and amount of money spent in the store (Bagozzi, 1986; Kim and Damhorst, 2010; Sherman and Smith, 1987). In the retailing context, response to store stimuli is often termed as approach or avoidance behavior. Approach is the desire to remain in the store, continue to shop, and stay for relatively long periods. In contrast, avoidance behavior is associated with negative reactions including a desire to leave the store and not return (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). In the retailing context, store atmosphere has been found to influence behavioral reactions indirectly through cognitive and affective evaluations (e.g., Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Law et al., 2012).

3. Hypotheses development

This study adopts Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to understand the impact of store stimuli on customers' internal evaluation states and approach-avoidance behavior in the context of a SBA retailer. The proposed research model is shown in Fig. 1.

3.1. Stimulus → organism

Store atmosphere consists of several cues (i.e., stimuli) that have an impact on the internal evaluation of customers (i.e., organism). Baker (1987) classified retail atmospheric components into social, design, and ambient factors. Social factors refer to employees and other customers within the store. Design factors refer to the visual elements of a space that tend to exist at the forefront of customers' awareness (e.g., color, layout, architecture). Ambient factors refer to the non-visual elements of a space, such as temperature, music, and lighting (Baker, 1987). In the case of

social cues, Baker et al. (1994) and Singh (2006) found a positive effect of retail store employees on cognitive evaluations. Specifically, Baker et al. (1994) examined the effect of retail store employees on certain cognitive evaluations such as customer inferences about merchandise quality, service quality and the overall store image. Their findings revealed that a retail store characterized by prestige-image social factors (e.g., more sales personnel on the floor, sales personnel wearing professional attire, and a salesperson greeting customers at the store entrance) were perceived as providing higher service quality than a store characterized by discount-image social factors (e.g., few salesperson on the floor, sales personnel not wearing professional attire, and no greeting offered at the store entrance).

Similarly, Singh (2006) established that social cues have positive impacts on specific cognitive evaluations such as perceived efficiency, price, and service quality. In Bitner's (1990) study, a cluttered environment, featuring an employee in unprofessional attire, influenced a customer's dissatisfaction with the store when a service failure occurred. Undeniably, there is a positive association between social cues and cognitive evaluations in a store setting. SBA retailers such as Abercrombie & Fitch, American Apparel, and Banana Republic have been known to place importance on employees' attire and behavior in order to create congruent image between employees and the store (Halpern and Odell, 2010). Hence, social cues work as a means to develop positive cognitive evaluations toward a SBA store. Thus,

H1a. A positive perception of social cues within a SBA retail store will lead to positive cognitive evaluations toward the store.

Design elements influence an individual's evaluations of objects within the environment (e.g., Baker et al., 1994; Campbell, 1979; Morrow and McElroy, 1981). Certain design elements such as color, layout, and signage used within a store can affect customers' cognitive evaluations of the store such as perceived merchandise and service quality, perceived price, and perceived efficiency (Bellizzi et al., 1983; Singh, 2006). The same merchandise can be perceived to be of higher quality when purchased from a store with upscale design (e.g., plush carpet, clear signage) than from a store with discount design

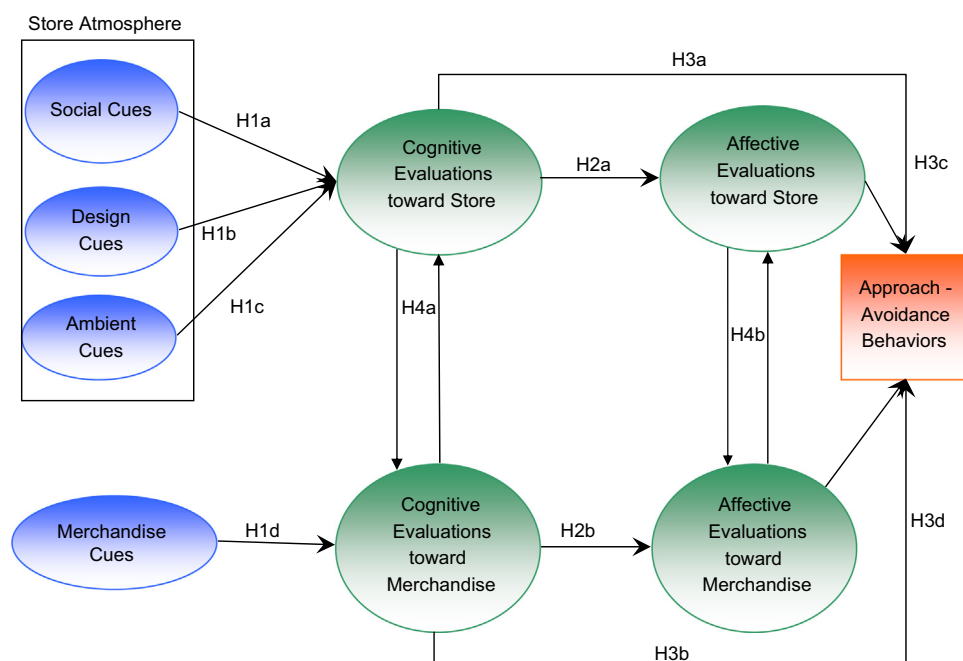


Fig. 1. The proposed research model.

(e.g., concrete floor, unclear signage) (Gardner and Siomkos, 1985). Furthermore, customers are willing to pay a higher price for merchandise sold in an upscale store even before they know the actual price (Baker et al., 2002).

Store design plays an important role for an SBA retailer as this retailer emphasizes the appearance of its stores through a striking design, unique look and feel (Floor, 2007). For example, Zara, a Spanish SBA retailer, designs its stores to create an airy and spacious look and reflect modern clean lines and simplicity (Hume, 2011). A European SBA retailer C&A, which offers inexpensive but fashionable clothing, redesigned its stores to create a balance between an attractive environment and the one that communicates the perception of value for customers (Ryan, 2011). Clearly, design cues such as color, layout, and in-store displays offered by the SBA retailer could help its customers form several cognitive evaluations such as value for quality and better service in customers' minds. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that the design cues present in a SBA retail store will enhance customers' cognitive evaluations. Therefore,

H1b. *A positive perception of design cues within a SBA retail store will lead to positive cognitive evaluations toward the store.*

Ambient cues refer to the background characteristics of the environment that influence customers at a subconscious level (Campbell, 1983). Ambient cues can be visual (e.g., color and lighting), acoustic (e.g., music and noise), or olfactory (e.g., smell and scent) (Bellizzi et al., 1983; Hirsch, 1995; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001). Although several studies have evaluated the relationship between ambient cues and affect (e.g., Gulas and Bloch, 1995; Mattila and Wirtz, 2001; Spangenberg et al., 1996), only a few studies have found the effect of ambient cues on cognition. In Areni and Kim's (1993) study on the relationship between music and price perception, shoppers perceived higher prices for wine when classical music was played than when hip-hop music was played in the background. In the study of Mitchell et al. (1995), odors (an ambient cue) that match the image of the product being sold had a positive effect on cognitive information processing among customers. Similarly, store lighting was found to influence consumer behavior with an increase in customer interaction with the merchandise in a brightly-lit store compared to a dimly-lit store (Areni and Kim, 1994).

Several SBA retailers are known to play a specific genre of music and focus on a particular type of scent for their store. For example, Victoria's Secret plays classical music through scented air in order to evoke image of luxury and grace, for which the store's image stands. Banana Republic plays a fusion of traditional jazz and hip hop in order to gel with the retailer's image of incorporating a modern twist on traditional styles (Nogaki, 1995). Similarly, Abercrombie & Fitch and Hollister are known for spraying their signature scent and playing signature music throughout their stores at all times. These examples allude to the importance of ambient cues in generating cognitive evaluations toward SBA stores. Thus,

H1c. *A positive perception of ambient cues within a SBA retail store will lead to positive cognitive evaluations toward the store.*

Since this study is focused on SBA retailers, the merchandise carried in the store is considered to be part of stimuli, because the merchandise is unique to that particular retailer and forms an integral part of the overall store image (Floor, 2007). In fact, several researchers have viewed merchandising as an important component of a retailer's image: Lindquist's (1974) nine different elements of store image included merchandise; Doyle and Fenwick's (1974) store image included merchandise assortment and styling; and Bearden's (1977) store image included quality and

assortment of merchandise. Despite the importance of merchandising in the retail mix, only a handful of store environment studies have considered the role of merchandise in customer behavior. For example, Thang and Tan (2003) considered merchandising (availability of merchandise, merchandise mix, and value for money) as a stimulus variable within the S-O-R model. Newman and Patel (2004) viewed different styles of merchandise that reflect the latest fashion as an important determinant of positive customer responses to apparel stores.

A few studies examined the impact of merchandise as a stimulus on cognitive evaluations. For example, Park et al. (2008) found that product presentation had a direct positive effect on perceived amount of information in an online retail setting. In Thang and Tan's (2003) study, when customers viewed the merchandising of a store (i.e., a stimulus), they converted the stimulus into meaningful information before making a judgment. That is, if a customer perceives a retail store to be superior in merchandising, it could act as an external cue and positively influence her judgment toward the merchandise. Hence,

H1d. *A positive perception of merchandise cues within a SBA retail store will lead to positive cognitive evaluations toward the merchandise.*

3.2. Cognitive evaluation → affective evaluation

As discussed earlier, this study employs cognition-emotion sequence to explain the internal evaluations toward the stimuli. When an individual encounters a stimulus within a SBA store, he/she may process the stimulus and form an initial mental image about it (i.e., cognition) which then gets converted into emotions such as excitement or interest toward the store. In other words, individuals might form a favorable or positive evaluation toward the store based on certain stimuli such as music played in the store or employees' greetings when they enter the store. These overall cognitive evaluations influence them to evaluate that the store was exciting, interesting, or appealing. Based on this reasoning,

H2a. *Cognitive evaluations toward a SBA retail store will have a positive effect on affective evaluations toward the store.*

Similar to the above justification, when customers have positive cognitive evaluations toward the merchandise carried by the SBA store, they may have positive affective evaluations about the merchandise. Although this relationship has not been studied in the context of an apparel store, Namkung and Jang (2008) found that, in a restaurant setting, product quality perception (cognitive evaluation) has a positive influence on emotions. Similarly, if customers judge the merchandise of the SBA store positively, it would then lead to the formation of positive emotions toward the merchandise. Hence,

H2b. *Cognitive evaluations toward merchandise carried by a SBA retail store will have a positive effect on affective evaluations toward the merchandise carried by the store.*

3.3. Organism → response

3.3.1. Affective evaluations → approach behaviors

Emotions that customers experience in a retail environment lead to either approaching or avoiding the store (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982). Consistent with the S-O-R model, Donovan and Rossiter's findings indicate that customers' affective evaluations mediate the relationship between the store environment and shopping behavior. It has been found that affect (pleasure and arousal) is positively related to several approach behaviors such as willingness to buy, desire to affiliate with employees, time spent in the store, money spent in the store, store liking, number of items

purchased, and willingness to return to the store (Dubé et al., 1995; Eroglu et al., 2003; Sherman et al., 1997). Similarly, if the stimuli within a SBA retail store elicit positive emotions amongst customers, it leads to their positive behavior toward the store. Therefore, customers who find the SBA retail store to be captivating may spend more time and money in the store than originally planned. Hence,

H3a. *Positive affective evaluations toward a SBA retail store will lead to approach behavior.*

When customers evaluate the merchandise positively, they may exhibit an approach behavior toward the retail store. Specifically, if customers experience positive emotions toward the merchandise, they will be prompted to stay longer in the store. Park et al. (2008) found that affective evaluation toward apparel product presentation had a direct effect on purchase intention. Similarly, any positive emotion toward the merchandise in a SBA store such as finding the styles to be appealing or exciting could lead to approach behaviors such as spending more time or money in the store. Hence,

H3b. *Positive affective evaluations toward the merchandise carried by a SBA retail store will lead to approach behavior.*

3.3.2. Cognitive evaluations → approach/avoidance behaviors

Although several store atmospheric studies that employed the Mehrabian and Russell model take into account just the effect of emotions on customer behavior (e.g., Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Kaltcheva and Weitz, 2006; Yoo et al., 1998), researchers also have demonstrated the role of cognition in behavioral consequences. For instance, Bitner (1992) revealed that employees and customers within a store environment experience cognitive states toward store stimuli, which in turn influence behaviors such as exploring the store, staying longer in the store, and spending more money. Also, Donovan et al. (1994) found that cognitive factors such as value for money, quality of merchandise, variety of merchandise, and price specials positively impacted customer behaviors such as spending more money and time than planned and unplanned purchasing. The same holds true with a SBA retailer, where a customer's positive cognitive evaluation toward the store results in positive behavioral outcomes. Hence,

H3c. *Positive cognitive evaluations toward a SBA retail store will lead to approach behavior.*

Similarly, if customers have positive cognitive evaluations of the merchandise, they are likely to stay in the store, explore more and possibly make more purchases than they planned. In the context of apparel shopping, Park et al. (2008) found that perceived information (cognitive evaluation) played a mediating role in the relationship between apparel product presentation (stimulus) and purchase intention (response). A strong merchandising mix provides customers with a wider choice of products, leading to customer satisfaction with the store (Golledge et al., 1966). Extending the above logic, when a customer holds a positive cognitive evaluation toward the merchandise, it will have a positive effect on his or her behavior toward a SBA retailer. Thus,

H3d. *Positive cognitive evaluations toward the merchandise sold by a SBA retail store will lead to approach behavior.*

3.4. Store-as-a-brand concept

One of the objectives of this study is to assess whether customers perceive the single-brand apparel retail store and its merchandise as a single entity. As a store-as-a-brand strategy, retailers strive to provide a holistic image, with which customers

do not perceive the discrepancy between the store and the products carried in the store (Floor, 2007). This can be tested statistically based on the research model developed in this study. If a SBA retailer is successful in creating a holistic environment (i.e., the customer does not view the store and the merchandise sold by the retailer as different entities), the internal evaluations (both affective and cognitive) that are generated by the SBA retail store and its merchandise should be statistically equivalent to one another. In other words, affective evaluations toward store and affective evaluations toward merchandise will be statistically similar for a SBA retail store. This also applies to cognitive evaluations. Hence,

H4a. *Affective evaluations toward a SBA retail store and affective evaluations toward the merchandise carried by the store will not be significantly different.*

H4b. *Cognitive evaluations toward a SBA retail store and cognitive evaluations toward merchandise carried by the store will not be significantly different.*

4. Methods

4.1. Instrument measures

The measurement scales employed in this study were adapted from the literature and, in some cases, were modified to fit the SBA retail context. All items were measured by a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'Strongly disagree' (1) to 'Strongly agree' (5). Table 1 shows the scale items for each construct along with its original source.

4.2. Content validity testing and pre-test

In order to obtain content and face validity, a group of subject-matter experts (i.e., three academic researchers and five doctoral students specializing in retail studies) qualitatively tested the scale items which were obtained from the literature. All the subject-matter experts concluded that all the selected scale items were clear and readable, and had content or face validity.

After the first content validity testing, a pre-test survey was conducted to check the need of refining the measurement items and to further check face validity. The pen-and-paper survey was administered to 108 undergraduate students at a major southern university. Once the data were obtained, unidimensionality of the constructs was checked by measuring the reliabilities of the constructs using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. As shown in Table 1, the reliabilities of all the constructs were above the cut-off level of 0.70 (Hair et al., 1998), thereby proving unidimensionality of each construct.

This study employed a mall-intercept survey to collect data from two malls in the southeastern region in the United States. A total of thirteen SBA stores, including Abercrombie and Fitch, Hollister, Express, and Gap, were selected for this study. These stores were selected in order to avoid gender biases as they sold clothing and accessories for both men and women. The participants for this study were shoppers who just exited from one of the SBA retailers located inside the mall. The survey was conducted during eight weekends (Friday evening through Sunday evening) as there are more shoppers in the mall during those times. Two interviewers were stationed near the store entrances and approached shoppers as soon as they exited the store. Irrespective of whether the shopper had purchased merchandise from the store or not, the shopper was approached by one of the two interviewers and invited to participate in the survey. The

Table 1
Sample scale items.

Variables	Factor items	Factor loading	Cronbach's alpha	Source
Social cue	● There were enough employees in the store to service customers	0.66	0.89	Baker et al. (1994), Machleit et al. (2000), Singh (2006)
	● The employees were well-dressed and appeared neat	0.67		
	● The employees were friendly	0.91		
	● The employees were helpful	0.86		
	● The employees were knowledgeable	0.77		
Design cue	● The color scheme was pleasing	0.76	0.89	Baker et al. (1994), Singh (2006)
	● The colors used in the store appeared to be currently fashionable	0.74		
	● The physical facilities were attractive	0.60		
	● The merchandise in the store appeared organized	0.64		
	● The merchandise was logically located in this store	0.58		
	● Navigating the store was easy	0.60		
	● In-store displays were impressive	0.66		
	● There was adequate display of in-store information	0.62		
● The décor of the store was pleasing to me	0.71			
Ambient cue	● The lighting in the store was pleasing to me	0.79	0.88	Baker et al. (1994), Singh (2006)
	● The lighting accentuated the products that were displayed in the store	0.66		
	● The background music in the store was pleasing to me	0.67		
	● The music was played at the right volume	0.66		
	● The music fit the image of the store	0.67		
Merchandise cue	● The store carried dependable products	0.76	0.85	Hansen and Deutscher (1977)
	● The store carried a wide selection of merchandise	0.69		
	● The store was fully stocked	0.67		
	● The store carried high fashion merchandise	0.68		
	● The store carried stylish merchandise	0.76		
Cognitive evaluations toward store	● I have a favorable opinion about this store	0.84	0.94	Wakefield and Baker (1998)
	● I like this store	0.91		
	● I have a positive opinion about this store	0.91		
	● This store was good	0.90		
Cognitive evaluations toward merchandise	● I have a favorable opinion about the merchandise carried in this store	0.88	0.92	Wakefield and Baker (1998)
	● I like the merchandise carried in this store	0.91		
	● I have a positive opinion about the merchandise carried in this store	0.89		
	● The merchandise carried in this store was good	0.90		
Affective evaluations toward store	● This store was exciting	0.80	0.85	Eroglu et al. (2003)
	● This store was interesting	0.79		
	● This store was appealing	0.82		
	● This store was sensational	0.79		
Affective evaluations toward merchandise	● The merchandise carried in this store was exciting	0.91	0.89	Eroglu et al. (2003)
	● The merchandise carried in this store was interesting	0.93		
	● The merchandise carried in this store was appealing	0.83		
	● The merchandise carried in this store was sensational	0.79		
Approach–avoidance behavior	● I enjoyed shopping in this store	0.91	0.94	Mattila and Wirtz (2001)
	● I liked this store environment	0.89		
	● This is a place in which I would feel friendly and talkative to a stranger who happens to be next to me	0.63		
	● I liked to spend time browsing in this store	0.75		
	● This is a sort of place where I would end up spending more money than I originally set out to spend	0.53		

interviewers introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the study and the use of the shopper's responses in the study. The interviewer also had the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) informed consent form for the shoppers to read if they chose to. Apart from being present in the IRB's informed consent form, the interviewer also stressed the anonymity and confidentiality of answers provided by the shopper. After receiving consent from the shopper, the interviewer noted down the store from which the shopper exited and then handed the questionnaire to the shopper.

The interviewer clarified any doubts that respondents might have had while filling the survey. After the survey was completed, the interviewer collected it immediately and checked if the respondent had answered all the questions clearly. If the unanswered question was noticed, the interviewer immediately asked the respondent to complete. This approach reduced the number of missing values.

From each of the two malls, 225 responses were obtained, for a total sample size of 450. After deleting 12 unusable surveys, 438

Table 2
Correlation matrix.

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Social cues	1.00	0.549	0.426	0.481	0.543	0.539	0.555	0.514	0.581
2. Design cues		1.00	0.641	0.733	0.716	0.785	0.692	0.725	0.743
3. Ambient cues			1.00	0.563	0.616	0.617	0.617	0.588	0.611
4. Merchandise cues				1.00	0.647	0.760	0.762	0.675	0.690
5. Affective evaluations toward store					1.00	0.856	0.763	0.747	0.781
6. Affective evaluations toward merchandise						1.00	0.774	0.807	0.822
7. Cognitive evaluations toward store							1.00	0.814	0.806
8. Cognitive evaluations toward merchandise								1.00	0.798
9. Approach–avoidance behavior									1.00

surveys were used in the data analyses. The largest percentage of the sample was characterized by: female (65%); Caucasians (77%), African-Americans (9%) and Hispanics (4%); ages of 18–25 (51%), 36–45 (22%), and 26–35 (18%); and household income of \$30,000–\$49,000 (49%) and \$50,000–\$79,000 (28%).

4.3. Data analyses

The proposed hypotheses were tested using a two-step approach suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the measurement model to evaluate whether the measurement items for each latent variable were appropriate. Second, a non-recursive structural equation model (SEM) examined the causal relationships among the latent variables. Both the CFA and non-recursive SEM were modeled using AMOS 17.0.

As a first step to the two-step approach, the correlation matrix of the variables was analyzed to identify the presence of highly correlated variables. As shown in the correlation matrix table (Table 2), the following pairs of variables were highly correlated: affective evaluations toward store with affective evaluations toward merchandise ($r=0.856$); affective evaluations toward merchandise with cognitive evaluations toward merchandise ($r=0.807$); affective evaluations toward merchandise with approach–avoidance behavior ($r=0.822$); cognitive evaluations toward store with cognitive evaluations toward merchandise ($r=0.814$) and cognitive evaluations toward store with approach–avoidance behavior ($r=0.806$). Affective evaluations toward both store and merchandise used the same scale items for these two settings.

The same applied for the scale items measuring cognitive evaluations toward store and merchandise. Hence, it is not surprising that these constructs are highly correlated with each other. Based on this justification, no measures were taken to rectify the issue.

CFA assessed the unidimensionality, reliability, construct validity, and model fit of the measurement model that is comprised of 9 constructs measured by 42 observed variables. After deleting items with low standardized factor loadings and adding error covariance based on modification indices, the goodness-of-fit statistic for the best fit model was significant ($\chi^2=2237.966$, $df=938$, $p < .001$) (Byrne, 2001). The model was considered a fair fit based on the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=0.051), non-normed fit index (NNFI=0.892), and comparative fit index (CFI=0.919). All factor loadings were significant ($p < 0.001$), indicating that all items were significantly related to the associated factors. The reliabilities of the final measurement items ranged from 0.85 to 0.94. The composite reliabilities of each construct ranged from 0.94 to 0.98, far above the minimum criteria of 0.70 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). To establish convergent validity, the average variance extracted (AVE) for each of the latent variables was calculated and found to be greater than the required criteria of 0.50. Discriminant validity was established because the

square-root of AVE was greater than the shared variance (squared correlation coefficients) between all possible pairs of latent variables (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Typically, most of the structural models are recursive, in which all causal effects are uni-directional; that is, no two variables in the model are reciprocally related (Kline, 2005). However, some structural models are non-recursive, in which there is a reciprocal path between a set of variables such that one variable has an effect on a second variable and this second variable in turn has an effect on the first (Dragan and Akhtar-Danesh, 2007). In this study's research model, there are two sets of reciprocal relationships between two sets of variables: (1) affective evaluations toward store and affective evaluations toward merchandise and (2) cognitive evaluations toward store and cognitive evaluations toward merchandise. In other words, affective evaluations toward a store are directly influenced by affective evaluations toward merchandise and vice versa. The same can be said for cognitive evaluations toward store and merchandise.

In order for a non-recursive model to produce meaningful results, a few criteria have to be met. First, a non-recursive model must be stable. A stability index (in AMOS 17.0) between -1 and $+1$ is considered to be a stable model (Arbuckle, 2007). Second, non-recursive models need to be identified by means of an instrumental variable (Martens and Haase, 2006). An instrumental variable can have a direct relationship with one of the endogenous variables involved in the feedback loop but not with the other endogenous variable in the feedback loop. For example, in the research model developed for this study, the ambient cues variable is instrumental as it has a direct path to cognitive evaluations toward store but does not have a path to cognitive evaluations toward merchandise. A third required condition for identifying non-recursive models is called "order and rank condition" which can be satisfied by incorporating an instrumental variable for every endogenous variable involved in the reciprocal feedback loop (Martens and Haase, 2006). For example, in this research model, the social cues variable is instrumental for cognitive evaluations toward store and merchandise cues is instrumental for cognitive evaluations toward merchandise. This study's research model satisfied the above three criteria of a non-recursive structural model.

5. Results and discussion

The research model and the hypothesized relationships among exogenous and endogenous variables were tested using the SEM technique. The non-recursive model was identified and the stability index was 0.348 for the variables pertaining to affective evaluations in the feedback loop and 0.517 for the variables pertaining to cognitive evaluations in the feedback loop, indicating that the structural model is stable and that the parameter estimates resulting from the model are valid. The goodness-of-fit

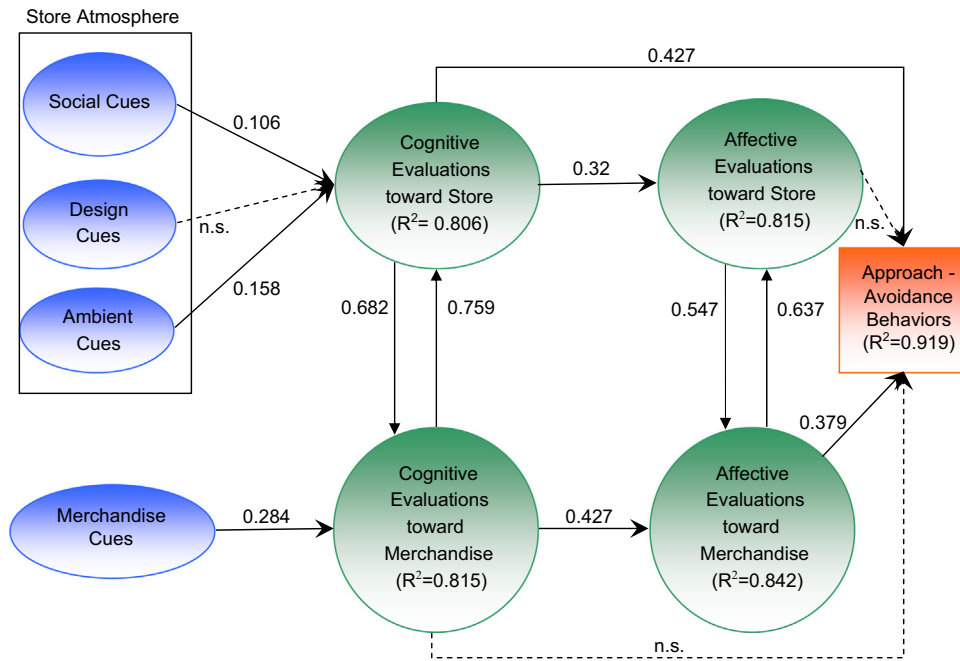


Fig. 2. The proposed research model with the standardized regression weights and the R-square values.

Table 3
Standardized regression weights: Hypotheses 1–4.

Hypothesis	Structural path	Standardized regression weight	Standard error	Critical ratio	t-Values	p-Value
H1						
H1a	Social cues → cognitive evaluation toward store	0.106	0.048	2.856	2.21	0.004 ^{sig}
H1b	Design cues → cognitive evaluation toward store	–0.003	0.132	–0.037	–0.02	0.970 ^{n.s.}
H1c	Ambient cues → cognitive evaluation toward store	0.158	0.065	2.868	2.43	0.004 ^{sig}
H1d	Merchandise cues → cognitive evaluation toward merchandise	0.284	0.098	3.262	2.89	0.001 ^{sig}
H2						
H2a	Cognitive evaluation toward store → affective evaluations toward store	0.322	0.096	3.024	3.35	0.002 ^{sig}
H2b	Cognitive evaluation toward merchandise → affective evaluations toward merchandise	0.427	0.115	3.386	3.71	0.000 ^{sig}
H3						
H3a	Affective evaluation toward store → approach–avoidance behavior	0.085	0.058	1.154	1.46	0.125 ^{sig}
H3b	Affective evaluation toward merchandise → approach–avoidance behavior	0.379	0.070	4.474	5.41	0.000 ^{sig}
H3c	Cognitive evaluation toward store → approach–avoidance behavior	0.427	0.053	5.768	8.05	0.000 ^{sig}
H3d	Cognitive evaluation toward merchandise → approach–avoidance behavior	0.116	0.057	1.532	2.03	0.249 ^{n.s.}
H4						
H4a	Cognitive evaluation toward store → cognitive evaluation toward merchandise	0.682	0.096	6.312	7.10	0.000 ^{sig}
	Cognitive evaluation toward merchandise → cognitive evaluation toward store	0.759	0.152	5.332	4.99	0.000 ^{sig}
H4b	Affective evaluation toward store → affective evaluation toward merchandise	0.547	0.135	3.838	4.05	0.000 ^{sig}
	Affective evaluation toward merchandise → affective evaluation toward store	0.637	0.126	5.326	5.05	0.000 ^{sig}

statistic for the structural model was significant ($\chi^2=2338.784$, $df=954$, $p < 0.001$) (Byrne, 2001). The model was considered a fair fit based on the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA=0.060), non-normed fit index (NNFI=0.901), and comparative fit index (CFI=0.912). The standardized regression weights, standard error, *t*-values, critical ratio, and the *p*-values for H1, H2, and H3 are provided in Table 2. The research model with the standardized regression weights and the correlations are provided in Fig. 2.

Hypothesis 4 pertained to the store-as-a-brand concept. Table 3 shows standardized regression weights for these paths. A chi-square difference test indicated that there was no significant difference between (1) the path from cognitive evaluation toward store to cognitive evaluation toward merchandise and (2) the path from cognitive evaluation toward merchandise to cognitive evaluation toward store. Furthermore, there was no significant

difference between (1) the path from affective evaluation toward store to affective evaluation toward merchandise and (2) the path from affective evaluation toward merchandise to affective evaluation toward store. Hence, it can be concluded that customers view the store and merchandise as a holistic entity, thereby supporting H4.

Apart from understanding the direct effect of one construct on another, it offers further insights if the indirect effect of each of all other constructs on another construct is found. Standardized total effect (STE) of a variable is the sum of direct and indirect effects from other variables and this statistic assists in understanding the variable's overall impact on another variable (Byrne, 2001). Table 3 illustrates the standardized total effects of exogenous variables (i.e., social, design, ambient, and merchandise cues) on endogenous variables (i.e., cognitive evaluations toward store and merchandise, affective evaluations toward store and merchandise, and

Table 4
Standardized total effects of exogenous variables on endogenous variables.

Effect of/on	Cognitive evaluations toward		Affective evaluations toward		Approach–avoidance behavior
	Store	Merchandise	Store	Merchandise	
Social cue	0.220	0.150	0.171	0.158	0.186
Design cue	–0.06	–0.004	–0.005	–0.005	–0.005
Ambient cue	0.308	0.210	0.239	0.220	0.259
Merchandise cue	0.446	0.587	0.465	0.505	0.489
Cognitive evaluations toward store	–	–	–	–	0.946
Cognitive evaluations toward merchandise	–	–	–	–	0.923
Affective evaluations toward store	–	–	–	–	0.447
Affective evaluations toward merchandise	–	–	–	–	0.664

approach–avoidance behavior) and the standardized total effects of both internal evaluations toward store and merchandise on approach–avoidance behavior. As seen from Table 4, the STE of cognitive evaluations toward store and merchandise are 0.446 and 0.587, respectively. This is greater than the total effect of social, design, and ambient cues on cognitive evaluations toward store and merchandise. This implies that merchandise cues had a greater total impact on cognitive evaluations toward both store and merchandise than social, design, and ambient cues did. Also, merchandise cues had a greater total effect on approach–avoidance behavior (STE=0.489) compared to the other three store atmospheric cues. Also, cognitive evaluations toward store (STE=0.946) and cognitive evaluations toward merchandise (STE=0.923) had a greater total effect on approach–avoidance behavior than affective evaluations toward store and affective evaluations toward merchandise did. This result points out that even though cognitive evaluations toward merchandise did not have a direct effect on approach–avoidance behavior, it had an indirect impact on approach–avoidance behavior.

6. Implications

This study offers several implications that can benefit SBA retailers who want to attract more customers and increase store patronage.

6.1. Store-as-a-brand concept

As hypothesized, based on this research model and sample, consumers view the store and the merchandise of the SBA retailer as a holistic entity. Since SBA retailers have to depend on only one brand of merchandise as a customer pull, they must pay close attention to the way they market their overall brand image. If consumers notice a mismatch between the apparel brand and the store image, they will avoid the store completely. For example, irrespective of the economic recession, A&F refused to offer discounts on apparel because sales and discounts were perceived to tarnish its prestigious image. Clearly, a single-brand apparel retailer must coordinate and offer consistent brand image through the store and the merchandise.

6.2. The impact of stimulus on organism

As expected, social and ambient cues had significant positive effects on the cognitive evaluations toward the store. In order for consumers to form a positive or favorable opinion towards the store, single-brand retailers need to focus on training employees to be friendly, knowledgeable, and helpful. Similarly, if a consumer perceives that the music or lighting in the store does not fit the store image (e.g., slow classical music or bright lighting at a store

that targets young customers), the consumer could form negative opinion about the store. Contrary to the expectation, the relationship between design cues and cognitive evaluations toward the store was not significant. This result is inconsistent with the previous finding that positive perception of design cues led to a positive perception of cognitive evaluation states (Bitner, 1992). This result seems to allude that social and ambient factors are more important in forming positive consumer opinions towards SBA stores than design cues are. However, one possible reason for the insignificant relationship between design and cognition is that the items used to measure design cues were derived from the studies that employed general merchandise stores. In this study, the same scale was adopted towards apparel stores in which consumer design perceptions might be different from general merchandise stores. Future studies can adopt a scale that has been developed exclusively for apparel retailers.

Previous studies did not consider the merchandise cues as a stimulus in the store environment literature. This study incorporated merchandise as a stimulus within the store environment of a SBA retailer. The relationship between merchandise cues and cognitive evaluations toward merchandise was significant. This study also identified that merchandise cues had a greater total effect on internal evaluations and approach–avoidance behavior than the three store atmospheric cues. This indicates that carrying unique merchandise is especially important to SBA retailers to win their customers' interests because one of the major reasons for customers to patronize the single-brand apparel retailer is the non-availability of the private brand merchandise elsewhere. SBA retailers could use the exclusivity of their merchandise to their advantage by touting their products' unique features and letting their customers know that their store is the only place where they can find that particular merchandise. For example, H&M, the women's specialty retailer, introduced an exclusive line of eco-friendly collection of red carpet looks called the "Conscious Collection" and touted it to be unique to H&M.

6.3. The impact of organism on response

Cognitive store evaluations had a positive significant impact on approach behaviors. SBA retailers need to reinforce a positive opinion about their stores in order to make customers stay longer and spend more. For example, Aeropostale generated a campaign called *Teens for Jeans*, which urged Aeropostale's customers to donate their jeans to earthquake victims in Haiti and in exchange receive 25% off a new pair of jeans. Such marketing strategies help promote a positive belief about the company, which may influence cognitive judgments toward the store and eventually increase store patronage.

Cognitive evaluations toward merchandise did not have a significant direct effect on approach–avoidance behaviors but had an overall total effect on approach–avoidance behavior (via

the indirect effects of other constructs, as shown in Table 3). Thus, marketers cannot ignore the importance of cognitive merchandise evaluations in leading to affective evaluations and eventually approach behavior. SBA retailers can promote superior quality and competitive pricing of their merchandise to improve customers' affective evaluations toward merchandise, thereby leading them to spend more time and money in the store.

Unlike cognitive merchandise evaluations, affective evaluations toward merchandise had a positive direct impact on approach–avoidance behaviors. This indicates that if customers found the merchandise to be exciting or appealing, they would spend more time at the store. SBA retailer could capitalize on this by asking their customers to tweet about how exciting and sensational their merchandise is and receive a discount in return depending on how many people follow the tweets. This would not only increase customers' emotional attachment to the merchandise but encourage them to return to the store.

Lastly, affective evaluations toward the store did not contribute to approach behavior. However, affective store evaluations toward the store had a significant total effect on approach–avoidance behavior (via the indirect effects of other constructs, as shown in Table 3) indicating that this relationship cannot be completely ignored. Recently, American Eagle launched a campaign in its flagship store in New York that called for customers to pose for a picture, after the purchase, which was then projected onto LED screens outside the store in Times Square. This strategy led to a significant sales increase in the American Eagle store as it converted customer's positive emotions toward an in-store experience into increased purchases.

7. Limitations and future studies

As with any other study, several limitations and opportunities for future research can be addressed. First, the proposed model was tested utilizing a few SBA retailers from two malls within a limited geographic area. Store atmospheric cues in single-brand apparel retailers might be perceived differently among different consumer segments (e.g., Gap vs. Aeropostale). Future studies could consider single-brand retailers targeting a particular consumer segment. Second, this study did not measure any specific cognitive evaluation (e.g., perceived quality, perceived price) and affective evaluation (e.g., pleasure, arousal) but was based on broad definitions of cognition and affect. Such specific evaluation measures could be employed in the future to understand different elements of cognition and affect. Third, this study employed a self-report survey method, with which respondents were asked to recall information from memory, albeit not too long from the actual shopping experience. This allows the possibility that some of the self-reported information may not have been accurate due to loss of memory. A future study could employ an experimental design by showing a video of the single-brand apparel retail store to simulate the shopping experience. This would alleviate the errors associated with the lack of accuracy due to loss of memory.

8. Contributions

A major contribution of this study that could lead to the advancement of the research stream was the addition of the merchandise cue as part of the store stimuli within the traditional SOR model. This study also enriched the existing SOR model by adding internal evaluations (i.e., cognitive and affective) toward merchandise and their impacts on approach behavior. Lastly, the research model enhanced the SOR model by evaluating the concept of store-as-a-brand. This study was the first to evaluate

the concept of store-as-a-brand statistically in the context of SBA stores. This study found that consumers fail to separate the merchandise image from the store image because their cognitive and affective evaluations toward store and merchandise are equivalent to each other. Both researchers and practitioners can adopt this model and evaluate the concept of store-as-a-brand not just in the context of SBA retailers, but can extend to other retailers that seek to develop brand identity.

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