

The role of experiential marketing in shaping brand identity within the fashion industry: A case study of Gentle Monster

Henan Sun*

School of Media, Korea University, Seoul 02841, Korea

Abstract. This study examines the role of experiential marketing in building and communicating brand identity, using Gentle Monster as a case study. In the highly competitive fashion industry, brands must continuously differentiate themselves to attract and retain customers. Experiential marketing offers a strategic approach by building emotional connections through immersive customer experiences. Gentle Monster, a South Korean eyewear brand, utilizes innovative retail spaces and artistic installations to create unique shopping experiences. This study explores Gentle Monster's use of spatial storytelling, varied global themes, and advanced technologies in its offline stores. The findings reveal that these strategies effectively enhance the brand's identity, resonating with its target audience of trend-conscious millennials and Gen Z. The study concludes with suggestions for deeper customer engagement and managerial implications for other fashion brands, emphasizing the importance of aligning brand identity with experiential marketing. Ultimately, the integration of such immersive experiences can drive brand loyalty and long-term business growth.

1 Introduction

The fashion industry is well known for its fast pace to keep on following the trend, so in this high-competitive and dynamic industry, it is important for brands to continuously gain popularity from their customers among many competing brands. To make the brand more specific than other choices available today for customers, brand identity is crucial to effectively differentiate and manage the brand [1].

Experiential marketing is an essential tool for brand managers to build their brand identity. As exchange processes and relationship marketing have become more central in recent years, experiential marketing allows brands to forge deeper emotional connections with customers. Experiential marketing is usually broadly defined as any form of customer-focused marketing activity that creates a connection with customers [2]. At present, experiential marketing is not widely used as an essential marketing strategy in the fashion industry because compared to other industries, such as tourism, the fashion industry is less interactive. However, with the development of technology, the concept of omnichannel has made experiential marketing become an integrated methodology in the fashion industry. Today's customers are routinely involved with multiple channels and devices, making a single shopping journey more complex [3]. Therefore, many brands build their offline stores as a space where customers can feel and experience the products, hence, driving purchase intention and improving the sales on both offline and online stores.

* Corresponding author: quanming@ldy.edu.rs

Many studies have been done on how experiential marketing leads to customer loyalty. In this process, brand identity acts as a mediator. Specifically, a brand does experiential marketing to strengthen its brand identity, and a positive brand identity can shape customers' perceptions of the brand and lead to customer loyalty. Therefore, understanding how experiential marketing influences brand identity is also integral in this process.

This case study aims to explore how Gentle Monster utilizes experiential marketing to construct and communicate its brand identity. Gentle Monster is a South Korean eyewear brand that implements experiential marketing to build a distinctive brand identity. Gentle Monster boosts its sales and awareness not only through its trendy eyewear design but also through innovative retail spaces, which are featured as artistic and interactive spaces. By examining specific strategies used by Gentle Monster, this study will highlight the impact of experiential marketing on consumer perception and brand differentiation in the competitive fashion industry, and thus illustrate the relationship between experiential marketing and brand identity. Finally, this paper ends with some suggestions, managerial implications for other brands, and a conclusion.

2 Literature review

2.1 Experiential marketing (EM)

Experiential marketing is a new strategy in the 21st century, when some changes were affecting the market. Information technology, such as the internet and other media, is everywhere in people's lives. Under this environment, brand information can be delivered to customers instantly [4]. The ubiquity of technology makes communication and entertainment easier. Brands are advertising themselves as customer-oriented. Also, customers are able to make connections with the brands, so the marketing is no longer a one-way interaction [2].

Experiential marketing involves a two-way interaction between the brand and the target audience. It provides the target audience with a live brand experience through authentic brand-relevant communications that add value [5]. Opposite to traditional marketing which is product-oriented, experiential marketing is customer-oriented, which intends to build a connection with customers. Instead of improving the functionality of the products, brands are trying to enhance the whole consumption experience. According to Schmitt, there are four characteristics of experiential marketing. First, it focuses on customer experiences; Second, it focuses on consumption as a holistic experience; Third, customers are rational and emotional; Fourth, marketing methods and tools used by marketers are multifaceted, not only using analytical, quantitative, and verbal methodologies of traditional marketing [2].

In experiential marketing, the customer value is not only found in the products and services themselves or in the information-gathering process. Instead, value is also derived from the experience of consumption [2]. Based on Schmitt's Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs), customers feel the experiences through five approaches: "sense," "feel," "think," "act," and "relate." Customers can "sense" the products and services through the five senses, and then they will either have a mildly or strong positive mood linked to the brands. Then, "think" means in the buying process, customers are also engaging and doing creative thinking, such as problem-solving. "Act" focuses on physical activities, and "relate" generates experiences by interacting with others and being part of a social context.

2.2 Brand identity (BI)

Brand identity is an important tool for a brand to differentiate itself from other competitors, especially in this dynamic market. Brand identity is often viewed as an internal construct that originates from the companies, reflecting what the managers want the brands to be. This identity remains stable and clear over time to ensure that brands serve as reliable references for consumers. Also, a fixed brand identity can help brands to navigate and adapt to market changes [1].

As the market changes, customers begin to be involved in building brand identity. For example, the brand identity prism proposed by Kapferer simultaneously incorporates both manager input and customer input. According to the framework, brand identity results from six dimensions: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image. Physique refers to the tangible aspects of the brand, such as its logo and product features. Personality encompasses the human traits associated with the brand, like being innovative or trustworthy. Culture reflects the values and principles that the brand stands for. Relationship describes the type of interaction the brand fosters with its customers. Reflection is the image of the target consumer that the brand portrays, while self-image is how the brand makes its consumers feel about themselves. Together, these six dimensions create a holistic picture of the brand's identity. The first five dimensions are manager inputs, while self-image is customer input. Self-image is a mirror that customers use to reflect on themselves and perceive themselves differently by associating with specific brands, in this process, brand image influences how customers perceive the brands, which leads to their self-expression [6].

2.3 Gentle Monster

Started in 2011, Gentle Monster is a luxury brand from South Korea specializing in sunglasses and optical glasses. Gentle Monster has established physical stores in various countries, including South Korea, China, Singapore, Japan, the United States, the UAE, the UK, and Australia. Gentle Monster's target customers are mainly Gen Z and millennials, as well as fashion-conscious individuals. According to similarweb, people ranging from 18-34 showed more website traffic compared to other age brackets [7]. Also, Gentle Monster targets customers who have their own fashion tastes and want to show their individuality through their choice of fashion. Also, its target customers are active in social media and always follow new trends.

Gentle Monster mainly focused on four growing strategies. The first is to collaborate with celebrities for marketing or involve celebrities in the product design process to reflect the celebrities' image onto the product. The second strategy is to partner with other international luxury brands such as Moncler, and Maison Margiela to change their designs and raise awareness. Third, Gentle Monster's product design is unique. Different from traditional glasses, Gentle Monster's design theory is to make their glasses oversized, geometric, and asymmetrical. The last strategy is experiential retail, which is what Gentle Monster is famous for. Gentle Monster's flagship stores and showrooms are known as "Art Spaces. Each store has different art installations to reflect its unique concepts, which give customers an immersive experience and create buzz around the brand. When new seasons or new collaborations are released, the installation will change to give customers a brand new experience.

This study uses Gentle Monster as a case study because Gentle Monster provides customers with a unique and immersive offline experience by designing its stores associated with the concept of artification. People can try on different products and experience differentiated artistic content in stores. Through the offline store decoration, Gentle Monster is reinforcing and conveying its brand identity to customers [8].

3 Experiential marketing in Gentle Monster

Gentle Monster's popularity lies not only in its unique product design, but also in its profound understanding and reshaping of consumers' expectations for shopping experience, transforming the retail space into a source of exploration and inspiration. This sophisticated combination of art, and technology with offline stores sets a new benchmark for the fashion industry.

3.1 Spatial storytelling with artistic inspiration

Gentle Monster creatively elevates the shopping process into an engaging performance by using spatial storytelling. It draws customers into an independent and meaningful story scene when they

enter, by employing interesting visual stimuli, such as space, material, sound, and movement, through spaces such as art galleries and exhibition halls where they can appreciate installation art, away from the display of product. Through this space, people are actively using it as a place to talk and communicate about the brand's story and philosophy [9].

One of the most important inspirations is art. Gentle Monster is involved in the concept of art, so there are many contemporary artistic installations in their offline stores. The Gentle Monster Starfield Hanam store, themed 'Self Similarity,' creatively creates mathematical concepts using visual and spatial elements. Inspired by the mathematical theory of self-similarity, the store features artwork, images, and installations that embody the idea of the infinite possibility of "expansion" through recurring geometric patterns, including fractals, Mandelbrot sets, and Julia sets.

3.2 Varied installation themes and concepts around the world

Gentle Monster rejects the standardized store model and creates each store with a unique design concept. Gentle Monster realizes that the true internal connection of a brand is not the similarity in appearance, but the similarity in its brand identity. The design of their offline stores is a strategic blend of cultural storytelling and brand identity, tailored to resonate with local cultures while maintaining a consistent global image.

3.2.1 Chengdu, China: Tea culture fusion

In Chengdu, Gentle Monster incorporated elements of traditional Chinese tea culture into its store design. The store features a tea house-inspired interior, blending modern and traditional elements. Bamboo, a material often associated with Chinese culture, is used extensively in the design, creating a serene and immersive environment. This approach not only respects the local culture but also provides a unique shopping experience that connects with the cultural heritage of Chengdu.

3.2.2 New York, USA: "The visitor"

The Gentle Monster store in New York City embodies a futuristic and conceptual design, resonating with the city's reputation as a global center for art, fashion, and innovation. The store features a massive media wall that entices passing people to gaze at some abstract installations, such as lunar, and a minimalist yet impactful aesthetic. This design aligns with the fast-paced, cutting-edge culture of New York, appealing to its visitors' appreciation for contemporary art and bold statements.

3.3 The technological catalyst

Brick-and-mortar stores are increasingly integrating advanced technologies like 3D and VR to enhance the customer experience. Gentle Monster also employs various advanced technologies to create unique and engaging environments in their offline stores, enabling a two-way interaction between the brand and the target audience.

3.3.1 3D visualization

3D visualization, which is meant to be static models that can be used to showcase products or spaces, is widely used nowadays. In many museums or art galleries, 3D videos help to enhance spatial storytelling and offer visitors more comprehensive backgrounds for the displayed artworks. Same with museums, all offline stores of Gentle Monster embrace 3D visualization to complement their products. The screens are set behind or next to the product display, playing the concept videos.

3.3.2 Interactive installation

Many Gentle Monster stores feature interactive installations that combine art and technology. These installations often respond to customer movements or interactions, creating a dynamic and engaging environment. This can include motion sensors, touch screens, and other interactive elements. For example, on the third floor of Haus Shanghai, there is an LED wall surrounded by space presenting an interactive media art exhibition.

3.3.3 Moving installations

Some stores incorporate robotic elements and kinetic art installations that move and change. These elements are usually installed at the entrance to surprise and delight customers, making the store visit a unique experience.

3.4 From offline stores to online buzz

Not only the artistic installation, when Gentle Monster releases its new collection or collaboration, but it will also have some special experiential marketing held in some of its offline stores.

The 2024 Optical Collection's "Gentle High School" campaign portrays the high school experience. To celebrate and advertise the launch of the collection, Gentle Monster held pop-up spaces in Seoul and Beijing. In the pop-up spaces, customers can wear Gentle Monster school uniforms and receive a "Gentle High School" student ID from a special photo booth. This pop-up space generated a huge buzz on social media at that time. Many customers share their experience and their student IDs on social media.

3.5 Discussion

By transforming the retail place into an artistic space where storytelling is conveyed, Gentle Monster is trying hard to explore experiential marketing. They make full use of new technology, enabling two-way interaction between brands and customers. Also, instead of being product-oriented, Gentle Monster's offline stores are not merely a space where customers can try on the products, it is more like a space where brands are building emotional connections with customers. These emotional connections can last for a long period even after the purchase because the in-store experience is closely associated with the online experience.

Experiential marketing in Gentle Monster can also be explained by Schmitt's Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs). First, customers can sense the products through their five senses. Then, customers have a positive mood associated with the brands because according to the correlation analysis done by, after customers experience the flagship store, the experience had a positive effect on brand attitude and brand loyalty [8]. At the "think" level, it is achieved sometimes. For example, in the new collaboration with Jennie, customers can design their own glasses with accessories. Customers are indeed involved in creative thinking during this process. Also, in pop-up spaces, customers who dress in uniforms and take their student IDs are the ones who "act" in this experience. Last, when many customers are sharing their experiences and purchases on social media, they are actually involved in interacting with others.

4 How experiential marketing helps build Gentle Monster's brand identity

4.1 Gentle Monster's brand identity

Gentle Monster's brand name consists of two parts: 'Gentle' stands for humble and wearable designs balanced against the 'Monster' aspect of attitude and uniqueness. Kim Han-kook, the founder of

Gentle Monster, said “Our beauty concept is weird beauty.”, which means people who wear Gentle Monster look gentle but have enthusiasm inside [10]. Gentle Monster is famous for its unique design, Gentle Monster’s main target is people aged from 18 to 34. According to Similarweb, this age group accounted for nearly 65% of the total traffic of Gentle Monster website [7]. Hence, Gentle Monster’s brand identity has five keywords: gentle, unique, youthful, trendy, and futuristic.

4.2 Experiential marketing’s impact on brand identity

Gentle Monster’s distinctive brand identity is closely tied to its store representation. The stores are displayed as art museums, delivering a combination of visual, auditory, and sensory elemental experiences to their customers. Even more, each store has its own concept, and unique artistic installations to match the concept. This artification makes Gentle Monster’s experiential marketing to be unique, which enhances its brand identity. Also, the pop-up activities not only utilize offline spaces to do experiential marketing, but also extend it online. It involves many young generations who pursue trends and like to create buzz on social media. This strategy helps Gentle Monster to impress people as a youthful and trendy brand. Last, Gentle Monster has a futuristic vision. This can be seen in their product. For example, in the Gentle Monster 2022 collection, the geometric detail symbolizes Gentle Monster’s futuristic vision, creating a variety of unique identities on the newest designs. In the offline stores, Gentle Monster is also conveying its futuristic vision by incorporating it into the concept of offline stores. For instance, the concept of Gentle Monster SKPS in Beijing originated from the curiosity of “What lies in the future, and what will future humans value and pursue”.

5 Suggestions and managerial implications

Although Gentle Monster already did a good job in its experiential marketing, it still needs to improve further. For example, although brands and consumers are in a two-way interaction by having customers participate in some artistic installation, consumers can seldom create the content by themselves, except in some pop-up spaces. Gentle Monster should make customers become more active participants rather than passive ones.

Although nowadays most fashion brands put more effort into operating online shops, offline stores are also crucial to creating an omnichannel experience. One managerial implication stemming from Gentle Monster’s success in experiential marketing is the importance of aligning brand identity with immersive offline experiences. Brands can leverage experiential marketing to not only showcase their products but also to communicate their unique brand identity in a tangible way. Creating interactive environments can foster deeper emotional connections between brands and customers, and thus enhance brand loyalty. Furthermore, integrating advanced technologies like 3D visualization and interactive installations can further elevate the experiential aspect, offering customers a more dynamic and personalized experience, which can be memorized by them a long time after the visit. Therefore, Gentle Monster’s experiential marketing, especially their use of offline stores, is worthwhile to learn by other fashion brands.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, Gentle Monster’s success in the competitive fashion industry illustrates the significant impact of experiential marketing on brand identity. By transforming retail spaces into immersive, artistic environments, Gentle Monster effectively differentiates itself from competitors and builds a strong, unique brand identity that resonates with its target audience. The strategic use of spatial storytelling, varied installation themes, and advanced technologies creates memorable experiences that foster emotional connections with customers. These experiences extend beyond the physical stores, generating online buzz and enhancing brand loyalty. Gentle Monster’s approach aligns with Schmitt’s Strategic Experiential Modules (SEMs), encompassing sensory, emotional, cognitive,

behavioral, and relational dimensions. This multifaceted experiential marketing strategy not only enhances the overall consumption experience but also reinforces the brand's identity as gentle, unique, youthful, trendy, and futuristic. Despite its success, Gentle Monster can further improve by involving customers more actively in content creation, thus deepening their engagement and participation. By continuing to innovate and refine its experiential marketing strategies, Gentle Monster can maintain its distinct brand identity and sustain its competitive edge in the dynamic fashion industry.

References

1. J.N. Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management: Creating and Sustaining Brand Equity Long Term*, (Kogan Page, London, 2008)
2. B. Schmitt, *Experiential Marketing: How to Get Customers to Sense, Feel, Think, Act, Relate*, (Free Press, New York, 1999)
3. S. Lynch & L. Barnes, Omnichannel fashion retailing: examining the customer decision-making journey. *J. Fash. Mark. Manag.* **24**, 471-493 (2020)
4. M. Ca, J. Yang & D. Fu, An Example Analysis of the Customer-centered Experiential Marketing Strategy Model. *Yangtze River Technol. Econ.* **4**, S2 (2020)
5. S. Smilansky, *Experiential marketing: A practical guide to interactive brand experiences*, (Kogan Page, London, 2009)
6. C. da Silveira, C. Lages & C. Simões, Reconceptualizing brand identity in a dynamic environment. *J. Bus. Res.* **66**, 28-36 (2013)
7. Similarweb, Gentlemonster.com Traffic Statistics (2024)
<https://www.similarweb.com/website/gentlemonster.com/>
8. H. Ryu, *A Study on the Influence of Brand Experience in Flagship Stores on the Consumer-Brand Relationship: Focusing on the Case of the Eyewear Brand 'Gentle Monster'* Master thesis, Hongik University, Korea (2015)
9. E. Ha & H. Lee, *The Artification of the Brand: Focused on the Gentle Monster Brand*. *Korean Soc. Sci. Art* **41**, 421-430 (2023)
10. Y. Bae, *Characteristics of Gentle Monster's Space Marketing Strategy and Flagshipstore Space Design Using Object*, Master thesis, Konkuk University, Korea (2020).