Discordant retail brand ideology in the House of Barbie

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to expand the scant literature related to retail branding ideology and the application of mythotypes to flagship stores within the Chinese setting. The study explores the transplantation of a retail brand ideology in the form of complex home-country cultural content to a host culture whose local retail narratives differ significantly from those of the brand enterprise.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an ethnographic study that spans the two years of the focal store's existence. With the help of native-speaking graduate assistants, store visits, interviews with Chinese locals and internet mentions and secondary information were collected. Data include fieldnotes, interview transcripts, photographs, news articles, blog comments and website information.

Findings – The paper details the mythotypic mistuning of marketscape and mindscape that contributed to the failure of this flagship store and build theory concerning the implementation of retail brand ideology and retail theatrics. The paper concludes that successful themed flagship brand stores encapsulate ideology in stories composed of mythotypes and encourages the enactment of that ideology through multiple, interrelated brand experiences. Misalignments of these mythotypes can impede the acceptance of retail brand ideology and the diffusion of the retail theatre concept.

Originality/value – While foreign and domestic flagship brand stores have flourished in China, cultural propriety of these stores includes a host of physical design cues that must mesh with the local culture's sensibilities and the brand's provenance. To translate the retail brand ideology into customer-centric meaning is challenging. The presence or absence of mythotypes comprising the servicescape profoundly affect their success.

Keywords Brands, China, Retailers, Department stores

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Stores that tell stories (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002) represent an increasingly powerful response to diverse and fragmented retail markets. Recent research (Borghini *et al.*, 2009) has demonstrated that successful themed flagship brand stores encapsulate ideology in stories (composed of mythotypes) and encourage the enactment of that ideology in multiple, interrelated brand experiences. These "ideology-demonstrating-and-informing" experiences reinforce the "cultural importance" of the brand. Extant research speculates,

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but does not demonstrate, the "theoretically and pragmatically important" influence that the role of "particular cultures, ethnicities, subcultures, communities, class and gender positions" exerts on these ideological dynamics (Borghini *et al.*, 2009). This paper expands the scant theory relating to flagship efficacy beyond US borders.

In this paper, we explore through ethnography and netnography the attempted transplantation of an iconic American brand into a Chinese cultural context for which the themed flagship brand store ideology and accompanying brand-building strategy proved to be poorly suited. We theorize at the level of retail ideology and its component elements about what hampered the translation of ideology and implementation of strategy. The field site for our qualitative study is the House of Barbie Shanghai (www.barbiemedia.com).

The House of Barbie Shanghai, the result of a three-year design process and a $10 million investment by brand marketer Mattel, hosted its dramatic "grand opening" on March 6, 2009. Located on the edge of Shanghai's up-scale Huaihai Road shopping district, the store encompassed 40,000 sq ft and stood six stories high, large even by Chinese retailing standards. The flagship was the first of its kind in the world and a tribute to the doll's 50-year history, although the doll's tenure in China is less than two decades. The retail space was designed to showcase a large and comprehensive collection of Barbie dolls and accoutrements, clothing for girls and young women, a Barbie-themed restaurant and facilities for group entertaining, a fashion runway, a beauty salon and spa, and make-up and candy counters. In addition, there were areas for activities such as computer-aided fashion design, posed photographs, and lessons in modeling, etiquette and English. Less than two years later, Mattel closed the store, after repeatedly lowering sales targets to no avail (Beaton, 2011).

For the ethnographic record, the Barbie brand, personified in a doll embodying both an American teenage fashion model and high-profile American woman, turned 50 years of age in 2009. Mattel leveraged this momentous birthday (a significant American rite of passage) simultaneously to garner media attention for the reinvigoration and global expansion of the brand and to launch the first Barbie-themed brand store in Shanghai, China. The decision to export the retail theatre concept that had proven so effective with "American Girl", another Mattel brand, was driven by declining US sales and the burgeoning of consumer culture in China, where the company's understanding of the Barbie persona was more tenuous.

In terms of the servicescape typology proposed by Sherry (1998, pp. 337-41), the House of Barbie Shanghai can be situated on a continuum from marketscape to mindscape. For a marketscape to thrive, the store must promote "the 'structures of common difference' that bind local cultures together and represent them to natives and tourists" (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999; Wilk, 1995). The most successful marketscapes develop a strong cultural connection to community, and promote the gathering of consumers in person and online (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002, pp. 25-6). For a mindscape to thrive, the store must encourage the exploration of "metaphysical inner space." The most successful mindscapes cultivate a "cultural connection to ideas of growth and development, such as those for travel, education, self-improvement, training and development, and spirituality," however, construed locally (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002, p. 27). Structural shortfalls anywhere along the continuum, whether the flagship is a relatively pure form or an edgy hybrid, can impede the store's success.

Retail ideology is a holistic integrated systematic set of thoughts and messages related to a retail brand and its physical site (Borghini *et al.*, 2009). The retail ideology emplaced in the flagship is embedded in the mythotypes – symbols that are vessels of local meaning that also express emotional complexes that are universal – embodied in narratives the brand offers up for co-creation (Olson, 1999). According to Olson, a mythotype is a symbol that:

- has local meaning to a particular audience; and
- expresses one or more universal emotional states such as awe, wonder, purpose, joy, and participation (pp. 91-3).

If mythotypes are missing or misaligned, the power of the ideology is depleted. Culturally mismatched mythotypes may derail the narrative entirely. Briefly recounted as they are discerned in the servicescape literature (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002), these narrative characteristics include: open-endedness (lack of closure inviting engagement); verisimilitude (appearance of truth); virtuality (mediatronic potential); negentropy (shaping of consciousness); circularity (inevitable return to origins); ellipticality (porosity evoking mystery); archetypal dramatis personae (everypersons); inclusion (merger of consumer and narrative); omnipresence (pervasiveness); production values (grandeur and spectacle). A brand that embodies these traits is alleged to diffuse effectively across cultural boundaries (Olson, 1999).

In tune with our theoretical focus on retail brand ideology within a non-native cultural setting, our study makes several subsidiary contributions. The study was initially motivated by a desire to honor the mandate to broaden the field of flagship brand store studies beyond the Ameri-centric focus and borders that have dominated the field (Kent, 2009b). Second, we hoped to contribute to the ethnographic record details of a retail branding story driven by globalization. The contribution of the servicescape to the brand gestalt (Diamond *et al.*, 2009) is increasingly apparent, but additional fieldwork (especially in markets around the world) is needed to deepen and refine understanding. A corollary need to unpack more comprehensively the lived experience of shopping (Lowrey, 2008) was also pressing. Third, as we documented the rise and fall of a flagship brand store, we attempt to debunk the presumption that "if you build it, they will come." This costly mistake relegated flagships to the status of advertising (Pine and Gilmore, 2011). Finally, we sought to contribute a modicum to the growing literature on Chinese consumer culture that burgeoning market forces are creating (Tai and Tam, 1997; Cui and Liu, 2001; Hiu *et al.*, 2001; Gerth, 2004; Wang, 2008).

To recap our theoretical stake in this investigation, we seek to detail the influences, processes and assumptions that may prevent retail brand ideology and flagship thematics from successfully crossing national boundaries. Toward that end, we examine the discordances emerging from a particular home-to-host translation. The dissonance provoked in Eastern consumer experience by a Western retail theatre template provides an opportunity to theorize and expand upon the role of retail ideology in themed flagship brand store diffusion.

Context of the store development

Few nonproprietary accounts of the corporate research underlying the House of Barbie Shanghai store design are available. Kahn (2008, p. 65) offers one glimpse of the process:

> Half a dozen Americans sat in a dark room, spying on Chinese families for three days straight. The American team, all staff or consultants for Mattel, were positioned behind a one-way mirror in a Shanghai office suite, anxiously listening while focus group leaders grilled prosperous Chinese mothers and daughters in an adjacent meeting room. The girls, ages 4-11, snacked on fruit and candy as the moderator lobbed question after question: Do you love Barbie? Why do you love Barbie? If you could imagine the most amazing Barbie store in the world, what would it look like and how would you play and shop there?

If not intentionally parodic (the description is faintly reminiscent of a Simpson's lampoon of marketing research), the account suggests at least some of the pitfalls encountered by managers (who are often blindered by a product-centric perspective) and architect/designers (who are often blindered by an aesthetic perspective) seeking to understand cultural diffusion.

The opportunity to restage (and perhaps significantly remake) the brand in the Middle Kingdom prior to the 2009 global financial crisis was compelling to Mattel management (Thomassen *et al.*, 2006; Parpis, 2009), who teamed with a number of US design and architecture firms to deliver a novel commercial spectacle (Kahn, 2008). While some luxury brand flagships had diffused successfully to China, the proposed store was to be an experience of a different kind.

Slade Architecture, a small young American firm that designed the new flagship, made use of Mattel's focus group data, had female staffers write essays of memories of Barbie, employed a "booklet of quintessential Barbie imagery" compiled by the teenage daughter of the executive creative director of the brand strategy division of Mattel's advertising agency, and "spent a few days on-site" before drafting the plan (Kahn, 2008, pp. 65-6). Slade architects:

> [...] toured and investigated a number of successful retailers in the US (including American Girl) as well as China. In fact, Mattel conducted a ten-day immersion process for the design team in Shanghai.

While Slade "did not specifically single out American Girl as a model to base House of Barbie on," the firm asserted that "there are certainly functional requirements that are common across retail outlets aimed at a lifestyle message, with heavy visitor traffic aimed at a young audience (which include both American Girl and House of Barbie)" (Slade, 2011).

Prior to this venture, Mattel had experience with some Barbie stores in Japan and Taiwan offering dolls and accessories, as well as adult fashions (Kahn, 2008, p. 67). Over all, this account suggests the kind of calibration issues involved in the acquisition (more, the imagination) of cultural competence by brokers seeking to influence behavior in unfamiliar settings.

Richard Dickson, Mattel's senior marketing VP behind the flagship launch, viewed the store as a "stake in the ground for years to come," and intended to "take learnings from there and apply them elsewhere" (Kahn, 2008, p. 68). Dickson chose Shanghai because "not only little girls, but teenagers, moms, even grandmas had a connection to the brand, really unlike any other country" (Lim, 2009). He asserted that "It's Barbie – we shouldn't limit ourselves to just one thing when we have a world of opportunity. Going to a Barbie bar – it sounds fun right away." Dickson saw the flagship as a way for consumers to be "living and breathing the brand" (ThingAsian, 2009). Given Mattel's successful experience in creating and evolving American Girl Place(s) in the

US market, where similar segment multiplicity and zonal theming had paid large dividends, Dickson's exuberance and willingness to generalize were not unexpected, but they were premature in the absence of culturally nuanced empirics. The store was intended in part as a commercial laboratory for the export of managerial discovery (just as learnings are shuttled between American Girl stores), but rather than producing a blueprint for adaptive expansion, it yielded instead a cautionary tale of managerial hubris. Less than a year after launching the House of Barbie Shanghai, Dickson left Mattel to become the president of Jones Apparel (Dodes and Zimmerman, 2010).

Told from the architectural firm's perspective (Slade Architecture, 2009, available at: http://sladearch.com), Mattel wanted a store "Where Barbie is hero; expressing Barbie as a global lifestyle brand by building on the brand's historical link to fashion. Barbie Shanghai is the first fully realized expression of this broader vision [...]." Slade sought to create a "sleek, fun, unapologetically feminine interpretation of Barbie: past, present and future." However, just as the potential application of an experiential retail template of one brand property (American Girl) to another (Barbie) is liable to be a risky proposition, so also is the contrast of home and host country brand essences (Barbie as aspirational role model for young girls versus Barbie as fashion model fantasy of young women with ancillary appeal to children, mothers and grandmothers) an additional layer of complexity and uncertainty in reception dynamics.

Instructively, the volume expansion objective underlying the establishment of this Asian beachhead for the $3 billion Barbie brand renders the challenge faced by Mattel similar to that encountered by marketers of products originally intended for one US ethnic minority who seek to "crossover" to mainstream markets in the hope of achieving economies of scale and commercial viability (Garofalo, 1993, 1994; Gibbs, 1999). Grier *et al.* (2006) demonstrated that in crossover situations, consumer characteristics, product characteristics, and mediating processes such as familiarity influence product attitudes and behavior. In addition, the manner in which a consumption context is understood and experienced by a particular ethnic group may facilitate or hinder the consumption of ethnically oriented products. The profound influence of context on ethnic consumption beliefs and behaviors highlights the critical role that brand store environments are likely to play in the reception by consumers in one part of the world of a brand or product line birthed in another.

Methodology

The ethnographic investigation of a site with significant geographical and cultural distance from the principal investigators posed challenges equivalent to those faced by early cultural anthropologists working in traditional societies as well by the corporate office of the focal brand itself. The three authors are all US citizens and native English speakers. These authors were assisted by four graduate assistants who were Chinese nationals. One principal investigator resided in Shanghai during the study, and acquired rudimentary facility with spoken Mandarin. This researcher was aided by three local graduate assistants who spoke both Mandarin and the local Shanghaiese dialect. The two other researchers maintained residence in the USA, where they worked with one Chinese graduate assistant. All of the graduate assistants had literacy in the written Chinese language.

Although the duration of its existence was not known at the outset of the study, the project documented the two-year life of the themed flagship brand store House

of Barbie Shanghai, from its opening in March, 2009 until its shuttering in March of 2011. The author living in Shanghai visited the store weekly or bi-weekly, sometimes alone, but often accompanied by one or two graduate assistants and/or a local informant. The days and times of the visits were varied, making it possible to observe at the site during periods of greater or lesser consumer activity. The graduate students in Shanghai devoted at least an hour each week to sharing weekly findings and planning specific inquiries for the following week. Several hours each week were spent at the store, interviewing informants in other locations, and reading and translating comments and blogs on Chinese web sites. The data that were analyzed consisted of fieldnotes, interview transcripts, photographs, news articles, blog comments in English and Mandarin and web site information.

Interviews conducted with Chinese locals included those with young girls in the presence of a parent, mothers of school-aged girls, young women (the primary target segment), and employees of the retail store. Qualitative interviews were shaped by a written discussion guide initially written in English, translated into Chinese, back-translated for accuracy, and shared with informants. Interviews ranged between 45 min and 1.5 h in duration and took place either in the store's restaurant or at a coffee shop near the store. The authors initiated contact with Chinese and expatriate interviewees through referrals from other study participants. Monetary incentives, the credential of university affiliation of the investigators, and interest in the store itself motivated informants to participate and to refer others. All participants received a payment of 100 rmb ($15.65), refreshments during the interview and, in addition, the young girls chose a Barbie doll from the store, at a cost of about 80 rmb ($12.52). Because the Shanghai-resident author was not a native Chinese speaker, the local Chinese graduate students conducted, recorded and transcribed all the interviews with non-English speakers. Interviews with informants facile in English were conducted by the author in the presence of one graduate assistant. This served the dual purpose of a training exercise for the assistants and the presence of a native speaker in the event of any misunderstanding on the part of informants. The authors residing in the US contributed additional observational directions and interview questions as the study unfolded over time.

In addition to conducting interviews with young women, girls and mothers, both within and outside the confines of the store, the researchers photographed shoppers, store interiors and activities. The local researchers observed and interviewed consumers in and around the neighborhood of the store. Photography in the store setting was expected and liberally permitted. While barring note taking in the store, floor managers encouraged visual documentation, even suggesting that photographs be taken of particular personnel, signs, price tags and other details. In-store shopping expeditions with consumers included having lunch or a snack in the café, viewing the modeling shows and browsing displays of clothing and accessories for dolls, girls and young women. In addition, various store employees of all levels were interviewed. The authors and the Chinese graduate assistant in the US followed the progression of the store through news accounts, YouTube videos, and blogs. Relevant blogs in English and Mandarin were located through searches for entries on Baidu (a Chinese search engine) containing the words "Barbie", "House of Barbie" and "Shanghai Barbie" over the two-year period of the store's existence. An effort was made to avoid posts containing commentary specific to the doll or to the store. Rather entries were experiential revelations and reactions

by bloggers who shared visits to the store on one or several occasions. These individuals were teenagers and young women who wrote stream-of-life blogs which often included shopping expeditions with friends. While our account draws most heavily from our field experience, we have included as well some of this anonymous commentary from the blogosphere.

The multicultural nature of the research team aided access to informants during the data collection phase and contributed to nuanced interpretation during the data analysis phase of the study (Sherry, 2006; Borghini *et al.*, 2009). Of particular help were the Chinese research assistants, who provided context for inconsistencies with traditional values raised by informants. Many of the insights into "normal" and "expected" aspects of daily Chinese life that are mentioned throughout this paper are attributable to comments, interpretations and additions of these young assistants. What might be deemed stereotypes in a Western context tend to be accepted and predictable behaviors in this communal social context, and these young Chinese nationals were extremely helpful in pointing out and interpreting distinctions in their role as assistants in this study. Researchers worked individually, and as dyads and triads, convening episodically for strategy and analysis sessions in similar configurations. We used the web to share data across two continents as they were acquired, insights as they emerged and media coverage of the brand as it was published.

The genesis of Barbie

The cultural studies literature on Barbie is vast (Steinberg, 1997, 2009), and analyses of this type have found their way into the consumer behavior literature (Chin, 2001; Rogers, 1999; Scott, 2004; Sredl, 2005). While we acknowledge the relevance of this work to a comprehensive understanding of marketplace behavior, a thorough review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper; we invoke it here to affirm the cultural grounding of this brand. The following is a brief summary of the development of the Barbie brand that gave rise to our focal research site.

Barbie was the invention of Ruth Handler and her husband Elliot, who drifted into the doll business by making doll-houses from wood scraps generated by their picture frame business. Elliot is the "el" in Mattel, the company he founded with Harold "Matt" Matson. In the early 1950s the combination of post-war prosperity and the exploding baby boom child population made toys an attractive and thriving industry. The Handlers themselves had a daughter – Barbara – who eschewed helpless baby dolls in need of mothering, instead preferring paper cut-out dolls with which to play-act adult situations. Ruth, contemplating the creation of an adult doll, chanced upon a version while in Europe. Unbeknown to her, this doll was created in the image of a prostitute from a German adult cartoon and marketed to men in bars. Named Bild Lilli, the doll possessed characteristics that Handler had envisioned: long legs, a tiny waist, and large breasts. This became the prototype for her new toy, which she launched at the 1959 New York Toy Fair as "Barbie Teenage Fashion Model." Like Lilli, she had overstated make-up, an exaggerated female body shape, and a coy sideways glance; absent were Lilli's nipples (*The Week*, 2009).

The doll was originally rejected by the industry; toy buyers were particularly ambivalent about the breasts. But girls loved the doll with its grown-up qualities and pre-internet interest spread via word-of-mouth. By the end of 1959 more than 350,000 dolls had been sold, and Mattel opened a new department to answer her more

than 20,000 weekly fan letters. In addition, the toy ignited a merchandising revolution. Since Barbie could assume myriad roles, the door opened to an array of high-margin play accessories, clothes and collectables. The size and diversity of the doll's wardrobe and her vocations and avocations, created a rationale for more than one Barbie doll occupying a single girl's life and play space. Girls quickly learned to play with and collect multiple "Barbies."

In 2009 Richard Dickson, the senior vice-president and general manager of Barbie, became the force behind the expansion of the brand into cosmetics, entertainment and global presence. Mattel created a comprehensive persona for the doll: her full name is Barbie Millicent Roberts, she hails from Willows, Wisconsin and attended Willows High School. She has four sisters: Skipper (1964), Stacie (1992), Kelly (1995) and Krissy (1995) and her first pet was a horse named Dancer. Her first boyfriend was Ken, who debuted in 1961 and whom she has dated on and off for half a century. In 1959 the first Barbie, a pony-tailed doll clad in the now-famous black-and-white striped swimsuit, sold for $3.00. Since then she has expanded both her wardrobe and her repertoire. According to the company's web site, in the past 50 years she has assumed 108 careers, been outfitted by more than 100 couturiers and is estimated to reside in the homes of 90 percent of US girls ages three to 11. Being a fantastic, quintessentially American girl, Barbie's passage across national boundaries might be expected to be either hastened or hindered to the extent that local cultures could assimilate such a distinctive icon.

Barbie in China

Although well-seated in Western popular culture, Barbie is relatively new to China. As with such icons such as Starbucks and Disney, the inclusion of the brand into Chinese life followed the political decision to open the country's borders to foreign products. Adoption of the doll was motivated simultaneously by Chinese consumers' curiosity about Western culture and their new sense of personal prosperity. With neither history nor strong trademark defenses, however, Barbie easily became the prototypical exemplar of a generic category, subject to imitation by lower-priced knock-offs. Girls and women in our study are familiar with the branded Barbie, but also tend to equate her with other tall, thin adult female manikin-type dolls with Western features and "yellow" hair. We found both "authentic" trademarked Barbies sans box and local look-alike versions readily available at retail outlets and on the internet for a relative pittance.

Barbie's physical appearance is aspirational among our sample of Chinese girls. Despite her various careers, the corporate mantra that *Barbie can be anything* and her heroic role in *Toy Story 3* (Pixar 2009), our young Chinese informants view her as a fashion model with a perfect body and ideal features and hair. One of the store's employees indicated that:

> Chinese consumers barely know anything about Barbie except that Barbie is a pretty doll. We can write her story and we target girls of all ages – no matter whether they are six years old or 60 years old.

In interviews consumers characterize Barbie as a "beautiful rich girl with lots of friends" and "a dream doll, a bling, bling doll" who lives "a dream life – you want to live like that." Barbie is characterized "like Paris Hilton – she is rich, she has a great life," but Barbie is "nicer – she would never be rude to anyone" (Chinese informant Pinky, 27). In addition to her personality and lifestyle, many Chinese girls covet her

long legs, ample bust and large round eyes, physical ideals that motivate substantial amounts of cosmetic surgery in the country (Haiken, 1997).

The House of Barbie Shanghai, March, 2009

> After a long way, we walked into this magic house, pink setting and beautiful floor. Barbie puts you in a world with fairy tales and throws your unhappiness out of your mind. What we have are only our dreams and uncontrollable heartbeat. I believe myself floating in the room with angels. There are florid lamps, friendly smiles and my dreaming elevators. Everything is unbelievably fantastic in Shanghai Barbie store (Blog post, Baidu, translated from Chinese).

The focal store, whose aura is reflected in this blog excerpt, staged a gala grand opening on March 6, 2009. Claiming to be the first of its kind in the world and a tribute to the doll's 50-year history, 6,000 VIP guests were invited, including many movie stars. Within the hierarchical Chinese society, the designation VIP generally carries concrete expectations of elevated treatment, special services and often a private meeting space. Another employee of the store indicated that the opening was bumpy; the generic designation of "VIP" to all guests precluded special treatment and the attempt to serve food in the café, which could only accommodate 500 of the 6,000 guests, was "crazy."

In the following section of the paper, we observe the convention in the consumer culture theory literature on servicescapes (Belk *et al.*, 1988; Sherry, 1998; Kozinets *et al.*, 2001; Diamond *et al.*, 2009) of conducting a closely-read "tour" of the built environment, unpacking the retail spectacle as it is jointly enacted in the microzones of the store, and using field notes, archival sources and verbatims to present thematic findings. The tour highlights those occasions of legibility and retail ideology in play as the brand is translated across national boundaries. In the evocative and oft repeated characterizations of our informants, we present our understanding of consumers' lived experience of "the pink world" in which they are "conquered by the pink heat of Barbie."

Grand tour of the site

The store was an expansive, free-standing structure in an up-scale shopping area on the edge of the former French Concession in Puxi, an older section of Shanghai. Although off the beaten track of Shanghai tourist destinations, the shopping area is familiar to locals and abuts an expatriate pocket within the sprawling city. Remote from the subway, public transportation to the store posed a challenge, although taxis are plentiful and inexpensive. The facade is a flat, box-like structure of frosted glass and stucco, which appears pale and undistinguished during the day, but after dark glows hot pink, a color echoed throughout its interior on walls, chairs, uniforms of sales clerks and myriad outfits modeled by the store's focal character.

The entrance was relatively nondescript, with little signage and no awning or other protrusions from the building. "Barbie" is subtly drawn in white lettering on a lace-etched front window, and Western adult female manikins model young-adult t-shirts with "Barbie" written in cursive, or "I'm Hot," paired with jeans. Rather than a toy store, the window display signaled a clothing store catering to fashion-conscious young adult women. The mythotypes of inclusion and verisimilitude were confounded by the etching of the words "American Brand" in Chinese in the front window under the "Barbie" signature logo:

> Why put the label "American Brand" here? Do they just want to cater to Shanghai peoples' tastes of worshiping things foreign and fawn on foreign countries? This is not the first time for me to see a brand or business claiming that it is an American brand (Sylvia, 28, Shanghai Graduate Student).

Slade Architecture designed the store as "a sleek, fun, unapologetically feminine interpretation that pays homage to Barbie, past, present and future." The company interprets the white paneled façade as "a picture frame (with) whimsical and feminine lattice pattern of Barbie-trademarked iconography [. . .] printed on the exterior glass." (www.barbieshanghai.com). An alternative interpretation by informants and bloggers characterizes the exterior during the daytime as "dull" and "easy to miss." In contrast, clear large and contrasting English signage at nearby Zara, Armani, and Gucci stores were described as more effective ("how people know this is important"):

> I stopped, staring at the building standing next to me. It seems to be a new building, and there was a security walking around the store. However, I am not sure whether this is the Barbie store I am looking for. Then, I checked the number on the building, number 550, and here it is (Blog post translated from Chinese; www.dianping.com/shop/3003295#ur).

> Last week, I had a business trip in Shanghai. During the break time in the morning, I went to the Barbie flagship store located in Shanghai. Without the neon light at night, Barbie store in daytime looked quite unnoticeable (Forum thread translated from Chinese; www.0791quanquan.com/forum/topic 25315 1 15 1.html).

The daytime façade of the building appeared to display none of the mythotypes essential to the transmission of the retail ideology the brand's positioning seemed to demand (and which are characteristic of Western flagship brand stores of ethnographic record), rendering the servicescape ineffectual during peak hours of consumer interest, especially considering target segments. The façade scanned better at night, highlighting the mythotypes of open-endedness, negentropy, ellipticality, and production values, but these narratives functioned more in a structural fashion than as legible bearers of brand ideology. That is, they emphasized mere spectacularity, rather than the moral and ethical fiber of the brand. Aspects of marketscape and mindscape might manifest at night, drawing consumer attention through the darkness, but interior worlds were most often discovered accidentally, or through dogged determination during daylight hours.

Nonetheless, the store earned a *Business Week* design award for 2009 and characterized itself as a "retail laboratory." Although the general blueprint of locations, planned activities and categories of display merchandise remained constant during the course of the study, the contents of many of the spaces varied unpredictably, reflecting something beyond periodic refreshing. The following section details the layout of each of the six floors at the opening of the store and describes activities and merchandise found on each.

First floor entryway

This space demonstrated the greatest variability over the course of the study. On some days, it was a vast, empty lobby. On other occasions there were elaborate displays in Lucite cases that steered browsing guests toward the up-escalator leading to the selling floors. When the store first opened, the space held a long table labeled the "Consumer Insight Gathering Center" and was staffed with four corporate researchers seeking subjects to complete surveys. Rainy days found the area stocked with open Barbie

umbrellas, echoing the weather-related entrepreneurial activity prevalent in surrounding street markets. Between one and three "greeters" wearing standard-issue Barbie retail uniforms were typically stationed in this area, one of the few visible signals that this was a free-standing specialized store dedicated to Barbie rather than the lobby of a shopping mall. The white walls highlight the small, colorful boutique of Barbie items to the left of the entrance, not visible from the exterior. The entrance design reflected principles of feng shui, which eschews panoramic open spaces between interior and street. Doorways to the far right and left, which hide the "up" and "down" escalators, are the only mythotypic allusion (circularity) available to shoppers, and there was little in this first floor entrance area that suggested the types of merchandise found on the upper levels. While the beginnings of a marketscape emerge on this level, there is no hint of mindscape at this point.

Second floor

The second level housed a spa, designed to serve not dolls or girls, but young adult women and men. The spa evokes the mythotype of inclusion, but this narrative element is misaligned with the brand ideology of femininity, evoking as it does a unisex ambience. The initial up-escalator bypassed this floor; access was either by elevator or via a descending escalator from the third floor. While this design may have aspired to ellipticality, it inspired less mystery than confusion. The entrance featured a larger-than-life portrait of Barbie and the phrase "100% Plastic Beauty," a concept that employees repeated, but were unable to explain to researchers. This inability to translate blunted the mythotype of archetypal dramatis personae; whether an unintended humorous consequence (a Chinglish translation) or intended but overly precious rendering of the concept of "plastic," the authenticity of the verisimilitude mythotype was compromised for consumers. "Treatments" took place in private rooms, but the reception area was consistently devoid of customers. Inquiries into treatment scheduling opportunities revealed an open calendar. Here, the transition from marketscape to mindscape may have met a cultural impasse.

Most treatments were intended for women, but there were a few skin treatment options for teens (deep cleansing or problem/acne skin) and three for men (gentlemen's facial, gentlemen's executive facial, and de-stress back, neck and shoulder massage). Several versions of 120-minute massages were offered for 880 rmb (about $120), expensive by Chinese standards and equivalent to the cost of such services at up-scale Western hotels. (Adherents of Chinese medicine have frequent massages, once or twice weekly at a cost of $20-$30.) Offerings include several versions of facials; one specialized treatment was purported to yield "smooth plastic skin:"

> (Upon viewing two signs in the spa: "I wasn't designed to do House Work" and "100% Plastic Beauty.") These are examples of irony, but I'm not sure that most Chinese would understand this or find it humorous. Rather it was saying that the people who come here are only looking after themselves. They're kind of selfish (Stephanie, 24, Shanghai Office Assistant).

Third floor

This floor is the first manifestation of mindscape that consumers experience in the venue. All of the mythotypes, with the exception of virtuality, appear to be present on this level, as our blog excerpt below would suggest. The third floor was the first point of entry from the ground-level escalator and the base of a three-story circular staircase

which housed the "Wall of Barbies," a spiraling ceiling-high display of Barbie dolls clad in varying hot pink ensembles. The Wall was the design centerpiece of the store. The two-story escalator ride up to this space was through a glowing pink tunnel amid sound effects of piped-in murmurs of girls and women verbalizing their excited anticipation of reaching the internal retail entrance:

> I was not able to calm down myself, and everything I saw in the store was so impressive to me. I saw the stairway connecting 3rd, 4th and 5th floor, exhibiting around 587 different Barbie dolls, which you cannot see this spectacular scene in some other places where Barbie was sold. Oh my god, I hope I can own all of the Barbie dolls (Forum personal thread, translated from Chinese, www.19lou.com/forum-11-thread-16064439-1-1.html).

At this entrance area Barbie passports were sold; for 50 rmb ($7) the owner received a lifelong 5 percent discount on all merchandise at the store and an annual birthday gift of a 50 rmb credit. During the grand-opening month, these passports were offered at no charge. Also in the entry area was a Princess Throne where a professional photographer took pictures of guests for a charge. (This is the only area where personal cameras were prohibited.) This entryway was alive with the promise of transformation, and is the first apparent alignment of mythotypes with brand ideology.

This and all selling retail spaces in the House of Barbie Shanghai were meticulously neat, clean and organized. Merchandise sold on the third floor was clothing and accessories for young adult women arranged in a boutique configuration with only a few items of each offering on hanging racks and substantial open space. Each price tag carries the tagline in Chinese "Barbie realizes every girl's dream." An elevated runway showcased six adult female manikins wearing casual, sophisticated, sometimes revealing Barbie-branded fashion outfits. Several local shoppers characterized them as "all made-in-Japan." When probed about the meaning of this, 27-year-old Lucy indicated that this indicates that it is "expensive, stylish, very energetic and bright and looking foreign:"

> I did my undergraduate study in Japan and I like to compare the Barbie items here with those in Japan. The clothes designed by Japanese designers are cuter, but these are the closest I can find in Shanghai to those in Japan. The price here is about 1/3 more expensive than that in Japan, but I still buy the ones I like (Lucy, 27, Shanghai lawyer, shopping with her mother).

The color scheme of the space and merchandise was predominantly hot pink, black and white, and clothing options represented the extremes of formality – either exceedingly casual daywear or very dressy special-occasion cocktail-wear. The fashion ethos of the brand ideology is reinforced here by the mythotypes of negentropy and inclusion:

> Barbie attracts me because she is very feminine and independent. She's in charge of her own life. And she has many different roles, but most important are her pretty clothes (Cui Xiujao, 25, Software company employee, upon purchase of a pink t-shirt).

The pinkness also communicated foreignness, gender and fashion:

> Red and yellow mean China. Pink is sweet, cute, young, candy-like. It is for girls, but it can be worn by men in a stylish way. Sometimes pink can make men look like sissies (Stephanie, 24 year-old office worker from Shanghai).

Although Shanghai temperatures in March ranged from mild to chilly, initial product inventory consisted largely of warm weather clothing in anticipation of the stifling

Shanghai summer. Prominently displayed were two-piece suits consisting of short boxy jackets (1,800 rmb or $230) and matching short-shorts (1,200 rmb or $190). A variety of accessories for young women was displayed, including jewelry, shoes, large purses in pink and white, and Barbie-logoed pink rolling luggage. A highlight was a $10,000 Vera Wang wedding gown displayed with an identical boxed collectable Barbie in the same gown. Nearby was a make-up counter featuring the line of Barbie cosmetics. Their logo was a picture of boyfriend Ken winking, presumably registering his approval with the results of using these products. The mythotype of production values infuses the marketscape of this zone.

Fourth floor

Access to the fourth level was via the spiral interior staircase surrounded by the lucite Wall of Barbies. All blonde Western-style Barbies were dressed in hot pink fashions which included swimsuits, ball gowns, day dresses and casual wear. Walking up the staircase provided a close look at these dolls and a negative contrast to the young women's clothing area:

> These clothes are ridiculously expensive, but more importantly of very poor quality. I would not ever buy something that cheaply made, even for less money. I wouldn't wear it, even if it was free. The clothes that Barbie wears are much more pretty than the clothes they sell. It would be a better store if they sold the same clothes as Barbie wears. Her clothes are so nice (Rita, 29-year-old paralegal from Shanghai).

The fourth level was an olio of the historical, the cultural, and the commercial. Displayed were Barbie dolls appropriate to each decade, beginning with the introductory Barbie clad in her signature black-and-white striped swimsuit dating from 1959. A commemorative collectable boxed set containing this original Barbie included a floor-length black evening gown, the written history of Barbie, and 1950s photos of designer Ruth Handler's family. Some dolls were boxed in pairs, such as Barbie and friend Midge, Barbie and Ken, and the unexpected pairing of Elvis and Pricilla Presley clad in wedding regalia. Shoppers in this area typically included groups of young women as well as mothers and daughters. One group of four Shanghai locals, all friends in their mid-20s, shopped for a wedding gift for a mutual friend. They chose the boxed Barbie-and-Ken in traditional Western wedding attire:

> This will be a wedding memory. We learned about the store from a tv program and from friends. We like the Barbie store because it is in line with Barbie's style. But more important is that it is in line with the style of the people who like Barbie (Linsey, 25, Office Worker).

Thus, far, the fourth floor comprises a mindscape well-reinforced by mythotypes, but of a relentlessly American character. One would expect resonance verging on rapture with American female consumers, but Chinese affordances embedded with Chinese significance seem lacking in the venue; that is, until we reach a focal and highlighted display featuring a special edition Shanghai Barbie and her new Chinese friend Ling.

Both Shanghai Barbie and Ling possessed Eurasian features and purported to be exclusive to the *House of Barbie Shanghai*. Here, verisimilitude, archetypal dramatis personae, open-endedness, and inclusion conspire mythotypically to reinforce brand ideology. The Shanghai Barbie and Ling playsets on offer included several fashion ensembles, a dressing table and a large purse which functions as a mobile pet carrier

for the doll's small pet dog. Several informants remarked that the presence of animals in this and other play sets was both appealing and curious, as domestic pets in China are a fairly new phenomenon; licensing fees and government restrictions on their locations make them both expensive and rare. The dog may provide the verisimilitude requisite to the brand's ideology of transformation via fashion.

This floor housed a display of Barbie dolls dressed by various couture fashion houses and globally renowned designers (Valentino, Versace, Kate Spade, Calvin Klein, among others), as well as a display of Barbies clad in ethnic costumes from around the world. Upon viewing the Chinese "Empress" Barbie, informant Pinky (aged 27) noted that the doll did "not look very Chinese – just very old," casting some doubt on the verisimilitude and inclusiveness of the product adaptation. Posters and boxed play sets showcase the myriad vocations and avocations that Barbie has pursued. Her "career" playsets cast Barbie as pilot, doctor, astronaut, policewoman, veterinarian, animal trainer and others, an apparent cornucopia of prospects for a culture currently undervaluing the role of women. In addition, Barbie demonstrated the ability to ski, roller-skate, play tennis, and use modern technologies; girl-sized versions of these Barbie-branded accessories were available for purchase. One corner of this floor housed a bay of computer consoles (a puzzlingly rare manifestation of the virtuality mythotype) where girls and women could design custom ensembles for personalized Barbies; these were produced and available for a fee of 100 rmb ($15) within the hour.

Fifth floor

The fifth level was dedicated to Barbie-logoed clothing and experiences for young girls. This floor relies heavily on the open-endedness, inclusion, archetypal dramatis personae, omnipresence and production values mythotypes to influence consumer behavior. Opposite the staircase was a small chocolate and soda shop ("Barbie Loves Chocolate") and an elevated runway where girls modeled their chosen Barbie fashions. These dresses were not the body-hugging, sophisticated adult fashions worn by the doll or the provocative clothing marketed to young women, but rather frilly, full-skirted, flowing princess-like gowns, most in shades of pink. Although relatively quiet on weekdays, on weekends this area was crowded with clusters of excited stage mothers who cheered and applauded their daughters and snapped flash photos. A mother visiting from Hong Kong with her six-year-old daughter, waited in the area while her daughter was prepared for a Runway Show:

> We came here yesterday and my daughter wanted to come back today. I like that there is so much to do here with my daughter and want to go to other stores like this with her. I bought my daughter a "Do-It-Yourself" Barbie and some other doll clothes. The prices are not bad, but Yiyi (the daughter) does not like the Barbie kid's clothes. She likes the Disney princess dresses better (Liming, 35, mother visiting from Hong Kong).

Several runway shows were scheduled daily; in each six girls took turns walking and posing on the runway and showing their smiles and dresses for professional and amateur photographers. The event was the culmination of a modeling lesson; the adult mentor who guided girls through this process emceed the show, introduced each girl/model and described her chosen ensemble.

These only-children displayed no shyness and appeared quite comfortable posing (even mugging) for the camera. Girls as young as four or five strutted down the

runway and peered directly into the camera lens as they positioned their heads, shoulders and hips in high-fashion parody. Several times throughout the year the store ran a contest for "The Next Top Model" and many mothers, as well as their little girls, demonstrated high levels of interest and involvement in this competitive fantasy.

The fifth floor is also the site of special events and entertaining. One informant mother (Linda, an American ex-pat with an adopted Chinese daughter) described her choice of this venue for the daughter's sixth birthday party. Her little girl and two friends had a "fabulous time and loved every minute" of the half-day experience. The mother, however, found herself feeling "left out of the celebration," since all of the costuming, make-up and runway modeling preparations took place backstage, supervised by the store staff and with a store photographer documenting the proceedings. This alienation may have resulted from the difficulty in reaching the multiple target segments simultaneously; the mythotypes that may have delighted younger girls failed to reach grown women. Effective retail theatre must engage all members of the audience, drawing them into a creative enactment of brand ideology. The Runway Show in which the girls participated was followed by a birthday lunch in the sixth floor café. The mother remarked that the birthday cake was served first and the rest of the luncheon food "took forever to come – I just let the girls eat cake." Despite her personal disappointment with the experience, this mother indicated that her daughter recalls this birthday party with pleasure. She often speaks about the experience, and expresses her wish to return to the store, although she has little desire to possess or play with a Barbie doll. The fact that the Barbie store was so quiet on the particular weekday of their birthday visit prompted the mother to express that she is happy they did this "since the store may not even be here next year."

Opposite the Runway were several life-sized Barbie portraits with cutouts through which girls place their heads and pose for pictures of themselves as adults dressed in formal Barbie attire. Behind this was a play area with climbing apparatus allowing girls to access the cutouts and a slide for exiting the area.

Sixth floor

The entire sixth floor of the building was a restaurant only accessible by elevator. This is common configuration in Shanghai. Customers expect that shopping malls, department stores and buildings will have restaurants on the top floor. The Barbie Restaurant was outfitted with shiny pink plastic booths and black-and-white plastic tables and chairs. The menu cover was an image of Barbie clad in her vintage black-and-white striped swimsuit and wearing pink sunglasses.

Meal, drink and snack options were skewed toward Western tastes. Featured were several flavors of ice cream and frozen concoctions, milkshakes and cocktails (Barbitinis). Despite the growing popularity of dairy products in China, the vast majority of the native population is lactose-intolerant and women generally do not drink alcohol. The café menu is extensive and contains breakfast, lunch and dinner options including a few "Chinese sets," multi-dish meals meant to be shared. Prices were equivalent to those at a Western hotel. Although an employee characterized the café as "crazy busy on weekends," the research team's visits at various times never witnessed it crowded, even during traditional mealtimes and on weekends. The few customers present on these occasions tended to be Western people eating ice cream and groups of Asian women with tourist maps.

House of Barbie Shanghai, March 2010

Consistent with its designation as "retail laboratory," the House of Barbie Shanghai changed significantly during its first year of retail life. At its first anniversary, the store and its contents differed significantly from what we observed at its opening. Unchanged was the architecture of the exterior and the first floor entrance area, although a window display showed Barbie shopping for sales and the window signage advertised discounts up to 75 percent. The small shop on the ground floor was filled with discounted Barbie dolls.

The most dramatic changes were evident on the second, third and fourth levels. The spa and beauty salon were closed and the entire second floor was no longer accessible to customers. This shuttering radically altered the traffic pattern inside the store; while it did not impede direct access to the third floor via the up-escalator, the down-escalator was blocked and egress from the store was only possible via elevator. This rearrangement effectively precluded evocation of the circularity mythotype.

The third floor clothing boutique for young women, including the signature Vera Wang wedding gown, had disappeared. Although the multi-level display spaces, wall posters, and statues of black 1950s poodles remained, the space had been reconfigured to incorporate several suites of sample bedroom furniture for little girls. (Employees estimated the price to be 18,000 rmb per set ($2,525) and interested clients were instructed to leave their contact information.) Tables were piled high with sale toys and clothing for girls, as well as t-shirts, blouses and coats for young women. Hanging racks had been jettisoned in favor of tables which sported signs indicating discounts of 50-75 percent. Gone were jewelry and shoes, although some purses remained in stock and on sale. Barbie passports were still available and valid and the Princess Throne remained in its original location, though it appeared to garner little use. Again, such merchandising was inconsistent with the circularity mythotype.

The product configuration of the fourth floor was not as radically altered, although similar to the third floor, signs indicated deep discounts on dolls and other toys. The computer fashion design area, which at opening required an entrance fee, was later designated a free activity and eventually cordoned off and closed. Thus, the last connection between the flagship and the virtuality mythotype was severed. The configuration of merchandise on the third, fourth and fifth floors paralleled more closely Chinese shopping norms and aesthetics. Densely stocked merchandise was piled high and was somewhat disheveled. This concession to local shopping practice may have been made too late in the game to reverse the store's decline, and was certainly inconsistent with the Barbie brand.

Our Chinese Research Assistants noted several changes in the assortment of Barbie dolls that were being sold during this second year. Although the "collector" and themed Barbies still were available, there were more versions that were functional, interactive, and customizable by their owners. For example, several kits had personal care accessories that both doll and owner could share; others encouraged the owner to create clothing, and still other versions featured jointed Barbies. These additions to the line allowed for more active play, evoking the verisimilitude mythotype.

The birthday parties and fashion shows on the fifth floor remained popular. Other previously advertised activities, such as etiquette classes and English lessons, disappeared. The cafe still functioned, but a chalk board menu advertised daily lunch and dinner specials for 40 rmb ($5.50).

House of Barbie Shanghai, March 2011

Mattel shuttered its flagship brand store the first week of March in 2011 without a public explanation of the decision. Apparently, the price reductions, merchandise changes and aesthetic adjustments attempted during preceding year were insufficient to yield expected profit and salvage the store. The company announced its commitment to maintain the Barbie brand in China and hinted that a traveling Barbie exhibit might follow. Robert Echert, CEO of Mattel in Zimmerman (2011, B8) offered an economic explanation for the demise of the store:

> In the U.S., annual per capita toy sales are $300. In emerging markets, it is $10. To introduce Barbie to China, we thought we would build a store patterned on the American Doll (sic) stores that have done so well here. We sold more Barbies out of that store than anywhere else in China, but not enough to cover the rent. So we won't be building more stores for Barbie.

In the next section, we interpret the setting and theorize its implications for flagship brand stores within the cultural context of China.

Misaligned mythotypes

In the course of our investigation, informants frequently pointed out aspects of the flagship brand store experience that they found to be surprising, inconsistent with conventional values or practices, or humorous in their inappropriateness. These elements correspond closely to the mythotype dimensions responsible for conveying retail brand ideology.

For example, in several contexts verisimilitude – an indelible hallmark of cultural propriety that certifies authenticity – is so commonly mistranslated that we dwell here on its many manifestations. Cues and affordances in the built environment seem neither Chinese nor Western. Informants told us that the various spaces within the store "looked Korean," an adjective that probing revealed as "fashionable," but in a conservative Asian manner. Striking discrepancies in quality between fashions for Barbie and offerings for young women were perceived. First-time visitors to the store evidenced excited anticipation, assuming that the quality, style, and sophistication of the young adult clothing would be similar to those of the clothing modeled by the dolls; they registered severe disappointment on finding that this was not the case. Enthusiasm further waned as informants examined the adult retail offerings, and dubbed the clothes "too casual for the office" and too cheaply made. Retail customer expectations were violated, and the brand promise rang false.

Prices were perceived as expensive relative to quality of merchandise. Informants compared items they owned to offerings on display, and bristled at what they deemed excessively high prices. One respondent pointed out a jeweled pendant with a large rhinestone-encrusted heart for 570 rmb ($85), and indicated "I have one like this and it was 150 rmb ($22)." Clothing was deemed to be "middle to low level quality and not worth that much money." Fashion-savvy young women indicated that other favorite stores, preferred for such non-designer dresses and accessories of this quality, priced similar merchandise at 30-50 percent less than did the Barbie store. This incongruity signaled inauthenticity.

Much of the merchandise itself lacked authenticity as well. Some items, notably purses, were deemed "plastic – not real – and not good enough." These were the size and shape of Gucci and other designer bags carried by informants, and priced

comparably at 1,500 rmb ($200), but evaluated to be of lesser stature. Informants indicated that friends "share" their designer purses: "They are expensive, but they stay nice; even if they are a little used, and we can all enjoy them." Barbie purses and accessories were neither "good enough" nor recognizable enough to merit being part of such communal pools.

Archetypal dramatis personae may be ineffectively rendered in the Chinese context. Fashions on offer for young women were deemed risqué. One informant indicated that "In some of this (clothing) my mother would not let me out of the house. Maybe you could wear this in the U.S.," in reference to a low-cut dress with spaghetti straps, a fairly typical Barbie fashion offering. Informants claimed that single Chinese women want to look "cutesie and girlie, like Hello Kitty" rather than provocative.

Ellipticality is elusive in the store. Promotional pricing both confuses and amuses consumers. Prices ending in 99 are unconventional in China, and pricing on various items, such as the classic original box-set Barbie at 499 rmb ($72), was at once puzzling and amusing to the Chinese. One rmb or yuan is worth less than 15 cents and there is no sales tax, so the difference between 499 and 500 is perceived to be insignificant. Informants frequently characterized such pricing as "odd."

The mythotype of inclusion may be misrendered. Inappropriate menu options puzzle consumers. The café menu surprised informants with its featured list of drink options comprising alcoholic cocktails and beer on the opening pages. Chinese women rarely consume liquor, and infrequently drink beer and wine, regarded as the purview of men. The more popular juice drinks were buried further back in the menu, and arrived iced or in slushy form. This drink format, as well as that of the proffered ice cream treats, was inconsistent with Chinese medical practices, which dictate ingesting nothing colder than body temperature. Further, local sanitation standards demand that all liquids be boiled; even plain water is served hot and consumed warm. Thus, beverage choice as a signal of community membership or symbol of identity is rendered ineffectual.

Negentropy is also ineffectively represented. For example, management encourages tipping in the café and the restaurant bill, at variance with the tradition in China, contains a line on which to place a tip. The convention in China is that restaurant servers who are given tips must surrender them to the owner; those who attempt to pocket tips risk getting fired. Tipping is viewed as a silly Western practice of paying extra for nothing. A service-oriented mindset is short circuited by these disparate views.

Finally, open-endedness gets garbled in translation. Open space with low traffic signals problems. The emptiness of the first level provided a sharp contrast with conventional Chinese retail settings in which spaces are crammed with both people and merchandise. Disengagement of customer from servicescape is the result.

Each of these discordant notes seems to signal a managerial attitude that privileges, whether consciously or not, a culture of origin view of value over a customer-centric appreciation of local wants and customs. Perhaps the most fundamental mythotypes for flagships, and among the easiest to generalize from West to East – pervasiveness and production values – are the ones which Chinese consumers seemed to recognize and respond to most favorably at the House of Barbie Shanghai.

Surprisingly, political and nation-building references and discourses on East-West historical relations (Dong and Tian, 2009) were absent from our conversations with

Chinese consumers about the Barbie brand, and from our netnographic findings. This may have been the case because consumers who were less than enthusiastic about Barbie's formal introduction to China chose not to visit the store. More likely, the retail brand ideology of the store (the fantasy fashion transformation) was perceived as neither exceptionally American nor Chinese, but merely generic. The following blog quote suggests this mythopoeic indifference:

> At the very beginning I did not think that I will be attracted by those American dolls. But after a visit accompanied by my niece, I realize that I still have a Barbie dream inside my mind. I really think that perhaps I am one of these dolls (blog post translated from Chinese; www.dianping.com/shop/2780281/all#ur).

The blogger's anticipatory indifference dissolves in the presence of the dolls and her niece, as she re-engages with a childlike sense of aspiration. However, the store's mythoypes do not produce a Chinese resonance that results in either complete identification or, as in the case of most Chinese consumers, purchase. Research on the American Girl brand (Borghini *et al.*, 2009) demonstrates that effective flagship brand stores motivate both identification and purchase.

The House of Barbie Shanghai was designed as a retail edutainment space, an escapist fantasy island for young girls and women, and, ostensibly, a learning laboratory for managers. In a context of new-found prosperity, interest in American products, rising materialism and economic independence and optimism, Chinese women and girls in larger cities have demonstrated interest in and behavior associated with Western shopping. Educated young women, both married and single, have gained financial independence through well-paying jobs, often while still being supported by spouses or parents. Traditionally, Chinese shoppers have purchased in small quantities from tiny, family-owned and managed shops located close to their homes, from merchants they know and trust. As retailing options expand and shopping becomes an avocation, these young women explore new venues, but continue to buy small quantities and remain both price-sensitive and quality-conscious. Name brands, less important in the past, are growing in popularity and recognition, and expectations of quality levels are rising beyond the traditional "just good enough."

In mega-cities such as Shanghai shopping is often a daily avocation both by young and old. This experience, however, frequently differs from westerners for whom shopping results in a purchase, but rather is equated with browsing, enjoying and experiencing the retail setting with family or friends. A trip to a newly opened Western store may be akin to a visit to a cultural museum that affords a glimpse into Western life. Consumers have no need to bring home a souvenir in the form of a purchase; it is the shopping adventure itself that represents value. The transformation-through-fashion fantasy, insufficiently encoded by the verisimilitude, negentropy, ellipticality and inclusion mythotypes, appeared not move the marketscape concept far enough toward the mindscape payoff for the House of Barbie Shanghai to command Chinese respect and loyalty.

The mismatch between fantasy and its low quality embodiment in adult clothing further exacerbated the cultural dissonance. The positioning of the store as a retail laboratory should have allowed both for experimentation with culturally expected and new (thus potentially inappropriate) merchandising elements, and for corrective recalibration or elimination of discordant elements as they were detected in the venue. Our consumer informants were quick to offer reactions and suggest improvements:

> The Lobby has to change; it is too boring [...]. They have to move some things from above (upstairs floors) [...]. There needs to be more bling bling (Pinky, Shanghai Office Assistant, age 27).

> All the clothes look cheap. They need to let you buy the clothes that Barbie (the doll) wears. These do not look so cheap, and they have good style. Girls (her age) want to be like that (Stephanie, Shanghai paralegal, age 29).

In addition to misaligned mythotypes, demographics and geography contributed to the store's demise. The existence and financial viability of the House of Barbie Shanghai was difficult to justify as a playhouse for female children in a culture in which girls are relatively underrepresented, or as a touchstone to home for expatriates in a context in which these foreigners comprise 0.3 percent of the population. Even its siting as a free-standing venue in a less accessible sector of the city proved a costly geodemographic miscalculation.

Theoretical contribution and managerial implications

Our study demonstrates that the structures, functions and mythotypes of a flagship brand store are culturally grounded, and pose challenges for translation. For effective retail theatre to occur, retail brand ideology and its component mythotypes must be aligned. The process becomes more challenging when home and host contexts differ. Our study abruptly ended when the House of Barbie Shanghai failed to become a sustained destination site for consumers or tourists, domestic or foreign, and shut its doors. Its spectacular design proved ideologically illegible in the Chinese setting. Had Mattel launched the flagship in a market more familiar both with Barbie and accessible (i.e. non-luxury) retail spectacle, or designed a more modest anchor store tasked with a brand-building program of consumer education (empowering girls while introducing and socializing the brand into consumer experience), the outcome may well have been different. Conversely, had Mattel hybridized the doll concept rather than the servicescape, and created a "Chinese Girl" line of products (perhaps targeted first to schools, then to households) adapted to the local context, an effective brand store might have been launched later in time.

Three theoretical contributions emerge from our investigation. The first has to do with the cultural propriety (Sherry, 1987) of themed flagship brand stores as their trajectories play out across national borders. The marketscape theme demands a host of physical design cues – from architectural affordances through product offerings – that mesh with the local culture's sensibilities and its perceptions of the brand's provenance. Spectacle that does not saturate and draw energy from the brand eventually palls, decaying first to mere grandeur and then to irrelevance. It fails to become a gathering place that fosters brand community (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002). An iconic brand is culturally grounded (Holt, 2004), and its successful diffusion relies upon the local value of the culture of origin, the local reinterpretation of iconicity that finds resonance with the ethos of the culture of insertion, or a combination of the two. If merchandising fails to tap the "symbolic richness" of the brand's offerings (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002) in a way that locals can celebrate, the marketscape implodes.

The mindscape theme demands that abstraction, introspection and fantasy be harnessed by the flagship in the service of spirituality, broadly construed, providing customers with an oceanic experience of merger with the brand (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002).

This theme promotes transportation and transformation, and promises consumers transcendence. In the present case, the targeted consumer segments seemed unable to achieve the apotheosis of fashion – the fantasy which the brand offered for inhabitation – despite the universal appeal of femininity, beauty and stature. These archetypal conditions were not rendered in a form that Chinese girls and women found believable, as either a consistent mode of entertainment or therapy. If a sense of "the extraordinary" (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002) is to be attained, a cultural touchstone will be required for authentication. Transplantation of flagship trajectories cannot be a simple matter of template duplication.

Our second theoretical contribution concerns the translation of retail brand ideology – the "extensive representation of moral and social values throughout the physical retail environment" (Kozinets *et al.*, 2009) – into customer-centric meaning. Retail brand ideology is a "set of tactics that culminate in a perfect place, rich in values, encouraging a type of ethically grounded acquisition, where consumers find that purchasing and partaking are social pursuits that help them gain or regain morality"; consumers' "physical experience (of the servicescape) suffuses the ideology with reality" (Kozinets *et al.*, 2009).

Our Chinese informants did not distill a coherent retail ideology from their House of Barbie Shanghai experience. Whatever aspirational dream may have been enkindled by the trappings of retail theatre seems to have been shattered both by the muddles in the mythotypes and the perceived poor quality of the merchandise on offer. The fashion value ostensibly embedded in the brand was not rendered in a Chinese idiom, and economic value was not realized in the actual product mix. To the extent that "fashion" may be conflated either with "luxury" or with "trendiness" in the Chinese market that a script for "femininity" involving identity achievement through individualistic consumption might be unavailable in the local cultural repertoire, or that American celebrity worship could fail to be motivational for three generations of Chinese females, ideological embodiment may have been inhibited. Some resonance with Chinese values is a minimum requirement for retail brand ideology to sediment in the servicescape.

Finally, the presence, absence and cultural attunement of the mythotypes comprising the servicescape profoundly affect the success of a themed flagship brand store. Omnipresence and production values alone are not enough to build a franchise. Virtuality, quite literally missing in action in the present case, is an essential feature for any flagship seeking to appeal to younger consumers. Missing as well is circularity, while ellipticality, open-endedness and negentropy are weak-form presences. Verisimilitude and archetypical dramatis personae appear not to conform to cultural canons of propriety. Inclusion is episodic and fragmented, as likely befits the disparate targets the brand envisioned, without the aid of a nuanced intergenerational narrative template. If, for the sake of argument, we take Disneyland, or even McDonald's, as the prototypical themed environment, adaptation to the local culture has helped ensure success. Had Mattel attempted such modification, or left some legible surface for co-creation of the brand on the part of consumers, the flagship might have sailed.

The creation of a retail format that was not quite Western and not quite Eastern – that failed to import the most assimilable features of the brand and graft them on to the most apparently receptive local sensibilities – was the brand's first misstep. The failure of what was purported to be a retail laboratory to listen, learn and adapt effectively in the face of prolonged discouraging consumer reception was the fatal one.

That such ambitious projects should be overseen by a multicultural team of strategists with sound insights into home and host cultures and the ability to influence designers across the marketing mix is a lesson still all too often learned too late. Penaloza and Gilly (1999) suggested over a decade ago that marketer adaptation to cultures of consumers necessarily involves processes of assimilation and accommodation – including accommodation to consumer resistance – that result in changes to the marketers as individuals, to their firms, and to the marketplace. Unfortunately, marketing organizations are generally structured in such a way that senior managers who have responsibility for multicultural strategies are far removed from day-to-day interactions with consumers. The marketplace culture, distinct from both marketer and consumer cultures and the product of their interaction, constitutes an important site of cultural learning from which these managers, like Mattel's, are often absent. Future investigation of such structural impediments to success, especially with such large-scale projects involving the collaboration of multiple organizations across cultures such as our present study represents, is urgently needed. Acculturated marketers, adept at mythotypic translation, are the key to successful themed flagship brand store diffusion.

Conclusion

Flagship brand stores foreign (e.g. Ikea, Apple) and domestic (Xinya, Li-Ning) have flourished in China. In the former category, both luxury brands (e.g. Cartier, Gucci, Armani) and pedestrian brands (e.g. Motorola, Vans, GAP) have been successfully animated by spectacular retail theatre. The failure of the House of Barbie Shanghai cannot be laid at the feet of the servicescape format itself, even if the template was inexpertly tweaked. Local analysts such as Ben Cavender of China Market Research have opined that "In China [. . .] nobody really knew what Barbie stood for" (BBC, 2011). Given that a primary function of a flagship is to make such signification come alive for stakeholders – such a servicescape makes the brand cognitively and viscerally known to visitors, in part by inviting their creative participation in the making of meanings – Mattel's effort was flawed from design through implementation. In this article, we have unpacked the structural and ideological components contributing to the store's demise.

The failure of the architourism strategy in a city as receptive to spectacle as Shanghai must be attributed in strong measure to management's neglect of the interests of the host community (Kent, 2009a). As the types of flagships proliferate globally (Webb, 2009), it is inevitable that hybridization will be employed as a marketing strategy. In the present case, the fusion of commercial and cultural flagships (Hays, 2009) created a hybrid that, despite the spectacular merchandising, was so irrelevant to the local market that no populist stakeholder support could be mustered on behalf of the store. A successful relaunch in China, whether of the brand or of the flagship platform, will require a careful reconsideration of the ways in which Chinese and American cultural sensibilities articulate. Understanding and nurturing the ways in which host cultures appropriate global brands, and tapping into the practices locals employ in nativizing global properties, are key challenges for twenty-first century marketing managers.

In their investigation of Chinese consumer experience of Starbuck's, Venkatraman and Nelson (2008) found that enjoyment of retail theatre rather than the purchase and

consumption of beverages or food allowed locals to forge a meaningful relationship with the brand. Chinese consumers viewed the servicescape as "a bridge between two cultures" and as "a place where they can communicate and mingle and find common ground," which contrasted with the corporate perspective of the brand at the time as "an emissary from the West to China, introducing Western ways and styles to the Chinese (Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008, p. 1023). However, the servicescape was able to support complementary conceptions of authenticity (both Western-ness and syncretic hybridity) such that corporate misreading of local desire did not impede business success, at least at the time of this particular study. Subsequently, the firm has claimed that it is:

> [...] really turning upside-down the go-to-market strategy whereby things in the past few years have been invented and executed here. They now have to be invented and executed by the local Chinese team (Ignatius, 2010, p. 115).

The firm seeks to "see the world through a Chinese lens," but yet market "within the guardrails of the Starbucks brand" (Ignatius, 2010, p. 115). In the case of the House of Barbie Shanghai, mythoypic mistuning of marketscape and mindscape caused the brand to miss each of these authentic sweet spots. Neither locals nor tourists forged a profitable bond with the brand.

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