Interpretation of the retail brand: an SME perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to explore the meaning of the term "retail brand" to small- to medium-sized enterprise (SME) owner managers and how this impacts upon brand management practice.

Design/methodology/approach – This research utilises a case study approach, which involved 12 SME retailers located in two regions of the UK, combining qualitative interview data with desktop research and documentary evidence.

Findings – The findings of this paper confirm that the owner manager is central to the brand management function in SME retail firms. Furthermore, it was found that the retail brand encompasses both symbolic and functional meaning to the owner manager.

Research limitations/implications – This research contributes to the retail and SME literature by offering a conceptual framework, which presents the interpretation of the retail brand from abstractive, service and environmental perspectives.

Practical implications – It is recommended that SME owner managers set an overall direction for branding across all aspects of the retail business. In doing so, existing retail brand models may be utilised as a tool kit for SME brand managers.

Originality/value – The research begins to address a significant empirical lacuna in branding at the SME retail marketing interface. This paper also adds to wider marketing discourse, through the presentation of terminological adaptation within a small retailing situ.

Keywords United Kingdom, Small to medium-sized enterprises, Owner-managers, Retailing, Retail branding, Brand management, SME branding/marketing

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

What is a brand? This classic marketing question continues to baffle, confound and fascinate academics and practitioners alike (Gabbot and Jevons, 2009). The brand's encroachment into a diverse array of industrial settings has resulted in a number of additional brand associations, questioned by both scholars and practitioners alike (Brown, 1995; De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997; Wood, 2000; Heding *et al.*, 2008; De Chernatony, 2009). Notwithstanding the plethora of work in this area, recent work calls for contextually based research to expose the multifaceted meaning behind the brand construct (Heding *et al.*, 2008; De Chernatony, 2009; Gabbot and Jevons, 2009).

In a retail context, branding as a key differential component of marketing strategy, has received significant attention in the literature (Kent, 2003; Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Burt and Davies, 2010). While acknowledging Ailawadi and Keller's (2004) definition of the retail brand, there still remains a lack of empirical research focused on understanding managerial retail brand perspectives (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Burt and Davies, 2010). In particular, there is a need to refine the conceptual construct of the retail brand (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Burt and Davies, 2010), in order to better understand how retailers become engendered with brand significance (Fernie *et al.*, 1997; Moore *et al.*, 2000). However, the unit of analysis to date has been the large retail organisation, despite the fiscal and economic importance of small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to the retail industry. In the UK, such firms form a significant 43.9 per cent of employment in the wholesale and retail sector.

There are a number of well recognised characteristics that differentiate SMEs from larger organisations (Carson and Gilmore, 2000; Gilmore *et al.*, 2001) and these factors will inevitably impact upon the interpretation of the brand in retail SMEs. There is growing academic interest in the brand concept within SMEs (Berthon *et al.*, 2008; Spence and Essoussi, 2010). It has been found that the value of nurturing strong brands is particularly important for SMEs (Inskip, 2004), where the brand is viewed as an intangible resource, critical to competing within volatile marketplaces such as the retail industry (Abimbola and Kocak, 2007). Given the disparity of SME marketing dynamics (Carson and Gilmore, 2000) and the subscription of SMEs to conventional terminological marketing definitions, SME brand management remains a fruitful domain for empirical investigation (Spence and Essoussi, 2010), particularly in the context of the retail industry.

This paper argues that in order for marketing scholars to further investigate the brand concept in the SME retail context, academics must embrace the multifaceted meaning of the term "brand" held by owner managers. The overall aim of this paper is to understand how SME owner managers interpret the retail brand and how this meaning impacts upon SME retail brand management practice. The structure of this paper is as follows. The broader brand management, retail branding and SME branding literatures are first reviewed. Following this, the qualitative methodology employed in this study is explained. Thereafter, the key findings from the interviews conducted are presented and then discussed in relation to the extant literature. In the closing section, the key conclusions and future research recommendations are outlined.

Literature review – what is a brand?
Branding theory
In 1960 The American Marketing Association defined a brand as:

> [. . .] a name, term, design, symbol that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller.

Notwithstanding the work to follow, there still remains little consensus on an overarching umbrella definition of the scope and the dimensional limitations of branding as a managerial term. This ambiguity may stem from the fundamental principle of branding, that is; to remain unique from competitors (Wood, 2000). Indeed, while an all-encompassing brand definition remains elusive in the literature; the only

consensus is that there is no consensus (Brown, 1995; De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997, 1998; Wood, 2000; Heding *et al.*, 2008, De Chernatony, 2009).

The seminal work of de Chernatony (1993a, b) and de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1997, 1998) captured the mental models of branding. Such early attempts, recognised the growing ambiguity of the brand concept and attempted to metaphorise the brand as an atomic concept with a central nucleus (the brand ideal) and molecular associations (de Chernatony 1993a, b). Further work by De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998) extended this atomic model of branding as a projective tool to incorporate a vortex model, in which the brand was defined as a holistic marketing construct consisting of a number of inter-related elements.

There has been further attempt to conceptualise the brand either through an analysis of the practical behaviour of brand managers, the consumption patterns of consumers, or a review of branding theories. Most notable is the work of Louro and Cunha (2001) and Heding *et al.* (2008). First, Louro and Cunha (2001), in review of the literature devised a number of brand management "paradigms" based upon two dimensions; the centrality of the customer within the brand building process and the level of brand orientation with the corporate consciousness of the firm. This work is presented in Table I.

The more recent work of Heding *et al.* (2008), revised Louro and Cunha's taxonomic approach through analysis of branding research, theory and practice and identified two additional brand management perspectives; the emotional and cultural approach. Within the emotional approach, the brand construct is extended as a central tenant within brand communities, as a conveyor of an emotional brand story, and a basis for an intimate brand customer relationship. The cultural approach of branding on the other hand, takes into account the socio-cultural perspective of the brand construct, which is perceived as a cultural artifact, and particularly important given the elevated role of consumption within post modern society.

In a recent special issue of Marketing Theory, the issue of the brand construct was addressed by a number of scholars (e.g. Brodie and De Chernatony, 2009; De Chernatony, 2009; Gabbot and Jevons, 2009). Relevant to this paper, a subjective

	Product paradigm	Projective paradigm	Adaptive paradigm	Relational paradigm
Central brand construct associations	Logo Legal instrument	Identity system Company	Image Shorthand device Risk reducer Added value Value system	Proximate relationship development Personality Evolving entity
Seminal work	Low and Fullerton (1994)	Urde (1999)	Keller (1993) Aaker (1996)	Fournier (1998)
Customer centrality/ strategic centrality	Low customer centrality Low strategic centrality	Low customer centrality High strategic centrality	High customer centrality Low strategic centrality	High customer centrality High strategic centrality

Source: Adapted from Louro and Cunha (2001)

Table I.
Branding paradigms and
brand definitions

ontology of the brand construct was noted, in that "there will never be a unifying definition of the brand, but a constantly evolving series of contexts or lenses through which the phenomena is viewed" (Brodie and De Chernatony, 2009, p. 97). This paper, therefore, provides empirical insight into the brand concept as viewed by SME owner managers in the context of the retail industry. The following discussion of the retail and SME branding literatures will provide some theoretical background to extant work in this area.

Retail branding

As a result of recent institutional changes in the retail landscape, including increased retailer power in distribution channels, heightened volatility in retail markets, and prolific international expansion of retail operations, retailers seek to establish specialised marketing functions within their organisations. As a result, retail branding as a key differential competitive component of retail marketing strategy, has received significant attention in the retail literature (Kent, 2003; Ailawadi and Keller, 2004; Burt and Davies, 2010).

Traditionally, branding within the field of retailing has been closely associated with private label brand produced by retailers (Burt and Davies, 2010), which enabled operating advantage for these firms in the form of superior profit margins, economies of scale, market segmentation and differentiation. Here, the products and services offered to define the retail brand, act as the core differentiator between the firm and competitors. As the role of private label brand development has become more strategically important, there has been increasing focus on mental models of the retail brand construct.

A second perspective was identified in the retail literature by Ailawadi and Keller (2004, p. 332), which defined the retail brand as:

> [. . .] the goods and services of a retailer and differentiates them from those of competitors. A retailer's brand equity is exhibited in consumers responding more favourably o its marketing actions than they do to competing retailers (Keller, 2003). The image of the retailer in the minds of consumers is the basis of this brand equity.

Competing retail brand perspectives have also emerged in the retail literature, which embrace the more complex combinations of tangible and intangible service, product, and organisational multi-sensory brand elements as a coherent brand strategy (Mitchell, 1999; Kent, 2003; Burt and Davies, 2010). From this perspective, the retail-*er* (that is the retail firm), becomes the brand (Bridson and Evans, 2004; Burt and Davies, 2010). This underlines the ability of retailers to produce superior brand reality as a result of the customer interface in comparison to manufacturers (Mitchell, 1999). A comparison of the brand links between retailers and manufacturers is presented in Table II.

Taking into account the links presented in Table II, retail firms also seek to build the retail brand construct to the level of customer relationship management activity, combining external marketing activity with store-based fulfilment of a brand promise. Such activity is also evident upstream by manufacturers who seek to capitalise on the benefits of stores as brand experiential spaces. Therefore, the retail brand can also be perceived as an emotional connection between customer and firm (Kozinets *et al.*, 2002). Albeit, evolving in complexity, the retail brand construct is presented by Burt and Davies (2010) as retail offering components (product and service provision), the

Traditional manufacturer brand links	Retailer brand links leading to "brand reality"
Media links – communication with consumers via media channels	Transaction and information links – transactions of goods and service inherently incur two way information exchange
Experience links (product usage) – experience of consuming the product	Infrastructure links – connecting the customer to the retail location. Retail locations are established as branded environments
Emotional links (images and associations) – created through consumer interpretation of marketing effort across the product life cycle	Operational links – operations are vital to delivering the brand promise for retailers
	Financial links – new financial services offered by retailers and new mediums of payment (e.g. online payment), creates information exchange potential
	Personal face to face links – through members of the organisations staff on a face to face basis, physical human relationships are created
	Service links – practical problem solving is vital to maintaining the relationship between retailer and customer
	Emotional links – retailer-advertising strategies taking highly visible stands on social issues
	Usage links – through consumer usage of own branded products
	Event links – development of leisure perspectives on shopping, retailers have established event links in which the brand can be centric
	Media links – through various media mediums
	Distribution and availability links – through retail expansion and adoption of online modes of delivery which extend the availability of the retailer's service to consumers

Source: Adapted from Mitchell (1999)

Table II.
Retail brand reality

retailer's ability to add value through the retail store (retail image), and the higher echelons of the corporate perspective (customer relationships and firm identity).

Scholars agree that a better understanding is required, of how retailers become engendered with brand significance through retail brand management techniques is required, both from a consumer and practitioner perspective (Fernie *et al.*, 1997; Moore *et al.*, 2000; Ailawadi and Keller, 2004). Given that retail branding has moved beyond product based explanations of retail brand distinctiveness to a more corporate store based level (Burt and Davies, 2010), this paper argues that the development of retail brand thinking persists in line with the wider debate presented within the brand management field (Louro and Cunha, 2001). The retail branding literature therefore provides a starting point, in a similar mode to the wider branding debate (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997, 1998; Wood, 2000; Heding *et al.*, 2008), to answering the central question posed at the outset of this paper "what is a retail brand?"

SME branding

One area of growing interest within the wider brand management field is the SME organisation (Inskip, 2004; Krake, 2005; Wong and Merrilees, 2007; Berthon *et al.*, 2008; Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008). This attention is reasonable given the lack of prior scholarly knowledge in the area, and worthwhile given the importance of the SME to the fiscal UK economy. Previous work in this arena has found SME owner managers must develop and nurture strong brands in a macro environment characterised by crowded market places, short product life cycles, rapid innovation diffusion and symbolic consumption (Krake, 2005; Abimbola and Kocak, 2007). Research to date has focused on branding through the lens of the organisational function of marketing within a SME context, more often contrasting the organisational idiosyncrasies of marketing management between entrepreneurial firms and large firms (Gilmore *et al.*, 2001; Carson and Gilmore, 2000; Gilmore *et al.*, 2001).

This relatively scant yet growing area of research underlines the preeminence of the owner manager as the fulcrum of the SME brand management system. It has been found that the owner manager leads and influences a branding within a small enterprise, driving marketing activities according to their competence, knowledge, experience, business style and personal networks (Gilmore *et al.*, 2001; Hill and Wright, 2001; Hill *et al.*, 1999; Simpson *et al.*, 2006; Merrilees, 2007; Martin, 2009; O'Dwyer *et al.*, 2009). While some studies argue that the brand concept remains peripheral to the operational consciousness of owner managers (Inksip, 2004), other work has identified various levels of brand management orientation within SMEs (Ojasalo *et al.*, 2008).

Prior work has specifically noted that SMEs who possess a culture of marketing orientation, catalysed by key decision makers within the firm, are more holistic and extravagant in their branding approaches (Mowle and Merrilees, 2005). In particular, the work of Krake (2005) underlines how the entrepreneur's experience, creativity and knowledge of the brand management are influential in the adoption, perception and success of branding strategy within SMEs. These findings are advocated by Spence and Essoussi (2010) and Ojasalo *et al.* (2008)) who further interject that the brand definition is based upon an owner manager based set of associations, which form the basis of an overall brand identity.

Notwithstanding this prior work, there remains a significant gap towards study of SME brand management within a retail context. This gap arises theoretically given the deviance of the SME circumstance from the large organisation situ (Carson and Gilmore, 2000), especially in terms of branding (Spence and Essoussi, 2010). These differences are presented in Table III.

In view of Table III, it is first evident that within a large organisation context, branding responsibility often lies with corporate level management and specialised marketing. In SMEs however, it is the owner manager who ultimately creates, build and maintain firm brand equity (Berthon *et al.*, 2008). In this regard, branding is mediated by the owner manager's understanding and knowledge of the concept. While retail branding is defined as an ever-evolving complex construct, encompassing complex links between customer and firm (Mitchell, 1999), in SMEs, branding is defined as a reductive process (Spence and Essoussi, 2010). Moreover, given the disparity of retail branding as a distinct domain of the brand management debate (Kent, 2003; Ailawadi and Keller, 2004); in light of this paper, the complexity of the retail brand construct may present further challenges to SME brand management.

	Large organisations	SMEs
Brand construct	Multifaceted concept: Ever increasing complexity Private labels and services Retail image Customer experiences Organisational identity Consumer relationships	Reductive concept based on the owner manager: Consisting of singular elements, e.g. logo, product, design Owner manager shorthand device Added value Company resource
Brand management focus	Complex nature, growing focus on strategic importance of branding	Reductive concept, experiential (what has worked in the past), found to be highly tactical/sales orientated, replication of competitors and industry norms

Source: Adapted from Mitchell (1999); Burt and Davies (2010); Berthon *et al.* (2008); Spence and Essoussi (2010)

Table III.
Retail branding in large organisations and branding in SMEs

Research issues
Notwithstanding the previous brand management, retail and SME branding debate discussed, a number of research lacunae persist. Given the ever-increasing importance of branding within retail markets, there is a need for an improved interpretation of the retail brand from both a practitioner and consumer perspective (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004) reflective also of the SME retail organisation. This call for contextually based research to understand the meaning of branding is likewise evident in the SME branding literature (Berthon *et al.*, 2008). The distinctiveness of this paper is at the retail branding and SME branding interface, whereby there is a need to better understand retail branding by SMEs. Therefore, the overall aim of this paper is to understand how SME owner managers interpret the retail brand and how this meaning impacts upon SME retail brand management practice. More specifically, the research objectives are:

RO1. To understand how SME owner managers interpret the term "*brand*" within a retailing context.

RO2. To explore how this meaning impacts upon SME retail brand management practice.

Methodology
An exploratory qualitative approach and in-depth interview method was deemed most appropriate to this study for a number of reasons. First, a qualitative research design is advocated in the field of SME marketing (Hill, 2001), and SME branding (Berthon *et al.*, 2008) as the most suitable method to obtaining a rich understanding of small firm activity (Fillis, 2001). Second, given the overall aim of this study is to assess the meaning behind the marketing term brand for SME retail firms, from an epistemological perspective, a qualitative design is most appropriate (Saunders *et al.*, 2007). Third, in view of the brand management and retail branding literature, the mental modeling approach (involving qualitative research) as advocated by De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley (1998), was considered most pertinent to the current study of retail SME branding.

The companies in this study were selected primarily in terms of company size (according to EU Commission definition of SME i.e. with less than 250 employees and turnover of less than 45 million Euros) and industrial situ (retail industry located in two different regions of the UK; namely Northern Ireland and Brighton). The chosen locations are particularly relevant to the current study in terms of both the retail and SME make up of these regions. In Northern Ireland, 78 per cent of 9,000 retail businesses are SMEs. Likewise in Brighton, described as a primary centre for retailing, there is a high percentage of SMEs operating in the retail sector. A total of 30 companies were initially identified across the two regions. In Brighton, relevant companies were contacted via the Creative Fashion Forum network consisting of SME fashion retailers, designers, manufacturers and educators. While in Northern Ireland such a network did not exist at the time of data collection, relevant companies were contacted via a formal letter of invitation, followed up by a confirmatory phone call or store visit. This purposeful sampling allowed for the selection of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002), for the in-depth study of SME retail branding.

A total of 12 retail SMEs agreed to participate in the study and in-depth interviews were carried out with the owner-managers of 12 retail SMEs located in two different regions of the UK. Several research themes were identified to guide the collection of data, however these interviews where informal and guided by the interviewee, not the interview schedule. A number of open discussion-based questions were designed to allow the owner manager to describe what is meaningful and salient to branding without being pigeon holed into standardised categories (Patton, 2002). Such questions included:

(1) What do you (respondent) understand by the term "branding"?

(2) How did you (respondent) go about forming your firm's brand identity?

(3) How does the business achieve retail market distinctiveness?

(4) How does this understanding of the term branding impact upon the (participant firm)'s brand strategy?

(5) How does brand strategy impact upon the operation of the retail business?

The qualitative analysis of data followed an inductive process, observing the recommendations of Morse (1994). To analyse interview transcriptions, content analysis was implemented which in this study refers to the searching of text for recurring words, themes or core meanings (Patton, 2002; Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Throughout the duration of the study analysis of the data went hand in hand with data collection, to allow for the emergence of important themes and patterns in the data (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). In presenting the initial findings of this study, quotations from owner managers will be used to illustrate the most salient themes. As the issue of confidentiality was important to the owners in this study, the SME retailers will be referred to as companies A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, and K. The corresponding owner manager of the company will be referred to as participant A, B, C, D et cetera. A summary of the retailers included in this study is presented in Table IV.

From this table, it is evident that a diverse range of SME retailers across the two regions were included in this study in terms of company size, location and merchandise category.

Company	Respondent code/ firm role	Number of stores	Company location	Merchandise category
A	A Owner manager	1	Brighton	Handmade leathers
B	B Owner manager	1	Brighton	Lingerie, erotic goods
C	C Owner manager	1	Northern Ireland	Children's fashion
D	D Owner manager	1	Northern Ireland	Pharmacy
E	E Owner manager	1	Northern Ireland	Furniture
F	F Owner manager	2	Northern Ireland	Sports and leisure lifestyle
G	G Owner manager	1	Northern Ireland	Arts and crafts
H	H Store manager	1	Northern Ireland	Men's tailoring
I	I Owner manager	1	Northern Ireland	Electrical
J	J Owner manager	1	Northern Ireland	Grocery
K	K Owner manager	1	Northern Ireland	Arts and crafts
L	L Owner manager	1	Brighton	Arts and crafts

Table IV.
Firm characteristics of
UK SME retailers

Case study findings
The following section reports the key themes significant to the owner manager interpretation of the retail brand according to the key objectives of the study. This first includes the interpretation of the retail brand by retail owner managers and secondly, the operational implications of the retail brand.

RO1: owner manager interpretation of the retail brand
The data first confirmed that the owner manager is central to the brand management function within retail SMEs. The findings herein first relate to interpretation of the brand around owner manager intuition and vision of the business. Second, it was found that owner managers described the symbolic and abstract meaning of the brand construct as an "identity", "image" or based on "firm heritage".

Owner manager intuition, vision and self-reflection. It was found that retailer owner managers were highly intuitive about their approach to branding. This took the form of a personal, instinctive approach toward designing the brand identity, implementing branding projects, and managing the retail brands. For example, the owner of Company C described how she went about designing the store and stated that she "just knew what she wanted". This phrase was a recurring theme throughout the interview with Company C (see Table V).

This owner manager perspective of branding was often described as a process of self-reflection about how these individuals personally consumed brands. As respondent D explained:

Personally a brand if I want it, I would buy it ... So I go to the gym a lot and I would like Adidas brands because it is good quality. I used to buy Nike but I don't like Tiger Woods and I don't like the way Nike continued to support Tiger Woods. So I don't buy Nike because of that. I think that has tainted their brand. So I suppose the brand is something that you aspire to [...].

Based on this, the owner manager of Company D developed a company mission statement, which defined the firm's brand and its component parts:

[...] there is I suppose the brand as far as (Company D). We have a mission statement for (Company D) ... It is: "Through (Company D) we shall provide and establish a first class service which shall establish (Company D) as; a first class shopping destination, providing a

	Companies and evidence
RO1 SME owner manager interpretations of "brand"	
Owner manager-based intuition, vision, self reflective	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L "I knew I wanted my shelving like this I searched online for the shelves I wanted the rounded edges. And I knew I wanted something quite bright. And we kind of got the wallpaper in and went from there you know … I just knew what I wanted. […] I just knew what brand I wanted" (Respondent C)
Symbolic and abstract meanings (identity, firm heritage, consumer imagery, reputation, customer loyalty)	C, F, G, H, I, L "[…] it is just that people would identify when they see (Company F) that they would identify … the definition of the brand (Company F) is equal to surfing in Ireland. That is the identity that I would like, and also with an identity would come about surfing, good knowledge of a good product, reliability, good product knowledge, pricing, good customer service and quality, quality product. That is what I would like to identify branding with (Company F). I would want people's experience of shopping with us to be a good experience so they would come back. And that we would sell a product and equipment for their needs and ability and their lifestyle" (Respondent F)
RO2 Operational implications of retail brand	
Management of store environment	A, H, K, L "[…] I thought about the jewellery cabinet at the back of the shop. For example, it had to reflect this colour so yeah it was important … I mean they say the devil is in the detail and I really believe that and not everybody would relate to all these bits of detail but I think it is important. It all adds up and create your overall impression" (Respondent L)
Customer experience management	B, H, J, K "[…] so really the branding is you come to (Company K) and you get an experience. Even if it is a Faulty Towers one you are still getting an experience"
Customer service	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L "[…] you know with these big companies you're only a number, whereas with (Company I) you're not a number and that's important … the personal touch with the customer is very important. They (customers) are not a number. That person or customer is our bread and butter"
Product mix	A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L "[…] it's an identity in terms of … for example, everybody knows (Company G) for selling handmade crafts and Celtic gifts. They all know that we do not sell leprechauns … for me that is the branding of the shop"

Table V.
Summary of qualitative findings

first class offer, and also through innovative and fashion led product ranges in a distinctive retail environment. And we shall strive to be different from the rest".

Symbolic and abstract meaning. The findings underlined SME owner manager interpretation of the retail brand concept as symbolic in nature. For example,

respondent E reflected on the conceptual perspective of branding by stating that "branding is what you are and what you do. Its small on a business card or it's a concept and a constant theme throughout your business." In particular, the themes of symbolic firm identity and associative SME retail brand image were closely tied with owner manager perspectives of the branding of their retail organisation, incorporating firm identify, image and heritage meanings.

In terms of firm identify, companies F and G described "identity" as a one interpretation of how the owner managers perceived the retail brand. The perception of Company F in particular noted the role of both products and services in the overall surfing "lifestyle" retail concept. Similarly, Company G conceptualised branding as an identity which set her business apart from others. In this case product mix elements where utilised in order to describe this terminological discernment by respondent G:

> [. . .] it's an identity in terms of . . . for example, everybody knows (Company G) for selling handmade crafts and Celtic gifts. They all know that we do not sell leprechauns . . . for me that is the branding of the shop.

With regard to image, for some owner managers branding was a set of symbolic or intangible image-based associations which were perceived to exist within their customer's mind around what the market offering. Company H for example suggested that their brand image was based upon consumer aspirations:

> [. . .] (company H owner /manager) would say that; "(Company H) dress gentleman and those who aspire to be gentleman, people like that". But at the end of the day there are suits out there . . . you can go to "Next", go to "Mark's' (Mark's and Spencer's) and pay £100 for a suit, but it might be a high-fashion thing that changes quickly.

In this particular case, imagery related to the self-reflection of the brands the owner manager personally consumed. In addition, participant D described how he felt that aspirational imagery impacted upon brand being "targeted" at particular demographics. This was reflected in Company H's overall brand strategy of creating a retail brand that was attractive to a particular demographic; "Then there is I suppose the brand as far as the (Company H) brand. Yes we are trying to target a particular group . . . such as upper to middle class females".

Other sources of brand image were evident in the responses by owner managers, including firm heritage.

For example, the owner manager of Company I referred to family imagery relating to the heritage of long-standing reputation of her retailer's brand:

> I think that it is important that people know that it is a family business; they know that we have been in business nearly 40 years; they know that if they are looking for something and we do not have that in stock that we will get it for them you know what I mean . . . and from our past record over the past 40 years I think it is important even from word-of-mouth that people tell people about us and that's how we get it all over country.

RO2: operational implications of the retail brand

Retail branding was also found to encompass both functional and operational meaning, whereby SME owner managers referred to the implications of retail branding as management of the store environment, the shopping experience, customer service, and product mix sold within the retail store.

Management of store environment. In this study, owner managers believed the retail environment was important in building an initial "look", which contributes to the overall brand. Respondent H, who also conceptualised branding as the imagery held by a target customer demographic (as previously discussed), noted how: "…branding is about all the detail in the shop". Respondent A also reiterated this perspective explaining while the firm's brand began with a "look", which followed on throughout other aspects of the business. It was explained that:

> […] branding is a look. I think it's something that when people see your name, they remember it, and they remember it for a reason. And your branding will then follow through throughout everything that you do.

For other retailers this environmental perspective presented a retail brand management canvas whereby the owner manager's attention is centred upon maintaining a desired firm identity or communicating particular brand messages through elements of the retail store. For example, participant L described how the holistic design and management of her retail store communicated messages of quality to customers (See Table V for more details).

Customer experience management. The majority of companies in this study explained that while the look of the brand was important, the "feel" of the customer experience was more significant in adding to the overall brand aesthetic. The owner manager of Company B, for example, suggested that it was the way in which the retail environment induced feelings within the customer: "(Company B)'s brand is all about the erotic, sensual and the kind of … the way that that can make you feel – amazing". Similarly, Company G argued that customers need to come into the retail environment in order to fully experience the underlying essence of the firm's brand. However, the owner manager believed it is difficult to represent such a diverse holistic concept within one look or image:

> I think that is what our problem is we have to find a way of putting an image in the world of what the (Company G name) is like. You only realise that when you come into the shop.

While this perspective underlines the utilisation of the retail store as a brand experiential space, other argued that the "direction" or "uniqueness" of their retail brand went beyond the customer experience. As Company E explained:

> […] the experience is part of it in that we want it to be unique and different and a very much sense of local and independent and all of those sorts of things. But the branding is I suppose sort of a direction and uniqueness would come out in more than just the customer experience.

This would suggest that for this SME owner manager, customer experience operated at a lower level than the "direction" or "uniqueness" of the overall firm's brand.

Customer service. Linked to the importance of the customer shopping experience perspective, the importance of customer service was also highlighted as an important element of the meaning of the retail brand. For respondent I, the service perspective went beyond functional services such as extended guarantees and after sales care, to encompass a company-wide service approach embedded in their brand.

This has resulted in a strong brand reputation and increased customer loyalty experienced by company I:

> You do get loyal people. People that are have been coming to us for the last maybe 20 years, and their children come and grandchildren would be coming to us and this … that is the way

it works, it keeps the business going ... you know with these big companies you're only a number, whereas with (Company I) you're not a number and that's important.

Product mix. The final operational dimension of the retail brand related to management of the product mix. This was viewed by SME retail owner managers as a key component of brand operationalisation. For example, the owner manager of Company D contextualised this through stating that "our brand at (Company D) is I suppose based on brands so you are trying to keep brands that people want. That creates a brand for us". A number of other retailers in this study related product mix to an over arching brand vision, which in the case of Company J needs to "fit with what we do".

Discussion

The findings of this study are summarised in Table V, which serves to first illustrate how the brand construct is first conceptualised according to the owner manager's intuition and vision and interpreted as both symbolic and functional meaning. It is interesting to note, that those firms who interpreted the brand in symbolic terms, almost always reverted to describing the meaning of the brand in operational terms. The operational implications of retail brand meanings related to management of the store environment, shopping experience, customer service, and product mix.

In the first instance, the findings of this qualitative study confirm the centrality of the owner manager in managing the retail brand within SMEs. This theme is consistent with the findings of the emerging SME branding literature, whereby the owner manager is placed as the key driver behind the creation, implementation and management of branding activity (Gilmore *et al.*, 2001; Krake, 2005). The case study data also provides empirical insight into the multifaceted meaning of the term "branding" (Wood, 2000; Heding *et al.*, 2008; Gabbott and Jevons, 2009), relating to both the symbolic and functional interpretation by the owner manager throughout the retail business. For owner managers the brand construct operated at various levels from symbolic abstraction to operational components of the retail firm's offering.

Next, the brand construct often began at a high, abstractive level of owner manager thought. This is consistent with wider brand management and retail brand management thinking, which perceives brand as operating at an abstract level encompassing an overall identity for firms (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998). Nonetheless, a key consideration of the SME branding literature must be recognised at this point. Within these descriptions of their interpretation of the SME retail brand construct, participants constantly referred to operational implications of this conceptualisation. This reflects, in a retailing context what Spence and Essoussi (2010) describe as the reductive nature of SME branding. In this respect, SME retailer owner managers sought to simplify the brand construct through reference of how this impacted upon components of their overall retail operation.

The framework presented in Figure 1 reflects this interpretation of "retail branding" according to both the owner managers of retail SMEs in this study and in consideration of previous research in this area.

This framework denotes the reductive process of how SME owner managers think about branding from a retail perspective. It is important to note that this model of SME retail brand interpretation is both fluid and interconnected. More specifically, brands may start at an abstractive level but are ultimately broken down into their component (or operational/functional) facets. In addition, owner manager thinking about the
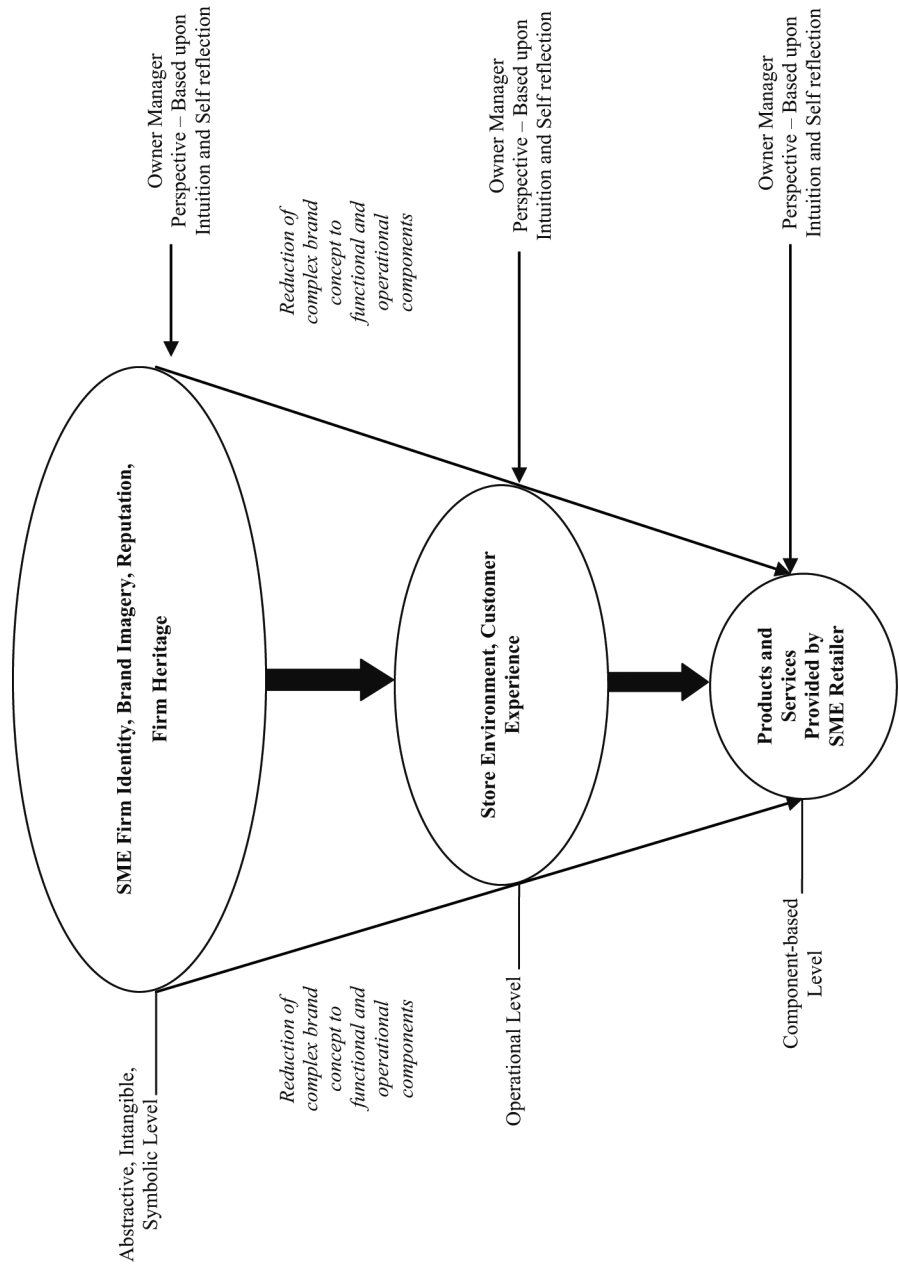
Figure 1.
The reductive nature of
SME retail branding

nature of their retail business may begin at any level of this reductive process. In turn, this confirms the dynamism, ontological fluidity and subjective nature of the brand concept previously noted in the branding literature (De Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997, 1998; Gabbott and Jevons, 2009) and the holistic perspective of retail branding cited within previous retail research (Kent, 2003).

From a scholarly point-of-view, these findings and the framework presented have significant implications for future search within this area. First of all, this study has confirmed that the brand construct is broken down into component parts by retail SME owner managers (Spence and Essoussi, 2010). In contrast to the wider brand management and retail brand management literatures, SME owner managers take part in a process of simplification complexity rather than amplification of the complexity of the retail brand. The value of this research lies in the appropriateness of component-based models of brand management in aiding SME owner managers rather than complex holistic models developed within the context of brand experts. Second, and, from a methodological point-of-view, this intuitive and instinctive approach to branding not only supports the findings reported within prior literature, but gives credence to the adoption of interpretivistic methodologies at the SME branding interface (Hill *et al.*, 1999). Specifically, as the entrepreneurs behind participant retail brands informally create, manage and implement branding strategies through their own intuition the findings of this study suggest that interpretive/phenomenological techniques are the most appropriate means of approaching the SME retail-branding interface.

Managerial implications
This study presents a number of implications for managers of retail SMEs. First of all, and given the propensity to simplify the process of branding found within SME retailers, it is more appropriate for owner managers to engage with component based retail branding as presented in Figure 1. This model may provide a useful tool kits for retail SME owner managers to aid the coordination of their brand communication more effectively. It is also recommended that owner managers adopt the principles of wider large organisational branding, such as the focus on the consumer, who ultimately interpret brand meaning (Louro and Cunha, 2001). Moreover, it is important that owner managers proactively seek to assess customer interpretation of brand meaning, in order to maximise the effectiveness of SME brand resources in general.

Conclusion
The findings from this study present new insight into the retail literature were the emphasis has been on the branding activities of larger companies, and also the SME literature, which has focused on manufacturing and high technology firms. The scholarly value of this research is twofold. In the first instance, the SME literature recognises that the marketing activities of owner managers within SMEs are different, in that SME firms are not just small versions of their larger counterparts (Carson and Gilmore, 2000). Second, retail branding is recognised in the literature as different to product branding (Kent, 2003). As contemporary theoretical marketing approaches to brand management emphasise the subjective nature of this phenomenon (De Chernatony, 2009; Gabbot and Jevons, 2009), the findings of this study provides insight into the multiple and dynamic interpretation of the SME retail brand derived centrally from the owner manager.

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The propensity of SME retail owner managers to talk about the "feel" of their brand, enlightens the need for future work to explore the intangible aspects of retail branding, some of which have been elicited within this study. In order to further the advancement of the management and scholarly understanding of SME brand experience however, this paper calls for consumer research into small firm retail brand experiences. It is recommended that future studies adapt previous methodological approaches (e.g. Kozinets *et al.*, 2002), which may include focus groups, in-depth interviews, ethnography and netnography. Such approaches are necessary to consider issues such as: What meanings do consumers attribute to small business branding? How do consumers perceive small business brands as opposed to their larger counterparts? How can SME owner managers improve small firm brand strengths? Notwithstanding this, the field of SME retail brand management in general, remains a fruitful and valuable area for future empirical work given the unique nature of both SMEs and retailers and the significance of such firms to the UK economy.

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