



HOW GLOBAL BRANDS MANAGE THE LOCALISATION OF SPATIAL EXPERIENCES - THE CASES OF STARBUCKS AND IKEA

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Abstract

This study explores how two global brands (Starbucks and IKEA) design spatial experiences that are localised for diverse cultural contexts. Through a series of interviews with store designers, design and marketing managers, and brand experts from both companies, we identify two different ways a brand and design team can be organized and how each influences the process of the localisation of spatial experiences. Our findings highlight issues related to a team's structure, the use of different design processes and how these influence the building of strong, locally relevant spatial experiences.

Keywords: design management, experience design, design process

1. Introduction

Global brands increasingly engage with new markets where they are encouraged to engage meaningfully with different cultures in order to make their products or services appeal. This is partly in response to pressure from consumers who reject a “one-size-fits-all” model. Therefore, successful global brands need to create a balance between sending a coherent message, and keep tailoring to different cultural local customs (Hands, 2008; Holt et al., 2004; Eldemener, 2009; Boutros, 2009).

Moreover, global brands now need to consider a holistic view of brand experience, sometimes referred to as the ‘360 degree brand’ (Business Dictionary (2019)), in which brick and mortar stores are just one of the touchpoints for delivering the brand experience. Neumeier (2004) defines brand experience as: “all the interactions people have with a product, service, or organization; the raw material of a brand.” Moreover, according to Forbes (2018), some retailers view the physical store as a way to move beyond transactional selling and connect with customers through experiences. Keeping that in mind, in this paper the term ‘spatial experience design’ is used to refer to all the elements within spatial environments that connect to a visitor, viewing the visitor as a complex emotional being, rather than just a person looking for an aesthetic reward.

These factors aside, it has been established that the way design is managed within organizations can have a huge impact on whether a brand succeeds or fails (Hands, 2008; Dutta, 2012; Best, 2010). As the global business environment gets increasingly complex, organisations use global teams to manage this complexity (Lane et al., 2004). Among the different types of global teams are globally distributed teams (GDT). A GDT is defined as a group of individuals: (i) belonging to one or more organizations; (ii) interdependent and driven by a common purpose; (iii) using technology-supported communication more than face to communication; and (iv) are based in different countries (Mattarelli and Tagliaventi, 2010).

Based on these core concepts, this paper examines two successful global brands underpinned by GDTs – Starbucks and IKEA - to examine how they confront issues related to arranging a global design team and how that affects localized spatial experiences. In order to examine the methods and approaches these organizations used to tackle such issues, we reviewed secondary sources and conducted an empirical study to understand how the brand is managed in relation to localising spatial experiences. The latter was conducted via semi-structured interviews with individuals in various positions on the Starbucks store design team and the IKEA marketing and design teams. In reporting on the findings of our study, we contribute to the fields of design management and interior design a deepened understanding of how global brands operate in relation to localising spatial experiences.

2. Background context: Starbucks and ikea as global brands

The companies selected for this study were Starbucks and IKEA. Both companies are considered valuable global brands with many stores around the world and a continuous presence at the top of global brand leader boards (Frobes, 2019; Interbrand, 2019; Financial Times, 2019). Therefore, studying these brands, and how they support brand development over different markets worldwide, offers a potentially promising starting point for understanding how a global brand can maintain good collaborations within organizations and produce successful localized spatial experiences.

Many examples of locally relevant solutions can be seen by reading Starbucks' stories and its news section on its website. Articles demonstrating a balance between locality and consistency include "11 stunning Starbucks stores around the world" where the local differences in the variety of examples offered are very evident (Starbucks Stories, 2017). Another includes an article titled "Five Starbucks Store Designs Inspired by History" which states "Every neighbourhood has a story, and often that history can be inspiration for Starbucks's store designers." (Starbucks Stories, 2016). For example, the Starbucks store in Miami, Florida (Figure 1a), which is within walking distance to the ocean, showcases the colours and textures of surrounding beaches (Starbucks Stores, 2017). Figure 1b demonstrates that when this store in Paris, France, was created, the building it was housed in was refurbished to ensure that its history was maintained. This included fully restoring the ornate and intricate 19th-century ceiling murals and motifs to their original state and revealing their true colours and historical qualities (Starbucks Stories, 2017). The New York store at 11 Penn Plaza (Figure 1c) is inspired by nearby Penn Station and Hudson Rail Yards with a design that conveys the electric energy of the city. On the ceiling, illuminated tracks snake through the space, drawing customers in from the busy sidewalk of 32nd Street. The work of artist Jake Wallace, influenced by the industrial architecture of New York City and the textures of the railroad system, shines above the back bar (Starbucks Stories, 2017).

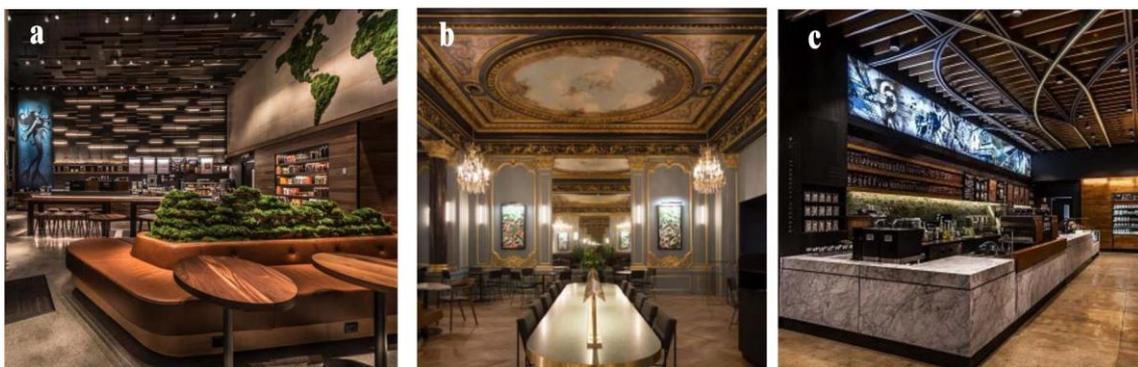


Figure 1. (Left to Right) a) Starbucks Store, Miami, Florida; b) Starbucks Store, Paris, France; c) Starbucks Store, 11 Penn Plaza, New York

Starbucks also sometimes collaborates with local artists (Figures 2a, 2b) when creating stores in new locations. Commenting on a recent collaboration, Starbucks stated: "The mission and values of the company talk about inspiring and nurturing the human spirit one neighbourhood at a time [...] Art is a powerful way to bring those ideas to life, and there's no better way to do that than by creating jobs for artists in the communities we're part of" (Starbucks Stories, 2017).



Figure 2. (Left to Right) a) Chilean artist Nicolas Arroyo's hand painted mural in a Starbucks store in Santiago is a visual collage that evokes city life; b) Kim West's mural interpretation of a coffee landscape in Terminal 3 at Los Angeles International Airport

Operating in a different commercial sector, IKEA likewise adapts to different locations around the world. Like Starbucks, IKEA sometimes collaborates with different individuals and companies to develop different pieces for their product range that are seen to better align to the aesthetics and practices of different cultures. For example, a 2019 Dezeen article offers an example of IKEA teaming up with top African designers to launch a furniture collection (Figure 3a, 3b).



Figure 3. (Left to Right) a) Product inspired by hair; b) Rug featuring geometric patterns

Moreover, from observing some IKEA stores adaptations in terms of spatial experiences to localities have also been evident (Figure 4a, 4b). For example, the IKEA store in Bahrain mimics the local surrounding environment where outdoor furniture is displayed, while the building materials mimic balconies through the use of materials most commonly used in the region.



Figure 4. (Left to Right) a,b) Outdoor furniture displays at IKEA store, Bahrain

The secondary sources highlight that both brands acknowledge that localisation is key for ensuring their brand is sensitive to the experiences and specificities of customers in different geographies. Even though literature from the IKEA case is focused on the design of products rather than spaces, publicly available material also shows that the design teams include other roles such as local interior designers, while observation of stores showed localisation in terms of spaces. However, what is less clear from these secondary sources is how these organizations come to manage the adaptation and integration of their global brand into geographically and culturally diverse spaces, and what role design as well as team organization plays in this. Therefore, looking into how these are achieved within each organization will offer an opportunity to understand the practices of design teams and designs role in creating culturally appropriate spatial experiences for global brands.

3. Methodology

The insights from the contextual review were used to formulate initial questions for empirical data collection. These questions were intended to explore issues such as: (1) understanding a design team's structure, its members' and their competences and qualifications; (2) understanding the process used for localisation; (3) understanding the tools used for both localisation and collaboration between the teams.

3.1. Primary data collection

3.1.1. Interviews

We conducted nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of both brand's teams. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling and new participants were recruited until data saturation was reached. The first recruitment approach was via messages distributed via publicly available professional networks (e.g. LinkedIn), and during interviews participants were asked to suggest other participants to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing (e.g. Skype) depending on participants' availabilities. We interviewed four staff members from Starbucks, and five from IKEA (see Table 1 for an overview).

Table 1. Participant information

Participant Code	Job Title	Interview Duration	Medium
Starbucks			
Store Designer A	Senior Designer – International Store Design & Concepts at Starbucks EMEA	1:03:02	Video Conferencing
Store Designer B	Interior Project Designer at Starbucks EMEA	27:58	Video Conferencing
Design Manager	Design Manager at Starbucks EMEA	51:30	Video Conferencing
Store Designer C	Store Designer at Starbucks, Miami, U.S.	37:28	Face to Face
IKEA			
Marketing Manager	Marketing Manager – IKEA Group, Gateshead, UK	58:32	Face to Face
Interior Design Lead	Interior Design Lead – IKEA Group, Bahrain	40:42	Face to Face
Marketing Specialist	Marketing Specialist – IKEA Group, Bahrain	38:09	Face to Face
Interior Designer	Interior Designer – IKEA Group, Bahrain	23:39	Video Conferencing
Architect/Interior Designer	Architect/ Interior Designer – IKEA Business, Amman	34:44	Video Conferencing

Starbucks interviewees were selected from two different Starbucks offices with two different store design teams. Three of the participants were based at the Amsterdam office and were responsible for the Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) markets, while one of the participants based in the Miami, Florida office was responsible for the South East America, Florida and Latin America markets.

IKEA has its own in-house design team and a GDT much like Starbucks, however they are grouped very differently. Instead of grouping all the designers concentrated regionally, IKEA has local designers dispersed into each one of their stores, the participants interviewed were selected from three different IKEA offices including Gateshead, U.K., Bahrain and Jordan.

The interviews began with a general introduction from participants about their role and then to specifics, moving between the individuals' own work, the wider design team and its position within the wider company. In the first part of the interviews, the participants were asked about their work on a daily basis and what a typical project looks like. The participants were then asked about their role in the context of a wider brand team in order to understand the bigger picture. We then moved on to ask about specific stores that they found successful, and what the representation of global identities in local territories means in relation to those particular examples. Finally, we asked about the main challenges they face in terms of localisation of spatial experiences and discussed initial suggestions on what kind of support would be useful to tackle such challenges.

4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017) was used to analyse the qualitative data obtained in the interviews. Data was transcribed by the lead author, which was then initially summarised through open-ended codes. Coding was conducted at the level of sentences, paragraphs or individual words, depending on their relevance to the study. The process led to us reviewing the codes and their relationships with each other and then developing themes, which we report on below. Our analysis led to the development of three themes in which two will be discussed in the following sections. These themes are Bac. The third theme that will not be discussed - "Possible Solutions" - include solutions to localisation and team issues suggested by participants. While of interest to our research, in this work we focus on understanding the opportunities and challenges participants expressed in terms of brand localisation in GDTs.

5. Findings

The first theme provides an overview of the relevance of localising spaces in global brands to the participants, while the second theme encapsulates what the interviews suggested to be the relationship between where the team is based and the struggles they face, as well as the tools, methods and processes they use.

5.1. The value of localising spatial experience

Findings from the interviews confirmed that localisation in relation to spatial experiences is practiced within global brand teams. Participants discussed the importance of localising and suggested that even though it is practiced, it can be further embedded and taken even further. For example, a participant from Starbucks notes:

"We as a design team are always interested in the local cultures, including for example; global artists, local events, and right now for example we make use of the internet, design websites, but I think it could be really interesting to have a platform that goes a bit deeper into a local culture. Giving an image to an outsider of what is really important for a specific area (..) it would be interesting if it goes deeper than just scratching the surface because then you can be more relevant in your designs and you can connect deeper into the local culture." Design Manager

Moreover, another participant from Starbucks confirmed that localising is practiced but needs to be further embedded in the team culture suggesting:

"I mean we do what we can but it is a challenge working for the world and making stuff that people can claim more so their own. It is a big challenge honestly. Some people like it more than others." – Store Designer A

"One of the things I miss when we come together as a design team is that we do not talk about culture as much as we need to." – Store Designer A

Evidence of the importance of localisation is also evident in the case of IKEA. A participant from IKEA talked about how some aspects that worked in other IKEA stores do not necessarily work in the participant's context, hence the need to localise:

"I face a lot of people that say in this country we used to this in another IKEA store – but from a local standpoint it would not work in Bahrain." – Marketing Specialist

Moreover, another IKEA participant suggested that localising is important in order to be respectful to other cultures, but at the same time suggested that in order to do so, the brand's identity needed to remain strong:

"You have to respect that culturally people are different and we are going in on that pretence but at the core of it the business idea and everything else is pretty much the same. Our identity is pretty strong and is not under compromise, we are not trying to be different, we are still IKEA, we are still Swedish." – Marketing Manager

In conclusion, the interviews showed that localisation is valuable to global brands, and participants even suggested the potential for localisation to be taken even further. If the identity of the brand is strong, localisation need not to be subject to compromise.

5.2. Design and distance

As discussed Starbucks' team is located regionally while IKEA's team is grouped in terms of locality. Moreover, where the team members are based was seen to alter the design process. The distance of the team members to the area they are designing for was mainly seen in the inspiration and generation of ideas phase and the feedback phase which are explained in this theme.

5.2.1. Inspiration and generating ideas

IKEA has local designers based in each one of their stores, who can also act as local knowledge contributors to that specific market because of their proximity to it. That is because when visits to local homes are conducted for research purposes, people from the local team are invited and their inputs are taken into consideration. In addition, even though the brief is handed to the local team with a certain demographic in mind, the local design team is left to interpret that brief and arrange it using both their professional and local knowledge. An example showcasing the use of local knowledge is shown in this participant's answer to seeking inspiration:

"We have that set and from that we get inspirational ideas whether from Pinterest or google and we also have a page which involves staff from the whole world of IKEA. So we can kind of search in that group and look at inspiration pictures, what people have implemented in their stores around the world and then we go back to our personal houses how people have things around and then we try to see what most houses have." - Interior Designer

The IKEA process starts and ends with the global team selecting a few members of the local team and visiting local homes in that region to specify the market drivers that need a design solution. The global team designs the new range of IKEA products and gathers inspiration for the backdrop of the spatial experiences, based on the home visits and the data gathered from them. The interviewee spoke about the home visits saying:

"There's one method that they do each year and it is called the home visit, it is where a team of designers and sales, randomly choose local homes and visit them. They try to understand how people place their furniture, how people organize, all of the different aspect of IKEA. Of course with the agreement of the people in the house we can take a look inside their storage units see how they organized the stuff. The living room, the kitchen, and all of the aspects taken from the home visits are translated into the upcoming rebuild, or upcoming campaign. The home visits are a very important method that they use that helps understand in reality how people live in their home in this local market." – Architect/Designer

The global team then launches that product range with a series of briefs for the local team to interpret in arranging the products. The local team interprets the briefs and arranges the season's products accordingly, considering their own local knowledge, the brief, and the feedback gathered last season. The interior designers interviewed from the IKEA branch spoke about the briefs suggesting that they adapt the spatial experience locally according to the brief, by arranging but also by mimicking popular building materials and settings for backdrop purposes. They suggested:

“They reflect the outdoor building materials (lime stone for example) usually also in balcony displays, and also they display interior materials that are usually used by locals, such as most common kitchen and bathroom tiles for walls and floors.” – Architect/Interior Designer

“We have what we call a work brief for every room. It talks about who is living in that room, it is a girl, it is a guy, living situation, are they living with kids, are they are multigenerational etc. Also it includes a kind of a problem, is it a storage space, is it that people come and sleepover etc.” – Interior Designer

However, the Starbucks process differs because the designers are located regionally and not locally. Therefore, their process begins with the real estate team, which identifies the market drivers requiring a design response. They research areas and new stores that could benefit the company, and develop a plan and budget for that specific site in the form of a brief. The brief shows up for the store design team on a database with all the new projects and on-going renovation projects. When the issues have been resolved the store design team – which are often not based in the location of the site to be designed – begin to seek inspiration. Sometimes this is done through travel, but travelling is more for the senior designers and managers. Those who get to travel usually bring back local products for the rest of the team to try. As the design manager at Starbucks mentioned in the interview:

“For example, if we travel and that is always a big budget issue, we cannot endlessly travel; and especially the project designers, they cannot endlessly travel. Then something that we always try to do, for example, is bring a few products that are locally relevant and they can be things to eat, coffee that is not from Starbucks but another brand, local tea, even some other products.” – Design Manager

Also, the store design team finds inspiration – although not required of them – in books and movies too. This is because the team is not local and therefore needs to explore the culture they are designing for before addressing the brief. A designer commented:

“It is not asked for us but we take initiative on, let's say, research and books. We watch films; we would do anything just to absorb and to actually understand who are the people we are working with.” – Store Designer A

The store design team can also contact the local team, which usually does not include designers, to get more locally-relevant information, although the information is not always reliable and accurate as one participant mentioned:

“So we try to do as much as we can and also to work closely with our guys on the ground. Normally they give us feedback on things and the problem with that is we would expect a bit of quality or much more insight from our partners but we don't always get that.” – Store Designer A

After seeking inspiration, initial concepts are drafted, with the help of a pre-established furniture and a material catalogue for each region and an art program where the store design team can choose from pre-made art, which may include collaborations with local artists from that specific region. A participant mentioned:

“We have a program called Starbucks art program and that is run by somebody in the US. It is a person that reaches out to artists around the world and they create pieces for us and that is renovated constantly as part of our catalogue. That means that it is a specific type of art that will run for a certain amount of time so it does not become

repetitive. It also means the artist is being paid fairly as the rights are purchased from them for that specific piece(...) So we have that as tools to implement and to tweak in our stores and we do the same with the furniture.” – Store Designer A

5.2.2. Feedback

The global team usually visits IKEA branches around the world once a year to make sure they are following the guidelines and are up to the required standard. The managers are usually the members of the teams that meet with the global team more regularly, after taking the teams’ suggestions into account. They usually represent the team at global meetings.

At IKEA, after final implementation, the global team visits to check that local stores are up to standard and gives the local teams pointers on how to advance. The local teams, including information from the sales and logistics teams, make small adaptations before the next product range launches. The major adaptation is informed by the home visits that the process started with. In terms of global visits a participant mentioned:

“They come for something they call the concept visit, once or twice a year. In the concept visit they check how IKEA in Jordan is applying the concept of IKEA.” – Architect/Interior Designer

In terms of small adaptations in between seasonal launches, a participant mentioned: *“Also from a sales perspective, if we notice that some items are not selling very well, we bring it to the front and test the sales of the item again. We try to refresh that on a monthly basis.” – Marketing Specialist*

While in terms of feedback at Starbucks the initial drawings are handed over to representatives of the market for feedback. The feedback is taken into consideration and the final concepts and drawings are drafted. If required, a local external firm can translate the drawings into the local language for construction teams to understand.

After the store has been implemented, final market feedback is gathered. However, feedback is used in the next project or renovation rather than being fed back into the same project because of the permanence of such spaces.

“We make so many stores in a short time that we don’t have time unfortunately to reflect a lot. I think we reflect on the go.” – Store Designer A

Within the store design team, there are weekly meetings for each market. Therein, the different teams meet to talk about relevant challenges, so it is important for the design team to present their project in order to receive feedback from the market.

5.3. Summary

The following table illustrates how two GDT manage their locally designed spatial experiences and the changes each team dynamic provides to the design process.

Table 2. Participant Information

Factor	Global Organisation	
	Starbucks	IKEA
Global Distribution	Regionally concentrated teams	Globally distributed teams
Inspiration	Inspiration through items that can be used from a distance such as books, movies, and an external local team	Inspiration through home visits, and locals relating global products to their own personal experiences
Generating Ideas	Pre-organised product catalogues based on region to choose from	Pre-made global seasonal product line with occasional locally devised solutions for designers to arrange
Feedback	The need for local visits to understand the local culture to be designed for	The need for global team visits to local stores to make sure guidelines are met

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to address how the fabric of GDT informs the localisation of the spatial experience design processes in global brands. Analysis of literature, semi-structured interviews, and observations from stores establish that both of the case study brands acknowledge that localisation is necessary. Looking at the examples of Starbucks and IKEA, it is evident that global companies have to choose between the team being in close quarters, and the team being close to the locations they are serving, and then develop tools to help fill the gaps that either choice entails. Evidence suggests that both brands generate ideas remotely. This shows that there is a need to create a framework that the teams could use so that they can immerse themselves holistically in a culture while keeping in mind the range of concerns including the budget, timeline, and methods of inspiration.

This study provides insight into the wider research topic of investigating the connections between brand management and experience design as influenced by the pressures of globalisation. The aim of the research was to investigate the relations between brand management and experience design within global brand teams, how they are influenced by different cultural contexts, and create a framework that those practitioners can use to enhance the creation of meaningful localised spatial experiences. We have contributed a deeper understanding of how team dynamics influence the design process in terms of localising spatial experiences can help global brand decide how to distribute their team members around the world. Moreover, understanding specific challenges that global teams face when distributed further around the world or more concentrated in certain locations in terms of localising branded spatial experiences can help develop processes, tools and frameworks that enhance the design process within these GDTs.

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