

# Visual Merchandising Displays – Practical or Ineffective?

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## ABSTRACT

Is visual merchandising display dead? It has been suppressed so many times before and in more than one way – especially when times are bad. However it has been brought back to life over and over again. Visual merchandising displays have long been a contentious issue in the apparel industry. Visual merchandising displays is about creating a sensation inside a store, creating the perfect look for a store and promoting the image of the store. Some regard it as a mere waste of good selling space. This study was undertaken to acquire a consumer response centred approach to visual merchandising displays and the effect it has on consumers. The study explored which aspects of visual merchandising displays consumers consider as significant in apparel retail stores. Therefore the primary research question posed by the literature was to identify which aspects of visual merchandising displays are the most significant and important to consumers. Explorative research was deemed to be the most appropriate for the study and qualitative data were collected. Focus groups were used to collect the first round of data where after naïve sketches were used to support the findings. The focus groups and the naïve sketches were analysed by means of a thematic analysis process. The findings indicated that a prominent visual stimulant and important aspect of visual merchandising displays was colour, which creates visual attraction and stimulation. Other important aspects of visual merchandising that were identified were the positioning of displays and the use of space, lighting as well as the neatness of displays. A further important aspect that was noted was that visual merchandising displays should provide information about the products sold in store. It became clear from the findings that visual merchandising displays have a functional role to play in apparel marketing.

Key words: Visual merchandising, apparel stores, colour schemes, space utilization, retail outlay

Visual merchandising must not be seen as a once off thematic or sales activity. It is rather an on-going process to ensure that visual merchandising is effective and useful. It is therefore important to consider how consumers and potential consumers react and respond to different visual merchandising elements, and to establish what they see as important factors in the merchandising process.

Visual merchandising is not an isolated and once off phenomenon but rather forms a significant component of retailing. Besides the window displays, which are y designed with

the purpose to attract walking by consumers and encourage walk-ins, there is also in-store decoration that is designed to enhance the customer's comfort and convenience while shopping. The overall aim is to enhance the consumers overall shopping experience. The next section focuses on what visual merchandising displays are and the role it plays in the total retail marketing effort.

### ***Visual merchandising displays***

Visual merchandising displays form part of visual merchandising, and it is imperative that the concept of visual merchandising is

explained and understood first before visual merchandising displays are discussed. . Visual merchandising can be defined as the activity that matches effective merchandise assortment with effective merchandise display (Bell & Ternus, 2006: 20). Visual merchandising can in simple terms be seen as the way in which retailers display their products in store in order to attract consumers and to enhance their propensity to purchase the items as displayed. Visual merchandising is therefore all about displaying the right merchandise and in so doing use the available retail space effectively and efficiently in order to increase sales. .

Visual merchandising display is one of the elements of visual merchandising and can be regarded as visual features that create attention or pleasure in a store (Mathew, 2008: 48). These displays are also known as feature areas. In simple terms, the displays that are used in apparel stores are predominantly used to decorate and beautify a store by adding additional fixtures, props, posters, materials, colours, frills and objects to a store. Apparel retail stores frequently use visual merchandising displays to illustrate a matter that is regularly associated with holidays, special days like Valentine's Day and St. Patrick's Day, women's month, mothers' and fathers' day, Easter, Christmas, seasonal changes, and major events such as the World Olympics. Therefore, depending on the event selected an apparel retailer's displays can be in a continuous flux of change. .

In today's retailing environment visual merchandising forms a central part of the retailers marketing strategy. Besides the window displays, which are clearly designed with the purpose to attract walking by consumers and encourage walk-ins, there are also in-store decorations that are designed to enhance the customer's comfort and convenience while shopping, and overall to offer the consumer a better shopping experience. Taking into account the importance of visual merchandising on retail businesses today, the single and most important reason for using visual merchandising displays is to engage with and inspire shoppers, to encourage them to buy more of the products the retailer is selling, to increase sales, make margin and generate a return on floor space.

Visual merchandising also has a profound effect on the acceptance of a product, the creating of the brand value perceptions, as well as the overall marketing of the product or brand. Attracting customers to retail stores and presenting merchandise in a way that will appeal to consumers senses is one of the many roles that visual merchandising displays fulfils in retail stores.

High-quality visual merchandising displays can uphold consumer interest and persuade consumers to lower their psychological defences to make a purchase (Kerfoot, Davies & Ward, 2003: 144). It is for this reason that retailers use in-store visual merchandising displays to influence consumer perceptions and by doing so also influence their buying behaviour. Retailers want their stores to attract consumers into their stores, and once inside assist them to find the merchandise they are looking for and to motivate them to make unplanned and impulse purchases – all influenced by visual merchandising displays. In addition to this, retailers want to provide customers with an enjoyable shopping experience (Levi & Weitz, 2009: 509).

Having discussed visual merchandising displays it is important to look at how these displays impact on shoppers or consumers perceptions.

### ***Consumer perceptions***

Consumer perceptions can be defined as the practice where a person observes, selects, organises and reacts to environmental stimuli in a significant way (du Plessis & Rousseau, 2003: 218). Apparel retailers have to discover and establish how their visual merchandising displays are perceived by consumers with the purpose to identify what the consumers are actually seeing, and which features are most important to them.

Consumer behaviour is often influenced by daily stimuli that act as triggers. It is therefore important that apparel retailers understand the idea of perception in order for them to determine what influences consumers to buy (Cant, van Heerden & Ngambi, 2010: 54).

Blythe (2008: 91) summarized perceptions as being "... a process of converting sensory input

into an understanding of how the world works". The process of perception consists of four important steps, namely exposure, attention, interpretation and memory.

Every message that is created by an apparel retailer is done with an explicit purpose in mind. When entering an apparel retail store, consumers act differently to the sensations and stimuli around them; they can decide to either pay attention to it or ignore it. However consumers emerge to make their own decisions by accepting the message that is fashioned by certain sensations or stimuli (such as visual merchandising displays) to fit in with their own special experiences, needs and prejudices (Cant, Brink & Brijball, 2006: 114).

By establishing or understanding how consumers perceive visual merchandising displays the retailers is in a better position to identify what consumers are actually seeing when viewing the display, how they interpret it and which features are most important to them. In so doing the retailer can better align the internal focus of their visual merchandising displays with the consumers' expectations.

In order to obtain answers to these pertinent questions research was conducted.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary research question posed by the literature was as follows: What aspects of visual merchandising displays are important to consumers?

### *Research design*

This research study used an exploratory approach into the South African apparel retail industry. Exploratory research was performed to illuminate unclear situations (Zikmund & Babin, 2010: 50) with regards to visual merchandising displays in apparel retail stores. This research method is not projected to present definite evidence, as it is more important to receive suggestions and insight than scientific objectivity (Wiid & Diggins, 2009: 199).

Qualitative research was used during this research study because an in depth

understanding of the consumers' perceptions about visual merchandising displays and the importance thereof was required. Therefore an interpretative technique that describes, decodes, and translates consumers' perceptions is necessary to obtain the required information (Cooper & Schindler, 2008: 214). Due to the exploratory nature of the study, non-probability, purposive sampling was used. The subjects were selected based of their accessibility and by the purposive personal judgment of the researcher.

The criteria that were used to select participants to take part in this study were as follows:

- People who buy clothing at apparel retail outlets in Tshwane
- People who reside in Tshwane
- People who read, speak and understand English
- People that are willing and that have the time to participate in the study

### *Data collection and documentation*

The data was collected by using a crystallisation process. In easy terms, crystallisation is a modern development of completing research and it is used in order to find various instances from numerous sources to find unification (Huberman & Miles, 1994: 179-210).

For this study, crystallisation was achieved by using focus groups and naive sketches to collect data. In this way, the researcher was able to compare two forms of data with one another to gain as much data as possible from each participant.

### *Data analysis and interpretation*

Once all the data had been captured and cleaned, the data analysis process started. Due to the fact that the data was contextual in nature, a process called thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis is an exercise where qualitative research involves searching through data to identify any repeated patterns (Tesch, 1990: 113).

## RESULTS

**Theme: Participants highlighted the importance of physical and sensory attributes of visual merchandising displays that facilitated subconscious perceptions to surface into conscious awareness and knowledge (cognitive process).**

The theme connects with the objective to determine what aspects of visual merchandising displays are important to consumers. Participants communicated that sensory and physical attributes are important to them. Attributes such as brightness, the size and height of displays, the suitability of the displays and the fact that the displays should be realistic and logical were highlighted. They also mentioned that the displays should complement the space of the store. Another aspect that the participants highlighted was that visual merchandising displays should give information about the merchandise on display.

It was evident that visual merchandising displays should provide context and cater for individual needs, by staying true to the brand image and by changing the displays regularly. In other words, keep the displays up to date with the current trends and seasons.

Three categories emerged from this theme. These three categories are explained below. Quotations were taken from the focus groups to illustrate the participant's views on the various categories of this theme/objective.

### **3.1 Important sensory and physical attributes of visual merchandising displays include:**

#### **3.1.1 Brightness, size and height of the displays**

The focus groups were more attentive to displays that were at eye-level, and that physically displayed the products that could be bought from the store by making use of mannequins or half-mannequins. Images, posters and pictures did not create the same interest and intention to purchase as the sensory experience then became one dimensional.

- "...maybe try to keep it to the eye level of your average height."
- "Prefer physical display to images and pictures."

#### **3.1.2 Size and suitability of the displays**

While the focus groups continuously agreed that the visual merchandising displays were useful, they were very intent on providing information about what aspects hindered the successful perception of a display. The majority of the focus groups explained that the display needed to remain secondary to the actual products that could be bought from the retail store. Furthermore, the participants were acutely aware of having enough space to move freely between apparel in store, therefore busy and extensive displays are not well received.

- "I don't like being overpowered by the display--it should be for guidance and demonstration, not dominant"
- "I had been or occasionally been given a fright by the props in the shops, especially when it's very busy and you walk, not on the pathway, and you turn and suddenly there is this prop standing looking and you, oh sorry, oh sorry, it's a prop, you feel so stupid speaking to the silly prop next to you not expecting it there..."
- "...the visual merchandising display should not detract from things like space, you should still have your space to walk around, and it should not be in the way of me seeing the product..."
- "Organised and structured displays"

#### **3.1.3 The displays should be logical and realistic**

The visual merchandising displays are better received if they are logical and realistic for the consumer. A fanciful, elaborately fictional display, while beautiful for some consumers, would not attract others if it was out of context with the product offering.

- "...what I will notice, is if it's out of context..."

### 3.1.4 *The use of displays should complement the space of the store*

The main concern that came from the participants of the focus groups was that visual merchandising displays should never be cluttered, but should always remain neat and well designed.

- “Don’t clutter”

### 3.2 *The use of visual merchandising displays should provide information about the product and emphasise the merchandise on display:*

The participants of the research study explained that visual merchandising displays should always strive to educate the consumer on the products and merchandise on offer. Whether it’s how to wear a scarf, or which leggings to pair with ankle boots, the display should empower and enlighten the consumer so that they are positively impacted to make a purchase decision.

- “Highlight the product on display”
- “Props and the fixtures must be complementary”
- “...make sure your products match your displays... the less confused the more simplistic the better so really decide on what you want to say and really match it to what you have to offer.”

### 3.3 *Visual merchandising displays should provide context and cater for individual needs, by means of the following:*

Providing information on the products in the store is an important outcome that should be realised by visual merchandising displays, in the opinion of the focus groups. However, the participants also feel that the displays should also seek to cater for individual needs. This should be done by focusing on the context of the display, as well as by ensuring that individual consumers will enjoy a display because of its texture, its dimensions, its colour and its décor.

- “Providing information about the product”
- “...if there is a context to the display, then definitely I will notice it and if there is no context obviously I would not consciously but it’s about subconsciously that I will notice it...”
- “...we look at the signage, the material that they use.”

### 3.3.1 *Change it regularly; keep it up to date*

All the participants of the focus groups agreed that visual merchandising displays need to be altered regularly in order to keep the atmosphere of the store fresh and vibrant and competitive. This will denote that new stock has arrived, or that new merchandise or products are on offer, creating more opportunities for the consumer to make a purchase decision.

- “...I do notice if they would change it continuously, you come to a specific Mall and you are there often, and you had this window being dressed say in pinks for a Lady’s Store, and suddenly it is in a total different colour, I notice it...”
- “Keep to the Brand, keep to the lifestyle, be neat, every second month, re-order it or replace it...”
- “...if they didn’t change the displays, they didn’t changed the products, so there is nothing new for me to see because it’s the old stock basically so you have seen the stock already so why are you going in again?”

### 3.3.2 *Stay true to brand image*

Consumers enjoy stores that have a strong but welcoming brand identity. It attracts loyalty and makes people feel comfortable with the quality and product offering that can be expected.

- “...the type of lifestyle, the type of person they are trying to attract or, then you know you obviously want to stay because you identify with the look

and the feel that they are trying to create...”

□ “...it’s buying the image; you are not buying the actual product.”

□ “...stick true to your Brand image...”

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings illustrated that a prominent visual stimulant and important aspect of visual merchandising displays was colour, which create visual attraction and stimulation in apparel retail stores. Further aspects that were identified were the positioning of the visual merchandising displays and the use of space and lighting inside the stores. The neatness of the visual merchandising displays were also highlighted as being a significant feature. Another important aspect that was noted was that visual merchandising displays should provide information about the merchandise sold in store.

It became clear that the visual merchandising displays should consider the individual needs of consumers. In addition, participants explained that by placing too many diverse kinds of products in the same visual merchandising display area, could result in a display being confusing.

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