

# Visual Merchandising Displays' Effect On Consumers: A Valuable Asset Or An Unnecessary Burden For Apparel Retailers

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## ABSTRACT

*Several consumers think they only purchase products when they go shopping, however time and time again they purchase the experience of shopping as well. The experience of shopping is highly influenced by the visual merchandising displays (also known as feature areas where merchandise is presented) used in store. Much has been said about visual merchandising displays and the effect it has on consumer behaviour. The way products are displayed and promoted in apparel retail stores can have a vast impact on consumer responses and how much merchandise the retailer sells. The main research question explored the effect visual merchandising displays have on consumer behaviour. Explorative research was deemed to be the most appropriate for this study and qualitative data was 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 naïve sketches were analysed by means of thematic analysis. The findings indicated that the visual merchandising displays guide consumers in the direction of the products they are seeking and that it also guides their decisions. The participants agreed that their buying behaviour is influenced on a subconscious level, based on the eminence of the visual merchandising displays, as well as their personal preferences and gender.*

**Keywords:** Visual Merchandising Displays; Retail Industry; Apparel Retailers; Consumer Behaviour; Subliminal Influence; Gender

## INTRODUCTION

A question that apparel retailers often ask is whether the visual merchandising displays used in stores are beneficial for their customers. Successful visual merchandising displays have an effect on consumer emotion; consumers sometimes purchase products unconsciously depending on their current mood. Therefore, consumers might visit a retailer to enjoy a mood-changing experience, something that will make them feel good. Apparel retailers can therefore take advantage of this human emotion to increase their sales by merely enhancing the store environment.

Retailers want their stores to attract consumers by assisting them to find the merchandise they desire and to motivate them to make planned, unplanned and impulse purchases, and to ultimately provide them with enjoyable shopping experiences (Levi & Weitz, 2009: 509). If the visual merchandising displays do not have this desired effect on consumers, the question whether it has any value for retailers to spend time and money on these visual displays arises.

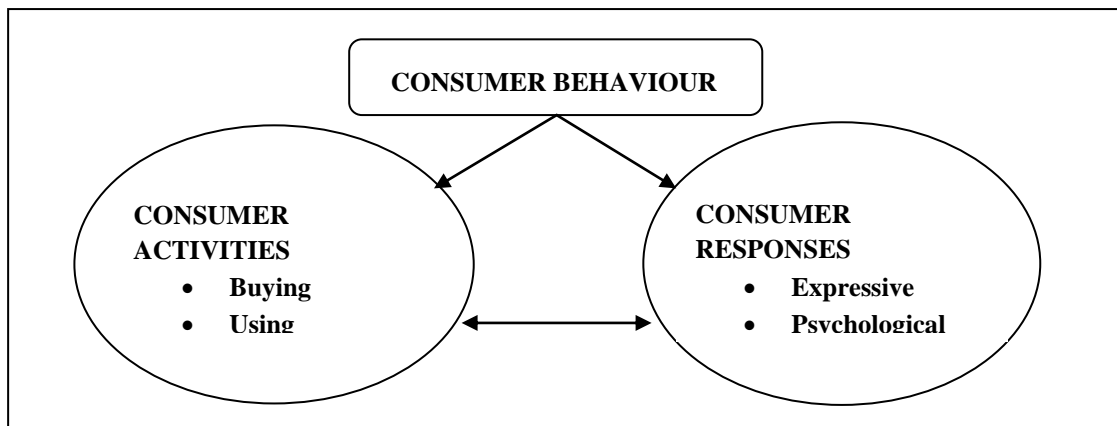
This study proceeds from a consumer response-centred approach to visual merchandising stimuli in an attempt to holistically consider this area of the retail industry. The study could benefit apparel retailers in South Africa as the impact visual merchandising displays has on consumer behaviour was uncovered.

**DISCUSSION**

**Consumer Behaviour**

The world consumers live in is rich with ambience. When entering an apparel retail store, consumers act differently to the sensations and stimuli around them; they either pay attention to it or they ignore it. Each and every message created by an apparel retailer is done with a specific purpose in mind. However, consumers transpire to make their own decisions by adapting the message that is created by certain sensations or stimuli (such as visual merchandising displays) to fit in with their own unique experiences, desires and prejudices (Cant, Brink & Brijball, 2006: 114).

Consumer behaviour can be defined as “... the study of individuals, groups or organisations and the processes they use to select, secure, use and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impact that these processes have on the consumer and society...” (Cant, Van Heerden & Ngambi, 2010: 51). Kardes, Cline and Cronley (2011: 8) added to this definition by stating that consumer behaviour also includes the consumers’ expressive, psychological and social responses that lead, establish or follow these responses as demonstrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Consumer Behaviour**

Source: Adapted from Kardes, F. R., Cline, T. W. & Cronley, M. L. (2011).  
Consumer Behaviour: Science And Practice. China: South-Western, p. 8

Figure 1 indicates that consumer behaviour consists of consumer activities and consumer responses, that both influence each other. Therefore, a consumer’s expressive, psychological and social responses will have an influence on their buying, using and disposing activities, and vice versa.

An expressive response reveals a consumer’s passions, feelings and their frame of mind. Furthermore, Figure 1 also refers to psychological responses that consist of a consumer’s thought processes, judgments, attitudes and values and could include a consumer’s feeling toward a specific apparel retail store. A retailer’s store environment could also influence the consumer’s purchase decision, which is discussed below.

For example, if a consumer wants to buy a new winter’s coat, both pleasure and indecision may form a part of his/her expressive response due to the various decisions that have to be made. The consumer will have to decide on a specific product, store, brand, style and colour, as well as on payment method. As part of the responses in Figure 1, the consumer could imagine wearing the coat, making a psychological list of characteristics the coat should have in order to enhance the decision-making process.

The social responses, as depicted in Figure 1, include a consumer’s obvious actions during a purchase decision. The consumer will start by comparing different stores and brands with one another, paying attention to different advertisements, trying on different coats, and obtaining opinions from friends or family. If a consumer is

not completely satisfied with the store environment, he/she might make a psychological choice not to enter the store, therefore deciding not to purchase the coat from that specific store. All of these actions could have an influence on the way consumers behave. Apparel retailers have to establish how their visual merchandising displays will be perceived by the consumers. It is essential to identify what consumers are actually seeing and how they interpret it. By establishing how visual merchandising displays are perceived by the consumers, it could benefit apparel retailers to align the internal focus of their visual merchandising displays with the consumers' expectations.

### **Visual Merchandising Displays**

Visual merchandising display is the presentation of merchandise at its finest. Display is the glamour, the spark, the stage, the oomph and sparkle that surrounds a store and makes the consumers stop, look, and buy what has been placed together with care and presented with skill (Mathew, 2008: 48). These displays are also known as feature areas.

Visual merchandising displays use creative techniques in order to save both the sales person's and the shopper's time by making shopping effortless. The visual merchandising display process is often referred to as the "silent sales person" by providing the consumers with information through visual mediums, as well as by suggestive selling - suggestions to add items to a consumer's original purchase (Bhalla & Anuraag, 2010: 21). This process is often referred to as the visual merchandising communication process. A great deal of communication between the retailer and the consumer takes place through the use of visual merchandising displays. The retailer communicates to the consumer by means of their store, the store's interior design, layout, atmospherics and merchandising displays, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Visual Merchandising Communication Process**

Source: Adapted from Bell, J. & Ternus, K (2006). *Silent selling*. 3rd ed., New York: Fairchild Publications, p. 21

Visual merchandising displays are frequently used to introduce new products or brand extensions to consumers, as well as to decorate a store. This is a planned and systematic approach to display the stock that is available in the store. Visual merchandising displays perform different functions in an apparel retail outlet, such as supporting sales, to support the retail strategies, to communicate with consumers and to assist in communicating the fashion retailer's brand image (Levi & Weitz, 2009: 531; Bell & Turnus, 2008: 20-22).

Displaying merchandise in windows was the first sign of visual merchandising displays, thus it was born to increase sales by first attracting shoppers through the power of window displays and then through in-store visual merchandising displays. These displays encouraged the consumers to remain in the store, purchase the product, and have a positive retail experience in order for them to return to the same store.

Retailers realise that the way in which they use visual merchandising displays has the power to create images of the products in the mind of consumers. Visual merchandising displays are now a significant tool for retailers in order to attract and entice consumers.

### **South African Apparel Retail Industry**

As the latest statistics indicate, the retail industry in South Africa is one of the largest contributors to the economy's total income (Statistics South Africa, 2010: 1). Retail trade sales increased by 3.4% year-on-year in November 2012 compared to November 2011. Main contributors to the 3.4% increase were apparel retailers in textiles, clothing, footwear and leather goods (Statistics South Africa, 2012: 2).

It can be inferred from the statistics that the apparel retail industry has a significant impact on the overall retail industry and that the apparel retail industry is responsible for a significant share of the overall retail industry growth (Statistics South Africa, 2011: 2). The demands of consumers, and the options presented to them within the apparel retail industry, are countless. Retailing allows that the individual demands of consumers are met even though individual expenditures are being compressed by difficult economic conditions. Nevertheless, the South African retail industry is still growing and is responsible for a large part of South Africa's economic growth.

The impact that retailing has on the South African economy and on people's lifestyles is easily overlooked. It is imperative that the apparel retail industry continues to find innovative ways to develop in order to remain competitive. Through the years, retailing has evolved and competition has become cut-throat. Due to the high competition in the apparel retail industry today, every store strives to entice consumers to enter their store by having the most exciting and visually appealing retail environment. This cultivates an atmosphere where consumers can shop effortlessly for different colours, fabrics, value and styles of international standards. In order to achieve such visually appealing retail environments, apparel retailers make use of visual merchandising displays.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The extent to which visual merchandising displays affect consumer behaviour was studied by means of exploratory research. Exploratory research is used to observe insights into the common nature of a research problem (Tustin, Ligthelp & Martins, 2005: 84). Due to the fact that detailed explanations, in terms of consumer perceptions, were needed, qualitative research was used because it discovers the true significance and new insights about the available data (Zikmund & Babin, 2010: 131).

Non-probability, purposive sampling was used where the samples were grouped in a process that did not give all the individuals in the population an equal chance of being selected (Tustin *et al.*, 2005: 89). Participants were selected on the basis of their accessibility and by the purposive personal judgment of the researcher (Zikmund & Babin, 2010: 432). The inclusion criteria for the purposive sampling for this research study were people who are located and buy clothing at apparel retail outlets in Tshwane; people who read, speak and understand English; people who have a cell phone and have access to e-mail; people who are willing and have time to participate in the study.

The first round of data was collected by means of two focus groups, each with eight participants. Naive sketches were used as a secondary measure to validate the data received in the focus groups. The naive sketches comprised of open-ended questions. In this way, two forms of data were compared with one another to gain the most data possible from each participant.

The focus groups were based on the use of visual stimulus material. Photographs from one of Tshwane's most popular apparel retail stores were presented to the participants in the focus groups. The participants were asked a question derived from the research aim. The question used to structure the focus groups (the same question was also used in the naive sketches) was: "Do the visual merchandising displays of a store effect your decision to make a purchase?"

Due to the fact that the study was contextual in nature, thematic analysis was used to analyse the gathered data. Repeated data patterns were identified and sorted into themes and categories (Tesch, 1990: 113). By following this process, it organises and describes data in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 82).

## **RESULTS**

The outcome (findings) of the question asked in the focus groups is examined in terms of a theme and its underlying categories, as outlined by Tesch's model (thematic analysis).

*Theme:* Participants expressed varied views in terms of the effect that visual merchandising displays has on their buying decisions based on personal preferences.

The theme connects with the following objective: To determine the effect visual merchandising displays have on consumer behaviour. The participants explained that their buying behaviour is influenced to a limited extent. They continued to say that the visual merchandising displays guide them in the direction of the products they are seeking and that it guides their product choice. The participants agreed that their buying behaviour is influenced on a subliminal level based on the quality of the visual merchandising displays and their personal preferences, including gender.

*...there is a distinction between men shoppers and women shoppers because mostly here the men said they don't really notice it; however, the women agreed that if it's in a context of what they want to buy, they will notice it. However, Participant X said that he would notice it, for instance, if it is in his context.*

The following three categories emerged from the theme:

- First Category – The Participants Agreed That Their Buying Behaviour Is Influenced To A Limited Extent

The focus groups found that visual merchandising displays aid in the final stages of decision-making regarding the purchasing of a specific product. However, there are other factors, like price, that also affect the final decision. When visual merchandising displays are well designed and logical, the participants tended to be attracted to the section of products that were emphasised in the display. This illustrates that visual merchandising displays influence buying behaviour. The following quotations were taken from the data to exemplify the findings:

*I think it influences me to want it, but I don't necessarily buy it.*

*...it draws me towards the section, to that specific section.*

*If I am happy with the visual merchandising display, that can lead to me buying the specific product.*

- Second Category – Buying Behaviour Is Influenced On A Subliminal Level Based On The Quality Of The Visual Merchandising Displays

The participants in the research study agreed that a visual merchandising display that is perceived to be of a superior quality has the ability to capture the positive buying behaviour of the consumer. However, if the display does not register as that of a superior quality for the consumer, it may create a negative perception of buying the product. The following quotation validates this category:

*Good visual merchandising displays will create the right atmosphere and context for me to buy, while bad visual merchandising displays will work against my purchasing the product in question.*

- Third Category - Buying Behaviour Is Influenced On A Subliminal Level Based On The Personal Preferences Of The Consumer, Including Gender

Although the visual merchandising displays are useful in promoting certain products, if the displays are well designed and logical, the participants feel that there are so many other personal preferences to take into account for the displays to have a lasting effect on every consumer. There are colours, textures, styles, décor, sizes, budgetary constraints and a host of other personal preferences that will affect the buying behaviour of the consumer more than the visual merchandising display will. The following quotations were taken from the focus groups to illustrate this category:

*...if I was a shopper, per se, I don't think I would notice it; it would still be one of those things that I would notice if it was not there...*

*...you will notice it subconsciously...*

The focus groups also found that visual merchandising displays aid in the final stages of decision-making regarding the purchasing of a specific product. However, there are other factors, like price, that also affect the final decision.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The participants' perceptions of the impact of visual merchandising displays on their buying behaviour varied, as evidenced by their attention or lack of interest to visual merchandising displays when they first walked into a store. Consumer behaviour is influenced by a limited extent as visual merchandising displays guide consumers in the direction of the products as well as in product choice. Consumer behaviour will also be influenced by their personal preferences and the quality of the displays.

What is noticed by the consumers, in terms of the visual merchandising displays, is mostly subliminal (below the threshold of consciousness) and it is influenced by personal preferences, contextual aspects, such as themes; type of store and brand or branding; gender, to some extent; quality of the visual merchandising display and sensory and cognitive aspects.

It was noted in the focus groups that the consumers' attention is drawn to certain aspects (such as colour and breathing space in the store) of visual merchandising displays which creates a space where their shopping experience can be positive. The participants tended to be attracted to visual merchandising displays that are well designed and logical. This illustrates that visual merchandising displays influence buying behaviour.

The research study suggests that women are more attentive to the complete retail experience which includes visual merchandising displays. In comparison, men search for signs in a store as to where to find what they are looking for. The focus groups also explained that they notice ill-fitting themes in apparel retail stores, in terms of whether the items displayed are actually available in store or whether it sends the correct message with the complement of the display.

## **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

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**NOTES**