

# The Impact of Visual Merchandising on the Consumer Decision Process for Intimate Apparel

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## Abstract

Intimate apparel has been regarded as a personal issue and the ultimate purchase intention is based on the degree of wearability in terms of the various functional considerations. Previous researches have seldom focused on its unique feature regarding consumers' decision process and there is one by Hart and Dewsnap (2001) specifically deals with the issue. However, focuses were put on the physical conditions of intimate apparel such as functional support; decline in aesthetic appearance of a bra and normal product replacement and the interaction between a retailer and a consumer has not been stressed. In contemporary intimate apparel retailing, the fashion and trend element becomes another key reason for consumers to purchase new intimate apparel and in order to be distinctive in the marketplace; intimate retailers has paid a close attention to intensify its retail identity by unique Visual Merchandising strategy to arouse purchase. In this study, Visual Merchandising of fashion-conscious and function-oriented intimate apparel retailers were included to test its impact of decision process. Focus group interviews were conducted to collect in-depth understanding on the impact of various strategies. The results show that mannequin format is an important criterion to influence the awareness stage and shop entry and the sensory pleasure inside a store. The combination of mannequin, lighting and props in a window display and a store highlight can further intensify the decision process where the former affects the affective pleasure of consumers and help them determine the suitability of a store's retail identity to personal preference, the latter intensifies the sensational feeling of consumers and encourage the tendency to try on or purchase which directly relates to the pre-purchase stage. Intimate apparel retailers can adopt the results as an reference to develop the corresponding Visual Merchandising strategies according their target segments.

*Keywords:* Visual Merchandising, decision-making process, intimate apparel

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## 1. Introduction

Comparing with fashionable outerwear, the perception of intimate apparel is based on the functional aspect. There is specific model to explain the decision-making process of fashion (Sproles, 1979) which focuses on the process, such as the influences of communication channels in current society, the characteristics and the functional purpose of fashion objects. However, for intimate apparel, Hart and Dewsnap (2001) also developed a decision-making model to explain the behavior. The study found that there were interlinked a complicated set of interlinked factors to affect decision making on intimate apparel, and amount the factors, brand loyalty tended to be the frequently adopted factor to shorten the decision-making process and the degree of perceived risk while shopping intimate apparel. Speaking from the viewpoint of marketing and consumer behavior, the two models are adequate to explain the corresponding phenomenon. However, viewing from the retailing aspect, store environment can intensify consumers' response (either positive or negative) to a brand of the product being sold in the store. To achieve a positive store atmosphere, visual merchandising has been widely employed by retailers. Also, intimate apparel has been going through a series of fashion treatments in recent years. Examples can be found in contemporary intimate apparel brands, such as Victoria's Secret; Une Na Na cool from Wacoal; Agent Provocateur and so on. Instead of targeting different customer segments by adding advanced functions to products, intimate apparel brands try to establish a distinctive image in consumers' mind with fashionable designs and unforgettable store atmosphere. In this study, focus is put on the influence of visual merchandising on store atmosphere

and its corresponding impact on consumer decision making process for intimate apparel.

### *Literature Review*

Visual Merchandising is an important component in atmospheric management. It includes both store exterior and store interior. Store exterior includes window display, retail premises, and facade whereas store interior includes store layout, fixtures and fittings, wall display and store highlights. Also, there are components governing both store exterior and interior, which include color co-ordination, lighting design, mannequin selection and the application of design principles. If retailers want to project the best side of its company, a good selection of the visual merchandising with a detailed consideration of proper cooperate expressions are vital. As a result, customer can receive the intended message of retailers through different kinds of theme and style developed from appropriate visual merchandising strategy. To sum up, visual merchandising helps maintaining the overall image of a retail store in consumers' mind (Park et.al.,1986)

Apart from retail identity building, visual merchandising is regarded as a powerful tool in shaping consumers' final decision inside a store. Visual merchandising focuses on various aspects of consumers, which include sensory pleasure, affective pleasure and cognitive pleasure (Fiore, Yah and Yoh, 2000). Sensory aspect includes personal feeling of consumers, such as response to temperature and noise, feeling crowded in a store (Grossbart et. al 1990; Hornik, 1992; Ko & Rhee, 1994). Store-related and product-related information can also be acquired from store

environment (Baker et. al 1994), for example, searching clothing that enhances one's self-concept (Kleine III et al., 1993). Also, window display plays a crucial role in affecting store entry decisions as it is a very important information cue for consumers (Bettman et. al, 1998)

Regarding consumer decision process, there are different school of thoughts regarding clothing consumption. The process of diffusion can affect consumptions' response to different product attributes (Mitchell and Creatorex, 1990). Examples include the selection of promotional channels and the format of transition. Also, there were other thoughts regarding general consumers decision making process. For Roger's model (1962), decision making was not longitudinal but rather cross-sectional. Following Roger's thought, Robertson (1971) developed a conceptual model with eight procedures (problem perception, awareness, comprehension, attitude, legitimation, trial, adoption and dissonance. However, Sproles (1979) developed a specific framework for fashion diffusion with ten procedures. The key focus of Sproles' model was the relationship between the influences of communication channels in current society and the functional purpose of fashion objects. To further elaborate this aspect, Kasier et al. analyzed the adoption process from the viewpoint of social psychology of clothing. Finally, symbolic interactionist theory of fashion was developed to explain the rationale behind change and adoption was mostly due to human ambivalence problem of appearance styles across different social strata. Capitalist society setting was the prerequisite of causing different appearance styles emerging at the same time. People involved have to engage in different degrees of social interactions to find out the most appropriate look within their social groups. Since there were many appearance styles claimed as fashionable at the same time, the negotiation process will keep on going. Hart and Dewsnap (2001) conducted a specific study on decision process of purchasing intimate apparel. The findings showed that consumers had to go through a set of interlinked factors or relied on brand loyalty to shorten the process. In the light of the criteria, self-concept, perceived risk and consumer involvement were also critical in shaping the final decision.

While reviewing the current trend of intimate apparel brands, being functional is the fundamental requirement of consumers, adding extra value to products is regarding as the selling point. In terms of functional aspect, using fragranced fabric or skin care treatment can be found in the Triumph brand. In terms of fashion side, fashion-oriented apparel brands have been introducing fashionable underwear from time to time. To name a few, brands like Calvin Klein, Victoria's secret, La Perla are all doing well by constantly introduce fashionable intimate apparel. Therefore, not only functions but also aesthetics are important while selecting intimate apparel. However, there's little research about the inter-relationship between the importance of store aesthetics and consumer decision process, as a result, the aim of this study is to look into this specific relationship.

## 2. Methodology

The ground theory was chosen as the study method by using focus group interviews. The choice of the grounded theory method was based on the nature of its analysis. The method can generate specific relationships and theory on a particular phenomenon or a particular group of samples. Also insight ideas can also be generated through the systematic gathering and analysis of data. The data were gone through three stages of

analysis so as to generate the core idea(s) of the study. Stages of analysis include open-coding, axial-coding and selective coding. During the selective coding, data were categorized according to different nature of the data. After the open-coding procedure, interrelationships between categories were developed and they were used as the criteria of collecting data in the axial-coding stage. During the axial-coding stage, developed relationships derived from open-coding were adopted as the basis to collect in-depth opinions from subjects. Further investigations will be started in selective coding by using the verified relationships in axial coding in order to generate a theory to explain the studied phenomenon. In the study, the aim is to find out the impact of visual merchandising on intimate apparel selling, thus, relationships located in the axial-coding will be discussed together with critical incidents that affect consumer decision making process.

For study samples, female aged 25 to 35 were the study target. The rationale of choosing this age group was 25 is the starting age of young adult (Hong Kong Government 2007) and this age range shared a relatively high consumption power in the Asia (Chandha and Husband 2006 ). Also, females in this group are mostly working ladies and grown-up and having the right to make decisions by themselves in making a purchase. Thus, focus was put on this particular group for generating inspirations. To select the participants, theoretical sampling was used. The direction of sample selection was based on the relationship generated from different categories in open; axial and selective coding. The data collection ends when no new relationship can be found from the axial data and selective coding begins. In the initial stage, samples were collected by arbitrary rules and ideas obtained from previous research. During the axial and selective procedure, sample selection was based on the ideas and findings generated from previous interviews. Finally, the sampling process ceases when the data reach the saturation stage (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

## 3. Findings and discussion

### 3.1 *The intention to look for new intimate apparel*

Subjects revealed that there were four reasons of looking for new intimate apparel, these being 1) physical condition. Due to daily usage and seasonal change, there was a constant need of replacing a new set of intimate apparel after a couple of months. 2) Print media. Among different kinds of promotional channel, printed media shared the highest influence on arousing the need to looking for new lingerie. Subjects reported that the unity of printed advertising, outdoor advertising and large posters in window display and store reinforces their memory of the new products and also, the repetition of same advertising image further arouse customers' intention to check out the promoted products. 3) Peer influence. Group cohesion has been found among subjects as a critical factor to try on new lingerie products. Subjects further elaborated that hanging out with friends could increase the tendency to shop impulsively, especially for consumers who rank group acceptance as a key element in their social lives; word-of-mouth communication became a standard to evaluate a new lingerie product. However, the difference between a fashionable outerwear and fashionable lingerie was fitting still shared the importance with style for evaluating the likeness of new lingerie design. 4) Self-concept. Comparatively, subjects with aesthetic training background tended to have a clear direction about what they need in terms of lingerie style, peer pressure acted only a reference for them and tended to evaluate

private self over public self when choosing lingerie. Subjects who had a strong public self concept tended to choose styles and brands that having a high degree of social acceptance or in other words, less fashionable and contemporary. The findings in terms of the need of purchasing lingerie were similar to Hart and Dewsnap's study (2001) in the problem recognition stage. However, an interesting finding was located regarding the impact of window display and in-store atmosphere.

### 3.2 Mannequin influence

Different types of mannequins adopted by high-end, mass market or function-oriented lingerie brands were shown to subjects. It is revealed that mannequins act as a barrier or a moral standard to store entrance. Negative feedbacks were obtained regarding the adoption of human-like mannequins with seductive postures. Even though for either high-end or mass market brands, placing human-like forms in windows draws the attention of the subjects immediately and also has a strong association with the negative side of being a bad girl. Nearly all the subjects showed a negative attitude on sexy mannequins in the study. Also the brand names of each retailer did not disclosed during the study; the brand perception effect would be eliminated. A number of well-know intimate apparel brands were included in the study; they were Victoria's Secret; Agent Provocateur; Calvin Klein to name a few. However, subjects expressed that they would not enter stores like Victoria's Secret or Agent Provocateur since immoral feelings happened when they saw the mannequins.

In general, mannequins leading to negative response to store entrance have similar features, 1) heavy make-up with flesh skin color. All the mannequins were with heads in the study. They wore heavy make-up to bring the silhouette of their faces and facial expressions are usually seductive in order to intensify the feminine feeling. 2) Exaggerated body gestures. Unusual postures are found, such as lying on the floor; hands putting on the waist to intensify the hour-glass shape, legs open wide to enhance the seductive feeling and the like. Apart from the focal point – mannequins, there are other supporting acts to help raising the negative feeling, these being 1) color and 2) fabrication. Color with high degree of saturation, especially the red family (e.g. fuchsia, shocking pink) gives an erotic feeling. If contrast color combination is adopted, such as black with red, it further intensifies the message. From the viewpoint of fabrication, lace brings out the sexy and feminine feeling alone whereas it is put on human-like mannequins, the sexual feeling is further enhanced.

Speaking from this perspective, it is found that only one component of Visual Merchandising can arouse the affective perspective of intimate apparel consumers. Studies revealed that the degree of approach response is determined by both emotional pleasure and emotional arousal (Crowley, 1993; Dovovan et. al, 1994) and they are the component of leading affective pleasure to consumers (Fiore, Yah and Yoh, 2000). Although it seems to be a small part in Visual Merchandising, a small change can cause tremendous outcome in apparel consumption behavior (Law, Zhang and Leung, 2004). Thus, it is of value to pay a close attention to it. Once consumers have no idea about the brand, for instance, hanging with their friends or being attracted by printed media, they may rely on the first impression on the store. Window display serves as the first interaction point with consumers, mannequins used for displaying clothing are the image builders of a brand. Conceptually, intimate apparel is regarded as some embarrassing among Chinese society, especially for Hongkong Chinese (Cohen, 1997; Wu, 1997), they tend to be contemporary

and open-minded, but when they deal with issues about gender and sex. Therefore, the adoption of seductive human-like mannequins immediately alerts consumers' emotion state. For consumers who have a high degree of brand loyalty, there may be less negative impact on them. For consumers who are attracted by print advertising and have little knowledge, exaggerated window displays may drive them away immediately especially among a highly conformed society like Hong Kong which treating intimate apparel as a taboo.

On the contrary, headless mannequins seem to have fewer problems in creating negative emotional feeling to the subjects. In fact, the Calvin Klein examples were shown, both female and male headless mannequin with full body was selected. The placing positions and the theme applied was about the intimacy of a male and female, however, subjects sensed that there was an intimate theme applied to create a unique brand identity in the window but there were no negative response towards that. Also, subjects with and without aesthetic training background (e.g. design, music training) were involved in the study but results showed that the former one showed further intention to investigate the displayed products. However, both groups indicated that the purchase intention was not strong since the affective pleasure was negative.

## 4. Recommendations and Conclusion

The study is beneficial to retailers who are newly established or re-position in the intimate apparel market. As mentioned, for consumers who have a high degree of brand loyalty, external factors such as store atmosphere, may not has a great impact on decision process. But, if consumers rely on peer influence, advertising or have no idea about a brand, visiting the store is the first contact with the brand. Having seductive human-like mannequins and matching with sexy lingerie and contrast color arrangement can break the decision process. Consumers' attention can be aroused at the awareness stage but in a negative way due to the social and cultural constraint. Therefore, it is difficult to continue the decision process from awareness to interest. The study also has an implication that consumers having aesthetic training/ education tends to show a high level of interest on unusual or exaggerated presentation format, thus, to strike a balance between forward-thinking and ordinary customers, it is recommended that headless or abstract form mannequins can be put in window displays whereas attention should be paid to store layout. Dividing a corner or section for displaying ultra sexy or feminine lingerie styles and presented by human-like mannequins is suggested. The intentional division of fashionable and basic lingerie styles helps satisfying both groups at the same.

The study further enriches Hart and Dewsnap's (2001) study on consumer decision process for intimate apparel that atmospheric management provides a critical direction for store entrance and pre-purchase evaluation. Paying a close attention to the interaction of cultural or societal difference and visual merchandising elements causes a great impact on final purchase decision. For future research direction, the study serves as a preliminary stage of locating the importance of store atmosphere on functional yet personal apparel; the authors are carrying further studies to look into the specific relationship in order to bring out new ideas to enhance intimate apparel retailing.

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