

The impact of sensory environments on consumer buying behaviour: A study of visual displays and sight atmospherics

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Abstract

Twenty-first century consumers have a lot of power in relation to buying due to their changing and demanding needs and wants. The entire selling activity has become more convenient for consumers as they can search for and purchase products from online websites instead of going to a physical store, which do have an influence on the physical brick and mortar stores in South Africa. This study was conducted to explore the influence of sight atmospherics and visual merchandising displays in apparel retail stores in Tshwane on consumers' behaviour. The study implemented an exploratory design which was qualitative in nature. Two focus groups were held, each made up of eight participants, and the gathered data was analysed by means of thematic analysis. It was found that visual merchandising displays had an unconscious influence on consumer behaviour and, since visual display is not the only factor considered when deciding to make a purchase, a pleasant atmosphere would influence participants to stay longer which in return could lead to a purchase. It was further found that consumers were influenced by sight atmospherics in either a conscious or a subconscious way which had an influence on the amount of time consumers would spend in an apparel retail store, and which would further influence their behaviour towards making a purchase or not.

1. Introduction

According to Liaw (2007:1) the retail industry has grown rapidly, resulting in a highly intensive and competitive market. Consumers have more options of where and how to purchase products. One of the most popular methods of purchasing is via the internet, making it extremely convenient for consumers to search for and purchase merchandise (Park, Li & Jeon, 2009:916). Due to the changed retail environment one of the biggest challenges experienced by retail owners is to draw buyers to their store and to retain them as customers (Dabija, Dinu, Abrudan & Postelnicu 2014:38). It is thus critical that retailers ensure their in-store environment has an effective design and that in-store improvements are done on a continuous basis to create a desirable environment where consumers would want to spend time during a shopping excursion (Hines & Bruce, 2012:105), instead of searching and buying over the internet.

Apparel retailers should regard the design of their in-store environment as part of their marketing strategy in order to develop consumer-oriented store environments which can ultimately contribute towards a possible competitive advantage. Such a competitive advantage can differentiate one apparel retailer from another based on factors that are most likely in-store-choice factors determined by the expectations of consumers in the target market (Hines & Bruce, 2012:105). Hines and Bruce (2012:106) indicate that retail stores can therefore not rely on differentiating their stores by only focusing on price, merchandise, place and promotion strategies anymore. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that consumers are increasingly using the internet for searching purposes and ultimately buying of merchandise. It is therefore critical that when customers do enter a store that the retailer needs to ensure that their store space is effectively used in order to ensure that they provide customers with an enjoyable, convenient, relaxing and worth-to-remember shopping experience, with the main objective being to draw and keep their attention (Dabija et al, 2014:38; Liaw, 2007:1; Wanninayake & Randiwela, 2007:5).

There are some international luxury apparel retail stores that manage to invest a lot of capital in designing and renovating their stores. The main challenge lies in understanding the needs of consumers and therefore creating in-store environments that will appeal to their needs (Hines & Bruce, 2012:106). However, not all apparel retail stores have implemented in-store environmental factors to enhance the shopping experience of consumers. Bohl (2012:1) indicates that consumers' decision to enter a retail store is very dependent on the in-store environment as it has a direct influence on the amount of time the consumer will spend inside and also on whether to buy or not to buy.

The study aimed to obtain an overall view on visual merchandising displays and sight as an atmospheric element which are becoming critical for physical retail stores that want to create loyal customers. A consumer-centred response approach was followed where the views of apparel consumers were determined. The main purpose of the study was to explore, within the context of apparel retail stores in Tshwane, South Africa, the influences of visual merchandising displays and sight on consumers' behaviour. This study could benefit apparel retailers in their search to remain competitive amidst changing consumer needs and buying patterns caused by digital competition. The findings obtained in this study can be altered to apply to the international customs and conditions of global apparel retailers.

The following sections give an overview of visual merchandising displays, sight atmospheric and consumer behaviour, followed by a discussion on the methodology, results and conclusion.

2. Visual merchandising

When passing an apparel store the window display might bring one to an immediate stop and create desire to enter the store. Once in the store the music playing in the background, the use of different colours or the striking display of merchandise might create a desire to browse a bit more. This scenario is called visual merchandising. Each of these elements are carefully planned to draw consumers into a store and to ultimately encourage them to make a purchase (Wiid, 2012:167).

Visual merchandising is defined by Bell and Ternus (2012:23) as "... the process of promoting the sale of products by producing mental images that urge potential consumers to make purchases". Visual merchandising is all about selling merchandise in a more visual way as to make the merchandise more appealing for consumers (Pegler, 2010:1). Visual merchandising therefore focuses on how the merchandise is visually communicated to consumers and whether the planned message was correctly transferred.

Visual merchandising consists of five components, namely store design, fixtures, presentation techniques, mannequins and store atmospherics (Bell and Ternus, 2012:24; Levy, Weitz, & Beitelspacher, 2012:487-492). Each component consists of various elements. For the purpose of this study visual merchandising displays and sight as an atmospheric element were investigated and will be discussed next.

2.1. Visual merchandising displays

Visual merchandising displays are an element of the component presentation technique, as indicated above. Mathew (2008:48) indicates that visual merchandising displays are considered as visual presentations that create awareness and enjoyment among consumers in a store. The purpose of visual merchandising displays in an apparel retail store is to create an appealing image by adding additional props, colours, objects, fixtures, posters, digital technology, lighting, movements, etc. to a store in order to draw consumers' attention, to make them browse longer and ultimately make a purchase (Frafan, 2015). Cant, van Heerden and Ngambi (2013:172) also indicated that visual displays can lead to impulse buying as customers do not necessarily plan beforehand on buying items, but shortly after being exposed to the visual stimuli a need/desire is created which results into an unplanned or spur-of-the-moment purchase.

The ultimate and core function of visual merchandising displays according to Wiid (2012:171) is to maximize the total sales of the store. Other additional and important functions that need to be considered are firstly that visual displays should draw consumers' attention through making use of effective colours, lighting and movement. Secondly, visual displays should arouse and hold consumers' interest as only making them aware is not sufficient. Thirdly, visual displays should stimulate consumers' desire to examine the displayed merchandise in more detail and to ultimately be inclined to try on and purchase the displayed merchandise.

Visual merchandising displays can be categorized according to in-store displays, point-of-purchase displays and window displays (Wiid, 2012:172-173). These are discussed below.

In-store displays can be broken down into self-selection and special displays. With regards to self-selection displays retailers put their entire selection of merchandise on display in either aisles and/or wall units in order for consumers to inspect the merchandise themselves (Bell & Ternus, 2012:194). Special displays refers to retailers aiming to present merchandise in such a way that it will draw attention and leave a lasting impression in the consumers' mind. Such displays are normally placed in stores where there is maximum exposure, for example near payment points, close to a store's entrance, at aisles where consumer traffic is heavy and on top of a counter.

Point-of-purchase displays are the most popular type of display due to its ability to stimulate consumers' immediate buying behaviour (Wiid, 2012:173). Such displays are placed where merchandise is displayed for sale and can include banners, cards, video screens, and so on.

Window displays play an important role in informing consumers what the store offers and also to draw consumers into a store (Bell & Ternus, 2012:304). The majority of apparel retailers make use of window displays to promote a specific merchandise item(s).

2.2. Sights as an atmospheric element

As indicated above, sight is one of the elements of store atmospherics that forms part of visual merchandising. Kotler (2001:50) defines "atmospherics" as the designing of a buying environment wherein specific buying emotions are formed by implementing the senses (sound, touch, sight and scent) in order to increase the possibility of purchasing. Within the context of South Africa, store atmospherics plays a critical role in the designing of in-store environments in order to increase customer spending. Studies done on this topic within the South African context are shown in table 1 below.

Topic/Focus Area	Author	Year
Store image factors	Dhurup, Mafini&Mathaba	2013
	Mafini&Dhurup	2015
	Mathaba	2013
Green atmospherics on store image	Muposhi&Dhurup,	2016
Use of store atmospherics	Nell & Cant	2015
In-store environment ambience factors	Abimnwi&Njuguna	2015
Boutique store atmosphere	Van Niekerk, Petzer & De Beer	2016
In-store shopping experience satisfaction	Terblanche &Boshoff	2006
Visual Merchandising displays	Hefer	2013

Table 1: South African studies on store atmospherics

For the purpose of this study, emphasis was specifically placed on sight.

Sight refers to the ability of humans to see in order to form opinions about specific things by using the eyes (Merriam-Webster, 2015). It is known as the most dominant and persuasive of the five senses (Hultén, 2011:259), and Gobé (2009:259) further indicates that people from as early as ten years of age use sight as the most dominant sense to learn and to understand the world. According to

Kotler (2001:51) sight includes all visual features (colours, shades, lighting, etc.) that retailers can use in order to create a pleasing environment that will draw consumers' attention.

The two elements of sight which will be focus on are lighting and colour, which are discussed below.

2.2.1. Lighting

Lighting is a term that refers to "... the medium of illumination that makes sight possible" (Collins, 2012), meaning that it is a combination of both natural and artificial light sources that makes objects, figures and pictures noticeable, as any form of lighting is needed in order to bring out colours (The Free Dictionary, 2012). It is therefore safe to say that all types of colours depend significantly on the use of lighting (Pegler, 2010:25). Hultén, Broweus and Van Dijk,(2009:99) state that appropriate lighting has the ability to create a suitable and pleasing atmosphere that will create awareness and ultimately interest among consumers.

There are various reasons why lighting can be regarded as important. One of these reasons is the fact that lighting has the ability to create a positive impression of the merchandise offered on display (Gupta & Randhawa, 2008:225). Another reason is that lighting has the ability to highlight merchandise in such a way that it separates one area from another (Levy et al., 2012:490) and enables retailers to create different atmospheric environments in-store for the different sections (Hultén et al., 2009:99). Lighting can further guide consumers into and through a store by drawing their attention from one feature area to another (Pegler, 2010:28) and, lastly, lighting plays an important role in contributing to the overall atmosphere of the store (Levy et al., 2012:491). It is, however, important that apparel retailers keep in mind that the type of lighting used in-store should at all times focus on and complement the merchandise, colour and displays by creating contrasts and balance (Binggeli, 2010:306).

2.2.2. Colour

The term colour is defined "... as the element of art that is produced when light, striking an object, is reflected back to the eye" (Esaak, 2012). According to Esaak, (2012) there are three characteristics of colour, namely *shade* which refers to the name of the colour, for example blue, *intensity* which refers to the brightness of a colour, for example "royal" blue and *value* which refers to the darkness or lightness of a colour, for example light blue or dark blue (Bell & Ternus, 2012).

Colour is the most predominant element of sight and is therefore one of the most domineering design instruments used by retailers to communicate to their consumers (Bell & Ternus, 2012). The role and importance of colour is well documented and it has the ability to affect consumers' sight experiences, as it can generate certain internal feelings and emotions within consumers that triggers and arouse specific thoughts, ideas and experiences (Gobé, 2009); it has the ability to affect organisations, retailers, products, brands, and window displays, as it enables consumers to remember and understand what a specific organisation, retailer, brand etc. stands for (Gobé, 2009); and it has the ability to affect different cultures by giving them social meanings (Hultén et al., 2009; Morgan, 2008; Levy et al., 2012), for example the colour white in China symbolises death and mourning, whereas in Western cultures it is a symbol of purity.

It is critical that retailers should know and understand the history and psychological meaning behind colours, as it will help them to create a pleasant in-store atmosphere that will stimulate positive emotions within consumers (Pegler, 2010; Gobé, 2009).

2.3. Consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour is defined as "... a set of value-seeking activities that take place as people go about addressing their real needs" (Babin & Harris, 2016:4). This simply means that actual thoughts, feelings and actions are involved when making a decision to purchase or not. According to Parumasur and Roberts-Lombard (2012:250) there are only two basic reasons why consumers need to make decisions. Firstly it is to satisfy their inner needs and wants and secondly because there is more

than one option to choose from. Therefore, whatever the reason may be, consumers need to make decisions on the type of merchandise they want to purchase, own and use.

In-store environmental stimuli, including sight atmospherics, have been proven to influence consumers emotionally, and therefore can have an impact on the way consumers behave (Jang & Namkung, 2009:451; Kang, Boger, Back, & Madera, 2011:2). A previous experience and/or memory is immediately recalled once a consumer is faced with a specific picture or object which brings a certain emotion to mind (Hultén et al., 2009:10, 57,115).

Emotions are defined by Liao and Liaw (n.d.:2) as the "... oral expression of feelings and as a personal, subjective psychological state." A store's environment can provoke three types of emotions. The first emotion is *pleasure* which refers to being satisfied, thus indicating whether or not consumers find an environment enjoyable, the second is *arousal* which refers to how much an environment is stimulating consumers, and the last emotion is *dominance* which refers to consumers feeling in control in the environment or not. However, according to Jang and Namkung (2009:451) dominance has no influence on consumer behaviour.

It is most likely that certain positive emotional reactions that are created by visual merchandising displays and sight will result in increased consumer spending, depending on the type of in-store atmosphere (Kotler, 2001:54). It can therefore be inferred that emotional reactions, such as pleasure and arousal, will most likely have an influence on consumers' behavioural responses. The behavioural responses of consumers can lead to approach or avoidance behaviour (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974).

It can be concluded that visual merchandising displays and sight as atmospheric elements do have an influence on the emotions of consumers which will further have an influence on their behaviour.

2.4. Research methodology

An exploratory research design was implemented for this study, to the extent to which the influence of visual merchandising displays and sight on consumers' behaviour was investigated. Due to the fact that more insight was needed on the topic, a qualitative research method was deemed appropriate. The participants of this study were carefully selected by the researcher based on the outlined inclusion criteria. Data was collected by means of two focus groups and naïve sketches.

2.4.1 Sample

The population for this study comprises of consumers living in Tshwane, South Africa. More specifically the inclusion criteria for the sample were any male or female older than 18 years, who bought at apparel retail stores, who resided in the Tshwane region of Gauteng, and that could understand, speak and write English.

The study implemented a non-probability purposive sampling method as the participants were selected, firstly based on the inclusion criteria and, secondly based on the personal judgement of the researcher. The sample size consisted of two focus group sessions, each consisted of eight participants, thus 16 participants in total. The sample was small, however it was deemed acceptable, as the nature of the research was exploratory and a state of saturations was reached after the second focus group was held (Malhotra, 2010:374). 16 naïve sketches were handed out to the participants before the start of the focus groups.

2.4.2 Measurement instrument

The data for this study was collected by means of a communicative focus group interview technique and naïve sketches. Two focus group discussions (and naïve sketches) were held, each group consisting of eight participants. Due to this, two forms of data was received and compared with one another in order to gain maximum data from each participant. The facilitator showed the

participants two pictures of a visual merchandising display where sight elements were also included. After having looked at the pictures, participants were asked two questions (the same questions for both the naïve sketch and focus groups), namely:

- When entering an apparel retail store, what is the influence of the visual merchandising displays on your behaviour?
- When entering an apparel retail store, what is the influence of the lighting (sight) used on your behaviour?

2.4.3 Data analysis

The obtained data was analysed by means of thematic analysis which is a qualitative research process that involves intensive searching through the gathered data in order to identify any possible patterns, known as themes and categories (Tesch, 1990:113).

2.5. Results

The results obtained from both the focus group interviews and the naïve sketches were based on the objectives of the study and will be discussed below. The influence of visual merchandising displays on consumer behaviour will be discussed first, followed by a discussion on the influence of sight on consumer behaviour. Themes were identified for each objective.

2.5.1. Objective 1: Visual merchandising displays

Two themes were identified and are explained below.

Theme 1: Tool for creating a purchasing context

The participants indicated that visual merchandising displays enhanced their buying experience in an unconscious way as they did not always consciously notice the displays, but that the displays definitely helped in contributing to a pleasant and satisfactory experience as they would view the store as being beautiful with colourful and decorated displays. The participants further indicated that a store with well-designed and intriguing displays contributed towards the overall welcoming atmosphere, and even if the participants couldn't find what they were looking for they still stayed and viewed the store as pleasing and enjoyable while ultimately searching for something to buy.

Theme 2: Varied views based on personal preferences

The participants showed that their buying behaviour was influenced to a limited extent, as other factors such as price also had a profound effect on the final decision to purchase. They indicated that visual merchandising displays did have an influence on the final stages of decision-making on whether to make a purchase or not.

It was further found that well-designed visual merchandising displays guided the participants in the direction of the merchandise that was displayed. This illustrates that well-designed visual merchandising displays influence consumer behaviour. The participants further mentioned that well-designed visual merchandising displays guide their product choice. For instance, if a consumer is searching for a coat and a specific coat is included in a visual display, the consumer may be more inclined to select that coat instead of other coats that were not part of the display. This only applies when the visual display is according to the preference of the consumer.

The participants also indicated that their behaviour is influenced in a subliminal way, as the (a) quality of the visual merchandising display indirectly had either a positive (high quality display) or a negative (low quality display) influence on their behaviour; and (b) that personal preferences and gender also had an indirect influence on their behaviour as visual merchandising displays focus on various facets such as colours, textures, styles, sizes, décor, etc. which may not suit the preferences of all types of consumers and would therefore affect the behaviour of the consumer more than the visual merchandising display in itself.

2.5.2. Objective 2: Sight

Three themes were identified and are explained below.

Theme 1: Influencing mood and buying behaviour

The focus groups explained that adequate lighting highlights the visual merchandise displays. This induced the participants to explore a bit more, which had a positive influence on their mood and behaviour as they would spend more time in the store. The participants also indicated that they would experience an emotion of irritation if they were not able to see what was going on due to poor lighting. This had a direct influence on their purchasing behaviour.

Theme 2: Silent language

Participants indicated that sight spoke a silent language, as the participants did not always notice it, except when it was unpleasant (lighting not sufficient). They indicated that stores with insufficient lighting implied that something was being hidden, whereas stores with "warm" lighting portrayed an image of being homier. As a result, the participants were more positive towards the retailer when warm and efficient lighting was used. This increased the time they spent in the store.

The participants further pointed out that sight could be context-driven and therefore appeal to a certain consumer group. The participants indicated that they would either leave immediately after entering a store or purely not enter a store when not feeling comfortable doing so, due to poor or insufficient lighting. They further indicated that sight could be regarded as part of the store's overall offering, image and quality and when the lighting was of a bad nature or low quality an image of uncleanliness, as well as a more depressing atmosphere could be experienced. It is therefore critical that the types of sight elements used should fit in with the overall image of the store and the type of merchandise offered.

Theme 3: Sight becomes salient or obtrusive

The focus groups agreed that sight elements which moved towards an extreme would lead to uneasiness or annoyance, which would affect time spent in the store as they would not enter or would leave shortly after entering the store. It was further mentioned that unpleasant sight elements decreased the likelihood of finding something to buy, as the time spent on browsing was reduced. Therefore, unpleasant atmospheric elements will most likely have a negative (not buying) influence on consumer behaviour.

3. Conclusion and recommendation

With regards to the first objective – the influence of visual merchandising displays on consumer behaviour – the participant's views were very diverse, based on the fact that not all participants noticed visual displays when they walked into a store, but that the displays did enhance the store's overall atmosphere, which inclined some participants to stay longer. How consumers behave is influenced by a limited extent through visual merchandising displays, as it guides consumers in the direction of the displayed merchandise as well as in merchandise choices. Personal preference, quality of the display and price all have an influence on how the consumer will behave. Consumers' attention was further drawn to certain aspects in a visual display, such as colour and lighting that created a space where their shopping experience could be positive. The participants tend to be more attracted to well-designed visual merchandising displays, as it guided them in the direction of where the merchandise was being displayed. This illustrates that visual merchandising displays influences consumer behaviour either positively or negatively.

With regards to the second objective – the influence of sight on consumer behaviour – the participants showed that the lighting in a store was an important factor when considering whether or not to enter a store and/or to make a purchase or not. From this it is clear that participants preferred

a store with proper lighting than a store that is too dark. The participants indicated that they would not enter a store if they could observe from a distance that the lighting was either too dark or too light, as they felt that the merchandise would not be of good quality. A well-lit store has the ability to guide consumers into a store and highlight the displayed merchandise which makes it easier for consumers to see and evaluate the type of merchandise sold. Depending on what consumers are searching for, it is clear that the correct use of lighting in a retail store can influence their buying behaviour.

In conclusion, it was supported that visual merchandising displays have a limited and an unconscious influence on consumer behaviour, as the visual displays were not the only factor considered when deciding to make a purchase. However, a pleasant atmosphere would influence the participants to stay longer which in return could lead to a positive or a negative behaviour. Lighting does have a direct influence on consumer behaviour, as an atmosphere with proper lighting will most probably end in a positive (buying) behaviour, whereas insufficient lighting will most probably end in a negative (not buying) behaviour.

It is therefore critical that apparel retailers should give attention to their visual merchandising displays and use of proper lighting in-store to ensure that the browsing time of consumers is increased. A future study can be conducted within another sector of the retail industry to determine whether or not visual displays and sight atmospherics have an influence on the way that consumers behave. It will also be of value to do future studies on the influences of technological tools such as mobile devices and tablets on consumers buying behaviour and spending patterns in apparel retail stores. It is also advisable to focus on a bigger sample size which is more quantitative in nature in order to generalize the findings.

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