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How does visual merchandising affect consumer affective response?

An intimate apparel experience

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this article is to investigate the relationship between visual merchandising elements and consumer affective response by focusing on a function-oriented product – intimate apparel.

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper, a different perspective on visual merchandising is offered through the different types of intimate apparel retailers (from fashion-oriented, mass market-oriented to fashion forward). This is presented in an interpretive study of Hong Kong Chinese female consumers, between the ages of 25 and 35. A qualitative approach is employed and the grounded theory method is chosen. A total of eight focus group interviews are conducted with 64 subjects.

Findings – The findings indicate that participating subjects have two points of view when evaluating visual store displays, which include utilitarian and hedonic aspects. The utilitarian aspect relates to the actual needs of consumers, such as garment deterioration, seasonal changes and occasions. The hedonic aspect finds that the perceived female image governs consumer interpretation and acceptance of visual displays. It also reveals that the need to be feminine sets the guidelines to evaluating visual stimulus in stores. Display elements, such as mannequins, colour, lighting and props that emphasize feelings of feminine sexuality, tend to trigger negative affective responses in consumers which finally affect purchase intentions.

Originality/value – The authors aim to explore consumer affective response on visual stimulus in stores by considering the aesthetic, symbolic and cultural perceptions of a function-oriented product – intimate apparel. The literature to date tends to focus on the interaction between individual visual merchandising elements (e.g. colour, lighting) with consumers. However, the product nature and its symbolic meaning have not been seriously taken into consideration. Due to the immense market potential in the East, applying western-developed theories may not be universally appropriate. There may be different results and patterns in consumer behaviour. Thus, this study aims to enrich existing knowledge of atmospheric management by including the interaction of Eastern values and product nature on affective responses.

Keywords Visual merchandising, Intimate apparel, Affective, Chinese people, Merchandising, Clothing, Affective psychology

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The affective aspect relates the expression of emotions or feelings from consumers towards stimulus in a store. It is also argued that a cue is important in explaining the ways that consumers respond to different indicators in evaluating either the performance or quality of a product (Richardson *et al.*, 1994). The concept is applicable on products with attributes that can be evaluated in an objective way, such as electrical appliances. When products with both functional (e.g. focusing on the utilitarian aspect) and aesthetical (e.g. focusing on the hedonic aspect) requirements are taken into consideration, the identification of the cue becomes more complicated. Taking intimate apparel as an example, fit is an important element during the selection process. Fit is defined as the conformation to the human body with enough room to move easily (Fan *et al.*, 2004). When it combines fashion elements, the criteria or standard of “fit” varies in the minds of consumers due to fashion influence. To market the products, fit is the utmost important part of buying intimate apparel. Therefore, it is argued that regardless of the prominence of the store atmosphere, consumers will still pay close attention to the functional details and fit of the garment. In reality, intimate apparel retailers spend much effort in creating a unique identity through distinctive visual merchandising strategies to provide a positive mood for consumers, aiming to increase purchase intention (Donovan and Rossiter, 1982; Morrin and Chebat, 2005), store loyalty (Hu and Jasper, 2006) and repeat purchase (Spangenberg *et al.*, 2006). Apart from stimulating a positive affective response from consumers, appropriate visual merchandising can also lead to a series of actions from consumers, for example, affecting spending behaviour (Chebat and Richard, 2003) and store/merchandise perceptions (Spangenberg *et al.*, 2006). Although retailers have put forth much effort in visual merchandising, the outcomes vary due to cultural differences towards the symbolic messages created by visual merchandising (Kim *et al.*, 2004).

Intimate apparel and fashion

Intimate apparel, used interchangeably with lingerie in this paper, is any undergarment worn next to the skin and underneath clothes. Functional aspect has been linked with intimate apparel for a long time. However, concern with aesthetics and market segmentation lies much with retailers while developing new intimate apparel products. Examples can be seen among intimate apparel brands, such as the fashion-driven brand Agent Provocateur, and mass-marketed brands, such as Wacoal and Triumph. The addition of a fashion element draws the attention of consumers not only to the functional aspects, but also the aesthetic aspects (Park *et al.*, 2006). As a high degree of fashion involvement and positive emotions help in enhancing impulse buying, retailers pay close attention to the store atmosphere in order to provide an unforgettable and pleasant shopping experience for consumers. In this study, intimate apparel is chosen because it has a high functional and symbolic concern (Hart and Dewsnap, 2001) and at the same time, has been packaged and promoted in terms of fashionable design, making it as part of the outerwear. The duality makes it difficult for retailers to provide the right store atmosphere and further investigation is required.

In terms of marketing focus, this paper offers focused yet practical suggestions on visual merchandising strategies such as the choice of mannequins and colour combination by considering the unique set of Eastern perceptions on products with both functional and aesthetic concerns.

In terms of academic focus, this study helps to understand the rationale of the impact of cultural perceptions and product nature on consumers' affective response towards visual merchandising elements.

Central concepts

Emotion and affective responses

Emotion is the core factors in affective perspective. It affects an individual's luminal and subconscious level, and serves as the internal motivator that attracts us to the things that makes us feel good or positively associate with our minds (Williamson, 2002). Individuals tend to focus on information selectively, which is consistent with one's mood state and later, recall the information that is mood-consistent (Mattila and Wirtz, 2000). Mood-based evaluations are common in individual judgment of products or services (Isen *et al.*, 1978; Schwarz, 1997). Russell and Geraldine (1980) assumed that affect is an individual's internal state comprising of both pleasure and arousal. The model has a two-dimensional matrix comprising of all affective combinations to explain different kinds of affective responses. The degree of emotional engagement leads to different levels of emotional response between an impulse and ordinary buyer. Minimal expression generates large differences in terms of shopping behaviour between the two buyers (Weinberg and Wolfgang, 1982) and develops automatic affective response for guiding further behavioural choices (Baumeister *et al.*, 2007). To manipulate affective responses, marketers use store environment to either enhance or reduce product perception as the consumer cognitive, emotional and conational aspects can be manipulated artificially (Derbaix and Abeele, 1985). A positive impact of affective pleasure can elongate the purchasing time in terms of consumer involvement and time spent in a store (Holbrook and Gardner, 1993) and gaining customer share (Babin and Attaway, 2000). The degree of consumer response to stimuli is interactive. An unforgettable feeling can be achieved if the third order emotion (e.g. experience in his/her conscious mind) of a consumer is being stimulated (Williamson, 2002) since the subconscious dominates how we think, and feelings derive the thinking path of consumers (Hill, 2003). As a result, a minor or intangible issue (e.g. ambient odour) can give a positive impact on the perception of shoppers towards the retail environment/quality and encourage spending behaviour (Chebat and Richard, 2003) in a retail setting. Although emotional impact is important in shaping shopping behaviour, the impact of emotional pleasure differs from emotional arousal. The former stimulates consumers to shop whereas the latter causes them to leave and has dramatic effects on store image, shopping values and store personality (Roger, 2006). Once consumers have a particular belief on the attributes of a store, it certainly affects the time spent there (Stoel *et al.*, 2004).

Visual merchandising

The design of a retail environment is related to the store atmosphere creation. Kotler (1974) defined store atmosphere as the quality of the surrounding space. It is an important issue for inducing the desired affective response of consumers and aims to enhance purchase probability. Based on Kotler's thought, Donovan and Rossiter (1982) extended the concept with physical in-store variables (layout, architecture etc.) and the influence of social factors (type and behaviour of people). Both factors can affect the affective perception of consumers on the retail environment by selective attention, distortion and retention of information (Kotler, 1974; Bitner, 1990, 1992; Sherman *et al.*,

1997). Mehrabian and Russell (1974) offered a conceptual model based on the stimulus-organism-response paradigm to study the store environment (S), individual's emotional state (O) and approach-avoidance behaviour (R). It was found that the interaction of the three aspects causes a significant impact on pleasure, arousal and dominance. Also, the arousal of an environment is taken into consideration for measuring environmental stimulation. The arousal of an environment is defined as its degree of novelty (new and surprising elements) and complexity (the number of elements and change in an environment) (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). A good retail environment design should consist of an appropriate degree of arousal in order to induce affective pleasure (Spies *et al.*, 1997). However, the combination of different elements should be taken into careful consideration since too much arousal will lead to lack of attraction and inability to focus (Kardes, 1999). Based on Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) thoughts, Babin and Darden (1995) added self-regulation their B-D model to explain the relationship between store atmosphere and consumer affective response. Both Mehrabian and Russell (1974), and Babin and Darden (1995) introduced conceptual models to explain the relationship between store stimulus and customers responses, but the interaction of product type and its corresponding symbolic perception have not been taken into serious consideration.

Visual merchandising and consumption

Visual merchandising enhances the attractiveness of a store and its perceived image from the viewpoint of customers. A positive mood serves as a contextual cue for evaluating the perceived quality, image of a product and store, and purchase intention (Bakamitsos, 2000). The impact of a pleasant store atmosphere is also positively related to customer satisfaction (Spies *et al.*, 1997). Atmospheric stimuli which please the actual and emotional needs of consumers enhance the degree of consumer participation in a store, leading to favourable purchasing behaviours (Wright *et al.*, 2006). In general, the store exterior and interior are the two major areas covered in Visual Merchandising and a variety of components (colour combination, product placement, lighting arrangement, layout and highlight design, mannequin and props selection, fixtures and fittings selection) are involved in creating a favourable shopping atmosphere. For instance, Babin *et al.* (2003) found that the combination of colours and lighting plays a critical role in influencing the purchase intention of consumers and store patronage. Intangible store elements, such as sprayed fragrance, can stimulate one's affective state and help boost mental imagination (Fiore *et al.*, 2000). Chebat *et al.* (2001) found that appropriate music can affect the cognitive activity of consumers. A positive imagery also helps in associating a better cognitive experience between consumers and products, and intensifying purchase intentions (Mandler, 1982; Macinnis and Price, 1987; Meyers-Levy and Tybout, 1989). However, consumers' responses can be affected by cultural difference. Chan and Tai (2001) found that Chinese Hong Kong people rely on culture values (e.g. practical realism) to evaluate store displays and less susceptible to environmental cues than American consumers. Also, Chinese cultural values had a direct relationship with store atmosphere evaluation in apparel consumption (Fok and Chong, 1996). For Vietnamese consumers, hedonic shopping motivations were directly related to store atmosphere evaluation in supermarkets (Nguyen *et al.*, 2007). For Korean consumers, different cultural expectations were found in store environment expectations in discount stores (Park, 2005). In terms of individual visual

merchandising element, there was colour perception difference towards mall décor between French-Canadians and Anglo-Canadians (Chebat and Moureen, 2007), store layout and shopping intension among South African consumers (Kempen *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, cultural difference is important to influence store atmosphere evaluation.

Symbolic goods consumption

Nowadays, consumers purchase goods not only to fulfil physical needs, but also for the intangible meanings behind the product (Levy, 1959; Elliott, 1999). To have the right selection, it is important to locate the right product personality and product variants (Govers, 2004). Apart from individual concern, symbolic meaning derived from products should also carry the right social meanings that fulfil perceived social standards (Dittmar, 1992). Individuals use consumer goods with the right symbolic meanings to develop, enhance or create identity (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998) and decode related messages from consumption practices of others (Belk *et al.*, 1982). However, how people in social groups interpret the meanings of products and brands might also affect individual evaluation (Ligas and Cotte, 1999). Product meanings that attempt to fulfil the requirements of individuals may be rejected if they are incongruent with symbolic requirements of significant referents (Elliott, 1999) or fail to reflect the affiliation to a specific social group (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Among the different types of products, clothing involves a high degree of symbolic value and social meanings (Finkelstein, 1998). It can distinguish personal difference in terms of race, gender, time, context and taste within a group of customers (Suttkes, 1995). Apparel styles and types can also project different social meanings in terms of distinction and identification (Gronow, 1997). In terms of intimate apparel, Hart and Dewsnap (2001) found that looking for the right self-image is crucial in intimate apparel purchasing and requires a unique set of considerations for marketers. Other studies (Koff and Benavage, 1998; Ostergaard, 1999; Shim and Bickle, 1994; Singer and Grismaijer, 1995) also support a close relationship between intimate apparel and external social identity, self-esteem and self-image. However, how visual merchandising interacts with consumers' affective state on the symbolic value of intimate apparel has not been studied in detail.

Research methodology

Although there is literature developed for fashion and retailing (DeLong, 1998; Eckman and Wagner, 1994; Kasier *et al.*, 1995), in this study, the usage of literature is to guide the research questions and directions, make comparisons with data while theorizing (Lempert, 2007), but not use them as a measure of the truth (Newman and Benz, 1998). Therefore, the grounded theory is chosen to collect and analyse data in this research. The rationale for choosing this method is that it allows for the understanding of interactions between personal experiences of subjects in daily life. The developed framework or theory is based on grounds of a particular issue and group of specific subjects that reflect reality (Goulding, 2002). Also, the method helps in understanding the rationale behind an issue. As there is little understanding towards the interaction of store atmosphere, product perception (consumers' understanding of a product) and affective response, the grounded theory can generate new thoughts from the viewpoint of product end-users. The research process included three phases of coding: open, axial and selective (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Throughout the open-coding procedure, opinions were grouped into various codes in order to develop concepts to

facilitate the next steps in data collection. The open coding stopped when no new ideas were generated from the raw data. Inter-relationships were developed from codes collected from open-coding. Further data collection was implemented for the purpose of acquiring information on the developed relationships and finally, selective coding was completed in order to determine the central and abstract ideas of the study.

To validate the results, both credibility and transferability were considered (Goulding, 2002). For credibility, fifteen members from the first five focus group interviews were invited to assess the accuracy of opinions that were being coded and related. Inaccurate reflections of meanings were modified immediately during discussions. For transferability, transcripts were given to another academic staff who is teaching consumer behaviour to re-code the raw data. Mutual consent was obtained about the core concept. The result was further assessed by a marketing manager of a well-known intimate apparel store in Hong Kong. The visual merchandising strategy was modified with regards to the suggested findings.

Research subjects

To execute the data collection, focus group interviews were conducted. Although the opinion of subjects may be affected by the group setting and dynamics (Sliverman, 2008), it is believed that group dynamics also help reveal the inner thoughts of subjects (Esterberg, 2002). In this study, females aged 25 to 35 were selected as the research subjects. Male consumers are not included as per the advice of two lingerie retail managers in Hong Kong that it is not common for male consumers to shop lingerie for their partners or as presents. The choice of the age range is because people over 24 are regarded as adults and this age is relatively high in proportion for working women in Hong Kong (Hong Kong Statistical Department, 2007). Asian working females in this age group have a relatively high propensity to spend on luxury or beauty-related products (Chadha and Husband, 2006). Participants for the first two interviews were recruited outside a lingerie select shop. For the other subjects, they were referred by the Hong Kong office of an international lingerie retailer. They were the customers and approached to participate in the research while for the rest of the interviews, the selection criteria was based on theoretical sampling suggested by the grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) where subjects should reflect the repetitiveness of the emerged concepts (McDaniel and Gates, 1998) (Table I). An honorarium of HKD 300 was given to each subject. The interviews took place at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University from December 2007 to August 2008. Also, the actual context has to be considered before making a sampling decision (Richards and Morse, 2007), and thus, purposive sampling is selected. The data collection process ended when the concepts generated from the subjects were saturated. Finally, a total of eight focus group interviews were conducted with 64 subjects. There are no conflicts of interest between the subjects and the researchers.

Interview materials

The interview materials were developed in accordance to different intimate apparel retailers, from those that are fashion-oriented, mass market-oriented to fashion-forward. To be specific, fashion-oriented products have a close connection with existing fashion trends (e.g. US brand Victoria's Secret), and mass market-oriented products are related to basic designs which are timeless and target

Table I.
Subjects' demographic
information

Demographics	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Age</i>		
25-29	22	34.4
30-35	42	65.6
Mean	29.6	
SD	3.06	
<i>Occupation</i>		
Designer	9	14
White collar	26	40.6
Housewife	3	4.7
Education	6	9.4
Medical	6	9.4
Sales and marketing	5	7.8
Others	9	14.1
Total no. of subjects	64	100

the general public (e.g. Japanese brand Wacol). Fashion-forward products are related to avant-garde or trendy designs (e.g. British brand agent provocateur). Design and lingerie professionals were invited to verify the selections. The inclusion of industry professionals provides an objective evaluation on the research stimulus (Grbich, 2007). The selected pictures were used as stimuli in the interviews. Semi-structured questions (see Appendix) were asked to collect individual opinions on the affective response towards the visual merchandising elements. The first two interviews acted as the pre-test. Subjects did not find any difficulties in understanding the questions but additional photos about store layout were added.

Data collection process

The focus group interview was divided into two sections. The first section focused on intimate apparel consumption behaviours. The second section focused on the affective responses on store display pictures. The interviews were taped and lasted for one and a half to two hours. Research memos were completed afterwards to develop hypothetical relationships from the data. The interview content was transcribed by a professional translator after the data was collected, from Chinese to English. Finally, abstract concepts were developed to illustrate components affecting affective pleasure.

The first two interviews were adopted as a blueprint to establish the codes, concepts and inter-relationships for open coding. For the third and fourth group selection, physical needs and differences in aesthetic preferences were used as the guidelines to locate subjects. The fourth focus group interview found that subjects with aesthetic training or backgrounds tend to accept fashionable or seductive window displays. Thus, focus was put onto subjects with or without a strong aesthetic sense in the last four interviews.

Data analysing process

The collected data were analysed in three stages, including open, axial and selective coding. The constant comparison method was applied to look for concepts from the interview data, memos and observation notes, and served as the guideline to look for the next subjects.

In the open coding stage, data were analysed line-by-line and grouped into codes until patterns were noticed. To ensure the appropriateness of coding, another researcher was asked to code the transcripts (Goulding, 2000) and a mutual consent was obtained. When the patterns were identified, the open-coding stopped. Focus was shifted to the code linkages followed by axial coding. Also, better-illustrated stories were selected as cues to look for new insights. The data collection stopped when theoretical saturation occurred. Finally, the emerging relationships were grouped into higher order categories leading to a core theory that explains the phenomenon.

Research findings and analysis

A grounded theory analysis of the narratives of Chinese Hong Kong female consumers generated findings in three stages. Detailed findings of the three stages are as follows.

Opening coding

Three categories were developed, including: the ideal female image; perceived socially accepted female image, and product nature. Each category summarized codes and concepts generated from the interviewees.

Ideal female image. An ideal female image serves as a standard to evaluate the attractiveness and appropriateness of an intimate apparel display and has a close connection between the corresponding affective responses on the visual display. The relationship is strong when dealing with hedonic displays. Hedonic displays focus on the sensational and emotional side of products rather than product functions. Visual merchandising features with the use of hedonic displays:

- use human-like mannequins either with heavy make-up/ hourglass body shapes or seductive body gestures;
- make use of props to enhance a seductive mood;
- project an ideal female to consumers from the perspective of retailers; and
- suggest a strong feeling of femininity.

Consumers not only evaluate from the viewpoint of preferences on the aesthetic content, but there is a strong need to look for the possibility of fit with the perceived images in the displays. It is without doubt that retailers create visually pleasing displays, but there is discrepancy between the expectations of consumers and the images projected by retailers as shown in the following quotes:

Those mannequins' body shape look unreal to me, I don't see how I will look good in those lingerie styles (interviewee 5, 25, housewife).

I guess not many females have body shapes similar to those mannequins in the window (interviewee 11, 28, pharmacist).

I feel that there is a long conceptual distance between my body shape and those in the window display (interviewee 16, 30, fashion designers).

However, there is an exception where positive responses were obtained and these are the headless mannequins. It was found that headless mannequins allow consumers to put themselves into the display and imagine themselves in the garments. Therefore, it decreases the psychological defence of having a surreal feeling on the mannequin's

body shape. Once the defence is low, consumers will show interest in the displayed lingerie. Another factor contributing to a favourable response on mannequins is body shape. Discussions revealed that the ideal body shape in the mind of the consumers is one which is ordinary, but with an ideal proportion. Natural bust lines, elongated legs and slender body shapes give consumer a positive impression and allow them to continue the fantasy, showing femininity yet at the same time, healthy, which is their goal. The following quotes further support this idea:

I certainly want to put on that lingerie, as it (headless) allows me to put myself in that position, I'm starting to think of trying on that style (interviewee 20, 25, model).

This display just makes me feel that the garments are too mature and feminine for me. In reality, people will not put on heavy make-up and set their hair (human-like mannequins) in such a style to match the lingerie. It is hard to find ladies in the mass market who have such an hourglass shape. I don't think that I will look good in those garments. It is because I am not that kind of woman and I do not have a good figure (interviewee 34, 26, merchandiser).

Chinese consumers treat lingerie display mannequins as a reference to determine the congruence of individual female image. Mannequins with a high degree of similarity in body shape and proportion tend to leave a better impression on consumers. The headless ones further enhance the impression by allowing consumers to substitute themselves. Therefore, from an individual consumer perspective, the first criterion of a visual display to determine an acceptable yet pleasant feeling is the mannequin.

Perceived social rules. Apart from individualized ideal female images, consumers also expect a visual display that fulfils social rules. This is a fundamental requirement that encourages them to further investigate other elements of a display. Again, mannequins have a crucial role in influencing consumer cognitive understanding on products and meeting social requirements. Human mannequins with heavy make-up, seductive facial expressions, exaggerated gestures and body shapes capture attention immediately. However, the response may not be positive. The mannequins project a sexual and mature feeling to the products. Instead of stimulating consumers to feel that the products are attractive, consumers tend to feel that the display projects are indecent as the following quote states:

The graphics, feminine colour combinations (fuchsia, violet and gold) and the sexy mannequins drew my attention to the window and made me stop immediately and take a closer look. Although they are visually stimulating, they may not be suitable for Chinese people. The colour combination is too much for us (Chinese consumers). Most of us prefer subtle or neutral colours because they make us feel acceptable psychologically. Wearing sharp, fancy and see-through designs is too much for us (interviewee 13, 25, marketing executive).

Consumer interaction with the other display elements is important to stimulate positive involvement. For example, colour and texture create strong symbolic messages followed by props and product styles. The warm tone; red, and the cool tones; black and violet, project a strong image of femininity, while for texture, lace, silk, satin and chiffon are classified as feminine fabrics and evoke a strong image of femininity. The combination of prior perceptions of mannequins, colour and texture, create a very strong visual impact on consumers where they felt that the display composition is too much for the Chinese. The consumers perceived that the public would not prefer an overly sexy or sexually driven image. When displays have these elements and use

them as focal points to draw consumer attention, it may lead to a negative affective response. The following quotes provide a detailed understanding of the idea:

The chiffon-like curtain symbolizes the mannequin as a seductive woman. Also the usage of an eye-mask gives an S&M feeling. The whole presentation projects a feeling that it is not suitable for ordinary customers (interviewee 28, 33, production manager).

I don't think a sexy presentation works on Chinese women, my mum always tell us have to be decent and only prostitutes wear ultra sexy lingerie (interviewee 25, 35, pattern maker).

I do not prefer displays showing the reality (bedroom scene) of our daily lives in the windows, especially compositions with an embarrassing feeling and adopting prostitute-like mannequins (interviewee 4, 28, surveyor).

It's annoying to see a bedroom scene with raunchy mannequins in a display (interviewee 26, 26, policewoman).

Sexy or raunchy displays intensify the negative affective response among Chinese consumers, making them feel that buying the lingerie is socially incorrect. Such a feeling further affects the approach response (e.g. store entrance) and the action even makes consumers feel that it results in losing one's face:

I feel so embarrassed if other people saw me enter a store with such indecent displays (interviewee 34, 26, merchandiser).

Certainly it is a face-losing behaviour if my friends/relatives/family saw me visiting those (with raunchy display) stores (interviewee 19, 30, doctor).

There is an exceptional case where consumers showed a positive attitude on window displays with abstract mannequins in an intimate relationship. Chinese consumers are not against sex-related themes in displays, but prefer a high degree of subtlety. Displays with explicit sexual feelings are rated as socially not preferred. The following quote indicates the concept:

The arrangement is like a normal relationship between couples. This makes me feel that it should be a bedroom scene; therefore, wearing lingerie is normal. Also, you can see, the mannequins are close to us in terms of the body shape. They are white in color and do not have heads, which just presents a mood. In my opinion, Chinese consumers prefer something subtle. The white mannequins contrast to the dark colored lingerie is just stylish. The whole presentation is close to us and the most important point is, it does not feel exaggerated (interviewee 1, 25, piano instructor).

Product nature. In comparison with outerwear, intimate apparel is treated as a personal issue. Subjects expressed that it is not expected to be seen in public. Among Chinese consumers, it is an embarrassing and unspeakable topic in public. Once intimate apparel is seen by others, the wearer becomes psychologically uncomfortable that she will feel embarrassing. The negative emotion further enhances negative feelings on intimate apparel as the following quotes state:

I admit that showing the bra strap is fun and fashionable, but it's hard to try it here (Hong Kong). I remember one day, I was wearing a pair of low-waist jeans, my panty was showing and colleagues asked me to tuck my shirt in as it was seen by others (interviewee 14, 29, teacher).

I personally think that showing the waistband of the underpants is chic. I saw many western girls dressed like that. Except that my figure is not perfect. However, it is also not totally accepted in Chinese society. People here (Hong Kong) see you as an indecent girl (interviewee 37,28, fashion designer).

When consumers look at an intimate apparel display, its perceived product nature governs Chinese consumers to apply a socially accepted rule for evaluation. As window displays serve as a projection of social values, the rules will be used indirectly to determine the corresponding affective responses.

Axial coding

Dimensional analysis was used after open coding. It is a higher abstraction of codes and categories generated in opening coding. The dynamic relationships of the data were grouped under six aspects, including phenomenon, causal conditions, context, intervening conditions, action strategies and consequence.

The first element is phenomenon. It is related to the discrepancy between the intended response of retailers and the actual response from consumers towards the visual merchandising strategy. It was found that intimate apparel retailers usually project a feminine yet sexy image in visual merchandising strategies to capture the attention of consumers. Although consumers indeed respond to feminine displays, it is not in a positive way. The negative response is due to the low degree of congruity between Chinese consumers and the female image created by intimate apparel retailers.

The second element is casual condition, which relates to the events leading to the development of the phenomenon. It was found that mannequins have a dominant effect on consumer affective response. There is a great perceptual distance between the body image of display mannequins and Chinese consumers. On the one hand, retailers believe that using raunchy or sexy displays can create a fantasy in the minds of consumers, and lead to affective pleasure. However, Chinese consumers prefer a feminine yet subtle female image. When retailers elect to present sexy displays openly, it causes great discrepancy. The difference is due to the inappropriate interpretation of western female beauty standards in the Chinese. Leung (2000) claimed that body culture is important in the Western cultural paradigm while for the Chinese, experiential somaesthetics is more important for determining the attractiveness of a woman. Thus, Chinese consumers enjoy a subtle yet feminine sensation generated from an ordinary mannequin rather than an hourglass figure with raunchy body gestures.

The third element is context, which is the specific location of background variables that influence further actions/strategies. It was found that there is a large difference between intimate apparel retailers and consumers on the preference of ideal female image. The difference mainly deals with the impact of Chinese social values on acceptable female image, intimate apparel perception and the need to sustain face within groups. It was found that purchasing intimate apparel is not just a personal, but also a social issue. Chinese consumers pay close attention to the difference in perceived and actual female image projected from intimate apparel retailers. The rationale is that looking for a socially accepted meaning is important even if a product is for private use. Although Chinese consumers admire western beauty standards, there is only a superficial influence. They may adopt the western style of physical dress, but the Chinese concept of beauty still dominates the degree of application (Leung, 2000). As the

need to maintain group esteem is more important in Chinese society (Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1998), whether an action/product can sustain face (Yang, 1993) is a concern.

The fourth element is intervening condition which is the mediating variable of phenomenon. When consumers look at intimate visual displays, they tend search for the symbolic meaning and evaluate with individual standards/perceptions. It is especially important that a display can turn an affective pleasure into arousal. Chinese consumers are very sensitive to elements on social image, and rank it higher than personal image (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). The combination of feminine colours (e.g. fuchsia, sexy textures (e.g. lace and chiffon), sexy props (e.g. eye-mask) and sexy mannequins stimulates indecent feelings, which goes against the typical Chinese female image in their minds. Thus, it is no surprise that Chinese consumers have such a negative affective response, especially since sex-related issues are a taboo among most of the Chinese (Ruan, 1992).

The fifth element is action strategy, the activities/action that occurs in response to the intervening conditions and phenomenon. Chinese consumers will look for other intimate apparel brands with a high degree of self-congruity in visual displays. They will also refer to mass-market brands, which match their perceived socially accepted standards. Finally, positive affective response happens when they find a brand integrating subtlety in their store displays and increases their intention to buy. A favourable preference of mannequins (e.g. ordinary body shape, headless, white skin colour and no exaggerated body gestures) provides information that helps in constructing the proper social self-image. As Chinese consumers express that they prefer a subtle and ordinary display rather than one that emphasizes sex, it shows that conforming to perceived social rules is very important. To a certain extent, purchasing lingerie is a type of consumption that involves face since Chinese consumers are not only concerned about their own faces, but also other's faces during the consumption process (Gao, 1998). Therefore, if consumers have any hesitations towards the display images, they will look for references in the market.

The sixth element is consequence that relates to the intended and unintended action strategies towards phenomenon. Three possible consequences may happen. First, the affectively arousing displays may increase the approach response of Chinese consumers, but will not increase the possibility of a trying on the item or purchase response. Secondly, if the visual display projects a raunchy or immoral feeling, the affective arousal will turn Chinese consumers away. Thirdly, they will recall negatively towards such brands in their minds.

Developed relationships in axial coding:

(1) Phenomenon:

- There is a discrepancy between the intended response of retailers and the actual response from consumers towards the visual merchandising strategies.

(2) Causal conditions:

- Consumers prefer a feminine and subtle female image.
- Consumers do not prefer too sexy or raunchy visual displays.
- Consumers feel that there is a great perceptual distance between the body figure of mannequins and their own.
- Consumers do not prefer openly exposed displays and layout.

- (3) Context:
 - The difference in the interpretation of an ideal female image between intimate apparel retailers and consumers.
 - The perceived socially accepted female image.
 - The social perception on intimate apparel.
 - The importance of face among Chinese consumers.
- (4) Intervening conditions:
 - The interpretation of the symbolic meanings of visual merchandising elements.
- (5) Action strategies:
 - Consumers search for brands with self-congruity in their displays.
 - Consumers recall mass-marketed brands as the socially accepted standard.
 - Consumers prefer to visit intimate stores with subtle displays and closed layouts.
- (6) Consequence:
 - Consumer approach response increases, but the trial/actual responses may not increase.
 - Causes affective arousal on visual merchandising.
 - Finally, negative brand re-calls occur.

Selective coding: perceived female image theory on visual stimulus

It was found with the grounded theory approach that perceived female image theory on visual stimulus explains the relationship between the impact of intimate apparel visual merchandising and consumer affective responses. The theory has grounds with Chinese female consumers and also other theoretical support from affective research.

From the response of subjects towards mannequins, colours and props, it can be summarized that the perceived female image plays an important role in influencing affective responses. Chinese consumers perceive a close relationship between lingerie and female image. Although Chinese consumers endorse both traditional and western values (Zhang and Shabitt, 2003) but the western influence on their cultural beliefs and norms is minimal (Leung *et al.*, 2005), especially in terms of female image (Leung, 2000). In terms of appearance, Chinese consumers adopt western trends in order to transform themselves and build themselves socially (Leung, 2000). Intimate apparel is not supposed to be seen in public and there are fewer changes in trends. It relates to the private self. Therefore, western influence may not be as strong. The findings indicated that Chinese consumers treat intimate apparel as a tool for being female, and not being feminine. Craik (1994) stated that being female refers to a biological classification whereas being feminine relates to social and cultural attributes. When selecting intimate apparel, consumers pay close attention to the functional store images (Doyle and Fenwick, 1974; Ghosh, 1990). When selecting fashion apparel, consumers will pay close attention to the symbolic store images (Sirgy, 1985). Hence, the perceived female image becomes an inherent attribute for guiding consumers in their evaluation of visual stimulus.

The findings revealed that there is a gap between what retailers deliver and what consumers perceive. Retailers that sell lingerie would most likely project emotions that arouse and are pleasant to consumers. The findings showed that Chinese consumers may feel distressed or unpleasant (Russell and Geraldine, 1980). The arrangements of display elements (colour combination, design principles, window styling, and product selection) may be aesthetically pleasing, but symbolically distressing. Hence, Chinese consumers pay close attention to the symbolic values behind visual merchandising elements and the perceived social standard. As consumers expressed that intimate apparel is a part of social self-formation, visual displays become an important channel for evaluating appropriateness as shown in the following quote:

I remember that I saw a display, with curvy mannequins and emphasis on the breast size, heavy make-up, with party-like hair style, posing in a seductive way and wearing see-through underwear. The whole scenario felt like strippers in a nightclub to me. I may glance at it, but frankly speaking, it didn't suit me very much. It is because I am not the type of woman that was projected (interviewee 53, 33, artist).

The quote implies that consumers have preset standards in evaluating a display. The standard relates to whether indecent, immoral feelings are projected through various visual elements. The feelings of indecency are socially constructed. The stripper example that is mentioned conceptualises the feeling of indecency. The way that the mannequins are dressed and colour combinations symbolize indecent women. As a result, such visual displays with similar colour combinations and styling will immediately trigger the feeling of indecency. The result extends Babin and Darden's (1995) model of the environmental impact on consumer affective responses. A perceived socially accepted image is similar to their moderator concept. However, the impact is not only focused on shopping emotions and consumer evaluations of the shopping experience, but also on product perception. Through different sets of visual merchandising cues (e.g. colour, display props, mannequins etc.), consumers associate symbolic meanings (e.g. raunchy, indecent) with intimate apparel. Thus, additional personalities are added to the product. As the product relates to the formation of social self, any deviations of social meaning will further trigger a negative affective response and such a minimal expression can lead to a dramatic impact on decisions (Weinberg and Wolfgang, 1982). Also, the degree of aesthetic knowledge can increase the degree of attention and awareness only. Sexy and raunchy displays merely draw the attention of curious consumers to the store, but for purchasing decisions, the perceived female image still governs the evaluation process as shown in the following quotes:

I remember that I was attracted by the sexy (lingerie) display on Russell Street, with raunchy mannequins standing on the balcony. They were all wearing see-through, shocking pink lingerie and garter. They were just so sexy; they immediately aroused my desire to take a look in the store. (Did you finally buy it?) Well, I admire the way that they were displayed, but for me, I just prefer something simple and stylish. It's because I am not that kind of woman, the products are suitable for those working in a nightclub (interviewee 43, 35, fashion designers).

I admired the X-rated display styles and wanted to take a closer look. However, I definitely won't try them on because they represent an indecent woman in our (Chinese) community (interviewee 45, 34, fashion stylist).

Discussion and implication

Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) suggested that there is less expectation for products with universal functions to conform to local values, but when the product itself ties to social and cultural experiences, the local context should not be disregarded. When drafting strategies for the store environment, intimate apparel retailers should take this suggestion into account. This is especially true for international well-known brands. A unified cooperate image is important, but perceived localness is also critical. For products tied to aesthetic and social elements, the degree of perceived localness becomes a critical point regarding product acceptance. In intimate apparel, both function and aesthetics are important. Therefore, in designing a retail environment, attention should be paid to the cultural and symbolic meanings of various stimuli (for example colour, graphics) since the stimuli have direct impacts on the emotion state of individuals and approach-avoidance behaviours (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974). Although the degree of novelty (new and surprising) and complexity (the number of elements and change in an environment) are also key elements for stimulating affective response (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974), an adjustment should be made between the content (for example raunchy ideas) and consumer perception (for example sensitivity to sex-related products) (Spies *et al.*, 1997) if a positive affective response is expected. With reference to the Chinese female consumers, display presentations stimulating affective pleasure should fit the perceived female image. Consumers like to see visually stimulating displays and in-store highlights, but close attention should be paid to the symbolic values of the display content. Chinese consumers link indecent feelings to the violation of social perception of female images, leading to a negative perception of losing face (Gao, 1998; Joy, 2001). Group face is more important than individual face (Li and Su, 2007), and since the Chinese does not view themselves as a single entity (Sun, 1991), they will extend the decision to his/her entire group (for example family, friends and relatives) (Joy, 2001) and try their best to act in accordance with social expectations (Yang, 1981). As a result, such displays may create awareness at the initial stage, but may prevent further positive consumer responses due to the conflict of the perceived and projected female image.

In terms of academic implications, this study reveals the importance of perceived social rules for direct evaluation criteria in a collective group. A small difference in the symbolic interpretation of a display element can lead to a completely different affective response between cultural groups. For instance, understanding the core value behind the response (for example enhancing face) can further predict the agent(s) stimulating different affective responses.

In terms of marketing implications, intimate apparel carries a relatively strong social meaning when compared with other apparel products. Therefore, retailers should allow consumers to have more personal affective interaction with the display. For instance, by using abstract form mannequins with natural body shapes and gestures, consumers are able to increase cognitive and affective interplay in their minds. Also, as the mannequin is the key element in delivering affective pleasure/arousal, natural body shapes can decrease the perception that only an ideal or hourglass shape can successfully carry out the garments. Then, it raises the degree of wearability in the minds of consumers.

Attention should also be paid to the arrangement of display elements. Retailers are advised not to use all elements that carry strong feminine meanings. Moreover, the symbolic store-image approach is suitable for a specific consumer group and product lines only. Local values should be considered for the mass market to avoid affective arousal.

Research limitations and further studies

There are several limitations in this study. In terms of product variety, only one function oriented product; intimate apparel, is adopted. For subjects, only female consumers are involved. Regarding the impact of aesthetic background on affective response, additional numbers of subjects from different aspects of the creative industry should be involved for further study. For the future, it is recommended that a diversity of function oriented products be adopted in order to develop a more comprehensive study. The study revealed that social perception plays an important role in manipulating Chinese consumer cognitive and affective responses towards visual displays. It is suggested that consumers from other Asian countries be included so as to provide a general understanding of the issue. Also, a comparative study of face and affective response can be done between the east and the west or within other Asian countries.

Conclusion

This study investigates consumer affective response on visual stimulus in stores by considering the aesthetic and symbolic aspects of a function-oriented product - intimate apparel. The congruity between the perceived fashion image and images projected from stores serves as a moderator that affects the actual purchase decision. Opinions compiled from an in-depth study of 64 Chinese Hong Kong female consumers lead to the conclusion that having the right perceived female image is crucial in influencing affective responses towards visual displays. It is found that attention should also be paid to the balance of a unified cooperate images and perceived localness while determining visual merchandising strategies. For instance, a small difference, such as the choice of sexy mannequins can hit the taboo of consumers and create a negative feeling and mood in their mind. In particular, Chinese consumers rank social expectations as important, the deviation of perceived localness may lead to a negative perception of losing face. Furthermore, the result indicates that when products entail both utilitarian and aesthetic concerns, social and local values should also be addressed as they can affect consumer shopping mood, approach response and purchase decision. In conclusion, consumer affective response and social perception are inter-related and this study endeavours to stimulate further research in this area.

Remarks

With regards to the details of the application of findings on lingerie specialty stores in Hong Kong, interested parties are welcome to write to the authors. We would be pleased to provide additional information and continue the dialogue. For the display pictures, please refer to the following website for the details (<http://ejm-intimatedisplays.blogspot.com>).

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Appendix. Interview questions*Opening coding and axial coding*

- (1) Problem recognition:
 - How often do you purchase intimate apparel?
 - How often do you source the information about intimate apparel?
 - Do you have any regular stimulus to arouse your attention to the need?
- (2) Information search:
 - Can the product type shorten your information search process?
 - Any favourite channels?
 - Can the product types shorten your information search process?
 - Discuss the impact of brand names on your information search process.
 - Discuss the impact of window displays on your information search process.
- (3) Store atmosphere discussion:
 - Discuss the impact of visual merchandising elements, including mannequins, colour, props, and product placements.
 - Discuss the feeling generated by the visual merchandising elements.
 - Discuss personal response/feelings/experiences with the visual merchandising elements.
- (4) What element, in particular, stimulates your mentioned personal response?
- (5) Consumer response:
 - Share your views on the impact of window display/ in-store highlights and any further action.
- (6) Selective coding:
- (7) Do you have any fundamental guidelines when evaluating a lingerie display?
- (8) Which window display(s)/in-store highlight(s) match your individual preference?
- (9) How do you evaluate the mannequins? Do they project your personal image? If yes, in what way? If no, in what ways?
- (10) What is your preferred female image in your mind? Please elaborate.
- (11) How does the female image contribute to your interpretation of window display elements?
- (12) Can you recall a lingerie display that made you feel pleased/relaxed? Why?
- (13) Can you recall a lingerie display that made you feel annoyed/distressed? Why?

Pictures were shown in the discussions about store environment.
In depth questioning was employed throughout the interviews.

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