Analyzing the Visual Merchandising Elements for the Apparel Retailers

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Abstract. Visual merchandising plays a key role, basically for pursuing the customer to enter the store by making the store attractive and changing the perceived image from the viewpoint of consumers. The brand image and the retailers’ image can be emphasized with the combination of these visual merchandising components. The aim of this study is to analyze and to compare the selection of design elements of different type of retailers such as fast fashion retailers, luxury apparel retailers, sportswear retailers or the retailers presenting products for women, men or both. To this aim, a content analysis was applied among 36 apparel retailers acting in Turkey. The findings showed that the visual merchandising elements were inarguably well employed by the luxury brand retailers, which was followed with the retailers selling high price fashion products. Among the visual merchandising elements special lighting and window displays were seen to be favored by all the retailers. Besides, the selection of different types of visual element were found to be based on the target customer group, while the apparel retailers selling products for females only are much more caring about the visual merchandising, it was vice versa for the apparel retailers selling only menswear.

Keywords— Apparel retailer, Color Focus, Shop interior, Signage, Special Lighting, Visual merchandising, Window display.

1. Introduction

In today’s apparel retailing environment, visual merchandising plays a key role, basically for pursuing the customer to enter the store by making the store attractive and changing the perceived image from the viewpoint of consumers [1]. Actually, there is a positive relationship between the pleasant store atmosphere and customer satisfaction and this causes to enhance the favorable purchasing experiment [2, 3]. Thus the concept of visual merchandising can be used as an effective strategy to strengthen the perceived image, to draw the attraction of the customers and to increase sales. Moreover, the retailers, which should develop unique positioning, create a clear differentiation and brand image enhancement can position themselves among their competitors and retain their market share by analyzing their visual merchandising concepts used by them.

Actually, including the exterior (the building, place, window display) and interior design components (store design), visual merchandising tries to create a pleasant store atmosphere. Among the elements of the visual merchandising, there are window displays, colors, lighting, signage and product information, and shop interiors which are actually addressing the visual senses [4]. Besides, there are other
components of visual merchandising appealing the other senses such as music, smells, touch and even taste and technologies such as digital displays [5]. These components are usually brought together considering basically the contextual aspects such as type of store, brand and themes. The brand image is emphasized with the combination of these components such as the selection of prestigious and unique elements for a luxury brand and the selection of neat and plain elements for a brand identifying itself with simplicity. Besides, the target customer group and their socio demographic properties such as gender, age or education and the personal motivations are also considered to improve the attractiveness of the stores for them. Thus, the apparel retailers especially the successful ones include or highlight some of the visual merchandising elements more than the others. But, it is not known exactly, if the apparel retailers actually consider these points in the visual merchandising activities and if there are apparent differences between different types of retailers.

This study aims to analyze what kind of visual merchandising elements are used by the apparel retailers acting in Turkey and to compare the selection of design elements of different type of retailers such as fast fashion retailers, luxury apparel retailers, sportswear retailers or the retailers presenting products for women, men or both.

2. Literature review

Visual merchandising is described as an attractive and eye catching technique to present and display the products to the target and potential consumers [6]. It is actually an activity matching the effective assortment of the merchandise with the effective display of it, which means selecting the right merchandise and placing it effectively in the efficiently used retail space [7]. The major aim of using visual merchandising was stated to be increasing the sales by drawing the attention of the consumers to enter into the store and encouraging them to remain in the store and having positive experience in the retail atmosphere and even motivating the consumer to make an unplanned and impulse purchase. The reason why the visual merchandising is influential on the consumers is that, the people actually don’t buy products just because of the products but they make purchases for various type of reasons such as cheering themselves up, beautifying their home, or adding value [6]. Being regarded as a ‘silent salesman’, visual merchandising was stated to be acting as a promotional tool by being an influential element in the marketing communication of the retailer which has the major role of appealing consumer senses [8-9].

Although it is a new concept, there are many studies regarding visual merchandising. Some of the studies are concentrated on describing the visual merchandising components, classifying the tools and making suggestions for improving the presentation of these tools. The other studies are focusing on analyzing the understanding of the consumers’ perceptions about visual merchandising display, putting forward the effectiveness of the tools with some claims about the convenience of these tools for special type of customers or retailers.

The attributes associated with the retail environment were classified as tangibles and intangibles where the tangibles covered the fascia, overall store design, window display, layout and merchandising, fixtures and fitting, decoration and signage; the emotional and intangible attributes included the ambience, image, positioning, branding, sensory perceptions and emotional connection [10-12].

Soundhariya and Sathyan listed the visual merchandising techniques as presenting merchandise at the focal point, window display, colors and textures, exterior architecture, handling of the mannequins, lighting and music, display themes, props and fixtures, banners, signs and graphics, and the end caps which are at the end of the store [13].

Jain et al included the window displays, the signs, interior displays and special sales promotions and even the cosmetic promotions into the visual merchandising tools, which can be used by a fashion retailer [6]. Stating that there are actually two classes of tools as the interior and exterior components, the authors included any tools such as color combination, product placement, lighting arrangement, layout and highlighting of design, mannequin and props selection, fixtures and fittings selection in creating a favorable shopping atmosphere by Law, Wong and Yip [1].
Taskiran listed the dimensions of the visual merchandising as window display, color, lighting, signage and shop interior [4]. Regarding the window display, the author added that some of the objectives of the window display should be to create impact, image, theme and composition. On the other hand, it is claimed that digital signage can also be used as electronic display, which can be benefited to convey a message or information to the consumers. Specifically regarding the themes, Madhavi and Leelavati stated that the themes can be conveyed by the correct use of merchandise color, presentation style, awareness of fixtures, path finding and sensory qualities of materials and lighting [5].

Considering the dimensions and tools used as visual merchandising tools by different researchers, it can be stated that some dimensions of visual merchandising are highlighted.

The importance of the window display was underlined by many researchers since it is described as the initial way, a store would attract the attention of the consumer. Jain et al. claimed that, the window display should be attractive enough since only three to five seconds of attention is given by the consumers to window display [6]. Thus, it should create a visual appeal, relevance and interest value. Moreover, the window display of an apparel store was stated to be able to show the seasonal trends in fashion colors and looks. According to Madhavi and Leelavati, display themes, which are related with the retailers’ imagination and creativity should be carefully selected and presented in good composition in window display creating an impact on the shopping mood of the customer [5].

Store layout and display as another visual merchandising element was claimed to be arranged in a way that the movement of the consumers is guided within the store. It was indicated that the front third of the store has 3 times more selling power when compared to back third of the store [11]. On the other hand, since a person entering into the room moves his/her eyes in Z pattern, the rear left of the store should be arranged in an appealing manner to guide the direction and keep the consumer visually interested [5]. Beside these, the usage of the empty spaces are declared to be significantly important within the perspective of visual merchandising.

Store design and shop interior covering the selection of the wall covering, carpets, furnishing, shelves and dividers are suggested to be designed to convey the image which is required to be projected to the customer [8].

Signages are referred to as providing a short cut for communication about a product. They were actually classified into two parts. The fixed signage was pointed that they give information about areas and facilities of the store such as fitting rooms and pay station and; the point of purchase signage such as speaker cards, posters and graphics was claimed to provide information about the product, institution or product and promote purchase. The proper signage was found to influence the sales up to 40%.

Colors were stated to be one of the powerful factor within the visual merchandising as they can be associated with emotions, gender or special occasion. Thus the selection of colors was emphasized to be matching with the theme of the items presented in the store [5] such as selecting light shades of pink and blue colors for baby accessorizes; red color with Valentines theme and so on.

Effective illumination and lightning was found to increase the sales up to 20% where the light blend with the interiors [5]. Besides, it was carried out that more items are handled by the consumer under bright lightning than soft lighting [14]. Actually, different lightings are proposed to be selected in different parts of the store considering the target consumer group. As a general concept it was added by some researcher that the main principles of design display should be to create balance, emphasis, proportion, rhythm, color, lighting and harmony where these principles should be applied for both window display and interior displays.

Although the most general dimensions and tools, which were investigated within the literature are as given above, some researchers also added some more components to the visual merchandising tools such as fragrances, music, and even store personnel. For instance, Fiore et al found out that sprayed fragrance, could stimulate one’s affective state and boost mental imagination [15]. Appropriate music could be influential on the cognitive activity of the consumers [16].

Other than the analysis of the visual merchandising dimensions and tools, some researchers investigated the influence of these tools for specific type of retailers and consumers in order to find out the most influential elements of visual merchandising which well match with the target consumer group.
Pillai et al investigated the influence of the different visual merchandising tools including graphics and signage, trends and mood boards, space management, numeric and visuals, dressforms and mannequins, synergy among different stalls, out of box thinking, merchandise planning and range planning, but the authors concluded that the most effective visual merchandising tool is to have proper lighting and attractive display themes [17].

A study established among a focus group of apparel customers revealed that the theme of the window and store display enabled the subconscious perception of the consumers to surface by creating an awareness and knowledge in consumers. Moreover, it was found that the attributes such as brightness, the size and the height of the display is important for them besides their suitability of to the brand image and their convenience to the store space. They revealed that they prefer the displays to be at eye-level, the use of mannequins or half mannequins instead of images and pictures but the displays should not prevent the customer to move freely within the store [18].

Krishnakumar investigated the attitude of the consumer towards visual merchandising in apparel purchase decision [8]. The authors found out that much consideration should be given into store front and store design adding that the proper and effective lightning (in terms of color, location and intensity) should be done to improve the effects of the display.

Hefer found out that the female consumers are much more attentive to the visual merchandising components whereas male consumers are showing attention only to the signages and directories which help them to find what they are looking for [19].

Oh and Petrie investigated the role of storefront window displays on the shoppers store entry decision and their perceptions about the brand or store image [20]. The authors concluded that visual perception of the store front display influenced the decision of the shoppers to enter the store. But this influence was stated to be depended on the inter-relationship among the type of the display, motivation and cognitive load effect. Moreover, they found that the merchandise focused window displays are easily understood by the consumers whereas the artistic window displays are promoting the wish for exploration within the consumers [20]. Nonetheless, the authors added that the artistic type of store display cannot be understood by the consumers having high cognitive load at that time.

Mehta and Chugan investigated the impact of visual merchandising on the buying behavior of customers visiting the central malls selling apparel products [21]. The authors analyzed four dimensions of the visual merchandising which are the window display, in store/mannequin display, floor merchandising and promotional signage and stated that except the in store mannequin display all the other merchandising dimensions are influential on the impulse buying behavior of the consumers.

Law, Wong and Yip investigated the effect of visual merchandising on the intimate apparel products for the women [1]. And they found that it should be taken care of the balance of the corporate images and perceived localness while preparing the visual merchandising strategies. Nonetheless, the authors added that the selection of the sexy mannequins as visuals could create negative feelings.

The studies investigating the effect of visual merchandising tools on consumers put forward that some of the tools are much more influential than the other. Besides, the studies emphasized that the selection of the tools should be made in a way that they should reflect the brand image and even personality. Last but not least, special type of merchandise or special type of stores are expected to use some visual merchandising tools more than the other.

Nonetheless, although the relation with the brand image and the usage of the visual merchandising tools are underlined, no study was come across in literature, which was putting forward if different type of apparel retailers are preferring different combination of these visual merchandising tool.

3. Method
Considering the lack of literature to analyze the selection of different combination of visual merchandising tools by different type of retailers, a content analysis was aimed to be made among the apparel retailers acting in Turkey. To this aim, 5 general visual merchandising dimensions with 7 sub dimensions were selected based on the literature. 39 apparel retailer were visited by an observation team of three people. The apparel retailers were assessed in terms of their usage of the predetermined
categories of the visual merchandising elements in their exterior and interior designs. All the data was
recorded and then analyzed according to different type of retailers. Within this regard, these apparel
retailers were classified in 8 categories according to type of the merchandise and price levels.

The statistical measures such as mode and average values were taken into account in order to make
the analysis and make a comparison among different type of retailers.

Finally, a focus group of customers were asked about their approaches toward visual merchandising
elements in their favorite apparel retailer store matching with the select apparel retailers to see if the
findings are overlapping the results of the content analysis.

4. Results and Discussions

The dimensions of the visual merchandising tools were selected as window display, color focus, special
lighting, signage and shop interior according to the study of Taskiran. But, considering that some tools
are more important and some points should be especially covered during the observational study some
sub dimensions were added within the dimensions of visual merchandising. Within this regard, 4
dimensions to the window display and 2 dimensions to the signage and 2 dimension to shop interior
were added. Since, the window display is one of the most important exterior display as it is the first
point that the customer makes his/her decision to enter the store 4 more dimensions, which are impact,
image, theme and composition, were added. Considering that the signage easies the movement of the
consumer within the store and it has the power of directly conveying the messages about the product,
prices or promotions, two specific dimensions were added to signage, which were electronic display and
lettering. Finally, covering many items, the shop interior was also handled by two more sub dimensions,
which were named as the usage of empty space and focal point. The dimensions and sub-dimensions
with their coding were given in Table 1.

| Table 1. Coding for dimensions and sub-dimensions |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Dimension code | Dimension name            |
| 1              | Window display                  |
| 1a             | Impact                            |
| 1b             | Image                              |
| 1c             | Theme                             |
| 1d             | Composition                       |
| 2              | Color focus                        |
| 3              | Special lighting                  |
| 4              | Signage                           |
| 4a             | Electronic display                |
| 4b             | Lettering                         |
| 5              | Shop interior                     |
| 5a             | Usage of empty space              |
| 5b             | Focal point                        |
On the other hand, the 39 apparel retailers were divided into 8 categories considering the type of merchandise they are selling and average price levels. These categories, their explanations, and the number of apparel retailers falling in this category are given in Table 2 below. Moreover, the group names were stated within the Table 2, which will be reused in the presentation in Table 3.

| Category name                                      | Explanation                                                                 | Number of retailer |
|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Low price mass merchandise store (G1)              | Huge capacity chain store selling low priced apparel for women, men, kids   | 1                  |
| Medium price level well known fast fashion stores (G2) | Mostly sell well known fast fashion brands at low, medium or medium to high price levels | 9                  |
| Medium to high price specialty stores (G3)         | Mostly specialty stores selling womenswear at medium or high price levels    | 6                  |
| Medium to high level sportswear retailers (G4)    | They are selling younger age consumer mostly                                | 2                  |
| High level sportswear retailers (G5)              | They are selling older people including the smart casual apparel products    | 3                  |
| Moderate price level luxury retailers (G6)        | They sell luxury items at moderate price levels compared to foreigners      | 4                  |
| High price luxury retailers (G7)                  | Well known luxury retailer                                                 | 11                 |
| Menswear retailers(G8)                            | Selling only to male consumers                                             | 3                  |

As seen from Table 2, not all the categories are involving the same number of retailers and even one category is involving only 1 retailer but since it is the largest apparel retailer in Turkey it was also included in the study. Besides, it should be mentioned that most of the retailers are predominantly selling women’s wear products because of this reason a special category was added, which are only selling menswear products.

| Table 3. The results of content analysis |
|------------------------------------------|
| G1 | Mode | 1 | 1a | 1b | 1c | 1d | 2 | 3 | 4 | 4a | 4b | 5 | 5a | 5b |
|----|------|---|----|----|----|----|---|---|---|----|----|---|----|----|
| G2 | Mode | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 |
| G3 | Mode | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 |
| G4 | Mode | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 0,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 0,0 |
| G5 | Mode | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 |
| G6 | Mode | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 1,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 |

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Table 3 gives the results of content analysis using the coding given in Tables 1 and 2. Regarding the assessment of mode values, it should be stated that the mode value was taken as the higher number (1) when the half of the retailers within the same category use this dimension of visual merchandising. From Table 3 general assessment of the all apparel retailers reveal that the mostly favored and used visual merchandising dimensions became special lighting, shop interior and focal point; the least favored ones became the lettering, electronic display and signage in the same order of magnitude.

Considering the categories, it can be stated that low price mass merchandise store (G1) was found to be emphasizing the color focus, special lighting and signage. Although it was not valid for all the retailers within the group medium price level well known fast fashion stores (G2), the highlighted visual merchandising dimensions were found to be shop interior, color focus and signage. Besides, it was observed most of them use special lighting. Similarly, for the third group, which is mostly specialty stores selling women’s wear at medium or high price levels (G3), the visual merchandising elements were listed as special lighting, color focus and shop interior but it was observed that the number of retailers which are using the dimensions efficiently are higher than the (G2). For instance, all of the retailers within this group was observed to be using special lighting. Regarding the fourth group which are the retailers selling younger age consumer mostly (G4), it was interesting to see that almost all visual merchandising dimensions are used by these retailers, actually this was mostly because only two retailers have fallen in this category. Nonetheless, by looking at the retailers in this group it should be mentioned that the other interesting point about these retailers is that none of them use the color focus. In parallel with this group, the retailers falling in the fifth group, which are High level sportswear retailers (G5), only one retailer among them is using the color focus. Besides as in the case of G4, the retailers in G5 were found to be less frequently using the visual merchandising dimension regarding the signage. The two groups Moderate price level luxury retailers (G6) and High price luxury retailers (G7) became the retailer groups, which were benefiting most of the visual merchandising dimensions on the other hand. Nonetheless, regarding these two group it can be stated that whereas the G6 makes the balanced used of the visual merchandising dimensions, G7 make special emphasize on some of the dimensions such as window display and special lighting. It was observed that the sub dimensions of the window display are strongly used by the retailers that fall into this category. The final group of retailers, which is Menswear retailers (G8) was found to be emphasizing the shop interior, special lighting and color focus comparatively. Within this regard, it was observed that they are similar to G2 and G3.

Other than these findings, it was further studied with a focus group of consumer involving 16 people whose profile was given in Table 4 below.

### Table 4. The profile of the focus group of consumers

| Gender | Age    | Education       | Income  | Shopping frequency     | Expenditure % of income |
|--------|--------|-----------------|---------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| G1     | Female | 18-23           | High school | Low                    | Once or twice a year    | 0-10 %                  |
| G1     | Male   | 36-42           | Undergraduate | High                  | Once or twice a month   | 20-30 %                 |
| G2     | Female | 18-23           | Still undergraduate | Low to medium | Once or twice a month | 30-40 %                 |
| G2     | Female | 30-35           | Undergraduate | Low to medium         | Once or twice three months | 10-20 %               |
| G3     | Female | 24-29           | Undergraduate | Low to medium         | Once a month            | 10-20 %                 |
| G3     | Female | 30-35           | Undergraduate | High                  | Once a month            | 40-50 %                 |
These participants were required to act as the consumer of one of these retailers according to their preference and rate these retailers using a 7 point Likert scale in terms of 5 Visual Merchandising dimensions, which were assessed with 10 questions. The findings were quite in parallel with the findings of the content analysis regarding the comparison of different types of retailers but there were some differences in terms of the most significant visual merchandising elements for this retailer within the consumers’ minds. The difference may be related with the point that the consumers within the focus group were not the only consumer of this retailer but they are the ones that shop from this retailer as can be seen from Table 4 within the column regarding shopping frequency from the select retailer. Nonetheless, working with the focus group showed that the dimensions which are used in the visual merchandising environment can be easily detected by the consumers which meant that the improvement of the usage of these items will be certainly be recognized.

| Group | Gender | Age Range | Education Level | Experience | Frequency | Rating |
|-------|--------|-----------|-----------------|------------|-----------|--------|
| G4    | Male   | 18-23     | Still undergraduate | Low to medium | Once or twice three months | 10-20 % |
| G4    | Male   | 24-29     | Still undergraduate | Medium     | Once or twice three months | 30-40 % |
| G5    | Male   | 24-29     | Undergraduate    | Medium     | Once or twice three months | 10-20 % |
| G5    | Male   | 36-42     | Graduate         | High       | Often     | 10-20 % |
| G6    | Male   | 30-35     | Undergraduate    | Low to medium | Once or twice a month | 20-30 % |
| G6    | Female | 36-42     | Undergraduate    | High       | Once a month | 0-10 % |
| G7    | Male   | 36-42     | Undergraduate    | High       | Once a month | 30-40 % |
| G7    | Male   | 36-42     | High school      | High       | Once a month | 20-30 % |
| G8    | Male   | 36-42     | Undergraduate    | High       | Once or twice three months | 40-50 % |
| G8    | Male   | 36-42     | Undergraduate    | High       | Once or twice a year | 0-10 % |

5. Conclusion
In this study, it was analyzed to see if there is difference for the retailers in terms of usage of different type of visual merchandising dimensions. With the application of content analysis among 36 apparel retailers acting in Turkey, the findings revealed that the visual merchandising elements were inarguably well employed by the luxury brand retailers, which was followed with the retailers selling high price fashion products. It was interesting to see that the fast fashion retailers were not so much considering the application of visual merchandising components. Among the visual merchandising elements special lighting and window displays were seen to be favored by all the retailers. Besides, the selection of
different types of visual element were based on the target customer group, while the apparel retailers selling products for females only are much more caring about the visual merchandising, it was vice versa for the apparel retailers selling only menswear. These results were also compared with findings obtained from focus group and it was seen that they were mostly confirmed but have small differences in details.

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