The Effect of Fashion Store Layout and Visual Merchandising on Female Consumer Walking Patterns: a Systems Perspective

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This paper presents a systems perspective on fashion consumers’ walking patterns and in-store behaviour, as influenced by the fashion store layout and visual merchandising subsystems. A qualitative approach through observations and unstructured interviews revealed the influence of consumer walking patterns and store subsystems on purchasing behaviour. A categorization of different fashion consumers, namely total image, category specific and purpose driven, emerged from this relationship. Differences between the consumer categories, expressed in the way fashion store departments are experienced, resulted in negative or positive inputs into the store system. Visual merchandise is influential in determining consumer walking patterns and purchasing behaviour.

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THE EFFECT OF FASHION STORE LAYOUT AND VISUAL MERCHANDISING ON FEMALE CONSUMER WALKING PATTERNS: A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Newman et al. (2002) argues the importance of research focusing on walking patterns in retail stores, as being an integral part of understanding consumer behavior and how store layout affects this behavior. This argument may also be relevant within the South African context, although such research has to date not been undertaken. According to Evans et al. (1996) an association exists between store layout and walking patterns of consumers and the layout could affect the duration of the consumers’ experience in-store and the number of products they are exposed to.

Newman et al. (2002) states that the consumer is either attracted or repelled by the shopping environment and/ or merchandise. Furthermore, Underhill (1999) defines a good fashion store, as one that maximises the fashion consumer’s exposure to fashion merchandise and invites consumers’ consideration of fashion items by displaying merchandise in their path and field of vision (Underhill 1999). Additionally, aisles and fixtures are placed with the intention of guiding the consumer through the store (Swanson and Everette 2000). It is also suggested that factors such as the accessibility, visibility and attractiveness of the merchandise in combination with the store layout may promote fashion purchases.

From a systems perspective, theorised by Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) and Spears and Gregoire (2004), it can be argued that by applying a particular store layout and certain visual merchandising techniques as inputs, consumers will automatically be directed through the store. In turn, this may deliver certain outputs, such as encouraging fashion purchases, or making it more accessible for the fashion consumer to obtain the necessary items. One way of gaining an in-depth understanding of the fashion consumer’s behavior, as a subsystem of the store system, is through studying their walking patterns through fashion stores. In order to do so the following objectives were proposed: To determine consumer walking patterns through fashion stores by evaluating the routes, direction and floor space covered in the free-flow, grid and combination layouts and the effect of certain aspects of visual merchandising and store layout on consumer walking patterns was determined.

A qualitative research design of a descriptive and exploratory nature was applied in this study. A non-probability sampling technique, namely convenience sampling that was purposive in nature, was used. Three major fashion stores, representing three different types of store layout, namely a grid, a free flow and a combination layout (Newman and Cullen 2002; Peter and Olson 1990; Walters and Bergiel 1989) were used as observations of targeted female consumers’ walking patterns were traced onto these floor plans. Field notes were made of all consumer behavior occurring at certain points. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with female consumers at the exit of the fashion store until the point of data saturation. A total of 60 consumers were interviewed and interviews were audio recorded in order to capture all comments for data analysis. The data gathering instruments used in this study, were pre-tested through a pilot study.

Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim to perform content analysis through coding of the data. During this coding procedure concepts and themes from the text were identified that sufficiently described the responses. Since the researcher becomes subjective to the research in qualitative studies through his/her involvement in data collection and analysis, Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for trustworthiness used in combination with the four criteria provided by Krefting (1991) were applied to the study.

Three consumer categories were identified by means of a comparison of all the different walking patterns across the three types of fashion store layouts, namely the total image, the category specific and the purpose-driven consumer. The interaction between the in-store behavior of the total image, category specific and the purpose driven consumer and the different store layouts resulted in a variety of consumer experiences. It was found that consumers’ shopping intentioned influenced their walking patterns and shopping behavior.

The first theme that the total image, category specific and the purpose driven consumers all verbalised, in terms of the free-flow layout, was departmental features. All three groups of consumers pointed out that departments of the free flow layout store were well-distinguished and well-organised. Secondly, all three consumer categories identified the easy access to merchandise the free flow layout allowed as theme.

Only the total image and the purpose driven consumer categories were identified in the grid layout store. A single theme of departmental features represented the experience of the total image and purpose-driven consumer in these stores. These consumers did however have different opinions, expressed as concepts, on the departmental characteristics. Once more, the departmental characteristics of the combination layout were a specific theme raised by two of the consumer categories, namely the total image and category specific consumers. However, discrepancies in their opinions of this store aspect were found.

The total image, category specific and purpose driven consumers experienced a common theme of visual attractiveness, through which visual merchandising was expressed in the free-flow and the grid layout. Nevertheless, the concept used to describe the theme differed between the different consumer categories, as an indication of their experiences of the visuals from these different layouts. Contrary to these two layouts, the combination layout rendered different themes to consumers’ experiences of the visual merchandise. The total image consumer identified a theme of elevated visuals as an attractive aspect of the visual merchandise, while the purpose-driven consumer was attracted by the visual appearance.

From these consumer opinions it is clear that both store layout and visual merchandising as subsystems within the store system have a prominent role to play in consumers’ in-store behavior and walking patterns, as the different consumer categories notice visual merchandising
in different ways. This needs to be addressed if the consumer is to be attracted to merchandise. A mutual relationship or interrelatedness between the retailer as a system and the fashion consumer as a subsystems exist. This results from the fact that through the visual merchandising and store layout, the consumer’s purchasing behavior is influenced. In addition to this, the retailer also benefits from the consumers’ purchases and store patronage as influenced by the store subsystems.

REFERENCES