

Online Visual Merchandising: an Impression Formation Perspective

Online Visual
Merchandising

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Abstract *The purpose of this paper was to provide an overview of the existing literature on on-line visual merchandising and to propose an alternative theoretical framework in which online visual merchandising research can be conducted. Two streams of research including the e-tail service quality literature and the store environment literature from environmental psychology perspectives were reviewed in the context of online visual merchandising. An impression formation paradigm from social psychology was adopted to establish the alternative framework to supplement the existing online visual merchandising research and generate deeper insights into the online visual merchandising phenomenon.*

Key words *Online, visual merchandising, impression formation*

Visual merchandising (VM) in traditional in-store retailing has been defined in varying scopes. Chappelle (2002), for example, restricted VM to placing merchandise on in-store fixtures in a visually pleasant, logical, and expected way to invites sales, distinguishing the term from window display which was defined as the planned three-dimensional staging of products to create a drama to entice customers into the store. Walters and White (1987) also defined VM as the activity of coordinating effective merchandise selection with effective merchandise display. These narrow definitions of VM stress the role of VM in enabling customers to approach the merchandise better within the store. However, the definition of VM that has been more commonly adopted by researchers and practitioners addresses a broader concept which emphasizes the role of VM as a communication vehicle for a retailer to interact with customers. For example, Phillips (1996) stated that VM encompasses all practices including merchandise presentations, design of a store's exterior and interior, and windows and point-of-sale displays that consistently communicate the store's image, reinforce the store's advertising messages, and stimulate the customer's desire to buy. Lea-Greenwood (1998) also affirmed this broad concept of VM by arguing that VM constitutes the total design and merchandising concept. The consistency in a firm's various communications is an important determinant of whether or not the firm can maintain a strong brand image (Keller, 1993). Therefore, whether VM is viewed as its narrow defi-

inition of merchandise presentation, or as the broad definition of all practices to entice customers, the pivotal role of VM practices in retail stores to communicate the right messages to the consumer seems apparent.

According to Shop.org ("Online Sales," 2008), online retailing has been one of the fastest growing industries in the U.S., reaching over 200 billion dollars of sales in 2008 with a 17 percent growth from the previous year despite the struggling economy. Apparel has been consistently ranked as one of the top online purchase categories in recent years in the U.S. (Greenspan, 2003; Rush, 2004), marking the largest online sales category (\$26.6 billion) in 2008 ("Online Sales," 2008). Due to this apparent growth and the tremendous potential expected for the future of online apparel retailing, the strategic meaning of understanding factors that can impact the psychological and behavioral aspects of online apparel consumers seems undeniable.

In the traditional offline retail setting, VM communications are especially important to new customers who visit a store or consider buying a product from the store for the first time (McKinley, 2003). This is because new customers tend to rely more on visual cues from the store environment than repeat customers due to their lack of previous knowledge on the store or merchandise sold in the store. A fair proportion of consumers are still non-online shoppers or novice online shoppers. Further, experienced online shoppers are used to seeing so many websites appear and disappear overnight and thus tend to be skeptical about a website they visit for the first time. Considering that VM influences consumers' decisions to enter and explore a store (Sen, Block, & Chandran, 2002) and that new customer acquisition has been a major interest to online retailers ("Online Sales," 2008), more investigation on the effect of VM elements seems to be necessary to help online retailers design their websites to entice more potential customers. In addition, VM may be a more important tool for online apparel retailers than for e-tailers in more standardized product categories due to the high aesthetic and symbolic significance of clothes to the consumer (Sontag & Schlater, 1982). By appropriately incorporating VM concepts to their merchandise selection, merchandise presentation, and design of website environment, online apparel retailers may be able to overcome more effectively the concerns that consumers may feel from not being able to try on the merchandise.

Despite the seemingly obvious importance of VM in online retailing, little research has been found in the clothing and textiles, retailing, or marketing literature that has directly addressed the online VM issues. However, the potential of online VM as a viable research area has been implied in the e-tail quality literature which has treated website design as an e-tail service dimension. In addition, another stream of literature has been investigating the impact of e-store atmospherics from the environmental psychological perspective. Unfortunately, few studies from these streams of literature have used the term VM for their

research constructs or investigated online VM issues in a comprehensive manner. Nevertheless, each of these research streams provides significant insights with which online VM research issues can be further discussed.

Therefore, this paper will review how some of the existing literature in the e-tail service quality and environmental psychology research streams has dealt with online VM-related issues. In addition, the impression formation paradigm from social psychology (e.g., Livesley & Bromley, 1973) will be explored as a potential theoretical framework that may provide an alternative picture of the effect of VM in the e-tailing context.

Online VM as an E-tail Service Quality Dimension

The retailing literature has considered merchandise assortment and store atmosphere as an important part of retail services (Kandampully, 1997). For example, Dabholkar and Thorpe (1996) included measures of physical aspects of the store (i.e., appearance and convenience of physical facilities) as one of the five basic dimensions of retail service quality. Lindquist (1974-1975) also identified merchandise attributes such as assortment and styling/fashion, and physical facility attributes such as lighting, store layout, and aisle placement as influencing consumers' attitudes toward retail stores combined with other aspects of retail services. These studies imply the importance of the coordination between merchandise (both assortment and presentation) and physical facility features in creating a coherent store image, which is a fundamental role of VM.

Huizingh (2000) provided a simple but shrewd observation that the capability of a website is determined by its content and design factors. The content factor refers to information, products, and services offered in the website (e.g., merchandise in an apparel retail site), whereas the design factor delineates the way the content is delivered to the website visitor (e.g., categorization and manner of presenting the merchandise). Huizingh further discussed that the design factor can be divided into features and perceptions. The concept of *features* addresses the *functional* aspect of VM (i.e., helping customers see merchandise better) such as navigation structure and search function - which appears to aim at meeting the online customer's utilitarian needs of shopping. On the other hand, the concept of *perception* addresses the *aesthetic* or *symbolic* aspect of VM (i.e., conveying store image), encompassing the hedonic quality of structure, image, and presentation style.

A variety of studies that examined website quality in online retailing contexts have also included dimensions addressing the functional and aesthetic aspects of online VM. To provide a few examples, first, Aladwani and Palvia (2002) developed a perceived web quality scale consisting of four dimensions - appearance, specific content, content quality, and technical adequacy - and tested its validity using student samples and four existing retail and corporate websites. In their scale, the appearance dimension included such items as attrac-

tiveness, fonts, colors, and organization, which may overlap with the aesthetic aspect of VM, whereas some items (e.g., ease of navigation) from their technical adequacy dimension seem to address the functional aspect of VM. Janda, Trocchia, and Gwinner (2002) identified five dimensions of Internet retail service quality including performance (transaction efficiency and delivery fulfillment), access (variety and universality of products), security (financial and non-financial), sensation (ability to interact with the product as well as with other individuals), and information (information quantity and quality, trustworthiness of information). According to these researchers, the sensation dimension of this scale encompasses various online interactive features such as the use of virtual mannequins or product pictures from multiple angles that can support consumers' shopping experience, which appears to address the functional aspect of online VM, as well as virtual chat rooms that can enhance the responsiveness of online retailers.

Ranganathan and Ganapathy (2002), through a survey with online shoppers, also identified four dimensions that addressed key characteristics of a business-to-consumer (B2C) website. They include information content, design, security, and privacy. Again, the design dimension focused on ease of navigation and presence of visual presentation aids, which taps into the functional aspect of VM. Similarly, Wolfinbarger and Gilly (2003) also suggested four factors which were labeled as website design, fulfillment/reliability, privacy/security, and customer service, and found that these four dimensions of an online retail website significantly influenced consumers' perception of quality and satisfaction with the e-tailer. Themes such as visual appeal, website design, ease of layout, tangibility, interactivity with products, and website appearance, which seem to address either functional or aesthetic aspects of online VM, also have repeatedly occurred in a wealth of other online service quality studies for both retail and non-retail websites (e.g., Jarvenpaa & Todd, 1996; Kaynama & Black, 2000; Kim & Stoel, 2004; Liu & Arnett, 2000; Szymanski & Hse, 2000; Yoo & Donthu, 2001), indicating the importance of online VM-related constructs in generating positive perceptions of e-tailers. However, in most of these studies, a relatively small number of items were used to measure the corresponding VM-related dimensions, and thus are insufficient to address the variety of potential online VM elements.

Online VM from the Environmental Psychology Approach

Baker (1986) identified three components of store environments: the ambient (e.g., music, scent, lighting, and air), social (e.g., store personnel and other shoppers), and design (e.g., style, architecture, layout, fixture, and display) components. Among these, the ambient and design factors are closely related to the functional and aesthetic goals of VM of a retail store. Based on the classic Stimulus-Organism-Response paradigm, the environmental psychologists, Mehrabian and Russell (1974) postulated that environments (S) can produce ap-

proach or avoidance behaviors (R) through three emotional states (pleasure, arousal, and dominance) as intervening variables (O). Donovan and his colleagues (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Donovan, Rossiter, Marcolyn, & Nesdale, 1994) extended the Mehrabian-Russell's model to the discussion of store environments, and found that consumers' self-reported emotional states (especially pleasure) induced by the store environment (with varying novelty, variety, irregularity, density, and size) significantly increased the consumers' various approach intention and behavior including willingness to spend time and money in the store and the actual time and money spent.

Donovan and his colleagues' studies stimulated a plethora of later studies that investigated various effects of Baker's (1986) three store environment factors. To summarize their findings, the ambient factor - or 'atmospherics' as labeled by Kotler (1973-1974) - including music (e.g., Baker, Levy, & Grewal, 1992; Dube, Chebat, Morin, 1995), fragrance (e.g., Fiore, Yah, & Yoh, 2000), and lighting (e.g., Baker et al., 1992); the design factor such as signage (e.g., Bitner, 1992), store layout (e.g., Merilees & Miller, 2001), physical attractiveness of a store (e.g., Darden, Erdem, & Darden, 1983), and product display (e.g., Fiore et al., 2000); and the social factor (e.g., Baker et al., 1992) all can induce variations in consumer responses including customer loyalty (e.g., Merilles & Miller, 2001), store patronage intention (e.g., Darden et al., 1983), purchase intention (e.g., Fiore et al., 2000), willingness to buy (e.g., Baker et al., 1992), price willing to pay (e.g., Fiore et al., 2000), satisfaction (e.g., Mano & Oliver, 1993), price perception (e.g., Grewal & Baker, 1994), and affiliation or liking (e.g., Dube et al., 1995). The studies based on the Mehrabian-Russell's model all have argued that the effect of store environments on the consumer approach/avoidance response variables occur through consumers' emotional states such as pleasure and/or arousal as intervening variables. However, most of these studies have also acknowledged a possibility that customers' cognitive perceptions such as judgment on merchandise quality and relative value to price also mediate (e.g., Baker et al., 1992; Darden et al., 1983) the store environment-approach/avoidance response relationship. This indicates that the Mehrabian-Russell's model alone (with only emotional states as a mediator) may not be a sufficient framework to understand the complex impact of various store environmental cues on consumer behavior.

Online store environment lacks some of the sensory properties of the traditional retail environment such as stimulations from touch, smell, and taste, which may increase the importance of available cues from the remaining sensory modalities (i.e., visual and aural). Especially, considering that over 90 percent of the cues provided by an environment tend to be processed through sight (Edwards & Shackley, 1992), the use of various VM features to enhance the reality of shoppers' vicarious experiences to compensate the missing sensory information seems to be critical in online retailing. Therefore, based on these affluent find-

ings from the traditional retail context, online retailing researchers also have paid attention to the impact of online store environment (website interface) on online consumers' emotions and behavioral responses, and found that various online store environmental cues such as navigation aids, friendly site design and layout, image size and clarity, advertising forms, visual presentation methods, and use of animation indeed make a difference in online shoppers' attention, approach/avoidance behavior, product memory, and loyalty (e.g., Menon & Kahn, 2002; Lee & Benbasat, 2003; Lohse & Spiller, 1998; Yun & Good, 2003).

Eroglu, Machleit, and Davis (2001) proposed a conceptual model that delineates the potential influence of online store environments based on the Mehrabian-Russell's model. They empirically examined the conceptual model using fictitious websites that sold clothes in a later study (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003), and found that online stores with various website environmental features including both high task-relevant cues (e.g., navigation aids, merchandise pictures) and low task-relevant cues (e.g., sound, music, colors, entertainment features, pictures other than the merchandise) produced more positive responses such as satisfaction and various other approach (as opposed to avoidance) intentions than those with only high task-relevant cues (Eroglu et al., 2003). They also postulated that the 'organism' intervening between the website atmosphere (stimulus) and approach/avoidance (response) is not limited to emotional states such as pleasure and arousal, since the individual's cognitive state (operationlized as 'attitude' in their study) induced by the emotional state also can constitute the organism. Another contribution of Eroglu et al.'s studies (2001, 2003) is the identification of two possible moderating variables - 'involvement' and 'atmospheric responsiveness' - addressing online shoppers' individual characteristics that may determine their susceptibility to the influence of the online retail environment. According to their findings, website atmospheric features appeared to significantly induce pleasure to those who were asked to only browse (low involvement) or possessed high atmospheric responsiveness, but not to those who were instructed to imagine a purchase situation (high involvement) or possessed low atmospheric responsiveness. In addition, although the effects of emotional (pleasure) and cognitive (attitude) states on approach/avoidance responses were significant for all individuals; contrary to the intuition, the low-involvement and high-atmospheric-responsiveness individuals' satisfaction with the online retail website visit was influenced to a greater extent by their cognitive state (attitude) than by their emotional state (pleasure), whereas the relative influences of pleasure and attitude appeared to be reversed among high-involvement and low-atmospheric-responsiveness individuals.

To summarize, Eroglu et al.'s findings seem to imply that website atmospheric features trigger pleasant feelings to some individuals, but their cognitive attitudes also play a significant role in predicting their avoidance/approach responses and satisfaction with the on-line shopping experience. Especially, the seemingly counterintuitive results of the relative

roles of emotion and cognition between high versus low involvement or atmospheric responsiveness individuals may indicate that website environment may exert a direct influence on online shoppers' cognitive states as well as emotional states unlike Erloglu et al.'s (2001) model which hypothesizes the mediation of emotions between website environments and cognitive states. In other words, the individuals might have interpreted the more affluent online store environmental features as signaling higher quality in other aspects of the online store, resulting in more positive attitudes toward the online retailer, which in turn positively affected satisfaction and approach responses. In addition, these cognitive judgments might have also contributed to the emotions individuals experienced in the online store environment (for more discussions on emotion as a result of cognition, see Holbrook & Batra, 1987; Reibstein, Lovelock, & Dobson, 1980). The above speculation provides a need to examine the impact of online store environments and various online VM cues on online shoppers' cognitive responses in a more extensive manner. In the following section, a social cognition paradigm, impression formation, is introduced as a possible theoretical framework in which future research in online apparel retailers' VM can be conducted.

Application of the Impression Formation Perspective in Online VM

The social perception literature states that 'person perception' is the process of forming an integrated impression derived from information provided on the stimulus person, and consists of such stages as selection, abstraction, interpretation, and integration of perceptual cues (Anderson, 1965; Asch, 1946). Asch and Zukier (1984) also postulate that the incoming stimulus information interacts with the perceiver's prior knowledge in the process of impression formation. In order to deal with the vast amount of information encountered in the environment, individuals develop mental categories or concepts based on similarities and differences of the information relative to category prototypes, specific category exemplars, or properties deemed to be required for the category membership that have been stored in their memories (Barsalou, 1992). These mental categories serve as prior knowledge with which the interpretation of information of a stimulus person is facilitated, inferences are made, and thus an integrated impression of the person is formed in the perceiver's mind (Feldman, 1988; Kunda, 2000).

The impact of visual cues from a person's appearance on the perceiver's impression formation of the person has been examined in the clothing and textiles as well as social psychology literature. For example, Thurston, Lennon, and Clayton (1990) found that perceivers made inferences about professionalism of women from the type of clothes the stimulus women were wearing and details of the clothes. In addition, visual cues such as clothing or appearance cues also have been found to be used in making various inferences about such individual characteristics as personality traits (Fiore & DeLong, 1984; Paek,

1986), social status (Damhorst, 1984-1985), competence or intelligence (Behling & Williams, 1991; Douglas & Solomon, 1983; Lapisky & Smith, 1981), and credibility (Fiore & DeLong, 1990; Forsythe, 1988). Inferences drawn based on individuals' appearance cues also have been found to affect perceivers' expectations of the individuals' behavior, which in turn influence perceivers' behavior toward the individuals (e.g., Forsythe, 1990; Paek, 1986).

Some researchers have argued that this information-driven impression formation process may be more appropriate in explaining person perceptions rather than object perceptions because people have more structured categories about nonsocial objects so that their impressions are less likely to be affected by information on an individual object (e.g., Brewer, 1988). However, extending this social cognition perspective into the discussion of consumers' impression formation of an online retailer from its website(e-store) seems adequate, given that brands are considered to possess personalities or identities like people (Martineau, 1958), and retailers communicate their brand identities through their stores (Lindquist, 1974-1975). Especially, Livesley and Bromley's (1973) temporal sequence model of impression formation process seems to provide a clear framework in which online shoppers' cognitive responses to online VM features can be discussed. According to Livesley and Bromley, impression formation of a social object begins with a *cue selection* process. From the selected cues, various inferences can be drawn as to individual characteristics of the social object (*interpretative inferences*). In addition, perceivers further process the cues and the interpretative inferences to derive implications on additional characteristics (*extended inferences*) that the social object might be possessing beyond the initial characteristics they have inferred, and form expectations of the social object's behavior which are often manifested in the perceivers' responses towards the social object (*anticipatory set*).

In the online retailing context, online shoppers can select to process various functional and aesthetic VM cues from an e-store during their interaction with the website to form their impression about the e-store. According to Ha, Kwon, and Lennon's (2007) content analysis of U.S. and Korean apparel websites, there may be three basic themes into which online apparel retailers' VM cues can be classified. They are labeled as *online path finding assistance*, *environment*, and *manner of product presentation*, each broken down into several sub-categories of VM elements. Each of these themes may contain both functional and aesthetic VM features. In addition, an individual VM feature (e.g., merchandise display method) may be analyzed for its functional (e.g., hanging display) and aesthetic (e.g., how consistent the hanger shapes are across products, and what kind of materials the hangers appear to be made of) aspects. Table 1 presents a taxonomy of online VM features identified by Ha, Kwon, and Lennon (2007) that is reorganized on a basis of functional versus aesthetic cues. *Functional cues* here refer to basic or core VM features that are supposed to assist online shoppers in finding and examining a product, whereas *aesthetic cues* include

Table 1.
Examples of functional and aesthetic VM cues on online apparel stores: Modification of Ha, Kwon, and Lennon's (2007) taxonomy

I. Functional Cues

Online Path Finding Assistance

- Site map
- Search engine
- * Merchandise categorization (e-store layout)
- * Sales/promotion signage (Does it lead to sales items?)

Manner of product presentation

- Types of product view (e.g., front, side, and back views)
 - * Product view presentation methods (e.g., 2-D, 3-D, detailed views: shown all together on same page, automatically alternating views, user controlling rotated views)
 - * Product color/fabric presentation methods (e.g., different colors and/or fabrics shown by swatch click, drop-down menu, showing all colors/fabrics on same page, shown each color/fabric as a separate item)
 - * Merchandise display methods (e.g., hanging, on mannequin, folded, flat, on human model, on cyber model) and if they are effective in showing the appropriate shape of a product.
 - * Mix & match coordination feature availability and methods (e.g., suggestion for each item, interactive mix & match, suggestion by look/style)
-

II. Aesthetic Cues

Online Path Finding Assistance

- * Merchandise categorization (e-store layout: if categorized by style or brand, it would insinuate the store/brand image)
- Merchandise category presentation styles (e.g., horizontal, vertical)
- * Sales/promotion signage (Is it aesthetically pleasing? Does it tell the store image?)

Environment

- Multimedia (audio/video)
- Visual impact (intro-page, background image)
- Color (color used in background, product image background, and text) and color use consistency

Manner of product presentation

- * Product view presentation methods (aesthetic aspects of 2D, 3D devices – color, size, etc.)
 - * Product color/fabric presentation methods (e.g., Is the color/fabric swatch aesthetically pleasing?)
 - * Merchandise display method
(e.g., If used human models or cyber models, what types of models were used? How do they look?; Types of hangers or mannequins used; Consistency in using display methods within a website)
 - * Mix & match coordination methods (interactive mix & match functions may implicitly communicate brand/store image; suggestion by look/style may directly communicate brand/store image)
-

* Online VM cues that may convey both functional and aesthetic meanings

all additional or peripheral aspects of VM that are adopted to enhance the visual appeal of the website and communicate images of the online retailer to the shopper.

According to Livesley and Bromley's (1973) impression formation model, to form an impression about an e-store, online shoppers may consciously or unconsciously select cues from an online store environment (*cue selection*), and interpret their functional and aesthetic appropriateness and meanings (*interpretative inferences*). For example, an online shopper may see a long list of merchandise categories on an online store homepage and interpret it as indicating wide merchandise assortments, whereas another online shopper may interpret it as a lack of organization of the website. These interpretations may then lead to different directions of *extended inferences*. For example, the former shopper may infer the size of the online retail company from his or her initial interpretation of wide assortment from the merchandise category cue. On the other hand, the latter shopper may draw an inference that the online retailer is uncaring to customers' needs from his or her initial inference of unorganized merchandise categories. These extended inferences may again trigger another extended inference with regard to the quality of other service dimensions such as the high and low reliability in order fulfillment, respectively. Based on all the interpretive and extended inferences the two online shoppers make, they may develop different overall impressions of the website, and thus their *anticipatory set* (e.g., attitudes toward the e-tailer and desire to buy products from the website) for the online retailer may differ. This example delineates a process by which a functional cue (merchandise categorization) may incur online shoppers' cognitive responses and impression formation of the website. It is expected that aesthetic cues follow a similar interpretative and extended inference making process to affect online shoppers' various attitudinal and behavioral responses toward the e-tailer. Support for this argument can be found from previous studies such as Kim and Moon (1998), Park, Choi, and Kim (2004), and Hu et al. (2004) which addressed the impact of aesthetic design factors (e.g., image, color, menu size, clipart size, etc.) on impressions of web pages including trustworthiness of the company and other affective impressions such as how likable the website is.

Based on the above discussion, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model that delineates the e-store impression formation process by which a functional or aesthetic VM cue in an e-store environment affects consumers' impression formation about the e-store through interpretative and extended inferences and thus modifies the consumers' responses to the retailer (anticipatory set). This figure also suggests some examples of specific constructs that could be considered for future research in applying each step of the impression formation process. Research is recommended for examining the constructs and the impression formation process suggested in this model using laboratory experiments in which some aspects of online VM (stimulus variables) are manipulated by the researcher to examine their effects on the

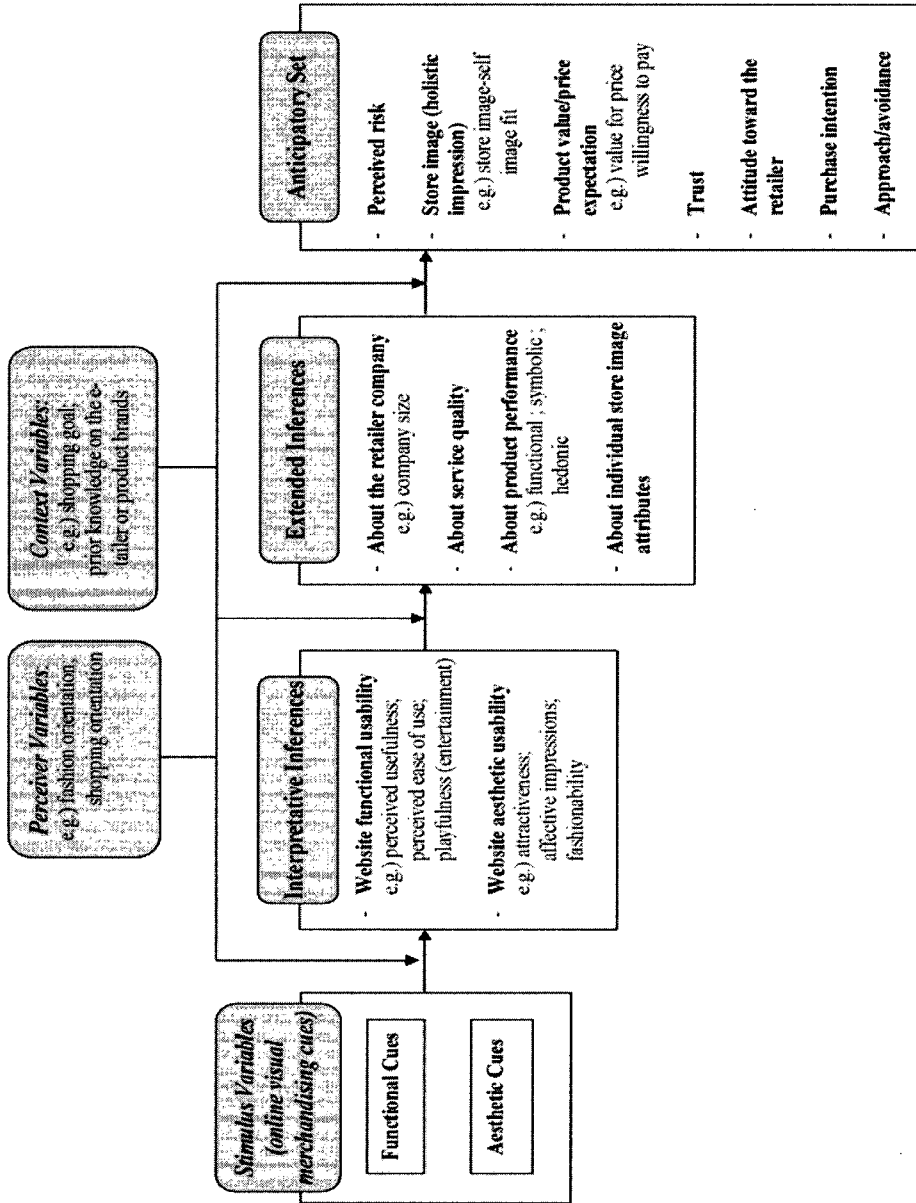


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for effects of online VM based on Livesley and Bromley's (1973) model of impression formation process

kind and extent of interpretive and extended inferences consumers make as well as their ultimate impact on variables in the anticipatory set. In addition, research using field work also will be valuable to verify the external validity of this model in terms of its applicability to the real-world phenomenon.

Furthermore, Figure 1 contains potential moderating roles perceiver and context variables may play in this process. That is, which online VM cues are selected for consumers to process and how the selected cues are interpreted may be influenced not only by the stimulus factor (online VM cues), but also by the perceiver factor (e.g., fashion orientation and shopping orientation of the online shopper) and the context factor (e.g., the consumer's shopping goals for the specific visit). For example, how fashion-oriented consumers are (Gutman & Mills, 1982) and whether they are utilitarian or hedonic shoppers (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982) can shape the formation of the shopper's impressions on an online retailer due to their different environmental scanning tendencies and prior knowledge. Fashion-oriented shoppers may react to an online store's aesthetic VM cues more sensitively than less fashion-oriented shoppers in forming their impression about the online store. In the same sense, whether the shopper's goal for a particular visit to an e-tail website is browsing as an entertainment (hedonic) or completing a purchasing task for a specific item (utilitarian) may affect which cues the shopper focuses on and how he or she interprets them. In addition, whether or not consumers had prior knowledge about the e-tailer or the products sold on the e-store and what types of knowledge they had may alter the way they process online visual merchandising cues. For example, if consumers' prior brand image about the e-tailer was favorable and strong, they may process online visual merchandising cues in a positively biased manner, and thus make more favorable inferences and purchase decision (Kwon & Lennon, 2009). On the other hand, it is also possible that if consumers had prior strong favorable attitude toward a product brand, they may make a favorable purchase decision in spite of some poor online visual merchandising on an e-store. Therefore, potential moderating effects of various consumers' individual traits (perceiver variables) and characteristics of a particular situation that led them to visit an online store (context variables) are important topics that need to be addressed in future research to generate deeper understanding of the online VM related phenomenon.

Conclusion

A website is an important medium that can communicate a retailer's image. Therefore, online retailers need to identify their target market and make use of online VM cues as a strategic tool to reinforce the congruent retailer impression in their target consumers' minds. In the same sense, multichannel retailers also need to ascertain their online image to be consistent with images portrayed by their offline stores or other channel operations as well

as other external communications such as advertisements. This paper provides an overview of two streams of existing literature – e-tail service quality and environmental psychology – that deal with some of the issues that need to be addressed by online VM research, and identifies a need to develop a more extensive theoretical framework in which online VM issues can be examined. In response to this need, this paper proposes an impression formation paradigm as an alternative framework for future online VM research. The maturity of a research area is measured by the degree to which research constructs are established, providing a solid foundation for better understanding the phenomenon (Touliatos & Compton, 1988). The conceptual model proposed in this study, thus, is significant in that it offers a potential theoretical framework in which future online VM research can be conducted to supplement the current literature that has only marginally touched upon the online VM phenomenon.

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