

Visual  
merchandising: shop  
window displays  
essay



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The way a store displays its merchandise in their window has a distinct effect on attracting customers through the door. According to Mary Portas (1999), shop windows are the 'art of the high street.

' Visual merchandising is the method of displaying products to promote a store with an aim to attracting potential customers. The brief was 'compare and contrast the shop windows from two fashion retail businesses. ' This essay will focus on Topshop and Primark; these stores were chosen because they aim to attract the same age group, yet have very different price bands. An important objective is therefore to evaluate whether the obvious similarities / differences have any effect on the window displays.

It was found that the Topshop window featured merchandise for both genders; whereas Primark' featured women's merchandise only - even though they sell products for men in-store. In terms of the types of each display, Topshop's female window was a promotional display for Kate Moss' new collection. The male window was a seasonal display to promote Christmas, and Primark's window appeared to be presenting an understated seasonal display, using party wear to promote the Christmas party season, and glittery background panels to add to the festivities. Primark' composition was symmetrically balanced in the mannequins with scene consistency from one window to the next.

Dominance prevailed in the foreground (i. e. the merchandise displayed), assisted by the background. Contrastingly, Topshop's blown-up photographs in the background dominated the merchandise in front. Topshop's female and male windows were both asymmetrically balanced, the female display

aided by the suspension of background panels at different lengths to create an angular feel, and the men's display using mannequins to display merchandise on one half of the window, and hanging merchandise on the other side. An important aspect of any visual merchandising display is colour palette choices.

Martin M. Pegler (1998) notes the use of colour psychology and suggests that hues and shades can represent a mood and provoke a response in potential customers. In reference to the palette choices in Primark, each window depicted a different colour theme; the main window portrayed purple and black influences, suggesting distinction and sophistication; a possible interpretation hints at the concept of trying to 'upscale' the brand and present a classier impression than Primark's current state of image. This was ratified by the other window which displayed deep reds and, again, black. Although red is commonly associated with excitement and stimulation (perhaps an attempt to draw in passers-by and enthuse them to enter the store), it can also evoke a sense of sophistication and classiness, to coincide with the purple window. Primark were seeking to convey the message that the brand isn't necessarily 'cheap' and 'bad quality'.

' The use of the upmarket colours of deep purples and reds, along with black to insinuate mystery and intrigue, presented a chic display to juxtapose the low prices. Comparatively, the Topshop windows featured no colour scheme; the female window appeared mix and match with no constant theme, however a possible grouping for the shades chosen could depict refinement and elegance with creams, blacks, greys and reds. The male window also had no theme; the window looked 'busy' due to the use of various different

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colours including greens and blues (perhaps enforcing the message of stereotypical 'boy' colours) with hints of red to link the message to Christmas. Reflecting on graphics usage, a stark contrast can be observed between Topshop and Primark in the visual merchandiser's choices. With Primark, it was evident that the main focus was the merchandise on the mannequins, rather than overuse of gimmicks and graphics. Simple signage on the windows ("A Whole Lot of Christmas") alerted the passer-by that it is an understated festive display.

This was simple enough to make the point without needing other signs or posters to accompany the display. The insignificant graphic usage in the Primark window encourages consumers to focus on the merchandise, rather than being distracted by unnecessary photographs or signage. A major dissimilarity of Primark in terms of graphics was that of the Topshop female window; the limelight was on the enlarged ads of Kate Moss modelling her new collection – the forefront mannequins tended to accompany the huge background panels, as opposed to the other way around. Although successful in creating a double impression by using the same merchandise on the mannequins as in the photos, it could be argued that there was an element of 'visual clutter' – too many photographs bunched together in a small space and not enough emphasis on the physical merchandise displayed in front. There was a clear message being transmitted through the Topshop window for women; "Kate Moss has a new collection." The focus of the display was the model and her collection; Topshop were obviously keen to entice customers into the store in time for Christmas to purchase the supermodel's Christmas collection.

The male window lacked in its graphic usage; some snowflakes simply suspended from the ceiling and painted on the window to denote a Christmas display. This allowed the passer-by to concentrate on the actual merchandise being displayed. A widely used concept for a store window is to create a 'scene' out of the display, using props alongside the products. Topshop rejected this idea by placing dominance on the graphics and merchandise itself, with no hints to an unfolding scene within the window. There were also no accessories used to compliment the outfits – which could perhaps have a detrimental effect on sales – as the consumer cannot see a complete outfit put together.

The Topman window, in contrast, displayed a festive scene effectively, through the use of Christmas trees and decorations as props. Interestingly, the visual merchandiser used actual merchandise to create Christmas objects; socks as baubles and jumpers wrapped as parcels. This provided an eye-catching supplement to the already very jovial setting. A subliminal meaning interpreted through this is that customers can relate to gifts and therefore can relate to the products being used as gifts, hence encouraging them to purchase. Primark also productively used props, in this instance to liken the scene to a bedroom setting; the message conveyed of a trendy woman getting ready for a night out. A dressing table was implemented, along with mirrors and coat stands which created a homely feel.

Primark made phenomenal use of accessories, using one mannequin to drape a single long necklace over it; the effectiveness has been achieved by using shiny jewellery against a matte, velvet torso. Visually, this creates an immensely stimulating piece. The mannequins in each window were vastly

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dissimilar to each other. The Topshop female window used unrealistic wooden stands, with no heads or feet.

The mannequins were emotionless and lacking in personality, the significance being that the aim was for Kate Moss herself to promote the merchandise through her photographs, rather than the mannequins. The mannequins for the Topman window were semi-realistic with heads and feet – including shoes – but no facial expressions. They took a masculine stance, some with hands on the hip – to exert confidence and power; and to exemplify the type of male the store is trying to attract. By personifying the mannequins, the visual merchandiser is enabling potential consumers to relate to the character and therefore relate to the merchandise being presented. An alternative to mannequins was used in one half of the male window, with merchandise suspended from the ceiling on hangers, perhaps to create some form of differentiation.

The Primark mannequins differed throughout the display; the main window used white semi-realistic dummies, with heads and feet, allowing the visual merchandiser to add hats and shoes to the display. The other window, however, used velvet, headless torsos to present the merchandise.

Alternatives to mannequins were also incorporated, similarly to Topman, by using fixtures such as rails and hangers to display the clothing. Aspects of a shop window allow one to interpret the type of customer the display is trying to attract. The Primark visual merchandiser was aiming the window towards females, through lack of a male window; perhaps females are more influenced by window displays than men, and therefore the focus of the

window was on creating an extraordinary display featuring women's merchandise.

The products were aimed at attracting those who are looking for an outfit for the party season; emphasis was placed on dresses and 'going out' outfits, with the bedroom style props adding to the effect of a female getting ready for a big night out. Topshop's female window was attempting to attract women who idolise Kate Moss, as the focus of the display was her new collection. The general theme of the chosen merchandise was sophistication and professionalism; presumably an attempt to attract the trendy, fashion-conscious businesswoman. This is interesting as the epitome of Topshop is commonly associated with young women, generally 18-25 year olds, yet the ambience of the display creates a more mature style, suggesting that Topshop is trying to appeal to a more grown-up market. The male window illustrated its conventional target market of trendy males who are interested in fashion and style; this is typified through the use of masculine mannequins wearing fashionable merchandise with a view to drawing in young male.

Considering the blatant festive nature of the male window display, one can conceivably interpret this as an effort to attract those who demonstrate excitement through Christmas and will therefore be able to relate to the display and thus the merchandise, stimulating the desire to enter the store. The aspects of the windows previously mentioned aid the overall effectiveness of the displays. The Topshop female window can arguably be classed as relying on too many graphics over the merchandise itself, resulting in a hectic window with no focal point, giving the customer no

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central feature to primarily cast their eye on. The window was effective in alerting passers-by to a new collection by Kate Moss, but perhaps ineffective at persuading consumers to actually enter the store.

The male window was similar in its overbearing nature – with usage of many different colours – however was perhaps more eye-catching as the mannequins gave a main point to the display, surrounded by the Christmas trees and snowflakes. The festive setting will also undoubtedly evoke a festive feel in passers-by; therefore perhaps overall, the male window achieved some form of a successful display. The Primark window certainly succeeded in effectiveness through the use of repetitive and complimenting colours, along with the use of relevant props. The visual merchandiser used the merchandise to create a 'boutique' essence, flattered by the glitter backboards to induce that 'party' atmosphere. It seems feasible that passers by would be instantly attracted to the Primark window; the mannequins bestowed dominance, allowing potential consumers to take in every aspect of the display. The focal point of this assignment was to judge the two windows through price distinction; after analysis of both windows, it transpired that although Primark's merchandise is generally low-cost, its display didn't correspond to this, as the window looked high-class and expensive; through the colour palette choices and the visual merchandiser's tranquil approach without overcrowding the window with unnecessary graphics.

The Topshop window, conversely, could be construed as lower quality, due to the overuse of blown-up photographs and not enough attention paid to the merchandise on the mannequins. Conclusively, it was interesting to study

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the store windows of two businesses that aim their merchandise towards a similar age group but assemble their windows very differently. Noticeably, the Primark window concentrated on creating a scene through props and colour, whereas the emphasis for Topshop was placed on the use of graphics. Ultimately, one cannot determine which is the most effective in attracting potential customers, as a store window is merely one technique for inviting customers to purchase within the store; other aspects must be taken into consideration and therefore it is not solely the responsibility of the exterior displays to attract consumers.