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Store-window creativity's impact on shopper behavior

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ABSTRACT

Store windows offer an opportunity for retailers to influence consumers who are in the vicinity of their stores. However, little is known about the effects of store windows on shopper behavior. This study examines store window creativity and its effects on store entry. In line with advertising creativity research, the present study hypothesizes that window displays that are more creative will be more successful in attracting store visits and that this effect is mediated by store window attitude, product beliefs, and perceptions of retailer effort. The study proposes that shopping frequency moderates this effect. The study tests these hypotheses in two empirical studies: one large-scale field study ($n = 1,834$) and one experimental online study ($n = 480$). The results, which support all the hypotheses, contribute to a better understanding of the impact of (creative) store window displays.

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1. Introduction

This study investigates how store window creativity affects shopper behavior. Specifically, the study explores how the level of creativity in store window displays influences consumers' willingness to enter a store. A main challenge for retailers is to convert consumers into shoppers (Bell, Corsten, & Knox, 2011; Sorensen, 2003). Store windows offer ample opportunities to do so near a potential purchase, which makes them highly relevant for retailers in their pursuit of increased store traffic (Ailawadi, Beauchamp, Donthu, Gauri, & Shankar, 2009). Consequently, store window displays are commonly used to influence consumers' perceptions of store and brand image and, ultimately, their decisions about whether to enter a store (Edwards & Shackley, 1992; Oh & Petrie, 2012; Sen, Block, & Chandran, 2002). Still, little academic research documents these effects.

The extant literature on store windows suggests that the presence (Mower, Kim, & Childs, 2012) and size (Edwards & Shackley, 1992) of store windows determine their ability to attract visitors to a store. In terms of store window displays, research suggests that retailers have two main concerns: *what* items to display and *how* to display them (Oh & Petrie, 2012; Sen et al., 2002). This study focuses on the second issue: how to design a store window that enhances consumers'

willingness to enter the store. Specifically, the authors compare the ability of more versus less creative store windows designs to generate store visits.

Although the positive effects of creative designs (i.e., designs that combine originality with relevance; Modig & Rosengren, 2014; Rosengren, Dahlen, & Modig, 2013) are established in advertising contexts (for a review, see Sasser & Koslow, 2008), no such case exists in retailing research. Although Modig and Rosengren (2014) find positive effects for creative designs in retail advertising, other researchers document negative effects of elaborate designs in in-store settings (Orth & Crouch, 2014; Orth & Wirtz, 2014). This dispute leads to uncertainty about the likely effects of creativity in store window displays. Advertising literature should be more informative than in-store literature for explaining the effects of creative store window displays. This argument is based on previous research that shows (a) consumers primarily use store windows as inspiration (Oh & Petrie, 2012; Sen et al., 2002) and (b) consumers' mindsets are different when they are outside a store compared with when they are inside a store (Lee & Ariely, 2006; Turley & Milliman, 2000). Consumers thus should process store windows in a way similar to their processing of advertisements, rather than to their processing of in-store displays. Consequently, more creative store window designs should be beneficial for retailers.

Two empirical studies test these arguments. First, the authors observe the shopping behavior of more than 1,800 consumers in a main-street fashion setting. This large-scale field study employs the double conversion model (Hui, Bradlow, & Fader, 2009; Sorensen, 2003). The results show that more creative store windows have an advantage over less creative store windows in terms of converting consumers into shoppers. Specifically, more creative window displays outperform less creative

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displays on measures of consumer attention and store entry. Second, an experimental online study (involving customers of a large, main-street retail chain) shows that presenting the same items in a more creative way leads to more positive attitudes toward the window display, enhanced product beliefs, and stronger perceptions of retailer effort, which in turn enhance store-entry intentions. This study also shows that shopping frequency moderates the effect of store window creativity on store entry.

The two studies contribute to an important field of retailing in which extant research is scarce (Bell et al., 2011). In investigating real customers of actual main-street retailers, the studies also complement previous research on store windows, which have primarily been based on small-scale studies and correlational designs of self-reported behaviors (Oh & Petrie, 2012; Sen et al., 2002). Furthermore, by tracking consumer reactions to store windows in terms of attention (study 1), store window attitudes (study 2), product perceptions (study 2), and retailer effort (study 2), this article offers a richer understanding of how and why consumers' visual perceptions (Oh & Petrie, 2012) and information inferences (Sen et al., 2002) affect store entry decisions. The results also suggest that the effect occurs for infrequent (rather than frequent) shoppers.

These results indicate that store windows have effects similar to those seen for advertisements. Greater creativity, which has proven problematic in an in-store environment, is beneficial for store windows. The findings have interesting managerial and theoretical implications. In particular, retailers might benefit from clearly distinguishing between displays inside their stores and displays outside their stores.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. The influence of store windows on shopper behavior

Store exteriors are consumers' first encounter with a retailer when shopping. In many settings, store windows are a prominent part of those exteriors. However, retail research has little to say about how best to design store windows to convert consumers into shoppers. Although a significant amount of literature documents the effects of store atmospherics on shopping behavior (for reviews, see Nordfält, 2011; Turley & Milliman, 2000), this stream of literature has focused primarily on in-store factors, such as music, scent, layout, design, and signage (Baker, Baker, Parasuraman, Grewal, & Voss, 2002; Baker, Grewal, & Parasuraman, 1994; Donovan & Rossiter, 1982; Grewal, Roggeveen, & Nordfalt, 2014; Kaltcheva & Weitz, 2006; Spangenberg, Grohmann, & Sprott, 2005; Turley & Milliman, 2000).

Still, the scant literature on store windows clearly shows that store windows can influence shopping behaviors. For example, Mower et al. (2012) show that the presence of store windows adds to the attractiveness of a store, and Edwards and Shackley (1992) find that larger window displays are more successful than smaller window displays in attracting attention. Although these studies do not explicitly investigate the impact of different store window designs, they suggest that one advantage of larger store windows is their ability to incorporate more design elements (Edwards & Shackley, 1992). Therefore, the results suggest that using store windows to showcase items in a creative way could have an effect on attention that is similar to the effect of creativity in advertising (e.g., Pieters, Wedel, & Batra, 2010).

Similarly, in a correlational study of students' (self-reported) use of store windows, Sen et al. (2002) find that consumers who use store windows to *infer* information about product fit and store image are more likely to enter a store than those who look *directly* at what can be observed, such as specific information about merchandise and promotions. More creative window displays then may be more successful in encouraging store entry, much the same way that creative

advertisements stimulate interest and increase the attractiveness of the media vehicle that carries them (Rosengren et al., 2013).

However, some research suggests that creative store window displays might not be beneficial. Oh and Petrie (2012) compare the effects of merchandise-focused designs with those of more artistic store window designs. This distinction is similar to that found in studies of advertising creativity (e.g., Modig & Rosengren, 2014; Rosengren et al., 2013), in that merchandise-focused displays are concrete, with a focus on the items on display (comparable to low creativity), while artistic displays are those that convey abstract messages and induce curiosity by using artistic, theatrical, and story-telling components (comparable to high creativity). In Oh and Petrie's (2012) study, both types of windows tend to perform equally well overall. However, when participants' cognitive load is manipulated to be high, the merchandise-focused displays outperform the artistic displays.

As this overview demonstrates, previous empirical findings on store window design are scarce and somewhat contradictory. Although some evidence indicates that store window creativity could have a positive effect on store entry (e.g., Edwards & Shackley, 1992; Sen et al., 2002), some findings suggest that this effect might not hold when consumers have a high cognitive load (Oh & Petrie, 2012). The latter findings conform to studies of the use of more creative designs in an in-store setting, where consumers prefer simple environments (Orth & Crouch, 2014). The following sections therefore pertain to whether the effects of store window creativity are more akin to those found in advertising (e.g., Pieters et al., 2010; Rosengren et al., 2013) or in-store settings (e.g., Orth & Crouch, 2014; Orth & Wirtz, 2014).

2.2. Store window creativity and store entry

Although "creativity" can be defined in several ways, it usually consists of two key dimensions: originality and relevance (e.g., Coelho, Augusto, & Lages, 2011; Sasser & Koslow, 2008). *Originality* denotes that creativity typically involves the recombination of existing materials in a new or artistic way or the development of materials that are completely novel, whereas *relevance* indicates that creativity provides an organization with direct or indirect value (Coelho et al., 2011; Modig, 2012). In this study, store window creativity is defined as window displays presenting merchandise in a way that combines originality with relevance (cf. Modig & Rosengren, 2014; Rosengren et al., 2013). Store window creativity manifests itself primarily as structured variation of displays, for example, in terms of specific shapes, objects, and their arrangements (Pieters et al., 2010). The notion of "structured variation" implies that creative designs are not necessarily complex in their visual setup but rather in the originality that goes into presenting the items on display in a relevant manner (Pieters et al., 2010; Rosengren et al., 2013; Sasser & Koslow, 2008).

Consumer reactions to store window displays will be more similar to their reactions to advertising than to their reactions to in-store communications. First, research suggests that activities outside and inside stores tend to have different functions for retailers (Cornelius, Natter, & Faure, 2010; Mower et al., 2012; Turley & Milliman, 2000). External variables normally communicate the retailer's overall image, thereby creating positive spillover effects to the store (Cornelius et al., 2010). Interior variables aim more at guiding shoppers within the store and tend to concentrate on displaying what items shoppers should select (Turley & Milliman, 2000). Therefore, external variables (such as store windows) primarily function in a way similar to advertising. Second, the current literature on store window displays suggests that a key function of store windows is to create pleasing impressions that result in approach behavior (Turley & Milliman, 2000). Store windows mainly work by inspiring and enabling consumers to infer information about the retailer (e.g., Oh & Petrie, 2012; Sen et al., 2002). Again, this function suggests that store windows are more akin to advertisements than in-store displays. Third, previous research shows that consumers' shopping goals outside of a store differ from shopping goals inside of a store.

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