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## Does the presence of a mannequin head change shopping behavior? ☆

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## ABSTRACT

Mannequins are ubiquitous; this research investigates a specific element of mannequin style, namely, the presence or absence of a humanized head. Study 1 demonstrates that in physical stores, the presence of a humanized head enhances purchase intentions for the merchandise displayed on that mannequin. However, in online stores, mannequin styles with and without humanized heads are equally effective. Study 2 confirms the physical store results among customers with less fashion knowledge (novices), but among customers with more fashion knowledge (experts), the results reverse, such that mannequins without humanized heads enhance purchase intentions. Further, accessories are more likely to be viewed by experts when the mannequin is headless. These results are based on experiments whose dependent measures included both survey and eye-tracking data.

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## 1. Introduction

Store mannequins are a very important element of visual merchandising, especially by clothing retailers that use them to display clothes and accessories. In fact, of one hundred and fourteen clothing and accessory retailers in a large suburban mall, eighty five percent of the window displays examined included mannequins. Mannequins enable consumers to visualize the merchandise in a three-dimensional space, providing information about the fit and look of the merchandise on a physical body (e.g., Oh & Petrie, 2012; Sen, Block, & Chandran, 2002). Yet despite this ubiquity, inquiry into the effects of mannequins is sparse. Related research provides mostly qualitative insights which are based on store displays in their entirety, rather than focusing specifically on the effects of mannequins (e.g., Fiore, Yah, & Yoh, 2000; Kerfoot, Davies, & Ward, 2003; Law, Wong, & Yip, 2012; Oh & Petrie, 2012). The results of such broader store display research highlight the importance of mannequins and the need for further investigations of their role.

Mannequins vary in their shape, color, and features across retailers (Schneider, 1997). Of the ninety seven stores in the suburban mall that displayed mannequins, seventy-eight displayed full sized mannequins, thirteen displayed half sized mannequins (on the top or bottom), while eleven (jewelry stores) showed only the neck (the sum is greater than ninety-seven because some stores displayed multiple types of

mannequins). One of the most salient variations between the mannequins was whether the mannequins featured a head or were headless. Thirty-two percent of the retailers in the suburban mall displayed mannequins with heads, while sixty-eight percent of the mannequins were headless. The type of mannequin used (head, headless or both) was not affected by whether the store was moderate or high end in terms of fashion. Headless mannequins tend to present an anthropomorphic human form, ending in a flat surface where the head normally would be. People's attention is naturally attracted to heads, as head contains as faces (eyes, nose, and mouth) which provide critical nonverbal cues (Palermo & Rhodes, 2007). Thus, investigating the impact of the lack of a head is both theoretically and managerially interesting.

This article seeks to determine how the presence or absence of a head on a mannequin influences consumer purchase intentions for displayed merchandise, as well as the potential moderating role of the location of the mannequin, that is, on an online retail website or in a physical retail store. In addition, the present study considers how consumers' fashion knowledge (expert versus novice) might moderate the impact of the presence of a mannequin head and explains the effects. Finally, eye-tracking measures provide detailed insights into the processing that takes place when consumers observe mannequins.

Two empirical studies serve to test the fundamental propositions. These are experimentally tested collecting measures from both surveys and eye-tracking. In physical stores, purchase intentions are higher for merchandise displayed on mannequins with heads versus those without heads. However, no differences arise across headed or headless mannequins for merchandise displayed through online stores. People's ability to envision themselves wearing the clothing is higher among novice consumers if the mannequin has a head, which results in higher

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purchase intentions. For expert consumers, the reverse holds: The ability to envision wearing the clothing and their purchase intentions are higher when the mannequin does not have a head. Further, accessories are more likely to be viewed by experts when the mannequin is headless.

## 2. Theoretical background

Mannequins have evolved, from simple dressmakers' forms to poseable wax dolls and painted plaster (Schneider, 1997). Modern retailers even feature mannequins that can serve as electronic observers, using embedded video technology (Grewal & Levy, 2015). However, the majority of mannequins in major retail chains are human-like forms, either with or without a head. If they have heads, the facial features vary from abstract to realistic, and the shape and color of the mannequin also vary from abstract (e.g., silver) to realistic (e.g., skin tone). While previous research has used mannequins in the investigation of window displays and visual merchandising (see Table 1), none have specifically focused on aspects of a mannequin that can impact consumer responses.

The central focus for this study to experimentally manipulate is the presence or absence of a head on a mannequin to determine how that impacts purchase intentions. Mannequin heads can contain faces which are generally realistic (i.e., eyes, hair). Faces attract people's attention more easily than virtually any other visual stimuli and provide a wealth of information (Palermo & Rhodes, 2007). In their eye-tracking studies, Hendrickson and Ailawadi (2014) report that cereal boxes with cartoon figures and faces attract more visual attention in a grocery store environment than boxes without any visible faces. Following this logic, a headed mannequin should draw more visual attention than a headless one, which in turn should lead consumers to pay more attention to the merchandise displayed on that mannequin. Accordingly, purchase intentions may be higher for merchandise displayed on these headed mannequins. In contrast, a mannequin without a head is less likely to garner attention, and the merchandise thus displayed may be less likely to be noticed.

By noticing the merchandise, it is more likely that the consumer may mentally simulate the experience of wearing the outfit. Work on mental simulation (Elder & Krishna, 2012) can be used to predict how customers will behave when exposed to sensory-rich cues, such as a mannequin. Specifically, mental simulation suggests that customers who are exposed to these sensory-rich mannequins are more likely to mentally simulate the experience of wearing the merchandise displayed. As a function they will better be able to envision themselves in the outfit and thus be more likely to purchase the outfit.

### 2.1. Shopping environment: offline vs. online

Store displays, including mannequins, constitute an important part of offline visual merchandising; visual merchandising in turn plays a significant role in creating retail atmospherics, which influence consumers' affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses to store environments (Grewal, Roggeveen, Puccinelli, & Spence, 2014). Building on research into the role of nonverbal cues (Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2014) and visual merchandising (Nordfält, Grewal, Roggeveen, & Hill, 2014), visual merchandising that captures attention should enhance purchase intentions and sales. Therefore, this study focuses on how the head of a mannequin affects consumers' attention and behavioral intentions. In physical stores, the presence of a head should engender positive reactions, more attention, and higher purchase intentions. The effects in an online environment are less evident, because the retailing context (physical versus online) can strongly moderate consumer responses (e.g., Harris, Grewal, Mohr, & Bernhardt, 2006).

Only 18% of major U.S. online clothing retailers create website displays of their clothing using photos of mannequins, 60% display clothing in photos with human models, and 31% show the clothing lying on a flat surface (Khakimjanova & Park, 2005). The limited use of photographs or videos of mannequins in online settings is likely a function of the ease of obtaining pictures of live models or the fact that only some online retailers also maintain physical stores, such that they would have ready access to mannequins. Additionally, the vast number of stock keeping units carried online, makes it time consuming to display all the merchandise on mannequins.

With what they display and how, online stores create an atmosphere that likely influences shoppers' cognitive and emotional reactions (Eroglu, Machleit, & Davis, 2003; Manganari, Siomkos, & Vrechopoulos, 2009). Because online shoppers cannot touch and feel the physical merchandise, e-tailers often provide more verbal and visual information about their products. For example, a consumer shopping online at H&M.com for a blouse can zoom in to see the shirt up close, read a description of the product, and assess which colors and sizes are available. All this information should encourage a more cognitive mindset, in which case any impact of a mannequin's face, in terms of drawing attention to the product, may diminish in an online setting. As such we hypothesize a mannequin style by shopping location interaction.

**H1.** A mannequin style  $\times$  shopping location interaction effect causes a headed (versus headless) mannequin style to enhance purchase intentions in a physical (off-line) store but has no effect in an online store.

**Table 1**  
Past research which has examined mannequins.

Author	Type of research	Variables of interest	Findings related to mannequins
Fiore et al. (2000)	Experiment	How graphical drawing of a display and fragrance impact attitude, purchase intention, and price.	Display drawing (which included a mannequin) and fragrance resulted in higher purchase intention and willingness to pay. Consumer envisioning facilitated by store displays. Mannequins were included as part of store displays.
Sen et al. (2002)	Survey	How store and product category information conveyed by store's window related to shopping decisions, and how relationships are impacted by knowledge of retailer's product(s).	Consumers with medium levels of clothing knowledge are more influenced by window displays in their shopping decision than those with low or high knowledge. Mannequins are part of the window displays
Kerfoot et al. (2003)	Semi-structured interviews	Effects of visual merchandising on purchase behavior and brand recognition	Generally positive responses to mannequins. Mannequins are very visual and help consumers visualize how the clothing will look on.
Khakimjanova and Park (2005)	Content analysis	Visual merchandising among e-tailers.	Mannequins are used frequently in online retailing/online visual merchandising.
Law et al. (2012)	Focus group	Consumer affective response to visual merchandising	Headless mannequins allow consumers to imagine themselves in displays and garments.
Oh and Petrie (2012)	Experiments	How store entry decisions are impacted by store window display type (artistic/merchandise focused), shopping motive (purchase/recreational), and cognitive load (low/high)	Store displays impact store entry decision, but its influence is moderated by display type, motivation, and cognitive load. Mannequins were included as part of the window displays.

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