

Capital informatics: permitting user control and intervention within a consumer touchpoint without sacrificing profitability

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ABSTRACT

The pursuit of a highly controlled corporate voice emerged with the advent of modern marketing practice.¹ At every level in which a consumer interacted with a brand there was to be careful consideration and controlled consistency. However, contemporary art practice (such as Jenny Holzer's work), and today's communication methods (e.g., texting and twitting), has challenged this control. New risks, and new opportunities have emerged. Next-generation marketing must embrace this risk: the consumer is already crouching at the boardroom table.²

The interplay between a consumer touchpoint, how consumers/users may co-opt or interact with that touchpoint, and the profitability gain or loss associated with such interaction is an increasing concern for commercial entities. For this investigation I looked at a specific control ideas for an example touchpoint (in this case within the fashion marketing field, a typical and non-typical window display) and a control and interaction method (in this case through the co-opting of the "message" conveyed by the marketer's proxy by allowing consumers to "put words" into the mouths of the mannequins). In terms of profitability, however, I used a default metric: increased consumer/retailer time leads to increased opportunity for sales; a simple "more equals better" formula.³

I use the term "capital informatics" to apply to information that is technically accessible to the consumer/user that can be freely modified by such consumer/users and can be directly transmitted to other consumer/users without any additional intervention or vetting of any kind by the marketer.

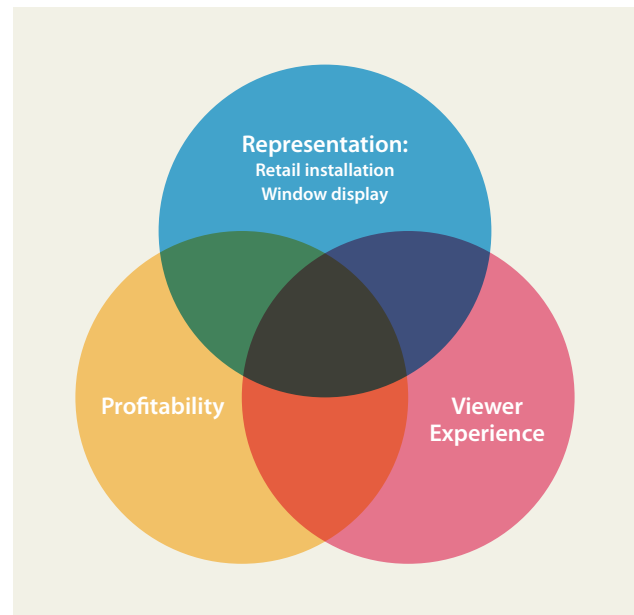
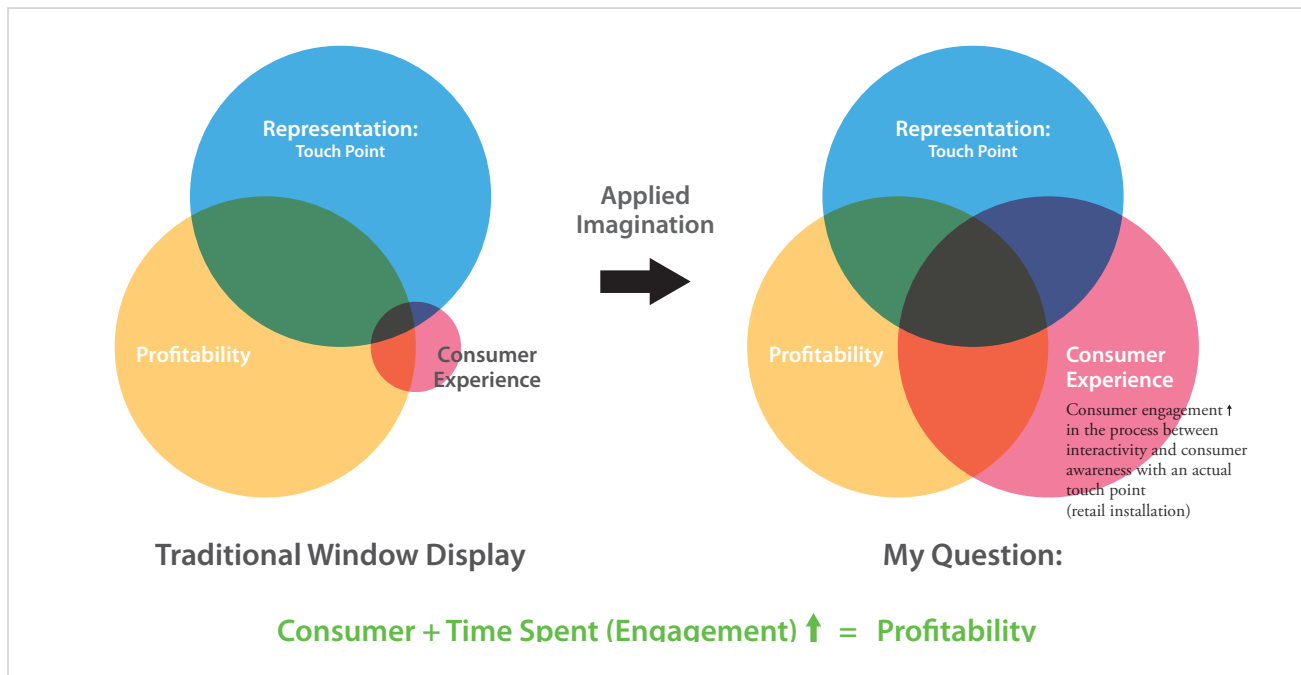


FIGURE 1: Current retail installation focuses on generating traffic into the physical stores. Therefore interaction with such a touchpoint is a key element in lengthening the viewers' interaction time.

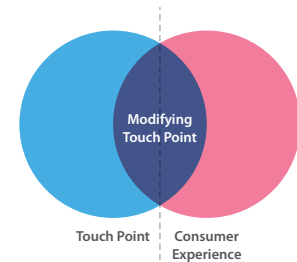
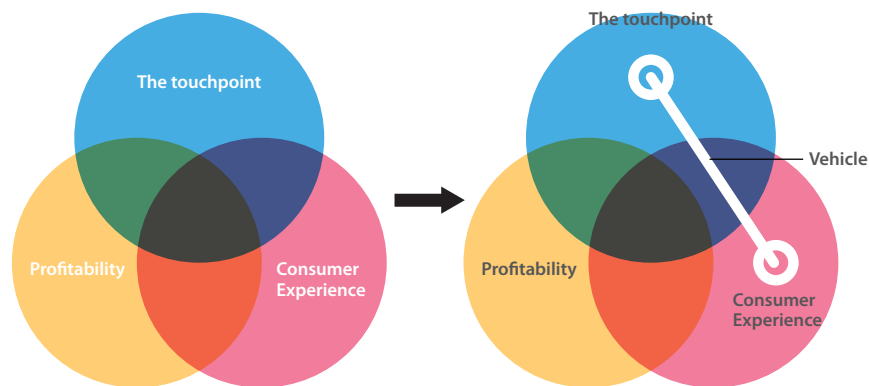
"The longer the possible buyer is captivated by a window display, the more likely it is that they will enter the store and spend."⁴

Traditional window environments have shown limitations to link the potential consumers as many of them perceived the window as a "transparent barrier between them and displayed merchandise." This is the reason for developing a retail installation that creates consumer engagement by permitting a modified touch point within a retail installation. The following three factors were considered.

- The touch point: in this research a fashion retail window display.
- The user experience: under this research consumer engagement with the window display touch point, and the capability to directly modify that touch point.
- Profitability: desirable action taken by a consumer upon, or after, interaction with the "window display"—here baselined as increased facetime.



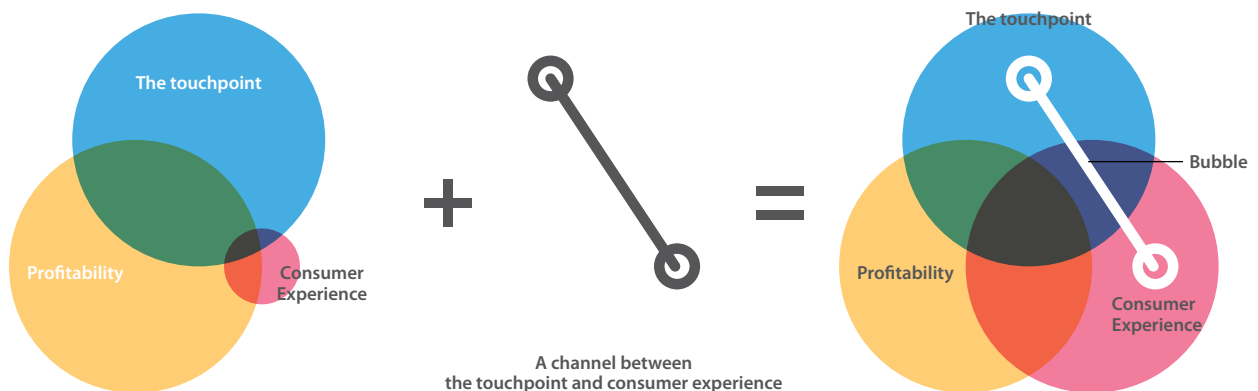
Methodology



Creating an interactive channel in the fashion retail window touchpoint

* S (stimulus) - O (organism) - R (Response) model: introduced by Mehrabian and Russel in 1974

* Stare effect: cultural critic Rosemarie Garland-Thomson.



INTRODUCTION

How can a retailer control risk if they permit a consumer to modify the voice of their window display? And, how can such a risk yield profitability when it could yield loss of control? Let us assume that profitability could be understood through increased “facetime” between the consumer and the retailer. Therefore, the assumption that “The longer the possible buyer is captivated by a window display the more likely it is that they will enter the store and spend” is accepted as a baseline. If more facetime equates to increased profits, then greater risks are desirable to achieve this. Risks are often associated with giving up control. My passion was to see if providing consumers with the opportunity to modify a retailer’s message, despite the control risk, would increase such “captivation” and facetime.

FACETIME INVESTIGATION

My explorations fell under four broad approaches; there were ten tests done in all. Through hindsight these can be grouped into three areas:

- Processes that could increase consumer engagement and facetime with a fashion window display
- Methods to permit a consumer to interact, if not modify, the voice of the retailer within the touchpoint
- And, The types of Technologies that could enhance and integrate the above two factors

In London and New York I conducted simple research through the use of a stopwatch and observation. I observed pedestrians as they passed by fashion window displays; if they passed by without looking at all they were not timed, but the percentage was of interest. I found that, of 1000 passersby in London 185 persons glanced into the window; when they did so the average was 3 seconds.⁵ The same test in New York yielded 164 persons per 1000. Interestingly, the engagement time was the same, 3 seconds. This seems to be backed up by published research.⁶

I created an installation with the objective of increasing facetime. This was accomplished through a test conducted in Madison Park, New York. I succeeded in increasing the interaction time to 10 seconds, which I considered a great success. But, in fact, criticism from professionals pointed out that because my model did not possess overt commercial objectives passersby were more likely engaged by the art nature of my piece.⁷ In this manner I failed to compare apples to apples. My target audience (25 to 35 year) may

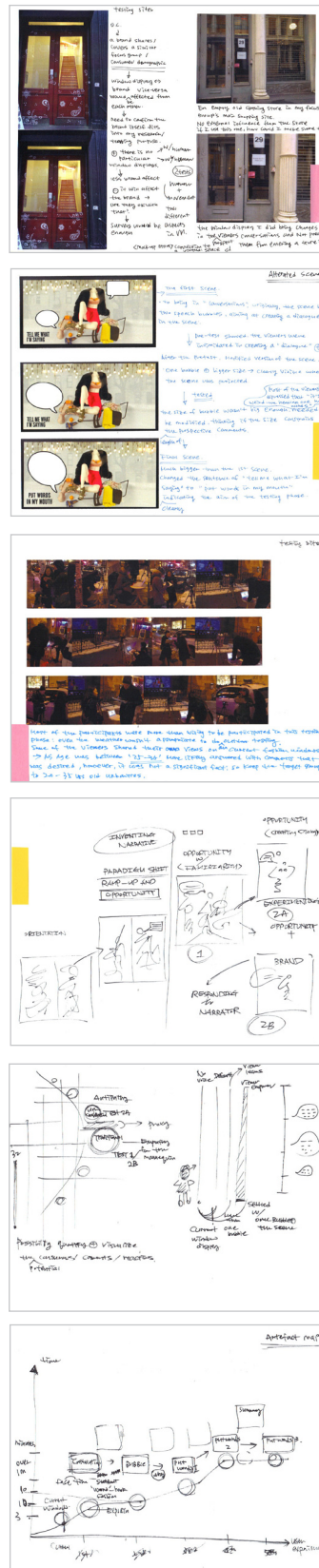


FIGURE 2: Sketches from the author's notebook: Planning out media and technology methods for testing and implementation of “put words in my mouth.”

have been attracted to the installation, a composition of mirrors and statements, due to the “fun” or non-sales aspect of my piece.

Yet, one critical detail was ascertained, the use of words could be a significant hook toward a general increase of facetime.⁸ My next investigation had to directly involve a fashion window display subject. Before I undertook this, I desired to see if I could find the simplest possible way to infiltrate a company’s touchpoint with brief, applied statements.

Using high-end fashion magazines, I added empty speech bubbles to selected fashion advertisements. London participants from the same target audience were asked to fill in these bubbles with whatever text or statement they desired. I built a display at Carnaby Street, London to present my “altered” advertisements. Surprisingly, a far greater number than I expected stopped at my display and filled in the bubbles: their statements varied, but there was a preponderance that addressed aspects of materialism. I was very encouraged; I could now asset that putting words into the mouths of the models: engaged the viewer, increased facetime, and crossed into the touchpoint/voice of the fashion manufacturer; could a manufacturer dare give up such control?

I simplified the concept through the use of an imperative statement which was to be expressed by the inanimate model, “Put words in my mouth”. In order to avoid the cost, approvals, accessibility, and time implications of constructing a complete 3D window display in New York a semi-virtual technique involving mannequins, photography, and projection was deployed. The mannequin was given a speech bubble that was initially not filled in, but could be filled in by texting to “her” address. Using this “window display ensemble” approximately 100 participants (over two sessions) were asked to directly put words into the mannequin’s bubble. Participants either were empathetic to the “voicelessness” of the model, or were antagonistic, flirtatious, consumerist, or even projective of their own feelings. I continued these tests with two additional phases, first using a traditional (high-end) window display style, and then using an unconventional display. The equation of traditional vs. nontraditional display was determined by professional critique.⁹ This provided another critical lesson. The traditional display was less challenging to overcome conceptually, so viewers more easily engaged. The unconventional display caused trepidation as viewers assumed there might be a “correct” or desirable response. This might be a lesson to retailers of not altering too many factors at once in order to engage viewers in a potential viewer-to-viewer dialog. Also noted was this: that when



Paradigm shift Ramp-up and opportunity



FIGURE 3: The entire voice of an advertisement is shifted through giving voice to the model. This low tech approach provided extensive feedback prior to moving toward the 3D, higher tech approaches that would automate the process.

more than one bubble was used (alluding to the concept that the mannequins would be “conversing”) viewers were faced with the challenge of creating dialog. This was a deterrent, one potential user suggested, “I am not that creative, I don’t know what they would say to one another”—this participant statement convinced me that the viewers were comfortable putting words into the mouths of a single mannequin. This was the least threatening, the most inviting, and the most engaging way to make the process as seamless as possible. The facetime in all cases was *very extended*—in minutes, not seconds. Interestingly, the comments modified the message greatly, but the risk to the retailer seemed even tamer than I had initially expected.¹⁰ I used varied technologies, ending (in the last phase) with text messaging directly to the bubble which was custom made in the form of a screen.

For the last phase an obvious brand (instead of a generic display) was used in the window. This had an interesting modification, with the consumer group becoming slightly more concerned with issues of beauty and status. The consumers, having been given a “controlled invasion of the touch point” revealed possibilities of commercial relevance with greatly lengthened facetime (exceeding one full minute) above a current miniscule average of three seconds. Consumers valued the given freedom, which permitted them access “behind the window” to the touch point. Allowing consumers the ability to “put words in the mouth” of the mannequin seemed worth the risk, and in over 80% of the cases, the user group actually appreciated the opportunity to do so.

The greatest challenge during the course of the project was in achieving clear objectives and focusing expectations. When I began I had hoped for two things: consumer involvement in the companies message and a definition of what I referred to as “the standard of beauty.” The goal was to see if consumer’s views of beauty could be communicated through the retail experience. My error was that I wanted to *empower the consumer voice* and *control that voice* at the same time. Vast amounts of time were spent on defining beauty and seeing if a kind of “beauty definitions language” could be packaged into the consumer experience. When I began testing the beauty issue was self-evident, I did not need to direct the consumer; as my research evolved from theory-oriented investigations towards tangible visual explorations I was surprised at how cognizant consumers were that they were being “sold to.” It was obvious that they fully knew that they were being marketed too and their involvement was a choice. The opportunity to infiltrate the marketer’s message was welcome, and, when each consumer read the previous consumer’s message (in the

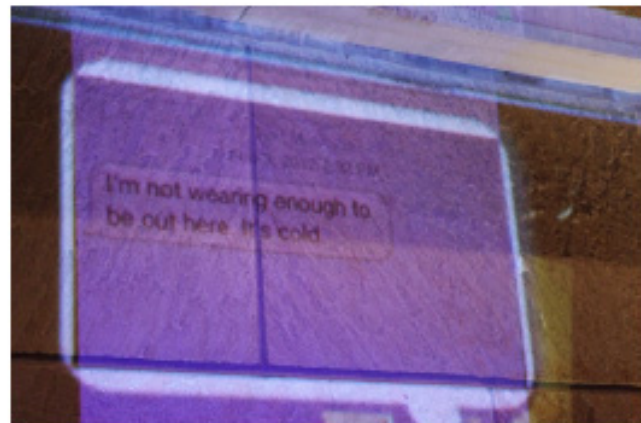
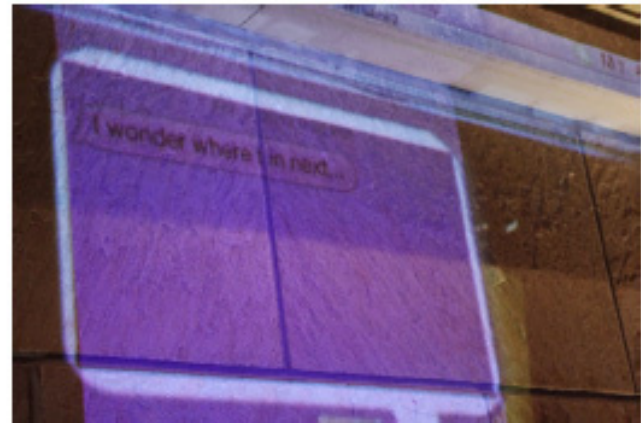


FIGURE 4: Test screens showing the messages from consumer/ users being transmitted to the screens. The ultimate display would utilize screen hardware shaped as voice balloons text would be conveyed by smartphone, and all would be seamlessly incorporated into the window display.

bubbles) whole shifts of thought occurred. The process was intended to bypass the marketer and allow intervention into the touchpoint toward a consumer-to-consumer “insider” dialog. However, the results were often a considered dialog of interaction to marketer/consumer and consumer/consumer. Rewardingly, the fear that many professionals expressed concerning marketer’s vulnerability in allowing consumers to speak for the mannequin—the “infiltration of the voice” did not materialize. In the end I believe my work will be an important detail in the progression of consumer integration toward next generation marketing. The consumer will become, more and more, an agent within the voice of the marketer and the brands of the future will become “deprofessionalized” through the infiltration of technology and media it supports; studies to see how this unfolds are critical to the building of company’s collective voice as perceived by their customers.

BIOGRAPHY

Youkyoung Kim is a stylist and fashion researcher with a strong interest in how design modifies consumer behavior, particularly through the use of new media and interactivity. She attended Sejong University for Industrial Design, received her Bac+3 degree in Fashion Design from Ecole de la Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne (ECSC), and is currently under thesis review for an MA in Design Studies from Central Saint Martins under their Applied Imagination in the Creative Industries focus. Ms. Kim served in various internship roles within the fashion and design industries before focusing her professional energies participating in aspects of consumer touchpoints and user experience; her strength in consumer semantics has lead to a number of roles in which her translation skills between Korean, French, and English permit design analysis for multiple market initiatives.

NOTES

- 1 Louis Slovisky, “Voice into Brand,” in *On Branding and Clear Communication*, ed. Alan Siegel (New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2007)
- 2 Richard Shapiro, Customers Own your Brand: 7 Customer-Centric Trends to Watch and Leverage in 2012, <http://blog.commpro.biz/?p=3538> (accessed January 21, 2012)
- 3 Gordon Foxall, *Consumer Psychology in Behavioral Perspective* (Washington. D.C.D, Beard books, 2004), 75.
- 4 Tony Morgan, *Visual Merchandising: Windows and In-Store Displays for Retail* (London: Laurence King).
- 5 United Nations Economic Comission for Europe, <http://www.unece.org/env/pp/introduction.html> (accessed March 25th 2012).
- 6 *Visual Merchandising: Aguide for Small Retailers* (Iowa State University, 1991), 24.
- 7 Rosemary Varley (Subject Director of Fashion Marketing and Retail Visual Merchandising, London College of Fashion), July 2011.
- 8 Phillips de Pury & Company, *Part II Contemporary Art* (New York: Phillips de Pury & company, 2011).
- 9 Katie Hawkins (Visual Merchandising Director, Christian Dior Inc.), January, 2012.
- 10 Participants were either: empathetic to the “voicelessness” of the mannequin (32); consumerist (26); projected their own feelings through the mannequin (13); flirtatious (12); or, even were antagonistic (2).