

From Theory to Reality: Enhancing Creativity and Achievements of Hong Kong Students through Online Design Platform and Consideration of Culture

Derry Law, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

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Abstract

Visual merchandising involves the manipulation of design elements and themes in retail outlets, thus creating a pleasant store atmosphere and shopping experience for customers. It is therefore important to teach students on ways to best determine the strategies that are appropriate for different types of stores, and provide training in both aesthetics and business operations. However, Hong Kong Chinese students have adapted a passive learning approach; they are result-oriented and insensitive to art, and therefore expect that their instructors will provide guidelines, definite answers and examples during the learning process as the means to achieving good grades. This is a cultural phenomenon found in many Asian countries. Therefore, stimulating their creativity becomes a difficult task as absolute answers cannot be given in terms of aesthetics and creativity. Instead of doing so, an approach is used which integrates a customizable design platform in an online store layout for store display assignments, and takes into consideration field research on local customs and aesthetics. A total of 100 Visual Merchandising students at a Hong Kong university have participated in a related study that utilized this approach. Focus group discussions and content analysis are used to collect and analyze the data respectively. It is found that the work of the student participants do not have a high degree of aesthetic congruence with those of previous students which were provided as guidelines, and they have adopted an open and creative attitude in developing store displays, thus indicating the success of this approach in stimulating student creativity. To further demonstrate their abilities, a publicly accessible exhibition was organized to showcase their creativity.

Background of the study

Teaching creative subjects is often a challenge. Instructors not only have to deliver the concepts of aesthetics, understand the learning patterns of their students and their internal processing patterns that shape the interpretation of aesthetics (Veryzer, 1993), but also design appropriate methods that guide students to creatively solve problems. This dilemma is common for instructors of design-related subjects. However, the situation becomes more complicated if the subject is both design and business related, as the students have to understand both the fundamental principles of aesthetic elements and the corresponding sensory qualities and applications in various business circumstances. Fashion Visual Merchandising is a subject that incorporates both design and business elements. Students learn to design store displays that are creative yet also project the appropriate identity of different fashion brands and consider the aesthetic preferences of the target consumers. Apart from being creative, they have to consider the sensory, cognitive and emotional qualities derived from the display elements. Thus, there is a dilemma between creating creative displays and fulfilling the expectations of the target audience during the process of idea development. Also, the background and characteristics of the students are important criteria that influence their degree of idea generation.

For instance, Hong Kong is a society influenced by both Eastern and Western values, which have a unique impact on the generation and execution of creative ideas. There is a strong correlation between aesthetic preferences and social values and perceptions (Yang and Wang, 1999) so that creators have to consider social acceptance while creating a new idea (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) to order to comply with the abstract aesthetic needs of their audience (Li, 1994). Although there are various techniques to enhance creativity (Butler and Thomas, 1999; De Bono, 1985; Osborn, 1969), the most important factors are to change and stimulate habitual thinking patterns (Boden, 1993) and locate the attributes that shape creative development. As the Chinese take social expectations into consideration during their creative processing (Rudowicz and Yue, 2002), an alternative way is required to enhance their creativity in which both social expectations and creative aspects can be addressed. In Hong Kong, the learning pattern of students is passive. They are trained to follow precise instructions in school and their need for aesthetic congruence in exploring new ideas is strong (Law et al. 2013) so that they rely on perceived patterns to evaluate design ideas during the creative process (Law, 2010). Also, since aesthetic background and social acceptance are crucial in influencing the acceptance of new ideas (Law and Yip, 2007; Law and Yip, 2008; Law, Yip and Wong, 2009) along with the influence of cultural values, an alternative method is required to stimulate Hong Kong Chinese students to be creative. Thus, this study proposes another means that would help students in becoming more creative.

Research subjects and methodology

The research subjects were one hundred undergraduate students who were enrolled in Fashion Visual Merchandising at a Hong Kong university. They were divided into ten groups and each group consisted of ten students. They were asked to complete a customizable assignment and develop a window display that would demonstrate their creativity by making use of a virtual visual merchandising platform and online display library, and finally, showcase their work in a public exhibition. The requirement of

the assignment included development of a theme from elements that they considered remarkable to Hong Kong, and transform their ideas into a window display for a fashion store. None of the students had a design background. They were to record their creative process into a learning journal and submit the journal as part of the assignment requirements. The learning journal was a record of their feelings and included their comments from the theme development to finalization of idea stages from an individual perspective. To obtain an in-depth understanding of their creative process, ten focus group discussions were arranged. The students commented and shared their opinions on: 1) the usage of the virtual learning tools in executing creative ideas, and 2) the creative and learning process from idea generation to showcasing their work in an exhibition. The interviews lasted for one hour and thirty minutes; their comments were tape-recorded and transcribed into English by a professional transcriber. Content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data and four themes were found.

Results and discussion

The content analysis revealed four themes from the results, including 1) enhancing of confidence in being creative; 2) reduction in psychological uncertainties; 3) increase in positive emotions; and 4) improving incentive to learn.

Enhancing of confidence in being creative

The students anticipated that there would be specific criteria included in the assignment brief and the need to properly address each one. During the creative process, they expected that they would have to comply with all of the requirements for a high grade. Based on the assignment requirements, they were to develop a creative fashion window display inspired by the city of Hong Kong that would draw attention to the retail identity of the company as well as match the identity at the same time. It was found that they have problems in generating new ideas since they do not feel confident in deciding which idea would be 'correct'. This is due to the fact that they have been trained to follow rules and instructions in the learning of new knowledge, which means that they continue to rely on a 'copy-and-paste' method even when carrying out tasks in creative subjects. This notion is supported by the following quote.

"It is difficult for us to start from the beginning in the generation of new ideas. We are used to having a set of clear instructions given by our teachers and our task is to fulfill them one by one. It is different in designing a window display. We have to consider the aesthetics and design elements which are abstract and we do not know which one is correct, which makes it difficult for us to carry out the task." (Stella, 20)

The feeling of insecurity in generating ideas was addressed when they applied the virtual visual merchandising platform and used the online visual merchandising library during the idea generation process. The online visual merchandising library included the display works of their senior classmates and the corresponding comments, so that the students could access the database at any time to obtain preliminary ideas of the design concepts, thus serving as a means and guideline for evaluating their ideas. After that, they started to use the virtual visual merchandising platform to work on the window display development. Since the platform allows the preliminary works to be stored online, the students could modify and change their

ideas at any time, which support their creative processing in a stepwise manner. The following quote supports this notion.

“The examples provided on the virtual visual merchandising platform gave me clear guidelines on how to turn abstract ideas into display works. This is important for non-design students like us. The online library gave us a good start on the initial idea generation.”

Reduction of psychological uncertainties

Aside from seeking detailed guidelines for idea generation, it was found that the cognition of art is weak among these students. They perceived that art is inferior in comparison to other subjects. This is because they have been taught that good grades in academic subjects are more important than non-academic subjects, such as art and design. They recalled that they seldom visited museums or did not receive training or undertake activities related to art appreciation. As their degree of exposure to art is low, their cognition level towards art is weak which causes the weak development of aesthetic algorithms. During the creative process, the students expect to use ideas that are highly congruent with their aesthetic algorithm. The following quote illustrates this notion.

“I remember when I was a kid, my parents never took me to art-related activities. I spent a lot of time in private schools because that’s what my parents planned for me. Even when I showed interest in drawing and painting, my mum told me these can’t help me earn a living. The most important thing is to get good grades and into business school.” (Gary, 20)

“ We were told to create window displays for casual wear fashion retailers with iconic Hong Kong elements but we need examples that show us what should be included in a casual wear fashion display, because we’re worried that we would be heading in the wrong direction. As we aren’t design students, it would be easier if we could begin the creative process with some examples, so that we can follow their ideas.” (Anson, 19)

To solve this problem, the window display examples on the online library provided visual references of acceptable ideas. This is very important for students who have not developed their aesthetic algorithms. The examples therefore serve as a guideline and framework to generate the initial idea(s) and also reduce their psychological uncertainties in the initial stages of idea generation.

Increase in positive emotions

The examples in the online visual merchandising library and a customized assignment topic, “A journey with Hong Kong visual merchandising” assisted the students in developing their initial idea(s) and there was an increase in positive emotions. Both the examples and customized topic provided familiarity to the students because the former not only reduced their psychological uncertainties, but also provided a high degree of congruence between inspiration and local elements for generating acceptable ideas. That is, the assignment topic made it easy for students to seek inspiration since they were to be inspired by local elements. The combination of both

the examples and a familiar topic provided clarity in direction to the students; it enhanced their confidence and generated positive responses during the process which motivated them to exploring the ideas further. Since Hong Kong students learn in a passive manner, positive emotions are important to them in continuing to develop ideas, and this serves as an alternative means for seeking the 'right' direction in their creative process. The following quote supports this finding.

"It is important to make reference to the works of our senior classmates. They are examples of what is correct in the concept development stage. This is crucial for us as it may affect our final performance and grade. We can also easily relate the topic to our final work by referring to traditional Hong Kong elements because we are living here and we are familiar with the local culture. This gives us comfort during the development of ideas (Dorothy, 21)"

Improving incentive to learn

When the students obtained their reference sources from the online display examples and started to develop and evaluate their new ideas by integrating Hong Kong and fashion elements, they did not have to change their learning style which made them feel at ease. They were also informed that their work would be showcased in "A journey of Hong Kong Visual Merchandising" exhibition, which further increased their incentive to explore new ideas by mixing the local culture into contemporary displays. This is because the students perceived that the works represent themselves and they do not want to lose face because their work lacked quality. It is critical among the Chinese community to lose not face in public, and thus, they started to look for different ideas and modify them to make their displays more creative and present their best in the exhibition. The quotes below support this notion.

"We have been told that our works will be showcased to the public and it is an honor to be chosen; we don't want to show poor quality work as our other classmates will display their work as well, we don't want others to think that our work is bad because that we will feel embarrassed and inferior in public." (Edwina, 19)

A familiar topic, an online design platform and a public exhibition all provided the means to elicit the creativity of the students. This is especially important for non-design students. As they are not trained in design and lack background in aesthetics, they require a clear and organized means of learning to manage abstract ideas that are also creative. A familiar topic helps them to become inspired in seeking ideas, such as the use of local Hong Kong elements in this study. Also, the examples and comments provided by their senior classmates from the online learning platform consolidate their selection process of ideas as they can obtain examples of acceptable ideas and use them as guidelines to evaluate their own ideas. This is in line with their learning patterns in which they need instructions throughout the learning process to continue with idea development. Also, the examples reduce their level of uncertainty during the creative process. After the development of their idea(s), the exhibition then provides a channel to realize their idea(s), so they can visualize their ideas, which in itself is a form of motivation and achievement as the exhibition is open to the public. Then, the creative learning process is complete, from idea development to concept execution.

Conclusion

Understanding of the learning patterns and cultural values of students is crucial in enhancing their creativity. The study on Hong Kong Chinese university students in successfully carrying out a project in Fashion Visual Merchandising shows that creativity can be enhanced by using customized teaching tools that take into consideration their learning patterns, such as by using an online visual merchandising platform and library to address the need to use standards and step-by-step instructions during the idea generation process. Also, the customized teaching tools enhance the confidence of the students in exploring new possibilities during the idea generation stage and reduces the psychological uncertainties of making the wrong decisions. The transfer of creative ideas to physical displays and showcased in a public exhibition positively enhance motivation and incentive to learn, as the exhibition theme “A journey of Hong Kong visual merchandising” provides a guideline in their search for inspiration. The ideas inspired by the local environment and culture serve as references to assess the degree of social acceptance. When students find ideas and elements that are considered to be acceptable, they are encouraged to continue to develop the ideas. Also, the exhibition further enhances the incentive to learn because when the students are informed that their work will be showcased to the public, as a result, they put forth more effort to address the problems that they encounter in the development process of their physical display and aim to show their best to the viewing audience.

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