

**KEEPING UP THE FAÇADE: A QUALITATIVE  
EXPLORATION OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT  
ON RETAIL WEBSITES IN SINGAPORE**

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# Abstract

The e-marketplace has been inundated with new retailers due to the tremendous growth of e-commerce in recent years. Small retailers, in particular, face continual challenges operating in an ever-competitive environment. Research suggests they could exploit store image as a source of competitive differentiation to set themselves apart from the other retailers. Many studies have focused on the management of consumer perceptions, but rarely did any adopt an impression management approach, given that such an approach entails fostering impressions and involves precisely the creation, maintenance and adjustment of images. The issue of how retailers manage images through their websites is, however, inadequately addressed in the extant literature. Addressing this gap is important due to the potential leverage of a retailer's image to elicit competitive advantage by inducing trust and creating value perceptions for consumers.

Grounded on dramaturgy and impression management theory, this study explored how retail websites exploit impression management tactics to shape online store images. To operationalise the inquiry, data collected from retail websites and interviews with small e-business owners and consumers in Singapore was used to examine retailers' communicative practices. The data was analysed using qualitative web content analysis as well as open, axial, and selective coding procedures.

The research found that online retailers engaged in impression management behaviour that addressed seemingly conflicting goals of persuading consumers and protecting the store from buyers' post-purchase demands. Persuasive tactics were employed during pre-purchase to portray the store as more reputable, legitimate and trustworthy than what they might be. Conversely, protective tactics construed an image of assertiveness towards averting potential challenges that might arise due to unsuccessful deliveries or product returns. Against the above backdrop, the thesis empirically developed a model illuminating a dramaturgical process of the 'backstage' transformation of web information elements into information tactics and impression management tactics, which enabled the projection of store images at the web storefront.

The original contribution of this thesis is the dramaturgical model of impression management on retail websites. The model explicated how online retailers persuade by either dramatizing or selectively disclosing information, and self-protect through information-giving tactics. The protective facet of the model was supported by assertiveness, which is a new dimension of

store image. The model converged disparate bodies of literature on dramaturgy, impression management, online store image and information transparency strategy. To practitioners, the model offered four strategic actions, six information tactics and nine impression management tactics that could be deployed to project four store images and two types of web façade. The study confirmed previous research findings that retail stores depicted themselves as being reputable, legitimate and/or trustworthy. A further finding was the use of proactive, anticipatory obfuscation and excuse tactics on retail websites. This finding is consistent with prior studies that affirmed the plausibility of impression management in the online context. Besides validating three transparency actions of revelation, concealment and selective disclosure on e-commerce sites, the study introduced another action – dramatisation, to the existing set of actions.

Keywords: Impression management, online retail, store image, consumer perception, dramaturgy

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# Publications

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# Abbreviations

B2C	Business-to-Consumer
B2B	Business-to-Business
C2C	Consumer-to-Consumer
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IM	Impression Management
IS	Information System
OIM	Organisation Impression Management