

"Visual Merchandising and its Interplay with Product Attributes, Brand Reputation, and Service Quality: A SEM-Based Analysis of Customer Behaviour in Retail Apparel"

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“Advertising moves people towards goods, merchandise moves goods towards people”

Abstract

This study examines the impact of visual merchandising on consumer purchasing behaviour in the retail apparel industry, emphasizing the interplay of product attributes, brand reputation, and service quality. Using a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach, data from 302 respondents were analysed to identify key determinants influencing consumer decision-making. The findings reveal that strategic visual merchandising elements—such as window displays, store layout, and lighting—significantly enhance brand perception, customer engagement, and purchase intentions. Additionally, product quality and brand reputation play a crucial role in shaping consumer loyalty. Service quality dimensions, including staff behaviour and checkout efficiency, further contribute to customer satisfaction. The study underscores the need for an integrated approach to visual merchandising that aligns with brand positioning and consumer expectations. Retailers can leverage these insights to enhance the shopping experience, optimize store layouts, and implement targeted marketing strategies. The research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on retail management, offering practical implications for brands seeking to strengthen customer relationships in an increasingly competitive market.

Keywords: Visual Merchandising, Consumer Behaviour, Retail Apparel, Brand Reputation, Service Quality, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)

Introduction

Consumers' perceptions of visual merchandising can stimulate in-store merchandise exploration, such as product interaction, distinguish a retail brand from competitors, enhance brand preference, and drive purchase intentions. However, the intersection of visual merchandising and cognition remains largely underexplored. The retail apparel market is evolving at an unmatched stride, and this transformation is not gradual but revolutionary. India is one of the most active and largest consumer markets in the world as per the report by UBS India is set to become the third-largest consumer market by 2026 leaving behind US and China. As per Statista, India's per capita disposable income is

projected to reach US\$ 4.34 thousand by 2029. This growth in disposable income is key driver towards changes in consumer spending patterns and enhancing overall purchasing power. In rural India, there has been a notable rise in the consumption of non-food items like consumer services and durable goods. Consumer services expenditure increased from 2.98% over 1999-'00 to 5.08% during 2022-23, while spending on durable goods tripled from 2.62% during 1999-'00 to 6.89% over 2022-23. This surge highlights the evolution of spending patterns in rural areas, where consumers are increasingly spending more on non-essential items. Technological advancements changed the way consumer shop, interact and make buying decisions. With the help of online shopping, consumers have access to a multiple products and services. This has helped the consumers in getting fair prices for products and services due to the price competitiveness in the market. Transactions have become smooth and stable, with the introduction of solutions such as mobile wallets and Unified Payments Interface (UPI). This has encouraged consumers to spend more on a variety of goods and services. In March 2024, the RBI governor announced that retail digital payments reached over 14,726 crore transactions in FY24 (up to February 2024) from 162 crore transactions in FY13. India's consumer market presents great opportunities as the country has a large population, a growing middle class, rising disposable incomes and growing aspirations. By 2026, India's consumer market is expected to become the world's third largest, because of the rising household income.

Consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour encompasses a series of activities undertaken by an individual or group. It refers to the patterns consumers follow while searching for, purchasing, using, or evaluating goods, services, and ideas they believe will fulfil their needs and desires. (yadav, 2015) According to Kotler and Keller, "Consumer behaviour is the study of the process involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and wants (Solomon, (2006)). According to Philip Kotler, Consumer is so simple that they do not did not require to study nor so complex is that there study not possible. According to Schiffman and Kanuk, "Consumer behaviour is study of what they buy, why they buy, when they buy, where they buy, how often they buy it and how often they use it". According to Walter and Paul, "Consumer behaviour is the process where individual decide whether, what, when where, how and from whom to purchase goods and services".

Retail apparel Overview

The retail apparel industry is significant contributor towards global economy. In 2023, the global apparel market was valued at approximately USD 1.71 trillion and is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 4.1% from 2024 to 2030, reaching an estimated USD 2.26 trillion by 2030. Factors influencing the growth of retail apparel industry are : Consumer spending, E commerce expansion, Fast fashion dynamics, sustainability practices. This shift is fostering a circular economy within the fashion industry, promoting sustainability and resource efficiency. The second-hand fashion market is gaining traction, with consumers increasingly opting for pre-owned apparel. changing consumer preferences have led some retailers to downsize or close physical stores. The retail apparel industry is characterized by its adaptability to consumer demands, technological advancements, and socio-economic factors. While growth prospects remain positive, the industry must navigate challenges related to sustainability, ethical practices, and evolving consumer behaviors to maintain its trajectory. The future of the Indian textiles industry looks promising, buoyed by strong domestic consumption as well as export demand. The market for Indian textiles and apparel is projected to grow at a 10% CAGR to reach US\$ 350 billion by 2030, with exports expected to reach US\$100 billion. Cotton production in India is projected to reach 7.2 million tonnes by 2030, driven by increasing demand from consumers. Kotler & Keller (2012) highlighted that experiential shopping, where consumers engage emotionally, is a key driver for purchase decisions in fashion

retail. Research showed that consumer preferences, psychological factors, and shopping motivations helps in shaping retail strategies. Statista reports showed a 53% increase in global apparel e-commerce sales from 2020 to 2023, emphasizing the critical role of digitalization. For Brands it is now essential to invest in user-friendly websites and create omnichannel experiences for survival and growth. Fast fashion contributes to significant environmental concerns, including waste and unethical labor practices. Fletcher (2008) in *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles* discussed the adverse effects of fast fashion on the environment and advocated for a shift toward slow fashion. With the advent of technology in fashion retail transforms the shopping experience. A study by Pantano et al. (2017) in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* found that AR in fitting rooms significantly enhances customer engagement and purchase intention. Francis & Hoefel (2018) in McKinsey's report identified Gen Z as a critical demographic, reshaping the retail landscape through their unique demands. Gen Z consumers prioritize personalization, sustainability, and social responsibility in their purchasing decisions.

Visual Merchandise

Strong visual merchandising plays a crucial role in differentiating retail brands by leveraging cultural symbols and associations. According to Matthews et al. (2013), retailers can establish a robust brand identity through the use of cultural memes—units of cultural meaning such as symbols, themes, or ideas that resonate with consumers. The interplay of visual merchandising, product attributes, brand reputation, and service quality directly affects consumer purchase intentions. A study in *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* (2020) emphasized that a positive experience in these areas increases customer loyalty and repeat purchases. A comprehensive approach integrating all factors is essential for sustained success in the apparel retail industry. Visual merchandising significantly influences consumer perception and in-store behavior. Strategic use of lighting, color schemes, and product placement can create an immersive shopping experience. Kerfoot, Davies, & Ward (2003) in *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* highlighted that attractive window displays and in-store arrangements enhance emotional responses, leading to increased exploration and purchase intentions. product attributes such as quality, design, and price determine consumer preferences and loyalty. Ailawadi & Keller (2004) found that consumers prioritize product quality over price, especially in premium apparel brands, emphasizing the importance of maintaining high standards. Brand reputation significantly impact purchasing decisions Keller (2001). Service deliveries are essential for enhancing the overall shopping experience. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry (1988) developed the SERVQUAL model, emphasizing the role of service dimensions (reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, and responsiveness) in shaping customer perceptions. Apparel retailers should align visual merchandising with the brand's core values and messaging. synergy between visual merchandising and brand positioning strengthens brand equity Levy & Weitz (2012) research showed that incorporating cultural symbols into merchandising enhances consumer connection with the brand Matthews et al. (2013)

Review of Literature

The reviewed literature highlights the multifaceted nature of retail environments and their impact on consumer behaviour. Key themes include the importance of visual merchandising, the integration of technology, and the need for inclusivity in retail strategies. Retail environments, plays a pivotal role in influencing consumer behaviour, particularly through visual merchandising, store ambiance, and product presentation. The reviewed studies highlight the significance of various factors in shaping shopper experiences and their purchasing decisions. According to Huddleston et al. (2020) emphasized on the use of eye-tracking technology to examine how visual attention to product, price, and information displays impacts purchase intention. Their findings suggest that signs providing product information without pricing significantly enhance the likelihood of purchase compared to

those displaying price alone. This study underscores the potential of leveraging visual merchandising to influence buying behaviour by capturing and directing consumer attention effectively. Şener (2018) explored the relationship between retail lighting design and consumer behaviour. The study found that lighting not only impacts spatial cognition and product perception but also influences price and quality perceptions. This highlights the need for retailers to strategically employ lighting design to enhance customer experiences and drive sales. Berkhout (2019) addressed the balance between variety and simplicity in retail assortments. The research emphasized that perceived variety, rather than actual assortment size, drives customer traffic and satisfaction. The integration of visual merchandising with assortment planning can create a seamless shopping experience, reducing complexity while meeting consumer needs for variety. Raju and Kumar (2024) investigated the impact of visual merchandising on impulse buying in organized retail outlets in India. Their study demonstrated a strong correlation between effective visual merchandising and impulse purchases, highlighting the importance of strategic product placement and attractive displays to stimulate unplanned buying behaviour. Chaudhary et al. (2024) examined the role of emerging technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and the metaverse in enhancing retail experiences. They found that immersive technologies significantly improve customer engagement and satisfaction, emphasizing the need for retailers to upskill their workforce to maximize the potential of these tools. Kim and Kim (2020) analysed the interrelationship between visual merchandising design (VMD), spatial configuration, and customer behaviour in fashion retail. Their findings indicate that strategically placed image recognition spaces and accessible sales areas enhance customer engagement and utilization. This quantitative analysis provides actionable insights for optimizing store layouts. To understand the negative effect caused due to visual merchandising Otieno et al. (2020) explored dissatisfaction among larger women in the UK regarding fashion availability, sizing, and affordability. The study revealed that negative experiences with visual merchandising, product range, and pricing lead to avoidance behaviour, emphasizing the need for inclusive retail strategies to cater to diverse customer demographics. Retailers can leverage these insights to create engaging, customer-centric shopping experiences that drive satisfaction and loyalty. Future research could explore these factors in diverse cultural and economic contexts to further enhance the understanding of consumer behaviour.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Visual merchandising and purchase behaviour

Visual merchandising occupies a critical position in shaping consumer purchasing behavior by augmenting brand perception, constructing captivating retail environments, and inciting spontaneous purchasing actions. It functions as a discreet yet formidable marketing instrument that can profoundly influence consumer choices within diverse demographic groups and retail contexts. The subsequent sections will explore the particular facets of visual merchandising and its ramifications on purchasing behavior.

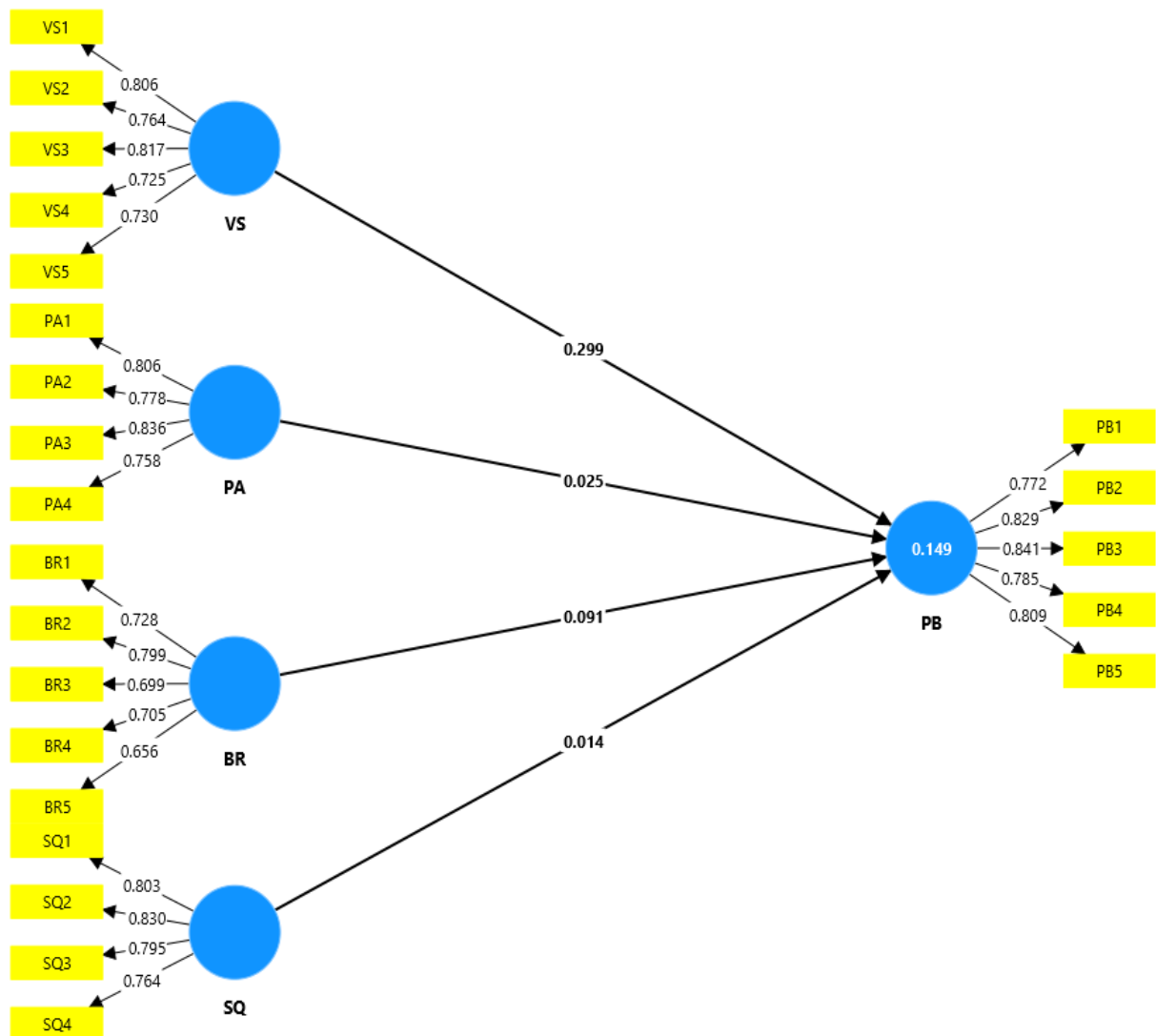
Influence on Purchase Intentions Elements of visual merchandising, including shelf displays, product showcases, and window presentations, have been empirically demonstrated to have a positive correlation with consumer purchase intentions. These components not only bolster brand recognition but also facilitate product accessibility, thereby enhancing the probability of purchase (Ali et al., 2024). In the realm of fashion retail, visual merchandising serves as an implicit signal that sways impulse purchasing through the deliberate deployment of window displays, in-store formats, and promotional signage (Mabel, 2024).

Impact on Consumer Behavior in Supermarkets In supermarket environments, visual merchandising is employed to convey the establishment's fashion value and quality perception, which can promote cross-selling and upselling opportunities. This phenomenon is particularly observable in Pune's multifaceted retail landscape, where visual merchandising influences consumer behavior by affecting

the frequency of visits and the duration of stay within stores (Sharma & Longani, 2023). For Generation Z, particular elements such as in-store promotions and store ambiance positively influence impulse buying, whereas lighting can exert a detrimental effect. Furthermore, store layout contributes to this dynamic when moderated by the store ambiance (Aires et al., 2024).

Effects on Children's Impulse Buying Visual merchandising exerts a considerable influence on children's impulse purchasing behavior, with aspects such as color palettes and interactive exhibits playing a pivotal role. This underscores the necessity for ethical guidelines in marketing directed at children, balancing engaging displays with responsible consumer practices (Kishore & Suneetha, 2024).

While visual merchandising serves as a formidable instrument for shaping purchasing behavior, it is imperative to consider the ethical ramifications, particularly when addressing susceptible demographics such as children. Retailers must find a balance between crafting engaging environments and adhering to responsible marketing practices to safeguard consumer welfare.



Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a structured approach to data collection and analysis to explore consumer shopping behavior within apparel stores. A comprehensive questionnaire was developed using

Google Forms, incorporating a diverse range of questions and scenarios strategically designed to elicit valuable insights. The survey was tailored to capture perspectives from individuals with varying backgrounds, including undergraduate students, graduate students, postgraduates, and employed professionals. The research aimed to examine key determinants influencing shopping experiences and purchasing behavior within the apparel retail sector.

Sampling Technique

To ensure the relevance and reliability of the collected data, a convenience random sampling technique was meticulously employed. This method enabled the researchers to focus on specific subgroups within the target population, ensuring that the insights obtained were both substantial and aligned with the research objectives. The survey was distributed among 350 individuals, out of which 302 participants provided complete and usable responses. The implementation of conditional sampling allowed the study to derive a more precise understanding of the intricate dynamics influencing consumer shopping behavior in apparel stores.

Data Collection Instrument

The primary data collection tool for this research was a structured questionnaire designed to capture key insights into consumer shopping behaviour. The questionnaire focused on four critical factors: Visual Merchandising, Product Attributes, Brand Reputation, and Service Quality, along with an examination of purchasing behaviour. The primary objective was to analyse the impact of these determinants on consumers' shopping experiences and purchasing decisions. Participants were asked to share their perceptions and preferences regarding these factors, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the relationships between these variables within the evolving landscape of apparel retail.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyse the impact of visual merchandising on consumer shopping experiences and purchasing behaviour in apparel stores.
2. To evaluate how product attributes influence consumer purchasing behaviour within apparel retail settings.
3. To investigate the role of brand reputation in shaping consumer perceptions and purchase decisions in apparel stores.
4. To assess the effect of service quality on customer purchasing behaviour in apparel retail environments.

This study was designed to provide meaningful insights that can benefit apparel businesses and stores by offering a deeper understanding of consumer decision-making processes. The findings aim to aid retailers in refining their strategies, enhancing customer experiences, and adapting to the dynamic fashion industry. By investigating the role of Visual Merchandising, Product Attributes, Brand Reputation, and Service Quality, the research seeks to contribute valuable knowledge to the field of consumer behaviour and retail management.

Analysis and results

To test the hypothesized research model, we employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), a variance-based technique, using SmartPLS4 (Version 4.1.0.9) (Ringle et al., 2015). PLS-SEM is particularly suited for research models that involve high-order latent constructs and complex structures, such as those incorporating multiple mediation relationships (Hair et al., 2017). Following established guidelines, we adhered to the recommendations provided in premier

sources for PLS-SEM regarding data analysis and reporting (e.g., Hair et al., 2017; Ringle et al., 2020).

Measurement Model Assessment

The assessment of the measurement model represents the initial step in PLS-SEM analysis. This step ensures that only constructs with adequate reliability and validity are included in the structural model. Specifically, we evaluated indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity for both first-order and second-order constructs.

Tables 1 and 2 present the results of the measurement model assessment, including outer loadings, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), square roots of AVE values, and Heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios. The results demonstrate satisfactory reliability and validity, confirming that the measurement model is appropriate for structural analysis (Hair et al., 2017).

Table 1. Factors, sub-items, and loadings.

Dimensions	Statement	Loading
Visual Merchandising	Eye catching window display at the store.	0.806
	Well-presented mannequin showcasing how to style different products.	0.764
	Store layout & arrangement of products that encourages to explore different sections & products.	0.817
	Discounts or special offers displayed.	0.725
	Lighting ambience within a store which impacts the mood.	0.730
Product attributes	Exceptional product quality	0.806
	Availability of product	0.778
	Wide range of product categories	0.836
Brand Reputation	Cost-effective or reasonable prices	0.758
	I hear or read a lot about it.	0.728
	It suits my preferences.	0.799
	Brand positioning in the society.	0.699
Service Quality	I am a loyal customer.	0.705
	Genuine & quality products.	0.656
	Behaviour of the salespersons.	0.803
	Store staff knowledge about products.	0.830
	Parking facility for the store.	0.795
Purchasing Behaviour	Time taken for billing.	0.764
	Because of the Brand Reputation	0.772
	Because it makes me Happy	0.829

If the ambience & service is appealing	0.841
If its worth of my money	0.785
Because it makes me feel satisfied	0.809

Table 2 Composite Reliability and AVE

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho a)	Composite reliability (rho c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Brand Reputation	0.771	0.786	0.842	0.517
Product attributes	0.808	0.824	0.873	0.632
Purchasing Behaviour	0.867	0.870	0.903	0.652
Service Quality	0.811	0.814	0.875	0.637
Visual Merchandising	0.828	0.840	0.879	0.592

Structural Model Assessment

The structural model was assessed following the comprehensive guidelines proposed by Hair et al. (2017) and Ringle et al. (2020). The evaluation began with an examination of potential collinearity issues among predictor constructs, as high collinearity can bias the path coefficients. The variance inflation factor (VIF) values for all predictors were calculated and found to be well below the recommended threshold of 5, confirming the absence of collinearity issues in the model.

Next, the model's predictive accuracy was assessed using the coefficient of determination (R^2 values). The results indicated that the model explained 51% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.51$) in the dependent variable, Engagement Intention. This demonstrates an adequate level of predictive accuracy, suggesting that the predictors effectively explain the outcome variable.

To evaluate the model's predictive relevance, the Stone-Geisser's Q^2 values were calculated using the blindfolding procedure. The Q^2 values for the endogenous constructs were 0.24, 0.47, and 0.30 for psychological safety, thriving, and innovative behavior, respectively. Since all Q^2 values exceeded zero, the results establish the model's strong predictive relevance, indicating that the predictors have practical utility in explaining the outcomes.

Finally, the path coefficients and their significance were examined to test the hypothesized relationships in the model. A bootstrapping procedure with 10,000 resamples was employed, using the no sign changes option and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. The results of the path analysis confirmed the significance of the hypothesized relationships, demonstrating that the proposed model captures the causal relationships effectively. These results are presented in Table 3 and Figure 1, providing detailed insights into the strength and direction of the relationships among the constructs.

In conclusion, the structural model demonstrates robust predictive accuracy, relevance, and significance, supporting the validity of the hypothesized relationships in the proposed research framework.

Table 3 Results of measurement model assessment

Relationship	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (O/STDEV)	P values
BR -> PB	0.091	0.098	0.086	1.053	0.293
PA -> PB	0.025	0.030	0.079	0.314	0.754
SQ -> PB	0.014	0.016	0.068	0.212	0.832
VS -> PB	0.299	0.299	0.081	3.703	0.000

Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the role of visual merchandising, product attributes, brand reputation, and service quality in shaping consumer purchasing behavior within the retail apparel industry. The results from Table 3 indicate that visual merchandising ($\beta = 0.299$, $p < 0.001$) has the strongest positive impact on purchasing behavior, reinforcing its role as a key driver in consumer decision-making. This supports prior research emphasizing the influence of store layout, product displays, and promotional signage in enhancing customer engagement (Kerfoot et al., 2003). Conversely, the impact of brand reputation ($\beta = 0.091$, $p = 0.293$), product attributes ($\beta = 0.025$, $p = 0.754$), and service quality ($\beta = 0.014$, $p = 0.832$) on purchasing behaviour was found to be statistically insignificant. This suggests that while these factors may contribute to overall consumer satisfaction, they do not directly drive immediate purchase decisions as strongly as visual merchandising does. One possible explanation for this outcome could be that consumers in the apparel segment are more influenced by in-store aesthetics and product presentation rather than brand image or service-related factors, especially in a highly competitive retail environment.

The findings also highlight the evolving nature of consumer preferences. With the rise of experiential shopping, consumers are drawn to immersive and visually appealing retail spaces that enhance their overall shopping experience (Pantano et al., 2017). Retailers need to prioritize creative and strategically placed visual merchandising elements to capture consumer attention and stimulate impulse purchases. Moreover, while brand reputation and product quality remain essential for long-term customer loyalty, their immediate impact on purchase intent may be moderated by external factors such as competitive pricing, digital marketing, and promotional offers.

Future Research Scope

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of visual merchandising on consumer purchasing behavior, there remains significant scope for further exploration. Future research can investigate the integration of digital and augmented reality (AR) technologies in visual merchandising, as emerging studies suggest that interactive digital displays and AR fitting rooms enhance consumer engagement and purchase intentions. Additionally, a cross-cultural analysis of visual merchandising effectiveness could provide insights into how consumer responses vary across different regions and retail environments. Given that brand reputation and service quality did not exhibit a significant direct impact on purchase behavior in this study, future research could explore their long-term effects on brand loyalty and repeat purchase behavior through longitudinal studies. Moreover, with the rapid growth of e-commerce, comparing the influence of visual merchandising in online versus offline retail spaces would offer strategic insights into how digital merchandising elements, such as website aesthetics and virtual store layouts, shape consumer decisions. Finally, incorporating consumer psychology into visual merchandising research—by examining factors like color psychology, sensory marketing, and emotional branding—could provide a deeper understanding of how subconscious influences drive purchasing decisions. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of visual merchandising's role in retail and offer practical strategies for brands to optimize their customer engagement and sales performance.

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