

Visual Merchandising as a Stimulus for Impulse Buying: A Systematic Review of Brick-and-Mortar Retail Studies

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Abstract:

In today's highly competitive retail marketplace, visual merchandising functions as a critical commercial strategy for driving consumer engagement and impulse buying behaviour. This study conducts a systematic review of literature published between 2015 and 2025 to evaluate how in-store visual stimuli influence unplanned purchase decisions in brick-and-mortar retail formats. Drawing on peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and doctoral research from prominent academic databases, the review integrates insights from both Indian and global markets. The findings identify key merchandising levers such as window displays, store layout optimization, lighting design, colour schemes, product presentation, store ambiance, and promotional media that significantly enhance shopper experience, emotional arousal, perceived value, and purchase conversion. The evidence demonstrates that strategically designed retail environments can effectively stimulate impulse purchases, strengthen brand perception, and improve in-store sales performance even among consumers with high self-control.

1. Introduction:

In today's highly competitive retail environment, brick-and-mortar stores are under increasing pressure to create engaging in-store experiences that attract customers and encourage purchases. Even with the rapid growth of online shopping, physical stores continue to play a crucial role, especially in categories such as fashion, FMCG, lifestyle, and personal care (Shah, 2014.).

Unlike digital platforms, physical retail spaces offer sensory interaction, immediate product experience, and emotional connection, making store design and presentation extremely important (Bhathena, 2025). Visual merchandising has become a strategic tool for retailers to express brand identity, showcase products, and influence customer movement in stores. Features such as displays, layout, lighting, colours, mannequins, and signage are deliberately designed to attract attention and shape customer perceptions. Effective visual merchandising strongly encourages impulse buying spontaneous, unplanned purchases driven by in-store cues. According to the Stimulus Organism Response (SOR) framework, visual stimuli affect shoppers' emotions and perceptions, which in turn trigger impulsive purchase behaviour. As existing research is fragmented across retail contexts, a systematic review is needed to consolidate evidence on how visual merchandising influences impulse buying in physical stores. Figure 1 below presents the Stimulus–Organism–Response framework.

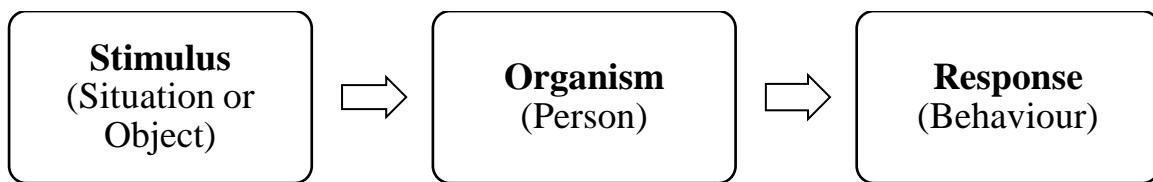


Figure 1: Stimulus–Organism–Response Model

2. Literature Review

Due to growing competition in the retail industry, retailers increasingly adopt visual merchandising and promotional strategies to attract new customers and build long-term relationships. Creative and distinctive window displays and store designs can effectively influence consumer responses and encourage impulse buying decisions. (Gudonavičienė & Alijošienė, 2015)

A study of restaurants in Slovakia revealed that atmospheric elements such as lighting, music, and background colors significantly attract customers and shape taste perceptions, indirectly influencing emotions and enhancing the dining experience. (Kleinová et al., 2015)

The results show that higher brightness increases pleasure and shopping intention, while its effects on price and quality perception offset each other. Accent lighting has a small positive impact on pleasure and perceived quality, and warm orange lighting enhances quality perception and shopping intention by increasing pleasure. (Zielke & Schielke, 2016)

The results indicate that impulse buying is significantly influenced by window displays, in-store displays, floor merchandising, and brand name, with window displays having the strongest effect by capturing attention and stimulating spontaneous purchase urges. (Randhawa & College, 2017)

Modern shoppers prefer safe and appealing store environments, prompting retailers to use tailored atmospheric elements to influence behavior, making continuous research into shopper needs essential. (Bawa et al., 2018)

Attractive product displays strongly influence purchasing decisions, while in-store ambiance and daily offers also significantly drive impulse buying. Therefore, retailers should prioritize these factors, particularly enhancing display attractiveness, to effectively boost impulse sales. (Chaudhari, 2023)

Although some shoppers practice self-control, effective visual merchandising can trigger impulse purchases, highlighting the need for hypermarkets to adopt optimal strategies, particularly for FMCGs. (Sahari et al., 2024)

3. Research Methodology

This study uses a systematic review approach to explore how visual merchandising influences impulse buying behaviour in brick-and-mortar retail stores. The main aim is to understand how in-store visual cues and other sensory elements shape consumer emotions and trigger unplanned purchase decisions. By bringing together insights from both academic research and industry-oriented studies, the paper explains how effective visual merchandising transforms simple product displays into powerful drivers of consumer desire and spontaneous buying. This review draws on literature sourced from well-established academic databases and reliable industry platforms, including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, JSTOR, Scopus, and Shodhganga. Research published between 2015 and 2025 was examined, with a focus on studies related to consumer behaviour, retail management, marketing, environmental psychology, and design. To ensure a comprehensive and balanced viewpoint, both Indian and international research were considered, and only publications in the English language were included.

A systematic keyword search was conducted using terms such as visual merchandising, impulse buying behaviour, in-store displays, retail atmospherics, store layout and impulse purchase, window display effectiveness, sensory marketing, and brick-and-mortar retail. However, the study relies entirely on secondary sources, which may reflect specific retail formats, cultural contexts, or consumer segments. Additionally, changing consumer preferences and the growing integration of digital technologies within physical stores may affect the long-term applicability of some traditional visual merchandising insights.

4. Overview of Previous Research on Visual Merchandising

Authors	Title	Research Objectives	Country	Key Factors
Rasa Gudonaviciene, Sonata Alijosiene (2015)	Visual Merchandising Impact on Impulse Buying Behaviour	To identify which visual merchandising elements have the greatest positive influence on consumers' impulse buying in specialised clothing and footwear stores in Lithuania.	Lithuania	Windows display, Store layout, In-store design, Promotional signage, Store atmosphere (lighting, colours, etc.)

Katarína Kleinováa, Johana Paluchováa, Jakub Berpíka, Elena Horskáa. (2015)	Visual Merchandising and Its Marketing Components in Selected Restaurants in Slovakia	To assess the types of visual merchandising elements utilized by restaurants in their operations.	Slovakia	Lighting, Musical background, Background colour
Stephen Zielke, Thomas Schielke (2016)	Effects of Illumination on Store Perception and Shopping Intention: Shedding Light on Conflicting Theories	To examine the impact of store lighting on the overall store environment, customers' perceptions of product price and quality, and their likelihood of making purchases in a retail setting."	Germany	Store lighting, Store atmosphere, Price and quality perception, Shopping intention
Komaldeep Randhawa, Dr. Rajni Saluja (2017)	Visual Merchandising and Impulse Buying Behavior – Is There Any Relationship?	To examine the variables influencing shoppers' impulse buying, evaluate the effectiveness of different visual merchandising and store atmospherics on such behaviour, and assess their impact on the brand image of apparel in consumers' perceptions.	India	Window display, Store layout, Product shelf presentation, In store form/mannequin display, Atmospherics (lighting, colours, scent and music)

Ramandeep Bawa, Rita Kant, A.K. Sinha (2018)	Impact of Visual Merchandising as a Motivating Factor on Shopper Buying Behavior	To investigate the effects of various motivational factors on attracting customers into a store and encouraging them to make purchases.	India	Store front, Window display, Mannequins, Music and theme, Lighting and temperature, Store front, Music, Scent
Mr. Mahendra Yadav, Dr. Chetan Chaudhari, Dr. Shailendrakumar Kale (2023)	Customers' Impulse Buying Behavior and the Impact of Visual Merchandising in Star Bazaar's Chain Stores in Pune City	To examine how visual merchandising influences customers' impulse purchases and the impact of product displays, store atmosphere, and promotions on impulsive buying behavior.	India	Attractive product displays, Store ambiance, Daily offers
Norshahniza Sahari (2024)	Unravelling the Impact of Visual Merchandising on Consumer Impulse Buying Behaviour in Hypermarket	To examine which visual merchandising elements prompt spontaneous purchases in hypermarket settings and to assess how consumer self-control influences the relationship between visual merchandising and impulse buying.	Malaysia	Cleanliness, Shelf Height, POP Displays, In-store Digital Media, Product Packaging, POP Materials

5. Key Observations

Based on the findings of this research, Figure 2 has been constructed to illustrate the relationship between visual merchandising elements and consumer impulse buying behaviour.

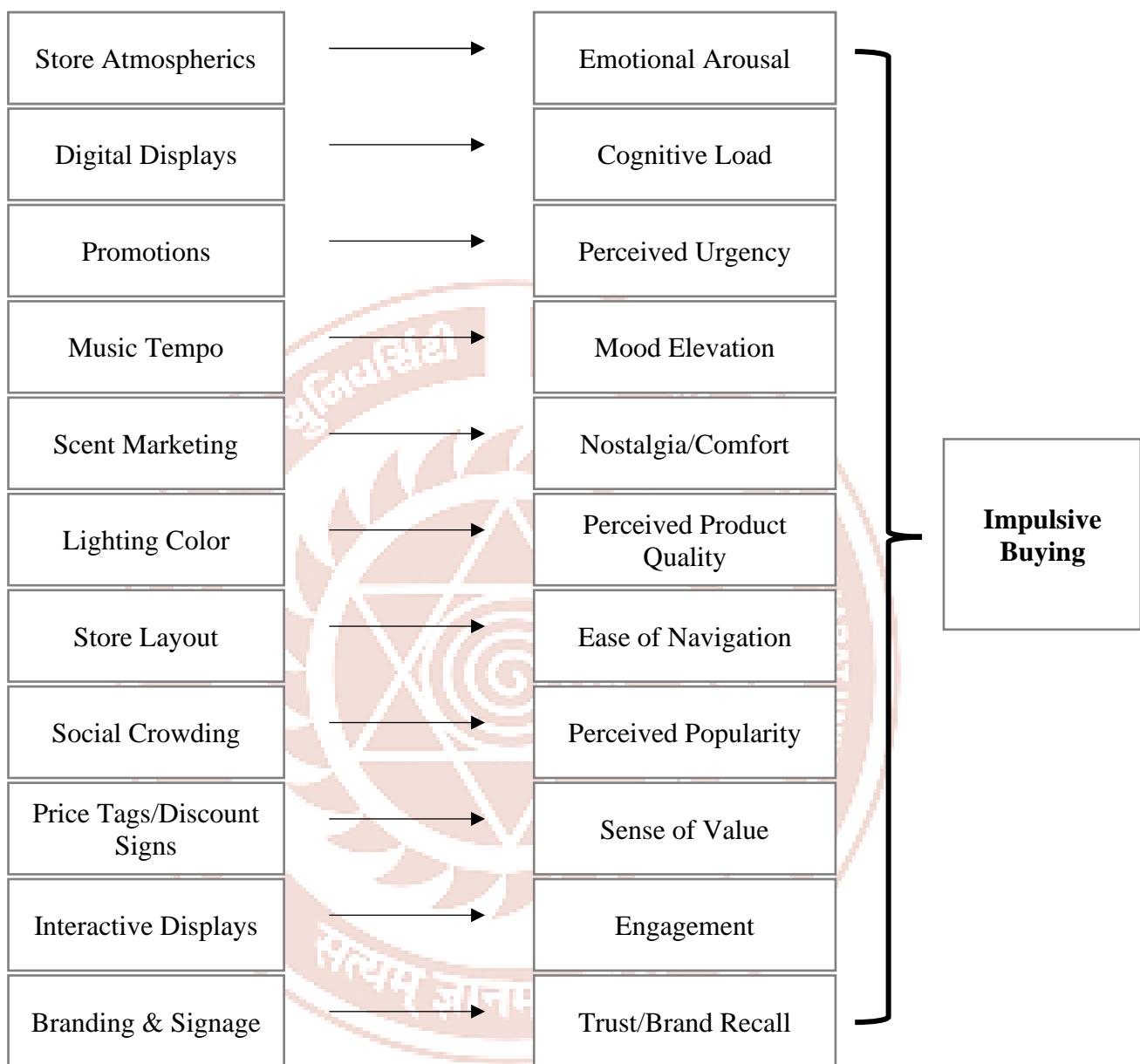


Figure 2: The relationship between visual merchandising elements and consumer impulse buying behavior.

6. Conclusion

A review of studies from 2015 to 2024 confirms that visual merchandising is a powerful commercial lever influencing impulse buying across retail formats. Strategic elements such as window displays, store layout, lighting, colour palettes, ambiance, POP media, and product presentation consistently drive consumer engagement, emotional arousal, perceived value, and spontaneous purchase intent across global markets. Beyond aesthetics, these tools enhance

brand positioning, customer experience, and in-store conversion rates. Context-specific tactics shelf optimization, sensory cues, and promotional displays further stimulate unplanned purchases. Overall, visual merchandising functions as a revenue-enhancing, shopper behaviour optimization strategy in experience led brick-and-mortar retail.

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