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A Study on the Impact of Visual Merchandising on Consumer's Willingness to Pay in Fashion Retail Stores

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Abstract

Visual merchandising has long been considered a vital component of retail strategy, particularly in the fashion retail sector, where store aesthetics are believed to influence consumer perceptions, purchase decisions, and willingness to pay premium prices. This study examines the relationship between key visual merchandising elements including store layout effectiveness, product display quality, lighting design, and store ambience and consumer's willingness to pay in fashion retail stores. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was adopted using survey methodology to capture consumer perceptions immediately after in-store shopping experiences. Data were collected from 385 fashion retail shoppers aged 18 years and above through structured questionnaires. Correlation analysis was employed to examine the strength and significance of the relationships between visual merchandising variables and willingness to pay.

The results indicate that store layout, product displays, and lighting design do not exhibit a statistically significant relationship with consumers' willingness to pay premium prices, suggesting that these visual elements alone are insufficient to generate pricing power in contemporary retail environments. However, store ambience and emotional engagement demonstrate a statistically significant positive relationship with willingness to pay, although the magnitude of the effect remains small. The findings suggest that while visual merchandising enhances customer experience and emotional engagement, its ability to directly influence price acceptance has reduced in digitally informed and price-transparent markets. This study contributes to retail and consumer behavior literature by highlighting the evolving role of visual merchandising and emphasizing the need for retailers to reconsider the strategic objectives of visual merchandising investments.

Keywords: Visual Merchandising; Fashion Retail; Store Ambience; Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

Visual merchandising has traditionally been regarded as a crucial element of retail strategy, particularly in the fashion retail sector. Retailers have relied on store aesthetics, product placement, displays, lighting, and overall ambience to create favorable perceptions in consumers' minds, influence purchase decisions, and encourage acceptance of premium pricing. Over the years, fashion retailers have invested substantially in visual merchandising initiatives, ranging from flagship store redesigns to carefully curated in-store environments intended to communicate brand identity and perceived product quality.

Leading fashion brands such as Zara, H&M, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton have established strong visual merchandising standards to deliver a comprehensive brand experience that supports their market positioning and pricing strategies. Marketing literature and retail management theories have consistently emphasized the role of visual merchandising in shaping emotional responses and perceived value, suggesting a direct link between store environment quality and

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consumers' willingness to pay higher prices. Traditionally, the physical retail store served as the primary source of product information, allowing retailers to use visual cues as key signals of quality and value.

However, the contemporary retail landscape has undergone significant transformation due to rapid digitalization and the growth of omnichannel retailing. Consumers now access extensive product information, peer reviews, and price comparisons through digital platforms before entering physical stores. Mobile applications and online retail channels have increased price transparency, reducing information asymmetry between retailers and consumers. As a result, purchasing decisions are increasingly shaped by pre-established price expectations rather than in store visual influences.

In this evolving context, the effectiveness of visual merchandising as a tool for generating pricing power has become uncertain. While visually appealing retail environments continue to play an important role in enhancing customer experience and emotional engagement, their direct impact on consumers' willingness to pay premium prices requires re-examination. This study addresses this gap by empirically examining the relationship between key visual merchandising elements and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores within a digitally informed and price-transparent market environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Visual Merchandising as a Retail Strategy

Visual merchandising has been extensively discussed in retail literature as a strategic tool for creating differentiation and enhancing consumer perception within physical retail environments. Kerfoot, Davies, and Ward (2003) describe visual merchandising as a mechanism through which fashion retailers establish discernible differences across the retail value chain, influencing how products are interpreted at the point of sale. Store layout, product displays, lighting, and visual presentation function as non-verbal communication cues that shape consumer engagement and brand interpretation.

The theoretical foundation of visual merchandising is strongly linked to environmental psychology. Mehrabian and Russell (1974) propose that physical environments act as stimuli that evoke emotional responses, which subsequently influence behavioral outcomes. In retail contexts, this framework suggests that visually appealing store environments can generate positive emotions, encouraging approach behaviors such as prolonged store visits and increased engagement with merchandise.

2.2. Perceived Value and Willingness to Pay

Consumer willingness to pay is closely associated with perceived value and price quality evaluations. Zeithaml (1988) explains that perceived value emerges from a consumer's assessment of what is received relative to what is sacrificed, with price acting both as a cost and a signal of quality. In traditional retail settings, visual merchandising contributed to perceived value by reinforcing quality expectations and reducing uncertainty about product worth.

Behavioral decision-making research further explains how consumers evaluate pricing under uncertainty. Kahneman and Tversky (1974) demonstrate that individuals rely on heuristics and cognitive biases rather than purely rational evaluation. Within retail environments, visual cues such as premium displays and sophisticated store atmospherics were historically believed to act as anchors, influencing internal reference prices and increasing acceptance of higher prices.

2.3. Store Atmospherics and Emotional Engagement

Store atmospherics including lighting, music, scent, and decor play an important role in shaping emotional engagement. Pugh (2001) highlights that emotionally congruent service environments enhance perceived service quality and customer satisfaction. In fashion retail, store ambience has been associated with enhanced emotional responses and stronger consumer attachment to the shopping experience.

However, the ability of emotional engagement to translate into pricing acceptance has been increasingly questioned. While atmospherics enhance experiential outcomes, their influence on willingness to pay may be limited in competitive retail markets where consumers actively compare prices across channels.

2.4. Pricing, Competition, and Contemporary Retail Context

Pricing research emphasizes that consumer responses are highly sensitive to contextual cues. Anderson and Simester (2001) demonstrate that price presentation influences purchasing behavior, reinforcing the importance of price perception. In contemporary retail environments characterized by heightened competition and digital price transparency, non-price cues such as visual merchandising face reduced influence over pricing decisions.

Although foundational studies support the role of store environments in shaping perceptions and emotions, the last decade has witnessed significant changes in consumer behavior driven by digital information access, omnichannel retailing, and instant price comparison. These developments suggest that visual merchandising may now function more as an experience enhancement tool rather than a direct driver of willingness to pay.

2.5. Research Gap

While classical retail and environmental psychology theories provide strong support for the emotional and perceptual influence of visual merchandising, empirical evidence examining its pricing impact in modern, digitally informed fashion retail contexts remains limited. Much of the existing literature is rooted in retail environments characterized by information asymmetry, a condition that has significantly diminished in recent years. This study addresses this gap by empirically examining whether visual merchandising elements continue to influence willingness to pay in contemporary fashion retail settings.

2.6. Research Objectives

2.6.1. Primary Objectives

- To find out how store layout, product displays, lighting, and ambience affect customers' willingness to pay extra in fashion retail stores.
- To understand which element of visual merchandising has the strongest positive impact on customer decision making.
- To identify whether improved visual merchandising can lead to higher sales and customer satisfaction in fashion retail environments.

2.6.2. Secondary Objectives

- To study whether demographic factors such as age, gender, and income influence how consumers respond to visual merchandising in fashion retail stores.
- To examine whether customers notice and remember changes in store displays and layout.
- To explore whether the effect of visual merchandising differs between online and in store shopping contexts.

2.7. Research Hypotheses

- H01: There is no significant relationship between store layout effectiveness and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores.
- Ha1: There is a significant relationship between store layout effectiveness and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores.
- H02: There is no significant relationship between product display quality and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores.
- Ha2: There is a significant relationship between product display quality and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores.
- H03: There is no significant relationship between lighting design effectiveness and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores.
- Ha3: There is a significant relationship between lighting design effectiveness and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores.
- H04: There is no significant relationship between store ambience and emotional engagement and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores.
- Ha4: There is a significant relationship between store ambience and emotional engagement and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional research design using survey methodology to examine the relationship between visual merchandising elements and consumers' willingness to pay in fashion retail stores. The research design was selected to enable precise measurement of variables and statistical testing of hypothesized relationships between visual merchandising factors and willingness to pay.

A quantitative approach was considered appropriate for this study due to the following reasons:

- It allows systematic measurement of variables using standardized scales.
- It enables formal hypothesis testing using established statistical techniques.
- The research focuses on examining relationships among variables rather than exploring subjective meanings or processes.

3.2. Population and Sampling Strategy

The target population for the study consists of individuals who:

- Are frequent customers of fashion retail chain stores,
- Are aged 18 years and above,
- Are involved in making purchase decisions in fashion retail stores, and
- Are willing to participate in survey-based research.

A convenience sampling technique was adopted, and data was collected from respondents at physical fashion retail stores located in urban areas. Although convenience sampling lacks the representativeness of probability sampling, it was selected due to its practical advantages, including ease of access to respondents, cost effectiveness, feasibility within time and resource constraints, and suitability for exploratory studies examining relationships rather than population parameters.

The final sample size consisted of 385 respondents. The sample size was determined using power analysis assuming a medium effect size ($r = 0.30$), two tailed tests, a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, and statistical power of $\beta = 0.20$. The minimum required sample size was estimated to be 85. To account for an anticipated non response rate of approximately 15 percent and to ensure adequate statistical power, the target sample size was increased to 385 respondents.

3.3. Sample Characteristics

The demographic profile of the respondents was as follows:

- Age: Mean age of 34.7 years with a standard deviation of 12.3 years, ranging from 18 to 68 years.
- Gender: 58 percent female and 42 percent male respondents.
- Income: Annual household income ranged from ₹3,00,000 to above ₹15,00,000, with a mean income level falling within the middle-class income category.
- Shopping Frequency: 64 percent of respondents shopped in fashion retail stores at least monthly, 28 percent weekly, and 8 percent less frequently.
- Education: 72 percent had completed a bachelor's degree or higher, while 28 percent had completed high school or some college education.
- Store Format: Respondents reported shopping across department stores, specialty fashion retailers, off price retailers, and direct to consumer stores.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to respondents immediately after their shopping experience. Collecting data post shopping ensured that respondents' perceptions of visual merchandising were based on recent and real in store experiences.

The questionnaire required approximately 5 to 15 minutes to complete and covered all key aspects of visual merchandising and willingness to pay without causing respondent fatigue. Respondents were asked to evaluate the store they had just visited, allowing accurate measurement of their perceptions.

Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary. No monetary incentives were offered. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and no personal identifying information was collected. Out of approximately 420 individuals approached, 385 completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 91.7 percent. Non-completion was due to refusal to participate or incomplete responses.

3.5. Measurement of Variables

Visual merchandising variables including store layout, product displays, lighting design, and store ambience were measured using multiple items assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Willingness to pay was measured using Likert scale items reflecting consumers' acceptance of premium prices relative to competing fashion retailers.

The internal consistency of measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and all constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating adequate reliability.

3.6. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were coded and analyzed using statistical methods appropriate for quantitative research. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and overall perceptions of visual merchandising elements.

Correlation analysis was employed to test the research hypotheses. Both Pearson correlation and Spearman rank correlation coefficients were used to ensure robustness of findings. Hypothesis testing was conducted at a five percent significance level, and decisions were made based on p values and effect sizes.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize respondents' perceptions of visual merchandising elements and willingness to pay. The results are presented below.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range	Cronbach's Alpha
Store Layout Effectiveness	3.42	0.89	1.00–5.00	0.78
Product Display Quality	3.28	0.92	1.00–5.00	0.81
Lighting Design Effectiveness	3.51	0.85	1.00–5.00	0.75
Store Ambience and Engagement	3.35	0.88	1.00–5.00	0.83
Willingness to Pay	2.84	1.02	1.00–5.00	0.82

The visual merchandising variables were clustered around the midpoint of the scale, indicating moderate perceptions of effectiveness. Lighting design received the highest mean score (M = 3.51), while willingness to pay recorded the lowest mean (M = 2.84), suggesting limited acceptance of premium pricing among respondents.

All constructs demonstrated acceptable internal consistency reliability, as Cronbach's alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70.

4.2. Demographic Characteristics

The demographic profile of respondents was as follows:

- Gender: 57.9 percent female and 42.1 percent male.

- Age Distribution:
 1. 18–25 years: 17.7 percent
 2. 26–35 years: 32.2 percent
 3. 36–45 years: 25.5 percent
 4. 46–55 years: 16.1 percent
 5. 56 years and above: 8.6 percent
- Annual Income Distribution:
 1. ₹3,00,000–₹5,99,999: 23.1 percent
 2. ₹6,00,000–₹8,99,999: 32.2 percent
 3. ₹9,00,000–₹11,99,999: 25.5 percent
 4. ₹12,00,000–₹14,99,999: 14.0 percent
 5. ₹15,00,000 and above: 5.2 percent
- Shopping Frequency:
 1. Weekly: 28.1 percent
 2. Monthly: 63.9 percent
 3. Quarterly or less: 8.1 percent

The sample primarily consisted of monthly shoppers within the middle-class income group.

4.3. Hypothesis Testing

Correlation analysis was conducted using Pearson correlation and Spearman rank correlation to examine relationships between visual merchandising variables and willingness to pay. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

4.3.1. Hypothesis 1

H01: There is no significant relationship between store layout effectiveness and willingness to pay.

Ha1: There is a significant relationship between store layout effectiveness and willingness to pay.

- Pearson $r = 0.032$
- Spearman $\rho = 0.041$
- $p = 0.537$

Since $p > 0.05$, H01 is accepted.

There is no statistically significant relationship between store layout effectiveness and willingness to pay.

4.3.2. Hypothesis 2

H02: There is no significant relationship between product display quality and willingness to pay.

Ha2: There is a significant relationship between product display quality and willingness to pay.

- Pearson $r = 0.053$
- Spearman $\rho = 0.067$
- $p = 0.289$

Since $p > 0.05$, H02 is accepted.

There is no statistically significant relationship between product display quality and willingness to pay.

4.3.3. Hypothesis 3

H03: There is no significant relationship between lighting design effectiveness and willingness to pay.

Ha3: There is a significant relationship between lighting design effectiveness and willingness to pay.

- Pearson $r = -0.015$
- Spearman $\rho = -0.023$
- $p = 0.737$

Since $p > 0.05$, H03 is accepted.

There is no statistically significant relationship between lighting design effectiveness and willingness to pay.

4.3.4. Hypothesis 4

H04: There is no significant relationship between store ambience and emotional engagement and willingness to pay.

Ha4: There is a significant relationship between store ambience and emotional engagement and willingness to pay.

- Pearson $r = 0.167$
- Spearman $\rho = 0.174$
- $p = 0.042$

Since $p < 0.05$, H04 is rejected.

There is a statistically significant positive relationship between store ambience and willingness to pay. However, the effect size is small.

4.4. Correlation Analysis and Robustness Check

To ensure robustness of findings, both parametric (Pearson correlation) and non-parametric (Spearman rank correlation) analyses were conducted. The Spearman correlation results are presented below:

- Store Layout → Willingness to Pay: $\rho = 0.041$, $p = 0.537$
- Product Display → Willingness to Pay: $\rho = 0.067$, $p = 0.289$
- Lighting Design → Willingness to Pay: $\rho = -0.023$, $p = 0.737$
- Store Ambience → Willingness to Pay: $\rho = 0.095$, $p = 0.042$

The direction and magnitude of relationships obtained through Spearman correlation were consistent with the Pearson correlation results. The similarity between parametric and non-parametric findings strengthens the robustness of conclusions. If relationships were non-linear in nature, substantial divergence between Pearson and Spearman coefficients would have been observed. The close agreement between the two methods suggests that linear relationships, or the absence of meaningful relationships, characterize the associations between visual merchandising variables and willingness to pay.

The results confirm that store layout, product display, and lighting design do not demonstrate statistically significant relationships with willingness to pay. Store ambience, however, shows a statistically significant positive association, although the strength of the relationship remains small.

4.5. Reliability Analysis

The internal consistency of measurement scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha. The results are presented below:

- Store Layout (4 items): $\alpha = 0.78$
- Product Display (4 items): $\alpha = 0.81$
- Lighting Design (3 items): $\alpha = 0.75$
- Store Ambience (4 items): $\alpha = 0.83$
- Willingness to Pay (3 items): $\alpha = 0.82$

All constructs exceeded the recommended reliability threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency. The results confirm that the items used to measure each construct are sufficiently correlated and reliably capture the intended variables.

5. Discussion and Interpretation

5.1. Synthesis of Findings

This study examined the relationship between visual merchandising elements and consumers' willingness to pay premium prices in fashion retail settings. The results indicate that store layout effectiveness, product display quality, and lighting design do not have statistically significant relationships with willingness to pay. These findings contrast with traditional retail and environmental psychology theories that suggest visual stimuli influence perceived value and pricing acceptance.

Among the four visual merchandising variables examined, only store ambience and emotional engagement demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship with willingness to pay. However, the magnitude of this relationship was small, indicating limited practical significance. This suggests that while consumers may respond positively to emotionally engaging store environments, such responses do not strongly translate into acceptance of higher prices.

5.2. Implications for Environmental Psychology

Environmental psychology proposes that physical environments influence human behavior by shaping emotional responses. While this framework remains valid in explaining emotional engagement and satisfaction, the present findings indicate limitations in its application to economic decision making. Positive emotional responses generated by retail atmospherics may increase enjoyment and store preference, but they do not necessarily override rational price evaluation in contemporary retail markets.

The influence of environmental factors appears to be stronger in contexts characterized by low price sensitivity, novelty, or information asymmetry. In contrast, the current study was conducted in a price-transparent, digitally informed fashion retail environment, where consumers often establish price expectations before entering physical stores.

5.3. Digital Disruption and Retail Transformation

The findings reflect broader structural changes in retail driven by digital technology. In earlier retail environments, store presentation and staff interactions were primary sources of product information, enabling retailers to use visual merchandising as a quality signal. However, contemporary consumers access detailed product information, peer reviews, and price comparisons through digital channels prior to purchase.

In such contexts, willingness to pay is increasingly shaped by external reference prices and competitive comparisons rather than in store visual cues. Visual merchandising may enhance experience and satisfaction, but it does not independently generate pricing power in highly competitive and transparent markets.

5.4. Role of Income as a Pricing Determinant

An important finding of the study is that income demonstrated a statistically significant relationship with willingness to pay. Although the effect size was small, it suggests that demographic factors may play a more substantial role in pricing acceptance than experiential retail elements.

Higher income consumers may exhibit greater willingness to pay due to reduced budget constraints and lower sensitivity to price differences. This finding reinforces the argument that pricing acceptance is influenced more strongly by consumer characteristics than by store presentation alone.

5.5. Statistical Versus Practical Significance

The distinction between statistical significance and practical significance is important in interpreting the results. While store ambience showed statistical significance, the effect size was small, indicating limited real-world impact. For retail managers, implementing costly visual merchandising changes based solely on small correlations may not yield meaningful increases in willingness to pay.

The overall pattern of results suggests that visual merchandising contributes more to customer experience and emotional engagement than to direct pricing power.

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the relationship between visual merchandising elements and consumers' willingness to pay premium prices in fashion retail stores. Using a quantitative survey of 385 respondents, the research analyzed the impact of store layout effectiveness, product display quality, lighting design, and store ambience on pricing acceptance in a contemporary retail environment.

The findings reveal that store layout, product displays, and lighting design do not have a statistically significant influence on consumers' willingness to pay. These results indicate that traditional visual merchandising elements, which were historically believed to justify premium pricing, no longer exert strong pricing influence in modern fashion retail settings. The widespread availability of digital information and price comparison tools has reduced retailers' ability to rely on visual presentation as a primary pricing signal.

Store ambience and emotional engagement emerged as the only visual merchandising factor with a statistically significant relationship with willingness to pay. However, the effect size was small, suggesting limited practical impact. This implies that while emotionally engaging store environments enhance shopping experience and satisfaction, they do not substantially alter consumers' price acceptance behavior.

The study also highlights the role of demographic factors, particularly income, in determining willingness to pay. The findings suggest that consumer characteristics play a more decisive role in pricing acceptance than experiential retail elements in price-transparent markets.

Overall, the research concludes that visual merchandising should be viewed primarily as a tool for enhancing customer experience and satisfaction rather than as a mechanism for generating pricing power. Retailers should therefore align visual merchandising investments with experiential and loyalty objectives instead of relying on them to justify premium pricing.

Limitations

Despite providing valuable insights into the relationship between visual merchandising and consumers' willingness to pay, the present study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged.

- First, the study employed a cross-sectional research design, which restricts the ability to establish causal relationships between visual merchandising elements and willingness to pay. The findings reflect associations at a single point in time and do not capture changes in consumer perceptions or behavior over time.
- Second, the study used convenience sampling, which limits the generalizability of the results. The sample primarily consisted of urban, educated, and digitally aware consumers who are likely to be more price conscious and informed. Consequently, the findings may not be fully representative of rural consumers, older age groups, or less digitally engaged populations who may respond differently to visual merchandising.
 - Third, the research focused on fashion retail stores across multiple formats, including department stores, specialty retailers, off price retailers, and direct to consumer stores. The relative representation of these formats may not accurately reflect actual market distribution, and the effects of visual merchandising may differ across specific retail segments, particularly luxury fashion retailers that were not extensively represented in the sample.
 - Finally, the study relied on self-reported survey data, which may be subject to response bias. Although surveys were administered immediately after shopping to enhance accuracy, respondents' perceptions and stated willingness to pay may not always translate into actual purchasing behavior.

These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted with caution and highlight opportunities for future research to build upon the results of this study.

Future Research Directions

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research.

- First, future studies may adopt a longitudinal research design to examine whether changes in visual merchandising over time influence consumers' willingness to pay. A longitudinal approach would provide stronger evidence regarding causal relationships and capture shifts in consumer perceptions in evolving retail environments.

- Second, researchers may consider using experimental designs to manipulate visual merchandising elements in controlled settings. Field experiments in matched retail stores could provide clearer insights into the causal impact of store layout, displays, lighting, and ambience on pricing acceptance.
- Third, future research may focus specifically on luxury fashion retail contexts, where pricing structures, brand heritage, and exclusivity differ substantially from mass market fashion retail. Visual merchandising may have a stronger influence on willingness to pay in high end retail environments.
- Fourth, segment specific analyses could be conducted to examine whether visual merchandising effects vary across income groups, levels of price sensitivity, shopping motivations, brand loyalty, or digital sophistication. Certain consumer segments may respond more strongly to environmental cues than the broader population.
- Fifth, future studies may examine alternative outcome variables beyond willingness to pay. While this study focused on pricing acceptance, visual merchandising may influence other important retail outcomes such as store visit frequency, dwell time, purchase quantity, brand perception, customer loyalty, and lifetime value.
- Finally, research may explore the role of visual merchandising within an omnichannel retail strategy, where the physical store represents one component of a broader multi-channel customer journey.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research. The study was conducted independently, and no financial or organizational influence affected the research design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of the findings.

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