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Research on the Mechanism of Offline Retail Visual Marketing Influence on Consumer Purchase Decisions

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Abstract. With the the rapid growth of online shopping, offline physical stores face declining customer traffic and intensified competition. Compared with online consumption, which is largely based on information presented through digital interfaces, offline stores use visual elements such as display windows, lighting, product displays, and digital displays to influence consumers' perceptions of the store environment, product value, and brand image, affecting purchase decisions. Based on SOR (Stimulus-Body-Response) theory and referencing foreign research on retail and consumer behavior from 2023 to 2026, this paper analyzes the pathways of visual marketing's influence on consumer decision-making from three perspectives: visual perception, emotional experience, and consumer behavior. It further explores the moderating roles of individual consumer characteristics, shopping contexts, and product attributes in shaping the effects of visual marketing. The study finds that a coordinated and orderly visual environment can boost consumers' perceived value of stores and products, enhance positive emotions, extend dwell time, and promote purchase intention formation. Issues such as visual information overload and chaotic spatial layout increase consumers' psychological burden, hence reducing shopping experience and purchase tendencies. Based on the research results, this paper proposes optimization strategies for visual marketing practices, focusing on visual information hierarchy, spatial layout, product display, and scene matching.

Keywords: Offline retail, visual marketing, SOR theory, consumer purchasing decisions, consumer behavior

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of online shopping and digital consumption channels, offline physical stores face issues of customer flow diversion and increased competitive pressure. As an important advantage of physical retail over online channels, the store visual environment influences consumers' evaluations of store image, product value, and brand positioning via elements like display windows, lighting, product displays, and digital display devices, thereby affecting purchase decisions [1, 2]. In recent years, research in foreign retail and consumer behavior has gradually shifted from examining individual visual elements to exploring the mechanisms of integrated visual environments, with increasing attention to how visual stimuli affect consumer behavior through cognitive evaluation and emotional experience [3, 4]. However, existing research still mostly

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focuses on specific visual factors or single consumption scenarios, while lacking a systematic understanding of how different visual elements jointly affect consumers and how consumer characteristics, shopping contexts, and product attributes moderate visual marketing effectiveness. Based on this, this paper examines the mechanism through which offline retail visual marketing influences consumer purchase decisions. Employing a literature review approach and drawing on SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) theory, this paper examines foreign retail and consumer behavior studies (2023-2026), exploring how visual stimuli affect perception, emotion, and purchasing behavior, and how consumer characteristics, shopping contexts, and product attributes moderate visual marketing effects. This paper aims to reveal the mechanisms underlying the impact of offline visual marketing on consumer decisions, provide references for brick-and-mortar retailers to optimize visual strategies and improve consumer experiences, and reflect on the risks of irrational consumption caused by excessive visual stimulation and the rational use of digital visual technologies in future retail.

2. The relationship between visual stimuli and consumer behavior

2.1. Visual design and consumer perception

Store visual design influences consumers' perceptions of the store environment, product quality, and brand positioning through elements such as display windows, lighting, colors, product displays, and electronic display devices. Product layout, display focus, and spatial layers in window displays affect consumers' initial perceptions of product value. Highlighting core products and maintaining orderly display can enhance the sense of quality, while designs with excessive product stacking and scattered visual focal points tend to create a cluttered impression and reduce consumer evaluations of the store image. Lighting and color influence consumers' perceptions by changing product presentation effects; appropriate lighting and color schemes can highlight product features, while inconsistent color combinations or excessive lighting weaken the overall visual effect [2].

Product display and digital display devices further affect consumers' processing of product information. Low-density displays help highlight product value, while high-density displays convey richness but must align with the store's positioning; otherwise, consumers may misjudge product tiers. For example, some overseas beauty and apparel retail stores boost consumers' recognition efficiency of core products and brand positioning by reducing shelf density, enhancing key product lighting, and unifying digital display styles [2, 4]. Electronic display devices can enhance the attractiveness of product information, but if the display content does not align with the store's overall style, it can easily cause visual conflicts and affect consumers' overall perception of the brand and products.

2.2. Visual stimuli and emotional responses

Visual information in stores not only affects consumers' perceptions of products and spaces, but also influences their emotional states through their perception of the environment. Emotional experience is an important psychological factor linking the visual environment to consumer behavior [3]. Spatial layout, lighting intensity, and display order affect consumers' psychological comfort. For example, spacious passageways, soft lighting, and neat product arrangement can reduce environmental pressure and create a sense of relaxation, while excessive lighting, crowded shelves, and excessive promotions increase visual load and reduce consumers' willingness to stay. Based on the 2024 European Retail Environment Study, well-organized spaces and comfortable lighting

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conditions can evoke positive emotions and improve consumers' shopping experience evaluations [2].

Different consumption scenarios have varying demands for visual atmosphere. Experiential stores enhance environmental appeal through themed displays, distinctive decorations, and creative layouts, stimulating consumers' interest and enjoyment. In contrast, functional retail spaces need to maintain visual simplicity, using clear layouts to reduce information overload and maintain a stable shopping environment. Thus, store visual design needs to adjust stimulation intensity according to consumption scenarios, so that the visual environment creates emotional experiences that meet consumer needs.

2.3. Visual stimulation and purchasing behavior

The impact of the visual environment on consumers ultimately manifests as changes in in-store dwell time, product browsing, purchase choices, and impulse buying. Although some stores can attract consumer attention via display windows, lighting, or promotional displays, the connection between visual displays and the shopping process is limited, failing to effectively promote product browsing depth and product interaction frequency. For example, if the main product placement is not prominent or the product display does not match the consumer circulation path, it reduces opportunities for consumers to interact with products and diminishes the actual impact of visual appeal on sales outcomes. A 2025 survey of U.S. clothing retail stores shows that stores with clear visual focal points and well-designed circulation have higher browsing depth and product contact frequency than regular stores, indicating that visual appeal must be integrated with the consumer journey [4, 5].

Effective visual planning can extend consumers' dwell time and increase product exposure and purchase opportunities. This includes window displays, flow design, and display order, which affect consumers' willingness to enter and browse. Stores with clear spatial layouts and prominent product displays are more likely to guide consumers via the purchase process. Meanwhile, themed display windows, key illuminated exhibits, and clear price information can enhance on-site stimulation and increase the likelihood of impulse purchases [6]. Besides, the visual environment affects consumers' judgments of product value and price. Stores with a simple and orderly quality feel tend to increase consumers' price acceptance, while environments with excessive promotional information and crowded displays are more likely to reinforce perceptions of low prices. Therefore, stores should integrate visual displays with product flow, key product layouts, and sales strategies to improve conversion efficiency from attention to purchase

3. The mechanism by which vision influences consumer decisions

This paper builds an analytical framework based on SOR (Stimulus-Organism-Response) theory to explain how visual marketing affects consumer purchase decisions. Specifically, visual elements like windows, lighting, and displays serve as external stimuli (S), while consumers' cognitive evaluations and emotional experiences represent psychological processes (O), leading to behavioral responses such as entering, browsing, and purchasing (R). Thus, visual marketing affects purchase decisions by shaping consumers' psychological states [1].

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3.1. Cognitive processing and visual evaluation

As external stimuli (S), visual elements in stores influence consumers' cognitive systems by shaping their information acquisition and processing processes [1, 5]. After encountering visual stimuli such as display windows, lighting, product displays, and information labels, consumers engage in cognitive processes including attention allocation, information screening, and value evaluation. However, excessive visual information, including unclear product hierarchies, redundant promotional content, and complex signage systems, increases consumers' cognitive load. As a result, consumers need to invest more effort in filtering relevant information, which raises search costs and reduces the efficiency of identifying core products and brand value.

In contrast, a well-structured visual environment improves information processing efficiency. High-contrast colors, focused lighting, and prominent display positions can enhance visual attention and help consumers quickly access key product information. Besides, reasonable shelf organization, concise price labels, and consistent information presentation reduce search difficulty and decision-making burden [5]. By integrating multiple visual cues, consumers form overall evaluations of store quality, product value, and price level, which further influence purchase decisions. Therefore, visual stimuli affect consumer perceptions and evaluations by shaping the information processing process.

3.2. Emotion-driven and decision-making preferences

Beyond their cognitive effects, store visual stimuli (S) evoke emotional responses. These emotional states link the visual environment to consumer responses (O) [2, 3]. Specifically, consumers form emotional judgments about the store based on spatial atmosphere, color combinations, lighting effects, and display methods. Some stores overly rely on highly saturated colors and dynamic displays to attract attention, but when visual style and product positioning are inconsistent, consumers may experience a gap between brand image and actual experience, reducing recognition of product value.

Positive emotions can reduce consumers' perception of purchase risks, increase acceptance of added value of products, and make them more willing to try new products or accept higher prices. Meanwhile, thematic visual designs and scenario-based displays can enhance consumers' experiences and increase their tendency to make unplanned purchases, while spacious layouts and orderly product displays can relieve psychological stress and encourage more thorough information comparison. In contrast, crowded and cluttered visual environments increase psychological burden, further making consumers more likely to avoid risks and pay less attention to non-essential products. Moreover, cognitive evaluation and emotional experience interact with each other: positive store perceptions can evoke pleasant emotions and enhance perceived value, whereas negative evaluations of the environment reinforce perceived defects and further reduce purchase intention [3, 4].

3.3. Behavior conversion and purchase decisions

Under the combined effects of cognitive evaluation and emotional experience, consumers transform their internal psychological state into external behavioral responses (R) [3, 4]. Positive cognition and emotions enhance consumers' approach behaviors, encouraging store visits, longer stays, and product engagement. In contrast, negative visual experiences reinforce avoidance tendencies, thus reducing product browsing and information acquisition. During continuous product exposure, consumers combine their needs, perceived value, and purchase risks to form purchase intentions,

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while the visual environment further influences final decisions by affecting product display effectiveness, information acquisition efficiency, and consumer experience [4].

From a behavioral perspective, visual marketing mainly affects two types of consumption behavior: planned purchases and impulse buying. For planned purchases, visual design reduces search costs and improves decision efficiency through clear product classification, reasonable layouts, and explicit information labels. In contrast, impulse buying is more strongly influenced by visual stimulation and store atmosphere; themed displays, featured products, and experiential layouts can boost immediate appeal and encourage purchases beyond original plans. Thus, the offline visual environment does not directly determine consumption outcomes but shapes purchase decisions via the process of "visual stimulus (S)—cognitive and emotional processing (O)—behavioral response (R)."

4. Moderating factors in visual marketing influence mechanisms

4.1. Consumer cognition and individual characteristics

The effectiveness of visual marketing varies across consumers due to individual differences. In particular, consumers differ in their attention to and responses toward visual stimuli in stores, which are mainly influenced by product involvement, prior experience, and personal preferences [7, 8]. When product engagement is high, consumers usually actively pay attention to the store environment, product display, and brand details, with visual factors having a more pronounced impact on their purchase decisions; while when purchasing low-value, high-frequency consumer goods, consumers focus more on shopping efficiency and have relatively lower sensitivity to the visual environment. Related research shows that consumers pay more attention to store atmosphere when buying high-attention items such as mobile phones and clothing, while less attention to visual arrangement when buying snacks and other fast-moving consumer goods [7].

Additionally, consumer experience and aesthetic preferences also influence how consumers interpret visual information. For example, young consumers are generally more attracted to novel visual elements such as creative window displays and digital displays, while consumers with more experience pay greater attention to spatial order, information clarity, and brand credibility. Similarly, consumers who frequently engage with fashion and art content have stronger abilities to recognize colors, displays, and design details, making visual marketing more influential on their consumption decisions. Thus, companies need to adjust visual strategies based on target consumer characteristics rather than applying a single approach across different groups.

4.2. Shopping scenarios and consumption motivations

The effectiveness of visual marketing varies with consumers' shopping goals and store environments. In functional shopping scenarios, consumers usually seek to fulfill their needs efficiently and pay greater attention to product search and information accuracy. In such cases, clear shelf categories, explicit price labels, and simple spatial layouts can reduce search costs, whereas excessive decoration or complex displays may increase information distractions and reduce shopping efficiency. By contrast, leisure shopping places greater emphasis on experiential value, with consumers more willing to explore products. Themed displays, featured displays, and ambient designs can increase pause intentions and encourage attention toward unplanned products [2, 4].

Moreover, store traffic density affects how the visual environment affects consumer psychology and behavior. Under high customer flow conditions, crowded aisles and dense displays increase

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spatial pressure, reducing consumers' willingness to stay and browse. Meanwhile, reasonable route planning and sufficient empty space can alleviate crowding and support information acquisition and product comparison. Therefore, companies should adjust visual strategies according to shopping scenarios, aligning display methods with consumer needs and contextual characteristics.

4.3. Product features and visual presentation

Product attributes are key factors influencing visual marketing effectiveness, as different products require different display strategies. Hedonic products (such as cosmetics, apparel, trendy toys, and cultural products) rely more on consumers' emotions and aesthetic evaluations. For these products, design-oriented displays enhance product appeal and perceived value, whereas functional products emphasize practicality and purchase efficiency. In such cases, overly complex visual designs may distract consumers from functional information and reduce communication effectiveness [9]. For example, the 2025 Japanese Retail Consumption Study found that themed and experiential displays in skincare and apparel stores enhance consumers' perceptions of product value, whereas consumers in daily necessities retail settings tend to prefer clearly categorized and information-oriented displays [9].

Moreover, product price positioning should align with visual strategies. For example, high-end products often enhance quality perceptions via minimalist designs, low-density displays, and refined presentation, while affordable products rely more on clear pricing information and promotional displays to highlight cost-effectiveness. When visual styles conflict with product positioning, such as excessive promotions for high-end products or costly displays for low-priced products, consumers may perceive inconsistencies in brand positioning and product value, reducing purchase intention [10]. Therefore, companies should develop differentiated visual strategies based on product attributes and market positioning to align visual expression with product value.

5. Conclusion

Based on SOR theory, this paper reviews overseas studies on retail and consumer behavior from 2023 to 2026 through a literature review approach, examining how offline retail visual marketing shapes consumer purchase decisions and the conditions shaping these effects. The findings indicate that the store visual environment does not directly determine consumer behavior but influences purchase intentions and decisions by shaping consumers' cognitive evaluations and emotional responses. In particular, visual information hierarchy, spatial layout, and the alignment between display methods and product positioning influence consumers' perceptions of product value, brand image, and purchase risk. Moreover, the effectiveness of visual marketing varies with consumer characteristics, shopping contexts, and product attributes. Consumers with higher involvement pay greater attention to store environments and product displays, while different shopping purposes and product types require differentiated visual strategies. Thus, companies should develop visual management strategies based on target consumers, shopping contexts, and product positioning to boost consumer experience and purchase conversion efficiency. This study is limited by its reliance on overseas literature and the lack of field data from local retail stores. In addition, differences in visual marketing across retail formats are not further examined. Future research can incorporate surveys, field observations, and experimental methods to verify the effects of visual factors across consumer groups and retail formats, while further exploring the application of digital visual tools in retail management.

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