

RESEARCH ARTICLE

RETAIL ATMOSPHERICS AS DRIVING FACTORS BEHIND THE ATTRACTIVENESS OF PHYSICAL FASHION RETAIL STORES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the retail atmospheric factors contributing to the attractiveness of physical fashion retail stores in Gauteng, South Africa, amidst the shifting retail landscape marked by the "retail apocalypse" and the rise of online shopping. Through qualitative research employing in-depth interviews with 10 participants, this study identifies key factors that influence customers' perceptions of retail atmospherics. Findings reveal that a diverse product selection, customer service, music, and the ability to physically interact with products are critical in drawing customers to physical stores. Conversely, factors such as poor cleanliness, inadequate customer service, limited stock variety, and cluttered store layouts deter customers from frequenting these retail environments. The study highlights the continued relevance of physical fashion retailers in providing an immersive shopping experience, despite the growing dominance of e-commerce. These insights provide valuable guidance for retailers seeking to enhance the in-store experience, foster customer loyalty, and boost profitability in an increasingly competitive retail environment.

KEYWORDS

Retail atmospherics, store attractiveness, physical fashion retail stores, fashion industry

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Gauteng, South Africa has experienced a notable transformation in the appeal of physical fashion retail stores. In 2017, the retail industry faced a significant crisis known as the 'retail apocalypse,' marked by the widespread closure of physical stores and the bankruptcy of many retailers (Shenjere and Middelberg, 2023). Factors such as the digital revolution, changing customer behaviours, and the impact of global events have reshaped the retail landscape (Matlala et al., 2022). The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the further increasing growth of online shopping platforms, compelling retailers to adopt digital solutions and create, execute and revise their retail strategies (Shenjere and Middelberg, 2023). While the importance of physical retail establishments has been recognised for decades, conventional retailers encounter increasing challenges from electronic commerce competitors in a progressively competitive market environment (Wang et al., 2023). This phenomenon has resulted in a self-perpetuating cycle, leading to a diminution in the attractiveness of local commercial districts and a consequent reduction in the number of physical retail establishments (Muschket et al., 2023). This paradoxical trend raises questions about the unique attributes that make physical fashion retail stores attractive to customers (Cant and Bothma, 2023).

Although online shopping continues to expand, brick-and-mortar outlets remain essential for retailers to uphold their brand image and improve customer interactions (Xue et al., 2023). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a shift in customer preferences was already present and therefore accelerated by the pandemic, with a growing demand for personalised shopping experiences and sustainable practices, signalling a transformation in what drives customers towards physical retail spaces (Naviaux and Janne, 2023; Gatawa, 2022). Fashion retail stores have shown resilience through nimble business practices and collaborations amidst the uncertainty caused by COVID-19, indicating the existence of distinct driving factors related to the fashion retail industry (Brydges et

al., 2021). To continue attracting customers, stores must be designed to facilitate an enjoyable and hassle-free in-store experience (Cant and Bothma, 2023).

Whilst some studies indicate that music is less effective in enhancing shopping experiences, other studies suggest that music, along with scent, layout, and sales assistants significantly influences customers' perceptions of store atmospherics (Angula and Zulu, 2021; Bawa et al., 2015; Verma and Prashar, 2017). Furthermore, the interactive effect of colour with other atmospheric elements has been highlighted as a factor influencing customer perceptions (Verma and Prashar, 2017). The strategic use of retail atmospherics has been linked to improved store performance and personalised customer behaviour in emerging markets (Behera et al., 2021). Overall, these studies underscore the necessity for physical fashion retailers to innovate and design their physical retail environment to compete effectively in the face of online shopping threats and changing customer behaviours (Badrinarayanan and Becerra, 2019; Happ et al., 2020).

To provide customers with a positive in-store experience and, in so doing, curate increased store attractiveness, retailers should consider store atmospherics, including design, ambience, the social aspect of the retail environment and trialability of products (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021). A diverse retail environment could provide a unique experience that is challenging to replicate in the digital realm, potentially offering customers a novel and appealing way to shop (Boustani and Zielinski, 2023). This study seeks to uncover if and how retail atmospherics contribute to the attractiveness of physical fashion retail stores. Therefore, this study aims to address the following research question:

RQ. What are the driving factors behind the attractiveness of physical fashion retail stores in Gauteng, South Africa?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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This section offers a review of the literature concerning the theoretical foundation that supports this study, focusing on retail atmospherics as driving factors that contribute to the attractiveness of physical fashion retail stores.

2.1 Retail atmospherics

Retail atmospherics, also referred to as the purchasing environment, comprises a deliberately crafted set of elements designed to evoke emotional responses in customers. These elements aim to increase the likelihood of purchases and encourage repeat visits to retail establishments (Li et al., 2009). According to a study, the physical environment comprises three crucial components: ambient, social, and design factors (Baker, 1986). Environmental factors comprise background conditions like temperature, scent, sound, music, and lighting, whilst social aspects involve the individuals present in the establishment, including both customers and employees (Baker, 1986). Baker subsequently conceptualised design as having two dimensions: functional and aesthetic. The functional dimension includes elements such as layout and signage, while the aesthetic dimension includes elements that induce pleasure for customers such as colour, materials, and style (Baker, 1986). Bitner similarly describes the “servicescapes,” where “the three dimensions include ambient conditions, space/function, and signs, symbols, and artefacts” (Bitner, 1992; Baker et al., 2002). An author addressed design and ambient cues under the general construct of store atmospherics (Kotler, 1973). While in other study, authors laid the groundwork for understanding the impact of ambient, social, and design elements in retail settings, and advance this discussion with the DAST (Design, Ambient, Social, Trialability) model by incorporating ‘trialability’ as a crucial component (Baker, 1986; Bitner, 1992; Roggeveen et al., 2020). This addition speaks to the evolving retail landscape, highlighting the increasing importance of experiential interactions in physical store formats. The DAST model not only enriches the theoretical framework by adding a new dimension but also prompts a re-evaluation of traditional atmospherics considering digital integration in retail (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021).

2.1.1 Design

In the context of the DAST model, design refers to the aesthetic and functional characteristics of the physical retail environment that contribute to the overall shopping experience (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021). The visual components of a physical retail store encompass its interior decor, spatial arrangement, aesthetic features, and any memorable visual elements on display, and collectively form the store's design elements (Angula and Zulu, 2021). Research indicates that design elements may have a more significant impact on customers' perceptions of the retail environment than ambient or social factors, which underscores the crucial need to comprehend retail design principles (Baker et al., 2002). Retailers must prioritise a deeper comprehension of design, as design elements are not only the costliest but also the most challenging aspects for retailers to modify (Baker et al., 1992). Consequently, it is crucial for retailers to grasp how shoppers interpret various elements of retail design (Steen et al., 2024). This understanding enables them to craft engaging store environments whilst minimising the expenses linked to renovations, ultimately boosting in-store efficiency and revenue.

2.1.2 Ambient

The ambient elements in a physical store are the background cues that would trigger a customer's sensory reception namely through sight, sound, smell, and touch (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021). Similarly, Bitner characterises ambient conditions as background features, specifically noting temperature, lighting, noise, music, and scent as key elements (Bitner, 1992). Cleanliness is frequently considered an ambient element; an environment with unpleasant odours may be perceived as unclean (Steen et al., 2024). According to Baker, customers generally have limited cognisance of ambient features unless these are particularly disagreeable or missing entirely (Baker, 1986).

2.1.3 Social

The social aspect emphasises that encounters with fellow customers or store personnel in the retail environment are considered social attributes that create a social atmosphere (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021). The extent to which customers perceive brand representatives as friendly, responsive, and knowledgeable plays a key role in shaping their overall experience (Boustani and Zielinski, 2023). It encompasses the interactions between customers and staff, as well as among customers themselves, which can influence the overall shopping experience (Roggeveen et al., 2020). While the DAST framework emphasises the importance of social interactions for physical retail spaces, the role of technology, particularly

artificial intelligence (AI), is also recognised as a transformative factor in shaping social dynamics, where AI can be used to personalise the shopping experience, thereby influencing social interactions within the retail environment (Rovai et al., 2023). Moreover, in the context of sports equipment stores, the social aspect is highlighted as part of creating an immersive and engaging experience, suggesting that the social dimension is not only about interpersonal interactions but also concerns the shared experiences that can be facilitated by the store environment (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021).

2.1.4 Trialability

Within the DAST framework, trialability is considered an aspect of retail atmospherics that enables customers to test products prior to making a purchase (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021). According to a study, product assortment is considered a separate element of retail environments, and although merchandising is visual, it can be modified more easily compared to the design aspects (Raajpoot et al., 2008). The importance of trialability is also underscored in the context of sports equipment stores, where it is associated with creating a memorable in-store shopping experience (Bonfanti and Yfantidou, 2021). It is therefore crucial to recognise that retail stores possess a distinct assortment of merchandise, which is essential for understanding the nature of trialability (Steen et al., 2024).

3. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was conducted to identify retail atmospheric factors that contribute to the attractiveness of physical fashion retail stores. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study as the focus was to determine why customers find physical fashion retail stores attractive, intending to gain a more profound understanding of customer experience in the context of the physical fashion retail space in Gauteng, South Africa (Leavy, 2020).

The factors that customers found both attractive and unattractive in physical fashion retail stores were identified using exploratory research. An exploratory design is effective when conducting qualitative research that seeks to gain new insight or identify new patterns of behaviour or customer preferences (Gupta and Mukherjee, 2022).

A non-probability, purposive sampling method was used for this study to recruit participants based on the following selection criteria:

- Participants aged 18 years and older for ethical reasons.
- Participants who have purchased an item from a physical fashion retail store in the past six months to provide an exact account of their lived experience.
- Participants who reside in the Gauteng Province.
- Participants who are willing to partake in the study.

Only participants aged 18 years and older were included to address ethical concerns in the study. Participants signed a consent form to partake in the study before being interviewed. In cases where participants' responses were quoted verbatim as supporting evidence, participants were assigned a participant number to ensure anonymity. In addition, the study underwent scientific and ethical review and approval.

Data was gathered from 10 participants by conducting in-depth interviews to gain insight into what participants find attractive and unattractive in physical fashion retail stores. In-depth interviews entail probing participants with flexible open-ended questions to uncover meaningful insight into more complex topics and to uncover factors affecting decision-making and customer preferences (Saunders et al., 2023). To avoid bias during the interview process, the researchers took care not to influence the direction of the participant's response when asking questions. Questions were asked by using an interview guide to structure the conversation. The following questions were asked to address the primary aim of the study:

1. What do you find attractive about shopping at a physical fashion retail store?
2. What factors did you find to be unattractive when shopping at a physical retail store, or perhaps aspects that the store can improve?

Themes and patterns were identified by using thematic analysis to analyse the qualitative dataset. Thematic analysis refers to the systematic process of coding and interpreting data to ultimately develop themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022). This method of data analysis was used to identify retail atmospheric factors that attract customers to physical fashion retail

stores, as well as those factors that they found to be unattractive of such establishments. Thematic analysis is commonly used to address research objectives concerning subjective experiences, opinions, preferences, and attitudes (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Elhajjaj, 2023; Pantano et al., 2021).

To ensure trustworthiness and rigour, the researchers asked additional questions to participants when there was a chance that participants' replies could be misconstrued. In addition, the research procedure was thoroughly detailed, the in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed, and a purposive sample was used to include only those participants who purchased an item from a physical fashion retail store in the past six months. Peer debriefing was implemented by providing the results and findings to experienced qualitative researchers to confirm the study's findings. Potential errors were addressed through reflexive analysis and external review.

4. RESULTS

Thematic analysis was employed to code and categorise the data gathered during the in-depth interviews, resulting in the identification of two themes. The themes with their respective categories are discussed subsequently.

4.1 Theme 1: Participants highlighted the attractive factors of physical fashion retail stores.

Participants explained various factors that they perceive to be attractive when shopping in physical fashion retail stores. Even though most participants stated that they prefer to shop online, they explained that specific aspects make shopping in physical fashion retail stores attractive. The identified theme comprises four categories that are described below:

4.1.1 Variety of products

When visiting a physical fashion retail store, participants are drawn to the wide stock selection, including various colours and sizes. This variety appeals to them and improves their overall shopping experience. The store's displays are also noted for their attractiveness and ability to engage customers, creating a visually appealing environment that increases browsing time. In addition to the diverse product range, participants appreciate the opportunity to stay updated with the latest fashion trends and styles. They enjoy looking at the curated displays and new arrivals, which help them keep up with current fashion. Observing what other customers buy and wear further enriches their understanding of popular trends and preferences.

4.1.2 Assistance

This study shows that most participants view customer service as a critical reason for choosing to shop at physical fashion retail stores. They highlight the importance of personalised and attentive interactions with store staff. Participants appreciated assistance navigating the store, receiving fashion advice, and answering their questions promptly. Positive customer service experiences were linked to greater loyalty and more frequent visits, emphasising the essential role of human interaction in enhancing customer engagement.

4.1.3 Music

Background music was found to be an attractive factor, significantly enhancing the store's ambience and overall appeal. Participants stated that the choice of music played a crucial role in setting their mood and improving the shopping atmosphere. Retailers are urged to select music genres and playlists to match their brand image and target demographic, creating a more immersive and enjoyable experience (Riaz et al., 2021). Additionally, the positive effect of music on participants' perceptions emphasises its potential as a strategic tool for boosting customer engagement and satisfaction in the competitive South African fashion retail industry.

4.1.4 Tangibility

Participants noted the appeal of touching and feeling actual clothing items. This physical interaction with products was a critical factor in their shopping preferences, allowing them to explore textures, fabrics, and quality. Participants expressed that this tactile engagement provided a more immersive and reliable way to assess merchandise compared to online shopping. This finding suggests that retailers should focus on visual aesthetics and enhance the tactile aspects of the shopping experience. This approach can differentiate physical stores from online counterparts, adding value to the overall appeal of physical fashion retail stores.

4.2 Theme 2: Participants highlighted the unattractive factors of physical fashion retail stores

Participants discussed various factors that they find unattractive about shopping at a physical fashion retail store. As such, they would rather opt to use e-commerce, m-commerce or social commerce platforms to shop for specific fashion items (Atilgan and Bayindir, 2023). The identified theme comprises four categories of unattractive factors, as depicted in Figure 1, which are discussed in more detail below.

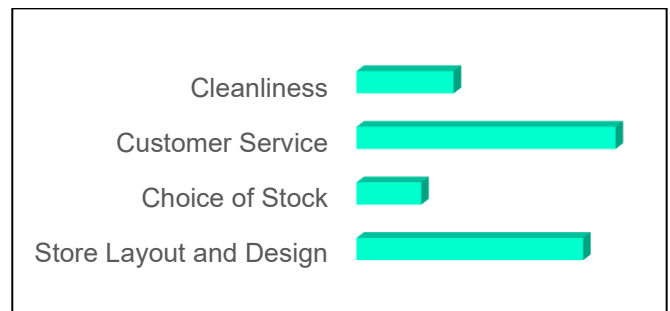


Figure 1: Unattractive factors of physical fashion retail stores

4.2.1 Cleanliness

Some participants expressed a strong dissatisfaction with the cleanliness and hygiene standards of physical fashion retail stores (Tan et al., 2020). Participants specifically mentioned a general dislike for the lack of cleanliness in these stores, specifically in fitting rooms. Participants felt apprehensive to use fitting rooms if these areas were not clean and tidy. This affects the length of browsing time and decreases purchase intention.

4.2.2 Customer service

The study highlights a significant finding regarding participants' dissatisfaction with customer service at physical fashion retail stores (Paul et al., 2016). A substantial majority of participants reported a general aversion to the customer service they encountered, citing issues such as perceived rudeness, lack of attentiveness, and inadequate product knowledge among staff. These shortcomings negatively impacted participants' overall perceptions of the stores and, in some cases, discouraged them from returning.

4.2.3 Choice of stock

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the available options, feeling that the store's inventory did not meet their specific preferences and needs. This finding highlights the importance of product diversity in enhancing the appeal of physical retail stores. The feedback from participants suggests that retailers need to carefully curate and expand their product offerings to include a wider range of styles, sizes, and trends to accommodate diverse customer preferences (Hanaysha, 2018). Even though the variety of stock available in physical fashion retail stores were regarded by some participants as an attractive factor, others felt the availability and variety of stock lacking (Cant and Bothma, 2023). This area of concern suggests that physical fashion retailers should ensure that they are well versed with their target market's precise needs and tastes in fashion on order to ensure that the choice of stock available meets their target customers' needs.

4.2.4 Store layout and design

Participants found the store layout unattractive in physical fashion retail stores. Several participants raised concerns about clutter and untidiness, which contributed to their negative shopping experiences (Mondol et al., 2021). Additionally, some participants were dissatisfied with the crowdedness of the store, viewing it as another detracting factor. Notably, two participants specifically mentioned that the presentation of products was unattractive. These varied insights highlight the complex factors that influence the perceived attractiveness of physical fashion retail stores, offering valuable guidance for retailers aiming to improve their customers' shopping experiences (Rahman, 2021).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The allure of a physical fashion retail store in South Africa includes many components that add to the entire retail experience. An enticing retail environment combines various aspects, such as adequate lighting, music, appealing decorations, layouts, architectural design, aroma, air conditioning, and trendy colour schemes. These aspects work together to

create an attractive ambience for customers, increasing their likelihood of engaging favourably with the store and its offerings. Colour, layout, comfort, scent, music, atmosphere, air quality, and the presence of other customers and shop employees are all critical components in defining the customer's view and attractiveness of the store environment. According to a study, retail environment components are core drivers of customer satisfaction. The findings from this study identified several key factors that attract customers to physical fashion retail stores. In addition, factors that customers find unattractive in physical fashion retail stores were highlighted. These insights can offer valuable guidance for retailers looking to enhance in-store experiences and boost customer satisfaction, ultimately improving customer footfall and profitability.

The diversity of goods, including a wide range of colours and sizes, emerged as a primary attraction for most participants. This supports previous research highlighting the importance of variety in product offerings to meet diverse customer preferences and needs. Additionally, visually appealing displays were found to be significant in attracting customers' attention, suggesting that effective visual merchandising plays a critical role in retail success. Retailers should prioritise maintaining a broad assortment of products and invest in innovative visual merchandising strategies to enhance the shopping experience.

Participants valued the ability to observe current fashion trends within physical stores. This finding is consistent with studies emphasising the importance of trend awareness in the fashion industry. Retailers can capitalise on this by ensuring their merchandise and displays reflect the latest trends, positioning their stores as trendsetting destinations. Although fewer participants mentioned customer service as a primary attraction, those who did, stated its importance. This highlights the need for excellent customer service as a differentiator in the retail market. Comprehensive staff training programs focusing on customer interaction and service excellence can enhance the shopping experience and customer satisfaction.

Sensory features, such as background music and the tactile experience of touching and feeling products, were noted by participants as attractive elements of physical fashion retail stores. These findings align with previous research on the significance of sensory marketing in retail. Creating a multimodal shopping environment by carefully selecting background music and allowing customers to physically interact with products can significantly enhance the shopping experience. Some participants expressed concerns about the layout, cleanliness, and clutter in physical fashion retail stores. These factors are critical to providing a pleasant shopping environment and can impact customer perceptions and satisfaction. Retailers should focus on optimising store layouts to improve navigation and maintain high standards of cleanliness to create an inviting and orderly atmosphere.

The study highlights several actionable areas for retailers to focus on to attract and retain customers in physical fashion retail stores. These include retail atmospherics such as, maintaining a diverse range of products, leveraging visual merchandising, keeping up with fashion trends, providing excellent customer service, incorporating sensory features, and ensuring optimal store layout and cleanliness.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, this study is limited by its focus on physical fashion retail stores within a specific geographic area, Gauteng, South Africa, which may affect the generalisability of the findings to other regions and types of retail establishments. The sample size of 10 participants may also limit the study's ability to capture a wide array of consumer experiences and perspectives. Additionally, the study did not explore the influence of emerging retail technologies, such as e-commerce and artificial intelligence, on customer behaviour. To address these limitations, future research should examine the impact of these technologies on customer preferences and experiences, explore the role of omnichannel strategies, and include a larger, more diverse sample across different retail sectors and geographic regions to improve the generalizability of findings. Longitudinal studies could also provide insights into the evolving consumer behaviours in the post-pandemic retail landscape.

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