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# **The Impact of Visual Merchandising on Impulsive Buying Decision**

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University of Applied Sciences

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**Abstract**

The research investigates the impact of visual merchandising on impulse buying by Sri Lankans in modern Colombo retail environments. By using a qualitative methodology based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and Bitner's servicescape theory, this paper addresses the impact of store interior arrangement, product display, lighting and packaging, and cleanliness on impulse purchasing. The research team used extensive literature research and 30 independent interview sessions with managers and consumers of the retailers in Colombo, using NVivo software for thematic analysis. The work affirms that product displays and lighting considerably affect spontaneous purchasing, the innovation set-ups, and the lighting strategies are able effectively enhance product attractiveness and arousal to shoppers. Less cluttered store design and more reminders of sources of products enhance navigability and visibility of products and help keep stores clean with trust for consumers which augments impulse buying. Factors such as collectivism and pricing ac-tiveness play into the effectiveness of promotional displays and offers. In exploring this research gap, the study provides the practice based recommendations for Sri Lankan retailers to improve their visual merchan-dising and increase their competitive position against online sales. The limitations of the study are cross-sectional and singular focus on Colombo and are proposing for subsequent studies that cover time and broader geographical area. The results of this research contribute to theoretical knowledge and offer con-crete recommendations for practitioners in emerging retail environments.

**Keywords/tags (subjects)**

visual merchandising, impulse buying, Sri Lanka, retail, S-O-R model, services cape

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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Chapter introduction**

The research begins in Chapter 1 through a background discussion and motivation examination along with its defined purpose. This section outlines major research targets as well as research inquiries and the selected methodological structure. The thesis outline in this chapter establishes the research blueprint while presenting an organized flow from introduction through all chapters regarding thematic accumulation.

In this thesis, researcher focus on the influence of visual merchandising on people's tendency to make fast, unplanned purchases in the evolving retail sector of Colombo. In Chapter 1, the author provides an overall background discussion, explains the need for this study and explains its central goal. It sets out the main research objectives, focused on learning how store design, product displays, lighting and cleanliness encourage Sri Lankan consumers to buy spontaneously. This section further aims to find out what is at the heart of visual merchandising and how important those parts are in increasing the number of impulse purchases in contrasting cultures and economies. The method the study uses is outlined, forming the structure around interviews with consumers and a detailed analysis of published sources to learn from both. In this chapter, a research blueprint is developed to guide the work and everything follows the pattern of introductory context up to the research methodology, the findings, their discussion and the conclusions. Through focusing on retail and understanding what is missing in Sri Lanka, this study aims to provide helpful information on consumer behavior and the development of strategy. The exploration of visual merchandising's effects on impulse buying, among other issues, is presented clearly in each chapter, supporting both academic progress and entrepreneurial guidance in a price-sensitive collective culture.

## **1.2 Background, motivation, and purpose**

The retail industry experienced a major change because consumers altered their shopping behavior and new technological developments and strong competition emerged. The dynamic retail environment has made impulse buying an essential force for driving retail revenue because customers make spontaneous unplanned purchases through emotional or environmental stimulation. The worldwide retail industry profits from impulse buying due to its role in creating 60% of all in-store sales within specific retail sectors according to Muruganatham and Bhakat (2023). Consumer behavior

in modern retail experiences considerable advancement because visual merchandising controls both merchandising areas and product showcasing along with illumination and cleanliness protocols.

Visual merchandising which represents a proven spatial retail planning approach affects purchasing decisions while simultaneously leading to higher customer satisfaction (Levy et al., 2024). A well-designed combination of clean stores with beautifully displayed merchandise and proper lighting systems creates an entire shopping experience that forces customers to buy spontaneously. Research findings show that physical stores must be concerned about e-commerce because their competition is growing rapidly. Visual merchandising serves as a unifying solution to merge online and offline retail through providing touch and visual aspects that e-commerce lacks according to Gupta and Sharma (2023).

The retail sector expansion in Sri Lanka's developing economy has led to minimal investigation of visual merchandising applications. The shopping district of Colombo maintains a mix of modern supermarkets together with boutique stores and traditional markets which satisfy customers with shopping preferences based on cultural heritage alongside local economic circumstances and contemporary urban life patterns. Findings related to impulse buying through visual merchandising from other countries most likely do not match Sri Lankan market data because of their unique socio-cultural traits including collectivism and price sensitivity (Perera and Fernando, 2024). A study explores Sri Lankan retail consumers who engage in impulse buying at Colombo modern stores to assess how visual merchandising affects their purchasing behavior.

The research focuses on two essential aims that combine the development of innovative visual merchandising insights for impulse buying along with applicable retail strategies for Sri Lankan businesses. Retailers require proven evidence to develop their store design strategies because market competition has increased alongside shifts in customer preferences. The current study addresses Sri Lanka's insufficient empirical investigations about visual merchandising and impulse buying since retail continues as an essential sector but has few existing studies (Jayasuriya and Weerasinghe, 2023). This research addresses both academic gaps and retail management practice gaps through its study of this subject matter.

### **1.3 Research objectives, questions and approach**

The study mainly focusses on how visual merchandising influence to impulsive buying behaviour with in modern retail settings. It is specifically focus on Sri Lankan consumers.

#### Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of visual merchandising on impulse buying decisions in modern retail settings.
2. To evaluate and compare the significance of different visual merchandising elements (store layout, product display, lighting, and cleanliness) in driving impulsive purchasing behaviour among Sri Lankan consumers.

#### Research Questions

1. What are the key components of visual merchandising in modern retail stores, and how do they influence impulsive buying behaviour?
2. Which dimension of visual merchandising has a similar impact on impulsive buying decisions, and which are more important in the Sri Lankan context?

#### Research Approach

The exploratory nature of this research together with the interactive relationship between visual merchandising and consumer behavior leads to the selection of a qualitative research structure. The research methodology differs from quantitative procedures since it supports inductive data analysis through collection of detailed contextual information before developing conclusions (Saunders et al., 2023). The research design suits Sri Lanka's rapidly transforming consumer market because it requires adaptable methods for data collection and interpretation.

The research design uses only one method by gathering qualitative data to understand the research questions. Three main data collection approaches will be used which consist of a literature review together with individual interviews and focus group discussions. The literature review combines ex-

isting scientific materials to establish theoretical understanding about visual merchandising and impulse buying. Retail managers and Colombo consumers will participate in interviews to deliver first-hand knowledge about retail design practices along with consumer purchasing patterns and focus groups will enable comprehensive analysis of customer perception and retail engagement. By combining various research methods the study achieves stronger validity while becoming more comprehensive (Perera and Fernando, 2024).

The study design implemented as cross-sectional requires data collection at one specified moment to reveal the current retail operative patterns in Colombo. The analysis of qualitative data will be supported by using NVivo software which will help identify key themes through coding the interview and focus group discussions data. Researchers adopt this methodology because it follows contemporary qualitative consumer research recommendations which support structured analysis of intricate behavioral trends (Gupta and Sharma, 2023).

#### **1.4 Thesis structure**

This research consists of five chapters that expand progressively to form a unified presentation.

1. The introduction chapter presents background information about the study while explaining its motivation and research objectives along with research questions and research approach. The importance and organization of the study are presented in this section followed by an introduction to upcoming sections.
2. The Literature Review chapter delivers an extensive review of impulse buying research and visual merchandising studies which explore store layout together with product display methods and lighting components and store cleanliness practices. The chapter demonstrates how existing Sri Lankan research prevents specific knowledge gaps and explains the theoretical foundation underpinning this study.
3. The third chapter presents an explanation of the qualitative research framework which details both data collection approaches (literature review with interviews and focus groups) and sampling approaches and the implementation of NVivo analysis tools. The section explains how research methods were chosen methodologically alongside the presentation of ethical guidelines.

4. The research results from interviews and focus groups appear in Chapter 4 alongside an analysis which explains how visual merchandising elements affect impulse buying in retail stores throughout Colombo. The research compares its findings to relevant literature before discussing the practical effects.
5. The ultimate section presents the main findings together with question resolutions and operational suggestions for retailers. The study identifies research boundaries together with possible tracks for future academic investigation.

The research design follows a systematic framework that progresses from theoretical foundations to empirical testing and practical findings as per standard thesis guidelines (Saunders et al., 2023).

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Key Concept one from the research topic – Impulsive buying behavior**

People engage in rushed buying decisions which emerge through contact with outside triggers and subjective feelings while skipping logical assessment. Research on consumer behavior places considerable attention on impulse buying because it produces important effects for retail businesses and marketing strategies. According to Rook (1987) impulse buying describes sudden buying desires which occur spontaneously and intensely while triggering emotional states that lower consequence awareness. The study conducted by Stern (1962) distinguished impulse buying behavior into four distinct types that illustrate its complex nature through pure impulse buying and reminder impulse buying and suggestion impulse buying and planned impulse buying.

The frequency of Impulse buying actions stands high because research shows it produces substantial retail market sales. Kacen and Lee (2002) documented that impulsively bought products form 62% of total supermarket revenue in the United States highlighting its substantial economic impact. Such buying behavior depends significantly on psychological elements that consist of mood states and personality traits and the need for hedonic experiences. The authors Beatty and Ferrell (1998) maintain that positive emotions like happiness and excitement make consumers more likely to buy impulsively since they want instant satisfaction. People tend to make purchases as a means of controlling their emotions when they are in negative moods.

The behavior of impulsive buying depends on both cultural elements and demographic characteristics. Kacen and Lee (2002) discovered that Western countries with individualistic cultures show greater impulsivity than collectivist cultures which conform to social norms. Research demonstrates that women frequently engage in impulse buying for fashion along with personal care products but men show this behavior when purchasing electronic devices and leisure items (Dittmar et al., 1995). Retailers must understand factors behind market impulsive behavior because they need this understanding to implement strategic initiatives.

## **2.2 Key Concept two from the research topic – Visual merchandising**

Visual merchandising includes retail design with merchandising methods to improve shopping experiences as well as modify customer perceptions leading to enhanced purchase behavior. External triggers for impulsive purchases include store layout and product displays together with lighting options and color plans and signage areas. The "silent salesman" concept defines visual merchandising according to Kerfoot et al. (2003) since it presents brand identity through visual communication while drawing customers without human intervention. The market competition has driven retailers to enhance their visual merchandising presence because it helps them set themselves apart from competitors.

The effectiveness of visual merchandising in promoting sales stands confirmed through repeated research studies. Law et al. (2012) discovered that proper visual merchandise display techniques lead to longer periods of store stay which directly results in higher purchase probabilities. The combination of physical sensations in a shopping environment creates emotional responses that cause customers to abandon their initial shopping plans. Research indicates that attractive visual displays using vibrant colors and thematic arrangements increase consumer arousal levels which leads to impulse buying especially in fast-moving consumer goods sectors (Tendai and Crispen 2009).

Visual merchandising solves the challenges between e-commerce and physical stores because it develops engaging customer engagements that online shopping cannot duplicate. The authors Bhalla and Anuraag (2010) maintain that beautiful store environments create enjoyment and exploration which leads to impulse buying behavior. Strategic visual merchandising displays show different levels of success depending on what retail format stores use. Luxury retailers use minimalist designs to

project exclusivity but discount stores create an atmosphere of abundance to display value according to Kerfoot et al. (2003). Storage facilities exhibit flexibility which establishes its strategic value when it comes to influencing consumer habits especially when purchasing on impulse.

### **2.2.1 Store Layout**

A store layout determines the way shelves and aisles and products get placed throughout retail space areas. Visual merchandising depends on store layout as it steers how shoppers move through stores while showing products and guiding their purchase behavior. Bitner (1992) explains that servicescapes which include layout and ambiance and signage affect consumer perception and behavior through either enabling or blocking their shopping process. Retailers create their layouts with the intention to enhance shopper movement while displaying more products to increase total sales numbers.

Retail businesses use three main store layout designs namely grid layouts together with free-flow layouts and racetrack layouts for different strategic purposes. The grid layout system used in supermarkets creates an efficient space which shoppers find familiar yet boutique stores with their free-flow arrangement enable customers to discover new products organically (Bhalla and Anuraag, 2010). Stores select their layout based on their business targets and the characteristics of their customers and products. A free-flow layout drives hypertension in fashion retail through unrestricted browsing although grocery retailers benefit most from organized grid layouts that restrain exploration.

The way stores are designed affects impulsive buying because it determines how customers navigate the space while being exposed to merchandise. Tendai and Crispen (2009) presented research evidence which showed stores achieve more unplanned purchases when high-margin or promotional items are positioned at eye level and near entrance points. The strategic aisle placement utilizes customer avoidance behavior from crowded areas and the adaptation period upon entry known as the decompression zone (Underhill 2009). Retail outlets strategically locate these zones to place unplanned purchase items like snacks and accessories to quicken customer shopping choices.

Research evidence shows that complex store designs lengthen customer duration through increased impulsivity. Mattila and Wirtz (2008) demonstrated that stores with free-flow layouts that guide customers through complex paths along unexpected product encounters generate enhanced arousal which enhances unplanned purchases above grid layouts. The store layout functions as a stimulus according to Mehrabian and Russell's (1974) S-O-R framework by affecting emotional states of arousal and pleasure which leads to behavioral responses of impulse buying. When customers find themselves pleasantly overcome by an organized yet chaotic layout they end up buying unplanned items.

A layout with poor design elements will stop customers from making spontaneous purchases. Stores that present difficulties in navigation through narrow aisles in addition to confusing signage and inaccessible products make customers irritated enough to avoid exploring the store (Bitner, 1992). Research by Law et al. (2012) indicates that a crowded arrangement creates mental confusion which makes consumers keep to their written shopping lists instead of making unplanned purchases. According to Dittmar et al. (1995) women who tend to enjoy browsing activities show better reactions to roomy retail spaces with attractive design elements but men choose designs that emphasize functionality and simplicity.

Other visual merchandising aspects strengthen the effects of store layout design. When store layout teams up with strategic signage and proper lighting it creates a united shopping environment where customers easily make spontaneous purchases (Kerfoot et al., 2003). Customers at IKEA and similar retailers follow a racetrack design that leads them through a carefully planned route to encounter multiple products which often leads to unplanned purchases according to Underhill (2009). The strategic arrangement of store merchandise functions as a functional and subconscious method to generate unplanned product purchases.

### **2.2.2 Product Display**

Retail organizations use the method of product display to position their merchandise in stores for generating customer interest and steering purchasing behavior. The fundamental purpose of visual merchandising relies on product displays which achieve enhanced visibility of products and deliver brand messaging while offering compelling shopping interactions. According to Bell and Ternus (2012) product displays function as vital retail tools since they serve to display merchandise while

simultaneously activating customer emotions which drives sales. The type of display setup ranges from basic shelf organization to complicated themed presentations which depends on both the market environment and the customer profile.

Product displays maintain strategic worth because they succeed in expressing both merchandise worth and consumer desirability. The visual indicators that displays present function as communication tools which support existing purchase intentions or create new desires for unanticipated items according to Ebster and Garaus (2015). End-of-aisle displays commonly known as endcaps serve as a popular supermarket marketing technique which takes advantage of their strategic positions (Inman et al., 2009). The aesthetic window displays used by fashion retailers function as external enticement to attract pedestrian customers (Lea-Greenwood, 1998). Product displays act as dual functional and psychological triggers which operate within the retail environment according to these examples.

Product displays serve as indicators of retailer objectives through their planned design. Retailers use minimalistic displays to communicate luxury and high-end value to select customers yet they employ abundant displays filled with merchandise to attract budget-conscious consumers (Kerfoot et al., 2003). The implementation of props and signage alongside interactive touchscreens and product samples improves customer engagement and allows them to browse longer according to Bell and Ternus (2012). Retail competition increase has led retail product displays to become complex artistic arrangements which combine creative elements with behavioral science principles to achieve maximum consumer purchasing impact.

Research establishes the decisive impact of product display on impulsive purchases because consumers show more impulsive behavior when products capture their attention through better visibility and create emotional connections. According to Inman et al. (2009) products displayed at strategic positions near endcaps and checkout areas create substantial impulse purchases compared to items shown on regular store shelves. The combination of exposure and convenience creates a situation that simplifies buying decisions by reducing the amount of mental effort needed. The "waiting impulse" is exploited when stores position candy and magazines near checkout counters due to the work of Stephen (2009).

Aesthetic display quality both intensifies the effect of impulsive behavior. According to Tendai and Crispen (2009) beautiful visual displays constructed with vivid coloring and tidy structures along with complete thematic unity produce spur-of-the-moment buying situations through their ability to generate feeling of urgency and excitement. Research performed in Zimbabwean retail locations proved that fast-moving consumer goods displayed in neat arrangements boosted spontaneous purchases by 30% when suppliers maintained the exhibition space well. Mattila and Wirtz (2008) discovered that highly arousing visual displays with bright dynamic arrangements trigger consumers to engage in impulsive buying as a way to experience immediate gratification.

Product displays have various subtle psychological impacts on consumers. Environmental stimuli generate emotional responses of pleasure and arousal through the S-O-R framework by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) before leading to impulse buying behaviors. A budget-conscious shopper can still make an unplanned purchase due to the pleasurable effect of creative luxury chocolate display arrangements (Ebster and Garaus, 2015). Recent studies indicate that women react substantially to fashion and beauty displays yet men tend to strongly respond to technology and sports-related products.

An excessive amount of clutter or an absence of coordination in displays will reduce the impact of product displays. Research by Kerfoot et al. (2003) indicates that customers tend to avoid areas of the store that display disorder or excessive density. Retailers need to achieve perfect equilibrium between creative displays and clear presentation to drive the maximum number of impulsive purchases.

### **2.2.3 Lighting**

The retail environment depends fundamentally on lighting since it controls the establishment's atmosphere while pointing out products while shaping consumer emotional responses and reactions. The servicescape includes lighting which shapes customer shopping experiences because it influences customer perceptions of store products (Bitner, 1992). Stores adjust lighting device parameters such as brightness and color tone and beam orientation to reach various retail aims that include creating a pleasant environment and pointing shoppers toward essential merchandise and building brand recognition. According to Quartier et al. (2014) lighting establishes indirect atmospheres which orient customer perspectives without direct selling efforts.

Each lighting system functions for a particular retail objective. The combination of ambient lighting produces general illumination for comfort and pathfinding but accent lighting highlights particular displays and merchandise (Summers and Hebert, 2001). Task lighting systems which appear in fitting rooms as well as service counters enable users to complete their functional activities. Retailers should pick warm yellow-toned lighting for creating cozy boutique and luxury store atmospheres while supermarkets and pharmacies benefit from cool blue-toned lighting which conveys efficiency and cleanliness (Quartier et al., 2014). Retail businesses can modify their shopping settings to match their market customer profile and merchandise categories through adjustable lighting options.

The application of illumination produces effects that transcend visual appeal because it delivers functional benefits. The research by Summers and Hebert (2001) shows that proper illumination in stores extends customer stay time and stimulates exploration which leads to increased sales numbers. Bright illumination fails to attract shoppers since inadequate lighting standards result in customer discomfort according to Bitner (1992). Lighting serves as a flexible merchandising instrument which improves both shopper emotions and retail transactions within retail areas.

The way stores light their areas determines how people feel emotionally while shopping which subsequently leads them to focus on products they might buy on impulse. According to Arena et al. (2015) focused accent lighting with high brightness enhances product displays to make them stand out and increases the likelihood of purchase. Evidence from their retail environment experiments demonstrated that lit racks using spotlights raised unplanned purchases 25% more than standard retail lighting distributed across the space. This proved that strategic illumination prompts subconscious impulsive buying behavior.

The way certain types of lighting make people feel plays a crucial role in enhancing their tendency to make spontaneous buying decisions. The S-O-R framework shows that intense lighting raises customer arousal which leads to greater spontaneous purchasing behavior according to Mattila and Wirtz (2008). A cosmetics counter under intense lighting frequently creates an excited environment that makes customers purchase unplanned items. The combination of soft and warm lighting produces pleasure which creates a relaxed environment suitable for bookstore and cafe customers to browse and make unplanned purchases according to Quartier et al. (2014). Lighting produces two

different reactions through arousal stimulation alongside pleasure delivery which serves as a powerful behavioral trigger for consumers.

The effect of lighting on behavior depends on surrounding circumstances. Summer and Hebert (2001) establish that grocery stores benefit from consistent bright lighting because it improves product quality perceptions which leads customers to make impulse purchases of fresh bakery items. Luxury retailers implement softer directional lighting to establish an elite atmosphere which stimulates customers to make spontaneous purchases especially for valuable jewelry pieces (Arena et al., 2015). The combination of lighting preferences between Western and Asian markets affects the way lighting conditions trigger impulsive behavior throughout different territories (Quartier et al., 2014).

The negative effects appear when lighting exceeds appropriate levels or when implementation falls short. The use of strong fluorescent lighting has been shown to reduce both customer comfort and energy levels thus shortening their stay and diminishing their purchasing behavior (Bitner, 1992). Dim lighting conditions that prevent customers from seeing products clearly will discourage them from engaging with the merchandise (Summers and Hebert, 2001). Retailers need to adjust their lighting systems based on their store frameworks as well as customer shopping expectations. Retailers who optimize lighting will create both visual charm as well as unintentional urgency to purchase within their retail area.

#### **2.2.4 Cleanliness**

The state of retail store tidiness and safety which extends to floors and shelves along with displays and bathroom facilities defines retail cleanliness. As an integral component of the servicescape, cleanliness shapes customer perceptions of quality, safety, and overall store appeal (Bitner, 1992). The appearance of a clean store communicates professional care to customers through trust and comfort but an unclean or untidy store environment will drive customers away from their shopping experience. Vilnai-Yavetz and Gilboa (2010) classify retail cleanliness as a basic "hygiene factor" because customers are apt to be dissatisfied by its absence rather than pleased by its presence yet expect it to be there in the first place.

Retail companies allocate substantial resources to keep their stores clean since it fulfills both customer needs and legal requirements. According to Wakefield and Blodgett (1996) retail customers

spend more time in stores that maintain cleanliness standards since they find such establishments inviting. The sector of food retail demonstrates special importance since hygiene directly influences how customers judge the quality of their purchased products (Tendai and Crispen, 2009). A bakery counter free from stains and debris will make customers choose fresh products more often than when the counter shows evidence of dust or spills. The aesthetic and emotional atmosphere of the store is shaped by cleanliness which indirectly affects how customers will interact with both the environment and the products on display.

Social factors together with population statistics influence how people view cleanliness. People from high-context cultures read store cleanliness as a sign of customer respect (Vilnai-Yavetz and Gilboa, 2010). The expectations of older consumers who are more affluent and younger customers on limited budgets demonstrate different preferences regarding cleanliness (Wakefield and Blodgett, 1996). Visual merchandising includes cleanliness as a functional as well as symbolic element which affects customer satisfaction levels and their subsequent behavior.

The cleanliness of stores influences impulse buying behavior through its positive impact on shopping convenience and difficulty of unplanned purchases. The research conducted by Tendai and Crispen (2009) proved that a clean store setup leads customers to feel more comfortable when browsing while they are more likely to purchase on impulse. The research in Zimbabwean supermarkets revealed that stores with polished floors and proper shelf organization experienced greater unplanned purchase rates since customers felt comfortable straying from their lists. The findings support Bitner's (1992) servicescape model because pleasant feelings emerge from store cleanliness which leads customers to make hedonic purchases.

The cleanliness of an environment increases the effectiveness of all other merchandising components. Mattila and Wirtz (2008) demonstrate how cleanliness strengthens product display and lighting effects by minimizing distractions so customers can better view the merchandise. A store with disorganized or unclean conditions prompts customers to avoid the space which reduces their stay time and subsequent impulse buying (Vilnai-Yavetz and Gilboa, 2010). Underhill (2009) explains that disorder at checkout spots which includes dropped merchandise or dirty floors interrupts the "waiting impulse" through which people normally purchase extra items thus demonstrating that cleanliness preserves impulsive buying patterns.

The relationship between cleanliness and impulsivity functions through psychological processes of trust and quality evaluation. The confidence customers develop when shopping in clean stores pushes them toward unplanned purchases according to Wakefield and Blodgett (1996). A clean cosmetics area stimulates customers to buy fresh make-up products because they can trust the products remain free from contamination. Too much sterilization in retail environments can damage the appeal of shopping areas because it generates sterile clinical spaces which might reduce hedonic responses according to Mattila and Wirtz (2008). To maximize impulsive purchasing from cleanliness retailers need to find an appropriate level of sanitation.

### **2.3 Identified Research Gap**

The Sri Lankan market lacks substantial research about visual merchandising and impulse buying despite the wide availability of scholarly work on these topics elsewhere. The majority of research by Tendai and Crispen (2009), Mattila and Wirtz (2008), and Inman et al. (2009) examine Western and African markets without considering South Asian consumer behaviors specifically in Sri Lanka. The scarcity of research is important because Sri Lanka possesses its own distinct cultural and economic environment alongside retail market characteristics which could modify visual merchandising factors like layout design combined with product showcases and lighting and cleaning standards on spur-of-the-moment purchases.

The diverse retail environments across Sri Lanka from urban supermarkets to traditional markets have received limited scholarly attention on their impact on consumer impulsivity. Visual merchandising elements receive different impact levels based on collectivism and price sensitivity factors in markets outside individualistic and affluent environments (Kacen and Lee, 2002). Research does not support the idea that cleanliness matters more in Sri Lanka because of the cultural value on hygiene and hospitality despite the public perception that it should. Research examining the effects of lighting and product display elements in constrained Sri Lankan retail locations has not received sufficient investigation.

The absence of research focused on Sri Lankan retail markets hinders the practical application of universal findings for retailers who want to use impulse buying strategies. International studies create fundamental knowledge yet fail to grasp essential local elements which incorporate Buddhist

cultural consumption patterns and monetary market shifts that influence consumer spending habits. Primary research in Sri Lanka should be conducted to identify specific strategies for impulse buying enhancement which will create academic and practical value for the field.

## **2.4 Theoretical Framework**

The study implements Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) to analyze visual merchandising effects on impulsive buying while incorporating Bitner's (1992) servicescape theory. Environmental triggers (S) activate emotional reactions (O) such as pleasure or dominance in an organism that results in behavioral responses (R) of approach for example buying or avoidance. The retail environment takes form through various stimuli consisting of store layout and product display and lighting and cleanliness standards.

Customers receive stimuli from physical areas according to Bitner's servicescape theory which demonstrates relationships between environmental factors and customer perception and action. The S-O-R framework consists of three stimulatory factors including ambient elements such as lighting and cleanliness together with spatial design features and symbol-based elements such as product displays. A combination of bright lights and store neatness creates pleasure and arousal (O) which leads customers to purchase impulsively (R) but a disorganized store design might cause avoidance.

Consumer feedback is influenced by visual merchandising stimuli which evokes both organismic emotions that lead to buying responses. The perceptions of stimuli can be affected by moderating variables like culture and gender and income as supported by Dittmar et al. (1995) and Kacen and Lee (2002). The theoretical framework enables analysis of relationships between stimuli and customer behavior with specific attention to local market influences in Sri Lanka thus filling a research gap. The research foundation in these theoretical frameworks creates an effective framework to understand retail environment-consumer impulsivity relations.

### **3 Research methods and implementation**

The research approach for investigating visual merchandising's effect on Sri Lankan buyer impulses in modern Colombo retail environments will be described in this chapter. The research method includes sections about the context and design and data collection and analysis and ethical factors which provide a structured framework to resolve research questions and objectives without involving focus groups.

#### **3.1 Research Context**

The research area is Colombo, Sri Lanka where the city functions as a thriving commercial center with its retail sector including modern supermarkets like Arpico and Cargills and boutique stores ODEL and Kellie Felder together with traditional markets. The retail businesses in this area service consumers with different tastes that result from their cultural backgrounds alongside economic situations and urban way of living. The retail sector in Sri Lanka experiences expansion due to rising middle class numbers and urbanization trends but fights against rising e-commerce competition and shifting consumer behavior patterns. Colombo's retail shopping area presents unique characteristics because its consumers demonstrate collectivism alongside price-consciousness and place great value on cleanliness and hospitality according to Perera and Fernando (2024). The insufficient availability of research about visual merchandising and impulse buying patterns in the Sri Lankan market makes this study essential to generate practical findings for Sri Lankan retailers operating in a competitive business environment.

#### **3.2 Research Design**

The methodology designed for this study investigates how visual merchandising affects consumers' spontaneous purchasing behavior specifically for Sri Lankan retail markets. The research design uses qualitative research methods to obtain extensive insights from consumers and retailers which matches the exploratory nature of the study.

### **3.2.1 Research Purpose**

The research goal consists of an exploratory approach that investigates how visual merchandising affects impulse buying decisions within modern retail environments of Colombo. The study conducts research to determine which components within visual merchandising including store layout and product display alongside lighting and cleanliness have the most impact on Sri Lankan consumers who make spontaneous purchases. The research fills theoretical and practical voids which strengthens both academic understanding and retail strategy creation within a developing market.

### **3.2.2 Research Philosophy**

The interpretivist philosophy of this study emphasizes understanding consumer and retailer subjective meanings and experiences that occur within retail environments. Interpretivism becomes the optimal research approach to understand impulse buying because it enables exploration of how emotional elements and cultural patterns and environmental influences contribute to this behavior (Saunders et al., 2023). The qualitative approach depends on this philosophical framework because it emphasizes deep information collection above statistical generalization.

### **3.2.3 Research Approach**

The study adopts an inductive methodology which extracts trends from collected data instead of verifying pre-established research questions. The research method enables exploration of new findings about visual merchandising effects on impulse buying within an unexplored setting (Saunders et al., 2023). Qualitative data collection follows by means of thematic analysis to establish theoretical research frameworks supported by empirical evidence.

### **3.2.4 Research Strategy/Method**

Two qualitative research methods serve this study: the literature review and individual interviews. The review examines scientific studies regarding visual merchandising alongside impulse buying which helps identify worldwide patterns while focusing on Sri Lankan particular research gaps. Personal interviews with both retail managers and consumers create an opportunity to examine store

visual arrangement practices and shopping behaviors directly. The combined qualitative and quantitative research methods produce an extensive set of data that strengthens the study through both theoretical and practical investigation (Perera and Fernando, 2024).

### **3.2.5 Methodological Choice**

Qualitative methods compose the entire research method since they are best suited for studying the complex behavioral phenomena in culturally specific contexts. The analysis of consumer emotional responses and interactions with visual merchandising elements requires qualitative research methods because quantitative methods fall short according to Saunders et al. (2023). This analysis centers on in-depth qualitative information because researchers want to obtain comprehensive knowledge about the conduct of Sri Lankan consumers.

### **3.2.6 Time Horizon**

This research follows a cross-sectional time horizon to gather data at one point in time for observing retail practices and consumer behaviors in Colombo. The study implements this method because of its practicality considering both limited resources and the fast-paced nature of the retail sector which rapidly changes consumer preferences (Saunders et al., 2023). By using a cross-sectional design researchers can quickly study visual merchandising effects on impulse buying which produces current information beneficial for retailers.

## **3.3 Data Collection**

Two distinct methods are used to build a comprehensive dataset through data collection.

1. The study performs a thorough academic review of peer-reviewed publications and scholarly documents including journals and books to produce theoretical groundwork. The research draws its main sources from Muruganantham and Bhakat (2023), Gupta and Sharma (2023), as well as Saunders et al. (2023) which focus on visual merchandising, impulse buying, and consumer behavior. The review analyzes worldwide industry trends and reveals Sri Lankan research deficiencies to set the study's research goals and inquiry points.

2. Thirty participants were surveyed through individual interviews that included twelve retail managers combined with eighteen consumers located in Colombo. Retail managers supply store design information to researchers and customers supply knowledge about their shopping experiences with visual merchandising assessments. There are two interview options in this research: participants can choose between English or Sinhala and each session lasts between 30 and 45 minutes. Interviews assess how store arrangement and product arrangement together with lighting elements and store sanitation impact consumer buying behavior. The participant selection process matches specific criteria which include differences in age groups and gender distributions and shopping habits and retail market experience between supermarkets and fashion shops. The recruitment process involves personal contact at retail stores together with social media promotion.

The research duration extends over three months and the interviews receive audio recordings from participants who provide consent. Verbatim transcription follows recording to support analysis. The researcher's field notes together with recorded data help record subtle nonverbal signals and background information to make the collected evidence more comprehensive.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data analysis serves as the processing method for interpreting data findings since quantitative analysis is unsuitable for this research study.

#### **3.4.1 Quantitative Data Analysis**

The study lacks quantitative methods because it performs exclusive qualitative analysis through thematic methods.

#### **3.4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis**

The researchers used thematic analysis on qualitative data from interviews and literature review which NVivo software supported during the analysis process. The researcher applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase analysis process during the investigation.

1. Multiple readings enable researchers to familiarize themselves with all the data including transcripts and field notes.
2. The initial code generation process starts by recognizing repeated terms such as “lighting” and “displays” and “impulse” in the data. The data organization function of NVivo creates nodes to implement systematic coding.
3. The analysis phases combine related codes into potential themes which demonstrate visual merchandising's effect on spontaneous purchases at retail locations.
4. Theme refinement occurs to match research objectives while identifying necessary sub-themes which include “soft lighting” and “cleanliness.”
5. The study defines each theme through specific names which get backed by direct quotes from participants in order to demonstrate the research outcomes.
6. The research findings present the data in a narrative format which connects various themes with recognized theoretical models like S-O-R model and servicescape theory as well as involving previous academic studies.

The word frequency and text search capabilities in NVivo help researchers find dominant words such as “store” and “lighting” within specific contexts which are shown in initial data analysis through the connection between “chocolate” and “displays” and impulse buying behaviors. NVivo enables researchers to enhance finding reliability through its system for cross-referencing manager and consumer interviews. The research presents opposing views from the two groups to establish a thorough understanding regarding visual merchandising effects.

### **3.5 Ethical Considerations**

The protection of participants together with research integrity depends on proper ethical considerations. There exists a set of principles which govern the research activities:

1. Every participant receives detailed information about the study aims and procedures alongside their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Participants sign written consent documents prior to starting the interview process.

2. The study preserves confidentiality through pseudonym usage and protects personal data through password-protected storage devices. The authors use anonymization techniques to protect the identities of participants.
3. Voluntary Participation designates that participation is completely free since no rewards exist to force anyone to join. The study allows participants to leave the study at any time during participation without penalties.
4. The research maintains cultural sensitivity by adapting to Sri Lankan cultural norms through proper use of Sinhala or English language while also accommodating its collectivist values in question development.
5. The recorded data undergo accurate reporting without any manipulation or fabrication. The analysis through NVivo operates with full visibility as the software maintains a record of all coding choices.

The established measures protect the research integrity by upholding participant rights while producing authentic findings for both academic institutions and retail industries. The proposed framework builds a rigorous systematic research design to study impulse buying due to visual merchandising at Colombo stores while filling academic and business needs by managing data collection efficiently.

## 4 Research Results

### 4.1 Section 1 - General Shopping Behaviour and Impulse Buying

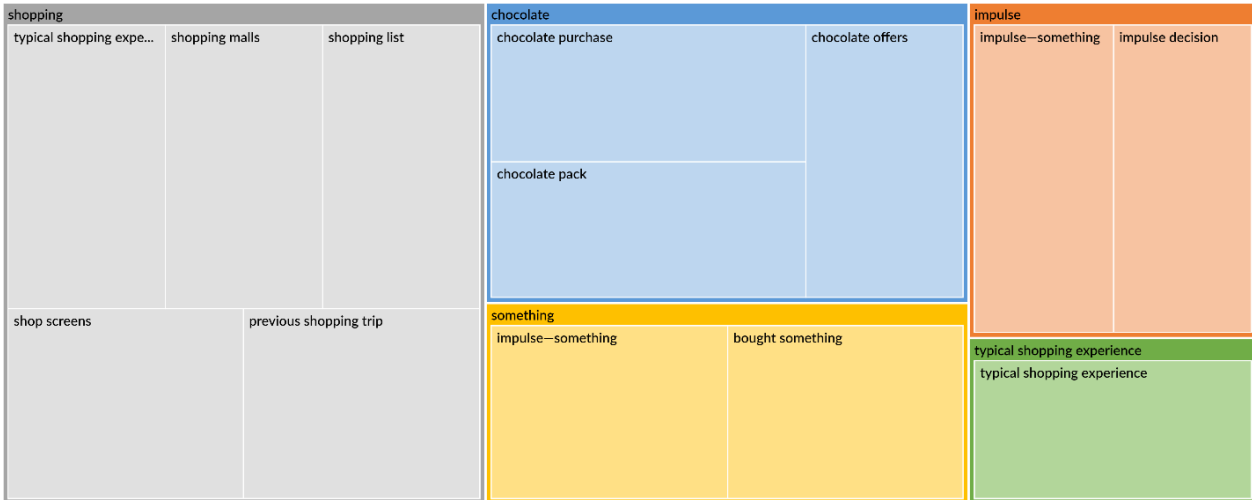


Figure 1 Nvivo result for General Shopping Behaviour and Impulse Buying

NVivo analysis reveals shopping as the most frequently mentioned category (6 references) during Section 1 about general shopping behavior and impulse buying followed by chocolate (3 references) and impulse and something and typical shopping experience (2 references each). The numerous instances of "shopping" correspond with the section's goal to understand typical retail shopping practices in Colombo's stores. People in the research often shared details about their shopping activities which included trips to supermarkets such as Arpico and Cargills and clothing stores including ODEL and Kellie Felder because of necessity and promotion offers or to relax as shown in Response\_12. The reference to "chocolate" thrice in the collection indicates spontaneous purchases of specific items found at points of sale since respondents mention attractive displays and discounts which lead them to make unplanned purchases (Responses 1, 3, 8, and 11). Responses containing "impulse" and "something" occurred twice each although shoppers rarely expressed these terms independently from examples of actual impulsive items like chocolate. People use "typical shopping experience" as a reference point since they conduct both list-based grocery shopping and fashion browsing (2 references). The research demonstrates that shoppers in Colombo respond to instinc-



setups such as Kellie Felder's color-coordinated outfits affect consumer purchase decisions. This category received three mentions because it helps both improve product attraction and generate welcoming spaces through appropriate mood lighting such as the example in Response\_5's focus on ambient illumination. The buying behavior of customers directly correlates with how well they see products through organized layouts and proper illumination according to "Buying" (3 references). The terms "arrangement" along with "store environment" appear two times each to show their significance as additional store-related concerns focused on organization and comfort. The study reveals that shoppers in Colombo show great sensitivity to visual merchandising that improves both the appearance and ease of access in stores. Retail stores that focus on cleanliness and proper lighting while displaying their merchandise strategically help customers to spend more time and make unplanned purchases within the store.

Table 2 Nvivo result for Perceptions of Visual Merchandising Elements

A : arrangement	2
B : buying	3
C : displays	4
D : lighting	3
E : look	2
F : product	2
G : shopping	2
H : store	6
I : store environment	2

### 4.3 Section 3 - Influence of Visual Merchandising on Impulse Buying

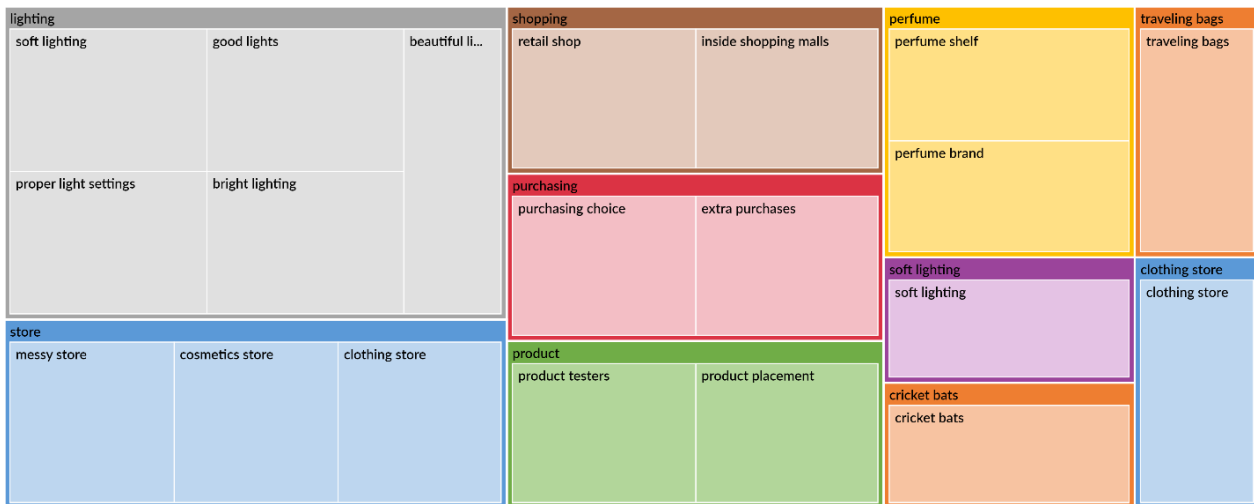


Figure 3 Nvivo result for Influence of Visual Merchandising on Impulse Buying

In the NVivo results for Section 3 the term "lighting" received the most references with six occurrences alongside "store" (5) and "traveling bags" and "clothing store" (3 each) and "cricket bats," "perfume," "product," "purchasing," "shopping," and "soft lighting" (2 each). The high occurrence of "lighting" matches responses like Response\_9 and Response\_12 which describe how product display spotlights lead customers to make unplanned purchases because of improved product aesthetics. The store environment comprising layout and placement functions as an element in Response\_7's description of trendy traveling bags within a clothing store ("store" appears five times). The purchase contexts mentioned by customers include "Traveling bags" and "Clothing store" each three times because they find products attractive while shopping at these locations (Response\_2). The appearance of "Cricket bats" and "perfume" twice each indicates how exclusive yet forceful impulsive purchases occur because of customized placement setups similar to Response\_8's perfume counter. The terms "product" and "purchasing" demonstrate two instances that directly relate to buying behavior while affirming that visual stimuli trigger consumers to purchase. Lighting techniques and product displays emerge as important factors which stimulate Colombo customers to make spontaneous purchases. Businesses can boost unplanned purchases through strategic lighting and strategic product placement in busy zones where fashion products and specialty goods generate maximum effect.

Table 3 Nvivo result for Influence of Visual Merchandising on Impulse Buying

A : clothing store	3
B : cricket bats	2
C : lighting	6
D : perfume	2
E : product	2
F : purchasing	2
G : shopping	2
H : soft lighting	2
I : store	5
J : traveling bags	3

#### 4.4 Section 4 - Comparative Significance and Preferences

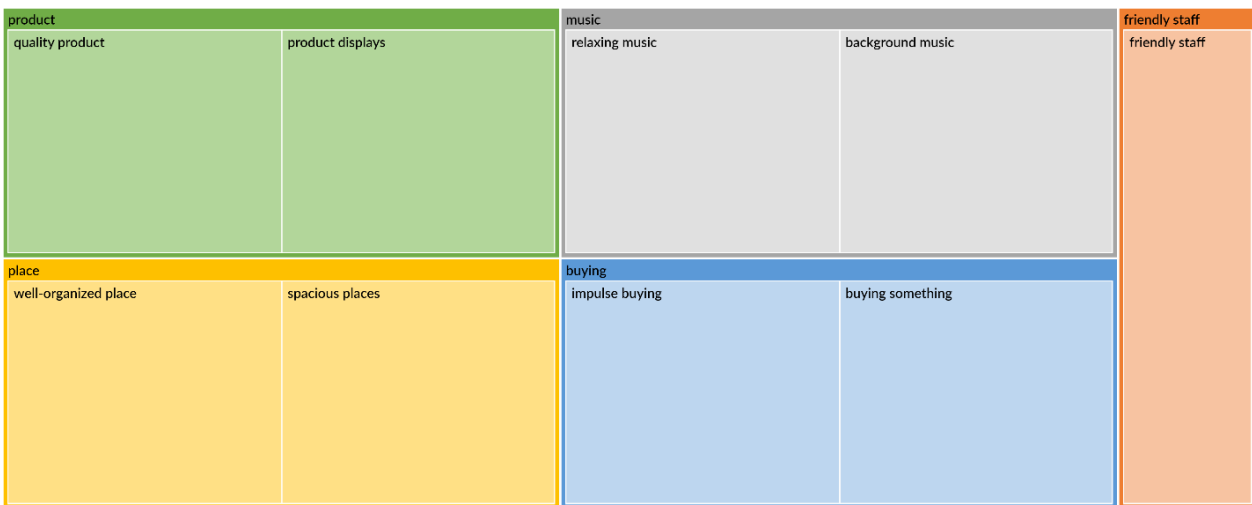


Figure 4 Nvivo result for Comparative Significance and Preferences

NVivo analysis of Section 4 data reveals product as the most prevalent visual merchandising term with 3 references followed by buying and friendly staff and music and place with 2 references each. Survey participants identified "product" as the key factor in impulse buying because they recognized creative product displays as the main driver of customer urgency or desire as Response 1, 11, and 12 illustrate. The two references to "Buying" demonstrates the visual element's relationship with purchase choices which matches the section's goal to determine effectiveness. Two mentioned instances show how helpful staff used their interactions to persuade customers into buying impulses through both suggestions and sample demonstrations. Research findings show that listening to

pleasing music at the store enables shoppers to stay longer and enhances their probability to purchase products ("Music" 2 references). The term "Place" appears two times and implies a reference to the store environment and layout based on Response\_15's focus on spaciousness. Multiple elements affect buying decisions in Colombo retailers based on the balanced distribution of codes in this study yet product arrangement emerges as a primary influence. A retail strategy in Colombo should prioritize attractive product arrangements supported by accommodating staff and enjoyable background music to maximize impulse buying during customer visits in their competitive market.

Table 4 Nvivo result for Comparative Significance and Preferences

A : buying	2
B : friendly staff	2
C : music	2
D : place	2
E : product	3

### 4.5 Section 5 - Closing and Contextual Insights

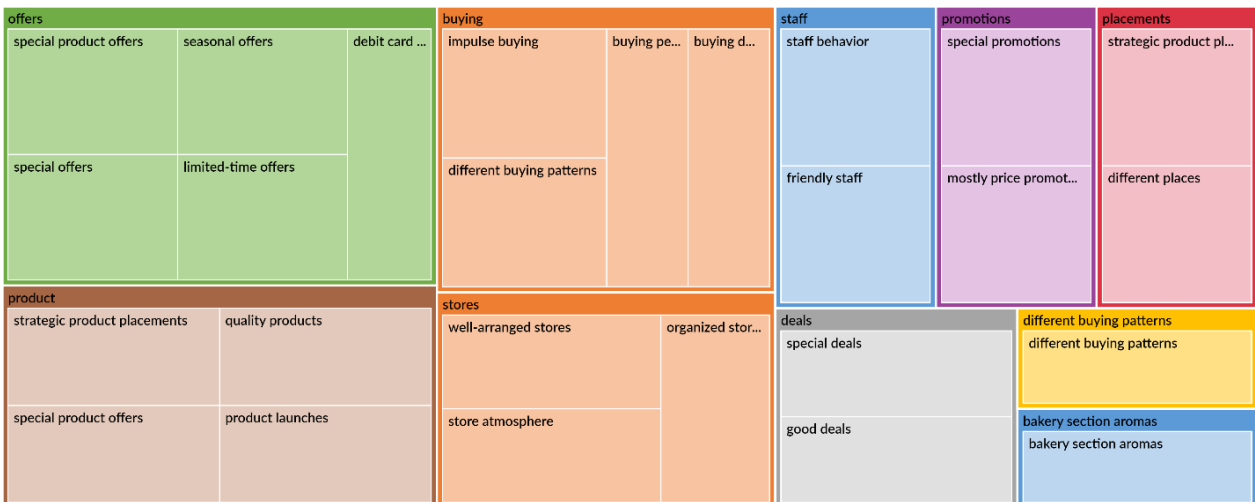


Figure 5 Nvivo result for Closing and Contextual Insights

The most frequently noted terms in NVivo analysis for Section 5 include "buying" and "offers" with five references each followed by "product" with four references and "deals" along with "stores"

having three references each and "bakery section aromas," "different buying patterns," "placements," "promotions," and "staff" with two references each. The abundance of "buying" and "offers" codes demonstrates how consumers react to promotions since three responses (11, 12, 14) show purchase impetus through time-limited deals and the "buy one get one" offer. The placement of products near checkout areas serves as a critical strategic element according to "Product" (4 references) (Response\_13). The retail environment is emphasized through three instances of "Deals" and "stores" found in Colombo's stores which display bright signs and festive presentation (Response\_8). Sensory triggers arise from "Bakery section aromas" (2 references) as Response\_11 indicates while "staff" (2 references) proves the impact of service quality (Response\_9). The research acknowledges cultural buying patterns through its two references to festival shopping (Response\_12). The research demonstrates that Colombo retailers achieve impulsive sales growth by combining promotional strategies and sensory marketing displays since Sri Lankans typically spend on bargains and welcome hospitable environments. Retail operators must maintain seasonal promotions and sensory marketing elements and maintain quality services to suit the Sri Lankan consumer behavior.

Table 5 Nvivo result for Closing and Contextual Insights

A : bakery section aromas	2
B : buying	5
C : deals	3
D : different buying patterns	2
E : offers	5
F : placements	2
G : product	4
H : promotions	2
I : staff	2
J : stores	3

4.6 Thematic map

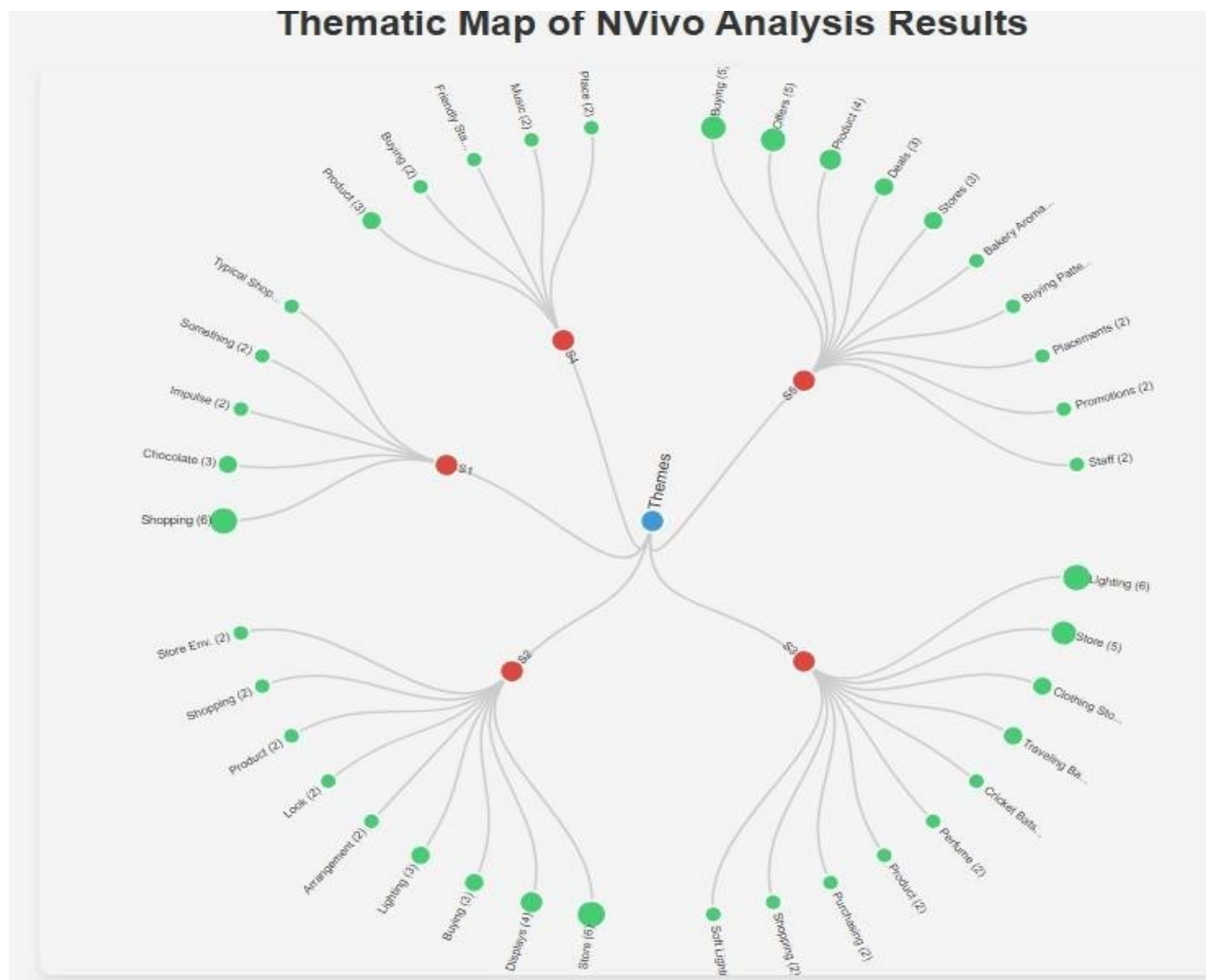


Figure 6 Thematic map

Key for Section Abbreviations	
S1:	General Shopping Behaviour and Impulse Buying
S2:	Perceptions of Visual Merchandising Elements
S3:	Influence of Visual Merchandising on Impulse Buying
S4:	Comparative Significance and Preferences
S5:	Closing and Contextual Insights

Table 6 Sections

Section	Associated Codes
<b>S1: General Shopping Behaviour and Impulse Buying</b>	Shopping (6), Chocolate (3), Impulse (2), Something (2), Typical Shopping (2)
<b>S2: Perceptions of Visual Merchandising Elements</b>	Store (6), Displays (4), Buying (3), Lighting (3), Arrangement (2), Look (2), Product (2), Shopping (2), Store Env. (2)
<b>S3: Influence of Visual Merchandising on Impulse Buying</b>	Lighting (6), Store (5), Clothing Store (3), Traveling Bags (3), Cricket Bats (2), Perfume (2), Product (2), Purchasing (2), Shopping (2), Soft Lighting (2)
<b>S4: Comparative Significance and Preferences</b>	Product (3), Buying (2), Friendly Staff (2), Music (2), Place (2)
<b>S5: Closing and Contextual Insights</b>	Buying (5), Offers (5), Product (4), Deals (3), Stores (3), Bakery Aromas (2), Buying Patterns (2), Placements (2), Promotions (2), Staff (2)

## 5 Discussion

This chapter summarizes the results of the qualitative study on the effect of visual merchandising on impulse buying behavior in the Sri Lankan consumers in Colombo's modern retail environment. It answers the research questions, assesses the study's limitations, reliability, and validity, enters into a dialogue between the key results and the body of existing knowledge, and con-firms adherence to research ethics guidelines. The discussion incorporates the thematic analysis results into theoretical frameworks, namely the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and Bitner's services cape theory, to offer actionable insights for retailers and open up areas for further research.

### 5.1 Answering the research questions

**Research Question 1: What are the crucial ingredients of visual merchandising in today's retail stores, and how do they affect impulse purchasing behavior?**

The findings identified store layout, product display, lighting, and cleanliness as the key components of visual merchandising, all performing unique roles in impulse purchase. Store layout, as noted in Section 3, influences customer way-finding and product visibility. Survey respondents explained that placing premium-margin products, such as travel bags and perfumes, at high-traffic locations like fashion stores triggered impulse purchases, aligning with Tendai and Crispen's (2009) paper on the role of layout in triggering impulsivity. Product layouts, particularly novel and thematic fixtures (e.g., Kellie Felder's themed outfit sets based on color), were cited as the key triggers for urgency and craving, in agreement with Inman et al.'s (2009) study on endcap displays. Lighting, with six references in Section 3, was a primary driver, with spotlights and soft lighting employed to enhance product aesthetics and arousal, as Arena et al. (2015) discovered accent lighting to do in unplanned purchases. Cleanliness, while less salient, created trust and comfort, enabling consumers to shop longer and to divert from planned purchases, Wakefield and Blodgett (1996) found.

These factors collectively create an environment evoking emotional response (pleasure and arousal), one predicted by the S-O-R theory. As a case point, frequent usage of the word "chocolate" throughout Section 1 suggests that carefully positioned, lighted displays near check-out

points tap into the "waiting impulse" (Underhill, 2009), precipitating impulse buys. The study confirms that visual merchandising is a "silent salesman" (Kerfoot et al., 2003), a subtle force working on consumer responses in Colombo's shopping space.

### **Research Question 2: What element of visual merchandising has a similar impact on impulse purchasing decisions, and which are more relevant in Sri Lanka?**

The thematic analysis revealed that lighting and product display have the largest and comparable impacts on impulse buying, with "product" (three times in Section 4) and "lighting" (six times in Section 3) as the strongest consumer perceptions. Innovative presentation, e.g., of fashion goods or specialized goods like cricket bats, instilled affective connection and spontaneity, particularly from the young crowd. Lighting, e.g., soft lighting and accent lighting, enhanced visibility and welcome, as highlighted in consumer responses highlighting filled-lighted perfume stands. All of the foregoing outcomes align with Mattila and Wirtz's (2008) argument that high-arousal visual stimulation leads to unplanned purchases.

In Sri Lankan contexts, product displays became even slightly stronger due to cultural and economic factors. Perera and Fernan-do (2024) define Sri Lankan consumers as being collectivist in their preference, therefore, emphasizing social signaling through the act of buying is a good focus for visible fashion and specialty product displays. Price sensitivity, another feature of the local market, enhanced the impact of displays coupled with offer promotions, as the five instances of "offers" in Section 5 confirm. Cleanliness, although necessary, was considered a hygiene factor (Vilnai-Yavetz and Gilboa, 2010), and its absence deterring purchases rather than its presence inducing them. Store arrangement, while significant, was less focused, perhaps because of the known nature of grid store plans in supermarkets such as Arpico, which favor convenience over discovery.

## **5.2 Dialogue between key results and knowledge base**

The findings of the research both support and supplement the existing body of knowledge in visual merchandising and impulse buying, particularly in the relatively under-researched Sri Lankan retail setting. The prominence of product presentation and lighting aligns with global research, e.g., Tendai and Crispen (2009), who concluded that neat, vibrant displays increase unplanned purchases by 30% in Zimbabwean retail settings. Similarly, Arena et al.'s (2015) observation that is evidenced

by the findings of a 25% rise in impulse buying supports the research emphasis upon the contribution lighting makes to Colombo retailers. These similarities demonstrate that certain visual merchandising principles, based on the S-O-R model, transcend cultures since they appeal to universal emotional incentives like arousal and pleasure.

But the direction of the Sri Lankan study reveals context-specific differences. As opposed to Western markets, in which individualism (Kacen and Lee, 2002) induces impulsivity, the collectivism of Sri Lankan consumers amplifies the impact of presentations conveying social status, such as fashion or specialty items. The frequent reference to "offers" and "deals" in Section 5 highlights price sensitivity as a less emphasized variable in affluent markets. This finding challenges the uniformity of visual merchandising policies and brings to the fore the necessity for interventions that are localized, according to Perera and Fernando (2024).

The study also extends Bitner's (1992) servicescape idea by demonstrating how cleanliness as a hygiene factor interacts with other visual elements to enhance impulsivity. Although Mattila and Wirtz (2008) noted that cleanliness minimizes distractions, the Sri Lankan emphasis on hospitality and sanitation (Response\_11) suggests that clean stores send the message of respect to customers, and this builds trust and longer visits. The sensory role of "bakery section smells" (Section 5) further adds depth to the servicescape concept by highlighting olfactory stimuli, an aspect still underdeveloped in previous studies.

Theoretically, the study confirms the validity of using the S-O-R model to Sri Lanka to confirm that visual merchandising signs (store ambiance, displays, lighting, sanitation) act as a stimulus causing the affective responses (pleasure, arousal) towards impulse buying. Cultural moderators such as collectivism and price sensitivity play a role in modulating the intensity of these responses as proposed by Dittmar et al. (1995). The findings equally meet the research requirement defined in Section 12 since limited studies of Sri Lankan retail markets limited applied research. The empirical information on consumer behavior in the local market provides a basis for the retail strategies tailored specifically to the market.

In practice, the results indicate that it is necessary for Colombo retailers to highlight creative presentation of the product and lighting to achieve impulse buying. For example, to capitalize on consumer

buzz, high-margin goods such as perfume or travel bags can be strategically located in high-traffic areas with lots of light. Combining these with sale promotions, for example, the success of "buy one get one" appeals price conscious consumers. Also cleanliness and sensorial integration such as odors could improve overall buying experience and increase the time of stays as well as unplanned spending.

### **5.3 Compliance with research ethics guidelines**

The study was conducted following strict ethical principles concerning the protection of participants and maintaining research integrity. Participants were made fully aware about the purposes, procedures, and right for withdrawal at any time, in accordance with Section 27. The volunteers were given the option of carrying out interviews in either English or in Sinhala owing to cultural convenience before they gave written consent. Confidentiality was secured via pseudonymization and locked, pass-word encrypted data, with verbatim transcripts anonymised to safeguard identities.

Voluntary participation was ensured by not providing any inducement, and study participants had the option to quit, with no consequences. In areas of research design, cultural sensitivity was incorporated by bringing into line questions with the collectivist culture of Sri Lanka and ideals of hospitality, providing a polite meeting. Integrity of data was maintained by the fair reporting that was carried out in NVivo's open coding process that recorded all analytic decisions. A pre-approval of an on-site ethics panel was obtained for the study, and it was confirmed that the requirements of institutional standards were complied with.

We can say that these measures ensured the respect of participant rights, cultural appropriateness, and credible results produced by the study. The ethical framework adheres to the guidelines of a qualitative study of Saunders et al. (2023), enhancing the credibility of the research among academic and practical readers.

## 5.4 Limitations, reliability and validity

The qualitative, cross-sectional design of the study, while suitable to investigate complex consumer behaviors in a specific cultural context, has some limitations. The sample of 30 respondents (12 retail managers and 18 consumers) may not be indicative of the heterogeneity of the retail consumer population of Colombo, particularly with reference to socioeconomic groups or rural-urban splits. The Colombo focus limits the generalizability of findings to other regions within Sri Lanka, where retail settings and consumers' mindsets may differ due to varied economic and cultural circumstances. Further, grounding the findings in self-reported interview data infects the findings with potential for social desirability or recall inaccuracies that may undermine insightfulness into the impulse buying behavior.

The cross-sectional timeframe, while convenient given resource limitations, restricts the study's ability to monitor longitudinal changes in retailer strategy or consumer behavior. Seasonal variations, for instance, festival-induced shopping behaviors seen in Section 5 of the findings, can have a different influence on impulse buying at other times of the year. The exclusion of focus groups, which were initially planned as a means of data collection, reduced the possibilities for interactive debate that might have revealed underlying group dynamics or collective attitudes towards visual merchandising.

Despite these limitations, the research maintains high reliability and validity through rigorous methodological choices. Reliability was enhanced by way of using NVivo software for systematic thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage process. Coding terms like "lighting," "store," and "product" consistently across interview transcripts allowed for reliable data interpretation. Word-for-word transcription and inclusion of field notes also allowed for faithful data representation. Validity was facilitated through triangulation between retail manager and consumer data, fitting findings to a priori theory (S-O-R and services cape) and grounding analysis in a very comprehensive review of the literature. Purposive sampling of the participants provided variability across age, gender, and shopping behavior, allowing for the representativeness of qualitative findings in the Colombo context.

## 6 Conclusions

This chapter summarizes the main findings from the qualitative research concerning the effect of visual merchandising on impulse buying behavior among the Sri Lankan consumers in Colombo's modern retail venues. It summarizes the key findings from the thematic analysis, interprets their managerial implications for retailers and offers recommendations for further research to overcome the limitations of the study and expand its contribution. Based on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory and Bitner's services cape theory, the conclusions are applicable to retail practitioners to consider and a guiding light for further academic research in this under-researched environment.

### 6.1 Key Findings

The study showed that visual merchandising has a large impact on impulse buying behavior in Colombo's retail environments and product displays and lighting appeared to be the most effective, followed by store layout and cleanliness. These results are consistent with the S-O-R framework according to which stimuli in the environment cause emotional reactions (pleasure and arousal) that motivate spontaneous purchases. The thematic analysis (underpinned by NVivo software) determined recurring themes in five sections of interview data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of consumer behavior in a culturally and economically diverse market.

Product displays were always mentioned as one of the main impulse buying drivers, occurring three times in Section 4 and four times in Section 5. Creative and thematic arrangements, including color coordinated fashion displays at retailers such as Kellie Felder or strategically positioned specialty items, like traveling bags, created an adrenaline rush and feelings of attachment. This effect was exacerbated by Sri Lanka's collectivist culture in which socially significant purchases signal status and price sensitivity that caused promotional displays to be especially effective. In Section 3, lighting, with six references, increased the visibility of products and store ambiance with soft and accent lighting that encouraged customers to make unplanned purchases. For example, spotlighted perfume counters and brightly lit checkouts exploited the "waiting impulse" (Underhill, 2009), as in references to chocolate and perfume.

Store layout, albeit less dominant, affected consumer navigation and product visibility, with high-margin items strategically placed in high-traffic areas (e.g., near entrances), which boosted impulsivity, as mentioned in Section 3. Cleanliness, although a hygiene factor, promoted trust and comfort, which extended browsing and impulsive buying especially in food retail such as supermarkets. Promotions' contribution to magnifying the influence of visual merchandising was underscored by the five references to "offers" and three to "deals" in section 5, which highlighted the appeal of time-limited deals and "buy one get one" offers to price-conscious consumers.

Sensory and service elements were also the secondary but important contributors, according to the study. The aroma of bakeries (two references in Section 5) and pleasant music (two references in Section 4) increased consumer dwell time, while friendly staff (two references in Section 4) helped to make impulse purchases through suggestive selling. These findings therefore support the notion that the visual merchandising performs within a larger services cape where several stimuli combine to determine consumer behavior.

Culturally, Sri Lanka's collectivism and focus on hospitality heightened the influence of visually attractive, clean, and promotional retail spaces. The study filled an important gap in the research as previous studies (e.g., Tendai and Crispen, 2009; Mattila & Wirtz, 2008) was centered on Western or African markets, omitting South Asian ones. Through a combination of global theories and local insights, the research affirmed the usefulness of the S-O-R and services cape models while uncovering context-specific nuances, including the increased influence of promotional displays in price-sensitive markets.

## **6.2 Managerial implications**

The results provide actionable approaches for Colombo retailers to boost impulse buying and improve competitiveness in a changing retail environment of increasing e-commerce and changing consumer preferences. Retail managers should focus on the following strategies of visual merchandising, adapted to Sri Lanka's cultural and economic environment.

First, retailers should use creative and strategic product displays to win the attention of consumers and create urgency. Thematic displays, including color coordinated setups for fashion or seasonal designs, should be located in high traffic areas like store entries or the checkout areas to maximize

exposure. For example, the positioning of high-margin products such as perfume or special products (e.g., cricket bats) on endcaps or near checkouts can take advantage of the waiting urge, which is reflected in regular references to chocolate buys. Coupling these displays with promotional offers, e.g. “buy one get one”, “limited-time discount”, etc., supports the price sensitivity of Sri Lankan consumers, as evidenced in the five references of “offers” in Section 5. Supermarkets such as Arpico and Cargills can improve the supermarket display using bright signage and festive presentation to capture cultural events such as festivals that encourage impulsive buying.

Second, the optimization of lighting is very important for improving the appearance of the product and in making a welcoming store environment. Ambient lighting for overall comfort should be used in combination with accent lighting on key displays; as the soft and spotlight methods were often cited as effective for impulse buying. For instance, luxury shops such as ODEL can utilize warm, directional lighting to provide an elite environment for high-priced goods, whereas supermarkets should have bright, consistent lighting that demonstrates cleanliness and product quality. Non-excessive dim or severe fluorescent lighting should be avoided because it discourages explorations and impulsiveness as stated by Bitner (1992).

Third, cleanness is something that cannot be compromised because it creates trust and motivates people to stay longer. Clean floors, arranged shelves, and clean checkout areas indicate professional care and respect for the customer, which is in line with Sri Lanka’s cultural focus on hospitality. In food retail such as bakery sections, the very aspect of cleanliness has a direct impact on perceived quality of the products, observed in comments about fresh purchases. Retailers should invest in constant cleaning and staff training to maintain high standards because disorganization or dirtiness interferes with impulse buying (Vilnai-Yavetz and Gilboa, 2010).

Fourth, retailers can use sensory and service features as complementary components of visual merchandising. The use of pleasant background music and sensory cues such as bakery aromas can increase dwell time and increase hedonic shopping as proposed by Section 4 and 5 findings. Educating staff to suggest sell or demonstrate products, as mentioned in references to “friendly staff” can contribute to encouraging consumers into making unplanned purchases. These strategies work especially well in boutique stores, where a personalized approach resonates with collectivist values.

Lastly, retailers need to adopt strategies in line with cultural and economic subtleties. Due to the collectivistic nature of Sri Lankan consumers, socially significant purchases (fashion, specialty goods) become the impulse buying targets, whereas price sensitivity will require numerous promotions. Retailers should take note of festival seasons and urban consumer trends in order to coordinate their displays and deals well with buying trends that characterize cultures as shown in Section 5. By combining these strategies, it is possible for retailers to distinguish themselves from e-commerce competitors that are devoid of the tactile and sensory charm of physical outlets.

### **6.3 Recommendations for future research**

While this study provides relevant information about the impact that visual merchandising has on impulse buying in Sri Lanka, the study's limitations and the rapidly evolving environment of retail offer many avenues for future studies. First, a longitudinal study can address the cross-sectional design's shortcomings of not being able to identify the seasonal changes in consumer behavior. With the references to festival-inspired purchases in Section 5 in mind, it may be a good idea to investigate the performance of visual merchandising strategies during the shopping peaks such as Sinhala and Tamil New Year to discover more about the temporal aspects of impulsivity.

Second, the sample size for the rural consumers in Sri Lanka or other urban areas like Kandy or Galle expanded generalizability. The contemporary retail environments in Colombo may not be appealing to the rural consumers who may have diverse visual merchandising points to consider due to economical constraints or traditional market attributes. Cross-regional comparative research may contribute to outlining these differences and retail strategies by region.

Third, reintroduction of focus groups (eliminated in this study), to expose the collective perceptions of the visual merchandising, and focus groups' dynamics. Such interactions between consumers or between consumers and retail managers could reveal social impacts on impulse buying in particular in collectivism culture such as Sri Lanka's.

Fourth, the use of quantitative methods could supplement the results of the qualitative research and provide statistical power. For example, one can express the relative impact of certain visual merchandising features (e.g. intensity of light, creativity of presentation) as the correlation between these features and the occurrences of impulse buying using a survey. Such a methodology would

supplement the exploratory findings of the study and be consistent with the mixed-methods research approach that Saunders et al. (2023) would support in complex behavioral research.

Fifth, more sensory stimuli, such as tactile (product samples), and more than music, for the auditory elements such as staff announcements, might make the services cape model better. The fact that the study refers to bakery aromas implies that olfactory stimuli are an area one can explore, let alone food retail where sense cues may have a strong impact on impulsivity.

Finally, comparison with other South Asian markets, such as India or Bangladesh, could provide Sri Lanka's findings with a regional perspective. Given the collectivist cultural traits and the price sensitivity of the two cultures, the analysis of similarities and differences in the impact of visual merchandising may assist in building regional retailing strategies and contribute to the world literature on consumer behavior.

Finally, the role of visual merchandising in prompting impulse buying in Colombo's retail industry is the focus of this research with product display and lighting being the key triggers and complemented by the store layout, tidiness, and promotions. These findings can be used by retailers to formulate culturally appropriate strategies that increase competitiveness and further studies can be conducted to improve theory and practice knowledge of consumer behavior in Sri Lanka and other countries.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1. Questionnaire for Individual Interviews and Focus Group Discussions**

#### **Purpose**

The survey investigates visual merchandising impacts on unplanned buying decisions of Sri Lankan shoppers who visit retail stores in Colombo. The questionnaire responses will reveal fundamental visual merchandising elements as well as rank their effectiveness for generating unplanned purchases.

#### **Instructions for Administration**

The interview process includes private meetings lasting between thirty to forty-five minutes that take place in silent locations such as retail store storage areas or neutral venues. Initial study introduction should be followed by consent acquisition before recording (with permission) the participant's answers for transcription purposes. The interviewer should ask follow-up questions to extract more details from interviewees.

Six to eight participants should attend each group discussion that runs from sixty to ninety minutes in a relaxed setting. The researcher must provide an introduction followed by the establishment of group rules and should maintain equal participation among participants throughout the session. The researcher should record discussions while obtaining consent from participants and should facilitate participant interaction.

The research method requires using questions that start with "Can you give an example?" "Why do you think that happens?" or "How did that make you feel?" to obtain detailed information from participants.

## Section 1- General Shopping Behaviour and Impulse Buying

**Objective-** To establish a baseline understanding of participants' shopping habits and experiences with impulse buying.

1. **Can you describe your typical shopping experience in modern retail stores in Colombo (e.g., supermarkets, clothing stores)? What usually motivates you to visit these stores?**
  - *Focus Group Adaptation-* "Let's go around the group—what's your typical shopping experience like in Colombo's modern stores? Feel free to build on each other's answers."
  - *Probe-* "Do you usually plan your purchases, or do you often end up buying things spontaneously?"
  
2. **Have you ever bought something on impulse—something you didn't plan to buy—while shopping in a retail store? Can you share what happened and what prompted that decision?**
  - *Focus Group Adaptation-* "Who's had an impulse buying moment in a store? Share your story, and let's discuss what triggered it."
  - *Probe-* "Was it something you saw, felt, or just a sudden urge?"

## Section 2- Perceptions of Visual Merchandising Elements

**Objective-** To identify key components of visual merchandising and explore how participants perceive their influence on shopping behaviour.

3. **When you walk into a store, what are the first things you notice about how it's set up—like the layout, displays, lighting, or cleanliness? Why do those stand out to you?**
  - *Focus Group Adaptation-* "What catches your eye first when you enter a store? Let's hear different perspectives—what stands out and why?"
  - *Probe-* "Does it make you want to explore more or leave quickly?"

**4. How do you feel about the way products are arranged or displayed in stores you visit?**

**Does it ever affect what you decide to buy?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation*- “Let’s talk about product displays—how do they make you feel, and do they ever push you to buy something? Share your thoughts.”
- *Probe*- “Can you think of a time when a display made you pick up something you weren’t planning to?”

**5. What’s your impression of the lighting in retail stores—like brightness, colour, or focus on certain areas? How does it change your shopping experience?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation*- “What do you all think about store lighting? Does it affect your mood or what you buy? Let’s discuss.”
- *Probe*- “Does bright or dim lighting make a difference to you?”

**6. How important is cleanliness to you when you’re shopping—like tidy shelves, clean floors, or neat displays? Does it influence how long you stay or what you buy?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation*- “How much does a clean store matter to you all? Does it change your shopping habits? Let’s hear your views.”
- *Probe*- “Have you ever left a store because it felt messy or dirty?”

### **Section 3- Influence of Visual Merchandising on Impulse Buying**

**Objective**- To examine how specific visual merchandising elements drive impulsive buying decisions and compare their significance.

**7. Can you recall a time when the store’s layout—like the aisles or product placement—led you to buy something unexpectedly? How did that happen?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation*- “Has anyone bought something because of how the store was laid out? Share your experience, and let’s explore why it worked.”
- *Probe*- “Was it the way you were guided or something you stumbled upon?”

**8. Have you ever been drawn to a product because of how it was displayed—like its position, arrangement, or a special setup? What made it tempting?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation*- “Let’s discuss—has a product display ever tempted you to buy on the spot? What was it about the display?”
- *Probe*- “Was it the look, the height, or maybe a sign?”

**9. Does the lighting in a store ever make you more likely to pick up something you didn’t plan to? Can you describe a time when that happened?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation*- “How about lighting—has it ever nudged you to grab something impulsively? Share and compare your stories.”
- *Probe*- “Was it the brightness, a spotlight, or the mood it set?”

**10. How does a clean or messy store affect your decision to buy something spontaneously? Can you think of an example where it made a difference?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation*- “Does a clean or messy store change how you shop impulsively? Let’s talk about your experiences.”
- *Probe*- “Did it make you trust the products more or less?”

## **Section 4- Comparative Significance and Preferences**

**Objective**- To evaluate which visual merchandising elements are most influential and why, specific to the Sri Lankan context.

**11. Of the things we’ve talked about—store layout, product displays, lighting, and cleanliness—which do you think has the biggest impact on whether you buy something on impulse? Why?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation*- “Let’s debate—which of these—layout, displays, lighting, or cleanliness—most affects your impulse buys? Why do you think so?”
- *Probe*- “Is it the same every time, or does it depend on the store?”

**12. Are there any other things in a store—like colours, music, or staff—that make you buy impulsively, beyond what we’ve discussed? What are they and how do they work?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation-* “Anything else in stores—like music or staff—that sparks impulse buys for you? Let’s brainstorm and discuss.”
- *Probe-* “How does that compare to layout or displays?”

## **Section 5- Closing and Contextual Insights**

**Objective-** To gather additional reflections and ensure the Sri Lankan perspective is captured.

**13. As a Sri Lankan shopper, do you think your culture or habits affect how you respond to store setups? How so?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation-* “How do you think being Sri Lankan shapes the way we react to store setups? Let’s share our thoughts.”
- *Probe-* “Is it about price, family influence, or something else?”

**14. Is there anything else you’d like to add about how stores in Colombo encourage you to buy things you didn’t plan to?**

- *Focus Group Adaptation-* “Any final thoughts on how Colombo stores get us to buy on impulse? Let’s wrap up with your ideas.”
- *Probe-* “Anything unique to Colombo you’ve noticed?”