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RETAIL OVERLOAD: CONFUSION IN THE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

FUTURE OF RETAIL ANNUAL REPORT 2023

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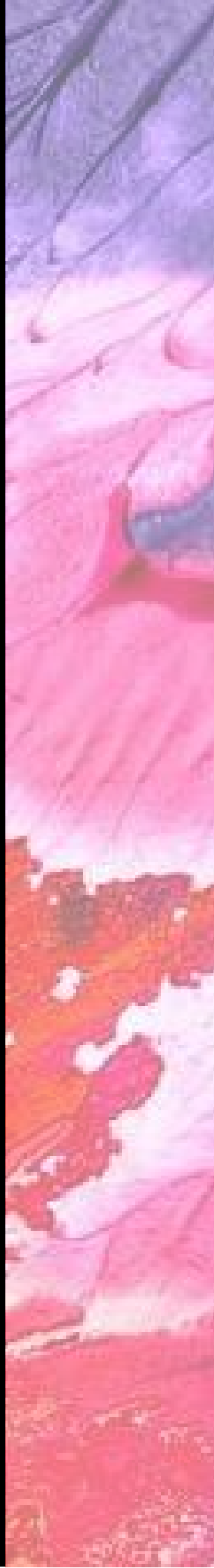

THE RETAIL INSTITUTE

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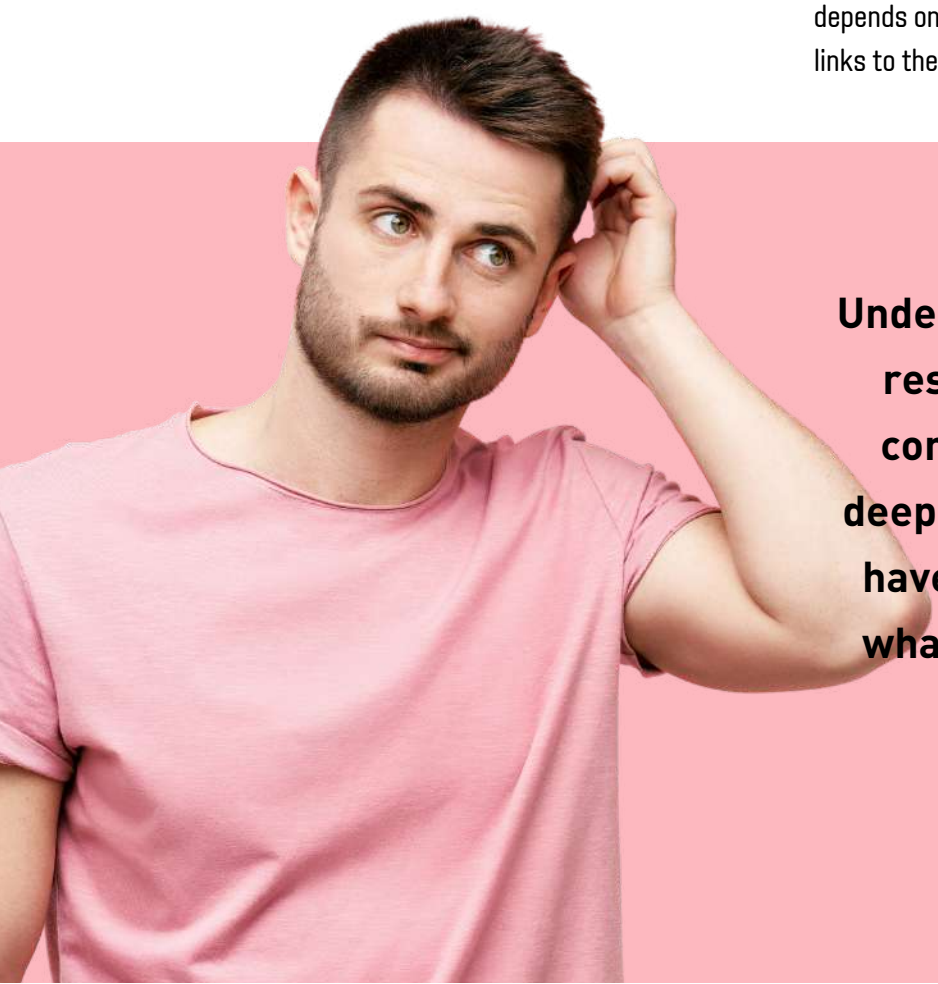
1.Confusion in the Shopping Experience

Introduction

Going shopping can be difficult. While shops, products and packaging provide inspiration, give people ideas and help them find what they want or need, sometimes customers only experience confusion and frustration. The many choices, sounds, smells and sights within stores can be overwhelming, making some people feel like they just want to escape. Innovations in retail don't work or don't make sense if customers don't value them and adopt them into their behaviours. Efforts to engage, excite, stand out, persuade or simply explain products more effectively might fall flat it they are not based on an appreciation of how shoppers feel. Understanding how consumers respond to complexity and confusion provides us with deeper insights than we would have if we simply focused on what works and what people want.

Therefore, this report poses a question: When does the shopping experience all become too much?

It addresses this topic from four different perspectives. Firstly, this chapter summarises recent research on the impact of confusion and too much choice in retail settings. It identifies situations that cause confusion and some that provide a more inclusive retail experience. The second chapter looks at the problem from a visual merchandising (VM) perspective. Dr Esther Pugh and TK Maxx visual merchandiser and Leeds Business School student Tyla Hockey discuss how VM influences buying behaviour and outline some techniques that help customers navigate through stores with a diverse product range. In the third chapter, by Nicola Moxon, highlights the dangers of gender stereotyping in shops, which no longer reflects social attitudes and can have harmful effects. The final chapter looks at packaging semiotics to show how the symbolic values of colours, shapes and images can guide customers but also how, if implemented incorrectly, they can cause confusion. It also notes that the impact of packaging design depends on the setting in which it is displayed, which links to the findings of the first three chapters.



Understanding how consumers respond to complexity and confusion provides us with deeper insights than we would have if we simply focused on what works and what people want.

Confusing Experiences

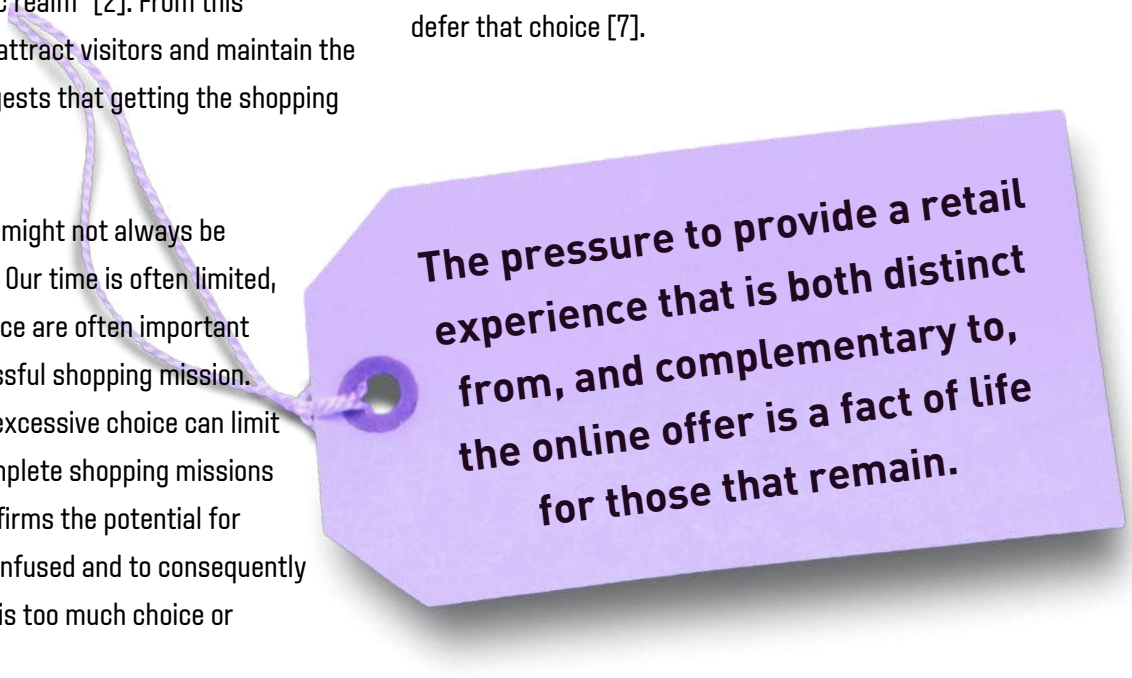
The concept of the 'shopping experience' has taken on new meaning and importance in response to the changing role of high street shopping. The shift to out-of-town shopping centres weakened the power of city and town centre retailers to attract visitors and online retail and social media has given consumers the power to demand more choice [1]. The last few years have seen big names leave the UK high streets and hundreds of stores closed. The pressure to provide a retail experience that is both distinct from, and complementary to, the online offer is a fact of life for those that remain.

A recent study has focused on the idea that the 'experience economy' is a means to counter the 'death of the high street', a process that has accelerated since the pandemic. The investigation of five UK city centres identified three connected layers of the experience economy: "in-store commercial experiences; leisure and entertainment-orientated adaptations to shopping centres and department stores; and the wider regeneration of the public realm" [2]. From this perspective, the need to attract visitors and maintain the life of public spaces suggests that getting the shopping experience right is vital.

The shopping experience might not always be positive for some people. Our time is often limited, and speed and convenience are often important determinants of a successful shopping mission. However, confusion and excessive choice can limit consumers' ability to complete shopping missions efficiently. Research confirms the potential for consumers to become confused and to consequently leave a shop when there is too much choice or information to process.

That confusion is associated with feelings of inefficiency, helplessness and irritation, meaning that people spend less time in the store[3]. There is potential for confusion in any setting with a large assortment of products and a highly stimulating atmosphere. In addition, there are still places and retail techniques that exclude some people due to inadequate provision for disability, diversity or neurodivergence. Shops and products should be accessible and ideally should be designed to encourage consumers rather than overwhelm them with too many sensory stimuli.

Research conducted on confusion and complexity in online retail includes looking at the relationship between choice overload and consumer behaviour[4] , the effects of background visual complexity [5] and advertisements [6] on purchase intentions, and how the size of the online choice influences the difficulties experienced in making decisions and the tendency to defer that choice [7].



There have also been a range of studies on sensory aspects of the shopping environment, both online and in stores. A study of the sensory components of e-commerce websites developed a technique to assess the online sensory experience in terms of haptic (touch), olfactory (smell) and gustatory (taste) components as well as acoustic and visual elements[8]. In stores, congruence between atmospheric cues such as light and scent can enhance consumer perceptions of a store[9]. Congruence is determined by the cues creating a similar association such as warmth or freshness.

Sensory marketing techniques have been found to enhance retail experiences, especially for luxury brands, by developing stronger emotional attachments[10].

These findings are valuable to anyone trying to understand the psychology of shopping and other social and environmental conditions that influence consumer behaviour in general. Of particular interest is the way that consumers react to an apparent information overload by using pre-established techniques and evaluation criteria to filter out options and make purchase decisions.

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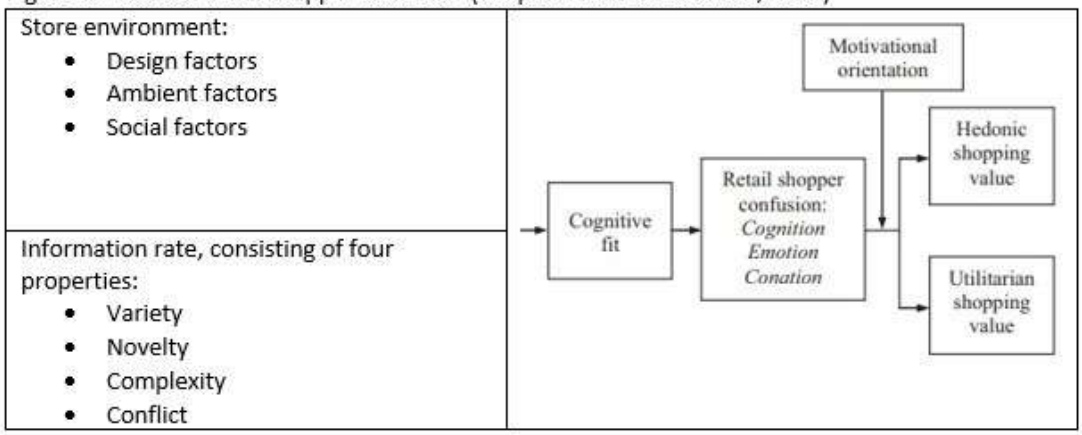
Types of Confusion

Analysis on shopper confusion breaks down the retail experience into factors that affect consumers and links them to different kinds of individual responses. Interview and survey responses by consumers has helped to categorise the causes of shopper confusion into ambient, design and social factors (figure 1) [11]. Ambient factors include sound or acoustic stimuli, lighting and scent within the retail setting. Design factors consist of the range of colours, signage, special arrangements, visual merchandising and other architectural and technological elements. Social factors relate to numbers and profiles of other customers and employees. The impact of each category might depend on levels of variety (e.g., too many or too few), novelty (e.g.,unexpected lighting or inexperienced employees);complexity (inconsistency or lack of clarity) and conflicting elements (such as confusing signage and labelling or poor lighting/sound systems). These elements contribute to shopper confusion cognitively, in terms of the ability to reason or process information, emotionally, in the sense of negative feelings created by the confusion, and conatively, in terms of the impact on behavioural intentions. The research shows that such confusion ultimately affects both the task oriented (utilitarian) and enjoyment (hedonic) aspects of shopping and can lead to people avoiding such retail environments [12].

Figure 1: model of retail shopper confusion (adapted from Garaus et al, 2015)



As consumers have limited capacity for evaluating every product feature, they are likely to use shortcuts in making purchase decisions. Brands provide such a shortcut by embodying multiple product attributes. However, there is still potential for confusion when using brands in the decision-making process. An empirical study of shoppers in Taiwan investigated how three types of brand confusion can impact consumer behaviours [13]. 'Similarity confusion' comes when different brands appear to be too similar for consumers to identify a single brand easily. 'Overloading confusion' is simply the overwhelming feeling that comes from an excess of choice. Finally, 'ambiguity confusion' relates to uncertainty about product features, possibly due to lack of familiarity or ineffective promotion by the brand.

The research found that brand confusion creates different kinds of response among consumers. They might delay their purchase so that they can gather more information and thus improve their certainty, or they might decide based on their previous purchasing behaviour. These findings could encourage retailers to use strategies that help people reach a decision quickly by providing information that reduces the need for further searching. Arguably, neither taking time to decide nor choosing quickly based on habit are ideal outcomes for either retailers or consumers. In each case there is the potential for dissatisfaction, either with the purchase decision or with how long it took to make the purchase.

'Similarity confusion' comes when different brands appear to be too similar for consumers to identify a single brand easily. 'Overloading confusion' is simply the overwhelming feeling that comes from an excess of choice.

The Agony of Choice

Many people value and expect to be given a choice when shopping. The e-commerce age has raised expectations by offering seemingly infinite choice and physical stores struggle to compete with this. Although the instinct of many retailers might be to increase the range of products that they offer to attract more customers, there could be a point when too much choice becomes less attractive. The success of supermarkets like Aldi and Lidl demonstrates that that providing less choice can work by enabling a more efficient, as well as good value, shopping experience.

The question of when more choice becomes too much is likely to depend on factors such as the type of shop and consumer characteristics. For instance, research that investigated emotional responses to large (24 items) vs small (4 items) product assortments found that choice overload was more likely among consumers who enjoy shopping less and who are under time pressure[14]. A large review of academic studies identified positive and negative consequences of increasing assortment size (defined as the number of distinct alternatives available to customers when they make a choice in a product category) [15] .

Positive effects included confidence, freedom, purchase incidence and sales while negative consequences related to increased cognitive effort, choice uncertainty and consequent choice avoidance. Larger assortments were found to be preferred when people were shopping for hedonic, risky or niche products. The presence of well-known brands also favoured assortment increases while experts and rich or educated consumers were found to be more prone to processing a larger assortment.

Choice overload can be mitigated by retailers using approaches that filter the choice for customers.

Overall, research appears to suggest that consumers prefer a larger choice, although there is also the risk of feeling overwhelmed leading to increased decision difficulty and feelings of regret [16]. Choice overload can be mitigated by retailers using approaches that filter the choice for customers. This is perhaps most obvious in online retail, which can control how much of the assortment is revealed and allows consumers to select according to criteria. However, a store's physical layout or visual merchandising can act as filters by guiding customers towards specific sections. Research supporting this premise suggests that this is an area of potential further development for retailers as omnichannel tools such as smartphone apps, smartcarts/shelves and other in-store technology provide further filtering opportunities.

The same study on choice overload also looked at the moderating effect of the level of consumers' involvement in the product on their decision making. Those with a higher degree of involvement in a purchase decision – meaning that they put more effort into the pre-decision-making phase – were more likely to experience some difficulty in making decisions when there was a larger choice of products. This has implications for businesses selling products that have higher situational involvement, an example of which are those purchased as gifts.

Messiness, Crowding and Complexity

There is evidence that a visually complex environment mars the shopping experience by making shopper's brains work harder, resulting in reduced ability to focus on products or remember them afterwards [17] . High visual complexity, both in terms of store layout [18] and disorganised arrangements of goods [19] also reduces enjoyment, which is likely to reduce time in store and number of purchases. Research in supermarkets has found that this is because visual complexity creates a 'perceptual load' of distractions that are irrelevant to a customer's shopping goals [20]. The findings suggest that reducing the complexity of the environment is especially important in the grocery setting when customers have mostly practical shopping goals. The researchers propose that this could be achieved by reducing the number of visible objects, more symmetrical layouts and displays and the use of uniform patterns and colours.

It is also important to be aware of aspects of the retail environment that generate the strongest responses among customers. A study published in the Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services looked at the impact of additional 'high arousal atmospheric cues' on consumer responses [21]. The cues targeted different senses, using bright lights, colourful materials, strong scents and music with a high frequency of beats per minute (→127bpm). The study found that adding a third high arousal cue to two others was the point at which sensory overload would ensue. In such a situation, individuals are unable to process the input stimuli, leading to negative consequences like confusion, frustration and withdrawal. Prior to adding a third cue, consumers potentially react positively when there are just two high arousal atmospheric cues, if they are congruent with each other; in other words, they convey a similar level of excitement or intensity (e.g., red background colours and fast music).

Lack of congruence and, more generally, a lack of obvious order in the retail environment, are likely to lead to negative reactions and behaviours among consumers. The added factor of human crowding can exacerbate these responses. Two experimental studies by Turkish/American researchers found that human crowding and store messiness create confusion among shoppers, meaning that they become irritated, inefficient in their shopping and more likely to avoid the situation [22]. In addition, deviant behaviours were observed including hiding merchandise in a messy store and hoarding goods when it is crowded [23]. In the food retail context, store crowdedness can also create perceptions of product contamination [24].

There are some situations where a degree of messiness or crowding can invoke more positive behaviours. For example, in some settings, disorganised displays have the potential to surprise consumers, leading to some positive responses. The surprise comes from the expectation of organised displays not being met. This has been found to increase consumers' curiosity levels and motivate greater cognitive effort to understand better what the retailer is offering [25]. A stronger focus and greater memory retention could increase the chance of a purchase. Social crowding also produces different behaviours as people feel the need to express their individuality when they sense an invasion of their personal space. In one study, consumers were found to be more likely to prefer environmentally friendly products in more crowded conditions[26]. This work also highlighted that social crowding affects people differently depending on personality traits with introverted consumers more likely to increase their preference for green products than extroverted consumers.

High visual complexity, both in terms of store layout and disorganised arrangements of goods also reduces enjoyment, which is likely to reduce time in store and number of purchases.

Inclusive Shopping

Personality differences and other customer needs are increasingly being acknowledged by retailers, as seen with sensory friendly shopping periods (sometimes called 'autism hours'[27]) in some stores. These involve a reduction in sensory stimuli such as smells, background noises or bright lighting for those who find such conditions too overwhelming for focusing on a task like shopping. Research on the sensory needs of some shoppers is still quite limited. One study on inclusive retailing experiences for families with autism has provided more detailed advice on atmospheric conditions to consider in catering for this marginalised population. This includes:

- Limiting the use of TV screens in window displays
- Use of adequate, non-buzzing or fluorescent lighting
- Calmer, lower volume music
- A spaciously designed environment
- Maintaining clear grouping of merchandise
- Implement regular staff training regarding disability awareness and diversity

There are other vulnerable groups that benefit from making shopping more accessible. For example, one study looked at the way that people with dementia experience grocery shops. Factors influencing accessibility included 'illogical arrangement', 'overload of products, information and people', 'visual illusions' and 'intrusive auditory stimuli'[28]. Arguably, implementing these recommendations would make a more welcoming experience for many customers.

Towards Clarity and Calmness

The excess of choice or stimuli can cause dysfunctional responses by consumers, which in some cases can be stressful [29]. In addition, similarity of products – such as store branded lookalike packaging [30] – or the feeling of being manipulated by the retailer – i.e., when the retail environment does not match the actual experience of merchandise properties [31] – have the potential to create confusion.

Perhaps some of these factors are inevitable, especially in large multi-purpose retail settings where the one stop-shop aspect still offers significant convenience for customers. The challenge, therefore, is to manage the potential information overload by helping customers to process that information as efficiently as possible. This is not simply a matter of keeping things tidy with all the same products neatly gathered. For example, the wine category typically consists of a large choice of information-heavy products whosedifference is not immediately obvious to the casual consumer. Research on this category has highlighted the value of images and displays that simulate consumption to engage with the customer's imagination [32]. However, such an approach was not as effective in 'information-low' categories as there is less motivation to seek alternative processing methods. Nonetheless, there is value in providing additional information that can inspire consumers. This could be through evoking the consumption setting in signage or interspersing promotional prices in the display.

The following chapters provide further consideration of the challenges and techniques for providing an inclusive retail experience.

2. Visual Merchandising to the Maxx: Balancing Calm and Chaos in a Discount Department Store.

By Dr Esther Pugh and Tyla Hockey *

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the placement and positioning of products in the retail environment and how this contributes to perceptions of calm or chaos. As expressed by Basu et al.,[33] there is a need for "greater clarity on treating visual merchandising (VM) as a product-driven display function, as opposed to store atmosphere as a store-wide display function." Furthermore, despite its prominence in retail experience and marketing today[34], visual merchandising is a neglected area in the academic literature. Most existing research focuses on two areas: the atmospherics of the sensory retail environment, and the responses of consumers to in-store stimuli and marketing messages[35]. Past research has adopted a consumer perspective, to analyse how VM influences consumers' choices[36], buying behaviour [37] and willingness to purchase [38, 39], of shoppers, rather than what visual merchandisers do.

There is minimal research on specific product presentation techniques. Furthermore, scant literature has been identified that sheds light on the discount sector, specifically discount department stores. Home, bath, and body products are also neglected, with fashion and apparel dominating VM academic research [40, 41], with occasional mentions of food [42].

This research sought to address these gaps by focusing on TK Maxx as an illustrative case to demonstrate how the visual merchandiser creates calm out of chaos.

TK Maxx is known as a maximalist Aladdin's cave where serendipity and excitement rule. Their loyalty scheme is called 'Treasure' and the retailer states that its "rapidly changing assortments create the treasure hunt experience that our customers love"[43]. As an off-price retailer, TK Maxx offers an ever-changing selection of merchandise at 60% off the price. This includes clothing, accessories, beauty, gifts, home, bath, and body. The retailer emphasises the diversity of its ranges and its wide assortment; "Our buyers choose many different colours, styles and fabrics so there is always a great choice for you". According to its website, the stores are flexible because they do not have walls between departments, so it can easily expand and contract merchandise categories in response to the newest trends and changing customers' tastes.

This chapter is written from the perspective of two passionate visual merchandisers; one who creates innovative educational programmes in retail marketing and VM at Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, and another who currently studies at the Business School and works at TK Maxx as a visual merchandiser.

This research focused on TK Maxx as an illustrative case to demonstrate how the visual merchandiser creates calm out of chaos.

* This chapter is a shortened version of: Pugh, E. and Hockey, T. (2023) 'Visual Merchandising to the Maxx: Balancing Calm and Chaos in a Discount Department Store', Proceedings of the Retail Institute Academic Conference, 1(1), October 5th, 2023, pp. 2-14.

VM and The Role of the Visual Merchandiser

Visual merchandising (VM) is defined as the strategies and techniques used in physical retail environments, which include floor layout, store design, windows, mannequins, lighting, product co-ordination and atmospherics, all of which act as 'silent selling' [44]. The term now encapsulates not only the visual sense but also the entire atmosphere of the store [45, 46], including the olfactory, haptic, aural, and even gustatory senses. The term visual merchandising is evolving again today, to describe the design and layout of online retail environments, as well as bricks and mortar[47]. What all definitions have in common, is that VM is seen as a marketing stimulus to influence customers' satisfaction and hence increase sales [48].

The framework below is adapted from an article by Basu et al. published in the Journal of Business Research and shows the behavioural psychology model of stimulus-organism-response in the context of visual merchandising. This demonstrates that visual merchandising is one of the stimuli on the consumer, which results in a behavioural response.

The visual merchandiser's responsibility is to design and execute product displays and devise workable layouts that communicate the store's mission statement [49]. To create calm, sometimes a potentially hectic sensory environment needs to be moderated, and the clever techniques of the visual merchandiser can achieve this. Whilst its brand characteristics make TK Maxx an exciting place to shop for some, for others it can seem chaotic. The ever-evolving, highly changeable, and wide assortment at TK Maxx, with the diverse colours, textures, shapes, and sizes of products, also make it a challenge for the visual merchandiser. It is their responsibility to create order, by using a toolkit of principles and techniques and applying artistry and knowledge that maintains an orderly store appearance. Due to the unpredictability of the TK Maxx environment and the uniqueness of each branch, the visual merchandiser cannot simply follow photographs and directives sent out by head office but must think for themselves about what will be the most effective way to merchandise products in their unique setting and situation.

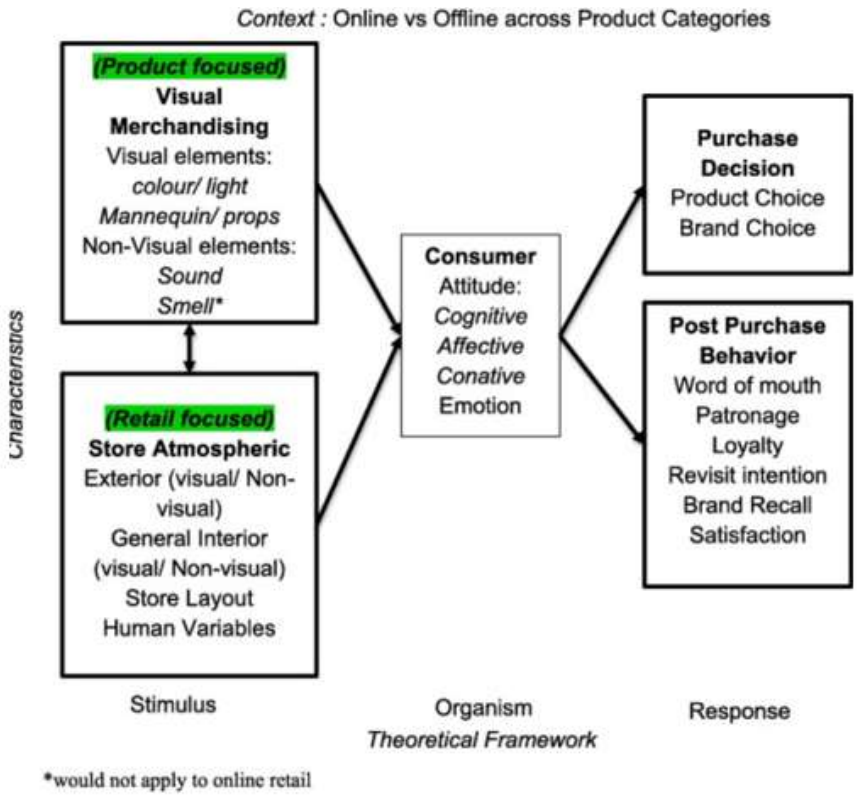


Fig.1 An integrated framework for research in visual merchandising (Basu et al., 2022).

Visual Merchandising to Create Calm out of Chaos

The anxieties that can affect large proportions of the population in retail environments can be eased with wellbeing interventions to help people relax. Neutral tones, greenery, and even soft surfaces are being implemented [50] and 'Calm Commerce' [51], is a trend in branding and marketing that optimises therapeutic sensory stimuli. These are examples of the retail environmental acknowledgement of mental disorders that affect many people. Neurodivergence (autism and ADHD) affects 20 to 30% of the global population [52]. Furthermore, WGSN in the report, 'Future Consumers' [53], highlighted the level of anxiety and fear that affects many people today, leading them to be susceptible to feeling overwhelmed in all aspects of life. This state of being overwhelmed can impact their enjoyment of shops and shopping, sometimes alienating them from these experiences. Many of the established 'visual merchandising rules,' such as making sure products are stacked at levels that can be reached and making sure there is adequate space between fixtures for wheelchairs and prams, link to concepts of inclusivity [54].

When it comes to creating calm out of chaos, Bell, and Ternus' (2006) principles of design, focuses on the visual sense: Unity, harmony, repetition, balance, rhythm contrast, emphasis, surprise, balance. It is about creating displays that are pleasing to the eye. By arousing positive emotions in consumers, retailers can encourage impulse purchase [55].

At TK Maxx, due to the quantity of product types, there is a danger that the stimulating environment creates unpleasant responses, such as 'sensory overload' or 'information overload' [56]. These are exacerbated because there are no walls separating the different areas of the store, and in addition to the volume and variety of product, the shop can be noisy and crowded. This could lead to excessive arousal, triggering sensory overload [57]. Sensory overload refers to a situation where individuals are unable to process the input stimuli, leading to confusion, frustration, and withdrawal [58]. The consumer would attribute these to the brand environment [59], and they would avoid visiting the store.

Hollister's stores have been described as a 'sensory assault' due to their intense scent, loud music, dim lighting, and tactile dimensions [60]. Hollister have, in 2023, introduced a new shopfit which is light, bright and quiet; a noticeable departure from their previous brand identity. The pictures below show the before and after of the store in Liverpool One, which has shed the dark and intense ambience, and literally 'come out of the shadows' (Pugh 2023) [61].

Fig. 2 and 3, Hollister, before and after.

Creating a sense of calm can be achieved by adapting principles of design that focus on the visual senses: harmony, repetition, balance, rhythm contrast, emphasis, surprise, balance. By arousing positive emotions in consumers, retailers can encourage impulse purchase.

Examples of Visual Merchandising Problem-Solving

In the forthcoming section, Tyla Hockey, a visual merchandiser at TK Maxx discusses her role, and the daily decisions she makes to create calm out of chaos. Her own words and photographs are used to illustrate.

"'Visual Merchandising' at TK Maxx can be tricky for multiple reasons. Firstly, we may only get one of a product that comes in. So, rather than lots of the same product displayed in a linear and profiled way which you may see elsewhere, at TK Maxx, shelving displays are usually filled with multiple assorted brands and products. This can be overwhelming and could create a sense of chaos in customers eyes. However, key visual merchandising fundamentals help to keep some structure and order."

"The TK Maxx mantra of 'Value, Volume and Variety' is supposed to be apparent to customers when they first enter the store. If the front of the store is filled with a uniform, boring and sparse display of the same product, the brand ethos is not communicated and furthermore, customers may not be tempted into the rest of the store. In Body and Bath for example, I recently created a gifting wall feature. Because it was not possible to organise by specific product type, because there were too few of each, I displayed by colour and product type."

"In the before photo there are some shelves that are too full and others too empty. There is little coordination, and the same stock is positioned side-by-side. This may create sensory overload and confusion for customers. By firstly organising colour, this creates calm for the customer and what I see as a visual journey. This is apparent in the after picture, beginning on the left of the wall with white, continuing through yellow, orange, pink, purple, green and blue. Customers can start at one colour and work their way through with their eyes. Additionally, instead of lining the same product up next to each other, I have dispersed these with other products using something we call 'landscaping', which creates a staggered effect with goods positioned at intervals. I have also maintained a sightline (the name we give to a straight line) on the top shelf by aligning smaller products, leaving larger products to the bottom. It is said that the customer's line of vision goes to the top of the fixture, and we aim to create a neat line here, avoiding leaving gaps and 'selling air.' Depending on the season, colour choices will change, in Summer we organise by colour from light to dark, and winter we will organise by dark to light."

BEFORE

AFTER

Fig. 4 and 5. Bath and Body Before and After at TK Maxx Keighley.

"Colour is not the only factor I consider. I also endeavour to get into the customer's psyche when displaying the product. As an example, electricals were crammed onto a back wall and were becoming hard to shop. Sales reports told us these goods were not selling but I was sure this was due to the fact they could not be seen clearly, not the products themselves. Something needed to change. In the below photographs it is possible to see the visual merchandising changes I actioned".

Figs. 6 and 7. Electrical goods before and after at TK Maxx, Keighley.

"To improve this, I moved this to the front of body and bath (near the store entrance). Due to the end use of these products, this is a logical product adjacency. I organised by product type and size and added 'Electricals' signage to make it more visible. By doing this, the department is more visible to customers, and it is one of the first things they see as they enter the store. In the following week, we saw an increase in sales in this category."

"Another example is a haircare feature. The remerchandising of this feature demonstrates that as well as colour, there are other criteria I always have in mind: brand, product type and size. This feature looked neglected and stock from other departments had been languishing there. It needed a refresh as it was not inviting to customers."

"To break down the complex problem-solving of the visual merchandiser, I have broken down into stages, with photographs, my method for creating this improved display".

Fig. 8 Original haircare fixture.

Step 1- "I identified the stock on the feature that did not belong there and removed it. This helped me to see what space was available".

Fig. 9 The product removed from feature.

Step 2- "I consolidate product of the same brand together and look at the quantity of each. If there is a brand with only a few products or too much of I will remove them and put them back into the main flow".

Fig. 10 Main wall Haircare.

Step 3- "I go back to the main wall and select other brands while keeping in mind value, volume, and variety so that customers are faced with choice and change".

Fig. 11. Haircare Replenishment

Step 4- "I will put the stock I have chosen into a basket and take it to the feature".

Fig. 12 Haircare Fixture After

Step 5- "this is where I will arrange all the products on the shelf either by brand, colour, product type or size, starting with smallest at the top into largest at the bottom".

Tyla further explains:
"These examples demonstrate the problem-solving of the visual merchandiser when dealing with complex displays with multiple products, brands, colours, shapes, and sizes. Price is also a key factor as we use price points to display certain products such as £19.99 and below or £9.99 and below to highlight assorted products in different price bands. Compared to the before images, the 'after' images show consolidated and shoppable areas which will act as positive stimuli, encouraging purchase, loyalty and return visits".

"TK Maxx is also a business largely 'working in the grey", Tyla says. "For example, stock in a specific department in one store may slowly deplete over time so you would reduce the size of the area. Then a week later we may get a sudden influx of product and must expand an area again (meaning taking space from another department). We never know what stock we will be receiving until it arrives on the day. The layout and fixtures within the store are constantly changing to avoid an area looking too empty or too dense and unstoppable. it is all about keeping balance".

Conclusion and Future Direction

The chapter has explored the role of the visual merchandiser at a UK (United Kingdom) discount department store and how they create calm out of chaos. By focusing on bath, body and homewares products, it demonstrates how the visual merchandiser makes important decisions with the customer in mind. Shelf display and presentation techniques based on size, colour, shape, and type, are implemented by the visual merchandiser, to create a feeling of calm out of potential chaos.

VM has multiple purposes, but it needs to create a pleasant shopping environment, which is not overly stimulating and meets the needs of shoppers. At TK Maxx, with its mantra of 'Value, Volume and Variety', there is potential for sensory overload; but the methods used by the visual merchandiser mitigate this by organising products in such a way that 'calm' is created.

What is not known is why some consumers are exhilarated by overtly sensory environments and some are frustrated and overwhelmed. Another area ripe for investigation is the experience of neurodivergent shoppers who make up an increasing percentage of the population. Other disabilities too, such as hearing and sight impairments, are neglected in VM research. The power of visual merchandising to promote inclusivity and diversity would be an interesting area to study.

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3.The Impact of Gender Stereotyping in Retail Servicescapes on Consumer Self-symbolism

Nicola Moxon *

Gender stereotyping is prevalent across advertising, product development, workplace culture, education, societal attitudes and behaviours and wider cultural norms [62, 63, 64]. It continues to be an influential aspect of life despite society's intolerance, cultural developments and significant attitudinal change [65,66,67]. This chapter draws together literature on servicescapes, gender stereotyping in advertising and consumer behaviour in the context of self-symbolism and presents findings of research on the effects of gender stereotypic content within the servicescape, upon the consumer.

The impact of negative stereotyping has received much criticism particularly regarding children's products through gender-specific colour and limited role diversity and the creation of automatic associations and behaviours entrenched in common cultural beliefs that have longstanding affects [68]. Research has explored the influence of gender stereotypic content in determining effective and influential advertisements 69,70,71,72,73], yet it has been shown to be ineffective [74].

Others have continued to highlight the incongruence between ad content and societal attitudes [75,76], indicating a strong presence of restrictive and submissive female roles in advertisements.

Harmful gender roles portrayed within the advertising content is a consistent discussion point defining the use of decorative roles, being unrealistic, under-representative and negatively restrictive with potentially harmful effects, alongside hostile and benevolent sexism via explicit and implicit stereotypic content [77,78,79,80]. The influence of this content effects consumption behaviour, individual self-perception and the creation/maintaining of their self-concept [81,82]. This can be negatively restrictive, compelling an individual to conform to the assigned stereotypical definitions, increasing anxiety levels and affecting wellbeing, relationships and interactions with others [83].

*This chapter is a shortened version of: Moxon, N. (2023) 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: The impact of gender stereotyping, conveyed through retail servicescapes, on consumer self-symbolism', Proceedings of the Retail Institute Academic Conference, 1(1), October 5th, 2023, pp. 20-34.

Servicescapes and Store Atmospherics

The physical retail environment is a persuasive brand tool influencing behaviour, emotions, judgements, expectations and interactions [84,85,86,87,88,89]. Conveying the brand image, values, tone and message provide an all-encompassing experience for maximum engagement and financial benefit [90,91,92]. Both the curated static and kinetic store attributes influence perception and behaviour [93], creating a dynamic experience effecting decision-making, satisfaction levels and engagement [94], with atmospheric cue - consumer self-concept congruency being an important factor [95,96]. Servicescapes can also be negative manipulative tools used for commercial gain [97] and it is conceivable that there is a difference between the brand's intention and consumer's perceived interpretation [98].

Consumer Behaviour and Self-symbolism

An individual's identity both influences and is influenced by their surrounding environment, which can be exploited [99,100,101]. The consumer experience is complex, especially for impressionable teenagers, whose curation and expression of their dynamic identities draws upon consumption practices, influencing behaviour, confidence, interactions, relationships, self-esteem and self-monitoring, simultaneously portraying both conformity and individualization [102,103,104,105,106]. Brands can manipulate content using congruent symbolic references, appealing to the perceived consumer's emotional state, yet this can lead to negative psychological reactions due to misinterpretation of message appeals [107,108,109]. The commodification of identity and self-esteem focused on materialism has become an identifier of self-worth [110] and a sense of inadequacy can develop [111] through comparison, enhancement and reinvention, particularly for teen consumers being susceptible during a transitional life stage [112,113]. This highlights a research gap regarding impact of concealed negative gender stereotypes within the brand servicescape.

Method

Analysis of the literature cited above demonstrated research gaps relating to the impact of negative gender stereotypes within the servicescape. To address this, qualitative research methods were used, employing content analysis of secondary data, with case study analysis using servicescape semiotics.

This included an investigation of the message appeals used within advertising to convey harmful and restricting stereotypes, which are also commonplace in different consumer-brand touch points, such as servicescape environments. A case study analysis of a UK fast fashion high street store was selected due to its female, Generation Z core customer base [114].

The commodification of identity and self-esteem focused on materialism has become an identifier of self-worth and a sense of inadequacy can develop through comparison, enhancement and reinvention, particularly for teen consumers being susceptible during a transitional life stage.

Results

Part 1: Harmful vs acceptable message appeals that promote gender stereotyping

The advertisement analysis revealed the predominant stereotype concern focused on appearance, whilst the perceived influence was equally split across harmful, questioned and acceptable levels. Harmful content (see Figure 1) includes a high female presence, is focused on appearance and contains sexual, degrading, contradictory and uncomfortable viewing message appeals resulting in some form of discomfort. Questioned content (see Figure 2) includes a high female presence, is focused on appearance and contains uninspiring, sexual, glamourizing, contradictory and conformity promoting message appeals, portraying limited aspirations. Acceptable content (see Figure 3) includes both female and male/female presence, is equally focused on appearance and role diversity and whilst it contains message appeals that are seen within harmful and questioned content it also includes appeals used to portray humour, challenge stereotypes and aims to improve self-confidence and be aspirational.

Figure 1: Message Appeal Relationships – Harmful Content

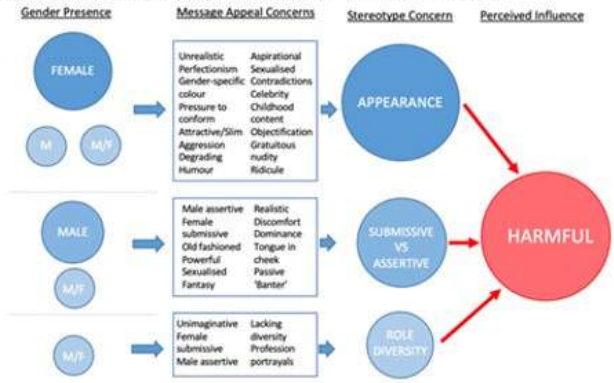


Figure 2: Message Appeal Relationships – Questioned Content

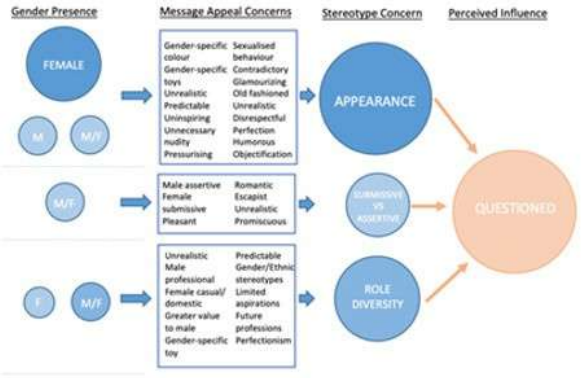
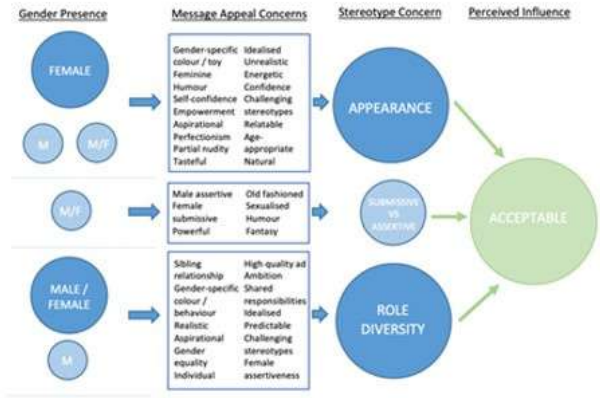


Figure 3: Message Appeal Relationships – Acceptable Content



Part 2: Servicescape attributes that reinforce negative gender stereotyping

The servicescape semiotic analysis (see Table 1) revealed questioned and harmful content across the material, conventional and contextual dimensions. The primary stereotype concern focused on appearance, with questioned and harmful signs (mostly) carrying a secondary concern of role diversity or submissive versus assertive. The harmful sign types typically carried sexualised, perfectionist, conformist and contradictory message appeal concerns with stereotypical colour assignment and unattainable attractive appearances. Cultural change in context to youth culture is strongly influenced by social media and celebrity pushing an agenda of conformity and perfectionism [115,116], with sexualised imagery providing conflicting messages informing cultural meaning [117].

However, numerous acceptable signs due to, in isolation, not representing any direct stereotypic concern, could collectively reinforce and amplify other harmful sign types. With similarities in message appeal concerns with the data in part one, it is conceivable to deduce that the store attributes could have similar negative impacts, such as pressure to conform, inciting negative personal emotions regarding appearance and creating unrealistic expectations of gender roles, presumed behavioural traits and the desire to emulate these [118].

Cultural change in context to youth culture is strongly influenced by social media and celebrity pushing an agenda of conformity and perfectionism, with sexualised imagery providing conflicting messages informing cultural meaning.

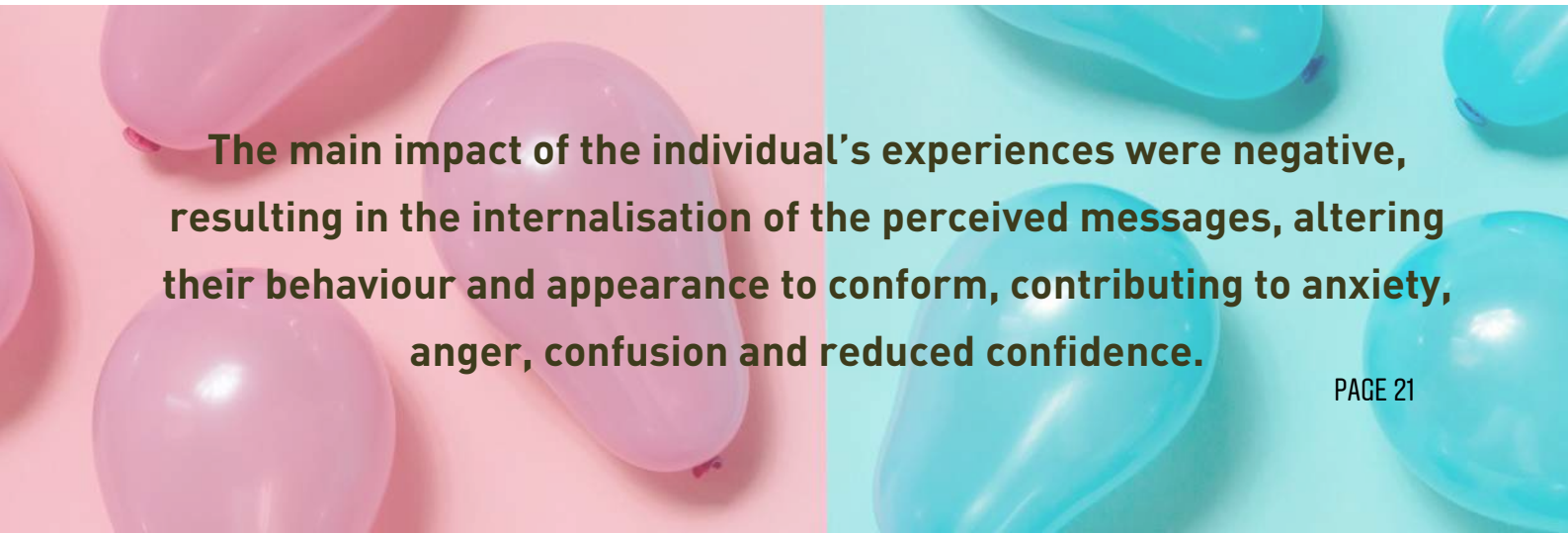
Table 1: Semiotic Servicescape Summary

ANALYSIS TYPE	DIMENSION	SIGN TYPE (STORE ATTRIBUTE)	ASSOCIATED PERIPHERAL CATEGORY
Material	Architecture	Shop Front Structure; Layout / Flow; Spatial Volume	ACCEPTABLE
	Décor	Colour Scheme; Lighting; In-store Imagery; Surface Texture	QUESTIONED ACCEPTABLE HARMFUL
	F&F	Shopfitting Kit; Cash Desk; Fitting Room Desk and Seating	ACCEPTABLE
	Signage and VM Cues	Signage and Messaging; Mannequins; Props; Feature Detail	HARMFUL QUESTIONED
	Technology	Video and In-store Customer-generated Social Media Content	ACCEPTABLE
Conventional - Spectacle	Proscenium	Shop Front / Cash Desk	ACCEPTABLE
	Circus	Product Display	ACCEPTABLE
	Carnival	Props / Mannequins / In-store Customer-generated SM Content	ACCEPTABLE
Conventional - Category	Function	Layout / Flow / Facilities	ACCEPTABLE
	Brand Aesthetic	Colour Scheme / Signage / Imagery / Props	QUESTIONED
	Industry	Shopfitting Kit	ACCEPTABLE
	Consumer Actions	Colour Scheme / Signage / Imagery / Props / Shopfitting Kit / Layout / Function / In-store Customer-generated SM Content	ACCEPTABLE
Contextual	Cultural Change	Layout / Signage / Imagery / Props / In-store Customer-generated SM Content	QUESTIONED
	Category Trends	Function / Signage / Imagery / Props	ACCEPTABLE
	The External Environment	Shop Front	ACCEPTABLE
Performative	Management Actions	Colour Scheme / Signage / Imagery / Props / Shopfitting Kit / Layout / Function	ACCEPTABLE
	Consumer Actions	Colour Scheme / Signage / Imagery / Props / Shopfitting Kit / Layout / Function / In-store Customer-generated SM Content	ACCEPTABLE

Part 3: Attitudinal impact of the environmental gender stereotyping on consumer self-symbolism

The secondary data analysis revealed four stereotype categories including restriction, expectations, pressure and harassment. The main impact of the individual's experiences were negative, resulting in the internalisation of the perceived messages, altering their behaviour and appearance to conform, contributing to anxiety, anger, confusion and reduced confidence. However, there was a sense of positivity revealed in the presence of attitudes such as resilience, determination and confrontation of negative gender stereotyping.

Due to correlation of recurring themes with part one and two discussed earlier, it is conceivable to deduce that the attitudinal impacts discovered would translate over to the servicescape negative gender stereotyping. When considering the relationships across each data set, there is a predominant focus around the concern of appearance with negative gender stereotyping (restrictions, expectations and exerting pressure on the consumer) conveyed through the material, conventional and contextual dimensions.



Discussion and Implications

The findings support previous advertising research highlighting incongruence between brand content and societal attitudes but in a retail store context[119]. The notion of the all-encompassing brand experience retail environment in which the gestalt perspective is highly influential is also supported [120], affecting cognitive processes, inciting emotional reactions, influencing behaviour and perception and inducing both positive and negative experiences [121]. The stereotype categories present have the potential to create negative attitudinal impacts that can affect an adolescent's anxiety and confidence levels, in turn influencing their identity construction through the act of self-symbolism [122]. While some aspects individually can be interpreted as acceptable and appealing, they can collectively contribute to implicitly reinforcing and amplifying negative gender stereotypic meaning representing aspects such as perfectionism, pressure to conform, objectification and sexualised behaviours. Careful consideration should be taken in relation to the interpretation of the store's symbolic qualities. Brand managers and designers should consider their servicescape proposals in the wider context of consumer impact and integrate appropriate ethical policies and design strategies actively addressing this issue. Overall, this paper highlights the presence of harmful and restricting gender stereotypes within the servicescape, with the potential to affect consumer wellbeing and identity construction through the use of self-symbolism. Aspects perceived as acceptable in isolation could also reinforce and amplify the harmful messages being portrayed in explicitly stereotypic content.

The stereotype categories present have the potential to create negative attitudinal impacts that can affect an adolescent's anxiety and confidence levels (...) While some aspects individually can be interpreted as acceptable and appealing, they can collectively contribute to implicitly reinforcing and amplifying negative gender stereotypic meaning representing aspects such as perfectionism, pressure to conform, objectification and sexualised behaviours.

4.Guiding Customers with Packaging Semiotics

The value of semiotics

Packaging can resolve consumers' confusion and help them to navigate through complex retail environments. When many products are displayed and the lighting, store layout, background noise and smells all compete to engage the senses, packaging must help shoppers find the right products quickly and easily. Retailers and brand owners design packaging to facilitate this process and the techniques they use to draw on the principles of semiotics. This chapter reviews some of the main semiotic principles that apply to food, beverage and other FMCG packaging. It shows how there are category-specific relationships between colours, shapes and product attributes like flavour and healthiness. It also discusses the role of congruence between packaging cues in reducing confusion.

When many products are displayed and the lighting, store layout, background noise and smells all compete to engage the senses, packaging must help shoppers find the right products quickly and easily.

We are surrounded by symbols and we use them constantly in everyday life. We use signs and logos consciously to navigate our way around real and virtual environments. Perhaps more sub-consciously, we use other images, colours, shapes and styles to determine what things are, what they mean and what we should do with them. We learn meanings through experience and observation and drawing on that information when making decisions. The science of semiotics seeks to understand the role of signs in human life.

Given the potential insight it provides on how people perceive objects or messages, it has significant value for designers, marketers or anyone interested in this aspect of culture. Looking at the design of modern grocery packaging, it is possible to see how shape, colour, images and text are all used symbolically by brand owners and retailers to convey product attributes.

Sean Hall's 2012 book, This Means This, This Means That: A User's Guide to Semiotics[123], describes the diversity of signs, including gestures, facial expressions, slogans, road signs, commercials, music, body language, paintings, photography, design, architecture, clothes and many more. The context in which signs are observed determines how we interpret them. Therefore, semiotics concerns the tools, processes and structures that help human beings understand the meaning of signs, whether they are natural or cultural. While animals, plants or clouds might have a natural meaning for us (for example, clouds are a sign of rain), cultural signs have been created by humans for complex communication. Hall states that signs can be literal, analogical or metaphorical. Using signs literally helps to avoid confusion. Analogies help us to draw likenesses between things such as people, objects or situations.

Metaphors use connections that might seem more tenuous. Rather than saying something is like another, metaphors insist that one thing is another, for example, "Red Bull gives you wings".

Semiotics concerns the tools, processes and structures that help human beings understand the meaning of signs, whether they are natural or cultural.

These often rely on the person interpreting the sign understanding that the symbol is often used a certain way – so we make the connection between 'wings' and flight, which symbolises freedom or even a kind of superpower. Here are some examples of concepts for which associated symbols have common interpretations:

- Texture = warm but imperfect; no texture = cold but perfect
- Size (large) = indicative of importance or authority
- Past = quaint, nostalgic, amusing, charming
- Future = new, ambitious, frightening

Semiotics provides us with guidelines for understanding how someone might interpret a symbol, although there is always some potential for them to draw a different meaning. Sometimes, combining multiple symbols with a common meaning ensures the message gets across as intended. However, being too obvious can have negative consequences, especially in persuasive situations like marketing where the creator of the message wants to stand out or convey a high level of expertise. Sometimes, a consumer can gain satisfaction from successfully interpreting a sophisticated message, which might invoke a shared cultural reference. That increases engagement with the brand or product.

Recent Research on Packaging Semiotics

Colour

Consumers use colour constantly, both to zone-in on a product category or favoured brand, and to identify flavours (or scents). Perhaps the most cited link between colour and flavour is for sweetness to be evoked by red or similar colours. This contrasts with blue as a more savoury, or specifically salty, indicator. Expectations of flavour are often learned from nature. As fruits often become red when they ripen and taste sweeter, we often make the connection between red and sweetness. Salt is mostly extracted from the sea, which is perceived as blue, thus generating that colour-flavour association.

However, colours can have multiple associations, depending on the situation. One study has linked a red drinking receptacle to creating a perception of (non-alcoholic) beer being more carbonated[124]. Orange and purple have strong associations with sweet, fruity flavours. Green has arguably more varied interpretations, with mint, lime and acidic [125] flavours all linked to that colour by different research studies.

These simple associations appear to make sense because most of us have learned these associations, either through nature or exposure to products over many years. However, many products have a more complex story to tell about their flavour or other attributes. To ensure that customers pick out a product from the many that are on a supermarket shelf, packaging designers might need to use colour in subtle or sophisticated arrangements. This could involve adjustments to the brightness (intensity) or saturation (high saturation means a low amount of white light mixed into the hue).

For example, a combination of high brightness and low saturation is associated with milder tasting cheese while lower brightness and high saturation creates sharper taste associations[126]. We might make such associations because we have learned that colours with high saturation/low brightness are reminiscent of warning signs (especially dark red) and something that might be sharp.

The idea that consumers instinctively look for certain colours when searching for their preferred flavours [127] (or other attributes) creates an unwritten set of rules for packaging within a category. Colour is an early (if not the first) cue that people rely on.

They will only switch to other cues, like the text, if the colour-based search does not help them to find the targeted attribute. Therefore, the congruence of a chosen colour with the product's flavour is crucial. It affects purchase decisions and determines whether the customer likes the product.

Some of this is down to the speed of mental processing. Incongruent colours (those that don't have automatic associations with the product/flavour) slow the search process, which can create feelings of frustration and, therefore, a negative association with the product.

Nonetheless, a moderate amount of incongruency may have advantages. It can help a branded product to stand out in a crowded retail setting and it can be used to convey distinct brand personality or premium quality. In some categories the colour associations tend to be weaker, which makes it less risky to use incongruent colours and can generate an impression of innovativeness. In many cases, colour alone cannot engage the customer sufficiently to ensure that they recognise and understand the product. It is one part of a range of semiotic cues that used together can be very effective.

A moderate amount of incongruency may have advantages. It can help a branded product to stand out in a crowded retail setting and it can be used to convey distinct brand personality or premium quality.

Shape

The shape of packaging and the words and images printed on it often convey similar attributes. Much of the research in this area focuses on comparing the effects of rounded versus sharper shapes. As with associations with colour, the expectation of sweetness that comes with rounded pack shapes and images possibly comes from nature (e.g., the curvature of fruit).

Other shape-related attributes linked with sweetness expectations include symmetric [128] and voluminous [129] packaging shapes. The sweet-symmetry association could be explained by people instinctively liking symmetrical objects, which is more likely to generate a sweetness association. Researchers have found voluminous and round shapes to correspond to sweetness of beer while bitterness was correlated with thinness, and angular shapes

Angular shapes could be interpreted as spicy, sour or bitter, depending on the category. For coffee, research has found that an angular background shape led to expectations of a more acidic (as opposed to sweeter) taste[131]. For ice cream, where sweetness is expected, angularity or sharpness enhances perceptions of flavour intensity while also being moderately linked to sour evaluations [132].

Shapes do not just convey flavour attributes. A common example of non-flavour related connotations found in the literature is the semiotics of products with various types of 'healthy' virtues. For example, yoghurt and salad dressing has been perceived as healthy when the packaging had a relatively slim body shape[133], an apparent metaphor for bodily healthiness. Angular, slim pack shapes were also perceived as healthier in a study on cookies[134]. However, some consumers may not make the connection between slimness and healthiness if they do not have a health-relevant shopping goal. In other words, if they are not looking for a healthy product, they will not pay attention to the package shape in that way.

Angular shapes could be interpreted as spicy, sour or bitter, depending on the category.

Such findings are category dependent. Roundness does not just have sweetness connotations as it is interpreted differently where sweetness is not as prevalent. For cheese packaging[130], round shapes printed on the packaging have mild taste associations while angular shapes (such as a triangle) arouse sharper taste sensations.

Images and Text

Interpretations of shape apply to text and images. This is because the shapes of images or within typefaces convey specific meanings. It is also possible to distinguish between the sounds of words by describing them as either rounded or angular.

Research using packaging for nuts and pickles found that those displaying angular fire icons enhanced spiciness expectations, while packages with rounded fire icons tended to be associated with a roasted flavour [135]. The more 'pointy', or 'aggressive' the fire icon was, the greater the expectations of spiciness.

Both literal meanings and metaphorical meanings have an important role in packaging semiotics. The use of a fire image to convey that the product has been roasted is literal whereas using one to convey spiciness is more metaphorical as it calls for an extended cognitive process in which the consumer makes a comparison between the heat of fire and the hot sensation generated by spicy food. Use of metaphor can improve the consumer's evaluation of the product (and brand) through the satisfaction gained from making that connection.

The actual shape of the product image can also influence flavour perceptions. As roundness creates an impression of sweetness, for a sweet product like chocolate this can be enhanced by a round image of the food on the packaging[136]. A study comparing two different chocolate products found that rounded shapes were associated with chocolate-covered caramel while angular shapes were more linked chocolate-covered malt honeycomb, a crunchier product[137].

Images on packaging also help to create visual texture. A comparison of flavour perceptions for fluffy and rough visual textures for a variety of snack packaging found moderate associations between the fluffy visual texture and sweetness and another moderate connection between rough or crunchy visual textures and saltiness [138]. The fluffy and sweetness link could originate from a shared positive affect evoked by both features or an association of fluffiness with sweet products like marshmallows or melted chocolate. In the case of rough and crunchy visual textures, indirect associations with salt crystals may be behind the link to that flavour.

The sounds of words can also create flavour associations. Research on this topic often uses made-up nonsense words to minimise any bias from associations with brand names or other aspects of language. For example, high-pitched words (such as 'kiki' and 'takete') can be associated with sparkling water, cranberry juice, and Maltesers (chocolate-covered malt honeycomb) while softer sounding, lower-pitched words (such as 'bouba' and 'maluma') are linked with still water, Brie, and Caramel Nibbles (chocolate-covered caramel) [139]. Higher pitched words had similar associations to angular shapes and lower pitched words had similar associations to rounded shapes. One investigation in this area tested the effects of 'blum' (low-pitched) and 'clax' (high-pitched) and confirmed that the former was more likely to be perceived as sweet and the latter as sour[140].

Typeface is an important aspect of brand identity and can be used to create cultural associations. Studies on typefaces have confirmed that sweet tastes are better expressed using rounded lettering and sour tastes are more effectively conveyed with more angular letters[141]. In addition, consumers understand when brands are using a typeface to communicate an exotic origin – described as 'exotypes'. Research on the use of exotypes, including Greek, Russian and Arabic styles, suggests that most people can identify the typeface most congruent with a product category [142].

The arrangement of multiple types of symbol on packaging is also important for their effectiveness. It is well established that positioning of an image or text can influence weight perceptions. Aradhna Krishna, who authored an influential book on how the senses influence purchase behaviour, has described how "product images that appear in the upper or left portions of a package convey lightness, while those placed in the bottom or right sections convey heaviness"[143]. As she acknowledges, it depends on the attributes that the package designer wants to communicate for whether heaviness or lightness is the appropriate option. Visual (and actual) weight can be used to convey premium or luxury values while lightness could relate to flavour, elegance, healthier ingredients or practical values (associated with portability).

Congruence and Context

The effect of sensory and semiotic packaging cues often depends on the congruence between them. In addition to logical associations between colour and flavour, congruence applies to the relationships between colour and image, colour and shape, visual and haptic, sound and shape and many more. It enhances flavour expectations, increases speed of recognition and usually means more positive product and brand evaluations.

Congruence occurs both through direct associations, such as when the packaging is the same colour as the product, or through indirect associations in which the cues and/or the product share an attribute or value. For example, visual and haptic elements might be deemed as congruent when they convey the same brand personality, which could be exciting, authentic, sophisticated or something else. When these elements are congruent, consumers are more likely to view them positively. This includes the taste of the product when sweetness cues are matched by the sweetness of the food itself. However, shape-taste congruence has been found to reduce evaluations of sour flavoured products[144], suggesting that over-emphasising some flavours could be counter-productive. Finally, increasing the number of cues, if they are congruent, increases the strength of flavour expectations [145]. However, when there is an incongruence between colour and background pattern, colour tends to be the cue that determines taste expectations, with other cues effectively discarded from consideration.

While consumers seem to prefer colour/shape congruence (e.g., angular with green shapes or pink with round shapes) to incongruent labels (i.e., angular/pink and round/green)[146] , incongruence is not necessarily something to avoid altogether in packaging design. Some of the literature acknowledges that consumers sometimes prefer moderately incongruent products (including packaging) compared with complete congruence or extreme incongruence. [147]

Congruence enhances flavour expectations, increases speed of recognition and usually means more positive product and brand evaluations.

This is related to the idea that packages that stand out in the category can be perceived as being premium products[148].Breaking the rules of the category can make the product appear to be exclusive or chic, for example, by using an extraordinary shape. However, 'over the top' differentiation could be off-putting for consumers, a view that resonates with extreme incongruence.

The relationships between packaging cues and consumer outcomes are often likely to depend on context and the presence of other cues. Product category, brand personality and retail setting are all potential influences on consumer perceptions and behaviours. While semiotic and sensory cues are a powerful influence in shaping consumer perceptions, other contextual factors will always be influential in a retail setting, with purchase mission and brand loyalty especially important. These include consumer goals, the appearance of other products in the same setting, and the types of messages placed on packaging.

A customer's focus on finding a favoured brand could reduce the effect of flavour cues. In addition, consumers might have specific goals that lead them to ignore packaging semiotics and focus only on specific information provided on the label. For example, typeface has been found to influence perceived product attributes like healthiness – a less heavy typeface was perceived as healthier than the same product in packaging with thicker/wider lettering – but only for consumers with a greater focus on health promotion[149].

Increasing the number of cues, if they are congruent, increases the strength of flavour expectations.

In addition to individual goals, design effectiveness depends on the type of message being conveyed. This could relate to information that relates to core product attributes or more general brand values. Contemporary packaging typically contains several different labels and messages with a real danger of cognitive overload and confusion caused by an excess of information[150]. This is a concern for those wanting to demonstrate credentials such as sustainability. The design of logos, brands or labels can impact how easily consumers can interpret what they mean. Consumers tend to like a label with high design complexity, which might include elaborate shapes and objects, and a greater willingness to buy has also been found for that kind eco-label[151].

This study, which used the zoom-in function on e-commerce websites, demonstrates that eco-labels need to be eye-catching and highly visible (as large as permissible) to ease processing (and reduce confusion) and enhance product evaluations.

A final aspect of packaging context to consider is the size of the display in which the product is likely to be presented. This could determine the choice of packaging shape, depending on the impression that a retailer or brand owner wants to achieve for the product. Specifically, research has found that simpler packaging shapes appear larger when they appear in a larger set of products or when the visual context is quite cluttered. Conversely, more complex pack shapes appear larger when in smaller or relatively uncluttered sets[152]. This is further evidence of changing psychological responses in response to cognitive overload. Considering the many potential sights, sounds and smells in which a product might be displayed, effective use of combined packaging semiotics seems to be vital in helping consumers identify the products that they seek.

In summary, people bring a huge amount of stored knowledge of symbols and cultural references to the retail setting. Consumers use colours, shapes, images, words, text, or different combinations of each to find and select products. Therefore, studying the visual codes of a product category is key to brand positioning and ensuring the appropriate level of packaging-product congruence. New and distinctive packaging designs should consider the meanings, especially relating to flavour or scent, conveyed by choices of colour, shape, images, typography and other cues. The fascination of semiotics comes from stopping to appreciate the associations we make, whether they are obvious or significantly more subtle. In addition, the context in which these processes happen will determine outcomes. The potential for information overload and confusion is an important consideration and packaging can help consumers overcome these issues with clear and enticing designs.

Conclusion

The idea that shopping experiences can be confusing and unpleasant might seem a negative view to take. This is not the purpose of this report. The intention is to identify and discuss consumer responses to various product-based and contextual stimuli.
The consumer decision-making process takes place in multiple online and in-store settings. People never do these things in a vacuum and recognising that fact is important for product and packaging design. The technologies and creative methods that retailers employ in contemporary commerce can inspire, engage and make the shopping experience easier. However, with many different products, services and media competing for our attention, it can quickly become a struggle to maintain focus on the shopping mission.

This point becomes more vital when one thinks about the large number of people who have limited capacity for processing the massive amount of information the retail environment projects. This report has looked at the problem from a range of perspectives. It demonstrates how ambient or design factors like lighting, signage and layout or more social factors like crowding and shop staff can overwhelm and cause confusion. Retailers need to balance these while providing the choice of goods that people expect, without meaning that decision making feels onerous.

To achieve a greater sense of calm and clarity, retailers must recognise these subtleties of choice and effective displays while remembering that sometimes there needs to a bit of 'messiness' to allow consumers the satisfaction of finding products by chance. Dr Esther Pugh and Tyla Hockey's case study of visual merchandising in TK Maxx demonstrates this point precisely. It is not the purpose of some shops to provide regimented displays of predictable goods. People enter some stores just to see what they can find, and intelligent, creative visual merchandising helps the shopper in such situations. Another way to engage shoppers is to appeal to their own sense of identity by matching products to perceived lifestyles. However, as Nicola Moxon demonstrates in her chapter, clumsy, outdated stereotyping can repel customers and potentially cause harm to young people by undermining their self-confidence. Even where less offence is caused, the reinforcement of gender stereotypes allows the continuation of practices that are out of step with social attitudes.

The research summarised in this report raises questions for both researchers and practitioners about what excites or overwhelms and what enables or confuses. There are many clues in the findings presented, not least in the semiotic analysis of packaging attributes. Shapes, images and colours, used well, can guide the consumer and limit the potential for confusion. Context and category considerations are always important, and it is now clear that recognition of diversity is vital if retailers are to appeal to the whole of society.

Shapes, images and colours, used well, can guide the consumer and limit the potential for confusion. Context and category considerations are always important, and it is now clear that recognition of diversity is vital if retailers are to appeal to the whole of society.

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