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VISUAL MERCHANDISING ACROSS CULTURES

Mariana STOICA
Moldova State University, Chisinau, Republic of Moldova
mariana.stoica@usm.md
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-1624-7353

Purpose of the article: The purpose of this article is to explore the relationship between visual merchandising techniques and cultural contexts, analyzing how these factors influence consumer behavior across various regions. It aims to provide insights for marketers and retailers on the importance of culturally informed visual merchandising strategies in global markets.

Methodology: The research employs a comparative analysis of case studies from multiple countries. It examines various visual merchandising strategies such as color symbolism, product placement, and storytelling within distinct cultural settings, investigating how these elements shape consumer perceptions, decision-making, and brand loyalty.

Conclusions: The study concludes that cultural values, traditions, and consumer expectations play a pivotal role in shaping visual merchandising strategies. Brands that effectively incorporate cultural nuances into their visual merchandising can create stronger consumer connections, improving engagement and fostering brand loyalty across diverse markets.

Originality: This research adds to the discourse on international marketing by highlighting the crucial role of cultural understanding in visual merchandising. It emphasizes the need for brands to tailor their retail strategies according to cultural contexts, offering new insights into enhancing retail effectiveness on a global scale.

Key words: Visual merchandising, cultural context, consumer behavior, international marketing, globalization, brand loyalty, retail strategies, case studies, cultural values.

Introduction

In today's globalized marketplace, visual merchandising plays a critical role in shaping consumer perceptions and driving sales. However, the effectiveness of visual merchandising strategies can vary significantly across cultures due to differing social norms, aesthetic preferences, and symbolic meanings. As retail brands expand internationally, they face the challenge of adapting their visual merchandising techniques to resonate with diverse cultural audiences. Despite the growing importance of cross-cultural retailing, there is limited research that explores how cultural differences impact the design and execution of visual merchandising strategies.

The problem being investigated in this study is the lack of comprehensive understanding of how cultural nuances affect consumer responses to visual merchandising. This gap in knowledge creates difficulties for global brands that aim to standardize their strategies across different markets while remaining culturally relevant. As a result, many brands risk losing their competitive edge in international markets by failing to align their merchandising with local consumer expectations.

The rationale for conducting this research is driven by the increasing need for retail brands to compete in a culturally diverse global market. As consumer preferences evolve, brands must move beyond a "one-size-fits-all" approach and adopt tailored visual merchandising strategies that reflect local cultural values. Understanding the relationship between culture and consumer behavior in the context of visual merchandising is essential for creating meaningful and successful retail experiences.

This research is important because it addresses a critical gap in the literature on international marketing and retail strategy. By examining the intersection of culture and visual merchandising, the study provides valuable insights that can inform both academic research and practical applications. The findings will not only contribute to the scientific understanding of cross-cultural consumer behavior but also offer actionable recommendations for global retailers looking to optimize their merchandising practices across different regions.

Literature review

The intersection between visual merchandising and culture has garnered attention as globalization has pushed retailers to adapt their strategies across borders. Several researchers have explored the way cultural differences shape consumer behavior and what are the perceptions of visual marketing techniques in diverse regions.

One of the earliest contributions to understanding how store environments influence consumer behavior comes from Philip Kotler (1973) in his paper "Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool". Kotler emphasizes the importance of atmospheric cues, including visual merchandising, in shaping consumers' emotional responses and purchasing behaviors in-store. Although Kotler's work is not explicitly cross-cultural, it established the groundwork for later explorations into how visual elements can differ in effectiveness across cultures.

Building on the importance of cultural differences, Geert Hofstede (1980) developed the well-known "Cultural Dimensions Theory", which provides a framework for understanding cultural variability in consumer behavior. Although Hofstede's work does not focus specifically on visual merchandising, his dimensions (such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance) have been used extensively in marketing research to explain how cultural values influence consumer preferences, including reactions to visual cues in retail environments. Another researcher, Marieke de Mooij (2010), in her book "Global Marketing and Advertising: Understanding Cultural Paradoxes", directly explores how cultural dimensions affect marketing strategies, including the design of retail environments and visual merchandising. De Mooij argues that individualistic cultures (e.g., the U.S., UK) prefer more straightforward and less cluttered visual displays, while collectivist cultures (e.g., China, Japan) favor more elaborate and symbol-laden merchandising. She emphasizes that successful global brands must tailor their visual merchandising to resonate with local cultural expectations, reinforcing Hofstede's dimensions.

The role of cultural context in visual merchandising is further explored by Jagdish N. Sheth and Rajendra S. Sisodia (2006) in their book "Does Marketing Need Reform?". They discuss how visual merchandising needs to evolve in a global marketplace where consumers are more culturally aware and seek tailored experiences. Sheth and Sisodia note that multinational companies have had to rethink their visual merchandising strategies to cater to culturally diverse audiences, citing examples from retail giants like IKEA and Walmart.

Finally, A. T. Kearney (2014), in their global retail development index report, noted the need for cultural adaptation in visual merchandising for retail success in emerging markets. Their analysis indicated that visual merchandising strategies that reflect local customs and values can enhance brand authenticity and consumer trust, which is crucial for long-term success in culturally diverse markets.

MATERIALS AND METHODS. This research utilized a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the differences in visual merchandising practices across various cultures and their influence on consumer behavior. The study focused on three key regions: Europe, East Asia,

and North America. These regions were selected due to their significant cultural diversity and prominence in global retail markets.

An extensive review of academic literature was conducted using databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. This literature review encompassed studies on visual merchandising, consumer behavior, and cross-cultural marketing to establish a theoretical foundation for the research.

Retail reports and case studies from credible sources, including Euromonitor International and Statista, were analyzed to gather insights into current merchandising practices within the selected regions. These case studies provided a practical understanding of how visual merchandising strategies are implemented across different cultural landscapes.

The research applied Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory as a framework for analyzing the cultural values that influence consumer behavior in retail. Also a comparative analysis was conducted to synthesize the findings from various data sources, including academic literature and case studies. This analysis aimed to identify key differences and similarities in visual merchandising practices across the selected regions. The results from the literature review, case studies, and cultural analysis were synthesized into tables and charts to provide a clear overview of the visual merchandising elements influenced by cultural factors, such as color preferences, store layouts, signage styles, and product placements.

Results and discussions

One of the most widely used frameworks for understanding how culture impacts consumer behavior is Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory. This model classifies cultures based on key dimensions such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance. These dimensions are widely cited in cross-cultural studies and serve as the foundation for understanding cultural differences in consumer behavior.

Table 1

Hofstede's cultural dimensions table

Dimension	Description	Country Examples
Power Distance	Acceptance of unequal power distribution	High: Malaysia, India
		Low: Denmark, New Zealand
Individualism vs. Collectivism	Degree of interdependence among individuals	Individualistic: USA, Canada
		Collectivist: China, Japan
Masculinity vs. Femininity	Preference for achievement vs. nurturing values	Masculine: Japan, Germany
		Feminine: Sweden, Norway
Uncertainty Avoidance	Comfort with ambiguity and uncertainty	High: Greece, Portugal
		Low: Singapore, Jamaica
Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation	Focus on future rewards vs. immediate outcomes	Long-Term: China, Japan
		Short-Term: USA, Australia
Indulgence vs. Restraint	Degree of freedom in fulfilling human desires	Indulgent: Mexico, Australia
		Restrained: Russia, Egypt

Source: author's elaboration

In high power distance cultures (e.g., Malaysia, India), consumers are more comfortable with hierarchy and authority. This reflects in luxury displays where premium products are highlighted, often placed at eye level or in exclusive, sectioned-off areas, signaling their superior status. On the other hand,

in low power distance cultures (e.g., Denmark, Sweden), egalitarianism is prioritized. This can lead to more democratic store layouts, where products are displayed with equal visibility, and the customer experience is more self-guided without overt hierarchies in product presentation.

Considering the individualistic cultures (e.g., USA, Canada), visual merchandising emphasizes personal choice and customization. Displays often promote products that help consumers express their individuality. There is a trend toward open, spacious layouts where consumers can move freely and explore products that resonate with their personal identity. On the opposite side are the collectivist cultures (e.g., China, Japan). The focus is on group-oriented displays, often showcasing products that emphasize family, community, or shared experiences. Store layouts tend to be more organized and structured, reflecting the importance of harmony and group conformity.

Masculine cultures (e.g., Japan, Germany) tend to prefer visual merchandising that is bold, aggressive, and focused on achievement or status. These cultures may favor strong branding, competitive displays (e.g., showcasing the latest technology), and product positioning that conveys success. Feminine cultures (e.g., Sweden, Norway) emphasize nurturing, cooperation, and aesthetics. Visual merchandising in these countries often features softer colors, eco-friendly themes, and community-focused displays. The shopping experience is designed to be stress-free and caring rather than competitive.

Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Greece, Portugal) tend to prefer environments that reduce uncertainty. In retail, this means clear signage, structured store layouts, and detailed product information that help reduce ambiguity and make the shopping experience more predictable and organized. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures (e.g., Singapore, Jamaica), consumers are more open to ambiguity and experimentation. Stores in these regions may favor more flexible layouts, innovative displays, and a broader range of product offerings, encouraging exploration and discovery.

In long-term oriented cultures (e.g., China, Japan), consumers value sustainability, durability, and investment in future benefits. Visual merchandising in these cultures often highlights eco-friendly products, sustainability messaging, and long-term product benefits. In short-term oriented cultures (e.g., USA, Australia), the focus is on immediate benefits, such as sales promotions, newness, and trends. Displays often emphasize urgency and short-term incentives to purchase, such as “limited-time offers.”

Indulgent cultures (e.g., Mexico, Australia) prioritize enjoyment and fun. Visual merchandising in these cultures may feature vibrant colors, interactive displays, and experiential retail that encourages consumers to enjoy the shopping process. Restrained cultures (e.g., Russia, Egypt) are more controlled and serious. Merchandising in these countries may focus on practicality, functionality, and minimalism, with less emphasis on flamboyant or interactive elements.

An other important instrument that allows us to search what are the visual merchandising specifics in different cultures is study of its four most important elements: colors preferences, store layouts, signage style and product placement.

After making an analysis of various data, containing valuable information about peculiarities visual merchandising in various countries, we synthesized the results in the Table 2.

Table 2

Comparative preferences for visual merchandising elements

Visual merchandising element	**Individualistic countries**	**Collectivist cultures**
Color preferencies	Bold, bright colors (e.g., red, blue)	Soft, harmonious colors (e.g., pastels)

Store layout	Open, spacious designs emphasizing personal space	Organized, community-oriented layouts
Signage style	Direct, promotional language	Indirect, relationship-focused language
Product placement	Focus on individual items	Grouping of items to emphasize communal use

Source: author's elaboration

In individualistic cultures like the USA and Canada, bold and bright colors such as red and blue are often used to grab attention and appeal to the individual's personal preferences. They prefer open, spacious layouts, allowing for personal exploration, giving the customer a sense of freedom and space, emphasizing individuality and autonomy. Direct and promotional language is used in signage focusing on sales, discounts, and calls to action aimed at the individual shopper. Also products are placed to highlight individual items, showcasing the unique qualities of each product to appeal to the individual shopper.

In collectivist cultures such as China and Japan, softer and more harmonious color schemes like pastels are preferred, reflecting values of balance, community, and serenity. Also they favor organized, community-oriented layouts, where products are arranged to encourage social interaction and communal browsing, often with less emphasis on personal space. The signage tends to be more indirect and focused on relationship-building, such as using subtle, friendly language that appeals to a sense of belonging or community. Products are often grouped together to promote their use in a communal context, emphasizing shared experiences and collective benefits.

Visual merchandising is also strongly influenced by the community and the traditions but also by the innovations and the quality of the products. In Table 3 we highlight the influence of these dimensions on the visual merchandising.

Table 3**.**

Cultural value impacting visual merchandising

Cultural value	**Influence on consumer behavior**	**Example of visual merchandising**
Community	Preference for communal experiences in shopping	Stores like IKEA create social spaces for families to gather, encouraging social interaction and collaboration during the shopping experience.
Tradition	Respect for cultural heritage influences display themes	Merchandising that highlights local crafts and traditional motifs, such as displays featuring artisanal products or regional artwork, connects with consumers' cultural identities.
Innovation	Acceptance of new trends affects display styles	Retailers utilizing interactive displays and tech integrations (e.g., augmented reality experiences) to attract tech-savvy consumers looking for the latest innovations.
Quality	Value placed on craftsmanship and quality	High-end brands like Hermès emphasize craftsmanship in their product displays, showcasing meticulous workmanship through visual storytelling and elegant presentation.

Source: author's elaboration

Consumers in collectivist cultures often value social interaction and communal experiences. Stores like IKEA design their layouts to include areas where families can spend time together, enhancing the overall shopping experience by fostering connections among shoppers. Cultural heritage plays a significant role in shaping consumer preferences. Merchandising that incorporates local crafts and traditional designs resonates with consumers' sense of identity, making them more likely to engage with products that reflect their culture. In cultures that embrace new trends and technology, retailers must adapt their visual merchandising to include modern and innovative elements. For example, brands that integrate augmented reality (AR) in their displays not only attract customers but also enhance their shopping experience by providing interactive features. In addiotion, in cultures that emphasize high-quality craftsmanship, brands must ensure that their visual merchandising communicates this value. Hermès, for instance, uses sophisticated displays to highlight the intricacies of their products, appealing to consumers who appreciate and are willing to pay for high-quality items.

Analyzing the various merchandising strategies across the world we could synthetize a table that show the specific of different regions in establishing their visual strategies guided by the variety of world cultures (Table 4).

Table 4.

Key visual merchandising strategies by regions

Region	**Preferred visual merchandising strategies**	**Example retailers**
North America	Clean, minimalist displays; emphasis on personal branding	Apple, Zara
Europe	Blend of classic and modern; focus on storytelling through displays	H&M, Marks & Spencer
Asia	Bright colors, intricate designs; emphasis on community and family	Uniqlo, Muji
Middle East	Luxurious, ornate displays; use of rich colors and patterns	Al-Hokair Group, Splash
Africa	Practical and straightforward; focus on essential products	Shoprite, Pick n Pay

Source: author's elaboration

Visual merchandising in North America often features clean and minimalist displays. Retailers like Apple focus on sleek aesthetics that reflect their brand identity and innovation. Zara also employs minimalism, emphasizing individual clothing items through streamlined presentations. European retailers often blend classic and modern styles, using visual merchandising to tell stories. H&M creates themed displays that connect with current trends, while Marks & Spencer uses a narrative approach to highlight the quality and heritage of its products, appealing to consumers' emotions and values.

In Asia, visual merchandising tends to use bright colors and intricate designs, reflecting cultural values that emphasize community and family. Uniqlo incorporates bold colors and engaging layouts, while Muji focuses on simplicity but also incorporates elements that foster a sense of togetherness among shoppers. The Middle East's visual merchandising strategies are characterized by luxurious and ornate displays that use rich colors and patterns. Retailers like Al-Hokair Group create visually stunning environments that reflect opulence, while Splash often utilizes cultural motifs and intricate designs to resonate with local consumers. African retailers tend to adopt a practical and straightforward approach to visual merchandising, focusing on essential products. Shoprite and Pick n Pay emphasize functional

displays that make products easily accessible, catering to a consumer base that prioritizes value and practicality.

Conclusions:

1. Visual merchandising strategies are deeply influenced by the cultural norms and values of each region. Retailers must understand and respect these cultural differences to effectively engage consumers. For example, individualistic cultures tend to favor minimalism and personal branding, while collectivist cultures emphasize community-focused layouts and social shopping experiences.

2. Consumer expectations and shopping behaviors differ significantly from region to region, which means retailers must adopt visual merchandising strategies that cater to local preferences. In some regions, consumers prioritize efficiency and functionality, while in others, the emphasis is on luxury and opulence or storytelling and tradition.

3. Global retailers cannot apply a one-size-fits-all strategy. To succeed in different markets, companies must localize their visual merchandising strategies. Whether it's through the use of color schemes, store layouts, or product placement, retailers need to reflect local cultural values and expectations to create a resonant shopping experience for consumers. Elements like color usage, store layout, and signage play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. Bright and bold colors may appeal to certain Asian markets, while muted tones and minimalist layouts are preferred in North American and European markets. Similarly, store layouts can emphasize openness for personal exploration or crowdedness to stimulate quick decision-making in socially oriented cultures.

4. In regions like Europe, storytelling through visual merchandising helps brands connect with consumers by linking their products to tradition, heritage, or modern trends. This approach fosters emotional engagement, which enhances the shopping experience and strengthens brand loyalty. In regions such as Africa, where consumers often prioritize practicality and essentials, retailers should focus on clear, straightforward visual merchandising. This ensures easy navigation and product access, reflecting the local demand for functionality and efficiency.

The global retail landscape is diverse, and retailers must adapt their visual merchandising strategies to meet the unique demands and cultural preferences of each market. By focusing on cultural alignment and localizing their visual presentations, companies can create impactful consumer experiences that drive both engagement and sales across various regions.

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