

Customer Perception in Kathmandu's Organized Retail Sector: Effects of Design, Ambient and Social Factors

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Abstract

Background: Store environment has become an important component of contemporary retail experience because customers evaluate not only merchandise and price but also design, ambient conditions, and social interactions within the store. This study examines the effect of three store-environment dimensions' design factors, ambient factors, and social factors on customer perception of organized retail stores in Kathmandu.

Methods: A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed. Primary data were collected from 250 customers of organized retail stores in Kathmandu Valley using a structured questionnaire and convenience sampling. Reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM) were used.

Results: Social factors had the strongest positive effect on customer perception, followed by ambient factors. Design factors also had a significant positive effect, although it was the weakest of the three.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that employee-related interactions and ambient conditions are more influential in shaping customer perception than physical design alone. Retailers

should therefore treat employees and sensory conditions as strategic components of the retail environment.

Novelty: The study extends store-environment research to the organized retail context of Kathmandu Valley and empirically compares the relative effects of design, ambient, and social factors on customer perception.

Keywords: customer perception, design factors, ambient factors, social factors, store environment

Introduction

Retailing has become increasingly competitive as changing consumer expectations, evolving shopping behaviors, and the transformation of physical retail environments have shifted attention from purely transactional exchanges toward broader customer experiences ([Roggeveen et al., 2020](#); [Reina Paz & Jiménez Delgado, 2020](#); [Petruzzellis et al., 2021](#)). Customers encounter multiple environmental stimuli throughout the shopping journey, including physical design, ambient conditions, social interactions, and other experiential touchpoints that collectively shape customer experience ([Roggeveen et al., 2020](#); [Reina Paz & Jiménez Delgado, 2020](#)). Retailers therefore increasingly use the physical store environment as a strategic mechanism for creating engaging experiences and influencing customers' evaluations and behavioral responses ([Roggeveen et al., 2020](#); [Petruzzellis et al., 2021](#)). Store environment has consequently evolved from being merely a physical setting for transactions into an important component of contemporary retail experience and value creation ([Roggeveen et al., 2020](#); [Petruzzellis et al., 2021](#); [Vilnai-Yavetz et al., 2021](#)).

Store environment encompasses physical, sensory, spatial, and social cues encountered by customers during shopping ([Areni & Kim, 1994](#); [Baker, 1986](#); [Bitner, 1992](#); [Kotler, 1973](#)). Design cues include store layout, visual merchandising, displays, signage, color, and interior design, while ambient cues include lighting, music, temperature, cleanliness, and fragrance ([Areni & Kim, 1994](#); [Baker, 1986](#); [Bitner, 1992](#); [Kotler, 1973](#)). Social cues include employee appearance, friendliness, competence, responsiveness, and customer–employee interaction ([Baker, 1986](#); [Bitner, 1992](#)). Baker (1986) classified these cues into design, ambient, and social factors, providing a multidimensional basis for examining customers' responses to retail environments.

Customer perception represents the overall evaluation customers form regarding a retail store and its products and services based on their shopping experiences ([Baker et al., 1994](#); [Bitner, 1992](#)). A favorable store environment can create positive affective responses, enhance perceived quality and value, encourage customers to spend more time in the store, and increase favorable shopping responses ([Aylott & Mitchell, 1998](#); [Babin & Attaway, 2000](#); [Baker et al., 1994](#); [Sherman et al., 1997](#)). In contrast, an unpleasant environment can produce unfavorable evaluations and reduce store attractiveness ([Bitner, 1992](#); [Baker et al., 1994](#)).

Recent retail research supports the multidimensional nature of store atmospherics. Roggeveen et al. (2020) proposed the design–ambient–social–trialability framework and emphasized environmental stimuli across the retail journey. Bonfanti and Yfantidou (2021) identified

immersive design, sensorial ambient elements, and social relationships as important dimensions of memorable in-store experience. Vilnai-Yavetz et al. (2021) found that the quality of in-store atmospherics positively affected actual spending and mall loyalty through perceived store atmosphere. Baid and Madhwani (2024) also reported that appropriate music characteristics improved customers' perceptions of service quality (Chalise et al., 2026).

The Nepalese organized retail context provides a relevant setting for examining these relationships because customers increasingly encounter supermarkets, departmental stores, apparel retailers, and shopping malls with different physical, sensory, and interpersonal environments. However, the relative contribution of design, ambient, and social factors to customer perception has received limited empirical attention in the Kathmandu context. Findings from other markets cannot automatically be generalized because customer expectations, retail formats, and service practices may differ across contexts (Roggeveen et al., 2020; Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021).

Accordingly, the present study examines the impact of store environment on customer perception towards retail stores in Kathmandu. Specifically, it investigates whether design factors, ambient factors, and social factors significantly influence customer perception. The study draws primarily on Baker's Store Environment Theory (1986) and is complemented by Kotler's Atmospherics Theory (1973), Bitner's Servicescape Theory (1992), and the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory of Mehrabian and Russell (1974).

Review of the Literature and Conceptual Framework

Store Environment

Store environment refers to the collection of physical, sensory, spatial, and social cues that customers encounter within and around a retail establishment (Baker, 1986; Bitner, 1992). Environmental cues influence customers' impressions of a store, its products, and the quality of service they expect to receive (Baker et al., 1994; Sherman et al., 1997). Contemporary research continues to treat retail atmospherics as a multidimensional construct that operates across several customer touchpoints (Roggeveen et al., 2020; Reina Paz & Jiménez Delgado, 2020).

Design Factors

Design factors comprise the visual and spatial characteristics of a retail store, including layout, color, interior design, product displays, visual merchandising, signage, and fixture arrangement (Areni & Kim, 1994; Baker, 1986; Ward et al., 1992; Wakefield & Blodgett, 1996). These elements influence customer movement, product search, store positioning, and perceptions of attractiveness and functionality (Baker et al., 1994; Baker et al., 2002). Recent retail research continues to identify design as a major component of the customer experience (Roggeveen et al., 2020; Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021). Therefore:

H1: Design factors have a significant positive effect on customer perception of retail stores.

Ambient Factors

Ambient factors represent background sensory conditions such as lighting, music, temperature, cleanliness, noise, and fragrance (Aylott & Mitchell, 1998; Kotler, 1973; Bitner,

[1992; Milliman, 1982](#)). Although some ambient cues operate subtly, they can influence customers' comfort, mood, attention, and evaluation of the retail environment ([Baker, 1986; Bitner, 1992](#)). Recent evidence indicates that atmospheric quality and music can affect customer experience and perceptions of service quality ([Vilnai-Yavetz et al., 2021; Baid & Madhwani, 2024](#)). Therefore:

H2: Ambient factors have a significant positive effect on customer perception of retail stores.

Social Factors

Social factors refer to human elements in the retail environment, particularly employee appearance, friendliness, responsiveness, competence, behavior, and customer interaction. Employees form part of the experienced retail environment because their behavior can facilitate product search, decision making, confidence, and personal attention ([Bitner, 1992; Baker et al., 2002; Shrestha & Mahat, 2024](#)). Recent research similarly emphasizes social relationships as a significant dimension of memorable in-store experiences ([Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021; Roggeveen et al., 2020](#)). Therefore:

H3: Social factors have a significant positive effect on customer perception of retail stores.

Customer Perception

Customer perception refers to customers' overall interpretation and evaluation of a retail store based on multiple product, service, physical, sensory, and social cues ([Baker et al., 1994; Bitner, 1992](#)). Store-environment stimuli can influence perceived quality, satisfaction, shopping value, and behavioral responses ([Babin & Attaway, 2000; Sherman et al., 1997](#)). Contemporary retail research therefore supports examining customer perception as an outcome of multiple atmospheric dimensions rather than a response to a single store attribute ([Roggeveen et al., 2020; Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021](#)).

Theoretical Foundation

Kotler's ([1973](#)) Atmospherics Theory proposes that retailers can deliberately design purchasing environments to produce desired cognitive and emotional responses. The theory provides a basis for understanding how lighting, music, color, scent, layout, and related environmental characteristics function as marketing stimuli ([Kotler, 1973; Shrestha et al., 2026](#)).

Baker's ([1986](#)) Store Environment Theory provides the principal foundation of this study by classifying store-environment cues into ambient, design, and social dimensions. The framework directly corresponds to the three independent variables examined in the present study and recognizes that customers respond to physical appearance, sensory conditions, and human interaction ([Baker, 1986](#)).

Bitner's ([1992](#)) Servicescape Theory explains how physical surroundings and social elements influence customers and employees during service encounters. The theory reinforces the argument that customer evaluations are shaped by environmental conditions, spatial layout, functionality, signs, symbols, and human interaction ([Bitner, 1992](#)).

The Stimulus–Organism–Response theory of Mehrabian and Russell ([1974](#)) provides the psychological mechanism underlying the proposed relationships. In the present study, design, ambient, and social factors represent environmental stimuli, while customer perception

represents the internal cognitive evaluation resulting from those stimuli ([Mehrabian & Russell, 1974](#); [Reina Paz & Jiménez Delgado, 2020](#)).

Empirical Review and Research Gap

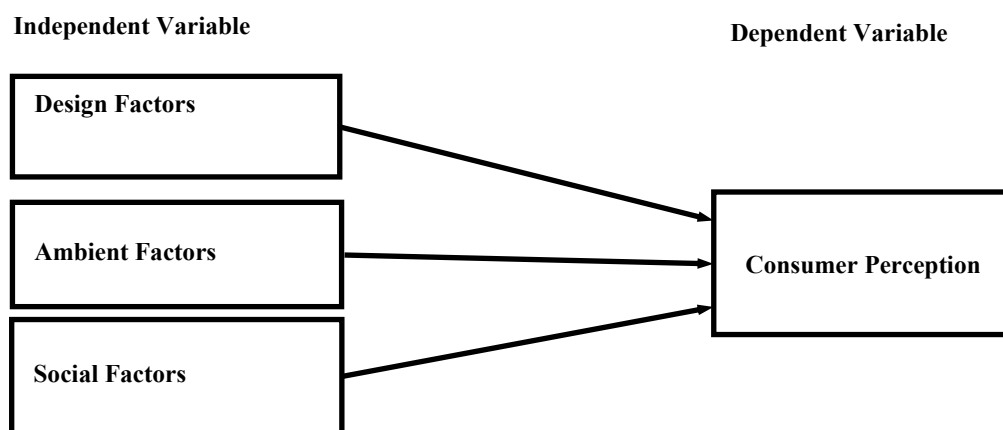
Baker et al. ([1994](#)) demonstrated that ambient, design, and social cues influence store image and perceived quality. Roggeveen et al. ([2020](#)) extended the retail-atmospherics perspective by showing that customers encounter multiple environmental touch points throughout the retail journey. Bonfanti and Yfantidou ([2021](#)) further showed that immersive design, sensorial ambient elements, and social relationships contribute to memorable in-store experiences. Vilnai-Yavetz et al. ([2021](#)) provided behavioral evidence that in-store atmospheric quality can increase spending and loyalty, while Baid and Madhwani ([2024](#)) found that music characteristics can improve perceptions of service quality.

Although these studies establish strong international evidence, the relative importance of design, ambient, and social factors may differ across retail markets. The present study addresses this contextual gap by empirically testing the three-dimensional store-environment model among customers of organized retail stores in Kathmandu Valley.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates Baker's Store Environment Theory ([1986](#)), Kotler's Atmospherics Theory ([1973](#)), Bitner's Servicescape Theory ([1992](#)), and the S-O-R perspective of Mehrabian and Russell ([1974](#)). Baker's three dimensions—design, ambient, and social factors—form the three independent variables, while the complementary theories explain how environmental stimuli influence customer evaluation. Aspfors ([2010](#)) and Manandhar ([2019](#)) provide contextual support for the store-environment/customer-perception framework.

Figure 1: *Research Framework*



Source: Adapted from Aspfors ([2010](#)); Baker ([1986](#)); Bitner ([1992](#)); Kotler ([1973](#)), Manandhar ([2019](#)); Mehrabian and Russell ([1974](#)).

Methods

Research Design

The study adopted a quantitative approach and used descriptive and causal research design. A cross-sectional survey was conducted to examine the hypothesized relationships among design factors, ambient factors, social factors, and customer perception. A structured, self-administered questionnaire was used for primary data collection.

Population and Sample

The target population comprised customers of organized retail stores in Kathmandu Valley, including customers visiting supermarkets, departmental stores, apparel stores, and other organized retail outlets. Convenience sampling was employed based on accessibility and willingness to participate. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed; 270 were returned and 250 usable responses were retained after screening.

Measurement and Data Analysis

The questionnaire measured four latent constructs using a seven-point Likert scale: Design Factors, Ambient Factors, Social Factors, and Customer Perception. Design factors captured layout, displays, visual merchandising, and related physical characteristics; ambient factors covered music, fragrance, lighting, and cleanliness; social factors captured employee attributes, behavior, responsiveness, friendliness, and interaction; and customer perception represented the overall evaluation of the retail store.

Data were analyzed using SPSS, Excel, and AMOS. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, followed by descriptive statistics and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). EFA used principal component analysis with Varimax rotation. Sampling adequacy was assessed using KMO and Bartlett's test. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and validity assessment were used to evaluate the measurement model, followed by structural equation modeling (SEM) to test the hypotheses.

The structural model was specified as: $CP = \beta_0 + \beta_1 DF + \beta_2 AF + \beta_3 SF + \varepsilon$, where CP represents Customer Perception, DF represents Design Factors, AF represents Ambient Factors, SF represents Social Factors, and ε represents the error term.

Results and Discussion

Respondents' Profile

From 250 usable responses were retained for analysis. Male respondents represented 60.5% and female respondents 39.5%. Respondents aged 20–30 years constituted 67.5% of the sample, and 72.0% held at least a bachelor's degree. More than half (54.0%) reported visiting organized retail stores fewer than five times during the reference period.

Frequency of Shopping

It is viewed 48% respondents visited organized retail stores fewer than five times during the reference period, representing the largest proportion of the sample. Similarly, 32% respondents reported visiting 5–10 times, while 20% respondents reported visiting more than

10 times. Overall, the distribution indicates that nearly half of the respondents were relatively low-frequency visitors, while one-fifth were frequent visitors to organized retail stores.

Reliability and Descriptive Results

All four constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.904 to 0.913, exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.70 and indicating that the items were sufficiently consistent for further analysis.

Table 1.

Reliability and Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Items	α	Mean	SD
Design Factors	9	0.912	4.73	0.95
Ambient Factors	12	0.904	5.45	0.99
Social Factors	6	0.913	5.57	0.85
Customer Perception	5	0.907	5.43	0.76

Table 1 shows Social Factors recorded the highest mean ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 0.85$), followed by Ambient Factors ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 0.99$) and Customer Perception ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 0.76$). Design Factors recorded the lowest mean ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 0.95$), although the overall evaluation remained positive.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

The data were suitable for factor analysis, with a KMO value of 0.915 and a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($\chi^2 = 3901.508$, $df = 231$, $p < .001$). Four components with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 were extracted and jointly explained 72.33% of total variance.

Table 2.

Exploratory Factor Structure

Construct	Retained items	Loading range
Social Factors	6	0.661–0.848
Design Factors	6	0.736–0.888
Ambient Factors	4	0.678–0.868
Customer Perception	5	0.553–0.823

Table 2 highlights the factor structure broadly supports the proposed four-construct measurement model. The retained factor loadings indicate meaningful associations between the observed indicators and their respective constructs.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

SEM was used to examine the direct effects of Design Factors, Ambient Factors, and Social Factors on Customer Perception. The results indicate that all three factors had positive and statistically significant effects on Customer Perception. Social Factors had the strongest positive effect ($\beta = 0.468$, $C.R. = 7.895$, $p < .001$), followed by Ambient Factors ($\beta = 0.297$, $C.R. = 5.484$, $p < .001$). Design Factors also had a positive and statistically significant effect on Customer Perception ($\beta = 0.267$, $C.R. = 2.880$, $p = .004$). Thus, H1, H2, and H3 were supported.

Table 3.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	B	C.R.	p	Decision
H1	Design → Customer Perception	0.267	2.880	0.004	Supported
H2	Ambient → Customer Perception	0.297	5.484	.001	Supported
H3	Social → Customer Perception	0.468	7.895	.001	Supported

Overall, Table 3 provide empirical evidence that Design, Ambient, and Social Factors are significant predictors of Customer Perception. Among these, Social Factors demonstrate the strongest predictive influence, followed by Ambient and Design Factors, highlighting the relatively greater importance of social influences in shaping customer perceptions.

Discussion

Social Factors emerged as the strongest predictor of Customer Perception ($\beta = 0.468$, $p < .001$). This finding is consistent with Baker's (1986) classification of social cues as a core store-environment dimension and with Bitner's (1992) view that employees form an integral part of the servicescape. It also agrees with contemporary research emphasizing social relationships and interaction as important components of memorable in-store experiences (Bienstock et al., 2003; Bonfanti & Yfantidou, 2021; Gwinner et al., 1998; Roggeveen et al., 2020). The result suggests that employee behavior, responsiveness, friendliness, competence, and interaction may be more influential than physical appearance alone in shaping customers' overall evaluations.

Ambient Factors also had a significant positive effect on Customer Perception ($\beta = 0.297$, $p < .001$). This result supports Kotler's (1973) Atmospherics Theory and Bitner's (1992) Servicescape Theory, which conceptualize sensory and environmental conditions as meaningful stimuli. It is also consistent with Milliman (1982), Morrin and Ratneshwar (2003), and Spangenberg et al. (2006), as well as Vilnai-Yavetz et al. (2021), who found that in-store atmospheric quality influenced spending and loyalty through perceived store atmosphere, and Baid and Madhwani (2024), who reported positive effects of music characteristics on perceived service quality. The relatively high mean for Ambient Factors further indicates that respondents generally evaluated the sensory environment favorably.

Design Factors also had a significant positive effect on Customer Perception, although the weakest of the three dimensions ($\beta = 0.267$, $C.R. = 2.880$, $p = .004$). This finding is consistent with the general theoretical expectation that layout, displays, and visual presentation contribute to customer evaluation (Baker, 1986; Baker et al., 1994). Its comparatively smaller effect size, together with the positive descriptive result ($M = 4.73$) and strong EFA loadings for the retained design items, suggests that adequate design may function as a baseline

expectation in organized retailing, while social interaction and ambient conditions provide greater differentiation; this interpretation should be treated as an inference rather than a directly tested mechanism.

Overall, the findings indicate that store environment is multidimensional and that its dimensions do not contribute equally to customer perception. The dominance of Social Factors followed by Ambient Factors suggests that Kathmandu retailers should treat employees and sensory conditions as strategic components of retail experience rather than concentrating exclusively on physical design. The findings also provide empirical support for the S-O-R perspective by showing that environmental stimuli are associated with customers' internal evaluations ([Mehrabian & Russell, 1974](#); [Reina Paz & Jiménez Delgado, 2020](#)).

Conclusion

The study examined the effects of design, ambient, and social factors on customer perception of organized retail stores in Kathmandu Valley. The findings demonstrate that Social Factors, Ambient Factors, and Design Factors all significantly and positively influence Customer Perception, with Design Factors showing the weakest effect among the three. Among the predictors, Social Factors exert the strongest influence, indicating the importance of employee behavior and customer–employee interaction in shaping retail evaluations.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, the study supports Baker's Store Environment Theory by demonstrating that design, ambient, and social dimensions are analytically distinguishable while also showing that their relative effects can differ in a specific market context. The findings also reinforce Kotler's Atmospherics Theory, Bitner's Servicescape Theory, and the S-O-R perspective by linking environmental characteristics with customer evaluation.

For retailers, the findings suggest three priorities. First, employees should be trained in friendliness, responsiveness, product knowledge, and customer interaction. Second, retailers should manage lighting, music, cleanliness, fragrance, and other sensory conditions consistently. Third, physical design should remain functional and attractive, but investment decisions should not assume that visual design alone will generate stronger customer perceptions.

Limitations and Future Research

The study used convenience sampling and a cross-sectional sample of 200 customers in Kathmandu Valley; therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all Nepalese consumers without caution. Future studies should employ probability sampling where feasible, include customers from other cities and retail formats, and examine potential mediators or moderators such as satisfaction, perceived value, shopping motivation, and customer experience.

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