THE ROLE OF WEB STORE STIMULI ON CUSTOMERS' IMPULSE BUYING BEHAVIOUR THROUGH BRAND PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

In light of prevailing technological advancements, online shopping has become increasingly prevalent. A well-designed webpage interface, particularly in terms of visual appeal, has the potential to evoke customer emotions such as pleasure and arousal, thereby stimulating impulse buying among consumers. In contrast to global brands, local web stores have faced challenges in devising strategies to cultivate

an environment conducive to enhancing brand perception and encouraging impulsive buying behavior, specifically in the realm of online local brand retailing. Previous studies have primarily focused on customers' cognitive perspectives, including privacy concerns, content sharing, and websites credibility. However, existing research has yet to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding customers' online impulse buying behavior. Addressing these gaps, this study aims to investigate the effect of different web store stimuli on creating consumers' brand perception of online web stores and its impact on customers' impulsive buying behavior. Data was collected through purposive sampling, involving 423 users of different online local web stores. The results showed interesting findings with implications for both theory and practice. Specifically, environmental stimuli, such as ambience (lighting), assortment, forum fnac and helping staff, were found to significantly enhance the brand perception of local web store outlets, consequently boosting customers' impulse buying behavior.

Keywords: Web store stimuli, customers' brand perception, customers' impulse buying behavior, online branding.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of prevailing technological advancements, online shopping has become prevalent (Wu et al., 2020; Saoula et al., 2023). A well-designed webpage interface, particularly one with visual appeal, has the potential to evoke consumers' emotions such as pleasure and arousal, thereby stimulating impulse buying (Kathuria & Bakshi, 2024). Nowadays, customers demand more than just product or service displays at web store branding outlets (Pereira et al., 2023). The role of the in-store environment has been an essential consideration in consumer behavior since Kotler (1973) introduced the concept of atmospherics in retailing, followed by recent studies (Shamim et al., 2024) aimed at eliciting emotional responses from consumers. The pioneering study by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) developed the M-R model based on the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm, demonstrating that environmental stimuli indirectly influence customer behavior through the emotional states of pleasure and arousal (Pereira et al., 2023). These responses play a significant

role in developing a favorable brand perception, which subsequently enhances impulsive behavior among customers (Bhatti & Rehman, 2020). Numerous researchers have made significant contributions regarding the effect of physical in-store environments (Shamim et al., 2024; Bhatt et al., 2020; Chang et al., 2011; Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017; Koo & Kim, 2013; So et al., 2021), brand perception (Park & Lee, 2023), and impulse buying (Bitner, 1992; Iyer et al., 2020; Rook, 1987; Rook & Fisher, 1995; Zhang et al., 2021) in different contexts. Impulse buying is defined as the tendency of customers to buy unintentionally (Vohs & Faber, 2007; Suresh & Abhishek, 2021) and immediately (Marques et al., 2013). An attractive and appealing virtual in-store environment helps develop a strong brand perception in customers' minds (Verplanken & Herabadi, 2001). This positive outcome contributes to increasing impulsive purchase behavior (Huang, 2016). Previous research has also examined the role of functional, ambient, and design characteristics (Triantafillidou et al., 2017), the internal shop environment, and in-shop emotions (Terblanche, 2018) in enhancing consumers' impulsive purchases in physical retail outlets. Moreover, the role of social factors (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008; Lee & Dubinsky, 2003), such as employee behavior, politeness, and friendliness, which help capture the attention of customers within online web store outlets, requires further investigation.

Regardless of the importance of these web store stimuli, research on online local branding is still scarce in terms of investigating the role of these stimuli in enhancing impulsive behavior through brand perception in customers' minds. Currently, due to increased competition in online branding, online local branding retailers are struggling to differentiate their products in terms of pricing, positioning, and differentiation paradigms. The traditional modes of selling products—price, promotion, and place—are no longer sufficient. Consumers nowadays demand more than just conventional products in virtual branding outlets (Roxas & Stoneback, 2004). Globalization has changed the dynamics of competition for different brands (Siddique et al., 2021). Online brands face immense competition from both local and global competitors (Park & Kim, 2012). This surge in competition has opened avenues for some brands while simultaneously raising barriers to survival for other local brands. Local brand retailers are striving hard to position themselves in the minds of customers (Pornpitakpan et al.,

2016). The upcoming wave of international competition has presented a significant challenge to local retailers in terms of their product sales. Despite providing quality products and services, local retailers are unable to position their products among their target customers, thus facing challenges in customer retention.

Recent trends in local retailing have advocated for re-strategizing local online business models to make them more attractive and build a positive brand perception among customers. The inclusion of web store stimuli has been an important consideration for reputable and famous branding outlets in the digital market (Leender & Haji, 2016). However, several local online brands still face difficulties in incorporating the right strategy to enhance their brand perception in customers' minds. Web store stimuli have been a crucial consideration for many online retailers in enhancing brand perception (Chen & Yao, 2018). Building a strong brand perception is critical for brand retail outlets because it increases impulsive buying behavior (Curhan, 1972; Zhang et al., 2018). Furthermore, it has been argued that customers with strong impulsive behavior are more likely to make purchases than those who are critical and cognitive thinkers. The relationship outlined in the existing literature underscores the need to measure the critical linkages between the web store environment, brand perception, and customers' impulse buying behavior.

Therefore, in addressing these gaps, this study aims to investigate the effect of different web store stimuli on creating consumers' brand perception of online web stores and its impact on customers' impulsive buying behavior. The theoretical foundation postulates that web store stimuli, including lighting, layout and design, assortment, displays, and attractive signs, along with helpful staff, are essential as they attract customers to visit the web store and spend time within the online brand outlet (Zhao et al., 2019). Another important factor that has received attention in recent years is the inclusion of a forum fnac (Chen & Yao, 2018), which provides customers with a small place to enjoy refreshments within the store outlet. This inclusion has gained traction in physical outlets. Moreover, incorporating a forum fnac as a form of virtual enjoyment by providing a source of refreshment for customers would be a value-added inclusion (Marques et al., 2013). Therefore, forum Fnac is an important web

store stimulus that enhances the brand perception of local brand outlets and engages customers in online impulse buying behavior. Finally, the study has important implications for online local brand managers. Given the changing market conditions, survival in this competitive online environment is not solely based on product quality or features. Managers need to effectively use web store stimuli to enhance online brand perception, thereby increasing online impulsive buying behavior among customers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impulse Buying Behavior

Impulse buying is defined as the sudden, unplanned, and consistent urge to purchase something (Rook, 1987, p. 191; Yang et al., 2022). The role of impulse buying behavior is paramount in both offline and online contexts (Chan et al., 2017). The tendency of customers to indulge in impulsive buying depends on several factors, including but not limited to store design, functional attributes, consumer characteristics, and environmental stimuli (Chan et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2022). These factors help retail firms develop positive engagement in retail-customer interactions, which may lead to unplanned purchases (Shamim et al., 2024; Siddique et al., 2021). Conversely, mitigating impulse buying is comparatively challenging in the online context as customers lack the opportunity to physically experience the desired product and environment, which could easily direct them towards unplanned purchases. Nevertheless, recent technological advancements and online progressions have revolutionized consumer behavior (Karampournioti & Wiedmann, 2022; Abid et al., 2023). Online web stores have significantly transformed their platforms, creating unique attractions for customers. These attractions rely on attractive web store design, layout, online frontline employee assistance, unique web store signs, and forum fnac, which positively draw customers' attention towards impulsive purchases. Moreover, research on impulsive purchases in the online shopping context highlights the significant impact of different web store environmental stimuli in enhancing impulsive purchases (Yang et al., 2022). Additionally, past literature has emphasized the significant importance

of impulse buying in the online retail shopping context. Various studies in the consumer behavior paradigm have examined this novel concept from different perspectives. For instance, Cachón-Rodríguez et al. (2024) measured impulse buying behavior and emotional regulation through anxiety, while Liu et al. (2020) assessed consumer online impulsive behavior using psychological distance and customer involvement.

Moreover, online retail customers are increasingly conscious of brands, preferring to visit those online stores with a positive brand perception. Brand perception refers to customers' opinions, feelings, and judgments about the brand in their minds (Garzotto et al., 2010). Customers prefer to visit online retail stores that successfully provide a wholesome user experience with their web stores. The advent of technological progressions and changing customer demands has created a buzz in online retail markets (Abid et al., 2022). In this regard, the role of attractive and unique web store stimuli in this digital age is equally paramount in creating a positive brand perception in customers' minds. Different studies (Marques et al., 2013; Leender & Haji, 2016; Chen & Yao, 2018; Triantafillidou et al., 2017) have emphasized the important role of attractive and creative web store elements that capture the attention of online consumers. Web store stimuli include a variety of online store attributes that help develop a positive brand perception, such as lighting, web store design and layout, assortment, product design, web store signs, web store forum fnac, and frontline employee assistance. Based on the importance of these stimuli, this study has conceptualized an integrated framework combining these web store stimuli and argues that online web stores should cater to these stimuli for better development of positive brand perception in customers' minds.

However, the role of web store stimuli and positive brand perception in measuring customers' impulse buying behavior to date is missing. Several studies, (Faria et al., 2020; Shamim et al., 2024; Terblanche., 2018; Yu et al., 2018), have argued for this important conceptualization, which can reshape the overall business design of the retail store. In this regard, a conceptual framework highlighting consumers' impulse buying behaviors through attractive web store stimuli and positive brand perception are investigated in the local branding context. The next section explains the development of hypotheses drawn to answer the potential research questions of the study.

Hypotheses Development

Web Store Stimuli and Brand Perception

It has been observed that modern customers expect more than just products and services from web store outlets (Aragoncillo & Orus, 2018). The environment of a particular place often exerts a stronger influence on consumers than the products or services themselves. The concept of ambiance, encompassing elements like music, aroma, and especially lighting, significantly impacts brand perception (Horváth & Birgelen, 2015). While product quality and functional attributes were once considered the primary focus for customers, the paradigm has shifted, with customers now drawn to the ambiance and cues of store outlets. These factors contribute to the identification of brands' perceived value, influencing purchasing decisions (Asshidin et al., 2016).

Lighting, in particular, evidently played a significant role in enhancing the emotional value of a brand, evoking positive feelings and associations that increase brand perception and store loyalty (Chen & Yao, 2018). Studies have also found a positive association between store image and the web store environment (Sarah et al., 2021). The in-store ambiance, including the lighting scheme, shapes various customer behaviours, contributing to the formation of a positive brand image during online shopping. Web store stimuli, such as store lighting, elicit specific reactions in customers' minds (Marques et al., 2013), which are influenced by sensory inputs observed during their visit to a brand outlet. Satisfactory inclusions in these stimuli help foster a positive brand perception in customers' minds. Therefore, based on the above-developed argument, it can be hypothesized that:

H_{1a}: Lighting scheme of local web stores positively and significantly influences brand perception.

In the realm of branding literature, design emerges as a pivotal consideration for customers (Spangenberg et al., 2012; Shamim et al., 2024). While previous studies often categorize design and ambiance together, critical contributions have begun to differentiate between them (Triantafillidou et al., 2017). Ambiance encompasses

factors like music, aroma, temperature, scent, and lighting scheme within retail stores. On the other hand, design specifically pertains to customers' perception of the layout, structure, and décor of the web store (Helmefalk & Hultén, 2017). Design characteristics focus on customers' ability to evaluate the layout of the in-store scheme, and décor, enticing them to spend time within the web store outlet (Floh & Madlberger, 2013). This aspect further fosters an emotional attachment to the specific online retail outlet (Zhang & Patrick, 2017). Moreover, it has been observed that web stores with the optimal combination of ambient and design characteristics tend to garner maximum satisfaction from customers. Brand perception encapsulates how customers feel and think about the products they purchase or use (Kervyn et al., 2012). The concept of layout and design has evolved significantly in recent years (Gul et al., 2023). While traditional beliefs emphasized the display of products and services to enhance web store layout and design, customer preferences have shifted (Shamim et al., 2023).

Today, customers demand a more engaging web store environment that captures their attention and encourages extended browsing (Siddique et al., 2021). Market preferences now lean towards creating value on online platforms, with an emphasis on attractive web store design rather than solely product display. Research findings indicate that online branding outlets focusing on providing appealing layouts in their web store designs often succeed in cultivating a positive brand perception among their target audience (Adeelar et al., 2003). Furthermore, unlike larger online superstores and hypermarkets, online local brands have increasingly prioritized upgrading their outlets to thrive in the digital market. This upgrading aims to enhance the perception about the particular brand which is a crucial consideration for every online local retailer. Therefore, based on the above-developed argument, it can be hypothesized that:

H_{1b}: Layout and design of local web store outlets positively and significantly influence brand perception.

Online branding outlets have established product classification systems to present product categories by brand, colour, and style. According to Morales et al. (2005), consistency between how consumers organize

their assortment (by product category schemes or purchase goals) and how products are displayed promotes the perception of variety and satisfaction for well-known product categories. However, consumers become confused and unable to enjoy products if the product organization does not align with the product layout in the web store (Kaur et al., 2017), leading to decreased overall brand perception (Kumar & Kim, 2014). It is crucial for local web stores to provide a comfortable environment where customers can spend quality time without any hassle.

Furthermore, online retailers face a fundamental strategic decision regarding assortment, including what products to offer (Shamim et al., 2021). They strive to balance variety, depth, and service level (Parsad et al., 2018). Sloot et al. (2006) found that failing to meet customer expectations results in brand switching (34%), followed by purchase postponement (23%), store switching (19%), and product switching (18%). Consequently, relying solely on substitute products to provide alternative options is not a viable strategy for retailers, as only 18% of consumers choose to switch products. Therefore, branding outlets must balance customer expectations and assortment availability within their stores. This balanced approach reflects positively on the customer end, resulting in frequent purchases of different products. Therefore, based on the above-developed argument, it can be hypothesized that:

H_{1c}: Assortments in local web store outlets positively and significantly influence brand perception.

Product display encompasses the wide array of products and services available within web stores (Triantafillidou et al., 2017). Factors such as product range, availability, quality, and price significantly impact both the hedonic and cognitive experiences of customers (Ballantine et al., 2010). The diversity within retail stores offers customers a plethora of choices, leading to heightened satisfaction (Ballantine et al., 2015; Shen & Khalifa, 2012). This emotional arousal further stimulates their engagement and interaction with the available services, fostering positive feelings of pleasure and joy, which in turn positively influence their perception of the brand's value (Abid et al., 2022). Therefore, the availability of functional attributes, coupled with design and ambiance, strengthens the customer-web store outlet relationship.

Conversely, it has been observed that different customers have varying preferences and choices when visiting any web store outlet. While some customers prefer the inclusion of ambiance and design, others solely prioritize functional attributes. Collectively, these factors directly or indirectly shape customers' experiences and perceptions of a specific brand (Badgaiyan & Verma, 2015). The primary goal of product displays on online platforms is to capture customers' attention and effectively showcase products (e.g., displaying products by name, price, or brand). This process enhances the level of understanding between brands and customers. According to Inman et al. (2009), displays increase unplanned sales by roughly 25%; however, other stimuli play crucial roles in fostering unplanned purchase behaviour among customers, particularly for commonly purchased products. Consequently, online product displays serve to attract customers' attention, thereby enhancing brand perception and stimulating impulsive purchases.Therefore, based on the above-developed arguments, it can be hypothesized that:

H_{1d} : Product displays in local web stores positively and significantly influence brand perception.

Competition has reshaped the landscape of online businesses (Acar & Polonsky, 2007; Liu et al., 2020), requiring online retailers to adopt innovative strategies to win over customers in the digital marketplace. An appealing online environment stands out as a competitive strategy to bolster brand perception (Siddiqui et al., 2021). Among various stimuli, signage in web stores serves as crucial navigational aids for online retail, guiding customers through the virtual aisles (Huddleston et al., 2023). Signs act as communication channels between branding outlets and their customers, instilling confidence in product purchases (Sarah et al., 2021). Customers are inclined to linger longer at convenient, visually appealing web stores, underscoring the importance of a well-designed layout, consistency, and clear directions to enhance brand perception. Online outlets that prioritize customer-friendly interfaces and attractive environments tend to attract more attention from customers (Siddique et al., 2021). Furthermore, researches(e.g. Cho & Lee, 2017; Villiers et al., 2018) highlights the significant impact of emotions on consumer decision-making and behaviour. The in-store environment and customers' emotional

states play pivotal roles in their purchasing decisions. Marketers must grasp the emotional triggers that lead to positive customer behaviour (Cho & Lee, 2017). Web store stimuli play a crucial role in evoking customers' emotions, thereby shaping a favourable perception of the brand (Villiers et al., 2018). Signage, in particular, serves as a powerful tool for conveying information and can significantly impact sales by providing customers with quick insights into product quality. Thus, even with varying product qualities, a single informative sign can influence product selection decisions.Therefore, based on the above-developed arguments, it can be hypothesized that:

H_{1e} : Signs in local web store outlets positively and significantly influence brand perception.

Forum Fnac represents a small place of refreshment within brand outlets, offering customers a space to unwind, socialize with friends, and engage in conversations about their surroundings and purchase patterns (Marques et al., 2013). This concept is gaining traction due to the growing demand for creativity within physical retail stores (Cachero-Martínez & Vázquez-Casielles, 2021). Furthermore, online web stores are also introducing separate areas of enjoyment through offerings like discounts and online gaming platforms, which actively engage customers (Marques et al., 2013). In today's digital landscape, customers seek more than just products and services; they value the level of engagement provided by online retail stores (Shahjehan et al., 2021). Therefore, fostering such creativity is crucial for ensuring customer satisfaction. Ultimately, the experience of joy fosters a strong perception of a particular brand in customers' minds. Based on the above-developed argument, it can be hypothesized that:

H_{1f} : Forum Fnac in local web stores positively and significantly influences brand perception.

Frontline employees play a crucial role in creating positive perceptions and experiences for customers (Rook & Fisher, 2013). The interaction between customers and online frontline employees significantly influences the in-store shopping experience (Amin et al., 2024), particularly from a hedonic perspective, where customers develop emotional attachments to web stores (Tantanatewin & Inkarojrit,

2016). This interaction not only impacts customer satisfaction but also fosters better overall experiences. Observations indicate that frontline employees wield considerable influence in engaging customers within web store outlets. For instance, a research by Amin et al. (2021) suggests that the friendliness and expertise of employees are instrumental in shaping positive brand perception and fostering future patronage, as they facilitate positive interactions with customers. Such engagement also enables online web stores to involve customers in various co-creation activities (Jin & Chen, 2021), thereby delivering potential value (Afzal & Azmi, 2021) and enhancing brand perception among their target audience. Literature underscores that interpersonal interactions between customers and frontline employees on online platforms contribute significantly to pleasant shopping experiences. Moreover, employee traits, including physical appearance, serve as motivators for positive customer behaviour (Bitner, 1992). Research by Abid et al. (2022) further supports this notion, indicating that employees who exhibit pleasantness towards customers outperform those who do not engage their audience within online retail outlets. Furthermore, pleasant employees are more likely than the distant and antagonistic ones to create a livelier and more stimulating online purchase environment (Hussain et al., 2023). As a result, it can be concluded that web stores with courteous employees attracts more customers' attention than stores with employees who ignore customers. This finding has significant ramifications for retailers since it can boost the amount of time customers spend in stores and their willingness to interact with store staff. As a result, retailers can create an exciting environment by engaging a number of personnel in stores and encouraging them to be friendly and helpful with customers for competitive outcomes in the market. Therefore, based on the above-developed argument, it can be hypothesized that:

H_{1g} : Helping staff in local web stores positively and significantly influences brand perception.

Brand Perception and Impulse Buying

Impulse buying refers to unplanned purchase decisions made by customers within retail outlets (Wu et al., 2020). Positive brand perceptions stem from high service quality within stores (Lenka et al., 2009). Turel and Serenko (2004) further assert that brand perception

is a fusion of perceived service quality (Kristensen et al., 1999) and emotional value outcomes resulting from customers' interactions with branding outlets. These positive interactions often manifest in spontaneous purchase patterns, also known as impulse buying behaviors (Jhandir, 2012). Brand judgment constitutes a personal evaluation of a brand's performance and image (Kalla & Arora, 2011), with consumers holding diverse attitudes towards different brands (Ladhari et al., 2017). To foster emotional attachment to a specific brand, web store retailers must provide an attractive and appealing online environment for their customers (Ladhari et al., 2017). Previous studies underscore a robust correlation between brand identification (Wong, 2004) and purchasing behaviour (Lin & Lin, 2013), resulting in heightened perceived value and customer experience. Such positive experiences cultivate emotional ties to specific brand outlets (Park & Noh, 2012).

Moreover, brands with emotional attachments tend to be more successful in cultivating positive brand perceptions (Vásquez, 2020), thereby fostering impulsive purchase behaviour (Reimann et al., 2008). Various factors facilitate impulsive purchase behaviour among customers in online retail outlets, including online in-store characteristics, point of purchase displays, locations, advertisements, product quality, and customers' emotional attachment to specific web stores (Alauddin et al., 2015; Shahpasandi et al., 2020). These factors, both directly and indirectly, bolster brand perception in the market, consequently amplifying impulsive purchase behaviour (Kwon et al., 2007). Observations indicate that a positive brand perception fosters a deeper understanding with customers, enabling them to engage in impulsive purchase behaviour. The significance of brand perception is evident in branding literature, as it not only enhances customer loyalty and satisfaction but also stimulates impulsive purchase behaviour (Achour et al., 2011).Therefore, based on the above-developed arguments, it can be hypothesized that:

H_2: Brand perception of local web store retail outlets positively and significantly impacts customers' impulse buying behavior.

Based on the above developed hypotheses and theoretical foundation, this study proposed a research framework comprising different web store stimuli such as lighting scheme, web store layout and

design, assortment, product design, signs in web store, forum fnac and helping staff. These combinations of different web store stimuli positively enhance brand perception in customers' minds which in turn significantly drives customers' impulse buying behavior with the web store. The theoretical framework can be reviewed in Figure 1 of the study.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of Study
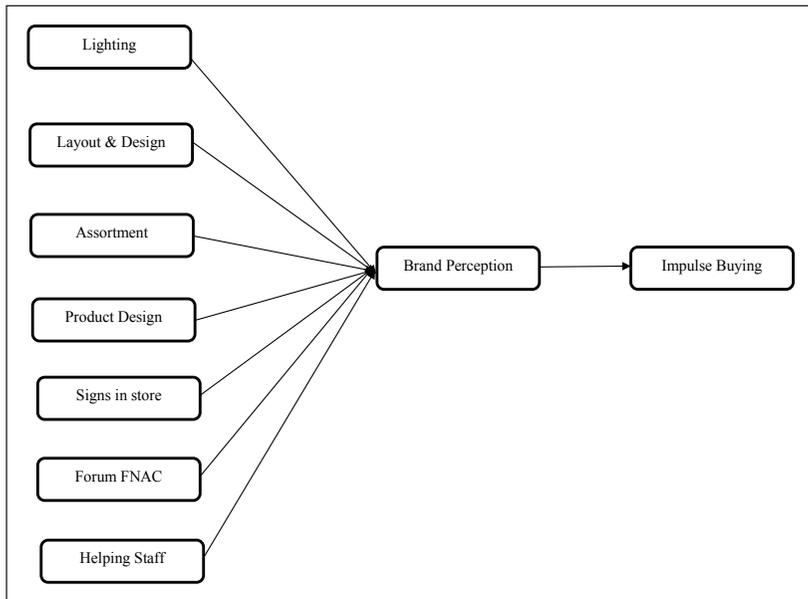
METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Collection Procedures

This study was based on a positive philosophical paradigm. The research design was quantitative, adapting a deductive approach. The time-horizon was cross-sectional, as the data was collected at one point in time from multiple respondents. The overall population of the study comprised respondents who have purchases from local online web stores in Pakistan. The choice of sampling technique

was purposive. An initial criterion was set prior to data collection, where only customers who purchased from local web stores were shortlisted. Two academic experts conducted face and content validity checks of the final scale before data collection. Items were analysed in terms of their structuring and academic language. A closed-ended questionnaire was designed for data collection, using a scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). Online data collection techniques were utilized, and a specific time of meeting was set with the respondents to record their online responses. The identity of the respondents was kept hidden to maintain ethical standards of research. The medium of instruction was English. The sampling size was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sampling collection table. A total of 470 responses were recorded, out of which 47 responses were excluded due to incompleteness or bias. Thus, a final sample of 423 responses was used for analysis to support the theoretical claims of the present study.

Furthermore, a pilot study was then performed to assess the reliability of the adapted scale, which met the threshold of 0.7. The data was analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was preferred over AMOS due to its effectiveness in managing complex data in low-structure situations (Hair et al., 2017). In addition, it is particularly suitable when theoretical information is limited, as in the areas of social media and social commerce. PLS-SEM is a robust method for assessing the validity and reliability of constructs and can handle complex cause-effect structural models. Given the many constructs and indicators in the current study, PLS-SEM was deemed a suitable analytical method (Hair et al., 2017). Smart PLS was used to estimate both the measurement and structural models.

Measurement and Instrumentation

The items were adapted from previous studies to measure different constructs. For lighting, three items were used, including the sample item, "*General lighting of the web store is pleasant.*" Layout and design were assessed using five items, with a sample item being, "*The layout of the web store allows a good exposure of products.*" Assortment was measured with five items, including "*The web store provides products that I would like to buy.*" Product displays were

evaluated with four items, such as "*The displays at the web store allow an easy observation of the products.*" Signs at the store were assessed with three items, with a sample item being "*The signs at the web store allow me to easily find the sections.*" Forum fnac was measured using three items, including "*Forum fnac represents an added value to the web store.*" Finally, helping staff was assessed using five items, with a sample item being, "*There are enough employees in the web store to serve customers*" (adapted from Marques et al. 2013). Brand perception was measured using six items, including "*The brand has a good reputation*" (adapted from Knight & Kim, 2007) while impulse buying was assessed with three items, including "*I often buy things online without thinking*" (adapted from Darrat et al. 2016).

Table 1

Demographics

Measure	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18-25	234	55.3
	26-33	81	19.1
	34-41	69	16.3
	42-49	23	5.4
	50 or above	16	3.8
Qualification	Bachelor	224	53
	Masters	108	25.5
	MS/MPhil	43	10.2
	Others specify	48	11.3
Income level	15,000–24,000	179	42.3
	25,000–34,000	101	23.9
	35,000–44,000	60	14.2
	45,000 and above	83	19.6
Gender	Male	183	43.3
	Female	240	56.7

Sample Characteristics

Descriptive statistics and frequency functions were calculated to analyze the data. Out of the 423 respondents, approximately 57 percent were female, and 43 percent were male. The respondents belonged to various age groups, with the highest proportion (55.3%) being between 18 to 25 years old. The next largest group comprised respondents

aged 26 to 33 years old (19.1%), followed by those aged 34 to 41 years (16.3%). Respondents aged 42 to 49 years constituted 5.4% while those above 50 years old made up the smallest group (3.8%). In terms of education, 53% of the respondents held bachelor's degrees, 25.5% had master's degrees, and the rest had either MS or doctoral degrees. Regarding income, most respondents (42%) earned between Rs. 15,000 and 24,000 per month, while the smallest proportion of respondents (14%) earned between Rs. 35,000 and 44,000 per month. A total of 83 respondents reported an income of over Rs. 45,000 per month. Table 1 presents the demographic statistics of the respondents.

RESULTS

Common Method Variance

In this study, the data were collected using a 7-point Likert scale, which in a single sitting, might lead to common method bias (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). To address this issue, Harman's single factor method was used to assess common method variance (CMV). Principal component analysis with varimax rotation was conducted in SPSS 25, following the recommendations of Hair et al. (2010). The findings revealed that a single factor explained only 35.34 % of the co-variance, well below the norm of 50 %, indicating no significant CMV issue in the data.

Measurement Model

Reliability and validity of the questionnaire data were analyzed using Smart PLS. The results of reliability analysis indicated that all items had factor loadings (FL) greater than 0.7, Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.7 for each indicator, Composite reliability (CR) greater than 0.6, Rho_ A values above 0.6. Additionally, each construct exhibited an average variance extracted (AVE) of 0.50 or higher, indicating satisfactory convergence. The results confirmed the internal consistency of the data (Table 2). The results also confirm the discriminant validity (Table 3) of the sample, as the diagonal elements are significantly larger than the correlations of a certain construct with any of the other constructs, and all values are above 0.5. In conclusion, the reliability and validity of data are confirmed, enabling hypotheses testing to be conducted on this dataset. Figure 1 presents the measurement model of the study.

Table 2

Reliability and Validity

Latent Variable	Indicator	FL	VIF	A	rho_A	CR	AVE
Lighting	Lighting_1	0.819	1.632	0.778	0.780	0.871	0.692
	Lighting_2	0.830	1.584				
	Lighting_3	0.847	1.604				
Layout and Design	Layout_1	0.855	2.396	0.899	0.900	0.925	0.712
	Layout_2	0.852	2.434				
	Layout_3	0.845	2.366				
	Layout_4	0.825	2.102				
	Layout_5	0.842	2.366				
Assortment	Assortment_1	0.847	2.389	0.881	0.882	0.913	0.678
	Assortment_2	0.790	1.924				
	Assortment_3	0.828	2.272				
	Assortment_4	0.830	2.157				
	Assortment_5	0.821	2.097				
Product Display	Displays_1	0.864	2.339	0.872	0.872	0.912	0.722
	Displays_2	0.839	2.022				
	Displays_3	0.858	2.248				
	Displays_4	0.838	2.019				
Signs in Store	Signs_1	0.905	2.543	0.848	0.849	0.908	0.767
	Signs_2	0.845	1.848				
	Signs_3	0.877	2.126				
Helping Staff	staff_1	0.842	2.418	0.909	0.911	0.932	0.734
	staff_2	0.835	2.299				
	staff_3	0.874	2.818				
	staff_4	0.867	2.567				
	staff_5	0.866	2.595				
Forum FNAC	Forum_1	0.878	1.949	0.830	0.833	0.898	0.746
	Forum_2	0.856	1.895				
	Forum_3	0.857	1.859				
Brand Perception	B.P_1	0.838	2.441	0.919	0.919	0.937	0.711
	B.P_2	0.851	2.581				
	B.P_3	0.858	2.689				
	B.P_4	0.832	2.363				
	B.P_5	0.843	2.517				
	B.P_6	0.838	2.502				
Impulse Buying	I.B_1	0.886	2.017	0.836	0.857	0.901	0.752
	I.B_2	0.819	1.798				
	I.B_3	0.894	2.125				

Table 3

Discriminant Validity

	Assortment	Brand Perception	Forum FNAC	Helping Staff	Impulse Buying	Layout & Design	Lighting	Product Display
Assortment								
Brand Perception	0.893							
Forum FNAC	0.887	0.830						
Helping Staff	0.839	0.812	0.821					
Impulse Buying	0.613	0.595	0.684	0.504				
Layout & Design	0.775	0.716	0.652	0.668	0.483			
Lighting	0.859	0.816	0.770	0.733	0.592	0.794		
Product Display	0.777	0.733	0.679	0.739	0.498	0.812	0.692	
Signs in Store	0.888	0.821	0.830	0.865	0.534	0.694	0.702	0.814

Table 4

Hypotheses Testing

	β	Sample Mean	Standard Deviation	t-statistics	p-values	Decision
H_{1a}: Lighting -> Brand Perception	0.155	0.154	0.042	3.724	0.000	Accepted
H_{1b}: Layout & Design -> Brand Perception	0.054	0.056	0.056	0.970	0.166	Rejected
H_{1c}: Assortment -> Brand Perception	0.303	0.302	0.060	5.031	0.000	Accepted
H_{1d}: Product Display -> Brand Perception	0.055	0.055	0.052	1.058	0.145	Rejected
H_{1e}: Signs at Store -> Brand Perception	0.103	0.103	0.057	1.823	0.034	Accepted
H_{1f}: Forum FNAC -> Brand Perception	0.143	0.143	0.052	2.765	0.003	Accepted
H_{1g}: Helping Staff -> Brand Perception	0.170	0.171	0.051	3.314	0.000	Accepted
H_{2}: Brand Perception -> Impulse Buying	0.529	0.530	0.046	11.577	0.000	Accepted

Figure 2

Presents the Structural Model of the Study
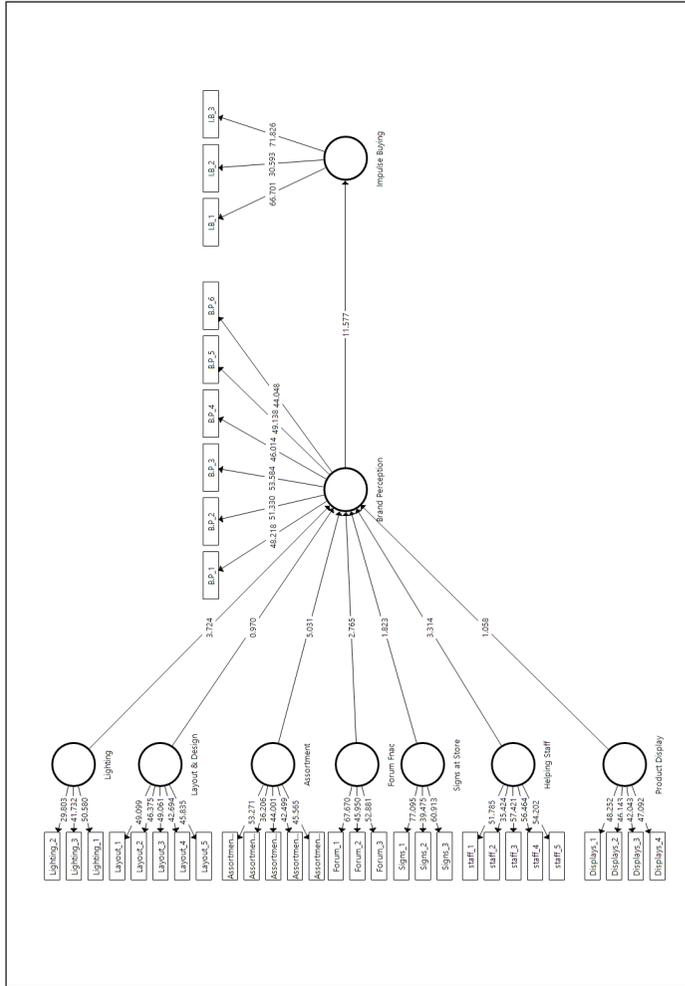
Structural Model Analysis

Smart PLS was used to perform the nonparametric bootstrap resampling procedure with a subsample of 5000. The results (refer to Table 4) showed that lighting in the local brand outlet positively and significantly affects brand perception ($\beta = 0.155$, P<0.01). However, the layout and design of the local brand outlets do not have any impact on brand perception ($\beta = 0.054$, P>0.05). On the other hand, assortments in the local brand outlets positively and significantly impact brand perception ($\beta = 0.303$, P<0.01). Products displayed in the local brand outlets do not have any impact on brand perception ($\beta = 0.055$, P<0.05). Similarly, signs in the local brand retail outlets positively and significantly impact brand perception ($\beta = 0.103$, P>0.05). Forum fnac of a local brand outlet positively and significantly impacts brand perception ($\beta = 0.143$, P<0.01). Furthermore, helping staff in the local brand retail outlets positively and significantly impacts brand perception ($\beta = 0.170$, P<0.01). Lastly, brand perception of local brand retail outlets positively and significantly impacts customers' impulse buying behavior ($\beta = 0.529$, p<0.01).

DISCUSSIONS

This study aims to investigate the effect of different web store stimuli in creating consumers' brand perception about online web stores and its impact on customers' impulsive buying behavior. With the advent of digitalization, the online retail market has undergone significant transformation, altering the dynamics of competition (Saoula et al., 2024). In this rapidly evolving landscape, local web stores have been striving to differentiate themselves and capture the attention of their target audience through strategic initiatives (Vonkeman et al., 2017).

The study underscores the pivotal role of brand perception in driving online impulse buying behavior (Pereira et al., 2023). Notably, the findings shed light on the substantial contribution of web store environment stimuli in shaping online brand perception. Elements such as lighting, assortments, in-store signage, forum fnac, and customer service have emerged as significant factors positively associated with the brand perception of local retail outlets. The

study's findings are in line with previous research emphasizing the significance of environmental factors in enhancing customer satisfaction (Shamim et al., 2024). It is evident that brand outlets striving to create appealing and attractive online in-store atmospheres gain a competitive edge in the market (Mattila & Wirtz, 2008; Safeer, 2024). Customer satisfaction with brand retail store outlets stems from a blend of ambiance, particularly lighting, and the availability of expected product assortments (Ballantine et al., 2010). Furthermore, the study highlights the positive and significant relationship between signs at web stores and customer satisfaction. Serving as indirect sources of communication and providing directional guidance for customers, these signs contribute to a seamless shopping experience, prompting customers to spend more time in the branding outlets (Parsad et al., 2019). Another noteworthy aspect receiving attention is the inclusion of forum fnac, a place of refreshment within branding outlets (Marques et al., 2013). The study reveals a positive outcome, indicating that customers are drawn to web stores that incorporate this unique concept, enhancing their overall shopping experience.

Finally, the helping staff is another important factor that was initially proposed in this study. The role of frontline employees is evident in terms of building a sound relationship with customers (Cho & Lee, 2017). It has been observed that those retail outlets that struggle with customer relationship management have a dull selection of frontline employees in their outlets (Lee & Dubinsky, 2003; Amin et al., 2021). Positive interactions between employees and customers consistently contribute to building favorable perceptions of specific brands in the market (Pornpitakpan et al., 2016). This positive brand perception shall enhance the chances of impulse buying, as customers are more focused on the in-store environment. The hedonic mechanism, which operates on an emotional level, leads customers to make frequent unplanned purchases within brand retail outlets as they tend to think emotionally.

The two-hypothesis including layout and design and product displays are rejected despite their inclusion in the web store stimuli. The results of the previous findings have suggested that customers nowadays prefer to have more than just an ordinary display of products and their layout mechanisms (Krasonikolakis et al., 2018). Additionally,

customers are concerned with the overall presentation of web stores, which captures their attention and encourages them to spend some time on local web retail outlets (Habib & Qayyum, 2018). Customers prefer to interact with frontline staff and other customers before making a purchase. Therefore, local web stores must modify their websites, including interesting stimuli and caring frontline staff, to help suggest customized product offerings.

THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretically, this study is extending the line of discussion in the following ways. First, this study has proposed that web store stimuli play a significant role in enhancing overall brand perception in customers' minds. Past studies have largely worked on environmental stimuli, product/service quality, store characteristics and consumer characteristics, that enhance impulse buying behavior (Chan et al., 2017). This study has expanded the existing body of knowledge by suggesting that customers now demand additional value-added features, beyond traditional stimuli, to significantly attract them to spend more time at web stores. This study has included web store signs, product assortment, product display, forum fnac and overall attractive layout and unique design of web stores as important stimuli that could enhance brand perception. Customers now expect a web store experience similar to what they enjoy in physical retail outlets (Soni, 2021). The combination of attractive and unique web store signs, easy and unique operative web store layouts and designs shall help customers to look for more options and variety available in retail web stores (Saoula et al., 2023). Moreover, the availability of unique and attractive product designs and a wide assortment of products are also important factors that can help retail web stores build positive brand perception in customers' minds. Finally, the inclusion of a unique yet crucial feature, such as the forum fnac, as a medium of enjoyment for customers in web stores should be considered. This feature is most likely to be available in physical retail outlets; however, it is less likely to be experienced by online customers. Therefore, a separate webroom having different engagement activities such as online games or any 'solve the puzzle and win the prize' segment shall enhance the chances of enjoyment for the customers that will

allow them to spend more time surfing at the web store and building a positive brand perception about the store.

Second, this study has proposed that positive brand perception of online web stores play an important role in driving customers' impulsive buying behavior. Past studies have emphasized that impulse buying behavior, characterized by random and unplanned purchases, often occurs in response to attractive environmental stimuli (Chan et al., 2017). This study has extended the discussion by proposing that while web store stimuli may not directly trigger impulse buying behavior, they contribute to building a positive and unique impression of the web store in customers' minds. Consequently, this positive impression can influence customers' hedonic and cognitive thought processes leading them to engage in unplanned purchases from the store. Therefore, the role of brand perception to enhance customers' impulse buying behavior is paramount.

The present study, along with theoretical insights, provides valuable guidance for local web store managers. Competing with global brands presents significant challenges. The study offers valuable insights for web store managers to prioritize their web store environment alongside their products and services. Customer reluctance to choose local brands can impact the overall brand perception of local web stores. Attractive web store stimuli play a crucial role in engaging customers and encouraging them to spend time on the web stores. Often, retailers fail to adequately showcase their products, which can lead to a negative impression. Attractive in-store environment plays a significant role to retain brand perception in the minds of customers. Thus, local web store managers should prioritize creating a creative web store environment that enhances brand perception and encourages impulse buying among their target customers.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

In online shopping, impulse buying refers to the tendency to make spontaneous purchases without much thought or regard for the product(s). It is frequently motivated by emotional or psychological

causes, such as a desire for immediate gratification or the fear of missing out on a good offer. Factors such as product positioning, recommendations, limited-time discounts, and checkout convenience can influence impulse purchases. Building on these insights, this study proposes a framework based on online web store stimuli for local retail brands facing challenges in maintaining market share and acquiring customers in the online market. The findings offer valuable insights for local brands to enhance the uniqueness and attractiveness of their web stores. This can be achieved by including more unique design elements, ensuring an easy-to-use layout, and offering product designs with attractive assortments. These improvements can help local web stores create a positive brand perception in customers' minds. Web store stimuli including website design, layout, graphics, and content, can significantly; influence customers' perceptions of a brand. A web store design and layout consistent with a brand's overall look can help promote the brand's identity and values. High-quality photos, videos, and interactive components on the web store can attract buyers and evoke a positive emotional response to the brand. Customizing the web store experience based on customers' requirements, browsing habits, and purchase history can result in a more personalized and engaging experience, thereby improving customers' opinion of the brand. Overall, web store stimuli can have a significant impact on a company's brand perception, therefore it is critical to have a well-designed and customer-friendly web store to improve brand perception. Thereby, enhancing the chances of impulsive buying behavior for local brands in the online market.

This study, despite its valuable contributions, has several limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted on the selection of different web store stimuli to assess their impact on brand perception and customers' online impulsive purchase patterns (Hashim et al., 2017). However, these stimuli are based on raising the hedonic perceptions of customers. Future research studies may explore cognitive stimuli, which are important for local web store retailers to incorporate for competitive outcomes. Additionally, customers today are demanding more value-added offerings through service exchanges. Future research should incorporate perspectives on value creation (Abid et al., 2022) and value co-creation (Hussain et al., 2023; Shamim et al., 2022; Shamim et al., 2021) to expand the framework and discussion. Besides that, future

research should study the role of customer relationship management which has been an important debate in academia to strengthen the relationship between customers and online retail firms (Abid et al., 2021; Abid et al., 2023). Furthermore, the role of customer engagement should be studied as a mediator to further expand the discussion of impulse buying in the context of online shopping (Siddique et al., 2021). Moreover, future research studies should employ advanced techniques such as eye-tracking and neuromarketing to obtain real-time customer feedback on online web stores and impulsive buying behavior (Siddique et al., 2022). Additionally, addressing the need for sustainable development is crucial in online retailing, involving considerations of various parameters of SDGs; future research questions could explore topics such as how sustainability influences the landscape of online retailing? (Jan et al., 2021a; Jan et al., 2021b). Furthermore, this study was quantitative. Future research directions should include the qualitative perspective which makes the study richer in terms of knowledge by incorporating opinions of local web store users. Lastly, as the study focused on the local web stores market, future research should conduct comparative studies between global and local web stores to analyze differences in strategies and sales outcomes.

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