

The Conditional Role of Store Interior Design in Customer Experience and Behavioral Intentions: A Qualitative Study in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explain the role of store interior design in customers' approaches to stores, shopping experiences, and behavioral intentions through participants' interpretations. A generic qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive epistemology was employed. Semi-structured interviews comprising 14 questions were conducted between 12 June and 16 July 2026 with 16 adults in Istanbul who had recent experience of physical stores and were recruited through purposive criterion sampling. No audio recordings were made; detailed contemporaneous notes were expanded on the day of each interview, anonymized, and analyzed using conventional, inductive qualitative content analysis. The analysis generated five themes: (1) spatial legibility and access; (2) sensory comfort and product interaction; (3) the formation of reported behavior and behavioral intentions under multiple conditions; (4) the generation of meanings of quality, trust, and brand through design and their subsequent evaluation against performance; and (5) variation in experience according to the user, shopping purpose, budget, and cultural context. The findings do not support a linear claim that design causes sales or repeat visits. Instead, design shapes the conditions for intermediate evaluations involving entrance legibility, circulation, accessibility, comfort, product assessment, and initial brand meaning. Reported purchases, purchase abandonment, and revisit intentions were interpreted in conjunction with product suitability, price, stock availability, information, service, budget, and prior experience. The study proposes a conditional experiential chain that analytically distinguishes design conditions, intermediate evaluations, reported outcomes, and contextual constraints. This distinction offers a more defensible account of the contribution of interior design to the physical retail experience while maintaining the boundaries between self-reported experience, intention, observed behavior, and causal effects.

Keywords: Store interior design; store atmosphere; customer experience; behavioral intention; qualitative content analysis

Introduction

The transformation of contemporary retailing has altered both the strategic position and the experiential function of the physical store. The growth of digital commerce, mobile technologies, social media, and integrated retail channels has made purchasing increasingly independent of a single physical location. Nevertheless, rather than rendering stores obsolete, these changes have encouraged retailers to reconsider what physical stores contribute that purely digital environments cannot fully reproduce. The movement from multichannel to omnichannel retailing has increasingly connected physical and digital touchpoints, requiring retailers to create continuity across information search, product evaluation, purchase, delivery, and post-purchase interactions (1). Digital



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transformation has consequently reshaped the retail value chain while simultaneously increasing the importance of identifying the distinctive experiential functions of physical stores (2). More recent research suggests that stores must provide customers with compelling reasons to visit by supporting experiences, discovery, service, social interaction, product engagement, and forms of value that extend beyond transactional availability (3). Within emerging forms of phygital retailing, physical environments are therefore being reconsidered as experiential territories in which material, social, sensory, and digital dimensions interact (4).

This transformation gives store interior design increasing strategic relevance. A store is not merely a container in which merchandise is placed; it is an environment that organizes movement, visibility, access, product interaction, sensory exposure, communication, and the symbolic presentation of a retailer or brand. Interior design incorporates multiple interconnected components, including spatial organization, circulation routes, entrances, furniture, lighting, colors, materials, display systems, signage, and functional arrangements (5). Customers encounter these elements simultaneously rather than as isolated design variables. Consequently, interior design can influence how easily customers understand a space, whether they experience congestion or accessibility, how effectively they inspect products, how comfortable they feel, and what initial meanings they assign to the retailer. Store atmosphere research has long emphasized that environmental stimuli can influence consumer emotions and subsequent approach or avoidance tendencies, particularly when understood through the stimulus–organism–response perspective (6). This perspective is important because it implies that environmental conditions do not mechanically generate behavior; rather, they are interpreted cognitively and emotionally before behavioral responses emerge.

The customer's first relationship with a retail environment may begin even before physical entry. Storefronts, windows, entrances, visual permeability, and exterior-to-interior visibility can provide information concerning what customers may encounter inside. Research on clothing-store windows has shown that display characteristics can influence entry-related judgments, although these relationships vary according to factors such as shopping purpose and cognitive processing demands (7). More recent evidence concerning exterior transparency indicates that clearer visual access to store interiors can facilitate consumer entry by reducing uncertainty and providing information about the environment before entry (8). Such findings suggest that attraction to a physical store should not be reduced simply to visual beauty. Legibility, anticipated ease of use, perceived accessibility, information availability, and confidence about what lies beyond the entrance may also constitute important parts of initial customer evaluation.

Once inside the store, customers are exposed to a complex configuration of spatial and sensory conditions. Lighting affects visibility and potentially the evaluation of colors and merchandise; layout affects navigation and product access; furniture and fixtures shape movement and interaction; acoustics and scent contribute to sensory experience; and temperature, air quality, and other indoor environmental conditions may affect comfort. Evidence indicates that consumers' assessments of indoor environmental quality are associated with purchase-related decision processes, demonstrating that lighting, thermal conditions, acoustics, and air quality cannot be treated as irrelevant background characteristics (9). At the same time, increasingly diverse customer populations challenge the assumption that one atmospheric configuration is universally comfortable. Sensory intensity, complex spatial organization, excessive stimulation, and insufficient accessibility can create exclusion or discomfort for some users, highlighting the need for more inclusive approaches to retail design (10). Accordingly, effective store design involves not only aesthetic composition but also the extent to which the environment enables different customers to understand, tolerate, navigate, and use the space.

Customer experience provides a particularly useful conceptual lens for understanding these processes because the retail encounter encompasses more than a single emotional reaction or purchase decision. Experience in a physical retail environment includes cognitive, affective, social, and physical dimensions that emerge throughout customers' interactions with the store (11). Customers may evaluate whether circulation is understandable, whether merchandise can be examined conveniently, whether fitting or comparison activities are supported, whether the environment feels pleasant, and whether interactions with employees and other customers are compatible with their expectations. These evaluations may contribute to broader impressions of value, quality, satisfaction, or trust. Research on retail trust, for instance, demonstrates that the store environment can participate in the development of customers' overall trust while interacting with other relational and commercial factors (12). Interior design therefore has both functional and symbolic potential: it can facilitate practical shopping tasks while simultaneously signaling meanings concerning professionalism, quality, prestige, accessibility, modernity, or brand identity.

However, the relationship between store atmosphere and customer behavior is neither uniform nor necessarily linear. Studies addressing impulse and unplanned purchasing illustrate this complexity. Research conducted in the apparel context has associated components of store atmosphere with impulsive purchasing tendencies, but different atmospheric elements do not necessarily exert identical influences (13). Similarly, consumer characteristics interact with store-atmosphere evaluations in shaping unplanned purchase decisions, suggesting that customers do not respond uniformly to the same environment (14). The implications are theoretically significant. A favorable interior may encourage exploration or improve mood without producing a purchase, while an aesthetically ordinary environment may still support purchasing when products, prices, or functional convenience correspond strongly with customer needs. Therefore, equating pleasant design with sales risks collapsing several distinct stages of the customer journey into one assumed outcome.

The same caution applies to patronage and repurchase intentions. Boutique-store research has demonstrated interrelationships among atmosphere, satisfaction, store loyalty, and repurchase intention, yet these variables form a network of relationships rather than evidence that interior atmosphere independently determines repeat purchasing (15). More recent research on apparel retailing likewise indicates that atmospheric conditions are associated with behavioral intentions through broader evaluative mechanisms and that customer characteristics such as age can modify these relationships (16). Even conditions conventionally interpreted negatively may produce context-specific outcomes. For example, perceived crowding does not necessarily reduce customer satisfaction or patronage intention in every setting; employee responsiveness and contextual interpretation can substantially alter its consequences (17). These results emphasize that the meaning of a design or atmospheric condition depends on how it is experienced within a particular retail, social, and cultural context.

A further complication is that purchasing decisions occur within a commercial system containing many determinants that are not reducible to interior design. Product suitability, price, stock availability, perceived value, service quality, employee behavior, warranties, information, prior experience, and customers' available budgets can strengthen or override environmental evaluations. Research examining why customers leave apparel stores without buying demonstrates that non-purchase can emerge from multiple factors rather than from store atmosphere alone (18). Thus, remaining longer inside a store cannot automatically be treated as purchasing, expressing willingness to revisit cannot be treated as an actual return visit, and positive impressions cannot be equated with completed transactions. A rigorous analysis of store interior design therefore requires distinctions among environmental conditions, customers' intermediate evaluations, reported past behavior, and future behavioral intentions.

These distinctions are especially relevant because much retail research operationalizes “store atmosphere” through broad composite measures. Such measures may combine physical design with employee characteristics, customer density, exterior appearance, music, scent, commercial communication, and other environmental cues. While useful for identifying associations, this aggregation can make it difficult to determine how customers themselves distinguish spatial design from service, product, and price-related conditions. It may also obscure contradictions within an experience: a customer may appreciate lighting while disliking scent, value the layout while rejecting the prices, or interpret luxurious materials as quality signals while simultaneously feeling that the store is not intended for someone with their budget. Contemporary physical retailing therefore requires a more conditional understanding in which different design components are interpreted within customer-specific and situation-specific configurations.

A particularly important issue concerns how retail environments generate meanings of quality, identity, and trust. Customers frequently make rapid inferences from cleanliness, maintenance, materials, spatial coherence, displays, and visual consistency. Yet these signals remain provisional until they are evaluated against actual products and services. A sophisticated environment may communicate quality but cannot demonstrate objective product performance, just as an orderly store may create initial confidence without guaranteeing satisfactory after-sales service. Retail design should therefore be understood as contributing to the formation of expectations and initial meanings rather than as independently validating the promises it communicates. This distinction becomes increasingly important in physical–digital retail ecosystems, where consumers may encounter a brand online before entering a store and subsequently compare digital promises with physical execution (2, 4). The store consequently functions as both an experiential setting and a site at which previous brand expectations can be confirmed, revised, or rejected.

Understanding these conditional and interpretive relationships also requires attention to customer heterogeneity. Retail users differ in age, sensory preferences, mobility, familiarity with store formats, shopping frequency, available time, budget, and purpose of visit. A customer entering with a specific purchase goal may prioritize direct wayfinding and clear product information, whereas an exploratory shopper may attach greater importance to displays, novelty, and atmospheric stimulation. Sensory features experienced as exciting by one individual may be distracting or uncomfortable for another (10). Likewise, the behavioral implications of atmosphere may vary across demographic groups and consumption contexts (16). The relevant question is therefore not simply whether a particular interior feature is “good” or “bad,” but under what conditions, for which users, and through which intermediate evaluations it becomes meaningful.

These issues create a strong rationale for qualitative investigation. Quantitative studies are essential for testing relationships among predefined constructs, yet they may offer less detail regarding how customers explain apparently inconsistent responses or how they distinguish design-related evaluations from competing considerations during real shopping experiences. A generic qualitative approach can be appropriate when the research problem concerns applied patterns of meaning without requiring exclusive commitment to phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, or a bounded case-study tradition (19). Purposeful selection of participants with relevant experiential knowledge can further facilitate access to information-rich accounts (20), while the adequacy of a qualitative sample can be judged according to the information power provided by the specificity of the research question, participant relevance, dialogue quality, and analytic strategy rather than by assumptions derived from statistical representativeness (21).

At the same time, interpretive qualitative research requires explicit attention to methodological transparency. Interview-based inquiry depends not only on the questions asked but also on how data are documented, interpreted, categorized, and reported. Research comparing interviews conducted with and without voice recorders demonstrates that note-based and recorded approaches may produce different forms and levels of detail, making transparency about the recording procedure particularly important (22). Qualitative content analysis likewise requires systematic attention to preparation, organization, abstraction, and reporting if findings are to be considered trustworthy (23). The position of the researcher is also relevant because professional knowledge and prior assumptions may shape what is noticed and how participants' accounts are interpreted; reflexive practice is therefore necessary to make these influences visible rather than assuming researcher neutrality (24). Reporting frameworks such as COREQ further encourage explicit disclosure of interview procedures, researcher characteristics, sampling, analysis, and limitations so that readers can judge the transparency of qualitative evidence (25). These methodological principles are particularly important when investigating interior design because a researcher with design expertise may otherwise be inclined to overattribute customer outcomes to spatial or aesthetic characteristics.

Despite the substantial literature on retail atmospherics, customer experience, environmental quality, impulse purchasing, trust, and behavioral intentions, an important explanatory gap therefore remains. Existing research demonstrates that physical-store environments matter, but it also indicates substantial variation according to the particular environmental dimension, customer characteristics, shopping purpose, product and service conditions, and outcome being examined. Furthermore, much of the literature does not clearly separate initial attraction, ease of use, sensory comfort, product interaction, trust formation, reported purchasing, purchase abandonment, and revisit intention. These distinctions are especially important in a diverse metropolitan retail environment such as Istanbul, where customers encounter different store formats, brands, price positions, and physical environments. Examining customers' own interpretations can clarify how interior design participates in experience without assuming that design independently causes entry, purchasing, prolonged visits, or repeat patronage.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to explore how customers in Istanbul experience and interpret the conditional role of store interior design in their shopping experiences and behavioral intentions.

Methods and Materials

The study employed a generic qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive epistemology. A generic qualitative design is a flexible approach that requires explicit justification and systematically examines patterns of meaning related to an applied research question, without claiming to describe an entire culture, explain a single bounded case, generate a new theory, or identify a phenomenological essence (Kahlke, 2014). The focus of this study is on the relationships of meaning that adults with experience of physical stores in Istanbul construct among design, store experience, and behavioral intentions.

The units of analysis were meaningful statements and passages relevant to the research question within the detailed interview notes prepared for each participant. Although the official thesis title includes the word "effect," the research design does not test causal effects, increases in sales, or population-level associations. Accordingly, the article title and all interpretations are restricted to the "conditional role" of design and the experiential relationships articulated by participants.

The study group was recruited through purposive criterion sampling from adults aged 18 years and older who were accessible in Istanbul and had experienced at least one physical store or commercial space during the preceding 12 months. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich cases with experiences directly relevant to the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participant selection sought variation in age, gender, educational attainment, and frequency of in-store shopping; these characteristics were not used as quotas or variables for statistical comparison.

During fieldwork, 20 individuals were invited, 2 declined to participate, 18 provided voluntary informed consent, and 2 withdrew from the interviews. Data from 16 participants were included in the analysis. Sample adequacy was determined on 16 July 2026 in accordance with the information power approach, taking into account the narrow scope of the research question, participants' topic-specific experience, the quality of their accounts, variation across cases, and the analytical contribution of additional interviews (Malterud et al., 2016). This decision does not imply statistical representativeness or a mechanically determined "saturation number."

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of participants (N = 16)

Characteristic	Category	n
Age group	18–25	4
	26–35	6
	36–45	4
	46+	2
Gender	Female	10
	Male	6
Education	High school	3
	Bachelor's degree	10
	Postgraduate	3
Frequency of shopping in physical stores	Several times a week	5
	Once a week	8
	Once a month	3

Data were generated between 12 June and 16 July 2026 through face-to-face interviews and online interviews conducted via mobile phone, using a semi-structured interview guide comprising 14 core questions approved by the ethics committee. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. No store photographs, videos, direct observations, biometric measurements, transaction records, or sales data were collected. The questions covered first impressions and store choice; lighting, color, layout, furniture, and circulation; the overall atmosphere; comfort and time spent in the store; purchasing and purchase abandonment; unplanned purchasing; quality, trust, and brand meaning; and revisit intention.

In accordance with the approved protocol, no audio recordings were made. The researcher took detailed contemporaneous notes using a structured template during each interview and expanded the notes on the same day. Short expressions recorded verbatim, researcher summaries preserving the meaning of participants' accounts, and analytical or reflexive notes were retained in separate fields. Note-based data generation entails a clear risk of losing detail and the sequence of statements. Although evidence suggests that detailed interview accounts prepared on the same day can, in some contexts, approximate audio-based transcripts, the two forms of recording should not be treated as equivalent (Rutakumwa et al., 2020). Accordingly, the evidence units in this article are reported as contextualized summaries rather than as direct quotations.

The data were analyzed using conventional, inductive qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Each set of interview notes was read holistically at least twice; meaning units relevant to the research question

were identified; open codes closely grounded in the data were generated; similar codes were grouped into subcategories and categories; and higher-order relationships among categories were developed into themes. The interview questions were used to organize the dataset and were not adopted in advance as the final theme labels. The codebook recorded definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, evidence units, revision dates, and the rationale for decisions. Traceability across the preparation, organization, and reporting stages was maintained in accordance with Elo et al.'s (2014) recommendations for trustworthy qualitative content analysis.

Events that participants described as having occurred in the past, including entering or remaining in a store, making a purchase, or abandoning a purchase, were coded separately as "reported behavior." Future-oriented statements about entry, purchasing, revisiting, or recommending a store were coded as "behavioral intentions." None were presented as directly observed behavior. Each recurring main theme was supported by contextualized evidence from at least two independent participants; this threshold was not used as a measure of frequency, importance, effect size, or saturation. Individual but explanatory accounts were retained as deviant, negative, or conditional evidence. The analysis was conducted by the researcher using a manual matrix; no second coder was involved, and intercoder agreement was not assessed.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were supported through coding closely grounded in participants' accounts; distinguishing direct expressions from summaries; searching for negative and deviant cases; providing detailed contextual descriptions; maintaining a versioned codebook and decision log; and documenting the chain from research question to code, category, theme, and evidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Elo et al., 2014). The COREQ criteria for interview-based studies were used to check for reporting omissions, rather than as a score substituting for procedures that had not been undertaken (Tong et al., 2007). Member checking, second-coder analysis, and transcript return were not undertaken; these omissions are explicitly acknowledged as limitations.

The researcher's experience in interior design and architectural visualization facilitated the interpretation of technical accounts but also created a risk of overstating the role of design. Accounts that did not align with professional expectations were therefore specifically marked, and alternative explanations involving products, prices, stock availability, staff, time pressure, and prior brand experience were retained in the analysis. This effort to make the influence of researcher positionality on data generation and interpretation visible is consistent with Berger's (2015) recommendations on reflexivity.

Ethics approval was granted by the ethics committee of İstanbul Nişantaşı University under decision no. 2026.04, dated 6 April 2026. Informed, voluntary consent was obtained from all participants, and their rights to decline to answer questions and to withdraw were explained. Data were anonymized using the codes P01–P16, the identification key was stored separately from the dataset, and personal data minimization was applied.

Findings and Results

The analysis generated five themes that do not collapse the experience extending from approaching a store to revisit intention into a single outcome. The themes are not mutually exclusive independent variables; they represent different levels of meaning within the same store experience. Each evidence unit was assigned to only one primary theme according to its central meaning, while relationships with neighboring themes were recorded as secondary links. For example, lighting was assigned to T01 when described as facilitating wayfinding, to T02 in the context of sensory comfort or color accuracy, and to T03 when explicitly linked to purchase intention. The same evidence was therefore not used twice as primary evidence.

Table 2. Main themes, analytical cores, and interpretive boundaries

Theme	Analytical core	Principal outcome level	Interpretive boundary
T01	Spatial legibility and access, from entry to ease of use	First impressions, entry evaluations, wayfinding, and circulation	Ease of use and access are not equivalent to actual entry, trust, or purchasing.
T02	The experiential basis of sensory comfort and product interaction	Comfort, color accuracy, trying products, comparison, and privacy	A positive atmosphere does not automatically result in staying or purchasing.
T03	The formation of reported behavior and behavioral intentions under multiple conditions	Accounts of staying, purchasing or purchase abandonment, and revisit intention	Past events, future intentions, and observed behavior are distinct; causality is not established.
T04	The generation of meanings of quality, trust, and brand through design and their evaluation against performance	Initial quality and trust inferences, brand identity, artificiality, or exclusion	A design signal is not objective quality or validated trust.
T05	Variation in experience according to the user, purpose, budget, and cultural context	User needs, purpose, budget, and limited cross-national observations	An individual experience is not evidence of cultural differences or cultural causality.

T01 — Spatial legibility and access

Participants evaluated window displays, entrances, clear aisles, the separation of product categories, signage, maintenance, and safe use within a shared experiential sequence extending from approaching the store to completing tasks inside it. In P01-Q02-U01, a dark and cluttered window display was associated with a tendency to walk past, whereas a clean, clearly identifiable entrance was associated with curiosity and a desire to enter. This evidence indicates that design provides customers with initial information about whether a store is accessible and understandable, rather than demonstrating that the entry decision depends solely on design.

In P02-Q06-U01, lighting that did not strain the eyes, clear aisles, and clearly differentiated product categories were described in conjunction with ease of use. Lighting and circulation did not perform the same function in this account; they jointly helped the customer interpret the space quickly. In P15-Q14-U01, readable labels, seating, and safe circulation were considered more important than aesthetic appearance in relation to particular user needs. This individual piece of evidence was not generalized to an entire age group but was retained as a conditional example indicating that accessibility should be understood more broadly than an “average user” assumption allows.

T02 — Sensory comfort and product interaction

T02 brought lighting, color accuracy, sound, scent, and thermal comfort together with opportunities to try and compare products, maintain privacy, and assess product information within a shared experiential context. In P01-Q04-U01, lighting that accurately rendered product colors and displays that facilitated comparison supported the decision-making process. This support does not imply that a purchase occurred; the participant described design as reducing the cost of evaluating products.

In P03-Q03-U01, outfit displays, fitting-room queues, music, and ease of movement were considered together in relation to remaining in the store. The favorable and unfavorable conditions within the same account were not treated as canceling one another out within a single “atmosphere score.” In P06-Q14-U01, an intense scent prevented the participant from staying despite a favorable assessment of the visual arrangement. This negative case indicates that successful visual design does not automatically compensate for discomfort in another sensory dimension, and that sensory coherence varies across users.

T03 — The formation of behavior and intention under multiple conditions

Participants' accounts of purchasing, purchase abandonment, longer stays, and revisiting included products, prices, stock availability, information, warranties, service, staff approach, and prior satisfaction alongside design. In P02-Q04-U01, the layout was described as potentially accelerating decision-making, but a purchase did not occur when the product's technical specifications and price were unsuitable. Design can reduce friction in information search and comparison; it cannot compensate for a mismatch between the product and its perceived value.

In P01-Q12-U01, the desire to revisit was explained in conjunction with product characteristics, price, a clean fitting area, and prior satisfaction. This account indicates that intention depends on accumulated experience extending beyond design. In P10-Q14-U01, staying longer in a store was described as potentially involving reflection, exploration, or comparison and as not invariably resulting in a purchase. Time spent in the store was therefore not used as a proxy for purchasing. The theme indicates that design does not independently determine behavioral outcomes; decision-making depends on alignment among multiple conditions.

T04 — Evaluating quality, trust, and brand meaning against performance

Participants drew initial inferences that a brand was attentive to detail, high-quality, youthful, luxurious, or technology-oriented from materials, cleanliness, maintenance, consistency between colors and window displays, and the spatial design language. In P01-Q08-U01, a coherent design language was associated with the perception of a brand as attentive to detail, whereas excessive ostentation was associated with artificiality. The possibility of reading the same design signal both favorably and critically indicates that symbolic meaning depends on customer expectations.

In P02-Q09-U01, design was described as supporting initial trust, but this trust was insufficient in the absence of information about warranties and after-sales service. A distinction was thus made between trust at the level of first impressions and trust validated through transactions and use. In P13-Q14-U01, a luxurious store appearance evoked apprehension and a sense of not belonging rather than trust. This deviant interpretation indicates that costly or ostentatious design does not produce positive brand meanings for all customers.

T05 — User, purpose, budget, and cultural context

The same spatial or sensory feature was evaluated differently according to participants' shopping purpose, budget, accessibility needs, and prior experience. Rapid wayfinding and product information were more prominent in task-oriented shopping, whereas displays and atmosphere could acquire greater significance in exploratory experiences. Budget could alter whether a luxurious appearance was interpreted as a quality signal or as an indication of high prices and exclusion.

In P01-Q10-U01, differences in fitting areas and access to product information were observed during limited experience abroad; however, this individual experience was not treated as evidence of national or cultural differences. In P02-Q11-U01, differences between store experiences were explained more in terms of shopping purpose, budget, and the approach of sales personnel than culture. The absence of comparable overseas experience among some participants was likewise not interpreted as evidence that "there are no cultural differences." Culture was therefore retained as a limited, exploratory context within T05, rather than being presented as an independent theme.

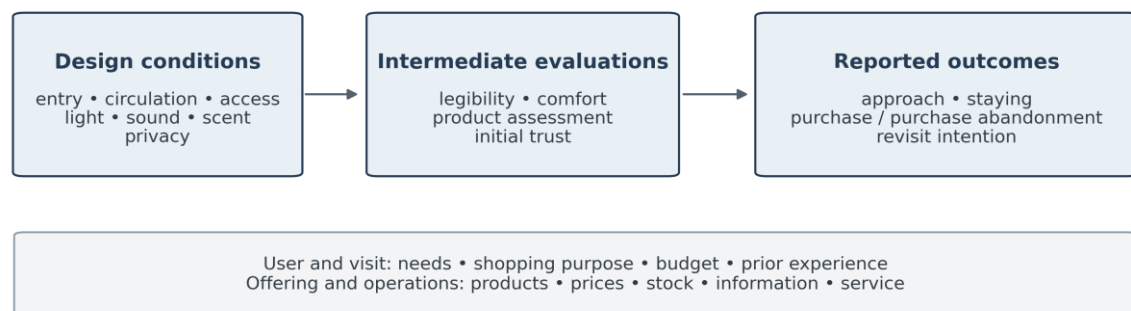
Table 3 presents eight evidence units selected to illustrate the scope of the themes. The contents are not direct quotations; they are researcher summaries that preserve the context of meanings recorded during the interviews and in notes expanded on the same day. Each row indicates both the supportive contribution of the evidence and the conclusions that cannot be drawn from it.

Table 3. Selected evidence units, analytical roles, and interpretive boundaries

Evidence	Theme/role	Contextualized content summary	Interpretive boundary
P01-Q02-U01	T01 / supporting–contrasting	A dark, cluttered window display was associated with a tendency to walk past; a clean, legible entrance with curiosity and the desire to enter.	First impressions do not substitute for products, prices, service, or location.
P02-Q06-U01	T01 / intersecting	Lighting that did not strain the eyes, clear aisles, and distinct product groupings were associated with ease of use.	Ease of use is not a completed purchase.
P06-Q14-U01	T02 / negative	Despite a favorable assessment of the visual arrangement, an intense scent prevented the participant from staying.	A positive visual arrangement does not compensate for sensory discomfort.
P02-Q04-U01	T03 / conditioning	The layout accelerated decision-making; no purchase occurred when the product's features and price were unsuitable.	An independent or causal effect on purchasing cannot be attributed to design.
P10-Q14-U01	T03 / negative distinction	Longer stays could involve reflection, exploration, or comparison and did not always end in a purchase.	Time spent in the store is not a proxy for purchasing.
P02-Q09-U01	T04 / conditioning	Design supported initial trust; a lack of warranty and after-sales information limited that trust.	Initial trust is not verified trustworthiness.
P13-Q14-U01	T04 / deviant	In some instances, a luxurious appearance evoked apprehension or a sense of not belonging rather than trust.	Luxurious design does not have a universally positive effect.
P02-Q11-U01	T05 / alternative explanation	Differences between store experiences were explained more by purpose, budget, and staff approach than by culture.	Culture is not the sole explanatory variable.

Read together, the themes reveal a three-stage but nonlinear experiential chain. Design conditions were first associated with intermediate evaluations such as legibility, comfort, product assessment, and initial trust; approach, staying, purchasing or purchase abandonment, and revisit intention were articulated after these evaluations. Each stage of the chain, however, was conditioned by user needs, purpose, budget, products, prices, stock availability, information, service, and prior experience. Figure 1 presents this pattern as a set of analytical distinctions derived from the data, rather than as causal path coefficients.

Conditional experiential chain derived from the findings

**Figure 1. The conditional experiential chain derived from the findings**

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that store interior design plays a meaningful but conditional role in shaping customer experience and behavioral intentions. Rather than supporting a simple sequence in which favorable design directly produces entry, purchasing, prolonged stays, or repeat visits, the findings revealed a more differentiated experiential process. Five themes emerged: spatial legibility and access; sensory comfort and product

interaction; the formation of reported behavior and behavioral intentions under multiple conditions; the generation of meanings of quality, trust, and brand through design and their subsequent evaluation against performance; and variation in experience according to the user, shopping purpose, budget, and cultural context. Collectively, these findings suggest that interior design operates primarily by facilitating or constraining intermediate customer evaluations such as ease of navigation, comfort, product assessment, accessibility, and initial trust. Behavioral outcomes are subsequently shaped through the interaction of these evaluations with product suitability, price, stock availability, service, prior experience, and customer-specific conditions.

The first theme demonstrated that spatial legibility and access constitute an important part of the customer experience from the moment a store is visually encountered. Participants associated clean and understandable entrances, unobstructed circulation routes, clear product grouping, readable information, and safe movement with greater ease of approaching and using the store. Conversely, cluttered displays, dark entrances, or unclear circulation could create hesitation or make the retail environment more difficult to interpret. These results correspond with research showing that interior design consists of interdependent components such as circulation, furniture, lighting, spatial organization, displays, and signage, all of which influence how the environment is perceived and used (5). They are also consistent with the S-O-R perspective, according to which physical stimuli acquire behavioral significance through customers' cognitive and emotional evaluations rather than through a direct environmental effect (6).

The finding that the process of spatial interpretation begins before entry is particularly important. Participants' descriptions indicated that storefront presentation and entrance legibility provide early information concerning what the customer might encounter inside. This supports findings that window-display characteristics can affect store-entry judgments, although their influence varies depending on the customer's shopping purpose and cognitive conditions (7). Similarly, experimental evidence concerning exterior transparency indicates that greater visibility into a store can facilitate entry by increasing available information and reducing uncertainty about the interior environment (8). The present findings extend this perspective by suggesting continuity between exterior legibility and interior usability: the information conveyed at the threshold appears to be followed by further assessments involving aisle clarity, signage, product grouping, and accessibility. Nevertheless, the qualitative accounts do not establish that a visually legible entrance necessarily causes actual entry. Rather, they indicate that legibility may reduce informational and spatial friction during the initial stages of the customer journey.

The second theme concerned sensory comfort and product interaction. Participants interpreted lighting, color, scent, temperature, sound, privacy, fitting facilities, displays, and opportunities for comparison as interconnected aspects of the physical shopping experience. Importantly, the value of these features was not limited to whether a store felt pleasant. Participants also evaluated whether the environment enabled them to see merchandise accurately, compare products, try items comfortably, move without difficulty, and remain in the space without sensory discomfort. This finding supports the multidimensional understanding of physical retail customer experience, in which cognitive, emotional, physical, and social responses occur simultaneously during interaction with the retail environment (11). It also aligns with evidence that indoor environmental quality, including lighting, thermal conditions, air quality, and acoustics, is related to consumer purchase-related evaluations (9).

At the same time, the negative evidence within this theme is theoretically significant. One participant described leaving despite positively evaluating the visual arrangement because the scent was excessively intense. Such findings indicate that positive evaluation of one environmental component cannot necessarily compensate for

discomfort produced by another. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary work on sensory inclusivity, which emphasizes that retail environments characterized by excessive sensory stimulation, difficult navigation, or insufficient attention to diverse sensory needs may constrain rather than enhance the customer experience (10). Consequently, the present findings do not support a universal prescription that greater sensory richness necessarily improves retail outcomes. The meaning of environmental stimulation depends on the user, the level of stimulation, the task being performed, and the broader configuration of the store.

The third theme showed most clearly why design should not be interpreted as an independent determinant of customer behavior. Participants linked layout and environmental conditions with decision facilitation, longer stays, purchasing, purchase abandonment, and revisit intention, but these outcomes were consistently described alongside product characteristics, prices, stock availability, information, warranties, service, and prior satisfaction. In one account, an effective layout helped the participant evaluate merchandise more efficiently, yet no purchase occurred because the product specifications and price were unsuitable. This demonstrates a critical distinction: design may improve the conditions under which a decision is made without determining the content of that decision.

This interpretation is consistent with previous studies on impulsive and unplanned purchasing. Research in apparel retailing has shown that different dimensions of store atmosphere can be associated with impulse buying, but these relationships are not identical across all environmental variables (13). Consumer characteristics also contribute to whether atmospheric conditions are translated into unplanned purchasing (14). Similarly, research examining why consumers leave apparel stores without buying has demonstrated that product and service factors remain important alongside environmental conditions (18). These studies support the present finding that a pleasant or functional environment cannot compensate indefinitely for unsuitable merchandise, unacceptable prices, missing stock, or inadequate service.

The distinction between staying longer and purchasing is also important. Participants indicated that time spent in a store could reflect exploration, deliberation, comparison, or uncertainty rather than a progression toward purchase. Accordingly, duration of stay should not automatically be interpreted as a sales-related outcome. A similar distinction applies to revisit intention. Participants' willingness to return was shaped by accumulated evaluations involving design, products, prices, prior satisfaction, and service rather than by interior conditions alone. Previous evidence supports this more complex interpretation. Research on boutique stores has identified relationships among atmosphere, satisfaction, loyalty, and repurchase intention, while also showing that repurchase is embedded within a broader network of customer evaluations (15). More recent evidence similarly indicates that store atmosphere relates to behavioral intentions through variables such as perceived value, trust, and attitude and that customer characteristics may alter these relationships (16). Therefore, the present findings reinforce the importance of analytically separating atmosphere, intermediate evaluations, intention, and actual behavior.

The fourth theme concerned the meanings of quality, trust, and brand identity generated through design. Participants frequently used materials, maintenance, cleanliness, visual consistency, displays, and spatial style to infer whether a retailer appeared professional, high quality, contemporary, luxurious, youthful, or attentive to detail. These observations suggest that interior design functions not only as a practical environment but also as a symbolic communication system. This interpretation is consistent with evidence demonstrating that characteristics of the store environment contribute to overall trust evaluations in retail settings (12). The physical store can therefore operate as a tangible expression of brand positioning and can establish initial expectations before customers fully evaluate products and services.

However, a central finding was that these symbolic meanings remained provisional. Participants distinguished between an attractive or high-quality-looking environment and actual confidence based on warranties, service, product performance, or previous experience. In other words, design could initiate trust but could not independently validate it. This distinction is particularly relevant in contemporary retail environments in which customers move between digital and physical channels. Digital transformation increasingly connects brand information, product search, physical visits, service encounters, and post-purchase experiences within a single customer journey (1, 2). Furthermore, the contemporary store is increasingly expected to operate as an experiential setting in which brand meaning, product engagement, and service are integrated rather than treated as separate functions (3, 4). The findings of the present study suggest that interior design can contribute to this experiential promise, but the promise must subsequently be confirmed through operational performance.

The deviant finding that a luxurious store appearance could create apprehension or a sense of exclusion further demonstrates that symbolic design cues do not carry universal meanings. Prestige-oriented design may communicate quality to one customer while suggesting unaffordability or social distance to another. This result connects directly with the fifth theme, which emphasized variation according to customer characteristics, shopping purpose, budget, and prior experience. Participants did not evaluate the same features identically. Task-oriented shoppers appeared to place greater emphasis on information accessibility and efficient navigation, while exploratory experiences allowed visual displays and atmosphere to assume greater importance. Likewise, budget affected whether luxury was interpreted positively as a quality signal or negatively as an indication that the store was beyond the customer's means.

These findings are consistent with research showing that customer characteristics condition responses to retail atmosphere. The moderating role of age in the relationship between atmospheric perceptions and apparel behavioral intentions demonstrates that a single environmental configuration cannot be assumed to function similarly across all customer groups (16). Similarly, evidence concerning sensory inclusivity shows that assumptions based on an "average consumer" may neglect individuals whose sensory or accessibility needs differ from conventional design expectations (10). Even crowding illustrates the contextual nature of environmental interpretation. Although crowding is often considered undesirable, evidence from Türkiye indicates that perceived crowding may under some conditions relate positively to satisfaction and patronage intentions, particularly when combined with responsive employees (17). Thus, the present study supports a contextual rather than universally prescriptive understanding of retail atmosphere.

The limited cultural observations made by participants should also be interpreted cautiously. Some participants referred to differences observed in stores outside Türkiye, while others attributed differences in their experiences more strongly to price, store type, purpose, or staff behavior than to culture. The available data were insufficient to isolate culture as an explanatory factor. This caution is important because cross-national differences in retail experience may simultaneously reflect retail format, income, customer expectations, regulation, brand positioning, service models, and shopping purpose. The findings therefore support retaining culture as a possible contextual condition rather than claiming that particular design responses are culturally determined.

Taken together, the findings support what may be described as a conditional experiential chain. Interior design first establishes environmental conditions involving accessibility, legibility, sensory characteristics, product interaction, and symbolic communication. Customers interpret these conditions through intermediate evaluations such as ease, comfort, perceived quality, product assessability, trust, inclusion, or exclusion. Reported outcomes

such as entering, remaining, purchasing, abandoning a purchase, or intending to revisit emerge only after these evaluations interact with products, prices, stock, information, service, budget, purpose, and previous experience. Such a structure is compatible with the S-O-R tradition because it places internal evaluation between environmental stimuli and response (6), while also expanding the analysis beyond a simple stimulus–response sequence by emphasizing the multiple commercial and contextual conditions surrounding behavior.

The findings also reinforce the continuing relevance of physical retail in an increasingly digitally integrated marketplace. As retailers seek to justify physical visits, stores must offer more than merchandise availability (3). They must support navigation, evaluation, comfort, trust formation, interaction, and meaningful engagement while remaining consistent with digital and service touchpoints (4). The present study contributes to this literature by demonstrating that the value of interior design lies less in directly “causing” purchasing and more in shaping the conditions under which customers can effectively approach, understand, use, evaluate, and interpret the retail environment. This more bounded interpretation avoids treating customer liking, behavioral intention, reported past behavior, and actual transaction outcomes as interchangeable indicators.

This study has several limitations. First, the findings were based on a purposively selected group of 16 adults in Istanbul and therefore cannot be statistically generalized to the wider population of Istanbul, Türkiye, or customers in other countries. Second, the study relied on participants’ self-reported experiences and behavioral intentions rather than direct observations, store-traffic data, transaction records, or experimental manipulation; consequently, the findings cannot establish causal effects of interior design on entry, purchasing, time spent in stores, or revisiting. Third, interviews were documented through detailed contemporaneous notes expanded on the same day rather than through audio recordings and verbatim transcripts, which may have resulted in the loss of nuances in wording, sequence, emphasis, or emotional expression. In addition, no objective measurements of environmental characteristics such as lighting, sound, temperature, scent intensity, spatial density, or circulation efficiency were collected. The analysis was undertaken by a single researcher without intercoder verification or member checking, and the researcher’s professional familiarity with interior design may have influenced interpretation despite reflexive efforts to preserve negative and contradictory evidence. Finally, participants’ limited and uneven international retail experiences did not provide an adequate basis for systematic cultural comparison.

Future research should examine the conditional experiential chain identified in this study using methodological triangulation and more diverse retail contexts. Qualitative studies could combine interviews with in-store observation, behavioral mapping, walk-along interviews, photo elicitation, and post-visit reflections to compare what customers say with what they actually do within the retail environment. Quantitative and experimental studies could test specific design components such as lighting, circulation, visual transparency, display density, signage, acoustic conditions, scent, and fitting-room design while controlling for product assortment, price, promotions, stock availability, location, and employee behavior. Before-and-after designs using store-traffic and transaction data would help determine whether modifications to interior environments produce measurable behavioral changes. Longitudinal research could compare revisit intentions with actual subsequent visits. Studies should also distinguish among retail sectors such as apparel, grocery, technology, furniture, cosmetics, and luxury retail because customer tasks and expectations differ considerably across formats. Cross-cultural research would benefit from matched store categories, comparable samples, and standardized data-generation procedures. Further research should also purposively include participants with different sensory, mobility, age-related, and accessibility needs to determine how inclusive retail environments can be designed without relying on assumptions about an average customer.

Retail managers, interior designers, and brand managers should treat store design as one component of an integrated customer-experience system rather than as an isolated aesthetic intervention. Practical evaluation should begin with the entire customer journey, from storefront visibility and entrance legibility to wayfinding, product access, fitting or testing, checkout, and exit. Lighting, sound, scent, temperature, furniture, display systems, and circulation should be tested not only for visual attractiveness but also for their effects on comfort, accessibility, product evaluation, and task completion among different customer groups. Designers should avoid assuming that greater luxury, stimulation, density, or visual complexity will generate universally positive responses. Store design should also be aligned with product assortment, price positioning, information quality, warranties, employee behavior, and after-sales service so that the expectations created by the physical environment are supported by actual performance. Managers should measure customer liking, comfort, time in store, purchase abandonment, revisit intention, actual visits, and sales as separate indicators rather than using one measure as a substitute for another. Regular user testing with customers of different ages, budgets, shopping purposes, and accessibility needs can help identify design solutions that reduce friction while maintaining a coherent brand experience.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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