

ETHNO-SENSORY MODESTY: DECONSTRUCTING VISUAL MERCHANDISING ARCHITECTURE IN MALAYSIA'S PREMIUM RETAIL SPACES

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Abstract. Malaysia's premium retail spaces fuse global luxury signaling with richly diverse local sensibilities around modesty, heritage, and ethnocultural plurality. This study proposes Ethno-Sensory Modesty Cues (ESMC) as a cohesive Visual Merchandising (VM) framework that embeds ethnocultural symbolism, modesty-informed spatial logic, and multisensory atmospherics into architectural design and shopper experience. Grounded in an S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) lens, the research advances a culturally situated model where ESMC (stimuli) activate affective responses (AR) and cognitive appraisals (CA) within diverse Malaysian publics, ultimately shaping behavioral intentions (BI) such as dwell time, visit frequency, willingness to pay, and word-of-mouth. The study addresses a threefold gap: conceptual (the absence of a defined ESMC construct that integrates heritage signaling, modesty norms, and multisensory design in Malaysian VM), empirical (limited multi-group tests of ESMC-AR/CA-BI pathways across Malay, Chinese, Indian, and expatriate consumers in Malaysia), and practitioner (insufficient guidance on harmonizing masstige accessibility with aspirational branding in premium retail spaces).

Keywords: *ethno-sensory modesty, visual merchandising architecture, Malaysia premium retail, masstige luxury, multisensory retail environments, Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R)*

Introduction

Malaysia's premium retail spaces operate at the intersection of global luxury branding and deeply rooted local sensibilities around modesty, heritage, and ethnocultural diversity. Visual merchandising (VM) architecture in these spaces does more than stage products; it materializes culturally inflected signals of ethno-cultural symbols, modesty-informed spatial hierarchies, and multisensory atmospheres that collectively shape perceptions of prestige, authenticity, and desirability. In contemporary Southeast Asian contexts, scholars increasingly foreground the retail environment as a culturally textured space rather than a neutral backdrop for consumption, underscoring the role of sensory design, materiality, and symbolic signification in producing premium experiences (Zhang et.al, 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Gong et al., 2025; Duruz et al., 2023). Yet in Malaysia, where Malay, Chinese, Indian, and expatriate publics intersect within high-end shopping ecologies, there is a notable gap in theoretically grounded exploration of how ethno-sensory cues operate within VM to negotiate modesty, heritage, and luxury signaling in masstige and premium retail settings (Chopra, 2026; Baber et al., 2026; Chowdhury and Shamsheer, 2025).

Problem statement

Although research on sensory marketing and visual merchandising (VM) has expanded globally, there remains a limited systematic understanding of how ethno-

sensory modesty is integrated into the VM environments of Malaysia's premium retailers. Furthermore, the mechanisms through which these cues influence consumer affect, perceived value, and behavior are not yet fully explained. First, there is a lack of robust theorization regarding ethno-sensory modesty as a unified VM construct that synthesizes ethnocultural symbolism, modesty-oriented spatial design, and multisensory stimuli within Malaysia's retail landscape (Chopra, 2026; Zhang, 2026; Duruz et al., 2023). Empirical research is also limited in clarifying how ethno-sensory modesty cues (ESMC) impact affective responses such as pride, nostalgia, and calm, as well as perceived luxury, authenticity, and purchase or visitation intentions among key demographic groups (including Malay, Chinese, Indian, and expatriate consumers in Malaysia) in premium retail settings (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Gong et al., 2025).

Additionally, the negotiation of masstige and luxury in VM, specifically, how retailers balance exclusivity and accessibility through architectural and sensory design within the Malaysian context, remains both under-theorized and under-examined empirically, particularly from a culturally contextualized Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) perspective (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Zhang, 2026). Lastly, the effects of temporal and event-driven reconfigurations of ethno-sensory cues such as those occurring during holiday seasons, promotional events, or temporary pop-up installations, on consumer experience and behavior in Malaysia's premium retail environments are insufficiently explored. This gap constrains the provision of actionable, design-relevant insights for practitioners (Zhang, 2026; Gong et al., 2025; Duruz et al., 2023).

Research gaps

Three central gaps are identified in the current literature, which this study aims to address. First, there is a conceptual gap: the lack of a well-defined construct of Ethno-Sensory Modesty Cues (ESMC) that integrates ethnocultural signaling, modesty-oriented spatial logic, and multisensory design within Malaysian visual merchandising (VM) practices. Although research on sensorial retail atmospherics and VM exists, few studies operationalize a culturally embedded, modesty-oriented, multisensory VM framework specific to Malaysia's multi-ethnic consumer context (Chopra, 2026; Duruz et al., 2023; Kumari et al., 2026). Second, an empirical gap is evident: there are limited empirical investigations into how ESMC influences affective and cognitive mediators, specifically, affective response (AR) and cognitive appraisal (CA), and subsequently shape behavioral intentions (BI) in premium, mass-prestige level retail environments, while considering ethnic and experiential moderators. While the S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) framework has been employed in luxury and multisensory retail studies, there is limited evidence connecting ESMC to purchase-related outcomes in Southeast Asian premium retail settings through rigorous multi-group analyses (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Zhang, 2026). Third, a design and practice gap exists: there is insufficient translational knowledge available to designers and merchandisers regarding the integration of heritage cues, modesty norms, and luxury signals in VM architecture, especially under the demands of masstige branding, without marginalizing diverse consumer groups. Addressing this requires the integration of ethnographic mapping, sensory ethnography, and quantitative modeling (SEM) to develop actionable VM typologies and guidelines tailored for Malaysian premium retail contexts (Baber et al., 2026; Chopra, 2026; Chowdhury and Shamsheer, 2025).

Literature review

Ethno-Sensory Modesty Cues (ESMC)

Ethno-sensory cues in retail spaces blend ethnocultural symbolism with multisensory atmospherics. Sensorial retail literature shows that materiality, lighting, scent, sound, and human interaction shape luxury consumer experiences. Defining ESMC requires identifying salient ethnocultural motifs and modesty-driven spatial logics in Malaysia's diverse retail scene, and understanding how multisensory stimuli influence affective and cognitive responses. This perspective views retail spaces as culturally textured, where heritage cues and sensory design together signal prestige (Chopra, 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Duruz et al., 2023; Stevens et al., 2019). Moreover, construct validation literature emphasizes the importance of clear definitions and validity evidence when measuring complex concepts across cultures (Brenlla et al., 2023; Rojas, 2013), guiding ESMC measurement across ethnic groups (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Gong et al., 2025). ESMC is best conceptualized as a higher-order construct integrating ethnocultural symbolism, modesty-oriented space design, and multisensory stimuli. Masstige and luxury literature show that authenticity and cultural resonance shape perceived prestige and accessibility, supporting ESMC as a mediator of affective and cognitive responses in diverse consumers (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Zhang, 2026; Gong et al., 2025). Psychometric research demonstrates that validating such constructs requires expert judgment and factor analyses to ensure reliability and cross-cultural invariance (Bautista-Díaz et al., 2022; Hoffmann and Liporace, 2022; Guerra et al., 2015). This supports a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic and quantitative validation across ethnic groups.

Visual Merchandising Architecture / VM Architecture Quality (VMAQ)

VM Architecture Quality (VMAQ) reflects consumers' perceptions of coherence, materiality, and design distinctiveness in retail settings. In Malaysia's multi-ethnic context, VMAQ should incorporate culturally recognizable cues such as heritage motifs, controlled openness, and material palettes, to balance exclusivity and accessibility. Prior research shows that spatial design and materials shape perceived premiumness and brand attitudes, supporting the idea that VMAQ mediates the effect of ESMC on affect and value perceptions (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Gong et al., 2025; Duruz et al., 2023). These results align with embodied approaches to consumer experience, where bodily interaction with space shapes brand emplacement and subjective experience (Stevens et al., 2019). Methodologically, VMAQ measurement must account for cross-cultural validity. Psychometric research endorses multi-faceted validation to ensure VMAQ accurately captures architectural qualities across ethnic groups (Brenlla et al., 2023). VMAQ can be measured through observed cues (layout, materiality, lighting, scent, sound) and designer intent, combining ethnographic and survey methods. The literature warns against single-dimensional metrics; a multidimensional approach aligned with S-O-R pathways better supports the inference that VMAQ affects AR, CA, and ultimately BI (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Gong et al., 2025; Duruz et al., 2023).

Perceived Luxuriousness (PL)

Perceived luxuriousness (PL) involves opulence, exclusivity, and prestige. Masstige marketing suggests brands balance exclusivity and accessibility, with VM cues signaling authenticity and status while remaining accessible to the public (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Zhang, 2026). In Malaysia's premium retail spaces, PL likely arises from ESMC-evoked heritage cues and VM architecture, making spaces both aspirational and approachable. Literature links perceived premiumness to multisensory atmospherics and authentic materials, indicating PL may predict BI through emotional resonance and perceived value (Baber et al., 2026; Gong et al., 2025; Stevens et al., 2019). Validating PL psychometrics requires demonstrating convergent and discriminant validity and testing invariance across cultures and ethnic groups. Research recommends modeling PL with related constructs (AR, CA) to ensure it remains distinct from authenticity and perceived value, supporting SEM analyses (Brenlla et al., 2023; Bautista-Díaz et al., 2022). Content validity and expert input are crucial when adapting PL measures to Malaysia's multilingual, multi-ethnic context, ensuring items capture culturally relevant luxury signaling (Alvarado, 2022).

Affective Responses (AR)

AR refers to discrete emotions (pleasure, pride, nostalgia, calm) triggered by the VM and ESMC. Research shows that multisensory atmospherics can evoke strong affective states, influencing approach behaviours Brenlla et al., 2023 and willingness to pay, especially in premium settings. Embodied approaches suggest affect is shaped by the body's interaction with space and materials, making AR key between ESMC and BI (Baber et al., 2026; Duruz et al., 2023; Stevens et al., 2019). In cross-cultural settings, affective responses may reflect cultural norms around modesty and heritage, so careful measurement is needed to capture nuanced emotions (Chopra, 2026; Peletz, 2021). Psychometrically, AR measures must be valid and reliable across ethnic groups, as affect is culturally mediated. Multigroup SEM requires measurement invariance to compare AR across Malay, Chinese Malaysian, Indian Malaysian, and expatriate groups. Literature recommends using convergent and discriminant validity to confirm AR's distinct role in the S-O-R chain. Expert-led item development and refinement help AR capture culturally relevant affective states linked to ethno-sensory modesty and premium spatial experiences (Bautista-Díaz et al., 2022; Hoffmann and Liporace, 2022; Rojas, 2013).

Cognitive Appraisals (CA)

CA assesses authenticity, value, and cultural resonance. In VM contexts, CA shapes how ESMC and VMAQ influence perceived value and trust, reflecting S-O-R's organism stage where cognitive evaluations guide behavior. Studies show perceived authenticity and heritage congruence boost perceived value and brand belonging, especially where modesty and cultural cues matter. CA links sensory input to BI outcomes like dwell time and willingness to pay (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026; Gong et al., 2025). Psychometric validation of CA requires evidence of construct validity and consistency across groups. This involves showing that items reflect authenticity, cultural resonance, and perceived value, with measurement invariance established among different populations. The literature underscores the importance of content, construct, and criterion validity, as well as reliability, particularly for CA's application in Malaysia's multilingual setting (Brenlla et al., 2023; Bautista-Díaz et al.,

2022). Incorporating CA in SEM allows for testing mediation and moderation within the ESMC–AR/CA–BI model (Baber et al., 2026; Kumari et al., 2026).

Behavioral Intentions (BI)

BI involves intentions to revisit, pay more, or recommend a brand. In premium retail, BI is influenced by PL, AR, CA, as well as ESMC and VMAQ, which affect perceived value and experience. Research shows that appealing multisensory environments and strong heritage cues boost purchase intentions, especially when authenticity and social presence are high in both physical and brand settings (Baber et al., 2026; Zhang, 2026; Gong et al., 2025). To measure BI, multi-trait validation and cross-cultural testing ensure consistency across Malaysia's main ethnic groups and expatriates. SEM-based analyses clarify if BI is mainly impacted by AR and CA, and how these drivers vary by demographics or brand exposure. Instrument development requires strong validation and adaptation for reliability and validity in diverse contexts, guiding BI item wording in Malaysia's multicultural retail (Brenlla et al., 2023; Alvarado, 2022; Rojas, 2013).

Research questions

Building on the preceding theoretical and methodological foundations, this study is guided by a set of research questions that may address the following: (1) How are Ethno-Sensory Modesty Cues (ESMC) embedded in the Visual Merchandising Architecture/Quality (VMAQ) of Malaysia's premium retail spaces, and what are their visual, tactile, and sonic signatures? (2) How do ESMC affect affective responses (AR) and cognitive appraisals (CA), and how do these in turn shape behavioral intentions (BI) (such as visit, dwell time, willingness to pay, word-of-mouth) across ethnic and experiential groups? (3) How does VMAQ mediate masstige-luxury signaling in Malaysian contexts, and how do visitors negotiate exclusivity versus accessibility? (4) How do temporal contexts (e.g., holiday seasons, seasonal promotions, pop-up events) reconfigure ESMC and their effects on AR, CA, and BI (*Figure 1*)?

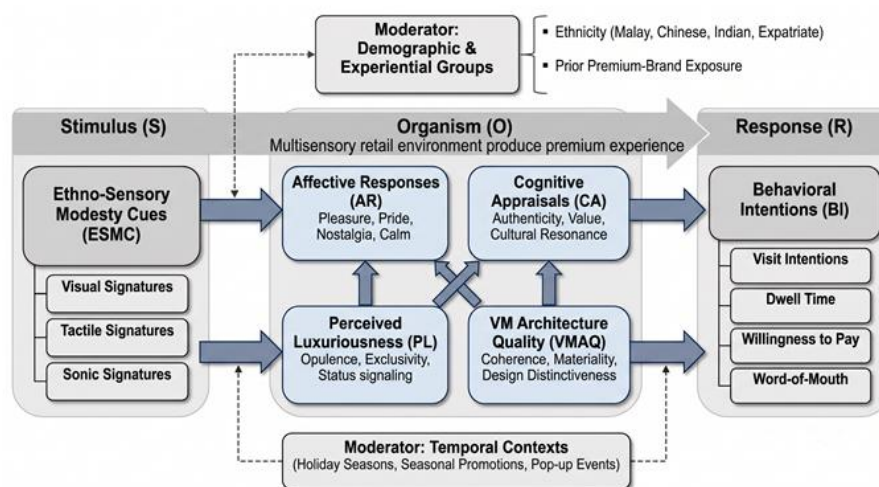


Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Materials and Methods

The proposed research methodology will utilize a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to investigate the multi-sensory, ethnocultural, and architectural dimensions of Ethno-Sensory Modesty Cues (ESMC) in Malaysia's premium retail environments. In Phase A (qualitative strand), the researcher will conduct ethnographic fieldwork, incorporating site observations, architectural analysis of visual merchandising (VM) layouts, and semi-structured interviews with designers and merchandisers to identify the antecedents, meanings, and intended effects of ESMC. Sensory ethnography and autoethnographic documentation will be used to record embodied responses to ESMC in situ, thereby yielding rich qualitative data on the experience and negotiation of ethnocultural symbols, modesty-oriented spatial logic, and multisensory stimuli among diverse publics. In Phase B (quantitative strand), the researcher will administer a cross-sectional survey ($n \approx 600\text{--}800$) to assess exposure to ESMC, VM Architecture Quality (VMAQ), Perceived Luxuriousness (PL), Affective Responses (AR), Cognitive Appraisals (CA), and Behavioral Intentions (BI). The quantitative data will be analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with multi-group analysis to test the hypothesized ESMC–AR/CA–BI pathways and investigate moderation by ethnicity (Malay, Chinese, Indian, expatriates in Malaysia) and prior premium-brand exposure. Additionally, a nested qualitative typology exercise will be employed to refine ESMC items and corroborate the quantitative model, ensuring cross-cultural validity.

To ensure methodological rigor and integration, the proposed study will adopt a design-by-collection approach, adhering to established best practices for instrument development and validation in cross-cultural research contexts. Content validity will be established through expert panel reviews involving specialists in ethnography, sensory marketing, and architecture. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses will be conducted to assess construct validity and reliability, while measurement invariance testing across ethnic groups will determine the equivalence of ESMC, VMAQ, PL, AR, CA, and BI, thus allowing for valid cross-group comparisons. Ethical considerations will include obtaining informed consent, ensuring cultural sensitivity in the depiction of modesty cues, facilitating multilingual data collection (in Malay, English, and Chinese), and complying with local research governance protocols. This integrated methodological framework is designed to ground the survey instrument in ethnographic insights and to employ SEM for generating robust, theory-driven, and generalizable findings regarding the influence of ethno-sensory modesty on premium retail experiences in Malaysia.

Contributions and implications

For theoretical contribution, this study defines Ethno-Sensory Modesty Cues (ESMC) as a culturally embedded Visual Merchandising (VM) construct, blending ethnocultural symbolism, modesty-based spatial logic, and multisensory atmospherics in Malaysia's premium retail architecture. Using the S-O-R framework, ESMC acts as stimuli activating affective and cognitive processes, shaping culturally specific behavioral pathways. VM is thus re-framed as a core interface where heritage and modesty norms drive perceived prestige, authenticity, and consumer responses among diverse publics. The model extends previous research (Tawfiq and Paff, 2026; Hassan and Ara, 2021; Krisjanous et al., 2021; Mustapha and Roslan, 2021; Chang and Teo, 2009), applying these concepts to retail architecture and sensory design, and theorizes

ESMC as a higher-order, culturally contingent construct mediating through VMAQ to influence consumer perceptions and intentions, with cross-cultural invariance tested via multi-group analysis. From methodological stance, the study uses a convergent mixed-methods, multi-site design, combining ethnography, sensory ethnography, and structural equation modeling (SEM) to capture Malaysia's diverse shopping environments. Ethnographic mapping and designer interviews provide qualitative insights into ESMC and design rationales, while sensory ethnography documents lived experiences, maintaining ecological validity. The quantitative component uses cross-sectional survey data ($n \approx 600\text{--}800$) and multi-group SEM to test mediation across major ethnic cohorts, assessing measurement invariance and cross-cultural validity. This approach aligns with best practices in cross-cultural instrument development and SEM-based testing (Tawfiq and Paff, 2026; Hassan and Ara, 2021; Krisjanous et al., 2021; Sumarlia, 2021; Chang and Teo, 2009).

As for practical implications, the research will produce a typology of ethno-sensory VM elements and design guidelines to help retailers balance heritage cues, modesty norms, and aspirational branding in Malaysia's masstige and premium sectors. These guidelines will enable designers to integrate ethnocultural motifs, modesty-driven spatial layouts, and multisensory features into cohesive VM strategies that support authenticity and inclusivity. This work provides practical recipes for creating heritage-savvy, modesty-respecting premium retail spaces in Malaysia (Tawfiq and Paff, 2026; Hatfield, 2025; Evans, 2015; Chang and Teo, 2009).

Limitations

This study offers a coherent, theory-driven framework with a robust mixed-methods design, but several limitations exist. The cross-sectional survey restricts causal inference; longitudinal data are needed to establish temporal precedence and stability of effects (Wang and Lin, 2024; Xing and Zainal, 2024). Despite multi-site sampling, findings remain potentially influenced by site-specific factors and may not fully generalize to all premium or masstige contexts in Malaysia, requiring replication elsewhere (Kumari et al., 2026; Evans, 2015). Measurement challenges arise in capturing a culturally situated ESMC construct; while mixed-methods support validity, achieving cross-cultural measurement invariance across groups may be imperfect, limiting comparability (Bautista-Díaz et al., 2022). Integrating ethnographic and sensory data with SEM depends on rigorous instrumentation; discrepancies between qualitative and quantitative items risk model misspecification (Brenlla et al., 2023; Stevens et al., 2019). Practical constraints like language diversity, fieldwork access, and dynamic retail environments may affect data collection consistency and ESMC mapping fidelity (Chopra, 2026; Duruz et al., 2023). The dynamic nature of masstige branding and cultural signaling means contemporary configurations may shift with macroeconomic or policy changes, limiting long-term applicability of a fixed ESMC typology (Kumari et al., 2026; Chang and Teo, 2009).

Conclusion

This study advances a culturally situated understanding of retail space by articulating Ethno-Sensory Modesty Cues (ESMC) within an S-O-R framework to illuminate how space, symbolism, and multisensory design jointly shape consumer affect, cognition, and behavior in Malaysia's multi-ethnic premium retail landscape. By integrating

ethnographic mapping, sensory ethnography, and SEM-based validation across Malay, Chinese, Indian, and expatriate publics in Malaysia, the research yields a theory-driven model that explicates culturally specific pathways from ESMC stimuli to behavioral intentions, while interrogating measurement invariance and contextual contingencies that influence cross-group comparisons. The study also reframes VM architecture as a dynamic site of heritage negotiation and prestige signaling, offering granular insights into how modesty norms and ethnocultural motifs can be embedded without eroding inclusivity or aspirational branding. Collectively, these contributions push forward the discourse on sensory marketing, cultural branding, and built environment studies in Southeast Asia, and provide empirically grounded design guidance for practitioners aiming to balance heritage, modesty, and masstige luxury in Malaysia's evolving retail ecosystems. Future research can extend this framework to other Southeast Asian contexts, test longitudinal effects across promotional cycles, and refine ESMC measurement through cross-cultural psychometric validation and cross-format replication (storefronts, pop-ups, and concept spaces).

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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